

*'Everywhere Thomson goes,  
he finds good tales to tell'  
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

THE GREEN ROAD  
INTO THE TREES  
An Exploration of England  
HUGH THOMSON

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## About the Book

In the past, Hugh Thomson has written books of exploration about places like Peru, Mexico and the Indian Himalaya. Now he returns to explore the most exotic and foreign country of them all - his own.

From the very centre of England - literally, as his village is said to be the geographical point furthest from the sea - he travels out to the furthest edges of the land. *The Green Road into the Trees* is a journey enlivened and made rich by the characters he meets along the way. And the ways he takes are the old ways, the drover-paths and tracks, the paths and ditches half covered by bramble and tunnelled by alder, beech and oak: the trails that can still be traced by those who know where to look.

Just as in his acclaimed book about Peru, *The White Rock*, Hugh shows how older, seemingly forgotten cultures, like the Celts, Saxons and Vikings, lie much closer to the surface than we may think; they have created some of the fault lines of land, wealth and privilege that we still live with. In recent years, archaeologists have uncovered some remarkable new findings about these cultures that have yet to percolate through to the wider public. By taking a journey through both the sacred and profane landscapes of ancient England, Hugh casts unexpected light - and humour - on the way we live now.

## About the Author

Hugh Thomson has led many research expeditions to Peru and is one of Britain's leading explorers of Inca settlements.

His previous books include *The White Rock: An Exploration of the Inca Heartland* and *Cochineal Red: Travels Through Ancient Peru*, as well as *Nanda Devi*, a journey to a usually inaccessible part of the Himalaya. His memoir *Tequila Oil: Getting Lost in Mexico* was serialised by BBC Radio 4.

As a film-maker, he has also won many awards for his documentaries, which include *Indian Journeys* with William Dalrymple, *Dancing in the Street: A Rock and Roll History* and *Russia* with Jonathan Dimbleby. He has taken filming expeditions to Mount Kilimanjaro, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Mexican Sierra Madre.

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Also by Hugh Thomson

*The White Rock: An Exploration of the Inca Heartland*

*Nanda Devi: A Journey to the Last Sanctuary*

*Cochineal Red: Travels through Ancient Peru*

*Tequila Oil: Getting Lost in Mexico*

*50 Wonders of the World*

# The Green Road into the Trees

*An Exploration of England*



preface  
publishing



For Daisy, Owen and Leo

*Illustrations by Adam Burton*

Out on that almost trackless expanse of billowy Downs such  
a track is in some sort humanly companionable: it really  
seems to lead you by the hand.

‘The Romance of the Road’,  
*The Pagan Papers*, Kenneth Grahame

*Mi casa es su casa*, ‘my home is yours’.

South American proverb

## Chapter 1

# The Stranger's Welcome

Hamlet: 'But this is wondrous strange.'

Horatio: 'And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.'

I STUMBLED INTO the English spring sunshine after a deep sleep. An unnatural sleep, a jet-lagged sleep. I had spent the months before travelling around South America and the long flight back across the Atlantic from west to east, against the sun, had wound my body up and then down. Now I was emerging after what seemed like a hibernation. The river meadows were flooded with purple bugle and fringed with white hawthorn blossom. My neighbour's apple orchard was also gleaming with blossom, underplanted with daffodils; it led down to the river which still ran fast with the old rains of winter. Back inland, towards the Chilterns, a flush of yellow was spreading across the year's first crop of oilseed rape.

Mole at the start of *The Wind in the Willows* realises that spring has arrived without his noticing. I felt the same way. When I had left for South America, it had been bitter February weather, with snow on the ground and the only colour coming from a woodpecker or robin.

Needing a strong coffee and with no food in the house, I cycled to the local market town. The sound of Abba's 'Dancing Queen' being pumped out by a brass band could be heard for some way before I arrived. A celebration was in full swing. Red and white bunting hung from the church,

matched by the small flags the children were waving and by the icing on the teacakes sold in the market place; near by was a puppet stall where Punch was setting about Judy with ferocity. The children watching had their faces painted to look like lions or tigers.

Tattoos snaked out of the busts and jeans of the farmers' wives queuing at the ice-cream van, which had been painted in neon orange with a 'chill-out' logo, and was dispensing Skyrockets, Mr Magics, Daddy Cools and Blackcurrant Peep-Ups. A quiff-haired teenager ostentatiously did a wheelie right across the Market Square on his bicycle pimped up with double shocks and chunky chrome spokes. Oblivious to the fairground stalls and the noise, an elegantly overdressed older lady with sunglasses, light wool coat and malacca cane was stooping against the spring breeze, leaning into it.

The band had finished 'Dancing Queen' and were now playing a more stately jig. I noticed not so much the music as their hats: a pink stetson playing the guitar, a bowler manning the cello, a Pete Doherty-style pork-pie perched on the lead guitarist and there, on the drummer's head, an unmistakable panama, just as I had seen and bought at a small market on the Ecuadorian coast only weeks before.

England has become a complicated and intriguing country. In truth it's always been one, but perhaps I'm just noticing it more now. The familiar is looking very strange. It may be the jet lag, or the sudden immersion in all this noise, colour and confusion after a deep sleep, but I am seized with a sudden desire to explore England. The few other times I've ever had really bad jet lag - the sort where you walk in a trance, as if under water and sedation - have been when I've travelled abroad, not travelled home. The only cure then has been total immersion in the new culture.

So I feel like plunging in - and to do so by the darker, underground ways, again like a mole, tracking the older paths into the country.

My usual pattern is to travel abroad to an exotic location, then rest up at home to write about it and try to cultivate my tomato plants in the insipid English sun. And then repeat the process.

Suddenly I like the idea of doing it all in reverse.

\*

I was on my third cup of coffee, when a dog caught my eye before I noticed its owner. Not to disparage the owner, who was large and wearing shorts and a brightly coloured pair of Crocs. But it was the dog that drew my attention: it had the wiry, attractive qualities of a natural rat catcher, a smooth-haired fox terrier with unusual markings, its face black and white in an exactly symmetrical way, black on one side, white on the other, as if wearing a harlequin's mask. And as such, a natural conversation opened with its owner, not that Simon, said owner, needed much excuse.

Even South Americans don't introduce themselves so fast. Within ten minutes, Simon had told me his entire medical, matrimonial and financial history, which could be summarised as 'crooked, divorced and bust'. Not that he was letting this get him down.

He made his living by being an artist and a poacher; the two seemed complementary. I was more interested in the poaching, having read Richard Jefferies' books on the subtle arts and skills, and occasionally brutal encounters, of the poaching world.

Simon supplemented his portrait painting by foraging for truffles and mushrooms that his dog found for him in the woods, and the odd larger bird or fish tickled out from under a gamekeeper's nose. At forty-nine, he was almost exactly my age, with a touch of the overgrown schoolboy, exacerbated by his shorts. He was large with a hint of vulnerability; he certainly had plenty to be vulnerable about. A car crash (or rather a car crashing into him when

he was parked) had broken his neck and left him with back pain, which he took morphine for, along with other pain-killers. As he talked, he apologised for occasionally repeating himself: 'It's all these drugs I keep having to take.'

I asked him more about the poaching. I couldn't help noticing the badge on his jacket lapel: it was for the Countryside Alliance.

'I like to call it "supplying wild produce". Rabbits, pheasants, squirrels, deer, mushrooms, truffles, crayfish. It's all in these woods. And a lot of the time if I didn't have it, it would just go to waste.'

He got out a catapult to show me, keeping his hands well below the café table. It was a beautifully crafted piece from birch, that he had made himself, with a thick industrial rubber band and a supply of lead musket balls that he kept in a pouch.

'Incredibly fast, incredibly accurate. Totally legal. And the best thing is that I can get it out quickly. Sometimes I'll get to a field and it's in those first few minutes that the best game presents itself, before I can get out a gun. With this little beauty I can pop off a rabbit straightaway.'

Simon ate a lot of rabbit and provided it for his son who lived with him. 'Skinning a rabbit is easy. Make one incision and you just unzip the thing. Get the guts out and you're away. Although like they say, there's plenty of ways to skin a rabbit. Not like a squirrel. Squirrel has a pelt so thick it's unbelievable. I look down the barrel of a gun sometimes when shooting a rabbit and you see the pellet pass straight through the skin, the flesh, the skin and out the other side. But with a squirrel the pellet never gets out again. Skinning a squirrel is a bastard.'

'Is squirrel good to eat?' I wondered, mindful of the old adage that they were just rats with tails, and conscious too that with the jet lag I was not at my sharpest.

‘Squirrel? Very tasty,’ said Simon loyally. ‘But what I really like is deer. Plenty of muntjac around. To the extent that it’s a pest. Beautiful deer, of course. I love the way they move. You know the best way to skin a deer?’

This was purely rhetorical.

‘Wrap some rubber bands around the handle of a golf club. Work the golf club down the spine of the deer when it’s suspended from a tree and tied to the ground. Then attach a lead from the golf club to the tow bar of your pick-up truck. Reverse very, *very* slowly.’ (Simon stressed this, as if concerned that I might rush the job.) ‘And the skin will peel off like a baby’s nappy. But the deer has to be fresh.’

I nodded.

‘Not so much any more, but there was a time when I was supplying a lot. Local hotels, restaurants, places up in London. They loved it. All my stuff was organic, free range – and local. That’s probably what they put on the menu. “Local free-range venison.” You bet it was free!

‘I had a good run with crayfish. They’re not on this year. Something wrong with the river. I tried the usual beats. A couple of years ago they were jumping into my hands. The other day though, I found a lovely stretch for eel. They’re coming back. I was going down in the boat and we passed plenty of perch. But what I liked the look of were the eel. Good, thick ones. Eel only put on a pound a year, so they’re slow-growing. Some of the butchers over in Henley and Maidenhead, towards London, have started to sell a lot of smoked eel.’

Simon ordered another cappuccino.

‘I live on air really. Painting doesn’t pay much. My life is about survival.’ This complaint – which sounded well rehearsed – was undermined when he showed me copies of his paintings on an expensive iPad he drew from a capacious pocket. The paintings were excellent. Some were of horses, commissioned by their owners. Some were large oils of patterns cast on water. ‘I did these from looking out

over the river so much, for fish. You get fascinated by the way the light plays on the water. There's always a patch beyond the trees where the light is slightly different.'

After a brief silence, he changed tack abruptly.

'I learned one thing from that car crash. All you have in this life is time. All that matters is time, and how you use it. Nothing else matters. Possessions don't matter. I lost everything after the crash. And I realised that nothing else is real. Your clothes, that magazine you're reading, that sandwich you're eating. Your marriage. None of it. None of it is real. All that matters is your time and what you do with it. I've wasted a lot of my life.'

Simon had gone from being very talkative to subdued. He explained that he had these sudden mood swings. 'It's the medication.'

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It was easy to live in the countryside, as I did, and not know what was stirring beneath its surface. Most rural dwellers in England are blithely unaware what the farmers around them are doing, let alone the poachers. If I made a journey, as well as being an investigation of the deepest past, I wanted to explore what was happening now - how the countryside was changing.

The question was which journey to make. There were many old trackways threading their way around England. Not far from me ran one of the oldest and most intriguing, the Icknield Way.

Unlike many of the older paths, this had not been commodified into a long-distance trail with accompanying guidebooks, signposts and people to hold your hand. For much of the Icknield Way's long route from the south coast near Dorset diagonally across the country to Norfolk, it was still half covered by bramble and tunnelled by elder, beech and oak, forgotten and ignored. This prehistoric track

dissected England in a way no modern major road did, since most ran arterially out of London. A century ago, one of the poets I most admired, Edward Thomas, had tried to follow its traces.

That same afternoon, I went over to an escarpment near by. Across the fields of oilseed rape, the clearest of paths showed the Way continuing up to the hills beyond.



It was a path I knew well: I had cycled, ridden and walked it many times, with dogs, friends and neighbours. From where I stood, the path led up into the Chilterns, one of the largest forested areas in England when the Anglo-Saxons arrived, as it still is. Before the Saxons came, this had been part of Roman Britain, but more lightly colonised because of the rougher terrain: south of Romanised Dorchester, the River Thames makes a great horseshoe sweep down from the crossing at Wallingford and around below Whitchurch and Mapledurham to reach Henley. The Chilterns sprawl out from the centre of this horseshoe in a mess of wooded valleys.

It was the West Saxons, the Gewisse, who colonised this area, a group less civilised than the East Saxons of Kent,

resisting Christianity until much later. Their original name, the Gewisse, is thought to mean 'the trusties' - or as we might put it, 'the heavies'; one historian described them as 'a strong-arm gang controlling weaker neighbours by brute force'. Only later have they been labelled more sedately as 'the West Saxons'. The eponymous kingdom they founded of Wessex is often associated with the south-west coast and Thomas Hardy's novels, but it was first centred here in Oxfordshire and the upper Thames.

Under the veneer of commuter respectability - for Henley in particular lies within striking distance of London and is much prized by Jaguar owners for its regatta and gentility - you do not need to go far into the woods to find traces of a less polite past.

Entering the Chilterns along the Icknield Way I came to Berins Hill, at the start of what locals called 'the Ipsden triangle', a dense patch of woodland in which both motorists and walkers were forever getting lost; it also had no mobile phone signal, which I found satisfying.

Berins Hill was named after the Italian bishop, Birinius, who in AD 631 came on a missionary expedition to convert those Saxons like the Gewisse who had not succumbed to the earlier charms of St Augustine. Birinius was successful and baptised the king of the Gewisse at nearby Benson.

Benson had now been taken over by the RAF, who performed helicopter manoeuvres over the fields. It was a place of security compounds, breeze-block buildings and shaved heads.

But Berins Hill was still wild. I came in from the fields and entered its wooded flanks. Because the beech trees were climbing up the side of the hill, they had to grow even higher to reach the sunlight. The effect was spectacular, the tall beeches disappearing for nigh on a hundred feet up into the canopy, the great height of the tree trunks accentuated by the delicacy and smallness of the beech leaves floating like maidenhair. With the large ferns

guarding the entrance to the wood, the effect was Amazonian; not for the first time, I reflected on how exotic we would find a horse chestnut in flower, or beech forest in spring, if we came across them in Brazil rather than Buckinghamshire.

As I got higher onto the hill, the ground thickened with holly and there were pockets of dense wildwood. And then to my surprise I came across something I had never noticed in all the years of passing, perhaps because, in the old maxim, you only ever find what you are looking for: off to one side, on the north, close to a small road but invisible from it, a broad, deep ditch had been dug, wide enough to be a substantial moat, a hollow way that did not feature on any map. And why was this called Berins Hill? Was it because from here the bishop could survey the broad sweep of the West Saxon heartland, both the farms in the valley and the woods up above?

Certainly St Birinius, as he later became, made a judicious if odd decision when it came to dividing up the parishes. Rather than doing so in the usual compact shape, he created long, thin strips that ran down from the hills to the river, so that each parish should enjoy access to the woods at one end and the River Thames at the other. The fact that they all look like Chile on the map has confused both priests and parishioners ever since: my own church lies many miles inland from the river villages it serves.

In the following centuries the West Saxons were forced south out of Oxfordshire by their neighbours to their north: first the Mercians and later the Vikings. This has always been a martial frontier, as evidenced by the much earlier Grim's Dyke near by, which marked a similar divide of the Iron Age. The hills that bisect the county are a natural border point. The centre of Wessex headed south, towards the coast. After Birinius, the bishops moved their see from Dorchester to Winchester - and the Chilterns and Berkshire Downs became savage and disputed frontier lands. They

were the scene of many battles, one of the most important being the battle of Ashdown, not far from here, which Alfred the Great fought against the Vikings in 871, a battle that deserves to be remembered as much as Agincourt, Waterloo or El Alamein.

It was Grim's Dyke that I joined just a little further to the north where the Icknield Way crossed it, a high embankment with a defensive ditch which once ran west and east from the Thames for hundreds of miles. This was one of the best-preserved stretches of the Dyke, as it entered the Chilterns.

The bluebells in the beech woods that surrounded and disguised the embankment came as a shock. I had forgotten that they would be there, a soft purple rather than blue, as I came in from the bright sunshine of the fields and saw waves and islands of them spreading below the trees, not so much lighting up the forest as glowing within it: purple shadows.

They spread across the ridge. A heavy-seeded plant, bluebells travel slowly across the ground: it had taken many, many generations for them to cover such distance. The carpet of blue flowers managed to be a celebration both of the transience of spring and of the permanence of the English landscape.

Along the top of the Dyke, I followed a path that was covered with beechmast and threaded through with white wood anemones. Looking down through the trees at the wheat fields to either side, with the young wheat still tight in bud, the stalks shimmered blue under the green of their tops, so that when viewed from certain angles they looked like water, an effect exaggerated when the wind blew across the fronds and sent a ripple of green-yellow across the underlying blue.

The Dyke took me back to an older heritage than the Saxon world; it was built by the Celts of the Iron Age in about 300 BC, for reasons that, if archaeologists are honest,

remain mysterious – to the point that there has been some argument as to whether it was for southerners to keep northerners out, or vice versa. To my lay eyes, it seemed probable that it was designed to keep the north out, with the ditch on that side of the embankment; but more crucial for me was the acceptance of a mystery. I was used in Latin America to ancient earthworks whose purpose or meaning remained resolutely obscure, and I liked that. Keats's idea of 'negative capability', that we should be humble in the face of what we do not understand, does not always sit well in the world of archaeology, where forcibly expressed hypotheses and the denigration of rival theories are the norm.

Perhaps because we understand so little about it, you never hear Grim's Dyke mentioned in the same breath as Offa's Dyke on the Welsh border. Yet it was also a substantial achievement and wherever traces of it remain, as they do on the high horse country below Wantage and even around Watford and suburban London, it is a reminder of how insistently north and south were divided in this country, a fatal fault line that ultimately allowed the Normans to conquer the Anglo-Saxon world.

It was along Grim's Dyke as it rose from Mongewell by the Thames over to Nettlebed (named at a time when nettles were much appreciated as a resource) that the bluebells were at their finest. I walked here in 'courting days' when I was eighteen, too shy to kiss the girl I was with and so kept talking of music instead, a male displacement activity long before Nick Hornby identified it; and I walked here more recently thirty years later when I had fallen in love again after a difficult divorce (aren't all divorces difficult?) and was trying to rebuild.

I found the bluebells in the woods had a mesmeric quality, one of darkness as well as of light, along this old earthwork trackway whose purpose was still not clear, that collated different impulses together for me: the mystery of

the path; the mystery of love that after thirty years I had still not understood; and the bluebells spreading underneath the beeches in purple shadows that would last just a few weeks but had taken centuries to establish.

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There is nothing like taking a walk to make up your mind. Or for making you accept an obvious solution, however challenging it might be.

I knew that I could base myself at home and launch excursions to various different trackways and drovers' paths around the country; cherry-pick them, so to speak.

But how much better to make a journey from coast to coast? To be bold. To begin at the Atlantic and end at the North Sea. To travel from Dorset to Norfolk. To follow the Ickniel Way not just for a few, familiar miles, but for its entire length right through rural England: the ancient, prehistoric way to cross the country, along its spine and following the hills.

There was a geographical appropriateness to the plan. Locals were fond of saying that we lived in the area that was furthest from the sea. I suspected that this was debatable and a contested national title - like the accolade of being the wettest place, for which I've seen many candidates - but it was undoubtedly very landlocked; it was also almost exactly at the midpoint of the Ickniel Way. By travelling from coast to coast, I would be connecting the place I knew so well with the country's furthest edges.

That same night, I looked out some maps and gathered the things I needed for such a journey. Truth to tell, as I had not unpacked, this was hardly difficult. My down jacket, tent and boots stood ready to go from my travels in Peru. The teabags and blister-kit were still in the backpack.

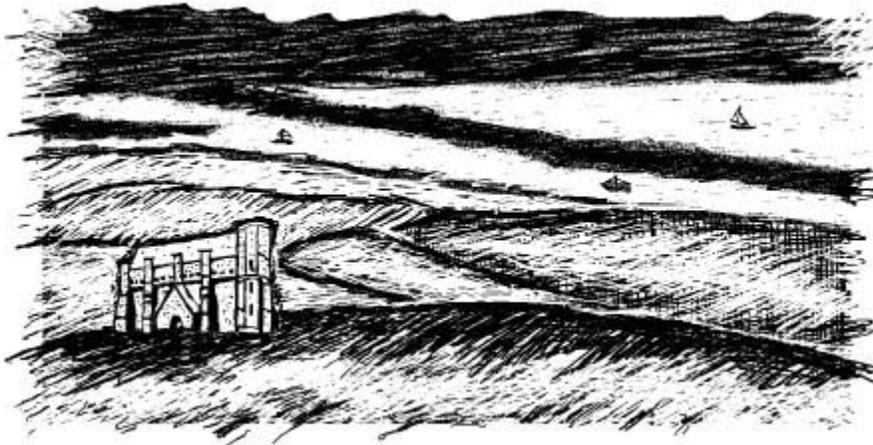
The cure for a hangover was to keep drinking. The cure for jet lag was to keep travelling.

I was on the train to Dorset next morning.

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Can there be a finer place in all England to start a journey?

I'm at St Catherine's Chapel on the Dorset coast. A square-cut Norman chapel with immensely thick four-foot walls, it stands isolated on a hilltop, with magnificent views sweeping down the Atlantic along Chesil Beach to Portland Bill. Behind me are the folds of Dorset, undulating away with their coombs and copses and small English lanes, made more drunken than usual by a toponymy that even locals find confusing.



The chapel was built in the fourteenth century by the monks of the nearby Abbey. They constructed it in stone throughout, including the roof, because of the fear of fire from both lightning and the French invaders who made regular incursions along the coast.

The chapel was abandoned for centuries. It has now been restored to its bare essentials and the walls repaired, but there is nothing inside - no pews, no altarpiece, no stained glass. Once a year at Christmas there is a small service held by candlelight for a few devoted souls.

As an emblem of both continuity and neglect, it could not serve me better. St Catherine was perceived as the

Athena of the early Christian world: calm, dispassionate, intellectual and courageous; dying as a martyr to a cruel Roman emperor, tied to the wheel that still bears her name and is lit up every Guy Fawkes Day. Her story made for an alluring myth – and myth it properly was. She was removed from the list of official saints by the Vatican in 1968 because ‘she probably never existed’.



The last chapel to St Catherine I visited was in the Sinai desert. This chapel has an equally wild beauty. Thomas

Hardy described it as being 'in a fearfully exposed position'. The chapel seems to be dedicated not to the church but to the sea.

I won't see the sea again for another 400 miles or so, when I emerge on the Norfolk coast. I will be following as near as I can the old road of the Ickniel Way, which has some claim to be the most ancient route in England. It linked the world of the Mediterranean, whose traders landed along the coast from here to Cornwall, with the world of those northern Europeans who came to East Anglia - a prehistoric highway between these two points of entry to England, slicing diagonally across the country from Dorset to Norfolk, with lay-bys at all the great prehistoric sites: Maiden Castle, Stonehenge, Avebury, a string of hill-forts and finally, on the Norfolk coast, Seahenge.

London and the South-East were completely avoided; only later, with the Roman invasion, did all roads start there and Dover become such a principal port. But that suits me fine. I want to take the temperature of England as a country not a city, and to slice across it from the South-West to East Anglia is the perfect way to do so. London can stay off my map.

Perhaps because of the later Roman reorientation of English roads out of London, far more traces of the Ickniel Way survive than one might expect: it has not simply been built over and tarmacked. Nor was the route taken by prehistoric man one that now favours the motor car. The old path often follows the hilltops, not the valleys; it is more concerned with natural ford points of rivers, with keeping above the flood plain and with following the grain of the landscape.

Dorset has always been a good launching-off point into England; so much so that Walter Raleigh concentrated on Weymouth for his defences against the Armada, as he suspected that, if Philip of Spain had any tactical sense, that was where he would land. In the event, Philip had no

tactical abilities whatsoever and south-westerly winds blew the Spanish fleet into the Channel.

Directly below St Catherine's Chapel, on the semi-saline waters of the Fleet Lagoon, protected from the Atlantic by the thin strip of Chesil Beach, I can see the old Swannery, established by the same Benedictine monks who built the chapel. It is one of the last surviving swanneries in the country, testament to the medieval appetite for roast swan (preferably with another bird stuffed inside), although now benignly managed to preserve, rather than eat, the birds. Daniel Defoe was much taken with it when he came this way in the eighteenth century: 'The famous swannery, or nursery of swans, the like of which I believe is not in Europe'.

When I descend there from the chapel, one of the women workers tells me they have just completed the biannual count of mute swans. Seven hundred and forty were tagged as their own, as opposed to any 'freeloading royal swans' belonging to the Queen that might come as visitors. She showed me some arresting photographs of the local villagers of Abbotsbury wading into the waters of the Fleet to help hold and tag the swans, as they have always done.

What is it about the incongruence of humans holding swans? Many of the pictures of Leda and the Swan gain their power from the sheer anatomical disjointedness of the species. It certainly puts a new spin on the idea of 'necking'.

In the photos, the villagers are putting on a brave face. The English countryman or woman is expected to deal with most things with aplomb: holding a live ferret, dealing with a dead sheep, breaking down in their 4x4 on the middle of Dartmoor. But holding a live swan, with a neck like an articulated python and a wing powerful enough to break a man's arm, is a whole different order of magnitude.

My path leads inland from the old Swannery. It's a good way to start getting into my stride: an old ropewalk, with a stream bubbling beside it, hart's tongue ferns in the banks, and roses in the cottage gardens I pass.

But any sentimentality is banished in Abbotsbury - as it should have been by the ropewalk, which was a brutal industry, a medieval sweatshop in which the endless tying of material into rope along a straight path would lose any charm if actually witnessed.

Abbotsbury is a testimony to destruction. Where the abbey once stood is a gaping void, with just the odd gatepost left. All that remains of what must have been a quite wonderful medieval building is the outpost of St Catherine's Chapel behind me on its hill, spared by Henry VIII at the Reformation only as a useful landmark for the navy of which he was so proud.

England's green and pleasant veneer - nowhere more seductive than in Dorset - has always hidden its capacity for sudden and brutal change. The winding roads that so picturesquely lead inland were the ones that killed T E Lawrence on his motorbike.

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My teenage children get embarrassed because, when walking, I have the most un-English habit of buttonholing complete strangers and asking them the time of day and what moves in their neck of the woods. While my children pretend that I am some stray father who has got attached and is just tagging along, the accosted stranger, after the surprise of being addressed by someone who hasn't known them for at least five years and is saying more than hello, will do that other very English thing: launch into a long tale. For it is a national characteristic that we have the boldness of the very shy. We keep ourselves zipped up but given the opportunity - the licence - and it will all pour out.

A few words to a farmer in Abbotsbury and I find myself hearing a story that needs a longer sit-down and a cup of tea, in a farmhouse with a horse yard and chickens that has managed to stay in the centre of the village without being redeveloped.

David Young was born in 1937. A shrewd and gentle man, he had lived his whole life in Abbotsbury. He practised mixed farming until the late 1960s, but then concentrated on dairy farming until 1998 when he retired, although he told me he wasn't sure 'whether he gave up dairying or dairying gave up on him'.

The whole village has always had one landlord: the Ilchester estate, which also owns the Swannery. Apart from some new shared-equity accommodation, put up by the Salisbury Trust, the Ilchester estate has completely controlled the village for as long as he could remember.

The old Lord Ilchester had a paternalistic interest in keeping the village uniform. 'Anyone painted their door a different colour, he would put them right.' He died in 1964, but both his sons had already been killed: one in a shooting accident when still a schoolboy; the other on active service with the army in Cyprus. The title then passed to a fourth cousin, which is about as distant as it gets in the peerage. The most recent holder had been called Maurice Vivian de Touffreville Fox-Strangways to his friends, Lord Ilchester to the neighbours.

When David was a boy, he and the other children in the village were always conscious of the power of the Ilchester estate.

'It was like a pistol pointing at your foot. No one would step out of line. As kids, all of us in the village would make dens, like kids do, but we never dared go into the woods, even though they were all around us. That would have been sacrilege, disturbing the pheasants.'

They had to be careful where they went anyway. The same reasons that might have made this Dorset coast

attractive to Philip and his Armada applied equally in the Second World War. The beach and surrounding area were heavily mined. I had seen the remains of pillboxes and barbed wire scattered along Chesil Beach, together with what the locals called 'dragons' teeth', large concrete blocks put up as tank traps.

David remembered that when they were children, the local gamekeeper had been blown up when he stepped on a mine.

'The estate had to bring an older keeper out of retirement. We weren't exactly scared of him, mind, but he was what you would call authoritative. No one wanted to get on the wrong side of him. Of course, in those days we respected people who had authority.'

This didn't stop David going out with his father to poach the odd pheasant for the family Sunday pot, particularly during the long years of rationing.

'We took a sponge and a bamboo and some ammonia. Put the soaked sponge under a roosting pheasant in a tree - and plop, there was Sunday lunch. No shots, no weapons. I was only a lad tagging along with Dad when he did it. Some of the locals used a different technique: they would pierce a dried pea with a needle, right through, and tie it to a stick. If any pheasant took the bait, they couldn't get loose. A bit cruel, that was. I never did it.'

David won a place to the grammar school in Dorchester. In those days there was still a train line from Abbotsbury. Now there are just a few intermittent buses.

'I used to get the last train back from Weymouth. Often I was the only passenger. I got to know the driver and he would let me drive the train. Think of that! You wouldn't get away with a boy being allowed to drive a train these days.'

David's father had been a reluctant farmer.

'His heart was never in it, not really. He should have been a carpenter. He was good with his hands. But that was

like a lot of people around here. They'd have a small dairy herd, say thirty cows - enough to earn a living and have a drink in the pub. Everyone around here was a farmer when I was growing up. Then my friends started to do different things. One went off and joined the fishing boats in Weymouth.'

David was more enthusiastic about staying. He took over his father's farm, and built up the dairy herd. That was in the days of the Milk Marketing Board, whose passing he, like many farmers, regretted.

'The Milk Marketing Board was a monopoly. That's why they had to get rid of it later. But it protected the farmers. They had the power to dictate prices to the big supermarkets. Soon as that went, the big five supermarkets could turn round and dictate prices to individual dairies.'

'When the milk quota came in around '84, it almost did for me. I had just started expanding the herd. Then I had to cut back again, so as not to go over the quota. I was taking milk up the back of the fields and dumping it so that I didn't get fined for overproduction. That was heartbreaking.'

'They have a much better system on the continent, where the quota system goes with the cow, not the land. But here we had the House of Lords controlling the bill as it went through Parliament. Vested interests. So of course they tied the quota to the land, to the owner. That meant that if they kicked a tenant farmer off, they could still keep his quota.'

David had now retired from running the farm, which had gone 'back-in-hand' to the estate. The yard at the back of the house was still busy with horses, chickens and ducks. His wife and daughters were active horsewomen. Just the week before, the family had suffered a bad burglary. Someone had broken into the tack room: 'While we were watching telly, they jemmed the door off and

wheelbarrowed away nine thousand quid's worth of saddles and gear.'

He still had a business looking after hedges and fences for other farmers, so saw a great deal of the surrounding area and its changes.

'This used to be a very sleepy farming part of the world. The land didn't suit big farms. Too hilly. Not like those prairies up in East Anglia. But all the small tenant farmers are going or gone. The estate runs most of the old farms now as one big business.

'A lot of people in the village have come from elsewhere to retire. Some of them have been here twenty years. They like to think of themselves as Abbotsbury people,' he laughed kindly, 'but they're not. Not like us. We don't have many second homes. Too far from London or the cities.

'In some ways I suppose farming has lost its soul a bit. But I can still do a day's hedging and be proud of it. And I've never wanted to live anywhere else. There are times when I come down from the back road on a summer's evening, and I've got a spare five or ten minutes. Then I stop and look around. I get a lot of pleasure from that. As much pleasure as for an art connoisseur at an art gallery. There's always something different to see, whether it's the boats over towards Weymouth Bay or what's changing in the hedgerows.

'I wouldn't have had my life any other way.'

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The butcher's in Abbotsbury sold me a pie for the day's walking. I'm a great believer in the power of the pie; in the Lake District I used to try to reach the summit of peaks with a pie still hot in my pocket from the Keswick shop.

I was taken aback, however, when I asked the farmer's wife running the shop which of the various pies she recommended.

‘Oh, I couldn’t say. I’m a vegetarian.’

How could a vegetarian run a butcher’s shop? It was not a question I liked to ask outright, although I suppose eunuchs were always good at running harems.

If the lost abbey of Abbotsbury had been a geographical and historical landmark of the most familiar sort, given that English schoolchildren were still force-fed ‘Tudors and Stuarts’ like geese for foie gras, then my next destination, at the top of the back road where David had his farming epiphanies, was exactly the kind of place I wanted to investigate. Set back inland from Abbotsbury, and a brisk walk up the coast path, was the Kingston Russell stone circle, a place so off the map that even Aubrey Burl didn’t list it in his authoritative gazetteer, *Rings of Stone*.

In a corner of a farmer’s field, the stones lay a little forlorn. There were seventeen of them, arranged in a careful, elliptical shape mirrored by other stone circles along the Atlantic coast. They had been there some 5,000 years.

The stones had all fallen over. English Heritage, who nominally administered the site, hadn’t put up so much as a board to inform visitors what they were looking at. While I was there, three couples passed at intervals, heading for the coast path. They would not have noticed the circle if I hadn’t pointed it out.

Yet the stones had a majesty, and much of that came from their position. The slight rise in the land meant that there was a clear sight line to the round hills of Beacon Knap and other similar knolls heading west along the coast. I was accustomed to the prehistoric love of mimicry, the circle reflecting the shape of the hills beyond.

Making a landscape yours, stamping ownership on the land by showing that you too can shape it, is a primal human instinct. The power of the sacred landscape, and in this case of the sea as well, can be refracted by a sense of placement, of concentration. There was a feeling at the