



A MODEST MEMBER

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Farmer Fred found in good spirits

Many years ago, before I became an MP, our district was surprised to learn that Fred, my farmer neighbour, was erecting an office.

Fred was not notable for the prompt way he dealt with his correspondence. He usually lets it mature in a china ornament on the mantelpiece for at least a month, and longer if it is unpleasant.

Nor was he well known for his modern methods of book-keeping. He keeps all his papers in a large cardboard carton.

When his accountant advises him that he can no longer postpone the evil hour for filling in his tax return, he carries the box to the accountant's office, tips the lot out on the floor and stalks out.

His more intimate entries are kept in a small red Cooper's notebook. None of us could see why Fred needed an office.

But we were even more surprised when we cased the joint.

We found that the office was a solidly built little edifice about 50 yards from the house.

And you're quite wrong — it wasn't that kind of building; it was bigger than that and had a chimney and a frosted window and a strong door with a big lock.

We puzzled about this, particularly as we frequently saw a light in the window at night and smoke coming out from the chimney. And, creeping close, we could often hear, not the thumping of a typewriter but tinkling sounds.

The whole district was soon on the prowl trying to find what Fred was about.

We tried various stratagems to get ourselves invited into the office but Fred is not as simple as he looks and for some time he kept us out.

But one hot night one of our chaps peeped through the open door and saw Fred wearing what appeared to be a baseball catcher's mask.

He reported this back to us and we could not stand it any longer, so we decided then and there to raid Fred's office. But when we forced our way in, we found not an office, but the most weird and wonderful home-brewing outfit ever seen.

There was an old bath bubbling quietly to itself. There were shelves of assorted bottles, some with corks tied down with string, some with heavy weights on top of the seals. There were jars

of yeast and tins of sugar with ants laying siege. There were mouldy marks on the ceiling where bottles had blown their tops. There were petrol funnels, bits of gauze, there was a bit of almost everything.

I will say this for Fred, he wasn't mean with us after the dust had settled. When we agreed to sample some of his homework he put on his mask to protect himself if a bottle exploded, and stealthily approached a particular batch of bottles.

He reverently lifted one down, stood it in a china wash basin and advised us to stand clear. Then he bravely took the top off and managed to catch quite a lot of beer in the basin as it came down. It wasn't long before we had enough in the basin to start.

We tasted it. You couldn't really say it was like bought beer, but it was, well — interesting. And it would make a rabbit fight a bulldog.

From then on we frequently used to come over to help Fred with his office work and it wasn't long before our wives started to smell a rat. This wasn't surprising because, if a batch went bad, you could smell us from miles away.

So we took the precaution of having an alarm system of tins tied to cunningly located wires, and dogs strategically placed, and so on.

Things have progressed since then. Fred is now the proud operator of a plastic plant with self-sealing containers and plastic tubes that gurgle engagingly.

He is really a craftsman and talks knowingly about vintages and recipes and so on. But still each new batch is an adventure to Fred and for all of us, even to me who hasn't been supposed to know about it since I became an MP.

When the Government announced that there were to be no restrictions on home-brewing, I went urgently to tell Fred the good news. But it didn't seem to make him happy.

He was morosely rolling up a reel of thin tripwire with a tin can tied every 10 yards.

He said he thought the decision had taken half the fun out of the business.