

LITTLE GADDESSEN—THE GARDEN VILLAGE

By "BEORCHAM"

It has been customary, of late years, to speak of two of Hertfordshire's oldest villages as "The Gaddesdens". A convenient label, but one not likely to please the inhabitants of either Great or Little Gaddesden. For these two villages, only a couple of miles apart, have little in common other than their name. They have kept separate identities for hundreds of years, and bear no more resemblance to one another than, say, Berkhamsted and Ivinghoe. Even the scenery is dissimilar.

Little Gaddesden is a hill village—one of the highest in Hertfordshire, in fact—sprawling along a parkland ridge and full of mementoes of the time when it was the pampered "model village" of Ashridge. Great Gaddesden, on the other hand, is compact and cosy, content with a tiny corner of the broad valley that gives birth to the river Gade. It is a neighbourly place, with old rustic cottages (and a few new ones) huddling around the 13th century church, a tiny school, a farm, and the "Cock and Bottle" public house. Great Gaddesden cannot have grown very much since the Domesday Book recorded the presence in the village of a priest, 15 villeins, and six ploughs.

The Brownlow Touch

But more of Great Gaddesden next month. Let us climb the hill back to Little Gaddesden, three times the size of its "Great" namesake and still haunted by memories of its Ashridge overlords. Way back in the 17th century the Dukes of Bridgewater began to recruit their household staffs from the village; and by the time the Brownlows started their glittering régime, Ashridge was, so to speak, the "industry" of Little Gaddesden. The Brownlows literally left their mark on the village, for stone plaques bearing the initial B and a coronet proclaim the houses and cottages that were strung along the village street for estate employees. And what pleasant-looking residences they are, with lovely gardens fringing the long village green. Crowding is unknown, and there are trees, trees everywhere. Even the parish church is tucked away near the end of a half-mile lane that leads to a farm, and nowhere else.

This church served a tiny farming community when the Bonhommes had their monastery at Ashridge. But even then the village had distinguished residents. A picturesque house near the war memorial is said to have been the home of John of Gaddesden, the skilled but highly eccentric physician to Edward III, immortalised as the "Doctour of Phisick" in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales". Not far from John's house stands the manor house, austere yet charming, built soon after "Good Queen Bess" spent part of her girlhood at Ashridge.

Until the end of the 18th century the cottagers depended upon agriculture rather than upon Ashridge for their livelihood. And one of the village farmers achieved national fame. He was William Ellis, a hard-headed business man with a flair for experiment and a forthright pen that made his books on farming topics best-sellers of the 18th century. He had much to say about fellow villagers, not all of it complimentary; gleaners came in for some particularly brutal criticism! We learn a little more about the cottagers from Peter Kalm, an 18th century Swedish naturalist. Staying at the village inn, in 1780, he recorded that day labourers were frequently employed, and that the farmers' own families toiled in the fields. (Nothing very exceptional in that!) But Kalm added that the parish could not boast more than 20 cows, individual farmers seldom possessing more than four. The Swedish visitor could not refrain from expressing disgust at the villagers' habit of "having their pints" in the inn on Sundays.

The Church in the Fields

If Little Gaddesden is a "Brownlow" village, then the grey church dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul may be described as a "Bridgewater" church. Memorials to this famous family crowd the walls, most of them incorporating quaintly-phrased tributes running to hundreds of words. We learn, for instance, that Elizabeth, Countess Bridgewater, was "a lady of exquisite fineness both of mind and body, agreeably tall, of a delicate shape, of a beautiful mien, and of a most obliging winning carriage."

One of the Bridgewater memorials was brought to Little Gaddesden from St. Martin-in-the-Fields when the original London church was demolished 200 years ago. St. Martin's long ago lost its fields, but Little Gaddesden parish church still stands in open country—one of the loneliest, as well as one of the loveliest, churches in the county.

On the way to the church one passes the quaint Bede houses founded for needy widows of the parish by Lady Marion Alford. This much-loved (and much-feared) Victorian dowager had more to do with the development of Little Gaddesden than any other member of the Brownlow family. She wielded enormous influence, particularly during the minority years of her son, Lord Brownlow. Her initiative and persistence resulted in the purchase by Lord Brownlow's trustees of the whole of the Duchy of Cornwall's property in the Berkhamsted district, with the exception of the Castle, for £144,000. It was in memory of Lady Marion that the grey fountain, beside the village street, was erected half a century ago.

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