

# Five Miles from Anywhere — No Hurry

Enid Porter writes of the 'Society of Idiots' and 'The Honourable Company of Beersoakers' who renamed the Lord Nelson inn at Upware.

A mile to the west of Wicken Fen is the small Cambridgeshire hamlet of Upware where, on the river bank, stood the Lord Nelson inn until it was gutted by fire fourteen years ago. The Lord Nelson was the official name under which it was licensed, but to countless sporting undergraduates, fishermen, wildfowlers, botanists, entomologists and skaters, from both the county and the University of Cambridge, it was the Five Miles from Anywhere — No Hurry.

Its landlord, for many years in the last century, was one Tom Appleby, and it was in his day that the house acquired its new name and its claim to fame. In the mid 1840's, two undergraduate clubs, *The Society of Idiots* and *The Honourable Company of Beersoakers*, used to stay at the Lord Nelson, during the Easter vacation, and spend a lively fortnight or so rowing on the river, boxing, wrestling, and playing at skittles and other games. In the evenings they gathered in the bar where local drinkers from Upware itself, from outlying farms and even from Wicken, three miles away, joined them and added their contribution to the revels, by entertaining the undergraduates with local songs and ballads. Only one rule was insisted upon by the Idiots and the Beersoakers, and that was that no one, on pain of forfeiting a quart of ale, should say what he meant.

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## Idiocy which amounted to genius

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One of the liveliest members of the two societies, a young man who had what a contemporary described as 'an admirable vein of idiocy which amounted to real genius', was chosen

to be the master of ceremonies, with the title of King of Upware. It was this undergraduate who, in about the year 1848, when the signboard of the Lord Nelson had been mislaid during repairs to the house, decreed that, in future, the inn should be known as the Five Miles from Anywhere — No Hurry, the last two words indicating that, as the inn was so far from the next drinking place, it was advisable to spend a leisurely stay at Upware. In actual fact, the nearest inn was but three miles away, in Wicken, but the remoteness of Upware justified the new title for the inn which, from then on, was painted on its wall and signboard.

The bestower of the new name, and uncrowned King of Upware, was Richard Ramsay Fielder, of Jesus College, who, on going down from Cambridge, temporarily deserted his 'kingdom', although he was to reappear later on the Upware scene. Before that occurred, however, the Five Miles from Anywhere became the headquarters of other undergraduates who formed the society known as the Upware Republic, which was led by such officials as the Consul, the President, the State Chaplain, the Interpreter, the Minister of Education, the State Fiddler — who was an Irish labourer — the Champion Tapster, and the more prosaically-styled Treasurer and Secretary.

Many years later, in 1917, the late Arthur Gray, the bookbinder of Green Street, Cambridge, following the publication in the *Cambridge Chronicle* of three accounts of old Cambridge which later formed part of his book *Cambridge Revisited*, was sent the Visitors' Book of the Upware Republic. It had been discovered, by chance, on a book barrow in a London street, and had been purchased by the sender for a few pence. This Visitors' Book — now, alas, vanished — provided much valuable information about the Repub-

lic and its members.

The title page of the book was dated November, 1851, and bore the request that members of the Republic should enter their names, with dates, before leaving the Five Miles from Anywhere. Should they fail to do so, then the names should be entered 'as soon after as possible by any officer staying at Upware'.

The visits of three hundred members and their friends were recorded in the book between November, 1851 and May, 1856, and the names of many undergraduates who later became famous in various walks of life, appeared on its pages: John Eldon Gorst, for example, who was knighted in 1885, and who became Solicitor General, Under-Secretary for India and M.P. for Cambridge University; Samuel Butler, then up at St. John's, who was to become known as the author of *Erewhon* and other works; Arthur Robert Ward, also of St. John's, who was later vicar of St. Clement's Church in Cambridge and who inherited, from his father, the ownership of Lords cricket ground which he sold, shortly before his death in 1884, to the M.C.C.

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## The Visitors' Book

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But the Visitors' Book was not a mere list of these and other names. It contained, also, a variety of notes and accounts of members' adventures when boating, fishing, shooting or skating round Upware, and of the social gatherings they enjoyed at the inn. So the book was enlivened by such entries as:

... Sailed in a "Funny" to Ely ...  
Left Ely in the "Tiddledy Widdledy" thing, as the natives termed it, and sailed by moonlight to the "Five Miles" — Here turned in — "done up" — regular bricks here and no mistake. (H. E. F. Tracey. 31 Mar. 1855.)

or

Arrived at 5 a.m. after an official and ex-official visit to Waterbeach Feast. (Ex-Consul Wolstenholme and Consul Sin Clarke. 1st June, 1853.)

or

2 Tub from Cross's to Upware where we enjoyed some of Mrs. Appleby's egg flip — 2 hours down



*The Five miles from Anywhere—No Hurry inn.*

— pulling — sail back. (R. W. Shooter, C. H. T. W. Daw and J. D. Ainsworth. 23 Apr. 1855.)

The last entry in the book was made on 14 May, 1856, when the Consul and President wrote that they 'looked forward with confidence to the next visitors' book as the mirror of many future happy days at Upware'.

Whether the second Visitors' Book was ever started is not known; perhaps — who knows — it may one day turn up as unexpectedly as did the first. So far, however, no further records of the Republic exist; but four years later, in 1860, the original King of Upware, Richard Fielder, took up residence at the Five Miles from Anywhere and resumed his monarchy.

He had, by that time, been called to the Bar, but seems never to have practised his profession, preferring to lead a wild, gipsy-like existence in the Fens. Dressed in corduroy breeches and red waistcoat, he took about with him everywhere an enormous brown earthenware jug capable of holding six gallons, although it was always referred to as 'His Majesty's Pint'. This jug, which he decorated himself, before it went into the kiln, with his initials and the arrowhead which was his crest, he used to have filled with punch which he shared with the bargees on the river, with whom he alternately fought and drank, as the humour took him.

On the walls and timbers of several fenland inns he wrote doggerel verses, which he signed with his initials and his broad arrow crest, as he related in the inscription he left behind at the Five Miles from Anywhere itself:

At the Five Miles from Anywhere

And the Sun at Waterbeach,  
At Fordham Green Dragon  
And the Black Horse at Reach,  
At Fordham's Cherry Tree  
And Wicken's Maid's Head,  
At Denver's Jenyns Arms  
Is the broad arrow spread.

He had verses published, too, in pamphlet form, and gave copies to his friends, usually signing them with his name, his title of 'First King of Upware', and adding, in Latin and in English:

**The Constitution of Upware**

Pay your way  
And no woman betray  
Is, in this little Realm, the Law.  
Smart and quick  
And a regular brick  
Pleas God be its King to the core.

The gradual decline of the river trade, and the consequent reduction in the number of bargees, deprived Fielder of the companions with whom he fought and fraternised. So he retired to Folkestone, became a sober and respectable resident of that seaside town, and died there in 1886.

The Five Miles from Anywhere, however, continued to attract numerous visitors, its appearance little changed over the years, save for the later replacement of the old, reed-thatched roof by one of corrugated iron. Probably the man who best knows and remembers the inn today, is Mr. Nigel Read, of the Black Horse, Dry Drayton, for his father was the landlord in the early years of this century.

Mr. Read can recall the heavy work of pulling the ferry which, in those days, provided the only access to Upware from the Stretham side of the

river. The ferry was leased to the inn landlord by the brewers, Messrs. Hall of Ely, at an annual rent of £7. Much of this rent was covered by the payment made by the County education authorities for transporting about thirty children, daily, to the Upware school. Many of these children had, on arrival on the river bank, already walked a considerable distance, and although, officially, they were supposed to be ferried across in a single journey, Mr. Read remembers that additional journeys often had to be made to pick up the latecomers. Foot passengers had to pay a penny each on the ferry, with an additional penny for a bicycle. The driver of a pony and trap paid 4d.; a heavy horse-drawn tumbril cart was charged 6d., while the owners of horses and bullocks had to pay a 2d. toll for each animal.

In the first World War, Mr. Read remembers, the road from Stretham to Wicken was begun, for use by the military in the event of the Kaiser's army invading this country. Another military road was made from the junction of the Fordham and Soham roads, while before the Dimmock's Cote bridge was built, after the 1914-18 war, a pontoon bridge was thrown across the river by the army, and was manned by the Royal Engineers. The foundations of the military roads were laid by bargees — there were still a few bargees coming up to fetch gas water from the Cambridge Gas Works for making fertilisers — with marl which they extracted from riverside pits and transported to the road sites in manually-hauled trucks.

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