

Far Forest - Recollections 1840

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The rude and barbarous seek to live apart,
In them is found no taste or love for art,
They shun the laws of town-life and its ways,
And, savage born, remain so all their days,
Their bodies their sole care, their souls untilled,
Like to the Forest soil become self-willed,
Breeding things rank and fruitless, thus they scorn
The law of love, and die as they were born.
(Unpublished poem).

In the year 1840 I had the misfortune to have my house set on fire by the carelessness of a servant girl; this caused me to remove soon after to the corner house at the bottom of Load street. Immediately after doing so I was appointed one of the overseers in conjunction with two other tradesman, Mr. Townsend, an ironmonger and Mr. George Pitt, a basket maker, our services being gratuitous and the duties very disagreeable.

The role then was to levy a rate every four months, and by this means each overseer had to write one rate book, and take his turn in collecting one of the rates.

But this year an exception to this rule took place for the following reasons:- Mr. James Holder, one of the oldest inhabitants of this town, had discovered that the "Far Forest" belonged legally to the borough of Bewdley, and not to the county. Mr. Holder, I say, was one of the oldest inhabitants, and I believe he was the very oldest, as he told me that when he was nearly out of his apprenticeship he went to see George III, when he paid a visit to Bishop Hurd, at Hartlebury Castle, in 1788.

The discovery placed my two fellow-overseers and myself in a very unpleasant position, and I suppose we were appointed because we were not likely to be frightened by the "Far Foresters", as the inhabitants of that lawless district, known the "Far Forest" were called.

The conditions and manners of most of these peculiar people were very primitive; they were besom makers by general report, but with many of them, poaching, sheep-stealing, and marauding in the neighbourhood, occupied a great portion of their time. Their stock-in-trade consisted of wood-cutting tools and besom trucks, whilst here and there a more respectable member owned a donkey. Education was quite unknown, and marriages and giving in marriage formed no part of their domestic economy. The coats,

breeches, and vests of the grown-up sons were of many colours, and as to their hats the Irish "caubeens" were genteel in comparison. Some of the house or rather hut-holders had a pig, some had two, and from a neighbourly dread of exchange or misappropriation, these useful animals and the donkeys occupied the "butt ends" of the huts.

The ladies were not a whit behind their aspiring sons in their costume and language; to describe the former would only create disbelief in the reader's mind, as to the truthfulness of the writer, and as to the rich native qualities of their dialogues, the less said the better. The younger children of course fulfilled the time-worn remark, like father like son, like mother like daughter, and, with the exception of being visitors occasionally to the neighbouring towns with their trucks or donkey loads of besoms, they might as well have had an impassible wall built round their forest colony.

However, the three overseers had to do their duty, and at my desire my two companions-at-arms breakfasted with me at six o'clock on the day we resolved to make our first attack on the breeches pockets of the Far Foresters.

We passed up the town and were soon on the turnpike road leading to Cleobury. About one-and-a-half or two miles brought us to a spot called the Pump, where we turned to the right, over a stile, and at once found ourselves in the far-famed Forest. This extensive tract of land belongs to the crown; it formed part of the properties of the Marches of Wales in past ages, and in recent times had been leased to the Winnington family. They were indulgent landlords, and as it often happens in other phases of life, their indulgence made their Far Forest tenants lazy instead of active. To us, therefore, as greedy overseers in search of money, our task seemed hopeless amongst a tenantry who paid rent, or left it unpaid, just as they themselves deemed proper.

And so it proved, for although we said again and again at each hut, in the language of St. George, in the old Christmas revels -

Money we want, money we crave,
And money we must haave,

not a penny did we get. It seems that our approach had been watched for and signalled throughout the length and breadth of the hostile territory, as not one senior male did we see during the whole nine hours of our march. This absenteeism we learnt afterwards was adopted under the belief that unless we demanded the rates from the men personally, we could not recover them by law. However, we met with plenty of advice from the ladies, and inferred that they had been carefully instructed by their lords.

Under a resolution come to between ourselves we adopted the civil plan, hoping by that means to get the money; but this, as it does generally in the case of dealing with vixenish wives, produced the opposite results. We were told by some to go to a very distant region, by others to go to the Head of that distant region and shake ourselves, to which advice, we, being both tired and hungry, turned a deaf ear. We were threatened with a variety of tortures, too numerous to mention in extenso, and told that we had better have stopped at home to mind our own business (which we certainly should have been very glad to do), and that if we dared to come again we must be sure to bring our coffins with us, for we should never quit the Forest again in our shoes.

To make our discomfort worse we could get nothing to eat or drink; we offered in two or three cases to pay for rashers of bacon and a loaf, but were met with direct refusals; so, after leaving the notices at each hovel, some of which were thrown back at us indignantly, we found our way into the turnpike road and being as ravenous as wolves, made straight for the public house called 'Mopsons Cross'.

Here we found several fitches of bacon hanging up (one of which I thought I should myself be able to curtail seriously, if not to eat the whole), and getting the servant girl to stand on a tall stool to cut off the rashers, we each in our turn snapped them off her, and, running to the fire, fork in hand, devoured them almost as fast as she could slice them off the fitch; whilst doing this the landlady, Mrs. Potter, supplied us with splendid home-made cider, in stone cups, and slices

and pints, and pints and slices, disappeared down our throats with amazing rapidity, for at least an hour.

One of our number, Mr. Pitt, had been a tea teetotaler for some time, but we persuaded that cider was not forbidden to man, although the fruit from which this beverage is extracted had been at a period the most ancient on record; and, sad to say, from the great fatigue he had undergone, and the great relish he found in the cider, long before we started to return home, he was far from being in a state to deliver an oration on the delights of temperance.

The end of this Far Forest collecting was, that after offering various unattached persons in Bewdley, one after another, from five to ten pounds to collect the rate for us, without avail, we, having a due fear of the coffin advice, placed the matter in the proper law officers' hands, and summoned every one of the rebellious and absentee tenants.

This, from an unforeseen cause, ended better than we expected; every rate was paid, not in propria personae by the tenants, but by some man-in-the-moon process as there was an expectation afloat that at the ensuing election there would be an opposition to the sitting member, and that it would be essential for his future success that this "worthy and intelligent" body of tenants should be duly registered on the list of free and independent electors. We, the three overseers, therefore escaped the ordeals of the other two Far Forest rates, so far as tramping the Forest went, but Mr. Pitt, although a consistent person in most things, was never known to pass Mopson's Cross in after days without calling to taste the cider.



Cider-making near the Button Oak Road (From Charles Purcell's collection)

Miss Whitcombe