

Plateau at about 250 metres O.D. dissected by deep valleys with steep sides forming tributaries to River Culm, flowing west. The river divides this area from the village of Hemyock, where the road from Wellington crosses by the St. Ivel Milk Factory, which also owns the several nearby cottages.

Whitehall and Rosemary Lane have the largest concentration of houses. A network of narrow lanes with high hedges serves between 20-30 small farms and other dwellings, new and old, from bungalow to medieval manor (Whitehall) and long houses. The main road is now too small for the many heavy milk lorries. However these same poor roads help to conserve the beauty of the Blackdown countryside.

A hundred metres of hedgerow bordering a road on a 16% slope were to contain the following eleven species: oak, ash, blackthorn, hawthorn, sycamore, field-maple, hazel, holly, willow, elm and elder. Other woody species in nearby hedges are wild cherry and dogwood. Ivy, bramble and rose scramble among the shrubs. This road and others like it almost certainly existed when the first Domesday book was compiled. In contrast some hedgerows on the plateau are almost pure beech, and these date from early 19th century enclosures. The sides and tops of these hedgebanks form a habitat for many wild flowers. Among the most conspicuous are bluebells in May, foxgloves in June and rosebay willow herb in July. Ferns are abundant on the shadier hedgebanks, particularly polypody, soft shield and male ferns.

Three of the larger wild mammals are present. Roe deer are so numerous that they have to be controlled; a farmer who has a young orchard holds a licence to shoot them. Several badger setts are sited on the upper Greensand where the soil is easy to dig. Foxes are numerous, and they are occasionally hunted by the Taunton Vale Harriers. Among the smaller mammals, wood-mouse, field-vole, mole, shrew, pigmy-shrew, grey squirrel, rabbit and hedgehog are common; hare, stoat, weasel and pipistrelle-bat also occur. The harvest mouse is uncommon, but its distinctive nest has been found in a tussock of Molinia grass. The presence of dormice has been inferred from finding hazel nuts gnawed in a manner characteristic of this animal. The inference has recently been confirmed by a cat bringing in a dormouse.

Ashculm Turbary is a common of 6.572 hectares leased at nominal rent from Parish Council and managed as a nature reserve by the Devon Trust for Nature Conservation. Peat was dug here until it was worked out about 100 years ago. The Reserve is designated by the Nature Conservancy Council as of special Scientific Interest. Habitats range from acid bog to wet heath, birch scrub elder and willow carr. The aim of management is to maintain range of habitat for plants and animals. This involves planned cutting of scrub. Experiments in progress show that the number of species increases spectacularly when an area dominated by Molinia grass is close cut yearly. A small plot skinned of vegetation has provided an open habitat now being colonised by some uncommon plants which were endangered species.

The land is mainly grade 3 often with thin soiled steep sloping fields, above average rainfall causes more silage to be made than hay harvested, though lack of sun may reduce sugar content of silage. Most farmhouses were built during the peak of prosperity in mid 19th century. Farming has been declining since, apart from during two world wars when German submarines prevented the import of cheap food from the Dominions. In 1947 farmers were actively exhorted to build up cow herds, mainly Friesian to produce milk for the Nation especially free milk to school children. On the Blackdowns mixed farming was general, cows, sheep arable, oats, wheat, barley, deep litter hens, Christmas birds using available outbuildings joining local egg co-ops giving employment as packers locally.

Culm Pyne Barton mentioned Domesday 1087 in Hemyock. Most of the land around Culm Davy was enclosed by 1837, the present large farmhouse and buildings date mainly from 1860 when agricultural prosperity was high, peaking about 1870. During all the depressed years the annual tythe payable to the established Church of England parson remained the same. It was a real burden for poor farmers to find actual cash specially during the pre-1939 depression. The present owner commenced mixed farming in 1954 on 115 acres, the annual tythe was £25. Queen Anne's Bounty would redeem tythe for 10 times its value but £250 could not be afforded then. By 1975 all Tythes ceased on payment of 2 years value. Culm Pyne has one employed herdsman. Most Blackdown farms are inherited employing little outside labour.

At Culm Pyne by 1981 there was a 65 cow milking herd and 45 acres were planted with bittersweet cider apple trees on 14 varieties of dwarf stock under 25 year contract to Taunton Cider Company. 6 tons crop collected in 1983, 1984-22 tons, new machine will gather up 200-300 tons a year by 1986. Traditional farming appears to be in decline, providing insufficient income alone to support a family to present day living standards. Those who are aware of this have a second earning capacity such as road haulage tourism, letting farm flats or cottages as self catering units, cider orchards; some wives earn money outside. However in spite of frequent rain in 1985, worries with the E.E.C., cut milk quotas, the hardworking Blackdown farmer is determined to preserve his independent way of life.

The day starts early between 5 and 6 when my husband and two sons leave for their jobs, farm work, local factory and one agricultural haulage. This is a farming area, a lot of local people are involved one way or another. I work two days a week in a shop, the rest caring for my family. I wash in a twin tub machine and I cook with bottled gas. Most houses are farms or cottages, some new houses and bungalows. We live in a 3 bedroomed cottage with a big garden. We grow a lot of vegetables which we freeze in season, also fruit. My eldest son keeps a pig for the freezer. We live in beautiful country and like walking. We watch more television in winter. We have a cat but most of our neighbours keep dogs. Both boys are Venture Scouts and Young Farmers. I attend W.I. and Keep Fit classes.

Primary health care provided by Hemyock and Wellington health centres. No doctor nurse or health visitor resident in area. Ante-natal care, family planning service, child assessment, all provided by general practitioners, also pre-school injections against pertussis, diphtheria, tetanus measles, (oral) polio during 1st 2 years Booster diphtheria, tetanus, polio at 5 yrs. BCG all at 13 yrs. Rubella to girls 11-13 Tet.+Polio at 15. The adult population is encouraged to be protected against tetanus, as farm injuries are a common problem eg: chainsaw cuts, crushing from farm equipment. Women are encouraged to attend 'Well Women Clinics'. Obesity hypertension, maturity onset, diabetes are prevalent. There is a case of Thyrotoxicosis and one of polyglycaemia.

Strangers were unwelcome on the Hills noted for superstition, coining, smuggling, sheepstealing and poaching. In 1863 George Brealey, supported by Quaker families from Wellington, was moved to start prayer meetings in his cottage at Rosemary Lane, Clayhidon. So many people came to his preaching he made a gallery, removing the ceilings. He baptised in the River Culm. He prayed for money and land to open the Blackdown Hills Mission 1865, beside his cottage. His son Walter and wife opened a school; he helped 130 people to emigrate to new lives. By 1900 there were 6 mission rooms, 4 Sunday 3-day schools, clubs, a library. At one time Brealey thought of leaving to preach to the 'Blacks'. An old lady begged "No! No! Master, we be blacks - we've got black hearts. God sent you to us." The mission flourishes today.

This is the main Chapel of the Blackdown Hills Mission. This Mission had its origin in a thatched Cottage, its site was next to the present Chapel. Started by George Brearly in 1863, the congregation is, in this present day, some of the fourth generations of the first worshipers. Present day adult membership approx: 60. There is a thriving Sunday School. Two youth meetings a week, up to 11 yrs - The Venturers. 11 yrs upwards - Teenscene. Women's fellowship meets fortnightly, mainly older age group. Chapel run by Elders of which there is a Leader. Congregation responsible for one third of the living of Leader of the Elders. The core of their worship, which unlike other religions, has no set Service, is designed to adhere to the true word of God.

This is an Elizabethan building which is a 'Chapel of Ease' within the Parish of Hemyock, the Rector being the officiating Minister. Services are once a fortnight, attendance being, for Communion: 6-8, and for Evensong: 10-12. There are in this present day, no other services or gatherings, such as Sunday School, women's meetings of Youth groups. Order of Service is as laid down by the Anglican Prayer Book and follows the lines of the normal Anglican Service. Other inhabitants of this area have however wide choice of attending church or chapel in Wellington and Hemyock. They are well served by Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Wesleyan and the new Community Church in Hemyock. It would appear that in 1985 Church attendance in this area is above the National average.

Farming is the main source of local employment, most farms are family run, some employ a herdsman, or part-time dairy worker. Several professional people live in this beautiful area of wide views, such as an architect, headmaster of local comprehensive school, another teacher, hospital workers. Self employed people of various categories are here including garden and agricultural machine repairer, riding school instructors (employing grooms) an internationally famous wildlife artist, Peter Barrett; an authoress of children's books. A guesthouse within the area employs some domestic labour especially during the summer months; some summer letting to tourists, supplementing farming incomes, and several people travel to Hemyock, Wellington, Taunton and Tiverton.

The first Young Farmer's Club was started around Hemyock in 1921 with calf-rearing. This club is well supported, as are the many Scouting and Guiding groups serving the Culm Valley area. The several churches encourage groups including Mother's Union. A flourishing Women's Institute with a variety of interests and entertainment meets monthly throughout the year. All forms of country pursuit are supported mainly hunting, shooting, trout fishing, motor-bike scrambling, horse riding from the local riding school or privately owned horses or ponies. Other than this there are manifold activities ranging from calligraphy, cricket, tennis, football to amateur operatics. Inhabitants have to be self-motivated and mobile to partake of interests in the local towns. The most popular interest is television.

Communication in this area of Blackdowns is by 'word of mouth', examples are: the Parish Church, the local inn, at meetings such as Women's Institute, Mother's Union, History Group, Gardening Club, mothers meeting at school, the village Post Office and other shops, over 60's Club and foot clinic. Communication by the 'written word': in local and national newspapers, letters delivered by postwoman in car, travelling library and delivery people, 'The Parish Pump', the church magazine containing news and events edited by the Rector of St Mary's, Hemyock. Communication 'by distance' includes telephone calls, Citizen Band Radio, Television, and BBC radio-local and national stations. Transport - There is no railway. Cars bus and bicycles, plus tractors are main transport.

Portculis groove remains at Hemyock Castle show us a modern technology of 800 years ago, but still used today. This groove tells of a large gate, chain, a windlass and perhaps gears man-powered from the adjacent towers. The home beyond contains 1980s technology. For example a heat pump heats domestic hot water. This not well-understood device hangs in the roof space and pumps heat into water. During day or night, sunshine or rain it continues to operate. Its virtue lies in the fact that for energy 1Kw consumed, 3 Kw is actually put into the water. In other words water can be heated over 24 hours at cheap rate fuel prices. The wonder lies in the simple process of the refrigerator being used in reverse. The loft air is cooled and the heat gained is pumped into the hot water system.

Simon came to N.Devon with a Danish raiding party, mutinied, was put ashore. He found his way to the cave of Old Mol, Overlord of Exmoor, who was ill. Simon cared for him until he died, married his daughter and became Overlord himself. He bathed at Simonsbath, Exmoor. About 700 AD King Ine of Wessex who farmed near Taunton led the Saxons to clear Celtic Dumnonii tribes of Devon and Exmoor from Blackdowns. Simon fought many battles, but was defeated and killed at Symonsborough, buried at Simon's Burrow. Friends made a huge barrow surrounded by four smaller cairns. The large Barrow was thought to contain treasure guarded by devils, who would punish those who dared to move the stones, but in 1870, James Bale, a road contractor despoiled the barrows by removing all the stones without apparent harm to himself.

At Oulescombe Bottom near the Monument lies Popham's Pit a sinister gully. Stout fences protect bogs and tangled undergrowth from fields around. There Sir John Popham Lord Chief Justice for James 1st vanished while hunting from his home, Wellington Court. He presided at trials of Guy Fawkes and Raleigh. Due to his reputation in some quarters he was thought to have entered one of the 'Mouths to Hell'. His wife's piety caused the Devil to grant the ghost of Sir John should emerge annually and advance 'one cock's stride' towards his wife's tomb in Wellington. An oak tree grew upon the site of his death. Locals wished to be rid of his spirit persuaded a saintly old ploughman, bible in hand, leading yoked oxen, singing psalms, to uproot the tree. The spirit escaped to Park Farm, later exorcised and returned to Popham's Pit

Tiz mostly vamily varms round yer bout 100 acres apiece. In the main tiz mook perduction een the valley an rearing bullocks an a vew sheep pon tap the eells. Zun of the edges ave a bin bull-dozed down, but za var as I can zee the vields be bout vour to vive acres, an yer vrom I can zee only wan plough-vield. Change and progress be all the yap I yers vrom the men volks, an even our 'Mook Vactory' ave a changed ees name, calls eezell St Ivel now, an yer, een dree yers a couple little varms over the road yer vram, be gone, an only the old varmouse lived een.

Dialect and translation (page 20) contributed by a Blackdown farmers wife aged 82 years on August 31st, 1985.

It is mostly family farms around here about a hundred acres each. In the main it is milk production in the valley, and rearing cattles and sheep on the hills. Some of the hedges have been bulldozed down, but as far as I can see the fields are about 4-5 acres each, and from here I can only see one ploughed field. Change and progress is the talk all the time with our men; even our Milk Factory has changed its name to St Ivel (Unigate) and in three years, two small farms over the road from here have gone and only the farmhouse is occupied.

This information was compiled by Hemyock WI: Members, Mesdames Clist, Ewins, Flemming, Shepherd, Shepard, Misses Brown and Sheppard. Mr Peter Reed contributed 'Heat Pumps'. Computer loan and help by Hemyock C P School.