









Around the Oxford countryside with S. P. B. Mais

BAMPTON STILL HAS NIGHTLY CURFEW

Customs of its own—and big drainage grievance

BAMPTON owes a great deal to its splendid isolation, to the fact that it was formerly roadless, a region of thickets, literally Bampton-in-the-Bush.

It owes to this isolation its unbroken continuity of tradition and custom in which it is richer than any other place of its size in the country.

Every night of the year curfew is still rung from the church at 7.55, followed by the date or calendar bell which rings out the day of the month.

On Shrove Tuesday, at noon, the pancake or pudding bell is rung to remind housewives that it is pancake day.

The annual horse fair, inaugurated in the reign of Edward I, is still held on August 26.

Every year at Christmas the mummings, in their medieval dress, go from house to house acting the ancient play of St. George and the Dragon.

The Ancient Order of Junketry turn out annually in great strength for the wheelbarrow race from one end of the town to the other, in which competitors, dressed in nightgowns, wheel their partners to each of the 11 pubs in turn and there drink a full pint of ale before they change places and continue the hazardous perambulation.

600 YEARS OF DANCING

The Bampton Morris Dancers have danced their own traditional dances every Whit Monday for over 600 years.

Francis Shergold, the head gardener at Weald Manor, showed me some of his dancing clothes.

"I am known as the Squire and bagman," he said proudly, "and my team consists of nine—six dancers, a clown or fool, an old fiddler and a collector who carries the ceremonial cake in a silver container impaled on a sword.

"If you manage to snatch a

once a year, on Whit Monday, but we go round to dance with other clubs—Abingdon, Headington, the City of Oxford and University of Oxford—during the summer.

"On Whit Monday we dance right through the streets all the morning and in the afternoon dance in the gardens of private houses."

Another ancient custom observed on the same day is the



Mr. F. Shergold, squire and bagman of the Morris dancers.

procession of garlanded children who collect withies, bend them into hoops which they decorate with wild flowers, and then march round the town from eight in the morning till noon.

Bampton is certainly to be congratulated on having been able to keep up so effortlessly its many precious and picturesque ancient customs, but isolation has its disadvantages.

SANITATION SCANDAL

I was shocked to find in 1954 a community of 1,300 people in Oxfordshire still without a main drainage scheme, and stories of buckets put out on the pavement to be collected do not make pleasant reading.

Miss Marjorie Pollard, a prominent member both of the Rural District Council and of the Parish Council, was rightly indignant about this.

"I should like to wheel our sewage cart up to Whitehall and face the Ministry with it," she said. "They say something will be done in two years, but it's always 'two years,' and two years never come.

"Meantime, the estimated cost is rising. Now it's up to about £50,000. It was only about half that sum before the war."

PUBLISHER

Miss Pollard, who is a hockey and cricket international, somehow finds time, in addition to her intense practical devotion to the improvement of parochial amenities, to run a most enterprising publishing house in her beautiful Tudor home at the Deanery.

She edits and publishes a highly successful magazine, the "Women's Hockey Field," the fortnightly official journal of the A.E.W.H.A.

She showed me several pamphlets and illustrated books that she has lately published on lacrosse and hockey for girls, and her office is decorated with the multi-coloured badges of all international hockey teams.

At the other end of the town, in the study of Mr. J. L. Owens, the headmaster of the Senior School, I got another sidelight on Bampton's interest in hockey.

The walls were lined with photographs of girls' hockey elevens of the last five or six years.

GREAT TRADITION

I'm specially proud of those," said Mr. Owens. "Ours is an all-age school of 260, and our children's ages range from five to 15. We have a great tradition in hockey, and that team at which you are looking had an unbeaten record that year except for a defeat by the Cheltenham Ladies' College under 15's.

"As I have only about 40 girls to choose from you can see that they are as keen as mustard. But between November and March our ground is better fitted for water polo than hockey. It's pretty well always waterlogged. Our most pressing need is for new playing fields."

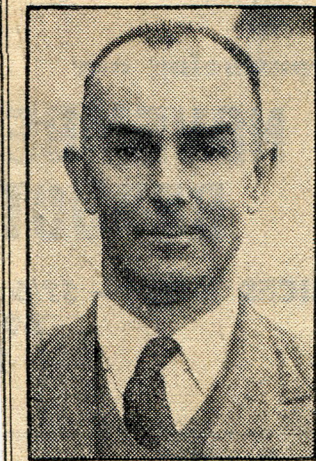
"And a drainage scheme." I reminded him.

"Oh! they've told you about that," he said. "I'm chairman of the playing fields and we've already got a grant from the Playing Fields Association. But we must have a dry ground for our boys and girls to play on.

BOYS TEACH FOOTBALL

"I send my boys up to the American school at Brize Norton to teach them to play English football, and we've made good friends up there, but we want to invite them back. We must have playing fields fit to play on, both when they're at school and after they leave.

"Our men's football team are well up in the Witney and



Mr. Wesley Jones

District League, and our cricket team play Merton College Barnacles, so you can see that the sporting spirit is alive enough. We must have a dry ground."

Mr. Owens' school is decidedly go-ahead, not only in games. He showed me a copy of "The Bamptonian," a most attractive school magazine which is not only written and edited by the school, but actually printed and published by the children.

I wonder how many rural elementary schools in England have the enterprise to print and

publish their own magazine.

Hockey and publishing seem to go hand-in-hand in Bampton, a most unusual partnership.

Much that I saw in Mr. Owens' school is unusual: the headmaster's study, for instance, which was entirely built by the boys. "And whenever they come to see me they take jolly good care to see that I haven't scratched the paint off the walls," he said.

He took me to see the very well furnished school library and the capacious school hall.

"This is the meeting place," he said, "of our famous debating society and of the girls' club. We also have folk dancing classes here on Wednesdays, woodwork classes, dairying and dressmaking classes, and I have just started a choral society."

"The school seems to be the focal point of all the aesthetic and cultural activities," I said.

"Isn't it the obvious place?" he replied.

EXQUISITE SPIRE

From the school I went to the church. St. Mary's is a cathedral in little. Its slender, exquisitely proportioned 13th century spire rises to a height of 170ft., standing out above the tall elms, stone houses and surrounding water-meadows. At each corner of the tower are flying buttresses supporting life-size figures of saints, standing like sentinels.

It is one of the loftiest, lightest and best-kept churches that I have seen and contains, among other treasures, a 15th century Easter sepulchre, a Tudor iron chest and an effigy of Sir Gilbert Talbot, of Bampton Castle, who fought at Agincourt.

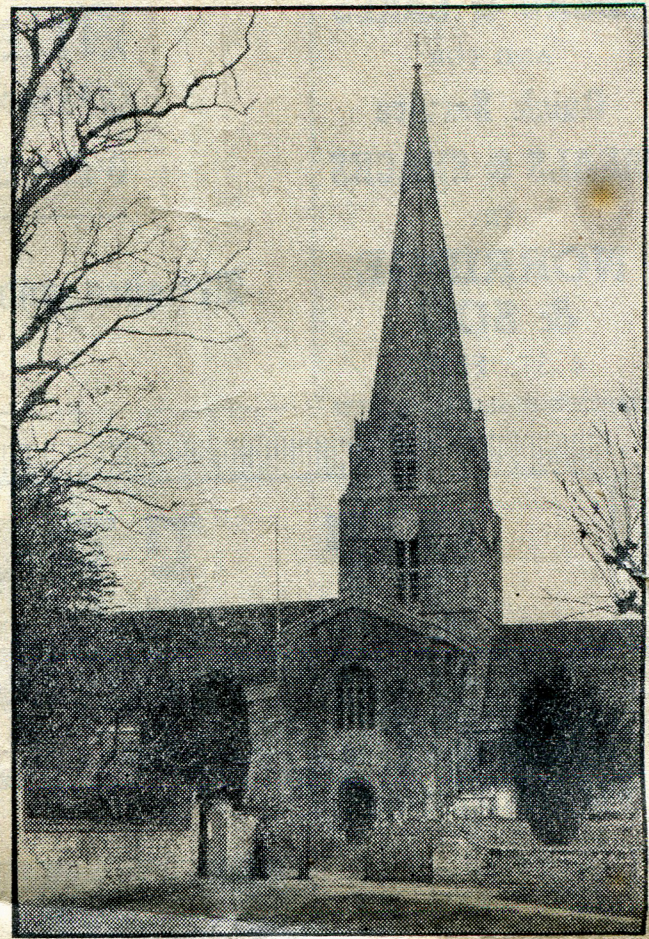
The Vicar, the Rev. C. C. Kelway, told me that he had already raised £1,300 of the £2,000 required to repair the roof.

"Bampton people," he said, "give readily. They have lately given £800 towards the organ and windows. Bampton is the birthplace of Leofric, first Bishop of Exeter, which explains why the living is in the gift of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter.

"All religious denominations thrive here. We have a Methodist and a Baptist Chapel, and the Catholics use a room in the Eagle Inn for their services."

Mr. Kelway took a bright view of Bampton youth.

"More than 100 children," he said, "attend Sunday School, Red Cross Cadets, Scouts and



St. Mary's, "a cathedral in little" with a 13th-century spire.

side and have had Americans from Brize Norton, officers of the Oxford Union, our local M.P. and leading Communists.

"This month John Cripps opposed Com. A. B. Brown, Deputy Mayor of Oxford, so it is perhaps not surprising that we sometimes get as many as three coachloads of visitors from Oxford."

TWO MILES TO STATION

Mr. M. John, the stationmaster, explained why the station was two miles from Bampton.

"The then Lord of the Manor refused to allow a railway to run through his land, so we remained cut off. Transport from Bampton is not easy,

market square every morning taking the girls to Smith's instrument factories, the Witney blanket mills, and the men to work on maintenance at Brize Norton.

"Some go to Pressed Steel and Morris's and some, of course, work in the shops."

STARS

It was while I was in the fishmonger's shop, a very up-to-date concern run by Mr. Bovington, who is also a professional beekeeper, that I met two of Bampton's most famous worthies, Count Munster, who lives in the Manor House, and Air Marshal Sir Roderick Carr, the New Zealander who accompanied Shackleton to the Antarctic and made the first R.A.F. long distance non-stop flight from England to Persia 27 years ago.

Bampton is also the home of Air Commodore A. S. Ellerton A.D.C. to the King until his retirement in 1949, and of Mr. Lloyd, the late chairman of Christie's.

With so many stars to pick from, one wonders why Mr. Wesley Jones ever goes outside Bampton for his debaters.

I didn't see signs of many ancient crafts but Mr. John showed me a rushwork stool made from local rushes by the W.I., who also, he told me, write poetry; and he took me to see Miss Taunt, who has been organist at the church for 40 years, following her father, who was organist for 50 years.

"My ladies of the choir," she said, "look very smart in their vivid blue gowns."

HUGE HANDKERCHIEF

She showed me some sacred pictures worked in silk and wool by her mother when she was 12, and a huge handkerchief, 3ft. square, bearing the date 1769, with picturesque prints of sedan chairs and Thames barges round the border, the body of the fabric being taken up with a table of distances between all the principal towns in the Kingdom.

I was told that the Ashmolean are very interested in this heirloom, as they might well be.

Mrs. P. M. Colville, of Weald Manor, told me that Bampton still has a thatcher, Mr. Tanner, who is scarcely ever at home as he is so busy thatching all over Berkshire and Oxfordshire, that there are still excellent carpenters and stone masons, one saddler, and one shepherd, Mr. Radband, who is over 90.

Col. J. J. Powell, churchwarden, told me that the bowling club which meets on Mrs. Colville's lawn is extremely



Miss Majorie Pollard, hockey and cricket international, and the multi-coloured badges in her office.

Brownies are all active, and there is a young men's social club which meets in the old Grammar School.

"Most of our activities are held in the W.I. Hall, which holds about 100.

"They have square dances there on Fridays, whist drives on Tuesdays, badminton on Thursdays, a cinema on Mondays, and the W.I., who have a membership of 80, meet once a month on Wednesdays."

THE TOWN HALL

"What about the Town Hall?"

"It consists of a fire engine station, a public lavatory and a bus shelter. It's not beautiful. We're not proud of it, but it does contain a clock in the tower which keeps time."

Mr. Wesley Jones told me of another social activity of which Bampton is justly proud.

"Bampton Debating Society," he said, "was founded in 1936 and is now acknowledged to be the most flourishing society of its kind in rural England. We meet once a month in the school dining hall and attendances vary from 80 to 120.

"We get speakers from out-

There are very few buses. There are seven trains each way on weekdays and one on Sundays.

"The Americans use the line a lot, and the schoolchildren and 40 or 50 Bamptonians go into Oxford on Saturdays.

"On the other hand, we are kept busy with freight, particularly with coal, coke, sugar, beet, grain, agricultural machinery and stores for the Americans.

"We have six special freight trains for the Americans every week. We are proud of the fact that automatic train controls were first used on this Fairford branch in 1907 and have been in use ever since."

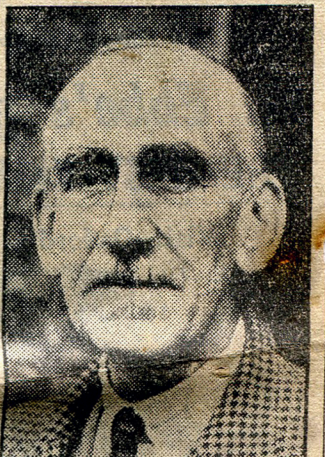
INDUSTRIES

Mr. John told me about the local industries.

"There used to be a tannery," he said, "but that's gone. There are ten farms, one of them at Ham Court, which stands on the site of Bampton Castle.

"Mr. Wilkins, of Coal Pit Farm, has one of the biggest dryers in the country. I suppose agriculture employs about 50 of the population.

"A dozen buses leave the



Col. J. J. Powell, churchwarden, who will be remembered by old soldiers as Adjutant of the Depot, Cowley Barracks, about 35 years ago.

active, winning ten matches last season, and that the badminton club is flourishing.

"I should say that we are quite a lively community for our size," he said. "The British Legion is nearly 100 strong and there is also a women's section who organise lectures and social gatherings."

The colonel turned my attention to the tunefulness of the church bells. "We have," he said, "a wonderful peal of eight bells and everybody wishes we could hear them more often."

TWO BUSES MORE

As I stood in the market place waiting for my return bus (there are only two a day) I was struck both by the silence and the beauty. It was still afternoon, but there was scarcely any movement; just a tram being wheeled and two lorries full of sugar beet passed by.

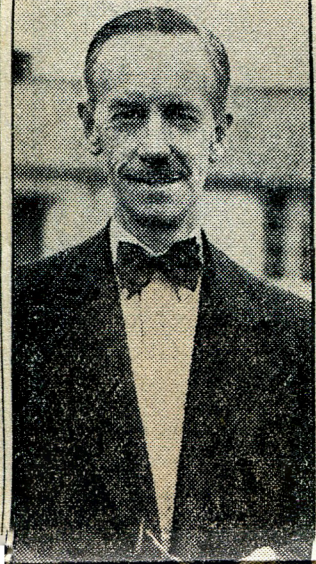
Spying a fellow creature standing in the porch of the Talbot Inn, I wandered over and put the inevitable question. "What is Bampton's most urgent need?" I asked.

He slowly took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed it at the grey stone building that occupies the centre of the square.

"See that?" he asked. "That, believe it or not, is our Town Hall. It ought to be blown up. We're genuine antiques at Bampton. That isn't. It's bogus. Blow it up, I say. It's a blot on the landscape, a disgrace to the town."

Town halls don't seem to be popular in Oxfordshire.

Next Friday: Bloxham.



Mr. J. L. Owens, headmaster of an exceptional school.

currant from the cake you will have good luck for a year. Originally it was not a cake, but a buck which we had the right to kill in Wychwood Forest on that day.

"We dance to 27 tunes in all, including 'The Willow Tree' and 'Green Garters,' and everybody at Bampton knows them by heart. All the same, it is difficult to get the youngsters to join.

"Our famous fiddler, 'Jinky' Wells, is dead, and his successor, Mr. Clark is over 70. We usually begin rehearsals about five weeks beforehand."

AT HOME ONCE A YEAR

"Do you only dance at Bampton?" I asked.

"We only dance at Bampton