

*Not long after I joined Oxford and County Newspapers in 1959 the Oxford Times started a series of features called The Oxford Times Drops In... The idea was a reporter and photographer would spend a day in a village gathering as much information about it as they could. I wrote several, including this one on Eynsham. Little did I know eight years later I would move there and remain for the rest of my life!*

In 1797 two Eynsham lads called Jeremiah Smith and William Wastie Junior went south for a holiday. It turned out to be some holiday. While they were taking their ease in a seaside tavern they were caught by a Press Gang and forcibly enlisted in the Royal Navy. Many a man was acquired by the Navy in this ungentle manner and never saw his village again. But not our two lads from Eynsham. Their village kicked up the devil of a row until it got them back again And, when their ship next sailed into port, there — thrust under the captain's nose — was a priority order for their release signed by a whole battery of Admiralty Office top brass, headed by Lord Charles Spenser, MP for Oxfordshire and later an Admiralty lord, and Sir Evan Nepean, the Secretary to the Admiralty no less!

Blood is much thicker than water in Eynsham and even today, when mass communications have robbed many villages — in the eyes of their older residents at least — of their microcosmic self-sufficiency, one cannot escape the aura of the family that surrounds it, the solicitous warmth for its members. In part it is due to the fact that Eynsham is one big happy family, or rather several, who have been here for centuries and can still be found at the centre of village life; in part perhaps to the fact that for its size — it has a population of nearly 3,000 — it is a very quiet village indeed.

We came to Eynsham by bus and we left by bus, and on the way back to Oxford my photographer colleague, Penny Tautz, put into words something that sounds rather funny, but really is not: something which I had felt myself all day. There is something almost Spanish about Eynsham. Whether it was the languorous charm of padding lazily along semi-deserted streets on a sunny August summer's day, sniffing giant hydrangeas in stone-walled courtyards, the simple courtesy of the villagers, the lunch in a cool inn, I don't know.

But the ironical politeness with which we answered the questions of the American couple across the luncheon table, who at two o'clock in the afternoon were considering driving to Stratford — they had to be back in Eynsham by five, they said! — suggested that we too felt we had stepped out of a world of hustle into an oasis of quietness from which it was rather foolish to go dashing off.

The long traditions of family life in the village we learnt about from Mr James F. Wastie, known affectionately as Fred, who climbed down out of one of the apple trees in his orchard beside the A40 to show us a number of old documents including the papers releasing the two Eynsham lads from naval service. The Wasties came from Scotland with James I and became landowners in Eynsham about 1603. In the 18th century one of them married the daughter of James Lord, who built Swinford Toll Bridge.

It is from the time of James Lord that most of Mr Wastie's documents date. He collected rates and other taxes in the village and he has left records, which as well as being interesting relics of the past show how old some of the village family names are. Many of them can be found on the one sheet of paper dated 1752, on

which James Lord recorded the rates he collected from each member of the village: they totalled £215 9s 5½d. Others are written in a notebook of the same year, when Mr Lord records on the flyleaf ‘a constable’s tax of twopence in the pound was granted to James Lord and Robert Wickson’.

Mr Wastie has numerous other papers besides, including the details of the building of the toll bridge and causeway, which cost £1,084 18s 4d. Subsequently, another document records, a mason and a labourer were paid 1s 6d a day for the repair of its road. He also has a receipt belonging to Mrs Lord, which records that on 9 June 1784 the sum of £1 8s 5d for Land Tax and 4s 2d for Window Tax due for the year 1782 was received ‘by us collectors, Charles Smith and Robert Wilsdon’, the latter of whom, being unable to write, has duly appended his cross to the bottom.

Fred Wastie himself, like his father before him, raises new varieties of fruit and has over 40 different varieties at Wisley and in the National Fruit Trials at Faversham in Kent. To several of them he has given names connected with his family and the village. For instance, among his apples are Eynsham Abbey, High Sheriff Wastie, named after Francis Wastie, who fulfilled that office for Oxford in 1770 and sometime lived at Cowley House, and Colonel Wastie, who commanded the Oxfordshire contingent during the Napoleonic Wars.

Eynsham Abbey, of course, is named after the famous Benedictine settlement which Aethelmar, Earl of Cornwall, founded in the village in 1005 during a lull in Sweyn the Viking’s attacks. Miss Moira Philcox, the village historian, who — unfortunately — was away on holiday when we called, has written in an attractive little booklet produced for visitors to the church: ‘This Benedictine Abbey dedicated to “God, St. Mary and all His saints, and to St. Benedict” was the one religious house in Oxfordshire which had continuous existence from the eleventh century to the Dissolution.’

Almost nothing remains, but if one looks hard enough one can see one or two other things. We found one when we visited Eynsham’s one remaining blacksmith, Mr Jack Burden, in Newland Street, where there are still vestiges in his back garden of Abbot Adam’s early experiment in town planning, that is one of the plots he conscientiously laid out. Also in his back garden is a truly gigantic hydrangea planted by his wife 35 years ago when it was ‘mere slip’ and now surely one of the largest of its kind in Oxfordshire.

The Burdens have been in Eynsham at least 200 years. One of them put the weathercock on the church tower in 1750. In Jack’s backyard a large iron wagon tyre, which has become the surround to a flower bed, is a constant reminder to him of how much the world has changed in his own lifetime. In his workshop an old-fashioned drill among an array of arc-lamps and welding equipment and a mass of modern agricultural machinery, tell the same story. ‘In the old days on April the First I used to get a constant stream of people in to borrow treacle benders and straight hooks,’ he told us. ‘I don’t get them any more. I suppose it’s because the blacksmith is no longer the village doctor for all its mechanical ailments.’

Another trace of the monks, which so faithful and factual a recorder as Miss Philcox might well fight shy of mentioning in any sober chronicle of Eynsham, is the ghost of one of them, which haunts one of the old village houses. We were told about it by Mr Bevan Matthew Pimm, the village postmaster. ‘Don’t mind the name,’ he joked. ‘When my grandson heard his parents talking about Nye [Bevan]’s

death recently, he said: "That's not grandpa dead is it?" Mr Pimm saw the ghost himself 50 years ago and several people have seen it since, including the present owner of the house. 'He's just an ordinary monk in a habit of the Cistercian Order. He doesn't get up to any pranks or anything like that.'

Pimm is Eynsham's family name *par excellence*. Old Mrs Pimm, as she is known, celebrates her 96th birthday shortly and she boasts a family tree which, with 150 descendants, stretches almost as far in front as her as it does behind her. Well, maybe that is a bit of an exaggeration. Her maiden family can trace their ancestry back to the Norman Conquest and the Pimms date from the 16th century at least. Their name still crops up all over the village.

'Eynsham was originally called Aegensham,' Bevan Pimm told us, 'or the home of Aegen, an old Saxon chief. I should imagine it has always been a very self-contained place. I have been here since 1937 at the Post Office.' He often has a laugh about the queer antics his customers get up to. 'One day a fellow came in and asked to take the whole £15 out of his Post Office book. Well, it was arranged and I counted the notes out to him. "All right," he said, "you can put it back now. I only wanted to see it was still there."

His brother, George, is Eynsham's sole surviving wheelwright, though only in name, because he doesn't make wheels any longer, but has a large builders' contracting business a short distance from the church. His son has just, through pressure of work, severed the family's long connection with Eynsham Fire Brigade, of which a Pimm has been a member since its establishment after the Great Fire of London in 1661. George Pimm himself was captain for 40 years and his family played a large part in the purchase of a horse-drawn fire engine in 1814, which now stands in the church.

Bevan told us about the Fire of Eynsham in the 1850s, when a steam thresher was introduced at Abbey Farm and 'what with all the thatch there was then pretty well burnt Eynsham down'. Later Mr Bernard Green, the church warden, told us about another. 'It was at Queen Victoria's [Golden] Jubilee in 1887. They had built a big bonfire, but they decided not to finish the day with a fire as they had started it with one!'

George followed his father as a maker of coach and wagon wheels, working from 6am to 6pm every day and reckoning to turn out a set of wheels for an Oxfordshire farm wagon in three weeks. 'I sharpened my first saw in 1901 when I was six-years-old,' he said. When he was not making wagon wheels he worked in the saw-pits. 'One man stood above the log and one in the pit under the log and it was hard work wherever you were, believe me.'

Saw pits now are a thing of the past. So too are the days when a man could be hung for stealing a sheep. But George's father could remember them well and one of the stories he was fondest of telling his son, and George is fondest of telling now, concerns a stolen sheep. It was a very dead mutton indeed when the police got wind of it and its stealer, not wishing to end the same way, begged the two village undertakers for a fee to bury it in a coffin.

The solemn farce was played out, the sheep duly buried, and the funeral cortege went home to rest in peace, as they thought. Alas for them, somebody informed the zealous constable. With less solemnity the grave was disburdened of its woolly corpse by our panic-stricken funeral directors, hastily deposited under one of the

meadows where it had once grazed, and the police were left to speculate with suspicion but no proof the spectacle of an empty coffin.

Today there is more concern with what grows on top of the churchyard than what lies under it. When we called on the Vicar of Eynsham, the Revd J.W.G. Westwood, he was jubilant, as he put it in his Welsh way, because the menfolk of Eynsham had made such a good job of tidying up ‘my untidy churchyard’. He was also jubilant because in less than six weeks £204 had come in towards the repair of the church bells.

He launched the appeal in July for £240, when he wrote: ‘I hope no-one will think this is an exorbitant sum. Very little has been spent on our bells since 1895.’ His hopes, it seems, have proved justified and, having told us a little of the history of his charming Queen Anne vicarage in Mill Street and the close connections of his church with Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, some of whose students will be conducting the services for him while he is on holiday, he passed us on to his senior church warden, Mr Bernard George Green, who he said would tell us a great deal more than he could about Eynsham.

He could indeed. Mr Green is 85 and has a wonderful memory, which spans all those years effortlessly right from the time he was three-years-old. As a boy he went for a brief spell to Bartholomew School, named after John Bartholomew, a native of Eynsham, who made his fortune in London and left £350 for educating ten poor boys of the parish. The building, which incidentally never belonged to this benefactor, but was built by the Parish as the Free School of Eynsham, still stands in the market square and is now the branch library and Parish Council chamber. John Bartholomew’s name is further commemorated in the handsome new secondary school, in praise of the staff of which and its headmaster, Mr Edwin.C. Stevenson, we heard a great deal.

After leaving school — he also attended the National School — Bernard Green was apprenticed to his father as a carpenter. In those days, he remembers, they still held Eynsham Races ‘down the Commons, you know along the road towards Oxford’, and he was fortunate enough to witness the last two occasions. ‘The last race but one they started fighting down in the meadows. Off came the policeman’s helmet. Then he drew his truncheon. That went over the hedge quick. But there was no more trouble the next year, though everybody thought there would be, and after that the Races stopped,’ he sighed regretfully.

‘In those days we had the old paper mills, Mr Sheldon’s flour mills, three malt houses and two brewers in the village. Of course, they’re all gone now.’ So too in the next few months will be the firm of John Bruce (Engineers) Ltd. which is in the process of moving to Bicester. Now most people earn their living outside the village. Mr Green himself left Eynsham to finish off his apprenticeship, but with one big difference. ‘I used to walk into Oxford on a Monday morning and walk back again on a Saturday afternoon. I did that until I was 21, then I broke my leg and stopped at home.’

Yes, life was different. There was Bobbie Barton’s shop, where you spent a penny on a farthing pipe, a farthing box of matches and a ha’porth of tobacco. There was the Club Dinner — ‘really the only social occasion we young people had. We all had to go to church that day and if you couldn’t go — or didn’t — you were fined a shilling.’ There was the fair in the market square in September. There were the village Morris dancers at Christmas and other times, and one cruel winter — ‘the

coldest I can remember' — Mr Green skated down the river to Godstow and could have reached Oxford.

'How did you do your courting?' we asked him. 'We didn't dare.' We didn't believe him and with good reason. His charming wife, Elizabeth, who is 91 next birthday, told us not to! They have lived in the village all their lives, were married in Eynsham Church 59 years ago, an edifice which has many happy associations for them both and about which Mr Green remembers one quaint custom which will serve to bring this rambling account to a close.

When he was a boy on May 29 — Oak Apple Day and Mr Green's birthday, which is why he recalls the incident so vividly — they used to hang from the Church Tower a branch of an oak tree. Now the puzzle is this. Oak Apple Day, which is also the birthday of King Charles II, celebrates his return to England in 1660 when the Royalists displayed a branch of oak in commemoration of his safe hiding in the oak at Boscobel. But Eynsham was a notorious stronghold of the Roundheads. Why then should the village bother to preserve a custom longer than anywhere else that must have been extremely distasteful to them?

Here we drop out, trusting that some of the many wonderful Eynsham folk we heard about but did not have time to meet will have the answer.

*Oxford Times 12 August 1960*

*Seemingly nobody knew, Nobody bothered to write in.*