PORTRAIT OF NEWBOLD VERDON

Newcomers have brought new ideas

By Phil Lewington

NEWBOLD VERDON is not blessed with an abundance of that picturesque charm or quaintness of character that the word village evokes in the mind of the uninitiated townsman. It is not the sort of place you would find featured on a picture postcard.

This large and sprawling village (mini-town might be a more accurate tag) in the heart of West Leicestershire's coalmining country, lives up to its title of Newbold.

The name, which was recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086, comes from the Old English word "bold", meaning building. Hence, Newbold — new building. (The Verdon bit comes from the family name of the French noblemen who arrived in the village at the end of the 13th century).

The handful of ancient cottages and farm houses that remain to give the village some architectural interest have been swamped by the functional and pragmatic lines of housebuilding of the twentieth century.

By the time of the last war Newbold had grown from the five inhabitants recorded in medieval days to a population slightly over a thousand strong. It had been a slow, unspectacular growth based on the twin industries of agriculture and mining.

With the prosperity of the 1950's and 60's the village experienced its own population explosion, doubling in size in less than a decade with a furious building of housing estates, both council and privately owned. Now Newbold is home to some 4,000 people.

But whatever Newbold may lack in the way of physical attractiveness it has retained that essential feature that differentiates a village from a suburban community — its sense of community and willingness to create its own social life. And it is a spirit which has kept pace with the physical growth of the village.

One man who has witnessed the spectacular growth of the village is parish council chairman, Mr. Michael Mensley.

"Forty years ago I knew or could name nearly everybody in the village," he said.

"But the growth has benefited the village. Newcomers have brought new ideas. They have brought new blood into the village and new blood is always a good thing for any village."

His fellow parish councillors are committed to helping the village not just in word but by deed also.

When the graveyard needed tidying they turned out with their forks and spades to help. They showed the same willingness to lead by example when the churchyard wall needed repairing.

A project which has featured regularly on parish council agendas in later years has been the building of new playing fields for the village.

Land has been bought, levelled and drained and recently re-seeded with grass. Mr. Mensley reckons the fields should be ready for use by next year.

"Later we hope to build a pavilion but of course that will be a whole new project," he said.

A new project is very much in the mind of Mrs. Nancy Argyle at the moment.

Although the village already has two youth clubs they are affiliated to the Methodist and Baptist chapels and Mrs. Argyle firmly believes there is room, and demand, for another.

"Ours is the biggest village in these parts but we have not got enough meeting places for youngsters. It means they have to travel to Desford or Barlestone to get to a youth club," she said.

Putting her own experience as a part-time youth leader at the Desford club to good use Mrs. Argyle has recruited willing helpers from the village to get the Newbold Verdon youth club project under way.

Helped by the youth tutor at nearby Bosworth College she plans to have the new club open by the end of next month. It will cater for youngsters between the ages of 11 and 16.

"Once it gets off the ground it will be very much their club. They will decide the sort of thing they want to do and will run it. We'll be there just to supervise things," said Mrs. Argyle.

Younger children in the village are very much the concern of Mr. Malcolm Mould, headmaster of Newbold Verdon County Primary School.

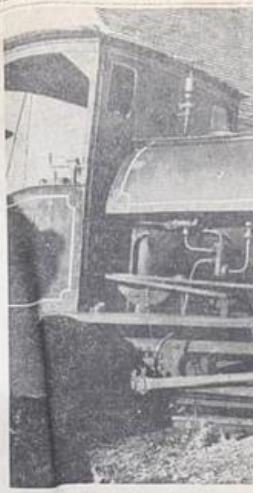
Like quite a number of his staff he lives in the village. In fact for him and his wife it was a deliberate choice when he took over the headship more than eight years ago, leaving behind the town atmosphere of the Ashby-de-la-Zouch school where he had been deputy head.

"The advantage of living in the village is that you are part of the community and you get a better understanding of the children and their parents," he said.

With 470 youngsters on the roll the school is in the top league of village schools for size.

"Our policy is one of picking out the best of the old and the best of the new but we are unashamedly old fashioned and disciplined about the merits of things like the three R's," he said.

Although the school draws all its pupils from the village it is far from being an insular and isolated institution.



Under the school exchange scheme (a kind of informal twinning arrangement) they have developed close links with a Leicester based primary school.

"This has been of great value to us, and to them too we hope — because we have no immigrant children and it gives our pupils the chance to experience a multi-racial setting," he said.

The sounds of a steel band or the spectacle of Asian dancing filling the hall of the village school are just some of the practical benefits arising from this close contact. And the Newbold children take with them a breath of fresh country air on their visits to the Leicester school.

This aspect of the school's work attracted the attention of a BBC Television film unit making an Open University programme on education.

So delighted were the television producers with the material they got from their filming at the village school that they decided to scrap extra filming at two other schools elsewhere in the country.

"The producer said they had got such excellent pieces from our school that they didn't need any more. Of course the real stars were the children," said Mr. Mould.

The film is due to be shown on the Open University broadcasts in October.

Mr. Mould said the school is never lacking willing help from the parents. Two years ago a fund raising venture to buy a mini-bus brought in more than £3,000 within nine months. The school was also able to afford to build a garage, in which to house the new mini-bus.

"There is a great feeling of community spirit here which may not be particularly evident from just a casual visit," he says.

"Although not as picturesque as



A relatively modern church for an ancient village. St. James Parish Church is a turn-of-the-century Victorian building which happily, says the Rector, the Rev. Charles Hall, is in good repair. A new tower was build in 1960, the last time major work was carried out.

"Although not as picturesque as a Cotswold village it makes up for it in the friendliness of the people."

The school buildings are put to good use outside classroom hours by many of the different organisations and activity groups that Newbold Verdon boasts.

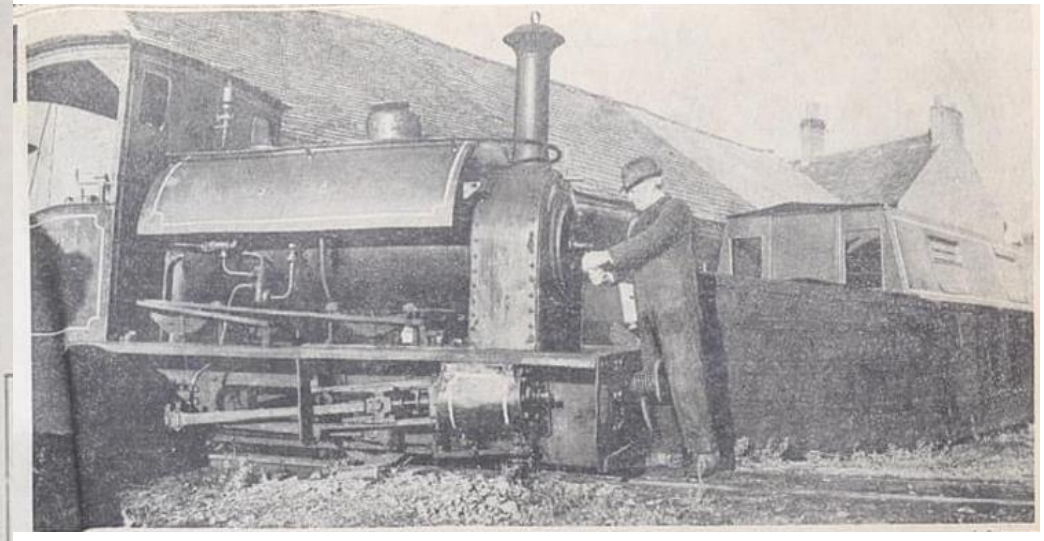
Typical of a score or so of local groups in the village are the Verdon Players, an amateur drama company who stage their productions in the school hall.

They have been putting on their twice-yearly productions now for the past 12 years and are firmly established contributors to local social life.

Founder-member and producer of their current production — a Francis Durbridge thriller to be performed in the Spring — is Mrs. Joan Brown.

"We get quite a lot of support from the village and seem able to attract steady audiences with people coming from other villages nearby as well," she said.

Visitors of a different kind are attracted to the village by farmer John Vernon's passion for things mechanical.



Many come to admire the 1932 Ransomes steam traction engine which Mr. Vernon painstakingly rebuilt and restored to working order.

The 12-ton monster is frequently seen leaving Church Farm during the summer months to attend traction engine rallies. An extra gear which Mr. Vernon built and installed himself has boosted the engine's top speed from a stately six miles per hour to a thundering 12 mph — on a good straight, naturally.

Although it might seem that farming tends to get in the way of Mr. Vernon's time-consuming hobby — or rather, vocation — for tinkering with engines, it was farming which first awakened his interest in mechanics.

"When I was a lad all the threshing machines used on farms were driven by steam traction engines and I became interested that way," he said.

But his interest does not stop short at traction engines. Church Farm must be one of the few farms around — perhaps the only one — to boast its own narrow gauge railway plus locomotive and carriages — all in working order.

Mr. Vernon rescued Pamela — a 1906 narrow-gauge coal-burning locomotive — from obscurity and neglect in a North Wales slate quarry, where the engine has spent its working life.

Again many hours of devoted work went into restoring the loco and its rolling stock. And now, on a warm summer's evening it's Mr. Vernon's delight, accompanied by his wife Gwen, to get up steam and chug off down the 500 yards of track laid out in one of his fields.

A native of Cheshire, Mr. Vernon has farmed at Newbold for 20 years. He has even made his

own wood burning boiler to heat the household.

His latest project — non-farming naturally — is the conversion of a 72-foot long "butty" boat into two fully equipped and powered canal boats.

The steel-hulled butty — a horse-drawn canal barge — was acquired two years ago from the canal side at Dudley.

Looking for all the world like some modern day equivalent to Noah's Ark the two canal boat cruisers dominate the entrance to Church Farm.

Mr. Vernon hopes to have them both in the water by the spring — one is being built for a friend. No doubt he will then treat himself, and Mrs. Vernon, to a well-earned rest on the waterways.

Another reminder of times past in Newbold is Mr. Dug Partridge, who lives on Dragon Lane. Or rather it is his trade as blacksmith that takes one back to the days of the village "smithy".

Forty years in the trade Mr. Partridge does not now actually undertake the work of shoeing horses in the village. He makes the shoes in the small forge at the back of his home — a modern semi — and then travels out to outlying farms and stables to complete the work.

He regrets the decline of the demand for some of the blacksmith's traditional products.

"People today don't want smith-forged wrought iron work. They'd rather buy mass-produced stuff — although it doesn't have the same strength," he said.

Now his work lies mainly in shoeing horses and in his time he has worked on expensive racehorses, hunters (he used to do a lot of work for the Atherstone Hunt members), and the great Shire horses, which could take up to two days to shoe.

The Jubilee Inn, one of Newbold's four pubs, is headquarters of the only football team in the village.

The team was started several years ago by the son of the present landlord, Mr. Harry Bell.

Born in the village Mr. Bell moved away to live in Barwell for more than 20 years. But he returned 11 years ago and with his wife Violet, took over the running of the Jubilee.

"I was very happy to return to Newbold," he said. "They're a very friendly bunch round here."

This Hunslet narrow-gauge rail locomotive was rescued from a Welsh slate quarry and restored by farmer Mr. John Vernon. It even has 500 yards of track to run up and down on at Church Farm. In the background is Mr. Vernon's current project — converting an old horse-drawn butty boat into two canal boat cruisers.



The fine oak staircase is one of the features of Hall Farm, home of farmer Mr. Iain Selkirk. The Hall is an 18th century manor house surrounded by an ancient moat, which is a listed historical monument. Mr. Selkirk and his family have farmed here since 1948.



It was home from home for Mr. Harry Bell when he returned to the village where he was born to take over the running of the Jubilee Inn, helped by his wife, Violet.