

THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF VILLAGE VIEWS: A BRIEF MISCELLANY



The quiet of these old-world cottages is symbolical of the peace and security we are enjoying in this country when there is so much unrest elsewhere.

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CONTENTS	Page
1. Introduction	4
2. What is an English village?	4
3. 300 years of village views:	
• The village	5
• Cottages and housing	6
• Church, school and shop	7
• Nature and the seasons	8
• Marriage	10
• Food and drink	10
• Work and wages	11
• Workhouse and manor house	12
• Self-reliance	12
• In-comers	13
4. Model villages	13
Index	15

"If you would be known, and not know, vegetate in a village;
if you would know, and not be known, live in a city."

Charles Caleb Colton (1777-1832)

Lacon, or, Many Things in Few Words Addressed to those who Think, 1820

Introduction

This pamphlet sets out various perspectives on villages and village life over the last three hundred years or so. Some of the writers lived there, others were just passing through; some expressed their thoughts in verse, others set their stories there, while others simply wanted the world to appreciate their lifestyle and understand their allegiance and attachment.

It is limited to English villages from 1700 to the twentieth century. Inevitably, it is very selective and restricted, but this is not an apology. No matter how extensive, it could only ever scratch the surface. Hopefully, it strikes a chord even in this brief form. If it provokes further examples, so much the better.

Some villages can be confining, and even isolating if the transport links are poor or many of the owners are second homers, but diversity is a strength of villages, as is their ability to adapt. Acknowledging and recognising this makes this pamphlet much closer to a "celebration" than a "commemoration". Villages may have originally developed as agricultural communities, or to serve the local pit or mill, or around an inn and coaching stop, but whatever the reason, villages are still the way that over 6m people, about 1 in 10 of us, live - often **choose** to live - today. The only constant is change.

What is an English village?

You will know if you live in one. It's bigger than a hamlet, but not big enough to be referred to as a town. This ought to be straightforward, but in practice it is not. 500 people might be a generally accepted minimum, about 200 houses, but the maximum has varied from 1500 to as much as 12,000. In 2006 the Commission for Rural Communities asked how many villages there are in England? They identified 3460 settlements that had between 100 and 10,000 residents. A population of 3000 is now the usual limit, though many people would argue that a village can be larger than this. Current definitions focus on rurality and sparsity rather than size alone - perhaps appropriately if the concern is sustainable communities. In this pamphlet if the writer thought of it as a village then it was - and hopefully still is.

The village

Brandesburton (between Beverley and Hornsea), East Riding of Yorkshire

"From thence [Hull] to Beverly againe 6 mile which is all a flat, thence to Brance Burton ... 8 mile all likewise on a Levell which they call Loughs; here we could get no accomodation [sic] at a Publick house, it being a sad poore thatch'd place and only 2 or 3 sorry Ale-houses, no lodgings but at the Hall House as it was called, where liv'd a Quaker which were sufficient people, the rooms were good old rooms being the Lord of the Mannours House; these were but tennants [sic] but did entertain us kindly, made two good beds for us and also for our servants, and good bread and cheese bacon and eggs ..." Celia Fiennes *Journeys* 1703
(refers to journey in 1697)

Benthall (across the Severn from Coalbrookdale), Shropshire

"One circumstance I remarked which gave me much pleasure. There was not a single cottage in which a fine hog did not seem to make a part of every family; not a door without a stone trough with the pig eating his supper, in company with the children at the same business playful about the threshold. It was a sight which shewed that cheerfulness and plenty crowned the board of the humble but happy inhabitants of this romantic spot." Arthur Young *Tours in England and Wales* 1776

Aldborough (now Aldeburgh), Suffolk

"Behind the row of buildings thus curiously intermingled, runs the one stragging street of the town, with its sturdy pilots' cottages, its mouldering marine store-houses, and its composite shops. Towards the northern end, this street is bounded by the one eminence visible over all the marshy flat - a low wooded hill, on which the church is built. At its opposite extremity, the street leads to a deserted martello tower, and to the forlorn outlying suburb of Slaughden, between the river Alde and the sea. Such are the main characteristics of this curious little outpost on the shores of England ..." Wilkie Collins *No Name* 1862

Little Treby, Loamshire

"But there were trim cheerful villages too, with a neat or handsome parsonage and grey church set in the midst; there was the pleasant tinkle of the blacksmith's anvil, the patient cart-horses waiting at his door; the

basket-maker peeling his willow wands in the sunshine; the wheelwright putting the last touch to a blue cart with red wheels; here and there a cottage with bright transparent windows showing pots full of blooming balsams or geraniums, and little gardens in front all double daisies or dark wallflowers; ..." George Eliot *Felix Holt: The Radical* 1866

Witton Gilbert, Co. Durham

"If we ... look down on... the older part nestling in the hollow, we reflect that it is, after all, a typical English village. Nothing of great moment happens here; life goes peacefully on, and men and women go about their labours, if not in the village itself, then in some factory, mine, shop, office or other sphere of work within reasonable travelling distance. Then in their hours of leisure they enjoy the usual social activities of our modern age." Women's Institute *History of Witton Gilbert* 1960

Cottages and housing

Conversation between Jack Anvil the blacksmith and Tom Hod the mason at the time of the French Revolution and just after Tom Paine had published *The Rights of Man*

Jack Anvil: "My cottage is my castle; I sit down in it at night in peace and thankfulness, and 'no man maketh me afraid'. Instead of indulging discontent, because another is richer than I in this world, (for envy is at the bottom of your equality works), I read my bible, go to church, and think of a treasure in heaven."

Tom Hod: "Aye, but the French have got it in *this* world." Hannah More *Village Politics: Addressed to all the Mechanics, Journeymen, and Day Labourers, in Great Britain* 1793

Bourne, south of Farnham, Surrey

"Everything had to be done practically in one room - which was sometimes a sleeping-room too, or say in one room and a wash-house. The preparation and serving of meals, the airing of clothes and the ironing of them, the washing of the children, the mending and making ... Then, too, many cottages had not so much as a sink where work with water could be done; many had no water save in wet weather; there was not one cottage into which it could be drawn from a tap, but it all had to be fetched from well or tank." George Bourne (Sturt) *Change in the Village* 1912

Bestwood, Nottinghamshire

"The Bottoms consisted of six blocks of miners' dwellings ... twelve houses in a block. This double row of dwellings sat at the foot of a rather sharp slope from Bestwood, and looked out, from the attic windows at least, on the slow climb of the valley towards Selby.

"The houses themselves were substantial and very decent. ... But that was outside; that was the view on to the uninhabited parlours of all the colliers' wives. The dwelling-room, the kitchen, was at the back of the house, facing inward between the blocks, looking at a scrubby back garden and then at the ash-pits. And between the rows, between the long lines of ash-pits, went the alley, where the children played and the women gossiped and the men smoked. So, the actual conditions of living in the Bottoms, that was so well built and that looked so nice, were quite unsavoury because people must live in the kitchen, and the kitchens opened on to that nasty alley of ash-pits." D H Lawrence *Sons and Lovers* 1913

Church, school and shop

Three Mile Cross, Hampshire

"Then comes the village shop, like other village shops, multifarious as a bazaar; a repository for bread, shoes, tea, cheese, tape, ribands, and bacon; for everything, in short, except the one particular thing which you happen to want at that moment, and will be sure not to find. The people are civil and thriving, and frugal withal ..." Mary Russell Mitford *Our Village* 1824

Hayslope, Loamshire

"... but when [the traveller] approached the Green, the beauty of the view that lay on his right hand, the singular contrast presented by the groups of villagers with the knot of Methodists by the maple, ... he paused.

"The Green lay at the extremity of the village, and from it the road branched off in two directions, one leading farther up the hill by the church, and the other winding gently down towards the valley. On the side of the Green that led towards the church, the broken line of thatched cottages was continued nearly to the churchyard gate; but on the opposite, north-western side, there was nothing to obstruct the view of gently-swelling meadow, and wooded valley, and dark masses of distant hill." George Eliot *Adam Bede* 1859

Sawston, Cambridgeshire

"Sawston was already familiar to him. But he knew it as an amateur, and under an official gaze it grouped itself afresh. The school, a bland Gothic building, now showed as a fortress of learning, whose outworks were the boarding-houses. Those straggling roads were full of the houses of the parents of the day-boys. These shops were in bounds, those out. How often had he passed Dunwood House! He had once confused it with its rival, Cedar View. Now he was to live there - perhaps for many years. On the left of the entrance a large saffron drawing-room, full of cosy corners and dumpy chairs: here the parents would be received. On the right of the entrance a study, which he shared ... here the boys would be caned - he hoped not often." E M Forster *The Longest Journey* 1907

Hitherton, Gloucestershire

"Sometimes motorists, hurrying from lunch at Oxford to tea at Broadway or Chipping Camden, lose their way and find themselves at Hitherton, and the little books prepared for their use tell them at once that Hitherton has 855 inhabitants, closes early on Wednesday, empties its letter-box at 5.30 P.M., boasts an hotel, *The Shepherd's Hall* (3 bedrooms) and a garage, ... and has at least one thing worth looking at, for the account closes with the command - *See Church*. Very few of them do stay to see the church, though the rector ... has not only written a short history of it but has also published this history as a pamphlet ...; and any visitor who appreciates a fine rood-screen when he sees one (to say nothing of two possible leper-windows on the north side) cannot fail to obtain a copy of this pamphlet. But away they go, these motorists, and never once turn their heads ... Thus when any strange and expensive-looking motor car stops there, everybody in Hitherton ... prepares at once to point the way to other and more important places." J B Priestley *The Good Companions* 1929

Nature and the seasons

Three Mile Cross, Hampshire

"Last year, in spite of the love which we are now pleased to profess towards that ardent luminary, not one of the sun's numerous admirers had courage to look him in the face: there was no bearing the world till he had said 'Good-night' to it. Then we might stir: then we began to wake and to live. All day long we languished under his influence in a strange dreaminess, too hot to work, too hot to read, too hot to write, too hot even to talk ...

"The only office requiring the slightest exertion, which I performed in that warm weather, was watering my flowers. Common sympathy called for that labour. ...

"Then, when we were out of the street, what a toil it was to mount the hill, climbing with weary steps and slow upon the brown turf by the wayside, slippery, hot, and hard as a rock! And then if we happened to meet a carriage coming along the middle of the road - the bottomless middle - what a sandy whirlwind it was! What choking! what suffocation!"
Mary Russell Mitford *Our Village* 1824

Helstone, Cornwall

"Is Helstone a village, or a town, in the first instance?"

"Oh, only a hamlet; I don't think I could call it a village at all. There is the church and a few houses near it on the green - cottages, rather - with roses growing all over them."

"And flowering all the year round, especially at Christmas - make your picture complete," said he [Henry Lennox].

"No," replied Margaret [Hale], somewhat annoyed. "I am not making a picture. I am trying to describe Helstone as it really is. You should not have said that."

"I am penitent," he answered. "Only it really sounded like a village in a tale rather than in real life." Elizabeth Gaskell *North and South* 1855

Mellstock, Wessex

"Mr Maybold leant over the parapet of the bridge and looked into the river. He saw ... how the water came rapidly from beneath the arches, glided down a little steep, then spread itself over a pool in which dace, trout, and minnows sported at ease among the long green locks of weed, that lay heaving and sinking with their roots towards the current." Thomas Hardy *Under the Greenwood Tree* 1872

Blackstable (Whitstable), Kent

"In winter the natives of Blackstable walked down the empty street with hurried gait, screwing themselves up in order to expose as little surface as possible to the bitterness of the east wind ..." Somerset Maugham *Cakes and Ale* 1930

Slad, Gloucestershire

"... winter was here. The day came suddenly when all details were

different and the village had to be rediscovered. One's nose went dead so that it hurt to breathe, and there were jigsaws of frost on the window. The light filled the house with a green polar glow; while outside - in the invisible world - there was a strange hard silence, or a metallic creaking, a faint throbbing of twigs and wires." Laurie Lee *Cider with Rosie* 1959

Marriage

Near Lyme Regis, Dorset

"The ladies here do not want the help of assemblies to assist in match-making; or half-pay officers to run away with their daughters, which the meetings, called assemblies in some other parts of England, are recommended for. Here's no Bury Fair, where the women are scandalously said to carry themselves to market, and where every night they meet at the play, or at the assembly for intrigue ... And yet the Dorsetshire ladies, I assure you, are not nuns, they do not go veiled about streets, or hide themselves when visited ..." Daniel Defoe *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* refers to journey in 1724

Food and drink

Island in Lake Windermere, Cumbria

"... the Isle did not looke to be so bigg at the shore but takeing boate I went on it and found it as large and very good barley and oates and grass; the water is very cleer and full of good fish, but the Charr fish being out of season could not easily be taken so I saw none alive, but of other fish I had a very good supper; the season of the Charrfish is between Michaelmas and Christmas ... [and] their taste is very rich and fatt tho' not so strong or clogging as the lamprys [sic] are, but its as fatt and rich a food." Celia Fiennes *Journeys* 1703 (refers to journey in 1698)

Sawtry, Cambridgeshire

"Coming south from hence [Wansford] we passed Stilton, a town famous for cheese, which is called our English Parmesan, and is brought to table with the mites, or maggots round it, so thick, that they might bring a spoon with them for you to eat the mites with, as you do the cheese. "Hence we came through Sautrey Lane, a deep descent between two hills, in which is Stangate Hole, famous for being the most noted robbing-place in all this part of the country." Daniel Defoe *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* refers to journey in 1725

Bourne, south of Farnham, Surrey

"In this parish ... good water was, until quite lately, a scarce commodity, and nobody cared to drink the stagnant stuff out of the tanks or water-butts which supplied most of the cottages. In short, prudence itself has seemed to recommend beer as the one drink for tired men. In their view it is the safest, and the most easily obtained, and, when obtained, it affords the most refreshment. Thus much their own experience has taught the villagers." George Bourne (Sturt) *Change in the Village* 1912

Work and wages

Mellstock, Wessex

"He sat facing the road, with a boot on his knees and the awl in his hand, only looking up for a moment as he stretched out his arms and bent forward at the pull ... Rows of lasts, small and large, stout and slender, covered the wall ... Outside the window, the upper leather of a Wellington-boot was usually hung, pegged to a board as if to dry. No sign was over his door; in fact ... any advertising was scorned; and it would have been felt as beneath his dignity to paint, for the benefit of strangers, the name of an establishment the trade of which came solely by connection based on personal respect." Thomas Hardy *Under the Greenwood Tree* 1872

Bourne, south of Farnham, Surrey

"Against the rich man ... the labourers have no sort of animosity. If he will spend money freely, the richer he is the better. I remember ... coming to a village which looked rarely prosperous for its county, owing, I was told, to the fact that the county lunatic asylum near by caused money to be spent there. In the next village, which was in a deplorable state, and had no asylum, the people were looking enviously towards this one, and wishing that at least their absentee landlords would come and hunt the neighbourhood, though it appeared that one of these gentlemen was a Bishop. But the labouring folk were not exacting as to the sort of person - lunatics, fox-hunters, Bishops - anybody would be welcome who would spend riches in a way to 'make work'. And so here." George Bourne (Sturt) *Change in the Village* 1912

Workhouse and manor house

Harby, Vale of Belvoir, Leicestershire

"Theirs is yon House that holds the parish-poor,
Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;
There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,
And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day;-
There children dwell who know no parents' care;
Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there!
Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,
Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed;
Dejected widows with unheeded tears,
And crippled age with more than childhood fears;
The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!
The moping idiot and the madman gay."

George Crabbe *The Village* 1783

"Carbury", Suffolk

"Suffolk is not especially a picturesque county, nor can it be said that the scenery round Carbury was either grand or beautiful; but there were little prettinesses attached to the house itself and the grounds around it which gave it a charm of its own. The Carbury River - so called, though at no place is it so wide but that an active schoolboy might jump across it - runs, or rather creeps into the Waveney, and in its course is robbed by a moat which surrounds Carbury Manor House. The moat has been rather a trouble to the proprietors ... as in these days of sanitary considerations it has been felt necessary either to keep it clean with at any rate moving water in it, or else to fill it up and abolish it altogether." Anthony Trollope *The Way We Live Now* 1875

Self-reliance

Allotment I

"The most convenient mode of giving [country labourers] gardens is to divide a field near the village into small allotments. ... The Bishop of Bath and Wells commenced the letting of allotments in 1807, but it is only since 1830 that its adoption has become common." *Penny cyclopaedia of the Society for the diffusion of useful knowledge 1845-6 Supplement*, p.88 according to the OED

Allotment II

In 1941 an article traced the history of the allotment from the 1830s, contrasting the original provision of allotments as a form of Poor Law relief for the village labourer to their more recent adoption by town dwellers for recreation. Allotments had to be requisitioned in World War I under the Defence of the Realm Act to ensure that villages grew enough to feed themselves. CR Fay and HC Fay, 'The Allotment Movement in England and Wales' for the *Yearbook of Agricultural Co-operation* edited by CR Fay, the Chairman of the Horace Plunkett Foundation from 1938

In-comers

Bourne, south of Farnham, Surrey

"The old life is being swiftly obliterated. The valley is passing out of the hands of its former inhabitants. They are being crowded into corners, and are becoming as aliens in their own home; they are receding before newcomers with new ideas, and, greatest change of all, they are yielding to the dominion of new ideas themselves." George Bourne (Sturt)
Change in the Village 1912

Model villages

In the nineteenth century a few employers built model villages for their employees. Their belief was that those who worked for them were entitled to decent housing, education and environment and, if they did not provide it, nobody else would. This was enlightened rather than just altruism: they recognised that it would enhance the well-being of employees and their families and, ultimately, the employer was likely to benefit as well.

Robert Owen was born in Wales and New Lanark is in Scotland, but the developments there after 1800 profoundly influenced initiatives such as these in England:

Samuel Peto - Somerleyton, Lowestoft, Suffolk 1850

Titus Salt - Saltaire, Bradford 1851

William Lever - Port Sunlight, Lancashire 1888

George Cadbury - Bournville, Birmingham 1895

Joseph Rowntree - New Earswick, York 1904.

In due course state provision was required, particularly where large numbers of homes were to be built, slums cleared or vested interests were in conflict.

For British Utopian experiments from 1325 to 1945, see www.utopia-britannica.org.uk/ This includes a gazetteer for counties in England.

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Sources

George Bourne (Sturt) <i>Change in the Village</i> 1912	6, 11, 13
Wilkie Collins <i>No Name</i> 1862	5
George Crabbe <i>The Village</i> 1783	12
Daniel Defoe <i>Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain</i> 1724/5	10
George Eliot <i>Adam Bede</i> 1859	7
<i>Felix Holt: The Radical</i> 1866	5/6
C R Fay and H C Fay, 'The Allotment Movement in England and Wales' for the <i>Yearbook of Agricultural Co-operation</i> 1938	13
Celia Fiennes <i>Journeys</i> 1703	5, 10
E M Forster <i>The Longest Journey</i> 1907	8
Elizabeth Gaskell <i>North and South</i> 1855	9
Thomas Hardy <i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i> 1872	9, 11
D H Lawrence <i>Sons and Lovers</i> 1913	7
Laurie Lee <i>Cider with Rosie</i> 1959	9/10
Somerset Maugham <i>Cakes and Ale</i> 1930	9
Mary Russell Mitford <i>Our Village</i> 1824	7, 8/9
Hannah More <i>Village Politics: Addressed to all the Mechanics, Journeymen, and Day Labourers, in Great Britain</i> 1793	6
<i>Penny cyclopaedia of the Society for the diffusion of useful knowledge 1845-6 Supplement</i> , p.88	12
J B Priestley <i>The Good Companions</i> London, Heinemann, 1929	8
Anthony Trollope <i>The Way We Live Now</i> 1875	12
Women's Institute <i>History of Witton Gilbert</i> 1960	6
Arthur Young <i>Tours in England and Wales</i> 1776	5

Villages

Aldborough, Suffolk	5
Benthall, Shropshire	5
Bestwood, Nottinghamshire	7
Blackstable (Whitstable), Kent	9
Bourne, Surrey	6, 11, 13
Brandesburton, East Riding of Yorkshire	5
"Carbury", Suffolk	12
Harby, Leicestershire	12
Hayslope, Loamshire	7
Helstone, Cornwall	9
Hitherton, Gloucestershire	8
Little Treby, Loamshire	5/6
Mellstock, Wessex	9, 11
Others: Island in Lake Windermere, Cumbria	10
Near Lyme Regis, Dorset	10
Unspecified	6, 12, 13
Sawston, Cambridgeshire	8
Sawtry, Cambridgeshire	10
Slad, Gloucestershire	9/10
Three Mile Cross, Hampshire	7, 8/9
Witton Gilbert, Co. Durham	6

The twenty-eight extracts included in this pamphlet illustrate some of the ways in which English villages have been described over the last 300 years. Another twenty-eight or two hundred and eighty extracts might have been chosen instead, but there would have remained omissions in how villages and life there have been characterised.

The extracts chosen extend from Cumbria and County Durham in the north to Kent and Hampshire in the south, from Cornwall and Dorset in the west to Suffolk and the East Riding in the east. But there are many geographical gaps nonetheless. Where is Northumberland, for example, or Devon, Somerset or Staffordshire? And where are the writers who have focussed on villages in Lancashire, Norfolk or Wiltshire?

If you wish to make suggestions about extracts that should have been included, or might be next time, please send them to admin@grettonbooks.co.uk

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