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Sidney Lee

Excerpt

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STRATFORD-ON-AVON

INTRODUCTORY

“ONE thing more,” wrote Sir William Dugdale in 1657, at the close of the eighteen folio pages of his *Antiquities of Warwickshire* devoted to Stratford-upon-Avon, “one thing more in reference to this ancient town is observable, that it gave birth and sepulture to our late famous poet, Will Shakespeare.” There is little need to add the comment that the “one thing more,” about Stratford, which the learned antiquary thought to have adequately noticed in these four-and-twenty words, has grown into the only thing about it that most men now regard as memorable. Nor would the modern pilgrim—that is, he who makes his pilgrimage with fitting judgment—readily admit that Dugdale has indicated the highest points of interest

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about Shakespeare's connection with Stratford. That the borough was his birthplace and burial-place gives it, after all, a smaller attraction than that he lived there for full two-thirds of his life. And completely as the resources of civilisation have remodelled the town in many of its aspects, it still boasts sufficient survivals of the age of Elizabeth to give the sojourner a far-off glimpse of Shakespeare's daily environment. The nineteenth-century manufacturer has not set his mark upon it: the inhabitants know little of life at high pressure. Their acknowledged affinity with the hero who makes their life worth living in more than a single sense, would seem to have held them aloof from all the ruder currents of modern life. It is only within the last half century that the town has begun to extend its boundaries, and the extension has not yet attained very gigantic measurements. The chief streets, with their offshoots, although they have grown wider in many places and in all cleaner, still bear the names by which Shakespeare knew them. The church on the river bank has undergone little change, and time has dealt very kindly with the exterior of the ancient Chapel of the Guild, with the

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Guildhall, and with the Grammar School, all of which were once overlooked by the windows of Shakespeare's far-famed house, at the meeting of Chapel Street with Chapel Lane. Although that house has gone, the public garden christened after it New Place occupies the exact site of the "great garden" that surrounded it when the poet was its owner. Cross-timbered houses, with the carved front in one instance at least merely mellowed by the lapse of years, often break the monotony of unlovely stretches of modern brickwork. The stone bridge across the Avon is in all its essentials the same as when the Elizabethans crossed it. The water-mill, although shaped anew, continues to do the noisy work in which it has persevered through nine centuries.

And when once the town is deserted for Shakespeare's playing fields in the neighbouring country, the changes grow less marked. Stratford always stood upon a "plain ground," as Leland described it early in the sixteenth century, surrounded by "the champain," that is, the flat open country. The woodland has grown scantier, but there is still no lack of it on the low hills of the district, and here and there

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on the banks of the river. The Forest of Arden, which was in its decadence in Elizabethan England, has now retreated into a mere name, but it was always in historic times cut off from Stratford by a wide enough tract of land to prevent it from affecting materially the immediate scenery. The Avon itself winds as of old from Naseby to the Severn, with Stratford on its right bank, midway between its source and mouth, and at a little distance from Stratford it still flows under bridges at Binton and Bidford which are as authentic relics of the sixteenth century as their fellow at Stratford. Numberless villages, like Shottery and Snitterfield, pursue that drowsy rural life which seems always able to resist time's ravages. They have not grown: some of them have been renovated by the modern builder; in a very few cases they have fallen into decay and all but disappeared. But none have quite reached *la fin du vieux temps*; and the preservation of an occasional relic like the maypole on the village green at Welford suggests to the least thoughtful passer-by their near relationship with the past. Saunter where we will by the homesteads and meadows of South

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Warwickshire, we are still led from time to time within view of scenes which may well have inspired poetic passages like Perdita's invitation to the sheep-shearing feast, or the song of Spring in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

But there is some danger, although the practice is an attractive one, in making Shakespeare's name the central feature of all Stratford history and topography. It has been done too often already. The writers of guide-books or monographs on the town and district have always endeavoured to fix the attention of the pilgrim or student exclusively on points of Shakespearian interest, and have valued only as much of their investigations as belongs to Shakespearian lore.

The scraps of information that their labours have yielded are of their kind beyond price; but they fail to enable the reader to form a coherent conception of the town's general development or social growth. With all respect to the antiquaries of Stratford, it may be said that they have overlooked facts in the various stages of the history of the borough which are of striking importance in the municipal history of the country. Nor is

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this the limit of their offence, if offence can justly be used in such a context. Although it would be only by an awkward distortion of the neglected facts that they could be turned to account in Shakespeare's biography, those of them that relate to the Middle Ages undoubtedly offer us traditions which influenced the life and thought of the poet as a Stratford townsman of greater receptivity than his neighbours; while those that concern the late years of the sixteenth century, or the early years of the seventeenth, can be made to create for us a picture of the society in which he actually moved. Thus we may be brought to the conclusion that something of Dugdale's method of dealing with Stratford is not without its advantages for the Shakespearian student. It is possible that an account of the town that shall treat it as a municipality not unworthy of study for its own sake, and shall place Shakespeare among its Elizabethan inhabitants as the son of the unlucky woolstapler of Henley Street or as the prosperous owner of New Place, will be more suggestive and in better harmony with the perspective of history,

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than a mere panegyric on the parochial relics as souvenirs of the poet's birthplace, home, or sepulchre. The following pages are intended as an experiment in the former direction.

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I

THE ORIGIN OF THE TOWN, AND ITS RELATIONS
WITH THE SEE OF WORCESTER

THERE are many towns in England that can claim greater antiquity than Stratford-on-Avon.¹ The county of Warwickshire, called by Drayton (himself a Warwickshire man) the heart of England, was doubtless in prehistoric ages part of the vast forest which covered all the Midlands, and which survived in later times in the chain of wood stretching, with occasional clearings, from Byrne Wood in Buckinghamshire, through Abingdon and Wych Woods in Oxfordshire, to the forests of Dean, Arden, Cannock, and Sherwood, and the Derbyshire

¹ The main authority for the history of mediaeval Stratford is Dugdale's account of the town in his *History of Warwickshire*, first published in 1656, and reissued under the editorship of Dr. William Thomas in 1718. Kemble's *Codex Diplomaticus* gives the text of the charters noted below.

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Wolds. The discovery of a very few tumuli in the district, containing some rude stone implements, mark the presence of a very sparse population in a neolithic age.

Avon is the Celtic word for river, which as *Afon* is still good Welsh. Arden is formed from the Celtic *ard*, high or great, and *den*, the wooded valley—a compound which also supplied Luxemburg with its district of the Ardennes. Place-names like these prove the sojourn of Celtic tribes in the north and south of Warwickshire before the Roman occupation. The Romans bestowed the title *Cornavii* on the inhabitants of the county. We know nothing of its origin, and find few traces of Roman civilisation in the district. But Rome's ubiquitous roadmakers did not leave the neighbourhood untouched. Ryknield Street, which ran from Tynemouth in Northumberland, through York, Derby, and Birmingham, to St. David's, skirted the Forest of Arden on its west side; passed through Studley and Alcester, and left the county five miles below Stratford by way of Bidford. The name of *Strætford* is a proof, too, that this was not the only "street" which approached the site of Stratford. It

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must have started into being like five other villages in different parts of England similarly named, as the approach of a Roman *street* to a *ford*—as the approach to a ford across the Avon of the smaller Roman road that ran from Birmingham through Henley-in-Arden to London. But whether it had become an inhabited place, or had its name before the Romans left Britain, is mere matter of conjecture.

Of the Teutonic settlers, a Saxon tribe, known to history as the Hwiccas, occupied Warwickshire and its neighbourhood in the sixth century; but according to local legends, the Celts did not make way for them without a struggle, which was waged very fiercely up the Welcombe Hills that overlook Stratford. For some years the Hwiccas lived in independence under their own alderman; but in the seventh century they were absorbed within the great Marchland—the middle kingdom of Mercia—and their aldermen declined into mere agents of the Mercian kings. The see of Worcester was formed about 679, and all the district of the Hwiccas constituted the bishop's diocese.