

**A SKETCH OF TOPPESFIELD
PARISH, ESSEX CO., ENGLAND
AND THE HISTORY AND
ANTIQUITIES OF TOPPESFIELD
PARISH, ESSEX CO., ENGLAND**

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A sketch of Toppesfield Parish, Essex Co., England and The history and antiquities of Toppesfield Parish, Essex Co., England by H. B. Barnes & Philip Morant & George Francis Dow

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H. B. BARNES & PHILIP MORANT & GEORGE FRANCIS DOW

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A SKETCH OF
TOPPESFIELD PARISH, ESSEX CO., ENGLAND,

Henry Broughton
BY REV. H. B. BARNES,
Rector of St. Margaret's,

— AND —

THE HISTORY AND ANTIQUITIES OF
TOPPESFIELD PARISH, ESSEX CO., ENGLAND,

BY PHILIP MORANT, CHELMSFORD, 1876.

Annotated and Edited

BY GEORGE FRANCIS DOW,

Secretary of the Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.; Secretary of
the Topsfield (Mass.) Historical Society; Member of
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A SKETCH OF TOPPESFIELD PARISH,
ESSEX CO., ENGLAND.

BY REV. H. B. BARNES, RECTOR OF ST. MARGARETS.

For the last six months I have been trying to gather material for a sketch of the history of ancient Toppesfield. The work would be by no means easy even for an expert, for there appear to have been no previous workers in this field, from whom to gather without toil that which must in the first instance have been discovered at the cost of much time and labour.

Of course the chronicler has the old records on the tombs, the old account books, as well as the old registers, which he can always consult, and which probably would reveal tales of deepest interest to any one who has leisure to study them, and experience and skill to understand the meaning of that which is written in these old-world records, but the present writer confesses with sorrow that even had he the time to spare he has not got the skill; but he hopes that he is no dog in the manger; so should any one (and especially any one interested in the connection between Topsfield and Toppesfield) wish to work up all that can be learned from these original documents, he may count on being met with the heartiest welcome, and the fullest help that can be rendered.

As then, (in the absence of other men's writings from which to steal, and of ability to make original researches) it is impossible to write any account of ancient Toppesfield which shall not be of an imaginative rather than an historical character, I have thought that perhaps some short account of the Toppesfield of to-day might be of interest.

The village is situated in the north-eastern corner of the County of Essex, near to the borders of Suffolk on the east, and of Cambridgeshire on the north; the country is not by any means of the level character that is usually attributed to the whole of Essex. There are no great hills but there is no flat country; all is undulating. Toppesfield itself—whatever the origin of its name—certainly by its position deserves its designation; the church does not stand on the highest ground in the parish, but yet its tower serves for a land-mark for miles around, on all sides except the west, on which side a wood screens it from view; while in the parish about two miles in a southerly direction from the church, is found the highest point in this part of the county, excelled in the whole county only, if at all, by Danbury Hill near Chelmsford.

The soil is almost uniformly clay, and very good for wheat growing, and its fertility is such that even in the present time of agricultural depression there is not an unoccupied acre in the parish. Yet it must not for a moment be supposed that Toppesfield has escaped unscathed; very far from it. Thirty years ago it was as rich and prosperous a little place as could be found; now it is miserably poverty-stricken; then, there were numbers of well-to-do farmers, now, the land is farmed in large holdings by men who, for the most part, live in neighbouring villages; then, many of the old houses dotted about the parish were occupied by large and thriving families; now, the families have gone and many of the houses are either occupied by labourers (*e. g.* Olivers, Cust Hall and Fry's Hall) or are falling into decay as "Mullows" has done. The impossibility of making a living off the land, has driven the descendants of sturdy yeomen to seek elsewhere, the livelihood which the ground their fathers tilled, can no longer afford them.

Nor is the lot of the labourer better than that of the

farmer; though the cause of the trouble is in his case different; for farm labourers wages, have this year stood higher than they have ever been known to be before. But in the old days the daughters and wife would earn more than the father, and would do so without being necessarily taken away from home; even thirty years ago, straw plaiting was a great industry in this part of England. Old crones maintained themselves in comparative comfort by holding "schools" in which infants of quite tender years were taught to plait, and, as the children grew up, they plaited as they stood in their cottage doors or as they lolled about the roads, and their work was every week collected by higglers who came round for the purpose. All this has come to an end now; no straw plait is made here for it can be more cheaply imported from the East than it can be made at home; and though the money that was earned in this way is much missed, yet the village is happier and better for the loss of this business, for straw plaiting always seemed—wherever it was done—to bring a moral deterioration in its train.

There is however an indirect way in which the agricultural depression seriously affects the labourer; it makes it very difficult for him to get a decent cottage. The profits of farming having been so much reduced, the farmers have been unable to pay anything like the old amount of rent and this has hit the land-owning class very hard; in some cases the depreciation of the value of land has been so great that its capital value now is little more than its old annual rent; plenty of good land can now be bought for £7. an acre and in this price are sometimes included farm houses and out-buildings and cottages which have quite recently cost more than now they can fetch, even with the freehold of the land thrown in; small pieces of land without buildings fetch (except for some special reason) even lower prices. I heard last week of thirteen acres of good land in an adjoining parish being sold for no more than £40.

The landlords then, being so hard hit in all cases, and sometimes having positively *no* balance left after they have paid the "charges" on the estate (doweries it may be or pensions determined upon during the fat years of prosperity) are unwilling, even when, through having other sources of income,

they are able, to spend more money than can be helped, on the up-keep of their farm buildings and the cottages on their farms; hence on every side the barns and out-buildings are more or less dilapidated, (though it must be owned that in this respect there has been a considerable improvement during the last two years) hence too the refusal to repair old cottages, so that cottage after cottage is condemned by the medical officer of health as unfit or unsafe for human habitation, and the inhabitants of the condemned cottages are obliged to seek their living elsewhere than in the old parish. As for new cottages, none have been built lately and none are likely to be built, for if the landlords cannot build them no one else will except from philanthropic motives, for it would be difficult to get a nett return of two per cent. on the minimum cost of erection.

The necessary results of such a condition of things are easily understood; the best of the young men go off to the towns, and there gain their living; many of them become policeman or employés on the railways; others become soldiers; the young women go out to domestic service and so the village is left with the old people and the young children to inhabit it. The proportion of the old is something remarkable; that the climate is extremely healthy and that longevity is much more common here than in most places, may have a little to do with it, but fails altogether to account for the wonderful proportion of old people in the population; no, the reason is that the young men and women as soon as they grow up go off elsewhere to seek a better market for their labour; and while we regret losing them, and fear that many of the men like the married man of the story find the change "none for the better and all for the worse," there can be no doubt that the course they take is the one which must seem most reasonable to those who have no knowledge of the condition of unskilled labour in the great towns. The extent to which this exodus is reducing the population of the parish may be judged from the fact that while in 1831 there were 1088 inhabitants; in 1881 there were 861; in 1891 790, and in 1901 there is no doubt that there will be a still further reduction. It is impossible to form an accurate estimate, but I should guess the number at 650, basing my calculation

on the number of children on the school books, which is now 115, while in 1891 it was 146. I am glad to say, however, that the average number in attendance for this year is higher than it was then, for while in 1891 the average was 111, it is for the time that has passed since the beginning of the current school year on April 1st last* 113, which we are proud to consider would be a remarkable performance for any school, but which is highly creditable in a parish where some of the scholars live two and one-half miles away from the school door. The school is a voluntary school supported by a voluntary rate of 4d in the £1, in addition of course to the Government grant; the total cost for a scholar in average attendance being about £2. 10. 0. per annum; the buildings are good and roomy, and would accommodate nearly double the present number of scholars. In the school is also held an evening continuation school for young men which was begun this year and which has been doing fairly well. In this same building are held the meetings of the members of what is known as "the school club," an excellent Benefit Society, a branch of the National Deposit Friendly Society. The Toppesfield branch started some fifteen years ago by the then Rector, the Rev. C. F. Taylor, has over 100 members; many of them however are now living in distant parts and some come from neighbouring villages. Toppesfield has reason to feel proud of its school and of its Benefit Society.

Near the School is the church which is dedicated to St. Margaret; the tower looks imposing from a distance but when examined more closely proves to be a rather poor specimen of the architecture of the beginning of the eighteenth century; there was an old tower, the inside of which must have opened on to the church, with a lofty early English arch, and which is said to have been built of flint and rubble; this fell down on July 4th 1689, and was replaced by the present structure of brick; the tower contains five bells, two of which however need recasting. The church consists of a chancel, nave, and south aisle with a gallery at the west end, against the tower. The chancel contains an interesting old

*It is only fair to state, that during the months April, May and June, there were ten more children on the books, but the average weekly percentage of children present is, for this year, over ninety-five.

tomb surmounted with a cross, built half in and half out of the south wall. There is no inscription on the tomb, and it is not known to whom it belongs. In the floor is an old brass, bearing the figures of a man and woman, and with the inscription

Pray for the sowlys of John Cracherowd and Agnes his wyff: the whyche John deceyde the yere of Our Lord God 1513, upon whose sowle Christ have mercy.

Near to this there is another brass plate with the inscription:

Here lyeth buried William Cracherod, Gent, who died Xth of January 1585, and Eliz; his wyfe the XVIIth of Feb. 1587.

Near to this again there is a tomb, with a full-sized effigy of a man, bearing no inscription, but probably containing an earlier member of the same family of Cracherod.

On the walls of the chancel are commonplace memorials of three former Rectors,* and two memorials of ladies which may be worth transcribing; on the north wall there is a marble monument bearing various symbolical devices† and this inscription:

*Against the east wall of the chancel is a small mural monument, upon which is written as follows:—Ego Richardus King, patria Herefordiensis, educatione Oxoniensi, professione theologus, officio capellaneus Jacobi Regis ferentissimi & hujus ecclesiae vicarius indignus, hoc in loco sacrosancto sponte depono & recondo corporis exuvias laus Deo, salus ecclesiae, & animae meae requies in aeternum. Amen. [For illustration of this tablet, see, *The Ancient Sepulchral Monuments of Essex*. By Frederic Chancellor, p. 325, London, 1890.]

†In English:—I Richard King, by country an Herefordshireman, by education an Oxonian, by profession a divine, by office a chaplain to king James and the unworthy vicar of this church, willingly deposit my remains in this sacred place.—Praise be to God, health to the church, and rest to my soul for ever. Amen.—*History of Essex (Co.)*. By a Gentleman. Chelmsford, 1771.

‡Two Bibles serve the office of trusses, upon which are two rows of books, that instead of two pilasters support a neat pediment, in the middle of which pediment is a beehive, and under the hive is written *industria dulcis*, meaning *sweet industry*. Over the hive is placed a dove, with the words *fida simplex* (imparting *simple fidelity*) written below it. Six of the books which compose the pilasters are labelled thus:—*Sacrae medit; Soliloquia; Publ. Prae; Praxis Pict; Flores Prae; Psalmi*.—*History of Essex (Co.)*. By a Gentleman. Chelmsford, 1771.