

On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 1526

headed. The wilted crop is then packed down tightly under black polythene clamps, and in these anaerobic conditions will mature into silage. The permanent pastures of the Oak Field and Banky Field, where a mixed population of rye grasses, cocksfoot, meadow fescues and timothy flourish, we leave to grow a few weeks longer before cutting for hay.

Walking quietly across the old turf on the Banky Field today I came upon the shallow scrape of a nest, set in the hollow of an old hoof print and half covered by the overhanging dried mud. Just a few bent straw shafts surround a clutch of four pale biscuit-coloured eggs, mottled with a darker brown staining. I used to worry about the cattle treading on lapwing nests when they are grazing, but for all their apparent clumsiness they walk delicately round them. However, although eggs are laid from the end of March onwards, the nests are commonly robbed by foes such as carrion crows, so it's often as late as July before we have this year's brood wheeling and turning somersaults above the meadowland. Their haunting cry is our sound of summer come once more. □



Tough rups. Farmer at Westbury-on-Severn discussing a lively flock of sheep with neighbour: 'Them be that lively I reckons them do be 'arf ship and 'arf goat. Them'll be that tough to eat tha'll be 'ard put to stick tha fork in tha gravy.' - Evelyn Brown, Churcham, Gloucestershire.

REBECCA THATCHER

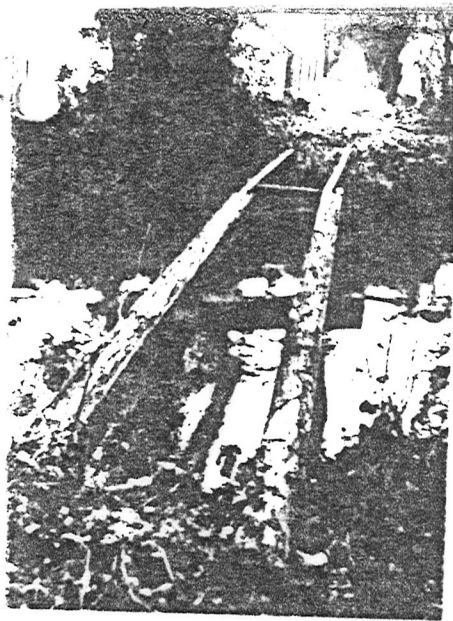
Gunpowder valley

Photographs by Bob Collins

HOT AND OUT OF breath, I struggled to the top of the hill, to the ancient chapel of St Martha astride the Pilgrim's Way. I sank down on the seat by the south wall and gazed at the valley of the little river Tillingbourne below, which lies between the hill and the village of Chilworth a few miles south of Guildford in Surrey. It was a peaceful scene: horses and cows grazed in the lush grass, a farmer was loading manure on to a trailer and people were walking along the footpath which leads from the village, past the seventeenth-century manor house to the chapel. Through the valley the river wound its way into the distance.

But it was not always so tranquil. It was busy enough to make William Cobbett, riding by in 1882, fulminate: 'This valley, which . . . seems formed for a scene of innocence and happiness, has been . . . so perverted as to make it instrumental in affecting two of the most damnable purposes; in carrying into execution two of the most damnable inventions that ever sprang from the minds of men under the influence of the devil! namely, the making of *gunpowder* and of *bank-notes*!'

Of the two, Cobbett much preferred gunpowder which could, he pointed out, be 'meritoriously employed' against tyrants. To make it required water power and charcoal, both of which the wooded valley of the Tillingbourne supplied. We may still trace the industry's



Last remains of the trestle bridge over the River Tillingbourne that carried gunpowder on its way to Chilworth railway station.

Cordwell and George Collins of the Chilworth mills and they became the only authorised gunpowder-makers in the country. £2,000 was loaned to them by the Crown to extend the factory and an order was sent to mayors and other local officers, instructing them to assist Cordwell and Collins in acquiring carts and barges to transport the powder from Chilworth to London.

About this time Aubrey wrote 'In this little vale are sixteen powder mills. They now belong to Morgan Rindyll of Chilworth manor, one of the representatives in Parliament of the town of Guildford'. By 1677, when Sir Polycarpus Wharton took over the mills, they had become so run down that he spent £1,500 of his own money to put them in working order. It did him little

archaeology here.

One of the basic ingredients of gunpowder is saltpetre, the chief source of which was the droppings from doves and pigeons. A process for purifying saltpetre was perfected at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and in 1625 the East India Company set up gunpowder mills 'on the edge of Windsor Forest'. At this time the forest stretched well into Surrey and it is believed that these early mills were at Chilworth. In 1636, the appointment of powdermaker to the King was given to Samuel



Millstones that once ground the King's gunpowder, now overgrown and abandoned, like the skeleton of the water-wheel (below) that drove them.

good, for he lost a fortune on the venture as the Crown would not pay its bills, and he ended up in a debtors' prison. Still, powder making continued there for more than two hundred years. In 1885 the Chilworth Gunpowder Company was formed, the factory was rebuilt and extended until it stretched for two miles along the valley. Then tragically, in 1901, an explosion in the Black Corning House killed six men and injured many others. ▷▷

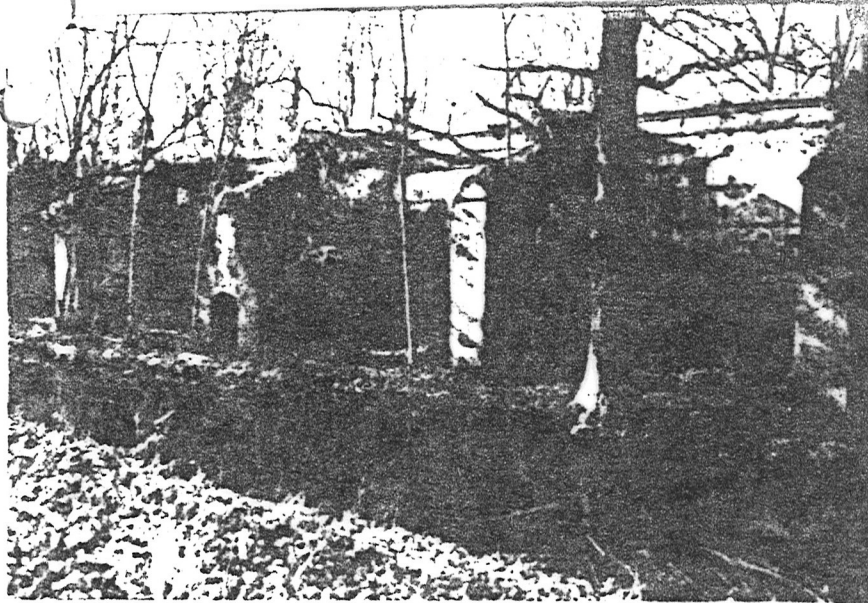


GUNPOWDER VALLEY

Guildford Borough Council and is preserved as an open space.

I left the chapel and followed the footpath down to the valley passing Chilworth manor, now the home of Sir Lionel and Lady Heald. Lady Heald told me that the manor was built on the site of an eleventh-century monastery and pointed out a stew pond in the garden which was a source of fish for the monks. The manor saw the building and the disappearance of the gunpowder factory and remained unchanged by either. The only change was brought about by Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, who lived at the manor in the early part of the eighteenth century and who added the north wing and a walled garden. From the manor I walked along the bank of the river; bluebells stretched in a haze for as far as I could see.

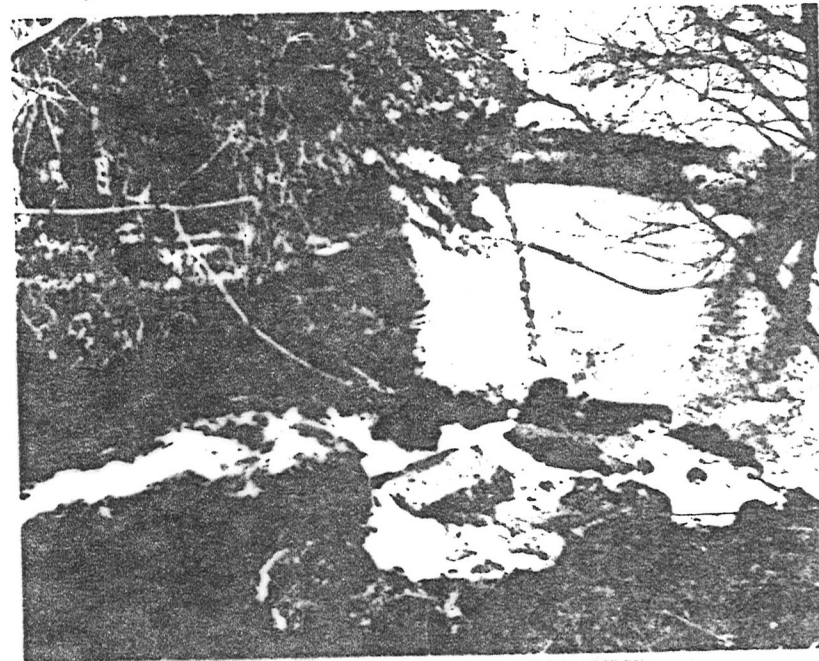
I came upon a row of millstones, half buried and overgrown. A little further along several brick pillars and a heap of twisted metal then, almost covered by ivy, a



Ivy grows up among the ruins of World War I powder mills along the bank of the Tillingbourne.

The Black Corning House was a two-storey building, the lower storey being below ground level and under the bank of the river. Here, powder cakes, made in a separate building, were crushed and granulated by means of two water-driven mills. From the Corning House three men were taking powder in barrels on a tramway to the Dust House some fifty yards away. The ground was frozen hard and the men wore nailed boots. It was thought that the cause of the explosion could have been a spark from one of their boots igniting the powder on the trolley.

The damaged buildings were repaired and in the First World War the factory worked twenty-four hours a day. After the war, the demand for gunpowder diminished; all the manufacturers amalgamated into Nobel's Explosives, later to become part of the chemical giant ICI, and in 1922, the site was sold. It is now owned by



ruined building. Across the river was part of a narrow railway – the route the powder had taken on its way to Chilworth Station. Still further along the bank, almost at the eastern end of the site, a whole row of derelict buildings. Enough of them remained to see that they had been of two storeys, the lower below ground level: the powder mills built after the explosion.

The whole site was littered with bricks and tangled metal, but nature had incorporated them into its plan and gradually they are disappearing under a carpet of nettles, brambles and ivy. The trees that had been cut down to provide charcoal have grown up again. It is almost as if 'that damnable invention' had never existed. If he were here today, I'm sure William Cobbett would be well pleased. □

Ordnance Survey

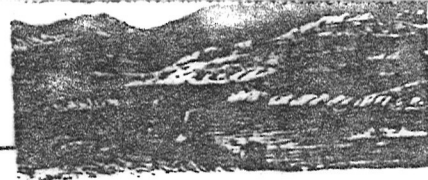
Crossed swords on the map – site of battle,
This bee-buzzing meadow of green,
Ruled now by a boy and his cattle,
Where once such confusion had been.

What slashing, what piercing and smiting!
What trampling, what dealing of death!
What groaning, what fiercely delighting!
What looting before the last breath!

How tiny this field, for the making
Of dynasties born in a day,
How still now this valley where, aching,
Survivors came, limping, away.

Long gone, the proud battle flags blowing,
All perished, the panoplied gains,
The victors long dead, never knowing
That nothing they fought for remains.

Hugh Russell



Ringed returns

SPARROW-HAWKS have been much in the news in recent years because of their vulnerability to pesticides and subsequent recovery after the voluntary ban on the most persistent of these. For five years I did not see a single one in Oxfordshire and it was not until 1977 that Trevor Young found a pair nesting in our parish, not in the conifer in which Harry Williams has placed his family scene (page 147) but in a field maple, a tree they have chosen ever since. We have now ringed twenty young birds in broods of three to five, and five have been recovered, which is typical of the high returns from ringing birds of prey. Two were road casualties in their first winter, a third killed itself against glass only a month after fledging, the fourth, a cock, was found dead about 2½ miles from its birthplace when 2½ years old and may have been shot. Even nearer was another cock, caught and released by Adrian del Nevo in Old Woodstock last January. This bird has survived for 3½ years, being ringed in July 1978. Only one of the five had travelled any distance: one road casualty was found sixty miles away at Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire. This is in line with what Ian Newton has reported on the British population, which is wholly resident, dispersing only short distances in random directions. The interesting point to me is that the 2½- and 3½-year-old cocks had presumably settled so close to where they were hatched. This suggests that there is plenty of room and food in our neighbourhood and we have some idea of its nature from