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ENGLAND LIVING and ENGLAND DEAD

by H. E. Bates

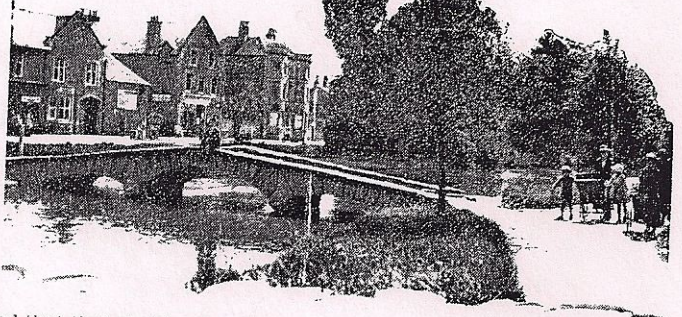
WE spent three days under the shelter of Chedworth Woods, at Withington on the Coln, before going northwards again into higher Cotswold. It was the kind of day on which to read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; the sweltering oppressive heat of the day would have recreated perfectly the atmosphere of the hot forest, relieving one's flagging mind of the work of conjuring up the fierce, moist heat. The hills were scorched and deserted, the rims quivering against the brilliant sky.

As we climbed steadily up, hoping all the time for the cool winds that never came, even at eight hundred feet, we thought of Cheltenham behind us in its saucer, sleepy, snobbish, soulless, the kind of place where no one would go except to sleep or die.

Between Compton Abdale and Bourton-on-the-Water we struck a bit of country which in its bare and primitive solitude could be compared in England only with the hill solitudes of the north or the Fens in the east. We walked for hours along a flood-washed stone track winding between two walls of sheepless hills without seeing a soul. Not a man or a sheep! There wasn't a sound in the hot air except the ticking of grasshoppers and our own voices.

It was a timeless bit of earth, belonging to no century, looking to us as it must have looked to Shakespeare if he ever roamed the Cotswolds, or to any eighteenth-century shepherd, or to Arthur Gibbs. It was gaunt, naked, everlasting land. We could hardly comprehend that the sophisticated, iniquitous, gossip-diseased Cheltenham lay only ten miles behind us.

Bourton-on-the-Water, the "Venice of the Cotswolds."



We hoped that that stretch of country would last all day, but we finally observed on a hill-top the silhouette of a man hoeing in the heat, and although he himself was part of the hills and looked as immemorial, he was the signal for a change, for a return to lower land and the villages.

After seeing him we climbed a little longer and then dropped suddenly towards the valley. Turning to look finally on that gaunt bit of earth behind us we discovered it had vanished completely. It was as though it had never existed. And this is the way of Cotswold. One hill will hide a valley behind as quickly as another will reveal a fresh view ahead. Vast conjuring tricks happen at every hill-top. A bit of familiar land vanishes in a minute as though sliced off the edge of earth, and before one's eyes some utterly fresh and different view appears, only to vanish also and be replaced in time.

We ought to have known what to expect from Bourton-on-the-Water. The guide book called it "The Venice of the Cotswolds"—and ought not that to have been enough? In itself the place is charming—trees, water running

through the streets, cool grass—but it was there that we first smelt the stench of the arty-and-crafty disease which has begun to attack the north limb of Cotswold.

The smell was brief and faint—but we had tasted it. Coming on in the heat of late afternoon we lost it again completely in the villages—Lower Slaughter, Upper Swell, Upper Slaughter, Lower Swell—as we proceeded to Stow-on-the-Wold.

And for Stow one can forgive anything, for this is the most memorable of all Cotswold towns, simple, dignified, honest-to-God, built with a lovely solidity within a barricade of trees on a wide wold, so that it can be seen, like some promised land, from afar off. A day later, from Chipping Norton, we saw it shining in the brilliant light of mid-day, a fine sight for any traveller coming in wearily from Oxfordshire.

We rested in the heat at Stow, sitting under the trees in the market square in the hot evenings to talk and wonder if the wind could indeed blow cold there in winter. We thought the place finer the longer we stayed.

And then foolishly we left. More northwards still were towns we must see—the guide-books, the art-books, the travel-books, the history-books all said so—and with the thermometer at ninety-nine we left Stow and walked madly through the heat like silly pilgrims, always in an agony of thirst and sweat, to Chipping Campden.

I do not know if it was the putrefying heat of that afternoon, but I caught the old stench again as we came to Campden. The place had the smell of death about it; and as we walked up and down its long, beautifully preserved street with its arty inn-signs, I felt that the place, like Northleach, had died with the hand-loom. It had been dead a hundred years and had been masquerading as alive with the help of the Morris disciples and the art-conscious hostel-keepers with their fat, American-screwed guest-books.

The faces of all Campdenites reflect the same desire—a desire to preserve Campden, to keep it secure from vandalism, to keep up the pretence of life in the dead body of the place; and so the shops are Victorian, the simple public-house hardly exists, the hotels are genteel and expensive; the date 1843 seems to be written in large letters over everything, and the people, from the hotel-keepers to the poorest, struggle pathetically to keep the place steeped in the atmosphere of that date.



(Pictures by courtesy of the G.W.R.)
Stow-on-the-Wold, "the most memorable of all Cotswold towns."