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Village in peace: Upper Slaughter, Gloucestershire, where, as everywhere, poverty has diminished.

Our villages, the myth and the truth

R E Bates surveys this century's changes and finds that they make life better for dwellers there

While the quality of country living may have changed it is absurd to mourn the passing of the peasant way of life which, though picturesque was for too many a wretched existence. Yet the community spirit, the sense of identification with one place, can give way to rootlessness and, around the perimeter of large towns, many villages are now dormitories for people whose real lives are lived at the other end of a railway line.

In this article Mr Bates, novelist and countryman, discusses the changing face of village life in the light of two recently published books.*

"Facts," it has been well observed, "begin by inspiring the imagination and end by putting it in a strait-jacket." Of no recent books I have read on the English countryside is this more true than of the two compiled by Paul Jennings and R E Moreau, with their utterly opposed titles, *The Living Village* and *The Departed Village*.

Mr Jennings is, and always has been, a great fact-finder, more especially of facts odd, bizarre, unintentionally funny, mildly lunatic and at times as absorbingly diverting but refreshing as recipes for medieval herb-drinks, cure-alls and love-potions.

Modern Domesday

This is not to imply that he is a fact-hunter merely for fact's sake, or a bad one, but simply that he is perhaps over-zealous, ever hungry for more. In a great drawing it is the lines that are left out of the picture that speak most; without air the drawing cannot breathe.

Mr Jennings' method is precisely the opposite. "Cram

the facts in as thick and odd and diverse and curious as you can get them", he seems to say, "and they will speak for themselves." Alas, they frequently do not; all too often, I fear, they tend to weave their own strait-jacket.

We must, however, grant that in the case of *The Living Village* there is much excuse for Mr Jennings. His book is not so much a catalogue; it had to be. Indeed, as he himself suggests, it is a sort of modern *Domesday Book*, "only on an infinitely greater scale" (incredibly without an index), dealing as it does with the results of a national competition for village scrap-books. This was organized in 1965 by the National Federation of Women's Institutes to celebrate the golden jubilee of a remarkable organization that affects the lives of no fewer than half a million women in these islands.

Evening out

Nor should one overlook its influence on the lives of numberless men left on their own for one night of the month with supper in the oven, the telly for company, and a constantly nagging desire to have another drink before a wife comes home with the jubilant and stunning news that "they made twenty-three-and-six on the bring-and-buy stall". (I speak from experience. With three WI presidents in the family there are times when I wonder whether it isn't resolutions instead of marmalade I am spreading on my morning toast, agendas instead of cream I am eating with the strawberries or group meetings I am having as a substitute for beef with the Yorkshire pudding.)

No fewer than 2,600 villages responded to the call for scrap-books, to which many men, as well as women,

Village in comfort: Piddletrenthide, Dorset, where aeriels and power lines speak of easier times.





Village of thatch: Great Tew, Oxfordshire, has changed little outwardly in 100 years, but this is where the resemblance ends.

Thwaite, Yorkshire, is at the head of Swaledale. To be snowed-up renews the village community spirit.



also contributed. Some of the resulting tomes are six inches thick; one is of 'two volumes each about the size of N to Z of the Shorter Oxford Dictionary'; many are ingeniously wrought, bound and embellished in styles worthy of medieval missals; a few are so delicately fashioned that readers are entreated to wear gloves before they handle them.

Modern nonsense

The resulting picture is of bewildering expanse, dealing as it does with every facet of rural life from wild flowers to combines, Jennings-odd characters to leek clubs, sacred recipes (especially of Yorkshire pudding) that cannot be written down, pubs to painting, coin clubs to cricket and the Lord knows what else: a picture so crammed with detail that it cannot be summed up, as Mr Jennings sums up the older village pattern, in one single succinct and illuminating sentence: "a dense, rich, dark rose window", a sentence worth half a ton of facts, fascinating though they individually may be.

But if Mr Jennings and the Women's Institutes together prove anything to me it is the modern wall one hears that the countryside is disappearing, or in decay, and the English village is as deserted and moribund as Goldsmith's, which is arrant nonsense. "I see the rural virtues leave the land," wrote Goldsmith; whereas I see, after nearly 40 years of rural life, precisely the opposite.

Extra pleasure

Virtues? The farm labourer on a wage of thirty shillings a week, scarcely able to afford meat once a week or a bone-shaker to go to work on and looking on a rabbit as a near luxury for Christmas dinner; the village shop selling little but fat, hand-cut bacon, sour oranges, cheap tea, mouse-trap cheese, candles, margarine and paraffin; cottages with neither sanitation nor running water: the virtues have departed.

The drift back to the countryside is not merely explicable as an escape route from our modern urban sub-topian horrors, of which architecture is the most monstrous of offenders, but because the village and the countryside are, by and large, infinitely better, more pleasurable and more satisfying places in which to live. At last, as Mr Jennings points out, modern mobility has given more and more of us the opportunity of satisfying the desire to repel the grey blight of urbanization and return to a richer Mother Earth.

Exit drudgery

It is of the old, long departed village that R E Moreau writes. His scene is "the tiny and unregarded Oxfordshire village of Berrick Salome" at the turn of the century: a world of horses and carriages, tricycles, soup-doling and cricketing gentry, hard hand labour on farms, the scythe, the carrier's cart, the bonded sheaf, the workhouse, the parish dole and an infinity of other departed virtues; a world little removed, in many ways, from Tess's freezing drudgery in the turnip field.

In order to present his picture Mr Moreau has drawn conscientiously, patiently and worthily on an infinity of facts unearthed from archives, libraries, map-rooms, deeds, records of churches, parishes, brewers and police-forces as well as much local reminiscence and gossip. His aim, I suspect, and also perhaps that of his publishers, was to produce another *Lark Rise to Candleford*. In this they fail largely because, as I earlier implied, facts alone, however mounted, do not make literature.

Throughout *The Departed Village* one longs, and longs in vain, for the uplifting phrase, the illuminating shaft of light, the touch of poetry. In doing so one constantly recalls Conrad's tribute to Hudson: "this man writes as the grass grows". If only Mr Moreau could and had done.

* *The Living Village*, by Paul Jennings (Hodder and Stoughton, 35s); *The Departed Village*, by R E Moreau (Oxford University Press, 32s 6d.).