

AN OX FEAST FOR ENFORD

By EJ Smith

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In the first few minutes of Coronation Day, a fire will be lit in a field in the village of Enford, one of those friendly villages of low-walled, thatched cottages clustered around an old church which line the Wiltshire Avon, where it winds, among willow clumps and deep water meadows, between the cold uplands of Salisbury Plain.

The fire will be for the roasting of the village ox — the centre point of the festive part of the village celebrations and the occasion for more discussion, speculation and banter than has been known in Enford for many a year. Enford, like hundreds of other West Country villages, is sparing nothing for its Coronation Day.

The Roasting

For months, the 700 people of Enford have talked of little else. Will "they folk awver the hill" be the first to be dragged headlong into the Avon? Will the ox, as some wiseacres assert, end up more like a foot-and-mouth casualty, in the fire, than as prime beef done to a turn? Will the "Swan" the inn whose sign straddles the road like a monster gibbet, have enough beer? Most questions like these are asked in fun.

Each villager who has a hand in the preparations — and there are many who have — is out to make it a memorable festival, the best on the Plain. On the Saturday, the ox will have been brought from the Ministry slaughterhouse at Pewsey, a fine young Devon steer which, in being fed against the sacrifice, has been as much a matter of public interest and concern as would be a Smithfield champion, if such were ever raised in the parish. The beast is the gift of a local farmer who like many others who have contributed handsomely towards Enford's rejoicings, prefers to remain anonymous. No farmer ever presented a beast before a bigger, or more critical or more exacting grading panel.

"Pretty ox - about seven hunderweight, I should zay," says a beef husbandry expert in the "Swan".

"Reckon he'll be barely a mossel enough vor all of we", says another.

"I zee'd en," says a third, "and he's got a nice finish. Not like that old gristle and binder-twine you have come Sundays".

The smallest details of the village preparation are matters of the keenest personal interest. Everybody, in some way or another, is helping. Mr. Eric Sargent, who farms 1,100 acres on the Plain (and shares about as much again in rough grazings, precariously, with the military), is chairman of the village committee; there has never, he says, been any occasion for worry

about the preparations. For the Coronation festivities, only one collection was needed to bring in all the money wanted. Not a penny has to be drawn from the rates.

No need here for elaborate direction; no need for a precise minute book or a guarantee of funds at the bank. No need for imposed hey-nony or organised attempts to recapture a spirit of "Merrie England". For here is a true Merrie England of the people's own making, coming spontaneously from the good heart and the community spirit of the villagers. When bricks were wanted for the wall of the ox-roast, Fred Phillimore, landlord of the "Swan" (who was known to plough a good acre a day with a swinghead horse plough on the stiff Plain clay before he became an innkeeper) had only to put up a notice outside the inn — "500 BRICKS WANTED - LEAVE THEM HERE" — to get enough and to spare. One man, having no old bricks to give, went out, and bought some for the pile.

Baden Powell, the blacksmith, fashioned the "needles" and iron for the roast, and Bill Benger, the builder, produced a fine fir pole which, tinned, will form the spit. Jack Dreweatt, the coal merchant, undertook all the transport, and Jack Howcutt, the bricklayer, built the wall.

In this way, every item in the programme, down to the last detail, has been looked after. Enford has even been able to dispense with the services of a professional ox-roaster, thanks to Mr. Ernest Allen, the schoolmaster, who hails from a village in Yorkshire where ox-roasting is an ancient custom.

Mr Allen's photographs and sketches and some extensive researches he has made for the occasion have enabled the three "chefs" — Mr. Allen himself, Mr. Crook, the farmer at Combe Farm, and Mr. Phillimore, the innkeeper — to school themselves thoroughly in the art.

A pin of ale, which seems a very adequate refreshment and recompense for the three cooks, will be set on a trestle hard by the roasting ox. All comers can see the cooking, but when the beast is declared done, the field will be closed to the "foreigners". Then to the feast — a real old Wiltshire-style spread of roast beef, bread, pickles and cheese, and free drink, all in the most ample measure, for the old people; a no less solid meal, also based on beef from the ox, for the children, and ox-sandwiches in abundance for the rest of Enford's 700.

Village Transformed

This is not the only feast, for even as the fire for the ox is being lit, after midnight, a grand bout of eating and drinking at the "Swan" will barely have finished. Here there will have been a board of ham and tongue, cold meats and pickles — and an undertaking by one and all to "make things a bit lively before eleven".

Overnight, the village will have been transformed with decorations of a scale and splendour which Enford has never seen before. Garlands and flags and streamers and flowers will

blossom from the dun-coloured cottages (there is a prize for the best of them) and will be carried even to the roadside. The church, where there is to be a special Coronation service, is to be floodlit. Where the main road cuts through Enford, between high banks, there will be poles carrying banners and streamers, and tubs of flowers are to be set into the banks. Even the bus shelter is to be decorated.

The children are to give an Elizabethan pageant, locally written, devised and produced, which will include Sir Walter Raleigh at his courtesies with the cloak, and a substantial portion of *Midsummer Night's Dream* (which comes prettily, and with some Elizabethan ripeness from the children's pure, broad Wiltshire speech).

Some of the performers will be on horseback. There will be folk dancing and ordinary dancing and sports and games and contests of many kinds. There will be some odd capers, too. During the afternoon, the villagers will assemble on the bridge over the river, near the church, to see the special events which have been promised there, and for which the bridge forms a fine grandstand.

These events are the particular care of Baden Powell the blacksmith, who is not only as prepared for anything as was his famous namesake but is also a specialist in the more bizarre forms of water sport. Pillow fights in the middle of the river will be among these high jinks — what spectacle, in the phrase of the immortal Kai Lung, could be more "gravity-removing"? A no less agreeable diversion will be a series of tug-of-war contests across the river; a local sport which, while providing fun for the spectators, is also taken very seriously by the combatants. The river here is about 20 feet wide, and at this time of year between two and three feet deep. But the villagers will tell you that it will be deeper on the day, thanks to an opportune and quite inexplicable irregularity which is expected to occur in the sluices downstream, the dictates of the River Board notwithstanding.

The Fiery Plain

For this event, there are four teams in training.

There will be pewter tankards, bearing a medallion of the Queen, for the winners, and spoons for the runners up. At night the Plain will blaze and echo with a gigantic firework display — yet another gift from an anonymous donor. And up on the Down, where for mile upon mile the grassland and corn stretch unbroken by house or hedge or tree, another fire will be lit.

Down in the village, merriment will be going on as the flames leap in answer to those, of other beacons fired on the hilltops above scores of other villages and hamlets. Beyond the Plain, ringed with fire, there will be a chain of beacons on the Marlborough Downs; farther away, those of the Mendips and the Quantocks, and on the tors of Devon and Cornwall. The day will not be over for Enford until the fire at last flickers down, leaving the Plain again to the peewit and the lark, and casting once more into the shadow the great burial ground of

the of the unknown man who – who knows? – may have fired his own beacon here thousands of years ago.

