



The Origin of the Berkshire Villages.

By *Llewellyn Treacher, F.G.S.*

THE problem of the origin of our villages is one which must have presented itself to every student of local history, but unfortunately most local historians appear to be content with the old saying that all trace of a beginning is lost in the mists of antiquity, and so give up attempting to penetrate the darkness. Such a position is most unsatisfactory as we cannot properly understand the meaning of any object unless we know, or at least conceive, something of its first appearance.

A good deal has been written, in a general way, about the origin of the village community, the manor, the parish church, and even of the parish itself, but so far as I can find out no one has yet dealt with the question of why any particular village was planted, grew up and persisted from time immemorial at one spot, and that from the point of view of to-day not always the most desirable one which could have been chosen. It is as an attempt to solve this problem, or at least to point out the direction in which a solution is likely to be found, that the following paper has been written.

While recently working on the early history of the parish of Sonning I found that the first written records of the place showed it as a well-established, flourishing community, and gave no clue at all as to what its preceding history, not to speak of its origin, was, nor how it came into being. Other parishes, with the history of which I was fairly familiar, exhibited the same difficulty. Evidently the use of writing to record facts and events of local history did not come into use until a comparatively late period in the careers of our villages, and so unfortunately we are not able to avail ourselves of the help of ancient documents in our inquiry.

For the main body of our information we must rely on a knowledge of the natural surroundings of the village, including the structure and disposition of the rocks as forming hills, valleys or plains, the fertility or otherwise of the soil with its resulting types of vegetation and animal life, the climate, water supply and the like. All this is far more important when we are studying early history

than it would be later on, because the first men were more directly dependent on nature and her wild products than their more civilized successors, who had learned to control natural forces and make them serve their more advanced interests.

More especially I would follow the principle of using "causes now in action" to illustrate what happened in the past, a principle which has proved so fruitful in geology and other sciences. Fortunately for the purpose of our inquiry most of the Berkshire villages provide excellent material, as the great industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries although it doubtless indirectly arrested their growth yet left them practically unaltered in plan and general appearance. In fact they are what the geologist (not the man in the street) would call well preserved fossils.

I have mentioned the village as a type, but the hamlets and even the ancient isolated farmsteads all belong in origin to the same family of settlements. The towns also should be included, but later changes have so overlaid and obscured their original sites that it is often difficult to discover their exact position.

Now the first thing I would notice with regard to our Berkshire villages is that practically every one of them is situated on, or close to, a spring of water, a natural pond or a small stream. Indeed it would appear that what attracted the founders to the sites was a supply of water in a safe and dependable form close at hand. It was not great rivers like the Thames which were sought after, for the so-called riverside villages are such only in name or by accident of position. Sonning for instance seems to have been a sort of double village, originating at two springs of water, one of which rises close to Sonning Farm and the other in a field at the bottom of Sonning Lane. It is interesting to note that when Sonning was an episcopal residence one of these springs supplied the Deanery and the other the Bishop's Palace. The latter is shown in that part of the old map reproduced in a recent number of our Journal where it is marked Conduit Field. The two mills mentioned in Domesday as belonging to Sonning were those of Sandford and Sindlesham, both on the Loddon. Sonning Mill on the Thames was in Oxfordshire, probably connected with the manor of Dunsden. Small streams join the Thames at practically every village along its banks, and it was because of these streams that their sites were chosen for settlement. For itself the main river would be rather avoided on account of the danger from floods. The origin of the towns was on the same principle. Reading began with small settle-

ments along the Holy Brook and not on the Kennet, still less the Thames. In fact the latter river seems to have formed an absolute boundary to the town on the north side, and when it was crossed it was Caversham bridge, not Reading bridge, which carried the road over. Maidenhead was first planted on the western bank of the stream, sometimes called the White Brook, which crosses the Bath Road near the Bear Hotel some distance from the Thames. Wallingford was at first connected with the Hagbourne Brook, Abingdon with the Ock or some of its small tributaries, and so on.

Inland the connection between the villages and the springs is still more conspicuous, and here we note further that on the size, and especially the reliability, of the springs and streams very largely depended the prosperity and power of development of the corresponding villages. These springs may be grouped in three or four classes each controlled by the geological structure of the neighbourhood.

West of Reading and north of the Kennet the strata have a gentle south-easterly dip and are composed alternately of impermeable rocks like clay and marl, and permeable ones as chalk and sandstone, a state of things extremely favourable to a well distributed natural water supply. The southern part of this district consists of a great sheet or block of chalk several hundred feet in thickness, extending from the crest of the Wantage Downs southward till it disappears beneath the clays and gravels of the Kennet valley. It is sharply truncated along its northern edge, or escarpment, at the foot of which are exposed the outcrops of the underlying marls and clays on which it rests. The southerly dip-slope face of the block is deeply dissected by a series of narrow, steep-sided valleys, the principal of which are the Lambourne, the Winterbourne, and the Pang with its various branches. The chalk absorbs most of the rain which falls upon it and acts as a kind of reservoir with a water-tight bottom of marl and clay. When, after a wet season, the water rises in the reservoir, it begins to seep out into the more deeply cut of the valleys, appearing first in their lower courses and gradually working up towards their heads, its upper limit depending on the amount of the previous rainfall. In the Ilsley branch of the Pang valley, the floor of which is usually dry, miniature floods sometimes occur and the gravel washed by the stream may be seen in several pits by the roadside. The place of outbreak of the water moves up and down the valley according to the season, and varies from year to year with variation in the rain-

fall. The springs are what are called intermittent, and unless wells are dug down to the dry-season water-level the water supply is not very reliable. Now although along the bottoms of all these valleys may be found many villages and hamlets they all, with the exception of Lambourn and Ilsley which owe what superior importance they possess to their convenient position for market towns, are quiet and unprogressive places. Even Lambourn and Ilsley, except on market days, are as sleepy as the rest of them.

Turning now to the northern, escarpment, face of the chalk we find a different state of things. Here we have the base of the formation exposed and along its junction-line with the underlying impermeable strata the water bursts out in springs of good volume. Now, while the deep-slope streams only carry away the overflow, the escarpment springs are like taps let into the very bottom of the reservoir and can be depended on as long as it contains any water, which is practically always, because dry weather never lasts long enough to allow the supply to become exhausted. Curiously enough we find the villages situated on these permanent springs were, in early times, the most important settlements in the county. There is quite a line of them reaching from Ashbury on the west to Cholsey on the east, some of the more easterly ones, however, being situated on springs issuing from the Upper Greensand, a formation subordinate to the chalk and which rests directly on the Gault clay.

The northern slope of the Vale of White Horse consists of sands and limestones belonging to the Corallian formation resting on Oxford clay, and repeating on a smaller scale the phenomena of the chalk we have been considering. The line of low hills between Faringdon and Oxford are exact counterparts of the chalk ridgeway, with dip-slope streams running down to the Ock on the south, and escarpment springs on the northern face connected with the valley of the Upper Thames. Here again the more important villages are on the escarpment side of the ridge. The largest place is Faringdon, a settlement of special interest from our present point of view, being situated close to the source of two distinct streams, one of which runs southward and the other northward, the little brooks running in parallel channels for some distance, their combined valleys forming quite a gap in the ridge, the lowest depression in which is near the centre of the town.

In the eastern part of the County, and also south of the Kennet, the strata are of a somewhat different character, consisting mainly of clays arranged horizontally, and capped on the hill-tops by thin

beds of gravel. Springs of water are thrown out along the valley sides at the junction of the gravel and the clay, but in most instances they are of small volume and only sufficient to support mere hamlets or single farmsteads. A good example is to be found at Ruscombe, which although a regular parish with an ancient church, is not, and never was, a village in the ordinary sense of the term. There are three farms, each with its little spring-fed pond and one or two groups of cottages in similar circumstances, but none of the springs are sufficient to supply a larger settlement. You have only to compare Ruscombe with such a place as Blewbury to see what an influence the natural water supply had on the early development of a village. The East Berks springs are not only individually of small volume but are also liable to fail altogether in seasons of prolonged drought. Consequently none of their villages were of much importance till the introduction of well-digging or other artificial means of obtaining water.

Another fact I would notice is that the spring, stream, pond or whatever the source of the water supply may have been, always appears to have a direct relation to a farmyard, so that we may fairly conclude that the germ of the village was a farm, and everything else about it the result either of the natural development of the farm itself or of institutions introduced from the outside, the water supply however, being for a long time the dominating factor.

It is therefore suggested that the foundation of our villages was contemporary with the introduction of agriculture into this country. By agriculture I mean not mere cultivation of the soil such as may have been casually carried on on the open downs or on terraces along the hill-sides, but an industry which required a permanent habitation to which surplus crops might be brought for storage, and where cattle and horses might be housed and fed. No doubt the natural fertility of the soil and the ease with which it could be cultivated had a good deal to do with the early development of the farms, but it could scarcely have had much effect on their origin. How could these early farmers tell which soil was fertile and which was not except by laborious experiment? There must have been hundreds of farms started most of which perished in infancy or dragged along a miserable existence, those which grew into villages being only a small proportion of the whole. In fact our villages are excellent examples of the survival of the fittest.

An objection may here be raised to the effect that in pre-historic times England, with the exception of some tracts of open downs,

was a land of dense forests and, especially in the valleys, almost impassable to man and beast, so thick and tangled was the vegetation. If this really was the case it certainly would have been difficult for these valley farms to have been established, at least before considerable clearing had taken place. But was this so? In primitive times not only was the vegetation wild but also the animals, and among them deer and oxen were not uncommon. These are browsing rather than grazing creatures, and where they existed in any numbers it is not likely that there would have remained much undergrowth in the woodlands. Most of the country would have been of an open, park-like character. Anyone who has kept cows and observed their habits knows very well that their favourite food is not grass but branches of trees, and in their feeding grounds old trees are fed off as high as the cattle can reach while young ones must be carefully fenced round if they are to grow at all. It is said that the prairies of North America owe their absence of forest trees to the vast herds of bison which formerly roamed over the plains and effectually prevented the growth of any plant larger than grass. Of course England is but a small place compared with that and conditions may have been different, still I think that the impassable forest has been much exaggerated and that there was no such woodland as would have prevented the building of farms in the valleys. Then it is generally understood that the keeping of domestic cattle preceded by some time the cultivation of the soil. The cattle must have had something to eat, and what was it, especially in winter, but mainly boughs of trees, including ivy? Even in much later times the loppings of felled timber were of considerable value for this purpose, and in Domesday we find the woods included as taxable property rather than obstructions to be removed.

Let us now take another line of inquiry and see where it will lead us, beginning with the earliest inhabitants of Berkshire of which any remains have come down to us. First we come to the men of the palæolithic or older stone age, but they need not detain us long. The evidence for their existence although abundant in the eastern part of the County is almost entirely of a geological character and concerns archæology but very little, and our present subject not at all. In fact palæolithic man lived in quite another world to the one we know.

With the neolithic or newer stone age men it is, however, different. Their remains, chiefly arrow-heads, celts and scrapers of flint, appear to be spread promiscuously over the surface of Berk-

shire and although, no doubt, if careful records were kept of all the finds, these might show some kind of order in their distribution, at present all we can say is that their abundance or otherwise at any given spot depends largely, if not entirely, on the zeal and energy of the local collector. The wide and regular distribution of such small objects argues a lengthy occupation of the land by the people who used them, and it also suggests, if it does not actually prove, that they were in a very primitive stage of culture. We must look for their modern representatives among the more backward races of the earth such as the Australian aborigines, who are described as wandering about in small groups of one or two families, camping at favourite spots where and when food is abundant. Their habitations are merely rough coverings of boughs or shrubs for protection against the wind. People in a similar condition dwell, or dwelt, in parts of the North American continent, and of them we are told that they never stopped longer than five or six weeks in a place. They lived on wild fruits and seeds and by hunting, had no fixed abode but travelled in companies and never stayed longer than the chase detained them.

Remains of the temporary dwelling-places of neolithic people are quite common in Berkshire. In the soil and subsoil of many gravel pits and quarries there may be seen traces of bowl-shaped depressions, lined with black ashes and so filled up with the soil that they make no feature on the surface, and can only be detected when exposed in section. Occasionally flint scrapers and celts occur among the ashes, one of the latter which was found near Maidenhead showing evident traces of the action of fire.

These remains show us that we are still back beyond the period in which our permanent villages were founded, but as time went on things changed. Increase of population meant decrease of game and either starvation or the invention of some other means of obtaining food. Then there was the immigration of more tribes from the continent, the principal of which are known to history under the general name of Celts, several waves of whom swept one after the other over the country in the centuries preceding the Roman invasion. It was probably the earliest among the newcomers who made the greatest alterations, the most important of which was the introduction of agriculture. To begin with, a few yards of the best available ground would be scratched over with rude tools of wood or stone, but judging from the habits of modern tribes in the same stage of culture the plots of land must have soon

become exhausted and the cultivators obliged to move on from place to place in search of fresh soil. Their dwellings would have then been only a little more permanent than those of their more primitive forerunners. It is probably to this period that we must assign such remains as pit-dwellings, hut circles and the like, which are occasionally met with in the more open parts of the country. They were useful while the conditions lasted, but neither they nor the conditions in which they flourished had any survival value compared to that of our regular villages with their water supply and so on.

Doubtless there were at the same time tribes in the pastoral, or cattle-keeping stage moving about the grass-lands with their flocks and herds. Probably they formed by themselves one of the small invading waves and gradually spread over the country, and I would suggest that it was a mixture of these with the rude cultivators which gave rise to a race of farmers proper, who eventually became the founders of our villages with their permanent habitations.

Other invaders came later, men of a more warlike nature, and imposed their rule on the peaceful agriculturalists, developing into military leaders, lords of the manors, nobility and petty kings. The remains they have left are conspicuous though with scarce a seed of life in them. Such are the pre-historic trackways, quite different in plan and purpose from the local village roads, the earthworks, the fortified camps, the barrows and rude stone monuments of various kinds. The makers of all these were not the founders of our villages, which existed before them, and would have existed independently of them had they never appeared upon the scene. They lived upon the labour and intelligence of the villagers, repaying it by the often very valuable aid they rendered by keeping order at home and defending the peaceable inhabitants from enemies abroad, and it was their inheritance into which the Romans entered when they conquered the country.

(To be continued.)

