

Cranbrook in Kent

A Visit to a Wealdon Townlet

By MARION HOLDEN BEMIS
Cranbrook Public Relations Office

"It isn't far from London," Henry Booth told me before I left for England last summer. He referred, you may have guessed, to the Cranbrook in Kent county, England, where our Cranbrook got its name, the Cranbrook that was an ancestral home of the Booth family.

The British refer to Cranbrook as a "wealdon townlet": a wald is a wood, a weald is a wold, and a wold is "an upland plain without woods."

These definitions leave me confused, because Cranbrook, Kent, was built in the forest of Andred, which covered the width of the modern counties of Kent, Sussex and Hampshire, part of the primeval wood that extended over much of England, furnishing the "early inhabitants settled near the coast or on the high ground, with their timber, and on occasion offered a place of refuge from their enemies."

So much for wald, wood, wold, weald.

DRIVING SOUTHEAST from London, you enter the wealdon townlet on High Street, stopping, if you are wise, in front of the lately renovated George Inn, where the look of the old town, if not the smell, has been retained. Says C. C. R. Pile, Cranbrook's official historian:

"Among the inns of Cranbrook, pride of place must be given to the George, with an unbroken record of 500 years or more, for the town was granted a market in 1290, and 50 years later Edward III introduced Flemish clothworkers into England, with Cranbrook one of the centers of the new industry; the consequent increase in the importance of the town, the constant coming and going of the cloth dealers and wool merchants and their trains of pack-horses, would soon give rise to the need for an inn or inns of some standing."

THE JULY DAY we arrived, hungry and thirsty, the inn keeper, in effect, was standing on his head over the eminent arrival of more than 100 club women, bent upon historical exploration. However, he righted himself long enough to make us welcome with tea and scones in a far corner of the refurbished dining room.

The place was charming; ancient in its heavy oak beams, its uneven floor, its millioned windows, its great chimney hung with polished copper pots.

When the bus loads of women emerged, we departed, pressing into the hands of the inn keeper the printed materials we "just happened" to have with us, about a far-away Cranbrook in Michigan of which he had never heard.

Emerging onto Stone Street, we looked down - along to spot the great copper kettle that still hangs over the door of the shop where George Booth's ancestors worked at their trade of copper-smithing - a trade that no doubt gave him his life-long interest in the crafts.

WE ALSO SAW the huge winding mill, last (and so carefully preserved) of the mills that pumped the water to run the looms of the Flemish cloth weavers who brought prosperity to the wealdon townlet in the 15th century, before Columbus discovered America.

At the old Corner Bookstore we purchased post cards and talked with the owner about the relationship of her Cranbrook and ours. Everywhere one turned up an historian, but of these, Pile is the first and best authority. All the books and booklets on Cranbrook and other nearby towns in Kent, are lovingly written by him, with

a stern eye for historical accuracy. Although there is a town of Cranbrook in British Columbia, as far as we know there are in the world only three Cranbrook schools: England, Australia and Michigan. Having talked with so many people in Cranbrook and other places in England who had never heard of our Cranbrook, I rather imagined that Headmaster C. Russell Scott of Cranbrook school in Kent would also know little about us.

On the contrary, he had visited our school, and on the wall was a plaque from our Cranbrook school to his, and another from his school on our walls here.

"And look here," he said, opening a guest book.

SURE ENOUGH, just a few days before our visit Mrs. Martin Butzel of Birmingham and her three sons had inscribed their names in the book, and a few days after we had gone on, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Palmer of our school were visitors.

Cranbrook school in Kent was founded in the 18th century and chartered by Queen Elizabeth who visited the town and stayed for a day at the George Inn, walking from her horse to the door on the fine broadcloth supplied by the cloth merchants. Local folklore had it that she walked a mile on fine broadcloth, but Historian Pile suspects this!

"In the early days," says Pile, "the school was, of course, a day school, misters were appointed and resigned at fairly frequent intervals, whilst the equipment appears to have been rudimentary."

"An early inventory of the utensils and appointments belonging to the Grammar School house of Queen Elizabeth in Cranbrook shows the following owned items:

In the school—1 Riders dictionary, 1 Scavola's lexicon, 1 John Munkhouse dictionary, 2 long tables, 3 long forms, 3 locks and keys and 2 bolts and 3 staples.

In the kitchen—1 portall with iron latch and hatch on the door, 1 lock and key with an iron knock on the street door, 1 long bench and 1 short one, 1 short dresser and 1 short screen.

"AT THIS PERIOD," says Pile, "no stipend was paid by the governors, but they kept the buildings in repair, the master having them rent free, paying to the governors a capitation fee for all boarders. The boarding fee of 50 guineas a year was retained by the headmaster." (Teachers have always been underpaid!)

School House, the main academic building, today resembles almost any ancient Detroit elementary school awaiting condemnation, but Pile calls it "a pleasing example of early Georgian architecture, built in the early part of the 18th century." Truly the English live by an admonition of William Hazlitt, quoted often in Pile's "Cranbrook Notes and Records": "Let us not rashly quit our hold upon the past."

Headmaster Scott's house is a newer Georgian, furnished in antiques, very beautiful inside and out. He took us on a short tour of the school, which we mentally contrasted with the luxury of our own Cranbrook.

THE BOYS ate on scrubbed oak tables in a simple room where we regretted we had not time enough to lunch with them. It would have been fun to listen to the talk of English public school boys. Later, we watched them playing cricket in a beautiful field farther up the side street on which most of the school buildings are situated.

We visited St. Dunstan's church, reached by a little path going up from the town's main corner where Stone and High streets meet. Part of this "cathedral of the Weald" was built in 1291, but in 1430 "the rich, Flemish weavers, settled in the village, decided to have a more impressive place of worship. Further additions to this noble example of bourgeois pride were made in the succeeding centuries."

Virginia Sackville West, who lives nearby and often writes about the towns of Kent, calls St. Dunstan's "a really beautiful church and church yard, planted with magnolia and flowering trees."

RICHARD CHURCH, English author of "The Golden Sovereign" and "Over the Bridge" writing



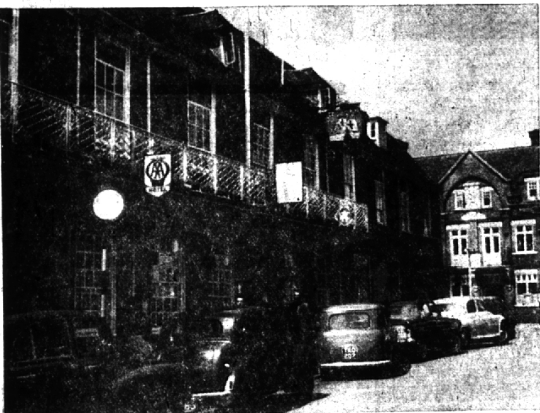
Side street in the village of Cranbrook, Kent county, England.

The Birmingham Eccentric
BIRMINGHAM, MICHIGAN
Thursday, August 21, 1958
SECTION B

Better than the pulping words and gestures that bring forth cold platitudes are a few words of kindness for another. In our own life, Dear Reader, you may recall how some friend or neighbor, coming to your aid in an hour of need, exemplified to you more tangible Christianity than dozens of sermons you may have heard. Uplifting sermons only help to want to help others.



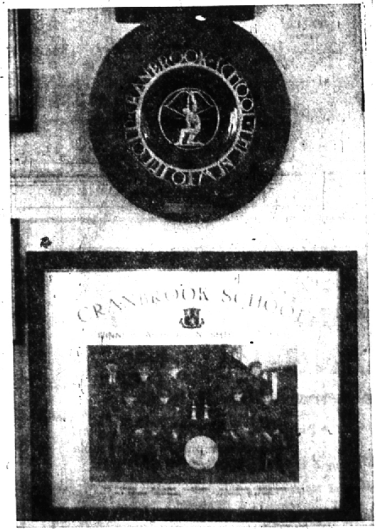
High Street, Cranbrook, England, looking toward last of the windmills left by the Flemish cloth weavers and now a town landmark.



George Inn at Cranbrook, England, where Queen Elizabeth stayed in the 16th century.



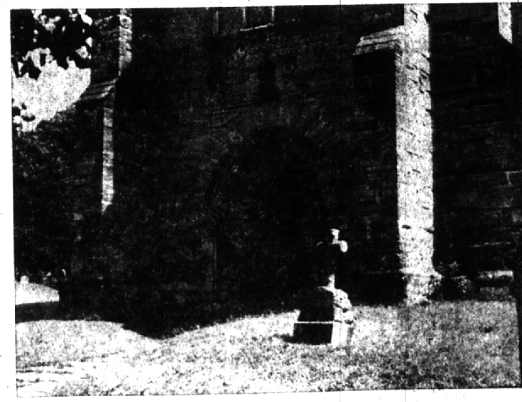
The dining room at Cranbrook School in Kent county, England.



The new to the old. This plaque was presented by Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills to Cranbrook School, Kent, England.



C. Russell Scott, the headmaster of England's Cranbrook School.



St. Dunstan's Church and graveyard at Cranbrook, England, at corner of Stone and High streets.

Photos by W. Sprague Holden
Director of Journalism
Wayne State University

of Cranbrook in Kent" for what folded within the embrace of the hills of the mid-Weald uplands, surrounded by apple and cherry orchards, hop gardens, and old-century innovations have made their mark. But there still survive several shops with the bow curved windows of the 18th century. Happily, one of them is a bookshop!