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"Orchard dips into cornland, cornland into
hop-field, hop-field into chestnut copse"
SURREY VALLEY FROM FOLLIS HILL



In Chilham, near Canterbury, the past lives in the present. Julius Caesar camped here; Normans built part of the castle; timbered buildings house modern shops

KENT IS MY COUNTY

If, as some say, England is a garden, then Kent is the garden of England. A novelist who makes it his home says Kent *is* England

by H. E. BATES

PHOTOGRAPHED BY E. G. MALINDINE



SOMETIMES when people ask me my politics I am inclined to answer, a little tartly perhaps: "I'm an Englishman." Similarly, if anyone asks me where I was born, I feel inclined to say, rather on the lines of the remark made to the gentleman who fell asleep on a haystack by the River Nene and was carried away by floods to wake in a strange village and wondered where and in what country he could be—"In England."

England, I maintain, is incomparable. I have even heard an intelligent American call it "the most beautiful, wonderful, exciting country in Europe," a judgment with which I could not quarrel even on a rainy day. But I also maintain that the heart of England is the south country, and furthermore that the heart of the south country is Kent.

This opinion is really the judgment of an exile. I am a halfway house man. My roots belong, not to the great jungle of industry and moor and mountain and pasture and lakeland, so much of it beautiful and startlingly rural and warm with life, that lies north of the Trent; nor to the county containing every subtle variation of landscape and husbandry except sheer mountain and lakeland where I now live. I spring from the Midland plain, where habit and thought and speech and outlook are more profoundly and intensely English than anywhere else in the land. It is the country of Shakespeare, Dryden, Bunyan, the great universities and the established English tongue.

North countrymen with their long and forthright vowels and West countrymen with



Here began England, 1,500 years ago. At Aylesford, in Kent, Hengist and Horsa fought and beat the ancient Britons, establishing a Saxon kingdom



"Invaders . . . From Streets About The Thames"

Rich earth, superbly drained, makes the cherry orchards of Kent and provides work and holidays for scores of pickers from the towns

The cockney brings his family for the annual hop-picking and quiet Kentish villages become segments of Poplar and Lambeth

their honeyed yokelese can only bow themselves out backwards when faced with the cradle of standard English that spreads along the green clay valleys from Warwickshire to the Wash. Even the south country, speaking a sort of semi-barbarous cockney that is very cruel on the ear, can do nothing but go with them there.

Happily the beauty of the English countryside is not judged by the accents that are spoken in it. If this were so, Kent would come very low on the list. For sheer plum-in-the-mouth doggerel, sloppy and bastardized, the speech of my adopted county takes beating.

Its Legendary Orchards

Indeed, I should be much surprised if any other county can offer such perfection in English misused. But if the ear is offended so harshly, the eye, the mind and the senses can only be continually delighted by the physical beauty of this piece of earth, two-thirds bound by sea, geographically, climatically and atmospherically so wonderfully placed that it teems with abundance. Its soil, notably on the famous ridge running from north of Maidstone to the sea, is not only among the richest in the country but also in the world. Its legendary cherry orchards are not there by accident, but because its special deposits of brick earth, rich, but, above all, superbly drained, are exactly what cherries need to grow to perfection.

Kent, more than any other county in England, is the most virile and beautiful testimony to the fact that the English countryside as we know it today is man-made.

Here it embraces a variety of crops, a system of agriculture, horticulture and arboriculture, not to be found elsewhere in England, especially in the north country, and still more especially in Wales and Scotland. What we—and, indeed, the rest of the world—regard as unique in the English countryside, and what we love most on the face of our land, the true England, is, in fact, largely the result of interference by man.

Where man has not been able to interfere so intensively or actively, the result is different. Mountains are mountains; man climbs them;

he does not and cannot attempt to re-shape them. The result is that you can walk down the valley of Glencoe or across to Snowdon range and feel, in the primitive and virgin bone of earth, that man has hardly touched it.

Nothing could be less true of the south country, where husbandry has been pecking and scooping at earth's surface, with the incomparably charming results that we see in Kent and also, of course, in Sussex and Hampshire, ever since the plough's first revolution changed man from a nomad with grazing herds to a settler with hearth and home. There is, in fact, a stretch of country here, extending from the New Forest in Hampshire to the great beech-woods that crown the North Downs above Wye, coming up through the deep hollied lanes of West Sussex, the great orchard-and-hop land of the Weald, through the superb tender-toned villages of Midhurst, Goudhurst, Rolvenden, Sissinghurst, Biddenden and many others, in which you will find scarcely a yard of earth despoiled by man. This once great forest, turned by man into a vast garden of which the supreme showpiece is Kent.

In my mind there is no arguing about this; it is so. The greatest part of the beauty of this piece of earth lies in the ceaseless variations it offers. Orchard dips into cornland, cornland into hop-field, hop-field into chestnut copse; copse folds on grass and grass into strawberry field and strawberry into flax; parkland and potato land change to orchards of hazel nut and pear and black-currant fields; deep-cut lanes of holly and hazel, splashed in spring with primrose and anemone and bluebell, turn to neat tunnels of rhododendron.

The Bristling Air

There is no doubt that the sea plays a great part in this. There is a certain bristling quality in the air, combined always with some subtle touch of sea beauty in the light of riding clouds. I have no doubt that all vegetation, trees especially, responds vigorously to this air so often drenched with sea-borne rain, endlessly freshened. I would go so far as to say that the sea is the power, above all others, that makes

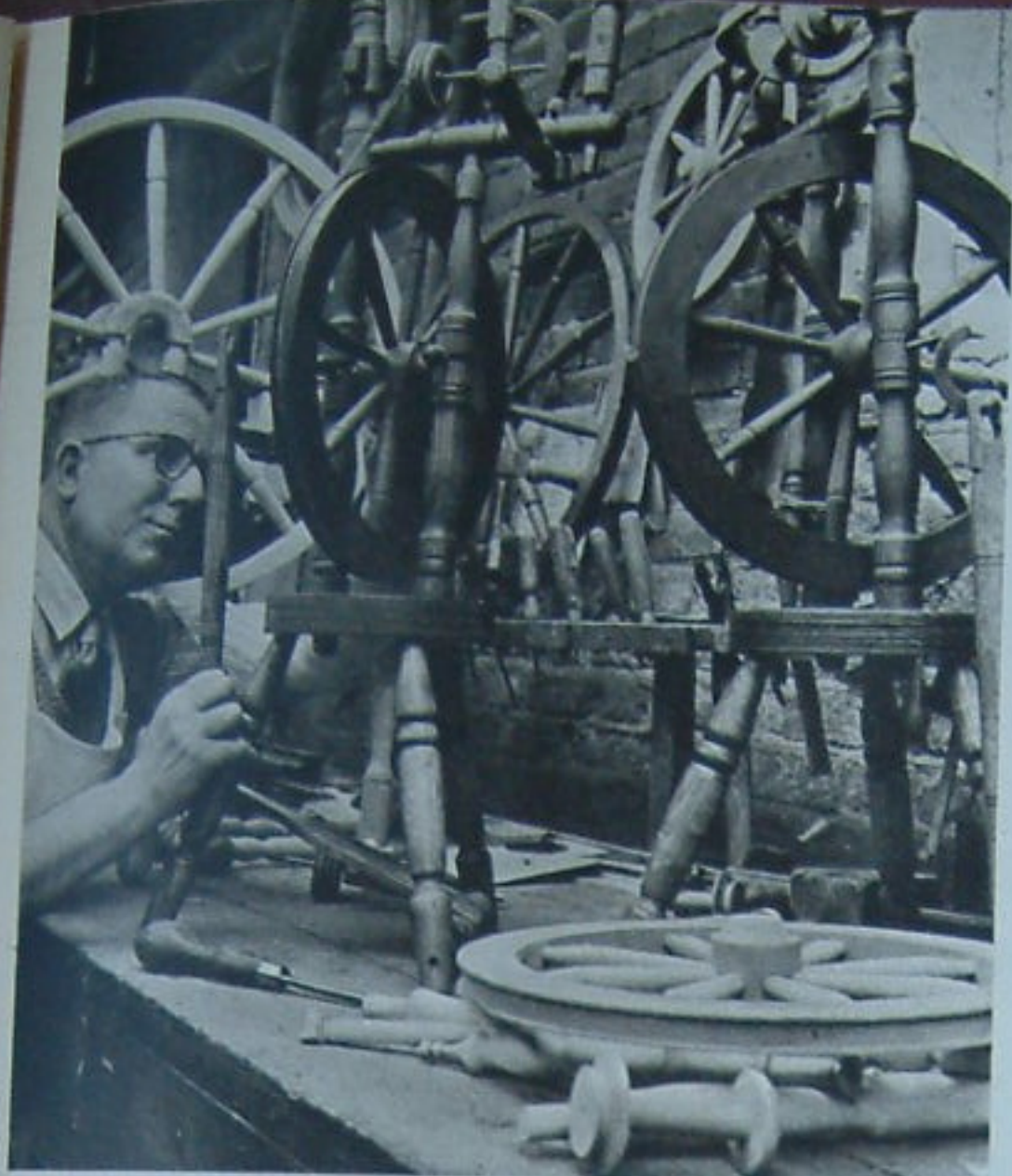
Kent what it is. It gives the supreme touch of salt that brings the dish to perfection.

It is curious and interesting to think that London is the other great force always restlessly impinging on Kent and Kentish ways. For a county that really projects like a promontory out of London's heart, Kent is surprisingly unsuburban. London has drawn for centuries on Kentish soil for its markets; the two have always fed on each other; and yet Kent has managed to remain surprisingly rural. It has never become cockneyized, although the cockney loves Kent, comes to its sea and orchards and villages and hop-fields as a man goes to visit old relations in the country.

It is still one of the nicest sights in England. I think, to see the cockney coming down to visit us here at the time of hop picking and apple harvest. You can still meet him by road and, most surprisingly, travelling by horse and cart. Not so often, now, of course—but on the roads about Swanley, on a late August

H. E. BATES sits in his Kent garden where





"Hardly Touched By Industrial Revolution"

Canterbury, home of weaving since time of the Huguenots, still produces hand-made spinning-wheels which go all over the world

Kentish wool is famous but, although mechanical clippers speed the work, no one has yet replaced the skilled sheep shearer

morning, it is still a reasonably common sight to meet the cockney family cart piled high with kids, bedding, trunks and mum and dad, all jogging down to Kentish hop gardens for the month of picking that begins on September 1.

There also is a great family packing up and departing in all Kentish village families on September 1. Your daily help and your jobbing gardener vanish from your scene; children are kept from school. A man and his wife and family may now earn, in a good season, with hard work, £5 a day; a man or woman, alone, £1 a day. All the time cockney and countryman incline to keep separate, both in the garden and out of it.

The cockney has his own camp, set up in the field, by stacks of faggots, the quickest possible replica of his own street in Poplar or Lambeth, complete with wives gossiping at doors, screeching infants, smart-alecks on racing bikes, astonishingly pretty girls, old prams, ice-cream vans, wheel stalls and a good com-

forting fog-up from cooking fires. In his own slick five-fingered way he takes a bit of the countryside and for a month or so makes it his own. The streets of superb little villages like Goudhurst become, on Saturday nights in September, segments of the Old Kent Road.

Cockneys have been doing this for years; yet they leave nothing urban behind. They come, bold court, turn modest villages into bits of London, drink country beer and depart. And Kent lets them go, having given nothing away. The thick rich fall of oak and chestnut leaf covers in a week or two the scars of cooking fires and the general mess of camps. The Kentish countryside gives a sort of long autumnal sigh and lapses back into a beauty hardly touched.

Yet I am convinced that it is precisely these impacts that give to Kent a certain sharpening of character it might otherwise never have. Because of them it has none of the true rural pudden-sleepiness typical of some East Anglian counties and of counties farther west.

The farther north you go, in my view, the more insular Englishmen become; the more they resent London and incline to provincial jealousies of the capital city. Yet it is undeniable, I think, that London, hate it though we all sometimes do, is the absolute symbol of the English character and that, because of it, life in the South is broader, less circumscribed by provincial prejudice.

Sweetness Of Cricket

We even play cricket better here; not necessarily with greater skill, greater intelligence or greater ruthlessness, but simply with a greater appreciation at the sheer sweetness and irony of the game. The two silliest games of cricket played in this island every summer are those between Lancashire and Yorkshire, where twenty-two gentlemen face each other on a basis of sheer stubbornness, without evidence of the slightest pleasure.

Not all of Kent's beauty rises from its flourishing and splendidly varied husbandry. Man, over centuries made rich from wool and hops and corn, has left here a magnificent

legacy of architecture, in particular of smaller domestic architecture, of cottage and yeoman house, and of barns that have the proud spaciousness of churches.

There is also a type of a house common here and never to be seen in the North: the weather-board house. The pure white or cream or sometimes pale apple green boards lie in clean horizontals, overlapping, like ships' timbers. With the double pitch of their mansard roofs they have exactly the appearance of painted arks, upturned. They are everywhere in the older parts of sea-coast towns and it seems unquestionable, I think, that fishing villages first devised them, building in the fashion of boats.

Strawberries And Sheep

Kent's great good fortune is that the industrial revolution hardly touched it. While the North and the Midlands were being ravaged by machines and the grab for coal, while the miles and miles of back-to-backs were eating their way into northern fields, Kent was free to go on growing hops and cherries, corn and apples, strawberries and sheep.

Its richness is not something imposed from outside by changes of political, industrial or economic power. The North has its richness and has paid for it: the North best knows how. The South, and Kent most of all, has had no price to pay for its heritage; its richness is under its feet and is continually blossoming, even in the shape of bricks and mortar.

There is so little about it that is intolerable to the eye—I except from this the unpleasant purlieus of Gillingham and Dartford and some bits of coastline—that I cannot help wondering sometimes if one little gesture of industrial rape might not have its own reward in making everybody here more sharply aware of what exactly it is they possess in and about these flowery orchard folds. But this would be rather like wishing an Australian drought on England simply in order to make Englishmen appreciate the wonder of rain; or a Jamaican hurricane so that we could all be more thankful for our tender, trying, temperate island air. Kent, happily, belongs to us all.

the roses climb up to the bedroom windows



NEXT WEEK: Louis Golding Speaks Up For Lancashire