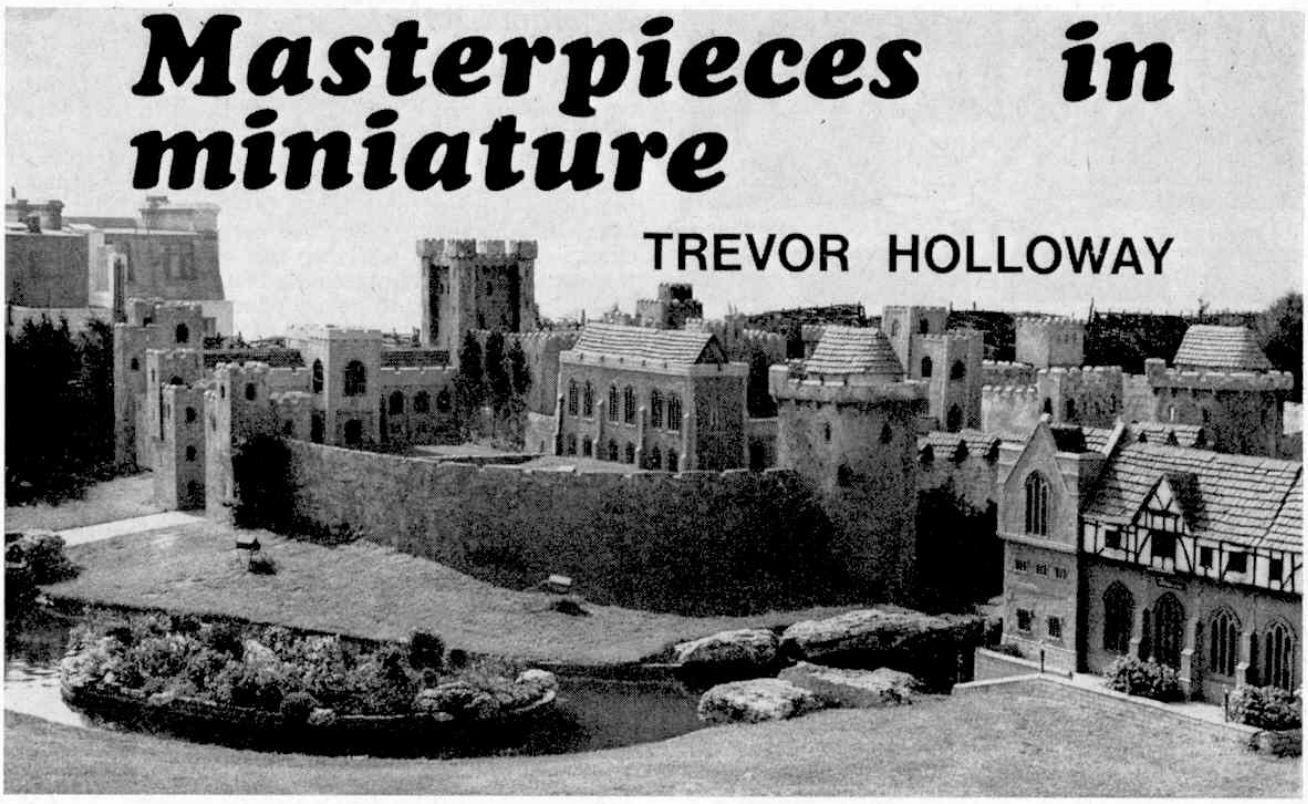
Masterpieces in miniature

TREVOR HOLLOWAY



ONE MORNING in 1936, Charles Morris, landlord of "The Old New Inn" at Bourton on the Water, in the heart of the lovely Coswold country, was gazing thoughtfully at his vegetable garden wondering how he could convert it into something more attractive.

His first idea was to reproduce a miniature glen with waterfall and stream flowing through a grassy valley, and spanned by little stone bridges in the village. Then he thought of a much more ambitious scheme—to reproduce the *whole* of the village in miniature, from the Church of St. Lawrence down to the smallest cottage.

Rome wasn't built in a day, neither was the model village of Bourton on the Water! Actually it took Mr. Morris and five other men four years to complete the task. Every building and every feature was carefully reproduced to the scale of one-ninth of the original, and everything was set exactly in position.

One of the most fascinating features of the village is the miniature River Windrush, about three feet wide, flowing from the working model of the mill through the whole length of the village. It is spanned by five little stone bridges, all of which are precise replicas of the famous bridges of Bourton.

Dominating the village is the Church of St. Lawrence and visitors are at once attracted by the voices of the choir which have been specially recorded and are relayed from a loudspeaker hidden away in the tiny chancel. The clock in the tower chimes every quarter hour, and the largest bell is only six inches in diameter.

The Baptist Church, with its beautifully carved miniature rose window, is also equipped with recordings of church music, and like the Church of St. Lawrence, it is completely furnished within. The shops of the butcher, baker and grocer are all to be seen, built of mellow Costwold stone, as are the bank, post office, smithy and the numerous other buildings.

The village can be viewed through a special kind of periscope which gives the illusion that it is the visitors who are small and the buildings life-size. Perhaps even more remarkable than the model village is the amazing *model* of the model village! It is small wonder that Bourton's Lilliput village attracts many thousands of visitors every year, including large numbers from overseas.

Britain's Lilliput villages are not mere collections of toy houses constructed of plaster and plywood. They are marvels of miniature craftsmanship, scale-built of brick and stone, exact reproductions of the various periods of architecture they represent—from Norman to the present day.

There are castles, ruined abbeys, country mansions, schools and colleges, and almost every type of building one might expect to find in rural England today. So perfect are they in detail that unless photographed with people in the picture to give a clue of their scale, it is well-nigh impossible to tell from the photograph that they are not actual full-scale buildings. Even the trees and shrubs in the gardens are miniature living plants.

A close rival to the model village at Bourton is "Little Britain", which you will find along the seafront at Weston-super-Mare. It comprises over fifty buildings and covers half an acre. It is not intended to be a model of any particular village, but rather a composite picture of all that it best in architecture in rural Britain.

Actually, "Little Britain" comprises the country town of Compton Fiddlestix and the nearby village of Stocks Green. The model took four years to build and nine months to "marry" to the site. One thousand miniature trees and shrubs had to be planted, lawns established, hundreds of electric lights installed, and sixty tons of Forest of Dean stone were required for landscaping purposes. The scale employed was 1 in. to 1 ft.

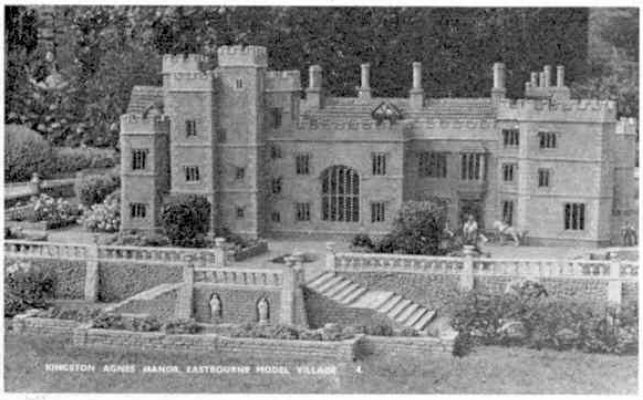
Compton Fiddlestix has an imposing town hall, a

solid old stone-built inn, picturesque alms houses, police and fire stations, antique shop, cafes and hotels. On the far side of the river stands St. Crispin's College, complete with its own chapel, from the inside of which comes the sound of organ music. As a background, the town has a fine old medieval castle with moat, and some charming waterfalls.

Beyond the town is the manor house, complete with real miniature roses growing in profusion. There are oast houses, a windmill, a ruined abbey and a fine old coaching inn.

The story behind the building of " Little Britain " is the story of a man who made his hobby his profession. He is Mr. S. E. Deboo, of St. Leonards-on-Sea, who has also designed the model villages at Ramsgate, Eastbourne and Hastings.

Says Mr. Deboo: " Ever since I was old enough to carve my initials on the dining-room table (and in spite of the hiding I got for so doing!) I have been passionately interested in wood-carving and model-making. Later, this was coupled to an equally great interest in landscape gardening—in particular, rock work and the growing of miniature shrubs and flowers. At the age of thirteen I was privileged to help with the building of the first model village in the world—at Bekonscot, Buckinghamshire. My work is both my pleasure and my hobby."



Above: Kingston Agnes Manor, Eastbourne.

Top: General view of the village at Bourton on the Water.

Bottom: The Abbey at Eastbourne Model Village.

The model village at Bekonscot, Bucks, 'father' of all model villages, is a delightful mixture of ancient and modern, set against a background of trees and bushes. There are houses of brick, stone, plaster and timber, all of which are now mellowed by time and weather.

Model railway fans in particular will be interested to know that Bekonscot model village has its own miniature railway, complete with country station and scale-model rolling-stock. It is a village which has managed to keep its old-world charm, yet at the same time adapt itself to modern trends.

The model village at Hastings is called Ganneymede. It covers half an acre and took three years to build. This particular village is famed for its old-world buildings, such as the Bishop's Lodging house, Prior's Cloister, Bargate, Vintners' Hall and the impressive ruins of Tangbourne Abbey.

We can stroll around the boundaries of the parish church with its well-kept churchyard, then pass on our way to old Fosse Mill and so to the 'massive-in-miniature' Ganneymede Castle, which stands sentinel at the bend of the river commanding the approaches

to the village.

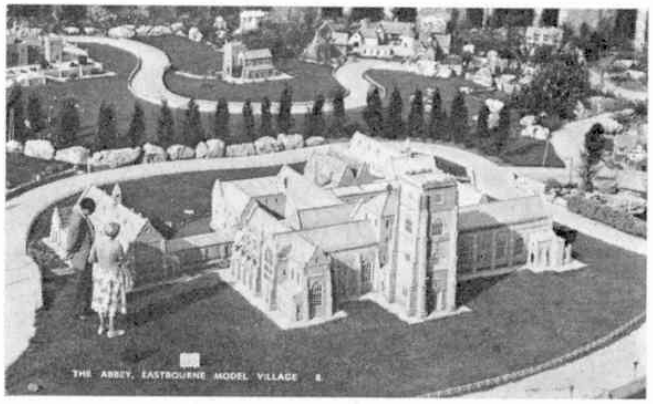
There is much else to see at Ganneymede—the stately building of King's College; Home Farm with its quaint old oast houses; Callis Court Manor, standing in gracious parkland; and hundreds of miniature flowers and shrubs, including dwarf rhododendrons, azaleas, daffodils, roses and conifers.

An outstanding feature of the model village at Eastbourne is a model of historic Fountains Abbey, Yorkshire. The real abbey stands in ruins, but the model at Eastbourne shows us the abbey as it would be if ever rebuilt. It is based on expert research and is claimed to be one of the finest architectural models in the country.

Here also we see the 'massive' medieval fortress of Kingsmere Castle, standing proudly on the far side of the river. Nearby, in well-appointed grounds, is Kingston Agnes Manor, alleged by our guide book to have been built in 1589.

Further exploration will reveal a fine old parish church, a dignified town hall, picturesque old timbered shops, a market cross and a couple of centuries-old inns.

Ramsgate's model village is a beauty spot in miniature. The delightful half-timbered houses are reflected in a winding, gently-flowing stream. A battlemented castle stands watch over the village, and the college cricket team can be seen in action on a velvety stretch of turf running down to the water's edge.

It comes as something of a surprise to discover that this otherwise peaceful village boasts its own airport, complete with modern terminal, runway and a giant (in miniature) four-engined plane standing by to take off on a flight to who-knows-where!

Apart from their value as a tourist attraction, Britain's model villages provide overwhelming proof that fine craftsmanship is still keenly appreciated in this age of mechanisation and mass production.