

Cotgrave

by William Lewin*

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Part I

The village of Cotgrave is so beautifully situated and so near to Nottingham that it has many visitors. There is, moreover, such a mixture of ancient and modern in its general architecture that visitors and new residents are more inquisitive about its history than about that of most villages. As I have written much about the village, many such enquiries come to me and I am writing this article to answer those questions which people are most curious about.

Monastic Beginnings

Cotgrave's history during the Middle Ages was largely a monastic one, owing to the fact that the Norman Lords who acquired it at the Conquest dwelt elsewhere and only paid visits on occasions of general travel. Not only did the two monasteries situated in the neighbourhood live on the fatness of its agricultural produce, but they annexed in addition a portion of the income of the Church which they did nothing to build, and were privileged also to nominate its clergy. As Cotgrave was a large village, possessing two major manors and several smaller ones, it had, through the Middle Ages, two successions of parish clergy who lived on the income which the monasteries did not choose to annex and nobly performed their sacred duty. Why Cotgrave was so fortunate as to retain its rectories, whilst most monastic villages were shorn of all but ---arage incomes has always been to me a puzzle and a surprise. Probably it was because then the village was difficult of access, having throughout all its past history been notorious for the bad state of its roads and bounded by wolds and difficult hills.

The monastery of Swineshead in Lincolnshire which acquired its Danish settlement of Stragglethorpe must have found the transit of produce particularly difficult, and probably early solved the problem by converting the whole district into a crop farm: for in no other way can I explain the fact that its tithes were converted to a definite annual contribution to its rector. The amount, which was £36, clearly denotes a settlement during the Middle Ages when such a sum represented considerable wealth. It also explains the reason why the district, so suitable for population, has never possessed one of more than its present number.

Pierreponts' First Appearance

When, on the destruction of monasteries, the Pierrepont family acquired it, and thus made their first entrance to the village, a good price was paid; for Henry VIII gave very few financial bounties away. The family also acquired with that manor the rectory patronage of the other, and, in course of time, succeeded in amalgamating the two. The single rector who then acquired the full tithe values of the village and the composition fortune of the other, became a comparatively wealthy man, and was generally presented to the living as a friend or relative of the ruling family of Holme Pierrpont. Only one personal tragedy has been associated with its lines of priests, and that was when the Rev. John Clarke was dispossessed at the Restoration and left to live or not as he was able. It is one of the few parishes which has

had an abbot for rector, for the last of the Swineshead race managed to transfer himself to the Stragglethorpe rectory, and was thus enabled to insure himself against poverty and neglect.

The King did not at once transfer the village manor, but continued to enjoy its income, leaving it to Queen Mary finally to dispose of it to the White family of Tuxford who enjoyed very much of her confidence and was, by marriage, allied to the all-powerful Cecils of that and the following reign.

The village passed very well through the two reigns, for, as it had contributed so much of its income to Catholicism, as represented by its monastic masters, the people probably felt themselves free of an incubus, and had the solace of obtaining, for the first time in its history, two squires resident in the village. For it happened that at the time the monastic properties changed owners, a change was made in the ownership of that section which had, during the Middle Ages, remained connected with the family of Ralph Bugge, the wealthy Nottingham wool merchant.

That estate, which included some part of the wolds and adjoined the boundary of Clipstone, was then acquired by Harold Scrimshire, who occupied the ancient Hall of his manor for about as long a time as the Whites remained in the other.

I have often asked myself where, during the monastic period, the two rectors lived, and I think the question is solved by the existence, until the last century, of two cottages by the church, of which the walnut tree is a perpetual historic testimony. I know that neither could have had a history earlier than the Tudor times but, as the church has remained constant in its present position throughout all the history of the village, so I think it probable that the homes of the rectors were so.

The monasteries left two outward traces of their long ownership. Not a stone remains to bear testimony, and I am confident that they were more importing agencies than contributories of wealth, such as all the secular owners of the village have been.

By every possible test, the village arrived at the Commonwealth period very successfully and happily, and the wars do not appear to have affected it, as they did places like Shelford or Newark. As the great house of Owthorpe was made uninhabitable during the wars, so those of Cotgrave must have similarly suffered, for, though the two ownership families remained in occupation until the early years of the eighteenth century, they had not, I think, the same interests in its welfare as in the years which preceded that exceedingly troubled time. Eventually the whole village became for sale and it was then that the Pierrepoints began to make themselves its greatest owners.

Their greatest competitive buyer was the Lambe family of Southwell origin, which had grown rich, Mr Penistone Lambe especially so, for it was he who founded the family which eventually obtained the Melbourne Peerage and gave to England its first Victorian Premier.

By what means a lady of the family who, by marriage, became Mrs Lionella Clay, inherited or otherwise acquired their Cotgrave property I do not know but that she was the owner at the Enclosure time and lived at Cotgrave Place is certain. It is also equally certain that by ten years later she had lost it by death or otherwise and that a London solicitor, a Mr Jansen, had then obtained possession and had succeeded her at Cotgrave Place.

Enclosures

The break-up of family estates during that exciting time brought into existence a number of yeoman freeholders who, until the French wars and their continuances, lived happily on their augmented incomes and served the parish ably as Constable, Churchwarden and sometimes even as Magistrate. It was they who, with the Rector and the Pierreponts, came to an arrangement about the better division of properties and forced the acceptance of the few smaller owners who had chiefly a homestead and an adjacent field or two. Between them all the open fields were enclosed, tithes were replaced by a considerable Rectory Estate, new roads were made, footpaths registered, and full manorial rights of wastelands and minerals legalised. The village was not considered at all, though the Church became possessed of lands, to augment the income by rates. The Rector was made responsible for the maintenance of the chancel of the Church and also became the controller of the only school of the parish. At that time the rector was non-resident, holding other important livings, and not until 1812 was that deplorable system finally destroyed.

Faced with Ruin

The Enclosure which began with such hope and which, for the first time, made the Wolds cultivatable ended when the French wars were over, when prices fell and a financial strain had arrived such as had never been realised before. If small owners had been allowed to defer fence-making and ditch-digging for a season or so they might perhaps have escaped bankruptcy but on such matters the Act was definite. What they could not do, the Commissioners, one of whom was the Pierrepont estate agent, were empowered to do and to charge owners with its cost. There is no doubt that the bulk of the owners were unable to bear the burden, with the result that within thirty years, they had, except as tenants, all gone, and the whole village, with Cotgrave Place, had become a Manvers estate. The Rector then arrived as resident and at once began to build a new home and, in the process, annihilated a small and ancient dwelling for its site.

Decay Begins

He was owner of five hundred acres of agricultural land and, though he leased to others at least half of it, was still a farmer of a large estate and so his successors remained until the last years of the nineteenth century, when the third Earl Manvers acquired most of it and the rectory income became finally controlled by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. At the same time, the rectory house was again enlarged, making it today an encumbrance, rather than a suitable habitation.

When the year 1840 arrived, the ancient village, which has existed through so many territorial and social changes, was manifestly falling to pieces. It had houses of the Elizabethan period, built of wood and bricks, centuries old. All over the village such bricks still remain, with stone foundations, telling of the antiquity of the past. Around what is left of the White dwelling the high wall exhibits brick sections centuries old, with a strange patchwork of those of more modern type and within its base is a stout wall of probably medieval times. There is not a single house in the village which has not at least once been reconstructed and several have been entirely rebuilt.

Part II

The last Duke of Kingston and his notoriously expensive wife can have had little residue income for estate improvements and not until the second Earl Manvers took the matter in hand were any serious alterations made. He, to his very great credit, began and carried successfully through a rebuilding scheme which completely revolutionised the aspect of the village and made it to a large extent what it is today.

He enlarged the ancient school and house at the foot of the Mill Hill and built the adjacent dwelling, so luxuriantly surrounded by garden flowers. That recently occupied by the Police Officer remained until more modern times a low thatched cottage. Those adjoining the Butt Field were entirely reconstructed and the ancient house of Mill Lane, less altered than any in the village, then acquired its modern roof.

Two cottages at the entrance to Butt Field whose stopped window frames eloquently recall the iniquitous window tax, were erected at that time, including, as thatched places, the Rose and Crown Inn and the cottages closely surrounding it, most of which have now disappeared.

Distinguished Occupants

The corner house of Morkinshire – a street as old as the village, which, by its name, must once have possessed county significance – which has had many distinguished occupants, including one carpenter bearing my full name, a blacksmith and a school master, is one of the old village, along with all on the right side of the street, together with the cottage at the end, through which a footpath, now disused, was marked out by the Enclosure scheme. The cottage, place and farmstead on the left are both products of that nineteenth century building period and one ancient holding occupied by the man who first used the canal as boat owner has now disappeared. The garden surrounded by a wall narrowly missed being occupied by several cottages, for contracts, which were cancelled by the war, were made. The two further cottages with large back gardens were originally one farmstead, whose last tenant, a Mr Parr, was for 50 years the Constable of the Court Leet and the last. The name disappeared on the death of a lady only a few years ago. In the cottage with the front street window lived my uncle, Mr Sam Smart who emigrated to New Zealand in 1858 and wrote an article which I described in the ‘Guardian’ a few years ago. Those cottages are small but have been improved in recent years. The next farmstead was where my uncle Sam Lewin was placed when a former farmstead was destroyed for the erection of the present school premises. The house at its back is old but its front part must have been an erection of the early nineteenth century when the post office place and its companion, the old village bakery were reconstructed. The cottage place which succeeds them is of an earlier nineteenth century period which then replaced the old-time beer-house which, with the Rose and Crown Inn, were the two social premises of the village. The original part of the Manvers Arms was scheduled by the Enclosure Act as a farmstead and a carpenter’s shop. Its present front part was probably erected when the beer-house was destroyed and has seen at most about 130 years. It at once became the site of the Court Leets and even of the Parish Meeting until, with the erection of the new school, all Church business was there transferred.

The circular estate, bounded on the other side by Risegate, containing none but farm and cottage places, must have been the private manor of the White family. The boundary lane was clearly a semi-private one with access by a wall gateway. It is the central circle where all the

best orchards were planted and where the famous cherries were grown. I was born in a cottage of that circle and, as my grandmother was the last appointed member of the ancient order of St John of Jerusalem, which had the Manvers Arms as its district meeting place, I have often wondered whether the whole circle was a middle-age property of the order.

Oldest Street Name

In Pepper Street, the oldest street name in the village, the large farm place was entirely rebuilt about the time of 1812 when the Manvers family may originally have acquired it, and the cottage place so long associated with the name Timm is probably of similar age. The high family residence at the end of the street consists of early nineteenth century work with mid and later extensions. The site was, with its orchard lands, awarded at the Enclosure to a Mr Thomas Frost who probably occupied its original cottage, now destroyed, where my father was born. He was very early succeeded by Mr Parker of the brickyard who erected the original section of the present house and probably planted its orchards, also largely with cherry trees, which my father rented and I, in my youth, protected. The property descended to Mr Parker Woodward, a once well-known solicitor of Nottingham and then to its present family owners. All the property surrounding the chapel, doomed to misuse by Methodist Union, is of mid-Victorian age except the two properties which were then modernised. Originally, they had an undivided approach to the plot of land which, about 1860, became annexed to the churchyard. In type they must have been Elizabethan, consisting of Brick, beam and plaster with low thatched roof. Their owner at Enclosure was, I think, Mrs Lionella Clay, though Earl Manvers possessed the birthplace of 'Rusticus' and that in which John Cooper, an early family relation of mine, first established Methodism under the shadow of the Church.

In my boyhood the pathway across the churchyard narrowly escaped being closed. Earl Manvers saw sheep grazing among the tombs and wrote a letter of protest. The vestry meeting decided to close the pathway by erecting at each end a highly staved stile which on one evening was sawn asunder by a person then unknown. The question was made prominent by a Church-Warden election, after which the authorities became, for the first time, sensible and erected the present fence, seeking no longer to obstruct the public pathway. A son of the man who broke the stile is now a resident magistrate and a large property owner. On the Main Street side of the churchyard pathway was, in my boyhood, a one-storied house used as a home for the oldest widow of the village. It had earlier been a girls' school, brought into existence by general subscription. By some arrangement it became added to the Manvers estate and was rebuilt as now.

Along the road to the rectory, anciently a field pathway known as 'Bakers Hollow', is a house which, at the Enclosure, belonged to a Mr Collishaw who had a considerable cottage holding. It is the only house scheduled in the Act as among the main village properties which still remain outside the Manvers estate. It has been the home of a doctor, a local veterinary surgeon and has undergone as much alteration as any in the village. The farmstead which adjoins it is one of the oldest of the local farm places and has several times been let away from the land. Among its tenants was one who, about 64 years ago, secured for the village its first gas supply. At that time it was decreed that the tariff should slightly exceed that of the town and it does so still. Next to the rectory is a cottage which I think was, with an enlarged land holding, occupied by curates during the period of the non-resident rectors. The present

family connection with it has extended to at least seventy-six years. Next to that is a place with an orchard which was, until after the Enclosure time, owned and occupied by a branch of a Scottorn family, once of much local importance but now gone.

The Old Rectory

The old rectory, a remnant of the ancient Scrimshire habitation, shows few signs of later reconstruction and seems capable of standing against wind and storm for at least another hundred years. As I remember its interior, it was a place made comfortable by every possible ancient contrivance and had a most cosy chimney corner such as, except at the bakery house on the Cross, are now all gone. All the other dwellings of Scrimshie-lane, until the old Bagguley farmstead is reached, are of nineteenth century erection. The Bagguley place was occupied by a tenant of that name before the Enclosure and so continued until a very few years ago. The name is now finally gone. The final home of 'Rusticus' has an ancient aspect and is occupied by a grandson. In three other houses his descendants are to be found, though in no other is his name continued. One son still lives but not in the village and, except by me, 'Rusticus' is largely forgotten. I, who fought him in many newspaper battles, have all his literary works of every edition and treasure his memory.

It is a strange fact that the greatest village population was during the eighteen sixties when it would have been impossible to house them except for the privately built cottages on plots snatched from waste grounds and the extensions of the Gripps and Chapel Yard. The latter place was originally a garden strip which was first used for a Methodist Chapel about the year 1806. In 1839 another, now the Village Institute, took its place. The one now closed was erected in 1892 and the last of all, now the central place of all Methodism, in 1902. The institute site does not honour the village. It ought to have been that surrounded by the wall adjoining Morkinshire Lane, where a playground for children could have been established.

It is strange, too, that so large a village can find no more suitable site for a cemetery than at its very centre. There is a field at the back of the Gripps cottages, where the Wolds Mill used to be, with a road specially made for its convenience. There one of the most beautiful cemeteries in the country could have been laid out and yet the people prefer to live by the side of the dead. The old Danish part of Candleby Lane has become essentially modern, though it still contains one house of considerable age. Along the main road which leads to Stragglethorpe is a large house reminiscent of a race of Smiths, who, for the village, have been curate, lawyer and farmer. It was the lawyer who, by inducing those who had built houses on the waste lands to pay a yearly ground acknowledgement, finally brought about their dispossession. The farmer was more charitable to the working poor than anyone had ever been before. The house was, for a period, occupied by the late Lord Henry Bentinck who had a very kindly feeling towards the people and their village.

*For more about William Lewin, see his entry under 'People'