



Conker time in the Vale of Evesham as two children play the age-old game with two horse chestnuts on strings. Long shadows and swirling clouds complete the autumn setting.

All Sir Walter Raleigh's fault

Tobacco growing in Gloucestershire

By Charles Hilton

For reasons that are well known, attention has been focused on tobacco as never before.

It is believed that the "noxious weed" was introduced into this country from the New World during the reign of Elizabeth I, either by Sir John Hawkins or by Sir Walter Raleigh. Certainly Sir John had described its use as early as 1575 after his second voyage across the Atlantic. From then on we have always imported the bulk of our tobacco from America, the term Virginia being synonymous with the best quality.

Gerard's Herbal of 1597 contains a long account of its cultivation and uses, and it is evident that it was regarded as a cure-all for both mishaps and complaints. These included the bites of animals, headaches, colds, bruises, toothache, asthma, giddiness, rheumatism, ulcers, apoplexy, kided-heels (chilblains) and even the plague. How anyone managed to take the juice in the quantities then prescribed without being sick is beyond belief.

Gerard also describes how it was smoked. "The dry leaves are used to be taken in a pipe, set on fire and sucked into the stomacke, and thrust forth againe at the nostrils, against the pains in the head, rheumes, aches, in anypart of the body." The habit was first known as tobacco-drinking, and the term smoking came very much later.

The smoking habit quickly caught on and, for a while, tobacco was smuggled into the creeks of Cornwall by French, Flemish and Cornish ships in open and armed defiance of the Custom-House officers. Tobacco also found its way up the Severn through the Port of Bristol. However, seeing that money was to be made in the new commodity, enterprising English farmers obtained seeds and quickly established tobacco growing on a commercial basis here at home. Gloucestershire headed the list, and there was a considerable acreage of crops round Cheltenham (then only a village) and Winchcombe.

Commercial cultivation lasted more or less for a hundred years. John Ogilby, Cosmographer and Master of H.M. Revels in the Kingdom of Ireland, recorded in 1675 that "at Cheltenham the people are much given to plant tobacco though they are suppress by authority."

A possible reason why tobacco growing became established in Gloucestershire could be that Raleigh, who was a frequent visitor to the county in between his voyages, introduced the smoking of the leaves to his aristocratic associates who then demanded a supply of seeds in order to grow their own plants. In addition, Severnsiders were well represented among his ships' crews and probably they supplied their friends with seeds and leaves.

By the end of Elizabeth's reign, the upper classes were avidly smoking tobacco in pipes, and the Queen even tolerated the habit at her court. James I, however, detested it as much as he detested Raleigh, for in his famous pamphlet "Counter-blaste to Tobacco," he wrote: "It seems a miracle to me how a custom springing from so vile a ground and brought in by a father so generally hated should be wel-



Virginia tobacco (Nicotiana tabacum), flower and leaf.

comed upon so slender a warrant." Another reason for concern was that, like the abuse of some drugs today by a minority, tobacco was used unwisely by some. We have the authority of Gerard who wrote: "Some used to drinke it for wantonnesse, or rather custome, and cannot forbear it, no not in the midst of their dinner, which kind of taking is unwholesome and very dangerous."

When English tobacco began to compete commercially with that imported from America, attempts were made to suppress its cultivation here at home. The reason was that trade was being fostered to create in America and the West Indies a permanent market for English goods in exchange for their products, of which tobacco was one. Protector Cromwell, for instance, received complaints from merchants in the New England colonies concerning the damage done to the plantations, the commerce and the revenues by the great and increasing quantities of tobacco grown in England. Thus, reflecting the principle of imperial preference in a most advanced form, an Act was passed to prohibit tobacco-growing in this country.

The growers most materially affected by the new legislation were those round Cheltenham and Winchcombe. Nevertheless, they did not intend that their livelihood should be sacrificed for the vaguely remote advantage of colonial prosperity, so they approached Parliament as follows: "Your petitioners have for many years past grown in ye common fields ye weed called tobacco, and prayeth that your Highnesse

and Parliament will permit them by your council to practice the same, as their crops will be imperilled and lost, and it will be the ruin of many labourers. Your obedient servants and all the counties round about shall accordingly pray for your Highnesse and Parliament."

The appeal cut no ice with Cromwell, and the Act stood. The growers of Cheltenham and Winchcombe, however, were not easily to be put out of business. They ignored the Act, and went on with their planting as before. When news of their defiance reached the authorities, a troop of horses was despatched from Gloucester to destroy the crops. Word reached the tobacco growers in time, and they and their workers banded together to meet the troop. They gave such a good account of themselves that the military had to withdraw, their task unfulfilled. Unlawful growing continued for some years, with many further attempts to suppress it. Eventually, however, it became uneconomic as a commercial crop, and so dwindled away. Cottagers grew it for a time to fulfil their own needs, then even this was given up, leaving the colonial tobacco as the main source.

Some interesting social developments in the tobacco habit occurred as time went by. The taking of snuff, mostly produced from inferior leaves, became general during the first year of Queen Anne's reign as a result of the increased quantities thrown onto the London market after the capture of Spanish ships loaded with snuff in the action of Vigo Bay. In Gloucestershire and neighbouring counties, men, women and even children smoked pipes of tobacco in the evening while clustered round the hearth.

Then in George II's reign, an innovation took place which set the social pattern in the houses of the aristocracy and of the well-to-do middle class. Tobacco smoking in long churchwarden type pipes continued, but a "smoking parlour" was now set aside in the large country houses and their town counterparts. It thus became fashionable for men to retire to this room after an evening meal, while the women went to the sitting room or parlour. Conviviality among the men was enhanced by

the addition of port wine. These procedures were reflected to some extent in public buildings. Beau Nash, for instance, banned smoking in the public rooms at Bath as he regarded it as disrespectful and unpleasant to ladies. His lead was adopted in other places.

Another change in smoking occurred during the reign of George III. It became unfashionable. Dr Johnson's recorded observation was: "Smoking has gone out." And it remained "out" for almost 80 years, except for army officers whose pipes and cigars were

regarded as symbols of their dare-devil attitude towards life. For civilians to take tobacco was now regarded as being "low" or "fast" when indulged in by the young. This attitude stayed with us until well into the present century.

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