

Edwin Russell, Reports in the Labourers' Union Chronicle , No. 8 (Oct. 12, 1872), p. 6

WINCHCOMBE.— Wednesday, October 2nd. Across the country several miles, where there are no railways made as yet, and where stone walls take the place of hedge-rows, the delegates wandered, up hill and down dale, until they came to Winchcombe, a small old-fashioned town, which appears to have almost grown out of date. There are about 3,000 inhabitants, the greater part of them agricultural labourers, and yet, strange to say, they have never had a labourers' meeting. They had heard of the movement, and had at length sent to the office at Leamington, asking for the visit of a delegate. Mr. Russell was deputed to attend, in company with Mr. Hemming, of Barrington (Chairman of the Northleach Board). They sent on the bills, announcing their coming, and now paid a visit to the place. They found that the bills had been well distributed, and were led to expect a large number of labourers at the meeting. They found several of the more influential men in the place favourable to the movement — amongst others, the Church minister, the Rev. Mr. Jackson, who was present during the whole of the meeting, and the high bailiff, Dr. Newman, who proffered the use of the Town Hall; but that not being considered large enough, we stood opposite his house, by his request. A band of music played, while the labourers marched through part of the town, in a long procession of men, women, and children; but as the hour was getting late, and by this time great numbers of people were anxious to hear the advocates of the Union speak on the subject, a wagon was brought to the spot, which served well for a platform. A labourer named Jotham Fry was called upon to preside, who, in a few quaint, but useful remarks, introduced the speakers to the meeting. The people assembled by this time could not have been less than 2,000, and still they kept increasing, and all seemed anxious to hear. Mr. Hemming delivered a well-received speech, which was frequently applauded. At the close of his address, the band struck up a popular air, and after the strains of the music had died away in the distance, Mr. Russell raised his voice in the advocacy of our noble movement. The vast concourse of people listened with great attention while he explained the constitution and rules and how the Union was conducted. All seemed to be well satisfied, and after inviting anyone to come up and speak on the other side of the question, no one attempted to come forward, so they began to enroll names, and form a branch, thirty members joining there and then, and scores said they would come and join another night, as they were not prepared with the entrance fee of six-pence. Three cheers for the Queen, three for the speakers and chairman, and three for the loan of the wagon, brought one of the best meetings to an end, that was ever held in the old town of Winchcombe.

Edwin Russell was one of the twelve labourers on the initial Executive Council of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in May 1872. Russell deputised in Joseph Arch's absence as chairman of the Executive Council, and in July 1872 he and Arch were described as 'the chief organising lecturers of the National Union'. He sent in much more detailed reports to the Chronicle than any of the union's other organisers, or 'delegates', and these permit the organising process to be traced in great detail. From October 1872, Russell seems to have concentrated his attentions on Herefordshire, having already briefly toured the county with Arch in June. Arch went on to become a Liberal MP, but the NALU largely fell apart in the mid-1870s and little else is known about Russell. He was listed in the 1871 census as a farm labourer living in Harbury in Warwickshire, aged 45 and born in Warwick. Interestingly, his eldest son had been born in St. Johns Wood in London, so presumably Russell was not always a farm worker. The 1881 census listed him as living in Commercial Road in Hereford, working as a 'General Dealer' and assisted by his wife and three daughters. He was also described as being a local preacher.

William Camden, Britain, or, a Chorographical Description of the most flourishing Kingdoms, England, Scotland, and Ireland (1607)

There is heere likewise Winchelcomb, a great towne and well inhabited, where Kenulph the Mercian King erected an Abbay, and on the same daie that hee hallowed and dedicated it, he freed and sent home Fabricht a King of Kent, whom he had kept before his prisoner. A man would hardly beleeve how much haunted and frequented this Abbay was long since, for the reliques of King Kenelme, a child seaven years old, whom his owne sister to get the inheritance unto her selfe secretly made away, and our forefathers registred in the ranke of holy Martyrs. The Territorie adjoining hereto in times past was reckoned a County by it selfe or a Sherif-dom. For wee read in an old manuscript sometime belonging to the Church of Worcester in this wise; Edric surnamed Streona, that is, The Getter or Gainer, who first under King Aetheldred, and afterwards for a good while under Cnute or Canut governed the whole Kingdome of England and ruled as Vice Roy, adjoined the sherif-dome of Winchelcombe, which was then an entier thing by it selfe, unto the shire of Gloucester.

William Camden was born in London in 1551, and attended Christ's Hospital, St Paul's School and Oxford University. From 1575 he taught at Westminster School but spent holidays travelling for antiquarian research. The first edition Britannia was published in Latin in 1586. He became headmaster of Westminster in 1593 and Clarenceux King of Arms, a senior officer of the College of Arms, in 1597. He died in 1623. Later editions of Britannia saw major changes. We present here the text of Philemon Holland's English translation of 1610, based on Camden's final edition of 1607 and probably translated under Camden's direction. It was the first ever published topographical survey of the whole British Isles, county by county. It does not describe a particular journey but within counties it often follows the main rivers.

Giraldus Cambrensis, The Itinerary of Archbishop Baldwin through Wales (1191)

What miraculous power hath not in our days been displayed by the psalter of Quindreda, sister of St. Kenelm, by whose instigation he was killed? On the vigil of the saint, when, according to custom, great multitudes of women resorted to the feast at Winchelcumbe, the under butler of that convent committed fornication with one of them within the precincts of the monastery. This same man on the following day had the audacity to carry the psalter in the procession of the relics of the saints; and on his return to the choir, after the solemnity, the psalter stuck to his hands. Astonished and greatly confounded, and at length calling to his mind his crime on the preceding day, he made confession, and underwent penance; and being assisted by the prayers of the brotherhood, and having shown signs of sincere contrition, he was at length liberated from the miraculous bond. That book was held in great veneration; because, when the body of St. Kenelm was carried forth, and the multitude cried out, "He is the martyr of God! truly he is the martyr of God!" Quindreda, conscious and guilty of the murder of her brother, answered, "He is as truly the martyr of God as it is true that my eyes be on that psalter;" for, as she was reading the psalter, both her eyes were miraculously torn from her head, and fell on the book, where the marks of the blood yet remain.

Giraldus Cambrensis, or Gerald of Wales, was born at Manorbier in Pembrokeshire in around 1146. His real name was Gerald de Barri, and he was of mixed Welsh and Norman ancestry. His father, William de Barry, was a leading Welsh nobleman. His uncle was Bishop of St. David's and he received a religious education. He became chaplain to King Henry II of England in 1184. He accompanied Prince John on his expedition to Ireland in 1184, which led to his first book, Topographia Hibernica (1188). In 1188 he accompanied the Archbishop of Canterbury, Baldwin of Exeter, on a tour of Wales recruiting for the Third Crusade, which led to him writing the Itinerarium Cambriae (1191) and the Descriptio Cambriae (1194). He died in about 1223.

St. Kenelm was the only son and heir of Kenulfus, king of the Mercians, who left him under the care of his two sisters, Quendreda and Bragenilda. The former, blinded by ambition, resolved to destroy the innocent child, who stood between her and the throne; and for that purpose prevailed on Ascebert, who attended constantly on the king, to murder him privately, giving him hopes, in case he complied with her wishes, of making him her partner in the kingdom. Under the pretence of diverting his young master, this wicked servant led him into a retired vale at Clent, in Staffordshire, and having murdered him, dug a pit, and cast his body into it, which was discovered by a miracle, and carried in solemn procession to the abbey of Winchcomb. In the parish of Clent is a small chapel dedicated to this saint.

A quick overview of the History of Winchcombe taken from "Winchcombe Cavalcade" by Eleanor Adlard

Our earliest monument in the Winchcombe district is the long horned barrow of Belas Knap, built on the heights above Humblebee Wood, some 986 feet above sea level, by the long-headed late Stone Age men. Life was then only possible on an eminence which could be used as a lookout over the trackless swamps in the vale below. It was a period of great importance as the dolichocephalic or long-headed men were evolving the beginnings of village communal life, in which they cultivated the land and used, as domestic animals, the horse, ox, pig, dog, sheep and goat.

The construction of Belas Knap shows design and building of no mean order, for the pancake layering of the thin stone slats is a magnificent example of the art of dry walling, still a peculiar Cotswold craft, while the revetments holding the great thrust of the barrow have remained unmoved during many centuries. The axis lies north and south, which is rare, if not unique, in Cotswold. It is now restored and scheduled an Ancient Monument, secure from further excavations, though it is too late to save its crowning circle of great stones which, old country men tell you, were dragged off by farmers to serve ignobly as stiles and gate posts. These long barrows were not only used as communal burying places and for ritual purposes, but probably served, too, as huge sign posts on the sky line of the hills to direct travellers across the pathless valleys.

Later the round-headed Bronze Age men came to Cotswold, bringing their distinctive beaker pottery with them; two bronze axes and a spear of this period were found on Cleeve Hill and are illustrated in Mrs. Dent's Annals of Winchcombe and Sudeley. Barrows of this age were round and built for single burials, but being less massively constructed than the long barrows, successive centuries of ploughing have much reduced their height and in some cases obliterated them. To the early Iron Age which followed, we attribute the building of the Camps crowning Nottingham Hill, Langley and Cleeve Hill. From Cleeve Hill, "duck motive" pottery was found in 1903 and similar pottery has lately been discovered in the Bredon Hill Camp. Finds of this period in the Winchcombe area include broaches and an enamelled horse trapping.

Radiating out from barrow to barrow and hill-top camp to camp are the trackways, marked by the darker green of the grass, a great stone, or a deeply sunk road crossing the streams in shallow fordable places, usually keeping just under the ridges of the hillsides for protection from the weather or enemies. Such a trackway runs from Belas Knap to

the Nutgrove barrow, and others lead to the chalk Wiltshire Downs, the nearest source of the all important flint tools, used not only as arrow heads and axes, but as domestic knives and scrapers.

In Neolithic times, life round Winchcombe was practically a hill top existence when hardy sturdy men and women grew and ground their corn, using primitive implements, and above all, laying the foundations of Cotswold masonry which endure to this day.

The coming of the Romans in AD 43 brought great changes, not least being the use of the potters wheel, which was first introduced in the latter part of the Iron Age. The Romans explored the possibilities of Winchcombe and called it a "fat-valley". building at least three villas in the neighbourhood of which Spoonley is the largest. It ranks among the most important Roman houses in England; its large granary measures 54x34 feet and is constructed like a church with naves and aisles. This villa was probably built in the 2nd century and continued to the 4th century; it was excavated by Mrs. Dent but has now, unfortunately lapsed into ruin again. Another villa is that of the Wadfields, originally called "Woad-fields" this too, was restored by Mrs Dent, who took the tessellated pavement to Sudeley Castle to preserve it from souvenir hunters. A third villa exists in Stancomb Wood, and there is a rumour that St Paul himself visited the Roman legionaries stationed at Millampost.

The subsequent history of Winchcombe is practically that of it's magnificent Abbey. After the Dissolution the little town deteriorated, in spite of grants of markets and spasmodic industrial efforts, the population then being little more than half it was in Elizabeth's reign. The neighbouring estates likewise declined, Langley being a hamlet in the 16th century. Postlip Hall in the 12th century has a sufficient population to warrant its own Chapel services with a Chaplain, and in the 14th century we read of several "new houses" at Cordean. These now cannot be considered other than solitary manors. But with the destruction of the abbeys, country towns were faded with new problems of poverty which the Civil Wars did nothing to alleviate. Various experiments in industry during the 18th century helped Winchcombe somewhat, and the proximity of the fruit growers and the energetic smallholders of Evesham further stimulated the placid life in the place.

Sudeley Castle is intertwined with Winchcombe, and is far more spectacular. This has been vividly described by Mrs Dent with much detail. As its name implies, it is of Saxon origin, South lea, or ley, meaning field. The site being a lovely and coveted one, the Castle was built in Stephen's reign, and rebuilt lavishly by Ralph de Boteler; "it had the Price of all the Buildings in those days". Leland further writes: "King Edward bore no good will to Lord of Sudeley, whereupon by complaints he was attacked, and going up to London, he looked from the hill of Sudeley and said 'Sudeley Castle, thou art the traitor, not I !' After that he made an honest declaration and sold his Castle of Sudeley to the King." Which was probably exactly what Edward IV intended.

Henry VIII stayed at Sudeley, liking the hunting and its "salubrious air". The Landoc says that on "July 17, 1535, Thomas Cromwell went down to Sudeley Castle to prepare for the Royal visit in the progress during July, August and September of that year. Henry with Anne Boleyn was here from Wednesday, 21 July to the Monday following". While at Sudeley Queen Katherine of Aragon employed her busy needle reconstructing a 14th century cope with its panels of saints and angels into the lovely Altar Cloth used till 1872 on Winchcombe Church Altar. It now hangs in a frame in the North Aisle.

Lord Seymour, High Admiral of England, married Henry VIII's last wife within a few months of the Kings death, and brought her to Sudeley. It could not have been a happy home for Katherine Parr, as Seymour was already casting covetous eyes on the young Princess Elizabeth, then at Sudeley, whence she was presently sent away "for unseemly romping". His vaulting ambition was leaping at the Crown, and when Katherine died in childbirth, it was gossiped that he had poisoned her to clear his pathway to marriage with Elizabeth. Katherine Parr was a kind step mother and patron of literature; it was during her reign at the Castle that Miles Coverable stayed there and worked at his translation of the bible into English. He preached at her funeral, which was conducted at Sudeley according to the new Reformed rites, the tragic Lady Jane Grey being chief mourner.

Seymour was subsequently beheaded as a traitor, and Sudeley passed into the hands of the Bridges family, later known as Chandos. Queen Elizabeth visited it several times on her Royal Progresses - probably with memories she did not share with her Court. There is a curious legend in Gloucestershire that she died here as a baby and that a village boy, the only available infant of the same age, secretly took her place in order to secure the Protestant succession. The legend was no doubt launched to account for her masculine qualities and the fact that she never married, but it does not explain her peculiarly Tudor traits.

During the Civil Wars Sudeley changed hands and was finally "slighted" by Cromwell, after which its owners, Lord and Lady Chandos, lived at Roel. Evil days followed and during the early part of the 19th century it even fell as low as to become a public ale house - "The Castle Arms". Mercifully in 1830 it was bought and restored by the Dent family and again resumed its rank as one of the more princely manors in England. Mrs Emma Dent was not only a distinguished writer, and a mine of local history but a great and beautiful lady; she was a sort of guardian angel to the district, keenly interested in its present as well as its past, and to her the Castle owes its wonderful collection of local antiquities.

The desecrated tomb of Katherine Parr was suitably restored in the Chapel, it had been opened several times during the last part of the 18th century by robbers and drunken farmers. In 1817 Mr Edmund Browne and the Rev. John Lates, vicar of Winchcombe, found the leaden coffin of the Queen where it was lying amongst rabbit holes, and had it re-buried in the Chandos vault. It is pleasant to add that the writer was able to complete this good deed by collecting the various "souvenirs" some hair, a tooth, a piece of the cere cloth, etc. remaining from the ghoulish vandals' haul, to be re-interred in a lead urn in the Chandos vault in Sudeley Church. So may poor Katherine Parr's bones at last be allowed to rest in peace.

So much for a brief survey of old days in the district. Times altered swiftly with improved transport of the late 19th century and even more speedy 20th century motors. Social life was revolutionised. The roads through Winchcombe had successively served pre-historic man for his hunting and trade trackways and the practical Romans who paved them with good stone. Later the victorious Offa and Kenulf had used these same "streets", followed in their turn by the throngs of pilgrims and Churchmen worshipping St Kenelm's sacred relics in the great Abbey. Then came the wool men with their pacing pack ponies, and always soldiers, marching to and from wars for or against Kings, Nobles or the Commonwealth.

In 1810, coaches left London daily for Gloucester and Cheltenham from Angel, St Clement's, or Golden Cross at Charing Cross. Slower transport was supplied weekly by wagons, or barges sailing up and down the Thames and the new Severn Canal. Then in 1840 the Iron Horse arrived in Cheltenham, and, as Amy Lowell describes it in Hedge Island, in a short moment the coaches with their gallant teams of fast trotting horses and monumental coachmen "vanished in a puff of steam".

MacAdam's day had arrived, too, and no longer were country dwellers confined to a small radius linked by bad roads and further impeded by frequent toll gates, which catered more for the slow traffic of asses, mules and oxen than hustling humans, already aspiring to the penny farthing bicycle.

The Winchcombe bus, until it was superseded by 20th century motors, continued to plod up Cleeve Hill, and to sidle down on daily trips to Cheltenham, plastered with white mud in winter and grey dust in summer months. And within living memory, Mr Drury's coach and four horses from Broadway would come at a spanking pace with much blowing of horns through Winchcombe to Cheltenham. Winchcombe had its own railway on the Great Western Line, completed in 1906, though as far back as 1865 the then Midland Railway had plans to link up Winchcombe with Beckford via Gretton, but this never materialised. The plans of this are in the Church Porch Museum.

The High Street, Hailes and Gloucester Street presently form the spine of this ancient town that can justly claim a thousand years of continuous occupation. At first sight Gloucester Street seems rather spartan and stark. It is a long curve of ancient cottages welded by time into a tight terrace of stone homes. Grapevines grow over the silvery gold walls. Stable doors are something of a tradition here. The frontages may seem quite bland, but each cottage holds secrets. Gothic doorways, massive timbers, gruesome gargoyles and mysterious carvings hide behind lace curtains. Inside, one may find cavernous Tudor fireplaces reappearing after long concealment. Newly rediscovered wells are sometimes revealed, and long lost wall paintings have been uncovered. There are still many more Winchcombe secrets to be found.

The town will not give itself to the passing motorist. It will not give itself to the tourist expecting a great architectural set-piece that can be inspected in fifteen minutes before speeding on to Stratford. Instant culture freaks will be disappointed. You must stop, look and linger. Take time to stroll down Vineyard Street to the Isbourne and cross the bridge into the grounds of Sudeley, then take the Old Brockhampton Road up into the glorious valley beyond the castle. Walk in the wood of Humblebee, the very woods that JRR Tolkien wandered before he created the magnificent "Lord of the Rings", if you look over your shoulder you may see Strider or even Gandalf himself. Search out Spoonley Villa, hiding in its dense wood, and sit in Roman rooms on mossy ways of fine, fallen masonry. Gently pull back grubby plastic sacks and you will find mosaics beneath your feet, if you listen you can hear the Romans whispering.

St. Peter's Church

Winchcombe Church is not disposed to be ornate and mystical. It is, instead, powerful, honest and uncomplicated. In this respect it reflects, in architecture, the spirit of the town. St. Peter's has a friendly, thriving and supportive community. The flower displays are often stunning. Many superb evening concerts are held in it. The tower is magnificent. It is not weakened by flamboyant detailing, and cradles a fine set of bells and a joyous band of ringers.

The church makes two concessions to ostentation in its glinting weathercock and set of gargoyles. Try making faces back at the forty or so gargoyles that decorate the exterior. How else can you respond to this huge collection of glowering, growling and grinning sculpture? They are famous across the land. There is a wicked suggestion that each figure represented a local character in the 1460's.

Winchcombe is so far from the sea, but ironically, the most startling image within the church is the great boat on the Sea of Galilee that spreads across the east window. A favourite feature of many is the beautiful brass chandelier donated in 1753 that hangs in the nave.

The screen has jumped to the west end of the church. It does not seem all that interesting, until, you spot the naughty imp looking at you from the carvings.

The construction of the church first started in the 1470's. A fruit of the co-operation between Sir Ralph Boteler, the Abbot, and a fair number of wealthy townsfolk.

Kenelm

The Monk's Tale of "Kingly" little St. Kenelm being butchered on the orders of his grasping sister has been shot full of academic holes. Dates and documents refuse to tie up! The little chap was more like 37 than 7. The monks of Winchcombe, with all the savvy of "The News of the World" news desk, realised that the savage murder of an innocent prince of seven would catch the imagination of the populace and draw in lots of pilgrims, hungry for miracles, with "dosh". Even now people stare at the stone coffins in St Peter's with curiosity and take the story at face value.