

'An Island in Sunshine'

BY FLORENCE E. PETTIT



ABOVE: chalky road of South Downs Way from Wolstonbury to main Brighton-Ditchling road at Clayton Hill—'Jack and Jill' mills are seen, centre.

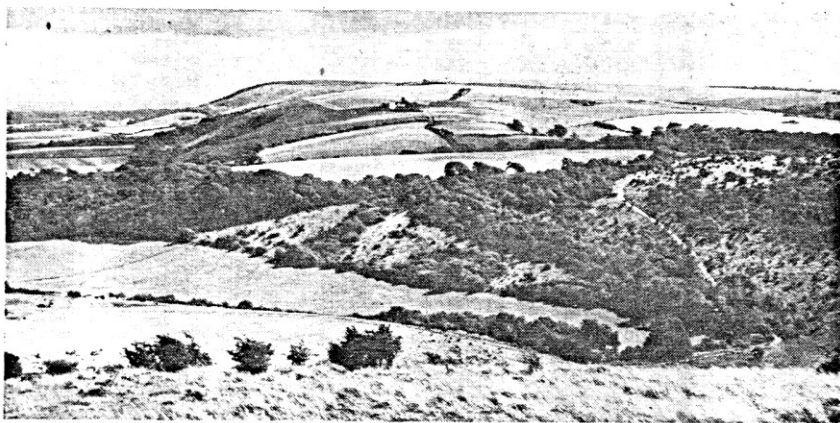
THE AUTHOR RICHARD JEFFERIES (1848 to 1887) glowingly described the hill on the Sussex Downs where he once walked—and where I walk often. I can see Wolstonbury from my home, and I can tell what the day's weather will be like by the appearance of the hill on the skyline.

Should it 'advance' towards me, then I know that rain is imminent. Occasionally it is itself blotted out by low cloud or mist. Usually it is softly distant, yet always abidingly near, inviting me to walk upon it now and then.

I climb upon its summit, as Jefferies did, with the wind from the sea blowing about me, for Wolstonbury is 677 feet high. Seven miles to the south the Channel sparkles beyond Brighton. If I turn slightly, the trees around the Devil's Dyke can be seen, thronged about by cars judging from the flashes of sunlight that catch windscreens.

Farther over, to the west, on clear days, the clump of beeches known as Chanctonbury Ring, north of Worthing, stands blue

BELOW: looking east from the earth-work at the crest of Wolstonbury.



Photos: Edward Reeves

in the distance. Much nearer, and eastwards, Jack and Jill catch my eye; they are a pair of black and white well-preserved windmills, home of a well-known golfer. From the valley road they appear to be near the sky. From the superior height of Wolstonbury they are curiously low, below the line of green hills. If I were to decide to walk past the windmills, I would eventually arrive in Lewes.

It is the immediate area below Wolstonbury Hill that is most inviting. I usually begin a walk near the windmills, preferably early in the morning, or at the closing of the day.

IN AUGUST, the chalk tracks are fringed with outsize wild scabious—almost as big as the garden ones. There are gorgeous red and purple thistles too, and white and yellow bedstraws that would grace any rockery. But—and this must be understood from the start—the flowers are not for plucking. The cushions of thyme that adorn the molehills are fading. So are the wild orchids that grew lately on the downs, although a few 'bees' are going to seed and some late red pyramids.

Blackberries are colouring up and all about spread the old-gold harvest fields. These slope away downwards. I know that when I actually arrive on the top, I will look down on to a patchwork quilt of colour, incredibly vividly beautiful—and still; it will be still, save where a field of barley has not been cut; that will be wafting softly, catching the light, looking now like a pale gold sea, now like a 'huddle of windsheep' as my son once expressed it.

Real sheep are all around, their lambs fat and feeding independently. A glance to the right, and downwards, brings sight of a badger track. Generations of badgers have lived there in the rather poor soil where foxes also used to abound. There may be a red form scuttling across a barren chalk patch, even today.

In one of his essays Richard Jefferies wrote:

On a summer's day, Wolstanbury Hill is an island in sunshine; you may lie on the grassy rampart, high up in the most delicate air—Grecian air, pellucid—alone, among the butterflies and humming bees at the thyme, alone and isolated; endless masses of hills on three



ABOVE: in the beech woods which skirt the northern slopes of Wolstonbury.

sides, endless weald or valley on the fourth; all warmly lit with sunshine, deep under liquid sunshine like the sands under the liquid sea, no harshness of manmade sound to break the insulation amid nature, on an island in a far Pacific of sunshine.'

Ten minutes' walk is enough to make one realise the meaning of the phrase 'an island in sunshine.' One can see little bits of road below, where cars are obviously hurrying, but the sound doesn't carry upwards at all. There is no sound save that of the skylarks soaring happily above. There are skylarks on Wolstonbury, all the year round (unlike Jefferies, we spell it now with two o's).

SO, WITH dancing harebells about one's feet, and with the happy larks above, it is with a spring in the step that one approaches the green summit. The distance is not far. The grass is cropped short—it was shorter in the days of many rabbits! The ground will be dry, for rain and dew trickles quickly away through the thin turf and the chalky soil.

There are hollows formed many years previously, by ancient Britons and Romans. There was an Iron-Age hill fort or camp here, with an earthwork running like a wide guttering all around the top of the hill. I always think, rather oddly, of the tinsured head of some monk!

From the top one can understand Jefferies' writing:

Some people would hesitate to walk down the staircase cut in the turf to the beech trees beneath. The woods look so small beneath, so far down and steep, and no handrail. Many go to the Dyke, but none to Wolstonbury Hill.

How glad I am that this still is true, a century after the essays were written. One can only explore Wolstonbury on foot or on horseback, but the ponies do not usually get up on to the summit.

From the grassy knoll above the 'steep staircase' gashed crudely out of the chalk on the northern slope one can look down towards Danny with its lake hidden like a jewel beneath massed trees; Danny and 'the Hurst of the Pierreponts' as Jefferies termed it, but called Hurstpierpoint today. This contains not only the famous College, but an Elizabethan manor belonging to the Campion family. It has now been tastefully divided into elegant flats, but its great hall is open to view—for a fee—once a week.

Descending by the easier velvety slope to the east one would reach the charming village of Clayton.

Time was when interesting flints could be picked up on the downs around here, especially in the small quarry on the right where, in spring, very long-stalked cowslips grow. (Flint implements recovered from Wolstonbury are now on display in the museums of Lewes, the County town.) Up until recently one could find that strange plant, the lesser dodder, with its thin, red, prostrate stems intertwined among the wild strawberries.

It was here that, a few years ago, I encountered a moss-gatherer. His flashing knives and trussed up sacks gave me a momentary fright, but he explained that he sold his sacks full of moist green moss to

the Brighton florists. Rising bus fares, however, were making it difficult for him to continue 'in business'!

Before my time the hill shepherds would augment their meagre wage packets by snaring wheatears that habitually bred in downland rabbit burrows. The wheatears would be baked into pies by hoteliers. Wheatears still breed on Wolstonbury in the summertime, but in decreasing numbers.

A LOVELY PASSAGE from a Jefferies' essay reminds me of the wild white violets that still grow about the feet of the hill in springtime. They are hard to find because they grow in the chalk close beside the little black/white banded snails. When the sun is in one's eyes the white lane dazzles and many pass the violets by although perhaps aware of their sweet scent.

Before I had any conscious thought it was a delight to me to find wild flowers, just to see them. It was a pleasure to gather them and to take them home; a pleasure to show them to others—to keep them as long as they would live, to decorate the room with them, to arrange them carelessly with grasses, green sprays . . . Without conscious thought of seasons and the advancing hours, to light on the white violet, the meadow orchis, the blue veronica, the blue meadow cranesbill, feeling the warmth and delight of the increasing sunrays, but not recognising whence or why it was joy.

So it is still, about the Wolstonbury he loved, for me at any rate. 'Beech and beautiful scenery,' he also wrote, 'go together.'

Even in August, there is a glow of russet about the tops of the great sweep of beeches that cover the lower slopes of the hill. These trees, in autumn, are like a huge fox's brush—gently curving, softly graceful, protected from the wind by the hump of Wolstonbury. They invite one to walk beneath their welcome, outspread branches.

Thus one continues to descend, walking beneath the trees, past all these viburnums, hawthorns and wayfaring trees. The viburnums had black and green and red and yellow berries upon them in large clusters in July—they berry up at the same time as the mountain ashes do, surprisingly early.

What a noise the rooks and jackdaws make as they rise like clouds of outsize midges above the treetops. Someone with a dog, perhaps, has disturbed them—or is it that the 'children' are about to leave home? There is a tree-pipit descending to a gorse bush—he sings coming down—unlike the skylark who sings as he ascends! From these

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RIGHT: the view north from the brow of Wolstonbury, with Danny seen in the valley below.

BELOW: the footpath up to Wolstonbury from the Clayton-Danny lane, looking south.

slopes I watch for the first willow-warblers in spring, the first chiff-chaffs and the first whitethroats. They usually come more or less together. In the early autumn they pass the other way—bound for the Channel and the faraway African shores.

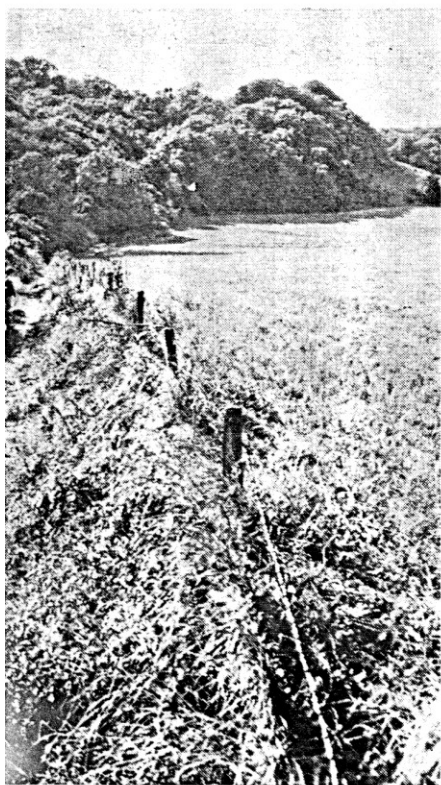
THE BEECH GLADES here have, alas, been fenced in since Jefferies' day. The deep cart tracks—now tractor ruts—are hard upon the feet. After rain they are well nigh impassable.

Here, in the glades, in May-time, the wild white garlic flings an oniony perfume about as one passes. Nearer to the Danny





Photos: Edward Reeves



'staircase' there are clumps of white helleborines—in May and June

In late summer and early autumn it is not white flowers to be seen but coloured toadstools and fungoid growths upon an overturned tree trunk close by the 'Arthur Rackham' oak with its grotesquely twisted old branches. This is a creepy bit of the woods, but a fascinating corner for those who like to sketch such distortions. Mostly, there is not enough light for painting—except in spring when the foliage is less dense and when the bluebells cause one to gasp in annual wonder and delight.

I OFTEN PAUSE beneath a beech, spreading its canopy of deep green about us. Here it was that my children used to climb—and challenge me to do likewise. Here sweet-hearting still goes on, to judge by the carved hearts and crude initials borne long-sufferingly by the once all-smooth grey bole. Here, too, we used to find the earliest of all wild orchids, the strange green twayblade that likes to appear in February—before all others. Its two, large, fat leaves are an open invitation to the gnomes of the woods to shelter beneath them.

"Twayblade!" my son used to call and, "Twayblade!" echoed my daughter, who had stumbled upon another. Now the little grandsons seek—and still find—them, but we never pick them, for orchids take an unconscionable time to grow. Fortunately, few passers-by appear to observe their

camouflaged flowers. I would like to think that Jefferies knew about the twayblades growing there down secret pathways.

Even when it is wet in the woods, there is charm. Our Essayist, who died so young—before he was forty—wrote:

*The raindrops as they slide from leaf to leaf,
the balmy shower that re-perfumes each wild
flower and green thing, drops lit with the sun,
and falling to the chorus of the refreshed birds;
is not this beautiful to see?*

THERE USED TO BE hanging, rosey vines in the hollows at the foot of Wolstonbury. There my son used to swing and pretend that he was Tarzan. A rubbish tip was started there a few years back and everyone round about was sad because of it.

However, already the hollow has been almost filled in—it was a very creepy place in two senses of the word—and Nature is clothing it anew.

There is change on Wolstonbury, as elsewhere, and yet there is still that timeless quality that makes me feel that it will be much the same generations hence—when my grandsons perhaps have grandsons of their own. I hope that these thoughts prove true, that other nature-mystics like Jefferies (and myself) will walk upon its slopes quietly, preferably alone, in the years to come, and sense the lovely spirit that pervades this gentle Sussex hill which Jefferies called 'an island in sunshine.'