



DORSET

by Richard Ollard

become, gazumped its rivals by securing the bones of the Martyr. Shrines and relics were the path-finders of the tourist trade. As soon as the weather begins to be half decent as Chaucer observed 'then longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.' Shaftesbury was not so easily accessible as the main centres of medieval population as Canterbury but it is hard to realise in the present rather cold, wind-swept town more than a shade reminiscent of some dour French town, that it was once a hive of activity, supporting besides one of the largest and richest nunneries in the country a dozen churches and chapels and boasting its own mint.

The dissolution of the monasteries and the iconoclasm of the Reformation obliterated all that. It is hard to think of a medieval town of comparable importance and wealth when so few external signs of the Middle Ages survive. Even the most modest Dorset village can generally put on a better show. But nothing except the frequent drifts of rain-sodden mist can rob the place of its marvellous views; and the riches of its past can, to an extent, be recovered in the Museum.

So conspicuous a stronghold was bound to suffer the depredations of the Civil War. The fluctuating fortunes of the war in the south-west exposed it to occupation by both sides. In 1644 it had the misfortune to be assigned to a regiment of the King's army on its westward march which was composed of Swedes, Germans and other mercenaries. In the following year it was an obvious centre of operations for the Clubmen. In this part of the county they were very much under the control of the Royalists. Early in August they assembled at Shaftesbury with the intention of relieving the Parliamentary siege of Sherborne Castle. Swift action by Fleetwood, Cromwell's future son-in-law, resulted in the surrender of fifty of the leaders, some of whom were Royalist clergy evicted from their livings, one of them a kinsman of Clarendon, the great Royalist propagandist and historian. Throughout the interregnum Shaftesbury remained a danger spot. As the Restoration approached a number of plots for seizing it for the

were reported but fortunately for the inhabitants nothing came of them.

Seen from the southern road up which we have come, the hinterland of Shaftesbury is not nearly as attractive as the Wiltshire environs to the north and east. The little salient hamlet pushes out beyond Gillingham, a town signally lacking in features. To the south-west there are some pretty villages, Stour Provost and Marnhull among them. Marnhull's church tower stands magnificently. Unlike Stour Provost, which is a neat, compact little place, Marnhull must have been blown about by a storm wind. Assuming the church marks the centre, you find bits of it lying about the place, including a very fine stone farmhouse and barn, probably dating from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, called Pope's Farm. A little way beyond it to the south-west you cross the Stour by King's Mill Bridge, a really elegant structure with the old millhouse just above it on the eastern bank.

If pursued, this road will take you to Stalbridge, an interesting, narrow hole with some beautiful features hidden away if you bother to look for them. Jo Draper's Dorset guide gives a much more sympathetic and better informed view of the town. But if you take the other road southward from Marnhull, you will reach Sturminster Newton, which is incomparably nicer.

On the way, you pass through the village of Hinton St Mary, not characterised by raw, aggressive-looking council houses, but once evidently the seat of some Romano-British grandee (one of the most beautiful mosaic pavements in England, now in the British Museum, was found here. Sturminster itself (Newton, with which it is joined, is in fact a separate village just across the Stour) is strongly seventeenth-century in character. Large, islanded buildings whose amplitude takes no account of the motor car, still less of the articulated lorry, surround one of the townscapes so lovingly and minutely recorded by Wenceslaus Hollar. Although some of the