Appendix 5

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE SOUTH DOWNS AND HIGH WEALD LANDSCAPES

Evolving perceptions of the South Downs landscape

A5.1 Over the years, the Sussex Downs have been the home and inspiration for a host of writers and artists. Their vision of the landscape has guided and expanded our collective perception of its qualities, helping us to see and undersgand it in new ways. In his books on the Sussex landscape, Peter Brandon provides a comprehensive view of the downs in literature and painting. He notes that the South Downs figured in literary and artistic imagination before the modern discovery of the landscape as an inspirational phenomenon at the turn of the Century. In his *Rural Rides* (1835) William Cobbett, ever the realist, was impressed by the productivity and sound management of the downs farmland and the relative prosperity of the labourers. The Sussex Downs inspired some of Cobbett's most vivid descriptive writing in which he combined a real passion for the scenery with an acute understanding of the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of agricultural production. Landowners and clergy wrote downland verse from the early 18th Century onwards and the painter Copley Fielding in the early 19th Century developed a personal vision on the Downs that ushered in new ways of thinking about landscape painting.

A5.2 At the turn of the Century, a greatly deepened appreciation of the downland scene was firmly established in the nature writings of Richard Jeffries (anticipating the modern interpretation of landscape) and in W.H. Hudson's passionate evocation of the magical qualities of the downs in *Nature in Downland* (1899). The downs as a subject for modern poetry was taken up by two nationally-famous poets, Hilaire Belloc and Rudyard Kipling. Belloc lived in the western downs and celebrated its scenery and tranquillity. However, Kipling was the poet of the east, and the bare, flowing forms of the eastern downs are the quintessence of 'Kipling Country'. Peter Brandon writes:

Kipling skilfully captures the essence of the intangible atmosphere of the Eastern Downs that has since been lost, such as the voice of the shepherd, the barking of his dog, the cries of the sheep, the far-off clamour of the sheep bells, jingling of harness, calls of the birds and the sound of the sea, in the absence of any mechanical noise whatsoever, something not to be heard any more and yet something so simple and familiar to downsmemen since the very beginning of man's farming the Downs some six thousand yeard ago.

A5.3 The South Downs, and 'Sussex by the sea' as Kipling enshrined it, received the best press imaginable, this popularity persisting well into the 1920s and 1930s. The popular market was flooded with guidebooks and articles including E.V. Lucas' excellent and evocative *The Highways and Byways of Sussex* (1904) with powerful illustrations by Frederick L. Griggs and Arthur Beckett's *The Spirit of the Downs* (1909). Images of the South Downs became associated with summer holidays and escape from city life in an idealised picture-postcard landscape. Peter Brandon again:

Although the Downs became part of writers' and artists' England, they tended to figure in the imagination as a snug retreat which put people out of sight and mind of the business lunch, the social scramble and the 'electric light' type of existence. They thus became a kind of 'never never' Kate Greenaway land of shepherds, tinkling sheep bells, country pubs and cricket on the village green, an England just out of reach which everyone longed to recapture but which they knew never existed in reality.

A5.4 Keen observers of this romantic and idealised view of the downs were quick to satirise, no more so than Stella Gibbons in her wicked parody *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). The tale chronicles the introverted doings of the archetypal rural family of the Starkadders in their bleak, blighted farmhouse near Brighton, where 'something nasty' was seen by Aunt Ada Doom in the woodshed. In promoting her work as a hopeful author, the writer-narrator marks some of the 'finer passages' with one, two or three stars:

***Dawn crept over the Downs like a sinister white animal, followed by the snarling cries of a wind eating its way between the black boughs of the thorns…. The farm was crouched on a bleak hill-side, whence its fields, fanged with flints, dropped steeply to the village of Howling a mile away….*

A5.5 Nevertheless, distinguished writers' and artists' colonies proliferated, notably at South Harting, Amberley, Storrington, Ditchling, Rottingdean, Charleston and Rodmell. In 1910 the *Sussex Daily News* reported that 36 artists listed as resident in Sussex exhibited their work at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. These artists created lasting visions of the Downs that have gained a permanent place in English literature and art. Artists were and continue to be inspired by the downs, from Copley Fielding onwards, the most famous early 20th Century practitioners including Philip Wilson Steer, Edward Burne-Jones, Eric Gill at Ditchling and the Bloomsbury Group of painters at Charleston.

A5.6 Perhaps the most remarkable downland artist is Eric Ravilious (1903-42), a versatile painter, designer, engraver, ceramic maker and war artist who died at a young age in the Second World War. Taught by Paul Nash, Ravilious was a meticulous painter of the eastern downland. He brought to his Nash-like downland landscapes a sure grasp of the *design* of the landscape and used the simplest and barest of lines in combination much complex but light hatching (the white of the paper showing through, like the chalk itself) to depict the graceful bulk of the empty landscape. These bleached watercolour washes made with a lightly-loaded brush (Ravilious did not use oils) are imbued with what Christopher Neve has called 'an irresistible dryness' that embodies the very dryness of the chalk itself. Moreover, the pictures capture perfectly the empty, muted downland landscape in the quiet lightof a dull day, and the feelings of stillness and solitude that go with it. Ravilious paid his first visit to the eastern downs in 1934, taking a cottage called *Furlongs* from which he often painted afterwards. His paintings of the downland are not numerous (he also painted chalk landscapes elsewhere in southern England), amongst the most striking works the *Downs in Winter* (c.1934), *Waterwheel* (1934) and *The Wilmington Giant* (1939).

A5.7 The landscape of the Sussex Downs continues to attract and inspire many artists. Of particular interest is the work of Carolyn Trant. Her drawings and prints of earthworks on the Sussex Downs reveal the layers of cultural history imprinted on the chalk. Her work depicts contemporary mountain-bike tracks alongside the ramparts of hillforts, uniting time and space in an historic continuum and emphasising that this is a landscape fashioned by centuries of human activities and that its futire lies in human hands.

A5.8 The last word is left with John Godfrey, reminding us that although no Lake District, the downs have much to offer:

The landscape of the South Downs is essentially picturesque rather than sublime and perhaps for this reason occupies a special place in the affections of Englishmen today, as it has done in the past. Long may it continue to do so.

Evolving perceptions of the Wealden landscape

A5.9 The definition of a specifically High Wealden cultural history is more difficult to pin down, suffering as it does in comparison with the rich artistic and literary connections associated with th escarpments, hills and jumbled heaths of the Wealden Greensand, notably the so-called Surrey Hills fringing the northern edge of West Sussex and the basin and escarpment country around Blackdown Hill in the north-western part of the County.

A5.10 In the early travelogues, the landscape is less differentiated, 'The Weald' often treated as a whole – although the hilly High Weald is more often than not given its due as a place of some awe.. As Peter Brandon notes in his book *Kent and Sussex Weald* (2003), the few early travellers who penetrated the Weald had little admiration to bestow. Daniel Defoe wrote in his *Tour* (1724-26) that, after emptying his pockets in Tunbridge Wells ('a man without money is nobody at Tunbridge'), he came through the southern High Weald, shrewdly observing that it was '…the deepest, dirtiest, but in many ways the richest, and most profitable country in all that part of England'. Another writer who bestowed mixed blessings was the independently-minded William Cobbett, famous for his *Rural Rides* (1835) who, in the 1820s, had an intense relish for the 'heaths, the miry coppices, the wild woods and the forests of Sussex and Hampshire'. However, Cobbett could be praiseworthy and scathing in equal measure, his admiration for the heaths taking a dip in the High Weald:

At East Grinstead, which is a rotten Borough and a very shabby place, you come to stiff loam in top with sand stone beneath. To the South of the place, the land is fine, and the vale on both sides a very beautiful intermixture of woodlands and cornfields and pasture. – At about three miles from Grinstead you come to a pretty village, called Forest-Row, and them, on the road to Uckfield, you cross Ashurst [Ashdown] Forest, which is a heath, with here and there a few birch scrubs upon it, verily the most villainously ugly spot I saw in England….

A5.11 And yet, here he is writing about the Turners Hill area, accurate, observant and appreciative of the sandrock features which were apparently more prominent in the landscape in his day (he was greatly impressed by the perched 'Big on Little' rock at West Hoathly):

The country that I have come over to-day is a very pretty one. The soil is a pale yellow loam, looking like brick earth, but rather sandy; but the bottom is a softish stone. Now-and-then, where you go through hollow ways (as at East Grinstead) the sides are solid rock. And, indeed, the rocks sometimes (on the sides of hills) show themselves above ground, and, mixed amongst the woods, make very interesting objects. On the road from the Wen [London] to Brighton… which goes through Lindfield… there is a long chain of rocks, or, rather, rocky hills, with trees growing amongst the rocks, or, apparently, out of them…. The country has no flat *spot in it, yet the hills are not high. My road was a gentle rise or a gentle descent all the way. Continual new views strike the eye; but there is little variety in them: all is pretty but nothing strikingly beautiful.*

A5.12 The appreciation of the more subtle charms of the Weald took a long time to mature, the area by-passed for the inspiring and sublime spectacle of nature in upland Britain beloved of the Romantic poets and artists. However, with the advent of the railway era, the region rapidly became better known by a mass audience, increasingly liked for its domesticity and subtlety but also for the touch of 'wildeness' in the rocky gills and mysterious uplands of the High Weald and in the graceful escarpments of the Surrey hills. If Cobbett compared Ashdown Forest (unfavourably) with the wilds of Nova Scotia and the High Weald around East Grinstead with the scarified rock of the Blue Mountains of America, modern commentators such as Vaughan Cornish were now talking about the *grandeur* of the area:

The ordinary traveller from London to Brighton by the express train is probably entirely unaware that he passes through some of the wildest and most beautiful country in the three kingdoms; he may, particularly about the Balcombe station, get glimpses of almost unrivalled forest scenery which remind him strongly of the run into Namur through the Ardennes… within thirty five miles of London you get a country as primitive and almost as lonely as that of the Adirondack [the Adirondack Mountains in up-state New York].

A5.13 The benchmark of Italian scenery prompted by the Grand Tour meant that the Weald (including the Downs) was compared with it, and increasingly favourably. This appreciation was augmented from a by a growing love for heathland, no longer the 'villainously ugly' landscapes of earlier writers, who saw them as unruly places, peopled by lawless souls. John Ruskin and young artists such as Birket Foster and Helen Allingham had a preference for these wilder landscapes, particularly the Surrey hills and Wealden heaths, echoing the earlier in interest in the Weald shown by J. W. Turner, Samuel Palmer and John Linnell. However, throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries the remaining heathlands and forest pasture continued to decline in area, due to continuing agricultural improvement, reduced grazing and re-afforestation, for instance, through the seeding of Scots pine originally planted in clumps from the 17th Century onwards for ornament and game conservation. Part of this growing appreciation of 'pine country' went hand in hand with the 'London into Sussex' exodus, the Wealden hills becoming a highly prized location for large houses in grounds from the mid-19th Century and well into the Twentieth.

A5.14 The appreciation of Wealden vernacular architecture also took root in the late 18th Century, the sturdy Wealden medieval and post-medieval timber-framed manors, farms and houses serving as an inspiration for new architecture based on the re-discovery of the older models. Although the Victorian taste for the Gothic swept the area, by the turn of the Century, there had developed a sound appreciation of the proportion, balance and graceful simplicity of half-timbered and stone-built houses. The members of the William Morris group in particular were fascinated with Wealden vernacular architecture (Philip Webb built *Standen* near East Grinstead) and re-interpreted traditional styles common between the 16th and early 19th Centuries. The eminent country house Architect Edward Lutyens also built in numerous Wealden locations.

References

A5.15 The materials below (also listed as background documents in ***Appendix 7***) have been used to compile the Appendix: all are recommended as fascinating introductory sources of information about – and insight into – the history and perceptions of two of the finest landscapes in southern England.

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Christopher Neve 'White. The Chalk Landscape: Eric Ravilious and Lightheartedness' in **Unquiet Landscape** [Places and Ideas in 20th Century English Painting] Faber and Faber, London (1990) pp.14-22.

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