

LEGG OVER DORSET

The Autobiography of Rodney Legg

Prolific is the word that applies, to someone with 125 books to his name - mostly about Dorset and in-depth history ranging from the Romans to the Second World War - though Bournemouth-born Rodney Legg prefers to call it 'six feet of books'. That's the shelf-space they occupy.

It is a life that also has had its own themes. Feral childhood turned to teenage protest. A journalist from the age of 16, he was the founder editor, in 1968, of the magazine that continues as *Dorset Life*. A love affair with the ghost village of Tyneham secured unprecedented public access to a live-firing range. For a quarter of a century he wardened Steep Holm island in the Bristol Channel as a nature reserve memorial to his broadcasting friend Kenneth Allsop. With international author John Fowles he published the 300-year-old archaeological notes of 17th-century antiquary John Aubrey. His pride and joy are his couple of cats. And the appearance of what now totals 62 letters (together with five 'lives remembered') in *The Times*: 'Enough to fill four pages!'

Legg's resentment against old attitudes in the National Trust turned into 20 years as a subversive insider who opened Max Gate and Fort Henry in Dorset to an admiring public and secured numerous lasting reforms. During this time, in pauses from the continuous motion of Dorset and Somerset countryside walks, he specialised in finding and researching an esoteric range of antiquities and bric-a-brac. His collection of Celtic heads is destined for the British Museum.

Often in trouble, never afraid to voice a difficult opinion, always crusading for a just cause, this revealing autobiography covers the lows and highs of a figure who – admired or otherwise – has become a much-loved Dorset institution.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rodney Legg was born in Bournemouth of solid Dorset stock and has emerged as a hugely prolific publisher, author and journalist particularly on country and walking themes and concerning the history of Dorset. He also edited both *Dorset – The Country Magazine* and *Purbeck and Poole Magazine*.

Nationally he is still active in the environmental movement having been chairman of the Open Spaces Society since 1989 and a member of the ruling council of the National Trust from 1990 to 2009.

'Rodney Legg, arch-scurge (then and now) of politicians, government, the military and the Establishment in general' - editor Fanny Charles

'A cross between a feral man of the wild and an advertising whiz kid (the former image, perhaps, being an example of the latter gift)'
- essayist Paula Weidegar

'A one-man Dorset cultural institution'
- feature writer Patrick Wright

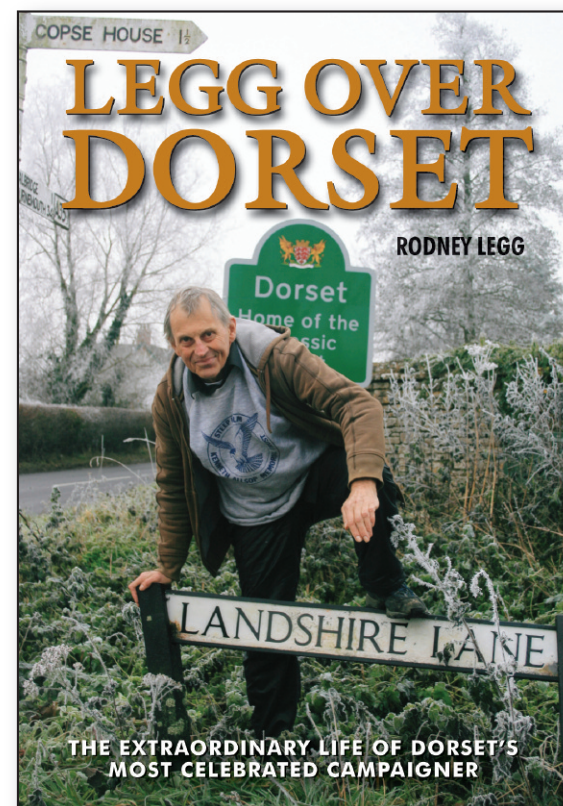
'That scurrilous ragmonger'
- businessman Jeremy Pope

HALSGROVE CATALOGUE

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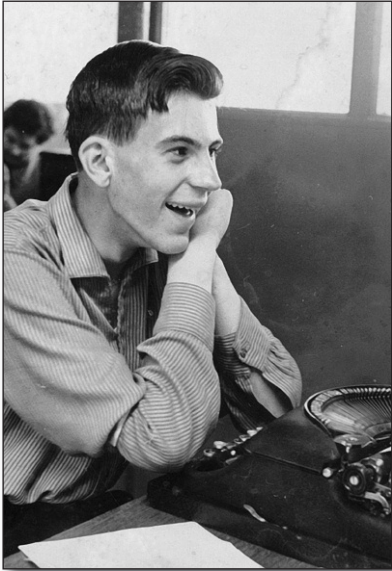


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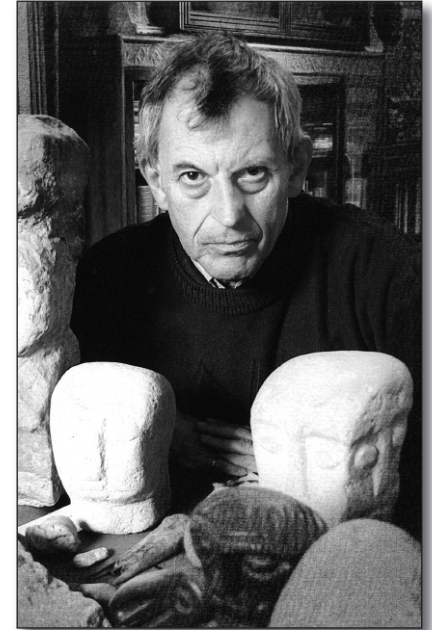
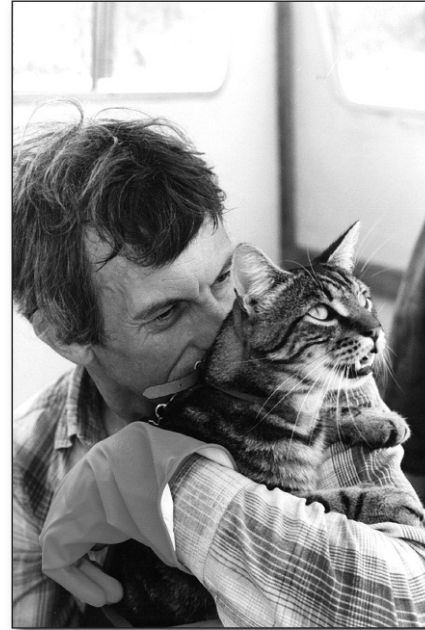


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Above: Norman Chislett and Rodney Legg at play
 Left: Reporter Rodney Legg with his Remington portable
 Right: Rodney and Salman Legg, en route to Steep Holm, photographed by John Pitfield
 Far right: Rodney Legg surrounded by Celtic heads, photographed by John Baxter



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Barrie Legg and Rodney, in Winton Secondary School tie, 1959

young it did not qualify one for membership of the master-roce. Form teacher Miss Thomas would snatch the pen from that hand and push it into the helpless other. For centuries, writing with live ink, the method assumed you were right-handed, to drag a wet nib across the page in a hand that rested on virgin paper. Doing this in reverse, I would push the pen into the grain of the paper-causing blots – and then smudge the results with my palm. To make things worse for Miss Thomas the content appalled her. Such as my project on the Second World War. Refusing to look at it, she said that war was brutality and violence, but I also reminded her of being in love. Total war, a decade gone, had taken Miss Thomas's sweetheart. Further cruelty for me was humiliation and ridicule for shambolic attempts at country dancing.

That torment at Summerbee Primary School ended with an awful 11-plus. Firstly, all my fish in the class aquarium were dead in the water under a cloud of graphite dust from mass pencil sharpening. Secondly, our class had never been confronted with a single IQ-type puzzle or question, whereas the 'chosen' next-door class had been doing them for weeks. As a result I went to Winton Secondary School for Boys.

I was required to attend Sunday School at the High Anglican parish church of St Francis of Assisi, Chammater, and was confirmed as a member of the Church of England. My questioning attitude agonised Father Julian Raddi. He infuriated an elderly spinster that I moved on the trot, behind the seats, replacing kneelers, Bibles and prayer books after services. "Don't be so irreverent", she remonstrated. I admonished her, saying the fault lay with those who left the place strewn with debris, and asked:

"Why should God's work be done inefficiently?"

A FERAL CHILDHOOD

It left me ever-ready to put down self-proclaimed religious people. Under-age exposure to hymns and prayer gave me a lifelong appreciation for the finest words in the English language. That scriptural heritage still trips off the tongue at apposite moments, such as when I was reprimanded by a rector for cutting down some scrub, to open up a view he had not realised was there:

"Lift up mine eyes unto the hills."

My mother shared my pragmatic view of religion. When the mission church and hall opposite our former home was sold by the Church of England, to the Lutherans, she voted with her feet and joined the German community. It appalled the vicar, Revd Reuben Henthorne, and those who still mentioned the war, which hardened her resolve. She became caretaker of the building. The congregation reciprocated by taking her on holiday to Hannover.

Throughout childhood, I saw all the popular movies at matinee showings, usually from a front of gallery corner seat at the Westover, including war films from *The Cruel Sea* to *The Longest Day*. Ealing comedies, the *St Trinian's* series and epic westerns like *Stagecoach* and *High Noon*. By the time I was teenager I had my own typewriter and, unusually for a male, could touch-type. Subsequent words can be blamed on teacher David Popham (his English is more mine than his) who also happened to be a Dorset devotee. I was a constant disappointment to math-ematician Victor Loosemore. 'Legg's Eleven' headmaster Stephen Lindley said to hilarity as my result was reported. Oddly, whilst algebra and logarithms remain a foreign country, I am fascinated by arithmetic and statistics.

Relations with teachers was not helped by having a letter published in the *Daily Express* denouncing the requirement that we should wear school caps as

Norman Chislett and Rodney Legg at play



Celebrating with the National Trust at Studland Manor after opening Fort Henry to the public, photographed by John Pitfield

Example of a double-page spread.