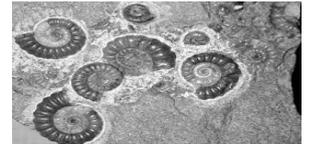


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I couldn't wait for the next person I saw or spoke to – family or neighbours – to ask me what I'd been up to lately, since I could answer "Oh, I've been out to Sea to look at crops and hedges". Wow! How amazing. We've got used to green roof gardens in our towns and cities. Had someone gone one stage further and planted up a container ship, or a redundant aircraft carrier perhaps? The printed word gives the game away, though, with that capital S, for the "Sea" that I'd been out to was the small settlement of that name just west of Ilminster. It does have its own little name signs as you enter the hamlet from either direction, and the name appears again on the sign post at the junction with the Chard road. But it's easily missed.

I've been told that the name originated from the many fossils of long-extinct marine life that people were always turning up there, although this could apply to almost anywhere in Somerset, or indeed all but the most ancient parts of Britain as a whole. Perhaps there is another explanation.

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My next call had a more explicit geological connection, for I was heading for a farm not far away, some of whose fields overlie the Chalk. When I wrote my great labour of love, "Ecology of the English Chalk" over 35 years ago, I'm ashamed to say that I hadn't realised the Chalk outcropped in Somerset at all. Not that there's very much of it. Just a few pockets here and there at the eastern end of the Blackdowns, especially around Combe St Nicholas, where I was heading.

Not that I was sure at this stage that I was going to get there, for as I'd left the farm at Sea, the thundery looking sky, which had been lurking and lowering menacingly, let loose a tremendous deluge, and here I was now, sitting it out in my steamed up car, parked in a lane-side layby near Clayhanger Common, as rain and hail roared down on the roof, and the road turned quickly into a river. It was 1pm so I ate my sandwiches, washed down with a mug of tea (adding further to the fuggy interior) and pondered on what I should do. Having come this far, however, I thought I should press on, and after setting the blower to full blast to clear the windscreen, I set forth again through the continuing downpour, arriving at my second destination unscathed.

As with the morning visit, a lively conversation followed, over more tea and home-made cake, focusing particularly on the new agri-environment and farm support schemes, and I felt sure there must be some ears burning in the various offices of the Rural Payments Agency. But as we talked, the rain eased at last, an edge of blue sky working slowly towards us, and soon I was able to make my way up to the fields after all. And here was what I'd come to see. A beautiful hillside of Somerset chalk grassland, with all the grasses and flowers aglow, and bumblebees and butterflies on the wing again, in what was now warm and steamy sunshine. Especially spectacular were the musk or nodding thistles, very typical of chalky ground, with their dense and beautiful deep mauve (occasionally pink) flower heads, which I am told produce the very best of pollen and nectar, and which are much favoured by downland bee-keepers.

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Last time I mentioned the taking by a sparrowhawk of one of our resident pair of mistle thrushes. The happier news is that the surviving parent – we don't know whether it's the Mum or the Dad – has since appeared in the garden with a youngster. And sitting at my picnic table well after sunset the other evening, what should catch my eye but a kestrel hovering, right overhead. That was good to see, too, as their numbers have declined alarmingly in recent years.