

*The Changing Village: Walesby*

THIS is a retrospective year. The period celebrated by the Silver Jubilee has been reviewed, analysed, filmed, sung, laughed over, wept over. A picture of the year 1910 has been reconstructed again and again until it is as familiar to us as our own. Few people, consequently, are now unaware of the vast changes in our method of living during the past quarter of a century. The tempo of the great scientific revolution of the last 200 years has been greater in the early part of this century than at any previous period. Old landmarks are disappearing; traditional ideas and ways of life have been altered. In few institutions has change and uprooting been more drastic than in the village.

The following description of the village of Walesby as it is to-day is intended to present a picture of a typical Nottinghamshire village in a state of transition. The facts were supplied by a small but keen local history group, with the co-operation of the schoolmaster and his pupils. The survey makes no claims to be comprehensive. It is merely an attempt to extract a 'still' photograph from the film of change and progress in village life and labour, and to preserve it as a record of Walesby in the early fourth decade of the twentieth century.

Walesby, according to an old directory, is (like most villages) a 'pleasant village', situated half-way between Ollerton and Tuxford. A more recent directory informs the inquirer that it is in the Newark Division of the County, and the rural district of Southwell. It lies at the foot of a ridge of low, soothing, easterly hills, with the Forest as its western boundary, and it is spread over an area of 1474 acres. It is situated mainly on the famous Bunter Sandstone — a misfortune for which its present residents cannot be held responsible. But it is at the extreme western edge of the sandstone country; the rich marl-lands actually begin in the eastern section of the parish. Farming is, consequently, not unsatisfactory; springs are plentiful; a tributary of the Maun

connects it with the outside world; it is sheltered by its sunny hills, on which hop-growing was once popular. Walesby's Danish ancestors were no fools when they selected the site.

The population of the village, at the time of the 1931 census, was 336, of which 172 were males and 164 females—a proportion that gratifies the ladies of Walesby. Statistical jugglers will be pleased to know that there were 82 private families living in 81 structurally separate dwellings, and that the averages of 0·23 persons to the acre and of 0·76 to the room are approximately the same as those for the whole rural district in which Walesby is situated. But, illustrated by these dry figures is a fact of supreme importance for Walesby—it is no longer a decaying village. In 1841 the population reached the peak figure of 416; the lure of industry and the late nineteenth-century agricultural decline had reduced this figure to the alarming total of 233 by 1911. Then came the change; and Walesby's most practical contribution to the Jubilee celebrations is a record of 25 years steady recovery, with the coming of the collieries to the district and with new amenities for country living provided by bus, wireless, electricity and a belated water scheme that comes, characteristically, at the wrong end of the list of improvements. By 1931 the population had risen to 336; and I am told that it is to-day 410—a remarkable increase of 74 in four years, or (another gift to the statisticians) approximately 1·5 every month.

In various ways, Walesby has to work for its living. And in the occupations of the breadwinning section of its 400 inhabitants the second aspect of change can be seen. At a casual glance there would appear to be little difference in this respect between 1935 and 1895. Then, as now, farming was the economic basis of village life; and still, to-day, there is the traditional wide variety of rural trades—the blacksmith, the two joiners, the builders, gardeners, baker, storekeepers and butcher. But now farming is split. Apart from the twenty-nine farmers and their farm labourers, there are the nine poultry farmers and their labourers (and of course the 8,000



to 10,000 poultry) – a sign of the growing specialization of the twentieth century. There are now 28 colliers working in neighbouring pits – almost as many as the farmers and farm-labourers. Fifty years ago, the young and enterprising left Walesby for industry and a problematical fortune; now, they still move into industry, but they stay in the village and forget the fortune.

It is, however, the social life of the village that shows most graphically the countryside in transition. Forty years ago, for diversion, Walesby stayed at home, supported its Feast, walked to Thoresby to celebrate, or journeyed adventurously on foot, or in the carrier's cart, to Ollerton, or Retford.

In 1935 the first regular bus service ran through Walesby.

It is impossible to estimate, as yet, the vast, fundamental alteration of outlook and activity that modern methods of communication are producing. Walesby's case is typical and startling. Regular, luxurious bus services connect the village with Retford, Mansfield and Nottingham; 160 inhabitants of Walesby possess bicycles – practically one bicycle between two people; there are 21 motor-cycles, or one to every four families; and 13 cars, or one to every seven families. With its buses, cars, motor-cycles and bicycles Walesby is becoming mechanized and is forgetting how to walk. On Saturdays there is a general exodus from the village; within easy reach there are a dozen cinemas. For those who stay at home there is the wireless – 73 sets (an average of approximately three to every four families) providing that background to household activities that seems so essential to-day.

But the consequences of communication developments are two-way. While these miracles of modern science are giving young Walesby dazzling facilities for spending its money outside, old Walesby is not forgotten by the modern mechanized salesmen. The one-time self-supporting village, with its occasional travelling pedlars, is now invaded by a swarm of eager dealers. Two bakers, two butchers, and three green-grocers bring weekly coals to Newcastle; five visiting doctors

keep Walesby fit, and half a dozen agents for insurance companies benefit from their work. Ice-cream vans, wireless vans, travelling chiropodists, lending libraries on wheels, itinerant chimney sweeps and laundries, all conspire to reduce Walesby to a state of affable acquiescence in a new world that insists on saving it the trouble of moving beyond its doorstep.

The initiative of the village is, however, far from dead. The old community spirit may be broken by the explosive, emancipating blows of a scientific era. Yet this much-maligned, spoon-fed age is producing an almost overwhelming display of organizing ability that is creating a new community idea. Sporting needs are amply catered for by cricket, football, tennis and bowls clubs. Life in Walesby in winter is more hectic than in many great cities. The Men's Institute, the Mothers' Union, the Sisterhood, the Girls' Guild, and the Wolf Cubs cater for organizational desires; a bewildering succession of dances, socials, whist drives and concerts is dovetailed in between the meetings of the Ladies' Choir and the Dramatic Society (temporarily defunct), the popular lectures – all provided through the Walesby Rural Community Council Branch and the adult education courses supplied by University College, Nottingham.

Walesby in winter is no place for weaklings. It is easy to have four or five evenings a week continuously occupied from October to March; this activity, coupled with an average rising time between 6.30 and 7 a.m., and an unwritten social stigma attaching to the late riser, is a challenge to the hardest.

Walesby is changing. The ultimate direction and the mental and physical consequences of the change are problems for the twenty-first century to solve. The contribution of this age is to register the features of the change. Perhaps some amateur camera-man will attempt to produce a composite film of Walesby's life to-day; the village is a compact unit, and the cinema could produce and preserve a far more vivid document of the work and pleasures than any written accounts. – J.A.G.