

The Marsh and the Visitor

Slip down between the general stores and the pet shop in Pulborough, West Sussex. Barn House Lane narrows from a track to a steep-sided path as it runs downhill. Then there's a gate, and you're out onto the Brooks, a great expanse of grazing marsh stretching away to where the Downs rise in the distance. The flood plain is flat, but the flatness is shaped and parceled by raised banks and causeways. So the view in each direction is built up in strata: in summer there's the glint of water deep in a rush-lined ditch, reeds above it, the still, rough turf of a bank where a few clumps of ragwort stick up like bunches of shabby chrysanthemums, and meadow grass blowing in clouds beyond. A dark line of trees marks the point where the land turns from low clay to higher sandy heath. And then, always, smooth and spacious, steady parent of the land below, there is the long grand slope of the Downs.

The slope visible here is Amberley Mount: a yellow-green cliff, scalloped where it rounds into caves and swells out again, lime bright in the sun, with a luminosity that comes of the chalk beneath. Woods grow up into the hollows, outlining the bareness between. And it's the bareness by which you know this Down, distinct from the hangers to either side, its turf closely nibbled by centuries of sheep. The few scattered trees have individual identity, each exaggerated by the shadow it throws. Sometimes they have a childish look: model trees stuck to felt; toys on a baize card table. Then the hill turns adult: muscle rounding over bone, flesh stretching and creasing. Mostly the Down is remote and ancient and impersonal. It loses its solidity as the evening fades, turning sage grey to an elusive purple-blue. For a moment it is a low cloud on the horizon.

The path from the village follows the Arun as it runs between deep banks grown over with grasses, ragged robin, and meadowsweet in summer. From the East, the Stor comes to join it; where they meet, there's a clanging metal footbridge and a willow. Beyond the bridge, you can walk low down by the water, chin-high in grass, or up on the causeway built by the Romans to get across the marsh from the posting station at Hardham to the settlement with its bath house at Wiggonholt, which now lies under the nettles of a roadside verge.

From this high path, part of the Greensand Way, the network of drainage ditches and dykes becomes visible, cutting purposefully across the meadows. In summer, it's not the drains themselves you see, but the rushes that grow up from them. So there'll be

purple clouds of fine-eared grass, and then a column of dense green. In autumn the ditches will be full, a kind of water-writing appearing on the flat. And then, as the floods rise, the humming grassland will become an inland sea. Most of the path is too wet to walk in winter, so I know the view only from a distance, from the village looking down over the pale floods reflecting low white skies. Even on summer days, when damselflies flap in the rushes and the high paths are cracked with dryness, the place holds the memory of winter like a basin. It is winter that makes it the shape it is.

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This was the landscape I loved when I was growing up, and it's still my secret standard for understanding other places. There's nowhere like it; I've looked. But trying to describe it I feel a strain. I don't know the names of the sedges I thought I liked so much: why had I never looked them up? To describe a place you're meant to know it intimately, to have lived with it, to have kept vigil through seasons and through years; better, to have been its active cultivator and guardian. The tradition of English place-writing, which flourished in the eighteenth century, and which has today expanded beyond all bounds, espouses slow, patient looking. It projects an ideal: that the writer of a scene will be as familiar with it as Gilbert White was familiar with the hanger at Selborne, and that he or she will have an expert understanding of the ecology. It has little truck with holders of a return ticket via London. The nature writer does not go out with the Dorling Kindersley book of wildflowers in order to check that those big plants by the river are Himalayan Balsam (invasive; disapproved of) and not a rare Sussex orchid. Quite right too in many respects, but not, perhaps, in all. It's a common thing to be a visitor in one's most loved places, and to learn about them has its own kind of value. My own way of looking has an urgency about it. I must stow away all I can in the short time before leaving again.

I grew up near Pulborough without knowing much about it in the naturalist's sense. The regular walk from home was over the golf course, a routine that seems to have left me with a lifelong aversion to gorse and sand. But going into the village was a pleasure. When we parked in the village car-park, it was to go over the road for a prescription, or into the solicitors' to drop off an envelope at the polished front door with an equally shiny magnolia growing beside it. I knew every shop along Lower Street

and the times of the trains that would take me to the shopping mall in Horsham, and these things were inseparable from the view of the Downs. The council tip came to the car-park one week in four. The omni-guzzling machine alarmed me – its actions were so frighteningly irrevocable – but I liked to go along with my father so I could stand and look out over the Brooks. Behind me the lorry ate another box of defunct cassette tapes, and before me lay what seemed the very contours of peace.

I wasn't conscious of being "in the country" until I came back to it in university vacations. I found a leaflet in Tesco's advertising the South Downs National Park and was astonished. There was a map showing all my familiar places marked as visitor attractions. Visitors! Never had it struck me that one might travel to the Arun Valley especially to see it. I had been for years a dedicated visitor to other places. My shelves were piled deep with saved-up leaflets from rural churches and guidebooks from many hundred country houses. They were mostly from the West Country, which was, as I knew from my family and from Daphne du Maurier novels, an area worth visiting. Sussex had always been the ordinary home we left behind on annual trips to real country, where there were red cliffs or moors. Now, suddenly, I wanted to look at the place from which we started.

As an adult, then, I became a visitor to this part of Sussex where the Arun cuts through the chalk. What had been background became foreground. The Downs acquired names and were sorted into scarp slopes and dip slopes. 'The path on the bank' became the Greensand Way. I sat making notes in churches, then put my coins in the slot for all the leaflets available, and postcards too. If there were no leaflets in the marked place on top of the prayer-book shelf by the door, I trespassed anxiously behind vestry curtains for further supplies.

I studied the Ordnance Survey map and saw with delight the profusion of italic lettering: roman road (course of), priory (site of), Roman villa, cross-dyke, barrow, barrow, camp. I have never had much capacity for cynicism about italics on a map – not like Evelyn Waugh, for example, who was skeptical about old England in the 1920s. "When I see Gothic lettering on the Ordnance Survey map" he said, "I set my steps in a contrary direction". I am hopelessly unstylish in this regard. I can't accept that 'site of' means 'nothing to see here'; I'm stubbornly concerned to stand in the place, to look out from that spot. So I loiter on the verge among the ragged grass and pineappleweed as the cars go by on the A283, magnetized by the idea that somewhere under me,

somewhere behind me, there's another language, a quite different way of life, and a frigidarium leads to a hot bath.

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My shoe-boxes of antiquarian knowledge are increasingly well-stocked these days. Yet I'm still only a visitor. My work is in cities (Liverpool, London, Oxford) and, however vividly I dream of a small open window under a low tiled roof, I'm not in the market for second homes. How valid, then, is my feeling about Sussex? And in what possible capacity can I write about it?

I wonder about the difference in perception between an enthusiastic church-visitor and an all-year-round parishioner. It's a difference much more pronounced if one shifts it back into the nineteenth century, or earlier, when a shepherd or the rector's wife, say, would know Wiggonholt church and two or three nearby, but nothing beyond that. I look at the font and recognize it as Sussex marble, I enjoy the plainness of the smooth arcades carved in low relief, and place it among the other eleventh and twelfth-century fonts I know. I'm moved by its simplicity in contrast with grander carvings, its silence in comparison with the dragons and saints elsewhere. I touch its cool Norman sides with pleasure. But for the local farmer this is not one font in a whole inexhaustible language of fonts; it is *the* font. It is what a font is. Would I like it so much if I had no choice, if I could not – next month – be off to the great churches of North Norfolk where painted angels hold up gilded lyres in the rafters?

Then, and it feels related, there's the problem of cows. Cows have a tendency to bring things to a head for the visitor. Their giant stillness arouses a strong sense of permanence. The faint low sound of their munching, or moving over the grass, sharpens the ear to the quiet. Or in the evening, when sound carries, perhaps a cough is audible several fields away and reminds one of the herd still out grazing, and there for the night. But a footpath that leads into a busy grazing field is a worry. There is the possibility of turning back, but it is probably a long way, you will probably get caught out by the approaching dusk if you risk it, and you may well already have come through a field of cows so that going back is on a par with going forward.

They look thoroughly absorbed and contented, the cows this afternoon. Most of the herd are grazing intently a little way to the left, but three cows have settled down

around the stile which is the exit from the field. I set off calmly, and wait to catch the eye of a nearby grazer, not wanting to disturb her. I smile encouragingly, feeling ridiculous. She looks up and, very slowly, swinging her bulk from side to side, wanders towards me. Her movement is a show of both casualness and determination, which I return in kind – until I’m stopped short by disaster. There’s a calf tucked into the hedge on my right, and its mother is on my left. I can’t walk between them so must walk round, thereby going straight through the herd.

What matters about this typical incident, aside from the fact that I was not trampled or squashed that afternoon, is that it makes me feel so stupid. I bring myself to tell it only because I discover how many otherwise practical and competent people feel the same. The cow problem bars me from places I would otherwise love. It’s worse than a ‘private property: no entry’ sign; it’s a no entry sign put up by myself. My maternal ancestors were dairy farmers in Cornwall, continuously, hundreds of them, for about four centuries. And now I can barely walk across a field.

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Then again, my ancestors didn’t have a library card, and I don’t think I’d relinquish mine for any level of familiarity with cows. All sorts of knowledge makes a difference to the path down the side of the marsh, be it inherited or learned-up, gleaned through daily necessity or sporadic enthusiasm. So, for example, I’m starting to learn about local building stones. Lavant stone, Bargate stone, Wisborough sandstone, Upper Greensand: a whole new landscape. The names, which I read in long lists in conservation documents, suggest a geological tour of the area, some of it deep below ground and other parts shaping the familiar surface topography. The lists constitute a geological itinerary, but they are also a course in architecture. Reading the names I think of certain church walls and the differences in colour and erosion start to emerge, amazingly various, requiring attention. It’s the overwhelming sharpness of new prescription glasses, which makes you feel giddy for a morning because there are so many bricks in the walls. Here, there are so many stones.

In the grand buildings not far away – Chichester Cathedral, Boxgrove Priory – the best materials were used for the job and no efforts spared. Fine-grained Caen stone was shipped over from Normandy – tonnes of it transported by human ingenuity and labour. It could be intricately carved, holding the true curve of a trefoil or a smooth ribbed

vault. In the little hamlets on the edge of the marsh – Wiggonholt and Hardham – the churches were achieved with stones readily to hand. The Hardham walls are mostly rubble, which is not to say haphazard or made from rubbish (the word now suggests broken cement blocks piled into skips) but built from stones that had already been used elsewhere, shaped for the wall of a barn or a house. Particularly strong materials were reserved for the church quoins, and there they still are. One of the big quoin blocks is a group of Roman clay tiles, set into Roman cement that dried around them two millennia ago. A later builder thought – why not? And with a good slathering of his own fresh-made mortar, he set the whole lot of tiles into the wall. He must have known a bit about those old Roman people who had left their remains all over the land; he gleaned odd bits of knowledge, like rubble. There's an Anglo-Saxon poem about a Roman wall, which refers to proud builders, long lost, now held in the earth. The medieval builder knew there was a long history of life around these marshes.

Over at Wiggonholt I peer at the church walls, trying to identify the stones for myself. It's like looking for clues in a painting to identify the hand – a connoisseurial kind of looking that moves from hunch to analysis, from a first impression to an up-close reading of an inky line. Except that here it's nothing like that, for me, as yet. I don't know nearly enough about stones for the grain and the ridge lines and the kinds of lichen to be meaningful. Resorting to the internet, and the excellent 'Building Stone Atlas' produced by Historic England, I discover that I am looking at Pulborough Sandrock. To know your stones you have to know the character of every quarry ever dug within in a radius of a hundred miles. I am content to realise that, though I'll never know those quarries, there is a common store of hard-won knowledge to which I can turn.

For the first time, I see the dials on the South wall. There's a rough dial incised into a high quoin stone, and a finer, larger dial a few blocks below. All the 24 hour-lines and numerals are just about legible. Since the sun is out, I rummage for a biro and hold it in place as a gnomon. The shadow falls, and yes it falls precisely: seven o'clock. The sun hasn't changed its orbit and the dial hasn't moved, so on this bright evening the dial still tells the right time.

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Seven o'clock in a crowded café on the Cowley Road in Oxford and I readjust my earplugs as two small boys wail distractedly into their milkshakes. The tall man next to me is reading Cervantes while swaying his crossed feet to music I can't hear; the glossily dressed student on the other side is explaining her thesis to her laptop camera with professional confidence. I can see the shadow falling on a dial scratched in sandstone on a church wall three hundred miles away.

Holding my coffee cup, I'm cross-legged in the long grass by the river. The sun is lowering behind me, sending a raking light over the meadow and the willows. It picks out bronze in the rusting spires of curly dock. Every hummock of grass casts a shadow. Yard by yard, as the sun moves, fields are lit up for examination. The light gives substance to each ear of grass and measures the thickness of sedge. For a moment the meadowsweet is luminously bright: creamy lace curling above red stems. Sappy buds move against hairy nettles.

The light begins to be more forgiving; the examination has been passed. Evening walkers come out along the path from the village in ones and twos, their dogs racing round me and then bounding into the water. The bare Down in the distance is smoothly aloof from it all.

Behind me, the roofs of Pulborough have joined together. The estate on the hill and the retirement flats and the old barns and the controversially prominent village hall are now all one, an ancient settlement on the edge of the flatland. There's a light coming on here and there. Later the wind will rise as the temperature drops; in the houses up the hillside people will look out at the black trees moving and pull their windows to on the way to bed. The marsh, now, is the visitor. It's come to Oxford. I'm glad of it here.

