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LIVING MAG

A countryman remembers by H.E. Bates

Hear the name of famous novelist H. E. Bates, and you immediately think of the English countryside he loves and portrays so well. This month LIVING begins a new series of articles in which he looks back over the changing landscape of England

It is forty-two years since I exchanged the blue slate and red brick of the heart of Midland England for an altogether serener, softer landscape that is the heart of Kent. I was a young, very impecunious and in certain senses a very innocent writer whose greatest virtue was, perhaps, a devouring single-mindedness. With me was my even younger bride and the course we had chosen to take on the threshold of our marriage was one which, I suspect, appeared to both our friends and families as one of a singular dottiness.

We had chosen to convert and live in a barn: more exactly a granary. This building was one of five which, until the blight of the Great Depression decreed otherwise, had been part of a farm. This farm, in turn, had been part of one of those large and superb estates, great house, great parklands and all, that had probably been as near self-supporting as could be over the centuries. These five buildings were the farmhouse, a large hay barn, an oast-house, a cow byre and the granary. All were built in Kentish ragstone and roofed with warm russet-brown tiles.

Perhaps the word 'built' is not quite the right one. 'Fashioned', possibly is nearer the truth: fashioned with an artistry, a skill and a pride which today makes a mockery of so much, both rural and urban, that passes for architecture. Every stone that was to house men, grain, beasts, hay and hops had been cut and graduated with as much care as if it were truly precious.

Thus the great hay barn had for its lower courses stones cut to about a foot square. The stones of the last, highest course were less than half that size. At regular intervals were perpendicular ventilating slits framed by red bricks. These bricks, set to a charming pattern, had a warmth of both colour and texture that contrasted and yet married marvellously with the surrounding grey-cream, lichen-flecked stone.

Except that they had no opening and few ventilation outlets—nor, except for the farmhouse, any windows—the other buildings were fashioned in the same supremely satisfying style: soft in appearance but substantial, graceful and yet of a sturdiness that would, you felt, defy sun, snow, frost and tempest for another thousand years. Only that part of the oast-house known as the roundel and its crowning white wooden cowl showed any sign of decay: a condition having nothing to do with any affliction from nature but only from the hands of some predatory builder who had filched the tiles. Happily, today, roundel and cowl have been

restored by a more enlightened owner to their original dignities, thus leaving these fine buildings in pristine unity.

Contrast all this with the impersonal brands and shapes of your modern half-farm, half-factory: steel, asbestos, concrete, corrugated iron and all the rest. Where stone and tile and brick breathe out a living warmth that for beauty matches the fissured bark of oak and chestnut, the silver of birch or the elephantine grey smoothness of beech, the modern agricultural horrors stand out not only as unbeautiful but, in a sense, sordid too. It is rather like comparing St Paul's with some Eastern brothel. Time will do nothing to gild their drab, weary and wearisome complexions.

Of the five farm buildings, three, including my own, are now houses, but the neighbouring landscape cannot have changed very much over the years except that of any former hop gardens nothing remains. Our nearest hop garden, reputedly the oldest in England, is a good two miles away.

I regret the passing of those old hop gardens very much. No crop is set on so varied and interesting a stage as the hop, from the time in March when the hop-stringing begins—making every garden look like some complicated spider's web, the fresh strings gold-brown in the spring sunshine—then on through high summer with the hops doing their bean-stalk race to reach the top of strings and wires, and eventually to September, when the spiders' webs become thick pale green curtains, the hops ready for picking.

That annual ritual of stringing the gardens must be one of the few remaining agricultural tasks still done wholly by hand. Even the picking of the hops in September is now completely mechanised. The early summer thinning and training of the young hop shoots is work done entirely by hand too, both it and the stringing calling for a fair degree of skill.

All these tasks are peculiar to Kent, Sussex and Herefordshire and I never fail to find them fascinating. But for me the most satisfying thing about the entire business of hop culture is the oast-house itself, and there are few things I like better than to stand on some piece of high ground and gaze at the groups of oasts, in twos, threes, fours and sometimes even sixes, rising from the landscape like so many red-brown steeples capped with white. Not the least delightful feature of these white oast cowls is the way, on some farms, they carry as extra decoration that fine symbol of Kent, the white horse, recalling / please turn to page 84

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- 13 Spread tomato mixture over dough.
 - 14 Arrange the slices of meat over the tomato, sprinkle with the grated cheese.
 - 15 Place olives (if using) in between the slices of meat.
 - 16 Heat under grill and melt cheese.
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A countryman remembers

its proud slogan, almost a battle cry
—Invicta.

I sometimes wonder if in any of these abandoned oast-houses a fragment or two of hops, shrivelled by time, remains. There was an occasion not long ago, when we found a few lost grains of wheat wedged between the floor boards of the Granary's upper storey. I found the discovery peculiarly touching. It was almost like the discovery of a long-lost coin. A triviality of course, like a blue fragment of a thrush's egg on a spring lawn, the first primrose, but such things have a way of enduring in the memory as tenaciously as the stones of farmhouse, byre, hay barn, oast and granary. They are like Shelley's 'music when soft voices die'. They vibrate in the memory.

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