

## A hymn to Cotswolds village life

CLIVE FEWINS

Not many English villages can claim to have given their name to a hymn tune, but Guiting Power, in the heart of the Cotswolds, has several more claims to fame — not least the quality of the stone quarried in the area and the lovely buildings made from it.

However, when you drive through the pretty village centre, with its classic gabled stone houses, sloping green and stone war memorial, you will almost certainly fail to realise that

Guiting Power is largely controlled by a charitable trust that owns more than half the houses.

Stop the car outside the bakery and general store, itself a rarity in a village with a population of only 320, walk across the green and you will find a large plaque mounted on a wall celebrating the life of Ellis Raymond Cochrane. Beside it is one to his wife Sally Latimer Cochrane, who died twenty-one years before him in 1977.



The pretty village centre of Guiting Power in the heart of the Cotswolds.

Twenty-one years ago I visited Guiting Power for *The Countryman* and interviewed Mr Cochrane about Guiting Manor Amenity Trust. In autumn 2010 I revisited the village — twelve years after the death of Mr Cochrane at the age of ninety — to see how things had changed since the village had lost its last lord of the manor.

“Really, things have changed very little,” says ninety-year-old Dorothy Watson who has been at Watsons the Bakers since 1934 and still takes an active part in the business, which is now run by her son Chris and his wife Christine. The Watsons still deliver a large proportion of the bread they bake on the premises to customers in neighbouring villages.

Only two of the current trustees, Mary Greenhill and surveyor Charles Arkell, knew Mr Cochrane, who bought the 1,000-acre (400 ha) estate in 1958. At the time it included forty-eight rather dilapidated houses. Concerned that local people should be able to afford to rent these houses once he had renovated them, Mr Cochrane established Guiting Manor Trust in 1960 and its replacement — the present trust — sixteen years later.

Guiting Manor Amenity Trust has as its aim the conservation of the village, its character and its surroundings, for pursuing altruistic educational policies and for “encouraging and supporting the arts and historical research”.

In other words, as Mr Arkell (who controls the rental and property maintenance side) puts it, the trust

was founded and designed to ensure the future of the village lands, houses, character and community.

Mr Cochrane was childless, so since his death the trust has acted as lord of the manor.

One of the biggest changes was the closure of the village primary school just before the death of Mr Cochrane. The trustees purchased the building from Gloucestershire County Council and opened a nursery school in the building. It has been running successfully ever since. The trust also runs the village meeting room, the Cochrane Room.

Amazingly, there are still two pubs, the Hollow Bottom and the Farmers’ Arms, both of which are popular venues with walkers as well as locals. And there are two bed and breakfast businesses in the village.

Tourism has increased in recent years, and the racing business has expanded, with two leading trainers establishing their stables nearby.

The estate, including the farm and some land rented for growing cereals, now covers about 2,500 acres (1,000 ha), more than double the size it was when bought by Mr Cochrane in 1958.

Guiting Manor Farms Ltd is wholly owned by the trust and has also seen major changes in recent years.

“We like to see it as a classic example of how farms should be used as educational resources and as models of conservation practice,” Charles Arkell explains.

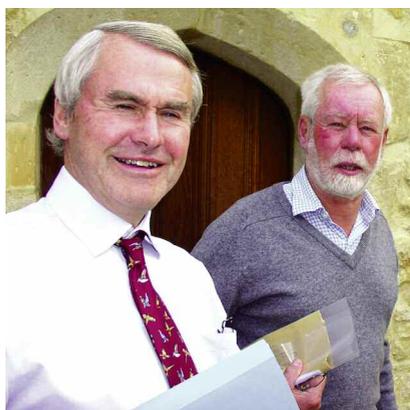
At the same time, the farm, which

produces sheep and cereals, is a strictly commercial operation, with a full-time staff of five, including manager Nick Bumford.

“I came here at the age of twenty-six in 1988,” Nick says. “Mr Cochrane made it quite plain to me that if I performed well, behaved myself and made good profits, then this was a job for life.”

He did not necessarily see it that way himself at the time. However, after having been a trust tenant for twenty-two years, raised three children, become a key figure in Gloucestershire agricultural circles and won several awards including the prestigious Booker Silver Lapwing Trophy for combining good sustainable farming with wildlife conservation, Nick is in no hurry to move on.

“Mr Cochrane made it plain that I was expected to become part of the community,” Nick continues. “I liked his approach, which was to encourage



**Charles Arkell and Chris Hayes, two of the trustees of Guiting Power Amenity Trust.**

the farm to pursue and expand sound conservation practices as well as to make money and help keep the trust buoyant. In addition to that, I have to say that after a few years this is the sort of place you fall in love with.

“We have had great success in expanding the natural wildlife with the techniques we have used to encourage biodiversity across the variety of ecosystems found on the farm. The techniques have included careful crop rotation, the planting and laying of hedges, and leaving wide margins on the edges of cropped fields to encourage the growth of wild plants and ground-nesting birds. As a result we have seen the return of skylarks to the area — they had only been seen here rarely since the 1950s — but also yellowhammers, barn owls, little owls, sparrowhawks, visiting merlins and the occasional hobby. In all experts



**Chris Watson runs the bakery in Guiting Power — with a little help from his ninety-year-old mother, Dorothy.**

have counted thirty-eight bird species on trust land.

“We have established a seventeen-acre (7 ha) nature reserve, and carried out a pond restoration, coppicing and replanting in the largest of our woods.

“The ancient semi-natural woodland in Castlett Wood is very species-rich and fed by a mass of springs that eventually become the River Windrush. The quality of the water produces tremendous biodiversity, with kingfishers, freshwater shrimps, swan mussels, Roman snails, water voles, brown trout and the occasional otter.”

The farm holds an annual open day and welcomes visitors by appointment. It is used as an educational resource by agricultural students. The farm has a schools’ pack and a study room in the 12,000 square-foot (1,100 m<sup>2</sup>) new farm building that was completed in November 2009.

The latest enterprise supported by the trust is just over two years old. In 2008 the post office closed as part of a national rationalisation programme. Now the trust-owned building houses a coffee shop that also sells furniture, interior decoration products, bric-a-brac and gift items. A Post Office service is still run from the shop on two half-days a week.

The trust helped get the venture established by fixing a rent that, like most of the rents in the village, is

considered by the trustees to be affordable. Rents set for trust properties have to be ‘proper market rents’, explains Charles Arkell.

“To a certain extent, however, the maintenance and improvement of the fabric of the period properties is subsidised by the income from the farm,” Charles continues. “Basically the difference between the trust and other more business-orientated landlords is that a Guiting Manor Amenity Trust house can be a home for life.”

This is how many residents see it. In total, of the 125 houses in Guiting Power, 67 are owned and let — largely to people who have lived and worked in the immediate area — by the trust.

“Only a very small proportion of houses here belong to weekenders, and second homeowners,” Charles Arkell says. “And of the working population, a high proportion work locally in the stone industry, the racing stables, and on the land. ‘Affordable rents’ was one of the great aims of Raymond Cochrane, and the trust pursues this policy vigorously.

“If there is one major difference between this village and the majority of other Cotswold villages, it is that it is a vibrant mixed community. It is anything but a timewarp. If there was one key word in Mr Cochrane’s vocabulary it was ‘perpetuity’. He believed in the future: and so do we.” ■

**Laughter lines** “I recognise and acknowledge Eton’s unique talent for getting stupid boys into Parliament.” Roy Hattersley