

LITTLE STOUR RECORDS.

①

By V. J. TORR.

East Kent, unlike many parts of the West Country, is not a land of many fresh waterways. If we exclude the River Rother, which for many miles divides Kent from Sussex and is any case for the most part a Sussex stream, and the Royal Military Canal, encircling the backside of Romney Marsh; about all we have left are two rivers, the Great and Little Stours. But it was not always so. If you look at a physical map of Kent which is marked in contours (and better still, if colours are used to signify differences in the height above sea-level of the surface of the land), you will find that the northern slope of the Kentish backbone, the North Downs, has a constant succession of mostly rather narrow and sometimes winding valleys, all heading for the lowlands by the Thames estuary and the open sea. Similarly there are many such valleys which empty themselves from the plateau between Folkestone and Dover into the larger one in which the latter town is situated. These have a more easterly inclination than those lying to the south, generally speaking, of Doverham and Canterbury.

These remarkable valleys are almost all quite dry at the present time, though a few of them revert to their ancient condition by still displaying phenomena called "nailbowms".

These are peculiar watercourses which sometimes are found in a state approaching flood, and sometimes mere trickles of water, and sometimes completely dry for long periods ^{at a stretch.} But it is probable that in prehistoric times all these ~~valleys~~ valleys were in the course of ages carved out of the chalk by the action of water; so that Kent would then have been a land of running streams.

The Great Stour is curious in that it has two separate sources, widely apart. One headstream rises near Lenham and the other near Postling, and both head east and west to meet at Ashford. Thence in their united course to Canterbury they pass through one of the most beautiful pieces of scenery in Kent, the winding valley past Godmersham, Clulham and Chartham, which is so reminiscent of ^{those} the Darent in West Kent and the Mole in Surrey. From Canterbury the river runs north-east, past Fordwich and Westbere, and eventually comes into the great belt of marshland dividing the mainland from the Isle of Thanet. This is the dried-up sea channel which for centuries was the highway for Roman ships plying between London and Gaul, now called France. Once ^{para} arrived at the ^{these} marshes, a branch of the Great Stour heads north for Reculver, while another and the more important one flows south to Sandwich, describes a loop, and then goes north to

270

meet the sea in Pegwell Bay, on the southern^③
coast of Thanet.

Very near the point where the Reculver and
Sandwich branches of the Great Stour divide
is a road bridge called Plucks Gutter, in the
parish of a nearly circular village called
Stowmouth. This got its name because
hereabouts was anciently the place where the
Stour ended in the tidal waters of the Wantsum
channel cutting off the Isle of Thanet from
the rest of Kent. Here also and to this day
is the place where the great Stour receives
its smaller tributary, the Little one.

Oddly enough, the Little Stour rises in Lymington,
divided by only about a mile or two of high land
from the Postling source of its greater sister.
Flowing nearly northwards, and in some parts
of its early course forming a nailbourne, it
passes Elham, Barkham and Kingston, and
then runs through the "country of the
tounes", a district notable for some of the
most attractive of Kentish villages, both in
themselves and because of their surrounding
scenery. Five villages in succession stand on
the Little Stour: Bishopsbourne (called anciently
simply Bowne); Bridge, a significant name, for
here the stream meets the great Roman highroad
to Dover, the Watling Street; Patrisbourne or Patricks-
bourne; Bekesbourne, known in really early times as
Livingbourne; and lastly Littlebourne, of which the church

has an ancient dedication, unique in the county, ⁽⁴⁾
to St. Vincent. (X) [to be continued] or →

When the land of the Bourne has thus been
travelled through, the Little Stour then meanders
along the valley between Wickham and Ickham
on the one side and Wingham and Preston on the
other, and finally joins the Great, quite close to
Pluck's gutter bridge.

The three parishes now in the spiritual
care of Mr. Pennely, like all the rest, whether
ending or not in "Bourne", have their being from
the common link of this picturesque little
river. This is the first part of a series of notes
about the Three - Bridge, Patrysbourne and
Bekesbourne - ~~which~~ ^{and they} are likely to continue
for a long time to come in the pages of their
common parish magazine. So to avoid any
contention, I thought the fairest thing would
be to call these notes "Little Stour Records" (X)

I hope to be able to put before modern
parishioners of the three places ^{Bridge, Patrysbourne, Bekesbourne} many
records from their past which are not only
good reading in themselves but also
information which otherwise they would find
it hard indeed to come by.

No time could be more appropriate than the
present for such a venture, for two reasons: -
a) It has been tried in many other places in
Kent, Sussex and elsewhere, and has been
received with real appreciation.

(5)

b) East Kent, though stuffed with ^{noble buildings and} proud history so that perhaps in one respect it is the most important part of England (quite apart from lying at the feet of its "Mother-Church"), has nevertheless had within the last 200 years a most discreditable record of destruction of valuable buildings which otherwise would still be its glory and boast to-day. This in hope of fanning up local pride as an antidote to these evil deeds, and to try to build up a shield against any more, that I have undertaken this task.

In case any reader might think this indictment of evil deeds mere rhetoric, let me set down only some of the instances which establish it to be sober fact:-

1) In the reign of King William IV, the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury committed the unpardonable offence of destroying the N.W. tower of the Cathedral, which had stood firm since the days of William the Conqueror and Archbishop Lanfranc, on the frivolous pretext that they wanted to erect in its place one which would match-up with that at the S.W. corner! No Chapter could get away with this sort of nonsense to-day, of course, but the lack of logic was pitiful. If different parts of the great church should all match, then clearly they should have pulled down the early Gothic quire as

discordant with the style of the nave and two ⁶ great towers. Nor was this all: the work put into this bogus N.W. tower was so inferior that it proved very expensive, later on, to repair.

2) About the same beighted period, ^{another} Norman tower of great architectural importance was wantonly destroyed, among the ruins of St. Augustine's to be.

2) In 1809, the very ancient church of Reculver was pulled down, in deplorable circumstances: - three years earlier, its Vicar had certified the Archbishop that it was in good repair. Gross neglect to erect piers to arrest the wastage of the nearby sea cliffs had produced a panic by 1809, and the local authorities wanted to salvage enough of the materials to build them and then church out of reach of the sea. Beyond doubt, a certain amount of duplicity and sharp-practice cast a further shadow over the whole ugly business. It is piquant to record that the new church proved so cheap and miserable a one that for very shame, a later generation felt bound to pull it down and erect number three!

4) Most shocking things happened in Canterbury, even apart from church vandalism. Every one of the ancient city gateways was demolished

with a single exception, and that saved only ⑦ after a bitter fight. Two of these destroyed Cates were actually Roman, and drawings of them still exist. In later years - in Canterbury of all places - various precious houses were destroyed (quite apart from any damage in either world war); an early Norman crypt, near the G.P.O., perished in order to lower a shop floor by a few inches; and even to-day the civic authorities need the closest watching to prevent any more villainies!

5) 13th-century domestic architecture is very rare any where, and destruction of it is therefore criminal. Yet the Preceptory of the Knights Templars at Swinfield has been suffered to get into bad condition, and the outlook is dark. (People in continental Europe do not behave in this barbarous way where precious antiquities are concerned; and yet their daily life is often more go-ahead and efficient than our own)

6) Nearly all the ^{town} fates of Sandwich came down, and in Dover every one.

7) The Court Lodge at Godmersham (13th-century) was wantonly pulled down, of recent years, despite loud protests.

8) It was like fighting at Dunkirk, though well after the end of the second war, to stop the authorities from butchering the precious church of St. Mary in Sandwich.

- 9) In 1978, the ignorant corporation of Deal ^⑧ were only prevented by higher authority from disembowelling the greater part of that town, whereby all manner of fine and useful houses would have perished.
- 10) Throughout in East Kent, this is near enough home to be included: - After some 30 years of scandalous ruin, the ancient church of Burham, near Rochester, was at last rescued and properly repaired.
- 11) Just finished is the ultimate rescue of Temple Manor at Strood, in the same area - after a long period in which the state of its roof became a public scandal.
- 12) To complete a dozen, as I write, a precious house, partly medieval, is being demolished in Upper Deal, despite a herculean fight to save it.

If anyone is not convinced by the foregoing cases, all in a limited area, that something is ~~not~~ radically wrong with the works in modern England, he must be dull of understanding - especially if he has travelled on the Continent and witnessed a very different public attitude. But I think I have written enough to prove my point, and to express the earnest hope that a wholly improved outlook may keep your Little Stour villages in their present attractive state.

(to be continued)