



Winfred E. Garrison

## Shakespeare's England

*In 1898, a young American bicyclist  
shows his interest in the great bard  
of Avon and reformer John Wiclif*

For the Shakespeare-loving pilgrim, who has made Stratford-on-Avon the center of his daily thoughts and nightly dreams from the day when he first stepped upon British soil, there may possibly be disappointment in store when he finds himself in the midst of the actual Stratford. Here one instinctively demands a more distinct flavor of antiquity than elsewhere,—more of the England of three centuries ago, more of Elizabethan gaiety and splendor and riotousness. In fact, you expect to find the supreme embodiment of Shakespeare's England,—and you do not find it. After passing through Coventry, where one might live in the sixteenth century and forget the nineteenth if he wished, and through

Kenilworth, which seems not so much to have come down into our times as to carry us back by some pleasant magic into the days of its early grandeur, the traveler finds in Stratford not a town of Shakespeare's time, but a modern town, containing a few relics of Shakespeare and his age. It has been rebuilt with broad and fairly straight streets, and the stream of tourists (of which we are two) has swept it clear of its atmosphere of quaintness and antiquity, except such as lingers about the Shakespeare birthplace, the Grammar School and Holy Trinity Church. These places, so long as one regards them apart from the town, are delightful and satisfying.

It is a beautiful and touching thing to behold the homage that is paid to the great dramatist, and the crowd of pilgrims who frequent this shrine is an eloquent testimonial to his fame. But one cannot help regretting that the poet's memory is made so much a matter of merchandise. Stratford owes not only all of its reputation, but most of its present prosperity to the fact that Shakespeare lived and died there. It would be interesting to know what proportion of its population owes its daily bread to the Shakespeare tradition. The per cent would be large. And it is not altogether pleasing to see "Shakespeare Cigars," "Shakespeare Restaurant," "Shakespeare Hotel," "Shakespeare Livery Stables," and other signs of the same sort staring one in the face at every corner.

Besides this, there are abundant evidences of the demoralization which results to the residents from habitual catering to a floating population of tourists. You cannot walk the length of a street without being accosted by from two to six urchins who, for the consideration of "tuppence" are anxious to guide you to a dozen spots where you don't care to go and acquaint you with a score of facts with which (thanks to your faithful friend, Baedeker) you are already familiar. They join themselves to you and will not be shaken off. When you decline their services, they unblushingly descend to undisguised mendicancy and still clamor for the "tuppence," or perhaps, with more moderation but equal insistence, for a penny.

Yes, it must be admitted that Stratford-on-Avon, as an historic town, fails to satisfy. It is a museum. Its individual exhibits are wonderfully interesting, but they bear the same relation to the town as the contents of any museum bear to the building in which they are kept.

The best thing about Stratford, to my mind, is Ann Hathaway's

cottage, the scene of Shakespeare's courtship, and one of its chief charms is that it is not in Stratford, but three-quarters of a mile away, in a village of a dozen cottages, called Shottery. It was Sunday evening. We had attended church in the morning at the Holy Trinity, where the poet is buried, and had spent the afternoon on the Avon, rowing leisurely up to Charlecote and drifting down again, basking in the sunshine and then seeking shelter from a sudden shower under the bushes on the bank. It cleared again with a bright sunset, followed by a long, soft, mellow English twilight, the sweetest of all twilights. On such an evening we wandered along the path which leads across the fields from Stratford to Shottery. A hedge of wild roses is on one side and a meadow on the other, while here and there a poppy flames by the path. The air is fresh and fragrant from the rain, and presently the thatch of Ann Hathaway's cottage appears at the end of the lane. Ah! Shakespeare, who could blame you for loving the girl who lived at the end of that walk? The only wonder is that a girl, the path to whose house was so flowery, wild and sweet, should not have been married to some other Stratford youth while the future dramatist was yet in grammar school. The fact that she was nine years his senior ought, for sentimental reasons, to have been forgotten long ago. It seems like an impertinence even to think of it as we follow this path, which doubtless the feet of the youthful Shakespeare often trod on a Sunday evening—unless the ways of men and maidens have greatly altered in three centuries. As I stood looking at the cottage and thinking it all over, a little girl—a very little girl—ran up with a wild rose fresh plucked from the hedge, gave it to me and ran away as quickly as she had come. I was sorry that she went away so quickly, and yet glad, for otherwise I would never have been sure that it was a spontaneous act of pure kindness with no expectation of reward. All the other children in and about Stratford wanted coppers.

From Stratford-on-Avon our route lay north for a few miles, back to Warwick, where a few hours were happily spent at Warwick Castle, a representative at once of ancient and modern splendor. The Earl charges an entrance fee of a shilling to the uninvited guests who care to visit his castle and grounds. A communicative gate-keeper informed us, in answer to our question, that between two and three hundred servants and attendants were ordinarily employed about the castle and park, but that many more were called in on special occasions, such as the recent visit of

the Prince of Wales. "And how large is the family that is served by these two or three hundred?" we asked. "Two kids and their parents," replied the ancient servitor. If beauty of architecture and of natural surroundings could ever make a loyal American wish to be an earl for the sake of living in a castle, Warwick Castle is the place to inspire that unpatriotic wish.

It would be as impossible as it is undesirable to give a consecutive account of the English weather from day to day. The record could not be even approximately correct unless it were given from hour to hour. As a rule, each day contains a mixture of sunshine and rain. It is merely a question of the proportion between the two. Moreover, English showers are usually small affairs, in space as well as in time. You see a black cloud about the size of a man's hand off your starboard bow, to speak nautically, and coming straight toward you. It is perfectly evident that there will soon be rain somewhere near, but it does not follow that you will get it. It may miss you by a couple of hundred yards; or you may dash forward and cross its path in front of it. In any case it will probably be over in half an hour, and the roads will be in condition to ride as soon as the rain has stopped. Hence it was that we were not greatly disturbed when it began to rain on us at Warwick Castle. We simply went indoors and looked at the Van Dyke portraits, Queen Anne furniture and ancient armor for awhile, and then rode on in sunshine to Rugby and Lutterworth.



Lutterworth, the home and parish of John Wiclif during the last nine years of his life, is well worth a visit. The town is nothing more than a thousand other English towns, but the parish church is one of the most interesting to be found anywhere. If the claims of the curate are correct, part of the present structure is nine hundred years old. The identical pulpit is in use from which Wiclif preached evangelical Christianity five centuries ago, and, in fact, if we may believe those now in charge, the whole building is substantially as it was in Wiclif's time. Among the relics of undoubted genuineness is the great carved oak communion table used

by Wiclif. It was made to stand out in the center of the aisle, instead of against the wall as an altar according to the Roman fashion then and now current. This usage, it will be remembered, was one for which Wiclif was called to account by his ecclesiastical superiors. Anti-hierarchical notions seemed to have been established in the very building, for there is a fresco of the Last Judgment, two centuries earlier than Wiclif, in which the most conspicuous among the damned are a bishop with his mitre, a priest with his robe and a king with his crown.

Leaving Lutterworth we returned to Rugby, visited the celebrated school and saw a part of a cricket match, and then went, as many of England's greatest men have done, from Rugby to Oxford, stopping on the way at Banbury, as perhaps some of them have done also, to make an evening meal on Banbury cakes and hot cross buns—"one a penny, two a penny, hot cross buns." (N. B. They are cold and cost two pence apiece.) They are very good, especially with milk, but are rather heavy when taken in quantities of more than eight at a sitting. Banbury Cross is there, too, but the old woman and her white horse, which figure in the nursery ballad, were not to be seen.

Oxford, by the time we reached it, had passed through the gaiety of her annual Commemoration Week, and had already settled into the somnolence of the "long vacation." The gray quadrangles were saved from absolute desertion only by the occasional passing of some student who had remained to read with his tutor. At long intervals a short academic gown and squaretopped cap are seen in High Street. But even when the life of the university is at a stand-still, the university continues to dominate the city and its atmosphere pervades every corner. The visitor who has had any particular acquaintance with universities will, during a couple of days at Oxford, think thoughts and experience emotions which, if he is wise, he will not attempt to express. It need only be said that it is a place which it is a joy to reach, a delight to remain in, and an agony to leave.

Passing on down the Thames toward London, one passes through Henley, which is just wakening for her annual week of festivities which accompany the boat races. Already the crews are in their training quarters, and one sees here and there, along the shore and loitering on the bridge, brawny young fellows, tall, deep-chested and clear-skinned,—the finest types of athletic young Englishmen. Farther on we come to Eton College

and step into the quadrangle just as the boys are rushing tumultuously out of their class-rooms with genuine school-boy enthusiasm for the dinner hour, – and every youngster of them wearing the short Eton jacket and tall silk hat which the rules prescribe.

Just across the river is Windsor, the home of the Queen, but Her Majesty was at home and the castle therefore closed to visitors. It is not nearly so attractive as Warwick anyway. From the royal palace it is a short five miles by a charming road to Stoke Poges churchyard, and there beneath the yew tree's shade, one who has not gained access to the presence of royalty may, without let or hindrance, seat himself upon a tombstone and contemplate, with the poet Gray, "the short and simple annals of the poor."

And it is only an easy two hours' ride from this calm, sequestered country church-yard to the very midst of the "madd'ning crowd's ignoble strife" in Fleet Street and the Strand.

*London, 3 July, 1898.*

This travel essay by W. E. Garrison is reprinted from his book *Wheeling Through Europe* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Company, 1900), pages 25-34. Images of William Shakespeare and John Wycliffe do not appear in the original edition. This edition © Keith Watkins, 2011

