

MUNBY'S DAY IN THE COUNTRY

by D. C. Taylor our President June 1993



Arthur Joseph Munby, poet, barrister and social worker, was born in Yorkshire in 1828. Half of his life was spent in cultivated society - he included among his friends Browning, Millais, Ruskin, Rossetti and Swinburne - while the other half was devoted to "colliery women, fishergirls, milkwomen, female acrobats and the whole sub-world of women manual workers". His marriage to his maid would have scandalised Victorian society, had it not been kept secret to all but a few until after his death.

Munby visited Cobham, Surrey, in 1861 on Saturday 10th August. The railway line did not come there until 1885, and so Munby travelled by train to Leatherhead and walked to Stoke D'Abernon. Street Cobham was on the old Portsmouth Road, and Church Cobham, the older settlement, by the parish church. Munby confused the two, and throughout the text the names should be transposed. "I walked on a mile or more along the flat high road to Cobham Tilt - a few houses on a common - and then just beyond, through Street Cobham, where the village road comes down to the Mole and runs beside it.

At the junction stands an old-fashioned mill, with a large undershot wheel in full play, and then comes the mill race, a long quiet strip of water broadening out beyond the weir into a pretty view, with old red houses on one side, and willows on the other, and the church spire in the midst".

The "old red houses" are now Cedar House, a National Trust property and Ham Manor, a fine Queen Anne house. The view towards the church, however, has been spoilt by redevelopment, and the mill was partly demolished in 1953.

Munby continues, "Few people were about in the village, which is thoroughly rural, and picturesque though not antique. Seeing 'Cobham Reading Rooms' over the door of a little house, I spoke to the old man who was weeding in the bit of garden in front. The reading rooms flourish, he said, but chiefly through the support of the neighbouring gentry, who established them five years ago. There are three classes of subscribers; the tradespeople and folk of the better sort are of the first, and these are numerous and take out books to read at home: the second, for working men, not so numerous; the labourers don't come much and don't take books out. Class 3 is for young men and even boys." These reading rooms were in an 18th century cottage demolished in the 1960s.

Munby's diary then records his meeting with a Cobham "working woman". "I walked on....and in the way I met a tall woman, who did not seem to belong to any of the ordinary classes of the village girls. Her face and hands were sunburnt and weather-stained, but her dress was not that of a labouring woman, though it was poor and worn. She had on a battered green velveteen bonnet, a shabby black cloak, and a brown stiff gown of milliner's design. Guided by this inconsistency to my question, I asked her, 'Are you the postman?' 'Yes Sir,' she replied readily; 'I'm going to Stoke now for the letters.' Whereon I turned back and walked with her. 'Your name' I said 'is Eliza Harris, and you are the rural messenger from Cobham to Stoke?' 'Yes Sir,' she said with a smile of surprise and taking me perhaps for an emissary of Sir Rowland Hill, she answered my questions with most cheerful eagerness. In fact Eliza's success in the Civil Service examinations list had caught Munby's eye the previous year.

"She is not yet one and twenty, though an outdoor life has made her look five years older... she is a regular postman, and earns 15/- a week. 'I walk eighteen miles every day Sir,' says she, 'except Sundays, and then I only walk four or five miles.' She starts at six in the morning, often without breakfast and her first walk is six miles. 'I like the work, and can do it very well. I'm never unwell at all, I go all weathers, of course when it's wet I have an umbrella, but I often get wet through. I wear out a pair of strong boots every three months. It's rather lonesome, that's all. I should like to be a postman in London streets, it's more company like.'

The establishment book of a former Cobham postmaster confirms Eliza's appointment in July 1860. A later entry reveals her dismissal in 1879 for 'detention of letters'.

The diary continues, "It was a beautiful barny evening, with a tender sunset coming on. I walked back thither and ordered tea at the White Lion. Meanwhile I went by a meadow path across to see the church. Very good externally; tower and

south door Norman, the rest perpendicular and Tudor. Interior apparently hideous and protestant. Two modern staircases outside, leading up through an ancient window to the private pews of a London alderman, whose execrable monument darkened the north aisle without. The churchyard smooth shaven, well kept, and pretty situate. Ancient timbered house at one corner, by a knot of yews. Quiet old red brick grange hard by, with shed in yard converted into meeting place of some kind. Howling match going on within, tombs in churchyard and all, I think under a century, slabbed and bricked and 'respectable'."

The London alderman was Harvey Christian Combe, Lord Mayor of London. Combe made his fortune in porter-brewing and moved to Cobham Park in 1807.



The "ancient timbered house" is Church Stile House, which dates from the 17th century, while the "quiet old red brick grange" is Pyports, formerly The Cedars. Here Samuel Wesley Bradnack kept a boarding school for young gentlemen. A pupil at another school was F. Anstey, who parodied Bradnack and the school in his novel Vice Versa. An ardent Methodist, Bradnack opened his home for revival

meetings, and Munby must have passed while a meeting was in progress, the description "howling match" indicating his strong disapproval of evangelicalism.

After his walk, Munby tells us, "I came back to the White Lion at dusk, had an excellent meal, served by a pretty sister of the landlady, in an upper room looking down the broad village street, where groups were lounging in the pleasant idleness that ends the week's work".

"After tea, I came down into the bar, where a little group of gossips soon formed. There was a shoemaker, and the builder, and one or two young farmers, and a twinkling old party who had means of his own and we all sat and talked of the harvest, and cricketing, and volunteers and of the old coaching days, when the White Lion, then twice as big, kept 40 horses, and 27 coaches passed to Portsmouth every day, and the shoemaker, who was then an ostler, saved £30 in his first year".

"There was talk too of one Richard Daw living near, a jovial man who gives his friends to drink of strong cider and ale and then chuckles to see them stagger. And of tramps and paupers too, what a number of tickets for food and lodging the Cobham peeler has to give away per night. And of course among other things I spoke of female employment; as to which they agreed with me, and said that the women work well hereabouts".

"Meanwhile the landlady, a pleasant nice looking woman of 30, and her sister aforesaid, were bustling about, serving many casual customers without, and waiting upon us men with oriental deference. Now and then at quiet moments they would sit down for a few minutes and join the talk or listen. The sister said the Cobham people were stuck up and divided: the tradesmens' daughters thought they were something, and looked down upon you, quite. She applauded my ideal portrait of a farmer's daughter ... So we chatted and smoked till 10.30, when I went up to bed, thinking of that admirable inn scene in *Silas Marner*."

The White Lion still stands on the Portsmouth Road, its mellow red brick facade concealing an older building. In 1861 the landlord was Joshua Rose. Munby's shoemaker and builder may have been William Matthews of World's End, a "bootmaker", and the local builder, Abraham Newland. Richard Daw may have been Eli Daws, a brewer who lived on Tartar Hill and was probably employed at Cobham Brewery, which adjoined the White Lion. The local peeler was William Perfect.

The next day, Sunday, Munby moved on: "A brilliant hot morning. I set off about 9.30, after breakfast, to walk from Cobham to Teddington. The road, after leaving the village and passing a short and shady ascent (Tartar Hill) comes out on the lofty broken common (Fairmile) that stretches all the way to Esher.

"...the views were charming: behind, the woods of Pains Hill Park beyond Cobham; to the left, the pale blue hills across the vale of the Thames; and in the middle distance, the heather, which was all in bloom, made broad bands of most soothing purple. There was the gorse too in flower: and all the wild broken beauties of such a scene in Surrey and I was alone in the sultry silence."

Munby returned to Cobham in later years to the home of his friend Judge Vernon Lushington of Pyports. He later lodged at Wheelers Farm, Pyrford, Surrey, where he had "an innocent but devastating" romance with a local girl. The property was later rented by the Lushingtons and then by Munby who lived there until his death in 1910.

The diary extracts of Mr. A. J. Munby are by courtesy of the Master and Fellows, Trinity College, Cambridge.