

As the sun sank towards the shoulder of Peckforton, the subtle alchemy of twilight transformed this broad vale of woodland and pasture into a dim sea that lapped the knees of the far hills. We had reached a point where the bank between the canal and the Weaver was particularly steep, the river meandering in great loops through the levels directly below, its slow-moving surface reflecting the evening sky like a burnished shield. In the middle distance the stream was spanned by a bridge of several arches, and on the farther bank a church tower rose above encircling trees to catch the last rays of the sun, which had already left the roofs of the village which clustered about it. This, we learned from our map, was the village of Church Minshull, and here we made our first prolonged stay since we had left Barrow-upon-Soar.

We could scarcely have chanced upon a better surviving example of the traditional English village had we purposefully scoured the countryside. Here was no show village of stockbroker-Tudor as false as a harlot's smile, and, more surprising still, it had escaped the fate of becoming an industrial dormitory, Crewe, aptly described by one of the villagers as 'no more than a ruck o' houses', being perilously near. Happily immune from these evils, and too unassuming to attract the sightseer, Church Minshull shelters securely under Weaver bank, a self-sufficient rural community that in numbers and activity has changed but little through the centuries. The reason for this survival undoubtedly lies in the comparative prosperity of local agriculture. Never before on our journey had we seen such well-drained pastures, trim hedgerows or prosperous farmsteads. They were a sight to gladden eyes grown accustomed to leagues of derelict land fast reverting to wilderness. Yet there was the same conspicuous lack of arable land as elsewhere, the Cheshire farmer's great cow-byres representing the mainstay of his livelihood. Possessing the finest dairy pasture in England, he is a milk manufacturer, and, as such, he has the better been able to withstand conditions which have brought the orthodox mixed farmer, who is the backbone of a healthy agricultural community, to the brink of ruin. Thus it is that conditions in the Vale Royal are not as rosy as they at first appear, although prosperity of any sort is preferable to neglect and decay, if the lease of rural life in villages such as Church Minshull is thereby prolonged.



BARBRIDGE

Chapter XXV

CHURCH MINSHULL

CHURCH MINSHULL contained many excellent examples of the timber-framed house built in the genuine regional style, interspersed with a few substantial farms of brick, a medium which superseded timber as the local building material from the eighteenth century onwards. Only one cottage represented our enlightened age—a featureless block of raw brick and slate which replaced an older building demolished under the Slum Clearance Act, whose misapplication is the latest menace to the English village. This incongruous newcomer might have been transplanted from the suburbs of Crewe, a tawdry paper rose dropped in a bed of wild flowers.

In a vale country such as this, where timber was once the most plentiful material, the tasks of the quarrymen and masons of the hills fell to woodmen and master carpenters. These characteristic walls of timber framing filled with lath and plaster work were the result, and their survival is an enduring tribute not only to the surpassing skill with which these local craftsmen wrought, but to the excellence of their materials. Because we have squandered the resources of forest and coppice with no thought of the future, such timber is no longer known, and our impoverished erections of brick and stucco compare to our discredit with these old build-

ings, whose every ageless beam cries eloquent reproof. It seemed most fitting that the church and the inn should stand side by side in easy intimacy at the centre of the village, for these immemorial institutions are the core of rural life. Side by side the living and the dead rested after their labours, for the gleaming and spotless tap-room of 'The Old Badger' was not a stone's throw from the quiet churchyard. The two buildings seemed to regard each other with the benign tolerance of old age, the church tower overpeering the wall of the inn yard, and the inn windows gazing undismayed at the tombs of patrons long dead and gone, as one who would with calm acceptance say: 'In the midst of life we are in death'.

In the church the ancient parish register brought home as nothing else could the strength and permanence of those ties which once held the countrymen to their land and to each other. This record, wonderfully preserved and legible, dated back to the sixteenth century, the same names recurring in birth, marriage and death generation after generation. To turn these pages of heavy vellum was to realise how, in the span of a lifetime, the bloodless revolution of the machine has loosed a bond which has survived plague, persecution and war for at least six hundred turbulent years.

Most remarkable of all the long-dead yeomen of Cheshire recorded here was one Thomas Damme of Leighton, who, it is written, 'was buried on the twentieth of Februarie 1649, being of the age of seven score and fourteen'. Assuming this entry to be correct—and there seems no good reason to doubt its authenticity—old Thomas Damme beats the better-known Shropshire patriarch, Thomas Parr of Glyn, by two years. Both these stalwart countrymen attained their great age under conditions which we now regard as barbaric, and without the aid of our much-advertised patent medicines, whose names are legion, and whose popularity does not flatter our much-vaunted standard of living. We shall not see such years again until we have recovered sufficient sanity to simplify the pattern of our lives.

From the churchyard gate it was possible to look right and left along the village street, from the Post Office at one end to the smithy and wheelwright's shop at the other. The post-mistress, white-haired and benevolent, as such a personage should be, supplied the children with the same sticky, vivid sweets as their mothers and grandmothers sucked when they, too, were young. Of an evening, when the menfolk repair to 'The Badger' for a

glass of mild, the housewives foregather in the post office for a gossip, on the pretext of a stamp or half a pound of tea.

The music of the street was the clink of the blacksmith's hammer, and there was seldom a day when a pair of cart-horses patiently awaiting their turn to be shod, or a new-painted cart with scarlet shafts up-reared, were not to be seen standing outside his forge, for Mr. Eggerton was wheelwright as well as smith. The wind of increased motor taxation had swept much well-merited business into a shop redolent of paint and new-hewn timber. Gigs and traps which local farmers had dragged from long years of retirement in dim and dusty cartsheds shone bravely with new paint and varnish, their frames and shafts, wheel-spokes and felloes all delicately lined out to contribute to that rich and graceful finish which the invention of the cellulose spray gun has blown into the past. One gig bore proudly a hand-painted crest, proof positive that the hand of this craftsman had lost nothing of its cunning.

Of the several institutions that contributed to that self-sufficient and corporate whole of village life, the mill was among the most important, but because the farmer no longer brings his corn to be ground, nor the cottager his humble gleanings, it has generally suffered eclipse of recent years. Yet we discovered that the waters of the Weaver still turned the wheels of Minshull Mill, the enterprising miller not only grinding cattle-meal for the local farmers, but supplying the whole village with electric current at a paltry rate, in defiance of the local supply companies. Born of a family of millers, he had taken over the concern in a derelict condition, and the fact that he was now deriving a comfortable livelihood from it refutes the popular conception of the water-mill as a picturesque 'by-gone' of no practical value.

For all its wheels and shafts, anything less like a factory than Minshull Mill would be difficult to imagine. The dim interior was heavy with the inimitable smell of musty sacks and dust of fresh-ground meal, a compound that is incense to the imagination. Like the rime of an autumn frost, the flour had whitened the cobwebs which hung from the rafters, and the hands of generations of millers had polished the woodwork of bins and traps to a smooth, honey-coloured bloom. From beneath the floor the water boiling under the mill wheels made distant thunder, a deep undercurrent of sound to which were added the rumble of the stones and the subdued chatter of the gearing. This was the

ancient voice of the mill—no high-pitched, distracting clamour, but a soothing rhythm, as measured and purposeful, as tireless and enduring, as the cycle of the seasons. The miller remains as close to the heart of essential things as the ploughman with his team or the shepherd at watch over his flocks.

A breakdown of this machinery was practically unknown, although it had been running for centuries. The two undershot water wheels had not needed repair within living memory; they were fifteen feet in diameter, their naves formed of the trunks of well-grown oak trees with the bark still upon them. The gearing was paired, wood meshing into iron, the best combination for silence and durability, but in the rare event of a tooth breaking the miller sent for a millwright from the Potteries who had not forgotten the art of shaping a new tooth, morticing and pegging it into place. Crab-apple—that magic wood of the Druids—has been found the most suitable for this purpose, and the miller of Minshull kept some by him in case of need.

In mediaeval times, and before the enclosures destroyed the truly socialistic character of the village community, the miller was paid in kind, claiming his portion or 'knaveship' with a measure called a 'toll-dish'. In this connection Messrs. Hopkins and Freese, in their book on the English Windmill, quote the following extract from the Red Paper Book of Colchester:

'Furst, the sise of a Myller is that he have no mesure at his myll but it be sised and sealed accordyng un to the Kyng's standard, and he to have in every busshell whete a quart for the gryndyng, and if he fett (fetch) itt another quart for the fettyng; and of every busshell malte a pynt for the gryndyng, and if he fett itt anor for the fettyng. . . .'

Monetary payment was substituted by an Act of George III, and now the country miller seldom or never grinds corn at all, though there can be no comparison in nourishment value between the old stone-ground flour and the devitalised white flour produced by the modern roller mill. From the same authority on early mills come these remarks on the process of stone-grinding by a veteran miller.

'In the so-called old-fashioned process,' he says, 'which every miller knows in his heart to be the only real process, the grain is dropped through a hole in the centre of the upper stone. The millstones are dressed diagonally, the effect being to grind the wheat in a circular movement converging towards the centre,

and the germ of the grain—a tiny nut which is oily and greasy—is dusted and pulverised by the dry stone into part of the flour from which it cannot be separated.

‘This flour, which is swept from the outer side of the stones into a trough which runs round the mill, is the real wholemeal flour. It is afterwards dressed through silks to remove the bran, thus leaving the ‘white’ flour—in colour a light cream. . . . The old despised windmills and water-mills gave the people the very best flour obtainable, and it is a thousand pities that they are not in use today.’

If ever a revival of public taste demanded stone-ground flour, Minshull Mill could supply it, the redressing and setting of the stones (‘French burrs’ for corn, ‘peaks’ for other grains) being the only alteration necessary. At present, however, we give our cattle the benefit of a process we deny to ourselves, and if we do not soon mend our ways there will be no millers left to dress a stone for wheat.

The road down to the mill was set with cobbles so fine that it resembled a shingle beach. Not a great while ago, we were told, these extended the length of the village street, while in the broad space before the smithy, at the meeting of two ways, there was a green where stood a solitary tree, its bole circled by a wooden bench. One can only imagine the children at play and the old men sitting at ease in the evening sun, for now all has been swept away by a tide of black tarmacadam, chequered with painted lines and symbols. To see it made me more than ever thankful that we had chosen to travel the only roads in England which are beyond the power of County Councils to deface.

It was this funereal road alone that brought the twentieth century to Church Minshull, for at night, when the street was dark and still, the village was ageless. Only immemorial country sounds did not break, but contributed to the silence, a cow moving in her stall, the sharp bark of a fox or cry of an owl from the hanging coverts above the river, and the murmur of the weir by the mill—an almost imperceptible rumour of sound. Could he return at such a time, old Thomas Damme would feel no stranger here.