

February 15, 2003

## Ambridge: the Net closes in

**Psst . . . have you heard? Beneath the tranquillity of the English village, gossip is alive and well and online. Nicholas Roe would like to tell you about it. But keep it to yourself, wont you?**

FOR years we've been reading obituaries on the death of the English village. The postmistresses have put up their position-closed notices for all eternity, the school playgrounds have fallen silent, the publicans have called their last last orders.

Through it all, only one ancient institution has remained untouched — the village gossip. While other arteries of the Heart of England have clogged and atrophied, these conduits of rustic malice have survived.

It has been testament to the most persistent of the countryman's qualities — the compulsion to make mischief behind another's back.

Now computer technology has brought new life to the tradition with the invention of the village website. Here, all the tales that were once whispered across the pews; the nudges, the nods and the knowing winks exchanged in the pensions queue, can be posted for the world to see.

Even the BBC's ersatz vision of the pastoral life, *The Archers*, has succumbed and Ambridge is alive to the lure of electronic tittle-tattle.

Villages all over the country are going online at a rapid rate. There are 8,000 parishes in England and more than 1,000 of them now have their own community pages. There, among the planning notices, bus timetables and B&B lists can be found gossip — hot gossip, exposing the feuds, humanity and complexities of village life to global inspection for the very first time.

You can speculate, for example, about the unexplained grave that suddenly appeared in the Cambridgeshire village of Gamlingay; read accusation and counter accusation on the subject of yobbism in Croston, Lancashire; or join the bitter little row in Marden, Kent, over whose vision of the village is the right one for public consumption.

There are rows about skateboarders, waste tippers, drinkers and drivers and about benefit scroungers. One community has been accused by a resident of having a more than usual interest in animal husbandry and there are dark references to intimacies with sheep.

It isn't always bad news, though. In the Hampshire village of Longparish members of the parish council recently noticed that youths have begun greeting them in the street like old friends. "They've taken to saying 'Hi!', instead of just melting away," reports the

chairman, Jeremy Barber. The reason? Youngsters have been using the village website to complain that they have “nothing to do” — a familiar enough refrain, but one they would probably not have bothered to make in person to a councillor. Yet their grumbles on the website produced a parish meeting attended by 20 teenagers, with the result that a skate-ramp was built last October.

Barber also reports that the village’s attractions, as described online, have persuaded two people to move there. “They looked at our site and said, this is the sort of place we would like to be,” he says.

Go over to the village of Croston, Lancashire, however, and click on “Croston Village Message Board”, and you stumble on a spiteful exchange in the classic rural mode. Here, some vindictive minx (though it could, of course, be a man) holds forth on village life, yobbism, even the state of the pubs and who drinks in them. “Someone tell me why that girl who’s (sic) name gets misspelt gets avoided like the black death with everyone in the pub,” demands Anonymous.

Fat chance you would find anyone Blu-tacking an answer to that one on a real noticeboard, but on the web they certainly will, and you and I can see it if we want to. Why is it that some people no longer drink in a certain pub over in Croston? Who blew the whistle on under-age drinking down the rec? The global community can now ponder these questions and make their own judgment.

There are outbreaks of parochial resentment and jealousy — terribly *Archers*, terribly Linda Snell — when residents in online villages jostle for power and influence.

Martyn Warren, the head of land use and rural management at Plymouth University, reports that almost 80 per cent of village websites are operated by just one person sitting in a room, squeezing information from local clubs and councils and bunging it online in a more or less unfettered fashion. It’s inevitable, it’s how villages so often work. But is it democratic? Doesn’t the medium demand a subtler approach?

On the village website in Marden there is someone who clearly believes so. Here is a bitter, anonymous tirade directed at the webmaster’s interpretation of local life: “We are delighted you feel so strongly about the village of Marden and the need to create a collective voice for the whole community,” purrs the respondent before slipping in the knife. “Is it really a concern for community that prompts you? Is this a true view of the village? It appears to be an image of a narrow minded commuter-belt rural cornucopia.” Ouch.

At Elmswell, Suffolk, a Byzantine struggle has been going on between two village sites. A local set up one for free, to discover that he is in competition with another organised by the parish council at a cost of £2,000. Now the Standards Board for England, which investigates allegations of council misconduct, has been called in to investigate. Food here for a positive banquet of gossip.

Much of the information and views delivered to the world online is, nevertheless, harmless and comfortingly idiosyncratic — exactly what you might expect of country life. Click on [www.winster.org.uk](http://www.winster.org.uk), and you are confronted with an olde-worlde village street in Derbyshire that gives up its secrets as your cursor roams the characters on view. You want Winster's traditions? Clubs? News? Click, click, away you go. As a metaphor for the complexities that may lie beneath apparently placid rural waters, it's picture perfect.

Rural websites have now become such a success story that they are attracting government money. Nick Holliday, the head of the Countryside Agency's Vital Villages Programme, says that more than £71,000 in grants has been paid to them and more is available: "We hear about dead or dormant villages but I think these websites can encourage the village spirit," he says.

There's even a commercial organisation called UK Villages Ltd — run from Harston, in Cambridgeshire — which offers communities a chance to post their details on a site free of charge (<http://www.ukvillages.co.uk/>).

No hamlet is so small or insignificant that it cannot stake a claim on the worldwide web. Crowfield, in Northamptonshire, consists of a mere 28 houses. But its website is buzzing with concern over a planned development. Peter Dean, a local who runs a "portal" to village sites (<http://www.villagekey.com/>) reports a tide of opposition to the scheme since it was publicised on <http://www.crowfield-village.com/>.

Could all this mean that there is a genuine online lifeline for once vibrant communities that feared they had no more to look forward to than becoming commuter wastelands?

At the Leicestershire village of Quorndon they believe they have the answer. "We're one hundred percent convinced our website is useful and important," says Kathryn Paterson, the clerk to the parish council. There, council minutes, local activities, planning applications, festive dates and more are all posted online and hot topics opened for debate (road closure plans head the list just now).

Oh, and the mysterious Gamlingay grave . . . there's an online explanation for that, too. It seems someone dug a hole in the wrong place and there's really no coffin at the bottom of it. At least that's what *they* say. No doubt the gossips have a better story.

- Countryside Agency Vital Villages grants: 0870 333 0170; or <http://www.countryside.gov.uk/>  
Martyn Warren's research at Plymouth University continues: [mwarren@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:mwarren@plymouth.ac.uk)

**THERE are hundreds of village websites (see <http://www.villagesonline.com/> for a full list). Many have discussion forums where topics are hotly debated. Among the most popular subjects are loutish behaviour among wayward youth, crime, street safety and house prices. Though there are a few warnings that anything offensive or defamatory will be removed, things do get personal — as this (edited but uncorrected)**

**selection reveals.**

<http://www.uckfield.co.uk/>

**Posted by Agnes Skinner**

If the Uck floods, lets hope it washes away all those gastly buildings on the Bellbrook industrial estate. I personally think that we should start a petition to close them all down. Also, I think it is ridiculous that the only place to store things in Uckfield is on that estate, why would I store my things on a flood plain?

**Reply, posted by Big Ron**

Agnes, what about the people who work there? Dont you care if they loose their jobs you selfish woman.

**From Agnes**

Big Ron, sometimes, sacrafice is needed to enhance the beauty of the world. If you stopped eating donuts, you too could be beautiful.

**Sarah, another user, says Agnes is “probably a bitter old spinster”. At this point a man called Peter comes on, calls people on £16,000 a year “plebs”, incurring the wrath of Dave and another user called I Hate Pete. Then Agnes is back:**

Dear Sarah:

I am not a bitter old spinster, I am still married to a wonderful man. Insults from a hussy have no effect on my life or ego young lady, it is obvious you have too much time on your hands, I assume you are a single mother on state handouts?

Agnes Skinner

From Sarah:

Agnus, please get a real life. I have two wonderful children and a husband, I have never had state handouts as we both work. You are a introlable bitter woman who must be very unhappy, I feel so sorry for you.

**Agnes tells Sarah that “no doubt next you will be welcoming asylum seekers into Uckfield with open arms” and chastises her:**

“I hope you are glad that you have made an old lady very sad, an old lady who worked her fingers till they bled in the war to make this country what it is today. Well, was before all the asylum seekers and spongers came here.”

Agnes Skinner

**Finally, Sarah can stand it no more and calls a halt . . .**

Shut up all of you ... arghhh i cant handle it anymore ... argghhhh someone help  
argghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh  
Sarah

<http://www.wargrave.net/>

**Posted by Bob**

Attention: Rich Folk  
You lot really are giving rich people a bad name with your appalling driving manners. I drive through Wargrave every day and the amount of times I've had to screech on brakes because some idiot in a

Jaguar or 4x4 or Mercedes hasn't used their indicator lights is positively dangerous.

The amount of stress created by a road accident far surpasses the energy that is spent moving one finger to flip the indicator switch. Wake up and start driving considerably before someone gets hurt.

**Reply, posted by Michael**

I'm not sure that it's the rich folk who need to pay attention. If you're having to "screech on brakes" as often as you say you're either driving far too fast or you haven't tried attending a defensive driving course.

I suppose the other explanation could be that it's the chip on your shoulder that's blocking your vision!

Did you mean driving considerably? It's a good idea.

<http://www.wreagreen.com/>

**Posted by Miss D. Meener**

School Pick Ups

I am amazed to see so many parked cars in the vicinity of the school . . . I can understand the concern for the safety of their children but I can also see a time when a child may step out from between the parked cars.

**Reply, posted by A Spiers**

The problem is each one of those caring parents who are picking up their little prince/princess believe that they are all right parking there for a few short minutes just so the spoilt brat doesn't have to walk more than a few yards, or heaven forbid get its hair wet.

Only when something dreadful happens (in a short minute) will somebody do something about it, and if you want to see even grosser acts of stupidity committed by caring parents have a look at Kirkham grammar at chucking out time.

These lunatics park all over the pavement and double yellow lines so pedestrians have to walk into the road to get past them, and each one thinks they have a special right to do so.

Maybe if we confronted these car bound morons outside the school gates and show our disgust at their selfish ways the one or two with a brain cell between them might look for an alternative . . . like walking.

**Ambridge: the Net closes in**

A YEAR ago the long-suffering Archers matriarch, Jennifer Aldridge — in blissful ignorance of her love rat husband Brian's affair with Siobhan — decided to take up a new hobby. She began a personal website to highlight the many delights of living in Ambridge, its history and people (oh, smug, smug Jennifer).

But what began as a pastime has become a political football as more and more residents stake a claim in the venture.

Dissent was first voiced by Bert Fry, who claimed the

picture Jennifer had put on the site of his garden made it look tatty. Then Debbie and Usha suggested Jennifer make the site less personal and more a village website.

Now everyone wants a piece of the action (such as it is) and it has been suggested that Usha be given joint editorial control. Chief busybody Linda Snell wanted the same access — accusing Jennifer of running the website as if it were an Archer family cabal — but has been thwarted. Grumbling Joe Grundy is contributing “Joe’s jottings” — bucolic musings about plants and birds.

Vanessa Whitburn, The Archers editor, promises tension “as various people battle for control” of the site from an increasingly distracted Jennifer.

Whitburn adds that the Jennifer-Brian-Siobahn triangle is far from over — “There’s a baby involved” — so could it be only a matter of time before Jennifer goes one better than smashing a perfume bottle against a wall and trashes her husband and her rival in cyberspace?

**Tim Teeman**