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English Chocolate, Ghanaian Cocoa

By Ryan Minor

On September 4th 2012 I visited the village of Bournville, England, the home of Cadbury Brothers Chocolate. Bournville was created in the 1890's as a safe haven for the company's employees, who, like most factory workers of the day, were subjected to the oppressive and polluted living conditions of England's newly forming industrial cities. The Chocolatiers founded the village on Quaker Christian principles and believed in the equality of all people. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the village consisted of approximately three hundred homes, a dining hall, a polo field, a swimming and fitness facility, shops, parks, schools, churches, and the Cadbury's factory. The Cadburys themselves personally financed most of these projects, including the homes. To this day Bournville is considered one of the most beautiful villages in England.



Figure 1: Cadbury factory, Bourneville, England. Photo by author.

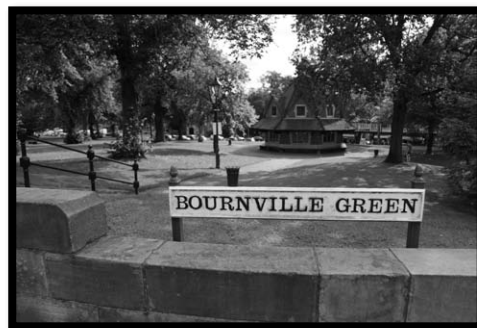


Figure 2-3: Row houses and pre-school & primary school in Bournville, England. England. Photos by author.

Walking down the streets it is hard to not fall in love with the surroundings. Trees line most of the well-kept streets, and at every turn there are open fields of wispy grass, or manicured parks and lawns. With clean appearances and uniform lines the original row houses still stand straight and tall, reflecting the sense of pride their Victorian reformers must have felt when they first saw them completed over a century ago.

The pre-school and primary school are housed in beautiful brick buildings from this same era, and boast one of the most elaborate bell towers in the nation. Next to these schools is a large park, with a lawn-bowling club at one end, a large playground on the other, and the Bourn brook cutting through its center. Across the street from this park is the factory itself. A large, freshly mown lawn stretches out in front of the massive factory complex, which is partially hidden from view by numerous mature trees of various shades of green surrounding its perimeter. As I approached the factory I was struck by the sweet smell of chocolate infused with the summer breeze; I thought to myself, even the air in Bournville has benefitted from the benevolence of the Cadburys.

I spent the rest of my day touring the factory, walking the streets enjoying the parks, visiting Selly Manor (a thirteenth century home the Cadbury's had moved to Bournville and restored), and soaking in the experience of witnessing, firsthand, one of the greatest social reform projects of Victorian England.



Figures 4-6: Selly manor / church / Bournville green and pavilion. Photo by author.

In the mid-afternoon, somewhere around three o'clock, as I was heading for the train station, I passed by the central park one last time. By then dozens of school children were running and climbing on the playground, while others played football (soccer) in the open field next to it. An equal number of parents stood by, watching them play, happily talking with each other in the soft light of the mild English sun as it peaked through scattered clouds. As I was listening to the children laughing, as they ran in lush green grass, a hint of chocolate passed by my nose once again. This combination of sight, sound, and smell, triggered an unexpected smile on my face. In that moment I realize the full weight of what this village would have meant to the working poor of 19th century England; it would have seemed like a fairytale come to life.

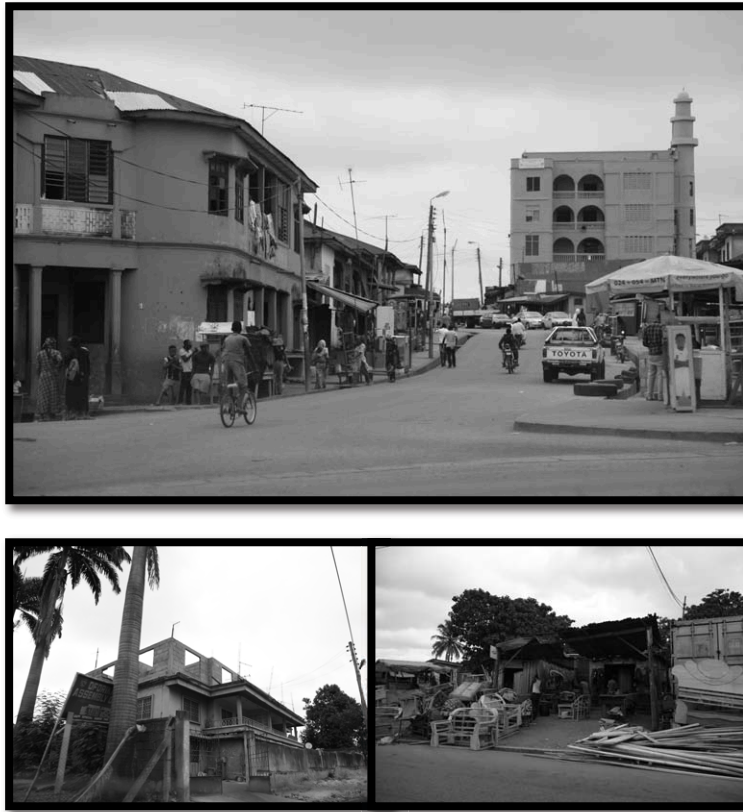
The next week I boarded a plane and headed for Ghana, in West Africa. Since 1911 Ghana has been one of the leading producers of cocoa in the world. Cocoa comes from a bean, which grows on a tree, which will only produce its spoils in equatorial climates under proper conditions. In other words, cocoa will not grow in England, or any part of Europe for that matter.



Figures 7-8: Cocoa pod / Cocoa before and after fermentation. Photo by author.

Cocoa is the primary ingredient in all chocolate products and has long been the largest export of Ghana. Literally hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians cultivate cocoa each year. While in Ghana I visited two cities, and some of the surrounding countryside. The first city I visited was Accra, which is the capital, and the second was Kumasi, in the region of Asante. Accra is situated on the coast and is home to 2.2 million people. Kumasi is an inland tropical city, with thick forest zones, and fertile soil perfectly suited for

growing cocoa. Kumasi was once the capital of the great Asante Empire and today is home to roughly 1.5 million people.



Figures 9-11: Kumasi streets and businesses. Photos by author.

The contrast between the appearance and standard of living in the chocolate producing city of Bournville, and the cocoa growing regions in Ghana could not be more startling. Both Kumasi and Accra are architectural hodgepodes of buildings (many unfinished or in disrepair), endless traffic jams on dirt or roughly paved roads, open sewers, constant power outages, and rivers heavy laden with garbage. In fact, many people live in previously abandoned structures, or in the back of the stores they work out of. And while Accra is also home to one of the largest airports in West Africa, one of the most modern universities on the continent, and multiple large scale development projects, including an indoor shopping mall that is similar to those in the United States; on the whole, the city, and much of the nation, remain without many simply

conveniences we have come to consider necessities in the Western world.



Figures 12-13: University of Ghana Balme library / Accra street view from window. Photos by author.

Many Ghanaian farmers have long battled poverty and live in regions that lack basic sanitation, clean water sources, and adequate schools for their children. Beyond that, numerous farming families are also heavily in debt from lean harvesting years, as cocoa is expensive to farm, requiring fresh soil, fertilizers, pesticides, and hired labor to cultivate each season.

As I walked the streets and rode in taxicabs around Accra and Kumasi, I was confronted time and again by the question of why Ghana has remained largely poor or undeveloped, despite the fact that the country has provided a substantial percentage of the core ingredient of the multi-billion dollar chocolate industry for over one hundred years. Furthermore, visiting Bournville, Accra, and Kumasi, all within a week's time, forces one to ask questions regarding both the historical and current fairness of the international chocolate commodity supply chain; as well as, general questions pertaining to the ethics of capitalism,

industrialization, imperialism, colonization, racial hierarchy, international labor exploitation, corporate responsibility, purposeful underdevelopment, and post-colonial government corruption. Questions that cannot be answered in this writing, but that are related to my current research, and the reasons why I visited these locations in the first place.

The Cadburys were obviously interested in labor reform and equality, but they were also part of the British Empire of the 19th and early 20th century; and as such, appear to have subscribed to Western values of invasive paternalistic rule and enlightened socio-cultural “reforms” that, in most cases, involved the removal of African autonomy in exchange for forced colonial submission. If nothing more, the constant struggle among African cocoa farmers for financial stability points to the fact that English chocolatiers never took the same initiative in alleviating Ghanaian hardships as was the case for their British factory workers. These contradictions regarding the treatment of labor at various stages of the cocoa/chocolate supply chain continue to this day, as debates over fair trade practices continue to be waged. Regardless of the debates, theories, or accusations, regarding this topic, the longstanding inequalities within the industry can tangibly be seen simply by examining the current state of Bournville, which was built on profits made from chocolate, and has continued to maintain its reputation as one of the finest villages in all of England; compared to that of Accra and Kumasi, as well as the whole of Ghana, which has continued to remain largely underdeveloped by modern standards, despite annually producing over half the world’s cocoa for several decades.

