

Stories for Lipreading



A GOLDEN ELEPHANT ON AN ENGLISH HILL by Jan Church.

[This text is read aloud at the beginning of this video:]
Welcome to Stories for Lipreading. If you haven't used our website before, we suggest you look at our 'How to Use' page before you begin. We hope you enjoy this factual piece which is called 'A Golden Elephant on an English Hill' by Jan Church.

A Golden Elephant On An English Hill by Jan Church.

One day in the middle of the nineteenth century, two men were standing in a village in India discussing water. For weeks the sun had been hotter than usual. The ground was parched. There was no sign of grass. The cows were standing listlessly. If you looked as far as the dusty shimmering horizon, there was no speck of green and no cloud in the sky that promised rain. The village depended on the rain to fill its pond, but the pond had shrivelled to almost nothing. The two men were friends. One was an Englishman, Edward Reade, and his friend was the Maharajah of Benares. They paced the ground, peering at the parched vegetation. 'Here,' said Edward. 'There might have been water in this spot once. We might strike lucky here.' 'Let us hope so,' said the Maharajah. 'I hope to find water for all my villages. This would be a good place to start.' Edward Reade smiled before replying, 'And I will pay for it.'

A month later, they returned to find the well had been dug. Edward Reade had indeed struck lucky. The village had come back to life. The fields showed signs of green, the cattle were healthy and the women of the village were spared hours of walking to find water for their families. In other villages, the Maharajah's plans for more wells were already underway.

Many years later, after a distinguished career in India, Edward Reade retired home to England. At first he was overwhelmed by the lush green of his surroundings, acres of grass, trees heavy with leaves, and the hedges alive with birds and butterflies. But all was not what it seemed. A hot summer had led to drought conditions in the Chiltern villages and one day, riding through the village of Stoke Row, he heard a mother shouting at her son for using up their last drop of water. In his next letter to his friend the Maharajah, he ruefully described the scene. The Maharajah's reply made him laugh out loud. The Maharajah remembered the day they had stood together in his village examining the dry ground and, in his turn, he was offering to give the English village a well.

And so he did. But this was no ordinary well.

Work on the well started in March 1863. It was not an easy task. Two men, taking it in turns in a hole only 4 feet wide, began the laborious task of digging by hand. Ladders had to be hauled down. Buckets of earth had to be hauled up. After the first 25 feet of clay and gravel, they faced a further 300 feet of chalk. There were two 8-foot-deep bands of sand that threatened to cave in on

Stories for Lipreading



them. As they went further down, the air became foul and daylight was a distant circle far above them. It took them a year of working, even through the dark days of winter. But, in the spring, after digging down 368 feet, a depth greater than the height of St Paul's Cathedral, they were finished at last. Water!

But this was no ordinary village well. Rising above it stood an exotic dome supported by eight slender columns. Round the base of the dome, the name of the Maharajah was recorded in ornate lettering. But best of all, beneath the dome, on top of the winding gear, stood a large golden elephant.

The well was declared open on Queen Victoria's birthday in May 1864, amid great celebrations. Some people had been worried about the cost of the upkeep for such a grand edifice, but the Maharajah had thought of this too. He had bought four acres of land and planted it with 100 cherry trees. The sale of the cherries would fund the maintenance. He also provided a cottage for a Warden of the Well to oversee the upkeep. For forty years, until mains water finally reached the village, the well was in regular use. Some people were still using it in 1939.

It is not often that you encounter a golden elephant in the English countryside. The well may no longer be used, the cherry orchard is now an open space, but the elephant still stands under his dome, commemorating a generous donor and a long friendship between two men who had met years before in India.