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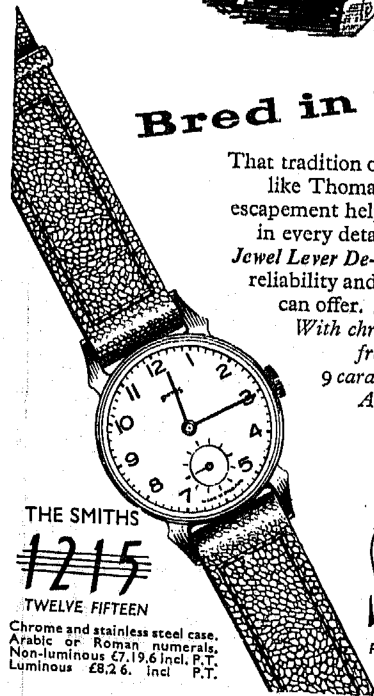

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The Countryman

A Quarterly Non-Party Review
and Miscellany of Rural Life and Work
for the English-Speaking World

Founded by J. W. Robertson Scott and Edited by John Cripps at Burford in Oxfordshire

O more than happy countryman if he but knew his good fortune—*Virgil*. Agriculture for a high-minded man is the best of all occupations—*Xenophon*. The profit of the earth is for all—*Ecclesiastes*. There is nothing better than farming, nothing more fruitful, nothing more delightful, nothing more worthy of a free man—*Cicero*. The best citizens spring from the cultivators—*Cato*. No more real service can be rendered than by improving agriculture—*Washington*. One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth—*Ecclesiastes*

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Twenty-five Years

by H. E. Bates

The first number of 'The Countryman' appeared in April 1927. Its founder-editor and his wife were the sole staff, and their office was the attic of their Cotswold manor house at Idbury, five miles from Burford. Friends prophesied a sale of a few hundred copies, but so great was Robertson Scott's faith in the future of the Review that he printed nine thousand copies of that first number, and when he retired from the editorship in 1947, only shortage of paper held the sale below sixty thousand. It has now topped seventy-five thousand. To mark our twenty-fifth anniversary we invited H. E. Bates to compare the life of the countryside today with that of the time when the first copies of 'The Countryman' were being dispatched from Idbury.

THERE seems to me no doubt that the first fifty years of the present century have been the most momentous in the history of our countryside and that the second half of them, the twenty-five years since Robertson Scott founded in 'The Countryman' a country magazine entirely fresh in its pocket-shape and intelligence of outlook, has been ten times more significant and revolutionary than the first. These years have

impressed on the countryside changes even greater than those which banished our independent peasantry and revolutionised, through enclosures, as G. M. Trevelyan has said, 'the immemorial manner of life in rural England'. Each quarter of this century has been hideously disrupted by war, a disruption that, in 1914–1918, dealt a pulverising blow at what had seemed to be the countryside's most cherished, secure and inviolate institutions, namely church, great house and squirearchy, but of which the fullest effects, the most beneficial effects, were not seen until another war had begun to repeat, in still more ruthless and disintegrating fashion, the blows dealt by the first. It is one of the deepest ironies of war that, while appearing to be pointlessly concerned with nothing but death and the attendant abysmal retrogressions that seem to take the combatants well back to the behaviour of cave-men, it is full of new sources of life and all sorts of compensatory progress in the most unexpected directions. No wars were ever more hideous or could have seemed more pointless than the two we have known this century; none had a more incisive, broadening and in a way more liberating effect on the countryside.

It has always been my guess that Robertson Scott intuitively recognised the coming of the second part of this revolution when he launched 'The Countryman' in 1927: that he felt himself and his own generation, rooted in liberalism, in middle age, to be poised between two worlds in a way that a single generation had never been poised before and would probably never be again. Behind him he could stretch out and touch the still living fringes of a kind of country life that would have been in many ways recognisable alike to Kilvert, Clare, Jane Austen, Parson Woodforde or even Shakespeare, in which the medieval hiring fair, the stage-coach and the distribution of largesse were, in fact, only just second-hand memories to a man of my own age. It was a world that would never come again, and though it would be pleasant to say that the trumpets were sounding at its death the real sound of its accompanying death-music was, in fact, something far less heroic. The conk of the internal-combustion exhaust was at once the knell and the clarion of the old and new worlds between which Robertson Scott and his generation must have felt themselves to be poised. Behind them lay the world of scythe and flail, of harvest homes and Plough Mondays, of the sanctity of Sundays and the honest toil of noble plough-teams, of charming dying antiquities and of villages' green-shrouded isolations. Before them lay the T-model Ford, the

bus, the tractor, the jeep, the bulldozer, the combine-harvester, the grain-drier, the baler and all the rest. And you may bang your head against the wall and wail your lamentations as much as you like at the death of one world and the rise of the other, but there seems to me no doubt – as I believe it must have seemed also to Robertson Scott – which was going to be the better, fuller, richer and more satisfying rural world.

It is not surprising, therefore, that 'The Countryman's' interests were almost equally divided between these worlds, between old and new and between conservative and revolutionary, just as they were divided between bird-watching and sociology and between the unearthing of rural oddities and the exposure of rural bigotry. It was not simply the voice of both worlds; its genesis was so apt that it gradually became the expression of an increasing longing, notable not only in this country but in Europe and America too, through which millions of people wanted to escape, either permanently or temporarily, from the too-insistent impact and insecurity of a highly mechanised, nervous urban life into the world of woods and grass and fields. Most of the people who felt this longing wanted, and even needed, to enjoy the benefits of both worlds. They were able to do so with an ease no other generation had known, and 'The Countryman' was, in very many senses, their voice. It was nostalgic, but not sentimentally so; it dealt with what ought to have been dreary things like rating committees and rural district councils, and yet managed to give them extraordinary interest and pungency; it looked lovingly on the charm and oddity of the past, and yet was consistently aware – and in many ways this was the thing I always liked most about it – that nothing ever really disintegrates the continuity of rural life, and that what appear at first to be its most disturbing and even disrupting influences, such as war and tractors and combines and electricity pylons, manage somehow in time to emphasise that continuity, to deepen its impression on the minds of those who live close to it, and to give its pattern an emphasis of fresh beauty.

'The Countryman' had been in existence exactly five years when I went to live permanently in the countryside, in Kent: to discover there what seemed to me almost the remains of a feudal kingdom, stiff with suspicion and bigotry, hostile to strangers, sociologically backward in surroundings of most opulent beauty, its labourers poor in some of the richest soil in the world. The slump had hit the labourer very hard. The

statutory farm wage was tenpence an hour. Butter was tenpence a pound, bacon a shilling; and cherries, the almost unfailing harvest of the bountiful brick-earth, were generally about fourpence. At market you could buy a rabbit, and even sometimes a lamb, for sixpence. On the other hand there was a great deal of hunting. At the local mansion twenty-two gardeners were busy manipulating colour-schemes in flower-beds according to the whims of the lady of the house. One mansion took in five hundred tons of coal a year. Guests plunged into heated swimming-pools. In September swarms of half-tame pheasants were let loose on stubbles, presently to be mown down by platoons of healthy gentlemen in plus-fours. Writers on rural topics spoke sonorously of the drift from the countryside. There was still a great deal of cap-touching. The clergy were too often men of bony, bloodless, pickled appearance, who floated rather than rode about the lanes on tall, refined bicycles that had something of the appearance of hammocks on wheels, visiting selected old ladies about tea-time. You could buy an excellent cottage, which I myself did, for about seven hundred pounds. The board of guardians still sat at the local workhouse and the parish council had had the distinction of not inspiring the erection of a single working-class house for fifty years or more, simply because its chairmen had, between them, owned the parish's entire rentable property. A great many children were knobbly with rickets and the farm labourer ate an awful lot of bread.

In the remarkable revolution of the succeeding twenty years it seems to me that the most interesting figure to emerge is not the squire, who now lives in a keeper's lodge because even a modified life at the Georgian mansion would ruin him; not the clergyman, whose church was actually, and in a deeper sense symbolically, destroyed by a doodle-bug; not the innumerable old ladies struggling to live on the interest of gilt-edged, clinging fearfully to the sacred principles of untouchable capital; and certainly not the gentlemen of little faith and alcoholic appearance who have fled to Ireland because they believed that England, of all places, was finished. The most remarkable person to emerge from the quarter-century since 'The Countryman' made its first appearance, it seems to me, is the farm labourer.

He has risen to heights of emancipation that would have seemed to his grandfather nothing less than gaining the gates of Heaven; but much more remarkable than the rapid increases

in his wages, his inclusion in schemes of social insurance, and his bounty of a fortnight's holiday with pay each year – much more than all his material advancement has been his own personal emancipation, quite remote from Acts of Parliament or social reform, in relation to the machine. In a craft so traditional and conservative and impervious to change as agriculture he has suddenly shown an astounding modernism. He has not only reversed every principle that actuated his forefathers in the blinding years of the Luddite riots – principles still as profoundly rooted as ever in the minds of dockers and miners – he has embraced every new-fangled, labour-saving device, the entire new bedlam of the agricultural show, with the joyousness of a small boy given an utterly new range of playthings.

The fact that he has been able to do this without losing his singular identity, and without resorting to the use of what is now significantly called the strike-weapon – note the militant term – is perhaps in some ways more remarkable still. His forefathers rioted against the machine with physical force; his contemporaries the dockers, not satisfied with refusals to work the sort of modern loading apparatus that would turn ships round at greater speed, have managed to introduce restrictive practices of their own which, at some ports, mean that the equivalent of fifty ships never put to sea in the course of a year. Research has also revealed that the miner, ever since the earliest days of the industry, has opposed with consistently stubborn bitterness every new device for the quicker extraction of coal. It would have been perfectly understandable if the farm labourer had behaved in the same way; no-one could really have blamed him if he had shown some opposition to the rapid and rising menaces to his most traditional of all occupations. Yet, left to himself – note that his community of labour is one of the last to receive the benefits of so-called political organisation – he has had the sound sense to accept every mechanical device offered to him, however large the number of men it replaced, and to adapt and absorb it into the seasonal pattern. And strikes, with him, are unknown. This is not only greatly to his credit; it has, I think, made him a bigger, better, more self-assured and broadminded man than his father. In something less than twenty years it has miraculously completed his emancipation.

Whether he grasps this is quite another matter. What he does grasp is the curious anomaly whereby invention, through

tractor and combine-harvester, seems to have done nothing to bring forward the position of either seed-time or harvest in the farming calendar. Indeed both, especially harvest, seem to get slightly later. These machines have undoubtedly brought something new to the pattern of the land; the tractor crawling like an orange beetle over dark furrows, and the combine laying its neat, oblong eggs of straw across untidy stubbles in place of the traditional tent-like shocks of corn. In a year or two it is possible that those tent-like encampments of harvest, for so long one of the most beautiful sights of the year, will be as rare, in parts of England, as a woman in a sun-bonnet tossing swathes of hay. A generation will grow up that has never seen them, just as a generation has already grown up that has never seen a team of horses, all brassy and strawed and powerfully glistening, at plough.

Something else important has been happening in what I hope are merely the years of 'The Countryman's' young manhood. The drift from the countryside, noted by writer after writer since the eighteenth century, has stopped; it has, in fact, according to the newest census figures, been reversed. No longer, it seems, are countrymen permanently forsaking country life for town life; but townsmen are turning more and more, as I have long prophesied they would, to the country. This is not an accident; it is one more inevitable result of the revolution in communications, swift alike in impact and result, that has killed for ever rural isolation. By this revolution small countries such as England, Belgium and Switzerland have been much more transformed than countries the size of France, whose economy remains remarkably evenly balanced between agriculture and industry, and where great stretches of thinly populated countryside, still poor in communications, separate the larger towns. England is not quite so much affected by distances, and every year the charm of her countryside, so often admired abroad, springs more and more from the fact that the pattern of rural and urban and suburban and half-urban life is so tightly and neatly woven. In France isolation still produces a remarkable eighteenth-century rural untidiness, a shabby and almost medieval primitiveness, that all travellers through its muck-strewn, hen-scratched, unmetalled village streets know so well. Here, with us, the fusion of rural and urban and suburban, and still more the impact and example of the urban mind, make the countryside neater, cleaner, drier, more orderly and accessible every year.

Communications have, in fact, transformed the English countryside into a kind of everyman's back garden belonging to the towns. Indisputable though it is that the drift from countryside to town has been reversed, it would also seem to be certain that there is an increasing, endless traffic, unassessable by any census, going both ways. The last twenty-five years have intensified it enormously, so that we cannot assess the number of people who enjoy, in England, something of both town and country life. It is certain that there are millions of them.

It is also worth noting that quite half the special beauty of our countryside – in my own village it amounts to almost every single acre of it – is the legacy of a system of class distinction and inequality now thought to be intolerant, intolerable and even wicked; and it is both ironical and instructive that the first exalted doubts on the future of a classless society should now come from the very man who was entrusted, in this country, with formulating the great plan from its genesis.

'Just from where, in our classless collection of men and women,' says Lord Beveridge, 'the leadership will come to make us a society with a sense of unity, in service to the world, I do not know . . . We have somehow to carry on the aristocratic tradition without the aristocrats'. I will not add to the supreme irony of this by suggesting that the new leadership might come from the farm labourer, complete with motor-cycle and tractor, flourishing in full emancipation, or from the illiterate viewer starving, as a former Cabinet Minister has so aptly put it, by his television set. It is a great question, that belongs, because of the levelling processes of our time, as much to the countryside as to the town. It is a very baffling question; and the only certain thing I feel about it is that 'The Countryman', during its next twenty-five years, will be watching with its customary breadth of intelligence and vision – and possibly, like me, with some foreboding – for what may be a more revolutionary answer than any given since its first auspicious birthday.

Wharfedale cricketer, whose team has just been soundly beaten by that of a neighbouring village assisted by a county player on holiday: 'O' course, we med a mistake shiftin' cattle. Cow packs ud 'appen a baffled yon county feller'.