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A MONTHLY JOURNAL 2/6 OF THE OPEN AIR

Country Fair

ALL ABOUT THE COUNTRY IN DECEMBER

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EDITED BY MACDONALD HASTINGS with A. G. STREET

KENT

BY

H. E. BATES

Decorations by Luther Roberts

WHEN I came to live in Kent, twenty years ago, it was as an exile from a countryside of flat river plains, bland and broad and unexciting, across which the counter-flow of the Industrial Revolution had left a red wash of brick streets whose common emblem was the aspidistra in the front-room window. I had lived, far too long, as I then reckoned it, to the sound of factory hooters marking the hours, the shriek of boot-stitching machines in back alleys, the peculiar tangy odour of leather on wet and windless afternoons.

Like D. H. Lawrence, I found it hard to bear the rape of central England by hands intent only on the spoils she gave. In so central a county as Northamptonshire, bounded by nine other counties, I had grown up also with a curious feeling of being shut in. Everything else of England, the sea especially, seemed far away. Excursions were necessary before I could discover for myself the simplest pieces of uncontaminated rural delight: the primrose woods of Bedfordshire, the cowslip fields of Huntingdon, the beech woods of Buckinghamshire. I was rather like a man brought up not only on the plainest of diets; for me it was bread and cheese at every meal every day. And I had begun to hunger, at last, and not unnaturally, for variation.

It did not occur to me for a long time after this that I had had the amazing fortune to discover every possible variation I needed within the boundaries of a single county. Kent is a large county, and its astonishing range of qualities, born out of the happiest union of climate and soil and husbandry and sea, cannot be discovered in a day. It is also, virtually, an island. Two-thirds of its boundary are formed of water.

The long sweep of Thames from London Bridge to the Isle of Sheppey, the flat sands of Pegwell and the Goodwins, the vast, creamy walls of cliff about Folkestone and Dover, and the final oddity of Romney's strip of half-land, half-shore: all this has a curiously separating, isolating

effect that to me, as a Midland man, has always been ceaselessly exhilarating and refreshing and beautiful and peculiar.

If you can imagine Kent bordered on its seaward sides, to the north and east and south, by counties having something of the characteristics of Picardy and the Pas de Calais you cannot fail to conclude, I think, that much of its distinction would have been lost. It would have become another rural appendage to London, simply another home county, half-suburban, insulated in fair comfort by surrounding counties taking away the first bristling and invigorating impact of sea.

But the special arrangement of its geography precludes it for ever from becoming, for example, just another Hertfordshire. It remains intensely, sometimes infuriatingly, insular: a maritime county gaining more than half its character, its air and its beauty from the contact of sea.

To a man accustomed to making journeys of ten miles in order to gather the first primroses of spring it had, when I first came here, almost unbearably accessible beauties. Its primroses were cast everywhere on its roadsides; bluebells grew in the hedgerows of its by-passes. Its woods had not been ravaged by the Industrial Revolution, but remained, as they had so long been, the surviving segments of a great forest, on the sheltered clearances of which a snug fat husbandry prospered with extraordinary richness and variation.

You could hardly walk a quarter of a mile without coming upon woods and copses of charm and lushness: yellow with hazel catkin in February, tawny-purple with alder caterpillars in April, foaming with sweet-chestnut in July. You were never out of sight of great trees. The quality of the land everywhere was of a startling fertility. The long ledge of sugary lightish soil running between the lower crest of downland and the dip to the Weald, a sort of great, curved step running south-eastwards from Swanley through Maidstone and the sea, is one of the richest in the world. It supports a prodigious agriculture: to which arboriculture and horticulture have added a touch of balanced floridity and neatness that gives the whole county the name by which everyone knows it—the Garden of England.

Sea, hills, woods, marshes, rivers, parks, oast-houses, hop-fields, village greens, cornland, pasture, orchards—the incomparable, magnificent orchards—it is very hard to know where to begin in Kent. Sea and hills and woodland seem to me to dominate the scene. There is sometimes even a feeling, more especially on dull, humid days of late summer, when the domination of trees, dark with too much rain, is almost too oppressive to bear. The horizons everywhere are unbearably shortened by masses of black leaf. A feeling that the sea is not only far away, but that it does not exist at all, dispels completely in these days the notion of the county being an island.

It becomes again what it once was, a ponderous and undulating forest out of which man has fashioned, over the centuries, a few clearings for the cultivation of his corn, his apples, and the most curious crop that surely ever climbed its way to heaven and big bank balances—the hop, that rustling, artificial-looking flower of green that drinkers for ever maintain, with stubborn sourness, is never to be found in their beer.

As if Providence had not given Kent enough in the way of agricultural riches it gave the hop as a final measure. I do not know the extent and wealth of the great hop-gardens about Paddock Wood and Goudhurst, where the countryside in late summer has something of the appearance of being smothered with giant vineyards, but my own village contains the oldest hop-garden in England. And in a good year, when, as for vines, both sun and rain have come down in perfect proportion, the crop from these thirty acres will bring £7,000.

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"Kent is very much Dickens country. He lived in it, wrote of it and, in some odd way, has left his seal on it"

STATISTICIAN'S CORNER

Total population of the county, including the County Borough of Canterbury, 1,563,286; total area, 975,960 acres. The percentage increase in population since 1931 was 28.2. The County Borough of Canterbury has an area of 4,690 acres, and a population of 27,778.

Of the 23 municipal boroughs, the largest is Bexley, with a population of 88,767; the smallest New Romney, with a population of 2,356. Of the urban districts (15), the largest is Chislehurst and Sidcup, with a population of 83,837, and the smallest Swanscombe with a population of 8,295. The largest of the rural districts (18 in number), is Dartford, with a population of 37,905; the smallest is Romney Marsh, with a population of 4,539.

The total area of the municipal boroughs and urban districts is 190,411 acres, and of the rural districts 780,859 acres. The population, per acre, of the former is 6.3, and of the latter .4.

Acres under orchards (June, 1950, figures), 72,527; under wheat, 66,887; under oats, 43,282; under potatoes, 17,530; under hops, 12,388 (statute acres, not hop acres). The smallest crop (rye, for green fodder), 289 acres. Permanent grass (mowing), 48,485 acres; permanent grass (grazing), 164,206 acres; rough grazing, 27,261. Total acreage of crops and grass of all kinds, 669,120 acres.

Total cattle and calves (June, 1950, figures), 126,063; pigs, 70,106; sheep and lambs, 423,229; horses, 6,804; poultry, 1,582,239.

Total number of workers on Kentish land, 43,925: men, 25,797; women, 4,203.

Yields per acre: mangolds, 20.3 tons; turnips and swedes, 12.7 tons; main crop and early potatoes, 9.7 tons; seed's hay, 36.2 cwts.; meadow hay, 23.1 cwts.; wheat, 22.2 cwts.; beans and peas for stock-feed (each), 15.0 cwts.

On these dull oppressive days of late wet summers, before there is any touch of change in the leaf, and when the angle of light is beginning to lower a little, I feel greatly drawn to the sea. There is a piece of country beyond the final rim of downland, over towards Faversham and north-eastwards by Canterbury, where the land is high, with sudden gaps in beech woodlands revealing silvery distances of low estuaries and creeks on a far pale shore. Farther north-westward you come upon sudden glimpses of the Medway, broadening out, populous with shipping, towards Sheppey and the sea.

It is very much Dickens country. He lived in it, wrote of it and, in some odd way, rather as a fire leaves a smoke-mark on the lip of a chimney, has left his seal on it. Rochester and some sections of shore and seaport and countryside are his own as much as London is. A certain shabby seaport fustiness, of the sort he loved to describe, remains about parts of Rochester, Sheerness, and Gravesend, untouched by chain stores and television poles. It is not hard to imagine some disportation with Pickwick at Dingley Dell.

Solicitors' offices, the offices of port authorities with dusty, gauze-covered windows, lace curtains over the windows of seedy, Georgian boarding-houses, squat, rotund little pubs, the sudden discovery of upturned boats in backyards: Victorian England, Dickens, the expansive and, as we like to think of it, prosperous and jolly times.

To-day a horrible general slatiness, a greyness as of abandoned ash-heaps, hangs over almost every yard of this north-eastern shoulder of the county. It appals

by its dismal, reckless pattern of slate and brick, of pre-fab and chain store: another great backyard of London, grey and dismal, composed of a million little back-yards, so raw and cancerous that it does not seem to belong to the rest of this bountiful countryside.

Yet even here the great cherry orchards flower right up to the rim of the ash-heaps, just as they do about the hideous purlieus of Swanley, and in spring and summer the woods on the hills above Maidstone, only a mile or two before the destitution and decay sets in, are marvellously beautiful with white-beam and viburnum and wild cherry and Travellers' Joy and all the many things that specially flourish in chalk hillsides.

We are placed about centrally between this depraved and fascinating bit of river coastline, itself a series of islands, and the still odder island of Romney Marsh. At Appledore, only one of several enchanting, forgotten and abandoned ports of which Kent is full, the land seems suddenly to pitch down to the level of the sea. Instantly the lush forestry of downland and ridge and orchard and even of Weald is finished; there are no more hops or cherries or sweet-chestnut copses or white fields of barley.

The nobility of the great wool towns, Cranbrook and Tenterden, is replaced by small, huddling villages with squat, rose-roofed churches not much taller than the big yews in their churchyards. A remarkable little kingdom emerges, almost entirely of grass and water, with a population of sheep more dense than anywhere in the country: utterly flat, green and curious, with a skyline as far and wide as the sea. Herons poise with melancholy reflection on the long dykes, lovely with grey-lavender marsh-mallow and purple loosestrife in summer, grey-bearded with heads of reed in winter; kingfishers whistle with needle-sharp cries down a wide landscape that because of its emptiness gives a remarkably enlarged and bell-like quality to the smallest sound.

The sensation that you are walking here on the bottom of a dried-up sea, a feeling perfectly correct in historical fact, increases as you go on towards the coastline. Tongues of shingle begin to cut into the dark green pastures, bringing in with them a range of sea-flowers. To the beauty of the mallowed dykes is added the dry brilliance of vipers' bugloss, vivid as delphiniums on shingle and sand in July, sea-thistle and convolvulus, yellow sea-poppy and foxglove.

To the east of all this a new depravity begins. On this remarkable stretch of countryside, unique not only in its own county but in England, the forces in our lives known as planning authorities have allowed, over the years, the erection of a coastal strip of bungalows of astonishing hideousness, to which has now been added a holiday camp or two. The once-beautiful little village of Dymchurch, to which even in recent years misguided ladies have gone in search of quietness because they had once heard of its legendary charm as a little fishing village unspoilt on the edge of the sea, is now rather like a sample segment of the Mile End Road or, better still, perhaps, Battersea Fun Fair.

Its effects spread out for some miles along the sea-wall. Only New Romney, for some reason, has escaped them and remains, old, lost, dignified and quiet, perhaps the nicest town of the entire long coastline. Its short main street is perfect as an example, architecturally and atmospherically, of an eighteenth-century seaport, now, of course, a port no longer, since the land is here, or hereabout, constantly advancing on the sea, pushing itself out at the point of Dungeness at the rate of some yards a year. Hideously the bungalows follow it. A mile or two eastward the sea revenges itself.

Savagely, at Sandgate, the sea eats in, making the cruellest mockery of the works of man some dozens of times in the course of an English winter by hurling promenades and breakwaters about as if they were

flower-pots. Concrete is bashed and fissured like egg-shell, and sea roads are blocked by barriers of shingle. Some eternally complex power of wind and current and tide is endlessly at work clawing lumps off land, pavements, houses and even, farther east still, the bastion of a castle. Here a friend has a house with a private beach. Two years ago he had a boat-house; to-day the sea has clawed it away.

Dover is out of reach of this merciless sea-beating. It is my favourite seaport in England: at first sight not impressive, rather drab, cruelly scarred by war, with a skyline of dock cranes not big enough to be important, a smell of coalyards, a constant yawking and squealing of sea-gulls on chimney-pots. Horrible gaps yawn in the semi-circle of its Regency sea-front crescent: half of which the local authorities have repaired and restored to decency, the other half of which they leave, for some reason, in monstrous decay. Its restoration could give Dover a crescent of maritime Regency architecture, perfectly set against the high background of hills, unequalled in England, a delicious curve of green and white fronting a harbour constantly tense with shipping, both steam and sail.

The port, indeed, thumps with life. It contains in many ways the whole essence of Kent as a maritime county; all of the peculiar independence, stubbornness, and restlessness of this county, set so near to the continent and its potential invaders that it can never slacken into the sleepy smugness that comes over some parts of the west, is concentrated into this town with its superbly impressive situation.

It is, of course, a garrisoned and fortified town: in that sense alone incomparable in England. Of its castle I will risk offending all Scotsmen by saying that it is as fine, as a specimen of permanently garrisoned fortification, as Edinburgh: perhaps finer. Seen from the sea, on a fine summer night, it stands up in the sky like some half-transparent model magically constructed of glass and salt and silver. By day it carries all the imponderable and invincible grimness, a sort of thundery and majestic cloud in stone, of the Middle Ages and of England defending itself over the centuries.

It is, I think, even more than the cathedral at Canterbury, the symbol of the entire Kentish character, the peculiar composite of suspicion, stubbornness, forthrightness and determination, all damnably annoying and yet infinitely English and admirable, from which love and fear of the sea are never absent. It reveals, more than any other English town I know, the salt in our blood.

You can even eat well in Dover. Its restaurants seem to have caught, by seaward rumour, a notion that there are countries where people may wish to eat after seven o'clock at night and even disport themselves, over wine, until the hour of eleven. They cater, as towns in

England are apt not to do, for travellers; and at the most ancient of them, a sort of semi-ecclesiastical cellar called the Crypt, something as good as France can be found.

Here, by a small miracle, in Dover itself, Dover soles may be eaten as they should be eaten: simply grilled or fried or meunière, firm and white as snow, tasting like clean portions of solid sea. They come to the plate here as big as the shape of a giant's foot, yet never coarse, and in their best season, in winter, full of a rare delicacy. I mention this not merely to praise a restaurant, but because all along this coast, from the bay of Rye to the estuary of the Thames, the fish is unequalled in the world.

From the shrimps of the Thames about Gravesend, where men still fish in their ancient bawley boats, down through Whitstable with its oysters and the reeking whelk and crab stalls of Ramsgate and Margate and Deal and Folkestone, on through Dover with its soles and finally round to Dymchurch and Rye with their famous plaice, the fish has the same first excellence as the fruit that grows inland. The Kentish sea, like the Kentish soil, is rich.

Some fusion of coldness and current and food and, perhaps, high iodine content gives the flesh of flat fish here an amazing sea-salt flavour, sweet and yet tangy as seaweed and vigorous as the bluster of sea air. It is sometimes possible to taste here an otherwise not very remarkable fish like halibut in which the succulence of the flesh about the fins, glutinous and fatty, is like the essence of pure sea foam.

No visitor to the Mediterranean should ever attempt the soles that are served there, laden with butter and almonds to give them flavour. He should save his money and go to Dover. There Kent will reward him—and if he loves oysters, as even Romans did, he is not much more than half an hour from Whitstable—with something of rare gastronomical beauty. He will feel that he is eating the sea.

Northwards from Dover the Downs spread and break into a series of wooded folds. Beech woods of high magnificence crown the innumerable rounded breasts of land that fill the countryside in the rough triangle composed of Ashford, Canterbury, and Dover. It is a piece of lost, steep-valleyed country, lovely and green: of abandoned great houses, scrubby little villages in twisted lanes that seem to double back on themselves and lead nowhere.

Summer, giving long, golden-green panoramas far over marsh and weald, is very beautiful here, and spring brings cowslips on the short, pale downland grass. Snow comes heavily in bad winters, filling the steep lanes like gullies, cutting off villages, burying sheep, giving weeks of isolation that are apt to cause surprise to persons dwelling on comfortable and snowless flatlands below. This is the

wildest, quietest and yet most uneasy of all Kent's countryside.

Man has put less of his mark on it than, perhaps, anywhere else in the country, with consequences that are cold and peculiar. I am not ashamed to say that sometimes, on darkening afternoons, it frightens me a little. A little of the primeval is left here, something of the old, dark air that Cobbett caught and hated so much on lonely heaths as he rode about the south country in the eighteenth century, and I am always glad to leave it behind.

Everywhere these Downs have beauty and dominance. Without them, as without the sea, Kent would be reduced to ordinariness. They add something uplifting and fine to her already great pattern of variation, and are themselves infinite in variation, too. About Lenham they suddenly take on a remarkable starkness. Lenham itself is a village of extraordinarily French appearance, with a square exactly like those seen so often in France, with little rows of clipped and pleached shade-trees round the sides. Its neighbouring ridge of Down is not so engaging.

Its peculiar structure, acting like the stone slab of a waterfall, allows winds from the north-east to come sliding over the top with vicious bitterness, holding to the face of the bare precipitous curve exactly like a stream of icy water. Blizzards pile here with double the depth and force that they have in the valley of the Medway, only ten miles farther north, and snow lingers in deep drifts on roadsides long after primroses have begun to star the ditches of kindlier country.

The Downs are really the bone and heart of Kent, just as the sea is the thing that gives it a certain headiness, a zest, of atmosphere. Constant conflict between sea wind and these hills creates a maddening and yet invigorating insecurity of climate. The hills break the sea cloud into intensely localised patches of rain. While sun shines on the flat coast strip about Hythe and Dymchurch, rain beats on the orchards of Sittingbourne; foggy cloud binds the Weald in rolls of cotton wool on an autumn morning, but the sky above Sevenoaks is all blue crystal and light, without a cloud. It is always the sea, with the hills, that confers these rapid changes on us here, saving us from the lethargy and enervation of the west. You feel here that the air is never settled, never stale or stable, never still.

If, indeed, the weather changes here, as they say it does, with every tide, then we have only another reason for the curious and beautiful quality of freshness, almost a sort of sweet bristling, that I have noticed in the air here ever since I came down from the Midlands twenty years ago to live in a county that seemed fabulously fertile. It is a very sweet and pleasant air. I like it, and I shall probably go on breathing it and liking it, I think, for the rest of my days.

"The rustic yet civilised people of Kent, more than the rest of the English, still breathe a consciousness of their ancient nobility, being the foremost to exercise acts of respect and hospitality, and the last to resent injuries."—*William of Malmesbury*, 1093-1143.

". . . . . O famous Kent,
What county hath this isle that can compare with thee?
That hath within thyself as much as thou can'st wish;
Thy rabbits, venison, fruits, thy sorts of fowl and fish,
As with what strength comports, thy hay, thy corn, thy wood,
Nor anything doth want that anywhere is good."—*Michael Drayton.*

"Kent, Sir—Everybody knows Kent—apples, cherries, hops and women."—Mr. Jingle.

NEXT MONTH: JOHN HILLABY ON THE WEST RIDING