

Another postscript to the Gas Holder story

One of Emsworth's more unusual characters arrived in the early 1950s to take up ownership of the grocer's shop at the corner of Victoria Road and North Street. After coming out of the army, Gerald Summers was still somewhat unsettled and whilst looking for a way to earn a living had been attracted by an advertisement which read:

‘Small Grocery and General Stores in a delightful Old World Fishing Village on the South Coast.’

In due course he arrived to take up life as a grocer in the shop, over which there were two large and comfortable rooms, ample space for Gerald, a passionate animal lover, and his animals and birds. Over time he had acquired dogs, a hawk, a kestrel, and his special pet was a large golden eagle named Random, which he had hand reared and trained from a fledgling. By the time Gerald and his menagerie arrived in Emsworth she had now grown a magnificent bird which he housed in the Victoria Road garage behind the shop. In there he had come across an old grocer's bicycle with a delivery basket and this Gerald transformed into what he thought would be an ideal mobile eagle-carrier. With Random perched upon the well-padded framework and the dogs cantering beside him, this was Gerald's key to the freedom of the surrounding countryside, the Nore Farm and Westbourne areas being his particular favourites. Soon established as a somewhat eccentric resident, he became a familiar figure pedalling around the town and local countryside, going as far afield as Harting.

Random's first bid for more local fame came when she landed on the top of the gas holder and flatly refused to come down again, thinking it would make a splendid look-out for possible quarry, despite Gerald's pleas, curses and producing some of her favourite and choicest lures. As night was falling fast, Gerald decided he had no choice but to call on the gas holder's keeper and explain the situation. The keeper refused to allow Gerald to climb the ladder to the gasometer's top (much to his relief) but contacted the gas company's superior officer in Portsmouth who advised them to contact the police; they in turn got in touch with the RSPCA. To Gerald's amusement their representative turned up complete with what looked like a wickerwork cat-basket about 18 inches square, clearly unsuitable in which to cram a golden eagle measuring over 3ft in length and weighing more than 12 lbs.

Fortuitously meanwhile the Southern Gas Board representative had rung to authorise the gas cylinder to be lowered. Lowered it was, slowly and imperceptibly, with Random, statuesque as ever, still perched majestically aloft, indifferent to the floodlighting which now bathed the scene and looking for all the world like a display of *son et lumière*. Sensing the unusual activity Emsworth residents in the meantime had begun to gather in ever increasing numbers to view what promised to be an interesting entertainment. The local newspaper reporter had also been alerted and marked the event by describing it as ‘Emsworth eagle immobilizes gas-works’ in the next day's newspaper, followed by a somewhat sensational and inaccurate account of Random's activities. Just one more episode in the colourful life of Gerald Summers, his golden eagle Random and the town's gas holder.

Reference: ‘Owned by an Eagle’ by Gerald Summers (1976), Collins Press.

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Figure.1: Random as a fledgling

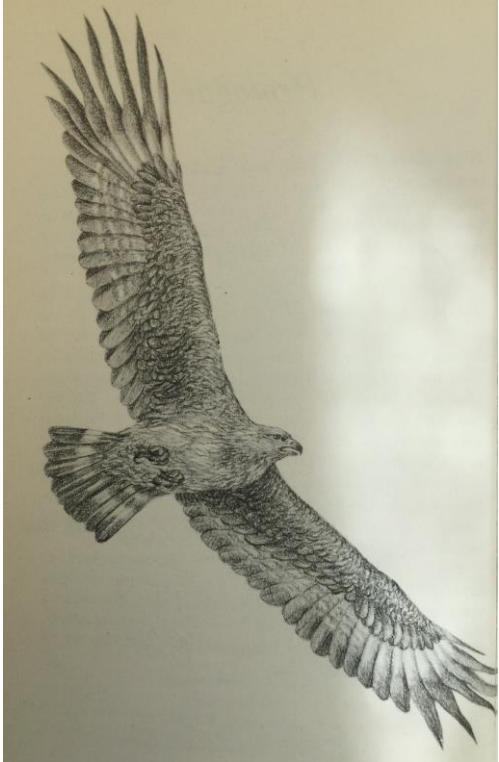


Figure 2: Random in flight