‘Mr Farnon is expecting me. He wrote asking me to come today.’

‘Mr Herriot?’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Surgery is from six to seven o’clock. If you wanted to bring a dog in, that would be your best time.’

‘No, no,’ I said, hanging on to my smile. ‘I’m applying for the position of assistant. Mr Farnon said to come in time for tea.’

‘Assistant? Well, now, that’s nice.’ The lines in her face softened a little. ‘I’m Mrs Hall. I keep house for Mr Farnon. He’s a bachelor, you know. He never said anything to me about you, but never mind, come in and have a cup of tea. It shouldn’t be long before he’s back.’

Mrs Hall, housekeeper of Skeldale House, is used to answering the front door. On the iron railings outside, a brass plate bears the name of Mr S. Farnon MRCVS, Veterinary Surgeon, and those ringing the bell are usually clients keen for Mr Farnon to see to their animals. This time it’s a young man smiling nervously at the door, name of James Herriot, who has come for an interview with her employer.

From Darrowby’s main square, the young vet has walked along the quiet street of Trengate until he reached Skeldale House, the only house to have ivy climbing untidily over its bricks. It has a fine, white-painted doorway and graceful, wide windows on the ground floor. The paint is flaking here and there but there is a ‘changeless elegance’ about the old house and James immediately likes the look of it. Mrs Hall ushers James in and for the first time, he enters the house which will become his home and workplace, where a new life awaits him.

I followed her between whitewashed walls, my feet clattering on the tiles. We turned right at the end into another passage and I was beginning to wonder just how far back the house extended when I was shown into a sunlit room.

It had been built in the grand manner, high-ceilinged and airy with a massive fireplace flanked by arched alcoves. One end was taken up by a French window which gave on a long, high-walled garden. I could see unkempt lawns, a rockery and many fruit trees. A great bank of peonies blazed in the hot sunshine and at the far end, rooks cawed in the branches of a group of tall elms. Above and beyond were the green hills with their climbing walls.

Ordinary-looking furniture stood around on a very worn carpet. Hunting prints hung on the walls and books were scattered everywhere, some on shelves in the alcoves but others piled on the floor in the corners. A pewter pint pot occupied a prominent place at one end of the mantelpiece. It was an interesting pot. Cheques and banknotes had been stuffed into it till they bulged out of the top and overflowed onto the hearth beneath. I was studying this with astonishment when Mrs Hall came in with a tea tray.

'I suppose Mr Farnon is out on a case,' I said.

'No, he's gone through to Brawton to visit his mother. I can't really say when he'll be back.' She left me with my tea.

While James waits for Siegfried, the doorbell constantly rings, each time causing the five dogs of the house to hurl themselves towards the door, leaping and yelping. With no sign of Mrs Hall, James answers the door and greets first Mr Bert Sharpe who has a cow 'wot wants borin' out', then Mr Mulligan, whose dog is 'womitin' bad', and finally a mysterious red-haired girl, Diana Brompton, who comes in to wait for Siegfried. James awkwardly attempts polite conversation with her, until she eventually marches out of the room, clearly annoyed with waiting. James then decides to wander out into the walled garden, flops down onto the knee-deep grass and rests his head against an acacia tree. As the sun beats down on him and a gentle breeze stirs the wisteria covering the back of the house, he half closes his eyes and dozes, conjuring images in his mind of Siegfried – a man with a curiously Germanic-sounding name . . .

And I opened my eyes. Somebody was saying 'Hello', but it wasn't Herr Farrenen. A tall, thin man was leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets. Something seemed to be amusing him. As I struggled to my feet, he heaved himself away from the wall and held out his hand. 'Sorry you've had to wait. I'm Siegfried Farnon.'

He was just about the most English-looking man I had ever seen. Long, humorous, strong-jawed face. Small, clipped moustache, untidy, sandy hair. He was wearing an old tweed jacket and shapeless flannel trousers. The collar of his check shirt was frayed and the tie carelessly knotted. He looked as though he didn't spend much time in front of a mirror.

Siegfried proceeds to show him around the well-stocked practice dispensary and then to take him for a spin in his battered Hillman to visit Bert Sharpe's cow and some other farms in the area. Siegfried's unorthodox driving – which veers between hurtling along tiny country roads at seventy miles per hour or idling along with his elbows on the wheel, only to slam on his brakes to point out some pedigree shorthorn cows – matches his erratic, unpredictable nature. His boundless energy, however, comes with considerable charm, and once James begins to work alongside Siegfried, it's soon clear how well respected and liked he is by those who live in the Dales.

Donald Vaughan Sinclair, on whom Siegfried was based, also forgot that Alf Wight was coming for an interview in June 1940. Born in 1911, Donald was older than Alf by some five years. A graduate of the Royal School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh, he had bought the Thirsk practice at 23 Kirkgate in 1939. Mrs Weatherill was the practice housekeeper, and she too wasn't surprised that Donald was out when Alf arrived as her employer was also forgetful or at least easily distracted as he charged about from place to place. Like Siegfried, Donald had a small, clipped moustache and the tweedy, slightly dishevelled appearance of an English gentleman, but he was attractive with it and something of a charmer when it came to the ladies.

He warmed to Alf instantly and offered him the position. In reality, Donald left for the RAF almost immediately and it was some months before Alf worked with him closely but because If Only They Could Talk is set in 1937, Siegfried remains in Darrowby and James soon gets a sense of the confusion and disarray that invariably accompanies day-to-day life with the more senior vet.

Siegfried Farnon charged round the practice with fierce energy from dawn till dark and I often wondered what drove him on. It wasn't money because he treated it with scant respect. When the bills were paid, the cash went into the pint pot on the mantelpiece and he grabbed handfuls when he wanted it. I never saw him take out a wallet, but his pockets bulged with loose silver and balled-up notes. When he pulled out a thermometer they flew around him in a cloud.

After a week or two of headlong rush he would disappear; maybe for the evening, maybe overnight and often without saying where he was going. Mrs Hall would serve a meal for two, but when she saw I was eating alone she would remove the food without comment.

He dashed off the list of calls each morning with such speed that I was quite often sent hurrying off to the wrong farm or to do the wrong thing. When I told him later of my embarrassment he would laugh heartily.

There was one time when he got involved himself. I had just taken a call from a Mr Heaton of Bronsett about doing a PM on a dead sheep.

'I'd like you to come with me, James,' Siegfried said. 'Things are quiet this morning and I believe they teach you blokes a pretty hot post-mortem procedure. I want to see you in action.'

We drove into the village of Bronsett and Siegfried swung the car left into a gated lane.

'Where are you going?' I said. 'Heaton's is at the other end of the village.'

‘But you said Seaton’s.’

‘No, I assure you . . .’

‘Look, James, I was right by you when you were talking to the man. I distinctly heard you say the name.’

I opened my mouth to argue further but the car was hurtling down the lane and Siegfried’s jaw was jutting. I decided to let him find out for himself.

We arrived outside the farmhouse with a screaming of brakes. Siegfried had left his seat and was rummaging in the boot before the car had stopped shuddering. ‘Hell!’ he shouted. ‘No post-mortem knife. Never mind, I’ll borrow something from the house.’ He slammed down the lid and bustled over to the door.

The farmer’s wife answered and Siegfried beamed on her. ‘Good morning to you, Mrs Seaton, have you a carving knife?’

The good lady raised her eyebrows. ‘What was that you said?’

‘A carving knife, Mrs Seaton, a carving knife, and a good sharp one, please.’

‘You want a carving knife?’

‘Yes, that’s right, a carving knife!’ Siegfried cried, his scanty store of patience beginning to run out. ‘And I wonder if you’d mind hurrying. I haven’t much time.’

The bewildered woman withdrew to the kitchen and I could hear whispering and muttering. Children’s heads peeped out at intervals to get a quick look at Siegfried stamping irritably on the step. After some delay, one of the daughters advanced timidly, holding out a long, dangerous-looking knife.

Siegfried snatched it from her hand and ran his thumb up and down the edge. ‘This is no damn good!’ he shouted in exasperation. ‘Don’t you understand I want something really sharp? Fetch me a steel.’

The girl fled back into the kitchen and there was a low rumble of voices. It was some minutes before another young girl was pushed round the door. She inched her way up to Siegfried, gave him the steel at arm’s length and dashed back to safety.

Siegfried prided himself on his skill at sharpening a knife. It was something he enjoyed doing. As he stropped the knife on the steel, he warmed to his work and finally burst into song. There was no sound from the kitchen, only the ring of steel on steel backed by the tuneless singing; there were silent intervals when he carefully tested the edge,

then the noise would start again.

When he had completed the job to his satisfaction he peered inside the door. ‘Where is your husband?’ he called.

There was no reply so he strode into the kitchen, waving the gleaming blade in front of him. I followed him and saw Mrs Seaton and her daughters cowering in the far corner, staring at Siegfried with large, frightened eyes.

He made a sweeping gesture at them with the knife. ‘Well, come on, I can get started now!’

‘Started what?’ the mother whispered, holding her family close to her.

‘I want to PM this sheep. You have a dead sheep, haven’t you?’

Explanations and apologies followed.

Later, Siegfried remonstrated gravely with me for sending him to the wrong farm.

‘You’ll have to be a bit more careful in future, James,’ he said seriously. ‘Creates a very bad impression, that sort of thing.’

While Siegfried fails to acknowledge his own shortcomings, such as forgetting appointments or driving to the wrong farm, he is not shy in doling out advice and pointing out James’s flaws, only then to prove he is just as guilty of them. In If Only They Could Talk Siegfried advises James not to get so worked up over a case. Shortly after, a client sends Siegfried into such a violent rage that he’s lucky to escape with his life.

Sometimes he would give me advice on how to live. As when he found me hunched over the phone which I had just crashed down; I was staring at the wall, swearing softly to myself.

Siegfried smiled whimsically. ‘Now what is it, James?’

‘I’ve just had a torrid ten minutes with Rolston. You remember that outbreak of calf pneumonia? Well, I spent hours with those calves, poured expensive drugs into them. There wasn’t a single death. And now he’s complaining about this bill. Not a word of thanks. Hell, there’s no justice.’

Siegfried walked over and put his arm round my shoulders. He was wearing his patient look again. ‘My dear chap,’ he cooed. ‘Just look at you. Red in the face, all tensed up. You mustn’t let yourself get upset like this; you must try to relax. Why do

you think professional men are cracking up all over the country with coronaries and ulcers? Just because they allow themselves to get all steamed up over piffling little things like you are doing now. Yes, yes, I know these things are annoying, but you've got to take them in your stride. Keep calm, James, calm. It just isn't worth it – I mean, it will all be the same in a hundred years.'

He delivered the sermon with a serene smile, patting my shoulder reassuringly like a psychiatrist soothing a violent patient.

I was writing a label on a jar of red blister a few days later when Siegfried catapulted into the room. He must have kicked the door open because it flew back viciously against the rubber stop and rebounded almost into his face. He rushed over to the desk where I was sitting and began to pound on it with the flat of his hand. His eyes glared wildly from a flushed face.

'I've just come from that bloody swine Holt!' he shouted.

'Ned Holt, you mean?'

'Yes, that's who I mean, damn him!'

I was surprised. Mr Holt was a little man who worked on the roads for the county council. He kept four cows as a sideline and had never been known to pay a veterinary bill, but he was a cheerful character and Siegfried had rendered his unpaid services over the years without objection.

'One of your favourites, isn't he?' I said.

'Was, by God, was,' Siegfried snarled. 'I've been treating Muriel for him. You know, the big red cow second from the far end of his byre. She's had recurrent tympany – coming in from the field every night badly blown – and I'd tried about everything. Nothing did any good. Then it struck me that it might be actinobacillosis of the reticulum. I shot some sodium iodine into the vein and when I saw her today the difference was incredible – she was standing there, chewing her cud, right as rain. I was just patting myself on the back for a smart piece of diagnosis, and do you know what Holt said? He said he knew she'd be better today because last night he gave her half a pound of Epsom salts in a bran mash. That was what had cured her.'

Siegfried took some empty cartons and bottles from his pockets and hurled them savagely into the wastepaper basket. He began to shout again.

'Do you know, for the past fortnight I've puzzled and worried and damn nearly dreamed about that cow. Now I've found the cause of the trouble, applied the most modern treatment and the animal has recovered. And what happens? Does the owner

express his grateful thanks for my skill? Does he hell – the entire credit goes to the half-pound of Epsom salts. What I did was a pure waste of time.'

He dealt the desk another sickening blow.

'But I frightened him, James,' he said, his eyes staring. 'By God, I frightened him. When he made that crack about the salts, I yelled out, "You bugger!" and made a grab for him. I think I would have strangled him, but he shot into the house and stayed there. I didn't see him again.'

Siegfried threw himself into a chair and began to churn his hair about. 'Epsom salts!' he groaned. 'Oh God, it makes you despair.'

I thought of telling him to relax and pointing out that it would all be the same in a hundred years, but my employer still had an empty serum bottle dangling from one hand. I discarded the idea.

Siegfried is quick to lose his temper but it's his younger brother Tristan who brings out the worst in him. Tristan is studying at the Edinburgh Veterinary College and returns to Skeldale House during his vacations. Siegfried boils with frustration over Tristan's indolence and failure to pass his exams and James is witness to countless arguments between the pair, which usually result in Siegfried ranting at his brother and throwing him out of the house.

The relationship between Donald and his younger brother Brian, the real-life persona of Tristan, was equally combative, just as relations often are between siblings, but the two had such outlandish personalities that their squabbles sometimes took on epic proportions. Like Tristan, Brian Sinclair was a student of veterinary science and by the time he returned to the practice during the Christmas vacation of 1940 Donald had already been discharged from the RAF – at nearly thirty, he'd lied about his age, and lacked the reflexes required for air instruction. Once the RAF discovered his true age, they reviewed his case and sent him home.

Siegfried is highly opinionated about many issues, not least on the topic of keeping dogs or any animals as pets. This mystifies James as Siegfried is forever surrounded by a pack of dogs, and not for any practical purpose other than he likes having them around.

People often wondered why Siegfried kept five dogs. Not only kept them but took them everywhere with him. Driving on his rounds it was difficult to see him at all among the shaggy heads and waving tails; and anybody approaching the car would recoil in terror from the savage barking and the bared fangs and glaring eyes framed in the windows.

'I cannot for the life of me understand,' Siegfried would declare, thumping his fist on

his knee, ‘why people keep dogs as pets. A dog should have a useful function. Let it be used for farm work, for shooting, for guiding; but why anybody should keep the things just hanging around the place beats me.’

It was a pronouncement he was continually making, often through a screen of flapping ears and lolling tongues as he sat in his car. His listener would look wonderingly from the huge greyhound to the tiny terrier, from the spaniel to the whippet to the Scottie; but nobody ever asked Siegfried why he kept his own dogs.

Siegfried’s lack of self-awareness when it comes to his own sometimes outrageous behaviour continues unabated throughout the James Herriot stories, and living and working with such a larger-than-life character can be trying for the younger partner. Despite this, James enjoys the company of Siegfried and his younger brother Tristan and becomes accustomed to the noise, the madcap schemes and the great laughs they share when swapping stories about the day’s rounds. In Let Sleeping Vets Lie, James looks back on the first two or three years of life at the practice and feels fortunate to be living with the two brothers, whom he considers friends, recognizing also that he had a lot to learn from Siegfried: ‘As a city-bred youth trying to tell expert stock farmers how to treat their animals I had needed all his skill and guidance behind me.’

Donald Sinclair similarly had little awareness of how funny or unusual his behaviour could be, and never considered himself an eccentric in any way. But, like, Siegfried he was a fine vet and regularly offered sage advice to Alf, both in the care of their animal patients and in their dealings with clients. He also readily admitted to having made mistakes in his work, but was revered among the farming community and was particularly skilled when it came to horses. In fact he was very much a horseman, comfortable in the equine world and with horse owners in the region – those with racehorses or thoroughbreds trusted Donald with their prized steeds.

In Vet in a Spin, James looks back on his relationship with Siegfried, who remains a close friend and work colleague decades later. Although Siegfried has always been infuriating and something of a tyrant at times, his enthusiasm is infectious, he has immense charm and is always fizzing with ideas. Critically, though, he has a good heart and is a stalwart of the community and it is those traits which redeem him.

Even now, as we still jog along happily after thirty-five years, I wonder about it. I know I liked him instinctively when I first saw him in the garden at Skeldale House on that very first afternoon, but I feel there is another reason why we get on together.

Maybe it is because we are opposites. Siegfried’s restless energy impels him constantly to try to alter things while I abhor change of any kind. A lot of people would call him brilliant, while not even my best friends would apply that description to me. His mind relentlessly churns out ideas of all grades – excellent, doubtful and very strange indeed. I, on the other hand, rarely have an idea of any sort. He likes hunting,

shooting and fishing; I prefer football, cricket and tennis. I could go on and on – we are even opposite physical types – and yet, as I say, we get along.

This of course doesn't mean that we have never had our differences. Over the years there have been minor clashes on various points . . .

There was another time Siegfried had to take me to task. An old-age pensioner was leading a small mongrel dog along the passage on the end of a piece of string. I patted the consulting-room table.

'Put him up here, will you?' I said.

The old man bent over slowly, groaning and puffing.

'Wait a minute.' I tapped his shoulder. 'Let me do it.' I hoisted the little animal onto the smooth surface.

'Thank ye, sir.' The man straightened up and rubbed his back and leg. 'I 'ave arthritis bad and I'm not much good at liftin'. My name's Bailey and I live at t'council houses.'

'Right, Mr Bailey, what's the trouble?'

'It's this cough. He's allus at it. And 'e kind of retches at t'end of it.'

'I see. How old is he?'

'He were ten last month.'

'Yes . . .' I took the temperature and carefully auscultated the chest. As I moved the stethoscope over the ribs Siegfried came in and began to rummage in the cupboard.

'It's a chronic bronchitis, Mr Bailey,' I said. 'Many older dogs suffer from it just like old folks.'

He laughed. 'Aye, ah'm a bit wheezy myself sometimes.'

'That's right, but you're not so bad, really, are you?'

'Naw, naw.'

'Well neither is your little dog. I'm going to give him an injection and a course of tablets and it will help him quite a bit. I'm afraid he'll never quite get rid of this cough, but bring him in again if it gets very bad.'

He nodded vigorously. ‘Very good, sir. Thank ye kindly, sir.’

As Siegfried banged about in the cupboard I gave the injection and counted out twenty of the new M&B 693 tablets.

The old man gazed at them with interest then put them in his pocket. ‘Now what do ah owe ye, Mr Herriot?’

I looked at the ragged tie knotted carefully over the frayed shirt collar, at the threadbare antiquity of the jacket. His trouser knees had been darned but on one side I caught a pink glimpse of the flesh through the material.

‘No, that’s all right, Mr Bailey. Just see how he goes on.’

‘Eh?’

‘There’s no charge.’

‘But . . .’

‘Now don’t worry about it – it’s nothing, really. Just see he gets his tablets regularly.’

‘I will, sir, and it’s very kind of you. I never expected . . .’

‘I know you didn’t, Mr Bailey. Goodbye for now and bring him back if he’s not a lot better in a few days.’

The sound of the old man’s footsteps had hardly died away when Siegfried emerged from the cupboard. He brandished a pair of horse-tooth forceps in my face. ‘God, I’ve been ages hunting these down. I’m sure you deliberately hide things from me, James.’

I smiled but made no reply and as I was replacing my syringe on the trolley my colleague spoke again.

‘James, I don’t like to mention this, but aren’t you rather rash, doing work for nothing?’

I looked at him in surprise. ‘He was an old-age pensioner. Pretty hard up I should think.’

‘Maybe so, but really, you know, you just cannot give your services free.’

‘Oh but surely occasionally, Siegfried – in a case like this . . .’

‘No, James, not even occasionally. It’s just not practical.’

‘But I’ve seen you do it – time and time again!’

‘Me?’ His eyes widened in astonishment. ‘Never! I’m too aware of the harsh realities of life for that. Everything has become so frightfully expensive. For instance, weren’t those M&B 693 tablets you were dishing out? Heaven help us, do you know those things are threepence each? It’s no good – you must never work without charging.’

‘But dammit, you’re always doing it!’ I burst out. ‘Only last week there was that . . .’

Siegfried held up a restraining hand. ‘Please, James, please. You imagine things, that’s your trouble.’

I must have given him one of my most exasperated stares because he reached out and patted my shoulder.

‘Believe me, my boy, I do understand. You acted from the highest possible motives and I have often been tempted to do the same. But you must be firm. These are hard times and one must be hard to survive. So remember in future – no more Robin Hood stuff, we can’t afford it.’

I nodded and went on my way somewhat bemusedly, but I soon forgot the incident and would have thought no more about it had I not seen Mr Bailey about a week later.

His dog was once more on the consulting-room table and Siegfried was giving it an injection. I didn’t want to interfere so I went back along the passage to the front office and sat down to write in the day book. It was a summer afternoon, the window was open and through a parting in the curtain I could see the front steps.

As I wrote I heard Siegfried and the old man passing on their way to the front door. They stopped on the steps. The little dog, still on the end of its string, looked much as it did before.

‘All right, Mr Bailey,’ my colleague said. ‘I can only tell you the same as Mr Herriot. I’m afraid he’s got that cough for life, but when it gets bad you must come and see us.’

‘Very good, sir,’ the old man put his hand in his pocket. ‘And what is the charge, please?’

‘The charge, oh yes . . . the charge . . .’ Siegfried cleared his throat a few times but seemed unable to articulate. He kept looking from the mongrel dog to the old man’s tattered clothing and back again. Then he glanced furtively into the house and spoke in a hoarse whisper. ‘It’s nothing, Mr Bailey.’

‘But Mr Farnon, I can’t let ye . . .’

‘Shh! Shh!’ Siegfried waved a hand agitatedly in the old man’s face. ‘Not a word now! I don’t want to hear any more about it.’

Having silenced Mr Bailey he produced a large bag.

‘There’s about a hundred M&B tablets in here,’ he said, throwing an anxious glance over his shoulder. ‘He’s going to keep needing them, so I’ve given you a good supply.’

I could see my colleague had spotted the hole in the trouser knee because he gazed down at it for a long time before putting his hand in his jacket pocket.

‘Hang on a minute.’ He extracted a handful of assorted chattels. A few coins fell and rolled down the steps as he prodded in his palm among scissors, thermometers, pieces of string, bottle openers. Finally his search was rewarded and he pulled out a banknote.

‘Here’s a quid,’ he whispered and again nervously shushed the man’s attempts to speak.

Mr Bailey, realizing the futility of argument, pocketed the money.

‘Well, thank ye, Mr Farnon. Ah’ll take t’missus to Scarborough wi’ that.’

‘Good lad, good lad,’ muttered Siegfried, still looking around him guiltily. ‘Now off you go.’

The old man solemnly raised his cap and began to shuffle painfully down the street.

‘Hey, hold on, there,’ my colleague called after him. ‘What’s the matter? You’re not going very well.’

‘It’s this dang arthritis. Ah go a long way in a long time.’

‘And you’ve got to walk all the way to the council houses?’ Siegfried rubbed his chin irresolutely. ‘It’s a fair step.’ He took a last wary peep down the passage then beckoned with his hand.

‘Look, my car’s right here,’ he whispered. ‘Nip in and I’ll run you home.’

As well as taking an instant liking to Siegfried, James quickly feels at home at Skeldale House and becomes fond of its many features and the people who live within its walls.

Every morning he walks out of the back of the house, through the high-walled garden, covered with wisteria, to the garage. To this day the garden at 23 Kirkgate remains intact, although it is half the size it once was, and now features a fine bronze statue of Alf Wight wearing his well-used Wellington boots. The wisteria has survived but the fruit trees have gone and sadly the acacia tree that Alf leaned upon as he dozed in the garden blew down one windy night. In If Only They Could Talk James already delights in his morning routine that takes him through the garden with its views of the fells beyond.

Down the narrow passage with its familiar, exciting smell of ether and carbolic and out into the high-walled garden which led to the yard where the cars were kept.

It was the same every morning but, to me, there was always the feeling of surprise. When I stepped out into the sunshine and the scent of the flowers it was as though I was doing it for the first time. The clear air held a breath of the nearby moorland; after being buried in a city for five years it was difficult to take it all in.

I never hurried over this part. There could be an urgent case waiting but I still took my time. Along the narrow part between the ivy-covered wall and the long offshoot of the house where the wisteria climbed, pushing its tendrils and its withered blooms into the very rooms. Then past the rockery where the garden widened to the lawn, unkempt and lost-looking but lending coolness and softness to the weathered brick. Around its borders flowers blazed in untidy profusion, battling with a jungle of weeds.

And so to the rose garden, then an asparagus bed whose fleshy fingers had grown into tall fronds. Further on were strawberries and raspberries. Fruit trees were everywhere, their branches dangling low over the path. Peaches, pears, cherries and plums were trained against the south wall where they fought for a place with wild-growing rambler roses.

In the years that Alf lived at Skeldale House, he developed a love for gardening and planted vegetable beds full of lettuces, onions, beans and asparagus, with masses of rhubarb, tomatoes trailing up the walls and strawberries in the summer. Manure from the local farms ensured the soil was rich, and Alf turned it over with the assistance of Wardman, an odd-job man who had come through the First World War and whom Donald had employed to help out in the garden, the garage and with any animals in the yard.

In the books, Wardman appears as Boardman, who is often lurking around the yard, tending the boiler or chortling with Tristan, who spends hours smoking his Woodbines or swapping jokes with the veteran, just as Brian Sinclair often did during his vacations. James describes the yard, Boardman’s cubby hole and his memories of Skeldale House in grander days when it belonged to a doctor.

It was square and cobbled and the grass grew in thick tufts between the stones. Buildings took up two sides; the two garages, once coach houses, a stable and saddle room, a loose box and a pigsty. Against the free wall a rusty iron pump hung over a stone water trough.

Above the stable was a hay loft and over one of the garages a dovecot. And there was old Boardman. He, too, seemed to have been left behind from grander days, hobbling round on his lame leg, doing nothing in particular.

He grunted good morning from his cubby hole where he kept a few tools and garden implements. Above his head his reminder of the war looked down: a row of coloured prints of Bruce Bairnsfather cartoons. He had stuck them up when he came home in 1918 and there they were still, dusty and curled at the edges but still speaking to him of Kaiser Bill and the shell holes and muddy trenches.

Boardman washed a car sometimes or did a little work in the garden, but he was content to earn a pound or two and get back to his yard. He spent a lot of time in the saddle room, just sitting. Sometimes he looked round the empty hooks where the harness used to hang and then he would make a rubbing movement with his fist against his palm.

He often talked to me of the great days. ‘I can see t’owd doctor now, standing on top step waiting for his carriage to come round. Big, smart-looking feller he was. Allus wore a top hat and frock coat, and I can remember him when I was a lad, standing there, pulling on ’is gloves and giving his hat a tilt while he waited.’

Boardman’s features seemed to soften and a light came into his eyes as though he were talking more to himself than to me. ‘The old house was different then. A housekeeper and six servants there were and everything just so. And a full-time gardener. There weren’t a blade of grass out of place in them days and the flowers all in rows and the trees pruned, tidy like.’

Alongside Boardman and Mrs Hall, Siegfried also decides the veterinary practice needs someone to take charge of the bills. His pint-pot system, a large beer glass stuffed with banknotes and cheques, is less than satisfactory, and putting Tristan in charge of finances was only ever going to result in chaos. We learn that the new secretary, Miss Harbottle, is in her fifties and recently retired from a firm in Bradshaw where she was known for her efficiency. A big woman, her round face framed by gold-rimmed spectacles, she is introduced to James and Tristan.

I shook hands and was astonished at the power of Miss Harbottle’s grip. We looked into each other’s eyes and had a friendly trial of strength for a few seconds, then she seemed happy to call it a draw and turned away. Tristan was entirely unprepared and a look of alarm spread over his face as his hand was engulfed; he was released only

when his knees started to buckle.

Miss Harbottle proceeds to tour the office while Siegfried hovers behind. She examines with horror the ledger and day books, which are covered in illegible scrawl. She pulls open a drawer in a desk, out of which fall old seed packets, a few peas and some French beans. Crammed in another drawer are soiled calving ropes which somebody has forgotten to wash, while empty pale ale bottles clink in another drawer. When she asks to see the cashbox, Siegfried shows her the pint pot on the mantelpiece, with some of its contents spilled onto the hearth below.

Miss Harbottle clearly has her work set out for her and Siegfried is keen for her to start. The relationship, however, soon turns sour as Miss Harbottle grows increasingly frustrated with Siegfried's chaotic way of doing things.

Siegfried looked down at the square figure behind the desk. 'Good morning, Miss Harbottle, can I do anything for you?' The grey eyes glinted behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. 'You can, indeed, Mr Farnon. You can explain why you have once more emptied my petty cash box.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry. I had to rush through to Brawton last night and I found myself a bit short. There was really nowhere else to turn to.'

'But Mr Farnon, in the two months I have been here, we must have been over this a dozen times. What is the good of my trying to keep an accurate record of the money in the practice if you keep stealing it and spending it?'

'Well, I suppose I got into the habit in the old pint-pot days. It wasn't a bad system, really.'

'It wasn't a system at all. It was anarchy. You cannot run a business that way. But I've told you this so many times and each time you have promised to alter your ways. I feel almost at my wits' end.'

Miss Harbottle was based very loosely on Harold Wilson, a retired railway clerk whom Donald and Alf employed in 1949 to help with the practice paperwork and to balance the books. He, like Miss Harbottle, had a difficult relationship with Donald who found the presence of Harold increasingly irritating. Harold, however, valiantly persevered, bringing some order to the haphazard organization of the practice, and stayed on as a valued employee for ten years.

After a few months, the battle between Siegfried and Miss Harbottle intensifies as each combatant attempts to assert their authority in a variety of crafty ways, with Siegfried more often than not on the losing side.

Watching him go, I thought wonderingly of how things had built up since the secretary's arrival. It was naked war now and it gave life an added interest to observe the tactics of the two sides.

At the beginning it seemed that Siegfried must run out an easy winner. He was the employer; he held the reins and it appeared that Miss Harbottle would be helpless in the face of his obstructive strategy. But Miss Harbottle was a fighter and a resourceful one and it was impossible not to admire the way she made use of the weapons at her command.

In fact, over the past week the tide had been running in her favour. She had been playing Siegfried like an expert fisherman with a salmon; bringing him repeatedly back to her desk to answer footling questions. Her throat clearing had developed into an angry bark which could penetrate the full extent of the house. And she had a new weapon; she had taken to writing Siegfried's clerical idiocies on slips of paper; misspellings, errors in addition, wrong entries – they were all faithfully copied down.

Miss Harbottle used these slips as ammunition. She never brought one out when things were slack and her employer was hanging about the surgery. She saved them until he was under pressure, then she would push a slip under his nose and say 'How about this?'

She always kept an expressionless face at these times and it was impossible to say how much pleasure it gave her to see him cower back like a whipped animal. But the end was unvarying mumbled explanations and apologies from Siegfried and Miss Harbottle, radiating self-righteousness, correcting the entry.

As Siegfried went into the room I watched through the partly open door. I knew my morning round was waiting but I was impelled by morbid curiosity. Miss Harbottle, looking brisk and businesslike, was tapping an entry in the book with her pen while Siegfried shuffled his feet and muttered replies. He made several vain attempts to escape and, as the time passed, I could see he was nearing breaking point. His teeth were clenched and his eyes had started to bulge.

In the immediate post-war years Siegfried goes on to get married and lives with his wife a few miles outside Darrowby while James, Helen and their son Jim are still living in the practice headquarters. In reality, Donald had married in June 1943 while Alf was in the RAF and he and his new bride Audrey Adamson initially lived at 23 Kirkgate. (Donald had been briefly married before while he was a student at the Edinburgh Veterinary College but he lost his young wife to tuberculosis in the early 1930s.) Donald and Audrey would remain married for over fifty years and it was said that her calm temperament acted as the perfect foil to Donald's more impulsive nature.

When the James Herriot books were published many assumed that Alf had

exaggerated the unruly tendencies of Donald to create the character of Siegfried. Donald himself was unhappy with his portrayal, declaring quite memorably after reading the first book: 'Alfred, this book is a test of our friendship!' In fact, many of those who knew Donald felt that Alf had underplayed his eccentricities – his behaviour was extraordinary and erratic in a myriad of ways, as reflected in the books. But he was at heart an immensely likeable and funny man, and, while he could be challenging, 'his many good qualities', as Alf's son Jim put it, 'far outweighed his less appealing ones'. Keen not to upset Donald, Alf deliberately played down his personality quirks in the remaining six books, although he still remains a key character right through to Every Living Thing.

By the time of Every Living Thing, set in the early 1950s, James, Helen and their two children decide to move out of Skeldale House into a more modern property, as they did in reality in 1953. Much as they love the place, it's a big house to look after and its high ceilings and draughty corridors make it impossible to heat.

We loved the old place but it had vast disadvantages for a young couple of moderate means. It was charming, graceful and undoubtedly a happy house in its atmosphere, but it was far too big and a veritable ice box in cold weather.

I looked up over the ivy-covered frontage at the big bedroom windows, then further to the next storey where there was a suite of rooms where, in the early days, we had had our bed-sitter. There was another storey if you counted the tiny rooms under the tiles; here there was a big bell mounted on the end of a spring which used to summon a little housemaid down to the ground floor in the early days of the century.

The old doctor who lived in Skeldale House before we took over had had six servants including a full-time housekeeper, but Helen looked after the whole place with the aid of a series of transient maids, most of whom soon grew tired of the hard work and the impossible inconvenience of the house.

On the day of the move, James finds that Skeldale House echoes with the life it once contained – the antics of three young bachelor vets, the squabbles between Siegfried and Tristan, the ever-present pack of dogs yelping at the door, children running down the corridors – a house that was noisy, chaotic but always happy. The lives of Siegfried and James are moving on, they are married men now and their domestic lives are no longer intertangled as they once were.

Leaving Skeldale had been a far greater wrench than I had ever imagined. After the van had taken the last of our things away I roamed through the empty rooms which had echoed to my children's laughter. The big sitting room where I had read the bedtime stories and where, before all that, Siegfried, Tristan and I had sprawled in bachelor contentment, seemed to reproach me with its ageless charm and grace. The handsome fireplace with its glass cupboard above, and the old pewter tankard which

used to hold our cash still resting there, the French window opening onto the long, high-walled garden with its lawns, fruit trees, asparagus and strawberry beds – these things were part of a great surging ocean of memories.

Upstairs, I stood in the large alcoved room where Helen and I had slept and to where we had brought our children as babies to sleep in the cot which once stood in that corner. I clumped over the bare boards to the dressing room which Jimmy and Rosie had shared, almost hearing their giggles and teasings which were the beginning of each new day.

I climbed another flight to the little rooms under the eaves where Helen and I had started our married life, where a bench against the wall and a gas ring once served as our only cooking arrangements; then I walked to the window and looked over the tumbled roofs of the little town to the green fells and swallowed a huge lump in my throat. Dear old Skeldale. I was so glad it was going to be kept on as the practice house and I would walk through its doors every day, but my family was leaving and I wondered if we could ever be as happy again as we had been here.

While both Alf and Donald continued to work at the Thirsk practice, Donald moved out with his wife Audrey in 1945. As Audrey came from a wealthy shipbuilding family, they were able to move into an elegant country estate, Southwoods Hall, in Thirlby near Thirsk, where Donald could indulge in the gentlemanly pursuits of hunting, shooting and fishing. Donald continued to work at 23 Kirkgate, although reduced his weekly hours, while Alf worked full-time with the help of assistants and eventually his son Jim.

Donald Sinclair was an extraordinary character, in life and on the page as Siegfried Farnon. Siegfried was always an essential part of the practice and of the world that existed inside Skeldale House. His presence in the James Herriot books adds vigour and humour to many of the stories, much of which reflect just how funny Donald was, often unconsciously so. Such is the case in Every Living Thing when Siegfried, who is still much admired by local farmers, treats Mr Hawley's calf.

The farmer, white hair straggling from under a tattered cap, watched anxiously as Siegfried bent over the prostrate calf in a pen in the corner of the cow house.

'What do ye make of it, Mr Farnon?' he asked. 'I've never seen owt like it.'

The appeal in his eyes was mingled with a deep faith. Siegfried was his hero, a wonder worker, the man who had brought off miracle cures for years, even before I had come to Darrowby. William Hawley was one of a breed of simple, unsophisticated farmers who still survived in the fifties but who have long since melted away under the glare of science and education.

Siegfried spoke gravely. 'Very strange indeed. No scour, no pneumonia, yet the little

thing’s flat out like this.’

Carefully and methodically he went over the little body with his stethoscope, auscultating heart, lungs and abdomen. He took the temperature, opened the mouth and peered at the tongue and throat, examined the eyes and ran his hand over the roan hairs of the coat. Then slowly he straightened up. His face was expressionless as he looked down at the motionless form.

Suddenly he turned to the old man. ‘William,’ he said, ‘would you be so kind as to fetch me a piece of string.’

‘Eh?’

‘A piece of string, please.’

‘String?’

‘Yes, about this length.’ Siegfried spread his arms wide. ‘And quickly, please.’

‘Right, right . . . I’ll get ye some. Now where can I lay me hands on a bit that length?’ Flustered, he turned to me. ‘Can ye come and give me a hand, Mr Herriot?’

‘Certainly.’ I followed him as he hurried from the cow house and outside he clutched at my arm. It was clear he had only asked me to come with him to enlighten him.

‘What does ’e want a piece of string for?’ he asked in bewilderment.

I shrugged. ‘I really have no idea, Mr Hawley.’

He nodded gleefully as though that was only what he expected. An ordinary vet couldn’t possibly know what was in the mind of Mr Farnon, a man of legendary skill who was known to employ many strange things in the practice of his art – puffs of purple smoke to cure lame horses, making holes in jugular veins and drawing off buckets of blood to cure laminitis. Old William had heard all the stories and he was in no doubt that if anybody could restore his animal to health by means of a piece of string, it would be Mr Farnon.

But the maddening thing was that as we trotted round the buildings he couldn’t find such a thing.

‘Dang it,’ he said. ‘There’s allus a coil of binder twine hangin’ there, but it isn’t there now! And I’m allus trippin’ over bits o’ string all over t’place, but not today. What’ll he think of a farmer wi’ no string?’

In a growing panic he rushed around and he was almost in tears when he saw a piece lying across a heap of sacks.

‘How about this, Mr Herriot? Is it t’right length?’

‘Just about right, I’d say.’

He grabbed it and ran as fast as his elderly limbs would carry him back to Siegfried.

‘Here y’are, Mr Farnon,’ he panted. ‘Ah’m not too late, am I? He’s still alive?’

‘Oh yes, yes.’ Siegfried took the string and held it dangling for a moment as he measured the length with his eye. Then, as we watched, wide-eyed, he quickly tied it round his waist. ‘Thank you so much, William,’ he murmured, ‘that’s much better. I couldn’t work with that damned coat flapping open as I bent over. I lost a couple of buttons yesterday. Cow got her horn underneath them and tore them off – it’s always happening to me.’

‘But . . . but . . . the string . . .’ The old man’s face was a picture of woe. ‘Ye can’t do anything for my calf, then?’

‘Of course I can. Whatever makes you think I can’t?’

‘Well . . . do ye know what ails him?’

‘Yes, I do. He’s got CCN.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Cerebrocortical necrosis. It’s a brain disease.’

‘It’s a terrible big name. And his brain? It’ll be a hopeless case?’

‘Not a bit. I’m going to inject vitamin B into his vein. It usually works like a charm. Just hold his head for a moment. You see how it’s bent over his back? That’s called opisthotonos – typical of this condition.’

Siegfried quickly carried out the injection and got to his feet. ‘One of us will be passing your door tomorrow, so we’ll look in. I’d like to bet he’ll be a lot better.’

It was I who called next day and indeed the calf was up and eating. William Hawley was pleased.

‘Must have been wonderful stuff Mr Farnon gave ’im,’ he said.

To him it was another miracle, but in his manner I sensed something of the deflation I had seen the day before when Siegfried tied up his coat. His favourite vet had done the trick again, but I knew that in his heart there was still the wistful regret that he hadn’t done it with that piece of string.