

## OPEN SPACE 2

● Veteran author Ralph Whitlock talks to Nicola Tyrer about changing village life

# The world we've lost

**W**HEN Ralph Whitlock was a boy, the six-mile trip to the city took two and half hours — by carrier's cart. A good scytheman cut an acre a day. And the country cottagers still carried water home from the well in buckets suspended from shoulder yokes.

Life was lived slowly, at a horse-drawn pace, and a death in the village was announced by the mournful toll of a bell across the fields.

Far-off and idyllic though it might seem to us now, Whitlock, veteran author of more than 100 books, most of them on the countryside, remembers it well; it's the world he chronicles in "The Lost Village" (Hale, £12.95), the life of one small village in Wiltshire from 1912 to 1939.

The village is Pitton on the Downs. Here Whitlock was born in 1914 and here he lived, a farmer like his father before him, for the first 54 years of his life. But it could be the story of any of the 9,000-odd villages which stud the British countryside. Most share its fate.

Actually, as any Wiltshire estate agent will tell you, Pitton is far from lost. Indeed, looking at its meticulously restored thatched cottages, you'd say it was booming. What is lost is a way of life "enjoyed or endured by nearly a thousand generations". That had its last phase in the decades before the wars. Now it has vanished forever.

In Ralph Whitlock's boyhood the village had 300 people, more than half of them with the same three surnames: Whitlock, White or Collins. The Whitlocks were there by 1605, when the parish register starts, with 22 Whitlock baptisms recorded between 1670 and 1700.

Today there are 500 inhabitants. Two families are called White, two named Collins. There are no Whitlocks (the author himself lives in a neighbouring village). The newcomers, whose enthusiasm for country life has pushed the price of a cob cottage — sold in the 1920s for £50 a pair — to £100,000 and more, are professionals or retired.

In the 1920s and '30s, all the people of the village worked in or close to it — as agricultural labourers, smiths, wheelwrights, builders, woodmen, shepherds. Now the doctors, architects and lawyers whose condemned cottages of yesterday are listed buildings, can do the daily six-mile trip into Salisbury in 10 minutes in



Old-life style: Ralph Whitlock in his grandfather's smock

their Merce and BMWs. Many journey farther... to London, Bournemouth or Southampton.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Whitlock, now a vigorous 74-year-old, with blue eyes and a raised halo of unbiddable white hair, feels no antipathy towards the newcomers. "They have changed the village, of course," he admits. "In my day it was very, very poor. The paint on the cottages was all peeling off. Thresholds were rotten and they often had puddles inside the door. The other big change is that when I was a boy, if you walked down the street you knew everyone you met.

"You knew when the bell tolled who had died. Now you may know only half the people you see. And of course, they don't stay, the way villagers used to. It takes five years to get to know someone and plenty don't stay that long.

"But the newcomers have saved Pitton. If the village still had to rely on local employment to survive, it would be a ghost town."

Whitlock's delightful book charts the landmarks of change. His father claimed to have owned the first bicycle; he himself remembers the appearance of the first motor car and the first sighting overhead of an aeroplane.

The invention of a portable milking bail in the 1930s enabled farmers to milk their cows in the fields instead of having to drive them through the village and risk street battles between rival herds.

It was a daily bus service that laid the groundwork for today's dormitory town. Electricity, the telephone and running water (which dried up the ancient village pond) arrived only in 1938.

For Ralph Whitlock, over every brash new bungalow hedged modestly by its cypress-hovers the spectral outline of a sepia-toned cottage.

Some buildings, of course, have survived. We passed one with a curiously arthritic-looking apple tree. "One of my great-grandfathers lived there. He planted it. He was a shoemaker. He used to get up at 4am and work till 8am, when he stopped for breakfast. He had four daughters. Each day it was the duty of one of them to sit and read the Bible to him for four hours."

The Old Bakery, now tastefully restored, was formerly the village shop, home to Uria Whitlock and his sister, known as Aunt Polly. "I remember going in there for a ha'penny of sweets and seeing Aunt Polly biting a pear drop in half to get the exact weight," says Ralph.

Of the 11 farmhouses contained within the village centre only one still functions as a farm.

Sadly, at Church Farm the majestic hammer-roofed barn and weatherboard granary, raised in traditional West Country style on mushroom-shaped staddle stones to defeat the rats, stands deserted. Its owner, Norman White, first cousin to Whitlock and another youthful septuagenarian, is content to stay on in the graceful medieval house he was born in. But his children don't want to farm.

An unsentimental man, Whitlock pokes the gentlest fun at those who idealise this rural past. To those who lived it, he points out, it was unhygienic and uncomfortable.

Take Dorset Blue Vinney cheese. Originally it was a hard cottager's cheese made from skimmed milk — not a bit like the blue-veined gourmet stuff of today. It disappeared because it was made under positively life-threatening conditions: one old Wiltshire farmer, not wanting to keep the Milk Marketing man waiting, strained the milk through his own shirt-tail before the official's horrified eye.

Of those who live in Pitton today and have turned it into a bijou suburb of Salisbury, Whitlock has only one major criticism: "It's the way they use their houses as a means of investment — adding on bits here and there, selling and buying over and over again just to make a fast buck. If people are on the move all the time it isn't possible to build up a real community."