

Extract from:

## **The Village that Died for England**

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### Chapter 3, Still Life in the Deserted Village

*Began learning a new song. Heard a great many discords.*

Teacher's Log, Tyneham School, 30 April 1873

THE ROAD TO Tyneham breaks off the B3070 just before East Lulworth. Long since metalled but still known as the White Way, it winds up on to a high chalk ridge that wheels round from the cliff-top heights of Flowers Barrow to form the outer rim of the Isle of Purbeck. Thomas Hardy may have imagined King Lear raging on the great expanse of heath to the north, but it is now blasted in a different sense – carved with tank battle runs, target tracks and, further east, a vast clay quarry. Blue butterflies flutter over the whale-backed down of Povington Hill, competing with red flags and the complicated bye-laws governing the administration of the range – spelt out clause by bureaucratic clause on a noticeboard.

After running north along the ridge for a few hundred yards, the road turns sharply at the all but forgotten site of the 'Maiden's Grave' described by Pennie, and starts to sink down past the concrete plinth of a recently removed military checkpoint, and through a little stilly wood of oak, ash and hazel. The first prohibitions are spelt out in black and white: NO VENDORS NO HAWKERS NO CAMPERS and NO OVERNIGHT STAYS. Further on there are older signs of chipped red enamel, still ablaze with the warnings of an earlier age: DANGER. THERE ARE BOMBS AND UNEXPLODED SHELLS INSIDE. THEY CAN KILL YOU ...

To drive down into the Tyneham valley is to sink into a zone where even the sharpest of actualities seems overtaken by myth. This was a well-loved place before history broke in to destroy it during the Second World War. Its small Elizabethan mansion lacked the aristocratic opulence of Lulworth Castle, but for nearly five hundred years it had belonged to the Bond family, well-established members of the Dorset gentry. *The Times* photographed the harvest here in August 1929, spreading the result – a horse-drawn harvester set off against valley and sea – over half a page. There could scarcely have been a more heart-stopping picture of England – a perfect fold in the downs, touched with eternity despite the distant outline of Mrs Wheeler's modern bungalow on the cliff above Worbarrow Bay.

The summer prospect remains compelling even without the golden oats. The land swoops down from Flowers Barrow, exposing a sheet of ocean before circling the odd conical headland known as Worbarrow Tout, and then rising up again into the limestone of the inner Purbeck ridge, where a turf horizon marks the top of Gad Cliff, still soaked in the smuggling romance of John Meade Falkner's novel *Moonfleet*. There are sheep and cattle in the valley, and abandoned farms, their yards piled high with great black plastic bags of silage. Thistles, gorse, bracken and ragwort grow in the neglected fields, and there is scattered evidence of military use too: a scarlet concrete bollard in the middle of a field, more rusting target tanks and, down on the beach, concrete dragon's teeth placed during the Second World War to deter enemy landings. Painted numbers creep incongruously below Gad Cliff, and a large '3' sits on Worbarrow Tout too.

The most prominent feature nowadays is a recently much expanded car park called the 'Tyneham Village Viewpoint'. As for the village, to begin with it is hard to see anything beyond the welter of signs. Few of the visitors who drop the requested parking fee of thirty pence into the collection post sense any irony in the sign declaring that 'All proceeds help with the upkeep of Tyneham

village.' Metal detectors are banned, dogs must be kept away from sheep and cows, and visitors are ordered to 'Enjoy the Wonderful Views'. The numbered posts of a 'Tyneham Trail' are scattered more discreetly through the village, each one explained in the accompanying leaflet – published with a grant from the Teachers' Fund of the School Curriculum Development Committee – that provides little drawings of the houses as they were before 1943, and names their evicted inhabitants.

Vigorously kept up by the Army, Tyneham village has the hectic flush of a place that has been restored way beyond the point of no return. The overgrown churchyard has been cleared and put to lawn that wouldn't look bad outside a government computer centre. The gravestones have been scrubbed so clean that even the most crooked ones seem filled with the desire to stand to attention. The pond has been bulldozed into new life as an eco-system with bullrushes, irises and the inevitable little island too. The ruined cottages of Post Office Row have also been robustly treated, their fallen roofs removed and their walls reduced to an officially recognised safe level and capped with cement.

Tyneham has been reinstated as an evocative visual aid. Television crews are sometimes to be found here, especially on weekends close to Remembrance Sunday when visitors may be asked to muster a sentence about their impressions of the place. I once came across a school visit. A representatively urban and multicultural class were standing knee-deep in the first cottage of Post Office Row, looking over the ruins of this extinguished Dorset village as if they were exploring some recently excavated ancient Babylonian site. 'Do you think there was a kitchen here?' asked the teacher, as his charges peered around the cramped space that had once been home to Shepherd Lucas and his family. 'What evidence have you got that they had a bathroom?' he asked an Asian girl. 'You're making assumptions all along the line.'

Outside the old post office next door, some elderly folk were bending over to read the signs inside a telephone box – an unusual model of magnolia concrete with red glazing bars and an ornamental metal finial, which rises up through four enamelled TELEPHONE signs to celebrate new powers in the air with the help of a spear blade thrust aloft. This over-restored freak gleams as if it were new, but connoisseurs will recognise it immediately as a rare example of the K1 kiosk, introduced by the post office in the early Twenties. Now locked against the threat of vandalism, it has a 'closed' sign cutely placed inside the door. The old wartime notices on the backboard – 'I am on war work. If you must use me be brief' – turn out to be colour photocopies.

Further up Post Office Row there is a symbolic oak tree, planted next to the church gate to mark the coronation of George V, and beside it the village tap with words from the Gospel according to St John inscribed in its stone: 'Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again. But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.' The Tyneham Trail leaflet commends the tap as 'a typical example of the Victorians' desire to promote the scriptures'.

The small church of St Mary the Virgin contains tablets commemorating the Bonds and their faithful servants, and, by the altar, a large stained glass east window made by Martin Travers in 1924, and commissioned by Warwick Draper, who lived at Worbarrow Bay, to commemorate his deceased wife Grace. It shows a Madonna and Child, set against a weeping willow and is rounded off with biblical words in which the whole of Creation – Mountains and Hills, Seas and Floods – praises and magnifies the Lord forever.

Of the two unmodernised Bibles on display in this partly thirteenth-century building, the one said to be the last used in the church has been restored by the Royal Armoured Corps, and is

now dedicated to 'the parishioners of Tyneham and Worbarrow'. The other, which was presented by two former villagers, stands across the chancel, open at the Book of Daniel where Persia was divided and the clash of great armies resounded overall. Looking down at that story of distant warfare and expropriation, I found phrases drifting up through the glass and, in the absence of any supervising vicar, coupling wildly with the story of Tyneham and its military evacuation: 'The robbers of thy people shall exalt themselves to establish the vision ...', 'He shall enter peaceably even upon the fattest places of the province; and he shall do that which his fathers have not done ...', 'And they shall pollute the sanctuary of strength, and shall take away the daily sacrifice, and they shall place the abomination that maketh desolate ...'

The rest of the church is devoted to a secular exhibition that hails Tyneham's evicted villagers in the same naturalistic spirit as it greets the fulmars and shags of Gad Cliff. The old fields and hedges are delineated on a map, each granted its traditional name – Longmead, Lower Limekiln, Old Cowleaze. Limpid colour drawings show yoked oxen, an ancient 'Iron Age' plough with a single wooden share, and medieval field systems which can still be seen as 'low ridges' when the sun is low in the sky. One drawing suggests how Flowers Barrow might have looked when its green rings were filled with wooden shacks and commanded by a clan chieftain with a slingshot in his hand.

The story of Tyneham's evacuation is easily reconciled with this prehistoric world. To begin with, as a sign explains, the RAF and Army were billeted in the village, but as the military build-up increased before D-Day, the valley was cleared on the order of Churchill's War Cabinet. Villagers received a month's notice, and an official pledge that they would be able to return to their homes once the emergency was over, but they had to be gone by 19 December 1943. So they filed, patriotically, out of their valley, but only after pinning a note to the church door: 'Please treat the church and houses with care. We have given up our homes, where many of us have lived for generations, to help win the war to keep men free. We shall return one day and thank you for treating the village kindly.'

Outside by the Coronation Oak a father barks orders at his young daughters. 'Stay on the path,' he shrieks. 'Do I make myself very, very clear. You'll get blown up otherwise.' The girls run on regardless, only pausing when they reach the old stone-tiled schoolhouse. Built by the Bonds in 1856, Tyneham National School was closed by the Board of Education as the roll dwindled in 1932. The log-book tells of school mistresses and their struggle to maintain standards in a valley where nature itself seems to have conspired against them. The children are generally well versed in religious subjects, but arithmetic, grammar and general discipline remain a constant battle. Attendance fails for many reasons besides illness – smallpox, diphtheria – and the weather ('not quite so good an attendance today owing to the inclement tendency of the weather this morning' – 27 June 1871). Perhaps the mackerel were in the bay, the harvest was being brought in or, as was reported on Ascension Day 1876, the militia were at West Lulworth and the children had gone over to stare. In 1874, the schoolmistress recorded that even the grass was against her: it was high and very wet, and it kept the little ones from coming to school. There were upsetting occurrences, like the funeral of a third standard girl who died of 'brain fever' in 1872: the children were 'much distressed at the sight of the funeral but sufficiently composed to go to the grave each with a bunch of flowers'.

On Empire Day the school would be visited by the Bonds and addressed, perhaps by its appointed correspondent, who in 1905 'tried to impress on the minds of the children the responsibility that rested on each true Englishman to uphold the honour of England in whatever country they were, and that as they grew older and had to go out into the world, and some of them, perhaps to

foreign lands, to strive never to do anything to disgrace the name of Englishmen'. The children would sing God Save the King as the Union Jack was hoisted, and then go on to recite poems by Rudyard Kipling and to sing 'suitable songs' like 'Brittania's sons on every shore'. Mrs Bond might then present each child with an orange – there was a famously productive orange tree in the conservatory at Tyneham House – and a holiday would be declared for the afternoon.

Like the rest of the village, Tyneham School was tightly managed by the Bonds and their rector. Visiting inspectors from the Education Department were worried about sanitation arrangements. They recommended printed copybooks, and regretted the harshness disfiguring the children's note-singing. Some commended Tyneham's as 'a good village school', while others threatened to impose a fine 'unless improvement is made in arithmetic'. The various standards studied set poems: in 1890 these are listed as including Wordsworth's 'Foresight', Miss Yonge's 'The Mother's Book' and Longfellow's 'Discovery of the North Cape'. Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' was set for the higher standards in 1892. 'Watching for Pa' was among the songs, and Object Lessons included plum pudding, St George and the Dragon, posting a letter and the Union Jack.

The state's presence in this valley has hardened since the days of the school inspectors, or the post office engineers who came to install the telephone box in the severe winter of 1929. The GPO had already made some concessions to Mr William Bond, whose conditions extended far beyond his refusal to have such a disturbing device as a telephone in Tyneham House. They had agreed to install an already outdated K1 model, rather than the current K2, which, being red all over and equipped with nocturnal illumination, was considered far too obtrusive. Yet they were still cursed by a rector who wanted none of their modern improvements. As for their original misplacing of the kiosk by the pond, rather than outside the post office, this is said to have enraged William Bond so much that he went home and suffered a stroke.

The ruined schoolhouse was repaired in the Eighties and opened as a gallery and museum. Its educational message is still full of poetry – albeit only that of military public relations. Offering its own surreal tribute to the tank, it repeats the myth of Tyneham, stripping it of social content and turning it into an ecological and archaeological saga. The visitor is informed that the Royal Armoured Corps has saved Tyneham and its valley from the fate of so much of Dorset's traditional landscape. There has been no commercial development, no deep ploughing to destroy the medieval field systems, no pesticides or herbicides to silence the valley's naturally polyphonic spring. The most arresting image, which showed the Army blasting away in the gorse, was labelled 'Co-operation – the Army creating small pools for dragonflies in the wet heathland area'.

That exhibition struggled valiantly to bring the story to a happy conclusion, but some visitors remain unconvinced by the new ecological settlement. I once heard an elderly lady, returned to England for a holiday after many decades in Canada, worrying about the fate of the poor villagers. She was promptly engaged by a burly range warden, who wasn't going to listen to any of this sentimental nonsense. 'The villagers don't even want to come back,' he said, adding that some of them were probably pleased to leave too: 'You imagine the life,' he continued, gesturing at the ruined cottages, 'no electricity, no water, everything owned by the same man.' The Army had done the villagers a big favour – booting them out into a world of statutory rights and hot and cold running water in the bathroom. But the lady wasn't having it. 'It's still wrong,' she muttered, striding off disconsolately.

The best testimony to this unresolved argument was to be found in the visitors' book, confidently placed with the assurance that 'your comments and suggestions will be appreciated'. An inscription signed 'Richard Attenborough and family', protested at the mess left by a passing film

company, and another regretted that 'the telephone box is an eyesore'. Some lamented the fate of the village in terms that would certainly not have been appreciated by the Ministry of Defence: 'Such devastation to a once beautiful area!' wrote 'One who was stationed here in 1943'. Another described Tyneham as 'a small pocket of humaneness in a sterile desert of uncanny beauty, like a viper or a scorpion. Deathly. I cry for thee Tyneham.' Somebody wondered 'Does Tyneham point the way to resolving the Inner City Problem?' and an indignant child had scrawled: 'How would you like it if someone came along and blew your house up! Traitors!' One freeborn Englishman grunted 'Fuck off Army and Don't Come back.' Others observed that without the Army to 'preserve and freeze' it, Tyneham would only have suffered a different destruction by the 'developers' and 'yuppies'.

By the end of 1990, that strange book of condolences had been removed from the old schoolhouse, never to be seen again. I last leafed through it during the Easter weekend that year, when the argument was still resounding. One of the final entries declared 'I think it was a jolly good idea (the army taking over and kicking all the riff-raff out). It is a pity they don't take over the whole of Dorset and irradiate the lot. Bloody peasants!' That one was signed 'General Sir John Hackett'.