

NATURE NOTES - 87

As I walked through into the kitchen to get my breakfast this morning (March 4th), my attention was drawn immediately to the west window with its view across to Aisholt Common and Great Wood, where a bizarrely patterned sky loomed, displaying, if not fifty, then many shades of grey. I grabbed my camera and rushed outside.



What met my gaze was a mass of parallel black and dark grey thin vertical lines extending against a lighter grey curtain from almost overhead to the horizon – a bit like a massive monochrome aurora. The horizon itself was becoming more fuzzy by the second, and as I watched, first the tree tops of Cockercombe and Parsons Lane, then the slightly closer Princites Covert, disappeared into a white haze. More worryingly, part of the column of black spaghetti started to converge into a funnel shape. Surely not a tornado?

The white haze advanced quite fast and proved to be very dense fine snow pellets. The patio flags and my picnic table were quickly covered. But in a trice it was all over. The snow passed and a less formidable sky appeared – a mosaic of broken flat mid-level clouds and blue sky. And all was absolutely quiet. There had been no lightning or thunder. Not even any wind – and certainly no tornado! Amazingly gentle in fact, considering how threatening it had looked. I thought of e-mailing my photos to Ian Ferguson at the BBC Points West weather studio, but never got round to it. It was presumably a consequence of the prevailing unstable cold airstream being gingered up as it crossed the warmer Bristol Channel.

I'm writing about this later in the day, pulled over in a farm gateway near Stogursey – I'm a bit early for an appointment – looking across soggy fields of maize stubble, with an altogether more solid looking dark sky looming beyond the more northerly stretch of the Quantock ridge visible from here – Dowsborough, Woodlands Hill – threatening yet more rain, perhaps even preceded by snow. When **will** it dry up properly? *A peck of March dust is worth a King's ransom*. How true that is, and how all of us – farmers, gardeners and walkers alike – are yearning for the experience of negotiating less squelchy ground again.

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The other day, during an exchange of e-mails, I was asked by my line manager for my contracts with Natural England if, with International Women's Day coming up on March 8th, I could send her any suggestions for a notable female biologist who had had a plant or animal species named after her. I thought of someone straight away: Lady Eleanor Glanville (~1634-1709), who gave her name to the Glanville (or Isle of Wight) fritillary butterfly *Melitaea cinxia*.

Eleanor Glanville was a passionate entomologist, yet this was a pursuit regarded at that time as highly eccentric, not least for a woman. She continued to engage in her studies after separating from her second husband, Richard Glanville, but when on her death it transpired that she had wanted to leave her money for the furtherance of entomology, her wishes were overturned on the basis that such a request only consolidated suspicions that she must have been of unsound mind! I hadn't realised, until I checked her out anew on Google, that she was born at Tickenham in North Somerset, not far from the one place where her fritillary has long established a breeding colony far from its main haunt, at Sand Point near Weston super Mare. I think she would be amazed to see how much interest there is in butterflies at the present time, but worried also at the way some species are still disappearing despite sustained efforts to conserve them.



Look out soon for those first brimstones and orange tips!

Chris S.