RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Lost Village

Richard Askwith

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‘I had imagined that my corner of rural England would always be there, like a great rock, with the past clinging to it like lichen. Now it struck me – this village wasn’t going to last.

‘Oh, the buildings would last; the fields and woods had a few more decades left in them yet. A handful of born-and-bred villagers would no doubt survive for a while. But the actual village – that miniature, self-contained ecosystem in which past and present were all tangled up, and people, buildings and vegetation shared one reasonably coherent collective story – that village had passed away long ago.

‘Eighty years ago, the villagers were a tribe: the offspring of a network of interconnected families as rooted in the local soil as the trees and hedgerows. The village belonged, by common consent, to them. Now the old tribe had all but vanished. And all the evidence suggested that similar tribes had been vanishing all over England.

‘I decided to go on a journey, to see if there might still be places where living remnants of the lost rural past – real country people – survived.’

About the Author

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The Lost Village

In Search of a Forgotten Rural England

Richard Askwith

‘The further one goes, the less one knows.’

Lao-tzu (6th century BC)

Author's Note

THIS BEGAN AS a book about modern village life and ended up as something rather different. I am glad that it did, because what I have ended up with – a collection of voices and stories from the English countryside – seems to me at least as valuable as what I was originally looking for. These are our countrymen and women, and their testimonies are worth listening to.

The book also describes a personal journey, physical and spiritual, in the course of which I learnt many things, including this: the English countryside is full of people – more than 9.5 million of them – who, for obvious reasons, know much more about their particular patches of the land, and their particular rural communities, than I could possibly know. Many are also remarkably well-informed about wider rural and historical issues. I feel presumptious pronouncing at all on so many matters about which I am relatively ignorant. The least I can do is acknowledge my debt to innumerable inhabitants of the English countryside, not just for the facts in this book but also for many of the ideas.

The following are not so much sources as books and archives that I have found particularly helpful. Some have more obvious relevance to *The Lost Village* than others. I warmly recommend them all . . . First, the three great 20th century portraits of individual villages: *Akenfield* by Ronald Blythe, *The Common Stream* by Rowland Parker, *The Changing English Village* by MK Ashby. On wider issues: *The Death of Rural England* by Alun Howkins, *The World We Have Lost* by Peter Laslett, *The History of the Countryside* by Oliver Rackham, *The Making of the English Landscape* by WG Hoskins, *Country Matters* by Richard Mabey, *England in Particular* by Sue Clifford and Angela King, *Lore of the Land* by Jennifer Westwood and Dr Jacqueline Simpson, *The*

Villages of England by Richard Muir, *The English Village* by Leigh Driver, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* by JM Neeson.

On more specific or local matters: *Of Pigs and Paupers* by Sheila C Frewin, *The Last Englishman* by Byron Rogers, *Exmoor Village* by Hilary Binding and Brian Pearce, the Exmoor Archive, *Reflections* by Birdie Johnson, the BBC Voices project, *An Historical Walk Around Weston Longville* by Majorie Futter, *Poppyland* by Peter Stibbons and David Cleveland, *Potter Heigham* by Olga Sinclair, the Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum, *Dipping Into the Wells* by Angela Spencer-Harper, *One From the Plough* by Brendon Owen, *Dorset Man* and *Dorset Woman* by James Crowden, Carmela Semeraro and the Martson Vale Oral History Project, *Witton Park: Forever Paradise* by Ken Biggs, Keith Belton and Dale Daniel, *The Isle of Axholme Before Vermuyden* by Dr Joan Thirsk, *Storm Over Axholme* by Stephen R Garner. (This is just the tip of a huge iceberg of often astonishingly erudite works of local history to be found in English villages. Such expertise is increasingly available online as well, as an internet search on almost any subject touched on in this book will demonstrate.)

My debts to the great English rural authors of previous generations will be self-evident. I am grateful to Faber & Faber Ltd and Farrar, Straus & Giroux LLC for permission to quote from ‘Going, Going’ by Philip Larkin (1972; copyright 1988, 2003 by the Estate of Philip Larkin); and to Faber & Faber Ltd and Harcourt, Inc for permission to quote from ‘East Coker’ by TS Eliot (copyright 1940 by TS Eliot and renewed 1968 by Esme Valerie Eliot). I am also more indebted than I can possibly say to the countless ordinary country people – some mentioned in this book by name and some not – who have shared their time and wisdom with me.

I should also thank Hannah Macdonald and Charlotte Cole at Ebury Press; Mari Roberts; Brie Burkeman; my sister, my

wife and my children, for their patience and wise advice; and my fellow villagers, past and present, in both Northamptonshire and Hertfordshire.

The events described in this book were spread out over many months. My written account creates, inevitably, an impression of a simpler chronology. In general, my narrative is presented in the order in which the events occurred. In some places, for convenience, I have departed from strict chronology. In a few places I have disguised personal details that might identify those who would not wish to be identified.

But my main distortion has been to leave stuff out: masses of it – incidents, interviews, villages, whole counties . . . To anyone who is disappointed by omissions in what follows (especially those who were kind enough to help me in my researches), I can only apologise. Rural England and its stories are too big to be contained in a single book.

Richard Askwith

I.

THE DYING TRIBE

WE HAD BEEN living abroad for a year. Never mind why. When we came home, our village seemed different. How? We weren’t sure.

It wasn’t a physical thing. Moreton Pinkney was still the same unremarkable scattering of brown stone Northamptonshire houses, neither pretty nor ugly, zigzagging along an undulating, rather-too-busy country road, with a couple of half-hearted greens and an old sandstone church that no one much went to.

Perhaps the road was busier. Perhaps the people were. I remember walking the length and breadth of the village one weekday morning and meeting no one – just cars hurrying past implacably.

Or perhaps it was us. Our time abroad had been spent in a little French village where children and pets played in the street and few people travelled further than the surrounding vineyards to work. We had grown used to an older, slower, more communal way of life. England jarred.

But there was something else, too. Our fellow villagers had, collectively, changed. Two well-loved older neighbours had moved away in our absence, and another had died;

eight other houses – out of 94 – had changed hands in the space of 11 months (average price: £342,000) and five now had ‘For Sale’ signs outside them. At this rate, the village would have an entirely new population within a decade.

That wasn’t all. The pub had closed; the sub-post office was closing. The church was sharing its vicar with five other villages. (The school and the shop had closed years ago.) There was still, allegedly, a bus service, but it had grown so infrequent – and was so little used – that they had stopped bothering to stick up a timetable in the old wooden bus shelter.

I won’t go on. Such changes had, as I’m sure you know, been taking place all over England.

None the less, these ones bothered me. Everywhere I looked there were bigger cars, new extensions and conversions, garages and conservatories, goals and climbing frames, satellite dishes and security gates – but no slow, bad-toothed, mud-spattered people standing and chatting. Several farmers had sold up and gone. One nearby farm – which hadn’t even had electricity when I first visited it a decade or more ago – had become a state-of-the-art equestrian centre, staging prestigious events that attracted the horsey set from miles around – and not, as far as I could tell, farming at all.

‘And what’s wrong with that?’ asked Clare (my wife).

I couldn’t quite say.

TIME PASSED. We hurried about our daily routines. The skies and hedgerows paled into autumn. From time to time we moaned – to ourselves and to any number of neighbours – about how busy we all seemed to be. From time to time we would meet and begin to get to know some new arrival to the village. From time to time we would pause at the end of our garden and drink in the evening light on the big rabbit-cropped pastures beyond it. Everything was as it used to be – except that something was different.

Then we went to church. It's years since this was something that many people in the village did on a regular basis. But this was Remembrance Sunday, when, for reasons few of us could put our fingers on, large numbers usually turn out. The small 12th-century church was comfortably full, with all sorts: old men with medals, middle-aged women with unaccustomed lipstick, children in hoodies, ex-soldiers in neatly pressed suits and ties, teenagers with sagging jaws and trousers. Every stratum of local life seemed to be represented.

When we moved outside for our two minutes' silence by the war memorial, I counted more than 70 people. What was it, I wondered, that made a community that was neither religious nor militaristic attach such importance to this occasion? There was no clue in the faces: just a generalised air of respect, for someone or something.

During the silence, my mind wandered. I thought initially about the young men named on the war memorial: Leonard Cross, John Osborne; Arthur Prestidge, Walter Thomason. Who remembered their stories now? All I knew about them was that they died between 1915 and 1918, at the ages of, respectively, 20, 25, 21 and 20, two near the Somme, one at Gallipoli and one in what is now Iraq. What, I wondered, must it have felt like to stand here 80-odd years ago, with four families present whose sons had been freshly slaughtered? Pretty much the whole village – perhaps 400 people – would have stood here then. The English country silence would have sounded the same to them as to us. Yet how different it would have felt. Our sadness – at the passing of time, at lost innocence, at idiotic wars everywhere – was real but remote; theirs was catastrophically close.

A few birds sang. Trees, gold-leafed now, rustled. A bitter wind sliced us from the north; pride kept us from flinching.

I glanced up at the forest of contemplative faces. It bore little resemblance, I realised, to my mental picture of my

fellow villagers. Some were strangers; others I knew only vaguely. There were old friends and neighbours as well, but a disturbing number of familiar faces were absent. Where, for example, was little Ken Poynton, bristling with dignity and medals, who always used to present a wreath at this ceremony? Where was Horace Merivale, who used to look after the garden up at the Manor, and who fought at Arnhem? The only men with medals today were from other villages. Where was George Stanton, the quiet farmer whose stooping figure, trudging indomitably across the fields in all weathers, had come to seem like part of the landscape? Where was old Mrs Pratt, whose family memories of the village went back deep into the 19th century?

All dead, of course – as, on reflection, one would expect. The years speed past; the old die. But something had died with them.

Eighty years ago, when the villagers turned out to share the burden of bereavement, they were a *tribe:* the offspring of a network of interconnected families as rooted in the local soil as the trees and hedgerows. One family's son was another's nephew and another's cousin and yet another's prospective son-in-law. There were occasional migrations, in and out, but the majority remained where they were. Even 15 years ago – when I first moved here – that tribe was dominant. The village belonged, by common consent, to them; those of us who had moved in from elsewhere were intruders.

Now the old tribe had all but vanished. As far as I could see, there were only two people present, both widows, who had grown up in the village: Mrs Storer, the organist (and blacksmith's daughter), and Mrs Fisher, who used to live in The Grange. Neither lived in the village any more, though their roots often pulled them back. I could think of three or four other born-and-bred families who still lived in the village, but that was about it.

Did it matter? I wasn't sure. I had nothing against incomers: I was one myself. I knew how much non-natives contributed to village life. What did it matter if we didn't have 'three generations in the graveyard'? Yet there was something about the abruptness of the indigenous villagers' vanishing that frightened me, like some medium-sized ecological catastrophe. Before long there really wouldn't be a single one left.

This thought then blended with some of the other concerns in my mental reservoir of generalised middle-aged anxiety: the plans I had read about in that morning's papers to roll out hundreds of thousands of new homes, not to mention roads and runways, across our region of rural England; the collapse of traditional farming; the darkening shadow of climate change. How precarious this all was: the crumbling stonework and crooked gravestones and old, weak-chested villagers. Change and decay, accelerating all around.

To my left, just behind the war memorial, were some other gravestones, leaning and time-worn. Lichen draped their tops in a bright camouflage of white, gold and green. I studied the inscriptions: 'In loving memory of George Wright, who died November 21 1908, aged 78 – At rest'. And, next door, 'In [. . .]ory of Alice Wright, who departed this life on May 24 1904, aged 82. The g[. . .] of God is eternal [. . .] through Jesus [. . .] Lord'. I wondered, briefly, if any of their descendants survived in the village – I had never knowingly met any. Then I began to wonder how and when, precisely, those missing numerals and letters had disappeared. Had they been dislodged by an especially violent gust of wind, or by a series of particularly big raindrops? Had some ravenous micro-organism taken a couple of bites too many? And how, if it came to that, had the next grave along achieved its current state – total illegibility?

Presumably, in such cases, infinitesimally tiny bits keep dropping off until one day so much has gone that the rest can't even be imagined, unless you remember what it originally said. There is never an identifiable moment at which the point of no return is reached – just many moments afterwards when you can say with certainty that the point of no return was passed long ago.

A huge lorry – Heygates Flour – crashed through the cold silence, rattling thunderously through the village. Simultaneously, the words of an old Philip Larkin poem began, for some reason, to rattle in my head:

I thought it would last my time–
The sense that, beyond the town,
There would always be fields and farms,
Where the village louts could climb
Such trees as were not cut down . . .

How did it go? There was more, I knew, but I couldn't quite get a fix on it. Something else, and then:

It seems, just now,
To be happening so very fast . . .

something, something . . .

For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn't going to last . . .

A bugle blew (courtesy of the Royal British Legion). A bemedalled old man and a young boy whom I had never seen before walked up to lay wreaths at the base of the memorial; as they walked back, the old man put his hand on the boy's shoulder. I looked again at the watching faces and saw – I thought – tears on three. It was hard to be certain, because my own eyes had clouded.

There was so much to weep for: not just the bitterness of death, and the ebbing away of memory, and the hundreds of thousands of brave little soldiers who have grown up and still grow up to have their hearts and bodies broken in battle, but the fact that – 35 years after he wrote them – the truth of Larkin's words had suddenly struck me. It – this village – wasn't going to last.

Oh, the buildings would last; the fields and woods had a few more generations left in them yet. A handful of born-and-bred villagers would no doubt survive for a while. But the actual village – that miniature, self-contained eco-system in which past and present were all tangled up, and people, buildings and vegetation shared one reasonably coherent collective story – that village had passed away long ago.

This realisation (which some people might classify as bleeding obvious) almost winded me. I felt bereaved. I had lived in this village for just a decade and a half, but I had thought of myself as a villager – in a broader sense – for as long as I could remember. Earlier in my life, the village in question had been Green Tye, in a quiet backwater of Hertfordshire. I wasn't quite sentimental enough to think of myself as, in either case, a true member of the village in question. My parents were white-collar country people, and so was I. I spent most of my school holidays working and playing on various farms, but I was away and earning my living in distinctly non-agricultural ways as soon as I was old and educated enough to do so. More recently, I had often been away from Moreton Pinkney, for work and leisure. Yet through all my travels, and through all stages of my life, I had never lost the sense of having a village near the heart of my mental landscape: a fixed point of continuity, permanence and peace to which I could always return. No matter how rootless, frenetic and metropolitan my own existence, I told myself, the village and its people remained,

just beyond the edge of my vision, planted solidly in familiar fields, as they had always been.

Or rather – because I had never consciously thought this through before – perhaps I had imagined something more than that. Perhaps I had assumed that, somewhere in the background of my life, there would always be, not just one village, but a whole network of many thousand villages, each with its own story and its own local families and its own unique landscape and memories and its own peculiar way of saying and doing things. In short, I had imagined rural England, and had blithely gone through life (eagerly embracing the modern wherever I found it) under the impression that it would always be there, like a great rock, with the past clinging to it like lichen.

Now, when I turned to look at it, it was gone.

We filed back into the cold church. As we did so, a few more lines of Larkin's poem came back to me, and echoed in my head as if I had never forgotten them, with the dull clarity of a muffled funeral bell:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

Three decades later, that same train of thought had crashed into me.

II.

A JOURNEY

I DECIDED TO go on a quest. Well, I called it a quest. My wife called it a midlife crisis.

It was a long time gestating. For months, my nostalgia had darkened. By the following autumn it was a melancholy obsession. Where other people saw the countryside, I saw a giant graveyard, haunted by the ghosts of a lost tribe that had once imagined that its lifestyle would last for ever. Where others saw rolling green fields, I saw the abandoned ridge-and-furrow corrugations of the dead. Where others saw villages – my own village, friends' villages, villages I just happened to be passing through – I saw the ruins of a collapsed civilisation, no more connected to modern life than the remains of Hadrian's Wall. Yes, there were people living in them. But they were a new breed, adapting the physical remains of rural England for the purposes of their new, post-agricultural society – in the same way that, in the fifth and sixth centuries, post-Roman Italians broke and baked the marbles of antiquity to make plaster for their pre-medieval huts.

And the question that kept nagging at me was: was that it? Was that really 'England gone'? Or might there still be

places where living remnants of the lost rural past survived – in the same way that some ancient Britons held out in England's wild places long after the Roman conquest?

There was only one way to find out.

One fine morning, without any clear idea of what I was doing, I set out in search of this (possibly imaginary) lost rural world. I had saved up a large chunk of annual leave from my job as a commuting journalist, so it wasn't entirely impractical (I thought) to spend a few weeks on the road. Just – as my daughter put it – a bit odd.

Attached to my quest was a vow: I would travel as people used to travel – in books, and perhaps also in reality – with a light, hopeful heart. Like most English people of my generation, I have spent much of my life in transit, usually grudgingly: rushing to work, dashing to the supermarket, ferrying children, sitting in traffic jams, racing to beat the bank-holiday crowds, polluting and congesting and endangering life. But I was also aware of another mode of journeying, from the same half-remembered, half-imaginary old England I was seeking. In that land, travellers would stride out bravely on summer mornings, heads filled not with the ticking of a clock but with breezes and birdsong, and be delighted to embrace whatever adventures befell them – floods, yokels, brigands, damsels, giants . . . the more the merrier.

So it would be with me, I decided, as I kissed my family goodbye and drove into the unknown.

Well, it was actually the known. I left on the little back lane to Weston, as I had done thousands of times before, and my elderly Nissan Micra seemed happy enough to proceed on autopilot as we creaked around familiar bends. None the less, I felt supercharged with adventure. The radio chattered about rail strikes and gridlock on the M25. Very well: I turned the radio off. I am, I said to myself, a free Englishman; I am in good health, in peacetime, happily married, gainfully employed, only moderately in debt. I am

setting out to explore my favourite country. How else should I travel, except in hope?

I opened the window and breathed in the damp, fresh smell of English fields. The air was clean from a recent downpour, the sky glowed with a deep, warm blue; the hedgerows were spotted with blood-red hawthorn berries, rich as wet paint; the meadows were thick with bright green grass, with springy mud beneath. In short, it was just the sort of day I imagined as the backdrop to all those other glad, life-affirming journeys that were so tied up with my idea of England's past.

Which journeys? I don't think I really knew. My working vision of the rural past was – like most rural nostalgia – blurred around the edges and light on specifics. I suppose that, if pressed, I might have fallen back on English literature and muttered something about Laurie Lee, walking out 'one midsummer morning' from his Gloucestershire cottage in 1934, or William Cobbett on his 'rural rides' in the 1820s; Mr Pickwick setting out with 'his notebook in his waistcoat, ready for the reception of any discoveries worthy of being noted down'; Bunyan's Christian, or Fielding's Tom Jones, or Malory's Sir Lancelot, or even Langland's Piers Plowman, rigging himself out 'in shaggy woollen clothes' and setting out to 'roam far and wide through the world, hoping to hear of marvels'.

A more honest reply might have involved *The Wind in the Willows* or Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and my immature yearning for the unthreatening adventures of childhood stories. More honest still: that I just had a vague, unsubstantiated hunch that the romance of the English countryside and the romance of the English journey were intertwined.

But there was at least one bona fide predecessor. Eighty years earlier, another English journalist embarked on a similar adventure, with, as he put it, 'the road calling me out into England'. On an April morning in 1926, Henry Vollam Morton, a 33-year-old feature-writer with the *Daily Express*,

set out from London in a bull-nosed Morris on a self-imposed mission to find the England of his and others' imagination.

His premise was (for a while) famous: seriously ill in Palestine, he became homesick for a rural homeland of high-hedged lanes and wood smoke in autumnal village streets, where the setting sun 'leaves a dull red bar low down in the west, and against it the elms grow blacker minute by minute'. Returning to health and home, he realised that his nostalgic yearning was both illogical (he was a Londoner) and widely shared. English exiles, he reasoned, always see such rural idylls when they think of England – even if in reality they have little or no direct experience of them. Green fields and thatched roofs stand as a kind of emotional shorthand for the real land of our experience – because 'the village and the English countryside are the germs of all we are'. That was the England that the soldiers he had fought with in the Great War had imagined themselves to be fighting for, even if they had hardly seen it. And now – having hardly seen it himself – he was going to go out and see how much of that green and pleasant land really existed.

His account of his quest – published first as a series of articles and then in a book – made him famous and rich. *In Search of England* has sold more than a million copies and remains in print today. In a sense, this is odd. Morton was a nasty man: an anti-Semite and a snob who admired Nazi Germany and confessed to his diary that 'I loathe the very word Democracy'; the cheerful charm of his writing only partially conceals his nastiness. There is a patronising edge to his treatment of the comedy yokels and blushing wenches he encounters on his travels, and you would never guess that, during much of his journey, the country was convulsed by the General Strike. At times it is hard to avoid the suspicion that he has simply made things up.

Yet his narrative has a momentum that makes it, for all its faults, irresistible. And there was a rightness to his premise

that shone through his journalistic insincerities, and that still shines through them now.

Even today, when 90 per cent of the UK population lives in towns and cities, and less than 2 per cent of the population works on the land, and one in 10 of us was born abroad, do many of us ever encounter the word ‘England’ without at least momentarily imagining a soft, green, timeless landscape of village greens, old cottages and tangled hedgerows in which calm, solid country people coexist with a mist of gentle history?

If such an ideal is patently imaginary, that doesn’t make it less potent. And I, at least, felt intoxicated by it as I set out to see if any of that England survived.

III.

INTO THE WOODS

I SOON SOBERED up. My initial meanderings took me through familiar villages such as Weston, Weedon Lois, Wappenham, Helmdon, Greatworth, Farthinghoe, Cottisford, Hethe, Hardwick and Stoke Lyne. Each had its charming cottages and pleasing views, but I could sense no trace of my imagined England in any of them.

I stopped now and then but my heart wasn't in it. Such passers-by as I could find were no stranger than I was. In a couple of cases they were people I already knew. No farmers leant enigmatically on five-bar gates; no old men gawped (as they did in Morton's day) at the arrival of a strange motorist. There was, in short, no rural wildness. Instead, each village seemed normal: dissected by the same wide grey road, with white lines and bollards and black-and-white 'sharp bend' signs in sensible places. Every pavement was empty; each garden gate closed; each house-face expressionless; and the same chunky, multi-coloured necklace of parked cars was draped around everything. No doubt each had its secrets, but none commended itself as a gateway to adventure.

I took to the motorway – thinking to start again further from home – and was surprised to find that, as the river of vehicles bore me smoothly southwards, slices of the land I was seeking began to appear. This sounds bizarre, yet there they were: every few minutes, among the damp meadows and thick-hedged pastures that glinted green and silver on either side, I would catch a glimpse that provoked an overwhelming sense of looking into the rural past.

Typically, I would see a cluster of distant trees, dense as broccoli, on the crest of a hill, with a few old cottage roofs alongside and, rising above the leaves, an old stone church tower, its needle-sharp spire a still pinpoint of eternity. Variations included: an old farm glimpsed from the back, its sagging sheds and rusting machinery being eroded by nature and time in what their owner probably imagined was privacy; a cottage in a field, apparently deserted, with the front door and gate hanging open; a herd of cows being driven up a tiny mud-smeared lane; an overgrown riverside hut.

It doesn’t sound magical in print. It was when seen from the corner of my eye. Try it next time you’re on one of the bigger, straighter motorways. Instead of encountering villages at their point of interface with the road, you catch them from, as it were, backstage. Thus you bypass the usual clutter of overwrought 21st-century life and see instead an older, more peaceful land: a place of stillness and permanence and slow-growing vegetation, where every field and copse and cottage and shed has its own secret store of memories, waiting for someone to unlock them. All I had to do was find them.

I turned off somewhere south of Oxford – and immediately felt myself tugged back into the turbulent but numbing stream of the mechanised, unmysterious present. Traffic jostled; rumbling lorries loomed and belched. The roadsides bristled with lights, signs and speed cameras attempting to keep the rush in check – with little success. Each time I

slowed down to consider my surroundings, bad-tempered queues of cars formed instantly on my tail, and I could think of nothing more sensible to do than to keep driving, taking the line of least resistance at each junction. I had little idea of where I was, and the incessant instructions and exhortations did little to enlighten me: ‘Ring road!’ they snapped. ‘Superstore!’, ‘Country club!’, ‘Champagne happy hour!’, ‘Polo!’; ‘Luxury cattery!’; ‘Exclusive Apartments!’ ‘Two-way traffic!’, ‘Watch your speed!’, ‘Take extra care – 172 casualties in three years!’, ‘Oxford Thames Four Pillars Hotel!’, ‘Oxford Science Park!’, ‘Littlemore Park!’, ‘European School!’, ‘Park and ride!’, ‘Caravan and camping site!’, ‘Recycling and waste centre!’, ‘City centre!’, ‘Garden centre!’, ‘Slow!’. It was like having a nagging parent in the car.

EVENTUALLY, AMONG SOME wooded hills near the bottom of Oxfordshire, I stopped at a smart village of about 300 houses called Stoke Row, whose attractions included a rusting metal structure, the size and shape of a bandstand, around whose roof were inscribed the words ‘His Highness the Maharajah of Benares’. I am indebted to a nice old man called John Pitt for the information (no doubt familiar to many) that this structure conceals a well, whose creation was funded by the aforementioned Maharajah in the mid-19th century because he was so moved by the stories of the villagers’ poverty that he had been told by the local squire’s son, Edward Reade, when the latter was out in India. Reade had dwelt particularly on the lack of a clean water supply (villagers being ‘dependent for water retained in dirty ponds and deserted clay-pits’, according to one letter, while ‘water used in cooking in one cottage was passed on to do the like office in others, urchins being cruelly thumped for furtive quenchings of thirst and washing days being indefinitely postponed’).

‘It goes 365ft deep, I think,’ said Mr Pitt, a small, smiling, white-haired man who was born in the village 76 years ago, ‘and it was all dug by hand. We used to get our water from it. We lived in that cottage there – it used to be two cottages then. My brother’s pigeons used to get on the roof, so you can imagine what the water was like.

‘But when the doctor used to come to the village, my mother used to let him use our front room as his surgery. She’d put out a jug of water from the well and he’d mix up his medicines with it. I often wonder if it was the medicine or the water that got the people better.’

The Maharajah also funded the creation of a neighbouring cherry orchard, whose proceeds were to fund the employment of a well-warden, as well as a tiny, octagonal well-warden’s cottage. The last well-warden was a Miss Turner, the local schoolmistress, who died in 1972. The lodge is now a private dwelling; little remains of the orchard, and the well is boarded over. Why? Mr Pitt rolled his bright blue eyes. ‘Health and safety, or whatever they call it.’

The tale of the well intrigued me – the village’s current prosperity can arguably be traced back to that far-sighted act of unilateral international aid – but I was no less interested in Mr Pitt himself. He had spent much of his life in the village – although for the past 30 years he had lived in the adjoining hamlet of Gallowstree Common – and was happy to share his memories of it. We spent some time driving round the area together, and he also gave me coffee in his house, which he had built himself.

He had, he explained, done well for himself, through years of hard work in the car-repair business, but his childhood had been a poor one. ‘We were extremely hard up,’ he said cheerfully. ‘It was hand-to-mouth, pretty well – especially when my father was ill and couldn’t work. I remember once they held a whist drive for us, because we had so little. But I think most families in the village were pretty hard done by in those days.

‘We didn’t have water; we didn’t have electric. We never had new clothes, and we certainly didn’t have toys. I don’t think we ever actually went hungry, though – you could always get food from the land, you see, and there was always rabbits. I used to go out with a mate on Sundays. He’d have the gun and I’d have the ferret – you could get three-and-six for a rabbit, if you gutted it, so it was worth doing.

‘Everyone worked wherever they could. My dad was a journeyman decorator, but that only kept him going in the summer. In the winter I’d help him working on Mr Greenaway’s thrashing machine. That was a dirty old job, if you were on the end where the chaff was coming out. Oh, terrible.’

He chuckled, crinkling his face along well-worn laughter-lines. The memory seemed to warm him. ‘It was a happy childhood,’ he confirmed. ‘A lot of our day consisted of roaming in the woods. We’d be gone all day. Our parents never used to worry – they knew we’d be safe. The older children looked after the younger ones, and everyone knew everyone anyway. If there was ever a stranger about, the whole village would have known about it in 10 minutes.

‘It’s different today. It’s changed out of recognition. There are still community activities – there’s lots of things you can join – but it’s not a community like we had when we were children. Nobody locked their doors then. But that’s gone.’

We drove in and out of a bewildering lattice of lanes, among tall, mysterious beech trees, as Mr Pitt pointed out old and new features. There were considerably more of the latter. ‘I reckon the housing here has trebled since I was a child. Look, those have all been built since I was growing up. And all those houses down there have all been built . . . That was a blacksmith’s shop . . . That was a carpenter’s shop – if someone died you’d see them making a coffin there . . . And a lady lived here who used to make boiled sweets . . . That’s new . . . So’s that . . . My mother used to put her washing

out on this piece of land here, but the guy who lived just there, Geoff Page, he kept goats, and the bloody goats used to eat the washing . . . That used to be a pond . . . There's another place been developed down there . . . And this', – a former mental asylum on the outskirts – 'has all been converted to very, very posh flats, a million and a quarter.'

No one could dispute the prosperity of the place: there were businesses operating under such headings as (to name just a few): architect, antiques restorer, classic cars, graphic design, kitchens, exhibition construction, photography, precision engineers, racing-engine reconditioning and marine-equipment supply. Had the Stoke Row of his childhood vanished? 'Not exactly. But the world has changed a lot. I still feel part of the village: I wouldn't want to move. But most people there don't know me.

'The woods haven't changed so much, though,' he added, as a threadbare lane took us back into the depths of the forest. For the first time in a long while, I felt that I was in a countryside older than myself. Cold light played mesmerically on the pale, upright trunks, which seemed to stretch indefinitely and identically in all directions; I could imagine getting badly lost here. 'I'd never get lost in these woods – even in the dark,' Mr Pitt declared. 'And I wouldn't want a torch, either. I can still walk from here to Ipsden and only cross a couple of roads.'

He showed me a clearing where the US army had had a camp in World War II. 'Then after D-Day they put barbed wire all round it and put German prisoners here. They had guns all around. And then after the war people from Reading – people who'd been bombed out – began to come up here to squat. My father and I helped make the huts a bit nicer for them.

'I used to walk for miles in these woods as a child. Everyone did – a lot of people worked in them. There weren't even paths, but we knew it all backwards. I knew where all the tent-peg shops were.'

Shops?

‘Not real shops. They were like outdoor workshops – the places where the bodgers and people worked.

‘It was the main industry then. Not just chair legs, but brushes – Star Brush in the village used to employ about 40 people – and pit props – I remember doing that with my father on Streetly Hill, sawing small fir trees to the right length. We’d cycle about two hours to get there. And then there was tent pegs, of course – they’d do that with a spoke shave, on a horse. Have you seen those horses that they sit on – they’re like three-legged benches? Anyway, in the war they made several million tent pegs for the army. And rifle butts, obviously.’

Those were good times – in the economic sense. But they weren’t easy. ‘It was pretty cold. I remember that. The trees would be felled in the wintertime, you see. And you have to do it straight after they’ve been cut down, or it would get to be too hard, whereas the green wood turns easily with a pole lathe, and you can just put the chisel into it.

‘So the bodgers and people would do their work in a “shop”, which would be made with three or four poles with some old galvanised as a roof, a bit of sackcloth hanging down, and then slowly you stacked the shavings of the wood from the work into a good wall all the way round to keep the winds and the cold out as much as possible.

‘I used to look after Silas Saunders’s shop,’ he said proudly. I don’t think I looked as impressed as I should have done. ‘His chair legs were famous. I think he stopped making them in 1961. I must have been about 12, maybe 13, when I worked for him. I was only rolling the wood, of course, but it was very interesting to watch him. The wood was cut into lengths, and then it was rolled down to where we were working in the wood, near Herrold Farm, where my mother used to be in service before she married my father. And these would then be what they call bodged, using a wooden mallet – you’d split them into almost like a triangle,