

HISTORICAL

Hillesden

by A. L. ROWSE

IF you take a map of Buckinghamshire and look a few miles south of the old county town, between it and the Claydons—that have their memories now for all lovers of English letters—you will find a name that means nothing to you: Hillesden. It is indeed a forgotten place:hipped up there on its little hill, the fat pastures and flat water-meadows all round it, isolated from any main roads, with only one little road winding up to it: a dead end.

And yet it was far from being that in its heyday; only its heyday was three centuries ago, the time of the Civil War, which left such a mark upon it and on the lives of all that lived there. Now, hardly anyone; just a cottage or two, a church, a farm, where once was all the bustle, the coming to and fro of a great house, with the family, important, numerous, ramifying in every direction, affecting the life of all this countryside. Now all vanished and gone; where the house stood but an open space in the fields, the fields revealing under the grass the slopes of the former terraces.

It was on a November day, the first of the month, that my friend and I set out in pursuit of this place. We were walking from Steeple Claydon, the way that so many generations of Verneys had gone to visit so many generations of Dentons. There in the village was the big Camp Barn around which Cromwell's small army, some two thousand men, was encamped and from which they advanced to the attack on Hillesden House: March, 1644, three hundred years ago. Over the Planks we went, directed by a superb young soldier newly returned from the wars: duly we negotiated the duck-boards laid across the low-lying water meadows and out into the open, lonely country beyond.

Sitting on a gate at the foot of the slope we ate our sandwiches, looking up to the corn-yellow haystacks moulded firm and clear by the November sun. There was a mellowness in the colouring, a water-clear purity in the air; the autumn fruits in the hedges glowed red and gold.

So we approached the place, the same way that Cromwell came. Drawing near we observed the remains of the park, a few oaks, the great ruined trunks of elms, the rich red-brick wall that bounded what had been the enclosure. Inside, nothing but space, every vestige of the house gone, except for the falling terraces under the grass, going down to the

ornamental water that had now—saddest touch of all—become a cow-pond; to the east, the great avenue running down the slope and away into the blue Buckinghamshire distance; on the horizon, the spire of Steeple Claydon whence the attack came; the dominant colour here the lemon-yellow of elm leaves lying everywhere.

We entered the church, dedicated (I noticed) to All Saints—and this was All Saints' day on which we had come. I took it as a good omen, that was at once in part fulfilled, for on throwing open the door a splendid interior was revealed: a late Perpendicular masterpiece in this sequestered spot, a jewel of a church, with its high graceful arcade, the nave so light and airy, with a continuous clerestory admitting the white November light. It was like being in a glass-house, but all the same with what richness!

One was transported with its loveliness—one held one's breath—and at the same time there was the unspeakable poignancy of a place that had kept its witness through all the ages and that was now left high and dry like some shell cast up by the retreating ocean, now unregarded, unvisited, empty and alone.

Something was listening in the silence; perhaps the silence itself was listening: something that could not get through, that could not be said in words. The spell was not broken, only deepened, by the comfortable noises of the afternoon outside; the clatter of the hens in the farmyard, a cock-crow further away, the lonely sing-song voices of children calling to each other across the fields.

I WENT UP INTO THE CHANCEL and there were all my friends: all the people that had lived here and loved this place in centuries gone by, to me so many living individuals with their troubles and their memories, the things that had happened to them thronging in my mind. For a moment it was too much: to find them all here just like that. I sat there a moment, reflecting on an easier plane how odd it was that I, a stranger, should come into this place, knowing so much about the men and women buried there, when I suppose they mean little or nothing to the living whose place it is.

There on his altar-tomb in the chapel lies Thomas Denton with his wife, the founder of the family, a lawyer who did well out of the Reformation and got this manor from the Crown on the crash of the Courtenays. There they are, two fine alabaster effigies, he in armour, she in close-fitting head-dress and costume of the mid-sixteenth century, the impulse of the Renaissance in the motifs on the pilasters on the sides of the tomb.

But the figures have been deliberately slashed, evidently by Cromwell's common soldiery, the sort of people that in all ages hate what is

beautiful because it is beyond them. The hands of both figures joined in prayer have been cut off at the wrists, one leg of the man and the cushion on which his head rests, so decapitating a pretty little lion creeping up to him. (I remembered the similar lion on the tomb in Hereford cathedral, that splendid Elizabethan affair on which Thomas Denton's son lies with his first wife, though his body is here with his second.) There are dents on the cheek and on the chin, evidently slashed with a sword or a pike; yet traces of colouring remain on coat and cushion. How brave and fine—and annoying to Puritan Philistines—it must have looked three hundred years ago, when they descended on the place.

Not far away is the Elizabethan limestone monument, with its sarcophagus, to his eldest son Alexander Denton and his second wife: very different from the magnificent altar-tomb on which he is depicted at Hereford, wearing a double chain round his neck and holding a cross in his hands. He evidently thought to lie there by his young wife, who died in childbirth at the age of eighteen. But life gained renewed hope for him, and here he is at last, gathered to his father and his descendants. These are many: they lie all around one under the flags, or under their slabs, their monuments upon the walls. One cannot hope to go into them all: sufficient to note two: the plain white and dove-grey monument to Dr. William Denton, with coloured coat of arms and flowers and fruit at the top—the most appealing member of his family and the one of whom by far the most has come down to us.

The second is a splendid work, a masterpiece by that admirable eighteenth-century sculptor Sir Henry Cheere, of whom Roubiliac was a pupil, and who executed the statue of Christopher Codrington at All Souls and the series of busts that decorate the bookcases in the library there.

Here he has a fine bold composition: a sarcophagus of a rare dark-grey veined marble, slotted or grooved, with beautifully carved great lions' feet supporting; above, an urn in white marble; on either side a portrait-bust, of Judge Denton and his wife; the whole built up on a base and backed by a tall diminishing shaft of dull grey. The portrait of the Judge is of a speaking character: in cap, ermine, and bands, a full heavy face, of an amiable, kindly man, well-liking and pursy, a face troubled with grief; his young wife, a small well-shaped head poised on an elegant slender neck with one curl coiled round. The whole thing is a splendid piece of work with its gradations of colouring from dark green-grey to dove-grey and white, and of texture from plain stone to highly polished marble.

He was the last male of his line: Justice of the Common Pleas and Chancellor to Frederick Prince of Wales, of an excellent reputation for bounty and hospitality. His youngish wife died before him: *Siste et*

defle, etc. After them came heiresses who in two generations carried the place away to the family of Coke of Holkham, who pulled the house down and sold the land.

But before that the house had had its vicissitudes, above all during the period of the Civil War. We derive a fairly full account of events there, and of happenings to its inmates from the *Memoirs of the Verney Family*.

THESE NEIGHBOURING BUCKINGHAMSHIRE families formed as in every county a close-knit, well-defined cousinage, with their own friendships and feuds, their quarrels and joys. Verneys of Claydon, Dentons of Hillesden, Hampdens of Great Hampden, Temples of Stowe, Grenvilles of Wooton: one sees the picture moving through the conflicts, the Civil War, of the seventeenth century into the serene calm, well established and secure, of the Whig oligarchy of the eighteenth.

It is the connection between the Verneys and the Dentons that is closest and to that we owe so much of our knowledge of their common family life. Though they are all gone now, the fields remember them. The tradition is that two black trumpeters in red used to sound a reveille from the hill at Hillesden to be answered by two trumpeters from the other hill. In the intervals left by passing planes one could hear those echoes still.

The foundation of the close relations that subsisted for a century between the two families was the marriage between Margaret Denton, eldest daughter of the house, and Sir Edmund Verney, the King's standard-bearer, who fell at Edgehill, torn between loyalty to his master and his inner conviction that Parliament was in the right.

Margaret's mother, Lady Denton, was a Temple of Stowe: a formidable, dominating old dowager with all the cross-grained character of her family. But like such women she was an excellent manager, a tower of strength to her numerous family and she had a way with children down to the third generation: in her time Hillesden was a matriarchy. Her daughter always came back to her mother for her confinements and almost always one or other of the Verney children was with grandmother for the benefit of 'Hillesden's sweet air.'

Stern with everybody else, the old lady was gentle with her great-grandchildren, and we find her pleading with Ralph Verney that his little Mun should not be whipped for being rustic and shy. 'i heare he is disliked, he is so strange. Sonn, you did see he was not soe, nor is not soe, to any where he is a quanted, and he must be wone with fair menes. . . . i pray tell him [Ralph's father] from me, I thought he had more witt then to thinck a childe of his adge woulde be a quanted presently. He knowes the childe was feloe good a nofe in my house. i preye shewe him

what I have written about him, and be shore that he be not fritted by no menes; he is of a gentel swet nature, sone corrected.'

'Spare the rod, spoil the child': the horrible adage throws light on the ways of our forefathers: life was apt to be a strenuous struggle for survival for the children.

TROUBLES OF ANOTHER SORT came over the marriage of a younger daughter, another Margaret, who, having been left a rich widow, was much sought after. Her mother objected to one well-qualified suitor because he did not live in Bucks; the daughter observes tartly, 'it was knowne before ever he came to the howes where his estate laye.' It was quite a good one: £2,500 a year in demesne, £800 per annum parsonage land held of the Church, subject only to £300 old rent and his mother's jointure of £100 per annum.

Old Lady Denton could hardly gainsay that: 'for the man, my mother sayes she canot as far as she sees Dislike him, & for my owne part god send me a good hus:, & I care not wher his land lies.' The truth was that her mother favoured a nephew of Lord Falkland's, with a still larger estate, 'but i am soe much against it that I will for no conditiones in the world here of it. . . . Suer I am not so fond as to be in love with any at tow days sight.' Fortunate for her that, being left well-off, she could choose for herself.

These two suitors, cancelling each other out, were followed by Lord Howard of Escrick, a widower with five children. This was no recommendation to Lady Denton, for though she recognized that 'he is honorablye desendede, & upon report is onest & worthye' still 'i will speake it to you I should nevar ventar upon so many children as 5, althoughe the ware wel provided for, for you know it is a grate family.' However, she did not dare to oppose the match, pressed as it was by Lord Pembroke and other great personages at Court.

Her daughter took the matter in her own hands and married somebody off her own bat: the son of Lord Eure, a North Country Catholic peer of no particular fortune. She had evidently been looking out for someone she fancied. Having been married once before, she knew.

At once alarm and despondency spread throughout the family. Ralph Verney wrote to his father, the Standard-bearer, now on the Scottish expedition with the King: 'Oh Sr shee is married, shee is married! and therefore now tis past recall. this unlucky deed was don before I mistrusted ever twas.' His father replied from the campaign: 'This woman laye soe neare my heart that I shall find her folly ther whilst I have an hower to live.' She must have been an attractive girl for them to feel

like that about her; but no doubt the thought of a fortune slipping out of the family had something to do with their grief.

Old Lady Denton was furious and in her anger blamed her grandson, Ralph Verney: 'Your mother writes me word about a samite gowne, i remembar i did here before of such a thinge, but no i pray tell her if she would provide sack cloth and line with asshis, then I mought morne for the folie of my wise disobedient children.' Only Ralph's father, Sir Edmund, was spared from this general commination: 'for she often saith you have dealt wisely and honestly and lovingly in this businesse, but all the rest of her children are fooles, and the night before I came from Hillesdon she told me that (except you) wee had all dealt unfaithfully with her.'

There was in fact nothing against the young man, who was a gallant, handsome fellow, save his religion. It was his Catholicism that the old lady had taken so much against—and the disappointment of her own projects. But a visit from the repentant, but safely married couple, did a world of good; and Mrs Eure's sister writes: 'the party (i.e. the old lady) is beter contented a great dell and showes him more respecke then I thought she would a done.' She even went so far as to be willing for the young couple to live with her at Hillesden; but her daughter was not inclined to risk that. 'I must confes to you I like it not by aney meanes, nayther do I thinke as he will.'

Her intention was, 'to youse all the meanes I can to convert hime, for if I live neere London I can have the best devines to my own house, and besides I intend to keepe on myselfe.' Actually it was she that was converted: not surprising considering that she was much in love with the husband she had found for herself. When he was killed, in the autumn of the year 1644, that brought such disasters upon the house at Hillesden, one of the women wrote of him: 'a gallant man, the whole nasion has a lose in him; he had but one fault.' That was his religion, for both the Dentons and the Verneys were strong Protestants.

Lady Sussex wrote to Ralph: 'Your ante is i believe a very sad woman for the lose of her fine husbände—I belive he hath not left her so good a wido as he founde her.' The young Royalist Colonel evidently had the suffrage of all the women; his inconsolable widow wrote of him as 'the galentest man that ever I knew in my Life.'

But within the year she consoled herself with another husband. Her brother, the delightful Doctor, writes to Ralph: 'I hope for the best, for I have great reason to believe she will quickly marry & (which is my comfort) to a Protestant this time.' Her third husband was the second son of Lord Sherard, another soldier, captain in the army of the Dutch States. Within a year he too was dead. She certainly had an improvident way with husbands. But by this time her mother was no longer there to impede

or advance her marrying again. Old Lady Denton died before the Civil War brought ruin upon the house.

Her figure loomed so large in the family that we hear little of her husband; but that Ralph Verney was much attached to him we learn from a passionate letter of regret: 'The greate God in whose hand is the soull of every livinge thinge hath by death taken my grandfather into an endlesse life.' His friend advises him to console himself and divert his thoughts with 'Breerwood's Logicke' and 'The Figures and the Tropes Rhetoricall.' Shortly after his mother died: 'Let me be buried in leade att Claydon next where yr ffather porposes to ly himselfe, and lett no strandger winde me, nor doe nott lett me bee striptte, but put a cleane smoke over me . . . and lett my fase be hid and doe you stay in the roome and see me wounde and layed in the firste coffin. . . .' (It is just like the last instructions that Elizabeth Henchard, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, left after her death: evidence of the absolute fidelity of Hardy to the old country life.)

After the death of Lady Denton—much concerned to the last about the disposition of her large fortune—her son Alexander reigned in her stead. He married Mary Hampden, a cousin of the great John Hampden; and we hear of a family gathering at Claydon for the christening of their son. At Hillesden a large family were gathered in the house in the first years of the Civil War: not only Alexander and his wife and children, but his sister Mrs Isham and hers, and his unmarried sister Susan.

SUCH WAS THE HOUSEHOLD upon which disaster descended in the year 1644.

The Dentons were Royalists; the convictions of Ralph Verney and his father, as we have seen, on the side of Parliament. But this did not break the good feeling that subsisted between the two houses. At the beginning of 1644 Mrs Isham complains of having soldiers quartered upon them: 'one hundred men in our one house, which my thinkes is very harde to be put in one house, and we being almost 50 in family.' Hillesden lay in an awkward strategic position out there in the no-man's-land between the King's headquarters at Oxford and the Parliament's forces at Aylesbury, covering the north road to London.

Early in 1644 the Royalists decided to fortify the place. Colonel Smith took command, dug a trench half a mile in circumference, enclosing the house and church. Forage parties from both sides swept the country round; and one day Royalist troopers drove off cattle belonging to a tenant of Mr Hampden's. There was a characteristic dispute as to the rights and wrongs of it—in the middle of a Civil War—and the injured tenant carried

his complaint from the Royalists at Hillesden to the Parliamentary commanders at Aylesbury. This woke them up to the danger of allowing the place to be turned into a strong-point; and a surprise was attempted by a force of three hundred horse and foot. It was driven off and the Parliamentary commanders prepared for a regular attack in strength. Half the forces were under the command of Colonel Oliver Cromwell—ominous name, if the Royalist defenders had known.

For with his usual dynamic drive he caught them in the midst of their preparations to stand a siege. Colonel Smith was still engaged on his trenches and throwing up a mound on which to mount the small ordnance he had obtained from Oxford, when out of the March morning, from over the hill at Claydon, Cromwell appeared with overwhelmingly superior forces. A parley was sounded and unconditional surrender demanded. When this was refused the place was carried by assault.

From the first the defenders were overpowered, and driven into the house and church. A second assault followed and the church taken: you may still see the bullet-holes in the old oak door. Seeing the hopelessness of any further defence, Colonel Smith surrendered the house on promise of quarter.

THE PARLIAMENTARY FORCES had certainly made a good haul at Hillesden: a store of ammunition in the church—to think what a narrow escape it had from destruction!—the cellars of the house full of beer, the stables full of horses, the yards of oxen and beasts. In the house a large sum of money was discovered behind the wainscot and in the roof. There were some forty casualties among the defenders. Sir Alexander Denton and his brother were marched off into captivity, the former protesting that he had only come to the house two days before to remove his family thence on the King's placing a garrison there. It was of no avail: off he was marched into the imprisonment from which he did not emerge. Next day, on the rumour of large forces approaching from Oxford—as usual, too late—the house was fired and burnt down: a Cromwellian touch. Having accomplished his purpose, he retired on Buckingham.

It was a melancholy procession of women, with such belongings as they could collect together, that made across the fields to take refuge at Claydon with their relations. Penelope Verney was among them and wrote: 'We were not shamefully used in any way by the souldiers, but they took everything and I was not left scarce the clothes of my back.' Mrs Isham described how 'Hillesden park pales be every one up and burned or else carried away, and the Denton children like to beg.'

On his way to the Tower, Sir Alexander wrote to his Steward to 'take a view of the house that was burnt upon Tuesday, that I may have some certayne information of what destruction is fallen upon mee, and whether it bee possible to rebuild those walls that are standing if the distractions of the times should settle.' Ralph Verney wrote to his brother: 'Suffer me to tell you how much I am afflicted for the ruine of sweet Hillesden and the distresses that happened to my aunt and sisters. God knowes what has become of my unhappie brother that was there taken.'

The taking of Hillesden had its consequences in two romantic episodes to which the stress—and the excitement—of war gave opportunity. One of the Parliamentary assaulters, Captain Jaconiah Abercrombie, fell for one of the distressed Royalist ladies, Sir Alexander's unmarried sister, Susan, already well on the way to becoming an old maid. Like his commander, the Captain must have been very prompt in action. Three days after, John Denton writes: 'My sister Susan, her new husband Captain Abercromy is quartered at Addington.' But in June we hear from gossip Mrs Isham—now silent enough under her slab in the chapel—'My sis: Susans marage is to be accomplished very suddnly if her captive be not killed, it tis him as did first plunder Hilsdon. . . . The Capt. his land is in Ierland, he is half Skotts, half Irish. I think fue of her frinds lik it, but if she hath not him she will never have any, it is gone so far.'

What is the explanation? Are we to conclude that the impetuous Ulsterman carried his woman off with him as part of the spoils? Anyway their brief happiness, snatched out of the chances of war, was soon at an end: next year he was killed by a party of Cavaliers from Boarstall and was buried at Hillesden among the family whose house he had plundered and whose daughter he had married.

A SECOND MATCH was not much longer in train. The Royalist Commander, Colonel Smith, had in the course of the operations fallen in love with Sir Alexander's young daughter, Margaret. His imprisonment in the Tower along with Sir Alexander advanced his suit. In August we hear from Mrs. Isham, who was sharing imprisonment with her men-folk, her brother and her husband, in order to look after them: 'I thinke it will be a happy mach if these ill times doth not hindre it, but he is still a Prisenor. So you may thinke itt a bolde venter, but if these times hold, I thinke thay will be non men lefte for woman.'

She at any rate was determined to do her best, and with the aid of Susan Verney procured the Colonel's escape—for which they earned a spell of

incarceration on their own account. Truly did Dr Denton declare that 'women were never soe usefull as now.' As for Colonel Smith, he died in his bed, a baronet.

Sir Alexander's troubles were not yet at an end. There was his eldest son, John, a gallant fighting fellow who was shot through the thigh 'endeavouring to gett my house then in the parliaments possession.' In August he was killed in leading the assault on a Parliamentary outwork at Abingdon. He seems to have been a well-loved young man—'that good young man whose very enemies lament him,' one account says. 'I must ever account it as on of my greatest and particular afflictions to loose the man that you and I did love soe well,' wrote Ralph Verney to Sir Alexander, 'but this is our comfort, hee lived and died most gallantly, and questionlesse is now most happy.' What a consolation—that is not for us—it was to them in their day to be so sure of a better world! Not long after, Sir Alexander received his quietus: he was not yet fifty, but the succession of blows had worn out his resistance. He died in captivity on New Year's day, 1645, and was brought home at last to Hillesden.

He had borne his troubles with all submission, in the spirit of his contemporary, Herrick:

*Rapine has yet took nought from me:
But if it please my God I be
Brought at the last to th' utmost bit,
God make me thankful still for it.
I have been grateful for my store,
Let me say grace when there's no more.*

This was far from being the spirit of Aunt Isham—as she was known to all the family: she did not cease to complain of her misfortunes to all her relations: 'For our clothes we must sew fig leaves together, we lost all by fier, and since I have had but one gown. I could wish as it would last me forty yeres as the childrenes of Iserells did, but, however, now I am come to town, I have not where withal to buye another.' She had not lost all interest in the world's affairs, however, when she adds: 'Ye fust of May but never so dull an one, and so fue chases [chaises] in hide Parke as I heare.'

WITH THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR, things became more settled and people began to make the best of things, whether they liked them or no. They began to reconstruct their lives on the old foundations in the old places. Already in 1648 we hear of Hillesden 'they are building there againe and

intend to sett upp a little house where the old one stood.' In spite of Ralph Verney's lament, under the rule of Cromwell's Major-Generals, 'I confess I love Old England very well, but as things are carried heere the gentry cannot joy much to bee in it'—or perhaps rather because of it—there was a tendency for the gentry to draw together, whether Royalist or Parliamentary, in self-defence against the new order. It was the foundation upon which the Restoration came about.

We find one of the Isham correspondents writing: 'In these degenerating times, the gentry had need to close neerer together, and make a banke and bulwarke against that sea of Democracy which is over running them: and to keep their descents pure and untainted from that Mungrill breed, which would faigne mixe with them.'

In reaction to their exclusion from politics and power, and to the social dullness of Puritan rule, the gentry went in more and more for horse-racing and gambling: already the gracious wind of the Restoration is blowing. Life has returned to the house of Hillesden, and Aunt Isham, who dearly loves a little gambling, complains that she is quite worn out by the late hours her rakish soldier-nephew, Harry Verney, keeps: 'he will never give one over as Longe as one is able to sit up.' Visits are resumed; the connection between the families is as close and affectionate as ever. The chief bond is between Ralph Verney and dear Uncle Doctor away in London. But now the Ishams are staying at Claydon; now Ralph is with his cousins at Hillesden.

His sister Penelope married another Denton, John Denton of Fawley in Oxfordshire. They were always in trouble. Now her husband is in prison at Oxford Castle for debt, and Pen is 'almost brought to deth's dore . . . this 3 days I have not eate more then a mess of milk and a negg. I must sell myself to my sking, goods & all to defray this great chargis.' Their three children died young. And then it turned out that her husband was cracked: 'Mr Denton has bin so outrageous with me, that he has run after me with his knif in his hand and vowed to stob me.'

It throws an odd light on the attitude of earlier centuries towards insanity that at a wedding feast at Claydon an elaborate practical joke was played on him: a letter was composed telling him that his mother was labouring to have his younger brother made a lord, but that if he would part with £500 he should have the honour himself; that his kinswoman, Lady Studdall, was working so successfully for his interests at Court that it was thought he was to be made a Lord of the Privy Council, and so on. There this cruel jest remains among the Verney papers, carefully endorsed 'A Sham Letter to John Denton that is crackt.'

But a year or two and he was dead. He had not been an unlovable man: he had had something of that quality of the Dentons. Sir Ralph wrote to his sister: 'though you have been unhappy in him, yet hee was

a Gentleman & your Husband, & twill be your Honour to conceale his faults.' Pen put on handsome mourning for him, but she was not inconsolable. She set up house in London with her gallant racing brother, Harry, whom she adored; there was not much love lost between her and the Dentons.

Before the Restoration the young squire at Hillesden died. He had never been able to get up sides with the devastated inheritance he took over from his father: the losses had not been made good, debts accumulated, he ran through his wife's fortune: he was no manager, things were too much for him. Shortly after, the bells of Claydon and Hillesden rang out and bonfires burned on the hills for the return of the King. Pen Denton expressed everybody's thoughts in her woman's way: 'I pray God send we may live to see peace in our times, and that friends may live to injoye each other.'

Aunt Isham, who had for so long been a feature of the landscape, was next to go, scattering little bequests to all her female relations: to one 'my little silver grater and my silver measure,' to another 'my diamond Bodkin but first put a stone in it,' to a third 'my little gold ring with a posie Ever Constant.' Except for her brother, the Doctor, she seems to have had most personality of all her family; 'she lived & dyed a good Xstian,' he wrote of her, 'and the best of us can doe no more.'

There is a genuine tribute to her personality behind the formal phrases of her Latin epitaph in the church where she worshipped from her girlhood and where she had witnessed such vicissitudes: 'Pia Mater! Certa Amica! Optima Conjux! Hic jacet quae virtute sua praelucet vivis sibi que fit superstes matrona tam tenax, amicitiae tam jurata cultrix. . . .'

SO LONG AS SIR RALPH VERNEY and the Doctor lived—and they both lived well into their ninth decade—relations between the two families continued close. But there was a new generation at Hillesden, where another Alexander, grandson of him of the Civil War, was growing up in the reign of Charles II. On the King's death we find him consulting his great-uncle, Sir Ralph, 'whether it be my duty for to goe into mourning . . . being in the Country, or if it be necessary for me, then whether my wife must doe the like, & whether it must be black cloth or Crape. I would not be singular.'

His wife was Hester Harman, only daughter of Nicholas Harman of Middleton Stony in Oxfordshire: beautiful and an heiress. Her pathetic story is told by John Verney: 'After she had had 7 children, on Thursday 29 March 1688, she left his house and him, & Monday 17 September 1688, she was delivered of a girle, which he would not own, named Eliz.

who soon died. This his wife Hester died in Aug. 1691 about Spittlefields & was buried in Stepney Ch. meanely.' The poor woman's fortune he had apparently already squandered. Sir Ralph wrote once to let Alexander know that he had heard of Hester in London; he only replied that he wished her at Jamaica. Within a few years he too was dead: like her, still young.

WITH THESE LATER generations it seems the Denton stock was failing; they had never been long lived. And with the deaths at length of Sir Ralph and the Doctor the intimacy goes out of the relations between Verneys and Dentons, that had subsisted so long, and with such fortunate results for posterity. A slightly hostile note creeps into the references of one to the other, exacerbated by politics. For after the Revolution of 1688, young Sir Edmund Denton came under the influence of the Whig Lord Wharton and marched along with the Temples in Buckinghamshire politics; while the Verneys adhered to the Church and Tory interest: a curious transposition of rôles from earlier days.

We hear of Sir Edmund become 'rich and great'; perhaps by marriage, for he married the daughter of a Court official, who was Clerk of the Board of Green Cloth. He held some office himself, which he lost on Queen Anne's accession and promptly quarrelled with his wife. He too died young, and is buried under a finely cut slate slab in the chancel of the church.

It is pleasant to record that in later years relations improved and neighbourly visits were paid between the two houses. In October, 1709, we read of all the Verneys being invited to Lady Denton's, 'and a fine entertainment we had; it was a Leaven dishes the first course, and a Doe killed on purpose on this occasion.' Alas, that we cannot keep up the standards of our forefathers! There was a large company to enjoy the Michaelmas venison.

Judge Denton succeeded his brother: the last of the male line at Hillesden. He was evidently a hospitable, agreeable, easy kind of man, a very worthy representative for the family to end with. He had scholarly inclinations and was a friend of Browne Willis and Parson Cole of Bletchley, who describes a visit to Hillesden in the autumn of 1735. He calls the house a good old one, on a beautiful hill, commanding a delightful prospect; before it a large parterre; below, a canal; below that, a very bold terrace; and through the gardens, charming vistas terminated by groups of trees and windmills. It must have been delightful. But 'the best thing belonging to this place is its master; to speak of whose humanity, probity and bounty, would be like telling the world that the warmth of

the sun produces the fruits of the earth.' The Judge was—have we not guessed it already?—a martyr to the gout. 'I cannot say that I am much better for the country,' he writes to his neighbour at Claydon, 'though my spirits and appetite are better but my pains are very violent.' His neighbour replies wishing he may find benefit from 'Hillesden's sweet air'—the long correspondence between Verneys and Dentons ends on that appropriate note—and with the hope that 'your pains will cease quite.' With the spring, they ceased for ever.

SO MUCH FOR THE DENTONS at Hillesden.

But half the richness of English history lies in the way layer upon layer is to be descried under the surface by the discerning eye. Before the Dentons there were the Courtenays. And there lies a very nice point about the nature of the Reformation changes in this country. As the result of them, eligible estates like Hillesden were apt all over the country to fall away from the great absentee nobles consuming their substance away at the Court or in some great house, and to come into the hands of smaller families who made their homes on the spot, cultivated them for all they were worth, identified themselves with them, prospered or declined with the place itself.

In fact we may say that the heart of those changes, the permanent upshot of them, was the rise of the gentry; the symbol, some such thing as here at Hillesden—the arms of the Dentons painted on the east wall where once stood the statue of the Saint.

The fabric of the church, save for their monuments, knows nothing of the Dentons—except that it holds their dust. It belongs to the century before they came, itself a moving memorial to the sense of beauty and the art of the late medieval craftsmen. The parishioners of Hillesden, all those coloured medieval tillers of the soil, those ploughmen and peasants in from the fields, and the distant Black Canons of Notley who owned the rectory and so were responsible for the chancel, must have been determined to do themselves proud. Look at the magnificence of the chancel: high up under the roof a choir of angel-figures, elaborately carved in stone with traces of their colouring still remaining, red and blue, ending up with the angel musicians playing upon their organs, their viols, lutes, and pipes. How it speaks of the certainty of the world of faith, the unity of all things visible and invisible!

What must this chancel have been like in the first flourish of its beauty with all the glass in its windows—that forgotten art—red and blue and green and gold! There are lights remaining in only one window to tell us something of what we have lost—wonderfully vivid scenes in the life of St Nicholas, patron of sailors and all in peril on the sea.

Here is the boy in red falling into the sea, the sailors hoisting sail: the inscription, *Cadit puerulus quem mox salvat Nicholaus*. Here again is a three-masted ship, with rigging and sails furled, at the quay-side with men unloading corn and tying it up in sacks: the whole full of life and action and that *naïveté* of spirit which enabled the medievals to transmit their vision so powerfully to the world. (Our dreams have no permanence, no lasting quality, in comparison.)

I wonder if we owe the theme of this window to that John Courtenay, an earlier owner of Hillesden in the thirteenth century, who was once in great peril on the sea by reason of a tempest rising at night. The mariners expected shipwreck; but he bade them have courage and labour one hour more, for that would be the time when his monks of Ford rose for matins and they would be praying for him, and by their prayers they would be preserved from danger. One of the company said that there was then no hope for they were all still asleep. Courtenay answered that they interceded day and night, and 'because I love them, and they love me, I know and verily believe that already they are interceding to God for me and mine, in safety and in calamity. And immediately the tempest ceasing, they all came safe to land.'

SO, OUR MINDS TEEMING with memories, half in a trance so strong was the impression that forgotten place had made upon us, we went down the little winding road to where the pastures opened at the foot, on either side.

Looking at the velvety emerald-green of shadow resting on the ploughed land—suddenly the All Clear sounded across the countryside. Astonished, we could not believe our ears—the war now sometime over and behind us. For a moment we stood there incredulous, struck-still, in the road, the familiar nightmare once more returned. Then a few steps forward around the bend and a David Cox scene presented itself: the corner of a plaster cottage, a little girl pushing a wheelbarrow, with a red hat to punctuate. The siren went again across the fields of Hillesden now behind us.

We went on our way to Buckingham, the road trodden by so many Dentons in the past—one disquieted, troubled mind turning backwards from the nightmare of our time to the troubles of theirs, and before them to the troubles and the bloodshed of the Courtenays, and before them the de Veres and the Boelbecs, who held Hillesden from the Giffards, who got it from the Conqueror; and before that, to Alric the thegn who held it of the Confessor, and so back to the original Saxon settler who gave his name to this place on the hill, standing above the swirl and conflict of peoples out of which we came.