

## HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS OF DORSET 1906

Frederick Treves

### CHAPTER VII MILTON ABBEY AND THE WINTERBORNE

THE surprising village of Milton Abbas is best approached from the South, from the Milborne road. The way leads up a shallow valley through which a small stream dawdles. As the traveller draws nigh to Milton the valley begins to close in, its banks grow steeper, while its slopes till now quite bare become covered with trees from foot to summit. The road, which so far has traversed a mere dip in the downs, now sinks into a wooded glen, at the shadowy entrance of which it vanishes. Once in the wood it makes a bend, and on a sudden the hidden village bursts into view.

The first impression is one of amazement, for the place is both extraordinary and unexpected. Indeed, there is nothing like to it in any part of England.

Milton Abbas consists of one long, straight street mounting up hill through a thicket. On either side of the way are mathematically placed cottages, all exactly alike. Twenty on one side and twenty on the other. The space between any two adjacent houses is the same, and in every space is a fine chestnut tree. The cottages are square, have yellow walls, thatched roofs, and an arrangement of windows characteristic of the common doll's house. Between the rows of dwellings and the road is a lawn-like stretch of grass. On either side of the highway, with precise repetition, is the unvarying line maintained yellow house and chestnut tree, chestnut tree and yellow house. Two only out of the regiment of cottages have dared to break forth into bow windows. In the centre of the settlement are a prim church and an almshouse, somewhat overredolent of charity, while at the end of the avenue of yellow houses is a quaint little thatch-roofed inn.

It is impossible to be rid of the idea that this is a toy town, a make-believe village, a counterpart of the Hameau at Versailles. Milton Abbas. The visitor may begin by regarding the strange yellow and green street as ridiculous ; he will end by owning that it is possessed of a rare charm.

Milton Abbas is a model village grown old. Its story is very simple. When Joseph Damer, afterwards Earl of Dorchester, became possessed of the Milton estates, he found the ancient village squatted indecently near to the spot where he intended to build his mansion. With the fine, quarter-deck high handedness of the eighteenth-century squire, he ordered the offensive object to be removed, and it was so. The old, untidy hamlet was entirely demolished as soon as the new Milton Abbas had been erected well out of sight of the great house. This was in 1786.

The quaint and all-of-one-pattern village is not the only surprising thing in this part of

the county. From one end of the toy town a road leads to a wood, into whose shades it dives deeper and deeper, as does many a road in the children's storybooks. It comes in time to the edge of the coppice, where is a great grass valley ringed about by hills. The woods creep down to the foot of the slope so as to form an amphitheatre of trees. Here, on a lawn and amid the flower-gardens of a private mansion, is a cathedral ! No other building is in sight. It is a strange thing to meet with a great grey house and a great grey church standing, side by side, in a hollow in a wood. The place is a solitude, green and still, shut off from the world by a rustling ring of wooded hills. Such is Milton Abbey.

The mansion house is neither beautiful nor impressive. It occupies the site of an abbey founded by Aethelstan in 938 for secular priests, who were made to give place to Benedictine monks in 964. At the dissolution it was given by Henry VIII. (for £1,000) to Sir John Tregonwell, his proctor in the divorce from Queen Katherine. From the Tregonwells it passed by marriage to Sir Jacob Bancks, Secretary to the Swedish Embassy (b. 1663), and then by purchase, in 1752, to Joseph Damer, afterwards Earl of Dorchester. With the exception of the hall, the whole of the monastic buildings were pulled down in 1771, when the present house was built by the Earl of Dorchester from the designs of Sir William Chambers, it is a large quadrangular mansion with a central court, and is constructed of white limestone, alternating with layers of flint. It is a curious example of its architect's notions of the Gothic style. The only interesting part of the house is the monks' hall or refectory ... a stately apartment with a roof of Irish oak." (1)

The Abbey church is a superb Gothic building, with an elaborate tower, many beautiful windows, and many exquisite flying buttresses. It dates from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, has been admirably restored, and is one of the most elegant of the many minsters in England.

The church inside is swept and garnished, but so empty as to give the impression of being abandoned. It needs such a crowd of worshippers as throng with restless feet the aisles of a Continental cathedral, whereas Milton Abbey is used only for the prayers of a small but devout district. The altar-screen, which dates from 1492, is a marvel of carved stone. The canopied sedilia are singularly dainty. The great oak tabernacle for reserving the Eucharist is said to be unique in England, while among many wonderful sculptures in stone is the rebus of Abbot William de Middleton, dated 1514, and composed of the letter W, with a pastoral staff by the side of a mill on a cask, or tun, and by inference therefore Mil-ton. Two archaic paintings are to be found on the rood-loft. They are said to belong to the time of Edward IV., and to represent respectively King Aethelstan and his mother. The lady who was buried in the Abbey holds in one hand an enormous glove, and in the other a strange bird, reputed to be a hawk.

There is one monument in the church which is, I think, the most commendable of all. It is to Caroline, Lady Milton, who died in 1775. The effigies of both Lord and Lady

Milton are carved in marble upon an altar tomb. The little lady is exquisite beyond all expression. She is fully dressed in a simple costume of the time. She lies back dead. Her head drops on a pillow over which her loosened hair has tumbled. Her hands fall by her side inert and helpless. Her feet cased in tiny shoes are the feet of those who have trodden their last steps. The figure is tender, delicate, realistic, lamentable. By her side her husband reclines, his head resting on his hand. He is assumed to be alive, and to be gazing upon her with a pompous robes. He is uncouth, foppish, and ridiculous. He is living, she is dead. His grotesque self-importance and too prominent concern only serve to intensify her simplicity, her stillness, her dreamless sleep.

Monuments to husbands and wives are to be met with in almost every ancient church, and present certain interesting variations. The two are generally shown lying stiffly side by side like Noah's Ark figures packed away in a box. Milton monument is a remarkable departure from this type, and I may here mention two other memorials in the county which are not of the conventional pattern.

Those who stroll over the smooth lawns around the Abbey Church will hardly realise that they are walking over the site of the ancient town of Milton. This old town has been graphically described by the Rev. Herbert Pentin. (2) It was a place of many streets and of many taverns. It possessed a brewery of great renown, as well as a grammar school founded in 1521. At this school were from 80 to 100 boarders, while among the scholars of one time was Masterman Hardy, Nelson's captain. There were over 100 houses in the town as distinct from the parish. It almost surpasses belief that the whole of this ancient settlement, its rectory, its school, its almshouses, and its redundant inns, were all swept off the earth because one Joseph Damer decreed that the town was too close to his residence, and proved an annoyance to him." He fell upon the little place and destroyed it, as Vesuvius overwhelmed Pompeii. As a rebuke to sentiment " he had all the headstones in the churchyard removed, broken up, or buried." (3) In the making of his gardens, too, he was annoyed by the obstinate turning up of the bones of the vulgar parishioners of Milton, and so great was his disgust that of these sturdy yeoman no remains are now to be found.

On the summit of a wooded hill behind Milton Abbey is the minute Norman Chapel of St. Catherine. It is approached by a long straight stair, the steps of which are of the greenest turf. Chapels on the tops of hills were often dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria, since the legend says that the body of that saint was buried by angels on the summit of Mount Sinai. The chapel, which is now once again used as a place of worship, has been sadly mutilated in past years. The destroyer of the old town of Milton turned it into a labourer's cottage. After this vandal's death the little shrine fell upon even more evil times.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Murray's Wilts and Dorset. London, 1899. Page 567.
2. Proceedings of the Dorset Field Club. Vol. XXV., page I
3. Ibid., page 5