

# *The Story of Swalcliffe*

*by*

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*At the end of the summer, when the hay and the harvests had been gathered in, Mr Norris gave a 'harvest home' to the people he employed. Everyone in the house was allowed to ask two friends. The butler, the coachman, the head gardener and others came with their wives. The dancing was in the courtyard of the house, on the clean stone floor and a local fiddler supplied the music on his fiddle.*

*"Up the middle and down again", was the merry tune to begin with. The dancers stood in long lines, men and women facing each other. They were led by the coachman and a granddaughter of the house on one occasion. Every movement in the dance was quick, "Hands across", first one hand then the other was warmly grasped. Then they whirled away, first to one side and then to the other side, opposite to one couple, then to other, up the middle and down again with the partners together till, breathless, the dance ended. A large supper was spread in 'the hall' (which was distinguished from the 'front Hall') before the party ended.*

*At Christmas there was sometimes a dance in the kitchen. A story goes that on one occasion when the room was very full, the little fiddler was hoisted onto the dresser where a chair had been placed, to put him out of the way.*

*On Christmas Eve, the Waits, or Carol Singings came round. They, like the May children, called at every house in the village and they sang Christmas hymns, songs and carols. The favourite one was 'How beautiful upon the mountains', but 'While Shepherds Watched' and 'Good King Wencelas' followed on. One man had a flute, on which he sounded the preliminary note. They sang in the front hall where they were very welcome. The family were all there to listen, even the grandchildren, when they were small, were hauled from their beds as a great treat, wrapped in shawls. They enjoyed it, till the grandfather, with a secret smile on his face, walked round and pressed a gold sovereign into the leader's hand and the choir disappeared through the green baize doors to begin again in the servant's hall. As the children grew older they would hear the muffled peal of the church bells, and then, at midnight the joyous clashing when the muffles came off. The sounds of the bells seemed to vibrate in the tower and to crash through the windows of the green room, so that, coupled with the cold moonlight, hearing and vision became one with the feeling that it was glorious Christmas Day.*

*On Christmas morning the church was full, everyone sang and people looked happy. 'Oh come, all ye faithful', rang out year after year, while 'Glory to God in the Highest', as an anthem, seemed to reach the highest pinnacle of praise in the old church, with the organ pealing out, the choir singing in the body of the church, the scarlet cloaks of the girls matching the berries of the holly entwined in the pillars and about the pews.*

*At Christmas time there was generally a school treat or an entertainment at the school, when village performers would do their best to be amusing. Sometimes there would be a concert, a popular song was about 'Humphrey with his flail' and 'Dorothy Draggletail' but there were many songs, some with rousing choruses in which the audience would join in.*

*On 'Twelfth Day' the decorations in the house were taken down and after a service in the church (it being the feast of the Epiphany) the choir girls in their red cloaks and hats alike, came up to the park,*

*They changed their books from children's library and they were given drinks of steaming hot elderberry wine (made by the Housekeeper who also kept the cloaks in camphor during the summer). The girls stood round a table in the billiard room and Miss Mary Norris entertained them. She trained the choir of children and played the organ in the church. Her elder sisters, Ellie and Annie, taught in the Sunday School and sat with the boys and girls in Church. Their father Mr Norris was known as 'The Squire' and there was close cooperation between him and his house, with the Vicar, the Rev. Canon Payne.*

*On the 'Twelfth Day' too, the Bell Ringers came to the Park. The bells were of bright pinkish copper. Six or eight men stood in a row each man holding two bells, one in either hand, held by a clean new-looking leather strap. Each man's thumb was raised, as he rang the bell upwards. They played chimes occasionally crashing all the bells together and beginning again. One of the tunes they played was called Mony Muske and there were many others.*

*On one occasion the ringers of Chacombe were invited to play at Swalcliffe Park, alternately and together with the Swalcliffe ringers, when all of them were entertained. On another occasion in the summer, there was a concert and competition at Banbury between the bell ringers of the different villages, which was largely attended by those who were interested.*

*Another Christmas jollity was the coming of the Mummers. There was a tangled vision of black faces and men tumbling about in semi-darkness, from a nursery window looking into the backyard, when the children were snatched away from the window and were not allowed to look, but, later when the mummers performed their play inside the house, a story seemed to emerge. The story was told in primitive sing-song verse by the men performing. There was some sort of a fight and a struggle and a man lay upon the floor. Someone fell upon him and pulled out a tooth which was held up for the audience to see; it was an immense one, probably a horse's tooth. There was a doctor, in top hat and knee breeches, there was a man with a black face, another man wore a ragged petticoat and a woman's battered sun bonnet.*

*The important part of the play seemed to be when the doctor took the hand of the dead man lying on the floor, pulled him up and shouted "Rouse up King Jarge and fight again" then there were cheers all round and the play came gradually to an end.*

*Most of it was founded on ancient tradition, handed down from father to son during the ages. Unknown to most people the play was based upon folk lore, on the worship of nature and on the conflict of good and evil.*

## *Chapter VII*

# *The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Passes*

*In 1890 Major Henry Crawley Norris, his wife Mary and their two sons Harry and Jack came to live at Swalcliffe. Their daughter Dorothy had married and was living in Kent.*

*Major H. C. Norris sold his property at Chacombe after the death of his father and he was ready to settle down at Swalcliffe.*

*He was born in 1841 at Wroxton where his parents had their first home and where all the children were born. He had a happy childhood at Swalcliffe from where he went off to school at the age of seven. When he was nearly seventeen, consternation came to the family. He announced his intention of being a soldier and of his wish to go to India, there being the chance of some of the fighting at the end of the Indian Mutiny and of some sport in the jungle. Such an idea was unknown to the family, no one before had thought such a thing. But his father, Henry Norris, agreed and Harry went to Sandhurst first and then to India in 1858. Colonel North of Wroxton Abbey gave him his sword and Canon Payne, Vicar of Swalcliffe, gave him his bible.*

*He went off in high spirits. He wrote long letters home, and he kept a diary during his time in India. In 1861, when he had been away for three years, he came home. There was rejoicing at Swalcliffe. The church bells rang, horses were taken out from the carriage and he was pulled in by willing arms. There was dancing on the higher lawn and a feasting afterwards for the village.*

*In 1867 he married and brought Mary, his bride, to Swalcliffe. She was the daughter of Sir William Bovill, Chief Justice of the Common Pleas. Her charm was appreciated and she received a warm welcome into the family.*

*Two or three years later Captain H. C. Norris retired from the army and from his regiment the 8<sup>th</sup> Hussars and he and his wife lived at Holton near Oxford. Their eldest son, Henry Everard Du Cane Norris was born 1869 to the great satisfaction of the family. The baby was christened at Swalcliffe and was given a silver knife, fork and spoon in a case, by the people of the village.*

*In 1875 Captain Norris began to build his house at Chacombe which had been his grandfather's estate and which was made over to him by his father. It took two years to build the house which was of solid rough stone with mullioned windows. The best landscape gardener of the day was engaged to lay out the garden. During the two years while the house was building, Captain Norris was Aide-de-Camp to the Duke of Marlborough, Viceroy of Ireland, spending much time at Dublin Castle and the Vice Regal Lodge. In 1877 he retired into his house at Chacombe with his wife and his three children.*

*Chacombe, several hundred years before, had had a celebrated bell foundry and the six bells of Swalcliffe church and of other parish churches in the neighbourhood.*



*So in 1890 another generation occupied Swalcliffe. The house was adapted to modern ideas. The saloon became the drawing room, resplendent with rose coloured brocade curtains. Furniture was re-covered, china was unearthed from protecting cupboards and the room lost its stiffness. The Chippendale sofas showed the beauty of their corners. Plants and flowers in mahogany and brass-bound tubs etc. were put in unexpected places giving colour and scent to the room and adding to the medley of pink and rose, of brown and green already there. The door to the morning room was locked up and the opening through the thick walls became a cupboard on the farther side. The morning room became a smoking room and the old study was neglected. A door was made in the wall of the dining room leading to the billiard room, but except for small alterations, the house remained the same as before.*

*The verandah was taken down and the house assumed a more important air, it looked taller and more solid. Much of the Victorian furniture disappeared and the older things of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were repolished and took on new life.*

*Harry Norris loved the place and was pleased to be back there. Many guests came and went and he and his beautiful wife Mary, paid constant visits to friends and neighbours in the country round. He was a first rate shot and a good raconteur of amusing stories. He was full of fire and life and had an original way of looking at things.*

*The Warwickshire hounds often met at Swalcliffe Park where Colonel and Mrs Norris loved to entertain them. The best bunches of grapes were produced for the Hunt breakfast, when the dining room was full of red-coated, white leathered, top-booted men, and ladies in their smart, well-fitting habits and shining top hats. They would come through to the drawing room, where a roaring fire would be burning at the end of the room.*

*The flowers on these occasions were a feature, the hot house producing magnificent cyclamens, the blossoms of which formed a complete mass of white or colour, excluding the green of the leaves. Chrysanthemums also were magnificent and took many a prize and different flower shows and the conservatory was full of colour.*

*Colonel H. C. Norris was fond of hunting and of seeing his friends, but though he was full of energy, he was not a strong man. He liked to see things well carried out. Uniforms with his yeomanry and dress clothes of the Warwickshire Hunt were very important to him and his black knee-breeches and silk stockings and the black velvet collar to the red tail-coat were immaculate when he attended Hunt Balls and other functions. He hunted about two days a week and kept two or three hunters which he shared with his sons.*

*The sons, Harry and Jack, were popular in the country. They were hard riders and good horsemen. Harry was the better horseman and had good hands. Jack was a more reckless rider and had a perfect seat. Young horses were sent them to break in with hounds and many were the falls and accidents they had, after which they were laid up in bed in the green room, with doctor Routh to look after them. Both boys were out for adventure.*

*Colonel Norris was eager to keep up the ancient customs of the place especially at Christmas. So the waits came in to house on Christmas Eve as before, the mummers were encouraged to perform their play and the ringers to bring their hand bells.*

*Old friends came to dine sometimes, bringing others who played carols and songs and old ditties, with a chorus to the accompaniment of a guitar. Colonel Norris delighted in it, and his wife was ever a gracious hostess.*

*When the two celebrated their silver wedding, a meeting was arranged in the school and a pair of silver candlesticks and an illuminated address were presented to them from the village and there were speeches and thanks all round.*

*At Christmas the house was full. The married daughter, her husband, and children, paid long visits. The nurseries were again occupied and children's voices sounded through the house, singing carols outside each bedroom door on Christmas morning and there was dancing and singing, games and little plays acted, at other times. The children went to church on Christmas morning with their parents and grand parents, sitting in the same pew, and singing the glad old hymns, as their mother sang them when a child. The organ was now in the chancel and the men and boys were in surplices. The old organ had been replaced by a new one, for the purchase of which Colonel and Mrs. Norris had collected money, and had held a bazaar at Swalcliffe to augment the fund, soon after they came to live there.*

*The stables also were full at Christmas as visiting horses came with the younger ones of the family. Sometimes the tithe barn over the way was requisitioned to hold them and sometimes stables were hired for them in the next village.*

*The son in law Arthur Davison was a good man to hounds and had first rate hunters. The daughter gave up hunting for some years but took to it again with vigor later, following her husband's lead over the stiffest country.*

*So for the third generation Norris's hunted with the Warwickshire Hounds and were members of the Hunt Club.*

*In summer also the house was full, with the Davison grand children. They were a healthy rose-cheeked lot and to them again Swalcliffe was second home, as it had been to the children of former generations. These children boated on the pond, swung in swings and got in to mischief, and at last came to live at Broughton Grange, three miles away, with their parents. So, comings and goings between the two places was frequent as were the comings and goings between Swalcliffe and Chacombe twenty years before.*

*Colonel H. C. Norris did much work for the County. He was Chairman of the Bench of Magistrates and he had sat on the Board of Guardians for many years. He represented Hook Norton on the Oxfordshire County Council, (called by the village Hooky Norton) and had many other posts of interest.*



*For many years Colonel Norris commanded the Banbury troop of the Oxfordshire Yeomanry. They were frequently entertained at Chacombe where they drilled. They were occasionally also invited to Swalcliffe Park for their drills, and for luncheon, before he came to live there.*

*In the time of the South African war, Colonel Norris commanded the regiment. He did great work for the Imperial Yeomanry, having his headquarters at Oxford, and enrolling many undergraduates and others for active service.*

*When his son Harry went out to Africa with the Warwickshire militia, Colonel Norris was as anxious as his own father had been when he went off to India.*

*Life did not go easily for him at this time. He lost a great deal of money in South African Mines before the war and he lost the sight of one eye which caused him much discomfort and suffering, and the house felt unhappy.*

*Great joy came though, at the end of the war, when their son Harry returned from South Africa. Five of the family went to Southampton to meet him and return with him to Swalcliffe.*

*The trades people of Banbury, gave him a welcome, waving to him from their door, as he passed in the Swalcliffe carriage.*

*The people of Swalcliffe met him with cheers; they took the gorses from the carriage at the foot of the village hill. They pulled him in. The people and children greeted him from the cottages and the bells pealed out joyously from the church tower. In the evening there was dancing, to the music of the Sibford band, on the upper lawn, with refreshments, in the same way they celebrated the return of his father from India forty years or so before.*

*Inside the house there was rejoicing too, in which the grand children joined and all was done to show the thankfulness of the family for his return.*

*The younger son Jack Norris had married. He lived in Sussex with his wife, but six years later, in 1905, he died. It was the first break up in the family. He was buried at Cowfold and a cross was put up, designed by his father, and made of the stone of the country which he had loved.*

*Some time after this "young Harry Norris" as he was called went to work in London.*

*The daughter and her family also left Broughton Grange and returned to Kent, so Colonel and Mrs Norris were lonely at Swalcliffe.*

*To the grief of their children they decided to leave it, to give up the lease. They bought a home at Folkestone and moved there in 1909.*

*At the very beginning of the Great War on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1914, Colonel Henry Crawley Norris died at the age of 73. He came back to Swalcliffe for his burial. He was carried up the steps of the churchyard in to the church he loved and knew so well: and his beloved Yeomen, Sergeants of the regiment, carried him, covered by the Union Jack, to his grave.*

*These men were on their way, that night, to the front, in France, where the Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars did magnificently.*

*They buried him where his father lay before him, both overshadowed by the great stone cross and beside the grave of his mother Eleanora. The church was full of his old friends who rallied round him for the last time.*

*His wife, Mary, outlived him by twenty-nine years. She died at the age of ninety-five and was taken back to Swalcliffe to her last resting place.*

*So, at Swalcliffe their bodies rest in peace; Harry and Mary; Henry and Ellen.*

*They had lived their lives out, in shelter of the old house, had lived and loved, had suffered and been very glad. And so the family of Norris passed from Swalcliffe.*

*The old house still stands in its dignity, on its old foundations.*

*The rooks croak and caw in the trees, and the pigeons coo their old story, the swallows dip in the pond, as they had always done, the whole bringing messages of peace and remembrance to those who care.*

*June 1943*

## *The Swalcliffe May Day*

*Awake! Awake! Lift up your eyes,  
And pray to God for grace  
Repent, repent of your former sins  
While you have time and space.*

*I have been wondering all this night  
And part of the last day,  
So now I'm come for to sing you a song  
And to show you a branch of May*

*A branch of May I have brought you,  
And at your door it stands  
It does spread out and it spreads all  
about  
By the work of Our Lord's hands.*

*Man is but man, his life's but a span  
He is much like a flower  
He's here today and he's gone tomorrow  
So he's all gone down in an hour.*

*So now I've sung you my little short  
song,  
I can no longer stay,  
God bless you all, both great and small  
And I wish me a happy May.*