CONTENTMENT IN THE "BACKWOODS"

Mr. Bill Prangnell with his sister, Miss Annie Prangnell, in the garden of the farmhouse at Newtown, where apart from a wireless set, life goes on much as it did 100 years ago. Their farm can only be found after difficulty, for no road leads to it - not even a track.

The farmer's only means of transport is a boat. His only water supply is a pond. The farmer, according to Aubrey de Selincourt's latest book, "The Channel Shore," which gave the first hint of this isolated residence, "is the most contented of men, without envy for what others enjoy."

Intrigued by the hint of mystery, a "County Press" reporter decided to locate the happy farmer and it turned out to be one of his most remarkable quests. He found that his steps had taken him back for a century into the rural life of the island. At first it was difficult to obtain a lead in my search (he writes) despite the explicit indication of the site on the rise of ground just to the eastward of a wide curve of Clamerkin Lake, but eventually I identified the man I sought as Mr Bill Prangnell, of Brickworks Farm.

BRICKWORKS HISTORY

Inquiries revealed that the brickworks were founded on this remote site early in the 19th century by Mr Henry Prangnell, who realised the possibilities of the fine quality of the clay to be found there, and, as principal, he established the business in conjunction with his twin brother William, and the younger brother Alfred. The brothers became famous for their speciality, white bricks, but also produced red bricks, fancy bricks, and tiles, all of which had to be transported across to Newtown by barge. Alfred became the expert of the family and eventually won the Island brickmaking championship. The
grandson, Tom, emigrated to Australia and New Zealand, finally returning to this country to operate the business for the remainder of his life. Some of the semi-tropical plants he brought back from New Zealand still flourish in the garden of the Farm. Since his death the family have turned to farming, concentrating on cattle, and because of the lack of transport for milk, Brickworks was one of the few farms allowed to continue producing butter throughout the war years.

THIRD TIME LUCKY

This information, together with innumerable family legends, whetted my appetite for the search. A map indicated the position of the brickworks, but two afternoons were spent in the famous search. A boat was the answer, I decided, but from the Newtown shore of the creek I found that the house and outbuildings were completely invisible. There were boats, but no boatman was available, and I determined to make another effort overland. Accordingly, I memorised the shape of the dense copse which screened the property, but before leaving Newtown I paused to admire the ornate bricks and tiles on some of the houses built from the local product. From the ancient borough I drove to Porchfield and then set off across country, which got rougher and wilder with every step, and over which no real track or path existed.

Fortunately, the ground had been baked hard by the sunshine of the last few weeks, but there were great areas to be traversed where the earth was pitted a foot deep with holes made by the feet of cattle, and which were obviously impassable in wet weather. This time my sense of direction was better, and after 45 minutes walking I sighted the concealing copse. Another five minutes elapsed before the first building, a long, low red-tiled drying shed, came into view, only 150 yards away. Sounds gave evidence that the building had been converted into a byre. As I drew nearer a man passed into the building carrying a pail, and then I had my first view of the entrance to the farmhouse itself - a shady pathway leading through a tangled orchard of plum trees. Walking towards the building, I was greeted pleasantly by Miss Annie Prangnell, who lives there with her sister, Miss Mary Prangnell, and brothers Bill and Ned, all lifelong teetotallers and non-smokers. As we chatted, Bill returned from a towing job at Porchfield, carrying a coil of heavy rope over his shoulder, and came forward immediately to extend a welcoming handclasp to a complete stranger.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

In looking at him, I could understand how he came to earn the description "the most contented of men". His bright blue eyes, the brightest blue I have ever seen, twinkled with delight as he proudly showed me round the house, pointing out where the old craftsmen, his forefathers, had decorated the hand-made wall bricks apparently quite haphazardly and according to the whim of the moment, but nonetheless beautifully. The door key motif predominated, but there were also elaborate designs in the relief interspersed with the heads of animals, fruits, and complete scenes, the whole surmounted by an artist's dream of a round twisted brick chimney. Mr Prangnell took me through the trees to the clifftop to show me where recent falls have revealed the strata of clay that made the works famous, and also pointed out the thicket in which runaway Borstal boys camped after breaking into his home to obtain food and a change of clothing. He also indicated where the wall of the building had been shattered by a "doodlebug" during the last war, the explosion throwing him out of bed. The family spent the next seven weeks sleeping in the air-raid shelter while completing repairs to the building!

COMPARATIVE VALUES

Neither he nor his sister appeared to mind the lack of such modern services as electricity, gas, water, or main drainage, although they admitted that they would not like to have to manage without their radio set. The only water available comes from a pond more than 100 yards away, and every drop has to be strained and boiled for use. For lighting they have oil lamps. When I jokingly remarked that it must be pleasant to have no electricity bills, Miss Prangnell replied, smilingly, "Yes, but the income tax man knows where to find us!"

SHARED DUTIES

While he rows a mile and a half up the creek to leave any farm produce for collection at the bridge, or to pick up any heavy supplies for the farm, Miss Annie takes charge of shopping. She trudges across that baffling stretch of countryside in all weathers to collect the family mail and, on Saturdays, her copy of the "County Press" from the post office at Porchfield. From there, if necessary, she catches a bus for Newport.

Bill is a first-class waterman, who knows every inch of the winding creek, and he is also a great authority on the raising of oysters, an industry in which he has taken an active part throughout his life. He told me the brickmaking had been abandoned by the family for more than 40 years, but as we parted we arranged a further meeting to discuss oysters next time there is an "R" in the month!