

IT'S SURPRISING what unlikely information you can come across if you explore an English village. Take Willoughby, for instance, a few miles to the south of Rugby and almost astride Warwickshire's border with Northamptonshire. Who would have guessed that the American actor and pop music idol, David Soul, lived for a time at the Old Vicarage? It wasn't that he had ousted the Vicar or anything like that, for the Old Vicarage had long been vacated by the local incumbent in favour of the smaller and more modern vicarage next door. It was just that while he was on tour in this country, he happened to make his home in Willoughby, and as a result the Old Vicarage added another chapter to its long history.

It happens to be one of the village's more impressive buildings, and its Regency façade of sand-coloured brick, enhanced by a fine porch, provides a pleasing picture at the end of a long drive. It indeed adds an elegant touch to Willoughby's architectural scene, which is a happy mixture of styles. Neat modern bungalows contrast with prim Victorian villas and terraces; mellow stone houses of earlier times stand cheek by jowl with their twentieth-century counterparts; here and there, large dwellings occupy spacious landscaped gardens; there's a sprinkling of council houses, several now owned by their occupants; and even a coy little Wesleyan chapel of 1898 to add further variety to the village's visual character.

The narrow stream which flows beguilingly by the side of the main street, darting through culverts and beneath mini bridges, contributes its own brand of charm, and enhances many a village garden as it passes by.

A few of Willoughby's older buildings are evocative reminders of a way of life now long gone. There's the golden stone Smithy for instance, no longer fulfilling the age-old function which its name implies, even though much of the old blacksmith's equipment still survives.

Not far away up a narrow lane by the side of the picturesque thatch-roofed Rose Inn, stands the former village school, its red-brick wall bearing an inscribed plaque which tells its own story: "This school was erected by the trustees of the charity lands for the use of the poor of Willoughby. Anno domini 1816." For many a long year now, the old building has been converted to residential use, and the children of the village have to travel elsewhere for their education.

But Willoughby can proudly boast its own bakery, a fact unmistakably borne out by the delicious aroma of freshly-baked bread issuing from the cottage next door to the village post office. Here, Mick Childs and his two sons run their enterprising business, producing bread not only for the local villagers, but for several neighbouring communities too. How refreshing it is to find a traditional rural trade surviving in this age of the impersonal supermarket.

Willoughby is the sort of place where self-sufficiency means a great deal. Apart from its pub, its post office and its bakery, it also has a thriving village store, run for the past eleven years or so by Mrs. Beryl Hallam. The well-stocked shelves and abundant variety of merchandise testify to the shop's

usefulness, and there's even the additional facility of a ladies' hairdressing salon upstairs.

It all adds up to a healthy spirit of community and leaves one in no doubt that Willoughby, as any villager will tell you, is a place where there always seems to be something happening.

The hub of all this activity is the village hall, a smart brick-built meeting-place in which a whole variety of events are held. They seem to cover most interests and all age groups, and range from the activities of the Women's Institute and the keep-fit enthusiasts, to special functions for children and the deliberations of the parish council. There was even an Irish Folk Evening here last month, while the hall's extension fund has triggered off a variety of additional events, from a fancy dress dance to a sponsored walk. The local cricket club, which enjoys something of an enviable reputation for its sporting prowess, has its own new and purpose-built pavilion adjoining its ground at the other end of the village.

Another hub of local activity is, of course, the parish church. This fine old building with its sturdy fourteenth-century west tower has among its treasures, a colourful east window depicting St. Nicholas to whom the church is dedicated. It shows him as a bishop in his dual role as patron saint of sailors and children. He stands, a young girl at his side, against a background of a ship bearing on its sails a picture of the three children he is said to have saved from a cooking pot in which an unscrupulous innkeeper had intended preparing them as a meal. Also in the picture are the three bags of gold which St. Nicholas gave to a poor father as a dowry for his daughters, a benevolent act which established him as the original Santa Claus.

In another part of the window is a representation of Magdalen College, Oxford, a visual reminder of the college's long association with the Manor of Willoughby, a fact also recorded in the name of one of the village's roads. Manor Farm still flourishes, a confirmation of Willoughby's traditionally close link with the land, but the old Manor House has long since gone. On its former site near the church, has risen an attractive development of modern bungalows.

In one of these lives Joe Bussey, secretary of the Willoughby Society, a zealous watchdog organisation which not only keeps an eye on the well-being of the village and its environment, but interests itself in the long history of the parish dating back to before the Domesday Book.

In delving into Willoughby's past, there's one aspect of local life, now confined to the pages of history, which the society's members must have studied in detail. This is the former Great Central Railway, the last main line to be built in England, in 1900, which at one time skirted the village and crossed the main A45 Coventry-Daventry road nearby. The remains of the bridge which once carried it are still here, an incongruous reminder of the days when steam trains reigned supreme.

Nowadays, however, there's no doubt that we are well and truly in the age of the motor car and diesel lorry, for the once proud piers of the railway bridge look down on a couple of garages-cum-

petrol stations, and a road transport café bearing the delightfully quaint name of The Sleepy Sausage.

Early transport of a different kind is recalled by the nearby Oxford Canal which passes close to the village's eastern boundary on its way to that celebrated canal enthusiasts' mecca, Braunston, just over the Northamptonshire border. Today, the canal's busy commercial heyday is forgotten, and the peaceful waters carry the craft of the leisure-seekers and holidaymakers. As a result, Willoughby has acquired its own slice of the tourist trade, albeit a modest one, for during the summer the canal-users find their way into the village to do their shopping, to quench their thirst at the Rose Inn - and, of course, to indulge in the luxury of Mick Childs' freshly-baked bread.

JOHN NORTON



(Above) The smart new pavilion recently built for Willoughby Cricket Club. (Below) The parish church with its sturdy fourteenth-century tower, is dedicated to St. Nicholas.



VILLAGE OF THE MONTH

IT'S SURPRISING what unlikely information you can come across if you explore an English village. Take Willoughby, for instance, a few miles to the south of Rugby and almost astride Warwickshire's border with Northamptonshire. Who would have guessed that the American actor and pop music idol, David Soul, lived for a time at the Old Vicarage? It wasn't that he had ousted the Vicar or anything like that, for the Old Vicarage had long been vacated by the local incumbent in favour of the smaller and more modern vicarage next door. It was just that while he was on tour in this country, he happened to make his home in Willoughby, and as a result the Old Vicarage added another chapter to its long history.

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WILLOUGHBY



The former Vicarage, an elegant Regency building of sand-coloured brick, has now been superseded by a smaller and more modern dwelling. The village is currently without its own Vicar and is awaiting the appointment of a new one.



The village pond adds a picturesque touch to the Willoughby scene.



Mellow stone and thatch enhance the appearance of the local inn, The Rose.



An attractive row of cottages near the centre of the village. (Below) The village stores, run for the past eleven years by Mrs. Beryl Hallam.



Next door to each other are the post office and the bakery.



Photographs: Lionel