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Off the Highway in Kent

## London's Doorstep

By H. E. Bates

LET'S go into the country! It is the summer cry of city dwellers and office prisoners. Certainly it seemed to be the cry of all England as I set off from Charing Cross and out of London along the Folkestone Road on an early spring Sunday to find my unknown Kent. The big white arterial road was black with ten thousand southbound cars.

I chose the day and the road deliberately. The day because I wanted to see how close to crowds I could find the unknown and deserted places; the road because I wanted to prove that the wildest and loveliest bits of England often lie only half a mile from the modern highway.

It is an hour and a-half's ride from Charing Cross to Charing. Every motorist who has been from London to Dover knows that great modern road running along for miles at the foot of the North Downs.

Charing is old and a little forlorn. The new road has by-passed it, leaving the old street winding empty up the hill, with its fine old inns empty and for sale. Walkers and archaeologists know it because of its youth hostel and the ruined archiepiscopal palace that is now part of a farm near the church, a lovely ruin with wild wallflowers and ferns growing in the walls.

And just as thousands of people must pass by Charing without giving it a thought, even more will go up its famous hill without suspecting what lies a couple of hundred yards from the crowded road.

How many motorists' trouble, as I did, to follow one of the little, white-washed roads that curl up among the trees, and explore? And would they suspect how wonderful, isolated and impressive it was up there, among the thick-set beeches and pines, the pines going up straight as telegraph poles?

After the crowded coast road the solitude was impressive. The woods cover so much of these hills that there is no room for any houses except a farmhouse or two and the solitary cottages of farm-labourers and workers in the chalk-pits. The soil is pure white like drifted snow. In the summer the slopes will be yellow

with wild rock-roses. There are no villages. They lie down below—Westwell, Eastwell, Hothfield, Lenham—under the shelter of the hills and trees, their squat Kentish church-towers looking squarer still from above.

You could walk all day, for miles, in these great woods. It is really like a piece of Rhineland forest, with the thick straight pines and the bare floor of slippery pine-needles, except that there is no river below, only the vast expanse of the Weald pastures and orchards, the fields' spring green and the orchards' white mists of blossom.

It was a clear sunny day, and I calculated I could see forty miles. The bare South Downs were visible, almost as blue as the bluebells just beginning to come out by the roadside. It was a magnificent sight: to be able to see almost the whole of Southern Kent and some of Sussex in one glance.

And in a moment it was gone. I moved up and over the crest of the hills and the view vanished. I felt suddenly instead that I was in Scotland; on the other side the hill dropped down for a sheer two hundred feet, a wild gorge of weathered chalk overgrown with briars as thick as my arm, and wild clematis vines that looped over sycamores like tropical creepers. It was an astonishing change. At the foot of the gorge the trees were as dense as a forest. They thinned again on the opposite slope, showing the white chalk seams at intervals.

It was just what I had set out to find: a piece of untouched England, an elemental bit of land that looked as if it had not changed for two or three hundred years, perhaps even for four or five hundred years, since the time of Chaucer.

The time of Chaucer! I realised suddenly that I must have my feet almost on the path of his pilgrims. I scrambled back up the gorge, down which I had gone to investigate some ancient well-like holes, down one of which a fox had dropped three prime white fowls.

I knew that the Pilgrims' Way ran along just under the crest of the chalk slope. So I went back over the hillside with excited haste.

And there it was, unmistakable, primitive, a clear gully-track cutting through the wood on the slope. I set foot on it and began to walk towards Canterbury with a strange pleasure. The wild anemones were like a light shower of snow under the trees. The bluebells were just showing colour.

Having started for Canterbury I went on. It was a pilgrimage I had made before. Now I began to feel some reluctance about it. The road was thick with cars herding to Margate, and Canterbury was a guide-book place, and guide-book places were what I wanted most to avoid. Yet I must stick to my resolution: to find my untouched England side by side with desecrated England, my wild and solitary places next to the towns and speed-tracks.

It may have been the pit-shaft wheels standing out black against the clear Spring sky that created an illusion, but I had an impression suddenly that I was in the North country. The hills are barer here than those above Charing. There is no impression of richness and grandeur. The people are miners. The wind sweeps off the coast, the fields are bleak, the woods are solid rectangular plantations, set to break the wind, like the belts of beeches in the higher Cotswolds.

Was this Kent, the garden of England? Back in the woods by the Pilgrims' Way it had been deliciously warm, like summer. Up here, as though to stiffen the impression of northernliness, it was bitterly cold. The wind came piercingly off the coast, and I was glad to stop and go into a little square bleak-looking public-house by the roadside and warm myself.

There was a little, sharp-faced, grey-eyed woman inside. She had an immense fire burning in the big hob-grate. Again it was like the North and I thought she spoke with a Northern accent, too. The bar was dim and bleak, with cold scrubbed deal tables and chairs. It was empty, too: the seaside trippers do not pay for bleak little Northern public-houses that have somehow strayed to the South coast.

The woman lingered about, as though wanting to talk with me. The place had a lonely feeling, an air of remoteness.

"Is it always so cold up here?" I said.

"It is cold," she admitted.

"But always?"

"It's colder a little farther along the road," she told me. "We're sheltered here. I think we may have snow, don't you?"

Snow! I stood over the fire and let the heat soak into my body while she told me about the collieries, with their cold names, Snowdown and Betteshanger, and their vast pumps which pump perpetually at an underground river. When I came outside to the road again the wind swept down at me off the unprotected hillside. And a day or two later snow did fall, to a depth of two inches! I wondered that the little house and the little woman hadn't been blown back to the North again long ago.

A bit of Scotland, a taste of North country, a glimpse of a German forest, a view as in Somerset—all in a day, and all in country lying on the very doorstep of London. It looks as if the wonders of England are where you least expect them, and that it may be worth while to go on trying to find them.