

HOSTAGES TO FORTUNE

Jo Eames writes:

A few months ago I chanced upon a novel set in Deddington in Oxfordshire from 1915-33. Some people in the village must know of it, but no one had mentioned it to me in the 20 years I have lived there.

The book is *Hostages To Fortune* by Elizabeth Cambridge, a pseudonym: was it frowned upon for a doctor's wife to write novels in the 1930s? For that's who she was – Mrs Barbara Hodges, wife of Dr Hodges, whose home and practice were in a house then called The Blocks, now Featherton House.

It is an autobiographical novel about a family established towards the end of WW1. The writing is clear and beautiful, opening with the birth of Catherine's eldest daughter, a scene we rarely witness first-hand in fiction, surprisingly perhaps when it is pivotal to so many lives. Here, it sets the author's agenda, which is to give us a rare and moving longitudinal study of motherhood. The innate differences in personality between the three children are finely-drawn, as is the hard-wired (and timeless) maternal anxiety over how to help each child thrive.

But for a Deddingtonian, the book holds another interest. How have we changed? And how have we not?

Our first glimpse of Deddington is in the winter of 1917. 'Against a close-packed sky of grey cloud...a church tower

stood up like a hill. Square, massive, broad-shouldered, the great bulk of ironstone dominated the cottages round the market place. It stood under its crown of pinnacles like a king.' No change there.

The husband, William, is the son of a previous village doctor. Deddington is familiar and comforting after the horrors of the Royal Army Medical Corps on the Western Front, from which he has just been invalided home. Catherine, though, is from the West Country and struggles to fit in. Slowly, she comes to a sense of the Deddington character: 'The village had a local reputation for independence and self-sufficiency, and had been stigmatised in the past as backward and drunken, a reproach no longer deserved. William, in his boyhood, had once counted 15 public houses. Catherine found the people likeable, once you knew them. They were loyal to their families, thrifty and swift to repay a kindness...The people had a hard, sardonic humour, apt to find the one word which would bite most deeply into the memory, a sane humour, natural to the rational, slow-moving tempo of the village.' Has anything changed?

Yes, actually. 'Children abounded. On Saturdays the market place was rowdy with shrill voices and tackety boots. There was a special season for peg-tops, dreaded by motorists.

Juvenile cricket occupied the square opposite Catherine's house in the summer. In the winter they made slides down the northerly road in front of the police station, or went tobogganing on home-made sleds.'

Sadly, apart from sledging, seasonal games have died out and gangs of children no longer maraud through the village. This change started long before the advent of 'screens'. The author describes cramped cottages with scarcely room for a woman to work, so that children, and many more of them then, were of necessity swept out to play all day. But perhaps the biggest change happened in the 1920s: 'The white roads, cambered for horse traffic, and worn into wheel tracks on each side had vanished altogether. The wide, black, tyre-polished roads, filmed with oil, were changing the face of the country. Trees Catherine and William had grown to love and look for were cut down... cars came through all day long, and all of them left something, more or less unsavoury, on the wayside grass...One by one the woods to which Catherine had taken her children were scattered with litter, sprouted notice boards and went out of bounds.'

As we face the challenge of undoing the damage caused by our reliance on the internal combustion engine and our lazy pollution of the natural world, *Hostages To Fortune* is a poignant account of a lost world.