

## JOHN MILTON AND HIS COTTAGE HOME AT CHALFONT ST. GILES, BUCKS.

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I SHOULD not have ventured to offer any remarks upon John Milton's residence in the Cottage at Chalfont St. Giles, had not the field been still open when requested to do so. The subject is not one that calls for any very special investigation, or that requires any great amount of knowledge, beyond that which it may be supposed is within the reach of most of us. I fear I can scarcely give any information which is not already known, my only hope is that this brief paper may elicit from others some fresh facts, and—if it be lawful for an antiquary to suggest such a thing—fancies also, that thus the subject may be invested with additional interest. I am fairly well satisfied, however, that extend our inquiries as we may, by historical reference and otherwise, there is little else to be ascertained with regard to this humble country cottage and its illustrious occupant, either during the short period of his residence here, or immediately before or after, beyond the facts already known.

In the first place, we may, I think, congratulate ourselves that the county possesses so interesting a memorial of the illustrious author of "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained," as the simple dwelling-house in which these masterly poems may, to a very great extent, be said to have first seen the light. It would be to the lasting disgrace of the neighbourhood if this once much cherished home of one of the greatest of men and grandest of poets that England is proud to reckon among her sons, were suffered to fall into decay for want of proper care and attention. Our transatlantic friends are, not unnaturally, great admirers of the renowned poet, and I believe visit this cottage in large and increasing numbers. Although I cannot bring myself to believe that any wise man among them would ever seriously contemplate the purchase and removal to America of, what

I must call, this unpretentious shell of an English cottage dwelling, yet such, however, if I am not mistaken, has been stated to be actually the case. We shall all rejoice to hear, not only that it is quite unlikely that the cottage will be improved off the face of the land, but that this rural dwelling and the one adjoining, having been acquired by a Committee, consisting of the Rector of St. Giles Chalfont, and others, with the view to its being set apart as a kind of museum for objects connected with Milton, all apprehension as to the building being tampered with may be considered as removed. It is satisfactory to know that the only addition it is contemplated to make to the present building is a restoration of the "barge-boards" which, doubtless, previously existed. A fund for this purpose, called the "MILTON MEMORIAL FUND," has been successfully launched, and it is to be hoped that the further sum necessary for the completion of the project may be speedily obtained.\*

The Chalfont Cottage is the only known residence which now exists that was formerly inhabited by John Milton. Howitt, in his charming "*Homes and Haunts of the British Poets*," says, "no man perhaps ever inhabited more houses, yet scarcely one remains." All have, one by one, disappeared; the cottage at Chalfont is alone standing. Bread Street, Cheapside, can no longer point to the house in which the poet was born; the London houses in which Milton subsequently resided, first as a lodger in St. Bride's Churchyard, then in Aldersgate Street, in the Barbican, afterwards in Holborn and Westminster, Bartholomew Close, Red Lion Square, and Jewin Street, all these have passed out of sight, as also the house in Artillery Walk, Bunhill Fields, in which he spent his latter years, and where he died in 1674.

Many were the haunts visited from time to time by Milton.

Of those in Suffolk, Howitt does not, I find, make any mention. Allusion should have been certainly made to the old vicarage house in Stowmarket, the living of which was held by his friend and tutor, Dr. Thomas Young,

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\* Since this paper was written, Her Majesty the Queen has graciously shown her sympathy with the movement by subscribing a sum of £20 towards the fund, at the same time expressing a wish to be informed when progress had been made.

from 1628 to 1655. Local tradition still points to a room there known as "Milton's room." The only evidence, however, that such a visit was ever made is contained in a letter from Milton to his reverend tutor dated July 21, 1628, in which he speaks of withdrawing himself for a short time from the tumult of the city, "*Stoam tuam Icenorum*," so that "Milton's room" at Stowmarket, and even the actual visit there, are purely matters of tradition. It is also surmised that Milton visited his brother Christopher at Ipswich, where the latter lived and died. The house where Christopher Milton dwelt, or rather the houses (for I have traced him in at least three of the Ipswich parishes where he held the office of Churchwarden), are unknown.

Personal memorials of the poet are but few. I suppose the trees said to have been planted by Milton are the most prominent. The Westminster house, the site of which now forms part of the lawn of Queen Anne's Mansions, formerly possessed such a tree. The Stowmarket vicarage garden, like the garden at Christ's College, Cambridge, has a mulberry tree supposed to have been planted by Milton.

The words used by Milton in his letter to Dr. Young are singularly suggestive of the occasion, when to escape the pestilence of the City, he withdrew to the rural habitation at Chalfont St. Giles. The circumstances that brought this about may be briefly told.

The ever memorable year of 1665, when that awful scourge known as the Great Plague ravaged the Metropolis, saw the completion of "*Paradise Lost*," a few lines of which were written as early as 1642, and continuously worked at from the year 1658, and probably underwent a last revision in this Cottage abode. It also witnessed a very general stampede in order to escape the pestilential air of the infected city, the best preparation for the plague being, as De Foe puts it, to run away from it. Not a few penetrated into Buckinghamshire, among whom was De Foe's own brother, who, it may be remembered, was urgent upon Daniel to accompany him, with his family, but to no purpose. Milton's town residence at the time was Jewin Street, Aldersgate, and being minded to quit the place, he turned to his Quaker friend, Thomas Ellwood, desiring him to find a place of security in the country to

which he might resort. Milton's love for rural retirement and openness of space is well known, and in the many changes of abode he invariably chose garden houses, removed as far as possible from all noise. It is not impossible that the frequent change of habitation had something to do with an absence of quietness and uncongenial surroundings; at all events, the removal to Buckinghamshire was not a change to be attributed to a restlessness of mind, or passing whim or fancy. It was a removal prompted by ordinary prudence; and Milton also, doubtless, calculated on the pleasant companionship of Ellwood and other attached friends, as well as enjoying the quiet retirement of the country and freedom from alarm.

Ellwood shall himself relate the circumstances, so far as the arrangement for Milton's leaving London for the country is concerned:—

“Some little time before I went to Aylesbury prison, “I was desired by my quondam master, Milton, to take “a house for him in the neighbourhood where I dwelt, “that he might go out of the City, for the safety of “himself and his family, the pestilence growing hot in “London. I took a pretty box for him in Giles’ “Chalfont, a mile from me, of which I gave him notice, “and intended to have waited on him, and seen him well “settled in it, but was prevented by that imprisonment. “But now being released and returned home, I soon “made a visit to him to welcome him into the country. “After some common discourses had passed between us, “he called for a manuscript of his, which being brought “he delivered to me, bidding me take it home and read “it at my leisure; and when I had so done return it to “him with my judgment thereupon. When I came home “and had set myself to read it, I found it was that excellent poem which he entitled ‘Paradise Lost.’ After I “had, with the best attention, read it through, I made him “another visit, and returned him his book, with due acknowledgement of the favour he had done me in communicating it to me. He asked me how I liked it, and “what I thought of it, which I modestly but freely told him “and after some further discourse about it, I pleasantly said “to him, ‘Thou hast said much here of Paradise Lost, “but what hast thou to say of Paradise Found.’ He made “me no answer, but sat some time in a muse; then brake

"off that discourse, and fell upon another subject. After the sickness was over and the City well cleansed and become safely habitable again, he returned thither, and when afterwards I went to wait on him there, which I seldom failed of doing whenever my occasions drew me to London, he showed me his second poem, called 'Paradise Regained,' and in a pleasant tone said to me, 'This is owing to you, for you put it into my head by the question you put to me at Chalfont, which before I had not thought of.'"

Ellwood at this time was apparently residing at the Grange in the adjoining parish of Chalfont St. Peter, in the family of the well-known Quaker, by name, Pennington: he afterwards resided at Bottrels, a farmhouse in St. Giles Chalfont, which is still existing, although it has undergone considerable change since those days. It should be mentioned that it was through Isaac Pennington's acquaintance with a noted physician, Dr. Paget, a friend of Milton's, that Ellwood was brought into contact with the poet, for whom he performed the office of Latin reader for about six months while he resided at Jewin Street.

Milton, it must be remembered, was no stranger to Buckinghamshire. At Horton, near Colnbrook, in the southern part of the county, John Milton's father once resided, and thither the son proceeded on quitting Cambridge, and continued to reside there for five years. During this period he imbibed a deep-rooted love for the county, which comes out strongly in several of his poems written at this period. The rural scenes which gladdened his soul through the medium of his eyesight while at Horton, can at Chalfont only be viewed through the mental vision, the darkened eyeballs having ceased to perform their office. But the inspiration was complete, for if, as it has been well remarked, "Milton served his apprenticeship to poetry at Horton," it was at the Chalfont Cottage that the work of the poet shone forth in its brilliancy. The early Buckinghamshire days formed a period of preparation; the time spent at Chalfont was more a time of production. Looking back from the Chalfont days to the home life at Horton, the mind of the blind scholar-poet could not but be refreshed by the remembrance of the past, while, on the other hand, the

ravages being made on all sides by the hand of death must have given a subdued light to his pleasant pictures, quickening we may well believe his ardour, and firing his fancy as he discoursed in gentle numbers of the "Paradise Regained" through the ONE who came to give sight to the blind.

It was in the spring of 1665 that Chalfont was reached, the journey, probably, having been made from town by horse or post conveyance, partially, perhaps, on foot. It is a little uncertain by whom the poet was accompanied. Doubtless, his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, was one of the "family" of whom Ellwood speaks for whom the cottage was prepared. It is by no means clear that his youngest daughter, Deborah, was of the party; Milton's two other children, Mary and Anne, certainly were excluded; they made nothing, so their father was repeatedly heard to exclaim, of deserting him, and only resided with him for five or six years after his third marriage. They left home to learn the art of embroidery in gold and silver, as a means of obtaining a livelihood with their sister Deborah, the home life having become intolerable. Aubrey says, that Deborah acted as her father's amanuensis; if so, the probability is that she accompanied him to Chalfont. But, on the other hand, Deborah at this time would be scarcely fourteen years of age; her youth, however, would certainly favour the supposition that she was with her parents. In addition to these, a single attendant may probably have completed the number occupying the cottage.\*

Of the cottage as a building, I certainly cannot speak in very complimentary terms. There is nothing special about it either to charm the eye or refresh the mind, but it seems not unlikely that it was a more pleasing object at the time when occupied by Milton than it is now. I cannot agree with Dunster, however, in thinking that the house is "not pleasantly situated, the spot being as little picturesque or pleasing as can well be imagined. The prospect from the heights of the adjacent hills is extremely pleasing and extensive, while the view from

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\* In a painting by Bonnet, "Milton after his Blindness," the poet is represented surrounded by his wife and two daughters, one of the latter, Deborah, his amanuensis.

the cottage (which, although it lies in a hollow, has the advantage of being on the high road), so far from not being picturesque, is exactly that which would, I should imagine, have delighted Milton, could he have looked upon it, and, indeed, give pleasure to anyone with an eye to admire the beauties of a rural prospect, or a mind given to contemplation. The cottage is just one of those ordinary buildings common in our country villages now inhabited by the labouring class, but which formerly must have been put to a higher use. The hand of time has passed over it, and, although in substantial repair, it gives evidence of having undergone considerable change since the time it was first built. It is of the old framed timber kind, built of red brick—its white-washed appearance has only been recently acquired. The cross-timbered construction marks its age as belonging to the early part of the 17th, or latter part of the 16th century. I have intimated that what we might now term its "primitive simplicity" is, if I am not much mistaken, of comparatively recent date. Ellwood speaks of it as "a pretty box," and there is no reason to doubt his words; whereas, it is now, as a building, entirely devoid of anything approaching "a pretty box," and has, both within and without, the unmistakable marks of a cottager's domicile. It will be noticed that a row of cottages is at the back of this house facing the road below. Of these, the one adjoining with its huge projecting chimney has been included in the purchase of "Milton's Cottage"; this was, undoubtedly, part of the original structure of the house in which the poet resided.

I have only been able to examine one single engraving of the house as it existed in former days; it is that given in Howitt's *Homes and Haunts of the British Poets*, published some forty years since. In this vignette the house presents a very different appearance in its outward aspect to that we now witness. The pointed gable in the front is not of so high a pitch as at present is the case, while, rising from a point where the armorial escutcheon is to be seen, is a second pointed gable of similar character, but of smaller dimensions. The whole of this space descending quite to the ground has the appearance of being plastered, and is marked by the cross-timbered work. This has now disappeared, and the present small



doorway occupies in part the lower portion. The lower window of what is now the kitchen or "living-room," which runs closely up to the main road, is identically the same, still preserving its diamond-shaped panes, wooden divisions, etc., intact. The upper window in the engraving is more immediately over the lower window, and situate nearer the street. The entrance has since been shifted some feet further from its original position adjoining the lower window, giving a somewhat vacant length of wall, which certainly does not add to the picturesque appearance of the house; consequently, the threshold is not the same which Milton was in the habit of crossing. The window of the parlour, where Milton is supposed chiefly to have passed his time, as well as the window above, remain the same; the small windows to the right, both lower and upper, are later additions, having been clearly added to give light to closets. In the garden immediately facing the cottage, a covered well exists, the same as in Howitt's engraving, and from its appearance doubtless was in use while Milton occupied the cottage.\* At the time of Howitt's visit to the cottage, it was occupied by a tailor, who is said to have remembered the porch formerly over the doorway, which he mentioned as falling down from age and decay. It is unlikely that this porch formed any part of the original building, or was in existence in Milton's days.

When Howitt visited the cottage the front was thickly covered with a growing vine, so that the small shield of arms engraven on stone and placed in the front of the cottage was too indistinct to allow of a close examination. Howitt had no doubt but that it bore the Milton arms, which he says he knew to be birds of some sort, and as birds were on the shield, he contented himself with the hasty conclusion. The arms Howitt heard were those of the Fleetwoods, and that General Fleetwood had purchased the house for Milton (!) I am not sure that the ownership of the cottage at the time when Milton took possession is clearly established.

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\* In *Sampson Agonistes* (written at Horton) Milton speaks of allaying his thirst from "the clear milky juice," an allusion, which Buckinghamshire residents can well understand, to the water of the well cut out of the chalk.



It is usually taken for granted that it belonged to the Fleetwood family, and in all probability did, but there is, I believe, no evidence to prove it. Certainly General Fleetwood did not purchase it for Milton. The shield was brought originally, I am told, from the Vache, the residence of the Fleetwoods, at a time subsequent to the cottage being inhabited by the poet; probably the family desired to connect themselves with Milton and his work, and had the shield fixed. The Fleetwood arms, which are upon the stone, are those recorded in the College of Arms, viz., *party per pale nebule, az. and or, three martlets countercharged*. The heraldic colours are not given, the stone being quite plain.\* The words "JOHN MILTON," painted on zinc, are now placed immediately beneath the escutcheon, giving the erroneous impression that the arms are those of the Milton family.

At a later period I find the house to have been inhabited by a labouring man, who was sorely puzzled to know what folk possibly came to look at! It is a sign of the change that has passed over the minds even of the less informed, that such feelings of surprise are now rarely met with. The cottage is at present occupied by the resident officer of the Bucks Constabulary.

The room in which Milton is said to have written in part his "Paradise Regained," and possibly given the finishing touches to "Paradise Lost," is on the right hand as the building is entered. It has a low ceiling, with rafters formed of strong beams of oak, and not being over well lighted, has a depressing effect upon the visitor. The mantelpiece, although ancient, can scarcely be the same as that which graced the room in Milton's time. The hearth is occupied by a modern stove, but it is contemplated to restore the antique dog-irons. In the wall on the further side by the fireplace is a square open aumbry or cupboard, coeval with the house itself. It is divided by a shelf of wood into two divisions, and here, in all probability, the original manuscripts of the poet's great works often found a resting-place. The staircase leading to the upper apartments is of rough hewn oak, the hand-rail being, perhaps, the most interesting por-

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\* The Milton arms, it may be mentioned, are *argent, a spread eagle with two heads, gules, legged and beaked, sable*.

tion of the remaining woodwork, and as old as the house itself. It may be regarded with interest as the identical staircase used by Milton. The rooms correspond with those below, except that over the kitchen the one room has been made into two. The room in which Milton probably slept, has a similar opening in the wall to that found in the lower room.

In different parts of the house there are slight remains of colour on its interior walls.

The open lattice window at the time of a first visit, called to my mind that here Milton would probably often be found listening to the song of the birds and the hum of numberless insects sporting in the rays of the summer sun, and he inhaling meanwhile the sweet-smelling perfume of the flowers, concerning all which he discourses so beautifully. It is the easiest thing possible to summon up a vision of the past, as one thought after another relating to his sojourn in this cottage comes to mind. These walls must often have resounded with the musical voice of the foremost among our lyrical poets, and perchance have re-echoed to the sound of the strains of the organ wakened by the touch of his fingers. Here, in his quiet suit of grey, or in the more dignified black, Milton was probably to be found sitting in his favourite elbow-chair in the summer mornings, perhaps as early as four o'clock, his reader with him, listening to the words of Holy Writ. During the greater part of the day, judging from his previous habits of life, study was pursued, one of the inmates of the house acting as reader. In the cool of the evening the little wicket gate would swing on its hinges, as crossing its threshold the great poet would, perchance, be led by his little daughter along the village street, down to the point where the Misbourne pursues its eager course; or, within the cottage, recreation would be found in the pursuit of musical science or some kindred occupation of an elevating character.

Here, too, Milton would receive his friends, among whom we may probably reckon Andrew Marvel, Henry Lawrence, and Cyriac Skinner. There was, some few years since, a charming picture exhibited at the Royal Academy, "Milton visited by Andrew Marvel." At the door of the Chalfont cottage Milton is seated, his wife, Elizabeth Minshull, being by his side. Marvel is seen

grasping his friend's hand, while Ellwood and another are seated on the opposite side, the latter having between his knees a violoncello. Milton had other visitors, who were less welcome. It was here that Judge Jeffreys called upon him and asked if Milton did not consider the loss of his sight a judgment from Heaven for his treatment of the king. Milton's reply is characteristic of the man—"Is not the loss of his head," he enquired, "a still greater judgment on the king?" ; concerning which it may be remarked that this latter was directly due to the fanaticism of a misguided populace, while no such averment can be made respecting Milton's loss of sight.

The flattering attention usually paid to so distinguished a person was, we may suppose, duly showed to Milton, and many, in all probability, resorted to this little cottage to show their respect for his singular talents, and out of regard to his character, which was highly esteemed in republican circles, if not, indeed, elsewhere. We may thus infer something of Milton's character from the circumstances and surroundings of this cottage home. Quite apart from the tone he adopted in controversy, which has caused him to be spoken of as a "vile controversialist," or the action he took with respect to the king, for which he has been styled "a notorious Traytor," or the domestic unhappiness which certainly existed, and for which Milton was not altogether irresponsible, I cannot but think that with so many tokens of earnest religious feeling and uprightness of life, he was such an one as found some consolation in "a conscience void of offence." The parish church would scarcely be resorted to by Milton and his friends, but religious meetings possibly were held in the cottage; or, if not there, Milton may have attended such assemblies under the roof of the Peningtons house at Bottrells. There is, however, no sign that he ever really attached himself to the people known as Quakers, notwithstanding that he deeply sympathized with them. Of all the great writers, Milton is, somehow or another, perhaps the one above others whom personally we cannot but regard with strange mingled feelings; but I often think, if we understood the circumstances of his position better, we should somewhat moderate our opinions. There is a severity in his dealings with those who happened to differ

from him, that it is little cause for wonder we feel anything but drawn to him. If, however, his strong feelings and stern prejudice lead us to judge him harshly, he was, it must be borne in mind, ever consistent in one uniform course of conduct. While at the Chalfont cottage, we know of nothing at variance with the devout and tender quiet which breathes in his poetry; and, all things considered, we do well to honour the memory of John Milton, and should respect his cottage home.

There are no "relics" as far as I know connected with Milton's residence at this cottage, but the idea of placing here objects connected in any way with the poet, is an extremely happy one. A little antique furniture of the period in which Milton lived, would again lend a charm to the scene of the poet's rural retirement, and serve to bring his tenure of the cottage prominently to mind. It would be specially interesting to have gathered together here a bibliography, as complete as possible, of all that relates to Milton, including a collection of the different editions of his works. Milton portraits, etc., might suitably embellish the walls of the apartment where once the living author resided, and the family pedigree which may be found in Le Neve's "Knights" (Harl. MS. 5801-2, British Museum), might here be suitably suspended. The visit of the Bucks Archæological Society to the cottage will, it is to be hoped, help this work forward, and lead to additional interest being taken in John Milton's cottage home at Chalfont St. Giles.