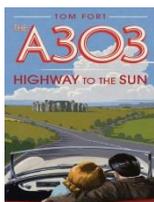


NATURE NOTES : 86



On top of my pile of new books acquired for the holiday break is one I spotted in a bookshop in Crewkerne just before Christmas. It's Tom Fort's *The A303 – Highway to the Sun*. I'd seen his delightful programme about this enigmatic road – twice in fact (good old BBC4) – and, like him, have some happy experiences along its route, notwithstanding the inevitable queues along the bottlenecks, and having to squint for miles on end with a blazing sun directly ahead when returning home on fine summer evenings.

The closest I came to personal involvement with the A303 was during that period, now over a decade ago, when English Heritage (now Historic England) was proposing the monumental (and monumentally expensive) idea of bypassing Stonehenge via a tunnel. Like Tom Fort, who gives this episode substantial coverage, I was not in favour of the idea. The very sight of Stonehenge, especially as you come upon it over the rise from Amesbury, never fails to thrill, and so it must be for the huge majority of people who drive past it – albeit sometimes at snail's pace, nose to tail. The tunnel idea was shelved, of course, although the old tatty visitor centre was cleared away and the new approach constructed, 'tarting' up the previously unspoiled Airman's Corner in the process, and doing away, incidentally, with another historic bit of road – the old A344 – which must have been the shortest A road in the country.

One part of the original plan which did go ahead was the conversion of a very substantial area of intensively managed arable land back to chalk downland, and I got involved via the National Trust and farmer Rob Turner from Winterbourne Stoke (who also features in Fort's book), to help survey the farmland affected. During that assignment I remember taking a long telephoto shot of Stonehenge from well to the south, with, in mid view, the usual string of traffic travelling in both directions along the A303, which here is contained by no more than a post-and-wire fence on either side. And there it was. Mysterious and magnificent, complete with fences, traffic and hovering Army helicopters. Stonehenge in its 21st Century setting, there to be appreciated by all.

My earliest associations with the wider A303 countryside were fully two decades before all this, when I had a series of contracts with what was then the old Nature Conservancy Council – another organisation which has suffered an endless succession of name changes and is now part of Natural England. My brief was to review the condition of all the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) on Salisbury Plain owned by the Ministry of Defence. Among these were the vast expanses of the Porton Down estate, unchanged from 1916 when it was first acquired by the then War Department for military training, and harbouring an exceptionally diverse flora and fauna overlying chalk of a particularly hard and skeletal nature. Here were expansive flowery carpets interspersed by ancient, waist-high ant-hills and savanna-like thickets of juniper, vivid herbaceous borders of wild candytuft and viper's bugloss marking the disturbed chalk of shell craters and tank-tracks, all accompanied by dancing blue butterflies and the plaintive call of stone curlews.



Junipers, including young seedlings, also grew along the crests of the butts of the rifle ranges at Bulford Camp, where the course of the intermittent chalk stream known as the Nine Mile River might be detected simply by the smell of mint crushed underfoot as you walked through chin-high cocksfoot and oat grasses. This is where I caught my first glimpse of one of the most obscure of the many Wiltshire downland figures – the Chalk Kiwi. At around that time, a Vulcan bomber was flying out of nearby Boscombe Down airfield testing a rocket engine (with earth-shattering sound effects as can be imagined), so I could revel in my dual delights of chalkland ecology and aircraft spotting. One of my great memories is of sitting by the River Avon one fine September evening amidst a great patch of purple devil's bit scabious flowers, watching this wonderful aircraft returning from a sortie, sizzling gently back to its base against a perfect sunset backdrop. Coots piping from the river. Heaven!

