

## Wartime Village

by Elizabeth Belsey

*Richard Garnett writes:*

*In November 1940 my father, David Garnett, left Hilton Hall, where he had lived since 1924, and let it for "the duration " at three guineas a week to Mrs Mary Sidgwick, the widow of Frank Sidgwick of the publishers Sidgwick and Jackson. Until the end of the war she occupied the house with her married daughter Elizabeth Belsey, her daughter-in-law Edith, their respective daughters Charlotte and Anita, and her housekeeper Miss Mitchell. Two further children, Andrew and Jane, were born there to Elizabeth-during the war, and for a time they hosted two evacuees. They also had occasional visits from Mary Sidgwick's other children, Christopher, Jeremy, Ann, Mary and Sally, and from Elizabeth's husband John, who were away in the services or reserved occupations.*

*Elizabeth Belsey<sup>y</sup> wrote this account in 1943 but it has never been published before. For reasons of discretion she changed the name of the village and those of some of its features, as well as those of all the inhabitants, some of whom are combinations of more than one original, while others have had some of their features altered. Nevertheless, many of the characters will be recognised by those who knew Hilton in the 1940s. For this reason I should perhaps add that I feel she has underestimated Parsons's contribution to village life, and been a little unfair to Beauchamp, whose considerable kindness Mary Sidgwick herself has acknowledged. But the picture as a whole is a very true one and provides a memorable record of an almost forgotten period in Huntingdonshire life.*

This part of England lies on the border of the fens, before they have had time to grow dry and hilly in their sweep towards the Midlands. To their neighbouring parts the fens have given their sea-shore flatness, the wind that sweeps unhindered in from the North Sea, the largeness of the landscape under the large skies, the few trees, the few roads always ditched, the fields ditched too, with ditches that are dry in summer but in winter deep and torrential. And the fens have given to their neighbours a dislike of floods, not their own grave fear for their homes and livestock, but the awareness that severe rains will bring the water over the roads, obstruct the rare buses, and rot the crops. For the soil here holds the water, an unfenny soil of

tenacious clay that clogs the labourers' boots and clings to the root-crops as they are hauled from its embrace. This grey-brown soil deprives the land of brightness. In sunlight it is clear and clean but never gaudy, and under a clouded sky it is sad, the greens saddening into greys, the browns fading with a vague, edgeless melancholy. Topping the faint incline that here passes for a hill, you may see the fields thus saddening and fading on to the remote horizon; and turning where you stand may count the spires of three or four churches pointing from between the trees spaced out upon the skyline. For here there is nothing to hide one village from the next but the horizon itself, and that one reached, you know that another identical horizon will appear before you, with more wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, sugar-beet, and inferior pasturage saddening and fading away from you, and more spires pointing from between the trees to north and south and west. But now and then the remoteness and monotony are contradicted by an aerodrome; and all day long overhead the heavy Stirlings and black, shark-like Wellingtons rehearse their expeditions to the Ruhr.

In the middle of this farmland, four miles from the nearest town, lies our village of Ditchton, which is not a street of undetached houses, but a loose gathering of cottage and farms disposed about the sides of the green and the four arms of the cross-roads. The green is of unusual size and beauty, stretching beyond the last houses to the parish boundary, and flanked with huge oaks and beeches, that strike the eye by their rarity. It appears a portion of the land that has escaped all acts of enclosure, being held as common pasturage by those villagers who own livestock. In summer Mr Beauchamp's flock of sheep is loosed upon the rough grass, with a lad of twelve as shepherd, his legs bound with sacking to protect them from the thistles; and the cows of several owners are driven to graze in a single herd: the two grey cows of George Gillett at the post-office, the three red cows of the small farmer Brice and the numerous good milkers of the large farmer Thoday. A plot of grass at the rear end of the green is kept mown for a cricket-pitch and the school sports; elsewhere a blaze of buttercups extends for a quarter of a mile.

Upon this ground compactness of building is ruled out by the prevalence of water. A stream, its high banks spanned with wooden footbridges, winds about the green, twice in a hundred yards crossing the road. These fords go dry in summer, but in winter the lorries slow up to meet the splash. Each elbow of the road embraces a capacious pond; every farm-house has its own, swarming with ducks, apart from the long pond at the roadside

opposite the George Inn, and the huge white-posted pond called Carver's Dyke, beside which stands the largest of the communal pumps. The height of the water in the ponds is closely scrutinised. With much rain the stream rises to the top of its deep bed and the ponds gush over the roads; but with drought the stream dries and the ponds sink, and the people fear the wells may fail. The farmers having voted against it for fear of raising the rates, there is no main drainage and no main water supply; both rich and poor rely on the cess-pools and the wells. The cottagers go out with buckets to the public pumps, but the well-to-do install electric pumps, or hire a man to work their private hand-pumps every day. Twenty-five minutes of vigorous pumping will fill a tank with enough water for six fastidious persons to make do, with a little providence.

So the houses stand in little groups, wherever a plot of ground rises. The older cottages, leaning out of alignment, are built of dark red brick with the sagging roof-trees and tiny windows of antiquity, the walls often washed with a characteristic orange-pink; or else rough-cast and the roofs thickly thatched. The old journeyman craft of thatching is alive; at dusk you may see a roof half mud-coloured, half yellow with fresh straw, showing where the thatcher has left his job for the night. Alongside are the 19th-century cottages, built like boxes of dirty greyish brick with slate roofs and the date inscribed under the eaves on a cement plaque. Next to these again are the council houses, a neat crescent of four blocks, with whitewashed walls and bright carrot roofs. They look colder than the cottages and despite their freshness, more fragile; but they have better window space, a proper damp course and gardens adequate for growing vegetables. Their contemporary is the gentleman farmer Beauchamp's modern house in the fields, low, angular, and washed a pale rose, with a flat roof and strips of expensive plate-glass windows. Beauchamp's large farming combine is bailiffed by Richardson, who lives in the old-new house on the cross-roads, once a farm on its own account. In his old barn the sheep are shorn, and in the yard close by the newest machines pile mountainous ricks of corn and straw, and a batch of Italian prisoners lead the carts from field to field, their clothes stamped with blue or crimson circles.

In one of the older cottages the post-office and general store are kept by George Gillett and his family. They also keep two cows and two pigs, and the old couple prefer raising vegetables and livestock to running the business of the store. Old George will sell stamps, but if you ask for anything as difficult as a telegram or a tin of cocoa, he will mutter, "Pigs got

into the ga-arden, I must call my shop-assistant," and shamble out at the back, shouting, "Oy! Jean! Shop!" But he will give your shoes a cheap and skilful cobbling. It is a decent little shop with a scrubbed deal counter and tidy shelves. Aspirin, liver-pills, ointment and finger-stalls hang on cards overhead; stamps and other valuable government property are kept in a rickety desk; on the counter you are likely to find a slab of bacon shouldering the soap. Once the Gilletts sold as many sweets as you could eat; now the wholesaler's van calls once a month to unload three tins of biscuits and a pound or two of fancy chocolate bars. "Oy, there's sweets at Gillett's!" Mothers run in their overalls from the cottages to buy "just whatever you can spare, Jean," for their children still in school; and the month's stock is sold by lunch-time. The butcher Bastable has no shop, but a large whitewashed shed where he hangs his meat and weighs it on the big scales in the corner. Many mothers take their children to be weighed in company with the meat. He makes no sausages now and his wartime beef is disliked; but his mutton is good, he often brings you liver, and sometimes a plateful of sheep's brains that will make two meals for a baby. Tall, spare, elderly Mr Bastable belongs to a family old and respected in the village, and lives in the Queen Anne house with the fine bow-windows on the green. He is more popular than ever since his daughter died of diphtheria, leaving her month-old boy for his grandparents to rear. He can afford a nurse for the child, though he is less wealthy than he was before the gentleman-farmer Beauchamp settled in Ditchton and, the people say, put Ba-astable's nose out o' joint. In the yard beside the green, where poultry peck among the cows' hooves, old Widgeon has his bakehouse, a small paved room made smaller still by the wooden kneading trough that runs along one wall. The oven-door is no bigger than that of a kitchen range, but to reach the loaves at the far end you need a shovel with a handle nine feet long. In the loft next to the bakehouse Widgeon keeps his emergency stocks of flour. He will sell you paper twists of yeast for home baking, but only a little at a time. It distresses him, a gentle, courteous countryman of seventy-six, who remembers old times, to think that of all valuable products, yeast should now be scarce.

You walk straight into the parlour of the George Inn, a long, low, sagging cottage with fine old chimney-stacks, and find an ancient little room with a low ceiling and red-tiled floor, benches along the walls, and an electric clock above the fire. There is no bar, but a doorway going down three steps to a cellar filled with barrels. Mr Wilkins does not drink or

smoke, an elderly, refined, melancholy-faced man, who always wears a black knitted cardigan and plimsolls. At the sound of your entry he appears from within the house and descends on his noiseless feet to the cellar to bring up your glass of the local ten penny or of oatmeal stout. He can rarely give you spirits now, rarely draught ginger, rarely cigarettes. But sometimes he will fetch from his locked cupboard a packet of biscuits wrapped in cellophane.

Milk is supplied by Mr Thoday in bottles, and by Mr Brice in cans sent round by his children on their way to school. There is plenty of milk in the village, no milkless days, no rationing. One family of eight persons, including one expectant mother and two children under five, takes five pints every morning, and often in the evening sends a child round to Brice's with a jug to fetch another quart, still warm from the six o' clock milking. In town this family would receive three priority pints daily - twenty-one pints a week - and the remaining five of them might get ten to fifteen pints between them. Perhaps thirty-five pints in all, as against forty-nine pints in Ditchton.

You may lead your small children round to Brice's and buy their oranges from time to time. You do not squeeze the oranges quite dry and you preserve the peel with care; for the peel of eight oranges, with the sugar you have saved from week to week, will make five pounds of good marmalade. Mustard and cress and cucumbers may also be bought from Brice, and perhaps a basket of pale green eggs from his ducks, which he may sell because he has fewer ducks than fifty. His mother will sell you honey from her own bees, perhaps a pound or two, no more, but good fresh honey in the comb.

Vegetables are grown at home, especially in the ample garden space of the well-to-do. A big patch is allotted to potatoes, and a plot of waste is dug for more potatoes. Artichokes, beans, peas, onions, leeks, celery, beets and spinach have lesser plots marked out for them; lettuces need a bigger plot; marrows sprawl over a heap of sods by the rhubarb bed; warm places in the lee of walls are selected for tomatoes. In the autumn Mrs Beauchamp leans over the fence of her kitchen garden, in pigskin gloves and a grimed but costly tweed suit, and tells you that only that week she has personally dug and clamped a ton and a half of carrots. Finally, the gardener contrives room for the rarer plants - chives, celeriac, endive, chicory, and sweet corn. The cottagers are harder put to it; but in many of the small old-fashioned front gardens a row of beans blocks the polyanthus, or a square of lawn is freshly dug for potatoes.

All other food comes from the town. It is four miles off and the buses only run on Monday, market day. All Monday morning the baker is besieged. The shop girls shovel into the window the currantless buns and scones, arrange on the counter the eggless sponge cakes, and set aside on extra trestles the pastries glamorous with faked cream; but by the afternoon the shop is stripped naked. Groceries are delivered once a week.

At the crossing of the roads in Ditchton stands the big house, built of the same weathered brick as the cottages to an excellent Jacobean design, its looks spoiled a century ago by the gigantic conservatory and a glum stucco frontage. It has clearly been the home of bygone squires, before the community lost the vestiges of feudalism. This happened not so long ago. Charlie Kitto the labourer tells, and often tells, this tale.

"Once I were workin' in the churchyard when I see a stranger chap peerin' at the headstones. And a-after a bit he come up to me and he says, speakin' American-like, 'Say, can you tell me which my grandfa-ather's grave is?' he says. 'No,' I says, 'I dunno who your grandfa-ather was.' 'Oh,' he says, 'his name was Bristow, he was Squire of Ditchton and he lived in that swell 'ouse on the cross roads.' 'Oh,' I says, 'if Bristow were your grandfa-ather, then that's his grave, that big 'un with the angels on. I know that well enough,' I says, 'your grandfa-ather earned me a beating once.' 'How was that?' he says. So I tells him, 'Squire Bristow, he used to ride round on 'orseback, and if he sees any of us lads forget to raise his cap to him, he'd tell on us to the schoolteacher, and she give us the cane.' 'Gee!' he says, like that, 'Gee!' and off he goes to look at old Bristow's grave. But I never tell him I were glad his granddad had bin layin' in the grave so long."

When Bristow died the big house was sold by his emigre son to the retired manufacturer Parsons, who still resides there with his wife, secluded but unpopular. They let a large room for weekly socials, a small room for the schooling of evacuees, and their garden for the annual village fete; but "they don't take no interest, except when they want to make a bit o' trouble." The officer in charge of the close-by searchlight post relates how Parsons demanded to have the whole camp moved into the next field, because the swivelling of the beam prevented him from sleeping. "He wouldn't a-known there was no beam," says Charlie Kitto, "if he'd been blacked out proper."

Not only the squires but most of the small private farmers have disappeared. The Grange Farm, the Low Farm, the Manor Farm and

Carver's Farm now either belong to old Thoday or else form part of the Ditchton Estates, the large enterprise whereby Mr Beauchamp made the money for his long pink house in the fields. The old farm-houses upon these lands have been let or sold to gentfolk who desire rural peace or to married Air Force officers attached to one of the aerodromes.

Of the working people, the greater part look ill and squalid, though spirits are high and manners neighbourly. Dwellers in council houses appear more prosperous; but many of the cottagers are poor and poor again, their swarms of children dirty, pallid and spindle-limbed, their scraps of gardens abandoned to the weeds. Nearly all of them are aged men, children and women; the men from eighteen to forty have mostly been conscripted long ago, though some have obtained deferment through being needed on the land. All the same, labour is scarce. "What with the Taterin' to be done, and the Beetin' to be done, and now all this Home Gua-ardin' and such to be done, it won't be a wonder if we never get nothin' done." Furthermore agricultural labour is skilled. The gaffers tell you that not anyone can drive so straight a furrow that he never lets the ploughshare split the sugar-beet that he is lifting. "Them Italian prisoners," says Charlie Kitto, "they're very nice chaps and willin' to work, but they ain't got no 'sperience, they split the beets terrible." In 1941, shortage of labour, combined with the wettest August for years, meant that the oats were still being harvested in November, while the potatoes were not completely lifted until Christmas.

Forty children are native to the village, and from ten to thirty are evacuees. Originally the village children went to the little school upon the green, and the evacuees to a class rigged up in a room of the big house and taken by two imported teachers. But since the lull in raids on most of Britain began, the evacuees have trickled back to the cities; and now it is not worth while to maintain a separate school. For forty or fifty children ranging in age from four to fourteen years are taught in two classes by two women; and though they learn very little they learn it well, for the governess of the school is an efficient teacher. Reading, writing and plain arithmetic, with a little religious instruction, are the sole academic subjects; in addition there are drawing, singing, sewing, modelling and handicrafts. The school is ugly and ill-equipped, and the text-books date from 1890 at the latest. In summer the children help to tend the churchyard, no men being available to do so; and the boys clip the hedges round the playground.

Here, as everywhere, there is greater willingness among the poor to receive evacuees than among the rich. While not actually refusing to accept the children - although Mrs Parsons at the big house is reported to fall ill whenever the billeting officer visits her - the rich accept them with a veiled resentment. "Virginia's got a marvellous cockney accent now," says Mrs Beauchamp, lowering her voice slightly, "and of course I don't really mind that, they can always grow out of it, but it's the habits she picks up. These two I've got do nothing but scream, and now Virginia's beginning to scream too. And because they do it, she will insist on sleeping in her vest." Nevertheless Mrs Brice at the farm admits she is glad when Stanley and Eric are taken back to Walthamstow - "they did make my Eileen so rude." And Mrs Evans at the White Horse complains contemptuously of the folly of her evacuee's mother: "See what she give Freddie for a vest when she come down, Sunday? Little bit of a hand knitted thing on a drawstring. Drawstring! What 'e wants is a good locknit vest I can boil."

Welcome or not, the children are swift to grow their country skins. They learn that there are other kinds of food than whelks and chips, and they learn to eat their dinner without vinegar or pickles. They come to like eggs, which some have never before tasted, to eat raw greenstuff for tea, and to drink milk. They grow inches taller in as many months. Six-yearold Freda from Hoxton, on first meeting cows in the road, shrinks with white lips towards the hedge. "Cows frow you up in the air on their 'orns an' you come down dead in the fie-oold." A month or two later Freda walks nonchalantly past a grazing herd and tells you, "Them two are Gillett's, them two grey ones, an' all them others are Mr Thoday's 'And this fat 'un 'ere's going to calve soon, and Mr Thoday 'opes it'll be an 'eifer 'cos bulls don't give no milk."

"I thought you didn't like cows, Freda."

"I fink I do like 'em now."

They learn the names of the crops and how to distinguish between the aconite, the buttercup and the celandine. They learn to herd cows with sticks and utter appropriate cries to horses. They know which fields belong to which farmer, and where each labourer works.

They forget to draw pictures of large square bombs falling on houses already far from vertical.

Parents frown at the legal extension of the holidays that leaves the children free for the most strenuous rush of the harvest. "At least you'd think they could have kept on the girls, and the little boys, wouldn't you?"

But the children are in heaven: for once permitted they dash on to the land with joyful yells and return at night scratched, burnt, and unsatiated. "Where are you going today, Frankie?"

"I'm going to work on the fa-arm," answers the fragile little voice, its natural Cockney already overlaid with East Anglian dialect, "'cos Mr Thoday said I may."

If he takes his meals with him he will not return till night, though you may chance to see him swaggering along beside a horse whose bridle he can scarcely reach. All day the wagons lumber along the roads, laden with corn, hay or rustling pea-haulms for the cattle's winter bedding; and every load is topped by tiny children. A big watchful lad controls the reins, a little boy or girl walks beside with a halter attached to the bridle, fancying himself the lord of the expedition. Later you will see the same wagon returning, empty of its hay, but filled with the same bunch of children, tossed in the bumping cart and singing "Roll out the barrel" or "I love sixpence" at full pitch in unison. So slowly the bulk of the harvest is reaped, carted and sold; till early in October the school opens.

The women talk of babies and the price of food; the men talk of the weather and the crops. Very little else, least of all the war, is ever mentioned. Every day at six-thirty, on their bench by the parlour window in the George, each with his pint before him, you may see Harry and Fred. Identical twins of sixty-two or so, they are bent, shambling, ragged, weathered like two old trees gone walking. Originally they were tramp-labourers from Hertfordshire, and used to work their way over half the Eastern counties and back again; but now, compelled by law to serve one master, they sleep in a shepherd's hut and are fed by Mrs Wilkins at the George. Their talk is ruminative and slow, for each corroborates the statements of the other, and not till the facts about the hay are well rubbed in by being asserted six times, are they willing to proceed to the facts about the beans.

"Bad soil round 'ere, sticky clay, 'angs on to your boots. But there's good fen soil near 'ere, black it is, all black. Chatteris'd be the nearest you'd find black soil, and that's eight mile from 'ere."

"Yeh, Chatteris is eight mile from 'ere."

"Yeh."

"That's right."

"Eight mile from 'ere to Chatteris."

"Ou ah, eight mile at least to Chatteris."

Other farmers and labourers enter, and the talk accelerates; but still it centres upon the soil, the weather, and the crops.

The men go; the children emigrate; the young girls leave the school for the nearest factory; the gentlefolk are farming, gardening and baking pies for the labourers; beer and tobacco are scarce; prices are exorbitant; foreigners work on the land; bombers roar over the fields; the Home Guard musters on the green; distant bombs thump; and still the talk is focussed upon the crops. The beans blossom and are sweet upon every breath of wind; the wheat grows from green to dark yellow; the apples redden and are gathered, eaten, dried, stored, or sold. Mr Brice's in-calf cow brings forth a heifer, to his great joy, and the joy of all his neighbours; Mrs Beauchamp's prize bitch breeds with a nameless cur, and the pups are beautiful; old Mrs Conway watches her Easter chicks scurry and chirrup round the bars of their mother's coop, and her flock of primrose ducklings toddle on their new feet to the pond. Mrs Beauchamp gives up gardening for a while; and her son born at Christmas is named Franklin. Young Mrs Kitto, not Mrs Charlie Kitto but Mrs George, whose husband is far off in the Merchant Navy, walks carefully down the road enormous with her fourth child. The district nurse is busy with Mrs Brice, whose fine little girl is born after long labour, weighing eleven pounds. Here at least nobody is troubled by talk of the country's declining birth-rate. Thus scarred by the evidences of war, the old village disintegrates and lives, owning even more intensely than other kinds of community the will to reproduce; and this desire, the first that we possess, is the energy of all communities in their rebirth from dissolution.

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