

NATURE NOTES - 85

Our editors have asked for some special recollections from contributors to mark the 200th issue of SCN, and it so happens that I am writing this twenty years to the day since I first migrated to Somerset. This was a result (among other circumstances) of landing that contract helping Philip White, then with Somerset Wildlife Trust but now of Hestercombe fame, visit farmers throughout the county with special wildlife interests on their properties in what were then known as County Wildlife Sites. The original three-month winter stint was extended for another year – and then for longer again, during which time I had picked up other work, not just in the West Country, but for which Somerset was an ideal base – so I stayed!

My new home was, of course, the Quantocks, where I was made so welcome. Not that I was fully aware of the beauty of these hills at first, for the tops were shrouded in dense hill fog for days on end (much like we've had this past week), and my first exploratory walks were in conditions where you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. I managed to walk up to and all round Cothelstone Hill in these utterly gloomy conditions, somehow finding my way back. But then it finally cleared, and all those amazing views were opened up, including the great 360° sweep from Will's Neck, which I used to walk to *every weekend!* I would set off via Bishpool Lane, Lydeard Hill, Bagborough Plantations (where there was an old derelict Caterpillar crawler tractor to sit on for a sandwich – or in those days even a smoke), up to the 1266ft trig point (386m never sounds quite so impressive), and back via the sheltered sunny margins of Great Wood, down across Aisholt Common (where I once encountered 40 red deer watching my progress) to Watery Lane, Durborough Farm, magic little Aisholt itself, and so back up Goods Lane to my hideaway.



Later, I was to discover the deeper Quantocks. I'd ventured beyond Will's Neck to Quantock Farm, Triscombe Stone, Great Hill and Fire Beacon, and had got into the habit of using the road from Bincombe across to Crowcombe, where I became aware of the sessile oak woods and hill land to either side (Over Stowey Customs Common, Great Bear, Robin Upright's Hill, Dead Woman's Ditch – what names!), but not until a memorable assignment for the AONB Service early in the Spring of 1999 did I come to fully appreciate the extent of that rolling landscape. Driving north-westwards on the A358 (or, better, riding the West Somerset Railway), you see its powerful skyline to your right, or from the more winding A39 through Holford, Kilve and St Audrie's, to your left, but once you get up there it's almost as though you are in another dimension. It seems impossible that so much could fit in. And still more wonderful names too – Black and Longstone Hills, Staple Plain, Halsway Soggs, Somerton and Slaughterhouse Combes, Herridge (as distinct from Merridge!), Bicknoller Post, Higher and Lower Hare Knapps, and Holford's little pine plantation war memorial, visible for miles.

Here were always more deer to be seen, and ravens heard calling. Curls of smoke at that time from the Rangers' swaling fires spreading across the great arc of sky. Constantly shifting views (and colours) of the sea, the two little islands of Steepholme and Flatholme and the Welsh coast behind them. And of course our own Hinkley Point Power Station sitting there quietly making electricity for us. And from the western heights, the settlements of Williton and Minehead with their backdrop of Exmoor and the Brendons. My paternal grandfather who was something of a composer knew Frank Bridge, and it so happened that I'd been listening about that time to Bridge's tone poem "The Sea", which will for ever more take me back to that time and place.

Now here I am, half-way through my eighth decade. I hope I continue to be blessed with the mobility I currently enjoy but I think my days of a weekly trek to Will's Neck may have passed. In his own declining years, another of my favourite composers, Frederick Delius, was carried around his beloved Norwegian hills by dedicated (if long-suffering) family and friends, but at least nowadays we have quad bikes and 4x4s to help in that regard.