

## GLOUCESTERSHIRE ACROSS THE ATLANTIC The Story of a Travelling Cottage and Smithy

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### Introduction

Many are familiar with Britain's open air museums such as Ironbridge and Beamish in which old buildings are preserved and former ways of working and living demonstrated. Less well known on this side of the Atlantic is Greenfield Village. This is the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, near Detroit. Said to be Michigan's most popular tourist attraction, it is now called simply "The Henry Ford". There are two exhibits here from Gloucestershire.

During his visits to England, Henry Ford always like to stay for a few days if possible in the Cotswolds, particularly at the Lygon Arms, Broadway. Impressed by the Science Museum in London, he had decided to build a museum of technology in the United States. This would house a wide range of early engineering and domestic artefacts, most of which came initially from Europe. The distinctive architectural style and attractive weathered appearance of typical Cotswold buildings appealed to him, largely because the stone walls, stone tiles and stone window mullions all blended together unbroken by other visible construction materials. Because of this, at the end of the 1920s he decided to buy an old style Cotswold house exhibiting as many local features as possible and re-erect it at what is now Greenfield Village. One requirement was that any changes which had been made must be restorable to their original state relatively easily.



Rose Cottage at Greenfield Village in November 2010.

(© Courtesy of Giles Martin)

### **The Cottage**

Responsibility for acquiring a suitable property, as well as many other exhibits for the new museum, fell upon Mr. Herbert F Morton, the Engineer in charge of Plant at the Ford Motor Company factory at Trafford Park, Manchester. After many months of searching, and dismissing other possibilities, he found what he was looking for: the three hundred year old Rose Cottage in Lower Chedworth. Consisting of two 16th century labourers' or shepherds' cottages knocked into one, with a barn and stable, it had everything Henry Ford wanted - even doveholes in the gable. Herbert Morton bought it privately, together with two acres of land for £500 in the spring of 1929, to preclude any price escalation which might have occurred had it been known that Henry Ford was the ultimate buyer. Prior to the early 1900s, it had been known as Chedworth Cottage. Its former location is a small field in Lower Chedworth opposite York House, and between Denfurlong and Bliss's Cottage,

### **The Forge**

Delighted with this acquisition, Henry Ford subsequently bought the village forge at Snowhill in November 1930 complete with old bellows, hearth, quenching troughs and other associated equipment. The forge had remained unused since the death of the last blacksmith in 1909. The adjacent dwelling accommodation was apparently beyond restoration.

### **Dismantling and Re-erection**

The story of the dismantling, shipping and re-erection of these buildings has been described in Herbert Morton's book published in 1946 (1) and briefly in The Countryman magazine in 1931 (2). Additional transportation details are outlined in two Great Western Railway magazines articles (3). Information from these sources together with details from the Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn (4), Alan Strickland and Ray Wilson is gratefully acknowledged. A similar but less detailed account of the moving of Rose Cottage has been recorded by Howard J. Westlake (5). This contains the selling price and enabled the former location of the cottage to be identified.



The Forge at Greenfield Village in November 2010.

(© Courtesy of Giles Martin)

### **Moving the Cottage**

The task of repairing, dismantling, shipping and re-erecting the cottage and barn were formidable. Rose Cottage had not been occupied for some time, and was not in good condition. Initial repairs were undertaken by a local Chedworth builder and completed by Mr. W Cox-Howman. He was a long established Stow building contractor who had a good reputation for restoring old Cotswold buildings. Over a two month period, decayed timbers were replaced, and old stone mullions restored and fitted with leaded lights in iron casements complete with old glass in place of the wooden windows. A porch was copied from one in a neighbouring village, and a dormer window fitted into the cottage roof. The restored cottage and barn were then photographed inside and out with special features carefully marked. Detailed interior and exterior drawings were made of both the house and garden, and the size and position of shrubs and trees noted.

Mr. Cox-Howman also managed the removal process. Doors, windows, staircases and other outstanding fittings were removed and carefully packed into cases. All the important building stones were numbered then the house and barn were dismantled. The building stone was packed in 506 coarse canvas sacks, protected by smaller loose stones. The garden walling, stone edging, crazy paving and other freestone were packed in 211 crates. Seven weeks after the restoration had been completed, Rose Cottage was ready for shipment on 28 March, 1930, everything totalling 475 tons in weight.

A special GWR train (some reports say two) of 67 wagons was loaded at Foss Cross to transport the sacks and crates to Brentford, where the dismantled buildings were transferred by barge to London Docks and then on to the S.S. London Citizen. The packing in sacks proved to be not a good method because of damage to the outer covering in transit. On arrival in New Jersey, the building stones had to be repacked in smaller bags, 818 in total. The shipment arrived in Dearborn in 18 freight cars at the end of April 1930.

### **Rebuilding the cottage**

Key workers in the dismantling and reassembly of the cottage and barn were a master mason C T (Tom) Troughton from Lower Swell and a master carpenter W (Bill) Ratcliffe from Bourton-on-the-Water. Both travelled to Dearborn to re-erect Rose Cottage with the help of American workmen. They left home on 30 May 1930, sailed on the RMS Homeric, and eventually left the United States on 28 November, reaching home again on 7 December, 1930.

After delays in overcoming problems getting permission to work in the United States reconstruction started on 8 July. It was completed on 23 September, with old English furniture of the correct style within. There were flowers and roses in the garden, a horse and cow in the barn, English doves nesting in their holes in the gable, and even a flock of specially imported Cotswold sheep nearby. Everything looked much the same as it did in Chedworth. Only a few changes had been incorporated. Some new timber from England had been used in the roof, new Cotswold oak flooring boards were installed, the tiles had been secured with copper nails and mortar instead of wooden pegs, and lead gutters and downpipes had been added. The porch had been installed at right angles to its original position.

In the garden the Chedworth well was no longer functional but merely filled with water because the natural water supply could not be reached beneath it. A dovecote had been constructed from spare building material sent over in case any of the original building stone was damaged in transit. The drystone walling was no longer dry, having been strengthened with cement bonding. It was a remarkable achievement in the days of limited mechanical aids.

Records and mementos of Bill Ratcliffe's experiences travelling to and within the United States and of the reconstruction process have been preserved by his daughter-in-law, Mrs Maureen Ratcliffe, and described by June Lewis (6).

### **The Forge**

Henry Ford's purchase of a 17th century forge was somewhat fortuitous. It seems that during his visits to Broadway he had consulted Mr. S B Russell, founder of the eponymous furniture workshops, about furniture and other contents for the rebuilt Rose Cottage. Mr. Russell himself had restored the Lygon Arms, and was able to find some domestic artefacts for the cottage. He lived in Snowhill, and had bought the smithy on the death of the last smith, Charles Stanley. The smithy cottage was unfit for habitation or restoration, and the contents of the smithy itself were fast deteriorating beneath layers of dust and mortar.

Mr. Russell wanted to preserve the smithy contents somewhere in the Cotswolds, but had been unable to find a suitable home for them despite determined attempts. He invited Henry Ford to look at the forge with the hope he might like to purchase it and the contents for his museum. His hopes were realised. Henry Ford became very interested indeed, and authorised the purchase of the smithy and its contents in November 1930. Soon a second building was on its way to Dearborn, with the implements all cleaned up and labelled.

The procedure followed was much the same as before, except the stone walls were packed in crates and the old clamped beer barrels. How many is not recorded, but Mr. Cox-Howman and is known to have bought one hundred. Once again Mr. Troughton was responsible for the re-erection of the smithy walls from the stone and 15 tons of timber shipped over. It arrived in Dearborn in mid-1931 and was erected with a few minor changes where the now demolished cottage has been attached. Soon it was in use again, and it is believed to be one of the oldest working blacksmith shops in the United States.

### **Today**

A recent (2008) external photograph of Rose Cottage looks the same as originals taken in 1930. Some 400 years on it seems to have survived well after its 1930 rebuild, as have many here in Gloucestershire which have neither been completely rebuilt nor travelled! Today it is also a source of refreshments in Greenfield Village.

### **References**

- (1) Morton, H F, *Strange Commissions for Henry Ford*, Herald Printing Works, York, 1946.
- (2) The Countryman Vol V, No. 1, pp. 21-31, April 1931.
- (3) Great Western Railway Magazine, Vol. XLII p. 196, May 1930; Vol. XLIV, No. 1, p. 10, 1932.
- (4) Personal communication, 7 August 2009.
- (5) Westlake, H. J., *The Chedworth Story*, Trafford Publishing, 2007.
- (6) Lewis, June, *Cotswold Life*, October 2010, pp. 188-189.

### **Footnote**

Rose Cottage, Lower Chedworth was situated at National Grid Reference SP 0656 1094 and the Forge at Snowhill was situated opposite the south-western corner of the churchyard at SP 0960 3368.