

8. PERCEPTIONS OF WILTSHIRE

'Wiltshire has a delightful emptiness, a landscape windy and suggestive, stimulating and soothing'
Geoffrey Grigson, 1905-1985 [1]

Introduction

A landscape is significant not only because of its particular character and qualities, but also because of special associations and perceptions attached to it. An examination of the way that others have perceived the landscape over time can provide pointers to a consensus view on why an area is considered special, and what particular features have consistently attracted attention and comment. This chapter considers the perception of the landscape of Wiltshire chiefly through its literary and artistic associations. References are listed in Appendix 3.

Landscape Descriptions

The landscape of Wiltshire is full of contrast and rich in historic sites and natural features. This has attracted naturalists, antiquarians and travellers to the area throughout recent history (for instance Inigo Jones made a plan of Stonehenge which was published in 1655). Records of visitor's perceptions reveal how the landscape was viewed as well as how it has changed. Views of the landscape were not always positive; William Gilpin wrote in 1770:

The Marlborough Downs is one of the most dreary scenes which our ancestors ... chose as the repositarium of their dead. Everywhere we see tumuli, which were raised over their ashes [2].

By the late Victorian period a more romantic and symbolic view of the landscape was provided by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). His last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, was partly set in Salisbury (re-named Melchester), and an important scene in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* [3] takes place at Stonehenge. Hardy describes daybreak at the conclusion of the flight of Tess after the killing of Alec d'Urberville. The scale and grandeur of the landscape are used to highlight the plight of the heroin and her fate is hinted at in the reference to the 'Stone of Sacrifice'.

The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway. Presently the night wind died out, and the quivering little pools in the cup-like hollows of the stones lay still.

Poets have also been inspired by the Wiltshire landscape. The highly regarded poet, Edward Thomas (1878–1917) developed a strong affinity with the area which he visited since boyhood. Thomas was a great admirer of Richard Jefferies and was commissioned to write his biography, which includes some imaginative descriptions of the landscape of Wiltshire. Thomas's poetry captured the essence of the English countryside and was inspired by nature and the landscape. His poem *The Combe* aptly describes the scarp edge north of the Marlborough Downs.

*The Combe was ever dark, ancient and dark.
Its mouth stopped with bramble, thorn and briar;
And no one scrambles over the sliding chalk
By beech and yew and perishing juniper
Down the half precipices of its sides, with roots
And rabbit holes for steps [4]*

In his prose work *In pursuit of Spring* [5] Edward Thomas describes a journey through southern England and, in this extract, recounts a walk through the gentle landscape of the Wylve valley:

I did not go into Wilton, but kept on steadily alongside the Wylve. For three miles I had on my left hand the river and its meadows, poplars, willows and elms – the railway raised slightly above the farther bank – and the waved green wall of down beyond, to the edge of which came the dark trees of Gravelly... The road was heavy and wet, being hardly above the river level, but that was all the better for seeing the maidenhair lacework of the greening willows, the cattle among the marsh-marigolds of the flat green meadows, the moorhen hurried down the swift water, the bulging wagons of straw going up a deep land to the sheepfolds, and the gradual slope of the Plain where these sheepfolds were, on my right.

In contrast Thomas describes the vastness and remoteness of the downland landscape in the first chapter of his biography of Richard Jefferies (1909), likening it to the ocean:

The Downs in this immediate country of Richard Jeffries are among the highest, most spacious, and most divinely carved in rolling ridge and hollowed flank, and their summits commune with the finest summits of the more southerly downs - Inkpen, Martinsell, Tan Hill ... Jeffries often thought of the sea upon these hills. The eye expects it. There is something oceanic in their magnitude, their solitude ... They are never abrupt, but, flowing on and on, make a type of infinity ... they have a hugeness of undivided surface for which there is no comparison on earth. [6].

Richard Jefferies (1848-1887), novelist, naturalist, essayist, and mystic grew up in a hamlet at the foot of the Downs near Swindon. Jefferies developed an extraordinary sensitivity to nature and wrote many perceptive letters, essays and books on rural matters inspired by this part of Wiltshire:

From the blue hill lines, from the dark copses on the ridges, the shadows in the combes ... there comes from these an influence which forces the heart to lift itself in earnest and purest desire. [7]

One of Jefferies' most well-known books *Wildlife in a Southern Country* (1879) contains an evocative description of the Ridgeway, which still has resonance today:

A broad green track runs for many a long, long mile across the downs, now following the ridges, now winding past at the foot of a grassy slope, then stretching away through a cornfield and fallow. It is distinct from the wagon-tracks which cross it here and there, for these are local only, and, if traced up, land the wayfarer presently in a maze of fields, or end abruptly in the rickyard of a lone farmhouse. It is distinct from the hard roads of modern construction which also at wide intervals cross its course, dusty and glaringly white in the sunshine With varying width, from twenty to fifty yards, it runs like a green ribbon ... a width that allows a flock of sheep to travel easily side by side [8].

Another native writer associated with the Downs is Alfred Williams (1877- 1930), a working man employed in the steam-hammer shop at Swindon railway works. Williams wrote both poetry and prose describing the local landscape of this part of the Downs.

The slopes of the downs, if they have general forms, are continually changing and interchanging in localities, assuming new and strange shapes, charming and surprising with their grace and exquisiteness ... for ever reflecting the mood of the heavens ... [9]

A standing sarsen stone, erected east of Barbury Castle on Buderop Down, commemorates Jefferies and Williams.

Another 20th century poet who lived in Wiltshire (at Heytesbury) is Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967). His poem *On Scratchbury Camp* [10] captures the atmosphere of the downs on a summer day and touches on the pervasive military presence and the archaeological heritage of the area.

*Along the grave green downs, this idle afternoon,
Shadows of loitering silver clouds, becalmed in blue,
Bring, like unfoldment of a flower, the best of June.*

*Shadows outspread in spacious movement, always you
Have dappled the downs and valleys at this time of year,
While larks, ascending shrill, praised freedom as they flew.
Now, through that song, a fighter-squadon's drone I hear
From Scratchbury Camp, whose turfed and cowslip'd rampart seems
More hill than history, ageless and oblivion-blurred...*

Other writers wrote specifically on the county, one of these, Geoffrey Grigson, lived at Broad Town Farmhouse for many years and produced a short evocative book on Wiltshire [11]. This celebrated aspects of the landscape such as the famous ruins of Fonthill Abbey:

Only fragments are left of Fonthill Abbey, deep in the woods of Fonthill Gifford...William Beckford, author, connoisseur, eccentric and millionaire, began the building of his vast Gothic abbey in 1796. In the same grey Chilmark stone as Salisbury Cathedral, it rose tall and thin, by turret and pinnacle, to a tower, 300 feet high, which gently collapsed one evening in 1825

Grigson describes the white horses which are such a prominent feature of the chalk scarps focussing on the Cherhill White Horse which like all the Wiltshire white horses is comparatively modern but inspired by the White Horse at Uffington Berkshire which dates back to the Iron Age. He notes that Cherhill White Horse is 123 feet long and 131 feet 'from ears to hoof' and that:

Dr Alsop, who designed the horse in 1780, pegged out the profile with white flags and shouted up corrections and alterations though a megaphone from the plain below

Myth and Legend

Archaeological sites

Wiltshire is well known for being steeped in myths and legends particularly surrounding the many stone circles, burial mounds and hill forts that characterise the area. Avebury World Heritage Site includes the largest stone circle in Europe and has intrigued visitors for hundreds of years with images often captured in topographical writings and drawings. William Stukeley, for example made a number of observations and line drawings of the monument in his visits to the area in the early eighteenth century. People remain fascinated by what they see and seek to find an explanation for its majesty and aura. One myth tells of the magician Merlin bringing the stones from Ireland.

Various legends have also been attached to Silbury Hill to help explain the creation of this unusual feature. Folklore has claimed it to be the burial place of King Sil, a knight in golden armour or fabled hidden treasure. It is also suggested as being a symbolic effigy of the ancient Mother Earth Goddess and associated with fertility rituals. Another explanation is that Silbury Hill could have been used as an accurate solar observatory by means of the shadows cast by the mound on the carefully levelled plain to the north, towards Avebury. Perhaps the most popular legend is that the hill was created by the Devil who was going to empty a huge sack of earth on the nearby town of Marlborough, but was forced to drop it at Silbury through the magic of priests at nearby Avebury.

Sarsen Stones

A similar fascination exists for the enigmatic Sarsen Stones, which have cast their spell on many who see them. The stones are often known as 'grey wethers' on account of their resemblance to grazing sheep when seen from a distance, or alternatively as 'druid stones'. In 1668 Samuel Pepys visited Avebury and Silbury Hill, commenting ... *it was prodigious to see how full the downs are of great stones, and all along the valleys stones of considerable bigness most of them growing certainly out of the ground so thick as to cover the ground* [12]. The fate of these stones may be traced to writings. Brentnal, writing at the end of the Second World War, noticed that *'the stones are gone for the most part to make the roads of Swindon'*. This was not the only use of the stones - many stones went into the making of early churches and footpaths - one such path of sarsen setts may still be seen between the villages of Alton Priors and Alton Barnes in the Vale of Pewsey.

Artistic Connections

The dramatic archaeological monuments and varied landscape of Wiltshire has drawn artists for many centuries. Turner painted Stonehenge, as noted by Nikolaus Pevsner (who himself lived for a time in Little Town) in his volume of the *Buildings of England* [13] on Wiltshire:

Its stones have a remarkable quality of reflecting light and its moods are as varied as our climate. Most dramatic during a thunderstorm, the weathered stones thrown up in stark relief take on new meaning, thrusting upwards like the very bones of the landscape – an aspect so wonderfully observed by Turner in his watercolour.

Turner also painted Salisbury Cathedral, but perhaps the most famous view of this building, which also captures its rural setting is Constable's view of Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Ground.

Avebury has been a source of interest for a number of artists. Paul Nash's imaginative style of painting was inspired by the megaliths at Avebury in 1933 which he saw as objects of mystery and which he represented in his 'Landscape of the Megaliths' series. In the book *Picture History* [14] Nash wrote a description of these stones:

The great stones were then in their wild state, so to speak. Some were half covered by the grass, others stood up in the cornfields were entangled and overgrown in the copses, some were buried under the turf. But they were always wonderful and disquieting, and, as I saw them, I shall always remember them Their colouring and pattern, their patina of golden lichen, all enhanced their strange forms and mystical significance.

The painter John Piper (1903-1992) knew and loved the Wiltshire Downs and designed a stained glass window for the Devizes Museum incorporating archaeological motifs from the Marlborough Downs including the stones of West Kennett Avenue, the Devil's Den dolmen, and several round barrows.