

A VILLAGE POET

by

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In many English villages there have lived simple, humble men who, all their lives, strove to express in verse, some more successfully than others, their thoughts, their moods and their observations of the countryside around them. Among such men was James Reynolds Withers, only child of a poor shoemaker, who was born on 24th May, 1812, in the Cambridgeshire village of Weston Colville.

It was from his mother that James Withers learned to read, for there was no money to send him to school, and having once learned he read everything he could lay his hands upon: the ballad sheets that found their way into the village, any books that he could borrow, and such few volumes as were in his own home — the Bible, the Prayer Book and *Pilgrim's Progress*.

He started regular work at the age of 10, doing odd jobs for a local farmer who paid him 2d. a week and gave him a bowl of milk every day, and a dinner on Sundays. But young James's attention was more often directed to the books that he took into the fields with him, than on the sheep or cows he was supposed to be minding, or the birds he was supposed to be scaring. And when he was not reading he was absorbing the beauty of the countryside around him. Soon, verses began to spin themselves in his mind, for, as he wrote in later life, "in all my occupations I found scattered some lines of poetry. In winter, if I shivered at my task, there was the beautiful hoar frost on the hedge to admire . . . in the busy toiling harvest there was poetry in the lines of sheaves, and even in the popped stubble."

Under-porter at Magdalene

In 1824, he went to work for a market gardener in Fordham, in Cambridgeshire, earning seven shillings a week and spending much of this on books. All of his free time was spent in reading or in going for long, solitary walks, and all the time he was

writing verses. Most of them he tore up and destroyed, however, for in his eyes they failed to express the thoughts and feelings he was trying to convey.

When he was 19, a relative obtained for him a job in Cambridge as under-porter at Magdalene College. But life in a town was not for James Withers; he longed for the green fields and the country lanes, so in six months he was back in Fordham for a while, before returning to Weston Colville. His grandmother died about this time and left a little money to his mother who spent some of it on apprenticing her son, for a year, to the shoemaker who had taken over her husband's business, and who promised to give James regular employment.

Back to Fordham

Before the year was up, however, Mrs. Withers had died and the shoemaker told James there was not enough work for him to do. Somehow he got through the next twelve months, then went back to Fordham and there married "not a rich wife but a good one". With her help, and by shoe-making and by harvest work, James Withers managed to earn enough to support her and, in due course, their four children. But he never ceased his verse-making, though only his closest relatives knew anything about it; they usually took down his poems as he dictated them, for he hated and found difficult the mechanical task of writing.

In 1846, the Withers family was in such financial straits that James, to avoid getting into debt, took himself, his wife and the children into the Newmarket Union for a time. While he was there he wrote a semi-humorous letter, in verse, to his sister in Cambridge, describing life in the work-house. But he could not wholly conceal from her his hatred of being shut away from the country fields and lanes:

I sometimes look up to the bit of
blue sky
High over my bed, with a tear in my
eye,

Surrounded by walls that are too
high to climb,
Confined like a felon without any
crime.
Not a field, nor a house, nor a hedge
can I see,
Not a plant, not a flower, nor a bush,
nor a tree.

Somehow he managed to get through this difficult time and to return to Fordham to continue his struggle for existence. But a few years later his fortunes miraculously changed.

In the autumn of 1852 he was doing harvest work for Mrs. R. D. Fyson of Fordham. Her nephew chanced, one day, to get into conversation with him and was immediately struck by his intelligence, and by his obvious appreciation of poetry and beauty. He then discovered that he wrote verses of his own and asked to see some, so James gave him a copy of his latest poem. Mrs. Dyson, on being given it to read, was so impressed that she at once sent for him and insisted that he brought her everything that he had written. In 1854, she succeeded in having published, in Cambridge, a volume of 56 of the poems. It met with such great success that in 1856 a second volume was issued.

James Withers now found himself a literary wonder. He was invited to London, he travelled about England and Wales, visiting places he had long wished to see. Charles Dickens and many other authors wrote letters of congratulations to him, and in 1860, the year before a third volume of his poems appeared, Queen Victoria sent him £50. Mr. Macmillan, the Cambridge bookseller, found for him a post, with a free house, in one of the London parks, but James loved Fordham too much to leave it, and the income from his books was sufficient for his simple needs.

In 1863, the three volumes of his poems were brought out in a new, one-volume edition, and this again brought the poet fame and money. Literary gatherings in London vied with each other to have him as their guest, and he was able to travel further afield — in England, Wales and Scotland, though only once did he make a brief visit to Paris.

Then, in 1867, he made the mistake of having a selection of his already-known poems re-printed, instead of those so far unpublished. The publishing firm went bankrupt, and more than half of the yet-unbound copies were sold for waste paper. The cost of the publication, however, was met

by the Baroness Rothschild who with her daughter, often visited James Withers in his Fordham cottage.

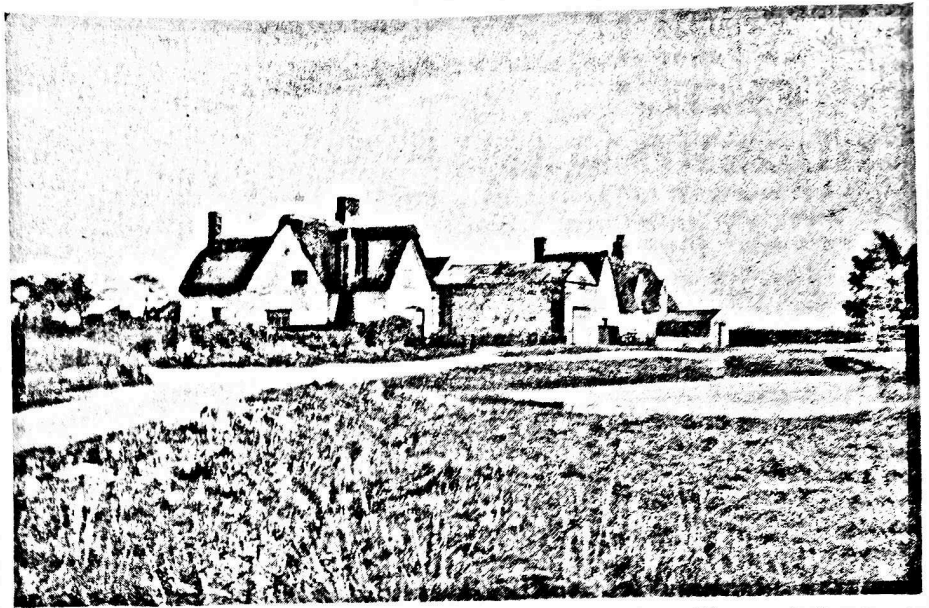
In 1869, a long poem, *Granny's Tale*, was published as a single volume and, unfortunately, reprinted with many alterations and revisions which very much spoiled it. James, disheartened by this and by the failure of some of his influential friends to get him a government pension, made no attempt to publish any more of his work.

Gradually he faded out of public view, though he never ceased to write. He remained in Fordham, living very quietly and simply on the small annuity which friends bought for him when the foreign loan in which he had invested the income from his books proved a disastrous one. In 1892 he died, having been looked after, since his wife's death in 1885, by devoted grandchildren. He was buried in Fordham churchyard and, three years later, a memorial stone was erected, by public subscription, on his grave, and a memorial window was placed in the church.

Full of the Countryside

Wither's poems are full of the sights and sounds of the countryside, and though they are, probably, little read today, yet they have many of the qualities which Victorian readers so admired. One of his best is, perhaps, *My Native Village*, with its description of Weston Colville Feast and of the shoemaker's shop where his father, and later, he himself worked:

There the shoemaker plied his busy trade,
There many pairs of heavy boots were made.
Late through the window gleamed his candle bright,
Then up again before the morning's light.
Here, when the winter nights were dark and cold,
The ploughboys met, and tales of mirth were told,
And all the news and scandal of the place
Were here discussed with comments on each case,
Whose horses now looked well, and whose looked bad,
Who was a handy, who an awkward lad.
He could write of a dead tree:
Thy withered arms stretch'd widely



Pond Green, Wicken, as it was in 1935. A favourite village of the poet, it was the subject of one of his longer poems.

out,
Are sapless, sear and dead;
And grey moss wraps thy trunk about,
And all thy beauty's fled.
Or of his memories of a haunted house:
It stood down in a shady lane,
With docks and nettles round,
And through the broken window pane
The bats a passage found.
The lonely owl there spread her wing
In search of rat or mouse;
With wailings loud the wind would sing

Around the haunted house.
He could even understand the exultant feelings of a fire-raiser in his *Song of the Incendiary*:

Oh, I love to see, on every tree,
The bright flames playing far and wide,
Making the darkness of night to flee,
And revealing things that night would hide.
See, see how they fall
On the old church wall,
And gild the vane on the old grey tower,
And dance round the bed
Of the sleeping dead.
And he could address amusing verses
To *A Lady whose Cows eat off the Author's Flowers*, or rather, as he explains, one of her cows:
I think 'tis right that you should know how impudent she is,
She leers in at my window with sly and roguish quiz,
And when I try to frighten her, and stamp and loudly bawl,
She licks her nose and coughs and

stares and does not mind at all.
The cholera epidemic of 1853 inspired his poem *Cholera*:

I'm coming, I'm coming, the scourge of man
I breathe on the child and its gambols are done,
I seize on the youth and his beauty is gone,
The maid in her bloom, and the man in his pride,
And age in his wrinkles I lay side by side.

And perhaps he was thinking of his own vanished hours of fame and recognition when he wrote the sad little poem *Oh, Do not bid me Sing*:

Those songs I sang when I was gay,
Nor thought this world a world of strife,
When roses seemed to strew my way,
And all unknown the thorns of life.
But I have sadly learned since then
That youth is but a pleasing dream,
That friendships warm, the boast of men,
Are scarcely ever what they seem.

James Withers' poems, today, may be almost forgotten, but he himself is still remembered in Fordham; his descendants still live in the village, and his house, The Poet's Cottage, still stands. His gravestone and his memorial window in the church are, too, a constant reminder of the man of whom a Vicar of Fordham once said: "His mind is so well stored with valuable information on a variety of subjects, that with the greatest enjoyment I spend hours in his company, and he delights in doing good."