

## **Our Rural Ride**

**29 March to 5 April 2009**

We set off after nine o'clock, rather later than planned, on the last Sunday morning in March. We ignored warnings of delays on the Forth Road Bridge and on the road beyond, and did right to ignore them, because everything was fine. We were making good progress until just after our lunch stop, when we realised that the bonnet of the car was loose. We waited almost three hours at Killington near Kendal for a mechanic to come out and fix it. Since we had found that the boot fitting had been vandalised the night before we left, we assumed that the damage to the bonnet was also malicious, but the mechanic said it was just wear and tear. He also said we had been right not to risk a long drive on the motorway with a broken catch on the bonnet. The delay meant we could not hope to reach Stockcross before midnight, so we stayed the night at the Holiday Inn at Stoke-on-Trent – this is a little off the road so we would not have found it without the advice of a helpful East European girl at the service station.

Leaving Stoke before seven, we reached Mike and Flis in Stockcross before midday. With their help we found a garage to fix the boot and then we went for a walk to Donnington Castle. This was a Royalist stronghold in the Civil War, destroyed by the Roundheads. By the roadside we found a small clump of white violets, which Anna said had a good scent. Although we saw other violets in the course of the walk they were all without scent. Primroses, daffodils, wood anemones and celandines were all out. We noticed how clear the streams seemed with their chalky and gravelly beds.

On Tuesday we picked up the car in Newbury and continued down into Hampshire. We wanted to get the Ordnance Survey map of the Meon area but in the first two little towns we tried, King's Clere and Whitchurch, there were no maps to be found. We had better luck in Wickham where we found the Winchester map. There we visited the Chesapeake Mill, which has been transformed into an antiques and bric-à-brac emporium. Anna spoke persuasively to the manageress and we were permitted to go onto the second floor which was clear of stuff for sale and where we could get a better view of the old timbers. The manageress was well aware of the story of the mill, and if not particularly interested in it herself she could understand why people might be. She seemed to recognise Robert Prescott's name. It was the story of the mill which first attracted Anna to this part of Hampshire, and her interest has grown as she discovered Edward Thomas's connection with the Meon valley.

From Wickham we went to Exton where Anna wanted to see the bridge over the Meon, the first of a number of sites relating to Thomas's poetry. Like other villages it had a prosperous look to it, with the houses presumably often owned by incomers. There was a little girl with a pad of paper making notes of what she could see. We made our way to East Meon, and then onwards to Oxenbourne where we were to stay the night.

Having located our bed-and-breakfast place we went back to East Meon, and examined the church, but were unable to get in to see the font because of repairs being made to the ceiling. Cobbett comments on the size of the church and uses it as part of his argument against those who believed that the population was growing; he believed that the land had supported, and could support in the future, more people

than it did under the misrule of the unreformed parliament.<sup>1</sup> He might have referred to the famous font as further proof of the past importance of the place.

On our second day we visited Selborne, spent some time in Gilbert White's house and garden. I recalled an earlier visit with Mummy and Daddy and the children. It was after Mummy's stroke, and was quite nerve-racking. The village street was very busy, and I worried about the children and the traffic. This time things seemed quieter. The Gilbert White museum shares the premises with a museum commemorating Captain Oates of the Antarctic, whose family helped set up the trust that manages the house. As often, I was left dissatisfied with the exhibits. The interpretation boards were unchallenging. I'm not sure how it could be done better. It hardly matters, however, because the main point of the visit is to look out of the windows across the garden to the hanging wood. We climbed the zig-zag path and walked along the top of the hanger. There were two woodpeckers answering each others' hammering. Cobbett describes the landscape of valleys and hanging woods. He explains in some detail the significance of the word *hanger*, which suggests that he saw it as a word local to this part of the country. There certainly are a lot of hangers round about.

He was riding from Hambleton to Thursley, but wanted to avoid the obvious route through Petersfield and Liphook and over Hindhead. He planned to pass to the north of Hindhead, and against all advice he made his way from East Meon to Hawkley, Greatham and Headley. He stands for a while looking down on Hawkley, Greatham and Selborne, admiring the beauty of the autumn landscape and wishing that he could get hold of Parson White's book.

From the south-east, round, southward, to the north-west, the main valley has cross-valleys running out of it, the hills on the sides of which are very steep, and, in many parts, covered with wood. The hills that form these cross-valleys *run out* into the main valley, like *piers* into the sea. Two of these promontories, of great height, are on the west side of the main valley, and were the first objects that struck my sight when I came to the edge of the hanger, which was on the south. The ends of these promontories are nearly perpendicular, and their tops so high in the air, that you cannot look at the village below without something like a feeling of apprehension. The leaves are all off, the hop-poles are in stack, the fields have little verdure; but, while the spot is beautiful beyond description even now, I must leave to imagination to suppose what it is, when the trees and hangers and hedges are in leaf, the corn waving, the meadows bright, and the hops upon the poles!<sup>2</sup>

His way was perilously steep as he went down through Hawkley Hanger, and then the road from Hawkley Green to Greatham was worse than the worst road he had seen in New Jersey. The path had been washed by the rains till it was, he said, as white as a fund-holder's door-step. It was dark by the time he reached Headley, and he employed a guide to take him to the northern foot of Hindhead, from which it was an easy step to his destination at Thursley. The guide had said he certainly knew the way, and Cobbett trusted him even though the direction of the rain on his face made him suspect they were too far south. It turned out that they were going over Hindhead after all, to Cobbett's mortification. He refused to pay the guide.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rural Ride through Hampshire, Berkshire, Surrey and Sussex*, November 24, 1822. (Penguin edition, page 81)

<sup>2</sup> page 84

We didn't see the view that he describes from above Hawkely. I would not be able to give so full and precise a description of any of the views we did see. It's a skill that one might cultivate. This was the passage from Cobbett that I chose to read at Daddy's funeral, because it illustrates the enthusiasm for the human countryside that he shared with Cobbett. Despite the soaking that he suffered, and despite his frustration at not going the way he planned, Cobbett said that the variety of soils and the variety of scenery made it the most interesting day of his life.

We took two other walks in the afternoon, first up Wheatham Hill and then out of West Meon along Coombe Lane and into Chappett's Copse. This second route was suggested by Anna's friend Richard Cook, and the hope was that we would see some flowers called helleborines, but it was obviously too early in the year. It was a rewarding walk nonetheless, for the view across the valley and for the peacefulness of the woods and delicate greens of the new growth. We ended up having a meal, good but expensive, at the Thomas Lord pub in West Meon - named after the founder of Lords who was a native of West Meon.

This concluded our first visit to the Meon valley. The next day we went to Farnham to pick up Rowwy and drive with her up to Stamford. We spent the night with Jeffy and Martin and then took the train from Peterborough to London, leaving the car in the multi-story car-park in Peterborough, a confusing place. We had two nights in Hackney. On the Saturday I went to Woking to visit Mary, while Anna stayed in London with Jessy. On the Sunday we picked up the car in Peterborough and drove home.

There was a hold-up on the A1 just north of Stamford, so we slipped off the main road and took a detour through Oakham and Grantham. In the course of this we went through corners of Northamptonshire, Rutland and Leicestershire, counties we hardly know at all, and we were surprised at the beauty of the countryside. The scenery is not so interesting as the Hampshire valleys, or at least we did not know enough to find it interesting, and the beauty was rather in the clear air, the bright spring sunshine, the blossom and the young green leaves. We were also rewarded by seeing a red kite just overhead. This detour, and the trouble we had finding the car in Peterborough, meant that we were late. The sun was setting as we passed through County Durham and Northumberland. The sun is not yet setting in the north-west so we did not have it in our eyes. As Anna was driving I was able to look out to the west and enjoy the sunset colours. We had dinner in Alnwick and then made good time and reached home at one o'clock.