

*The*

## VISIT TO WYE COLLEGE

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ON arrival at the college we were met by Dr Hill and ushered into a hall, that was originally the refectory, overlooked by a charming portrait of the Queen Mother.

We learnt that the school was founded by Cardinal Kemp (1447-1555) who, when appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, felt an obligation to his home village. He founded the school as a training place for priests but, after serving as the village school, it was taken over in 1894 as an agricultural college and in 1898 began running some courses for the University of London. By 1947 the college was devoted entirely to those courses and it is now part of the University.

At first the college taught pure agriculture but began to teach horticulture in 1947 and in the 50's and 60's introduced other courses to meet the demand for a more specialised approach. Interestingly the college claims to have been the first to offer courses with the word "environment" in the title, beginning with "Rural and Environmental Studies" nineteen years ago. Apparently, to begin with, these students were ostracised by students on agricultural courses as they felt that environmentalists could have nothing worthwhile to contribute. Happily, in these enlightened times, both groups have discovered common ground.

About one third of the student body is made up of post-graduates with forty-five different nationalities represented.

The oldest buildings are set in traditional quadrangles, and behind them are modern laboratories. We were led past these and out to the glasshouses where we met Dr Taylor in one of the test fields. He is working on a project involving *Tagetes erecta*, a form of African Marigold. His research is funded by the Mexican government, as the marigold forms an important crop in Central America. It is a natural source of pigment used in food colouring mainly in America and Japan. Dr Taylor explained that there were up to 2000 plants grown by tissue culture in order to improve the crop. The problem is that the seed is not normally stable and produces many colour and petal variations. Growing the plants in this way they hope to eliminate these problems and are expecting to retrieve half a million seeds which hopefully will not display the same tendency for variation.

After our talk from Dr Taylor, we went to one of the large glasshouses, where several experiments were in progress. The temperature is regulated by a computer system with automated windows, which open a fraction at a time in order to regulate the speed at which the air cools. They also have boilers and back-up generators in case of power failure.

14 One of the most interesting experiments was that of nutrient film technique, whereby plants are grown in a shallow trough of slowly moving liquid without any solid growing medium. In this way the roots receive a balanced "diet" of nutrients in solution, which can be easily controlled. One such experiment concerned the growing of cucumbers in a saline solution to test their tolerance of salt, as some countries have no fresh water to use.

In the second greenhouse we visited tropical and sub-tropical plants were being grown. This provided a reservoir of plants for use in teaching and also allowed experiments in the biological control of greenhouse pests, with the use of predatory insects. Wye College has a small concern called "Wyebugs" supplying these commercially.

There was also a small section of desert in this glasshouse where the problems of desertification were being addressed. Apparently, 6 million hectares of land are lost to desert annually.

Having thanked Dr Hall for his hospitality we dispersed for lunch and regrouped at the "Tickled Trout", a public house on the edge of the village.

We were met by Mrs Whorton who told us that Wye had developed on the ancient trackway leading from the West to Dover, at the point where travellers had to come off the Downs to cross the River Stour, fording the river where there now stands a bridge. There has been a mill on the site since before Domesday – the present building is no longer used and is to be converted into flats. As we walked through the village looking at the various historical buildings Mrs Whorton explained that after Cardinal Kemp left the village his house, "Olantigh", was taken over by a family called Thornhill. The master of the house survived the Civil War, serving as a Royalist, but died young. His wife outlived him and on her death left money to the village for almshouses and a school. The college building was unused because of the Reformation and the village school was set up there. In 1894 when the building was acquired for use as an agricultural college the school was moved to its present site and is still called the Lady J. Thornhill Endowed School. Until five years ago a Mrs Dupont (who died aged 101) could remember being a pupil there at the time of the move.

We saw the site of a medieval cellar, which it is hoped to open to the public soon and many converted "hall houses".

Arriving at the church, and taking a welcome pew, we were told of the enlargement of the building by Cardinal Kemp, who felt that his local church should reflect his new status. Not only did he add another storey and chancel to the building but he also enlarged the tower, which collapsed 100 years later, was hastily rebuilt, collapsed again and was left as a squat tower in the 17th century. The cushions on the pews had been worked by parishioners to represent local life and the huge stained glass west window was replaced, after being bombed in World War 2, with a window commemorating Wye students who had died in the War.

A most welcome cup of tea was taken next and then it was back onto the coach for the journey home. Many thanks to Jeremy and Sheila Cope for organising the raffle (which I won!). I am sure we would all like to thank Jack Woolford, who organised the trip, and Lin Clackett, who attended to the administration.

