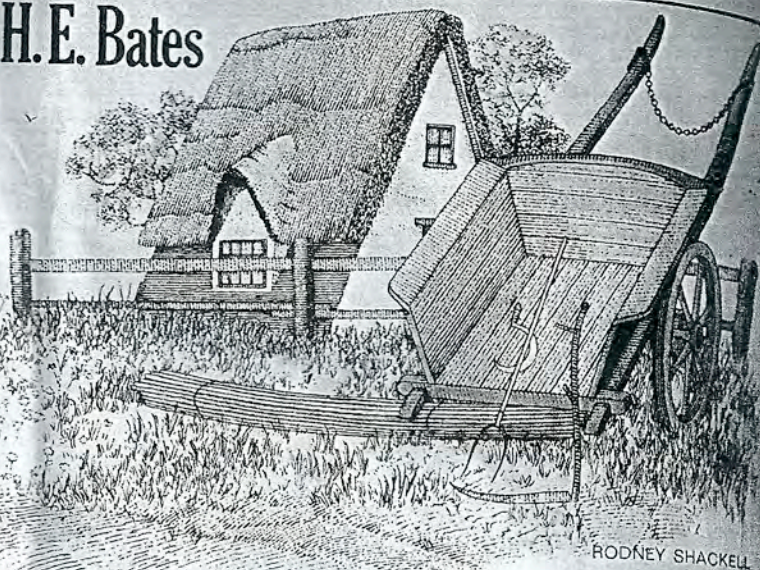


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# A Countryman Remembers by H. E. Bates

## Where Once I Walked



RODNEY SHACKELL

If I were asked to choose a single word to express one of the greatest changes in the English countryside over the past forty years I think that word would be 'walking'.

When I first made Kent my home it was possible to walk for considerable distances on lanes and roads without being violently molested by traffic. I could then leave my house, walk 50 yards down the road, one way or the other, and then walk for hours in the sanctuary of footpaths, carriage tracks, green lanes and little roads utterly deserted.

If I turned right outside the house, that is to say towards the east, I crossed a fairly large field by footpath; when that ended I merely had to skirt a couple of hundred yards of woodland—in spring a veritable paradise of bluebells—and so over a small stone bridge spanning the young river Stour. On the bridge I might pause to watch a pike waiting stiff and still as a steel rod in the shallows, to gaze on long tresses of water-weed sinuous as bright green eels in the quick current, and in summer time, in the distance, spires of purple loosestrife and pink Rose Bay willow herb.

A few more yards and I was in a deserted green lane. In spring that was full of primroses and birds' nests. As you traversed it you scarcely ever saw a soul. When it came to an end the road beyond it was no less tranquil: no cars, no tractors, just occasionally perhaps an old countryman with a flat horse-drawn cart fetching chestnut poles from a wood. The roadside banks there were steep, giving a marvellous sense of seclusion. Rich with violets both purple and white, purple

roses and anemones, nests of robin, chaffinch, blackbird and thrush, long-tailed tit and Heaven knows what else, they gave off a positive air of contentment. Here indeed was the true heaven that was countryside.

If I turned westward on leaving the house the journey was much the same. There I skirted a pond rich with yellow waterlilies and shaded by chestnut trees, then on across sheep-filled meadows and eventually a dozen yards across a road into a great acreage of parkland. Or for variation I could keep to the road, skirt an ancient pub and take a path through fields to the village church—a church, thanks to Hitler and his doodle-bugs, now derelict. Beyond the church lay a valley of meadows, hop-gardens, orchards and strawberry fields. I had merely to cross the road in order to find myself in another green lane, this time shadowy with copses of hazel and hornbeam and in every way as deserted as the first. And so back, eventually, across another park, then over another road, then finally across the young river Stour again and so to home.

This walk was, I suppose, about five miles long, only a mere fraction of which was on hard roads. Today, such is the revolution that has been overtaking us, I am afraid even to begin it. In the narrow little lane running down to the river it is more than likely that a E-type Jaguar will slice round the first corner and come within an ace of cutting my ear off, if not my head. A fast Mercedes will confront a slow fork-lift truck, a juggernaut load of tree-trunks or a combine harvester.

Worse even than this, many of the hedgerows 'where late the sweet birds

to wire and concrete. Many of the footpaths have gone too. And, most monstrous of all, sheer greed, money-grubbing or callous exploitation, call it what you will, has robbed these pleasant walks of several thousand trees, denuding the once densely-wooded river banks, so that they now seem to cringe under exposure.

If this is the fate of the little roads, what of the bigger roads? No man in his right sense would set out to attempt a quiet country walk on them. Not one juggernaut but a thousand, in one form or another, violate them constantly, without rest. It is easy to be pious about the evil of speed, but the frenzy of certain motorists careering down narrow lanes as if they were tracks at Silverstone is truly frightening. Thus is walking now dead; or you are dead walking.

Soon they will be driving a new road through this stretch of English pastoral. It will leap over the old smaller roads, drive through farmyards and tie itself in knots at junctions and roundabouts, to become eventually a link to that totally unnecessary piece of monumental stupidity, the Channel Tunnel. The juggernauts will rush on it. It will open up new views for the motorist, of course, but walking on it will once again be courting death. If I lament its arrival I lament even more the parklands and their great houses where I once walked in peace. The great houses have vanished, like many of the great trees that once surrounded them. I am only glad that I have been able to preserve one small section of one of them, trees and all. There I can still walk and recollect in tranquillity.

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