

5/9/87
Guardian

on the back of an envelope, portable, with Macmillan and education. He didn't want 1922 Committee at Wimple



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I SPENT a few summer days at Wimple. It is not the most beautiful village in England. But there are plenty of contenders for that title. Half a dozen of them are in Devon, less than half an hour's drive from the Wimple parish boundary. Hundreds more are to be found in the self-consciously picturesque Cotswolds, the majestic Yorkshire Dales, the blantly affluent Sussex Downs and the confidently serene Malvern Hills.

All of them claim (and some actually possess) exclusive characteristics. But there is an idea of the perfect English village which binds them altogether in the romantic imagination. Against a background of oaks and elms, hawthorn hedges and dry-stone walls divide neat cottages and even neater gardens from Norman churches, Elizabethan rectories and Victorian public houses. Queen Anne's Lace

grows on the roadsides, rose bay willow herb amongst the ruined farm buildings and wild roses amongst the privet and hawthorn. Wimple is nothing like that.

If it were to be tested against a barometer of rural charm, it would push up the mercury to the point on the scale marked "highly attractive." Part of that attraction is the slight imperfections which lift it off the lid of the chocolate box and protect it from the accusation that it is really a picture postcard.

Wimple has a pair of incongruous semi-detached Victorian villas which stand amongst the thatch and the whitewash like visitors from an industrial city who came on a day trip and enjoyed the visit so much they decided to stay. The White Barn has a stained glass window in which Mr Punch occupies the place normally

reserved for saints and martyrs. There is a bungalow called Osokozy and a council house named Ova Yonda. All the blemishes confirm that the village has not been preserved in Fortnum and Mason aspic.

Wimple has to be taken — or left — according to its relationship with reality not romance. And reality is apples.

They grow on single trees in the corners of private gardens. Cows graze amongst rows of apple-bearing grey-green saplings which run up the local hillsides across the contours in fair imitation of a Tuscan olive grove. And, to the west of the village, they grow in forests which proclaim their purpose and ownership to the world in great white letters which tower over their branches. The letters read: "Whiteways Cider Orchard".

Wimple is, or used to be, Whiteway's village. The family

lived and died and are buried there — apart, that is, from Captain E. V. Whiteway MC, killed in France in 1917, and Sub-Lieutenant Whiteway RNVR, lost at sea in 1940. Their names appear on the local war memorial.

The Whiteways saved Wimple Cricket Club by providing it with a pitch, opposite the Whiteways cider press and in the shadow of one of the Whiteways family houses. It must be one of the most beautiful village cricket grounds in England. It is bounded by the trimmed, flower-speckled hedges of an arcadian fantasy. And two immense perfectly shaped oaks tower over the game from within the boundary.

The batsman, taking guard from either end, sees trees beyond long-off, mid-on, square leg and third man. Every match on such a pitch must be

an idyll. Last year, the worm almost came out of the bud.

Whiteways began as a partnership in 1904. In 1930 it became a public company and in the 1960s the takeovers began. First, Showerings of Shepton Mallet acquired Whiteways. Then Vine Products of Kingstons joined the family. In the 1970s VP Wines and Babycham became the property of Allied Breweries and Allied were amalgamated with Lyons. Then Elders of Australia cast its covetous eyes over the lot. Allied-Lyons fought back.

Part of the strategy was to increase the book value of every item of its property. The hope was to price Elders out of the market. The consolation was that even if Elders won, Allied-Lyons shareholders would get the highest possible price in compensation. As part of that process, the cricket ground was designated building

land. Even in Australia, the value of cricket grounds is underrated. Last year at Wimple CC, batsmen, waiting for the next wicket to fall, talked like columns from the Financial Times. None of them expected an innings in 1987.

The story has a happy ending. Total war against the predators did not require the destruction of the cricket ground, and life in Wimple returned to normal. The flower show was held as usual in the Victory Hall — though, in the absence of a royal wedding, the theme chosen for the flower arrangement competition was more prosaic than in 1986. The little river has cider cans sharing its bed with smooth pebbles — the work, the locals say, of townies waiting to catch the late train back to Exeter after a night at the Fountains Inn or Thirsty Farmer. The straw geese and peacocks remain secure on the thatched roofs.

But, to me at least, it still seems quite extraordinary that an English village, recorded in the Domesday Book, should suddenly have one of its most English activities disturbed by Australian commercial ambitions and the manipulations of the City of London. It is as if the whole of Wimple — church, Victory Hall, public houses and cider orchards — was, with its people, portable property to be passed from hand to hand.

It has happened before. According to Curiousus, a 19th century Exeter historian: "At the dissolution of the monasteries, King Henry VIII gave the manor of Wimple and the advowson of its church with the property of Tavistock Abbey to Lord Russell on the 4th July 1539." So it is possible to ask, at least rhetorically, what there is to complain about. I make no complaint, but I do express surprise. I thought we had improved since then.