

## Memories of a Norfolk Village

Written in the Spring of 2021:

Up on a hill in the east of England, partly surrounded by a youthful stretch of river, lies a patch of land, that if you were to spend there a decade or so, could leave an impression on you. Not with a how-do-you-like-me of a cheap panorama, but with the confidence of a place whose ridges, old moats, ponds, ditches and acres of common land are infused with meanings that exist entirely independently of your understanding.

We English usually don't, as you know, masculinise or feminise what we suppose are things. Moreover, giving them human attributes, an English professor once told me, was a 'pathetic fallacy'. I made a bad joke about that based on a pun because I am an idiot and that was the nature of our relationship. But, I could never think of this part of the world as being anything other than a woman. Or anything other than woman - a universal. Some kind of archetype that would regard you with a straight back and firm gaze and demand something decent from you. 'She' is part of my past now, of course. I am one of those men, river-wise, in his silty-years. 'She' is 300-moons ago, 1,500 kilometres away, and a vicious techno-political diktat distant.

'She' is, though, a regular setting in my dreams. I'm sure you experience this phenomena; when you realise that you are back 'there', somewhere jettisoned by time and geography. For me it is the twisting country drifts (lanes), banked by hedges and fields in summer harvest. That is the way it is. Invariably, it is a reward for having slipped off some soulless motorway, Roman in its intent to corral those journeying to some fate someone else had in mind.

Right now, I am killing time in a petrol forecourt, and in my hands is a vastly more considered and grounded attempt to remember that place than I can manage. It's 100 or so pages of a self-published book called 'Memories of a Norfolk Village', written by one Alfred Absolon.

Alfred was born in 1893, in the village of Colkirk (Anglo Saxon for the Church of Cola), up on that same hill in the east of England. He worked the land as a youth and young man, and between the years of 1967 and 1972 he resolved to leave a written record of his life and experiences there. He did so in order that his children and grandchildren would know something of the country life he had lived, and which had died, in his sight, after the Second World War.

Such written memories of that village life would not have been so necessary in the centuries leading up until the First World War. Conversations at the small cottage of the village cobbler and 'salty socialist', Billy Dunn, would, for example, involve talk of events 50 years ago as if they were as fresh as yesterday. The continuity of life in the country took, according to Alfred, no account of time. One old boy, 'Old Lake', who would have been born in the mid 18th century, told him how people had socialised in his youth. They would gather in one another's houses in the evening: the fire the only light. And if the boys kept quiet, they would hear their grandfathers telling stories that their grandfathers had told. Events centuries past were thus so freshly imprinted in Old Lake's mind that he would talk of them as if he had experienced them himself.

The farming traditions, too, remained by and large constant - rungs down to an un-jettisoned past. Alfred would, as other local farmers did, erect elaborate dollies on the thatched stacks of wheat. A custom Alfred assumed stretched back to pagan times when "our heathen forefathers would perhaps put up an effigy of a farm god to keep off the evil spirits. Later they would be saints. It came to the same thing."

A gentle scepticism of the church - especially the Catholic Church (the countryside was "riddled with priests" before the Reformation) is evident in Alfred's memoirs. It isn't, however, the scepticism of the modern rational atheist. For although Alfred was clearly a practical man and his account of a farming life would serve as a decent handbook for anyone brave or desperate enough to consider a return to the land, a brief look at the chapter headings will show an understanding of the existence of manifestations of the other-worldly.

In amongst the sections on pigs, horses, barley and threshing, there are pages devoted to encounters with witches, both white and black; ghosts; and the occult. His brother, born in the

'chime hours' would experience paranormal experiences, as did many others in the village. It seemed to be considered normal (there were no trans-humanists on the internet to explain the phenomena away). A friend of his aunt, for example, would be visited by a phantom black dog, who she would just ignore as she went about her business. It seems clear that the supernatural spirits had space to breath in the quiet and dark of rural Norfolk.

Not all spirits, however, were benevolent. 'The place no one would talk about' summons the menace of an old moat down an ancient track enclosing an area of perfectly smooth turf. A piece of land that had terrified the boys that stumbled upon it so much they could not set foot on it. A few years after Alfred and his mates had come across this place, a retired soldier and bachelor, Ted Latterly, went missing. Some young men knew where to go to find him. They headed off to that same moat, miles from the village, and found him dead, drowned in a puddle of black water. It could have been the moat that was once part of a manor owned by one of the knights of the Bishop of Norwich's private army in the 12th century. That it was evil was understood by all.

The countryside bore the marks of changes and cataclysms. Meadows "scarred with mounds and ridges" tell of settlements abandoned to the Black Death (which if I were writing for other, more politically 'agreeable' portals, I suppose, would prompt me to construct some shameless connection with the present). The great watershed in Alfred's life would, however, leave no disfigurement on the English landscape. An account of a cricket match before that hell of mechanised carnage seems almost as foreign and impossibly romantic as an account of Tolkien's hobbits in the shires.

"After the match we retired to the pub at the edge of the green where the men had their beer and I had my lemonade. Then came the sing-song. Man after man got up and sang a sad song about love and death and the field of glory - the theme never seemed to vary. It was the same men who went off to war not so long after, and me with them. The Norfolk's took it hard, and few of them came back."

Alfred did, of course, survive; though not a word of his wartime experiences are included in his memoir. He continued to farm the area until the current of his life bore him to another part of England, and it wasn't until after the Second World War that he returned to the village to look up old friends. Frank Wright, the blacksmith, was one of those he aimed to see. Frank was a master craftsman, and "to see him tempering a piece of steel was pure joy". He would, with great ingenuity, make tools and implements according to Alfred's rough drawings.

It was, though, a tragic meeting. "the forge was out and cold... and inside was an old bent man, standing forlornly by the once well-kept drilling machinery, now rusty and unused. I had to get out of the place quickly or else burst into tears." Frank's trade had been killed off, "to make a bright and brittle new world". The village he knew had, for him, not survived the second war. It had become a sleeping place for town workers, "drained of virile blood and bereft of its soul".

Alfred died in 1980, which is the year our family moved to that same village. My parents had taken over the running of the village pub - the same one that served the beer to the men who sang those long sad songs of love and glory - and although Alfred would consider it a corpse of the place he knew, I have to say that for a 10-year old kid from the suburbs of Essex, it was magical and exotic enough. For a start, there were plenty of Old Boys around. Old fellas whose dialect was near impossible to understand. They'd stop us sons of foreigners in the lanes and ask what we supposed was a question, and then react to our embarrassed confusion with a slow grin and, invariably, the words "dew yew keep a troshin' bor" (keep threshing, neighbour).

As my Norfolk accent got broader - to the distress of my mum and dad - my knowledge of the area grew wider. We had the freedom to learn, you see. We would - I, my brother, and the local kids - just roam the haunts all day: biking, fishing the pits, ponds, or the young river; playing football; scrapping; or, later on, shyly courting.

Summer work in my late teens just broadened my love for the place. One job I had involved driving around the county taking samples of grain from the farmers. The small farms were the best: you'd invariably get a cup of tea and a mardle (chat) from old boys who delighted in laughing at themselves. The kind of laughter - and forgive the fancy - that you could hear chortling down those rungs of time - all in the cadence and settled-on grammar (he do do that, dut he?) of a folk

becalmed in that patch of land. The phrase 'at that time of day' would, for example, sometimes be used to talk about times years past. Those old boys, 'Sid', 'Lightening' (a tractor driver who was a little slow, and who would invariably make sure there was no trouble at closing time - standing by the door leading into the dark night, quiet smile on his face like a benevolent bouncer) are - at the present time of day - no longer with us.

The pub, above which we had lived, was the last place I visited when I was last in England. I had gone there with my elder daughter and an old childhood friend. It was a winter evening, and as we walked the village lanes, we pointed out into the pitch darkness (for there are still no streetlights) to my daughter at the places in which events had marked our youth.

'Look', I said to her, pointing to a dim patch of shed-shaped dark in the Camping land by the church graveyard, "that's where I got my scar in a fight". 'Camping', by the way, I learned from Alfred doesn't refer to the pitching of tents, but rather an ancient game of primitive hockey played between neighbouring villages. In old English 'camp' means 'battle', and in this particular game, there were no rules: just sticks and a puck, and smashed heads and limbs. I will let someone with a modern education dismiss my fanciful notion that the violence that patch of land had soaked up over the years would in some way encourage our youthful scraps of rite-of-passage violence.

We made a circle of the village and came across the pub, where my family had lived for over 20 years, and crossed the threshold into the public bar.

I now know I will always remember that evening. Not because there are great things, superficially, to tell of it. Sure, there was the fellow who I had fought with on the battle ground holding court. He was delighted to see us, and soon was calling other old childhood friends to join us. I can remember almost all of the conversations, the pose and position of the men (that is just how it was), all known to each other, all free in their own broad Norfolk wisdom to partake of the conversation. And sure, I remember the quiet Latvian rapture in my daughter's face when a young local arrived with some dead pheasants for the landlord's pot. But no, it's not for any of these reasons that it stays firmly embedded in my consciousness. It is rather because I think I somehow knew at the time that it would be the last time I sat there.

It was in the last month of the Year before Covid, a watershed too in its own debilitating Soviet style. That pub, together with the church, closed its doors shortly after our visit, and I am going to assume the owners at the time have moved on or are bankrupt. Maybe it will open again soon, and those villagers who are vaccinated will gain access with a miserable swipe of smart phone. They will probably in the near future have to pay with those devices, too. My old man had kept cash in a wooden till to the increasing discontent of the Inland Revenue. Those days have long disappeared, and to add to that web of control, records of vaccine status will join those of financial transactions to flow down a digital channel implementing the iron law of the hierarchy of ex-nihilo fiat debt relationships and newly-fangled injections conferring permissions required by our technocratic masters of the material world.

I wonder how Alfred would have reacted to that? The very last vestiges of village virility smothered in a fussy digital grid, to which no appeal to human nature can be made. Communication once bourn on a current of talk and folk memory generation-upon-generation deep replaced by the printed word and more formal grammar; to be in turn dominated by the bleat of self-conscious social media post. Any communal togetherness around the physical warmth of fire now only open to those with up-to-date injection status.

All that is left is the darkness of the village streets. As sacred as sleep.

I wonder how, too, how I will react. I am writing the notes for this in my fifties in the forecourt of the Pagan God of Fertility (it's a petrol station called Astarte) watching the reddening corpus of the ATTA vaccination begin to glow as the sun begins to set. I wonder if I should succumb to the pressure for the sake of a pass to ease travel back to the place of my formative years: a pass back to the past.

Knowing I won't means that village and its ways: all the laughter and freedom and lessons, will retreat further into whatever forms of memory I can retain: her moats and ditches, hills and rivers, drifts and harvest smells only- and yet still - a landscape of my dreams.

Dew yew keep a troshin!