

## Villages Old and New

J.S. Ryan

ABSTRACT: Some cultural reflections occasioned by the Newly Created Urge for more and more evocative built-up areas, and these soon to be styled 'Villages', Atmospheric 'Quarters' or 'Precincts'. This survey glances at the layer patterns of propinquity, agriculture and trade over some two thousand years. Much of today's 'village movement' has many antecedents and parallels.

### *Just a Current Trendy Fad? Or a Yearning for the World Before 1850?*

As the previous paper on the emotive—and even charismatic—qualities of the word or concept 'village' would seem to indicate, both our contemporary urban designs and the like (yearning for some form of) urban regeneration projects seek continually to synthesize the visual image of a particular place. And they seek to emphasise its 'atmosphere' by a new—or freshly perceived—term, usually 'village', for a pleasingly small and homogeneous area and for this label to have a non-strident ambience. This sort of setting is often/ usually one where there are to be identified:

- (a) a significant number of historic buildings and places; and
- (b) a perceptible/ to-be-deliberately-stimulated sense of the past.

This process is clearly one which is capable of a degree of 'antiquing', and so of thereby contriving for/ bestowing on such a place a (nostalgic) sequence of historical associations, a haunting quality best described as its aura and a part, they aver, of its subtle and yet generally perceived appeal.

### *Earlier/ the Earliest 'Villages' – and our Recollections Thereof*

Clustering of houses/shelters together into villages in prehistoric times made sound sense—this for such peoples/clusters to obtain mutual support, and for their protection from wanderers and thieves. But since the members/ the persons so domiciled had to work in their fields every day, and both water and protect their crops from marauders, such a populace would usually be but a few hundred, close-knit to a degree, almost all intermarried, and, necessarily, punitive to all who transgressed

on their place.<sup>1</sup> For many millennia, most such ‘villages’ were almost self-sufficient—food, housing, clothes and tools were in the main made in the village, and surpluses of food were consumed in festivals (many of these in Europe much later duly appropriated by Christianity into the church year), while custom determined most organizational choices. Hunger and danger were recurrent hazards, but, in the main, the community survived, maintained its cultural identity and in the good years it prospered. It was far more harmonious than can be easily imagined as possible in any/such a cross section of individuals today.

### *The Greatest Change and its Increasing Momentum*

However the city, an organization beginning about 5,000 years before the present, it must to be realized, then became parasitic on the village in two ways – (1) the food consumed by it having to come from further villages; and (2) the ever burgeoning city becoming a consumer of people, both those needed to work in it, and those dying there because it was unsanitary and disease prone, and (3) because so many employed in this consuming and focal location had not the opportunity for marriage, still less the chance to nurture children. Yet in both such focal places for population—the village and the city—infant mortality was frequently very high, and so large families were needed, to maintain functional numbers of persons.

The next phase, land shortage would lead to migration, the men joining armies—or, often, marauding bands—or else led away to become involved in the occupation of distant lands, in despite of their original occupants. These relentless pressures both spread the size of cities and denuded the villages, as well as led to the use of iron for tools, thus connecting inextricably the rural majority with (centralized) urban networks.

The early period of all villages having adjacent lords and being under their ‘protection’ has often been called the ‘civilized compromise’, whereby the two sides, power and service, respected each other, so that, in (more) civilized societies, the armed might would protect the village from outside attack. In this fashion, the style of village life evolved steadily, despite likely set-backs in matters of food supply, plagues, external threat, and of their happening to be in the path of larger or smaller marauding forces.

And yet the population of the initial village life would create/ created new villages, as and when climate and soils made farming practical and sustainable. Across millennia, this seesaw pattern would—and did—

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<sup>1</sup> The ducking of ‘witches’ and worse would seem to be survivals of the unease at strangers and a like intolerance of those of their own who somehow appeared ‘different’.



*Emsworth, Hants. 1830s. Note the water cart and the pedlar's display.*

produce obvious population growth, although the records across the world are meager, yet much is emerging through more recent archaeology, which has shown evidence of part-time grain farming appearing in better-watered locations as in Israel, Jordan, Syria and Turkey and Iraq about 11,000 years ago. Like studies in central Mexico establish the harvesting of corn, squash and beans, about 6,000 years.

Without itemizing or categorizing them, it is clear that these general patterns occurred in many types of human location, and while we cannot now discuss the massive transfer of Old World crops and of such domesticated animals to the Americas and other overseas sites, along with the matching/counter of the spread of American food crops—among them corn, potatoes, and tomatoes—the Old World progressively conformed to and functioned under these general principles, as is often/generally seen to have been achieved through the remainder of the historical continuity of that place and the society living and working there.

Another milestone for humanity was the onset of commercial farming in Eurasia, with heavier plough shares, larger teams of ploughmen, and the cultivation of elongated strips of land, the final consequences of which were increases in wealth, and the magnification of inequality, all

of this duly leading to the inevitable and widespread commercialization of village life. Clearly the patterns/lessons of human slavery in North America would suggest other forms of ruthlessness and commercialism. Another worldwide development—that had still hindered ‘development’ in Africa and in the tropical interiors in southeast Asia and South America, would be the obstacles to transportation there, but

after 1950, commercialization penetrated almost everywhere, and the old-fashioned village solidarities had been correspondingly compromised.

William M. McNeill, ‘Villages’, p. 1454. (In *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World*, Vol. IV, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

This fine survey may be quoted for its reflective conclusion:

Beginning on a large scale only after 1950, radio and TV began to penetrate villages. This expanded encounter with urban sights and sounds provoked widespread discontent with traditional villages ways, especially among the young. Accordingly migration to cities accelerated, and the long-standing civilized compromise that had always subordinated villages to urban control, but nonetheless accorded substantial local autonomy ... to villages [which] began to crumble. About half the world’s population now lives in towns or cities. ....

This is perhaps the greatest transformation that our species has embarked upon in some 11,000 years. The upshot is unforeseeable, and sure to be profound. [Op. cit., IV, p. 1154.]

*And Now What Of the Nuances Still Linked For Us With the Suggested/ Asserted ‘Village’ Connotation?*

In such cases, as it is used/invoked more recently in some fashion, there is strongly suggested—or somehow understood to be still present and accessible—this semantic dynamic comes from the various cultural associations lingering or even signposted there. Such reminding places are often styled ‘quarters’, are often/are perceived to be an integral/magnetic element of a larger and more conformist, of even drear town or city’s charm, and are asserted to be somehow ‘heritage’, to appeal alike to both those living there, and those visiting.

For their visual and earlier/suggested, and present functional qualities are important elements of the present town’s/city’s more comfortable (self) image and of its perceived/sensed achieved identity. The lessons

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<sup>2</sup> The series of four volumes is edited by Karen Christensen and David Levinson. London: Sage, 2003.

and observations drawn from such historic ‘quarters’ are part of the catalyzing design, ornamentation and mode of revitalizing of its older surviving building complexes, a number of which may be progressively molded into such beckoning and engaging ‘precincts’.

*But What Was/ Is Meant by the Emotionally Attractive Term, ‘Village’?*

The study of the community known as a ‘village’ has long been a fundamental and convenient method of discussing the evolution of both the social institutions of the settled, and, thenceforth, of progressively their evolving cultures. From the time that farming became a way of life for most of humanity, beginning about 11,000 years ago, the majority of the human kind had lived in settlements of the sort called ‘villages’ and they would continue to do so, it is usually agreed, until about 1950. Of course, villages varied greatly in both location, and in the pattern of cultures in historical time. But there were certain uniformities that distinguished these communities from both the various rogue and foraging bands and from the greater settled groupings that became the norm progressively, if at differing speeds across the globe.

The commonalities of village life had consisted in:

nearby work in the fields,

the cultivation of the soil;

the bringing of water enough to grow the crops on which the community depended, as well as

seed for the next planting, and the dues that might have to be paid to landowners, various officials, armed bands and or other strangers.

*‘Villages’ as Precursors to the Manorial System*

It will be enough for now if one seeks to confine our discussion to the Teutonic countries within the many Indo-European peoples, and similarly seeks to re-identify the various bonds holding together such settled groups and subsequent clusterings. For the core factor—with them/within their mediaeval identities—was always how far land was held in common instead of by totally isolated individuals. And our concern now must be as to what extent husbandry and the law patterns of such a/any race will have determined the behaviour of the individual in such a village, as living in a traditional proximity, firstly to kinsmen, and then to his neighbours, with, however, the movable property there being owned jointly. Further, there would have been some accepted—if variously applied—arrangement in respect of the arable, the woods, and the waste spaces near this village/ common habitation.

Assuredly, too, there would have been agreement as to the (British/Celtic) usage of pasture, wood, and waste. Pastoral habits must have greatly contributed to giving the system of land-holding its peculiar character. Most students of such societies—as in Western Europe, our standard model—would have a considerable awareness of the complex reckonings of pedigree and of social rank, one which would have led to marked inequalities, despite the general notion of birthright. And with the pressure of population rising, there would have been a steady progression from the pastoral lifestyle to the more settled ways of agriculture. Clearly kinship through the male line—strong earlier in the times of regular warring—was one related to a regular economic system based on the use of fields with determined strip usages.

However, sooner or later there would have arisen some sort of manorial system, with various shapes to the plots/allotments,<sup>3</sup> and with possible coercion of the tenants by the lord. Further, there would arise a system of preferences in relation to the distance between the house/abode and the allocated strips/shares in the field. Soon after this, there would also arise the need for a village green for the night rest of the cattle employed in the tillage process, as well as a system for the progressive development of orchards, despite the occasional need for re-allocation of these and other allotments.

If we consider for a moment the Old English legal system, that did not permit the alienation of folk land, or of estates held by the customary law of the people. Yet, by the end of the first Christian millenium, the all-powerful church had come to insist on the right of individual possessors to give away land for the sake of their souls, while the desires of fathers to make provision for their daughters would have caused constant collisions with the customary tribal laws. And the Norman period would see the rise of tenure and obligation—i.e. the notion of an estate burdened with necessary service for a superior—in lieu of tribal folk land. However, the open-field system with an intermixture of strips and common rights in pasture and wood was the prevailing system in England for more than a thousand years. Under the later customary name of ‘champion farming’, it had existed everywhere in the country until the Enclosure Acts of the 18th and 19th centuries put an end to it.

The lush meadows were constantly owned by entire towns and distributed in portions, but the control/use of arable areas became more and more a matter for the manorial court. However, another significant

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<sup>3</sup> A fascinating insight into these systems, stable by the end of the first Christian millennium, will also be recalled by older readers in the matter of allotments as practised by various countries under the stresses of war, as in England in the period 1939 to 1945, and lingering variously thereafter, as well as being practised variously on/near ‘Commons’ at the beginning of the third millennium..

feature was that the *commons* had survived the wholesale process of enclosure, but not the abolition of their restrictive admeasuring in 1837.

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Perhaps it is enough now to consider the general principles that may be deemed to be behind the emotive attachment to the ‘village’ in the 21st century—

1. the primitive stages of our civilization/ inherited ‘European’ culture disclose in human society a strong tendency towards mutual support in economic matters, as well as for defense;
2. in the epochs of pastoral husbandry land had long been owned by tribes and then by extended kindred, while the individual only enjoyed rights of usage and of possession;
3. the most natural form for defense and cooperation is that of kinship and the emotional ties involved there;
4. in the course of time, the ‘village’ bonds became those of (generations of) neighbours, rather than those of kinsmen;
5. in many of the communities of England—as generally in Western Europe—the usual/standard units were those needed for efficient farming, and they were kept together by rules of united or single succession.

In the end, the treatment of the commons can be seen to represent one of the last communal arrangements, and it can only be reasonably and justly interpreted by reference to the law and practice of former times.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Some indication of this shaping of work practice and such communities in the early 20th century may be found in Paul Gavrilovich Vinogradov, *Villainage in England* (1892). [This work has been styled perhaps the most important book written on the peasantry of the feudal age and the village community in England. Cp. his *The Growth of the Manor* (1905) and *English Society in the 11th Century* (1907).]

*The Urban 'Villages' Noted to be Appearing in British/Australian Cities in the Later Decades of the Twentieth Century*

Such places, often labeled 'centres' can easily become activated by the marketing capacity of a variety of spatially/economically related outlets and their capacity to generate more trade in a symbiotic fashion. They can also be the subject of feature articles in the local press or attractive/engaging presentations by the electronic media. Workspace themes, both past and present, are a social magnet, and so old warehouses can be converted into restaurants and small businesses—miniature market places—all of this generating progressively higher rents, in order to assist the further physical reconstruction, and, perforce, the economic reconstruction.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, there is a positive side to all of this work, a concern to revitalize historic urban quarters as regional economies contract and face uncertain/more challenging futures. Further, new mixes of technology, improved education, decentralized tertiary colleges and the cultural vitality that has come with greater educational opportunities, as in the United Kingdom or in Australia, and the steady influx of tourists assists communities to ride downturns in the economy, and recreate the community's self-image and sense of pride. Further, there has often been a slowness in appreciating the potential of tourism as a tool for urban regeneration. Interestingly here, a focus on industrial tourism during the 1980s in England led directly to the English Tourist Board (ETB) as part of a five year plan to sponsor tourism- sponsored parts of Manchester and Salford as a Strategic Development (SDI). A particular aspect in this—in both England and Australia—is the acceptance that old warehouses with new functions, the building of new hotels, and closely sited residential accommodation can reinvigorate dying areas, as much in Australian cities as in British ones.

For the truth is that many/most historical and cultural heritages have left rich urban fabrics and streetscapes of short, narrow and winding streets. Another example that comes to mind is Dublin, chosen in 1991 as being 'City of Culture', much of this achieved on a policy of decaying businesses staying where they had long been and moving to both renovate and integrate the old into new structures there. And one's television will have afforded many interior shots of structures, long

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<sup>5</sup> The writer has had a close association with, and at various times lived in, the historic precinct of Old Sydney, The Rocks, and has watched the numerous and awkward—but deliberate—attempts to capitalize on/ produce some sort of sharing of the nuances of that nation-founding place. Arguably many of the current schemes, focused on world tourism at the seaward end of The Rocks Area—courtesy of Lease Lend—are not necessarily likely to remind the sojourner of a setting where a convict and post-convict society progressed somehow from their initial penal identity. Yet their ability to revitalize whole precincts is not in doubt.



derelict after World War II, now becoming functional and spectacular office and living spaces.

### *Not Quite a Conclusion*

The moral of all of this is that the ‘village’, or, if you will, the micro-community with a common focus, has been re-incarnated, albeit in a perhaps somewhat contrived form. Indeed, it is amazing how many decentralized towns and cities can and have developed tourism in historic quarters, provided only that they focus on interesting aspects and assets, as well as providing the facilities—service industries, restaurants, transport, and numbers living in close proximity. Another obvious factor is improvement to the environment, all of this well stated by R. Hewison:

As SAVE Britain’s Heritage 1982 pamphlet, ‘Preserve and Prosper’ makes clear, tourism by itself will not provide all the funds necessary for preserving old buildings. Indeed the costs of tourism ... will sometimes exceed the revenue from visitors... Yet if the buildings themselves do not profit from tourism, other aspects of the economy do... The main economic benefit will be derived by transport, accommodation, catering and retailing businesses. In this context the historic building is a classical example of the loss-leader.

*The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987).

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While we have diverged somewhat from the ‘village’ theme, it will be clear that there are many responses to the human micro-focus and its ‘community’, to savoring the relics of the past, and to the processes of ‘re-using’ that which appears to have become obsolete, as well as the interesting and exciting bonus of finding anew the micro-community in which mankind has felt most at home over to many millennia.

In brief, we have also glanced at the issues of urban design, urban regeneration, and the process of endeavouring to revitalise compact areas where there is less ‘through-flow’. In short, there is an authorial decision to focus in the last part of this paper those zones/quarters/precincts which can still confer a strong sense of place and identity on the larger community through historical continuity and cultural associations. For of course, these are the most significant elements of the city’s image, its historical continuity and ultimate identity.

And for Australia, perhaps the most urbanized smaller nation on the planet, this survival of the ‘village’ cannot but signal the way to revitalize the city, even as it enfranchises so many of their often

immediate heritage that late modernism had sought to disguise or even obliterate.

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