

# Waiting for War



The rag regatta at Odney in June 1939. A combative rowing event has thrown into the water the high-powered pairing of Bernard Miller, above, and Michael Watkins, below. The tall man looking innocent in the boat in the foreground is the shop assistant Paul Roake, later to be the inadvertent focus of a heated wartime council debate.

The Partnership ... will hold, of course, to its main principle of trying to behave to all its members as a decent family behaves to its own ... For each Partner absent on public service the Partnership will go as far as ever it can in making up the whole of any difference between his service pay and his remuneration from the Partnership.

SPELAN LEWIS, GAZETTE OF 9 SEPTEMBER 1939

If a comet hit the earth, some ... would spend their last minutes in writing anonymous letters blaming the management for it.

SPELAN LEWIS, GAZETTE OF 23 SEPTEMBER 1939

As the 1930s progressed Spedan came up to London less and less. That didn't stop him sending off missives of advice, instruction and observations from his retreat in the little village of Leckford in Hampshire, which in 1929 he'd bought – yes, the entire village – with its charming house of amber sandstone with mock Tudor chimneys. There he was attended by a set of secretaries who worked in rotation, typing the bulk of the nearly 40,000 numbered memoranda he produced between 1917 and 1955, a colossal output. To a friend he confessed, 'You will not be surprised that my five stenographers are considered bad risks by insurance societies, and martyrs, though quite mistakenly, by themselves.' His habits included the Churchillian eccentricity of having a secretary parked outside the bathroom with the door ajar so that she could catch and record his *bons mots* as he loofahed his back.

Spedan enjoyed the life of a country landowner, improving his tenants' living and working conditions, which he was disgusted to discover were among the worst in England. Warned that increasing their pay would incur the wrath of his farming neighbours, he adopted the simple expedient of reducing to zero the rent on their tied cottages, which he promptly set about overhauling. He built a golf course and a cricket ground, and experimented with livestock and different crops. He liked to tinker with nature. He planted a 'wild' patch of crocus bulbs one September by having his groundsmen collect conkers, paint half of them white, then walk round the designated area dropping them randomly from a bucket. They were to plant a yellow crocus bulb where a white conker had fallen, a purple in place of a natural brown one... but only after they had inspected the outcome and swapped conkers over if they thought the result not random enough. He had an impulse to order his world – or in this case to re-order it in a disorderly fashion. He was an early espouser of the new science of ecology, to which he later said he'd have liked to devote his life. His view was neatly expressed by his nephew Peter in 1989, when 'green' issues started to emerge:

The green issue seems to mean anything that people instinctively like the sound of but, equally instinctively, are not prepared to take up or pay for if they have a choice. Man is Nature's Sole Mistake. The free market will not fix it. Indeed, mankind being what it is, the free market is the cause of the trouble, because the harm is indirect, long term, and not necessarily suffered by the perpetrator.

Spedan's family life was briefly idyllic but ultimately desperately sad. Beatrice and he had three children in five years – John, Jill and Edward – but tragedy had struck in 1931 when the much-loved oldest, John, caught meningitis at the age of eight and died three days later. As a consequence