

Pulverbatch under the Spotlight

Pulverbatch is one of those villages whose charm depends entirely on the temperament of the visitor. If he is one who likes a busy social life with plenty of houses and people, then he will probably dislike Pulverbatch intensely; but if he is one who enjoys solitude and can find company in the songs of the birds and in the music of the wind in the trees, then he will fall in love at once with this scattered little community.

In the strict sense of the word, there is no village of Pulverbatch. Rather it should be said that there are three centres of a widely flung parish, Church Pulverbatch, or Churton, as it is called, may be regarded as the spiritual and educational centre, for here one finds the church and school; Castle Pulverbatch may be called the business centre, for here are the village post office, the village inns and the smithy; and Wrentnall may be given the title of the agricultural centre, for here one finds some of the best farms, including those of Mr Joseph Bebbington and of Mr William Bebbington, Chairman of the Parish Council, and also that attractive mansion known as Wrentnall House.

Each of the three hamlets stands at the head of a knoll or hill, and peeps across at the others from beneath a cluster of shady trees. In between them are deep valleys through which connecting roads wend their way below overhanging hedges and at the lowest point are streams meandering over fields and roads. In wintertime these brooks are not easy to cross, and floods occasionally make the roads impassable.

Standing as it does within a few miles of the Welsh border, Pulverbatch has had a long and chequered history that goes back to very early times, but whether this history is fact or legend has apparently not been definitely decided.

For example, if one asks a villager about the castle that is believed to have existed there, he is emphatic that the claim is true; but some other dabblers in history are not so certain.

Castle Hill certainly looks as though it might have been the site of an old border fortress. The mound in the centre is said to be the site of the original saxon keep, and the walls on the left are part of the rampart enclosing the original bailey, and the portion nearer the road is supposed to be a larger bailey added by the Normans.

Roger de Montgomery, upon whom so much of Shropshire and the adjoining part of Wales was conferred, is said to have ejected the two brothers Hunnit and Uluiet, who owned Pulverbatch at that time, and to have given it to one of his followers, Roger the Hunter. Here Roger the Hunter held his manorial courts and exercised the almost unlimited powers of the Norman barons. We are told that from this historic character are descended, through the female line, several Shropshire families of distinction, such as the Constantines of Easton Constantine and Oldbury; the Uptons of Waters Upton; and the Stapletons of Stapleton and Wistanstow. In the male line the Shropshire estates descended to Roger de Pulverbatch, who held them in the reign of Henry II, and the de Kilpecks who held them to 1295, and then Pulverbatch came into the possession of Ralph de Botiler, whose descendants held it in the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

The original castle at Pulverbatch is believed to have been a typical Saxon structure, probably of several storeys high. Outside was a court or bailey surrounded by a ditch and wall, with a timber palisade running along the top of the wall. The appearance of the

remains would seem to justify this story, for the mound and ditches certainly appear to be man-made.

As in every other village, the parish church is, and has been for unbroken centuries, the real centre of the life of the community. Here we may find records of the fortunes and misfortunes of the villagers, and the churchyard provides its many "sermons in stones".

The village's connection with Saxon days is marked by the dedication of the church to the Saxon saint Edith, and there are in the church many interesting relics of earlier times. Rebuilt in 1853, the church stands on an ancient foundation, and the tower, which dates from 1773, is the oldest remaining portion.

The rector (Rev. O. G. Crockett) told me that the registers date back to the year 1542, and are continuous right up to the present day. Some panels in an old chair in the vestry bear the date 1646, and there is a piece of Elizabethan oak panelling on the left-hand side of the south porch inside the church. "Pulverbatch has always been a separate parish," he said, "but for a considerable number of years there were no resident rectors, the parish being served by curates." Ratlinghope, which has had a chequered career, at one time belonged to that parish, but has now been attached to Wentnor. The parish of Pulverbatch covers an area of roughly four miles by five.

The present rectory was built during the incumbency of the Rev. Gilpin by the then patron, Lord Kenyon, and the question of where the original rectory stood is much discussed. Possibly, as there was at one time no resident rector, there may not have been any rectory.

"The most interesting thing about Pulverbatch," said the rector, "is that it was recently discovered to have a connection with Sarah Jennings, the famous Duchess of Marlborough. Whalleybourne Farm, Wrentnall, was once in the possession of that branch of the Jennings family from which Sarah came." Sarah Jennings, who was born in 1660 and died in 1744, began as a maid-in-waiting to the Duchess of York, afterwards Queen Anne, over whom she exercised an important influence in later years. She married the Duke of Marlborough, the great English soldier, who had a brilliant military career.

The village smithy in Castle Pulverbatch was once a flourishing affair where many horses were shod each day, and where neighbouring farmers came to discuss the latest news.

But it is now only a shadow of its former self, and Mr. F. H. Griffiths, who at the age of 60 years or so still carries on the work, loves to recall its past glories. At one time he has put on as many as 120 shoes in a day, but today machinery, motor cars, buses, and other modern inventions have combined to make the trade much less important than it was.

Mr Griffiths is typical of these old village folk, who make the village their world. For 34 years he has never slept in any other bed except his own bed at the smithy house.

His son, Mr W. Griffiths, who helps his father with the work, told me that many years ago Pulverbatch used to have an auction and a fair of its own, but it no longer holds that distinction.

Talking about the village generally, Mr Griffiths disclosed the fact that the church clock never strikes.

Whether it is due to the healthy bracing climate or the quiet life the inhabitants live, most of the villagers attain a ripe old age. Mr John Buttery, who is 87, and Mr John Hockenhull, who is about 80, are village characters, but they have a long time ahead of them before they reach the usual age attained by the inhabitants. Mr Robert Jones, of Gold Valley, a farmer, who used to wear an old fashioned smock, with a quaint hat, died in 1917 at the age of 102 years; Mrs Elizabeth Phillips, who kept the Woodcock Inn, died in 1926 at the age of 92; two sisters, Hannah and Mary Jane Hughes, died in 1917 and 1918 at the ages of 97 and 88 respectively; and there are many others who were within a year or two of 90. Within the last week or so Mrs Mansell, Church View, died at the age of 85, and Mr Thomas Middle died at the age of 84.

The local branch of the Women's Institute plays an important part in the village life, and the members are joining in a visit to Liverpool shortly for their annual outing.

Castle Pulverbatch possesses what few villages possess – a village green, known as the Knapp, and the Parish Council is obviously anxious to see that it is properly protected, for in 1932 they erected a notice bearing various rules and regulations and with hints as to what the consequences might be if their orders were not obeyed. The notice was signed by Mr W. Bebbington, Mr George Mansell, and Mr Henry George. Its real object, I believe, is to warn the litter fiends among the many visitors to this local beauty spot.

There is a story told in the village that Mary Webb used to walk alone to the top of Cothercott Hill, and sit there in the stillness writing parts of one of her novels. The scene of "Armour Wherein He Trusted," her last – and unfinished – novel, is laid in the neighbourhood of Pulverbatch.

Some people disbelieve the story, but whether it be right or wrong, she could have chosen no better spot. Evening was falling when I climbed up there, and the fine view of Shropshire's plains and hills was beginning to be swallowed up by the dusk. The air was scented with the smell of lilac and hawthorn blossom, and the only sound was the twittering of the birds and the soft call of a cuckoo in the valley below.

With regard to the date of the article "Pulverbatch under the Spotlight" - the article states "within the last week or so Mrs. Mansell, Church View, died at the age of 85". Mary Anne Mansell died at Church View on Thursday 10th May 1934 and was buried on Friday 18th May 1934. The article must therefore have been written late May/early June 1934. I checked in the Pulverbatch Parish Registers and the first occurrence of Rev. Crockett's name was performing a baptism on 30th August 1931. He followed Rev. John S. Bevan as rector.

*Pam Willing
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