

Feature on

RIVER

BOOK REVIEW

JACK WOOLFORD

*Reflections of River,
the Kentish Village*
by DOUGLAS WELBY

With a strikingly apt hard cover, reflecting the title in Crabble Mill pond, beautifully printed and lavishly illustrated in both colour and black and white, Doug Welby's book is, as Fred Thomas says in his foreword, "a labour of love". Published by Mr. Welby himself, a percentage of the profits on the book will go to River Conservation Society.

The book begins with a restrained account of the creation of River Parish Council in 1894, its demise in 1904 and rebirth in 1987 and goes on to describe the rescue of River Recreation Ground from housing development. Reading between the lines is a delicate delight.

Then follows a rapid survey of the centuries, from the Domesday Book and earlier beginnings of River, Kearsney and Crabble, with explanatory references to courts, customs, places and people: Archer's Court, Old Park, Kearsney Manor, Kearsney Abbey; Claringboulds and Fectors, Knockers, Pains and Pilchers; beating the bounds.

The author goes on to select key events in the history of River and to describe them in vivid local detail. An account of the agrarian rebellion of the 1830s is followed by one of the formation of the River Conservation Society in 1985 as a community initiative to prevent further destruction of surrounding woodland and to defend a right of way.

The water shortage problem (still with us), the 1987 Great Storm and the development of the Kearsney swannery from 1282 to 1996, complete this section.

The "battle" of Coxhill Bridge in 1856, arising from disputes about turnpikes, was succeeded by rows about the havoc to footpaths caused by the coming of the railway in the 1860s. The spread of housing brought the tramway in 1905 and its replacement by buses in 1936. Lewisham Road, Minnis Lane and Coxhill Gardens were born and grew before the Second World War and The Ridgeway, the River Estate and the acquisition of Bushy Ruff afterwards. The Channel Tunnel also figures: in 1882 Kearsney Station was chosen as a starting point for tunnelling.

St. Radigund merits and receives very detailed treatment, archaeological as well as historical, including the siege of Dover in 1216 and a long list of distinguished associates from Richard 1 to Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The history of the Parish Church, centring on restorations and extensions, has a wealth of fascinating detail, stopping short of current controversy. The Methodist and Baptist Churches are more briefly celebrated.

The development of milling technology and the history of Crabble corn mills is described, including the accidental deaths of the two young Pilchers, the bankruptcy of their father, the miller, and the take-over by the Mannerings. The change from water to steam power shifted milling to the Buckland site. An account of the decline of Crabble and its rescue and restoration



as a working mill by the Cleary Foundation is also linked with the creation of River Conservation Society in 1985, and the subsequent creations of the Crabble Corn Mill Trust and the Friends of Crabble Mill. The long controversies with Dover District Council, the successful pursuit of awards and funds, the achievements of working parties - in all of which the author was deeply engaged - make an exciting story.

Fascinating details of paper-making technologies, precede the account of the six mills on the Dour, their interlocking

problems and their owners. Crabble, River, Bushy Ruff and Buckland Mills are included.

The laborious scholarship involved in amassing fragments of evidence from so many sources is praiseworthy indeed. The River Workhouse merits similar treatment because the original mansion (sic) survives in Valley Road (its successor is now Buckland Hospital), as do River Cop, which dates from 1879, and River School from 1821. P.G. Wodehouse was briefly a pupil at a private school called Malvern House. Where is the plaque?

The accounts of the two World Wars, necessarily brief, highlight otherwise unsung local heroes and heroisms. The section on local leisure (eg. hunting, cricket, tennis, bowling, rugby, soccer, carnivals and tugs-of-war) stresses the breakdown of local isolation by the advent of railways, cycles and cars and the communal self-help which created River

Village Hall.

The author obviously expresses personal opinions, not all of which will command total assent, but this is both inevitable and stimulating. Mr. Welby has provided a miscellany of history and cooperative endeavour celebrating the growth of a community. We need to be reminded of this in order to ensure that it continues. It is the essence of civilisation.

Reflections of River, the Kentish Village. 1997. 209pp. £15.00 D. Welby, 2 The Ridgeway, River, Dover CT17 0NX