

## A Berkshire Bicycling Holiday

Kenneth Warren

In the summer of 1898 Falkner and some friends - regrettably it is not clear whom - made a visit of two and a half weeks to Berkshire. The holiday is of especial interest, because, exceptionally, there survives a day by day account of it in the form of four notebooks filled with pencil notes of the places visited, presumably made on the spot, or perhaps written up in the evenings. Together this record spans the period 20 August to 7 September. However, there is a gap of four days, 28 to 31 August, of which there is no description, presumably because at least one other notebook is missing. In the first week they seemed to have averaged about 17 miles a day. The notes which Falkner made are above all of churches, but there is a good deal also of wider topographical interest and some insight into Falkner's interesting ways of thinking and his prejudices. Another fascination of the account, rough-hewn as it is, stems from the fact that it is a description of rural England on the very threshold of the motor age - no more than a decade later the situations would have been very different. This bicycling holiday led to more writing, both topographical and in poetry.

The account begins on Saturday 20 August, in Hungerford. It was a baking day, an auspicious beginning for a holiday which was throughout to be blessed with marvellous weather. It was indeed so hot that at some time in the day, the forty year old Falkner bathed in the river Kennet, and seems not to have found the experience uncongenial as he had his wash in the Thames on the Dragon cruise nine years before. Hungerford was a 'clean but uninteresting village town'. Its church was pleasantly situated and 'built in the very best gothic of 1814..'



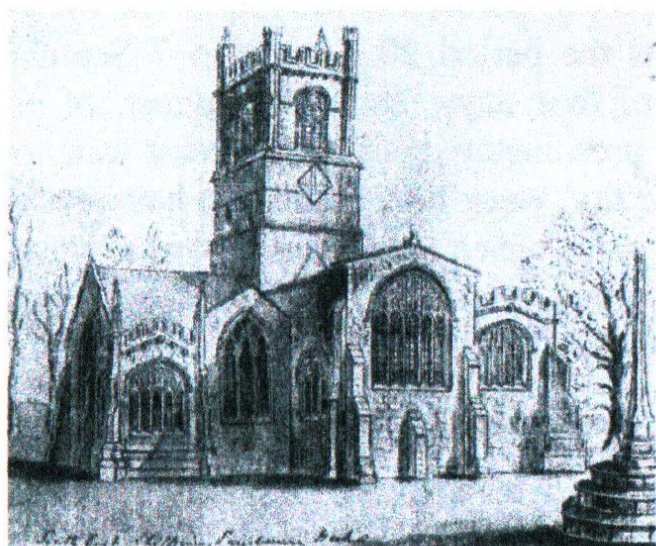
*The Three Swans Courtyard*

He was favourably impressed by the *Three Swans* and the *Bear Inn* - 'both are clean and comfortable and both make bids for the cycling trade'. From here the party rode over the downs to the Sheffords on the river Lambourne.

Falkner now began to



find indications of what were, by his standards, acts of architectural vandalism. At East Shefford the old manor house of the Fettiplaces had been pulled down in 1870 ‘..the fine stone of the windows broken to mend roads... The old rafters of the splendid roof taken to mend stable roofs and hatch-poles’. Further up the valley , the chancel of East Garston church, said to have been very good, had been pulled down in 1875 ‘..and the present terribly insipid one erected’. That night they slept at Lambourne.



### Lambourne Church

After worshipping in Lambourne’s ‘very fine cruciform church’, they set out next morning on what was ‘another baking day’ north eastwards across the Lambourne Downs to the Fawleys, Farnborough, Brightwalton and

Chaddleworth and then came back to the *Three Swans* at Hungerford. That day his record contains a description of the ‘down country’, writing interesting in that it shows him in the process of conscientiously trying to evoke the distinctiveness of a landscape. He amended his pencil draft as shown below, the words in brackets being his first shot.

‘It is well worth making an expedition into the down country. The utter loneliness, not the loneliness of a desert, or of a moor but the loneliness of interminable cultivated land, is most striking. The long swelling ridges with beautifully soft (outlines) contours are like a very heavy rolling sea swell quite calm. In (many) most places cultivation and grass alternate - there are no hedges. In August the heat is tremendous. Everything is burnt to a tawny yellow, so that the eye needs to distinguish between the brown of the stubble field, of the grassy slope and of the higher and infertile fresh ploughed land. The brown grass slopes get slippery as ice. The heat twinkles and shimmers over the ground. Often the eye can see no dwelling at all. There is here and there a piece of bosky scrub and short trees. The hillsides are sometimes sprinkled with stunted and wind-bitten thorns and on the ridges are seen the barrow and the characteristic clump of crowning trees. There are the roughest



tracks, now of turf now chalk, across them on which an adventurous cyclist may (venture) ride with a stout heart and machine he does not mind knocking about. But the turf even when it looks best is full of treacherous little pittings that shake and try machine and rider. It is as silent and lonely as in prehistoric times.'

On Monday morning they set off down the Kennet to Avington and Kentbury. The latter was 'a cheerful village', but its church had been badly restored, or, as he more colourfully put it, 'bedevilled in 1859 and 1884'. Hampstead Marshall church was not much better, having been 'first Jacobeanised and in 1893 gothicised'. A little later they went towards West Woodhaye and Inkpen. Whatever the condition of the churches, Hampstead Marshall and Kirby had fine houses and grounds. On this day he inserted a 'General Note', 'Inns are few - the traveller may pass several villages without a public house - it is best in down expeditioning to take your own provend'. At Hampstead Marshall they had some problem with officialdom - '...a pestilential sextoness gave us much trouble with the keys - and afterwards jawed us by the space of twenty minutes'.

Next day they turned north crossing the Kennet to Wickham where 'the gothic revival of 1850 has run riot' in both church and manor house, so that at the latter '...are stables, windows, parapets, spire, greenhouse and what not all in the most approved "wedding cake" gothic'. As they climbed up to the high ground around Leckhampstead and Peasemore, they were entering visibly poorer country, much affected by depopulation over the previous 40 to 50 years. Leckhampstead was not only a 'depressing squalid village with a very humble inn the *Stag*', but its old place of worship, about a mile in the direction of Peasemore, had been demolished in 1860 to be replaced by one in the village centre. Now therefore there was 'a hideous new church of coloured bricks'. (A less emotional commentator at the same time merely noted that it was of flint and brick and that it contained woodwork and an ancient font taken from the former church). Peasemore made little better impression - it was 'a poor and decreasing parish', but after that they came to Chieveley 'a pleasanter looking village'. From Winterbourne a 'pretty woodland ride' led down hill to Boxford.

On Wednesday they went up the Newbury to Abingdon road and then off west to Beedon and Catmore 'in an extraordinarily remote and inaccessible position'. At this point in his account, Falkner inserted another 'General Note', identifying one of the factors in the sparse and often declining population of the downland parishes, their lack of surface water and difficulty in finding a



substitute. East or Great Ilsley and West Ilsley were both 'pretty' villages. However, at the latter, 'the church was "rebuilt and beautified in 1878"'. In the process every thing of interest was swept away except a few timbers and pendants of the Jacobean roof left in the modern roof'. Further north, West Hendred had 'an excellent and interesting church... most refreshing in a terribly restored district'. The cyclists then turned south east to Chilton and to Upton where there was 'a very early exceedingly interesting church so shamefully mishandled by restorers as to have entirely lost its character. It looks as if built yesterday'. After this things again improved. On Friday, 26 August they went to East Hendred, once an important centre of the cloth trade and from which a green road led to Skutchamore Knob (on the Ordnance Survey map Scutchamer Knob), once a location for great fairs. Even now 'the village is full of old houses, small, many thatched, with some remains of barge boarding and a good many excellent iron fastenings to dormer and other windows'. Later in the holiday they were to visit Hagbourne a few miles to the east, '... probably as picturesque and old fashioned a village as can be seen in the length and breadth of the land... so typically early English as to seem impossible off the stage'.

Blewberry was 'a rambling village with many tumble-down



**Blewberry Cottages**

old houses and a great many inns of which the *Load of Mischief* seems the best'. Next day they turned west to beyond Wantage to Letcombe Regis and Letcombe Basset. Everywhere they found churches rebuilt, spoiled or 'ruined and gutted' by the restorers, but there were other insights too - at Letcombe Basset a small stream had been dammed for the creation of great

beds of watercress, and in the same area a feature of the district was the existence of '...slim, clean shaven "boys" of all ages dressed in greys with cloth caps, and thoroughbreds with their forelegs in cloths - the training stables appear to be as ordered as a man of war'.

By Thursday 1 September, after a gap of 4 days for which there is no evidence of the course of their travels, they were setting out from Faringdon, to travel southwards across the Vale of the White Horse. They went to Kingston Lisle then by Challow, Goosey and Shellingford and across the Thames at Radcot Bridge, where



they seem to have spent the night. During the next two days they worked their way back eastwards slightly to the north of the previous day's route, and then south to Lyford, Denchworth and the Hanneys. On Sunday 4 September, the 'hottest day we have had - cloudless but heat exhausting', they determined to 'do' the Ridgeway. Again Falkner tried to evoke the spirit of place on this ancient routeway in the neighbourhood of Letcombe. 'The great track varies in width from 60 to 200 feet. It is generally grass - often with mole hills and deep ruts. Here and there the chalk comes through. On either side runs an earth mound - sometimes surmounted with wind-bitten thorns. There is an intense solitude in the limitless, hedgeless tillage fields, dotted here and there with a rick yard or byre and very rarely with a farm house - and constantly with clumps of trees, generally firs sometimes beeches, called "Follies" '. The party must have enjoyed, though Falkner did not attempt to paint in, the marvellous views from the high ground, where as a slightly later traveller put it, one can '...watch the varying light, like the work of a giant brush on some vast canvas, blend, renew and change the many tones of green and dun, grey and gold, in wood and ploughland, hillside and cornfield...' (1)

The practical and the humorous still appeared. He pencilled in 'General note how blackberries and nuts can be had everywhere for the asking', and, discussing a hillslope marked with gullies near to White Horse Hill, he wrote 'Supposed to represent the bars of the manger. - It is also a favourite tobogganning ground for children..' That Sunday night they stayed in the *Lamb* at Wallingford and were,



**Wallingford from the Thames**



he recorded, 'much dissatisfied'. On Monday and Tuesday they travelled the area between Wallingford and Didcot, on to Abingdon and then south west through Drayton to Wantage. The holiday seems to have ended on Wednesday, 'a perfect' day, in Faringdon.

The long rides of the holiday bore fruit in Falkner's *Murray's Guide to Berkshire*, published in 1902. It shows evidence of other journeys of which no record has survived, for, in addition to the villages and churches covered in 1898, there are accounts of and trenchant criticism of other sections of the county. For instance, in the great northern bend of the river between Reading and Maidenhead were the churches of Wargrave - 'much modernised and of little interest' -, Hurst, which had suffered '...ruthless restoration and rebuilding' and Cookham, so 'restored' that '...it lacks all interest'. Such offences were in part '...through the deplorable architectural ignorance of the clergy'. He seems not to have allowed that architectural judgements could vary, nor to have considered whether in some instances at least the comfort and convenience of a worshipping congregation might have been of greater importance and certainly of more concern to the clergy whose taste he deplored.

This Berkshire guide was dedicated to those who loved peaceful, unspectacular landscapes - 'It is hoped that this Handbook ...may prove of use to such sober-minded people as can be found to take pleasure in the quiet scenery and antiquities of an agricultural county. It is the result of personal exploration, reinforced by the assistance of many friends'. A further product of the 1898 excursion of cycling friends was a poem - *The Last Church* - whose pencilled draft is to be found in the last pages of the final surviving volume of his notes from those hot and often 'perfect' days.

(1) R. Carton: *England* (Adam & Charles Black. London, 1932)  
(1945 ed. p. 68)

See also H. J. Massingham: *English Downland* (Batsford. London, 1936) Chapter VI.

The Notebooks containing the account of this holiday are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.