

A View of old Ickleford



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When the correspondent from The Bedfordshire Times and Independent visited Ickleford in 1910 he found a very different place than we experience today. The purpose was to view a shining example of village industry although some of the employment problems in rural communities are familiar today.

A Village Industry A Remarkable and Successful Experiment

Just beyond the frontier of this county lies the pretty village of Ickleford, which is only half a mile off the main road from Bedford to Hitchin. It is just the typical quaint old English village with its manor house, farmyards, and rustic cottages with a strange dip in the ridge of the roof, and their smiling gardens in front, assembled round several pieces of village green, which are shaded by elms and chestnuts. The Old George and the Green Man stand cheek by jowl near a venerable little church which is attributed to the Normans, but seems to illustrate every period since. The village and its surroundings are quite agricultural and pastoral in character, but beyond the railway arch the dwellings are less picturesque, and there are indications that the parish is not without its poor people. But Ickleford lies within the sphere of social experiment. It is not far from the Garden City, and, though there may be no actual connection in the nature of cause and effect, it seems not very surprising that prophets of the social redemption should rise up in that country. [*]

At this time of the year our villages appear charming places to live in, but the problem is how to persuade people to live in them all the year round. There was a time, we are told, when the home arts and local industries sufficed to maintain a happy and contented peasantry, but the era of manufactures has changed all that.



Reformers who desire to set up village industries will look with interest upon a remarkable experiment which has achieved a goodly measure of success at Ickleford. We confess that until a few days ago we had never heard of it and hardly knew the difference between Ickleford and Ickwell Green, but on our receiving an intimation that there was an exhibition illustrative of a village industry to be seen in that village, our representative journeyed over there at the first opportunity. Set amidst the luxuriant gardens near the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Witter, stands an unpretentious building which, from its style and flower-decked windows, obviously differed in character from the neighbouring dwellings, and could not be the school which we had already passed. Venturing to enter, we at once discovered a room full of beautiful objects, and were courteously received by Mrs. Witter and her sister. In a brief conversation we learnt for the first time the nature of the exhibition.

This picture of hope was to make the village famous for three decades and its metal working legacy remained until living memory, only succumbing in 1979.



The Old George and Green Man public houses



Looking towards the railway arch



Looking towards the Manor

[*]The Simple Life

The Garden City attracted many utopian idealists who saw the town as the perfect environment for their lifestyles. Old-fashioned romantic traditions like May Day and folk dancing were revived and many of them wore 'rational dress', These pioneers, and the atmosphere of the new town are described by Sydney Palmer, who built and lived in a Baillie-Scott designed house at 29 Norton Way North. He talks fondly of Letchworth's early days: "They were great days! Garden City was very young and full of promise. A large proportion of the first immigrants – the pioneer settlers were young married folk, poor but bursting with hope and idealism. We were very sociable and there was a complete absence of class consciousness. It was the done thing to be poor; if you were not, you pretended to be. No doubt we were "cranks". Socialism, vegetarianism, simple life, bare legs and no hat, and so on, were innovations which provoked the derision of visiting journalists. These oddities were peculiar to us at the time, but became common enough everywhere a few years later." Rather a long way from the realities of village life.

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Ickleford in 1915