SUNDAY EXPRESS
magazine

7 MARCH 1982 CONTENTS NO. 48

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Photograph by Bryce Attwell

OPENLINE
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NO DEPOSIT-10 MONTHS TO PAY
LIGHT SUMMER ELEGANCE
IN SIZES 14-24

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Matching Blouse from £4.99
To complete your outfit, order this pretty and practical shirt blouse in a fine woven check pattern, flecked with contrasting colours. Long sleeves with button cuffs and small pointed collar. The fabric is machine washable 65% polyester 35% cotton. You have a choice of three colours: pink, blue or beige, specially selected as a perfect match to the suit. Made in Macau.

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IN SIZE-WISE

3
WHERE ALFRED BURNT THE CAKES

Robert Temple discovers a backwater in Somerset where not much has changed since Alfred the Great hid there.

Pictures by Dave Johnson

The Danes overran England in 878AD the only unconquered patch was a few square miles of impermeable willow and impenetrable marshes in Somerset. In this so-called "Isle of Athelney", where some bits of hard ground rose from the mists, King Alfred took refuge. The Danes still swirled across the willow beds of Athelney, and today Sun Dare, the West Country's last hurdl-maker, still weaves the snaking staves or wickets into a pattern even older than Alfred. It matches one found in excavations of 6,000-year-old hurdle tracks under the peat of neighbouring Bridgwater.

Athelney, about ten miles south-east of Bridgwater, remains stuck in the past. The last of its prosperous Norman cob cottages, with mud walls 14 inches thick, was demolished last summer. Ancient traditions of hardihood continue. Sun Dare, like many of his neighbours, grows large quantities of vegetables "to give to friends", who grow other kinds to give to him. He makes a modest 180 gallons of cider a year to sell, and friends who call at his wisty shed—through the black winter evenings—"it makes 'em see double and feel single, he says.

Locals talk freely of King Alfred past, as though he had passed through the other day. "We have lots of Alfred stories here," said Harold Meade, a retired pubkeeper. "He called King Alfred. They also have an ancient cider barrel here from the Anglo-Saxon era and know Alfred's Town, a pub called the King Alfred. It was still sheltering in a corner of the pub where he had left the cakes behind. He was used to returning to his table in later years. The housemaid had asked him to watch over the cakes in the oven, and he decided on her return, remembering that he would be quite happy to eat his cakes but couldn't be bothered to mind them. He didn't know he was the king. A stone monument, erected in 1801, commemorates Alfred on Athelney Farm. It stands on the site of the Athelney Monastery, which the king founded after he emigrated to the New World. He was then known as "old man of the forest", and was later to be reconciled with his hereditary enemy. The Danes encamped a few miles away, and Alfred prepared to meet them. He was accompanied by a nobleman, Sir Thomas Fother and a young squire, Sir Thomas Fother. The Danes had a large force, but Alfred was determined to fight. He organized a small band of men, including the renowned Arthurian knight Sir Thomas Fother, and attacked the Danes at the Battle of Ashdown. The Danes were defeated, and Alfred was hailed as a hero.

"Getting in here" has always been the mark of Athelney. Even now, with the marshes largely drained for pasture, and thatched cottages rising along the courses of the two rivers, the Parrett and the Tone (which join here), the water comes spilling in and overflows. The great bare, a wall of tidal water, still comes at the clock. Oliver Cromwell and Sir Thomas Fother were accused of burning the Parrett house by less than two inches in 1644. It is treacherous, and the river current runs strong for any swimmer. As Thomas Hughes, author of "Tin drum" (Scholastic, written in 1941 about Athelney, is tutored by the young squire Sir Thomas Fother, formidable only in summer, and even then dangerous, to all who have not the secret.

Someone who sees the museum is Harold Hembrow, who has the slightest hesitation in wading down into the river mud to catch eels. He is baby eel, caught about February when they are "keepers" thick. They have to be caught at night, so that an Athelney man will "sleep by day and be out all night, living" as Hembrow puts it. "I've caught about three or four ten pounders of eels in an hour."

Eel nets come in two kinds, the Bristol net, which is used to look on as a suspicious foreign import, and the local nets, which are made by Harold Meade, based on two nets within crossing each other at right angles. "An eel is the size of a knitting needle and the length of a mantidloth," says Meade. But by the time the conversation turns dolorous, the fishermen have grown to five feet long and are jumping up the river banks and being lugged by the fishers. "Eel nets make only lightly browned," says North Meade, "they ruin the flavour."

Stan Dare tells knowledgeably about his wits: "When it's really hot they come one and half inches a day, and if it gets a bit cold they might not grow at all for a blister week."

He can make wattle caskets 6ft high and 6ft wide in a day. When he works, he sits down at a table and builds himself out of simple materials, his hands like a Deacon with their rapid weaving.

Children used to spend the afternoon stripping the willows with their governess. "They get sixpences a bundle," says Athelney's oldest inhabitant, Mrs Rose Turley. Aged 97, she lives alone with her cat Twinkle and still cooks her own meals. She says, "I believe a woman needs to keep the responsibility of supervising her household."

Mrs Turley was taught to milk at the age of 10 and had to do it every day. Her father earned 12s 6d a day, a fair amount for a farm labourer. They rarely ate meat. On Saturday her brother would go into Bridgwater to buy a rabbit for supper and her mother would make a stew of it for Sunday lunch, with potatoes and "little horses" in it if she had any. The rest of the week they lived on cabbage.

George Bowden (top), Harold Hembrow and witten bower

Stan Dare has designed his own frame to weave hurdles from willows—willow branches. He can make six in a day

Harold Meade makes meal from honey by his honey producer

Len Meade is said to make the finest log baskets in Somerset.
Mrs Tottle speaks with incredulity of people today: "They'd as soon buy foreign apples as English! There's too much money today. In years gone by, there was no money and people had to make their own happiness, and care for others. "Today people don't care about others and if they have children they don't have to work to feed them, they just get a cheque from Taunton Security."

One of Athelney's social hubs is the Old King's Head, where Harold and Norah Meade, though retired, still welcome everyone who cares to drop in to tea. Every afternoon the postman Ken Ashworth stops for his cuppa, passes along the news from the route, together with any verbal messages. He likes to recount how his uncle could roll two cigarettes at once, one with each hand. And a friend would lay snuff along his arm like a trail of gunpowder and sniff it all up at one go. "Smell it all up in one go from both arms at once, Ken?" teases Harold Meade. "Well, could've been"—tales here have a way of growing in the telling.

"At lastly the Meades' house was a unique pub without a bar or cash register. Now the great nine foot-high cider barrels are empty in the barn. The pub only served homemade cider and local beer, and customers helped themselves to it and left money in a box if they could afford to. They could also wander about the house if they wanted to. There never was a pub sign, so some old customers who come visiting from "outside" still turn up wanting to relax on the enormous settle and engage again in the local sport of "cider wallopin'". The usual way to do this is with a series of seven or eight pints of "mixed"—half of "old" and half of "mild" (Athelney language for dry and sweet). Cider must be walloped in a china mug—glass spoils the taste. "Pints of mixed" are then walloped back by the thirsty toper. The Meades now only oblige friends and never charge. Harold Meade "keeps a bee or two", producing honey from the willow blossoms, and from it he makes mead, the better one being the dry, "dry because it is older, just like I get drier the older I get," he says.

Len Meade, brother of Harold, lives nearby and sits for hours basket-making in his garage. He is said to make the finest log-baskets in Somerset. Len is constantly grafting rare apples, which he tries to save from extinction by collecting cuttings from everywhere. One of his recent prizes is a rare apple called the "Rattler" which makes a noise like a rattlesnake if shaken when ripe.

Len still has an old bird-net and explains: "When I was a boy if you couldn't catch a thrush or a blackbird you might have nothing to eat. Two of you would go out at night, one would shake the hedge-row and the other would stand on the other side with the big bird net open to catch what flew out. Sometimes you have to be just as wary living at Athelney as a sleeping bird. 'You need three eyes to live here,' says Len, 'one in the back of your head to see what people are doing and saying behind your back.'"

Harold Hembrow agrees that life in Athelney is less than idyllic: "Oh, 'tis a wicked place. Near everyone be carryin' on with near everyone else here. It's true what Leonard say, ye do need three eyes." He has had over £1,000 in cash stolen from his house under a year. As Harold Meade says: "They'll whip the sugar out of your tea today.

But life goes on much the same. The withies are cut, starting at the fall of leaf, when the sap goes down. George Bawden boils them in the last functioning coal-fired willow boiler in the country. Hembrow, his back completely gone and standing up only by the strength of a steel corset, will spend months going through the withy beds cutting them into bundles faster than the eye can see, a master of a trade older than the monarchy or even the English language (which in any case is nearly Elizabethan at Athelney). Withies now fetch £12 a bundle.

When the mists rise up in the morning, the few pieces of high ground still show above them as they islands they were when King Alfred fled to them through the swamps. On such a day, when the morning sun strikes the ruined church atop the 'Mump' and makes it gleam against a soft grey cloud, as the beams of light stream through the silvery willows, and as the tidal current of the river rushes past faster than a hare can run, gurgling like a man choking on cider, you can feel the super-natural power of a place that lives entirely to itself.

The ghosts of all the dead of Athelney are lurking sadly in the withy beds, where the living with their hoes and sickles go to seek them. And there, the living and the dead become one among the endless thickets of willows, joining to make the spirit of that place which is Athelney, coming together as its ageless dream.

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