

**A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLISH
RURAL LIFE FROM THE
ANGLO-SAXON INVASION TO
THE PRESENT TIME**

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A short history of English rural life from the Anglo-Saxon invasion to the present time by
Montague Fordham & Charles Bathurst

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BY

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WITH A PREFACE BY

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PREFACE

TO those—and they are now many—who are earnestly seeking for a true solution of our many agricultural problems, industrial, social and political, the study of the conditions prevailing in rural England from the earliest historical times and of the vicissitudes, both of our greatest national industry and of the classes engaged in it, is an indispensable equipment. By such investigation alone can the difficulties of these problems be appreciated, blunders in rural policy be avoided, and antagonistic interests be reconciled. It will be rendered easy and attractive by a careful perusal of this little book, which skilfully summarizes the chief features of English village life and English agricultural history from Anglo-Saxon times down to the XXth century. And a chequered and kaleidoscopic history it is, replete with picturesque incident, remarkable in the vicissitudes of fortune of both rural industry and rural population, and, as regards the peasant and (more recently) the agricultural labourer, infinitely pathetic and at times tragic. Round this pathetic figure

Mr. Montague Fordham sympathetically weaves his historical narrative. He pictures for us first the ancient self-governing village communities with their carefully partitioned open arable fields, their moots, their reeves and their haywards; then the feudal conditions of Norman times, based upon military organization, with their manors, demesnes, incidents of tenure and communal rights; the restlessness and misery of the XIVth century, with its Black Death and Peasant Revolt; the growing commercialism of the XVth and succeeding centuries, with its concomitant transition from customary tenants and bondsmen to tenant farmers and labourers: the continuous policy and process of enclosures, so fruitful in the economic development of England's agriculture, so fateful to the social development of England's peasantry; the growth of Puritanism in the XVIIth century and with it the disappearance of seasonal merrymaking and gaiety from the villages, and their replacement by religious rivalry and discord; the spread of sheep farming for cloth manufacture in the XVth and XVIth centuries, and that of more enlightened and economic methods of arable cultivation in the XVIIth and XVIIIth, the latter associated with the honoured names of Jethro Tull, "Turnip Townshend," Bakewell, Colling, Arthur Young and "Coke of Norfolk," when England was self-contained in the matter of her food

supply and was pre-eminent among the nations of the world in her agricultural processes and prosperity: the disappearance of village industries, the waning of the leadership of the Church, and the rise of the country squire and the capitalist farmer in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries: the periodical recrudescence during the last hundred years of emancipatory labour movements, headed by such sturdy countrymen as William Cobbett, Robert Owen and Joseph Arch: the improvements in agricultural machinery and rural science in the middle of the last century: and finally the catastrophe of the great agricultural depression which commenced in its late seventies, which ruined landlords, farmers and labourers alike and depleted the countryside both of men and money.

The writer lightly and hopefully touches upon the rural Renaissance of the XXth century, now rudely interrupted by the great European War. He rejoices, as all who really love their country must rejoice, at the improved amenities of village life, at the increasing facilities for a more rational system of education, and particularly at the spread of the Co-operative movement, invading, as it rightly does, every branch of agricultural activity, and not merely affording to the small-holder and allotment-holder the commercial advantages enjoyed by the larger farmer, but also

welding together every class of the rural population in a common effort to promote the industrial welfare of the locality and to carry to the homes of the humblest of its workers a due proportion of the prosperity and happiness which such solidarity is bound to engender.

The old Squires of England were not always wise and were sometimes despotic, but they were, as a class, imbued with a traditional sense of honour, integrity, patriotism and sympathetic knowledge of their poorer neighbours which are not so markedly characteristic of the more progressive plutocracy which has largely replaced them.

The war will in its results afford unparalleled opportunities of awakening to new vigour the life of our villages and the development of a healthy, happy and largely increased rural community. The spirit of comradeship, self-denial, dogged courage and simple piety is abroad in the land, and is growing with every month of the present struggle for our national existence. It must be the aim of well informed rural reformers to turn this spirit to good account, and seek not by restriction, still less by penal legislation, but by mutual goodwill and sympathy to combine the freedom of life, social intercourse, innocent gaiety and simple religious faith of mediaeval rural England with an economic im-

provement such as that which marked the XVIIIth century, but one of which all classes alike will feel the benefit and by means of which the enterprising manhood of our villages will not decay while a surfeit of wealth accumulates in the hands of the few, but will find a ladder easy of ascent by which they may climb to a position of industrial independence and social advancement.

The inspiring "call of the land" will thus be heard and responded to by many of the most robust, physically and morally, of our fellow-countrymen and the stability of the nation enhanced thereby.

CHARLES BATHURST.

LYDNEY PARK,
February 1916.