

Wanderings in Wiltshire



by *Lewis Brown*

IN the little market town of Trowbridge, near where I was staying, I joined a 'bus which soon landed me a few miles away at Steeple Ashton. I had selected this ancient village as the commencing point for a North Wiltshire walk, having planned a route which would keep me away from the main roads.

I wanted to see some of the villages which had achieved importance in the old days when the cottagers produced a lot of the broad-cloth of the time, but which have fallen into obscurity in modern times. At the same time, I hoped on my way to see some of the spots whose beauty has become famous even in the lovely Westcountry.

The wide main street of Steeple Ashton is reckoned to be one of the finest in the county. Its well-preserved houses and cottages certainly gave me the feeling that here was a place of which England's most ancient shire might well be proud.

"Steeple" comes from "Staple", the old word for market, of course, and this reason made it interesting for me to find an unusual market cross standing on a little green in the middle of the village. It consisted of a solid-looking stone pillar, surmounted by a sundial and a ball, also of stone—above these were a cross and a crown of metal. About two hundred and twenty years have passed since this monument was erected to mark the spot where, it is said, a market cross was built in 1679. Nearby, I found an old roadside lock-up. It was of the pill-box kind still to be found dotted about the country and which was fashionable in the days when prison reform seemed a long way off. If I had had time I should have lingered for a close inspection of Steeple Ashton's lovely perpendicular church. Of an almost cathedral-like appearance, this fifteenth-century building seemed strangely large for a village.

Discovering a path running around one side of the church, I continued across meadows for a mile and a half to where the thatched roofs of Keevil contributed an old world atmosphere. The timbered and plastered walls contrasted sharply with what I remembered of Steeple Ashton's stone and half-timber. There was a splendid church, standing a little away from the village and set rather nobly on some higher ground.

I was told how, in the spring of 1939, this beautiful village was almost wiped out by fire. Blazing thatch

from a farmhouse was borne on the wind, fortunately a lot of it towards open fields. All the same, nine people were made homeless before the spread of the fire was stopped.

SEEND

My next main objective was Bromham, but I had first to get to Seend, some three miles or so away. Seend is near to the Semington Brook, a tributary which comes down to the Avon a few miles westwards. Like many villages and towns in this part of the country, Seend went through a period of prosperity when the spinning

● The Market Cross and Jail at Steeple Ashton.



wheel in every cottage was busy producing yarn for cloth-making. With the coming of spinning machines, however, places like Seend fell suddenly on anxious times.

From Seend I put my best foot forward across open country, for I had it in mind to get to Lacock, if possible. I found it was the best part of four miles to Bromham. The great house which was once there was often visited by royalty in days bygone. It was the custom to stop there to break the long coach journey from London to Bath. James I stayed there on a number of occasions.

In the churchyard I came across the resting place of the great Irish poet, Thomas Moore, who died at his house at Sloperton in 1852. Some years after a stained glass window, representing the Last Judgment, was put up in the church as a memorial to the much-loved poet. Bromham was the birthplace of a number of famous men, among them George Webbe, Bishop of Limerick, and the well-known Somerset historian, the Rev. J. Collinson.

WILTSHIRE'S LOVELIEST VILLAGE

Two miles beyond Bromham I came to what must surely be one of Wiltshire's — I might have said England's—loveliest villages—Sandy Lane. The way was along a quarter-mile stretch of road which was flanked on either side by tall trees. Neatly set on either side of the main road, I discovered the most delightful thatched cottages, their gardens ablaze with flowers.

The Church of St. Nicholas was among trees in a secluded by-lane, its walls of timber and roof of thatch blending perfectly with the surroundings. About sixty years have gone by since the sanctuary was raised by the subscription of the villagers.

Just beyond the post office—a thatched one, as I should have guessed—and facing squarely the village "street," was a good-looking inn, "The George". In front, cool lawns beneath towering elms made this a really inviting spot at which to halt for some well-earned refreshment.

Nowhere, I think, have I been more conscious of the peacefulness of the English countryside. On this occasion the day was sunny, bees hummed and birds sang joyously, as well they might. How far it seemed from the city and all the bustle of industry. Yet I knew that all about me workers toiled at a task which they never would complete, for I was in the heart of a countryside where for centuries man has lived by the soil.

I was now headed for Lacock, and for a mile and a half the way was by way of a lovely woodland lane. To the left were the leafy slopes of Spye Park and on the right the parklands and copses of the Bowden estate. The lane emerged suddenly from the trees and I found myself on Bewley Common, a perfect spot at the top of Bowden Hill. From here the view is a famous one, and, I thought, justly so, for rarely had I been privileged to gaze out over such a glorious panorama.

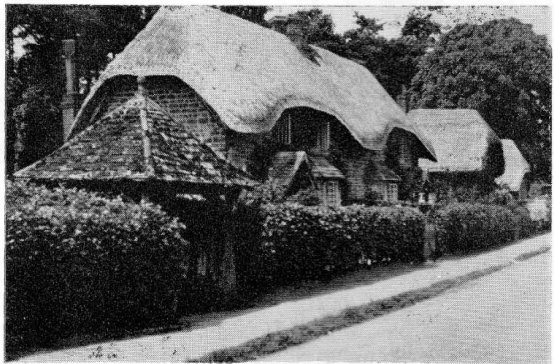
LACOCK

The road, as it drops down towards Lacock, is, for a while, exceedingly steep. No motorist or cyclist could, with safety, give attention to the picturesque thatched cottages which are half-way down the slope. I was glad to be on foot this time (though I recommend this part of the country for enjoyable cycling or touring) and was able to appreciate the grand beauty of my surroundings.



• Keevil Village.

• At Sandy Lane.



• Lacock Abbey.





• The Pack-Horse Bridge at Lacock.

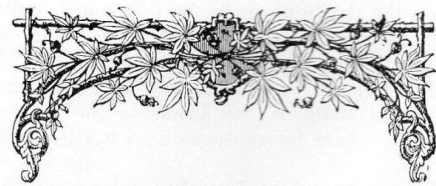
It was about two miles on to Lacock. What a perfect village this is! Just before I entered the village I passed the notable abbey. Early in the eighteenth century was established an Augustian nunnery, which was to pass into various hands during its colourful history. Today the house (for its ecclesiastical associations are only in the past) is under the care of the National Trust.

How fitting it is that Fox Talbot should have laid the foundations of the science of photography here at Lacock Abbey, so close to the village whose gabled and timbered buildings have, to this day, proved an irresistible magnet to camera users.

I discovered that the church at Lacock was rather uncommonly dedicated to St. Cyriac. Here Bishop Jewel preached his last sermon in 1571. Then he made his last journey—to his house at Monkton Farleigh—where he was to die a few days later.

Between Steeple Ashton's ancient market cross and Lacock's fifteenth and sixteenth century houses I had come about fourteen miles, and I was not sorry I was able to cover a pleasant run back to Trowbridge by way of Melksham, Semington and Hilperton, in a Western National bus.

My walk had been typical of many which can be taken through the rich and leafy country to be found in the northern part of Wiltshire. Those who will follow my example will, I am sure, enjoy the experience a lot.



Day's End

*I love to wander, without care,
When night is young, and warm the air,
Down country lane, by lazy stream,
Where thrushes sing and night owls dream,
Where campion flowers, pink and white,
And buttercups, yellow delight,
Grow proud, the hawthorn hedge beside,
Not like the vetch that loves to hide,
And clover's white domes, in the grass,
On mats of trefoil leaves amass,
Then as the sun draws to the west
The night owl wakes and starts his quest
For food, but, weary and well fed,
The thrush, like me, retires to bed.*

Christine M. Neale.