

A DETECTIVE ESSAY IN LITERARY
GEOGRAPHY

BY RALPH W. V. ELLIOTT

One day in May, 1135, some white monks from Combermere Abbey founded a new Cistercian monastery near a ford of the Dee at Poulton a few miles upstream from Chester. In itself this was no very epoch-making event, but evidence is accumulating to strengthen the view that in due course the founding of Poulton Abbey led to the writing of the greatest medieval English poem outside the work of Chaucer: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The poet has left us no clue to his identity or habitat except the sensuous vividness of his landscape painting, which suggests both a remarkable eye for detail and a close familiarity with the scenes depicted, and at one place in the poem, while Sir Gawain searches for the Green Chapel, we are actually given a piece of genuine itinerary. Sir Gawain is journeying through North Wales, leaving Anglesey on his left hand, and then crosses the Dee by some ford into the "wilderness of Wirral."

THE MONKS MOVE

The remaining action of the poem takes place in or near the castle of Bercilak de Hautdesert (who later turns out to be the Green Knight) and, although no more place-names are mentioned, the poet was obviously at home in the wild, hilly countryside he describes. The nearest scenery fitting these descriptions within the area covered by the poet's dialect is the Staffordshire Peak country, and here is our first important link with Poulton, for as the Welsh proved unruly neighbours the whole abbey, while retaining its Cheshire possessions, was transplanted, in May, 1214, to a wild corner of North Staffordshire moorland, by the river Churnet near Leek, to become the abbey of St. Mary and St. Benedict of Dieulacres.

The organizer of this move was Ranulph, Earl of Chester, whose father according to tradition had died near the same spot, at his favourite hunting lodge of Swythamley, which formed part of the new abbey's endowment. Here the monks established one of their granges, half farm, half miniature monastery, cultivating forest and marsh until the grange became the "Parke-laund" of the sixteenth century, and it is still a private seat.

There was never a castle at Swythamley such as Sir Gawain so opportunely discovered, but not only is Gawain's approach to the castle very like the journey from the present Abbey Farm (with its few pathetic remains of the monastic buildings) to Swythamley Park, but there is also a distinct likeness between the terrain at Swythamley with its central eminence, once called Knight's Low, and the situation of the poetic castle, enthroned on a *lawe*. That such a castle never actually existed need not surprise us, for the several up-to-date features so expertly enumerated by the poet were only just beginning to make their separate appearance in English domestic and ecclesiastical architecture. It was a brilliant vision superimposed upon a genuine English hill.

DAY OF THE BOAR HUNT

It is here that Sir Gawain relaxes and is subjected to the temptation of his alluring hostess while her husband is away hunting, for three successive days, deer, boar, and fox. Here again the terrain is at times so vividly described that identification becomes possible, particularly on the second day, that of the boar hunt.

Starting from Swythamley, within echoing distance of the Roaches (the poet's *rocheres*), the hunters crossed the latter, then headed northwards past Flash (the poet's *flosche*) towards the steep banks and

narrow valleys of the Wildboardclough country beyond the river Dane. Many of the features the poet mentions in unusual topographical words still bear the same or closely similar names to-day.

Sir Gawain was able to relax at Bercilak's castle because upon arrival he had been assured that the Green Chapel which he sought was "not two miles hence." Again the poet was speaking from personal knowledge, and it is almost uncanny to read his description and the directions given to Gawain by his guide and then to walk the two miles that separate Swythamley Park from what is surely one of the most fantastic natural chapels in existence. From the top of a "high hill" Gawain's guide points to a steep valley:—

Ride down this path along that rocky
bank
Till you reach the bottom of this
forbidding valley,
Then look up a little among the trees
on your left hand,
And there, along the valley, you will
see the Green Chapel.

Anyone can make the same journey to-day, first climbing up towards Roach End from Swythamley, then turning sharply northwards and down again, steeply, some 500ft. in under a mile, into the valley of the Black Brook and thus to its junction with the Dane at the Forest Bottom. Sir Gawain saw no building there, only rocky crags and strange piles of stones all *knokled* and *knorned*; and indeed all you can see to-day, up on the left bank, are the twisted shapes of the Castle Cliff Rocks.

But the poet knew that there was something else there, "either an old cave or a crevice of an old crag—he could not say for certain," a tremendous rock fissure entered through a cave-like hole in the hillside. Already in the seventeenth century Dr. Plot, historian of Staffordshire, knew it as Lud's Church or Ludchurch, truly a weird church, about 100ft. long, with vertical walls up to over 50ft. high, nowhere above 10ft. wide, and with a hole at each end leading downwards into the earth and hitherto only partly explored. Tradition records it as the hiding place of Lollards and the surrounding region is rich with legends of headless riders and a tall man in Lincoln green.

STRANGE TUMULT

One other detail the poet adds, and again its source is at the same spot: after Sir Gawain has climbed to the top of the Green Chapel he hears from "that high hill" a strange tumult emanating from the other side of the brook, a fierce grinding noise "grievous to hear." There is no forge now at the Forest Bottom, but on old maps it is still marked, and the little wooden bridge over the Black Brook still bears the revealing name of the original stone arch, Castor's Bridge, and traces of iron slag lie not far below the soil. That the Cistercians of Dieulacres and Swythamley grange worked this forge has yet to be proved, but it is highly probable.

Other interesting links remain to strengthen the chain of evidence that connects Poulton and Dieulacres with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; it is hoped to publish them before long. Not the least remarkable of them is the fact that just when the poet was combining, for the first time, it is believed, in English his two themes of the temptation of Gawain and the beheading challenge, the abbot of Dieulacres was involved in 1379 in a very shady incident in which a local man of some substance was beheaded on the moors just outside Leek.

By themselves these parallels and identifications may not amount to much, but added up they present a body of evidence which may bring us closer than ever before to this unknown artist of the fourteenth century. It is no wasted labour, for he was a great English poet.

The TIMES
Wednesday
21st of May
1958