

“Would you like to see the Earth move?” Alan Garner says. We are in Blackden, Cheshire, in the kitchen of Toad Hall, the 15th-century house Garner bought, for £510, in 1957, and where he has lived ever since. Obviously the answer is yes.

We leave the kitchen and walk through to the Old Medicine House, a timber-framed hall with a cavernous central chimney that is big enough to sit inside. This building used to be an apothecary, and it also used to be sited nearly 20 miles from here — more on that anon. Garner and I settle down on the sofa at the far end of the building. It is just before suppertime, so the sun is spilling in from the west through the narrow panes of glass set vertically between ancient timbers; two parallel bars of light are splashed on to the red tile floor.

In four minutes precisely, Garner says, I will see a third bar begin to appear beside the first two: first as a sliver, then growing and growing, as this patch of Earth begins its journey towards night, turning its face from the Sun. “We’re moving at 900 miles an hour!” he says merrily, and suddenly I’m tempted to grip the arm of the sofa. We sit in companionable silence for the next 240 seconds. Suddenly, it’s there: an edge of light on the tile, fine as a needle at first and then, before my eyes, broadening to a blade. I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck as I witnessed this ordinary miracle: something anyone could see, any sunny day of any year, but hardly anyone ever thinks to look for.

Garner will be 84 in October. For the past 58 years — ever since his first book, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, was published — he has been noticing things that other people have never bothered to recognise. He has been called a writer of fantasy, or a writer for children, but neither of those terms does him justice. JRR Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, CS Lewis — the worlds they created were wholly invented: no one can visit Middle Earth, or the planets of the Ekumen, or Narnia, except in the pages of their books. But Garner’s fantasy world can be walked in the strange and beautiful landscape — just a few miles from where we are sitting — of Alderley Edge in Cheshire.

Garner is one of Britain’s greatest writers, yet, because he works slowly, his reputation can run underground like a seam of Cheshire salt. But when I put together *First Light*, an anthology to celebrate his life and work that was published in 2016, the list of admiring contributors makes for an astonishing roll-call — Ali Smith, Philip Pullman, Stephen Fry, Margaret Atwood and more. Elidor, said Neil Gaiman, “changed the way I saw the world”. The worlds Garner has conjured in books from *The Weirdstone* to *Elidor*, *The Owl Service*, *Red Shift*, *Strandloper*, *Thursbitch* (the last two, like *Boneland*, published for adults, though very much a piece with the rest of his work) have had a profound influence on British literary culture and beyond.

This new memoir, *Where Shall We Run To?*, comes as a wonderful surprise. For all the years I have known him — coming up for two decades now — he has always insisted he would never write about himself. “I could never write my autobiography,” he still insists. “I find no point in it, it doesn’t interest me. I don’t find me interesting.” But he then makes a distinction which is characteristic of his precise thinking. “But things that I’ve witnessed are interesting.”

Where Shall We Run To? is just that, a book of witness. Its 16 chapters are tales that recall his childhood during the second world war. Its encounters are vivid and immediate, but it is also an examination of class and change in the England of those years. It begins with Garner

and one of his gang finding what they think is an unexploded German bomb, a classic escapade. But in the next chapter Alan gets a scholarship to Manchester Grammar School, and life changes for ever. He understands that some mysterious separation has occurred between him and the landscape, and people, with which he grew up. “I felt something go and not come back,” he writes. “The 1944 Education Act” — which made secondary education available to all and introduced the 11-plus, “was not a total blessing”, Alan says to me now. There is this balance about maintaining the place for the future and keeping it a living entity Travelling from Alderley Edge to Manchester to his new school was more than a journey of miles. “It came at a price. It was a kind of double apartheid. The social environment of middle-class Alderley Edge would not accept me, and I was a pariah to my own family. So there was nowhere to go, except school, in Manchester, where I could be the emerging me without having to apologise.”

More than 70 years have passed, but the wound is still raw. “I was caught out by it,” he says of how he felt when it came to writing about the emotion of that moment. “I hadn’t planned to write it. It wrote itself; and I was disturbed for some time afterwards, because it was still there and still hurting, that rejection.”

After school and national service, he went up to Oxford, the first in his family to go to university; but left before finishing his classics degree. “I realised it would not be possible to be both an academic and a writer — that’s my personality, it’s not an absolute,” he says now. He knew where he wanted to write, too; he recognised even that this decision to head back to his family’s ancient home turf was unusual. “It’s almost impossible for anyone to live their life where they grew up. Unless doing so is a priority that overrides almost everything else. Which I know it was with me,” he says. As he gets older, he says, he is becoming “more and more neurotic about not having to move from where I am”. How many people can say they still reside within a dozen miles of where they were born?

But it is that deep inhabitation of place across generations that gives his work its peculiar force. *Where Shall We Run To?* is powered by a sense of belonging that is all the more powerful for its lack of sentimentality. Perhaps the casual reader might assume Garner’s deep immersion in his corner of England would make him an isolationist: quite the contrary. Talk of Brexit, the thought of breaking any part of that connection, fills him with dread: a generation just younger than his, he says to me, “has no experience of lying in bed and knowing that someone immediately above you had come a long way to kill you. And was trying to do it now. But today, to start to drive a wedge in, to start the antagonism all over again, is beyond criminal.”

Garner looks to the future while also thinking deeply about the past: one of the reasons he’ll take the time to watch the Sun move across the face of the Earth. This is why he and his remarkable wife, Griselda — the pair have been together since 1961 — want his work to live on. Of course, his books will survive: but the couple are working hard to secure an educational legacy as grounded in place as Garner’s work is.

When he was growing up in this part of Cheshire, the people here were, for the most part, poor. Now that footballers have cottoned on to the beauty of Alderley Edge, property prices have shot up. Toad Hall sits on the site of a Bronze Age burial mound; and the Old Medicine House, one of the finest timber-framed buildings in the country, was bought by the Garners for £1 in 1970 when it was due to be demolished. It was re-erected, beam by beam, right beside Toad Hall. They set up the Blackden Trust to protect both buildings, and the

archaeological and educational work that now goes on in them. “Buildings travel in time,” he says. “There must be no red ropes around, no notices saying do not touch. So there is this balance about maintaining the place for the future and keeping it a living entity, not as a museum.”

My last day with the Garners is spent with a group of A-level students from Manchester Grammar as they are being shown flint blades, dated to 8,000BC, that have been found on the site. Part of the trust’s work is this kind of student outreach, but Garner’s writing inspires other kinds of outreach too. Both *The Owl Service* and *Red Shift* were made into acclaimed television productions. “*Petals and Claws*” is a beautiful travelling exhibition (at MOMA Machynlleth until August 4) celebrating 50 years of *The Owl Service*; visual artists have responded with vigorous beauty to Garner’s retelling of the myth of Blodeuwedd, the flower-woman transformed into an owl. And Elizabeth Garner, his daughter, is working with musician John Dipper and storyteller Nick Hennessey on a performance piece based around *Where Shall We Run To?* that will have its debut at Alderley Edge Methodist Church in October.

The sun, at last, goes down. A bottle of white wine appears. Garner knows time has passed, is passing, but the future awaits. “I’ve still got plenty to do,” he grins.

Where Shall We Run To?, by Alan Garner, Fourth Estate, RRP£14.99, 208 pages
Erica Wagner edited ‘*First Light: A Celebration of Alan Garner*’ (Unbound)