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Chapter I *Welsh Cattle*

IT has been told elsewhere how the little boys at Farnborough village school rather liked to be naughty at certain seasons and made to stand on the form, because from the form they could look out of the window and see anything that passed along the road. Such a season, especially, must have been the few days before and after Blackwater Fair—the 8th of November; for then the roads, those elm-lined Farnborough roads, usually so quiet, were lively with frequent herds of Welsh cattle going to or from the fair.

It was doubtless a sight well worth being punished for. Long years afterwards I too—though with none of the luck of the Farnborough boys (my education was neglected: I never went to a school where they stood on forms)—used to wonder at the multitudes of cattle, going from Blackwater then to Farnham Fair on November the 10th. Smallish black beasts they were, if I remember right, with long horns. But for how many ages already, before Farmer Smith's time, Welsh cattle had been a feature of Blackwater Fair I cannot even conjecture. Mrs. Piozzi speaks of cattle at that fair, in her Italian travels; earlier still (August 17, 1763) Wesley had crossed the New Passage of the Severn, going from Bristol

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to Chepstow, in a boat that had brought over "a herd of oxen." It is true he doesn't state where the oxen were going; but, from the month as well as from other considerations, it seems likely that they were on their way across the south of England, and due in the Hampshire neighbourhood in November. In this connection I had an interesting note from a friend in Gloucestershire one September. The ferryman at Arlingham Passage, he reported, had told of seeing in his youth, in the early autumn, as many as four hundred head of cattle on the Welsh side, waiting to be got across the river. So perhaps Wesley had seen Blackwater Fair cattle. In fact, one must think that even in his day the bringing of cattle from Wales was a very antiquated part of England's life.

Be that as it may, the custom was in full swing in John Smith's young days. He often spoke of it. The subject came up first during a discussion of the roadside ponds of Farnborough. These ponds, it seemed, had not always been useless. For one thing, they were necessary for the travelling herds. Five or six ponds were mentioned—mostly dried up or drained or filled up now, though one remained—Slades Pond. As this was almost opposite Mrs. Cooke's school, one may imagine how eager the little boys must have been to be deemed naughty enough for

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standing on the form, where they might look out at herd after herd of cattle.

John Smith said he used to like to listen to the Welsh drovers. He knew when they were coming, to what fair (for Blackwater was merely the greatest, not the only one), and "purty near how many droves they were bringing." They came, never touching the turnpike roads. "They'd lose a day goin' round, sooner 'n they'd pass a 'gate.'" So, right away from the west of England, they worked their way up, keeping along on the commons, towards London. Then, nearing London, they diverged southwards to the sea.

Details to fill up some of these outlines were obtained from time to time. The droves numbered up to a hundred and fifty each, and at certain seasons their passing through the neighbourhood was continuous. November and December were their months, the November passing, for Blackwater, lasting about four days. To Farnham Fair, never much of a cattle fair indeed, not many of the Welsh came. If other drovers found one of their number going there they were careful to stay away for fear of spoiling his market. At Blackwater, on the contrary, they congregated freely. All along the route the cattle were sold out gradually, but the chief market for them was at the coast. Should a drover, however, get rid

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of all his stock before reaching the coast, it was sometimes worth his while to go back to Wales for more. From Farnborough the way seems to have been towards Horsham and Brighton—a fact pleasantly recalled to John Smith when, in his old age, he at last visited the former town. For he was reminded then of places he had often heard of in his boyhood in connection with the Welsh cattle.

Ten miles a day was about the journey for a herd, across commons, avoiding roads excepting for roadside ponds. To know these ponds, and to arrange for reaching them at a reasonable time, was of course an important item in a drover's business; and of course, too, he needed to know how the commons followed on. The latter were wanted only for travelling over; for feed, arrangements had to be made with farmers, to allow the droves a turn-out in the pastures. At nightfall the cattle arrived at a pasture, to rest and to feed; but often the next evening would have come (such was the drovers' policy) before the herd was on the move again, for a shorter stage to be done by night.

All these arrangements, plainly, needed to be planned out beforehand; and if it was profitable to the farmers to sell their feed, the Welshmen for their part were shrewd at bargaining. "Upright men," John Smith found them, "but close-fisted."

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He always got along comfortably with them; only sometimes it annoyed him when "four or five, or as many as six at a time," would come to bargain with him, talking in English as good as his own, and then suddenly turning to one another to gabble in a tongue he couldn't understand. He felt at a disadvantage then.

With every herd there were four or five men on horseback—often two on one horse. And all up the main roads were the known inns—their customary places of entertainment—where a clever landlady was needed to satisfy these welcome guests, and a clever cook to keep the frying-pan going, for their food. Fried liver and bacon was a frequent dish with them.

Of these men one, William Thomas by name, had a reputation for shrewdness, even amongst his own fellows. He was an owner rather than a drover. He would ride three or four days in advance of his herd, buying up the feed; or sometimes he fell behind, to sell again for some other herd a piece of feed his own after all had not needed. He made considerable profit, John Smith thought.

Although the commons were turfy, and the roads—where touched at all—nowise so hard as now, still the cattle needed to be shod, and kept shod, for their long journeys. "Rare fun" this furnished, for a boy. One of the drovers carried

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a wallet holding a few spare shoes—flat pieces of iron about the length and breadth of two fingers—and a supply of short nails “in a piece of fat bacon.” The nails were so kept to prevent rust, so that, if one of them did chance to pierce the hoof, the flesh “shouldn't ganger.” (This word was pronounced to rhyme to “anger.”) And if any beast showed sign of being footsore, straight-way it was hustled apart, driven over cunningly laid rope that caught its legs, lassoed, and thrown over. And so, with pincers and hammer the shoeing was got through.

It was “the Cattle Plague” (not the foot and mouth disease, but the rinderpest) that finally broke down this custom. For then travelling by road was forbidden and the cattle were sent to their destination by rail.

Earlier in the year—in the autumn—sheep from Wales travelled the same route—“From the Mountains to the Marshes,” as John Smith said. They were in flocks of about fifteen hundred up to two thousand, and they came to Blackwater across the commons by way of Reading. A little farther on they were “dispersed of,” to go on, presumably, towards Rye; “down to the marshes.” “Wild as rabbits” they were; but there were two or three dogs with the men, and “the dogs did all the work.”

(See Note A, Appendix.)

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Chapter 2 Dog-Traction

AN impression of bustling activity, in old Farnborough of all quiet places, sometimes grew out of John Smith's references to the earlier days of his recollection. Not always, of course. When he spoke of the herds of Welsh cattle or of the flocks of Welsh sheep, the imagined sound of innumerable pattering hoofs took the fancy far from bustle to heath-commons and unfrequented roads; and an even quieter glimpse came for a moment, when he happened to mention that he had seen flocks of geese on the turnpike. It was after a remark of my own. I had mentioned to him Cobbett's talk about thousands of geese on the commons between Chobham Ridges and Farnham. "Very likely," John Smith assented. "I remember flocks of them—two hundred at a time perhaps—being driven along the road on the way to London." To think of it is to think of a road where no traffic was likely to be passing for hours. After the slow geese had gone by utter silence would return to it.

But something of a clatter woke up in the fancy—a speedy rattling of wheels—when he told how hawkers were wont to visit Farnborough, in little cofter carts drawn by dogs. Leaving a

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house, he said, the men (in twos, apparently) jumped into the carts, one each side with legs dangling over the fore-part. "They would whip up these poor dogs, and off they'd go—the dogs barking, the men hollering." Does not Farnborough stir in its sleep, at the clamour? The first milk John Smith knew to be sent to London by rail was conveyed to the station in this way. A farmer of Frimley had a son in London who found a good opening; and the farmer took the milk daily across the Hatches, driving dogs in a cart "to meet the up train." One of these dogs, by the way, was "an ordinary house-dog." The other was a sheep-dog, very savage. "If you didn't look out he would come at you right across the road and have you, spite of the cart and the other dog." The noise of the barking of these dogs could be heard afar.

But how erroneous is fancy! While I picture to myself the scurry of this dog traffic, the true objection to it seems to have been, on the contrary, that it would go too stealthily. In the prevailing quiet it lent itself too easily to mischief, keeping quiet itself.

For according to John Smith, a couple of men driving dogs in a light cart could go ostensibly hawking cheap goods, but actually thieving. Their method was simplicity itself. While one of them was "driving his bargain at a house

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with the wife or daughter or the maid-servant," the other would be prying about. And at night, when they returned to London or to Reading, it was with "something else than ware." In fact, the quiet movements of the dogs, and the narrowness of the carts, made this mode of travel only too convenient for robberies. It was easy to pass the turnpikes, easy to get along narrow pathways through shrubberies or plantations. And this, it was suggested, was the reason why traction by dogs was at last stopped about 1854.

Something a shade more commercial, a shade more methodically bustling therefore, centred round the "Tumbledown Dick"—that notable posting inn. The stage-coaches stopped there, and not the stage-coaches only. Road waggons—those cumbersome predecessors of the modern goods train—were wont to call at the "Tumbledown" on their lumbering journeys between Southampton and London.

Accordingly, once a week if not oftener, this was the scene of a fish-market for Farnborough and the neighbourhood. There, where heath verged on village, fish from the sea could be profitably unloaded, and there whoever likes to imagine it may imagine some slight weekly clamour, as from a fish-market. Yet the only detail I can give in connection with this traffic seems to restore the old country quiet. A hawker

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there was, Ben Fry by name, who bought fish at this "market" at the "Tumbledown Dick," yet is said to have hawked it about Farnborough, in a cart, three days a week. Perhaps it is well not to imagine the fish on the third day. But it's not amiss to imagine the quiet roads and lanes, and Ben Fry's voice sounding along them.

The "Tumbledown Dick" was probably a place of more consequence then, before railways had brought London so much nearer. Important property sales were held there. Before Aldershot Camp and town changed all the neighbourhood it must have been the last house on the road for miles. In John Smith's childhood, he dimly remembered, the old sign showed a man in top-boots, with pipe and glass, falling under a table. Soon after Aldershot Camp was founded an officer there contrived to get this altered to a painting of a hussar falling from his horse; but later this was replaced by an attempted reproduction of the earlier picture. John Smith used to attend the property sales at the "Tumbledown," not as a buyer—he never had any money for that. But as an inhabitant of the district he felt a need to know the values and the ownership of lands and houses. Several old sale-catalogues, marked in his writing with names and figures, are indicative enough of business interests, business chatter, in thin trickle of loquacity hovering about the ancient