

An Ancient English Village

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(Colonel Richmond Munn came to live in Merriott soon after the end of World War II. This article was first published in booklet form in 1961, without copyright reservation. Copies of the original booklet survive but the small and somewhat indistinct print made reproduction for screen reading impracticable and so this version is an exact transcription.)

The village of Merriott has the reputation of being the largest in Somerset. About a thousand voters on the electoral roll attest its size. Few of them would claim for it any pre-eminence. Guidebooks mention it almost with disdain. 'If you have time,' says Penguin Guides, Somerset (p. 111), 'make a detour for Merriott, a straggling village with some good stone houses (like all the villages in this district).'

Yet Merriott is distinctive and has, in its day, 'been distinguished' as a study of its history reveals. Merriott inhabitants (excluding the 'foreigners' who have settled there in increasing numbers in recent years) are in their manner, customs, appearance and exclusiveness a race apart from their neighbours. Even their dialect has been unintelligible to other Somerset folk. They look different. They have the appearance of southern Europeans, a suggestion about them of gypsy blood. The men are handsome, dark haired, dark complexioned and hard-bitten. There is a look in their brown eyes of self-possession and reticence. They do not talk overmuch and they gesticulate not at all. Their smile comes slowly, but when it reaches the eyes there is a gleam as when the sun breaks through to light a distant scene. Distant! Perhaps that is the key word: they seem to be looking patiently into the distance. But they are men of action, the old stock; men of the fields and the open. In their recreation they have been apt to be bold, even turbulent. Neighbouring villagers to this day speak of the wide berth it was advisable to give Merriott after dark. It is not for nothing that it has been called 'Little Ireland'. The public houses, and there were many of them not so long ago, could tell tales of fights, pressed sometimes even to push of pitchfork.

The women are a good match for their men, as well they have had to be. Violent domestic strife seems to have been, at one time, one of the village recreations. 'It was nothing, of a Saturday night' says one old timer, wistfully, with a touch, perhaps of exaggeration, 'to see all the furniture fly out of a cottage door, followed by the wife'. Quite likely the women liked it that way! A stranger today can scarcely fail to notice an air of purpose and sturdy independence of the women as they go about their business in the street. They march about their lawful occasions; there is nothing of mincing or tripping or coquetry in their gait. There is a remarkable absence of cottage-door gossiping or house-wifely hobnobbing. But there is within their own homes a natural graciousness, a kindly courtesy which is indeed reminiscent of Ireland.

No one knows how the village earned its nickname of 'Little Ireland'. The natives accept it with amused tolerance and all, native and neighbour alike, agree that it is not inept. There are tales that seek to account for it, of strong concentrations of Irish labour when the railway was being built; there are legends of Irish monks who converted the inhabitants and founded a monastery. Its origin, it seems, must always be in doubt. The still observable fact remains that here is, though fast disappearing, a racial enclave for which there is no accounting.

The name Merriott - earlier forms were 'Meriet', 'Meryet', 'Muriet' - derives from 'Maergeat', meaning 'Boundary Gate'. This in itself is suggestive of character. 'Boundary Gate' has about it a clanging finality. 'Thus far but no farther,' it seems to say, 'produce your passport'. The boundary was the line of the River Parrett along which the Saxon invaders were halted in the year 658 A.D. - thirteen hundred years ago.

The shape of the village is, appropriately enough, like a broad-headed arrow of which the apex points northeasterly at the crossings of the Parrett. The base is formed by the Roman road which runs from the southernmost point of the village at Merriottsford in a northwesterly direction, over Egwood Hill, through Newchester Cross, where once was the Roman settlement of Nova Castra and on to the Fosse Way beyond Lopen. The sides are two roads stemming from the base at Newchester Cross and Merriottsford respectively, and converging at Townsend, the one along the high ground, the other along the low. The three roads enclose some 30 acres of good farmland that has been communally cultivated from before the Conquest. Some of the landmarks still survive. Buildings followed the roads and only now are encroaching upon agricultural plots hallowed by tradition; the effect was to produce a sort of early ribbon development that now is dubbed 'stragglings'.

Before the days of effective draining, marshy swamps lapped three sides of the spur of Egwood Hill, upon which the village stands. Egwood itself, but a vestige of a wood now, must have sealed it off from the west. 'Aeg', be it noted, is the Anglo-Saxon for 'edge'. The village was isolated and is, even now, off the beaten track. Which goes some way to explaining the peculiar insularity of the inhabitants.

From the darkness that followed the Roman withdrawal from Britain, Merriott emerged secluded, still upon its swamp girt promontory, but in good hands. It belonged to an Anglo-Saxon landowning family with large holdings in Somerset, Wiltshire and Devon. The head at the time of the Norman Conquest was one Eadnoth The Staller - Master of the King's Horse - Sheriff, and Commander of the Men of Somerset. It is a resounding title.

Evidently he accepted the verdict of Senlac, for he lost his life at the head of the men of Somerset in 1068, fighting the sons of King Harold who had taken up piracy and brigandage in the West. William the Conqueror confiscated his lands and divided them amongst his followers, part of Merriott going to the Count de Mortain. Eadnoth's son, Heardinc, dubbed in his time 'The greatest of all the Anglo-Thanes', became one of William's Justiciars in the fullness of time, and was rewarded by the grant of six manors in Somerset, including Merriott, where he took up his residence and founded the de Meriet family. His eldest son became Nicholas Fitz-Harding de Meriet, and his second Robert Fitz-Harding of Bristol, from whom, as a matter of history, descended the Lords of Berkeley (cf. Burke's Peerage - Berkeley).

In spite of the tagging of 'Fitz' to Harding and the assumption of the name de Meriet, presumably in deference to prevailing fashion, the family was Anglo-Saxon. All around had been planted Norman Knights - the Courtenays, Mandevilles, Daubenays and the likes so that, in a sea of Norman origin there was in Merriott an island of English Aristocracy with its roots deep in the past. It flourished for three hundred years and the manor and people of Merriott with it. Here was cause for legitimate pride.

Merriott was fortunate in having a resident English lord of the manor in the dark days when, in the reign of Stephen, unbridled feudal anarchy was destroying the people. Of the closing entries in 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', G. M. Trevelyan says: 'In it we hear the bitter cry of the English common folk against the foreign chivalry to whom foreign Kings had for a while abandoned them', (History of England, 3rd Edtn., p. 139.1.34). That Merriott had an English lord of the manor may have set a seal upon her character which time has not obliterated. Folk memory is long. She does not suffer 'foreigners' gladly, and her independent spirit is manifest.

It is interesting to speculate on how close a connection was retained between the brothers Nicholas Fitz-Harding of Merriott and Robert Fitz-Harding of Bristol. There seems no reason to doubt that it remained quite close for several generations, as would be natural in two branches of an aristocratic English family in the midst of Normans. There opens up here a possible explanation of the mysterious Irish link.

In August, 1166, Robert Fitz-Harding of Bristol entertained Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster, his daughter, Eva, and sixty of his followers at a feast in Bristol. Dermot had been ousted from his kingdom of Leinster, and had come to England to ask King Henry II for help to regain it. Henry, being fully occupied with troubles of his own in France, referred him to his barons in Wales and the West. The result was the invasion of Ireland by the Earl of Pembroke, Richard Fitz-Gilbert de Clare, better known as Strongbow.

Thus began the 'Irish Question', which was to baffle England for eight hundred years. And Robert Fitz-Harding of Bristol was at the starting gate.

In the upshot Strongbow married Eva MacMurrough, proclaimed himself King of Leinster on her father's death, captured Dublin, a Danish city at that time, and handed it over for development to the citizens of Bristol, of whom Robert was the chief.

It is not difficult to deduce that Nicholas in Merriott was in a position, if he wanted it, to obtain cheap Irish labour for, say, building his manor house, draining swamps and the land, making roads and, perhaps, quarrying stone. In this event the name 'Little Ireland' may well have been clamped upon the village and Irish blood introduced in quantity into the Merriott Anglo-Saxon stock.

A hundred years later Sir John de Meriet began the building of the present church hard by the manor house. His infant son John was the first to be baptised there in 1276. The Priest was Henry, Vicar of South Petherton, the Godparents Sir Gilbert de Knowle and the Lady Albreda de Mohun.

The completion of the church must have set a crown upon the fortunes and prestige of the family. Young John was destined to enhance them. When he was twenty-one and his father dead eleven years, he received his summons to the Scottish War. Wallace was out upon the Border and Edward had raised his standard at Carlisle. When the young knight came riding back, Falkirk had been fought, Wallace defeated, and he had won more than his spurs. He was acclaimed by the title 'Great Warrior' and he had in his scrip a charter of free warren from the King, granting him permission to hunt the fox, hare, deer and badger with his own hounds in the royal forests, an honour never lightly bestowed by the kings of England.

It is interesting to find that the contemporary Fitz-Harding, Lord Berkeley, took part in the same campaign and received the same reward. They may well have fought under the same banner.

But the young Sir John had earned a greater reward for his people. The king issued a charter permitting the holding of fairs and markets in the manors of Merriott and Lopen. They prospered. Men came to them from as far afield as Exeter. 'Dominus de Meriet', the title by which in future his own folk knew him, must have been, in Young Sir John's eyes, a prize greater than the favours of princes.

Merriott under the de Meriets had but a century more to run. The last Sir John, a knight 'of much reputation in the days wherein he lived', died without heir in 1391.

It is possible to idealise unduly this knightly Anglo-Saxon line, none the less there can be little doubt that they held their heads high and honourably acquitted themselves. If they did ill, no ill report has lived after them. Many of them died in the Welsh and Scottish wars and in France serving their kings. Few lived to old age. There is no memorial or effigy to any of them in the church which they built and where they worshiped, but their name is still on the lips of men in the village that they served.

The manor house did not long survive its old masters. The Manor, being held in chief, reverted to the Crown. A male cousin in Wiltshire, who might have petitioned for a reversionary grant, disappeared - possibly in the French wars. It would have been fitting for the last de Meriet to die at Agincourt.

In the event the King bestowed Merriott upon Sir William Bonville, who had married a de Meriet girl. It was an evil day for Merriott, for it brought the manor into the orbit of the Wars of the Roses. Disaster awaited the Bonville family and destruction the old home of the de Meriets.

Sir William was Sheriff of Somerset, Dorset and Devon. His grandson, William, a most distinguished soldier and administrator - Sheriff of Devonshire (1422), Seneschal of the Duchy of Aquitaine in reward for his services in France at the head of twenty men at arms and six hundred archers (1442), summoned to Parliament under the title of Lord Bonville of Chuton (1449), afterwards Governor of Exeter Castle for life - was a Yorkist. He, 'doing his homage' had taken livery of the manor of Meryet, Somerset, in 1425. His principal seat was Shute. It was a grave misfortune, which cost him his life that bitter enmity existed between his family and that of the Earls of Devonshire, the Courtenays, who espoused the Lancastrian cause. In November 1455, a deputation of the Commons drew attention to the 'grete and grevous riotes doon in the Weste Countrey betwene the Ele of Devonshire and the Lord Bonville, by the which som men have be murdred, some robbed and children and wymen taken!' (The Book of The Axe, by C. P. R. Pulman, p. 763.1.25.) The immediate occasion for this petition, which called for a Protector to be sent to see that justice was done, was a particularly murderous outbreak by the Earl of Devonshire's son who, with sixty of his men, cut the throat of one Radford, an old man who was lawyer to Lord Bonville, and pillaged and burnt down his house.

Such was the state of the West when the first battle of St. Albans heralded the Wars of the Rose in 1455.

At Wakefield in 1460, Lord Bonville's only son, as well as his only grandson, were killed. At Northampton the same year King Henry was captured by the Yorkists and Lord Bonville was made his custodian. The following year the Lancastrians rescued their king and beheaded Lord Bonville who, relying on the king's promise of safe conduct, had eschewed flight and remained to hand his charge over personally. The Earl of Devonshire it was who, with the Queen and the Duke of Exeter, contrived the execution. The direct male line of the Bonvilles of Shute was extinct.

In that same year the manor house at Merriott was laid to waste with a ferocity so savage that not one stone was left standing. To this day no sign remains of any building upon the site between the church and the northern escarpment where it stood with its courtyards and outhouses, its gardens, stables and kennels. Yet today, if the farmer who owns the land sets his plough too deep he is apt to turn up building stone, and here and there the spade unearths debris scored with the marks of fire. No building has ever again been erected there. If this was an outcome of the Bonville-Courtenay feud, the vandals destroyed better than they knew.

Cicily Bonville, ten years old when her great grandfather was beheaded (whose father and grand father were killed at Wakefield) was heiress of all their estates which, including the baronies of Bonville and Harrington, were of vast extent. She married Sir Thomas Grey, created Marquis of Dorset in 1474, and thus acquired a mother-in-law, Elizabeth Woodville who, by her second marriage, became Queen of King Edward IV. Cicily was destined to become a great lady at the courts of Kings Henry VII and VIII. The manor of Merriott was traveling in the wake of great events.

Henry, Marquis of Dorset, was grandson of Cicily Bonville. By his second marriage to Frances Brandon, daughter of the Duke of Suffolk and Mary, Queen of France, he became father of the Lady Jane Grey. Among his lesser titles he was lord of the manor of Merriott. The melancholy result of his daughter's incursion into power politics is well known. He was executed in 1553 and she in 1554. Merriott once more reverted to the Crown Royal Manor without a manor house, a straggling village of no renown.

If, as is very probable, the Greys came to Merriott from time to time, they must have used some house other than the old manor, which had ceased to exist. To those who are aware of the connection it is not surprising to find a legend which couples the oldest existing house with the name of the Lady Jane Grey. Moreover, it is still called 'The Court,' and is on the traditional site, near Merriottsford, where Bristward the Saxon Thane of the Lower Tun had his 'Hall' when Harold was King.

Although it is still occupied, the old building is hard to find. An obscure lane leads out of Lower Street to a water mill. An archway, cluttered up with carts and the flotsam and jetsam of bygone agricultural ways, leads from the lane into a deserted yard. Here, on the right, is the facade of the building, pierced by two tiers of mullioned windows, rugged with age, under moulded hoods. Some of the lights are bricked up, others are guarded by rusted iron bars. An ecclesiastical origin is suggested by a simple trifoliate design at the head of each. The leaded panes look out of dark rooms where no movement is. It is an eerie scene. The windows and the rooms behind them keep their secrets. Is this, for instance, the lost chapel of St. Catharine? There is a legend that says so and there is nothing incompatible in the two legends. Imagination easily sweeps away the more modern, upstart buildings, a mere two or three hundred years old,

which have surrounded and stifled the Court, and re-erects a worthy house with its lawns and gardens running down to the willow-lined stream, its gatehouse on Lower Street, and its courtyard, its guesthouse and chapel - a fit place for the Marquis of Dorset and the noble Cicily Bonville; and for their great granddaughter, The Lady Jane Grey.

But Merriott, though a Royal Manor, never again climbed on an aristocratic band-wagon, nor hitched its own wagon to any noble star. Queen Mary bestowed it upon one family, Queen Elizabeth on another: the names of neither are remembered. Rice, Pyne, Painter, Hooper, Rodbard, Whitley, these are the men associated with the lordship of the manor in the last four hundred years. Now not even the title remains.

If Sir John de Meriet, on that early April morning in 1276, when his son was christened, had looked west from the church door he would have seen geese on the common of Hitchen, swine and their swine-herds in Egwood and, probably, pack ponies carrying sacks of corn down the Broadway - the old Roman road - to the two mills near Merriottsford. If he had looked to the south towards the distant, wooded hills of Dorset, he would have seen near at hand, across Church Street - Higher Street, men must have called it before the building of the church - the Beredun or village cornfield, divided by grass balks into strips or 'landsheres' of half an acre each. The dividing balks are still there and village allotment holders today dig the same plots of land the villeins and freemen cultivated a thousand years ago. 'Landshers' the allotments are still called, and 'Beredun' was the name of the area as late as the eighteenth century. In his day Sir John would have seen there only corn and fallow: now houses stand on Hitchen common and are slowly swallowing up the 'landshers' on Beredun.

Had the younger John, on the eve of his departure for the wars in 1297, taking counsel perhaps with Ernald de Morny, his confessor, whom he had himself appointed as vicar of the little church, looked from the escarpment behind the manor house to the north, he would have seen at his feet the 'Parks' reserved for his pleasure and for jousts and tourneys and manly exercises, and beyond alternate marsh and forest as far as the hill of Sedgemoor low on the horizon. On the morrow he would ride with his squire and his page - his mounted men-at-arms and his archers at his back - down the self-same road that, today, leads under the trees of Egwood to Lopen, The Fosse Way and the north.

If a freeman of those days were now to enter the village from the east he would be astonished at the number of 'good stone houses' but he would find the names of field and road familiar: 'Bow Mill', 'Lipe', 'Tunsend', 'Higher Street', 'Abbot's Field', 'Monkhouse Lane', 'Clapperhay', 'Lower Street' and many more. He would pass the mills that are mentioned in the Domesday Book, but they have been silent these eight years. He would find where the ford was, a bridge spanning the stream that used to turn the wheels. He would recognise the Roman Broadway breasting the slope of Egwood Hill. He would have no difficulty in finding his way.

As some of the names suggest, there is a tradition of monastic ownership of which no record now remains. Legend says that monks from Ireland baptised converts at the Holwell, a spring which rises alongside a brook by Clapperhay. Old folk have been known to go there even now for water to bathe ailing eyes. There is, too, a persistent legend that somewhere in the Parks monks buried a chain of gold. There are old men in the village who have, from their boyhood, poked about hopefully for it. The story smacks of the crock of gold at the rainbow's end that

for ever eludes Irishmen. It is typical of the stories these men tell who have heard them from their fathers, and they from theirs, and what is more, believe.

The persistence of surnames is a feature of this village: Lawrence, Mitchell, Wills, Hooper, Templeman, Osborne, Pattermore, French; these go back in court proceedings, wills, rent rolls, parish registers and the like to the beginning of the 16th century, and for how long before no man can say. They still appear in the electoral roll. So great was the press of individuals bearing these names that a custom arose which must be rare, if not unique, in English villages. Irrespective of their true names, each was given a nickname which became more abiding.

It is difficult for a stranger to equate Sammy Soldier, Sammy Pinch, Tommy Tiptoe, Hard Crib, Sammy Duchy, Sammy Alluad to the Osbornes, for instance; or Willv Wantsee, Lizzie Partridge, Jimmy Doctor, Henry Squinty to the Lawrences; or Frankie Marlem, Willie Winkle, Sammy Nameldish to the Wills, no one in the village escaped twenty, thirty, fifty years ago. The custom is dead, but some of the names linger on. It manifested a strong clan sense.

From time immemorial Merriott had been mainly agricultural, providing grist for its own mills. As a sideline, it bred horses, and horses entered very much into its economy. They were used for carrying fish from the fishing villages on the coast to market inland; for long-distance cartage of Merriott garden produce; and for the haulage of flax to the sail-cloth making at Tail Mill.

Speed was of the essence of the fish-carrying trade, so the carts were two-wheeled and light, the ponies or cobs wiry and fast. It was a business which lent itself to sport. Long before dawn the carts would be making for the coast at Bridport or Seaton or Lyme, driving against time to meet the boats: a quick turn round, like guns coming into action - a quick load - a crack of the whip - and away for market at Crewkerne or farther afield, for the trade was chiefly in Merriott hands. Wagers were laid and much money changed hands on the results of these races.

The animals bred for the light van a work were known as Merriott half-breds. They had to have stamina and endurance for a steady haul to places as far away as Bristol and Salisbury twice a week. It was apt to be a gruelling job for man and beast in all kinds of weather.

The haulage of flax was heavy work and Merriott bred the appropriate horses. The weaving of sailcloth for men-of-war and merchantmen was a lucrative enterprise so long as sailing ships kept the seas. It may well be that sails of Merriott cloth were spread on all the seven seas during the Napoleonic wars.

These were the activities which made Merriott men hard, self-reliant and devil-may-care. Some of their pastimes were in keeping. There was a village club whose business it was to foster them. One club had its own banner; to be standard-bearer to the club for the year was a great honour. There was 'kick-shin', a form of single combat that describes itself in its name. Contestants wearing special boots with iron toecaps used to assail each others' shins, ringed by appreciative spectators. A good kick was applauded like a goal or crisp cover-drive. There was organised racing between fish carts down the Roman road from Egwood, through Newchester Cross, down the Broadway (distinguished for its narrowness!) to the crossroads near Merriottsford and back up the hill to the Old George Inn. It was robust work, requiring skill and nerve. Riding off into ditch or wall was allowed and practised. It was a boast that a

Merriott man could drive anything on four legs but no one could drive a Merriott man. The club and the village brass band, resplendent in uniform, made high days and holidays merry and memorable.

Those days are gone. Time's winged chariot has a jet engine now and Father Time is dabbling with nuclear power. Merriott tranters drive lorries. Trains carry fish and garden produce to the London market. The horses have gone to the knacker's yard, the carts to the fire. Men and women of the old Merriott stock are awaiting their turn for rest beside Sir John de Meriet's church.

Let an old-time Merriott man who still keeps a pony or two for breaking and selling, have the last word. It would be an impertinence to attempt a reproduction of his Merriott speech:

'Vaathur told I as how us come vrom Iereland vust gwaine off, the time when thur werden no taties auver thur. He wur vriende wi' Maister Whitley wot wur Lard o' the Manor them days. Many's the time th've a-lookt vur thic wold gold chaain wot the monks had a-hided. All 'em evur vound wur a box o' beer bottles; but thur wurdn' nowt in narry a one o'em.'

'I hreckon nobody doan't know whur th' wold Monk's House ' wur to; ne'et the Manor: an' nobody doan't know nuthin 'bout the Meriets no mwore; ' 'tiz all a-lost an' vurgot.'

He is wrong about one thing. There were men of his name in Merriott long before the Irish potato famine. It may be that an ancestor was horse-breaker to Dermot MacMurrrough, King of Leinster, and afterwards to his son-in-law Strongbow, Earl of Pembroke, the friend of Robert FitzHarding of Bristol, who was the younger brother of Sir Nicholas Fitz-Hardmg de Meriet, long, long ago.