

A MIDDLESEX DIARY

BY MICHAEL ROBBINS

THE diaries of country parsons supply the local historian with some of the most attractive details for his accounts of the minor affairs of life in past centuries. William Cole at Bletchley; John Skinner at Camerton; James Woodforde at Ansford and Weston Longueville; Benjamin Newton at Wath; William Jones at Broxbourne; Francis Kilvert at Clyro—these and a good many others have left diaries which have been published. But Middlesex has been unlucky; many of its parsons have been worthy, some even learned, men, but so far no diarist has been found among them. There are scattered references to the county in Evelyn and Pepys and in Wesley's *Journals*; there are pleasant notes on life at Brentford in the 1770's by John Yeoman, a Somerset man¹; but a full-length diary by a resident is lacking.

There do exist, however, some interesting passages on life in rural Middlesex in the middle of the 19th century, in the diary of the Rev. B. J. Armstrong. Portions of this diary relating to his incumbency of East Dereham, Norfolk (1850-1888), have already been published,² edited by his grandson, the Rev. H. B. J. Armstrong (formerly vicar of St. Margaret with St. Nicholas, King's Lynn), and the following extracts have been made, with his permission, from the first manuscript volume of the diary. This volume is perhaps more properly described as "memoirs"; it was begun in 1843, and entries were made only at long intervals, covering events going back to 1829, written up from notes.

Benjamin John Armstrong, who was born on 11th November, 1817, was the son of B. J. Armstrong, an oil merchant of Hatton Garden. The family lived successively in Old Kent Road, at 14, Kensington Gore, and in Hatton Wall, until in 1830 the elder Armstrong decided to take a small house in the country at Southall.

"It was thought advisable," wrote the son, "to take some small place in the country for the benefit of our health. . . . He took a very pretty and rather commodious cottage-residence at Southall Green, Middlesex, about a mile out of the high road to Uxbridge, and exactly 10 miles from Tyburn Gate. Our intention was to reside half the year at Southall, and the remainder in London, and I remember we moved there on the

26th June, 1830—the date is impressed on my mind as it was the day of the funeral of King George IV and we heard the cannon at Windsor Castle as distinctly as if we had been but four or five miles off.

“From my earliest years I was a great lover of the country, devotedly fond of flowers, and really esteemed a walk in a garden a treat. My delight at everything I saw was beyond bounds—gardens were allotted my sister and self—there was the canal to fish in—a pony to ride—besides animals of different kinds, and poultry, and a cow, and in fact everything which could make us happy; and happy indeed we were. Having been long pent up in town, Annie and myself viewed Southall as a second Paradise, and I remember I nearly hung myself on my pin—before the very first morning after our arrival, in attempting to scale the yard gates to see the country beyond them.” (In the passages quoted, minor amendments of punctuation have been made, for easier reading.)

Armstrong was first at school at Stormont House, Kensington Gravel Pits (Notting Hill Gate),³ then at Thavie's Inn (57, Holborn), and then from October, 1831, at Ealing “Great” School. His sister went to Mrs. Seward's boarding school at the Rectory, Hillingdon,⁴ and later to Syon Lodge School, Isleworth.⁵ His description of Dr. Nicholas's school at Ealing adds something to the accounts already in print⁶:

“Ealing School, at the time I speak of, boasted many young men who were drafted thence to the universities; they occupied (by paying rent for them) private apartments and were allotted extra indulgences in consequence of their superior age and abilities. This school being almost considered a public one, the fagging system was regularly carried on, and as in such cases ‘might is right,’ these ‘first form fellows’ used to make their juniors little better than the Gibeonites, to wit ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water.’ One of these fags being indisposed or out of the way, his master threw me his dirty boots and a blacking brush, and told me to clean them or he would thrash me. I was so incensed at this that I returned the compliment by flinging them at his head. He did *not* thrash me then but meditated another revenge, which was to induce a squinting, carrot-headed, thick-set boy of the name of Harding to pick a quarrel with me, which he did in the most summary way, viz., by boxing my ears without the slightest cause. Upon this a ring was formed, and contrary to all expectation I gave

this boy a complete thrashing, which established my superiority and prevented my being harassed in future by the boys; so that, being in good favour with the masters, and always having plenty of money and provision, I became a favourite with all, and my time passed pleasantly enough during the three years I was at Ealing School. . . .

“The proprietors were F. Nicholas, M.A., of Wadham College, Oxford (afterwards M.A. of Cambridge, and lately D.C.L. of the former university) and also the Rev. G. Nicholas, M.A., Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge.⁷ The brothers, who were both clever fellows, only examined in classics, but liked their horses and guns evidently better than keeping school. They were assisted by six regular masters,⁸ two of whom resided on the premises (which were very extensive and included two splendid halls for dining and diversion, a fives court, and playground). The school was divided into nine classes, of which the two headmasters instructed the first three, and the day was occupied in the following way. We rose at six. School commenced at seven and continued to nine, when we breakfasted. School again from 10 to 12. Then an hour given for walking (within certain bounds) in the town. School again from one to three. Then dinner, and finally school from five to seven. On Tuesdays this was mitigated a quarter, and on Thursdays and Saturdays a half. The education was first-rate (particularly in the classics), and as the time was judiciously divided, and there was no alternative but to learn, the boys progressed rapidly, and the school turned out some bright fellows. For my own part, I shall always say I learnt more here than anywhere else, and it was a sad mistake of my father when he removed me. As for mathematics, no one scarcely thought of them, and I venture to say there was not a boy in the school who could explain the difference between an equilateral and an obtuse-angled triangle. . . .

“One of Terence’s plays was annually performed in an elegant and complete little theatre fitted up in the large dining hall. The programme of entertainments consisted of selected English speeches in the morning with a cold collation, and quadrilles to a full band, and the theatre and a supper in the evening. The performers (who were dressed and painted by an artiste) consisted of the boys of the first two forms, and it was said by some that the play went off better than the celebrated one at Westminster School. . . . The three toasts after

the collation were 'Mr. Nicholas and the Ealing School,' 'Lord Montford (who always came) and Eton School,'⁹ and 'Dr. Tattersall and Westminster School'¹⁰—to which the last to this day proverbially replies in the very same words learnt by heart, in which the sentences—'human mind,' 'vast conception,' 'public institution,' and 'march of intellect' occur at intervals. The play this time (June, 1832) was the *Adelphi*."

In 1834 Armstrong took the part of Cratinus in Terence's *Andria* (which, writing some years afterwards, he called the "Adrian"). Some years later, on 19th June, 1837, he went to some school theatricals at Dr. Jamieson's, Wyke House, Osterley¹¹; a piece called *Rolla* was performed,¹² but the second could not be, as the hero was drunk. It was a failure, he mildly observed, compared with theatricals at Ealing School.

When he left school in 1834, the question of a profession arose. He was offered an ensigncy in a West Indian (or "yellow fever") regiment, but as he was the only son his father apparently ordered him not to take it. He thereupon went to the "senior department" of King's College, London, founded in 1828, only six years before. He wrote: "The course for the work at King's College was *not half* what was required at Ealing School for the same time"; and he left after three terms. In 1836 he went up to Caius College, Cambridge; by some chance his baptism, performed at home, had not been recorded, and he had to be baptised again at St. Ethelburga's, Bishopsgate, in order to get the certificate required at Cambridge.

Meanwhile his diary casts some interesting sidelights on life at Southall. About 1834 he wrote: "At Southall everything prospered. There was an excellent clergyman, no dissent, and the pretty little parish church was always full. Things have strangely altered, however, with respect to that church now." In 1836: "A remarkable change for the worse took place about this time in the hitherto retired neighbourhood of Southall Green. The railway spread dissatisfaction and immorality among the poor, the place being inundated with worthless and overpaid navigators¹³; the very appearance of the country was altered, some families left, and the rusticity of the village gave place to a London-out-of-town character. Moss-grown cottages retired before new ones with bright red tiles, picturesque hedgerows were succeeded by prim iron railings, and the village inn, once a pretty cottage with a swinging sign, is transmogrified to the 'Railway Tavern' with an intimation

gaudily set forth that 'London porter' and other luxuries hitherto unknown to the aborigines were to be procured within." The Armstrongs' house was demolished and rebuilt in that year.

In 1837 religious dissensions are recorded. "About this time the first stone of a new chapel was laid at Southall Green, built by one Dobbs, an extensive vitriol-maker and stationer in the vicinity. Mr. D. was a dissenter, but by no means violent, as may be seen by the circumstance of the chapel being always annexed to the Establishment; it is pretty certain, therefore, that he built it to put in a low churchman to oppose Mr. Moore, whom he accused of not preaching the Gospel, and with whom he carried on a paper-war for some time, and appealed to the Archbishop to compel Mr. M. (though only curate) to have a second sermon on Sundays.¹⁴ There was church room in the parish church and to spare, and dissent was almost unknown among us. The first stone, however, was to be laid, and certainly the proceedings reflected but little credit upon the admixture of churchmen and dissenters present, as their speeches contained many sly hits at the respected parish priest. The seven Misses Dobbs sat on the platform all of a row to listen to the tirades, mostly upon that comfortable doctrine of 'faith without good works,' and an Irish divine (son-in-law of the founder) made a violent speech, during which he had frequently to wipe the perspiration from his brow, in which he *spoke out*, and significantly remarked that 'no cold-blooded morality, he vouched, would be preached *there*'—'no Plato, no Epictatus,' and so forth. The heat was intense, many of the women, unused to such powerful appeals, fainted away, and the majority (like myself) were disgusted. . . . But Mr. D. was foiled after all, for the two clergymen who served the church in succession, though low churchmen, had too much principle to allow Mr. D. to dictate to them on points of doctrine."

Most of Armstrong's diary at this period, however, is filled with accounts of the sport he got in the neighbourhood.¹⁵ The first entry occurs under 1833, when he was 15: "Having heard that Mr. De Burgh's stag hounds met at Sipson, I repaired thither on my pony and found a brilliant field assembled of above 200 scarlet coats, among whom were the Dukes of Cumberland and Wellington and Sir F. Burdett. I was delighted and amazed at this brilliant display, and my pony

bolted at the onset, nor stopped till he and his rider were completely knocked up." In 1835 he notes: "During the college vacation I frequently rose at seven, walked to Notting Hill, met the chaise and drove to Southall, changed my dress and my horse, rode 10 miles to cover, rode up to the hounds, and returned to London by coach at night." Later in the year he visited Pinner¹⁶ and Egham races, and he noted that the shooting at Northchurch (between Berkhamsted and Tring, in Hertfordshire) was poor, owing to the poaching carried on by the navigators building the railway close by.¹⁷ In 1836 he writes of attending a steeple-chase at Hayes and coursing at Hampton; in the Easter vacation of 1837 he had seven days' hunting with Mr. De Burgh's and the Royal Buck Hounds, at Drayton, Ascot Heath, Hillingdon, Ewell, Salt Hill, Gerrards Cross, and Stoke Common. He also mentions visiting the Hippodrome at Notting Hill¹⁸ in that year, and later on he went pheasant shooting in Osterley Park.

He has a note on the Middlesex election of 1837: "This election was more favourable for the Conservatives, as they got a Tory in, and expelled Joey Hume, the old member. . . . Byng and Wood stood first in the poll,¹⁹ and the festivities given by the latter gentleman at Littleton (which I shared) were grand in the extreme: his chairing was attended by hundreds on horseback and in carriages; soldiers and sailors in uniform formed a part of it, and a splendid exhibition of fireworks took place in his grounds in the evening. The poor were entertained as well as the rich."

He went to six meets in April, 1838, noting particularly those at Hayes, Hillingdon, Bushey Heath, and Salt Hill. "The running over the grass to Harrow each time was magnificent," he wrote, "only that the fences were difficult and the hounds went a racing pace. Nothing could be more brilliant than the meets of the Royal Pack at this time; they were attended by most of the sporting nobility then in London, and the show of horses and of elegantly dressed ladies on horseback and in carriages at the place of appointment was well worth riding a few miles to see, independently of the first-rate sport which invariably followed." In August he went "as usual" to Pinner races, and in September he was shooting at Southall—"considering the vicinity to London we had very fair sport." In the Christmas vacation of 1838-1839 he went out with the Royal and the Old Berkeley, meeting

at Hayes, Iver, Uxbridge, Littleton, Sipson, Amersham, and Chobham, and he also managed to shoot a few birds at Southall. One of the runs gave rise to an incident described in *The Times*,²⁰ which he transcribed into his diary: "'The Queen's Stag Hounds.—Narrow Escape near the Great Western Railway.' After alluding to the meet and the former part of the chase it went on to say: 'On reaching Southall Park, the noble animal (the deer) turned towards Hounslow, followed by those whose courage and spirited steeds enabled them to overcome those difficulties which opposed their progress. They had not proceeded far, however, before they found themselves close to the line of the railway, when most of them turned to the right and went over the bridge; but those of higher blood, among whom were Mr. W. Duncombe, Mr. Armstrong, Junr., Major Lloyd, etc., leaped the fences, and most of them passed over.' It then proceeded to tell how the train was 'upset by going over the major's horse, which was killed on the spot,' and how the gentlemen above were among the few in at the death, concluding with a hearty wish from the editor that we might be prosecuted for the feat."

In 1839 there was "fair sport" in partridge shooting at Southall, and Armstrong attended a Court of Conservancy on the Lord Mayor's barge at Teddington Lock—Armstrong senior, a Middlesex magistrate, had committed some men at Petty Sessions for illegal fishing in the Thames, over which the Lord Mayor still exercised jurisdiction.²¹ The Lord Mayor was "really gentlemanly," but the Lady Mayoress "short, vulgar, and covered with finery."

On 7th March, 1840, he attended a coursing meeting at Osterley, and on 10th March he had a "splendid run" with Mr. Anderson's stag hounds—"from Hayes we went to Rickmansworth without a check, and lost our deer." On 14th March "I met the Queen's in the same neighbourhood and had an hour and 35 minutes over the grass without a check; the deer was taken at Stanmore." At the same period he had a day from Cranford and one with a bagged fox with the Thorpe Harriers from Mr. Fagg's at Bedfont. In the spring of 1841 he writes: "I went to Southall by the rail in the morning, and rode my horse all the way from there to Brighton by eight in the evening via Kingston and Horsham."²²

In 1840 Armstrong had been ordained and appointed curate of St. Peter, Saffron Hill, at £100 a year.²³ In 1842 he became

vicar of Crowle, in the Isle of Axholme, Lincolnshire (which he reached from Hull by steamboat up the Trent), and married Ann Rebecca Duncombe, of Lagley, Great Berkhamsted, Herts.²⁴ In 1844 he became rector of Whitchurch (Little Stanmore); but at this point there is unfortunately a long gap in the diary until 1850, when on leaving Little Stanmore he made a few observations on his Middlesex parish:

"The bulk of the congregation were decidedly puritan. . . . Notwithstanding the isolation of my church from the people,²⁵ and means used to draw them to Edgware, where a different system prevails, I often count 300 in a congregation which at my first coming among them did not number 150. . . . I have boys', girls', and Sunday schools, at the former of which I lecture for an hour on Tuesdays and Fridays; also a coal and bread charity, clothing club, parochial library, field garden allotments; and I visit every family certainly four times a year." He was a moderate, though zealous, Tractarian, and he notes that at this time the round of fast and festival was observed in six contiguous parishes, and that Mr. Monro at Harrow Weald headed a brotherhood (the college of St. Andrew) in a monastic building.²⁶ He also mentions being told by an old bellringer that on Sunday afternoons some 15 years back (i.e., about 1835) he had locked up the church for want of a congregation.

Armstrong was struck by the unfamiliar and then unfashionable appearance of the church, and in 1849 he published an account of the church and parish, of which three more editions were brought out down to 1908. Much more is known now about the Duke of Chandos and Handel than when Armstrong wrote, and his book, though it is still followed by modern writers, requires to be edited in the light of recent research. This would be a useful task for someone to undertake.

On 14th September, 1850, Armstrong was instituted to the vicarage of East Dereham, Norfolk, which he held until 1888, two years before his death, and there are naturally only passing references to Middlesex in the diary after he left Whitchurch.

NOTES

1. *The Diary of John Yeoman*, ed. M. Yearsley (1934).
2. *A Norfolk Diary*, ed. H. B. J. Armstrong (1949).
3. "Stormount House, at the north-eastern extremity of the parish, is occupied by Miss Tracy as a school": T. Faulkner, *History and Antiquities of Kensington* (1820), p. 587; the site is occupied by No. 1, Clanricarde Gardens, W.2: F. M. Gladstone, *Notting Hill in Bygone Days* (1924), p. 91.

4. Later called Bishopshalt (the bishops of Worcester were the rectors): R. de Salis, *Hillingdon through Eleven Centuries* (1926), pp. 62, 96, 100.
5. "An establishment for young ladies, conducted by the Misses Lane": G. J. Aungier, *The History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery, the Parish of Isleworth*, etc. (1840), p. 232.
6. See E. Jackson, *Annals of Ealing* (1898), p. 168.
7. For the Nicholas family, see Jackson, *Ealing*, pp. 172-173.
8. These had included Louis Philippe, later king of France, during his exile in England, 1800-1814; and George Huxley, father of T. H. Huxley: *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, ed. L. Huxley (1900), p. 1.
9. The diarist meant Eton College. Lord Montfort (1773-1851) was at Eton 1785-1788; he had a seat at Drayton: G. E. C., *Complete Peerage*.
10. William de Chair Tattersall (1752-1829) is said to have been praised by David Garrick for his performance as Phormio in Terence's play at Westminster School. His eldest son James Tattersall (1780-1855) may be referred to here; he was a King's Scholar at Westminster and therefore took part in the play. Another son, John Tattersall, who lived at Ealing, apparently did not go to Westminster: G. F. R. Barker and A. H. Stenning, *The Record of Old Westminsters* (1928), ii. p. 904.
11. "Wyke House . . . was recently occupied as a boarding school under the superintendence of Dr. Jamieson. It is distant from Brentford about one mile towards the north and is remarkable for its good and well-managed kitchen-garden": Aungier, *Syon*, p. 212.
12. This was apparently an English version of *Die Sonnenjungfrau*, a play about the Spaniards in Mexico written in 1791 by August von Kotzebue (1761-1819).
13. "Navigator. . . . 2. A labourer employed in the work of excavating and constructing a canal (cf. navigation) or in later use any similar kind of earthwork": *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. The word (later usually shortened to "navvy") originally meant the aristocrat of the labour force: see R. Lloyd, "The English Navvy," *Quarterly Review*, vol. 289 (October, 1951), p. 500. The Great Western Railway was opened from Paddington (old station) to Maidenhead on 4th June, 1838; Southall station was opened on 1st May, 1839: E. T. MacDermot, *History of the Great Western Railway* (1927-1931), i. pp. 55, 57.
14. Norwood church (which is here referred to) was at the time a "peculiar" of the Archbishop of Canterbury, like Hayes (of which it was properly speaking a chapel of ease) and Harrow, and therefore outside the diocesan jurisdiction of the bishops of London, and remained so until 1871: see D. Lysons, *The Environs of London* (ed. 2, 1811), ii. p. 594; G. Hennessy, *Novum Repertorium Ecclesiasticum Parochiale Londinense* (1898), p. 354.
15. On sport in Middlesex at the time, see *Victoria County History, Middlesex*, ii. (1911), p. 253; G. C. G. F. Berkeley, *Reminiscences of a Huntsman* (1854; new ed., 1897) and *My Life and Recollections* (1865); J. P. Hore, *The History of the Royal Buckhounds* (1895).
16. Later called Headstone Races: W. W. Druett, *Pinner through the Ages* (1937), pp. 116, 188.
17. The London and Birmingham Railway (later part of the London and North-Western) was being built 1835-1837 and was opened from Euston Square to Boxmoor on 20th July, 1837, and to Tring on 16th October, 1837: H. G. Lewin, *Early British Railways* (1925), p. 53.
18. The Hippodrome was a racecourse on the north side of Bayswater Road, opened in 1837 and closed for racing in 1841: E. Walford, *Old and New London* (new ed.), v. p. 182; T. B. Cato, article in *Home Counties Magazine*, vol. 14 (1912); Gladstone, *Notting Hill*, p. 81.
19. George Byng, of Wrotham Park (1764-1847), who represented Middlesex for 57 years, and Thomas Wood, of Littleton Park.
20. *The Times*, 14th January, 1839. The train (locomotive *North Star* and three coaches) was completely derailed. *The Times's* comment was scathing: "We trust that the gentlemen of 'higher blood' will be prosecuted for this feat. They are at liberty to break their own necks if they please; but they are not justified in breaking other folks' necks by riding over a railroad. . . . Although they may have no brains of their own to be knocked out, other people have."

21. On the City of London's jurisdiction over the tidal Thames, which was extinguished in 1856, see F. Thacker, *The Thames Highway: a History of the Inland Navigation* (1914), chap. viii, p. 199. The barge was the *Maria Wood*: see Thacker, and J. Tavenor-Perry, "Strand on the Green," *Home Counties Magazine*, vol. 13 (1911), p. 109.
22. The Brighton Railway was opened as far as Hayward's Heath on 12th July, 1841, and to Brighton on 21st September, 1841: C. F. D. Marshall, *A History of the Southern Railway* (1936), p. 268.
23. Armstrong's preferments are wrongly stated in Hennessy, *Novum Repertorium*, p. clx.
24. Armstrong, *Norfolk Diary*, p. 5.
25. Most of the population of Little Stanmore parish lived on the west side of the main street of Edgware, and consequently were much closer to that church.
26. On Edward Monro (1815-1866), see *Dictionary of National Biography*, and W. W. Druett, *The Stanmores and Harrow Weald through the Ages* (1938), p. 218.