SHAKESPEARE'S WINDSOR

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WINDSOR TODAY is still regulated by the Windsor of Queen Elizabeth I and Shakespeare. Few landmarks recognisable by them survive. The castle stands, changed and yet changeless; the *Three Tuns*, once the guildhall, still presents its ancient walls to the modern gaze: there is little or nothing else, and yet Shakespeare could be at no loss to identify the topography of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Parish church and corn-market still dominate High Street—a newer church and a newer corn-market, but rising from the roots of the old. The Garter Inn and the adjacent White Hart were burned down on a summer day in 1681, but the latter was rebuilt on the ashes, and since there is a White Hart there today it is not hard to divine the site of its original neighbour. Frogmore is still a familiar name, and Datchet Mead still finds its margin in the Thames, though both are now within the confines of the Home Park Private, and the latter has lost its separate identity.

Of all the localities commemorated by Shakespeare, the one which has most successfully resisted time is Bachelors' Acre at the back of High Street, last surviving remnant of the open field called "The Worth." He probably did not know it by this name, though it was referred to as "Bachelors' Acre where the Butts were usually sett and made" as early as 1651.[1] Tudor Windsor was better acquainted with it as "the Oley pit" or Pits Field. "Marry, sir, the pittie-ward . . ." replied Simple when asked which way he had looked for Dr. Caius, and Shakespeare was clearly thinking of this historic playground where cattle pastured and the young men had once practised archery. It was crossed by the conduit carrying Queen Mary I's water supply from Winkfield to the castle. Conversely, open sewage from High Street crawled through the clover as late as 1809, when King George III celebrated his jubilee and the Acre was hastily cleansed for the festal ox-roasting. The Bachelors of Windsor, a society of responsible townsmen, was founded in 1761 to safeguard the public amenities of the field, and even this century continued to resist encroachment "in this their Acre." Today they are called to remembrance by a weathered obelisk, and the Acre is a car park.

Visual evidence of the anatomy of Elizabethan Windsor is supplied by John Norden, who prepared his "topographicall deliniation" of the castle, town, park and forest in 1607, only four years after the demise of the house of Tudor. He made two copies: one for King James I, which is now in the British Museum, the other for Henry Prince of Wales. The latter came to light in about 1912 and found a home in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. Though not precisely identical, both consist of double-page illuminations on vellum. "Table 1" of the copy in the Royal Library presents "An ample and trewe description of his Ma^{ties} Castle of Windesor, the

[1]Deed in the possession of Windsor Corporation (lease to Richard Hale), October 6 1651, Register of Leases (RTL.I. p.19), Kipling Building.

Chappell, and of all other materiall thinges therof . . .", and it also shows part of the little town below the walls. The White Hart and the Garter, standing side by side opposite Castle Hill, are represented by sign-posts and cross-beams, and Norden was at pains to show the massive porch of the Garter Inn and the courtyard at the back.

Narcissus Luttrell recorded in his diary in July 1681 that "On Monday the 18th happened a terrible fire in Windsor, which burnt down the inn called the Garter and the Whitehart, and several other houses; and was at last happily stopt by the great pains of the prince." This royal personage who did not disdain to play the part of fireman was Prince Rupert, the great commander in the Civil War, first cousin of King Charles II and Governor of Windsor Castle from 1668 until his death in 1682. His official residence in the Round Tower sufficed for his simple tastes, and he spent much of his time there. The White Hart was soon rebuilt, for the borough accounts for 1688–9 show that Mr. Isaac Clark paid an annual rent of £1 "for ye White-Hart Inn" and another £1 for "those 2 [next] houses where the old Garter stood."[1] No one can doubt that the White Hart has occupied the same site since Shakespeare's time, and that the inn which in Norden's survey adjoins it on the side nearest the junction of High Street and Peascod Street must be the Garter.

Although *The Merry Wives* is not predominantly a social document, its comedy is ruled by a revealing realism. The trouncing of the "Witch of Brentford" would not have struck contemporary audiences merely as a device to make them laugh: they really believed in witches. The Queen herself, it was said, had been menaced by the witches of Windsor in 1574 and the Dean had been called upon to examine the suspects. Falstaff boasted that but for his own admirable dexterity of wit "the knave constable had set me i' the stocks, i' the common stocks, for a witch," and the historical context of his remark is provided by Norden, who in Table III shows the stocks and pillory beside the parish church. It was this same church, "a spacious, antient, ill-built fabrick, the pews being so constructed as to exclude a majority of the inhabitants from attending divine service," which was demolished in 1822 to make way for the present parish church. A plan in a manuscipt history of Windsor dated 1811 in the Royal Library shows that its general layout was singularly like that of its successor.

Norden's corn-market too has a familiar look. It was a new one, completed in about 1596, and the wooden pillars of the open corn-exchange supported an upper storey. Market-house and guildhall were not then incorporated under one roof, civic business being still transacted at the Three Tuns, which stands on the other side of a cobbled alley. The present Guildhall, completed by Sir Christopher Wren to a design of Sir Thomas Fitz, stands on the site of an earlier market-house and reproduces it in form, but the columns and arches of the corn-exchange are of Portland stone and the handsome Council Chamber above of red brick.

When Norden made his survey the town had scarcely begun to break away from its two main thoroughfares: Thames Street, which follows the north-west contours of the castle uphill from Windsor Bridge, and High Street, which continues the route southward to the Great Park. There the Long Walk passes the mausoleum of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, a compelling landmark visible among the trees

[1]R. R. Tighe & J. E. Davis, *Annals of Windsor*, 1858, Vol. I, p. 670.

deepest part of the dell filled up, his favourite thorns all buried, and the antique roots of trees covered up.[1]

The Royal Librarian, the Rev. Bernard Woodward, suggested in the Gentleman's Magazine in January 1868 that Herne's Oak must have been nearer the castle, since Page, Shallow and Slender lay in the castle ditch "till we see the lights of our fairies." The fairy pit he identified with a saw-pit in the old timber-yard opposite the South Terrace, reminding his readers of Mistress Page's directions:

"Let them from forth a saw-pit rush . . .
With some diffused song."

The idea was not new. J. O. Halliwell, who edited the original sketch of *The Merry Wives* for the Shakespeare Society in 1842, had found the timber-yard on King James I's copy of Norden's survey and argued the existence of a saw-pit and a putative Herne's Oak not far away. This "third alternative," as Woodward called it, never received popular support. It depended on a too literal interpretation of the action of *The Merry Wives*—Shakespeare was not, after all, presenting a time and motion study—and since there had never been any traditional oak near the castle to which he could point, it lacked substance. This zone of pure chalk is in any case an unlikely habitat of memorable oaks.

The theme in its opposing aspects attracted passionate support from many pens. To read these various authors today is to be inveigled into a slough of disputatious minutiae which has long ceased to hold even academic interest. The Home Park Private bears little resemblance to the rough grassland where until 1785 herds of deer roamed, and since the terrain is so completely changed, disinterment of old controversy would be pointless. It is sufficient to know that in this private royal park both Herne's Oak and the fairy pit are perpetually commemorated.

Herne the Hunter himself has never been precisely identified. Tighe & Davis point out that in the original sketch of the play the name was "Horne," and Halliwell found in the British Museum a manuscript of King Henry VIII's reign which named "Rycharde Horne, yeoman" as one of the "hunters whiche be examyned and have confessed" to hunting in His Majesty's forests.[2] According to a tradition passed down in Windsor Forest, Herne was a keeper who, after being wounded by a stag he finally killed, became insane, tied the antlers on his head and hanged himself on the celebrated oak. Ireland refers to the legend in his *Picturesque Views on the River Thames* in 1801. Shakespeare presumably used the tale of the horned spectre as he heard it from local gossips and did not add to it. It was Harrison Ainsworth, in his *Windsor Castle* (first published in 1843), "a romance combining fiction with distorted fact," who endowed the ghost with that livelier, but spurious, realism on which generations of absorbed children have since been nurtured.

[1]The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare, edited by Charles Knight, *Comedies*, Vol. I, p. 204.

[2]MS. Bib. Reg., 17C, xvi (*Annals of Windsor*, Vol. I, p. 683).