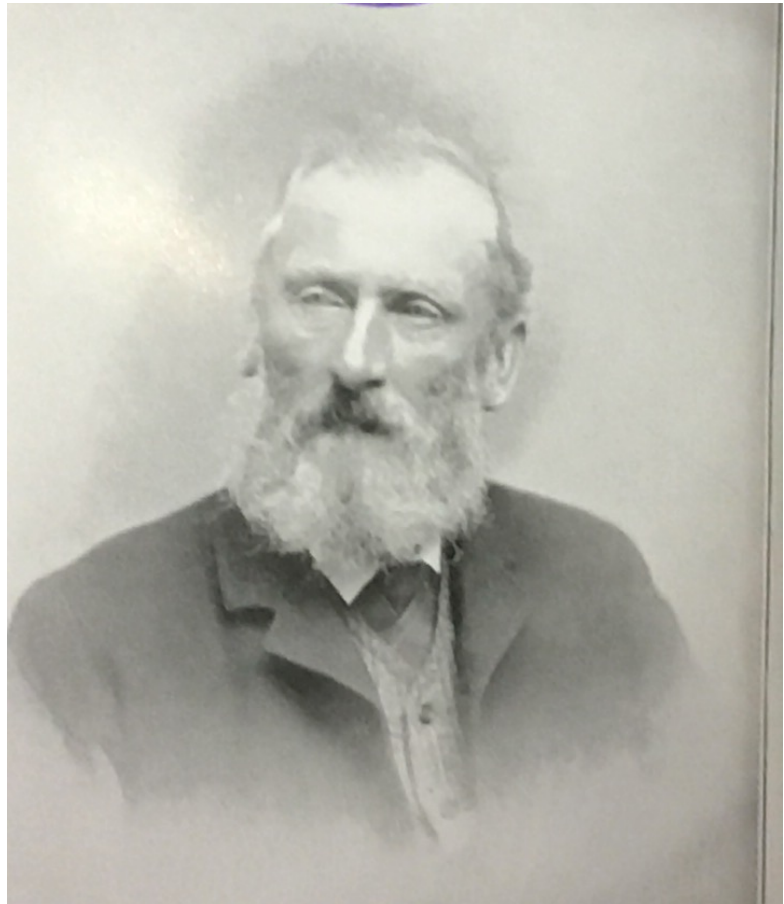


## ‘Rusticus’

‘Rusticus’ was the pen-name for a Cotgrave poet who published quite prolifically in the mid-nineteenth century. His real name was ‘George Hickling’ and he lived his entire life within the bounds of the village of Cotgrave. He was born in 1827 to George and Alice Hickling, his father being a framework knitter and young George followed his father into the same trade. He began work at the age of thirteen and continued in the business until his retirement round about 1900. Sadly, his mother, Alice died in her early 50s so, in the 1851 Census we find that young George had married Ann Smart and was living with his widowed father-in-law, William Smart, while George senior continued to practice as a framework knitter in the old home, living with George’s elder brother, Thomas, daughter-in-law Sarah and their two children. George’s wife Ann died at the age of 56, leaving him a widower from 1880 until his death in 1909. From 1861 George added the occupation of cottager to that of framework knitter, suggesting the gradual run-down of the latter activity in the village as the centre of gravity shifted to the mills of Nottingham and Beeston. Indeed, we know that for some sixteen years George was employed by the London Hosiery firm I & R Morley (who opened their Nottingham factory in 1866). However, George had given up farming by the time of the 1891 Census, a time when British agriculture was under serious competition from cheap imports of American cereals. Finally, George had retired at the time of the 1901 Census, though continuing to live in the family home along Scrimshire Lane, as recorded in 1881 and 1901.



He published no less than five books between 1856 and 1892, the first being ‘Mystic Lands’, a collection of poems which he dedicated to the Cotgrave Rector, the Rev J H Browne MA, Archdeacon of Ely. Further books of poems were published under the titles ‘Pleasures of Life’ (1861), ‘Echoes from Nature’ (1863) and ‘Echoes from the Woodlands’ (1892).

The first of these was characterised by the following, somewhat overblown dedication to Henry Pelham-Clinton, 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyne:

TO  
THE RIGHT HONOURABLE  
HIS GRACE  
THE DUKE OF NEWCASTLE, K.G.,  
HER MAJESTY'S  
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE COLONIES  
AND  
LORD LIEUTENANT  
OF THE COUNTY OF NOTTINGHAM;  
A NOBLE-MAN  
IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD,  
WHERE DIGNITY OF SOUL, LARGENESS OF HEART,  
AND  
LOFTINESS OF PURPOSE  
COMAND THE ESTEEM AND RESPECT  
OF HIS FELLOW MEN  
IN EVERY GRADE OF LIFE,  
THIS VOLUME,  
AS A SLIGHT TRIBUTE OF HOMAGE AND ADMIRATION,  
IS RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED  
BY  
THE AUTHOR

'Echoes from the Woodlands' was similarly inscribed. 'I have dedicated this volume to the "Noble House of Manvers" as a tribute of respect; my ancestors and myself having held successive tenancies of small holdings on the Holme Pierrepont Estate at Cotgrave for over 160 years.' We see here, perhaps, an example of the subservience expected by the Nobility from their tenants during the nineteenth century!

Below, we reproduce three of Rusticus' poems as a small sample of his work. These clearly demonstrate his love of Cotgrave and, incidentally provide a vivid word picture of the nature of life in an agricultural community in the middle of the nineteenth century. Particularly significant are his comments concerning the friendly interactions between all the villagers, no matter what their individual trades. For example:

"The butcher looks in at the house of the baker,  
The baker oft chats with the worthy shoemaker"

The contrast with today's considerably more hectic lifestyle is dramatic – compare, for instance, the once-a-week carrier service into Nottingham with the every-twenty-minute bus service we rely on today!

Finally, Rusticus also published a very different kind of book in 1881 entitled 'Sectarianism vs Christianity or What is Religion?' This was a prose discussion of the 'evils' of sectarian disputation, arguing in favour of a gentler, more tolerant approach to religious belief than was current in 1881. We should remember that the nineteenth century saw the rise of non-conformism in all its variations, conflicting somewhat with the simple life and beliefs of a tiny village such as Cotgrave. Rusticus obviously felt strongly the need for toleration, rather than the fierce argumentation which characterised religious life at that time.

### **Three George Hickling Poems**

#### **Our Village**

Our sweet little village has qualities rare,  
No village with it in the shire can compare;  
'Tis lovely, 'tis pleasing, 'tis charming, 'tis quiet,  
'Tis seldom disturbed with confusions and riot.  
Its farmhouses and cottages are both neat and clean,  
Its orchards are fruitful, its homesteads are green.  
It sits in a valley surrounded with trees,  
It receives in its pureness the fresh morning breeze.  
The sun at his rising looks down with delight  
On the gardens of roses so blooming and bright.  
It is blessed with a plenteous supply of good water,  
And health paints the cheek of the peasant's sweet daughter.  
It has groves, it has dells, it has sweet rippling rills,  
It has flower-bedecked vales, it has green wooded hills,  
Where the song birds of summer do sing with delight,  
And the bees gather nectar from morning till night.  
It has elm trees and poplars, acacias and limes,  
And clustering laburnums hang over sweet thymes.  
It has green shady lanes, where with high flavoured talk,  
At the mild hour of eve rustic lovers do walk.  
A neat little church with a tall gothic spire,  
Makes the prospect as pleasing as taste can desire.  
Its streets are commodious, its houses well built  
And of plague-breeding nuisances it bears not the guilt.  
It has a well-ordered inn and a sure-going mill,  
And a snug little school room at foot of the hill.  
It has garden allotments and suburbs most charming,  
And acres on acres of excellent farming.  
'Tis owned by a landlord most liberal and kind,  
And in loyal devotion 'tis never behind.  
Well fed and well clad are its sons of hard labour,  
Who look not with envy upon their rich neighbour.  
On Sunday you scarce would be able to tell,  
Which was rich and which poor when you heard the church bell.

So gay and so fine does our village appear,  
You would hardly discover a dark corner there.  
As you saw the dear children trip on the broad street,  
You'd find them all healthy and rosy and neat;  
No squalor or wretchedness are to be seen,  
But all are respectable wholesome and clean.  
Our village has beauty and talent and wit,  
High life and real worth and much learning has it.  
It has hearts than which none could be truer or warmer,  
It contains the real species of true British farmer.  
Kind friends and kind neighbours are there to be found,  
Kind words and kind actions within it abound.  
It has fondhearts and sweethearts and hearts full of love.  
And hearts which are filled from a fountain above.  
If you pass on the streets true politeness will meet you  
Kind looks and bright smiles and sweet voices will greet you.  
Unlike the false state of the huge market town,  
When even your neighbour next door is not known,  
Our village rejoices in friendship and unity,  
Closely joined is the whole of its little community.  
The butcher looks in at the house of the baker,  
The baker oft chats with the worthy shoemaker;  
The shoemaker speaks to the man of the plough;  
The man of the plough to be civil knows how  
To the man of the loom – to your servant, dear sirs,  
And the man of the loom with the tailor confers;  
And thus by the cords of sweet sympathy bound,  
Our village as one loving household is found.  
It has faults, it has failings, why this I know well  
But these I will leave for another to tell:  
My muse knows not how to bring these to your view  
But delights in the beautiful, good and the true.

### **My Village Home**

My cottage is scanty, its limits are small,  
And it ranks with the lowly on earth;  
But the shadows dance gaily along each white wall  
As the flames briskly burn on the hearth.  
Though hardship and toil through the day may betide,  
Yet the evening as surely doth come,  
When contented I sit by the cheerful fireside  
In my own dearly-loved Village Home.

The strifes of the world and its mammonish cares  
And its questions so vexed and abstruse,  
Excite in my bosom no sorrows or fears,  
Nor rob my sweet home of its use.  
Then, simple and fearless, in God I confide,  
And a child in his hands I become,  
O then I am blessed by the cheerful fireside,  
In my own dearly loved Village Home.

When I watch the bright flames as they dance in the grate,  
And feel the sweet glow at my heart,  
I'll think of the wretches who mourn their sad fate  
In lands o'er the oceans apart;  
I'll think of the place where the despots abide  
And of homes which are compassed with gloom;  
And I'll joyfully sing by the cheerful fireside  
In my own dearly loved Village Home.

O England! blest England! no country with thee  
In all the wide world can compare;  
The cot of thy peasant, so favoured and free,  
Is a castle of liberty dear!  
No pleasures of freedom to him are denied,  
No shadows around him dare loom; -  
Then thankfully I'll sit by the cheerful fire-side  
In my own dearly loved Village Home.

### **The Village Church**

Thou sacred pile! What ages now are past and gone;  
Since someone laid thy first foundation stone;  
Yet there thou stand'st in solemn majesty,  
With silent finger pointing to the sky.  
Thy hands that reared thy walls, where are they now?  
They've mingled with the clods, they've been laid low  
Some centuries; but thou hast braved the storm -  
A thousand tempests have not marred thy form.

The noble walnut near thy steepled tower  
Is the orchestra of the feathered choir;  
Among its boughs the sparrow rears her young,  
And robin redbreast sings his evening song:  
The starlings, too, with notes above the rest,  
Here take abode, and here they make their nest;  
The blackbird perched on high at break of day,  
In early spring here pours his mellow lay:  
The ploughboy hears, and from his humble bed  
Unwilling creeps to eat his morning bread.  
The stately yew tree, at thy chancel end,  
Through many a fleeting year has been thy friend;  
Beneath its shady branches, widely spread,  
Lie buried in the dust the silent dead;  
The moaning wind sighs through its creaking boughs  
As evening's darkness thick around it grows:  
Ah! That's the spot - the terror of the place -  
The churchyard yew frights all the rustic race;  
On winter nights the village urchin there  
Oft sees strange sights, and does strange noises hear,

As terrified he plods his homeward way  
From some beloved and long-protracted play.

Time-honoured building! Consecrated fold!  
Had'st thou a tongue, thou could a tale have told;  
Under thy shade the village worthies sleep,  
And o'er their graves a strict watch thou dost keep.  
The godly minister of byegone years,  
Whose warning voice was heard till hoary hairs  
A crown of glory on his crown did lie,  
Rests here until the last trumpet rends the sky.  
The parish clerk, who in the time of yore  
His office held full forty years or more.  
Here sleeps secure, in sheltered corner laid,  
Amongst the congregation of the dead.  
The sexton, worthy man, who in his day  
Could tell where each departed neighbour lay,  
Himself at last a narrow home he found  
In the accustomed spot, the well known ground.  
The village rulers – men of common sense,  
Who in their lifetime spent the village pence,  
And were content, and never once did dream  
Of railways or the mighty powers of steam;  
The slow-paced husbandman of ages past,  
Who followed ancient rules from first to last,  
And seldom ventured o'er the village bounds,  
Except to sell the produce of his grounds;  
The village idler and the village slave,  
The merry milkmaid and the shepherd grave,  
The brawny arms that flung the rustic flail,  
The stalwart forms that walked the hill and dale,  
The village squire – the man of high renown,  
The village maiden and the village clown;  
The sage philosopher, the village fool,  
The man of wit that kept the village school,  
The lowly cottager, the man of wealth,  
The child of sickness and the son of health;  
The village matron and her children dear,  
The patriarch who saw his ninetieth year, -  
Here, side by side, are laid in kindred dust,  
To wait the doom of wicked or of just.

The infant thou hast seen first draw its breath  
Pass on to youth, to manhood, age and death -  
And this repeated oft and o'er again;  
Yet thou thy form and fashion doth retain, -  
The vane topped spire, the battlemented base,

The merry bells, the clock with ancient face,  
The old grey walls, the gravestone leaning near,  
The grated vault, the tomb with moss grown o'er,  
Are now the same as when in childhood's days  
We rambled round thy sides and trod thy ways.

Thou pile revered, thou hallowed house of God!  
What generations have thy pavement trod;  
What numbers now lie buried at thy feet  
Who once within thy sacred walls did meet;  
And we, who in thy presence now perform  
Life's duties and endure life's storm,  
Shall soon with our forefathers sleep, and swell  
The dust wherein the worms delight to dwell.

**2019**