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THE LOST VILLAGE

I want to tell you about a certain English village that the great majority of British people have never heard of. If it were just another village (there are thousands in England) this would come as no surprise. But Tyneham is no ordinary village. It was once, but not now, and not for many decades. Tyneham sits in a fertile South Dorset valley about a mile from the coast. In the Tyneham Valley there are woods and streams and there's an abundance of wildlife. In the village there's a little pond, an old-fashioned telephone kiosk, and a small schoolhouse opposite a fine medieval church.

But Tyneham has none of the amenities of contemporary life. It has no electricity or running water. There are no televisions, washing machines, dishwashers or ovens. And on an Autumn evening, when the sun dips behind the Purbeck Hills and the last visitor drives away, silence falls. A haunted silence.

Here's the story. For centuries, until the 1940s, a fairly benevolent feudal system operated in the Tyneham Valley. The proprietary owners lived in a grand Elizabethan manor house. There was full employment, the valley was well farmed, and the fishing community at nearby Worbarrow was proud of its relative independence. But the valley had an important and influential neighbour. For many years the British Army's Tank Corps had occupied a large parcel of land in the vicinity, using it chiefly as a gunnery range and training ground. By the early Forties, however, with the war in Europe at its height, the range had became inadequate. More and more troops were being drafted into the area for training. More accommodation was needed, more space required for battle exercises and for testing new long-range weapons.

So it was that a fateful decision was made; a decision sanctioned by Winston Churchill's

government. In November 1943 a letter was sent to every tenant and householder of the Tyneham Valley, including the gentry up at the Big House. The letter informed every labourer, artisan, gardener, farmer, woodsman, fisherman and landowner that the valley was required for military operations and that they must give up their homes and livings for the duration of the war. Everything would be handed back when the conflict was over, but for now they must simply leave. No arguments would be entertained. They had until a few days before Christmas to get out.

For many, the evacuation was devastating. The valley had been their world. Some had never stepped outside of it, or wanted to. As they left they closed their windows, locked their doors, bolted their gates, to make sure that everything would be safe while they were away. Some 225 people left by the deadline that bitterly cold December. Some made the transition well enough, but others could not adapt. Some of the older evacuees, it's said, died of shock or a broken heart. Still, those who survived knew that they would be able to go home as soon as the war was over. The War Office had promised.

But promises can be broken. The church was plundered in the people's absence. The houses and cottages were abused, shelled, burnt. And when the war ended the Army refused to relinquish its hold on the valley. The people were not allowed to return – ever.

I hadn't heard of any of this myself until I came across an article about it. Then, fascinated, I sought further information, and finally, feeling a need to see this place for myself, I packed a bag and drove to Tyneham, which was about 200 miles from where I lived at the time. The Tyneham Valley was (and still is) in military hands, but on certain weekends and for the entire month of August each year the public are allowed to come and go pretty much as they please as long as they keep within specified boundaries. The day I went there was a sweltering one. After parking my car in the designated parking area just above the village I strolled down the grassy incline between ancient trees, through a wooden gate in a low stone wall, into ruins.

Yes, Tyneham is virtually nothing but ruins now. A haphazard assortment of roofless, semi-collapsed dwellings with weed-covered floors, cold fireplaces, ivy crawling through ragged rectangles that once were windows. I had approached the village full of expectation, excited by what I would surely find there, but the ruins were disappointingly ordinary. They had no atmosphere at all. There was no lingering sense of generations, or loss, or betrayal. I referred to Tyneham as 'haunted' earlier. That's a contrivance often summoned by people trying to describe the place. The only haunting is in the mind. There's barely a whisper of history there, of life as it must have been lived.

Only two buildings were not reduced to ruins. The church and the schoolhouse had been refurbished for the visitors; turned into museums of sorts, relating to old Tyneham and what happened there in 1943. I wandered into the neatly turned-out schoolhouse: a lofty, chapel-like room with sturdy wooden beams, brass oil lamps dangling on long chains from the white-painted ceiling. A large blackboard and an upright piano stood either side of a brick fireplace. Rows of linked desks displayed samples of decades-old school work, under glass.

I was looking at the work on the desks when an elderly man came in. We struck up a conversation. He too had come to look the school over, but he wasn't just another casual visitor. He'd been a pupil there once upon a time. He remembered 1943 very well, he said, and told me how it had been for him and the other evacuees. Yet he was no sentimentalist, this fellow. He came back to Tyneham regularly, but his nostalgia was well under control. He gave me his view of life then for the ordinary working family. A very down-to-earth view. While a community of sorts had existed in the valley for centuries, life had been far from easy for most people, even in the 20th century. There'd been little money, no such thing as flush toilets, running water, radio, and most other things that we take for granted nowadays. He was cynical, too, about the class divisions built into such communities; an alternative view to the slightly romantic picture I'd been forming from much of what I'd read of life back then, which painted Tyneham as an

idyllic, nigh-on-perfect place for all who lived there. While it was nothing but silent ruins now, back then it hadn't been perfect. It had been real life.

In the many years since my first visit to Tyneham – I've been back four more times – very little has changed. There have been attempts to sanitize the setting, tidy it up more than it had been at the time of my first visit, with many of the old buildings shored up and made safe (though not rebuilt) so that visitors may walk in and out of them and take photographs without risk. There are still jeeps there, and tanks on hillsides, and barbed wire and warning signs, and it is still a rather tragic place, empty and soulless. Very few birds fly over Tyneham, and whatever animals live in its woods, they keep much to themselves.

In spite of all this, Tyneham has been on my mind all these years; years in which I have written about it here and there. Among the things I've written is a novel, set in 1999, about a man in his seventies who returns to the village he was evicted from along with 220 or so others just before Christmas 1943. In the book I have renamed the village – I call it Rouklye – but all of my descriptions fit Tyneham fairly precisely. The title, too, seems appropriate. I've called it *This Ruined Place*.

Michael Lawrence