

FYFIELD

A Village that Wandered - and Once, was Sacrificed!

A village which has moved three times in little more than 100 years. - That is the unique record of tiny Fyfield, an odd assortment of quaint thatched cottages, ugly tumble-down slated dwellings and modern council houses, standing alongside and just off the old London to Bath coaching route a few miles outside historic Marlborough.

Nettles and coarse grass almost hide the remaining foundations of the original village down near the banks of the River Kennett, once a favourite haunt of trout fishers but now little more than a trickle of water winding through the low-lying fields below the church.

A cluster of farm buildings and one or two old cottages are the sole relics of the original community.

Villagers First Move

Perhaps the cottagers found their riverside homes too damp when the river bursts its bank in wintertime. Whatever the reason, they allowed their cottages to decay and, not much more than 100 years ago, a new village began to take shape at the bottom of the hill alongside the main road.

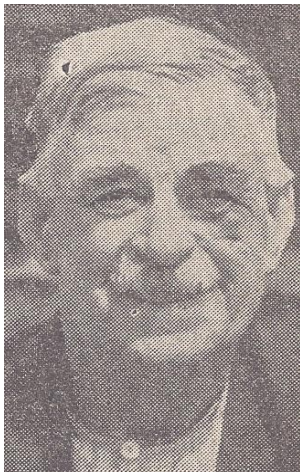
Most of the new village was built to the south of the road but other settlers preferred to make their homes under the rocky bank of the rising downland on the other side of the now busy highway. A few of these slated homes still remain but the majority are in a poor state of repair, some of them being condemned and unoccupied.

Then, less than a quarter of a century ago, the peaceful villagers became the victims of modern mechanisation. The old coaching route had become one of the most important motoring roads leading from London to the West Country.

To cope with the fast increasing flow of traffic, the road had to be widened and a dangerous bend eliminated. - So Fyfield was sacrificed.

Chapel and Inn Pulled Down

Nearly a dozen cottages, a Methodist Chapel and the 'Fighting Cocks' inn, all on the southern fringe of the road, were pulled down and the villagers gathered up their trappings and moved yet again.



This time they came to rest on top of the hill. New red brick council houses were built to accommodate them on the side of the road leading to the neighbouring village of Lockeridge. But although they were given an improved standard of accommodation the villagers were not entirely satisfied with their new village.

The authorities omitted to re-erect their "local" and now they have to walk the mile or so down the road to the "Who'd 'a Thought It" at Lockeridge.

A farm worker all his life, Bill Wiltshire, aged 77, often visited the now demolished "Fighting Cocks" Inn

But the people of Fyfield have become accustomed to travelling to neighbouring parishes for their wares since their village is a village only in name.

No Post Office , No Shop, No Pub

There is no Post Office and no shop and of course no pub .

Fyfield's past is obscure, yet the village was mentioned in the Domesday Book as Fifhide, and probably dates back to Saxon times. The belief that it had its origin during the Saxon period is strengthened by the peculiar shape of the parish. Modern travellers can pass from east to west in a matter of seconds, probably without knowing that there is a village there at all.

But to make the journey from north to south is a different matter. The parish stretches from Totterdown to Clench Common, it being the object of the Saxons to include in each parish a little sownland, some woodland and a dash of water.

Few who rush by on the main road notice the well-kept parish church the first stones of which were laid in Norman times but which has been much changed down through the ages and is now chiefly in the Early English style, with a Perpendicular tower.

You will find the interior whitewashed, a wooden floor and blue tiles around the altar. An ugly black stove overshadows the little old font.

Norman, Early English and Perpendicular styles are all incorporated in Fyfield's well-kept parish church. This view was taken from the winding lane leading down to Bill Wiltshire's thatched cottage



I Came Across "The Devil's Den".

But if Fyfield dates from Saxon times it has a link with an age far more distant. Turning up a little track over the downs, I came to Clafford Bottom and there the remains of a Long Barrow called locally the Devil's Den. How it came by this name is not hard to see. A great stone slab, measuring nine feet by eight feet, is balance on top of one of the original four uprights.

Shepherd Seated On A Sarsen Stone

Moving out over the barren solitude of the downs, I breasted a hill and found myself almost in the midst of a great flock of sheep, with their shepherd, 68-year-old Walter Hurkett, eating his lunch as he sat on one of the many Sarsen stones that litter the downs.

Walter lives in a cottage on Fyfield Hill, almost within a stone's throw of the Devil's' Den. Fond of sheep, all his life, he started as a 2s. 6d. a week shepherd boy at the age of 14, graduating to a full blown shepherd four years later.

His flock of Hampshire Downs were a little restless and Bonnie, Walter's ten-year-old collie was kept busy preventing them from straying too far afield. The old shepherd explained that it was shearing time and the flock would not settle very well because it had to be mixed up. Walter looked a picture of health on that sunny day and I was not surprised to learn that he had not had to call a doctor in all his life. "Except for a bad finger," he added.



Devoted His Life To Sheep

Apart from the pay, conditions have not changed much for a shepherd but even if he had barely enough to live on, I don't think Walter Hurkett would change his job. He has devoted his life to sheep and is never happier than when in charge of a fine flock on top of the downs, no matter what the weather.

Going back into the village, I called at the a thatched cottage in Back Fyfield to see Mr. "Bill" Wiltshire but he had made his way over the fields to the nearest post office at Lockeridge to collect his pension. Later I found him at the inn a few yards away from the Post office quenching his thirst, for it was a warm day.

Bill has worked on farms all his life and has spent a good deal of time in the Fyfield area. Several times in 77 years, Bill has paid a visit to the Fighting Cocks and can well remember the old cottages being pulled down to widen the road.

A flock of sheep, the open downland and his dog "Bonnie" are all that Walter Hurkett, a 68-yr-old shepherd, needs to keep him happy

Lost in Blizzard of 1881

I heard from Bill the well-known local story of the Fyfield carter and his youthful assistant, who journeyed over the Downs to Devizes market and back in 1881. That was the year of the great snow storm and on their way back through a blizzard, the carter drove his horses off the road and they were all found the next day frozen to death.

The last 100 years or so have probably been more eventful for Fyfield than any other period during the centuries of its existence. It is hoped that the village has now finished its wanderings and that, in time, Fyfield will grow once more into a real village, complete with shops, Post Office and "local".

Written by Maurice J. Trowbridge for the Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser, Friday, June 16, 1950