

THOMPSON OF KILBURN

by Fr Patrick Barry OSB

THE squat brown tower of the church rises up behind Robert Thompson's home and workshops at Kilburn, and in the churchyard on the other side of it he was buried on the 11th of December of last year. It was a perfect day on which the cold, clear air of December was warmed in the open by the brilliant sunshine which fell on the little church and beyond it on Robin Hood's Look-out, the Devil's Leap and the White Horse of Hambleton. There were no jet planes screaming overhead nor noise of traffic in the village. The clear sunlight, the deep shadows, the browns, greens and greys of the winter countryside, the crowds of villagers and friends made a scene quiet, complete, final and very beautiful. Many of those present must have seen in it a fitting close to a life of nearly eighty years of creative work, a life for which Robert Thompson himself had chosen the motto 'Industry in quiet places'.



He spent his whole life in Kilburn except when he went to see a job or buy some oak trees, and many of those who suffer from an impulsive travel-mania must have wondered, when they met him, what they had gained by it all. He had a mind and character very different from the vacant earnestness of those who have travelled too far, seen too much and understood too little. All the downright strength and stubbornness of Yorkshire were there tempered by a humour, an understanding of men and a gentleness which had grown and matured with his work. To know him was to know one of nature's gentlemen to whom pretence and affectation were utterly foreign.



He was a native of Kilburn and from the age of 8 lived in the southernmost of the three cottages which he later joined together to make one house—part of it half-timbered, part of it stone, and furnished, as time went on, with his own furniture. His father was a joiner and carpenter, but Robert Thompson did not begin his working life with him.

Until he was twenty he was apprenticed to a firm of engineers at Cleckheaton. No one who knew him in later years will be surprised that he did not find this work congenial. He returned to Kilburn and in the first two decades of the century accepted any work that came to him. It might be

mending carts or making gates, painting a barn or repairing a house, making a coffin or restoring the village school. He worked in stone also. When the tower of Gillng church was repaired before the first World War, he was one of the masons and he carved the gargoyle which leans out on one side of it. After the war he made the stone crosses which were set up as war-memorials at Coxwold, Hushwaite and Bishopthorpe and the stone war-memorial tablets in Thirsk church were also carved by him.

Although during this period he was of necessity engaged in every sort of work which a small builder and carpenter might tackle, the idea which made his life was gradually taking shape. Perhaps one should rather call it a fascination—the fascina-

tion of English Oak. He was a man of sense and a skilled craftsman and without doubt his work would have prospered in his own countryside, even if he had never fallen in love with oak as a material. It was, however, this love which made the difference. He chose oak as his material, the stuff he wanted to work in. That led him to a study of what other craftsmen had done with it before. He studied and read about medieval oak-work and copied the tools which had been used to work it, so that he could use them himself. His earliest work was rugged—even uncouth, but there can be no doubt that the inspiration behind it was a reverence for his material. That was a good foundation and he was a good learner. As time went on his work developed.

However, the desire to work in oak was not enough. A man must live, and oak is expensive. It takes years to season and you need capital to lay in stocks. Moreover, you must have orders, and orders do not grow on the hedgerows of a remote village. He made some furniture for his house, a pulpit for Yearsley church and communion rails at Harome, but the great volume of his work was the usual odds and ends—painting and repairing a Dutch Barn, fixing a gate or mending a cart. It was a long



time before he was free to indulge his passion. Indeed his passion might never been more than a side-line for which time had to be taken from other things, had he not met Fr Paul. He was 43 at the time, yet his real work had scarcely started.

It was in May 1919 that he first met Fr Paul. That was the



beginning of a friendship which lasted until Fr Paul died in 1954—a friendship of which Thompson was always eager to talk. Whenever he started a new Visitors' Book, the first signature must always be the familiar; V. P. Nevill. In that way and in many others he always testified to the debt he owed to Fr Paul and to what that friendship meant to him.

The story of their first meeting is worth recording. Fr Paul was parish priest of Ampleforth and he used to cycle over to Kilburn to visit the one Catholic of the village, Sydney Mawe, who still lives there at the age of 75 and recalls clearly how he took Fr Paul to Robert Thompson. Sydney Mawe worked occasionally with Thompson and he had known Fr Paul since his appointment to the parish five years before in 1914. That afternoon they were having tea together in Kilburn and Fr Paul told him that he had a large figure for a crucifix which he wanted to put up in the graveyard at Ampleforth. He wanted a large oak cross for it and had approached other carpenters in vain; they had no oak beams large enough. Mawe told him that he could get his oak in Kilburn, took him down the road and introduced him to Thompson—an act of which he has ever since been justly proud. The entry is still there in Thompson's book of estimates : 'Proposed Village Crucifix for Ampleforth, Yorks'.

It seems simple, but Thompson used to tell the story of how he came to accept the job. He was asked to do a job in oak and he answered 'Yes' without hesitation. 'I hadn't the oak and I didn't know where it was coming from, but I wasn't going to say no.' He went out to look for the oak and found it at last on the Newburgh estate. There was a tree felled on the hill to the left of the road between Cox wold and By land. The agent said he could have it, but he would have to get it away himself. So with Sydney Mawe's help he sawed it up by hand and got the beams he wanted from it. You can see the crucifix standing in the graveyard at Ampleforth. Thompson was



not going to say no to a job in oak, but he can hardly have guessed what the job was leading him to. It gave Fr Paul some ideas, and he did not relinquish them.

During the next thirty-five years more and more orders came from Ampleforth for Thompson's work. It was not just that a table, like the first one he made for the Library, weighing a ton and a quarter, was not likely to be broken up easily by boys. Fr Paul saw in Thompson's work the civilized dignity which boys could be taught to respect. He thought, as always, not just of saving money in the long run, but of saving boys from barbarism.

Through his work at Ampleforth, Thompson was gradually introduced to a wider public. There were choir stalls at Workington and a crucifix at Bamber Bridge in 1921, and Screens for Fort Augustus in 1922. His first work for Sir Giles Scott was the Abbot's choir stall and the six stalls flanking it at the West end of the New Church. He always enjoyed telling the story of how Sir Giles asked him where he thought the joins should come on the large carved panel of the Abbot's prie-dieu. He replied by asking why Sir Giles wanted a join; if he came to Kilburn he could have it in one piece. On these stalls he carved an inscription in a place where few have been able to find it. It reads as follows: '1928 SIR GILES SCOTT, R.A., Architect ROBERT THOMPSON, Craftsman.'

Of all the work which Thompson did at Ampleforth his chef d'oeuvre was the Library. He always called it 'My room' and he had every right to do so. His earliest work there was the largest of the big tables and the big chair used by the President of the Debate. Then in 1925 came the first of the carrels. In later years he often

used to stand in the Library and look at the carrels—a most complicated construction with no two bits of timber the same size or thickness. 'I don't know how I did it', he would say, 'And I'm glad I haven't it to do again.' Then, after many experiments, he developed the round-backed chair which he called the 'Ampleforth' or 'Monks' chair. The second lot of carrels was built in the room which had been St Oswald's Common Room, when that was taken into the Library in 1934. During the war one important item was added when Anthony Griffiths presented the large double-sided bookcase for Reference Books.





After the war the work was continued with the new shelves for the big room (the Upper Library). These were made in 1948 and were the gift of Mrs Dormer. She had generously given to Fr Paul the royalties of Hugh Dormer's Diaries and he used them in this way. Then in 1950 came the Memorial Library with all its furniture, financed by the Old Boys' Memorial Fund as a setting for the memorial tablets recording the names of those who were killed in the war. The final touch came in 1955—the Library door in which the inscription, composed by Mr Shewring and written on vellum by an Old Boy, John Martin, was framed. It was Robert Thompson's last work for Ampleforth and completed his work on 'My room'.

Within ten years of his meeting with Fr Paul the workshops and half-timbered house at Kilburn were becoming famous. Thompson was getting orders for work from all over England and the volume of this demand continued to increase steadily. It would be impossible to give here anything like a complete list even of his major contracts. It is enough to say that even during the war he used to refer to his Order Book as the Black Book, because, when something went down on it there was no knowing when it would come off.

With the increase of his work and the spread of his workshops he was able to employ and teach more men and boys. His methods also and his ideas about joinery underwent a gradual transformation. There were concessions to machinery in the sawing shop and a less severe conception of some problems of construction. His work, without losing its strength, acquired more grace and subtlety. There were some who thought that these developments were a pity, but Thompson never regretted them. He never lost and never failed to communicate his own singleness of purpose. Good well-seasoned oak from his own yard was the material and it must be well worked;

that was what he demanded. His standard of workmanship did not fail and it must have been seldom that any fault escaped his eye. Last summer he had a very complicated piece of carving ready for despatch in his shop. The wood was curved almost into a semi-circle, but it was so well joined that not even he could find where the joins were.

As time went on Robert Thompson himself was less able to spend time in the workshops, and when one went to Kilburn one found him at his drawing table in the little office at the back of his house. It was a pity in many ways and he sometimes felt it himself. In the early days any bit of oak lying about his shop might suggest something to his mind and he would carve it, like the two book-ends in the Library with monks' faces, the carving of Abbot Smith sitting in the Library chair which stands in the Guest Hall or the paper weight with the mice running in and out, which he gave to Fr Paul.

The choice of the mouse itself was an admirable example of Thompson's attractive blend of simplicity and astuteness. He chose it as a trade mark to protect his work. When he chose it he was as poor as a church mouse, and he wanted it to be a symbol of his motto 'Industry in quiet places'. What could be more charming and simple? Yet no commercial expert could have found a more telling advertisement. It is the one thing that nobody can forget and everybody can understand. As a symbol, the mouse was appropriate and pleasing; as an advertisement, it was a stroke of genius.

In the years since the war Robert Thompson grew to his old age with dignity. He had the happiness of seeing his two grandsons, Robert and John Cartwright, learning to take over and carry on his work. But he did not spare himself. He had one very serious illness, but recovered from it wonderfully and was back at work in Kilburn as soon as he could be and sooner than the doctors liked. The illness which killed him was upon him last summer. He fought it with great courage, but it was too much for him and he died on 8th December in the Purey Cust Nursing Home in York.



And so he was buried in the churchyard behind his home. His epitaph might well have been the words of Ecclesiastes: 'And I have found that nothing is better for a man than to rejoice in his work, and that this is his portion'. Of course the inspiration of his life went deeper than this. In the early days he had carved on the ingle-nook bench which he made for his house 'Fear God and Honour the King'. None who knew him as friends could doubt that God came first. The fullness, the strength and gentleness of his character were not entirely man-made. In his life he valued the prayers of his friends. There is no remembrance he would value so much as prayer now that he is dead. ∞

