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WHEATHAMPSTEAD: AN AUTUMN IDYLL

by Arthur Grant

WHEATHAMPSTEAD is mainly known to lovers of English literature through Charles Lamb's incidental reference to this old-world village in one of the finest of his autobiographical essays, "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire". All his life he had heard his sister talk of Mackery End, a farmhouse within a gentle walk of Wheathampstead. The old farmhouse, the woodhouse, the pigeon-house, and the orchard were to him a dream of infancy and so, at last, when that pathetic pair did visit this part of Hertfordshire, Lamb was too full of Mackery End to tell us anything about Wheathampstead. It must be confessed that as a name, Mackery End, or Macry End, like Stoke Poges, has not much to charm. A shrine, indeed, is twice blessed when, added to its associations, its name has a haunting melody all its own; so it is with Wheathampstead, "so called of the corne" for which the county has been famous for centuries. Euston Road and King's Cross do not suggest "the sweet security of streets" whatever Charles Lamb may say; but when, within an hour of leaving London, you step on to the platform at Wheathampstead station, you feel at peace with all mankind. All our worries are forgotten as we reach beloved Hatfield of many memories, and proceed by the leisurely single branch line between Hatfield and Luton, following the course of the tiny Upper Lea, the river whose lower reaches are dear to the memory of Izaak Walton.

Don't be in a hurry to leave Wheathampstead station, for it is situated on a gentle height facing southwards, and when the train moves off, you will find that the whole village lies before you. As a picture how beautifully it composes. The spire of the parish church and the roofs of both nave and choir appear above the trees, and the eye lingers restfully on the great chestnut trees that separate the churchyard yonder from the rectory. In the foreground there is the warmth of red-brick cottages, weather-stained barns, and the stately chimneys of a seventeenth-century farmhouse. A few spruces give an additional character to this ideally English landscape. Away to the south towards St Albans the road ascends until it is lost in the pastoral common of No Man's Land. As Autolycus put it to me, however, "if you tried to shoot a hare or a rabbit on that 'ere common you would soon find out whether or not it was no man's land; but bless you," he continued, and a nod is as good as a wink, "there were ways and means"; Autolycus knew all about it. I have a great respect for Autolycus and his opinions. It was he who informed me that Redbourn Church, a few miles distant, was built by Julius Caesar, and referred me to the parson for corroboration. A few days later he accidentally met me at St Albans, opposite an ancient hostelry (every other house is one, so that the coincidence does not count for much), and kindly inquired if I had found the old church. The rogue! Where shall I meet him next, at Stamford Fair in the company of mad Shallow, or in the company of old Sly's son in the neighbourhood of Marian Hacket's? But this is trifling.

Leaving Wheathampstead station, the road winds through the village, across the river Lea at the old bridge, and up the steep ascent to No Man's Land. I must not, however, be led astray from the objects of my pilgrimage, and so I enter the churchyard by its quaint lichgate, and renew my acquaintance with the old church of St Helen's, Wheathampstead. The swallows were collecting on the warm southern roof on the day of my visit. A few days later I saw them encircling the great Norman tower of St Albans Abbey in their wheeling flights. It was a pleasing association, as old as the days of the Psalmist. *Quam delecta sum tabernacula.* "Would'st thou know," writes Charles Lamb, "the beauty of holiness? Go alone on some week day, borrowing the keys of good Master Sexton, traverse the cool aisles of some country church: think of the piety that has kneeled there, the congregations of old and young that have found consolation there, the meek pastor, the docile parishioner. With no disturbing element, no cross-conflicting comparisons, drink in the tranquillity of the place, till thou thyself become as fixed and motionless as the marble effigies that weep and kneel around thee." Of such is St Helen's, Wheathampstead. In former years I borrowed the keys, but now the door in the north porch is open, and the rector, Canon Davys, who is himself an authority on church architecture and church music, has placed a notice in the porch intimating that the church is "open daily for private devotion, quiet rest, or suitable reading, and inspection of the building and its memorials." Here are no gorgeous windows of the princely perpendicular period. The central tower dates from 1290, and the chancel windows consist of the form expressive of the Early English period, three long lancet lights. Beneath are the poppy-headed stalls of the choir, not the originals, unfortunately, but reproductions made of old oak brought from Cambridge. The low screen cutting off the north transept is Jacobean work. The transepts contain exceptionally fine mural tablets and tombs with recumbent effigies of the sixteenth and seventeenth century squires and dames. Here the six lancet windows have given way to the decorated form, and as the sun shone through the painted window of the south transept it tinged with rose-colour and gold the alabaster tombs of a knight and his lady, even as in Keats's poem the wintry moon shone through the blazoned casement and "threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast." But the glory of St Helen's Wheathampstead is its connection with the Macry family. John of Wheathampstead, 33rd Abbot of St Albans, was the son of Hugh Bostock and his wife, Margaret Macry or Mackery, daughter of Thomas Macry of Macry End. Their brasses still pave the floor of the north transept of Wheathampstead Parish Church. John Wheathampstead was twice Abbot of St Albans, from 1420 to 1440, and again in his old age, from 1451 to 1464, during the civil Wars of the Roses. He combined the administrative ability of a great ecclesiastic with the other accomplishments of churchmen in those times. He was a booklover, historiographer, and writer of verse; he presented to the abbey church the finest organ in any monastery in England; he designed the great screen over the high altar afterwards erected by a successor, Abbot Wallingford, and he erected the richly-carved watch-loft that guards the shrine of St Alban, on which the wheat ears of the abbot could be distinguished, just as in similar fashion the lamb of St John the Baptist and the eagle of St John the Evangelist were engraved as his insignia on the plate presented by him to the church. At St Albans Abbey, now a cathedral, you still may see Abbot Wheathampstead's sepulchral chapel opposite the great shrine of which he was so proud to be the protector that even on the brasses in memory of his parents in the Macry Chapel at Wheathampstead

he described them in Latin as " the father and mother of the Shepherd of the Sheep of the Anglican Proto-Martyr."

My path leads me through the Rector's meadow. Deborah in her song of triumph referred to the days when "the highways were unoccupied and the travellers walked through byeways." Today we are well content to leave the highway to the traveller, reserving the byeway, Shakespeare's footpath way, for the pilgrim; and in Hertfordshire you never need to leave the footpath way, unless when lost in a deep Hertfordshire lane it may be necessary to find your bearings somehow by clambering through a gap in the hedge , overrun as usual with traveller's joy, red-berried bryony, and woody nightshade or bitter-sweet, to where, as Charles Kingsley says , the white chalk fields above are quivering hazy in the heat . Now the path leads to a wooden bridge, close to which there are beds of yellow musk and wild mint. From thence the river skirts the by-road as I wander westward until I reach a finger-post at the junction of what are practically four country lanes dominated by a small alehouse bearing the name of The Cherry Trees. There are many such in this country, where the customers must be few and far between, and where the income seems to be derived from other sources, working an allotment, keeping pigs, or selling coals. I notice, for example, that mine host of the Marquis of Granby, another Leaside "public" with a grandiloquent name, varied his practice at the bar with that of chimney sweeping. Nearer London doubtless there are places not so primitive , but when I reached The Cherry Trees I was reminded of a passage in Lamb's delightful essay on "Old China," a passage which, you remember, he puts into the mouth of Bridget Elia, his sister Mary : " Then do you remember our pleasant walks to Enfield and Potter' s Bar, and Waltham, when we had a holyday, (holydays and all other fun, are gone now we are rich) and the little hand-basket in which I used to deposit our day's fare of savoury cold lamb and salad, and how you would pry about at noontide for some decent house , where we might go in and produce our store, only paying for the ale that you must call for, and speculate upon the looks of the landlady , and whether she was likely to allow us a tablecloth, and wish for such another hostess as Izaak Walton has described many a one on the pleasant banks of the Lea when he went a-fishing.

Leaving the pleasant banks of the Lea, the path to Macry End leads northward for a few yards, when the lane suddenly widens out into a heath, with great stretches of old turf on either side of the way, bordered by noble elms. The pilgrims' path, however, is yonder field track through the gate to the left at the bottom of the heath. On a previous pilgrimage to Macry End the field was glowing with purple lucerne. This year, faithful to tradition, the land had been sown with wheat. Here the harvest had been garnered, and three ploughs were already at work, with three horses yoked to each plough. The ploughman, amid the September sunshine, whistles as he goes, recalling, not Lamb, but Gray, in that ever-memorable Elegy "How jocund did they drive their team afield!". Crossing the fields diagonally, I am at last face to face with the red-tiled cottages, the Jacobean manor house, and the farm of Macry End, all nestling under their ancestral oaks.

A veritable haunt of ancient peace is this old seventeenth century manor house, the successor, doubtless, of the earlier home of John of Wheathampstead. One notes the old bell-tower, the clustered chimneys, some spiral shaped, the sun-dial, the stables deep red

and lichened, from the roofs of which there comes the slumberous cooing of pigeons; even the stately lawn, with its double row of standard roses leading to the front of the manor, are suggestive in their formalism of old-world gardens. A distant sound of guns indicates that partridge shooting has begun among the stubble of this old corn country. The whole scene has an early Georgian atmosphere about it, that of a manor house of the Stuart period as it would appear in the days of George the Third. To complete the illusion, while the lateness of the harvest had somewhat delayed the cub-hunting season, I am met at a turn of the road by the huntsman exercising his hounds.

Such were my impressions of the manor house of Macry End; but Charles and Mary Lamb had no eyes for the manor house, all their thoughts were centred in the farm across the way, where dwelt one of their handsome Wheathampstead cousins. "There was a grace and dignity, an amplitude of form and stature, answering to her mind, in this farmer's wife, which would have shined in a palace." How they feasted on the fatted calf, drank the home-made wine, and called each other by their Christian names, like "Scriptural cousins," is familiar to us all. The old yellow-tinted front of the farmhouse faces the west, surrounded by its great barns, mellowed with age into a study in red, gamboge, and brown. The house has evidently been added to since Lamb's time, and the modern front facing the east, clothed with ivy, looks out into a garden and orchard. 'Tis a quiet pastoral scene, of field and meadow bordered with oak, ash and elm, intersected by grass-grown lanes that lead to nowhere particular, sometimes to decayed farms far from the great roads where the watch-dogs bark a joyful welcome, and the whole population of the poultry-yard rushes out to greet the infrequent passer-by.

I am once more on my way to St Helen's, Wheathampstead. Both the name and the place have a fascination for me. It is eventide, and as I leave the common and enter the footpath through the cornfields that lead from Gustardwood towards Wheathampstead village the setting sun in splashes of red and gold is glowing through the elms, as if their massive boughs were mullions and transoms of a great cathedral window. The six bells of St Helen's are ringing for Evensong, and now the swell of the organ is heard as the choir singing a processional hymn take their places in the stalls. When describing St Helen's in the full blaze of noonday I did not mention that for evening services the church is lit entirely by candles, three rows down each side of the nave, a cluster of five on either side of the lectern, and four separate clusters lighting respectively the pulpit, the two sides of the choir, and the sanctuary. The medieval effect is very striking. For a time the painted windows told their stories as long as the daylight lingered; but the lancet windows in the chancel were the first to fade, then the candelabra emphasised the shadows of the great dim roof and the ponderous pillars of the central tower. They cast, too, a Rembrandtesque light on the groups of worshippers. We are back into the fourteenth century, contemporaries of John of Wheathampstead and Macry End, or of that sweet lady of the alabaster tomb. Nothing seemed to break the continuity of that ancient sacred service; church, lessons, liturgy, music, all were alike time-hallowed. The old order changeth, but not at Wheathampstead.

But now the day is ended, and with its close also ends another pilgrimage. I hope that it will not be the last to the same neighbourhood. Alas! Is there a single one of all those hallowed

shrines that we would not gladly revisit, places dear to our memory, places so far removed from the environment and worry of our work-a-day life! It is in this mood that I bid farewell to the Church of St Helen. As I linger for a moment before I turn into the village, only a dim glimmer from the monastic-looking tapers of the great church lights the churchway path. Beyond the village the overhanging trees of a Hertfordshire lane make the September night doubly dark. Not till I reach the breezy common at the top of the hill does the white chalk road reflect the radiance of a thousand stars.