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THE BOY WILL DO

JOHN RODDIS



With a Foreword by
H. E. BATES

Foreword

If I speak of Higham Ferrers as the most beautiful place in England it will be understood, I hope, that I am speaking of things seen through the mind's eye. The beauty of things seen in retrospect, through endearing association, over a period of time, is something that cannot be registered by photography, still less by ballot papers.

I will not say, therefore, that Higham Ferrers is physically the most beautiful town in England, or even in Northamptonshire. I will not attempt to maintain that, among Northamptonshire stone towns, it is more beautiful than Oundle, or Brackley or Towcester or the north-eastern villages of the Nene. I will simply say that it is nearer my heart.

There are good reasons for this. I was born over the hill, in foreign parts, in what was virtually a new town. But in all the most influential respects I was brought up in Higham Ferrers, in its fields and in the valley which it dominates so beautifully. I was fortunate in a grandfather steeped in reminiscence of it and in its history, so that I grew up to feel close not only to its present, then represented by any number of delightfully robust mutton-chopped characters now dead, but by its past, represented by its great archbishop, the famous Chichele. To me Chichele is not only an Archbishop; he is not simply a name; he is another boy following a plough among the spring coltsfoots in the fields about his native town.

In the six hundred years since Chichele's day Time has gone past Higham Ferrers and has not, in material respect, touched it very much. I delight in this. The essence of its architectural art remains exactly as I knew it as a boy and probably as travellers knew it in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Church, with its superb doorway, the Bede House, the Cross, "The Green Dragon," the College, the Town Hall, the Walnut Tree, Wood Street and the perfect and enchanting Square with the chestnut trees—modern improvement has not, thank heaven, touched them at all and I profoundly hope they never will. And in case the citizens of Higham Ferrers might here and there grow careless about this inheritance of theirs I may say that I am supported in my enthusiasm for its beauty by two American authors, Ruth McKenny, author of the famous play "My Sister Eileen," and her husband Richard Branstetter. These two Anglophiles have written a specially commissioned book, designed to appeal more especially to American Festival visitors, called "Here's England," in which they hail Higham Ferrers as one of their favourite towns in what is, they are never tired of maintaining, their favourite country.

If this short foreword of mine can add anything to the pride of those persons looking at the historical pageant of Higham Ferrers in the Festival of 1951 I shall, therefore, be more than glad. If it can do anything to check the impulses of those people who from time to time talk of pulling bits of the Ancient Borough down I shall feel that every word I have ever written of Higham Ferrers, whether fact or fiction, has been worth while. Higham Ferrers does not belong simply to history; it belongs, like history itself, to the future. Leave it alone, therefore: the unique group of ecclesiastical buildings, the 18th century houses, the College, the pubs, Wood Street with its limes, the incomparable Square with the Chestnut Trees. It can only grow in beauty.

H. E. BATES,