

Morning
LY 16, 1934

A Village Lost in the Woods

ABINGER'S PAGEANT

The history of a village lost in the woods. This is what the people of Abinger, in Surrey, seek to portray in the pageant which they performed for the first time on Saturday afternoon in the garden of the Old Rectory, where the great tulip tree planted by John Evelyn stands.

As the Woodman says in introducing the pageant: "Before there were men in Abinger there were trees."

As he speaks a flock of sheep pass across the ground which the Woodman has cleared. They are followed by Britons, Romans, Saxons, and Normans, who illustrate in successive episodes the life of the parish. The Canterbury Pilgrims ride down from the hill in the background. Knights in armour, jugglers and excisemen gallop at break-neck speed over the bracken-covered slopes and disappear among the great oaks. Abinger hammers ring. Evelyn plants his tree.

And at the end, as the flock of sheep pass again across the ground the Woodman laments.

"Houses, houses, houses! Bungalows, hotels, restaurants, and flats, arterial roads, by-passes, petrol pumps, and pylons—are these going to be England? Or is there another England, green and eternal, which will outlast them?"

The pageant will be repeated on Wednesday evening.

PAGEANT OF TREES "Times" 15/July/1934 VILLAGE PLAYERS AT ABINGER

FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
ABINGER, JULY 15

Abinger Pageant was held yesterday in this secluded Surrey village. The performance was devised to obtain money towards preserving the eleventh-century parish church.

The dominant theme was trees—"a village lost in the woods"—and it was perhaps a just beginning that motorists had to abandon their cars and walk a long way upon leaf-mould paths between trees to reach the old rectory hollow where the pageant was presented. The affair was not theatrical, but depended on various kinds of natural effects. The players enacting the tale of a village were mostly the villagers themselves. And animals were prominent entertainers also.

The opening ceremony was the driving of a flock of sheep off the arena. Later a chain of Saxon maidens, doing homage to Rome, led forward a large but diffident cow. (Those who liked this creature's performance gladly read a programme advertisement, which said: "Get your milk from the cows that are taking part in the pageant.") There were, besides, hounds on the leash—and, above all, horses. The trotting on and off of colour-cloaked personages was one of the delights. A smuggler in the eighteenth century—one who had used the hollow green-sand lanes of Surrey in his trade—was, when caught, taken away on a galloping horse, with hands tied behind his back, so fast that we watched him up and over a neighbouring hillock, fearing lest he should become unseated. In the thirteenth century scene, done on a miniature scale by children, who look like figures from a Breughel, positively the smallest pony in Britain appeared. During the following scene, while Canterbury pilgrims sang a Latin hymn, this pony neighed with remarkable variations of pitch, the resonant bass notes being particularly unexpected from so small an animal.

The history told was mainly of village amusement and occupation at different periods. Mr. E. M. Forster had written words to be spoken ringingly by a narrator, the Woodman, between scenes which themselves were in dumb-show to music composed and arranged by Dr. Vaughan Williams. The interlarded words emphasized the fact of trees, growing up and being cut down through centuries in this spot. A great tulip tree, said to have been planted by John Evelyn, author of *Sylva*, still stood visible to us behind the old rectory. Pride in parish tradition was fostered when the narrator recalled the names of local people and places that had come down through the history: Edser, Hoad, Evershed, Dewdney; Frogberry Lane, Friday Street, the Tolt and Volvens. But he always returned to the chief character, the trees, and at the end he asked: "Houses and bungalows, hotels, restaurants and flats, arterial roads, by-passes, petrol pumps and pylons—are these going to be England?" And then uttered the warning: "You can make a town, you can make a desert, you can even make a garden, but you can never, never make the country, because it was made by Time."

This, indeed, was the better sort of pageant; and the audience, for one thing, was impressed by the charming and serious children who acted in it. Yet, for all its country dancing and humour, the total effect was touching. Could the sunny trees, within whose circle we sat, withstand for long those influences of the time which are alien to these gentle players?

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