

## FEVERELL'S MIDDLESEX

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(First published in *The Countryman*, Autumn, 1948)

Talking of childhood, Feverell said that seeing how homesick the middle-aged can be for the scenes of their early youth, and how distressed at finding those scenes altered and impaired, he was glad to be spared any possibility of such pangs. The countryside of his own childhood existed no longer: Greater London had submerged it; it was irrecoverable as Atlantis.

As he remembered it at the turn of the century it was still obstinately a country landscape, though on a clear day he could see the smoke and the smokestacks of London on the south-eastern skyline. In some engravings of the outskirts of London c.1800 one sees the same sharp imposition of city on country, which now, with the development of ribbon building and residential estates, is scarcely, if at all, to be found. Indeed, if he wanted to recall the scenes of his childhood, Feverell said, it was to such prints and engravings that he turned; and he found very much the same aspect of fields and elm coppices, calm Georgian mansions and squat farmsteads, with a rampart of London behind them. The soil - it was a theory of Feverell's that soil determines most things - was the heavy yellow London clay: an excellent soil for what does well in it. The district had formerly been renowned for its wheat, but by his time it was all dairy-farming and hay. London clay makes bad lawns but excellent hayfields. The first piece of country behaviour he ever learned was not to walk through standing hay, and the second was always to shut gates. But it was a

country of footpaths, so he had plenty of opportunities to study Middlesex hay at close quarters and to learn how, from day to day, its colouring developed, the first pure green becoming silvered and silver-purple as the seed-heads expanded, or golden with buttercup; or stained with clover. Irishmen and tramps used to come into the district to be hired for the hay-harvest. With their coming the ditches became exceedingly interesting (all small children study ditches), enriched with thrown-away boots, waistcoats, kettles and blue enamel saucepans.

Once the hay was cut, he said, the fields seemed to grow smaller, lacking the feeling of perspective which is given by the flow of air-currents over the undulating surface of the standing crop. But in any case the fields were small, and closed in by solid hawthorn hedges, old and well-kept. There were many hedgerow elms too, and elms were planted in the middle of pastures to give shade to the cattle. It was under these elms that the drinking-troughs were placed. Everything was kept in good order. Gates were square on their hinges and closed with wooden latches; the stiles were made of oak, shiny with use; the ditches were kept so clean that water actually ran along them instead of stagnating in puddles. He never saw a barbed-wire fence or a pasture full of thistles. The only exceptions to the common tightness and good husbandry were some of the old barns. They had gone out of use when the farmers turned from corn to pasture, and as they shed their tiles in the autumn gales, or as their mortar crumbled and loosened the bricks, their owners did not always trouble to mend them.

These barns were to him romantic and soul-stirring. They were the nearest thing he could find to a real ruin; and the popular art of that date laid great stress on the beauty of ruin and squalor. A cottage in a Christmas number could scarcely be decently represented without some picturesque holes in it; at the least it had to have a broken-backed roof, little peepy windows set in askew, and a general appearance of decrepitude; just as a church had to be heavily draped with ivy before it was suitable for polite eyes.

'But while the Gothic half of me', said Feverell, 'was shuddering delightfully at ruined barns, my everyday seeing

was accustoming me and attaching me to a totally different manner of building: the modest, solid, reasonable tradition of brick. There were no grand buildings within the range of my childish walks; but at least there were very few silly ones. Near the canal there were some wooden shingle houses, such as one sees in Essex. These were painted - cream colour, or buff or pale grey - and, though I naturally longed to live in one of them, I also felt that they were somehow slightly perverse and like summer houses. Otherwise, thank God, it was all brick!

Brick, and clay tiles, he continued, and timber, were the natural building materials of Middlesex, and as proper to the landscape as elm and hawthorn. Some of the farms must have dated from the seventeenth century, built of small dark brick in a timber frame. Many of the later-built cottages were of yellow stock brick, and had nothing very much to commend them except rectangularity and absence of ornament. For the rest, farms and inns and moderate country-houses were Georgian boxes, with a door in the middle, and two stories of fenestration in the frontage, and dormer windows in the roof - but such fenestration, said Feverell, such just proportion between brickwork and glass, and such roofs, hung with narrow, deeply-rutted tiles, and weathered to the colouring of a bed of wall-flowers! Mixed in with these were some early nineteenth-century 'cottages of gentility' - bowers for retired tea-merchants or ladies in keeping. These adhered to the general pattern of symmetry and sobriety, but added a few mild architectural flim-flams - an iron-work balcony, a green copper hood over the door, ogee windows, or a lunette in the pediment. Some of them still preserved their original stables alongside - and English architecture is at its best when housing the horse. Some were painted in dull delicate tints, like sugar-biscuits.

Even the ungentle cottages of this date, Feverell said, had a kind of elegance. Often they were built in a terrace, with the central cottage distinguished by some formal element - a pediment, or a special doorway, or a label above the door giving the date of building. Urbanity had touched them, though with the lightest touch of its finger-tip; they looked as if they had been built with consideration. And at that date nobody admired them at all; a shapeless lump of whitewashed cob with

a thatch roof was what a cottage had to be before it could be admired. The people who lived in them, however, liked them a great deal, and trimmed their door-steps with pairs of large pink-and-white shells washed every Saturday, or with potted geraniums, and were always touching up the paint or clipping their box borders, or edging the little flower-beds in front with scallop-shells or whitewashed stones or fanciful wire scrollings or rows of stone ginger-beer bottles set in bottom uppermost. It was rare to see a trollopy exterior. As for the gardens, the choice of flowers was conditioned by the stiff clay soil: there was generally a standard rose in the centre of the flower-bed, there was often a lilac in one corner, and for the rest it was wallflowers, Brompton stocks, Canterbury bells, the common iris, London pride, and always white garden lilies, of which the secret was to plant them tight and leave them alone.

Whether in terraces or isolated, these cottage dwellings were placed functionally. 'I mean', he said, 'in regard to need, not by habit. There were no villages in the landscape of my childhood. The former villages had solidified into little towns. So the cottages stood where they were handy for farms, or for small local industries, or as appendages to coaching inns or country houses, or because some one had wanted a cottage just there. One sees the same disposition of dwelling-houses in France often enough. And in the north of England too, for that matter. But it is not recognised as typical of the English manner of life because our experts in rurality are obsessed with the village, and the village community clustering round the manor-house and the church - a more amenable social unit, I daresay, but not the only expedient for living in the country. Speaking for myself,' Feverell continued, 'having grown up under this dispensation, nothing would induce me to live penned up in a village. A plain-headed brick cottage, flowers in front, cabbages at the back, a tarred shed on one side, and nothing round it but the autumn mists rising out of a clay soil - that is my idea of rural domesticity'.

Seeing his friend smile he said: 'Yes, I know what you are thinking - that clay soil. When you cut into it with a spade it was like cutting into a cheese, a Stilton cheese. But one can't remember a clay country without being constantly aware of its

soil. It is a ghost that can't be laid. It climbs up in the elm trees, it wanders about at dusk in the smell of the may-blossom or the brickworks; you carry it indoors on your boots, you carry it in your bones as rheumatism, it shapes the landscape and colours it. A clay landscape is always a painting in oils, a landscape of heavy, powerful colours well rubbed into the canvas. And when the autumn fogs varnish it, it looks as rich as a plum cake. But I was talking about a tarred shed. I mustn't forget those intense black notes in my Middlesex landscape. All the wooden outbuildings, from the long milking-sheds in the farmyards to the little tool-sheds and privies in the cottage back-gardens, were tarred a solemn universal black, and often the weather sides of the houses were given a black coat too. The farms, particularly, had a grandly melancholy appearance, their black outbuildings gathered round brilliant slime-green horse-ponds. So it was very appropriate that the bird of the locality should be the rook. Every grove, every spinney, had a rookery. I think I was never out of earshot of rooks cawing. I woke to them every morning, and fell asleep to them every night.

'Except for a couple of months in late spring when all the hawthorns came into bloom, all the lilacs and laburnums, and the red and white horse-chestnuts, and bloomed with the exuberance of a kermesse in Flanders, it was not, I suppose, a gay landscape, and certainly not a picturesque one. But children don't require gaiety, and only understand the picturesque in terms of Wardour Street. In real life they are as indifferent to it as the true artist is. Holidays took me to the sea, to bluebell woods, to mountains in Wales or villages in Devon. I enjoyed the amenities, and returned to be satisfied with flat fields, well-kept hedges, dusty roads, rational houses, brick cottages with tarred sheds, a walk to the canal, a view of the gasworks - and to my special private sensations, which were dear to me because I had come to them entirely by myself. No one had told me to see with a particular thrill - it was almost a religious awe - the row of poplars along the railway embankment. Except that it was a place where I could pick up chestnuts, no one had directed me into the mossy avenue where I used to feel myself watched and mothered by the broad, mild countenance of a forsaken Georgian mansion - it was in

chancery, they said, which meant exactly nothing to me. No one had told me to admire the emphatic blackness of the tarred farm-buildings under the canary-yellow pattern of the October elms against the dove-coloured clouded sky. And certainly no one had told me to look with intensity at this part of Middlesex because in another thirty years it would be gone for ever.

'I suppose I heard them talking about it. I must have. But the talk of parents is always full of angers and grievances, and as they never do anything about them one soon learns to discount it. For that matter, I could have seen for myself what the future must bring. There were the new houses by the railway station - a little colony of them, all gables and roughcast and fancy timbering. And each had a mangy little lawn and a fanciful gate with a fanciful name on it. And when the evening train had come in - the six o'clock - you could hear all the latches of those gates clicking, one after another, like a clock-maker's shop, as the city gentlemen came home from the city. When I was a little older I used to go that way and watch the new houses being put up, and talk to the builder's men. There was a very friendly plumber, I remember, and once he let me help him to put a bath in. But what child ever puts two and two together? I saw my world being nibbled away, and continued to live in it as though it, and I too, were eternal'.

'And those new houses, with their gables and roughcast and fancy timbering;' said his friend, 'were you so immunised by your Georgian brick that you did not admire them?' Feverell laughed: 'I didn't admire them. But to be honest, I dare say I would have thought them wonderful if my architectural high-mindedness had not been reinforced by a good dose of social snobbery. The people who lived in them, you see, were the sort of people my mother called "mere". They wore the wrong kind of shoes, and bought their groceries at the new multiple store, and used printed invitation cards, and talked about "running up to town". We still said "going to London"'. 'And you have never been back?' 'Yes, once. It was about ten years ago. I went by train and walked about a little. They were still there, those houses by the railway station. They were the only things I could recognise. But I can't say that time had improved them.'