

# *The Countryman*

*comes from the country*



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## *Inkpen—A Village with a Future* by Victor Bonham-Carter

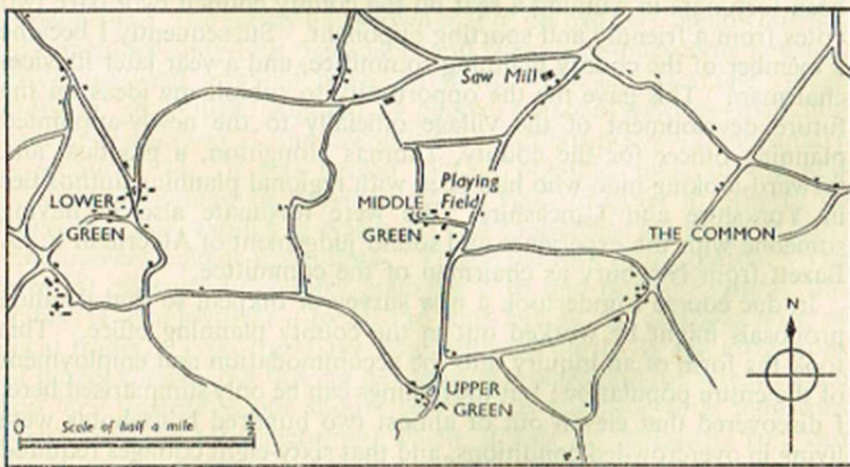
THE prosperity of the countryside is inseparable from the well-being of village life in all its forms — work, trade, housing, schools and social amenities — for the land is nothing without human activity upon it. In the past there was no doubt about this. The feudal system depended absolutely upon the close corporation of the manor, and right down to the nineteenth century country life was community life. It was improved communications, new forms of motive power, and the decline of agriculture and crafts under Victorian industrialism and free trade that sapped its communal strength. The town, too, has invaded the country by absorbing large tracts of land, and by infiltrating into the village, where nowadays you will often find far too many town-minded people, who are conscious of no obligations and regard the countryside merely as a pleasure ground.

However, times are changing once more. Two world wars have hastened the crisis which a top-heavy industrialisation was bound to bring on; and we are now rediscovering an economy in which agriculture and limited rural industries have a secure place. It has become essential to re-establish in villages the social conditions that will attract men and their families. Houses alone are not enough; they must form part of complete communities, which will supply those who do the work of the countryside with the whole range of material and mental satisfactions they need. In other words, the village is now reasserting its necessity, but with a difference. Much of the old rural civilisation has been irretrievably lost — most of the crafts, customs and traditions, for instance; and it is possible that dialect will disappear as well. It is no use regretting the past. The functions and capabilities of each village have to be re-assessed, and that is what is being attempted in every county planning office today.

I had the good fortune to be a member of the Berkshire Planning Committee during the year in which the Town and Country Planning Act was passed. Berkshire, particularly west of Reading, is a rural county, and villages are a prime concern of the committee; for me the subject had an added interest because the village of Inkpen, where I had been living since 1938, presented special difficulties. It lies in the farthest corner of the county, about eight miles south-west of Newbury and five due south of Hungerford. The parish covers some three thousand acres and contains an amorphous collection of houses, roughly distributed in four settlements. Of these, Lower Green on the west, Upper Green on the south, and The Common on the east surround on three sides a central settlement known unofficially as Middle

Green. In each there are one or more of the essential village institutions — church, chapel, school, hall, inn and shop — an arrangement which suits some people well, but others not at all. Middle Green, though least compact, is best equipped, since it has a shop, a chapel, the post office, the school, an inn, large sawmills, and a big level field used for cricket before the war. Hitherto development has been gradual and haphazard, so that it has served merely to perpetuate, if not to increase, the difficulties of the six hundred or so inhabitants of the village, who lack the coherence of a community owing to the scattered nature of the place. In spite of this there are several ties that hold Inkpen people together. On the economic side there is a common interest in farming and the sawmills, a thriving local concern employing over fifty hands. On the social side sport has a strong following, although facilities were inadequate until recently; in addition, each society or club exerts its own particular attractions — the women's institute, the band, the flower show and others. At the same time the village hall — quite a good building, but badly sited — is poorly attended, although, had the village been more compact, the tale might have been different.

During the war, in the off moments of army service, I used to reflect on the Inkpen problem and wonder whether anything could be done to pull the place together physically. I feared that there might be no control over the expected building boom after the war, and that the further random siting of new houses would merely make matters worse. Obviously the most urgent need was to establish Middle Green as the centre of the village in every sense. All future development should be attracted to it, in order to create a balanced community, and also to provide the outer settlements with the services they lack. This would



*The four settlements which comprise the present village*



be a long-term process absorbing all public and private enterprise for many years to come. How to start? After much thought I decided to try to establish a playing field, for this was a familiar and feasible project, and it had many practical advantages. Permanent facilities for recreation had long been needed, for adults and children, and the eight-acre field in Middle Green, where cricket had been played before the war, was ideal for the purpose. In addition to being large, flat and central, it was most accessible and might eventually become the village green, because buildings could be placed on three of its four sides.

I managed to interest a nucleus of active people in the idea, and it was decided to adopt the proposal as the village war memorial. Accordingly, a committee was formed, all residents were consulted by circular letter and public meeting, and an appeal was launched. Within two years nearly £700 was collected in subscriptions and from the proceeds of village functions such as dances, sales and concerts, one of which was generously given in the village hall by Solomon, the well-known pianist. In addition £200, the capital of a local charity, was brought into the scheme with the permission of the Charity Commissioners; and finally a grant of £800 was received from the Ministry of Education under the Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937. The greater part of the sum of £1700 was spent in purchasing and draining the land, laying out the various pitches, fencing, tree-planting and necessary cultivations. Finally the property was vested in local trustees, and suitable arrangements made for its maintenance. Throughout there was the closest liaison with the county education committee whose help was invaluable. On Whit Monday 1946 the field, which by then had been declared a public open space, was formally opened.

I had been demobilised on New Year's Day of that year, and had been fortunate in winning a seat on the county council by a bare two votes from a friendly and sporting opponent. Subsequently I became a member of the county planning committee, and a year later its vice-chairman. This gave me the opportunity to submit my ideas on the future development of the village officially to the newly-appointed planning officer for the county, Thomas Houghton, a practical and forward-looking man who had been with regional planning authorities in Yorkshire and Lancashire. We were fortunate also in having someone with the experience and sound judgement of Alderman F. D. Bazett from Newbury as chairman of the committee.

In due course I undertook a new survey of Inkpen, so that detailed proposals might be worked out in the county planning office. This took the form of an inquiry into the accommodation and employment of the entire population; but the findings can be only summarised here. I discovered that eleven out of almost two hundred households were living in overcrowded conditions, and that sixty-eight cottages required attention. Thirty of these were worth reconditioning; the remainder

# INKPEN VILLAGE: NUMBER OF HOUSES AND THEIR OCCUPANTS

	Houses	Breadwinners <sup>1</sup>	Dependants
Lower Green ..	69	101	104
Middle Green ..	60	94	93
Upper Green ..	24	40	55
The Common ..	45	78	63
TOTAL ..	198	313	315

<sup>1</sup> Including pensioners and persons with independent means.

were fit only to be pulled down. Forty-nine new houses were needed, therefore, for the overcrowded and displaced, and another twenty for the families of men who were already working in the parish, or wanted for personal reasons to live there, but were obliged at that time to live elsewhere. Thus sixty-nine new houses were required. In the end there would be in the parish two hundred and twenty-nine houses to accommodate about seven hundred people.

The experts pointed out, however, that the provision of houses alone would not solve the difficulties of the village, unless at the same time Middle Green was properly developed as its centre. At least three hundred more people would be required, if the land round the playing field was to be occupied by houses and a self-contained community created upon which the outer settlements could rely. A community of less than five hundred people cannot usually afford the services which modern living requires, nor can it support a social life of its own. Twice that number was estimated to be the best for the whole parish of Inkpen, of which Middle Green, to be effective, should have half — a village within a village as it were.

Then, of the three hundred proposed new residents in Middle Green, at least one-third would require work, to support themselves and their dependents. The survey had shown that of the existing 'breadwinners', who included sixty-four pensioners and persons of independent means, fifty-eight went away to towns to work. The largest single village industry, agriculture, engaged 84 people, personal services (including part-time workers) 37, the sawmills 29, small businesses 17 and sundry occupations 24. It was agreed that, if possible, most of the new occupations should be provided on the spot, in order to prevent an abnormal daily exodus to Newbury, and to increase the range of local employment outside agriculture. This is the root of the matter. The greatest difficulty in country planning is to find not agricultural, but industrial employment — to fill the gaps left by the disappearance of local trades. True, they have been replaced partly by the attractions of the local town, but this is a devitalising process and has already gone too far. Instead, scope should be given to the basic rural industries (extractive and manufacturing) which, if they are efficiently run, can stand up to modern conditions. Then there is a whole range of services (shops, garages, road transport, agricultural contracting and



many others) in constant demand in the countryside, but hitherto needlessly monopolised by the town. Finally there is the controversial question of introducing small factories into those villages that are short of employment — a matter that can be no more than mentioned here. For these reasons, in the Middle Green proposals, up to ten acres next the existing sawmills were reserved for, say, extensions to the timber yard, one or two works processing wood (turnery or furniture-making), an implement welding and repair shop, a builder with a yard and half a dozen employees, or similar enterprises. Then provision was made for more shops supplying everyday needs. The village as a whole has long been short of retail services, and a higher population would increase the demand. Minimum requirements appeared to be a grocer, baker, chemist, draper and shoe shop, coal merchant, stationer and bookseller, ironmonger, and small laundry, all of which would provide employment as well as service. In this way a hundred workers would soon be absorbed, quite apart from limited opportunities on the land where, however, greater output will have to come from improved methods and not increased employment.

Thus a development plan for Inkpen was eventually drawn up in the county offices, in co-operation with Raglan Squire, partner in the well-known firm of architects, Arcon. A detailed lay-out of Middle Green was also prepared. All the natural features surrounding the playing field have been preserved, and it is proposed to cut right across the old social segregation, whereby the wage-earners lived in one place, the shopkeepers in another, and the gentry in yet another. A suggestion that there should be a new primary school at the north end of the playing field was accepted in principle by the Education Committee, and a combined village hall and pavilion, for which land was reserved by the trustees, was to be built on the south. Then there is a proposal for new shops, with flats over for single people and others who want a minimum of housework and no garden of their own. Finally, the planning officer proposed that, by virtue of this development, Inkpen should become one of the 'key' villages of the county, serving not only its own internal interests, but also those of surrounding hamlets and farmsteads, in an area inhabited by several hundred people, where individual and piecemeal development would not be justified. The plan is now awaiting consideration by the county council. Thus far runs the history of one attempt to solve the problems of the scattered village.



MOTHER of seven boys, to friend who remarked what a pity it was she had no daughters: 'Boys be best. They on'y wants a shirt an' a kick i' the pants, an' they c'n be a brave help on the farm. Girls wants proper dressing an' be more of a trouble. Boys be best'.

## Hints for the Home Acre

I wyll not saye that it is the beste waye and wyll serue beste in all places, but I saye it is the best way that euer I coude proue by experyence, and haue assaied many and dyuers wayes, and done my dyligence—*The Boke of Husbandry*, 1534. You plant and transplant and are dirty and amused—*Gray*

### Corn On and Off the Cob

ONE of the easiest crops to grow on a light sandy loam in the southern half of England is sweet corn. For three years, working only at week-ends and on summer evenings, I have grown a small area of it for sale, and have made a profit at the rate of about £100 an acre in a good season and £60 in a poor one. In 1945, in partnership with two friends, from a quarter of an acre we sold 2800 ears, or cobs, at a little more than 9d apiece. Between us we worked for 250 hours. I quote that year because it was the only one in which we kept a detailed log.

All three summers have been the very opposite of what we were told sweet corn must have. In 1946 it rained every day in the crucial month of June, and the young plants never grew an inch; yet from three quarters of an acre of ground full of couch and poppies we made a profit of just under £40. One of the most surprising attributes of sweet corn is that of growing at a ferocious speed at the first hint of real summer weather. Last year in the middle of July I thought that the field would be a dead loss, but during that remarkable spell of fine weather at the beginning of the Olympic Games it more than made up for lost time. We had our first meal of corn-on-the-cob on August 18, and sold our first consignment, for 1s an ear, six days later.

Last year my one partner and I intended to grow principally maize for our hens, and to sell only enough sweet corn to cover the cost. But we were almost the only growers in

our district whose crop succeeded, and the demand was so urgent and flattering that we sold 536 ears and gave away about 300. Even then we managed to leave enough to harden on the stalk to rub off about one hundredweight of good maize by mid-November. On it our hens grew sleek and fat.

Experience has taught us that the light sandy loam must be rich in humus. Basic slag applied in late autumn, and a top-dressing of nitrates in mid-June and mid-July are usually necessary, though not indispensable. Lack of potash is apt to prevent the end of the ear from maturing. In order to give the crop all the available light and heat the rows should run north and south. If the plot measures less than a rod, allow for the smallest margin of error in wind-pollination by making the fullest use of the prevailing wind. It may be necessary to sow the seed extra thickly, or to assist pollination by hand dusting. The rows should be spaced as for potatoes, and the seed sown in the last fortnight of April. Average germination is just under 80 per cent. The seed is now cheap enough to sow double and thin out; since there is no small drill reliable for sweet corn, this must be done by hand. It will transplant if the soil is damp.

It is important to keep the young plants well hoed. After they have made about a foot of growth, they can beat even the toughest couch-grass, though, of course, they prefer to have their feet clean. In plots with wire-worms it is courting disaster to