

An important Roman Pavement lesser mosaic in 1594



"Our Village Series"

WOODCHESTER

★ *The famous Roman Villa* ★ *The last of the Ducie Family* ★ *The Other Village*

THOUGH its fame dates from the Roman occupation, evidence of life almost 2,000 years before Christ has been discovered in the locality of Udecaestre, Wuducaestre, Wodecestre, Widuceastre, Wydchester, Wychester, or—to give the village its modern spelling—Woodchester.

To the world, however, it is noted above all else for its Roman Villa. From the foundation excavated it must have been one of the finest and largest in England—it had more than 60 rooms and a corridor 100 feet long. Some writers have stated that it was built in the first or second century, but this is only conjecture.

The tessellated pavement of the central hall, main point of attraction, measures over 48 feet square and was discovered by gravediggers in the old churchyard in the 18th century. In the Festival year of 1951 42,000 people from all over the world visited the site. Another 7,000 came in 1953 when a lesser mosaic in the Priory grounds was opened.

The present Rector, the Rev. H. D. Woolcott, instituted in 1947, played a big part in this work. The earliest recorded instance of a church with a settled minister was at Woodchester. His name was Wulphun and he lived about the year 900 or just before.

There is a belief that St. Paul may have preached here for we are told that the Apostle went to the utmost limit of the West, which in those days was Britain. And if he did come to Britain he was sure to have visited the Roman Governor who lived at Woodchester.

The churchyard in which the old Parish Church (12th or 13th century) stood is part of the site of the Roman buildings. It was pulled down in 1863. The present church was consecrated the same year. In the church register, which dates from 1563, mention is made of a christening in the early 1800's. At the ceremony were the child's mother, grandmother, great grandmother and "grand"

great grandmother. This question of old age seems to be almost hereditary in Woodchester. Villagers are reputed to have been blessed with long life. Compared with some of the villagers of yesterday, Woodchester's oldest residents now are mere youngsters. Mr. E. L. A. Fawkes, of Dairy Farm, for example, readily admits that at the age of 83 he is a young man.

A farmer-milkman all his life, Mr. Fawkes remembers when during the great blizzard of 1881 he had to dig his way through the snow in Gloucester Street. It took him four hours to get to the top—from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m. At that time he was living with his father at Hammonds Farm, in the old Painswick Road.

On his marriage, some 56 years ago, he moved to Woodchester and continued his milk round. When a young man he was a keen sportsman and was regarded as one of the best track runners in the district. He was also an expert shot and a weight lifter though he had no training. The trophies at his home, gained from his sporting successes, tell a story of triumph over disability. When a small boy Mr. Fawkes had a principal bone removed from his right arm and damaged his spine in two places. He is now a life member of the Dairymen's Association and has been chairman of the local branch of the Traders' Association for 37 years. He has been chairman of the Parish Council, chairman of the local branch of the Conservative Association, chairman of the local branch of the N.F.U. and a member of many other village and district bodies.

Mr. Fawkes lives in North Woodchester. Why the dis-

crimination between the north and south of the village is not really known, unless it is simply because of its straggling nature but there has always been a division. In years gone by it has been known as Far and Near Woodchester, and Upper and Lower Woodchester. It is a tradition that whichever part you live in, when referring to the opposite end you always call it "the other village". It is just one of several village customs.

Woodchester Feast was revived last year on the first Sunday after September 8, as usual. Previously it had been usual for the church bells to be rung but last year they were considered unsafe. They have now been lowered and dispatched to London for repairs.

Some of the young people of the village, who have been taking an increasing interest in the bells, have formed themselves into a handbell ringing group and have broadcast on two occasions.

In connection with the Feast many older residents will remember the processions in the village before the war when the Holloway Benefit Society took advantage of the festivities.

The North side of the village has the Roman Villa, the Priory (erected in the form of the letter "H", a customary form in Henry VIII's time), the church—and the Royal Oak Inn where Mr. Lionel Bennett is the landlord. The South side contains the Court, the Baptist Church—and two public houses, the Ram Inn (Mr. Arthur Latham), and the Yew Tree (Mr. Alec Walker). Mr. Latham is the oldest licensee. His niece once kept the Yew Tree and her father for 50 years before her.

The sign of the Ram belongs to the days of the Cotswold Wool and cloth trade. Woodchester was famous for its fine broad cloth and it is recorded that George III, his consort, Queen Charlotte and

the three eldest princesses through his endeavours that visited the factory of Mr. the Chapel was built. Obediah Paul.

Today there are many factories along the valley. Readers may remember the great fire at the piano works in 1938 when material damage amounting to £20,000 was caused.

A lesser known industry of the village—it only had a brief existence—was glass making. This work came to an end about 1615.

Along the same valley, on the main Stroud Nailsworth Road, an open air swimming pool was opened at Hillgrove House in 1934. Stroud branch of the Toc H organised sports at the opening. The pool measured 90 ft. by 50 ft., its deepest end was six feet six inches and the shallow end was two feet nine inches.

Farther along the valley, away from the village proper is the Dominican Church of the Annunciation consecrated in 1849. Here candidates are prepared for the priesthood. The Franciscan Convent (of the Immaculate Conception) was established about 1860. The laundry was completely destroyed in a fire in 1950 and the main building severely damaged.

WOODCHESTER PARK

Take the road past the Dominican Church and very soon the traveller will come upon the silent beauty of one of the Cotswold's least frequented valleys. The unique beauty of Spring Park (now known as Woodchester Park) lies in its thickly wooded slopes. Along the entire length of the valley seven lakes are linked together—a distance of about two miles.

Queen Elizabeth granted the Park to George Huntley in 1564 but later his grandson, also named George, aroused the bitter enmity of the people of Woodchester and Nympsfield when he proceeded to enclose common land in an attempt to consolidate his grandfather's work and establish the Woodchester estate as the centre of the Huntley family.

When Huntley was killed by being thrown from his horse, the Park was sold to Sir Richard Ducie whose descendants held it until about a century ago. In 1854 it was sold to Mr. William Leigh who pulled down the 18th century mansion built by the Ducies and planned another on larger dimensions in Gothic style. The finest workmen were engaged but Mr. Leigh overestimated his expenditure and the mansion was not, and never has been finished.

Before the last War no hunting was allowed in the Park. One day the Berkeley Hounds chased a fox into the grounds and when the Hunt staff rode in to retrieve them, they found the lodge gates locked against them.

The Park was once a favourite spot of Mrs. Catherine Garland, now 80 years old and living at South Woodchester. She is a native of Slimbridge and has lived in Woodchester for about 50 years. Not far away, at Convent Lane, lives Mrs. Lizzie Churchley (84), one of the oldest residents. When she first came to Woodchester about 50 years ago she opened a general store.

PRAYER METINGS

Between these two homes is the Baptist Chapel which was built at a cost of about £600 in 1825. In 1829 Mr.

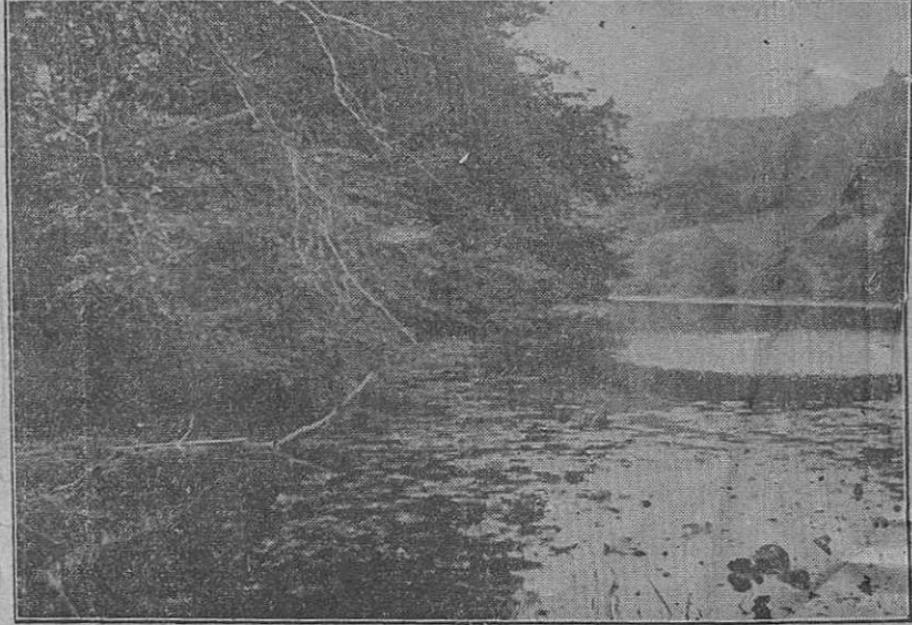
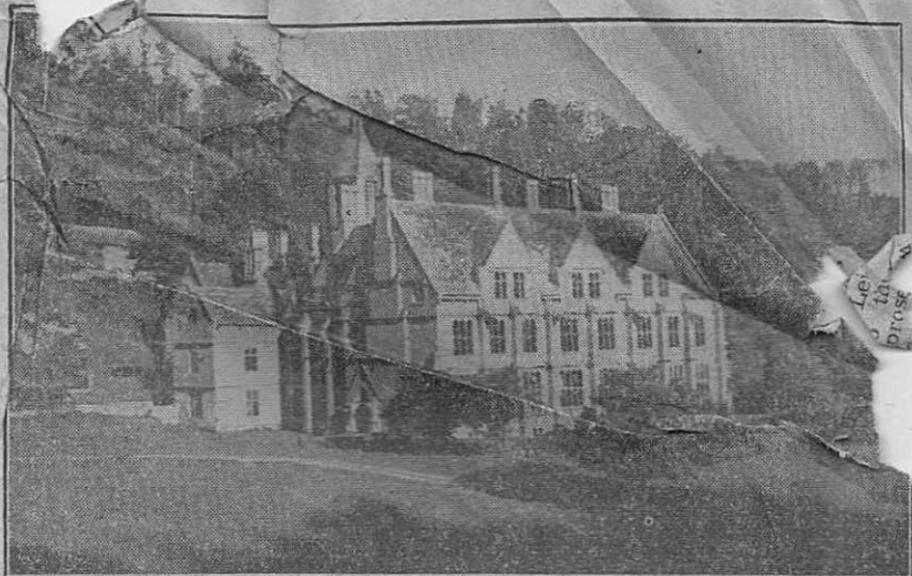
Atcombe, not far from the Chapel, was, it is believed, the site of a gallows. They were supposedly on the land which for many years was known as the Hanging Acre.

Returning to North Woodchester two other buildings are worthy of a brief explanation—the Parish Room and the School. The Parish Room was built by subscription in 1834 and, though originally a school house, is today used by several organisations for their annual sales, socials and other functions. The school buildings were erected on Glebe land in 1888 at a cost of £1,400. The then Rector, the late Rev. F. Smith conveyed it to Trustees as a site for "A School for poor Persons," to be used on Sundays as a Sunday School under the Rector, and on other days for educational purposes under Government inspection. In 1924 a schoolmaster's house was added for which the village must thank the late Mr. Henry Workman, a benevolent and life-long inhabitant.

It seems that Woodchester has always been conscious of its poor people. In 1763 the Overseers of the Poor of the Parish bought the old Alms Houses for £16/16/0. Under the Local Government Act of 1894 the Parish Council took charge, the repairs being carried out by public subscription. It was in 1950 that the news came that the five houses would have to be demolished.

Today, despite its central position between the two towns of Stroud and Nailsworth, Woodchester is still very much a village community. And who can blame them with such a heritage. They have a long and magnificent history to live up





Woodchester Park Top: the unfinished Mansion. Bottom: a view of one of the lakes.