

Three hundred years ago London smog (and over-eating) killed a fantastic veteran

THE sky darkens; the very air turns a dirty, choking yellow; motorists slow to a crawl with headlamps peering through the midday gloom. . . . Smog has wrapped London in lethal darkness once more.

But smog is nothing new to the capital—except in name. Londoners have suffered from its effects through 17 reigns. Yes, the full-bottomed wigs of Charles I's days required a generous daily powdering to cover up London's grime. Smog did exist 300 years ago—to a lesser extent, it is true—but it killed just the same.

And it helped to kill the very "grandfather" of England's oldest inhabitants. For Thomas Parr was a ripe 152-year-old when smog—and over-eating—killed him in the Strand.

Tucked away in a corner of Shropshire, near the Welsh border, lies the little hamlet of Glyn. And there, in March, 1483—during the reign of King Edward IV—was born Thomas Parr.

To-day Glyn is part of Whittington, in the parish of Great Wollaston; but in the days of Edward IV, and until 1864, it came under the parish jurisdiction of Alberbury.

Unfortunately the Alberbury parish registers reach back into history no farther than 1564—so the actual date of Thomas Parr's birth can never be established beyond all doubt. And compulsory registration of births, deaths and marriages did not come into force until 1837.

His father was a small-time yeoman farmer named John Parr. Thomas was reared at Glyn and spent the first 17 years of his life working on the family farm, a leasehold property.

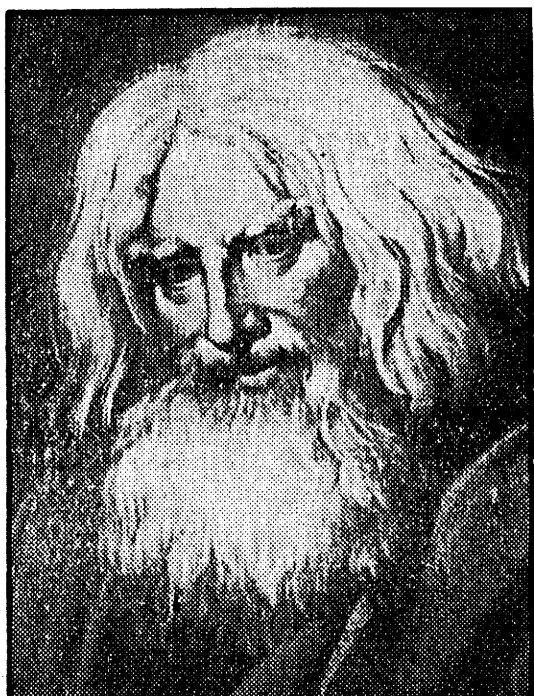
For the next 18 years—until he was 35—Thomas Parr worked for a neighbouring farmer as an ordinary labourer, and leading an apparently normal, if bachelor, life. Then his father died.

In 1518 he moved back to Glyn to carry on his father's work. The lease had a further four years to run and this is where we get our first unalterable date. For in 1522 his landlord, Mr. Lewis Porter, renewed the lease for a further 21 years.

TIME marched on. . . . In 1543 the lease was renewed again for another 21 years—but this time by John Porter, son of Lewis Porter. Time plodded on, relentlessly on—through the reigns of Edward VI, Lady Jane Grey's sojourn in the Tower; Mary I, and into the seventh year of Elizabeth I's rule. In 1564 it was grandson Hugh Porter who renewed it yet again—this time for life, and Thomas Parr was by then a mere 81. The lease did not expire for more than half a century!

Just one year earlier Parr had made a drastic change in his life. He married. Miss Jane Taylor—her father was named John but her age is unknown—was his wife for more than 30 years. They had two children; a boy named John, who survived ten weeks; and a girl, Joan, who lived only three.

Old Thomas Parr notched up his century in March, 1583. But if telegrams had been invented then it is extremely unlikely that the chaste and haughty Eliza



The artist represented Thomas Parr as a noble patriarch. He was not quite that . . .

NAUGHTY OLD PARR

both I would have sent her congratulations.

For old Tom's reputation was none too good and in 1588—when he was 105—he was in disgrace. One Katherine Milton bore him a child.

But because Old Tom was thought to be too venerable for the more normal forms of punishment, he did public penance—by standing in Alberbury Church wrapped in a white sheet.

When his wife died in 1595, Parr remained a widower for ten years until he was 122. Then he married another Jane. She was the daughter of John Floyd (or Flood) and the widow of Anthony Adda.

Retirement was a word not to be found in Parr's meagre vocabulary. For at the age of 130 he was still a very active farmer even threshing corn with a flail. But old age was catching him up at last. Within two or three years his eyesight failed and he was blind for the rest of his life.

Fame had waited a long time before reaching Thomas Parr, but in 1635 Thomas Howard, second Earl of Arundel, came to see him. The Earl was visiting his Shropshire estates, when he heard about this astonishing case of longevity. Promptly he arranged for Parr to be taken to London for viewing by King Charles I.

John Taylor, the "water poet" and a contemporary, wrote that a litter with two horses was provided for Old Tom, who was accompanied by the Earl's private fool and a member of his household, in charge of the little party.

THE story goes that when the Earl's servants arrived at the door of Parr's cottage they found a very old man, with a white beard, sitting there contemplating space. Asked whether he was ready for the journey, he replied "I am not Thomas Parr, but his son; my dad's in the house!"

So the long journey began. They passed through Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Coventry, Daventry, Stony Stratford and Redbourn. Finally, after about 12 days, the party reached London and the Earl's town residence, Arundel House, at the end of September.

And from there the "olde, olde, very olde man Thomas Parr" was taken to nearby Whitehall and the Court of King Charles. What sort of man did the King see? According to John Taylor, Parr had a handsome, wrinkled face; a tolerably neat beard; weakened limbs and "blood most chill and cold."

King Charles had a twinkle in his Royal eye as he asked: "You have lived longer than other men; what have you done more

than other men?" Old Parr's sightless eyes couldn't twinkle but there was a chuckle as he told of his penance in Alberbury Church at the age of 105.

"Fie, old man," retorted the King. "Can you remember nothing but your vices?"

His task accomplished, the Earl of Arundel moved his protegee into the Queen's Head public house nearby in the Strand. There everyone who was anyone in London's society came to see him. The King's Painter in Ordinary, Sir Anthony Van Dyck, was commissioned to execute a portrait.

Old Parr's most important visitor was Dr. William Harvey, one of the King's physicians and the man who discovered the circulation of the blood.

And Dr. Harvey, who was very far from being a credulous man, has left us the following notes on Parr: "He heard extremely well understood all that was said to him, answered immediately to questions, and had perfect apprehension of any matter in hand; he was also accustomed to walk about, slightly supported between two persons.

"HIS memory, however, was greatly impaired, so that he scarcely recollected anything of what had happened to him when he was a young man—nothing of public incidents or of the kings or nobles who had made a figure, or of the wars or troubles of his earlier life, or of the manners of society, or of the prices of things—in a word, of any of the ordinary incidents which men are wont to retain in their memories. He only recollected the events of the last few years."

Other people besides Harvey noticed the old man's daily habits. They have recorded that his digestion was excellent—though he had only one tooth—and he slept a great deal.

Harvey also gives us details of Parr's diet. ". . . by day or by night, observing no regular times for eating, he was ready

THE STRANGERS by

to discuss [con] eatable that ordinary diet rancid cheese, form, coarse a small drink whey.

On this s ing in his hou did this pool length of day.

But over-eat at work. W Old Parr fell difficult to br hours of Nov With him at wife, Jane th Harvey.

King Charl mortem to be Harvey perfor and noted the ber 16—the b birthday of t

Several phy sent and Ha noted: "All t appeared so nothing happ with the old r he might per paying the d for some th Parr's death

SWAN & EDG

The Wonder TYRON MAUR

JOHN FORD'S

THE

Colour by

LEICESTER



NG1

WELL GWYN?

