



Gateway Old Palace.



COBHAM COURT



VILLAGE STREET



The Way to Church

BEKESBOURNE

HERE is a difficult village to locate. You naturally walk towards the church, which stands on an eminence, or rather on the slope of a hill, but when you reach the road close by you see no village, no suggestion of a street. Hasted tells us that in his day, a hundred and fifty years ago, "the village consists of only five houses." Those houses, all residences and farmsteads, remain, but some distance away evidence of a real village and a few old houses can be found. These Hasted must have missed.

The traveller of to-day might also be excused for mistaking the street as a part of Bekesbourne, for it is close, very close, to its neighbour, Patrixbourne. As a matter of fact, only the high road separates them, and when you turn a corner and see the cluster of houses you do not realise that on one side you are in Bekesbourne and on the other side in Patrixbourne, with the glorious trees that rise up in Bifrons Park and spread their branches across the road. This road is a portion of the Pilgrims' Way which ran from Dover to Canterbury, and you can still follow it without a break. In some places it ceases to be an actual road, becoming a mere bridle-path in the woods, but even here it is possible to ride a bicycle.

The mention of the Pilgrims' Way takes back our thoughts to centuries ago, when up by the church stood a magnificent archbishop's palace. But before that we find the village mentioned in Domesday, when the name was Livingsbourne, because a Saxon chieftain named Levine possessed the manor. Like most of the property in this part of Kent, Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux, afterwards became the owner, and, following precedent, the Crown took over the property when the Bishop fell into disgrace. But I shall have more to say about these ancient times when describing the Old Palace which stands near the church.

Yes, the so-called street of Bekesbourne is a beautiful spot of the sylvan type, for even on the side of the road which belongs to that parish, trees, shrubs and flowers grow among the houses. From whichever end you approach it the view is truly Kentish, for we have mighty trees rising out of the park, with Patricbourne church nestling in a wreath of wide-spreading branches. Beyond are the pastured Downs as a background, and standing near by are oasthouses that have alas! become a mere reminiscence of the past when hops were grown in great abundance hereabouts. At the end of the street is a tiny triangle with a grass floor, from which rises a tall conifer shrub, which the villagers tell you is hundreds of years old. Let them rest happy in their pride. Anyway, it is a glorious specimen of a Wellingtonia not as old as they say.

You cannot miss the artistically-shaped Bifrons Cottage with its closely-cropped yews in the garden. How they love to train trees to all sorts of shapes in this part of Kent! And then opposite is a house where Tudor origin is evident in its fine gable and overhang on one side, and at the other end a chimney-stack rising above a gable-shaped wall. Seventeenth-century bricks are everywhere, even in the tall garden walls. And this reminds us of the hopelessness of getting these old walls erected now-a-days owing to the enormous cost. What treasures they have become! And yet so frequently I see them bare of wall fruit by owners who fail to appreciate their value. I recently saw a Kentish garden surrounded by a brick wall no less than twelve feet high and its entire length fifteen hundred feet. Three hundred years ago it was built and, according to an old account, had cost £71 2s. 2d. What would be the expense to-day? And yet on the whole stretch of this superb garden wall I noticed only three ancient pear trees which might have been planted when the wall was built, so crusted were the stems and so worn out and unfertile their branches.

What a charming picture is made by that range of little houses, in the midst of which nestles the general shop of the village, with its quaint gable ornamented with a carved bargeboard. The large building at one end is older than it looks, for its overhang has been encased and its walls covered with mathematical tiles. On one of the buildings is the date 1699. Not far away, and standing isolated although flush with the road, is a half-timbered house, now divided into two dwellings and known as Elephant Cottage and

Lion Cottage from the carved corner brackets. In one case we see the head and shoulders of an elephant and in the other case a full-length lion, while other designs represent human heads. And so we stroll along the old street, along which the Canterbury pilgrims once pranced on their palfreys or struggled to keep up the pace on foot.

On one side of us are cottages with large gardens in front—gardens with a cabbage patch in the centre, but fringed by flower borders ablaze with all the homely old blossoms we treasure as the special pride of our Kentish villages—Michaelmas daisies, dahlias and chrysanthemums, with a little rose tree proudly growing out of a high standard stem. This I saw in the autumn-time. And then—the coloured leaves of the trees opposite, from flaring flame hue to every orange and yellow tint, and a few still deep green with a tinge of the blue of the sky peeping through.

A narrow road leads from one end of the village to the church, but the usual approach is from the railway station and the viaduct. Along this road we find a few modern houses, but thus far they are not crowded; then past the modern rectory and a halt on a small bridge, erected in 1830, that spans the Nailbourne, sometimes in flood and overflowing its banks and at other times with its bed as dry as a bone. This is a tributary of the remarkable Nailbourne that rises at certain periods in the Elham and Alkham valleys. (This Nailbourne is fully described in Volume II. of the "Saunter Through Kent" under the heading of Elham.)

No road leads to the church and you approach it along the footpath of a hill, similar to the entrance to the church of Reading Street in the Isle of Oxney. And here I might mention a local superstition which I unearthed at Reading Street. Here it is: Of necessity the corpse had to be lifted over the gate when a funeral took place, and on the return of the mourners they stuck a pin in the gate over which the body of their friend had been carried. It gave future happiness to the dead and prevented bad luck from befalling the living. I asked an old Bekesbourne inhabitant if the same superstition was carried out during the funerals in his churchyard, but he replied, "I think I heard of some rubbish of that sort, but we are too sensible to think of doing it now."

As you ascend by a green path the slope in the meadow the beautiful position of the church of St. Peter is impressive, and the

modern lych-gate is appropriately placed. On a carved inscription you are told that it was erected in 1870 in memory of George Gipps, of Howletts. Passing through the gate you find several stone steps leading to the porch, which is undoubtedly the most precious possession of the church. It is of Norman date and consists of two shafts with carved capitals. The corbels are human faces. Above the cylindrical mouldings is a chevron design, while the outer moulding is ornamented with nail-head design. The fool who wishes to perpetuate his memory has been at work on this doorway with wondrous industry. And the breed must have lasted many generations, for we find initials and dates cut into the masonry as far back as 1611 and as recently as the present century.

A wall around the church shows that restoration has been freely carried out; as a matter of fact, it was started in 1881 and continued for nine years, the fabric being in such a dilapidated state that the work was costly and the parish not rich enough to raise all the money at once. Happily, the Gipps family came to the rescue and gave great financial assistance. The upper part of the tower was almost re-built, and all the mullions of the windows save those in the chancel are new. The walls are of flint and superbly built, but a transept was added in 1876, unfortunately of brick on one side and of plaster on the other, and it is quite out of keeping with the rest of the building. Two long, narrow original lancets are to be seen at the east end and a smaller one in the other walls of the chancel, but two Norman lancets have been blocked up.

The churchyard is a spacious one to-day, but not so long ago it was very restricted. So the parishioners made representations to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who purchased a plot of land adjoining, but there was not a farthing in the coffers to pay for laying out the new bit of God's Acre. Not to be beaten, the men of the parish determined to carry out the work themselves. They began in September and worked every evening and every Saturday afternoon, and when the day of consecration by the Bishop of Dover arrived, what pride was in their hearts! They had completed their work—footpaths, the turf brought into cultivation, and a neat iron fencing placed around it all. Here in the centre of the new churchyard is the stone cross surrounded by a box hedge containing the names of Bekesbourne heroes who died in the Great War:—

Captain W. Howard, W. T. Goldup, P. Moore, F. W. Kingsford, S. J. Bushell, A. Bean, W. Gibbs, H. Hoare, J. Knight, W. C. V. Newport, G. E. Cage and J. Mepsted.

A dark little church is St. Peter's, for the windows are few and small, with deeply-tinted stained glass. You can enter either by the west door under the tower or from the Norman doorway in the north; but whichever way you walk inside you are struck by the darkness, the narrowness of the building and the flint walls. For there are no aisles or chapels—just the nave, the chancel and the modern transept, which is now used as a vestry. But there is something charming about the crudeness of these polished flints—they have nothing to hide by the aid of plaster. Here you see them just as the masons laid them centuries ago. And what arduous work with old-world tools!

The original Early English arch leading from the nave to the tower is acutely pointed, and the style of the chancel arch carries out the idea of the original one. It was entirely re-built as we see it to-day during the restoration which commenced in 1881, and at that time the oak screen was placed here. The only other arch is the one that leads into the transept, and this is wooden with ornamental capitals. Above the altar are two beautiful, long, narrow lancets, and in three niches large carved figures. Other things to notice are a remarkable double piscina and a benitier. The piscina is in the chancel and consists of two bowls, with a shaft, obviously of later date, running up between them. The benitier is just within the entrance on the north side of the nave and, although somewhat rough in formation, has a good ogeed head. All the equipment of the church—choir stalls, pulpit, lectern and font—is modern, but the deeply-splayed thirteenth-century windows of the chancel are worthy specimens of the style of the Early English period.

There are only two brasses in the church, both mere inscriptions. One is dated 1593 and commemorates Henry Porredge, with Latin verses; the other records the death in 1600 of Margaret, daughter of John Coppin, wife of Mark Cullinge. It states that she left one son named Mark and one daughter named Katherine.

The west window was erected by the widow of George Gipps, of Howletts, who died in 1883. The two lancets in the east end of the chancel were placed there in memory of their parents by the children of George and Jane Gipps. On the south wall of the

chancel is a window erected in 1885 by George Bowdler Gipps "in thankful remembrance of a special mercy." The two-light window on the same side of the chancel was erected in 1893 to the memory of David Thomas Smith, churchwarden. On the north chancel wall is a lancet erected to the memory of three members of the Gardner family—Austen, Harriett and Reginald Charles—all of whom died between 1853 and 1860. Also in this wall is a lancet erected in 1886 to Johannis Mears. The coloured windows in the nave are erected as follows:—A two-light window to William and Elizabeth Sharp and their son William, in 1886; a three-light window to the memory of Eliza Sargent in 1890; a single-light window to Mary Wardell and Mary Ramsay, erected in 1883; a window of two lights to James Craiqie Robertson, fourteen years vicar of the parish and late Canon of Canterbury Cathedral; and a three-light window dedicated to Jane Gipps, the younger, the date being 1891.

On the walls are many mural tablets, far more than in most village churches, and they recall the names of many local worthies. Here is the list:—To the children of the Honble. and Rev. Wm. Eden and Anna Maria Dowager Baroness Grey de Ruthyn; to the Hon. and Rev. Wm. Eden, who died in 1859, and his widow, Anna Maria Lady Grey de Ruthyn, who died in 1875; to the Rev. William Bedford, fifty-seven years vicar of the parish and fifty-six years rector of Smarden (1783); to Isabella May Wardell, seventeen years organist, the memorial having been placed here by many of her friends in 1926; to Sir Thomas Pym Hales, Bart. (1773), representative of the Port of Dover; to Annae Battely, with a Latin inscription; to Sir Philip Hales, Bart., at whose death, in 1824, the title became extinct, and also his wife, Dame Elizabeth Hales, who died in 1833, and their only child, Elizabeth; to Lady Yates, relict of the late Mr. Justice Yates and of Dr. Thomas, Bishop of Rochester, her death occurring in 1808; to Robert Peckham, late of Archbishop's Palace (1795); to Richard Fogg, Esq., "descended of the ancient family of Foggs of this county. He faithfully served King Charles the First as captain of several of his men-of-war at sea, and he died in 1681"; to Henry John Wardell, seventeen years vicar of Bekesbourne, erected by his parishioners and friends in 1893, to Commander George Gipps, R.N., who died in 1916, the stone having been placed by his sisters, Edith Weir and Maud Hill; and to John Peckham, Esq., who died in 1792 and was descended from the ancient family of the Peckhams, of Chart Sutton.

By the pulpit is a tablet to the memory of Norman Ramsay, Second Lieutenant, 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, youngest son of Robert Ramsay, of Howletts, killed in action in France, 1916. This pulpit was erected by his brothers and sisters in 1921. Half hidden by the organ is a memorial to Philippi Branden. An inscription on a brass tablet on the south wall reads as follows:—"This church consecrated to the Glory of God in XII. Century was restored A.D. 1881-1890 chiefly by Jane Gipps the younger Who also gave 6 bells and by other members of her family—Henry John Wardell, M.A., Vicar." Two other brass tablets are to the memory of Richard Nelson Bendyshe in 1915, and to Cuthbert Gardner and Florence Balleine, the date being 1895.

At the last restoration a fine monument was removed from another part of the church and placed in the tower wall. It is of marble and the figure of a knight in armour is represented as kneeling on a cushion at a prayer desk. It is a very fine bit of carving. Sir Henry Palmer, to whom this memorial was erected, died in 1611 after living at Cobham Court for many years and becoming a leading man in this part of the county.

In addition to the church, Bekesbourne, so strangely neglected by historians and equally unknown to the average wayfarer owing to its obscure position, can boast of much old-world history. In fact, this tiny inland hamlet was a limb of the Cinque Ports and, more strangely still, connected with Hastings, which is not a Kent port. As such it was compelled to contribute men or money to the Cinque Ports' fleet, and in the thirteenth century it provided one ship. One peculiarity of its position was that Bekesbourne was outside the police jurisdiction of the county of Kent, and malefactors at one time had to take their trial at Hastings. What was the effect of this law? Felons and others would rush to the place as a sort of sanctuary, for no other than the Hastings authorities dare arrest them. At last the Mayor of Hastings hit upon a happy solution—he appointed a leading inhabitant of Bekesbourne as his deputy mayor, and this important personage was empowered to try prisoners at the Court House, now known as Cobham Court. To be practical one of the Mayors of Hastings at last refused to appoint his deputy of Bekesbourne, and as years passed the parish became merged into the police administration of Kent. But during its existence as a limb of Hastings it came into notoriety when in the

many mistakes when he states that this gate-house was demolished, for here you see it to-day—a square brick building of the very early Tudor period. The doorway is of stone, and windows at the side have also stone mullions deeply set in the walls of great thickness. On one wall are two stones let into the brickwork, on one of which is inscribed the arms of the See of Canterbury and Archbishop Parker, while on the other one is carved "A.D.—T.C.—1552" and underneath Archbishop Cranmer's motto, "Nosce Teipsum et Deum." Inside the building, which is now used as a residence, are to be seen some old beams, a chimney corner, and ancient stained glass in a window.

There is no doubt that this part of Kent was a vast settlement of the Romans, and every mile of land, if it could be dug up, would disclose remains of that period. When the railway was being made a remarkable wooden structure was discovered thirteen feet below the surface of the soil. A shaft had been made out of heavy beams, and below was a cavity no doubt used as a sepulchre. The timber, which had become jet black by age but had remained quite hard, formed a shaft three feet three inches in diameter. In the sepulchre were found several urns in which had been deposited the burnt bones of the dead. It is probable that it was the burial place of an important Roman and his family. Later on, close to the same spot, was found another shaft, but this was not composed of timber and was a mere hole dug in the ground. At the bottom were flints, but no human remains could be discovered.

Whispers only were heard during the Great War; you dare not speak about it. Like mushrooms, strange buildings sprang up in various parts of England, and especially just inland from the coast of Kent. Here were quartered our gallant airmen, ever watching for the approach of the enemy from across the Channel. No longer was Bekesbourne a peaceful little village, silent save for a passing train or motor, or the song of the ploughman and chirruping of birds. Sometimes at night the distracting buzzing of airplanes starting on a flight broke the silence and the old people of the village who had been left behind and the youngsters would listen in fear lest ill should befall these young heroes of the Air Force who had endeared themselves to everyone. On more than one occasion the Germans spotted the aerodrome, but the bombs they dropped just missed the hangars, the workshops and the quarters

of the garrison. Then came peace and the cluster of buildings was empty until bungalow dwellers found them out and formed the colony which lives there to-day. The huge hangar is used by the members of the Kent Flying Club.

Here at Bekesbourne I came across an old Kent superstition. In days gone by the village midwife provided two garments—a boy's nightshirt and a girl's nightgown.

"To be quite prepared if the child was a boy or girl?" I suggested to the dear old lady who was telling me the story.

"Next 'zackly," she replied. "I only put these clothes on just for a moment, just for luck. If it was a girl I puts on the boy's shirt; if it was a boy I puts on the girl's nightgown. It meant that when the boy grew up all the girls would fall in love with him, and the opposite with the girl—she'd have all the lads after her!"

