



"A beautifully controlled plunge down into the village"—Charvil Lane ends in this hill down to the river.

AMONGST the many glories of this country I would rate the Thames as the most glorious; but then I am a river addict. And, amongst the many glories of the Thames, Sonning stands very high. It has been described by many writers as the best of the Thames-side villages, although one or two have objected that, like Pangbourne, Wargrave, and Goring and Streatley, Sonning has grown so big that it must be called a town.

I would not subscribe to that, being unwilling to stimulate megalomania on the banks of the Thames. Sonning, to me—and, I am sure, to every overseas visitor—is the idyllic English village. If you approach it from the Bath Road by Charvil Lane (which leaves A4 by the Wee Waif roadhouse), you will see what I mean. The lane is narrowly haphazard; but so it should be, for one would not expect chervil to grow along a by-pass, and presumably it is from chervil that the name is derived. Charvil Lane rides high for a moment at the brink of the Thames Valley, and then it takes a beautifully controlled plunge down to the river. One moment your car is on a level with the chimney pots and the next it is lurking with cydonia japonica at the foot of the sunbaked walls.

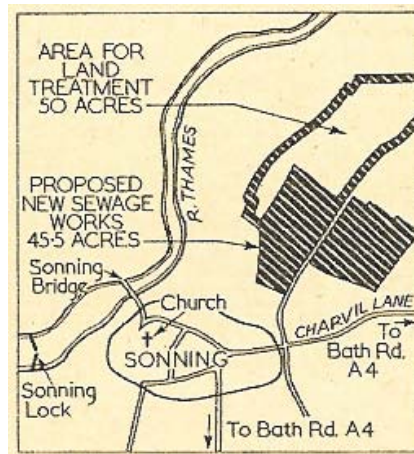
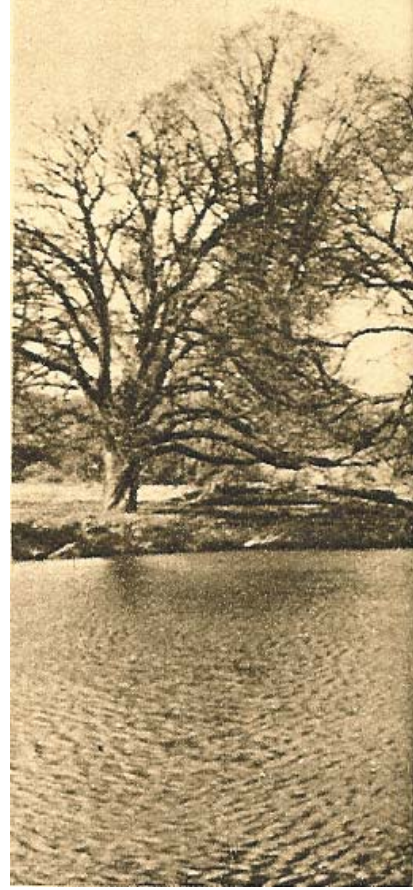
And what walls they are—black and white, yellow-red, or occasionally stone (though the taste is intrusive, for this is not stone country); with such walls go an equal variety of windows—mullioned, dormer, diamond-paned—looking out on to gardens that reveal the greenest of fingers, even if the greenness is owed to a substantial income and the nearness of the King's seedsman and a well-known rose grower who boasts the biblical name of Elisha.

From this you will gather that Sonning is consciously beautiful. It is. Our more acid weeklies would describe it as bourgeois, to which I would add the footnote that if this is bourgeois count me amongst the despised, for to the general taste Sonning is "such a pretty place," and the general taste matters. Sonning is like Beethoven; it appeals to the man who "knows what he likes," and fortunately for the sanity of the race such men are in the majority.

SONNING and SEWAGE

AN IDYLIC VILLAGE—
AND A MOST
UNFORTUNATE PLAN

BY MICHAEL BROWN



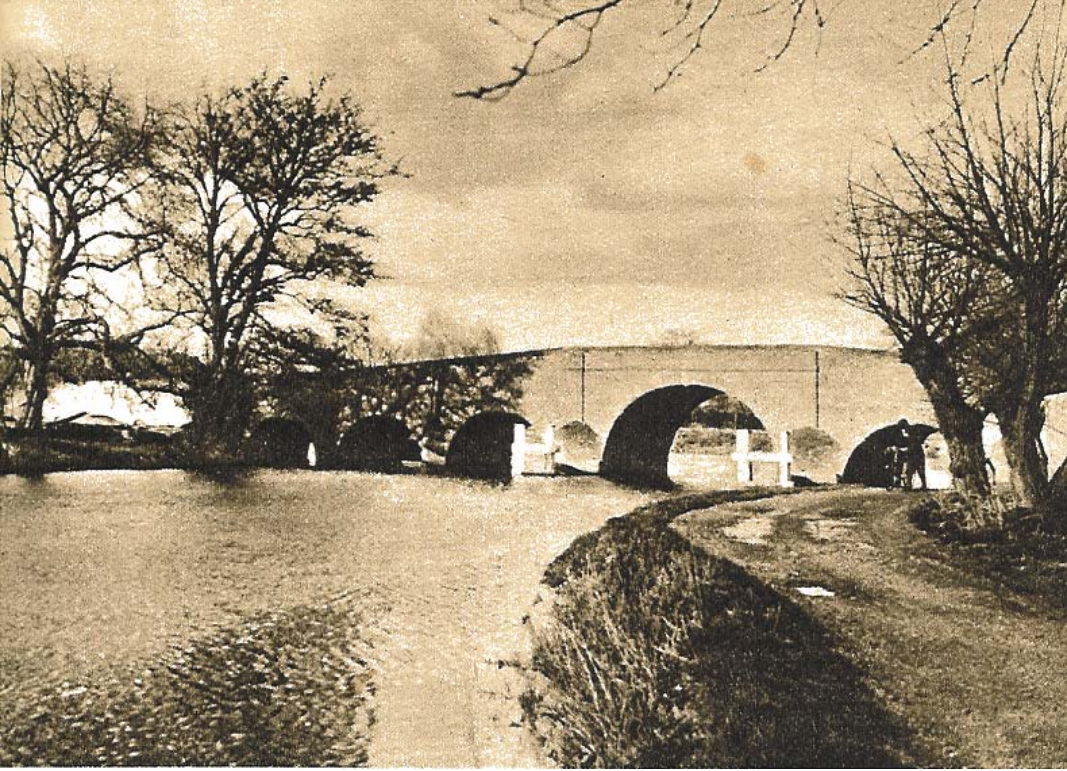
The village is, of course, dominated by the Thames, which has flowed out of Reading on its way down to the North Sea, past the recreation ground and the gasometer, the transformer station and the aforesaid seedsman's grounds. Then it has suddenly had its ponderous passage broken by a couple of islets on which the osiers grow, the mud squelches, and the yellow reeds whisper in the March breezes. If you land on these islets you may muse that they are in as primeval a state as they were a thousand years ago, and should be left to the swans and moorhens as a midstream sanctuary. The moorhens

will appreciate this, but the Thames swans—hardened beggars all—will encourage your punt unmercifully if a crust of bread is occasionally thrown overboard; Past the islands the river is healed again for the wholehearted thrust down to Sonning Lock, winner of the "prettiest lock" competition, held by the Thames Conservancy, for twenty-five years in succession, which fact will give some idea of the virtues of Sonning Lock as a showpiece.

Downstream again are the mill and the bridge. The bridge is dominant, for it has fourteen brick arches and is one of the finest over the Thames; it is also one of the most dangerous for road users, but not one of them would wish to have it replaced for that reason. Seen under the branches of the horse chestnut, which droop elegantly until, at their tips, the brown and sticky buds—bursting now—turn up to the light, the bridge makes one realize that the most harmonious pictorial compositions of man are derived from tradition.

Beyond the bridge hotel lawns reach down to the river's edge on the right bank, the millstream swirls in on the left, and then the Thames is out again into typical Thames country—water meadows, rich and green, everywhere fringed with the thirsty osier.

Alongside the lock, the bridge, and the stretch of river between, the few streets of Sonning climb and descend the side of the valley. You can drive slowly round, or you can park (with some difficulty on a spring Sunday)



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and peregrinate on foot. Either way the same thoughts will strike you; that to shop in one of the grocery stores must ease the irritating fiddlesomeness of coupon-snipping; that to bank at such a branch must make even overdrafts a pleasure, and that tea and scones at any of the teashops must really be tea and scones (if you are in the know you might ask for lardy cake). You will admire Lutyens' ability in the Deanery, and note that the church is E.E. and Perp. The hotels remain country pubs in looks, and to come ashore on a hot summer night after a pole down to Wargrave and back, in order to sit and down the watery pint, remains a pleasure which Englishmen and most foreigners will enjoy, weak beer and Exchequer duties notwithstanding.

There is the picture, painted in traditional oils and with a Munnings brush. On the delicately tinted canvas the Reading Town Council has daubed a violent red. Just outside Sonning it proposes to build a large sewage disposal works.

Now it must seem to the insensitive that every proposal to increase the amenities of civilization meets with a howl of protest. Reading, with its 100,000 people, must dispose

of its sewage. But there is a sense of fitness about these things, and this sense has been outraged by the plan. Sewage disposal plants are not pleasant places, as old Brooklands habitués will agree. One does not make a compost heap alongside the rosebed. Consequently Sonning's protest has been loud and long, and it is supported by no less a person than the Vice-Chancellor of Reading University, Sir Frank Stenton, for the University would have to abandon its farm in the neighbourhood. As Reading University has a first class reputation for agriculture, the town would seem to be cutting off its nose to spite its own face.

The motorist is not called upon to carry a flag of protest on his car over this business, which is largely local, however international its ultimate effect. No roads will be closed to cars, no privileges taken away. But he cannot help regretting such an error in taste as is contained in the plan. If you do not agree, go down to Sonning on a June evening and think it over again.

It is perfect. You are in the rosebed and the scent of Etoile de Hollande is in the air. Ought it to be mingled with that of the compost heap?

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Originally printed in the Autocar, April 7, 1950

