

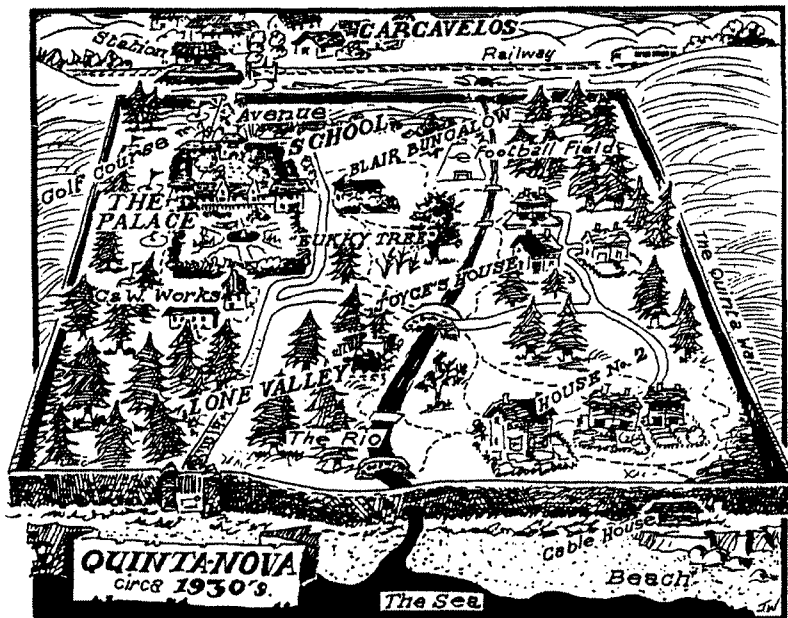
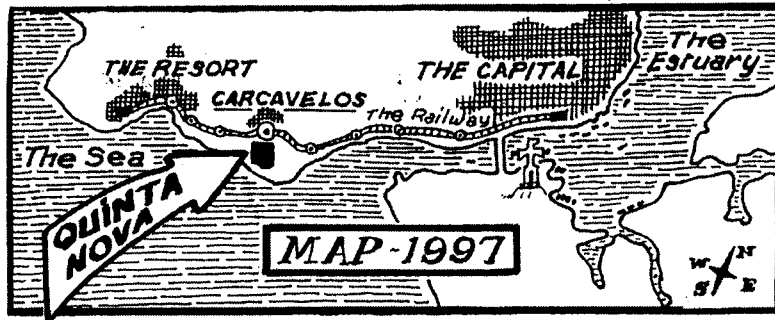
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## “THAT’S WHERE I WENT DEAF...”

by John Wheeler



Agnes and I sit together in a modern train as it transports us towards a place of some significance in my life story. In the nineteen thirties, I lived for some memorable years in this foreign land. It was a period that my brother and I distinguished ever after as “the time in the quinta years”. Six decades later, Agnes and I are on our way to discover how much still remains of the quinta to remind me of those special years in my childhood. They included the last years in which I had my hearing and the first in which I was without it....

*THAT* happened in the month of May, I recall. The year was 1937 and what happened was meningitis.

Now it is the month of May, once again, but it is May 1997. The sun is warm and bright and this much, at least, is the same as I remember. Agnes’ eyes and mine are on the panel in our carriage, which shows the name of the next stop. It comes up and there is our destination.....CARCAVELOS.....

*Carcaveiros..... I never heard it referred to thus. To my parents and everyone else it was always “Car”, in the Cable & Wireless parlance of the ‘thirties. It was here that the cable from Porthcurno came ashore, invisible beneath the sand, to be relayed onwards towards Madeira and beyond. Only when breaks occurred, such as the occasion when a freighter hooked up the cable with its anchor, could the cable be seen thick and black. Then a team of men with spades dug a great trench in the beach to expose it while a white cable ship arrived to lie close to inshore. Hooves churning up the sand, three pairs of yoked oxen hauled new cable from ship to shore. A massive pulley-wheel secured to a rock gave the oxen the space to strain against the hawser at right angles along the beach.*

*Quinta Nova was the Company-owned estate where the C&W staff of this overseas station lived with their families, in a dozen or so scattered, semi-detached houses. The one-mile-square*

quinta, between Carcavelos proper and the sea, was enclosed within a wall twice the height of any of us quinta children. For practical and make-believe play, the quinta provided us with pine forests, stretches of rough, open ground, hills and levels, bamboo groves and countless bushy nooks and crannies. There was 'Lone Valley', a quarry-like depression that offered the challenge of one vertical fifteen-foot wall and, in winter, a stony pool deep enough to flow over the tops of our Wellingtons, which, invariably, it did. Our favourite climbing was 'The Eukky Tree', the trunk of which was festooned with strips of ever-peeling bark. With the freedom to roam almost everywhere within the wall, the quinta was, for us children, a veritable Garden of Eden.

Of the children whose homes were in the quinta, there was 'Nige', a tough little knot of muscle who was always a fraction in front of me in footraces. There was Pam H. and a solemn, dark-haired Scottish girl with freckles, named Joyce, whom my mother liked to call "your girlfriend". There were other children and, as my constant companion, there was my younger brother, David. Quinta Nova, a British enclave, was Mecca to the expatriate families who lived in the foreign land outside the wall. While the parents took advantage of the quinta facilities, 'The Club', a games room, a nine-hole golf course and tennis courts, their offspring joined our activities. Cheery Michael B. was one of these 'outsiders', and D. Perks was another, whose home in the casino resort further along the coast David and I sometimes visited. In the long summer holiday the P&O liner from Southampton sometimes brought 'temporaries' from their boarding schools in England.

The children of the quinta did not form a constant group and no one considered himself or herself leader. Families left and new ones came. Mainly, we met up around the quinta by chance or intention, often hurling javelins on ahead of us or loosing off chicken-feathered arrows, both available in profusion from the straight-growing bamboo groves. For a time homemade catapults were all the rage and I had several of varied lengths and thickness of rubber. A life-long habit of penknife-in-my-pocket originated in these days. We seldom hit our targets, but perhaps it says something

for the freedom that we were trusted with that, in all the years of flying missiles, there was only one mishap. In a noisy trench warfare game one evening in ditches near the Eukky, with several 'non-regulars' in the enemy trenches, a misguided piece of realism in the form of a lobbed rock 'grenade', laid open Pam H.'s scalp beside me. I was the one who saw her home, a red trail forming behind us. Before we reached her gate, her father rushed out with a napkin still clutched in one hand, alerted by Pam's wailing. "Who did this?" were his first shocked and furious words.....

It occurs to me, as the train passes beneath the approach road of a towering suspension bridge, that was not there sixty years ago, that I have, in 1997, no idea what this appalled and angry bellow sounded like...On the far side of the river that the bridge spans, made tiny by the distance and raised high above the skyline on a lofty divided plinth, Agnes and I can see the standing statue of a robed Christ, His arms outflung as He casts His benison across the busy seaway to the capital city that now lies behind us. This landmark also post-dates my last, nineteen thirties day outing to the capital. Now, westward bound, on this coastal railway line, we are still some distance from our destination. But it is a short line and the stations are not far apart...

In the quinta, David and I were quite often out and about on our own. One such occasion, loping single file along a faint trail in an outlying part of the quinta, I found a patterned, brownish-grey hawser undulating smoothly across the path an inch or two in front of my toes. It was long enough that both head and tail were hidden in grass. With a grab at David and a yell of "Run!!" I did exactly that for at least two hundred yards. David had no idea what we were running from! In spite of later assurance that our Eden contained no dangerous serpents, we trod carefully for some time to come and added big sticks to our armoury.

This event predated our adoption of 'Jocky', a Scottie-type black mongrel, from a departing single man named Bill who, I suspect, was numbered among those who admired my mother from afar. For a couple of years Jocky was invariably with us. Neither he

*nor we would have recognised a dog lead. A lasting image was to remain with me of Jocky's enthusiastic hindquarters bounding over tussocks while David and I career pell-mell behind him.*

The train is rocking through a station without stopping, passing a marina with a mass of small craft harboured within a protecting wall. The glittering estuary widens and then there is a stretch of beach below the train window. *Harbour*, I think, ....*beach* .....

*Harbour.... "So-and-so broke your harbour yesterday!" This news, usually whispered on the way to school, informed one that an erstwhile friend had visited the Lone Valley pool and removed stones from a recently constructed 'harbour' and used them in the construction of a new one. The coolness that followed was more a matter of custom than conviction. Linked as we were in brotherhood of the water-filled boot, we understood that the number of useable stones in the pool was finite and that, when the spirit moved us, we ourselves would be back building a new set of quays and jetties requiring stones to be filched from another construction.*

*For the beach in the summer months we used a small locked portal near the south-eastern corner of the quinta, the function of which was to provide Company employees with easy access to the stout little building above the sand called, appropriately enough, the 'Cable House'. This end of the long beach was deserted except for us C&W families. The children swam and surfed in gentle waves, their mothers gossiping in swimsuits under portable shades. As the sun dropped lower over the sea, David and I competed to be the first to spy our father skirting the Cable House, in shirtsleeves, with his bow tie and the big hat he wore turned down back and front.*

*Then there was the last summer when I no longer heard the calls of the children in the sea. My surfboard lay unused at home for I was not allowed into the water. It was autumn, more than a year after the meningitis, that my mother finally gave way to my pleas after ensuring that I understood the condition, "Keep your head out of the water!" I rushed away from her into the sea without a thought*

*that this marked, perhaps, the first sad diminishment of her conviction that I would hear again one day.*

In my pocket as I peer ahead from the train window, though I know it is too soon for any familiar sights, are some faded black and white photographs taken in the quinta. One of these shows a buoyant group of young school children, among them the eight year old hearing 'me'. I know exactly where it was taken with, among the background buildings, part of the 'Palace' in which not long afterwards I lay ill. David is among the younger children in front and most of the happy faces have a vague familiarity but it surprises me, now, how little I remember about these children. A few I can name, but most names I have forgotten....

I recall David saying to me in later years, "I think you forgot quite a lot about the quinta after the time you went deaf". He was right, but I do also remember quite a lot.... For me, now, the time element is all confused and my clearest memories are of detached incidents. What I have forgotten entirely are the sound effects. My memories come now, as it were, with the sound off.....

*The sound of the sea? It was, surely, constant in house Number Two, close to the shore boundary, and I had my hearing during all the years that we lived in it...Then there was 'clacketting', an annual craze that followed the few days when shooters came to a clearing in the pine woods to blast overflying pigeons with their shotguns. We children pounced on discarded empty cartridges, trying to gather ten of them that we could ram on to our fingers. Afterwards we went about the quinta bringing our fingertips briskly together, 'clacketting', a sound effect that soon became unpopular in house Number Two. Also, there was the day when the rumble of distant heavy artillery rolled over the quinta from the upriver direction of the capital. Full of wild surmises, the children climbed trees at the top of the Lone Valley cliff attempting, in vain, to get high enough to peer up the estuary. Later, we were told of a military mutiny on one of the nation's few naval craft, which had been fired upon by shore batteries.*

Another station platform skims past and we can no longer see the sea. Now my cheek is pressed to the window and I am straining to peer ahead as far as possible. Any minute a familiar sight may appear because Carcavelos is not far ahead....

*Carcavelos station. Behind the inland platform lay the village, behind the opposite platform, across a rough narrow road, the high wall of the quinta stretched far to left and right. Alongside the platforms was a level crossing and the road ran up into the village. Quarter of a mile up, this road split on either side of a dusty triangle on which a market was held. Here, one day, in spite of my mother's "Don't look", I saw a woman with a wrinkled brown face framed in a black shawl holding in one hand a hook-bladed old knife and in the other a headless, kicking chicken. Not so far up the road Doctor de M. had his surgery.*

*Doctor de M..... He, I know, was one of the indistinct pair of medicos at the foot of the bed on which I lay, disorientated, face down and feeling very poorly. Perhaps it was Doctor de M. who extracted fluid from my spine for the analysis to define my illness. I felt nothing. Whatever type of meningitis was identified, it annihilated my hearing.*

*In the direction of the sea, across the level crossing, was the entrance to the quinta. A long, dead straight avenue ran, walled on either sides and lined by young trees, from the break in the quinta's boundary wall, through a short arched passage, into the courtyard which was the hub of the Quinta Nova. On the left of the entrance passage was the school hall with the school itself, at right angles, together forming one and a half sides of the courtyard. On the right, a matching, similarly shaped structure housed 'The Club', games room and Company Offices. These three sides were long, narrow, two storey buildings. The fourth side, the south, was formed by the Palace, a great rambling edifice, in some rooms of which resided the manager of this Carcavelos Cable and Wireless Station. The imposing Palace staircase up to the second floor entrance was directly opposite the avenue. Altogether, this large cobbled courtyard with its four majestic pepper trees was an attractive and*

*imposing place where children trod with hush and circumspection. It was here that I accepted a dare from Michael B. to chew a couple of the red pepper berries, with distressing results. Against this backdrop, also, was my bout with meningitis played out in 1937...*

Agnes and I wonder, in 1997, do any of these buildings still survive? There is a distinct slowing of the train. We exchange an excited glance then our attention becomes riveted upon the dreadful sight that is coming into view. We see desolation, bare, scraped earth extending several hundred yards back from the railway line, with more and more revealed as the train slows. There is a straggle of trees and, at the distant seaward edge of this great bulldozed expanse, a huddle of red roofs that awaken no memories in me at all. No sign of the quinta wall is to be seen as the level crossing passes slowly beneath the carriage window and the train halts alongside the modern, glassed-in Carcavelos station platform. We disembark from the train. The street into Carcavelos is there, shaded attractively now by mature trees, and the village has become a pleasant town of white-walled buildings.



The Patio, St Julian's School (courtesy of Ormond Fannon)

But where are the high quinta boundary wall, the avenue, with, beside it, the first holes of the golf course which, after meningitis, I played frequently against myself using a mixed bag of children's and cut-down clubs, while all the other children were in their classrooms and I was not because I could not hear? All seemed to have been scraped from the earth in preparation for a vast building project. The train departs and the crossing opens to allow through cars upon a road that curves behind the station and then turns, a good way off, towards the distant sea, just where I estimate the quinta's western boundary was of yore.

Rather downcast, Agnes and I walk in the hot sun upon the dust beside this road. There are drainage pipes stacked and other evidence of the construction soon to be undertaken. Of the quinta as I recall it, nothing appears to remain. We approach the straggle of trees and, suddenly, I find my feet rooted to the earth....

*Somehow, I seemed unsure where my feet were, that sunny evening in May 1937, as the school Wolf Cub pack stood in a circle round Akela, who was also 'Ma' R., the headmaster's wife. The fifth tee of the golf course was on my right and the big blocks where the mysterious Company business went on were a couple of hundred yards away in front of me but I did not see them because it hurt my eyes to focus on them that far away. My green jersey seemed very hot and my cap was an iron band that caused sharp pain in my head. David and I were boarding at the school for one term while our parents spent their three-month furlough in England. I shared a room at the back of the school building overlooking the dusty oblong that was our playground, where we ran about and crouched over our marble contests. Looking down from this bedroom window, it was almost directly above the central playground steps. Charleyboy was my roommate, a sturdy boy with a large head, who was my own age. It was Charleyboy who spoke the last words I ever heard distinctly. Customarily, we lay in bed whispering to each other well into the dark. But that evening in May I went out like a light...*

I wake up and find Agnes directing a puzzled look at me. "Look," is all I can say, pointing to the trees that begin twenty yards

away across the bare earth. This sprawl of trees has, seen from the end, become two rows of trunks, leading dead straight, to the clump of roofs that were visible from the train. It is the avenue that led, sixty years ago, to the Palace courtyard! Left and right all is devastated and the high walls of the avenue have been battered down to waist-high mounds, but the three hundred-yard avenue itself bisects the cleared area otherwise just as I recall. The trees are taller and concrete pillars now block ingress and perhaps the top few yards of the avenue have gone beneath the bulldozer. I realise my memory is at fault. The quinta entrance was not exactly opposite the level crossing. But here it is and, a few hundred yards off, maybe there are other sights from the past. We start down the avenue....

*I woke up in the night and Charleyboy was leaning over my bed in the dark. "Ugh!" he said. "You've been sick!" And those deathless words were the last I was ever to hear clearly! Afterwards, after the doctors' visit, the next day or the one afterwards, I only knew it was light, Miss du B., our French gym mistress, a lady who always held herself with such erectness that she seemed in danger of falling over backwards, was beside my bed reading aloud to me from my book. What I was hearing was meaningless, a droning with highs and lows and gaps. The last time I was aware of hearing my own voice was when I dimly heard my own peevish and feverish complaint to Miss du B., "I can't hear....."*

Sixty years later I am walking nearer and nearer down the avenue towards the place where I last heard. With me, snapping the camera, is the best thing to have happened to me during those six decades.....Agnes, my wife! The further down the avenue we go, the more I feel at home. There is a stretch of the original high wall, appearing exactly as it did when it formed the safe boundary wall of our extensive children's paradise. The buildings, the roofs of which had seemed unfamiliar, are falling into place. And I have a growing conviction that, in spite of the devastation to right and left, ahead things do look familiar! Through the arch as we near it, I gain a glimpse of remembered cobbles, a feathery tree branch, and, right opposite, part of the Palace staircase appearing, indeed, grander and more elaborate than I recall. Then there is a blue notice board and, in

gold letters, 'St. Julian's School, Quinta Nova'. A memory comes surging back from the past. St. Julian's.....of course! How had I forgotten that?

In the shadow of the arch two men are talking. I have the envelope of photographs in my hand and I select one. It shows my mother, David and me in best clothes, besides a round pond which is the centre of a formal garden... the Palace garden below the terrace, taken by a photographer while we were living in the Palace, not long after my illness. It is one of several such photographs, a surprise gift for my father. One of the men recognises the place immediately and, with a smile, directs us into a doorway to one side of the short passage. A lady comes from an office there. As soon as I explain that I am a long past pupil of St. Julian's, she invites us to wander round.

A few steps forward and I have gone back in six decades. The courtyard is unchanged! The same, long matching buildings are left and right with window shutters open against the walls. The Palace is in front, somewhat decrepit in appearance but that's how it looked in the 'thirties. The staircase is, indeed, grander than I recall. There are more trees, too, but I was right about the four feathery pepper trees that provide most of the shade. The identical cobblestones are underfoot; the same entrance to the school is in the corner to my left. There is more architectural adornment than I noticed as a boy, over windows and on a gatehouse above the arch, but this attractive square is, with the extra details that I had forgotten, exactly the same! I can point to within a yard the exact site of my last clear memory of meningitis in 1937, a period that was otherwise a black unconsciousness of unknown length.....

*I was being carried, feet first, flat on my back, midway across the courtyard between the school entrance and the Palace steps. I knew exactly where I was although all I saw were the leaves of a pepper tree moving slowly overhead and, above them, a sky of vivid blue lit by the sun of a day in May, 1937. I had blacked out again before the Palace steps were reached. My parents were there when I woke up, having returned in a small single-engined 'plane, with several touchdowns, which was a hair-raising adventure in*

*those days. I never thought to enquire how they were informed. I like to think that a message from Pa R. sped to them along the cable undersea to Cornwall to reach them on a coarse white folded paper oblong inside a yellow envelope.*

*A white-uniformed Scottish nurse, with carrot hair just like mine, was attending me when I was again aware. Her name, perhaps through the new communication problem, was lost along with much else in my poorly registered memories of the subsequent year or two. She and my mother were with me, clapping encouragement, when I finally contrived to stand unsupported and to totter upon my spaghetti legs. We remained resident in the Palace for some time, during which, happily, I made a full recovery – except for that little nerve needed by the ears, which was a 100% non-operative thereafter! David and I had vast, empty rooms to play in. I remember propelling our Dinky Toy cars on immense journeys around the floor of the ballroom. Then we were a month or two in England, where I was taken from one specialist to another, until we returned to the quinta, taking over the 'Blair Bungalow', which was the abode of the station's second-in-command. My main memory, there, is of the bound copies of a superior boys' magazine left by the son of the house, and the serial I devoured about 'Seadrome', a futuristic airport constructed in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.*

*It was from this house that I started my rounds of golf, in the mornings when the course was usually empty. At weekends I played my father who gave himself a stroke-a-hole handicap and two on the long ones. But I never beat him, even with argument about one or two holes of ambiguous length, for he was a low-handicap player, frequent winner of the Quinta Nova golf tournaments. For a longer period we occupied the house where Joyce had lived, which was partly surrounded by fir trees and not far from the main quinta road, bumpily negotiable to cars, that linked the houses. Here a short story in one of Joyce's Girls' Annuals had an evil effect on me. It was about a blind Princess and, that night and for many a year afterwards, blackness filled me with terror. How I loathed the blackout in the war years soon to come!*

*Except for David, I had little contact with other children. Approaching Nige on our return from England, keen to resume relations, he literally back-pedalled with a mien of absolute bemusement. For a spell, perhaps a year, I enjoyed a new kind of freedom, school-less and not unhappy. Deafness did not concern me. Abomination of deafness came soon after, with a vengeance, which six decades has not diminished! Came the day my father was borne away peering through the back window of a taxi, to a new posting in Zanzibar. David and I were not to see him again until World War Two was over. The two of us, and for a time, our mother, returned to England – sailing on R.M.S. 'Alcantara'. The "in the quinta years" were over. Also on the liner was Miss W., a St. Julian's teacher going into retirement. When she was the winner of the shipboard 'Passing the Needles' sweepstake, she insisted, as we neared the quay in Southampton, on giving the money to my mother ".....for John".*

I returned from childhood to the sun-drenched courtyard of Quinta Nova in 1997. A group of children emerge from the door that, in the past, led into the forbidden territory of the 'Club'. Agnes hears a teacher calling to them in English. St. Julian's has expanded. Without having to look, memory informs me that there are two exits from the courtyard, left and right, in the corners where the buildings join the Palace. We pass out of the courtyard to the right. It was here that the group of 1930's school children pressed together to have their photograph taken.

We see a new classroom building in front where, in days gone past, tennis had been played. Agnes takes my photograph. In this snap the background buildings are the same as those in the old one, but behind me, other children are running up from the block buildings at the bottom of the Palace garden where the main Cable & Wireless business of the Carcavelos overseas station had been carried on. A signboard indicates that St. Julian's Primary School now resides there. These running children wear dark grey with dark green jumpers, a change from the old St. Julian's light grey with colours of eggshell blue and chocolate. As Agnes and I return into the courtyard and cross towards the opposite exit, children are

pouring from the second floor Palace portal and down both side of the imposing staircase. If Pa and Ma R., Miss W. and backward tilted Miss du B. are able to look down from above, they must be delighted by the hundred-fold expansion of their school!

Agnes and I mount a few steps into the eastern exit of the courtyard and there, in front of us across the quinta road, just where it ought to be, is the 'Blair Bungalow' where I had read the exciting episodes about the Atlantic 'Seadrome'! Furthermore, on our left, a door is wide open enabling us to look down the corridor that runs the full length of the original school building to the entrance hall at the far end. It is better lit, now, with strip lighting.....

*Midway, on the courtyard side one of the doors led into the school library. In here, one day, a much younger 'me' crouched alone in the room, selecting my next book to read. I felt sad because I had put into the shelf for returned books 'Swallowdale' which I had read with special delight while believing it a one-off tale like the Percy F. Westerman's and the A.G. Henry's I usually selected. My heart jumped when I became aware that, in the low dark shelf in front of me, were a row of dull green volumes by Arthur Ransome, identical to the one I had just read. I could hardly believe it when I discovered that each one featured the 'Swallows and Amazons' of 'Swallowdale', a discovery so important that it seethed within me till the end of lessons, when I sped home to burst into house No. Two, bawling out my momentous news to my parents, who received it with only a polite response!*

I draw Agnes' attention to another door, on the same side of the long corridor but nearer to the end where we are peering in.....

*In this room Miss W. captured the class's imagination with a lesson in which she took us to the depths of the ocean, describing the blackness, the enormous pressure that no human diver or 'thirties technology could possibly withstand, and the very few grotesque creatures that were able to venture there. When she set us the homework essay, 'My Visit to the Bottom of the Sea', we went round the quinta for a week, trying to pump each other about how we were*



*going to tackle the fascinating problem. I fear I let my friends assume that I, too, was putting myself into the body of one of the grotesque, eel-like creatures of the abyss that Miss W. had described to us. On the day I received my one and only classroom commendation, ever, for my essay which began, "I am King Neptune.....".*

Proceeding, Agnes and I descend a few steps that my boy-sized feet had unwillingly mounted each day, for years, on my way to the school entrance in the courtyard.....

*Some days, we children came on old bikes that had been sold on by family after family. The one small enough for David was a girl's model. We rough rode the footpaths, standing on the pedals and negotiating ruts with balance far better than I had later. The paths from the house converged alongside the 'Blair Bungalow' garden and there we encountered quinta friends on foot or on their own battered two wheels. The short stretch from the corner of the garden, along a few yards of the quinta road, and up to the steps was where disclosures regarding broken harbours in Lone Valley were usually whispered.....*

The school playground behind the school is of the same dimensions as I remember and some of the original trees survive, but the bare earth had been paved over. There is another modern classroom on our right but, behind it, the old gate into the Palace garden is unlocked. We go in and circle the round pond that is unaltered. Ivy still climbs to the Palace balcony and the hedges and paths radiating from the pond are only a little more overgrown. Agnes takes a photograph of me, once more beside this pond. I am sad that David will never see it, knowing that he would recognise the scene in an instant.

We cross to the corner of the 'Blair Bungalow' garden. No paths converge there now. Instead, a new flat playing field stretches away covering the paths we negotiated on our bikes without ever setting foot to ground. Beyond, trees and bushes have run wild, but,

far away in the direction of the sea, the red roof of a white building is visible. I wonder if it can possibly be house Number Two....?

Agnes and I retrace our steps towards the courtyard. We pause beside the paved playground and regard the long white back of the original school building. I pick out a second-floor window near the middle. It is the window of the bedroom I shared with Charleyboy, where, one night sixty years ago; he spoke his four immortal words! Taking Agnes by the arm I point to this window and say, "That's where I went deaf."

---ooOoo---

**John Wheeler was born in the Suez Cable & Wireless Station in 1927. Early years were spent in England and at his father's overseas postings. He went to Carcavelos c. 1934. He spent the war years in England with Miss M.M. Taylor, a teacher of deaf children in Brighton, and attended hearing schools and Goldsmith's Art College but joined the staff of Miss Taylor's school in 1950. He taught deaf children for 37 years and married Agnes, another teacher, in 1968. They have one daughter, Tasmin, and are now retired and living in Seaford, East Sussex, England.**