

COUNTRY WEEK

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THIS week, I have been initiated into the secrets of terrier stripping. May, I am informed, is the month in which any border terrier wishing to cut a dash through the summer books an appointment at a pet hairdresser and spends half a day being plucked.

Our border terrier has been looking like an overused and unclean toothbrush for some weeks, and has taken to lying under the lavatory to keep cool, so, ignoring the smirks and sniggers of my husband and sons, I accompanied her to Posh Pets, a salon specialising in hair care for canines.

For the next four hours, a girl in a green overall was her slave. The terrier loved it. My fears that it would hurt her were banished within moments—she rolled over on her back and her eyes glazed in a trance of pleasure as her attendant whirled a cloud of fast fingers and flying hairs about her. At lunch-time, smart little brown dog pranced to greet me, svelte and urbane and feeling just as every girl does on a good hair day.

Animal business is engrossing at present. My mare is due to foal at any moment, and the closed-circuit television in her stable provides only marginally more absorbing viewing than can be had watching paint dry. Most of the time, only the mare's large rump is visible, as she stands hock deep in straw, staring vacantly out into the yard.

Her daily journey to her field 10yd away is accomplished with maximum groaning and sighing, and once in the field she simply stands by the gate, occasionally toying with a blade of grass until it is time to come in again. One longs to rush out to her with a deck chair and foot stool, urging her to put her feet up and get some rest, but life just is not like that for horses.

MEANWHILE, THE GARDEN has taken advantage of my lack of concentration and has become a jumble of clashing colours and

exuberant growth. I was overzealous with seed orders during the long, cheerless winter, and am now racing belatedly to plant out trays after trays of seedlings, secretly hoping that the hens will eat some of them and scratch up others while making space for their dust baths.

The hammock swings enticingly beneath two old apple trees, but so far I have managed to take advantage of it only when reading to the children. Once we were in it, however, the three of us spent a whole day reading *The Secret Garden*, and another reading *Little House In The Big Woods*. I do not think my determinedly macho sons would go for *Ballet Shoes* or *What Katy Did*, but the life of a garden captured their interest as fully as it did mine at their age, and Laura Ingalls Wilder's books about a pioneering family and their journey across America include unbeatable details such as how to make your own bullets, and are firm favourites.

Reading aloud and being read to, in the garden during the summer or inside by a roaring fire any time, are two of life's great pleasures, and are among my most vivid memories of my own childhood. It may seem difficult to find time to sit *en famille* with a book; there are story tapes, television and videos to compete with and a thousand

distractions always available. But pick the right book, and you and your children can bask in dappled sunlight for hours, unfettered by feelings of guilt or accusations of laziness.

OUR VILLAGE REACHES its prime as June approaches and the cricket team begins to play two fixtures a week on the green. People you never otherwise see except speeding away to town in their cars, are suddenly to be found enjoying leisurely afternoons outside the pub watching a cricket ball hurtle towards the windows of the Spar shop or into the hands of an alert fielder. Emerald turf, crisp white flannels and the thwack of leather on wood. All that is needed to complete the Rupert Brooke ideal is a cucumber sandwich and cup of tea.

Village cricket is flourishing in this corner of rural Norfolk, and several members of the team give up an evening a week to foster young talent for the future. My sons are both enthusiastic players and love the training session on the green. Indeed, older son, whose school hours are long, has to perform a change worthy of Superman in the back of the car while eating a picnic supper every Wednesday in order to present himself on time as a village cricketer rather than a schoolboy.

For me, the cricket season is bliss. Having spent various freezing afternoons through autumn and winter watching rugby and hockey matches on godforsaken seas of mud without understanding the rules at all, I welcome the civilised nature of cricket. For a start, you can read the paper. The pace of cricket is not such that this is frowned on in spectators. Secondly, chairs are usually provided, and thirdly, the rules are straightforward—well, at Under 9's level they are anyway. It is an almost perfect sport, but with one flaw: practice on the lawn accounts for two or three window panes a season. The village green beckons for the summer holidays.



‘**A**LL secrets are told to you a bit at a time,’ says Geoffrey Humphries, an English artist who has lived in Venice for 31 years and become something of a legend. He began gilding 10 years ago, gradually learning his skill by restoring his own old, battered picture frames.



He follows the traditional Venetian method of gilding, which dates from the 17th century and uses 24-carat gold: 'Old friends taught me.' One frame takes a week to make and gild, and the effect is 'plain and simple'. For Mr Humphries, the most exciting stage is the last, when the gold is

burnished and starts to shine: 'It is a love of gold of course.'

Friends and visiting artists, including Ken Howard, RA, insist that their paintings are displayed in his frames. 'I wish they wouldn't,' he jokes. 'The sun is out.'

Mr Humphries regrets that old-fashioned gilding is

a dying trade. 'In the past, people had to pay a gilder to become an apprentice—that is no longer the case.'

LIVING NATIONAL TREASURE

FRAME GILDER

However, in July, he plans to teach his teenage daughter the craft.

Photograph: Simon Upton.