



An American Visitor in Polstead Road

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One warm, pleasant Thursday morning in late June 1994 I visited Oxford with the intention of seeing the Ashmolean Museum and 2 Polstead Road. I had read much about Lawrence while studying at Richmond College in London during the previous two months and planned on seeing several Lawrence associations in London and Oxford. Little did I know on that Thursday morning I was about to embark on an incredible journey into the life of T.E. Lawrence and his boyhood home of 25 years.

I walked at an eager pace up the Woodstock Road, not knowing if 2 Polstead Road was a museum or a private residence. I hoped that it was the latter as I wanted to see the house in use and hoped that perhaps the owner would allow me to see the bungalow in the garden. I reached Polstead Road after a brief mile walk and turned into its tree-lined shade. Although I had never been there before, number two was exactly as I had always known. The wrought iron gate stood open, inviting me in, yet I stood in awe of the knowledge of the events here in the early part of the century. After standing at the gate for a few moments, the front door swung open and an elderly gentleman emerged. He had reached his car door before he turned to see me standing there in awe. We talked briefly, then he took me on a tour of the house and bungalow. On my journey back to London by coach I rode the whole way intoxicated by memories of my visit to Polstead Road.

I wrote to Mr Phillips, the owner, to thank him for the tour and his time. Both July and my stay in London were drawing to a close. I desperately wanted to remain in England another month and wanted to spend it in Oxford so I asked Mr Phillips if I could live at his house during that time and offered to help with any chores around the property. A few weeks passed and I feared the worst and began to make reservations for my return trip to Chicago. Only days before my departure I received a note from Mr Phillips inviting me to live at 2 Polstead Road for the remainder of my summer break. With overwhelming enthusiasm and joy I wrote back informing him of my acceptance of his generous invitation.

I arrived at 2 Polstead Road with a suitcase in tow on 22 July and quickly found my second-floor room to my liking. Over the course of the first week I explored the entire house from basement to attic. What I discovered will amaze anyone interested in Lawrence and his formative years.

Much of the house is exactly the same as when Mrs Lawrence moved out in 1921. She departed for missionary work with her son Bob and left behind all her furnishings.

Since then the house has had only two owners, and most of the furniture today was that bought by Mr and Mrs Lawrence at the turn of the century.

The basement has three rooms and a large storage cupboard. The kitchen was originally in the room at the bottom of the stairs, a fact that is apparent because of the large fireplace there. The other two rooms were servants' quarters and one can still see the 19th-century floor tiles and the old woodwork coated with several layers of paint.

As the visitor enters the front door, they are confronted by a second door. The glass in both these doors and the east-facing windows of the front hall are all made of beautiful stained glass. Immediately in front of the door is the breakfast room which still has its old table, wooden chairs and cabinets. The room to the left of the small hallway is the old parlour with large bookcases, rocking chairs and a dresser. The most interesting feature of this room, and perhaps of the whole house, is the inside of the cupboard door. Here, on the green-painted background, can still be clearly seen all the recorded heights of the Lawrence boys from 1896 to 1921. Will was the tallest at over six feet, while T.E. came to just five feet six inches. Across the hall, the dining room still has the original dining table and chairs plus sideboards. China and swords now adorn the walls and the room looks so much as I am sure it did when the Lawrences lived there that at times I expected the whole family to walk through the door and sit down to dinner.

The second floor also has three rooms: a living room, master bedroom, and a study. The master bedroom is to the left of the staircase and looks out over the garden and bungalow. The room has an original clock, dresser and table. The study has two painted windows with an unknown countryside scene and the living room a large table dresser. Late at night I would read on the living room floor, hearing the clock tick off the seconds that separated me from the days of old and the Lawrence family letters once read in this room.

The third floor is quite cramped and has five bedrooms of various sizes with nothing unusual in them except for an occasional dresser.

The lawn in the garden still has its original edging stones and bits of playground equipment can be seen rotting next to an old lawn roller. The apple trees are over a hundred years old and date from when the area to the north of Oxford was all orchards. Today many of the original apple trees grow in peoples' back gardens, but now separated by brick walls. Near the entrance to the bungalow is a large old fig tree dating back to a cutting that Lawrence brought home. Every year Mr Phillips enjoys the figs with his coffee.

The bungalow still has many of the features described in the books, including a large dresser. Legend has it that it was used by T.E. Lawrence himself. I often sat in the bay window of the bungalow at all hours of the day and night, with the windows propped open. I wondered about Lawrence, and all he stood for, and how much this room meant to him. The glory of his youthful past could still be felt in the hollowness of his room during the empty hours on a moonlit night.

