

A Chiltern Village  
A note by F. G. Parsons for Monks Risborough Church Magazine [c.1937]  
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Whiteleaf, it is true, is only a tiny Chiltern village, though a very pretty one, and its history will hardly interest many people; still, to those few, some memories of what it was like long ago may be welcome.

Some of our greatest historians regret the scarcity of details that are left to them about people and places, details too insignificant and too well known to be set down at the time, and now so hard to recover. They know full well how these seemingly trivial facts, if only they could be restored, would lighten and brighten many a dull tale that they have to write.

It was some such feeling that made me wonder whether I could rescue a few facts about my own little village from the fading memory of some of the old country—folk who are still left, and this decided me to call upon an old friend of mine, an old lady of 84, who was born in the next cottage to the one in which she now lives. She is Mrs. Lacey and is one of the Grimsdale family which first appears in our Church Register of Monks Risborough in 1660, the year when Charles II came to the throne. The Grimsdales were then living at Coppice House, away up in the woods, but later came down to Whiteleaf.

Mrs Lacey must have been born about 1855 when the village was still a rural hamlet and one of her earliest memories is the burning of Chilton's cottage, then standing near the village well, behind the two semi-detached cottages that Miss Taylor built in order to replace two others that were past all hope of repair. The well and the village pond were the only sources of water supply the village had in those days. The pond was in front of the great barn, which is now the Library, and encroached a good deal upon the road, narrowing it so much that only one cart at a time could pass. Fire, in those thatched, wattle and daub cottages, was an ever-present danger, which was increased by the scant water supply and Mrs Lacey remembered another fire that burnt the only cottage then standing in Peter's Lane.

Whiteleaf House at that time was owned by Mr Thomas Parsons, a namesake although no relation, of mine. He improved the property a great deal though I think the house, for many years before, must have been the most important residence in the hamlet, for it stands on the highest point of the Upper Icknield Way (500 feet above sea level and there are several records of gentlefolk who lived in Whiteleaf in earlier times whose home it probably was.

There are no records of this particular family of Parsons in the parish register because they belonged to the Baptist community, but Tom Parsons and Tom, his son, were at one time well to do brewers in Princes Risborough and the archway leading into their brewery still stands in the Market Square, by the side of Mr. Bloss's furniture shop. Many of their little acts of kindness are still remembered in our village. Old Mary Aldridge, for instance, used to come in from Monks Risborough to collect all the used tealeaves, which were carefully kept for her in order that she might brew them again. Mr. Parsons, too, had a seat put on the roadside leading to Green Hailey for two old

cronies to sit upon and enjoy their pipes in the sun. These two were Jesse Lacey, Mrs Lacey's husband, and old Bryers. Mrs Taylor has only lately replaced the seat by a larger one, protected from the rain, in memory of King George V.

The Red Lion Inn has been rebuilt within the memory of almost all of us. Lovers of old village alehouses regret the change but brewery companies have to pay dividends to nay dividends. When Mrs Lacey was young, and used to make some of the beautiful lace for which Bucks was famed, tied houses were unknown and the Inn was kept by Lacey, the butcher, whose son is now at Monks Risborough. For generations, it seems, there had been a butcher's shop attached to the Inn, and the large shed, which now stands to the South of it, is on the site, or perhaps was part of slaughterhouse.

When the tap room of the old Red Lion had a sanded floor I used sometimes to join the symposium of local talent collected there of an evening, and enjoyed with humble admiration the amount of meaning that a few words could be made to express when the talkers were content with subjects that they and their audience really understood. It was Butch, I think, who said meditatively one evening: "There be old dog fox in that hedge." And most of the company nodded their agreement and understanding of all that this implied, but Josh, who kept some fowls near the hedge in question, took his pipe from his mouth and murmured softly to the ceiling: "There *wur* old dog fox in that hedge." Only eight words to sum up the long tale of the iniquities of old dog fox and how his sins had at last found him out, in spite of the moral support and backing of the secretary of the Hunt.

As we approach the end of the village - I do not intend to go any further at present - where the Hollow Way leaves the Icknield Way, there stood a great barn, opposite the house now called 'High Road'. It was of special interest to the village children because a family of white [Barn] owls nested there.

Perhaps I wronged Whiteleaf by describing it as a retiring, though still typical and quite charming village. It is all that, but I had forgotten, as all its old inhabitants seem to forget and ignore, that it is known to Archaeologists throughout the Country as the site of some of the Prehistoric Hill Signs of England and that pints of ink have been shed in acrimonious discussions over the meaning of its Cross.

It is a curious thing, but I have never been able to induce any native son or daughter of Whiteleaf soil to talk about the Cross and I have never heard them mention it to one another. They are not the least proud of it. They did not even name their village inn after it; and, although I have spent a good deal of time at the Cross, I have never seen any of them come near it. What they know, or think they know, about it they will not tell me, for I have lived here for only ten years and they are not yet sure that I should listen to them with understanding.

But what the village was like when they were young gives them as much pleasure to tell as it gives me to listen to their telling.

F. G. Parsons.