



CHAPTER EIGHT - HOUSES

Many things have contributed to the many changes in the sort of places in which people live. Before the first World War about four or five big houses occupied nearly half the village. Some of them were in such positions that wonderful views were to be seen from their windows and if a cottage should obstruct that view a belt of trees was often planted behind it. The outbuildings and servants quarters attached to these mansions were tucked out of the way and the master or mistress rarely saw them, for their care and attention was left in the hands of an agent.

To a great extent the life of the place centred round these large estates and everybody knew when "the people", as the owners were called, were away, or when they were having a party, when combined efforts were being made for any object. It was pretty well known beforehand how each household would react, and so plans were always made accordingly.

These comfortable places with their leisurely ways have gone. One of the largest, the mansion, has been pulled down and four smaller ones built on the site and pleasure gardens, the stable and coach-house have been converted into two more dwellings and the land around has been sold off and put to many different uses. The beautiful farm which supplied the needs of this establishment is still working as such, but instead of supplying the food and pleasure of just that one community it now produces for the district at large.

At the beginning of World War 11, one of these estates was for sale and it was taken over, I believe in the first place as a temporary measure, for a girls' school which was evacuated from the coast. The house was originally built for a school at the end of the last century, but for some reason or other the venture did not last and for some forty years it was a private residence. The lands

attached to it in those days were extensive including a number of farms, but with each change of ownership pieces have been sold off and now only the park remains. The premises are at last being used for a settled purpose, for over the past few years a large scale building programme has been carried out and no doubt this now well-known girls' college has come to stay.

The remainder of these mansions have been converted into flats which although serving a very useful purpose, it has taken away their character, and we have seen the passing of an age in a few years which our England has known for centuries.

On the downward scale for size and grandeur there were a dozen or more houses which kept establishments of two or three indoor servants, with a coachman, gardener and house-boy outside. Several of this sized house had enough ground to keep a cow or two, and poultry to supply their needs.

The owners were often professional men, travelling to town to carry on their business. A few were retired. It was often from this group that members of the Parish Council and similar bodies were drawn.

Sometimes I used to help my school pal on Saturdays to do his round for the Magazine Club, run by these people. Each member bought a different magazine, such as "The Strand", "The Sphere" etc. and his job was to collect them from one and pass on to the next, and for this job he received a penny per month from each one. It worked out at about two shillings a month, which was quite a lot of money for a school-boy.

The attraction where I was concerned was that Mr. Willie, already mentioned, was a member of this Club and he often lent Gordon his bicycle to do the round on and with me to help him. The delivery was done more quickly and we had more time to ride the bike, usually both of us on it at once. The finish of this was that the bag in which the books were carried got between the wheel and the mudguard while going down hill. We could not say that we had not been on it together, for the two doses of gravel rash gave the game away and that was the end of the bike for our use.

A fairly large number of villas were, and still are, scattered about the village. The big noticeable difference about them then and now, caused again by the value of money, is that generally they are not so tidy, for the occupiers in days gone by could afford to keep a general maid and a jobbing gardener one or two days a week. Now these workpeople are hard to find and houses of this type are rather too large for the people living in them to look after on their own.

With the cottages, the older ones built in the last century, the common style was two rooms up and two rooms down, with the back and front doors opening straight into the rooms and the stairs going up just inside the back doors. The cost of building this type of house must have been very low, for there was not much in them, and the rents anything from two to three shillings a week, including rates, and before 1914 it was quite a common thing to see a number of signs up in any street stating "This house to let", and if you saw one "For Sale" the notice was usually up for a long time.

There are four cottages on the edge of the green which in those far off days were known as "Make-shift Row" for one or more were nearly always empty. They have recently been sold for nearly two thousand pounds. What a change!

The most amazing thing about these old cottages is that at some time in their history almost every one of them has housed a large family and so you see that overcrowding is no new thing, although there were houses to be had, most of the working class of that period could not afford a bigger place.

For a few years before the war the style of cottage property changed from two to three bedroom type, and then came the complete halt in building for five years, during the war, which was the prime cause of the housing shortage, and so the demand has never been caught up with. The effort to do so has gone on through several different phases except for the six years of the second conflict, which greatly widened the gap between supply and demand.

The local authority have made tremendous efforts with their Council houses, which I am afraid have been somewhat frowned on by many, but if that had not built, many families would have been in a very sorry plight.

Quite a number of nice places have been put up by private enterprise and until recently have fitted into the scheme of things, but what of 1959 onwards? The demand has broken all bounds and prices out of all proportion are being asked and paid for little places packed into any little space of land and compared with some of them, the Council house, not long ago looked down, now appears as a palace.

What of the future? I know the people have got to have somewhere to live, and what a problem it is! But our village as such, is fast disappearing. Even worse than this, with many of these very worried people, the struggle is to get a house, and after they have got it, the job of keeping it, with the things that go with it, often seem to be the end of their interest in the district, just somewhere to eat and sleep. How lucky I am to have lived here long enough that the place really does mean something to me.

In the main road, right opposite the Church stand six Almshouses for old people, the gift of a wealthy land owner in 1715. With the original set-up the folk entitled to live in them, must have at some time worked on the estate. This scheme was faithfully carried out for nearly two hundred and forty years and there was almost always a waiting list for would be occupiers. During recent years, again because of the fantastic change in the value of money, the present land owner was unable to carry on the charity and so, as in many cases throughout the country, it was handed over to the Charity Commissioners with an investment which brings in a small sum annually, the whole thing being administered by representative trustees.

These trustees made an application to the local authority for help to improve and repair these old dwellings, and after various meetings and enquiries, the outcome was far from what they expected as far as the trustees' ideas and plans were concerned. They were just turned down because of the great expense involved, but the Council made another move in altogether another direction.

Adjoining the Church opposite was a beautiful open field, which they purchased and on it, well back from the noisy road they built a court of twenty eight old people's flats, with all modern conveniences and greatest of all, a resident warden to keep an eye on them and their needs.

In front of them is a well laid out public garden, while at the back, facing south they have a summer house with a fine view and overlooking the cricket field.

It is true they have to pay rent for these places, which include heat and hot water. With the old age pension and other means this can be met. The result is that the waiting list is now for these new places and the demand for the old almshouses is very much on the decline.

If you stand in the road and look one way you see a memorial to a thoughtful rich man, who has given two hundred and fifty years of excellent service to many poor people. You look the other way where you see what is being done in our welfare state, you are standing between two and a half centuries of progress and change. If we are honest, who wants to go back?

Often with progress and new advantages, those responsible mostly look forward a good long way, as they think, but the very fact that they have made an improvement, makes the demand for it even greater.

This has happened with nearly all the public services in our village. At the turn of the century the Parish Council was responsible for the installation of both water supply and sewage disposal, both at that time, well in advance of most villages and

both capable of serving more than double the number of people then living here, but now, with gas and electricity they are all loaded to capacity, and people often grumble about the poor service they get.

I expect future generations will moan about the out-worn things which we shall leave for them, for this part of our human make up does not seem to change a lot.

Another noticeable change is the great increase in number of owner occupiers and the decrease of tied houses, which have always been a mixed blessing. In bygone days in country areas it was very common for workpeople to put up with irritations and sometimes hardship to keep a roof over their families' heads. There are still some and the old terror of what happens if they should be turned out is still there, but the law has now stepped in and the position is not quite so desperate when trouble arises.

Many young people have seen this worry with their parents, that they make up their minds early to own their own places, even if they have to work hard to do it. They earn better money and there are ways of getting help which their parents hardly knew of and by becoming property owners, they automatically take more interest in rates and public affairs, even if it is only to grumble, but it is still interest.

The village public house has changed in character quite as much as the private ones. The one hotel and the three pubs here are all fairly old. Fifty years ago the hotel did good trade as a family and commercial house, with three bars, a club and billiard room, several cabs and a wagonette for hire, these being later replaced by taxis. This establishment found employment for several people both inside and out to keep its many services going. Most of the services are no longer needed to-day, because of easy travel.

The people who used the country hotel for their holidays are now able to go abroad or go touring and instead of staying in one hotel for a fortnight, they now stay at a different one each night and the commercial traveller is able to get to his own home with his car and samples and so he rarely needs the hotel bed and breakfast.

The club and billiard room seems to have gone right out of popularity, and it has for several years served a more useful purpose as a tea and snack room for travellers by car and coach who do not use the licensed bars. The cabs and taxis have all disappeared, and so have the stables, coach house and ostlers' quarters, leaving a large open space for a car and coach park, which is rather uninteresting compared with the lively activities of bygone days.

The pubs are still busy places supplying refreshments of various kinds, but much of the friendly atmosphere of the dart and slate club seems to have gone and an evening sing song is seldom heard. Even in these places of leisure nearly everybody is in a hurry to get on their journey, or home in time for such and such programme on the "tele".