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England: A House in the Country

St. Antony's College
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Dear Dick,

Last July Nancy and I found ourselves in possession of a house, Wintles Farm, Mill Street, Eynsham, Oxfordshire, six miles from Oxford City and University. Even though economy and necessity dictated buying a house--renting is nearly impossible around Oxford--I find it remarkable that an irredentist Vermonter should own his first real property not only outside Vermont, but outside the USA, though the two may be synonymous.

Eynsham shows us the reserved friendliness that one would expect from a village sceptical with a thousand years of experience. Nancy and I are less reticent about our delight with Eynsham and in our house.

Wintles Farm ceased being a farm about five years ago and although it no longer has living, breathing cows it retains the major symptom of a farm: there is always something to be fixed or done, although things are really never done on a farm. Something may be fixed, adjusted, made neat, or accomplished, but it is only for now, for a while. Split kindling, pile it neatly to dry behind the kitchen stove, burn it, and then go split more kindling. Have the roof fixed and a high wind loosens a slate; the builders have to come back with their ladders. Replace a broken window pane and find that the bottom of the frame is punky and has to be renewed. On this farm, construction and decay are jousting and it's a race between the builder and the rain to see which gets to the loose slate first.

The trouble is that for every job I tackle, I create one or two more, or the one job reminds me of others I'd forgotten. There was, for example, a stone wall with one end tumbled down. It had nothing to do with neighbors and only kept a bed of weeds from wandering, but neatness demanded repair. It took the best part of a Sunday morning to build it up, and with the wall up it was obvious that I had to make a bit of lawn where the weeds were. The next step was to order three clematis plants to climb the end of the barn at the back of the grass.

When I put strips of rug mat across the bottoms of the front and living room doors to stop the drafts, I made the chimney smoke. That reminded me that I had to put a strip of tin on the bottom of the chimney beam to keep it from charring any more than it already had during the past several hundred years. When I was putting two lights of glass in the barn window--and one in the garage--I remembered that I had to plane the barn doors and rebolt a latch so that the old cow tie-up where the children play would be tight and dry. Two jobs listed for each crossed off, with victory going to the Farm.

It is a hard choice whether to tinker on Sundays and read microfilms every other day or to say to hell with it and read microfilms on Sunday and get mud and sawdust on me six days a week. I prefer though, especially when in my centrally heated study room in College with my stocking feet against the radiator, the mild adventures of Wintles Farm to a furnished flat connected to the world by a concrete and tile corridor.

The troublesome fireplace is a long story. When we bought the house it was a narrow coal grate surrounded by mustard colored tiles, to match the room's decor, chocolate walls halfway up and ochre from there to the ceiling. We had the builders take away the tiles and look around. They discovered a wide stone fireplace with a back of thin brick and an oak chimney beam across the top. The brick are probably 18th Century and are more recent than the stone and beam.

The builders put in a temporary firebox for Nancy when I was away, a small grate in the middle of the fireplace with five bricks on each side for walls. When I complained to an architect that my draft prevention had made the fire smoke, he said that the cold air pockets on either side of the fire, between the bricks and the stone, caused the smoking. The other night we took away all the complications and built our fire on the original back hearth. No smoke. One round for us.

The kindling to start our chunk coal fires in the fireplace, I split from old boards I found in the garage. Luckily for me, the previous owner of the house had an acquisitiveness equal to my own, and kindling, some old door latches, and bits of iron I'm sure will be useful, are laid away in the coal shed.

In addition to the barn door needing planing, I found that three windows and the bathroom door didn't close. The only thing to do was to buy a plane and keep it handy. I consulted Kimber and Son, who started off as our builders and are now our friends, about where to get one cheapest. I was told that a good plane, and one the right size for "easing" windows, was available at the local store.

Mr. Sawyer and his son run the grocery and ironmongery store down the street. Old Mr. Sawyer is a raffish man with a long thick nose. He races greyhounds as a hobby and sometimes makes money at it. On Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, "that bitch of mine won a cup down to Swindon," he told me. I bought the plane from him. Young Mr. Sawyer works in the store and delivers paraffin (kerosene) for customers' heaters. Every Friday he "tops off" the five gallon can in the coal shed from which we fill the heater in our hall. It's very convenient having a hardware store two minutes from the back gate.

Doors and windows sticking reminds me of the mute but definitive weather analyzer we had in a rented house two summers ago: our garage doors. It was an abnormally dry, sunny summer for England, dry for most anywhere, actually, and the doors shrank so that they didn't

fit. When the autumn rains came, they swelled back to normal--just the reverse of what I was used to. My recent efforts with a plane can be laid to the wettest fall England has had since they started recording weather statistics.

Nothing in our house is true, everything is slanted. A window seat in the living room drops 1½ inches in less than three feet and probably the only level thing in the house is the record player. This troubles the experienced carpenter enough, and for me it is an endless source of exasperation. One of the first things I did after returning from India was to try to close off the attic stairs, where drafts came down and precious heat went up. I used beaver-board and 2 x 1 inch wood strips. There wasn't a straight line to be found and no two were parallel. A two hour job, I'd thought, became one of five hours. But I did stop the drafts.

One can't really expect a house about 400 years old to be as square and even as when it was built; soundness is better than superficial accuracy. Strong the place certainly is. The walls are 18 inches thick, stone set in clay mortar. The eight foot chimney beam stretching across the kitchen fireplace is eight by twelve inches. The principal rafters are five by ten inches, of oak or elm. Whatever the wood is, it's hard. Worm had gotten at some of the principle rafters, at the purlins (timbers running across the rafters and ninety degrees to them), and at some of the collars (timbers making the bottom of an equilateral triangle with the rafters). We had the worm-eaten wood scraped away preparatory to spraying on a worm killer. Some of the purlins and collars looked as if they were eaten clear through. But the scraping revealed iron-hard cores thicker than the timbers that would be used in building a house these days.

The principal rafters are one of the clues to the age of the house. They are notched into each other; there is no ridge board. Our architect friend, who specializes in old buildings, says that this is a 16th Century and medieval technique.

The name Wintles Farm is of recent origin, however. The postmaster says it dates from the Twenties, but he isn't clear just why. When he was a boy it was called the Chesterfield Place and two maiden ladies lived in it. On their deaths, the heirs sold the property to the Oxford County Council who resold it to a man named Hawkins who still owns the granery next door. His grain storage building sits in what was the farm's rick-yard. In England, or at least in our part of Oxfordshire, a rick is a haystack and a rickyard is where the haystacks are put.

Sometime along, Hawkins sold the house and barns we have to a man named Freeman. From him it went to Harcourt and then to Austin. Freeman kept cattle and ran the place as a farm until his cows and a neighbor's cows were banned from the streets by local authority. With this ban in force there was no way to drive the cattle from barn to

pasture, so Freeman moved himself and his cows to another town and the neighbor moved his cows out of town, but still lives opposite us. Freeman evidently had a taste for gin because when we cleaned out the cellar we got forty sacks of junk, mostly gin bottles. Harcourt didn't drink, he told us.

Wintles Farm is at the southeast corner of Newlands and Mill Streets. Just south of us on Mill Street is Hawkins' granary. Across Mill Street from us is a Cotswold-Romanesque pile called the Catholic Apostolic Church. I don't think it has held a meeting since we've lived in our house. Just south of the church lives Bill Banting, who moved his cows out of town. North of the church is a Victorian Gothic house where two American Air Force families live. The husbands are stationed at Brize Norton 20 miles away--the home base of the RB-47 that was shot down over the Berents Sea last spring.

Just across Newlands from our kitchen window is the handsome, square, stone house where eighty-year-old Miss Swan lives and teaches her 16 kindergarten pupils. She has reportedly taught school to nearly everyone in the village. Beside her, an ex-Polish immigrant named Garcia has his cobblershop. Several doors down Newlands from him lives Mrs. Hawtin, our cleaning lady. Mrs. Hawtin is an energetic woman of fifty-six who makes Nancy and me feel less like sissies because she, too, complains about the cold. She and her parents have always lived in Eynsham and she has all the local lore at tongue-tip.

Not far beyond her cottage (I want to write about English cottages in a future letter) the blacksmith, Burden, has his shop. His family have been blacksmiths on this same spot for hundreds of years and a forbear supposedly shod the horses of Charles I and his party when the King was fleeing Cromwell's forces during the Civil War. Mr. Sawyer has his store just beyond Burden.

Coming back up Newlands on the other side, the first house is a cozy thatch--most of the houses in Eynsham have roofs of Stonesfield slates which are rough stone slates and not the smooth, shaley slates. Fred and Sophia Sternfeld live there. Fred is a Lecturer in Music at Oxford and is an old friend from Dartmouth where I first had him as a professor in Music I. Midway up the street lives Miss Lees, a sweet, pale, timid lady who paints and recites Dickens. Between the last house and our garage is a paddock where two furry horses provoke endless comment from our black Labrador, Prince. The pastoral atmosphere of this side of our house will be shattered if the paddock's owner gets permission to build houses on the land. His request for permission has gone through a public hearing, the Rural District Council, the Oxford County Council, and is now with the Housing Minister in London. The historically and aesthetically minded of Newlands have been opposing him. The houses he plans to build, according to the sketches, will be respectable enough, but hardly mellow and mossy. The hearings were held while I was away, so I had no chance to oppose progress. This is probably fortunate as newcomers in Eynsham should be seen and not heard.

Our house, as are a fair proportion of those in the village, is classed as an ancient monument and we cannot change its outward aspect, or make major interior changes without permission.

Eynsham's citizens are pleased that their village is older than Oxford and jab this fact at newcomers with a superior smile. When Oxford was the Oxen Ford, and before 1117, the earliest certain teaching in Oxford, and before the time of Henry I (1100-1135), when there was probably teaching going on in Oxford, Eynsham had an abbey and was an established social unit.

Egonesham, the house or place of Egon, is mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle (itself 9th Century) as the site of a battle about 570. A Benedictine Monastery was founded there about 1005, but it didn't survive the Norman Conquest. It was reestablished soon after 1100, and became the second richest in Oxfordshire. The abbey no longer exists. Henry VIII scattered its clerics and made its walls a quarry for local housebuilders.

Mr. Harris, the egg-woman's husband, has found Roman coins in his garden. And when Kimber and Son were rebuilding some cottages down the street they found some bits of pottery identified as dating from the 8th Century.

On the edge of Eynsham, on the Oxford Road a half mile from our house, is the Thames ford that was one of the strategic prizes of the battle in 570. Swinford, as it is called, was a major river-crossing point by ford or ferry on the main London-Oxford-Wales road. An Act of the 1766-7 Parliament granted the Earl of Abingdon the right to build a bridge across the river at the site of the ford "whereby many mischiefs and inconveniences will be remedied." I pay five pence every time I drive my car across that bridge. It goes to the present Earl of Abingdon, who, according to my calculations, must gross a minimum of $50 daily thanks to a previous Earl's foresight.

I don't very often reflect that Saxons fought Britons a few feet from our front door, or that there are almost certainly stones from the demolished abbey in our walls, or that our house was probably built about the time Drake defeated the Armada, but when I do, Eynsham seems especially pleasant.

Yours sincerely,

Red Austin

Granville Austin

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