

Accent on AVENING

PAT KAYE visits a Cotswold village in the "industrial valley" country surrounding Nailsworth and Stroud, and finds an interesting amalgam of old and new.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRIS WRIGHT

When Arthur Twisden Playne, B.A., one of the Playnes of Longfords Mill, at Minchinhampton, wrote his *History of the Parishes of Minchinhampton and Avening* in 1915, he described Avening as lying "in one of the lovely valleys which run from the Severn Vale up into the hills, each contributing its little rivulet to swell the volume of the great river". And he goes on to observe: "Of all these valleys, that in which Avening is situated is one of the most beautiful."

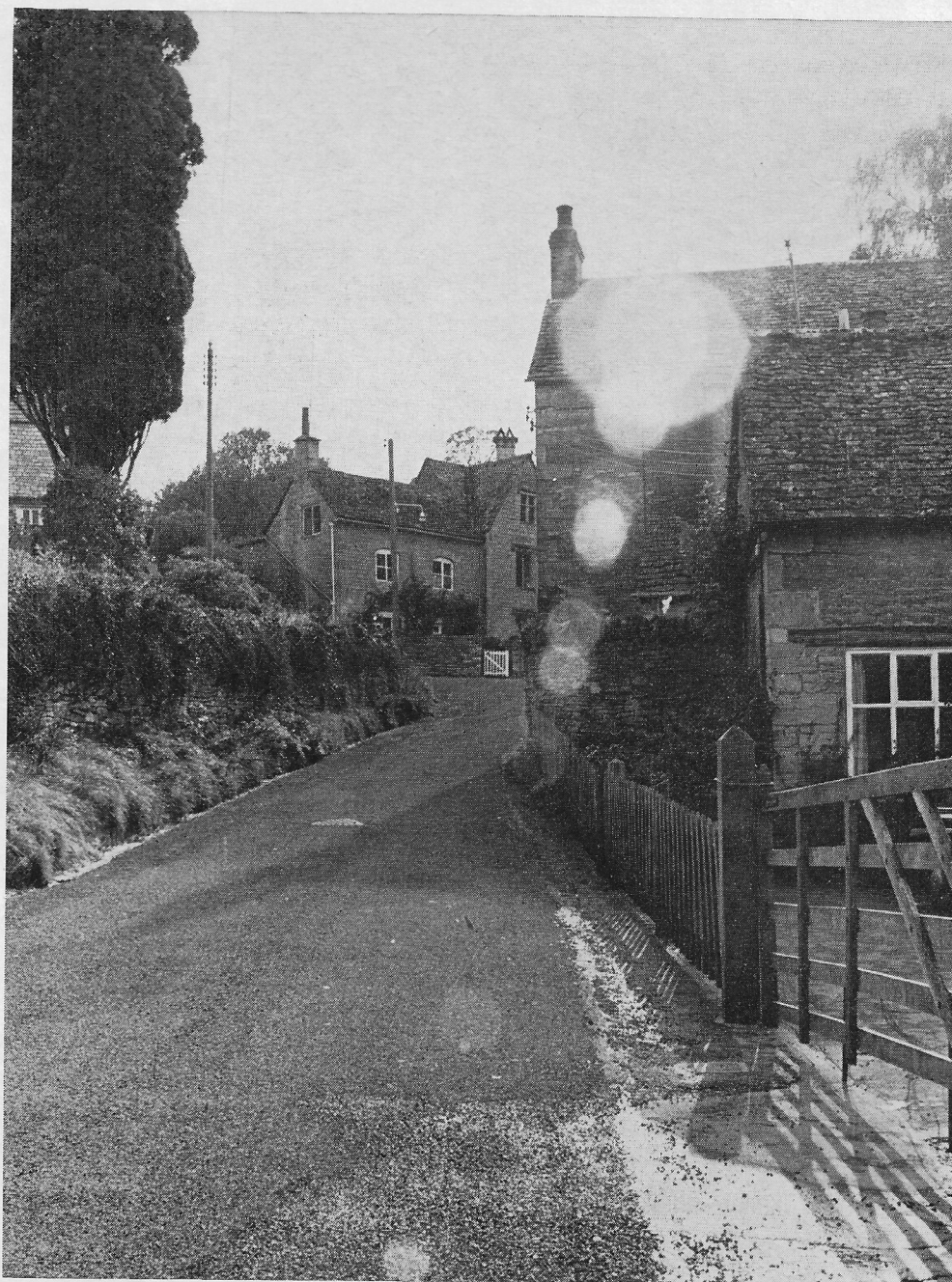
Driving in on the Tetbury road, through flattish fields and more or less unremarkable scenery, one is hardly prepared for the sudden breathtaking vista of a deep wooded valley with groups of stone houses and cottages set at random intervals on its slopes.

One is even less prepared, as the road winds down to The Cross, for what looks like the scouring out by a giant hand of the entire centre of Avening village and the filling in of the heart of it with an ultra-modern housing development in all its stark newness. The unweathered stone and extraordinarily steep-pitched roofs somehow accentuate the fact that these houses belong to another age and have not evolved with the rest of the community.

Like many small towns and villages all over Gloucestershire, Avening is putting up a determined fight to preserve its heritage and traditions. Whilst no-one in the village admits to being against reasonable development, or is indeed in anyway hostile to newcomers, the majority feel they have been badly let down by faceless developers and builders whose obvious insensitivity has caused a good deal of ill-feeling and concern.

New building is not of course bad just because it is new. In fact there are numerous instances all over the village of expert infilling and landscaping, where the new complements the old and even shows it up to better advantage. Even the newest stone weathers in time. The first row of Council houses, erected in 1927, no doubt stuck out like a sore thumb when they were first put up, but now they have mellowed into a guise of rustic simplicity that belies their comparative youth.

Likewise, the new Council houses built on a ridge high above the village look pretty raw at the moment, but there is sufficient space round them for planting trees and shrubs. A good number of trees have, in fact, now been planted, though unfortunately some have been torn up by vandals — taking advantage, no doubt, of the fact that young saplings can't fight back — and it is planned to plant a good many more.



Like many small towns and villages in Gloucestershire, Avening is fighting with determination to preserve its heritage and its Cotswold charm. These three pictures (opposite and below) typify the still basically unspoilt character of much of the village. The old mill stream is seen in the photograph below.

Below right Mrs. Molly Woollett, Clerk to Avening Parish Council, has lived here for two years and is described by the older inhabitants as typifying "the sort of new-comer we want". She points out that "Avening is a unit on its own, not a suburb of anywhere, and people therefore tend to become more involved in community affairs". Although not against development, she stresses the importance of keeping the village as a village.

Far right Mr. John Millman, cabinet-maker and craftsman in wood, moved here with his wife from Dursley nearly five years ago. They live in what was the Police house - there is no village policeman now, only a visiting patrol. He has a museum over his garage housing a marvellous collection of old wood-working tools and farm implements, all from pre-mechanisation times. "This is a happy and friendly village," he says, "with the usual village rivalries, but too many more new houses could entirely blot out its character." He also feels very strongly that "there should be scope for some sort of small industry in every village" and that the old mill would be ideally suited for this purpose in Avening.

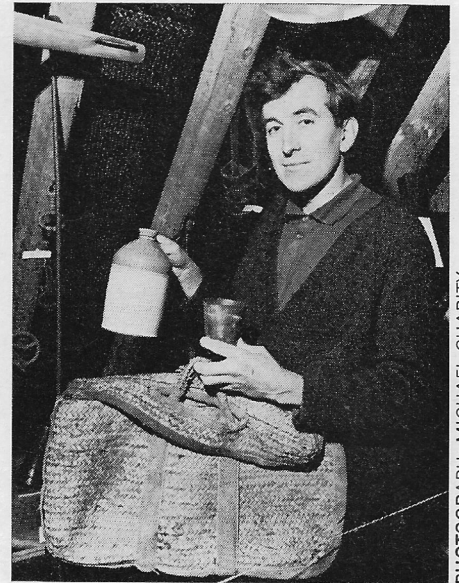
Further private development is on the cards, but with the help of the newly formed Avening Society acting as watchdog, it is hoped to curb the more outlandish notions of future developers and to avoid at least such a large concentration of new dwellings in one small area. The society's power is of course purely moral, its aims being "to protect the village from incursion and to keep the balance between old and new". It will act in support of the Parish Council.

Surrounded as it is by light industry at nearby Tetbury and all along the Stroud Valley, Avening has no shortage of employment for its inhabitants, now numbering about a thousand. Only a few generations back, Longfords Mill at Minchinhampton provided the only source of work, and as late as the first decade of this century Arthur Playne was able to remark: "The

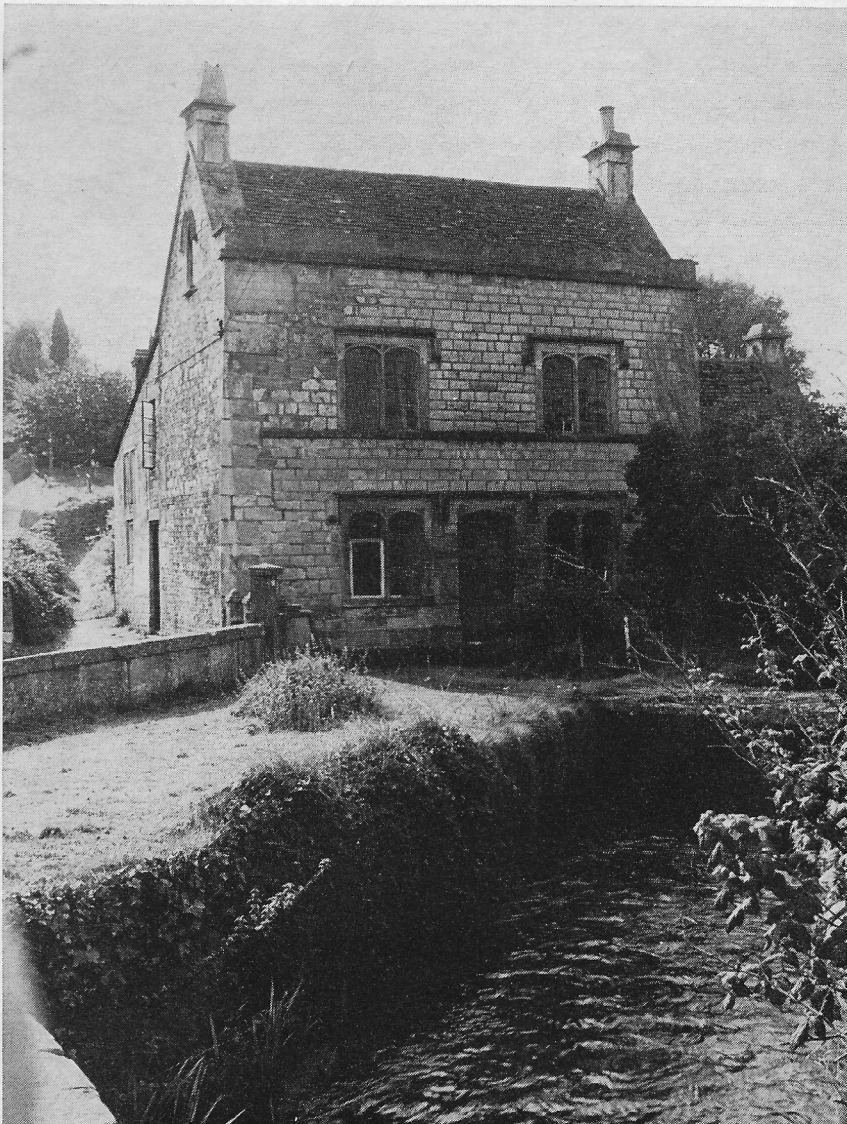
inhabitants . . . have, as a rule, from early times been healthy, well fed and housed. Work has been plentiful for those willing to do it, and wages, especially in the mills, have been good and unemployment rare".

The only mill in Avening, still used as a corn mill until a few years ago, is now empty and there has been talk of turning it into flats, whilst still retaining its character. John Millman, who has his cabinet-making business and craft museum in the village, would like to see the mill used for light industry, for he feels very strongly that small communities should have scope for providing local employment.

At the time of the Domesday Survey there were five water mills in the parish and "a wood two miles long and half-a-mile broad, in which was an aviary of hawks". According to Atkyns, "it has its



PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL CHARITY



name from the small brook which runs through it, *Avene*, in the British language signifying a small river". At the time of Edward the Confessor the manor belonged to Brittric, Lord of Gloucester. At the Norman Conquest it came into the possession of William, and a charter of 1082 records that "William and Matilda endowed the Abbey of Holy Trinity, Caen, with the manors of Avening, Nailsworth and other lands, for the good of their souls". Caen retained the Avening endowments for 333 years, during which time the church was served by French priests from Caen.

Before Matilda was won by William, she had apparently fallen in love with this same Brittric who had been sent on a mission to Baldwin, Count of Flanders. Unfortunately the young man chose to reject her advances, a misdemeanor for which he was subsequently to pay with his life. Shortly after the accession, Matilda persuaded the King to dispossess Brittric of the manor of Avening and other estates and to throw him into prison in Worcester, where he died. In remorse for his persecution, she is said to have entirely rebuilt Avening Church so that Masses might be said for his soul.

At the consecration on Holy Cross Day, September 14th, 1080, the Queen gave the builders a feast of boar's head, and the Avening Feast, revived some twenty years ago, is regularly celebrated on "Pig Face Day".

Ancient tombs with port-hole windows, unearthed in 1809, show that Avening was inhabited some three thousand years before Christ, and coins and broken pottery found in local fields and gardens indicate Roman



occupation.

Avening Church had many famous Rectors – the list is complete as far back as 1291. One of these, Robert Frampton, Bishop of Gloucester, narrowly escaped imprisonment in the Tower in the reign of James II for refusing to read the Declaration of Indulgence in the church. Later he was deprived of his Bishopric for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to William III. Pepys spoke of Frampton as “a young man of a mighty ready tongue, preaching the most like an apostle that ever I heard man . . .” Another notable incumbent was Dr. George Bull, who became Bishop of St. Davids.

At the suppression of alien monasteries, the manor was given to the Abbeys of Sion in Middlesex. At the Dissolution it came to Henry VIII, who granted it to Andrew Lord Windsor. It later passed to the Sheppard family and in 1812 was duly sold to William Playne of Longfords.

Avening Court, on the site of the original Manor House where King William and Queen Matilda had stayed whilst superintending the rebuilding of the church, has been much rebuilt and added to over the years. There is no Lord of the Manor now and the house was recently sold to a Swiss investment trust. The previous owners, who lived there some twenty-three years, entered a good deal into the life of the village, and speculation as to the future rôle of Avening Court is now rife. All sorts of strange rumours have gained currency, even one concerning the establishment of a Bunny Club at the Court – though this can hardly be the sort of “light industry” which John Millman wishes to encourage!

Apart from his woodworking business John Millman also has a fascinating museum above his garage and workshop. Besides traditional craft tools connected with woodworking, blacksmithing, thatching and coopering, there are horse-drawn and handworked farming tools, domestic

relics and wooden toys. These include a horse and wagon and a tram given him by Canon Richards, who had them as a boy. By popular demand the museum is now open to the public on Sundays.

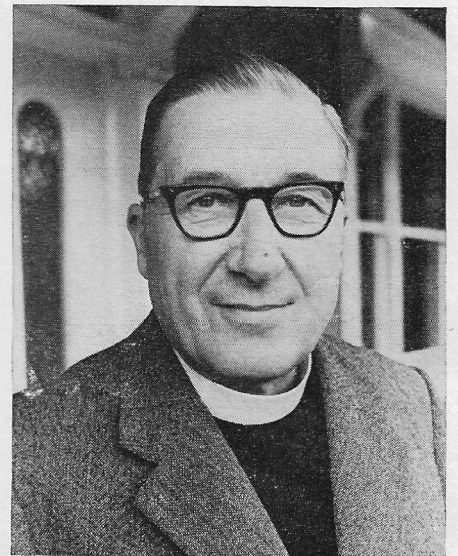
But this isn't the only museum in the village. The other one is in the church, located behind the organ. If you squeeze between this and a heavy stone pillar you

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continued

Right Canon B. M. Richards has just retired after eighteen years as Rector of Avening's Holy Cross Church. He feels that although the village has managed to retain its unity up to now, soon the newcomers may outrun the older population. “We had the usual awful choice”, he says, “between stagnating and becoming a backwater, or of growing and developing and thus enabling us to retain our church and school.” Nevertheless he feels there is still a very strong sense of “this is our village”, and a consciousness of its identity and heritage.

Right Miss Georgina Edmunds is President of the local Women's Institute, a Parish Councillor and Churchwarden. Born here – all her family were Avening people – she is manageress of a food store in nearby Minchinhampton, where she has worked since she left school. Her late father was a bellringer in the church and for many years Captain of the Tower. “This is a lovely village,” she says. “I don't really think it's spoilt. We've all worried about it but I've come to the conclusion that people are the most important – and the new people are all very nice.”



will be rewarded with a sight of many interesting objects, including human bones, models of the Avening Sepulchres, the mechanism of the old tower clock and medieval pottery found in the school playground during excavations in 1950. There is also a sample of cloth made by Avening people at Longfords Mill, which is still partly driven by the Avening brook, and a picture of the Avening Chalice, the earliest Elizabethan chalice in the county, hall-marked 1562.

The church itself, standing on a small rise above a smooth mown churchyard, is one of the best preserved of the ancient churches on the Cotswolds. Its interior, light and airy, is made particularly colourful by the brilliant altar cloths and needlework hassocks.

A remarkable monument in the church is that to Henry Bridges, whose effigy shows a man kneeling on a cushion in an attitude of prayer, partly dressed in armour and wearing long hair and beard. He had apparently been a pirate, smuggler and highwayman, and settled in Avening after being pardoned by James I. Arthur Playne conjectures that he lived at Avening Court,

"was a notorious highwayman" and that he "created terror in the whole countryside". He was, in fact, the fourth son of the first Lord Chandos of Sudeley, and according to Mrs. Dent's *Annals of Winchcombe and Sudeley*, must have been left with very slender means, "and having in those times of peace no vent for his love of adventure, is said to have followed the life of a free-booter, indulging in deeds of lawlessness and robbery almost surpassing our modern powers of belief".

Bridges also put in some time as a pirate and his Royal pardon describes how he did "arm and supply with gunpowder, picks, darts and other weapons of warlike nature" the ships *Salamander* of Bristol and *Mary Grace* of Penzance. Thus armed, he relieved a Danish ship, the *Whalefishe*, of £30 worth of salt, some flax and £90 in Spanish coin.

There were originally five bells in Avening Church, but in 1830 or thereabouts the treble bell at Cherington was stolen and set up in Avening tower to make a ring of six. It was believed at the time that if a bell could be taken from one tower and put in another without the thieves being caught in the act, there would be no redress.

However, the culprits were all sentenced to six months' hard labour.

A very eminent resident of Avening was the late Lord Lee of Fareham, a considerable benefactor to the village, who among other things, donated the recreation ground. He had a distinguished career in the First World War, and he owned Chequers, which he donated to the nation fifty years ago. He lived at Old Quarries, built as a rectory by Rector Brooke in the early part of the last century, and now a residential home for handicapped boys. On to this he built picture galleries, and at the beginning of the last war pictures from the National and Tate Galleries were stored here for protection at his own expense, before being removed for greater safety to the mines. At his death he left his collection of pictures to London University, and they are now housed in the Courtauld Institute. He also left a charity of £1,000, "for helping lame dogs over stiles".

Avening is particularly fortunate in its stone-built Memorial Hall, constructed in memory of the forty men of Avening who perished in the First World War. All organisations in the village use it and the school

Left An attractive scene with the village's smart sign in the foreground. The Parish Church of the Holy Cross is predominantly Norman, cruciform in plan, and contains a mini-museum of interesting bygones.

Right There is a fair amount of new housing development in Avening. "The unweathered stone and extraordinarily steep-pitched roofs somehow accentuate the fact that these houses belong to another age and have not evolved with the rest of the community."

Below right This old building was used as a mill until a few years ago. Now it stands empty although there is talk of turning it into flats or even a centre for light industry.

Below Mr. Donald Teakle, Chairman of Avening Parish Council, has lived here for thirty-three years, and was born only a few miles away. "We are trying to keep the long-standing character of Avening," he points out, and he adds: "We are endeavouring to amend the new housing estate and to prevent the housing authority from allowing any more building which is not in the traditional style." He is confident that the new Avening Society's function as watchdog will be of great help to both Parish and District Councils in this field.

