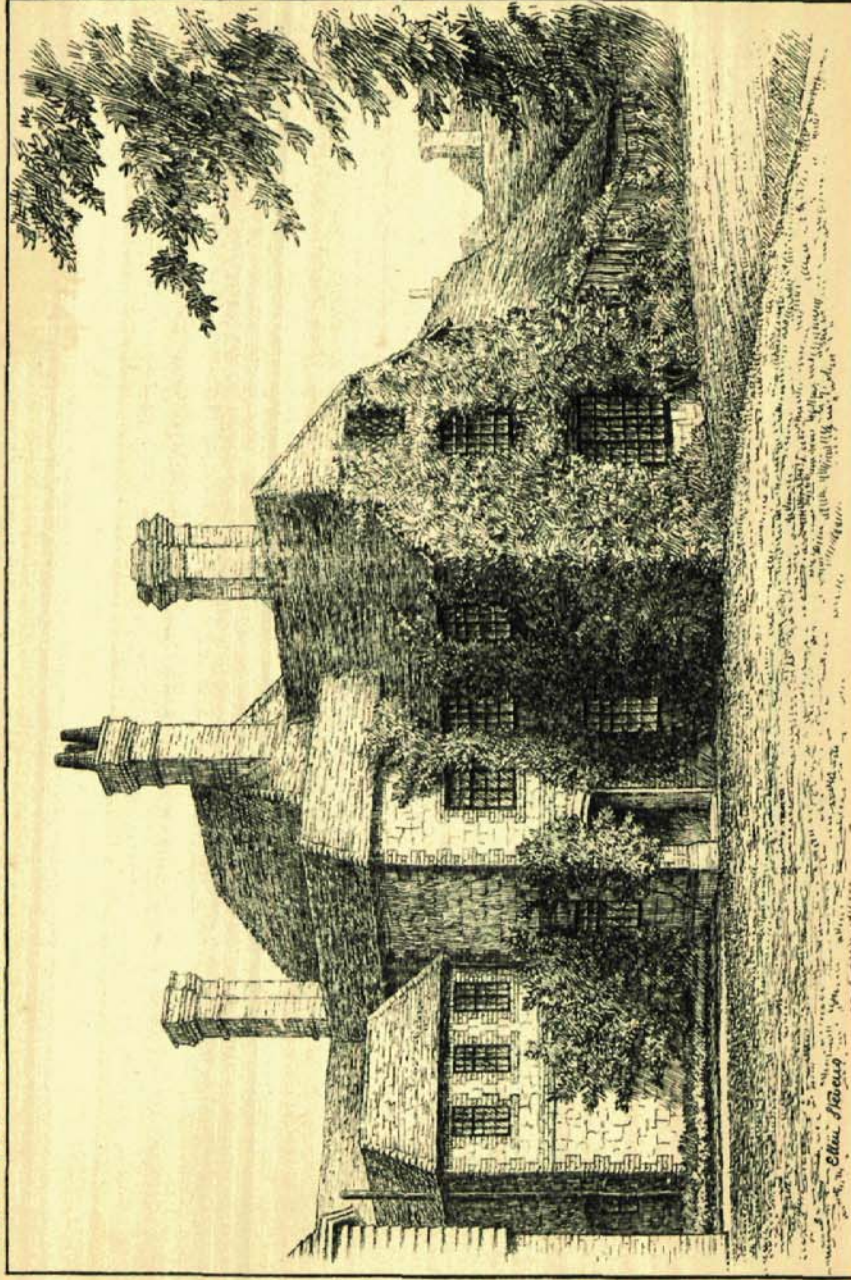




THE WAKES, GILBERT WHITE'S HOUSE, SELBORNE, HANTS—GARDEN FRONT.

GILBERT WHITE OF SELBORNE.

BY LINDA GARDINER.

When the Hampshire Field Club and Archæological Society came into existence in 1885, a proposal was made that it should bear the name of the Selborne Club or Society, a name in harmony with the pursuits and objects of its founders, who have since, however, wisely extended the field of observation to the Archæology and the general Antiquities of the county. The title of "Selborne Society" was subsequently adopted by a body of naturalists, in company with whom the Hampshire Field Club celebrated on June 24th, 1893, at Selborne, the Centenary of the death of Gilbert White. The meeting on that historic occasion was not the first expedition of the members of the Hampshire Society to the country of Gilbert White. They had already traversed the "hollow lanes," climbed the "Zigzag," viewed the landslip, and made pilgrimage to "The Wakes" and church, in company with the Geologists' Association, in 1891. Many individual Members were familiar, by near residence or by frequent visits, with every feature of the place, every view of "the vast range of mountains known as the South Downs," every "rugged gloomy scene" among the deep lanes, and with each nook and corner of the straggling village, with its thatched and timbered cottages, its Plestor or green, and its tree-crowned hanger,—the quiet Hampshire village which has become, as it were, one of the world's possessions.

A tablet in the old church, a modest head-stone in the churchyard, and a book that has passed into edition after edition, and is reckoned among the classics for all time; these are the memorials of the life of Gilbert White of Selborne, the little, kindly, unassuming parson of the 18th century, who seems

never to have been vain enough to have his portrait taken and who was best remembered by his younger village contemporaries as a small man in a wig and buckled shoes, who used to walk about the Selborne lanes, tap-tapping with his stick as he went, and to ride over on his pony each Sunday to take duty at Farringdon Church. The book is after all, a simple and, comparatively, short book. To not a few people it is something of a problem why such a volume should have won its place among the immortals while hundreds of more learned, more brilliant, and infinitely more lengthy and pretentious works have been laid on the shelf and left there.

"The secret of the charm of his writing", as Professor Newton¹ remarks, "has been sought in vain. Some have ascribed it to his way of identifying himself in feeling with the animal kingdom, though to this sympathy there were notable exceptions. Some, like Lowell, set down the 'natural magic' of White to the fact that 'open the book where you will it takes you out of doors', but the same is to be said of other writers, who yet remain comparatively undistinguished. . . . If we grant, what is partially true, that it was the first book of its kind to appear in this country, and therefore had no rivals to encounter before its reputation was established, we find that alone insufficient to account for the way in which it is welcomed by thousands of readers, to many of whom—and this especially applies to its American admirers—scarcely a plant or animal mentioned in it is familiar or even known but by name. . . . That he was a prince among observers, nearly always observing the right thing in the right way is a very great merit, but not a few others have been as industrious and as accurate without attaining the rank assigned to him."

Probably all these things have gone towards making the fame of the *Natural History of Selborne*; but perhaps greater than any of them is the simple sincerity which shines from every page. It is the old charm of the man who writes because he has something to say as contrasted with the man who writes because he wishes to say something; the man who speaks of the chosen study of a lifetime, not he who has "got up" his subject in a fit of transitory or manufactured enthusiasm. No word of it was written for

¹ Professor Newton's account of Gilbert White's life in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, is esteemed one of the most admirable histories of a naturalist ever compiled. A private re-print, as revised by the author, was placed at the disposal of the writer.

effect, or even for publication. Four of the letters, on swallows and martins, were read before the Royal Society; but all were penned simply for the information of his friends. And when a man writes in plain sincerity what is in his own mind, the very force of that sincerity is apt to find its way to the minds of others. White's own work is a proof of this. His Natural History, the pursuit of his life, comes to the thought of every one at the mention of Selborne. When publication was in view, he determined to add an account of the antiquities of the village, to which he devoted most careful investigation; but men do not know White as the Selborne antiquary. The quiet directness of White's manner, even in its occasional didactic tone, and the old world leisure his observations and occupations suggest, have a fascination of their own, especially in an age like this, when—except for the school which he may be said to have founded—every observation must support a theory, every wild flower lend itself to a deduction, and every throstle's song be weighted with an emotion or a moral.

The earliest evidence of White's predilections appears in a record reported to have been made by him in 1737 of the coming of the cuckoo and the departure of the wild geese; he was then seventeen and on the eve of entering Oxford. Two or three years later his skill in "landscape painting" in some letters from Devonshire won the admiration of his college friend Mulso. But there was then, it would seem, a good deal of the mere rambler and sportsman about him and it was not until he had passed his thirtieth year and taken up his abode—except for one brief interlude—at Selborne, that he began to keep the Gardener's Kalendar which was the precursor of the Naturalist's Journal, and the Letters. Practically Selborne was his life-long home, though when he was born at the Parsonage, on July 18th, 1720, that house was not the residence of his father, John White, a barrister, but of his grandfather, the Rev. Gilbert White; and when the family returned to the village to dwell at "The Wakes," some six or eight years later (after a sojourn at Compton, near Guildford) that now venerable dwelling had been newly built; having been bequeathed by her father to Mrs. Charles White, wife of the vicar of Swarraton and

Bradley. Its name is derived from a former owner of the land, one Wake, of whom it was purchased by the elder Gilbert.

The education of the younger Gilbert was commenced at a school at Farnham and continued at Basingstoke Grammar School, under Thomas Warton, whose two sons, Joseph and Thomas, were fellow pupils; the former rose to be headmaster of Winchester, the latter became professor of poetry at Oxford and poet laureate. While White was at Basingstoke the destruction of a portion of the Holy Ghost Chapel took place, to which he alludes with reference to the fragment remaining of Selborne Priory. He says: "wantonness no doubt had a share in the demolition, for boys love to destroy what men venerate and admire. A remarkable instance of this propensity the writer can give from his own knowledge. When a school boy, more than fifty years ago, he was eye-witness, perhaps a party concerned, in the undermining of a portion of that fine old ruin at the north end of Basingstoke town, known by the name of Holy Ghost Chapel. Very providentially the vast fragment, which these thoughtless little engineers endeavoured to sap, did not give way as soon as might have been expected; but it fell the night following with such violence that shook the very ground and awakening the inhabitants of the neighbouring cottages, made them start up in their beds as if they had felt an earthquake."

Proceeding to Oxford in 1740, Gilbert White graduated B.A. in 1743, and was elected a Fellow of Oriel in the following year. In 1747 he was ordained deacon, and became curate to his uncle, Charles White of Swarraton; but he lived at Selborne, and in 1751 acted as curate in charge there, for a few months, under Dr. Bristow. In 1752-3 he was proctor of his University and dean of Oriel; next year curate of Durley, and subsequently of West Deane, in Wilts. In 1757, he took the small college living of Moreton Pinkney, in Northants (a living held now, one is glad to know, by a lover of birds and nature, the Rev. R.D. White). Gilbert White had no intention of residing there, however, and settled down permanently at "The Wakes," which passed to him on the death of his uncle in 1763. No offers of better livings could draw him henceforth from his

beloved village, where the remaining years of his life were passed; but he acted continuously for a quarter of a century as curate in charge of Farringdon, his first signature in the parish register occurring in 1760 and the last on New Year's Day, 1785.

A quiet leisured life, no doubt, was that of the bachelor cleric, but nevertheless it was a leisureliness that lay more in the age than the individual. "He lived," observes Dr. Bowdler Sharpe in his new edition of *White's Works*,¹ "in a different age, and although he tells us sometimes that he was much 'hurry'd' there was none of that dreadful haste which characterises our national life at the present day. In his own day the parson naturalist was by no means a lazy man, and Mr. Lowell is mistaken when he says Mr. White seems never to have had any harder work to do than to study the habits of his feathered fellow-townfolk or to watch the ripening of the peaches on his wall." Apart from the active interests which the work of a naturalist and a gardener implies, there is every reason to suppose that Gilbert White did his duty as a clergyman in times when less strenuous efforts were expected of the clergy than now is the case, and that he was an affectionate member of a large and attached family circle. Pleasant pictures of village and parsonage life of the period are supplied by the diaries of Henry White, Gilbert's younger brother, who was Vicar of Fyfield, and whose journal has been edited by the late Rev. R. H. Clutterbuck—himself most ardent of Selbornians, most genial of antiquaries, and kindest of friends. We read there of rural cheese and apple fairs, of the growing of tobacco and valerian as well as of more ordinary crops, of musical evenings with violin and harpsichord, of expeditions to concerts at Salisbury, of meteorological phenomena, of domestic economies and farming experiences, of trials with servants "past all reprehension," of influenza, and of election riots.² Probably in Selborne the round of life was much the same; while the Garden Kalendar sufficiently proves that it

¹ *White's Selborne*, edited by R. Bowdler Sharpe, L.L.D., London, 1900.

² Mr. Clutterbuck's notes on the parishes of Fyfield (extracts from Henry White's Diary); re-edited by E. D. Webb, were published at Salisbury, in 1897.

was not Gilbert White's way to be satisfied with watching the peaches ripen. He knew, as Dean Hole writes; in his preface to the *Kalendar* in the 1900 edition already alluded to,

"When, where, and how to perform all garden work, and when the process was important he did it or saw it done. His man-servant 'John' and (Robin) 'Tull' were his subordinates. He employed other labourers at times to do the rough work; 'Dame Turner and her girls' come in to weed the walks; but he sows his own choice seeds, strikes his own cuttings, prunes his vines, transplants a mulberry tree which he had raised from a layer, makes a bed of aromatic herbs, superintends the burning, grubbing, and planting in new ground added to his garden, the cutting of the alleys, the levelling of his terrace."

The cutting of the pathway on the Hanger must have been the most momentous of these operations, and it is thus recorded by Henry White:—

"1782, April 4, The New Path up Selborne Hanger cut obliquely fr ye foot of ye Zigzag to ye corner of Wadden Close, opens the most picturesque view of the inside wood in ye style of Reubens; and the most amazing views ever seen,"

Moreover, the home duties included personal surveillance over the vintage of the vines, the brewing of the beer, and the curing of the hams.

Apart from home chronicles we have records of frequent visits to relations in Sussex and London. Ringmer in Sussex was the home of his aunt Rebecca Snooke and of that most celebrated of tortoises which subsequently became an inmate of the Selborne garden. The house in which Aunt Snooke lived is still standing, Mr. Hudson tells us in his delightful "*Nature in Downland*," and it had the curious fate of being occupied some fifty years ago by a tenant who had all the nightingales frequenting the grounds destroyed because their late singing disturbed his rest.

"There are many memories of Gilbert White in this part of downland, as it was his custom when travelling to Ringmer to break his journey at Chilgrove, a charming spot among the downs about midway between Petersfield and Chichester, and at Shopwyke House, close to Chichester. Chilgrove Manor was owned by his friend, Mr. Woods, who gave White the information about the stone-curlews on the downs; and Shopwyke House was owned by another member of the Woods family, who was Gilbert White's relation by marriage."

A yearly visit to London likewise varied the busily peaceful country round. His brother Thomas was a wholesale ironmonger in the city, with a suburban residence in Lambeth, and was a botanist, antiquary and F.R.S. His brother Benjamin was a Fleet Street publisher, and published the works of Thomas Pennant; and it appears to have been over the proof-sheets of the "British Zoology" that the acquaintance began for which naturalists of all time have to be grateful. One could wish that Mr. E. J. Sullivan, who gives us pleasingly quaint sketches of Gilbert White in his study, Gilbert White setting his watch by the old sun-dial, and Gilbert riding down one of the hollow lanes, had given us also a fanciful record of the meeting of these two naturalists in the low-ceilinged book-lined sanctum in 18th century Fleet Street. Two years later White first met Daines Barrington, whose *Naturalist's Journal* was another of Benjamin White's publications; and it was seemingly about 1770 that the first idea of publishing from his own pen a history of his own neighbourhood was taken into consideration by Gilbert White as a possibility "had I resolution and spirits to set about it." The work was eventually issued by Benjamin in 1789, in the form of a substantial quarto, at a guinea; and the fact that this was the only edition published during the author's lifetime shows that it did not leap into any phenomenal popularity, though it had the respectable success among those of kindred mind and tastes which was all, we may be sure, its writer ever anticipated. Since then over eighty editions have appeared, science and art vying to honour the old naturalist of Selborne.

"The Wakes," Gilbert White's old house, stands in the village street. The most characteristic portion, the back, as shown in Miss Stevens' sketch, has changed but little under the hands of later residents. The "great parlour," which he added, his study with its window looking upon the big garden, the kitchen—now a library—the bedroom in which he died, and the old brewhouse, still remain; his bookcases and the staff with which he tap-tapped the Selborne lanes, are likewise preserved.

Wholly unaltered, happily, through either the zeal of admirers or by the monument-loving vulgar, is the humble headstone in the churchyard inscribed.

G. W.

26TH JUNE,

1793.

A marble tablet to White's memory was placed against the wall outside the church, but has since been removed, for its better preservation, into the chancel and fixed to the south wall. The words "the fifth grave from this wall" refer to its original position. The inscription is as follows:—

"In the fifth Grave from this Wall are interred the Remains of
The Revd. GILBERT WHITE, M.A.,
Fifty years Fellow of Oriel College, in Oxford,
and Historian of this, his native Parish,
He was the eldest Son of John White, Esq., Barrister-at-Law,
and Ann, his Wife, only Child of
Thomas Holt, Rector of Streatham, in Surrey,
which said John White was the only Son of Gilbert White,
formerly Vicar of this Parish.

"Apart from Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle, and other places of historical interest in the British Islands," says Dr. Bowdler Sharpe, "there is probably no place, save Stratford-on-Avon, to which the pilgrims of the Anglo-Saxon race render more respectful tribute than to the lowly headstone which marks the grave of Gilbert White of Selborne."

Since writing the above, two volumes have appeared—*"Life and Letters of Gilbert White,"* by Rashleigh Holt-White—giving the facts of Gilbert White's life in much fuller detail, and containing a great many letters now published for the first time. These letters, preserved by Lord Stamford, who is a descendant of the family, date from early days at Oriel, and carry us through much of Gilbert White's life. His character is here vindicated from some attacks which have been made—that by maintaining a discreet silence he

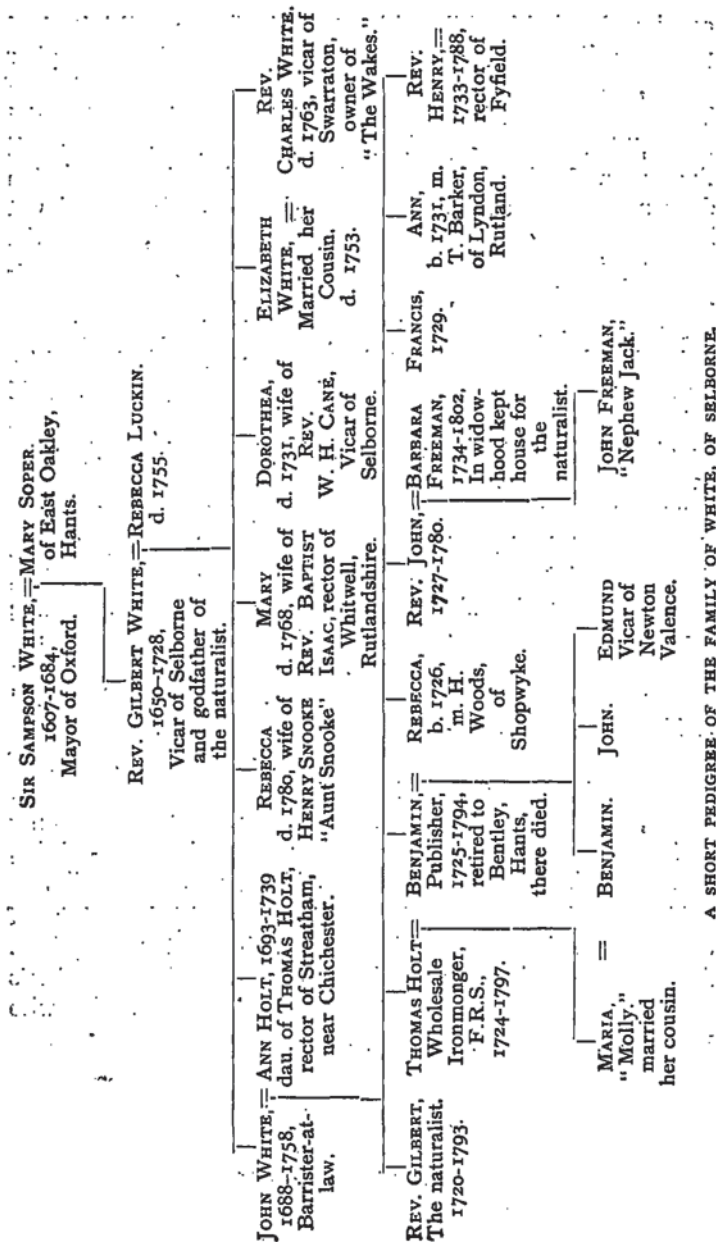
continued to hold a fellowship at Oriel after he had inherited property which ought to have vacated it. His biographer shows, by statistics of rental, that the representation of White as a man of large income, "living on his patrimonial estate," is quite erroneous. In fact, the net income from all the land and other property which came into his possession does not seem to have exceeded £100, and he would not have been called upon to resign his fellowship, unless the property inherited brought a larger income than the emoluments from his college.

As regards the accusation that he held at one time a living in which he did not reside, we cannot fairly judge him by the present standard of clerical obligations. We should infer, from these letters, that he took a view of the duty to provide for the spiritual wants of his parish, higher than the average of the day.

The biographer puts forward the absurd suggestion that the name White is derived from "Jutæ or Guti or Viti." It doubtless originally referred to a light or fair complexion, corresponding with French, *Le Blond*; the Italian, *Biondi*; the Dutch, *De Witt*; the German, *Weiss*; and the old classical *Candidus Chlorus*, etc. On the other side we give a short pedigree of the White family, and we are indebted to Mr. Rashleigh Holt-White for the following:

Thomas White, brother of Gilbert, prefixed the name of Holt to his surname on inheriting in 1776 a property in Essex, from his maternal great-uncle Mr. Holt. His only male descendants now living are Mr. Rashleigh Holt-White, of Warren Wood, Bexley Heath, Kent, and his family.

No male descendents of any other son of John White of Selborne survive except of Henry White, rector of Fyfield. Lord Stamford is the most junior member of his mother's family, being a grandson of the Rev. Francis White, who was Henry White's youngest son.



ITINERARY OF THE MINISTRY OF GILBERT WHITE.

COMPILED FROM SOME OF HIS SERMONS.

In April, 1894, Messrs. Sotheby held a sale of rare books and MSS. Amongst them was the author's autograph MS. of *Gilbert White's Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, said to contain many passages not in the printed editions, and never to have been out of the possession of the family. Bidding commenced at £210 and stopped at £290, at which price it was knocked down to Mr. Pearson. At the same time and place some MS. sermons in the handwriting of Gilbert White were sold, and six were secured by Mr. Tregaskis, the antiquarian bookseller of 232, High Holborn. Amongst them two which appear to have been favourite discourses for Easter Day and Whit Sunday (*sic*). These interesting relics, all very neatly written, were endorsed with the date and place of delivery. Mr. Tregaskis kindly allowed the endorsements to be copied, and by this means we are enabled to construct a fairly complete Itinerary of Gilbert White's ministry from its commencement in 1748 to within a month of his death in 1793. The early sermons were preached at Swarraton and Bradley, where White was curate to his uncle Charles; at Durley, West Dean and East Grimstead, which parishes he served as curate for a very short time. At Faringdon (*sic*) (he officiated as curate for over 20 years; occasionally serving neighbouring churches, and in his declining years officiated at Selborne only. After the year, will be found in the following list, the place where his Easter sermon was preached, and next the place of the Whit Sunday sermon. The dates and places of some other sermons will also be found. The MSS. from which the list has been compiled appear to have served on many occasions in the same place, and were subsequently in the possession of the Rev. Glyde White, curate of Ewelme in 1813. They were priced at three guineas each and met with ready purchasers from Mr. Tregaskis, to whom our thanks are due for allowing notes to be made in April, 1896, while in his possession.

- 1720.—July 18th, Gilbert White born.
 1748.—Ordained deacon by Secker, Bishop of Oxford.
 1749.—Ordained priest by Beauclerk, Bishop of Hereford, by letters dimissory from Hoadley, Bishop of Winchester.
 1749.—Easter Day, Swarraton, where he was curate to his uncle, Charles White, rector of Swarraton and Bradley, 1733 to 1759.
 1750.—Easter Day, Bradley.
 1751.—Easter Day, Swarraton.
 1752.—Proctor at Oxford.
 1753.—Dean of Oriel College.
 1754.—Easter Day and Aug. 11th. Durley.
 1755.—July 20th, West Dean and Grimstead (Hants and Wilts).
 1756.—Whit Sunday and May 9th, Selborne and Empshot; Aug. 22nd, Newton Valence and Hawkley.
 1757.—Whit Sunday and Feb. 27th, Selborne; Sept. 1st, West Deane and Grimstead; Sept. 25th, Newton Valence and Hawkley; Nov. 13th, Selborne.
 1758.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Aug. 27th, Selborne; Oct. 22nd, Faringdon.
 1759.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and July 1st, Selborne; Oct. 7th, Swarraton; Oct. 14th, Bradley.
 1760.—Whit Sunday, June 15th, and Aug. 17th, Faringdon; June 22nd, Selborne.
 1761.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Feb. 13th, and June 7th, Faringdon.
 1762.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, March 7th, and March 12th, Faringdon; March, 28th, Chute; April 4th, North Tedworth; April 25th, Chute.
 1763.—Easter Day and Whit Sunday, Faringdon.
 1764.—Whit Sunday, March 4th, and June, Faringdon.
 1765.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Jan. 13th, Faringdon.
 1766.—June 15th, Faringdon.
 1767.—Jan. 25th, Faringdon.
 1768.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Sept. 18th, Faringdon.
 1769.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Feb. 26th, and April 23rd, Faringdon.
 1770.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Nov. 4th, and Dec. 2nd, Faringdon.
 1771.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Dec. 8th, Faringdon.
 1772.—Easter Day, June 21st, and Sept. 13th, Faringdon.
 1773.—Easter Day, March 7th and Sept. 5th, Faringdon; Sept. 26th, Newton (Valence).
 1774.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Oct. 30th, Faringdon.
 1775.—Whit Sunday, and Nov. 19th, Faringdon.
 1776.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Mar. 31st, Faringdon; Oct. 6th, Selborne; Oct. 13th, Chawton.
 1777.—April 13th, Selborne; April 20th, Faringdon.
 1778.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Feb. 22nd, and April 15th, Faringdon.
 1779.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Feb. 7th, and Dec. 12th, Faringdon.
 1780.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Feb. 4th, Faringdon.
 1781.—Easter Day, April 29th, and August 19th, Faringdon.
 1782.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Feb., Faringdon; April 14th, Selborne; Nov. 10th, Faringdon.

- 1783.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, May 18th, and Aug. 17th, Faringdon.
 1784.—Easter Day, Faringdon; Sept. 19th, Selborne.
 1785.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Feb. 20th, July 17th, and Nov. 20th, Selborne.
 1786.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Oct. 22nd, Selborne
 1787.—Easter Day, Aug. 12th, and Nov. 18th, Selborne.
 1788.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, and Aug. 31st, Selborne.
 1789.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Aug. 23, and Nov. 22nd, Selborne.
 1790.—Easter Day and Whit Sunday, Selborne.
 1791.—Easter Day, Whit Sunday, Aug. 21st, and Oct. 12th, Selborne.
 1792.—Easter Day and Whit Sunday, Selborne.
 1793.—March 31st, April 19th (The general Fast on account of the war with France), and May 19th, Selborne. Gilbert White died in his 73rd year, June 26th.

G. W. M.
