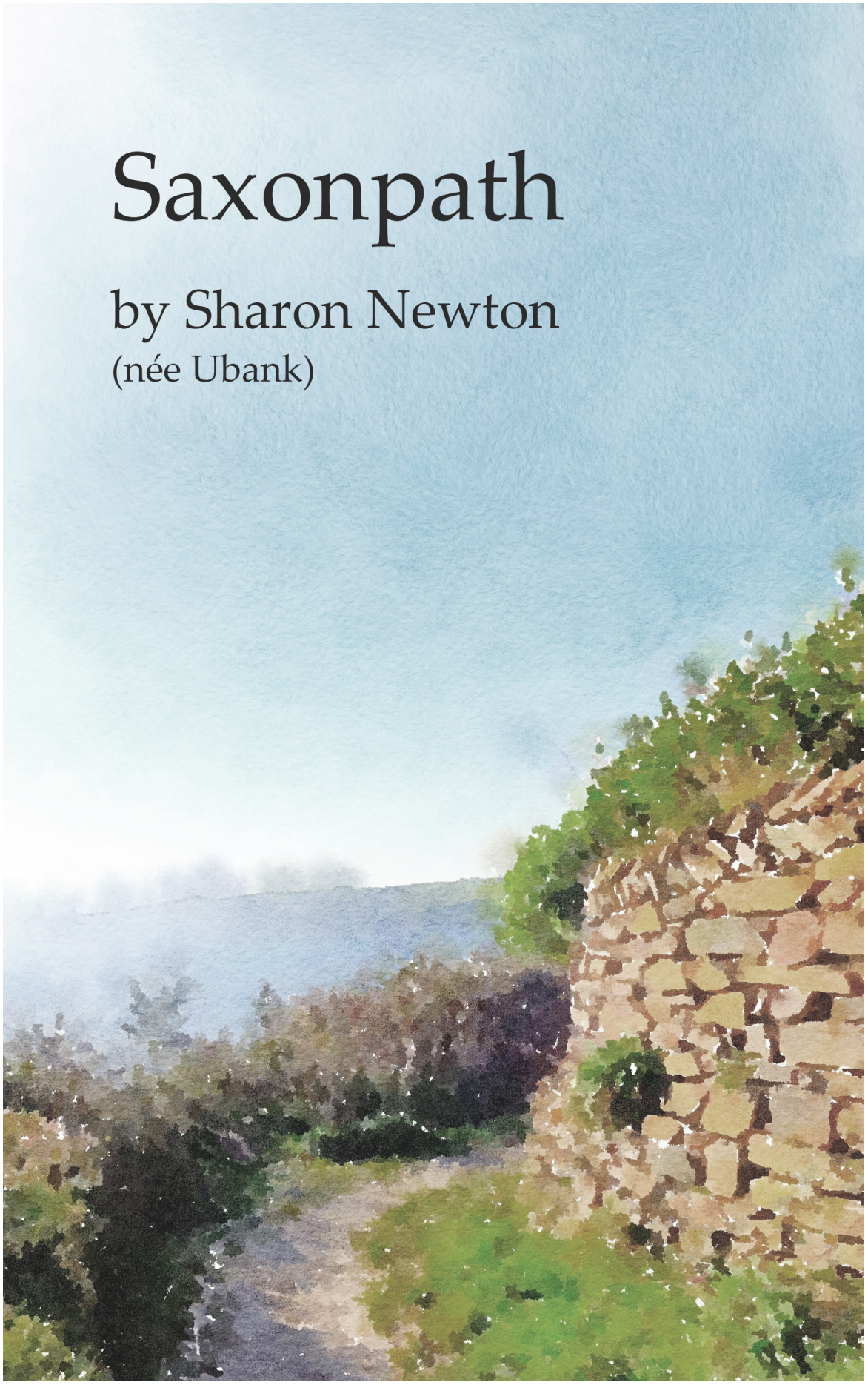
Saxonpath

by Sharon Newton
(née Ubank)



S A X O N P A T H

By Sharon Newton (neé Ubank)

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Table of Contents

1

It was a friend who discovered Saxonpath. And she discovered it just in time. For the quiet fields it crossed were about to be transformed into a brand-new town.

This is how it happened. Jackie was studying towards a degree, and her work included a survey of the landscape that surrounded her home. At the end of the road where we both live, lay acres of fields, interspersed with brooks and hedgerows, ponds and tiny, ancient woodlands that became jewel boxes of colour in the springtime.

And so she packed her paper, pencils and other necessary paraphernalia before heading out into the wilds. Although those fields lay so close to her home, it really did seem like a distant country. The local farmer did not welcome tourists, and the sight of him prowling around with a shotgun was sufficient to make most walkers beat a hasty retreat. And there were very few footpaths crossing the fields so it was difficult for Jackie to avoid trespassing if she was to explore the countryside with the thoroughness that her studies required.

But there was one clear, distinct path that ran across the land. It linked Stoke Gifford in the south with Patchway to the north, holding the fields together with the sinuous strength of a spinal cord. The few remaining footpaths tended to run towards it like a rather meagre lattice of nerves through the body of the landscape. And so Jackie found herself walking that path again and again until it started to become a familiar companion.

As she travelled along it, she found herself impressed by the hedgerows that marched along beside her. The term ‘hedgerow’ does not quite convey what she encountered there, for these were tall, lofty structures, creating the impression of walking at the edge of a great forest. Mighty oak and ash loomed above her, their lower limbs interwoven with the limbs and boughs of lesser trees. At the heart of those hedgerows ran deep ditches, broad enough to be used as paths in their own right and sufficiently secret to provide cover for fleeing fugitives. Sometimes the footpath chose to run between them instead of beside them, their boughs interlocking overhead to create a green cage.

As Jackie contemplated those hedges, she became aware of the great richness of life represented within them. There were so many different kinds of trees growing there. She knew that such richness frequently denoted great antiquity, and she

began to wonder just how old those hedgerows really were. Eventually, wondering wasn't enough. Instead, she decided to find out.

In her studies, she had encountered Hooper's Law, a method of dating hedgerows by means of counting the number of woody species within them. The thinking behind this law made a lot of sense to her. A farmer may plant a quickthorn hedge to serve as a living fence, preventing his livestock from straying. But over time, new species arrive to enrich that hedge. Seeds are blown in by wind and other weather. Birds, replete with berries, perch and cast their seed-rich droppings on the earth below the trees. A squirrel or a jay buries an acorn and then forgets all about it. In the warm shelter provided by the hedgerow, the seed germinates and – providing nothing chews it too vigorously – grows.

And so, as year succeeds to year, new species arrive, until that original thorn hedge becomes a complex mosaic of many different kinds of trees. Thus, the more species-rich a hedgerow, the more ancient it is likely to be.

Hooper's Law provides a very specific way of measuring this. It instructs the curious observer to pace out a thirty metre length of hedgerow and then count the number of woody species growing within it. Each species growing along that thirty metre length represents a century of that hedgerow's existence.

This method, when cross-referenced with other sources of information such as maps and old documents, proves to be a reliable one. So full of confidence that Hooper's Law was going to provide her with some answers, Jackie set off.

She was strict with herself, seeking to make random choices amongst all the possible thirty metre lengths of hedgerow instead of simply selecting the more interesting-looking sections. And she also strove to put aside her self-consciousness as she marched along those hedges, measuring out her lengths with a ridiculously exaggerated stride. She persuaded herself that nobody was watching, although doubtless a few squirrels lurking in the shrubs were having a snigger at her expense.

And so she paced, observed and recorded before taking her results home in order to make some sense of them. And back at base, sat at her table with a mug of coffee by her side, she discovered a surprising uniformity in those results. Again and again, the thirty metre lengths yielded nine woody species. There were scarcely any exceptions to this rule.

Nine woody species took the origin of those hedgerows back nine centuries. Nine hundred years – it seemed impossible. Generations of trees had grown, matured,

declined and been replaced along that line of land without any real disturbance to the total structure.

The environmental writer Chris Baines once remarked that there are features in our landscape – woods and hedgerows and ponds – that are older than our most ancient cathedrals. Tourists travel from afar to visit our cathedrals. But those older structures often get grubbed out or filled in without a second thought.

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Jackie carried out her survey during the latter half of the 20th century, which strongly suggested that the hedgerows she had examined had come into being during the 11th century – the century of the Battle of Hastings, that pivotal era when Saxon England became Norman England. Perhaps when those lengths of hedgerow were first established, there was still a Saxon king upon the throne.

When I conjure up the Saxon era in my imagination, I picture it as big and brutal and epic – an era of heroes and holy folk, battles and miracles, conflicts between kingdoms and conflicts with Vikings. And yet, it was also the era of humble, hardworking folk who left behind no name for themselves. But it was those folk who left behind much of the landscape we still inhabit today, including the mighty hedgerows that marched across the fields just at the bottom of our road.

So in the light of this discovery, the only proper name for the old route that crossed our local fields was Saxonpath.

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The names of the trees that accompany Saxonpath read like a poem. Oak and ash, crab apple and elm. Field maple, hazel, holly and hawthorn. Blackthorn and buckthorn. Spindle and dogwood and dog rose. Guelder rose and the aptly named wayfaring tree. A host of names, each one surrounded by a host of echoes and associations. Trees belonging to the wild, the haunt of bird and beast, their boles and bases inhabited by toadstools, mosses and lichens, their feet a froth of flowers in the spring. Yet trees processing along the borderland with humanity as well, submitting to our purposes and receiving the names we give them. And with those names grew stories, myths, memories, links with medicine and nourishment and sometimes poison as well. Trees, with their own wordless green life surging skywards, and yet trees brought to life in an entirely different way by our wealth of words.

And word soon got out about Saxonpath. Everybody wanted to enjoy it before the landscape it crossed was lost forever. So, one mild grey day in January, just before the earthmovers began in earnest, a hundred and fifty or so people gathered together in order to walk its entire length.

It was a good-natured expedition. The walkers, brightly clad in waterproofs, were soon strung along the path like brilliant beads upon a thread. Together we crossed muddy fields, following the path as it crossed the brook via a narrow bridge or we found ourselves required to clamber across a stile into yet another meadow. The land stretched all around us, grey-green with winter, the bare boughs of wood and hedgerow rising dark against the sky. Meadows sloped gently up and down. Little ponds shone in various crooks and corners.

On that quiet afternoon, in such a quiet landscape, we were a focal point – a moving column of colour, conversation and laughter. Just before we reached the final length of the path leading on to Patchway Common, we all climbed over a stile and – without realising what we were letting ourselves in for – dropped into a huge, sticky morass of poddled mud. Screams rose into the air. Wellington boots became firmly wedged and bobble hats were abandoned - and as we sought to extricate ourselves, the herd of cattle who had poddled the mud in the first place, came rushing across to welcome us.

Walking events were not so efficiently regulated by health and safety considerations in those days.

Over twenty years have passed since that walk – aptly named the "Something To Tell Your Grandchildren About" walk. The land at the bottom of the road has now changed out of all recognition. Thousands of new brick houses occupy it. Roads perpetually humming with traffic traverse it. A huge supermarket with its attendant shops, stands at the heart of that landscape. Churches, schools and community centres rise in its midst.

Yet, despite all these changes, Saxonpath remains. Admittedly, it is fragmented now, and can no longer be followed as an unbroken line across the land. And yet, it is still possible to piece together its route as it runs from Stoke Gifford to Patchway Common. It still has stories to tell if you are prepared to stand still and listen to the rhythms and melodies that still murmur beneath the sound of the traffic.

I invite you now to walk with me, crossing an ordinary 20th century housing development, almost identical to hundreds of other developments that can be found

across this land. But beneath the surface of this ordinary place, I hope you will discover the special, the precious, the timeless. And if Saxonpath demonstrates that there is no such thing as an ordinary place and reminds us that every landscape is composed of layer upon layer of story, then this little book will not have been in vain.

Saxonpath remembers what was once important but is now rarely considered. As the most significant track across the neighbourhood, it linked two early settlements – settlements that were of sufficient significance to begin and end a journey. But those early habitations have now been surrounded by later developments, resulting in the loss of their earlier importance. But Saxonpath, simply by being there, reminds us of what once mattered to our ancestors.

At its north-western end, it arrives at Patchway Common. Nowadays, when local folk think of Patchway, they picture in their mind a large 20th century housing estate to the west of the A38, a town built to provide housing for the many people who came here to work in the thriving local aeroplane industry. But this is not where Patchway began. The original Patchway was the Common, and its origins are lost in the shadows of time.

It still feels rural as it crosses the width of Bradley Stoke, like a green girdle embellished with cottages, ponds and houses. And that is despite it being severed in two places by the new town's trunk roads. Where it is pierced by Bradley Stoke Way, a bridge carries it across the new road, affording wonderful views of the town's nature reserve as it wends its way alongside Patchway Brook and then Stoke Brook. The bridge is called Primrose Bridge in memory of Primrose Cottage which once stood where the highway now runs. If you stand at its eastern end and look to the south, you will see a couple of apple trees immediately below you. This is nearly all that remains of the fruitful little garden that once surrounded the cottage, a significant little building because it housed a bread oven where the inhabitants of that little hamlet would bring their baking.

The Common was once an almost entirely self-sufficient place, an outlier of Almondsbury which stands just a mile or two to the north. A few small shops stood along its length, together with a tiny school, a tin mission church (known as The Cathedral) and a chapel. You can still see the chapel – now a residential dwelling – next to Pond Farm at the western end of the Common.

The common land itself consists of a ribbon of grassland which runs with several interruptions along the length of the hamlet. At one point, the grassland is deeply dimpled by a pond which is lovingly maintained by local conservationists. Manor Farm once stood opposite this pond, and its cattle used to browse in the adjacent

fields. That building met its demise during the time that Bradley Stoke was being built, but not everything was lost. Some of the stone from the farmhouse was salvaged and used to build the bridge that crosses the duck pond in the town's nature reserve.

Despite the streets and houses that surround it, Patchway Common still feels rural. My favourite time to walk along it is in the spring. The cottage gardens, particularly at its eastern end, are then bright with snowdrops and crocuses, and it is at then that the old farm pond becomes thick and glutinous with frog spawn.

'Patchway' is a very old Saxon place name. 'Way' may refer to an ancient track, but it is more likely to derive from 'haeg' which indicates a holy place, a sacred site. That word is still used when a saint's life story is described as a hagiography.

This particular place name is so old that it is likely to refer to a pre-Christian sacred site. 'Patch' is thought to be derived from a personal name – perhaps the leader of the settlement, who was also responsible for his clan's priestly duties.

A sense of sacredness, of otherness, may still be felt in the vicinity of the common. Not far from it, rises Savages Wood which is probably an ancient woodland around which other trees have been planted. Quite a few people have commented upon the rather discomfiting, almost eerie, atmosphere of that place. Some have sensed that something terrible – perhaps a murder – has occurred there. Perhaps it was a ritual murder, a human sacrifice, representing the darker side of religion. Because of the sense of the uncanny present in the wood, some people I know have chosen to give it a wide berth.

I am blissfully oblivious to this sinister atmosphere. Savages Wood does elicit a spiritual response within me, but I sense I am responding to the sublime. As I gaze into the lofty canopy of beech, oak and hornbeam, especially in the spring and autumn when the foliage is at its most vibrant, I feel as if I am standing within a great natural cathedral, the boughs arching overhead to the glory of God. Yet for many the sense of the sinister lingers. And nobody really knows how the wood acquired its name. Did something particularly savage once happen there?

And so it would seem that the common originated in early Saxon times. But perhaps it is even older than that. That long, narrow road once ran all the way eastwards to Bowsland Farm – if you walk along Patchway Brook, you will eventually arrive at a copse of garden trees that mark where the bottom of the farmhouse garden once stood. A line of stepping stones a little further along the

brook links the former garden with the fields beyond it, fields which now form part of the town's nature reserve.

But did the road always end there? Dave Baker, a local history enthusiast, has dug and delved within various old documents and delivered what seems like a credible conjecture that the common may once have been an offshoot of a Roman road, leading to somewhere that mattered two millennia ago, but which is now forgotten. As the Romans certainly left their mark on the Stokes and surrounds, this conjecture is far from fanciful.

Yet people dwelt here long before the Romans arrived. Beneath the rather prosaic car park that serves the town's shopping centre, lie the remains of a Bronze Age settlement. A team of archaeologists excavated it before the first supermarket was erected, identifying such subtle marks as post holes and the depressions in the ground created by rain water dripping from eaves, and then concluding that a number of circular thatched dwellings once occupied that spot. Evidence of burials were also discovered. The Bronze Age settlement lay just yards from where Savages Wood now stands. Was it first acknowledged as a sacred site by those folk? Or perhaps its numinous associations extend back even further in time.

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And so Saxonpath at its north-west end, recalls the ancient origins of Patchway, leading travellers to a destination that held a particular significance for them. And something similar occurs at the path's south-eastern end.

When local people are asked about the heart of Stoke Gifford, they probably picture the village green, lying close to Bristol Parkway station. Despite the noise of the trains and the traffic on the busy road nearby, it is a serene place – an expanse of emerald grass where the walker may rest awhile. It is flanked by St Michael's Church (which is likely to be Norman in origin), the old school rooms and the Beaufort Arms inn – or the Salvation, the Education and the Damnation as they were once known.

And yet this is probably not where the village of Stoche (the Giffard part came later) began. Years ago, the historian Mike Stanbrook devised a map indicating how the village may have looked in the fourteenth century, and embedded in that map were indications of the village's origin which, like Patchway Common, probably extend back to early Saxon times.

Like the name ‘Patchway’, ‘Stoche’ is a Saxon place name. It is found again and again in our landscape. It indicates an establishment of territorial rights – think, if you like, of a stoke as being a stake in the land.

In that fourteenth century facsimile, the fields had yet to be enclosed into the smaller, more intimate compartments with which we are more familiar nowadays. In those days, the landscape was still dominated by large fields which were usually worked communally. And the Great Field way of doing agriculture was probably a Saxon concept.

Deeper into the village, along North Road, you will find Rock Lane. There are two entrances to it – the western end is flanked by the Poplar Rooms and playing fields on one side, and the Baptist Church on the other.

It possesses two entrances because it is roughly triangular in shape. If you look at Mike Stanbrook’s map, you can find that triangle embedded in the village. And it is flanked by three great fields, which roughly equate to the lane’s three edges.

It is conjectured that it is here – and not by the village green – that the heart of the village is to be found. This is probably where it began.

We know that there have been people occupying our neighbourhood for a long, long time – long before the coming of the Saxons. However at some point, the Saxon ways became established. And one of their ways was choosing to cultivate three or so great fields – in our village, these became Stoke Field, West Field and Down Field. The inhabitants would have dwelt on the inner edges of those fields so that they could easily walk to their work each day. The area enclosed by the triangle which became Rock Lane may have served as a village green where those early inhabitants of Stoche could keep a watchful eye upon their livestock.

Those great fields, worked communally by the settlers, would be cultivated in rotation to maintain the fertility of the soil. The land would be distributed amongst the villagers in bundles of long strips lying parallel with each other, the bundles distributed randomly to ensure that no household acquired all the best land. And those bundles would be annually redistributed by lot so that the system was regulated as fairly as possible. That was the theory anyway, and hopefully, it worked out in practice.

The village would possess a plough and a team of oxen, and as the plough turned the earth, so the beasts would enrich it with their dung. It seemed a perfect system. The cultivation of those long parallel strips of land produced a characteristic ‘ridge

and furrow' pattern that can still be seen in other parts of the country today, where the old fields have grassed over, preserving the plough marks. At Ashton Court estate, immediately to the south of Bristol, it is possible to discern this pattern, rippling beneath the grassland like bones beneath the flesh.

Stoke Gifford of course, has undergone much disturbance since those days and so it is unlikely that any evidence for the old field system now remains. And yet, a faint memory can be found in maps of the parish produced during the nineteenth century. By then, the business of enclosure was well under way, but one sequence of small fields is rather peculiar. Each field is long and narrow, unlike the more rounded enclosures that surround them. Their position is in line with one of the great fields that surrounded Rock Lane. Could it be that in this particular place, the ridge and furrow pattern was so deeply etched upon the land that it was easier to work with it rather than plough it up and start all over again?

And there remains another memory of that ancient field system. For centuries, Westfield Lane provided a link between the villagers and the land where they worked. During the twentieth century, the old rural way of life all but disappeared as Stoke Gifford became part of the outer suburbs of Bristol. Because of this, Westfield Lane was lost. But a new Westfield Lane was established, although this latest version is a broad road which takes workers to the various businesses that have sprung up in the area. It no longer follows the original route, but at least the name, together with its associations, remains.

In Mike Stanbrook's depiction of Stoke Gifford, the edges of the settlement are flanked by woodland, as vast in extent as the great fields that they guard.

This makes sense. At the heart of the ancient village, sheltered by the settlers' habitations of wattle, daub and thatch, was the enclosed green where the livestock was guarded. Immediately beyond those simple homes were the great fields which occupied the villagers for much of their time. And beyond that again, were the great woods. What did they represent?

Perhaps the villagers cultivated the land immediately outside the circle of their homes, leaving the wildwood at the edge – which may have been growing there since the end of the last Ice Age – intact. But although that ancient woodland wasn't removed for the plough, it did not remain untouched. It became a source of timber and small wood, probably harvested late in the year when the leaves had been shed, most of the cultivation in the fields had been completed and there was a need for

firewood and building material. And perhaps the villagers' pigs were taken there in the autumn to root and rustle through the undergrowth, increasing their girth on the annual harvest of acorns.

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But I wonder if on a winter's afternoon, those woods felt as if they were a long way from home. Think how tiny the original settlement of Stoche must have been and how vast the world that surrounded it. And this was an age when the only sources of light after sundown were the moon, the stars and the fires that people might make.

Imagine a small group of villagers gathering their firewood as the short winter day draws to a close. Beyond the bare, black lacework of the trees, the sun sinks in smouldering crimson. And then, the light grows dim and the world becomes grey and vague. It is time to be heading home.

But perhaps one villager lingers a little longer than the others. There is some work that he needs to complete. Absorbed in what he is doing, he does not immediately miss the company of his neighbours. And then he looks up and realises how dark it has become.

The wood no longer feels familiar. It is like a cage. The trunks massed around him are the bars, blocking his way, obscuring his vision, rendering his world small and confused. The boughs mesh overhead, obscuring the sky. Roots tangle together on the ground, trying to trip him up. He looks around trying to remember how to find the way back to the open fields.

Something unseen crashes through the undergrowth. What was that? It was probably only a badger but it might be a wolf. Or a bear. Or even one of those mischievous creatures, half-earth, half-spirit, who so love to ensnare the human beings that they – only just – resemble. The Fair Folk. He really doesn't want to meet any of them.

Panic sets in. Blindly, he thrashes his way through the hanging boughs as the trees seem to surround him ever more closely. Ivy brushes against his throat and he fears fingers trying to throttle him. He will never escape from this place – never! It must be enchanted. He is completely and utterly lost.

And then he perceives a place where the darkness appears paler. Surely that must be the open sky. He stumbles towards it, almost weeping with relief. And then, he is over the threshold and out into the open, and there are the dark, comforting

figures of his neighbours, only a little distance away. They are waiting for him. He crosses the unseen path towards them as an owl hoots long and low in the wood and the Plough hangs reassuringly big and bright in the clear sky overhead.

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We will begin our journey at Rock Lane, the heart of Old Stoche. Saxonpath does not properly begin here but an old footpath still links it with this original heart of the village. It does not seem to connect so naturally with the village green of today, despite the easy access provided by North Road. And so, just as with Patchway Common at its north-western destination, so Saxonpath remembers the origin of things at its south-eastern end . And it is good that it remembers because it is so easy for us to forget.

At the back of Rock Lane runs Brickyard Lane which takes the traveller to the old builders' yard at the back of the village. And along Brickyard Lane, sheltered by houses, lies a little glade. And at the heart of the glade lies a pond.

This is a place where I like to pause. On one side, the pond is towered by tall trees rising up like a rock face above the water. These trees give a sense of a secret place, a sheltered place, hidden from the world.

Newts occupy this pond during the spring and summer. I like to linger here to watch them – tiny, heraldic dragons with spangles and ruffles and spots, their actions deliberate and serious as they part the water with their delicately constructed hands, their fingers almost human in appearance.

The pond also has a reputation for being haunted. Locals walking their dogs in the early morning have witnessed a woman running towards them, but as she approaches, she vanishes like a mist. But the dogs sense something uncanny. Their hackles rise, they bark and they refuse to walk that way again. But, as with Savages Wood, I am blessed with insensitivity and thus I am free to gaze into the pond weed and enjoy the sight of the newts.

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Much of Rock Lane has now been covered with fairly modern houses. But some of the older buildings remain – a farmhouse or two and a goodly number of cottages. One of those cottages – Beaufort House – is mentioned in Ros Broomhead's history of the village. When she was growing up, the ground floor of that habitation served as

the village sweet shop and was consequently known as ‘God’s House’ by local children.

I first met Ros on that walk along Saxonpath almost a quarter of a century ago. She came up to me and whispered, “I am writing a book”. And write it she did, describing the life of the village before everything changed and it became perceived as an outlying part of Bristol. Later she wrote a history of St Michael’s church.

Ros was the daughter of the Reverend Railton-Jones, who is remembered today in the name of one of the roads in the parish. Dwelling therefore, at the heart of the community, she heard all kinds of anecdotes and local legends. My favourite story of hers concerns a vicar who I suspect was probably her father. He arrived in the parish during the Second World War, just as a warning went out that German spies disguised as parish priests were being parachuted into Britain. Consequently, his first encounter with his spiritual flock resulted in him being arrested on suspicion of espionage.

Ros remained in the parish all her life and was much loved as a gentle, gracious and genial character. Her funeral was held in her beloved St Michael’s church and that ancient building was packed for the occasion. Such was the place she held in the heart of her family, friends and neighbours.

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Along Rock Lane, you can also find the renovated former village police house. The days when a tiny place such as Stoke Gifford could boast its own police officer now seem as distant as the days of the Anglo-Saxons.

But we now arrive at the aforementioned North Road, which runs the length of the village and serves as its high street. Across the road is Court Avenue and at its end, we find the footpath that takes us to Meade Road and the start of Saxonpath proper. But as North Road has its own tale to tell, we will perhaps linger here for just a little while.

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I am writing this in my favourite part of our home – the comfortable old chair by the patio doors that look across the back garden.

As I write, our local blackbird occasionally bursts into song from a nearby tree before descending to the patio to pick up the currants we have strewn for him there. He has confidence in us and does not fly away if we happen to be in the garden at the same time as him. Instead, he will stand there clucking whilst gazing at us with a rather fierce gold-rimmed eye, in the hope that this will procure even more currants from us.

Beyond the garden rise the tall trees of Sherbourne's Brake. As I write this in May, they are just putting out their first fuzz of summer foliage. The view across to the Brake is magical during spring and autumn evenings. Then, the low sun illuminates it so that it seems to swim in an almost unearthly golden light. After an evening storm, the light always seems stranger and lovelier, particularly when the sky is still the colour of slate and the Brake is bridged by the flimsiest of rainbows.

The view from our garden is wide-sweeping. Further to the south, beyond the roofs of the far end of Bradley Stoke I can see the line of North Road as it runs through the heart of Stoke Gifford. Before the willows by the brook come into leaf, I can just about make out the tower of St Michael's at the edge of our vantage point. But visible all year round is Silverdale, an 18th century building which once served as a coaching inn, at which time it was known as The Portcullis.

Silverdale lives up to its name, and shines silver in the sun. It stands tall and catches my eye like a beacon blazing in order to draw my attention to something. And it succeeds in its task, giving me a deep sense of the stories that this parish holds, of the people who have passed this way throughout the centuries. And the presence of the old coaching inn reminds me that Stoke Gifford was once on the way to somewhere, and that people would travel along North Road to reach a wider world – London and Gloucester in one direction or Bristol and the West Country in the other.

Nowadays, it still leads to other places but probably more courtesy of the railway than the road system. North Road extends tentatively towards busy Beacon Lane but traffic using it is not encouraged to join in with the cars moving away from the heart of the village.

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As I sit here gazing through the window, I am aware that the heart of Stoke Gifford runs along a ridge. So many houses have been built here that it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the local topography nowadays, but anyone who ascends to the village from the Frome Valley – particularly as they climb over Stoke Park – will appreciate that it certainly does stand on high ground. And the dedication of the local church also bears witness to this. St Michael's refers to the great archangel who battled in Heaven against the fallen angels, evicting them from their original dwelling. As a defender against spiritual darkness, churches built on high ground were often dedicated to him as these sites were often associated with previous pagan practice which the Church wished to supplant. The St Michael's Church that stands on the summit of Glastonbury Tor beautifully illustrates this point.

Close to the Portcullis, Parsonage Field could once be found. It is no longer visible as it is buried beneath hundreds of houses, but prior to this building project it was excavated by archaeologists who uncovered a number of the village's secrets by doing so.

It must have been a difficult field to cultivate because its surface was so uneven. To the casual onlooker, it appeared as if a team of giant moles had thrown up a succession of hills across it which had subsequently become covered with grass. It was probably left to pasture most of the time – doubtless the farmer hoped that his livestock would prove to possess sharp eyes and strong legs.

But as the archaeologists dug and delved, they discovered that Parsonage Field – which stood so close to the heart of the village at Rock Lane – had been almost continuously occupied between the 14th and 18th centuries. The humps and bumps were all that remained of those buildings.

One of the buildings proved to be the 18th century parsonage that had given the field its name. But another building – dating all the way back to the 14th century – proved to be even more intriguing. Fragments of high-class, expensive pottery suggested that it hadn't been occupied by ordinary villagers. It was eventually surmised that what had been uncovered was the manor house belonging to the Giffards, the Norman lords of the manor who had bestowed their name upon it.

The Giffards owned a great deal of other land, so it is possible that they never dwelt in the village and probable that they hardly ever visited it. Their principle stronghold was at Brimpsfield in the hills close to Cheltenham – there, they built

themselves a castle. Stoke Gifford was probably managed by a steward whose presence may have cast a cloud of gloomy resignation over the hard working and impecunious inhabitants of the village.

The Giffards were a wealthy and powerful family with considerable influence upon the politics of the day. And yet despite this, their elaborate manor house became a forgotten – and even a forsaken – place. For as they excavated it, the team identified that it had suddenly been abandoned in the 14th century and never inhabited again. Why?

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I visited Brimpsfield on a bitter, bright day at the end of the year. The Severn Vale was clad in the quiet subdued green of winter, but as we ascended the hills through the brittle, brilliant air, we saw that the fields were covered in snow, blue-white and unbroken in the sharp, thin sunlight.

We climbed out of the car and on to Brimpsfield Common beneath a sky of such a perfect, pure blue that you felt you could crack it between your fingers. We walked across the snow to the parish church – which strongly resembled our own St Michael's – and passed beneath an avenue of neatly clipped yews which extended their boughs as if they were playing an arboreal version of Oranges and Lemons.

It was a relief to enter the church and escape the chill of the air. And we discovered that the interior of that building was beautiful. It was filled with white winter light which penetrated the tall, coloured windows, falling as fragments of colour upon the walls and floor. That same light ignited a huge vase of golden chrysanthemums and winter greenery close to the altar.

An inscription within the church came from the Psalms:- "One generation shall praise Thy works unto another and declare Thy power." And the little church, standing sturdily there for century after century, enduring so many upheavals, bore testimony to this. As we left, we paused within the porch to gaze at a number of crosses scratched roughly into the stone, the work of men and women embarking upon pilgrimage and using those marks to pledge their intention to complete their sacred journeys.

Back into the iciness of that day, we trod back through the snow, regretting how our feet crumpled its crust and destroyed its pristine surface. At the edge of the common lay a deep ditch, lost in smoke-purple winter shadows. The last of the

autumn leaves still clung to the beech trees whilst the rest curled crisply in the snow amongst the roots.

As we gazed, a freshly-enamelled pheasant scuffled through the leaf litter whilst a blackbird foraged furtively in the shadows. We felt that we were gazing into a place of sanctuary that had never experienced any strife.

Which is testimony to the healing power of time. For it was here that the Giffards had built their castle, and it was said to have been a mighty stronghold. It began as a rather rough and ready motte and bailey, cast up hastily by the new overlords to overshadow the village and remind everyone just exactly who was now in charge. Later, it was transformed into a more elegant structure with a central tower and four corner towers with a barbican at the entrance which compelled visitors to switch from side to side as they walked, leaving them vulnerable and exposed.

Those who have studied the castle believe that it was similar in appearance to Goodrich Castle in the Forest of Dean. And it was most certainly a beautiful and formidable structure. A pair of corbels carved with human faces have been salvaged from its ruins and can now be viewed at Gloucester Museum. They speak eloquently of master craftsmanship.

But however beautiful that building was, the fact remains that it no longer exists. All that is left behind is this hollow, this negative image of a building. It seems that not a stone remains on site, although a walk around the village will reveal some interesting stonework set in a number of its buildings. Perhaps most incongruous of all are the pair of elaborate stone shields adorning the roof of an outhouse close to the parish church.

It would appear that the castle – like the manor house at Stoke Gifford – was hastily abandoned during the 14th century. But whereas the manor house was left to decay, it seems as if the castle was destroyed, deliberately and thoroughly, so that it could never be rebuilt.

What did happen to the Giffards all those centuries ago?

~

It is said that Walter Giffard fought alongside William of Normandy at the Battle of Hastings. The demise of Harold, the last English king, has taken on an almost mythological cast. Who is not aware that he fell after being pierced in the eye by an arrow?

But what is not so often mentioned is that, as he fell, a number of William's henchmen crowded in like hyenas to brutally complete what the arrow had begun. It seemed as if the helpless, stricken king was hacked to pieces.

Walter Giffard was one of those henchmen. And the newly-crowned William the Conqueror rewarded his family for this deed by bestowing upon them a considerable number of manors which included, of course, Brimpsfield and Stoche, as well as Rockhampton.

As time passed, the Giffard's star continued to ascend. By the beginning of the 13th century, they were numbered amongst the most influential barons of the land, and they possessed holdings in six different counties. And like many of their peers, they were frequently in conflict with the king.

Helias Giffard, for example took umbrage with King John. Brimpsfield Castle overlooked Ermine Street, the Roman road extending west from London, and on once occasion, Helias stormed the royal baggage train as it lumbered along that route. He joined forces with his fellow-barons and forced the king to acknowledge Magna Carta. The king responded angrily, seizing his land – including Brimpsfield Castle – and bestowing it upon his crony, Bartholomew Peche. And just for good measure, the Pope also excommunicated Helias and his brothers for their involvement in the rebellion.

However, after the death of King John, Helias swore his allegiance to the young Henry the 3rd and his family's lands were then returned to him. It seemed as if life would return to its usual pattern.

And that usual pattern certainly involved behaviour that angered others. The abbot of Gloucester officially complained that Helias had taken the law into his own hands and was hanging his own men at Brimpsfield instead of submitting to the abbot's authority. And John, who succeeded Helias, continued the family tradition, for in 1264 he was summoned to Gloucester Castle by its constable to answer for a misdemeanour. He appeared at the castle with a gang of armed supporters who killed some of the constable's men before driving the rest away.

~

John's confrontation with authority certainly reached its apogee in his opposition to Henry the 3rd, now a grown man capable of making his own decisions. And the decisions made by that monarch made him extremely unpopular with his nobles.

He was accused of showing favouritism towards his French knights, apparently promoting them to positions of power at the expense of his home-grown aristocrats. And John, particularly incensed when the post of Sheriff of Gloucester promised to him was instead bestowed upon a certain Marci de Basile, was quite happy to throw in his lot with the rebels.

The situation escalated until it resulted in armies facing each other across the battlefield. The chronicler Robert of Gloucester recorded the details of the conflict, and in those chronicles, Giffard emerges as a prominent figure.

But his most dramatic exploit took place during the cold, pale season of Candlemas in 1264, when he and a number of his men volunteered to take Gloucester for the barons.

To achieve this, John Giffard hit upon a devious plan. They sneaked across the Severn where they disguised themselves as Welsh wool merchants. Then they arranged their men in the back of a cart amongst the bales, crossed the Severn Bridge at Gloucester and persuaded the porters at the city gates to allow them to enter so that they could sell their wares.

Once across the threshold, they flung aside their Welsh woollen cloaks to reveal themselves as fierce, armour-clad warriors, who then proceeded to take control of Gloucester.

They didn't entirely succeed. Although they held the town, the castle remained in the hands of Lord Clifford who held it for the king. And eventually Prince Edward came out, riding to its rescue.

The city paid the price for what appeared to be its collusion with the rebels. It was destroyed as a warning to any others who might consider harbouring the king's enemies. And the unfortunate porters who had permitted Giffard and his men to cross the city threshold were hanged.

The rebels were also punished but they do not appear to have suffered as greatly as the city did. And it was not long before the Giffards had returned to royal favour. By the time Prince Edward had become King Edward the 1st, John Giffard was fighting for him at the Welsh and Scottish borders. That proved to be a lucrative move, for the spoils of war were there for the taking. Indeed, John Giffard amassed so much wealth from those battles that he became known as Sir John le Rych.

And so that is a brief summary of the clan who imposed their name upon our parish. Arrogant, proud, aggressive, quarrelsome and not averse to drawing blood –

but nevertheless, you couldn't accuse them of being uninteresting. All the same, it might be preferable to allow them to be interesting at a safe distance.

~

I have often wondered whether Court Avenue was named after a folk memory of the buried manor house – certainly the houses in that road were built before the excavations of the 1970s. If so, it recalls the family at the zenith of their wealth and power. However, the Wheel of Fortune turns for everyone and eventually the Giffards found themselves on the descent. But that is another story.

It is time now to make our way to Meade Road, where Saxonpath with its stately hedgerows officially begins.

4

Meade Road begins at the brow of the hill, commanding beautiful views across to the north. Even though the landscape has been carpeted with houses it is still surprisingly green, and from this vantage point, countless trees rise above the rooftops.

At the top of Meade Road stands Knightwood Farm, a long, low building which is probably much older than it appears. It is believed that it may have started out as a medieval longhouse, the family inhabiting one end, the cattle inhabiting the other, settling into sweet straw and helping to keep the house warm.

When Stoke Gifford was still a farming community, the cattle used to happily amble across Beacon Lane in order to be milked. But when the lane became a busy road, they could no longer cross in safety. And so an underpass was provided for them. The cattle have long since gone and their pasture is hidden beneath bricks and mortar, but the underpass remains, providing a useful link between Stoke Gifford and Bradley Stoke.

And just below the old farm, begins the wonderful hedgerow that accompanies the line of Saxonpath. This particular length of hedgerow surmounts an old wall constructed from the local oolitic limestone. Alas, this length of hedgerow is not as rich as it used to be. When new houses were constructed behind it, the builders were a little cavalier in their attitude towards it and paid scant attention to preserving its integrity. This deeply upset a friend of mine who happens to live along that road. One breakfast time, whilst clad in her dressing gown and clutching her baby, she witnessed a group of builders cheerfully butchering the hedge. Filled with fury, she charged outside in her rather dishevelled state and angrily ordered the destruction to stop. She must have taken the workers by surprise because the downed tools. I am certain that it was her action that ensured that the hedgerow is still standing today.

When some work was carried out at the front of my friend's house, a length of Roman culvert was uncovered just outside her front door. My friend believes that it was used to pipe water to a farm that apparently once stood towards the lower end of the road.

Certainly, the Romans were active in this parish. A villa was excavated next to Bailey's Court Inn – it now lies preserved beneath the town's cricket pitch.

Interestingly, an old footpath leads directly from Saxonpath to Bailey's Court Inn and I cannot help but speculate that this path may pre-date the Saxons, linking one Roman settlement with another. We shall follow that footpath for ourselves later on in this book.

However, perhaps the most dramatic local discovery of Roman remains was made in the fields running alongside Hatchett Road in Stoke Gifford. That area now consists of housing and public open space. But in Ros Broomhead's day, it was known as Smithy Field.

During the reign of Queen Victoria, a young artisan went for a wander across those fields. It was a lovely day in Lent and he wanted to gather some primroses for Mothering Sunday. Nevertheless he was not above distraction, so when he noticed what looked like pottery wedged into the bank of the brook he decided to aim a few stones at it.

His aim proved true and the pot shattered. To his surprise, a cascade of coins then poured into the water. Wading into the brook (and doubtless wincing at the Lenten chill), he retrieved some of them and found that they didn't resemble any of the coins he was familiar with. They seemed to be very old indeed.

Eventually the coins found themselves under the scrutiny of a local antiquarian who identified them as Roman and of a low denomination. Judging by their date, it was likely that they had been hidden in the ground at some time during the third century. And there they had remained for hundreds of years, until a little protuberance of pottery had caught a young lad's eye.

But why had nobody noticed that pot before? Perhaps the previous winter had been particularly stormy, and the rainwater rushing along the brook had washed away part of the bank. But if this explains why the pot remained hidden for so long, it doesn't explain why the pot was buried there in the first place.

Curiously, our local pot of Roman treasure seems to be part of a wider pattern of concealment. For in and around the Severn Vale, a number of pots have been recovered which contain Roman coins of low denomination of about the same age. These modest hoards almost seem akin to ancient piggy banks.

~

The third century AD was a time of uncertainty and change. The Roman Empire was in decline and the armies that had protected Britain for so long had returned to their

mother city, sometimes to support the bid of yet another claimant to the Imperial throne and sometimes to protect Rome from the ravages of incoming barbarians.

And word soon got around that Britain was now undefended. During the time of Roman rule, civilians were not allowed to carry arms, which resulted in generations of Britons not knowing how to defend themselves. It did not seem the best of times to be dwelling in this land, especially when invaders from Ireland and northern Europe decided to try their luck with regards to the riches that must surely be found on our shores.

The Severn Estuary was particularly prone to pirate attacks that could penetrate fairly far inland. And perhaps this explains why people buried their coins and hastily hid out of the way when they received news of an impending raid. Nevertheless, this still doesn't explain why the coins that were concealed in this way were of such low value. The mystery remains.

And ironically, as Britain became more and more isolated from the rest of the Roman world, so money ceased to matter anyway. The towns, where all the international trading had taken place, ceased to function and the Britons returned to being a rural people who employed barter in order to acquire the goods they desired.

So perhaps this is why a pot of Roman coins was found in Stoke Gifford one afternoon in early spring. Or perhaps not.

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About a hundred years later, Smithy Field became designated for new housing and once again the archaeologists were called in.

And as they undertook their meticulous examination of the layers of soil within that field, they discovered a Roman settlement. And within that settlement were two graves. In both of them, the bodies were buried facing east, which suggested they were Christian burials, the bodies aligned in the direction in which it was believed that Christ would return on Judgement Day.

One body appeared to have been buried with appropriate depth and decorum. But with the other body, it was a different matter. It had been covered shallowly, and the stones above it had been arranged hastily. What had happened here?

Could this be further evidence that this quiet field, apparently in the middle of nowhere, had possibly been subjected to a barbarian raid? Was it in anticipation of this particular attack that the pot of coins was buried in the banks of the brook? And

had one of the inhabitants of that settlement been murdered by raiders and buried hastily and furtively by his family who were at the same time, in fear of their own lives?

We shall probably never know.

But this not all that archaeologists discovered. For the settlement was rich in metal, particularly little solidified droplets that suggested that this site was once used as a foundry.

And this leads me to conjecture. Ros Broomhead knew that place as Smithy Field. But from where did that name originate?

Is it just possible that when the Saxons settled at Stoche that the ruins of the old foundry still remained above ground? And did the Saxons bestow those Roman ruins with a name from their own language? And if that is the case, the memory of the Roman foundry then persisted in a place-name long after the ruins had disappeared. And that name was still being used – even though probably nobody knew why – well into the 20th century.

Place names can behave like fossils. The living settlement may have perished long ago, but it leaves its imprint upon the words used to describe it, the pattern persisting long after the nature of the place has changed beyond recognition.

At nearby Almondsbury, Over Lane runs steeply down from the ridge that carries the A38 (which probably originated as an ancient trackway following the high ground) to the little hamlet that bears its name. Then the lane continues to descend until it reaches the lush green pasture land that extends for several miles until it reaches the Severn.

But what is interesting is the probable meaning of the word. 'Over' is a very old place name, probably Celtic in origin, and it was used to describe a cliff by the sea. Which seems odd because the sea is now miles away from that little settlement.

But a long, long time ago, it wasn't. The lush pastureland at the foot of the hill owes its existence to an extensive system of drainage rhynes which were established centuries ago. Before the land was drained, the Severn estuary would have spread across the plain and its waves would have lapped at the lower edge of Over Lane. The sea has long since retreated, but the name continues to remind us of how the world must have looked many centuries ago.

~

Further along the Severn, flanked by salt marsh, stands the little settlement of Hallen. And that too is an old, old place name, dating back to Celtic times. 'Hallen' is linked to the Celtic – and indeed the Latin – name for 'salt' and holds within it a memory of the days when that precious commodity was extracted from the marshes once the sun's heat had evaporated the water. And salt was of sufficient importance to our predecessors to be honoured in a place-name, for in the days before refrigeration, it was one of the most effective ways of preserving food from corruption.

As summer drew to an end, our ancestors knew that it would not be long before the grass ceased to grow for the winter, making it impossible to provide all their livestock with sufficient food. It was then necessary to slaughter the creatures they could not sustain, and eat their meat during the cold months of the year. But without the preservative power of salt, the meat would quickly become inedible. Thus, a good supply of salt could provide the difference between surviving the winter or starving.

No wonder salt is honoured in the names of the places that provided it.

Closer to home, Hatchett Lane, which runs close to Smithy Field, also has interesting origins. It is believed to derive from 'Hach gaet', which is a Viking place name. Thus, a lane in a quiet West Country village can serve to remind us of the many different people who have settled in this land.

More poignantly perhaps, is Welsh Acre, a little field that once lay close to Webbs Wood to the south of Bradley Stoke. 'Welsh' was originally a term of contempt used by the Saxons to refer to the Romano-Britons they found occupying the land they had invaded. The field was not far from the Romano-British villa close to Baileys Court Inn – could it be that the original inhabitants lost most of their land to the acquisitive newcomers and dwindled away, dwelling in reduced circumstances and working their small plot of land that – in a derogatory manner – remembered them in its name? It may just have happened in that way.

~

Layers and layers of happenings. Many of them lie beneath our layers of words. Smithy Field and the surrounding land was once frequently flooded, as Stoke Brook was apt to sprawl beyond its banks. To remedy this, the waterway was deepened and straightened, an operation that took place not so many years ago. As the engineers worked, they excavated the remains of a prehistoric sea monster, revealing yet

another chapter of our local story. As they gazed upon their discovery, they doubtless considered that what we now regard as flooding was little more than a slight puddle compared to what had once been here.

5

At the lower end of Meade Road, a holding known as Watch Elm Farm once stood. A curious story lies behind the name of this farm.

In an article of the 18th century publication "The Gentlemen's Magazine', John Player wrote about a vast and hollow tree, ancient beyond knowing, that stood at no great distance from the farmstead that had received its name. It was so large that sheep were accustomed to shelter within it during stormy weather.

Because it was such a significant landmark, it was chosen by the village watch to mark the place where their shifts began and ended – hence the name 'Watch Elm'. This was in the days before an official police force had been created, so communities needed to exercise vigilance amongst themselves. Eventually, this venerable specimen was struck by lightning and shortly after, decay set in. It was not long before what had become a nationally recognised historic monument had rotted away altogether. All that remained was the name of the farm. But the farm eventually disappeared as well. However, when Bradley Stoke was built, one of the roads lying close to where the elm had stood – which was very close to Saxonpath – was named Watch Elm Close.

Mike Hill, who once lived in Meade Road, became fascinated by Watch Elm Farm and eventually spent a lot of time researching its story. Poring over census returns, he discovered that a young boy called Harry Sherbourne was living on the farm at about the same time as Sherbourne's Brake – the wood I can see from our window – was being planted up on what was then Hale's Common. Could young Harry Sherbourne have given his name to the wood that so many of us love to visit today?

Sadly, Mike is no longer with us. Like Ros, he was a gentle, gracious, loveable character. He was fascinated by the antiquity of Saxonpath and often conjectured upon writing a novel based on the characters that might have walked along it throughout the centuries. Perhaps one day, someone else will take up that challenge.

~

Doubtless, every neighbourhood has its famous trees. The Watch Elm lies beyond living memory and has passed into the realms of legend, but there are other trees I remember, although as my memories do eventually get a little embellished by imagination, these too may very quickly become legendary in stature.

An old black poplar once stood in Sherbourne's Brake, close to the brook. Black poplars are trees of the water's edge rather than woodland so it may be that this tree existed before the Brake was planted a century or two ago.

It leant precipitously, as if it was about to topple at any minute. This gave it an alarming appearance, but it is the way that poplars tend to grow and so it was probably as stable as any other tree in the wood. Its bark was wonderfully furrowed and fissured, like the face of an ancient rock guitarist. High above our heads it would shake a shock of fluttering leaves into the sunlight, and it was possible to watch them glittering from a considerable distance.

But what fascinated us most about this tree was that it was hollow. Because of this my children called it the Yawning Tree. I would sometimes imagine what it would be like to ascend through its interior, the shaft growing ever more narrow, involving the necessity of shrinking with it, until I emerged as tiny as a raindrop and crawled to the very end of a twig. What views I would enjoy from the summit!

Unfortunately, the tree's hollow interior made it irresistible to local arsonists. The regular sight of flames illuminating the Brake would result in telephone calls to the hard-pressed fire brigade. Eventually the council decided that because of the fires, together with the fact that in their eyes the tree seemed to be perpetually on the verge of toppling over, they had no choice but to fell it. An unhappy decision because the black poplars of Old England are becoming very rare indeed.

The fallen giant was left in the wood to serve as a rustic seat. The tunnel remained, although I doubt if anyone was sufficiently enterprising to enter it. Eventually, it became the home of all kinds of interesting mosses and fungi which conspired with the other elements of nature to crumble it into a rich loam until no trace of that mighty specimen survived.

However, my grief for this glorious giant was short lived. One spring morning as I walked through the Brake, I noticed a number of large, loopy, crimson catkins, resembling rather alarming looking caterpillars strewn across the ground. Poplar catkins. And then I realised that, interspersed amongst the other trees, were a number of slender yet deeply fissured trunks, each leaning precipitously away from the perpendicular. And at the summit of each of those trees was a tiny shock of trembling new foliage.

The old poplar had eventually flung out a succession of suckers that had proceeded to thrive. Now when I gaze across to the wood, I can see the familiar

glitter of their ever-restless leaves. The black poplar is dead. Long live the black poplar.

~

Further north, there stood a tree in a hedgerow that had long ago been petrified by lightning. Its appearance was rather alarming, its dead bare crown frizzled into ripples of twisting woody snakes. This appearance earned it the name of the Medusa Tree.

When the new town was built, the hedge where it stood was destroyed. But its weird appearance must have made an impression upon the town's developers because the road that replaced it was entitled Cross Tree Grove.

In the north of Bradley Stoke, there is a pub known as the Hollow Tree. It was originally the Bradley Stoke Inn but when it was adopted by a new brewery, the name changed. But perhaps this new name is more evocative than the original. Perhaps it too remembers the Medusa Tree or one of the veteran oaks of Bradley Stoke, a few of which can still be found about the place.

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There is no sign of Watch Elm Farm now, and the place where it once stood is occupied by smart new houses. But I have spoken to people who remember the old farms along Meade Road. One recalls a wartime event – the Dutch barns, used for storing mangold wurzels being hit during an air raid. They burst into flames and for a long time afterwards, the air was saturated with the scent of roasted root vegetables.

I also once met a wheelwright who lived in Meade Road. His family business was no longer in operation, but he recalled the days when his skills were required by the farming families of the parish.

Traversing Beacon Lane is no longer an idyllic experience as it requires the assistance of a pelican crossing. On the far side, Meade Road becomes Meade Lane, an altogether more rustic path than the one we have just followed.

At first, it is accessible to vehicles, for access is required to the 21st house named Little Leaze. This dwelling replaces a house built fairly early in the 20th century which bore the same name.

A gentleman who made shepherds' crooks lived in the first Little Leaze. We once fell into conversation, but we were both quite shy so I never did find out exactly why he was making them.

Beyond Little Leaze the lane becomes a footpath, cradled in a basket of overarching greenery, half-hidden from the houses that surround it as it takes the traveller towards Bailey's Court Road. It is now a pleasant place to walk but it is altogether different from how I remember it when I first saw it. The impact it made upon me at that time was enormous.

When Saxonpath still ran across the open fields, this part of it was hidden within a corridor of double hedge, a wonderful green tunnel, a secret road. For the hedges hid the path so effectively from the surrounding fields that it seemed to an onlooker that they were simply gazing at the border between one field and the next.

It was a magical path, paved with soft turf, the trees arching overhead to enclose it. Walking along it was rather like travelling through a parallel universe or at least using a wormhole to reach another dimension. How wonderful to walk along that path without anyone beyond it being aware of your existence. Surely it was the kind of path that Robin Hood and his Merry Men would have found useful.

It retains some of its magic today, even though the council has replaced the soft turf with an all-weather surface, suitable for bicycles and pushchairs. But its atmosphere remains – the green lattice overhead, the quietness, the sense of small creatures scuffling in the secret world created by the old stone wall, the roots, the boughs and the leaf litter where the hedgerow still grows in its rich and tangled manner.

Last winter, I used it as a short cut after delivering Christmas cards in the nearby streets. In those streets, the night was an amber pool of lamp light, in which Christmas lights flashed and twinkled, a dazzling display of urban festivity.

Then I dropped into Meade Lane. The street lights were now far away and the lane was plunged into darkness. I could scarcely see where I was placing my feet. And then I felt – really felt – what this place must have felt like when it was still deeply rural, in the days before street lighting when the silence and darkness of night were all embracing and the dawn all the more sweet because of it.

Meade Lane is also a crossroads. The old path that once led to Baileys Court and beyond once began here – it is no longer evident although its route can be followed through the new roads. And a little further along there is another junction on the

side of the lane which once led all the way to Little Stoke Farm. As already mentioned, if we have the stamina we will return to those paths later.

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Saxonpath crosses Bailey's Court Road and then continues along the offshoot of Sherbourne Avenue marked by the postbox where the two roads meet. And then it becomes diverted towards other hedgerows because during the development of this area, its original line was lost.

Yet, despite its fragmented nature scattered amongst bricks and tarmac, there are still a few things of interest along here. At one point, the pavement of one of the new roads passes through a little corridor of laurel hedge and thus crosses Saxonpath at right angles. It is possible to stand at this point and look right and left along the length of the hedgerow. A plum tree once stood here, a remnant of the old days and delightful because it was one of the first trees to blossom in the spring time. But it is now gone.

Looking northwards along the hedge line, the most dominant tree is a massive ash that spreads widely through the surrounding sky. It is the favoured haunt of starlings, magpies and crows who cling to its branches like sailors to the mast of a ship. This is truly a tree of life.

Whenever I look at this mighty old tree, I am reminded of Ygaddsril, the world-tree the immense ash which, in Norse mythology, connects Middle Earth with the land of the gods above and the underworld where the dark dwarves dwell. Here along the branches and roots of this tree, all the traffic and gossip of the universe took place. Indeed, it was the universe. And perhaps this is what a mighty tree eventually becomes – a cosmos all of its own, each level possessing its own life forms, distinct but interconnected.

Ash trees are now under threat from a deadly disease. As I look at our own mighty Ygaddsril, I plead, "Don't go, don't go. Don't leave us like the elms did. The world would not be the same without you."

~

Beyond this point, the diversion from Saxonpath can be picked up along a lane that can be followed as it heads towards Stoke Brook. It can be pursued in the other direction as well, and followed until it emerges into a little offshoot of The Bluebells.

This cul-de-sac has a pleasant, almost rustic demeanour and this may be intentional, for it stands where ancient Webbs Farm once stood – once a proud farm in its own right, but eventually becoming a satellite of Bailey's Court Farm.

Both ends of this lane were once bordered by hedgerow, although in places this has now been replaced by garden fencing. Because of this, in springtime the nostrils are more likely to be assailed by the odour of wood preservative than May blossom. I cannot help regretting this, for it was along this lane that the importance of hedgerows to our fellow-creatures was really brought home to me.

It was a Saturday in late spring, a day of fresh, clean heat. I was walking through the streets of Bradley Stoke, feeling distinctly uneasy. The place seemed deserted. The houses were shut up tight. Nobody was walking about. Nobody gardened. No children charged around with bikes or footballs. The roads were free of traffic and the silence was not peaceful for it was the silence of utter absence. Not a creature stirred or made a sound until I began to believe that the town had been evacuated and nobody had told me about it.

And then I turned into the little lane, neatly bordered by its closely-knit hedgerows. There, a sparrow kerfuffle was taking place – a great crowd of small, dusty, fawn coloured birds scrapping excitedly in the midst of the new leaves. And I breathed a sigh of relief, because here was life.

Hedgerows are artificial constructs – trees grown in a row to define boundaries and deter cattle from straying. They represent nature manipulated by human beings. And yet, they have become an enormous blessing to the fauna and flora of this land.

A hedgerow is like a green highway, a place where creatures can move from place to place, protected from unwanted observation. Particularly when they persist in hostile landscapes, they offer subversive routes, alternative alleyways in a potentially dangerous world. Plants can spread along them too, flourishing in the shelter of the hedgerow's base, setting seed and sending out runners, travelling along in safety.

Hedgerows can link one ancient wood to another, mingling the flora and fauna of both of them, enhancing the richness of our world, encouraging it, protecting it. And when the hedgerows that were originally planted on farmland remain after a new town is built around them, they may provide that town's only refuge for the plants and animals that suddenly find themselves on the verge of eviction. Hedgerows are places of life in what can be an otherwise sterile world, as I realised so vividly on that quiet spring day.

Much human activity is destructive towards the natural world. Sometimes, it seems impossible for us to ever live in harmony with our fellow-creatures. And yet, now and again, we do seem to sing in tune with everything else. And hedgerows – the result of centuries of slow, patient maintenance – are one of those melodies that enable the birds to sing more freely and the wind to play particularly lovely tunes through the flute holes between the foliage.

Our old coppice woods work in a similar way. Most of our ancient woods are far from natural in appearance – indeed, they are usually described as 'semi-natural woodlands'. For millennia, human beings have worked them, cutting the long wands of hazel for weaving into walls and fences, gathering firewood and growing on the taller trees as timber for the future.

And without our intervention, the woods would be poorer – a dark tangle of crowded trees, all the life limited to their upper boughs because the sunlight can scarcely reach the ground. But woods that are managed are more open so the light can penetrate every part of them. Without that light, we would not experience the dreamy mists of bluebells that so typify this country in the springtime. And neither would all those other bright flowers – campion, anemone, archangel, orchid, bugle, moschatel and ransom – flourish either. The flowers attract the insects. The insects attract the birds. And thus, the world becomes a richer place.

Woodlands and hedgerows are managed slowly, a section cut back each winter. The result is a mosaic of habitats – from the newly exposed earth to the leafy regrowth of the cut stools to the full richness of trees ripe for further harvesting. And each habitat attracts its own attendant creatures. Variety is precious.

It is said that if a hazel tree is regularly coppiced, it could live indefinitely. Years ago – before the current conservation group began their sterling work – I walked through Sherbourne's Brake with a tree surgeon friend. "If those old hazel stools aren't coppiced soon", he remarked, "they will decay".

And so it is not necessarily the initial act but the continuous interaction between us and the rest of creation that makes all the difference. Many of the town's hedgerows now inhabit a kind of No Man's Land, stuck between the fences that separate one garden from another. In some ways, they are safe – no-one can get to them, so no-one can destroy them. But in other ways, they are in great danger. For if no-one can destroy them, then neither can anyone tend them. Without regular layering, the trees will grow lanky and top-heavy and become sparse at the roots.

There will no longer be a complicated tangle of woody life where creatures can take shelter. The sunlight can no longer penetrate to encourage the bluebells to blossom and the butterflies to thrive. Eventually the trees will outgrow their strength, become overcrowded and die. And the hedgerow will die with them.

So, as in every worthwhile relationship, constant nurturing is required. And I remain encouraged. For in a world where we seem so out of touch with creation – and so often, the Creator – the slow dance between humanity and habitat, demonstrated in woodland and hedgerow, gives us just a little hint of long-lost Eden – a hint found in little pockets of places the length and breadth of this land.

~

Emerging from this lane, it is just possible to see the original line of Saxonpath as an avenue of stately oaks, especially lovely in golden autumn. Then the line becomes interrupted by a row of houses and we are forced to cross the brook by a new bridge before we can resume the route that our ancestors followed.

6

The wooden bridge we cross may not be on the original line of Saxonpath, but it is pleasant nevertheless. Here, much of the brook is half-hidden beneath a deep, witchy tunnel of blackthorn. In some ways it seems a sinister shrub, enclosing great lengths of earth and water in its gloom. And a scratch from a blackthorn requires immediate attention. Each long, sharp thorn is deeply grooved and rutted at the microscopic level, and each of those grooves harbour microbes that can cause serious infection.

But blackthorn has its sunny side. In the season of Lent when the trees are largely bare, it suddenly breaks forth into blossom – dozens of tiny, dusky-white, gold-spangled flowers against the tangle of black twigs. Where the blackthorn forms a long tunnel here, something akin to a festal arcade is created. In the fields close to my home, blackthorn blossom used to form an archway over a hedge-door and at that time of the year, I liked to walk underneath it, imagining I was passing through a portal into another world. I never did find that other world – instead, I would usually go straight home and start the ironing.

Richard Mabey records how those innocent white blooms, borne so early in the year, were popular at one time as wedding cake decorations – each blossom delicately candied before use. Blackthorn blossom is virginal, the plant of new beginnings. Yet it is not always necessarily a herald of the spring.

My former mother-in-law, who was brought up in the country, told me about 'blackthorn snow' or 'blackthorn winter'. Yes – the blossoms resemble snow, but the associations run deeper than that. Just before the flowers open, we often enjoy a week or two of almost unseasonably warm weather. we are lulled into a false sense of security. Jumpers are discarded, people lounge about in parks. And then, the blackthorn blossoms and everything changes again. The temperature plummets and snow often falls. It is winter again.

I was told about blackthorn winter many years ago, and I have been watching out for it ever since. During that time, I can only recall two years where the pattern has not held true.

And blackthorns are also beloved because of the sloes they produce – tiny, deep purple plums with a powdery bloom.

To place a raw sloe upon the tongue is a shocking experience. It is so sour that the mouth immediately puckers and dries. But when sloes are added to gin, then something truly alchemical happens, seducing everyone, including those who dislike sloes and those who dislike gin.

I have only been industrious enough to make in on one occasion, when a friend very kindly gave me a copy of her recipe. And so, I set off for one of the local blackthorn thickets, gathered my harvest and returned home, where each tiny sloe was individually pricked with a fork to encourage the juices to flow. It took a very long time, and this probably explains why I haven't bothered to repeat the experience.

I then had to combine the sloes with a particular volume of gin. But I am not fond of gin and probably resented spending money on something I didn't like. Because of this, I didn't think through the process logically and inadvertently used twice as much sugar and sloe mixture than I should have in relation to the amount of gin added to it.

When I realised what had happened, I assumed the results would be disastrous. But it proved to be a happy accident. That Christmas, we celebrated with a thick, pink, sweet, sticky liquor that tasted decidedly festive. That was certainly a mistake worth making.

The friend who had given me the recipe asked me how I had fared. I enthusiastically described my sloe-hunting session at my chosen blackthorn thicket, at which point her face fell. "That was my sloe patch", she sighed.

~

But it is time to leave this bridge and take a few steps back until we reach a little metal bridge that crosses the brook several yards upstream. This brings us back to Saxonpath. On either side of the brook, tall oak and ash rise along the slope. To the south, the trees disappear into the gardens belonging to the houses already mentioned. To the south, they form a dense, deep woodland, a little world in its own right.

We like to idle away our time upon this bridge, particularly in the summer when dragonflies and damselflies abound. Very occasionally, we spot a kingfisher here, shooting down the stream like a bolt from the blue. It is a place that invites a person to linger.

The metal bridge replaces an earlier stone bridge. At one time, stone bridges were quite commonplace around here – nowadays, the only one of which I am aware spans Bradley Brook just beyond the duck pond in the nature reserve. Big Dave, a local man who knew everything about everything and who become a good friend, told me about those bridges. They were constructed of a certain width to ensure that only one sheep could cross them at a time. This enabled the farmer to count them as they passed from one field to another.

Big Dave was a treasure trove of anecdotes. Walking through Sherbourne's Brake with him one day, he pointed to some stone foundations in the brook and told me that local folk always maintained that they marked the remains of a Roman bridge. And at the heart of the little woodland that Saxonpath becomes just beyond the brook, he once showed me the remnants of a brick structure which he speculated may have been a mill when the deep gully that ran through the wood carried water. And he told me stories about an ancient inn that was said to have been situated along this stretch of Saxonpath, to provide sustenance and shelter for the travellers en route.

But Big Dave was also capable of destroying our own romantic legends. Along the path beside the gully, stands a slender green pillar, fluted and rather ornamental and crowned with a flowery little piece of ironwork. My friend Jackie, the friend who was responsible for identifying the significance of Saxonpath, had conjectured that this was a Victorian lamppost, positioned to guide the wayfarers of yore, particularly if they were recovering from a visit to the ancient inn. It all felt very beautiful, that ancient lantern in the middle of nowhere, like something straight from the pages of The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe.

But Big Dave was having none of that. When we pointed out the pillar and told him our tale, he snorted in derision. "That's no lamppost", he retorted. "That's nothing but an old stink pipe to keep the air moving round the drain underneath it."

And sadly, he was right. The little watercourse had carved out the gully beside the path as it tumbled eagerly towards Stoke Brook, had at some time in its history been culverted beneath our feet, leaving the deep hollow of woodland that we know today, the hollow that becomes a bowl of bluebells every spring. Yet despite this, I do not quite believe that the age of romance is dead.

Big Dave was a giant of a man and a faithful supporter of local conservation projects. He had worked upon the land for most of his life and possessed remarkable

strength. He could fell a tree in the same time it took the rest of us to sort out our shoe laces. In his latter years, all that hard work took its toll and his body began to decline. It was a long, slow, sad felling of the giant that we knew until sickness took him at last. Watching Dave fade away from us must surely have been akin to the experience of our ancestors witnessing the demise of the Watch Elm.

~

The deep, water-carved woodland is one of my favourite places along Saxonpath. Before the town was built, I sometimes climbed into its interior, sunk below the level of the adjacent fields. It was a favourite haunt when I was in one of those melancholy, introspective moods in which I wished to refrain from human company. Or when I was just in a bit of a strop.

Deep in the woodlet, amongst the tangle of undergrowth, lay a fallen tree. And there I would sit until my various thoughts and feelings steadied into 'a green thought in a green shade'. Because of the sunken nature of the place, I could see nothing but trees towering around me and could fancy that the entire land was covered in primeval forest, as it was once said to be, a time when it was reckoned that a squirrel could travel from coast to coast without once touching the ground.

On one occasion, I was sat in there feeling particularly morose when I became aware of the baying of hounds in the distance. Although most of the farmers had by then moved on, it was still not entirely impossible that fox hunting still took place in the local woods and fields.

I decided to stay put, but was then disturbed to hear the padding of canine feet behind me. I sighed. The last thing I wanted to encounter was a pack of animals and people intent on slaughter.

I stiffened, waiting for my peace to be destroyed. And then I relaxed, for padding past me was a fox, pelt as bright as flame, step as light as the fall of an autumn leaf.

We surprised each other with our presence. For a few seconds, our eyes locked and we held each others' gaze. The deep brown eyes were cool, intelligent and almost humorous. For a brief moment, we were a pair of fugitives – I in search of solitude, the fox fleeing for its life. Then it seemed that the fox shook himself and came to his senses, remembering I was human and therefore a potential enemy. Our eyes broke contact and the fox ran on until he was lost from sight in the undergrowth. And once again I was alone.

I valued that encounter for a number of reasons. It was not simply that wild animals are beautiful and interesting – it was also the sense of connection.

I had experienced pain in the transition between childhood and self-conscious adulthood. AS a child, I had tumbled through the world, at one with it, oblivious to the distance between myself and my fellow-creatures. I remember being taken out to the countryside with a group of friends and finding a buttercup meadow. We vaulted the stile and ran through the field, exulting in its golden glory. It felt as if we could run forever without growing weary beneath the sapphire dome of the sky, our ankles brushed with gold. We felt eternal, and the glorious field appeared to be infinite.

But growing up threw a shadow over such experiences. I remember a school friend recalling a sunny afternoon when she realised that everyone – including herself – would one day die, and how the sun lost some of its brightness that day. With a realisation of mortality, there also seems to arrive a realisation of our separateness from the world, a sense of how difficult it can be to connect with others, particularly other species. Sometimes I felt that when I stood to gaze upon the glory of the earth, all I did was cast my shadow across it.

Ejection from Eden certainly seems to be the unhappy inheritance of humanity as a whole. And I sense that each individual experiences at some time in their life that sense of being locked on the outside of Paradise.

And so, I often felt as I was an outsider looking in – a helpless onlooker upon the beauty of the world. longing to be a part of it but simply standing waiting at the walls during the party of Creation. That is why that encounter with the fox in the heart of that tiny woodland meant so much to me.

~

As soon as the significance of Saxonpath was realised, a small group of us worked hard to ensure it was protected, together with the ponds and woodlands of our neighbourhood. There was a fear that the tide of the new town would wash away everything if we weren't careful. We wanted to ensure that when human beings moved into the area en masse, there would still be homes for birds and badgers and bank voles.

The woodlet in the gully seemed a particularly precious place and we were assured by the local authorities that it would be protected as part of any permission granted to develop the land surrounding it. Therefore, when I went out on an early

walk one blissfully beautiful May morning, I was surprised to be greeted by the sounds of chain saws emanating from the gully.

Clambering over the building site that now bordered the gully, I came face to face with a gang of men cutting down trees. I jumped up and down and shouted, growing red in the face but only succeeded in making them laugh, probably because I looked so ridiculous.

But I was certainly not laughing. As I stumbled homeward, the tears were rolling down my cheeks because I knew that if the gully was lost, it could never truly be replaced. I remembered all that Chris Baines had said about hedgerows being as venerable as cathedrals and I wanted to weep some more. But weeping wasn't going to solve anything. It was time to take action.

The council offices were shut because it was a Bank Holiday weekend, which meant that the planning enforcement officer couldn't be contacted. So I decided to tap into what is one of the most powerful resources of all – people power.

Before long, a little group of us was assembled. Tasks were quickly deployed. A complaint was placed at the office of the housing developer which was received by a rather startled sales rep. Local TV and radio stations were contacted, together with the local press. Then we marched off to the gully to stand our ground. But by then, the chain saw gang had disappeared. A car had been witnessed pulling up close to the gully and the driver running out to tell the men to stop because there was going to be trouble. Evidently, the phone call to the sales rep had been a good move.

However, we were unwilling to leave the gully, lest the work gang decided to return. So that weekend, we stood vigil, waiting for the planning office to open on Tuesday and the matter could be properly resolved.

It was an interesting weekend to say the least. For a short while Saxonpath became famous as camera crews and sound recorders and journalists paid us visits. We enjoyed the glamour of being minor celebrities for a season, even though the glamour was somewhat tinged with mud and dried leaves. But it was important that the media were involved. Big companies hate bad publicity.

The euphoria may have gone to our heads though. One of our party asked a reporter what it would take to get Saxonpath on to the national news. "You will have to lie in front of the bulldozers", she replied. "And refuse to move whatever happens." We looked warily at each other. "Local is good", someone said at last.

But when the press weren't around, it was usually quiet and sometimes rather tedious in the gully. And it rained a lot that weekend. I spent a lot of time alone in there, rain dripping from my coat hood, wondering how everybody else was spending their Bank Holiday weekend.

It was our aim to keep vigil between sunrise and sunset. And so I would rise at 5 am and plod across to Saxonpath, armed with a flask of coffee and a pack of marmalade sandwiches. That was a magical time to be awake, the birds of the parish creating incredibly tight contour-lines of song, and the scent of the new day fresh upon the air. One morning, I watched a red deer casually cross the road as I set off for sentry duty.

A friend usually joined me for breakfast. We would sit in the very depths of the gully, inhaling the damp, musky scent of the bluebells whilst we talked and talked and talked. We would eat sandwiches and drink coffee and then we would talk some more. And then, we would usually talk again.

We tended to be so engrossed in our conversation that we were largely unaware of what was happening all around us. Indeed on one occasion, it took me a while to realise that for most of the time we'd been sitting there a sparrowhawk had been regularly skimming the tops of our heads. So much for dedicated vigilance.

But perhaps the most magical times were when I was completely alone in the gully, particularly when it wasn't raining. I would sit quietly for hours in the midst of the bluebells, just content to be. A pair of wrens were nesting in a crevice within the oak that rose above my resting place. They seemed quite unconcerned about my presence as they swiftly flitted to and fro. And so I sat there, as still as a growing tree and enjoyed the richness of the present moment as if it was the only moment that existed. Which in a way, is true of every moment. Loneliness gave way to a quiet rootedness in the land I was growing to love.

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The Bank Holiday weekend eventually drew to a close. The building contractors returned to the site and we awaited the arrival of the council's enforcement officer.

It was a grimy sort of day. A small group of us stood defiantly by the main opening into the gully whilst earthmovers turned precariously close to us. But not everybody on the site was hostile. A young lad came over and offered us cups of tea.

“I might work here”, he said, “but that doesn’t mean I agree with everything that happens. And it’s wrong to destroy those old trees without good reason.”

We felt as if we were waiting forever but the enforcement officer actually arrived no later than mid-morning. He picked his way across the mud until he reached us, the trousers of his tidy suit tucked neatly into his gum boots.

“I uphold your complaint”, he said. “The company should not have begun to destroy the hedge. It will now be fenced off against any further damage and the company will be required to take compensatory action.”

And so we had won, and perhaps Saxonpath could now be safe for the next 900 years. “Walk away with your heads held high”, asserted one of our company, and that’s what we did whilst paying appropriate attention to the whereabouts of our feet on that miry building site. As we left, our young friend came running up to us, crying “Congratulations! You’ve done it. That’s what should have happened.”

~

It was a curious little adventure in the midst of life’s more ordinary events and I occasionally look back upon it with a rather amused affection. During that strange time, there were so many interesting encounters, of both the human and non-human kind.

One of the strangest meetings took place a few evenings after we had secured the safety of the gully. I still liked to visit it on a regular basis, just to ensure that all was well.

As I stood there, gazing into the undergrowth, a couple of very relaxed and hirsute gentlemen approached me, carrying a plank of wood between them. We fell into conversation and I briefly outlined the story of the Battle of the Saxon Gully.

“You had to fight that battle”, one of my new companions mused. “The world’s going a bad way at the moment.”

“Exploitation everywhere”, commented the other. “And the Mother doesn’t like it. You watch – the Mother will take her revenge.”

“Too much worship of Mammom”, continued the first speaker. “The love of money is the root of all evil. It’ll catch up with us all in the end, and then we’ll be sorry.”

I murmured in general agreement with their sentiments. Then I asked them why they were carrying a plank of wood which had evidently been taken from one of the adjacent building sites.

"We're going to sell it", one of them replied. "You can make a lot of money out of planks, you know. They're worth a lot of cans of baked beans, especially if we go to the discount shop."

~

And so, Saxon Gully still remains. It is now surrounded by houses and the local den-makers have made a few inroads there, but it is still a beautiful place and can hopefully enjoy whatever peace and quiet is still available in the midst of a busy new town.

A few years ago it received visits from a snow squirrel – an albino grey that gleamed as it moved from bough to bough. It didn't seem to live there all the time – indeed, I felt I discerned a particular pattern in its appearances. It always seemed to turn up when wintry weather was on the way which led me to speculate if it truly was a snow squirrel, pulling along the laden clouds from the north by means of an invisible string attached to its tail.

As well as amused affection, I also look back to the Battle of Saxon Gully with gratitude because during those damp, green days spent in the depths of the hedgerow I realised how deeply I loved my neighbourhood and how fiercely I was prepared to fight for its well-being. And as I reflect upon the times when the birds cheerfully carried on with their lives all around me, I had a fond hope that the the land might just love me back in return. And thus, that sense of disconnection with Creation that I had experienced for so long passed away and I felt once again that I belonged to the rest of the universe. A little chink had opened in the gates of Eden.

7

Saxonpath rises steeply alongside the gully, leaving behind the valley where Stoke Brook runs. At the top of the gully, the next section of the hedgerow has been lost. But the line of the path continues, linked by a little alleyway linking one street with another.

And when the hedgerow begins again, it is glorious to behold. A double procession of stately trees – venerable oaks shaped by the centuries, mighty ashes and a tapestry of hedgerow shrubs – marches magnificently in a northerly direction. And running in the midst of that double hedgerow, is a deep, mysterious ditch just begging to be explored.

Many years ago, a little group of us planned just such an expedition. Some of the members of that group were veritable pillars of society – parish clerks and councillors, and even officials from the local gardening society, no less. This expedition was a serious business.

And so, for one blissfully carefree afternoon we scrabbled our way through the hedge-tunnel as if we were an intrepid team of cavers. Eventually, we emerged, scratched and scuffed and happy, with bits of twigs in our hair. We ambled cheerfully back to base, showing every indication that we had been dragged through a hedge backwards.

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This part of Saxonpath now runs behind the playing fields surrounding a local primary school. As it approaches Savages Wood Road, another hedge attempts to join it from the east – and before the school was built, it was possible to follow that hedge to the place where it intersected with Saxonpath and then continued on its way.

The meeting place of those two hedgerows was particularly beautiful – quiet and secluded and lovely to look at. It led into a stand of pure field maple, their leaves curved into little hands with rounded fingers that turned the colour of clear marmalade in the autumn. Amidst the strange, silvery mistiness of a fine October day, those leaves seemed like jewels set amongst mother-of-pearl.

Whenever I paused at that meeting place and gazed into the canopy, I always experienced a curious feeling of happiness. A great sense of peace would descend which made me want to start singing out for joy.

How can I account for those feelings? Was it simply the happy association of shapes and colours that happened to please my senses? Was it because of the deep seclusion of the place, the field where the hedgerows met feeling like a quiet sunlit room in a quiet happy house? Or could it be that something very special had happened in that place – perhaps the meeting-place of lovers or close friends, or perhaps it was the place where a saint had prayed or preached to the hedgerow birds? Could it be that I could still sense the faint fragrance that remained from a joyful occasion that had occurred a long, long time ago.

As I have already written, I remain largely oblivious to the unpleasant sensations that so many people experience in places that are reputed to be haunted. But I am blessed indeed if I can sense the presence of the happy and the holy.

Or perhaps that meeting place of two rich old hedgerows was what the ancient Celts would have called a "thin place" – a junction between this world and that other, heavenly world that exists mysteriously alongside our own reality. These borderlands were often borders in other sense – perhaps a natural spring would arise there, representing the meeting place between earth and water, underground and overground. There were border times as well – the intersection of night and day or the seasons. These times and places were regarded with reverence and awe by our ancestors.

The topography of the parish has now changed so much that I can no longer experience that magic. But sometimes I wonder whether a particularly thoughtful child pauses in his or her play and senses something – a hint of half-heard music, an elusive scent that suddenly fills the heart with joy. And then perhaps, they run to find their friends and forget all about the experience.

~

At Savages Wood Road, it is difficult to detect the line of Saxonpath. To remain faithful to it, it is necessary to cross the pub car park (where, until a few years ago, a line of old hedgerow trees still grew) and then get across the busy, fume-filled road that leads into the town's shopping centre. Then it is necessary to walk a little

further besides the traffic before plunging behind a fence and finding the beauty of the hedgerows once again.

8

Saxonpath now draws close to its northern destination. And once again, the double hedgerows are beautiful and stately, bordered by grassland. I remember once walking beside them on an autumn day and encountering a mother with her young child. They were gathering acorns, ash keys, hazelnuts and other seasonal treasures and then examining them with a sense of wonder and joy.

At the end of this particular stretch of hedgerow is a special place. Running at right angles to Saxonpath is another venerable hedgerow. Before the building of Bradley Stoke, it marked the parish boundary between Patchway and Stoke Gifford.

Parish boundary hedgerows are usually very old indeed, perhaps even dating back to when this system of land division was established. This hedgerow can be traced from the upper end of Braydon Avenue where it forms the boundary to a row of back gardens. If you care to look further west, you will see some venerable oaks in the distance that may mark other fragments of that hedge line.

The hedgerow continues, forming the boundary between Stoke Lodge school and Jubilee Green. Then if forms the northern border of the shopping centre car park where it has been unfortunate enough to be submitted to some rather unnecessary butchering followed by remorseful replanting. Its line is taken up again beyond Bradley Stoke Way where it becomes the northern border of Savages Wood.

On Rogation Sunday, St Chad's Church in Patchway used to organise a beating of the bounds which included a perambulation of the boundary hedgerow. This was generally regarded as a celebratory affair and a good excuse for a bit of a social. Doubtless the more dubious aspects of this ceremony were discarded, as they involved holding small children upside-down and banging their heads on the ground at strategic points along the boundary so that they would remember exactly where it was.

You would expect the meeting place between Saxonpath and the parish boundary hedge, this encounter between two ancient arboreal giants, to be a magical place, perhaps one of those 'thin places' so revered by the Celts. And that intersection does not disappoint. For sheltered in the crook of those old hedgerows is a pond.

It is a beautiful little feature. Cobblestones have been set in its banks to provide secure footing for the cattle that once drank from there. And in the spring and

summer, this little shining dell of water become inhabited by newts, including the rare great crested species.

It is a special place, a secret place, hidden within a protective girdle of trees. Long may it continue to thrive.

The parish hedge appears to follow a spring line for this pond (named Dewfalls Pond in memory of a local farmer) is not the only pond to be found along its length. In the Jubilee Fields, Davis's Pond can still be found although it is not always treated as kindly as it could be , and frequently finds itself the receptacle of an impressive collection of shopping trolleys.

An old pollard oak once grew beside it, putting forth a profusion of lobed leaves and acorns from its stubby bole. But like the Yawning Tree, it was hollow and therefore attracted the attentions of local arsonists. Eventually, that sturdy old individual met its demise but not before local folk had collected a good quantity of its acorns in order to begin the next generation of venerable oaks.

The adjacent pond was named after Howard Davis who dwelt at Little Stoke Farm. He was a great naturalist and introduced Sir Peter Scott to the potential of Slimbridge which resulted in the creation of the Wildfowl Trust (now the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust). He was something of a local hero and is commemorated in a beautifully carved timber seat standing close to the pond. His wife was an avid photographer and their son, Martin Davis, has gathered many of her excellent images in his book 'The Goose With The Golden Eyes'. The photographs and Martin's prose help to evoke a world that now seems very distant from the one we currently inhabit.

We have probably lost most of the ponds that once populated the boundary hedgerow. I imagine them strung like silver beads upon a string, shining beneath the sky.

Neglect, housing development and possibly a drop in the water table have doubtless hastened their demise. And yet the memory of those long-lost ponds still remains.

Many years ago, a man purchased a house along Braydon Avenue. The garden at the back was bordered by the parish hedge.

He set himself the task of embellishing the garden and to that end, decided to dig an ornamental pond. The task completed, he surveyed his work with pride and then left his new garden feature to settle.

But he awoke one morning the following spring to find that his garden had been invaded. His pond was heaving with frogs – layer upon layer of them so that there seemed to be hardly any room left for the water. Indeed, the pond could not contain them all and so they had also spread out across the lawn. And there they stayed and brooded, motionless save for the ceaseless throbbing of their throats above their steady, intense gaze.

It was at that moment that this gentleman discovered that he found frogs to be rather frightening creatures. He hadn't quite realised just how many of them there were in the world. In a panic, he gathered all the buckets he could find, filled each one with frogs, deposited them in the back of his car and drove them deep into the countryside.

However, he didn't drive deeply enough. The next morning, he awoke to find his pond and lawn once again filled with frogs. There they squatted, as still as statures, save for the soft pulse at their throats, their eyes still gazing balefully at him. I suspect that at that particular moment, he simply gave up and resigned himself to leaving the lawn unmown until the end of their breeding season. Which given the decline of our frog population in recent years, was probably the best decision.

Unlike this frog-fearing gentleman, I find this story quite wonderful. For despite the current scarcity of ponds along the hedgerow, the local amphibians continued to keep faith that one day they might just return, and they demonstrated their faith through their annual spring pilgrimage – an amphibian version of the medieval treks to Canterbury. What persistence. I imagine the myth of the ponds being handed from generation to generation of frogs, infused in the spawn and spoken about between tadpoles even if they were only spawned in a rather inconsequential puddle. It seemed that the held on to the belief that one day, a better world would arrive. And then, when the garden pond at last appeared, surrounded no doubt by an army of guardian gnomes, the prophecy appeared to have been fulfilled. How wonderful for the frogs! How alarming for the householder! But I trust he did eventually come to terms with his vernal visitors and was happy to offer shelter to them, acknowledging the annual miracle he was privileged to witness.

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A tiny watercourse emerges from the springline of the parish hedge and trickles alongside Braydon Avenue through a tunnel of trees until it eventually joins with

Stoke Brook close to the edge of Sherbourne's Brake. It is not the most dramatic of rivers and yet kingfishers have been known to visit it. And once, just for a week or two, a water rail lurked in one of its less accessible reaches.

I once explored the banks of our local brooks with a friend who had taken an academic interest in them. As we wandered, we began to realise just how dramatic a small lowland brook could be. Here were waterfalls and rippling rapids, sinuous curves and sandy beaches, overhanging cliff faces, stony shallows and still depths – yet all on a tiny scale. My friend commented that if there were no tall trees to give us a sense of scale, our little brooks could pass for broad and navigable rivers. The same patterns are worked out on both the macro and the micro scale of the universe.

I love the patterns, the rhythms, the resonances, the call and reply of the natural world – God's symphony, each part echoing another, mirror-images, the large wrought in the small, the detail in the big scheme of things, so many threads of music woven into one coherent song. The curvaceous ripple of an acorn leaf repeated in the tree's curling boughs and stout old bole. The outline of a coast broken into many coastlets which then divide again and again. The universe reminiscent of a series of Russian dolls. I don't pretend to fully understand Mandelbrot or the principle of fractals or the Golden Mean – all I know is that it's out there and in here and it works and is deeply satisfying.

This little brook is graced by bluebells and whitebells in the spring. Birds continuously flit and sing from the boughs of the trees which enclose it. It is always a beautiful place. And every year, I go on pilgrimage to enjoy the primroses that grow upon its bank.

However, every year without fail, I am thrown into panic for the primroses just aren't there. Primroses may be abundant everywhere else, but along the bank, there is not even a leaf to be seen. "They've gone", I tell myself each time. "Someone has dug them out. Or they've been washed away by the winter storms. That's the last I'll see of them", I lament.

And then – just as I've given up hope, I take a stroll beside the tiny stream – and lo and behold, there they are, shining very pale and pure upon the dark bank, like stars or fairy lanterns set in the deepest abyss. And once again, I rejoice that despite all the sad things that happen in the world, heat and cold, summer and winter, springtime and harvest still arrive with their attendant train at more or less the appointed time.

The bank where the primroses bloom lies in deep, damp shade which probably explains why they flower so late. After years of keeping vigil there, I am now beginning to relax and trust that they will eventually make an appearance. Last winter however, was so cold that I very nearly did give up hope. But the bank did eventually blossom, to my enormous relief.

And there have been other encouragements. A few years ago, the primroses spilled out upon the grassy verge above the tiny valley. Soaked in sunlight, they are thriving and the carpet of pale light grows year by year. Last year, they began to bloom in February. The cold weather continued but instead of destroying them, it seemed to preserve them so they were still blossoming merrily away in May.

But despite this new primrose garden, I shall doubtless continue my annual pilgrimage through the little valley. It seems to have become a part of my life. Doubtless, I shall have the occasional panic if the primroses delay their arrival. And doubtless I shall respond with relief and rejoicing when they eventually peek out from the dark earth. I no longer worry whether or not Santa will visit on Christmas night, because I have now transferred my anxieties elsewhere.

One of the few tracks that doesn't seek out Saxonpath crosses this little brook. Perhaps it was never intended as a public footpath, but instead was used to link Home Field at Little Stoke Farm with a little low hut in the fields to the east where shepherds could attend to their livestock during inclement weather or at night. The remains of the hut were still standing when the first houses of Bradley Stoke were being built.

Home Field is now Little Stoke Park. A gap in the hedgerow leads across Little Stoke Lane and the old route then crosses the grassy expanses between the houses to the path that runs alongside the social club and doctors' surgery. When I am in a wild and romantic mood (and when it isn't raining), I like to eschew the path in favour of the high green bank that creates a boundary between the social and residential area. When a blue spring wind is blowing, it is almost possible to believe you are wandering free across the hills and vales for at least a minute or two. This breezy stroll is followed by an awkward scramble back down to the pavement, at which point all sense of romance is quickly lost.

Similar banks have been erected directly behind the social club, and I have joyful memories of tobogganing down their snow covered sides whilst attending a New Year's Eve party nearby.

On the far side of Braydon Avenue, a tiny bridge crosses the equally tiny brook. On the far side, a few steps in a northerly direction leads into the streets of Bradley Stoke. The old track continues through a lane between garden fences until it emerges into Jordan Walk, continues over the zebra crossing on Brook Way and enters Hawkins Crescent. It then turns into Stephen's Walk and continues into The Culvert where some vast and venerable oak trees set in grassland mark the site of the little hut. This tiny patch of Old England seems so isolated now, and yet if you align your vision you can see hedgerows running between the houses, the old greenways still persisting. Indeed, if you learn to look in the right way wherever you walk, you will see the secret countryside continuing in a rather subversive manner, getting on with its existence alongside our own, and remaining largely unheeded by the world at large. And at this point, all I can say is long may it prosper!

When you stand in the midst of those great oaks, you are only a few minutes walk from Saxonpath. So if you feel the need to make this walk into a round trip, you can simply cross Three Brooks Lane and skirt around Meadowbrook School until you find the path running behind it. And then it is entirely your choice whether you follow it to the left or the right.

Incidentally, the footpath also crosses Little Stoke Park in the opposite direction. On the far side of the field, it crosses the Blue Bridge which overlooks Station Road and then enters the fields beyond. This was once the route used by the cattle when they returned to the farmstead to be milked. The path however, continues into Redfield Road where some lovely old houses can still be found, complete with communal pumps on the pavement (I assume they are no longer needed nowadays!).

9

But we are now ready to complete the final stretch of Saxonpath as it heads towards Patchway Common. The path passes through the boundary hedge not far from Dewfalls Pond and then continues along its way.

At this point, the walker has a choice of two routes. One takes a westerly direction and links up with another path travelling in from Stoke Lodge. The other runs east of Dewfall's Pond. Initially, both paths take a little searching out as their routes are obscured as they make their way through Dewfalls Drive and Wheatfield Drive. But eventually both resolve themselves into lovely green lanes running parallel with each other, each reminiscent of Meade Lane as they proceed in sheltered leafy loveliness. Here bluebells grow and birds sing and berries ripen in readiness for the autumn.

The eastern arm of Saxonpath eventually passes a little row of brightly-coloured cottages before emerging on to the Common. The western arm runs close to a tiny orchard hidden behind high hedgerows.

But now it is time to rest for a while, to sit beside the pond and gaze at the kingcups if you have arrived here in the springtime, or enjoy the birds that scuffle around the Common all year round. You have just completed a journey of great historic significance and it is good to pause and dwell upon that fact.

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Sometimes I wonder about all the journeys that have begun and ended at Saxonpath. Nowadays, I tend to use sections of it as short cuts to people and places but in the past it may have marked the beginning of more epic excursions.

Many years ago, I gave a talk on local history at the library in nearby Patchway. Afterwards, a man came up to me and introduced himself by telling me that he had once worked at Bowsland Farm, which once stood at the easternmost point of Patchway Common.

"One day I was working in the fields and I found this", he told me, holding out his hand.

Lying snug within his palm was a rounded object, fabricated from some rather dull grey metal. Engraved upon it was the image of a simple, daisy-like flower.

"Do you know what it is?" he asked and I had to admit that I didn't have a clue.

"Neither did I", he replied. "But I took it down to the museum and they identified it for me. It's medieval and it comes all the way from Canterbury".

He explained that what we were both gazing at was a memento acquired by a pilgrim who had made the long and difficult journey to the shrine of St Thomas a Beckett, "the holy blissful martyr" as Chaucer described him. He then went on to tell me that the little object was an ampule and the pilgrim would have purchased it on the understanding that it contained a tiny drop of the saint's blood. And this was apparently why it was such a dull grey colour – not because of the blood within but because the ampule was made from lead, as this was apparently the only metal considered strong enough to contain such a holy liquid. Which would seem to associate sanctity with radioactivity. Perhaps both are dangerous but also possess the property to heal.

The daisy motif was virtually the trade mark for St Thomas's shrine so that the successful pilgrim could return home bearing proof of a completed journey. And of course, it is very useful for us centuries later when we wish to imagine that journey for ourselves.

As I think about this token of completion and all it must have meant to the person who obtained it, my mind goes back to the porch in the church at Brimpsfield and the rough crosses carved into the stone there – tokens of the beginning of a pilgrimage, tokens invested with anticipation, apprehension and dedication.

But what did pilgrimage mean to our medieval ancestors? It is perhaps impossible to feel the world as they felt it, but we can gaze at the words they have written, the symbols they have left behind and attempt to glean what we can from them.

In those distant times – especially before the plague years - ordinary folk rarely strayed far from their parish. They were beholden to the lord of the manor and obliged to work for him so that wandering at will was regarded as behaviour bordering on the anarchic, capable of unsettling the pattern of society. In those days even to marry outside the parish required special permission as one lord would lose a worker whilst another would gain.

And so people did not travel as freely as we do. Yet it is probably part of our nature to experience wanderlust from time to time. And that is one of the reasons why pilgrimages can be so useful, even before the spiritual aspects of those journeys are taken into account. Because if an individual felt called to be a pilgrim for a while,

then their lord usually let them follow that call, acknowledging that in the hierarchy of things, a Divine command stood above any manorial obligations.

So pilgrimage often gave ordinary people their one and only opportunity to travel and doubtless, there were those who grasped that opportunity eagerly. Some of Chaucer's pilgrims certainly seem to have ulterior motives – the desire, perhaps, to live life more fully. The Wife of Bath seems to have regarded the various pilgrimage circuits as so many singles clubs where she might find success in acquiring yet another husband.

But of course, this is not all there was to medieval pilgrimages. Of the many who travelled in this way, there were many who must have felt called by God to embark upon their journey. Perhaps they wished to express their devotion to Him. Perhaps they wanted to seek Him. Perhaps it was a way to atone for sins, expressing penitence and also thanksgiving for forgiveness.

There is something rather poignant about the latter motive. Perhaps people sometimes felt that forgiveness is something that must be forcefully extracted from a begrudging divinity. One of my favourite passages in fiction can be found in 'Katherine' by Anya Seton which gives an account of Katherine Swynford, the mistress of John of Gaunt. The heroine of the tale eventually comes to grieve deeply for her sins and the consequences that have arisen from them, and she longs to be forgiven, to be set free from her past. And so she sets off on pilgrimage.

She chooses to walk barefoot. Her feet become bloody and broken, but still she does not feel that she has atoned for her sins. And so she continues and her suffering continues but still her sins weigh her down.

And then she encounters Julian of Norwich, the medieval mystic who had received a series of visions of the crucified Christ as she lay grievously ill. Mother Julian gently counsels the forlorn pilgrim and reminds her that in the breaking of His body and the outpouring of His blood, Christ has removed the burden of her sins. The debt that Katherine could not pay for herself has been cleared. Katherine may walk free.

And so Katherine turns, heads homewards and begins a new life.

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Medieval roads may not have been as dreadful as we are led to believe but certainly, travel was far more difficult for our ancestors than it is for us today. Although those

who have spent days waiting in an airport lounge because of a traffic control strike or bad weather may choose to disagree with me on that point. But certainly if a person really wanted to prove they were sorry for some past demeanour, then the pilgrimage certainly offered plenty of opportunities to demonstrate that.

The roads probably were muddy and rutted on many an occasion. Doubtless there were times of year when it simply wasn't worth travelling unless you really had no choice. And of course, there was always the threat of being attacked by outlaws and robbers, people who belonged nowhere and waited to prey upon innocent wayfarers. No wonder so many pilgrims chose to travel in company.

And then there was the lamentable state of the accommodation along the way. The hostels were often filthy and the food indifferent. At night, travellers were usually required to share flea-ridden beds with strangers, often succumbing to sleep only when they were too exhausted to itch and scratch any longer. Doubtless, they also learnt how to block out the sound of loud, collective snoring.

Pilgrimage was certainly not for the faint hearted. And yet, someone from our own neighbourhood seems to have completed that arduous and unpredictable journey to Canterbury and returned, bearing the evidence with him or her. Who was this person? What was his or her motive? We shall probably never know. But it reminds us that even Saxonpath – a leafy green lane that originally ran through quiet fields was not always simply the beginning and end of a single journey. For Saxonpath links with other paths and is capable of taking the traveller half way round the world and back again if he or she desires. As Tolkien put it, "the road goes ever on and on".

Sometimes I make a conscious effort to walk Saxonpath from one end to another for no practical reason whatsoever. Perhaps there is something of the spirit of pilgrimage in this decision. I may not be looking for spiritual solace in this instance, but I am looking for something. Perhaps it is an understanding of the place where I live. Perhaps I seek a deeper connection with this land and those who have lived upon it before me. Whatever the reason, it always feels as if walking Saxonpath is an honourable activity.

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In the 14th century – Mother Julian's era – one of the Giffards became a pilgrim. This is her story.

We have already encountered John Giffard who became known as 'Sir John le Rych' because of the profits he made from warmongering amongst the Welsh and Scottish borders. Despite all his time spent away from home, he still managed to marry three times.

His first wife was Matilda, Countess of Salisbury. Their union did not appear to be particularly romantic. Indeed, matters were so far from ideal that Matilda sent an angry letter to Henry the 3rd, complaining that Sir John had abducted her and forced her into marriage.

No response to this letter is recorded and it seems that Matilda felt she had no choice but to resign herself to her situation. She eventually bore Sir John three children which included a daughter who was christened Katherine – evidently a popular name at that time.

However it is possible that the burden of this undesirable marriage eventually took its toll upon Matilda, for she died when Katherine was just twelve.

Katherine would have been on the brink of womanhood and perhaps her own marriage partner was being considered at that time. How terrible to lose the wisdom and guidance of a mother at the very threshold of adult life.

Sir John then wedded Alicia Matravers, but she did not live for long after the marriage. And she bore no children. But the demise of Sir John's bride must surely have affected Katherine's approach to life, making her acutely aware of the transience of its sorrows and joys. Perhaps the sands of time seemed to shift and lurch beneath her and she must have wondered if there was anything of permanence, anything or anyone that could be trusted in this world.

Sir John next married Margaret Neville who bore him a son who was also named John. And perhaps with this third marriage, something of stability entered the Giffard household.

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When Katherine was about 16 – the year was 1289 or thereabouts – she was married to the wealthy Sir Nicholas Audley to whom she bore three children. But again, the vicissitudes of life once again let her down. For Sir Nicholas joined Sir John – Katherine's father – and went to Scotland to fight alongside King Edward. Both were killed. So – when she was probably still in her twenties – Katherine was an orphan, a widow and a mother.

She was also a wealthy woman, which could have offered her some compensation. But it seemed that by then, Katherine had become disillusioned with the precarious ways of the world. It must have seemed to her at times that the Wheel of Fortune was careering out of control. And so she decided instead, to seek the Kingdom of Heaven.

She bestowed most of her wealth upon her children, retaining just enough to provide her with an annual allowance. And then, in the company of her faithful servant Mabel, she set off.

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The chronicles tell us that "she was bidden to wander till she heard church bells rung without ringers" – an inexplicable command but Katherine, like Abraham the patriarch, seemed determined to set off in good faith.

They left Katherine's home in Much Marcle and travelled until they reached the town of Ledbury. They were weary when they arrived there and so rested in a field just outside the town. And as they recovered their energy, Katherine witnessed the miracle that she sought – church bells ringing without the intervention of human hands. The bells would have been hanging in a tower slightly apart from the rest of the church building, and it must have been there that the miracle took place.

And so Katherine had arrived in her promised land and there she remained for the rest of her days. She became an anchoress, living in a little cell attached to the parish church, and there she served the people of Ledbury with her prayer and the power and the wisdom that flowed from it.

To be an anchorite or anchoress was an enormous commitment, a total giving of oneself to God. And in that total giving was a total renunciation of the world – a world that had proved to be such an unreliable place for Katherine. Before entering her cell, she would have received the Last Rites as a symbol of her death to that world she was leaving behind. Then she would have entered her tiny, simply furnished cell and begun her life of prayer. She would have been allowed a servant to provide for her basic needs, and this role would have been taken on by Mabel. And the parish priest may have served as her spiritual director so she was not entirely alone in her vocation.

Her separation from the world would have been so complete that she would not have even been able to observe Mass with the rest of the faithful. Instead, she would

have watched the proceedings through a hagiograph or 'squint' – a small, narrow opening in the wall connecting her cell to the church.

There is still an anchorite's cell attached to the parish church of Chester-le-Street in County Durham. I visited it one hot August afternoon. As I stood there, marvelling at how anybody could be content to spend their entire life in such a small and simple space, the door slammed shut behind me and the bright summer's day was replaced by the deep dimness of the room. And of course, I panicked, convinced that the door had been locked behind me and that I too would have become an anchoress.

In that shadowy solitude, deprived of all but the must basic of creature comforts, the anchorite or anchoress would approach prayer in the same way that St George would approach maidens captured by dragons. This was war. Sometimes the anchor would experience the bliss of heaven, but sometimes he or she could confront the horrors of hell – which included the dingiest quarters of the human heart. This was no retreat from reality. For the anchor, this was the spiritual battleground and his or her prayers were essential weapons in the war waged against all the evils that afflict the earth and its creatures.

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Katherine – although a solitary – was, in truth, part of a company of saints. For her century witnessed a great flowering of Christian mysticism. We have already encountered Mother Julian but there were others – Richard Rolle, together with the unknown authors of "The Cloud of Unknowing" and "The Ladder of Perfection", each writer beseeching its audience to look beyond the apparent permanence of this world to the heavenly kingdom beyond. They encouraged people to seek God, even if that meant entering a place beyond their deepest understanding where they could only know anything through love.

If Katherine was prepared for her wanderings by the uncertainties of this life, then it was likely that this great surge of longing for God arose from the uncertainties of the age. For the 14th century was not the easiest of times. The weather deteriorated, resulting in failed harvests. These in turn led to famine and famine resulted in plague. There were earthquakes, even in parts of the world that were usually free of seismic activity – England was certainly afflicted with a number of

tremors. There was war and civil unrest. No wonder people looked to heaven, for earth seemed to have very little to offer.

And so, Katherine turned her back on the world, sacrificing her wealth and freedom to go where she pleased in order to be a doorkeeper at the portals of heaven. And there she stayed in the dimness, far away from her family, apparently lost to the world and yet praying for its salvation.

She became beloved by the people of Ledbury. They came to her for prayer and spiritual direction in their lives and she would speak to them through a little grille set in the door of her cell. And doubtless, the industrious Mable was also held in the town's affection as she cheerfully went about her mistress's business. The pair became such a part of Ledbury's life that various landmarks were named after them. The field where Katherine witnessed the miraculous ringing of the bells became known as 'Katherine's Acre' and the stone where she sat to rest became 'Katherine's Stone'. A footpath across those fields became 'Mabel's Furlong', doubtless recalling the route of all those errands that the faithful servant ran for the anchoress.

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But what became of Katherine after her death? The poet John Masefield believes he may know the answer.

John Masefield's childhood was spent in Ledbury, and so he became well acquainted with Katherine's story. He eventually wrote her biography which is where I learnt about her.

In his book, the writer takes us into the parish church and invites us to the threshold of the north aisle, whilst explaining that Katherine was never canonised and therefore possessed no official shrine within the building.

Then he directs us to gaze upwards into the heights of the archway guarding the north aisle. On either side of that arch can be seen a stone figure of a woman's head. One of the woman's faces bears an austere and rather exalted expression. The other woman seems rather homely and jolly in comparison.

Masefield suggests that these carvings just might depict the saintly Katherine and her good servant Mabel. And he also suggests that this may mean that Ledbury's official saint may be buried somewhere beneath the church's north aisle.

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John Masefield also offers a possible explanation for that miraculous ringing of the church bells. He notes that a fault line runs through that part of the country, which can occasionally cause earth tremors. Indeed, the poet recalls his own childhood when tremors rattled the dishes upon the dresser in the kitchen.

And of course the 14th century was known to be a time of particularly energetic seismic activity. During that time, an event that took place close to Katherine's marital home became well-known as The Wonder of Marcle. During that time, a nearby hill shook with a 'horrible roaring noise' for three rather troubling days.

And so, the poet conjectures, could this be the reason why the church bells at Ledbury rang without the aid of human hands? Could those bells have welcomed Katherine to her destination because a tremor was jolting the earth beneath the belfry?

Perhaps there is a natural explanation for Katherine's experience. Nevertheless, she believed that she had received a Divine call to wander until she had encountered those bells ringing apparently of their own volition, and she responded to that call with faith. And she was in just the right place at the right time to witness that phenomenon. Surely that is miracle enough.

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And so, Katherine's mortal remains are believed to be resting peacefully in Ledbury. The remains of her father and stepmother have found their repose deep in the interior of Leckhampton parish church.

Leckhampton lies in the shadow of the hills that encircle Cheltenham. We visited it on the same midwinter's day that I visited Brimpsfield.

By the time we arrived there, it was late afternoon and the light was already beginning to fade. Gloom was gathering beneath the trees that bordered the pathway to the church. A squirrel ran lightly across a carpet of frosted leaves, its claws tapping against them with a sound like falling tinsel.

The gloom had also descended upon much of the church's interior, so that it was already cloaked with night. Close to the altar was a Christmas crib, around which a family had gathered as if to gain comfort from the light within. But eventually they too rose and left, and I remained alone. I began to search for Sir John.

In the shadows towards the rear of the church, faintly lit by a high, clear window, stood a medieval tomb. Lying upon it was the effigy of a Norman knight, sword at his

side. A stern looking moustache bristled briskly beneath his nose. Here was Sir John le Riche, as fierce, brave, bold and arrogant as you would expect him to look.

Beside him lay Margaret, his third wife, neat in gown and mantle, hood and wimple. I stood gazing at the pair for some time, admiring the exquisite sculpting of the sober grey stone that had been used to communicate their features.

Sir John was a troubling character in some ways. You could sense his pugnacity, his Norman arrogance, even as he lay there, made quiescent by death. Yet curiously, I did not find myself disliking him. He would have made a dangerous enemy but surely he would also have made a strong and lively ally. And in the dim emptiness of that church lost in the depths of winter, I found the presence of the knight and his lady strangely comforting.

And so as we reach the end of our pilgrimage, we find that we have also glimpsed the pilgrimages of others – especially the journey undertaken by Katherine and Mabel. St Katherine probably never walked along Saxonpath, yet she is associated it through her family ties. And now, as we stand upon Patchway Common, perhaps gazing into the little pond in the hope of spotting a frog or two, it would be tempting to call that the end of our journey and head homewards. But perhaps I can encourage you to walk with me for a little longer, so that we can take a stroll along some of those lesser paths that find their way to Saxonpath, and as we do this we can begin to weave together this neighbourhood in walking and in words.

If you have time and energy, we will retrace our steps along the western flank of that last little stretch of Saxonpath. Continuing to head westwards, this extension of the path crosses what is now Brook Way before passing through Courtlands where it crosses an old hedgerow. It then carries along a little further until it joins an alleyway that leads into Bourton Avenue. From there, it is a walk of a few minutes to Little Stoke Lane and then on to Clay Lane where the ancient hamlet of Little Stoke once clustered around the farm that bore its name.

Hardly anything now remains of that hamlet, but Clay Lane still possesses a rural, leafy atmosphere, largely due to the trees planted at the border of the lane and the fields by Mabel Davis.

Where Clay Lane meets Little Stoke Lane, you will find an old, tangled pear tree growing. In the springtime, when it is decked out with silver blossom, it resembles a galleon in full sail.

One day in early autumn, I led an official expedition of school children to see this tree. I was just about to tell them that sadly, this venerable old veteran no longer bore fruit when one of the children cried, "Look – I can see a pear!"

"So can I!" cried another child. "And there's another one!"

"I can see lots!" cried someone else.

I am so grateful that they spoke before I did.

the pear tree once stood, surrounded by flowers and vegetables, in the garden of the cowman's cottage. When Little Stoke Lane was being straightened and widened in order to facilitate the increase in traffic, local people tied a notice to the tree, begging for it to be spared. And their pleas were heeded, for the line of the road was modified and the tree was allowed to remain.

Just across the road is a pair of red brick houses bearing a plaque of the Beaufort arms and the date 1908. These were the last buildings to be erected in the hamlet, just before the Beauforts sold off the entire parish, and now they are the only buildings to remain. A little leafy lane runs down one side of them – it now takes you into an area of housing and grassy open space, but it once led to a field called Oaklands. It was probably named after the beautiful trees that once grew there – trees that were painted by Mabel Davis. The painting of them hangs in her son's study.

A footpath once ran from Little Stoke Arm all the way to the southern part of Saxonpath, meeting it at Mead Lane as mentioned earlier. We can still follow the line of this path by walking through Little Stoke Park, following the hedgerow as it flanks the main road. in the days of the farm, this was Home Field and during the Second World War, it was occasionally subjected to air raid attacks because of its proximity to the railway line and the aeroplane factories. Yet, despite these disturbances, the cattle in those fields would plod along quite happily the next morning to yield their usual volume of milk.

David Griffiths was once the groundsman for the parish council, and responsible for the maintenance of Little Stoke Park. On one occasion, he observed an odd-looking stone object in the little brook that runs along the bottom of Clay Lane. With the help of Mike Gallivan, a parish councillor, he managed to drag it out, to find he had recovered a large, circular structure what was eventually identified as part of a cider press.

During the war years, a number of service men were stationed in Home Field and at that time they were employed in rescuing the lower half of that same press which was then positioned in the garden at Little Stoke Farm and used as an ornamental feature. Cider presses are difficult to date – their design hasn't changed for centuries, because they quite simply do the job that is required of them. So our local example could be ancient or no more than a century old.

But however ancient or modern, it remains an exciting find. And amongst the flats and houses associated with Neate Court, which stands just north of Clay Lane, a few ancient, gnarled apple trees still grow. Doubtless, they provided the raw ingredients for the cider.

David Griffiths – or 'Griff' as he was known by many people – was one of life's natural enthusiasts. A cheerful, optimistic, loveable bear of a man, he was an example of how, with the right attitude, it is possible to rise above adversity.

When he was a little lad, he lived close to the heart of Bristol. But he lost his home and all his possessions during the Blitz – indeed, he just about escaped with his life because he and his family had to be dug out of their air raid shelter.

When such misfortunes as this befell families, they would be taken to the local community hall and kitted out with spare clothes. Unfortunately, the clothes provided for Griff were far too large for him so that he did not exactly cut a figure of sartorial elegance.

The impression is always given that everybody pulled together during the war years. Perhaps that was true in general, but of course there were always exceptions. Unfortunately, Griff experienced the latter.

When he returned to school clad in outsize castoffs, everybody – including the teacher – made fun of him. Day after day this happened until Griff became so miserable that he simply stopped going to school. And because of that, he didn't learn how to read.

But he did learn to cook because his father was a chef, and so he was able to make a living for himself. He shared digs with another man who said to him one day, "Will you teach me how to cook?"

"Of course I will", replied Griff. "But in return, will you teach me how to read?"

The deal was struck. Griff's housemate learnt how to cater for himself and Griff acquired literacy.

Many years later, after Griff and his wife had moved to Stoke Gifford and were busily raising a family, Griff began his work with the parish council. As part of his job, he occasionally paid visits to the local tip. And there, his curiosity was aroused by the numerous old bottles he found poking out of the rest of the debris.

He began to collect them. Before long, he had so many that he began to display them in his garage, which effectively became a bottle museum.

By this time, I had become friendly with his daughter who gave me a guided tour of the collection. And because Griff had not only collected the bottles but also researched their history, she was able to share some of their stories with me. Griff's garage was where I first encountered codswallop bottles – bottles that contained lemonade and which were sealed with spherical glass stoppers. They were worth very little, hence the origin of the phrase, "What a load of old codswallop".

Eventually, Griff amassed so much information that he decided to write a book about all hed had discovered. That book was published. Later, he wrote and published a book about the Second World War.

For me, Griff's story celebrates so much of what is good about the human spirit. Griff was deprived of literacy because of other people's cruelty. And yet, he learnt to read and write as an adult and not content with that, he proceeded to become a published author. Surely we can all be inspired by his ability to creatively overcome the situation life placed him in.

Griff was a much-loved local character. His life came to an end a couple of years ago, following a long illness. But he faced his demise with his usual grace and optimism. "I am now ready to go to God's garden", he told one visitor.

The parish council wished to erect something in his memory and chose to place a beautiful bench upon the village green at Stoke Gifford. This memorial was planned whilst he was still alive and he was asked, with great sensitivity, what he would like to have inscribed on the plaque to be attached to it.

Griff was very voluble in his reply. "Well…there's this…and this…oh, and perhaps it could say that, as well…" he began, rattling off all kinds of information about the things that mattered to him. Eventually, his daughter had to gently bring him back to reality by saying, "Dad…it's really quite a small plaque, you know."

Griff was quiet for a while, considering all the grass he had mown and the trees he had planted and tended throughout the years. Then he realised what he wanted inscribed upon that bench.

"It's this", he said. "Look around and think of me."

So that was what was chosen. And I have paid my own little pilgrimage to Griff's Bench. And I have sat there. And yes – as I have gazed around at the grass and the greenery, I have remembered that giant-hearted man with great affection.

~

Beyond Little Stoke Park, the path crosses the road and continues across the playing fields on the far side.

Again, these public open spaces were once farm land. The rich old hedgerows that encircle them bear testimony to this – they are as ancient and venerable, in the manner of so many of our local hedgerows and provide a treasure trove of flower and fruit for our local fauna.

~

And just as it is with Saxonpath, so these hedgerows enclose tunnels through which wonderful secret journeys can take place.

When my children were growing up, they often played in those fields and hedgerows with the other children who lived in our street. One boy was particularly imaginative and as they created dens amongst the hedge-tunnels, he encouraged them to create legends to describe the origin of each den.

The one legend that I recall is the rather chilling tale of the Wolf Den. At the heart of this enclosure there stood an old, gnarled and hollow tree. It was declared that if anybody should enter that den at the time of the full moon and thrust their hand within that hollow, then when they retracted it, they would find it transformed into a wolf's paw.

This story entered the depths of the children's imaginations. It troubled them. Eventually, it made them so uneasy that they began to shun the Wolf Den, so that it was left alone and forlorn whilst youthful voices rang out from all the other dens. Such is the power of legend – even if it was actually a legend created by the people who for some inexplicable reason, decide to believe it is true.

These fields – which only lie a stone's throw from our home (not that I would dream of throwing stones at them, of course) have entered into my own mythology.

I suppose it only really happened in recent years when an elderly dog became part of my household. As he became increasingly infirm, our walks with him became limited to those fields and those walks became so slow that at times they almost came to a standstill.

But it was during that time of painfully sluggish perambulations that I really came to appreciate the beauty of those fields. They are of course, perfectly ordinary playing fields and probably no different from many other playing fields scattered across our land.

But that is just the point. For trudging across that expanse of grass at all times and in all weathers, I began to realise more fully the beauty of the ordinary and understand that if we are prepared to see with the eyes of the heart and imagination, we will realise that every square inch of this universe pulsates with wonder.

I remember the time when I was initiated into the mysteries of pond slime. Until then, it had just been mucky green stuff that wrapped itself around things. But then I gazed at it through a microscope and I looked at it in an entirely different way. Here was pattern, order, symmetry, beauty on a very small scale. Detail, purpose, meaning. We are fools if we discard anything as too uninteresting to be contemplated.

And so, as I plodded along with Pickle, I saw the change of the seasons in the trees. I gloried in the apple blossom and the May blooms. I heard the shrieks and the squabbles emitted by the brand-new starling families as they congregated on the football pitches, and I watched the rooks construct their nests, cawing in broad West

Country accents as they worked. There were sparrows and blue tits and greenfinches and there were blackberries to eat in the autumn. And every blackberry is unique – some small, sharp and shocking, others vague and scented and watery whilst others explode upon the senses with all the happy-sad sweetness of the season.

We walked those fields on winter dawns when the low sun rose and transformed frosty grass into a glittering carpet fit for a magical palace – tiny, twinkling, golden lights to be crushed beneath our feet. And then the sun would create roads of light across the fields and of course (once I had extracted Pickle from the interesting-smelling but decidedly unsavoury objects he found in the hedgerows), we would follow them, half-expecting to find ourselves in another realm when we reached the end of those long, low sunbeams.

Sometimes, wild geese would fly overhead, uttering their exultant cries that stirred up yearnings in the heart for strange, distant lands. And yet, I learnt that the strange and the unknown land was actually here and everywhere.

~

As time went on, poor old Pickle's insides got in such a muddle that he also came to require a walk in the middle of the night and these became the responsibility of my husband. And so he had the curious experience at midsummer of witnessing the first tentative light of a brand new day before he had personally finished the old one. And it was during those walks that he became familiar with Scrobbletail.

Scrobbletail was a lanky and rather unkempt old fox with a damaged, lumpy tail. He probably spent most of the day lying up in the big bramble patch at the corner of the field. But the night time was his kingdom, and my husband would often spot him, a vague, dark shadow amongst the lighter shadows, a vagueness that would eventually move and reveal itself as a living creature.

Scrobbletail did not disdain the man and dog who had entered his domain. Instead, he became as interested in them as they were interested in him. Initially, he was too shy to draw very close to them but he would follow them at a safe distance. Eventually, he began to play his own version of Grandma's Footsteps with them, stalking them very carefully but becoming as still as a statue whenever they turned to look at him. It was a perfectly amicable relationship that suited all three of them. And eventually, as he became accustomed to their presence he would come running across to greet the playmates who had entered his rather solitary nocturnal world.

But my most enduring memory of those fields comes from long before the days of Pickle and Scrobbletail. Heavy snow had fallen all day, but by night the skies had cleared and a full moon hung in the sky like a great white lantern, filling the world with a charged and altered electric blue light.

Just before bedtime, I wrapped up warmly and crept out into a bone-numbingly cold world. Not a soul was abroad. I reached the edge of the field, and standing in the deep shadows of the hedgerow, gazed at the meadow of light that lay before me – a vast expanse of perfect, unbroken snow, blue-white and seeming to belong to the fields of the sky. It was the same kind of glory as when the frost-grey field was kindled into gold and diamonds by the rising sun. And I had a heady, happy sensation of being able to run forever and not grow weary, just as I had sensed when I had run through the buttercup meadow when I was a child.

~

The poet-priest R S Thomas once wrote a poem entitled "The Bright Field":-

> I have seen the sun break through
> to illuminate a small field
> for a while, and gone my way
> and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
> of great price, the one field that had
> the treasure in it. I realise now
> that I must give all that I have
> to possess it. Life is not hurrying
> on to a receding future, nor hankering after
> an imagined past. It is the turning
> aside like Moses to the miracle
> of the lit bush, to a brightness
> that seemed as transitory as your youth
> once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

I recall the magical "thin place" that once stood close to Saxonpath and I begin to wonder. Perhaps the thin place can be in our own hearts. Perhaps we can learn to

look at the world in the small. open way of a child and perhaps we will then perceive how closely Heaven hovers at the edge of earth.

~

The path runs along the back of the fields until it joins the path that runs between the fields and the houses. Then – just past the lane that heads off to the right, and is still awash with bluebells in the spring – it descends through a broad, grassy area between Elm Close and Hercules Close. On May evenings, the daisies that grow in this grassy place glow like the flowers of the Elysian fields, and down by the brook, a Tree of Heaven stands.

This slope was once a farm field known as Hilly Gathams. Ascending it after a hard day's walking, I can fully appreciate its original name. It makes for a wonderful place for tobogganing though, providing you allow for the busy road at the bottom.

~

Lyn and Mick have lived at the bottom of our road for decades, their home overlooking Stoke Brook. They can remember when most of this estate was built. When they first came here, that busy road that can now take an age to cross, was merely a narrow dirt track used only by farm workers.

At that time, there were badger setts close to the brook, and on fine nights the creatures would play in their front garden, their striped muzzles gleaming in the pale light of the stars. And there were other visitors too. One hot sunny day, Mick was reading his newspaper in the living room, the windows thrown wide open to attract elusive breezes. As he relaxed, his back to the garden, he became aware of something warm and rasping moving lovingly across his pate. Turning round, he encountered a large and motherly-looking cow who had strayed across from the nearby fields.

But as more and more people came to live in the area, the dirt track had to be replaced by a bigger, broader road. Lyn and Mick knew this was necessary, but nevertheless they still grieve for the badgers. For, early one morning, before the day fully begun the earthmovers arrived to prepare the new route. All was swept before its path, including the badger setts which had probably been rooted in that particular place for centuries. "They didn't stand a chance", Lyn recalls with sorrow. "And they'd just had their young as well."

It was too late for the badgers, but when the engineers insisted on altering the line of the old path on the far side of the brook, something ancient and reactionary arose in Lyn. Every day, the ground workers would stake out the route that they had determined, and every evening, Lyn would go out and realign the stakes to the original line of the path. Her small war on behalf of the old ways even attracted the attentions of a local TV station, and her cause seems to have been successful as the path, having crossed the brook by a metal bridge then ascends beside a lovely old hedge until it merges with Saxonpath in the midst of a sunny glade.

But before we climb that final stretch of the path, let's stand upon the bridge for a while and gaze into the brook. You never know what a brook might bring along for you – sometimes a mallard or moorhen or a rather nervous-looking rat. Once I observed a grass snake swimming upstream, its body curved into a succession of s's as it swam against the current.

Stay here for a while and enjoy the sights and scents and sounds of nature whilst the world goes roaring by. If it is early springtime, the pussy willow at the top of the bank will be spiky with gold and silver catkins that gleam like glass in the sunshine. Linger here and let your eyes take their fill of them. And then we will continue along our way, still weaving the world together with our walking and our words.

11

And so, having ascended the last stretch of the Little Stoke Farm lane, we find ourselves once again at Meade Lane and we are ready to explore the next path that leads us out to the wider world.

To reach our starting point, we will need to turn south and follow Meade Lane back towards Stoke Gifford. Pass Little Leaze and continue until you are very close to Beacon Lane, the busy road that heads off towards Winterbourne. And there, between the hedgerow and dry stone walls, is an opening that leads into Pursey Drive.

The route of this next path is no longer obvious, but it can be pieced together by following footpath signs until you find yourself at the place where Pursey Drive emerges next to a roundabout,. And on the far side of that roundabout, is a fine Victorian building which is now known as Bailey's Court Inn, but was originally a farm which bore the same name.

When the farm was still in operation, this rather slanting route that we have followed was a magnificent tree-flanked avenue that swept up to its front door. It was a wonderful sight. And one of the last families to farm there was the Purseys whose memory lingers in the name of the road we have just walked along.

The Purseys were quite a remarkable family. One of their clan became an Olympic sharpshooter. Another discovered that he possessed the somewhat mysterious ability to dowse. And upon that statement, hangs a tale.

George White, the famous pioneer of aviation, had Hollywood Towers, close to Cribbs Causeway, built for himself. It now belongs to Bristol Zoo. Everything there was just perfect for him except for one small yet necessary detail. It seemed impossible to discover a water supply for the site.

Sir George called in a succession of engineers but each one of them failed to discover a source of water for their client. And then he heard about the reputation of the Pursey family.

So after the experts had left, taking all their sophisticated equipment with them, Edmund Pursey arrived, bearing nothing but two long, slender twigs cut from a hazel bush. He proceeded to walk across the site until the wands suddenly jerked and swayed across each other, apparently of their own volition.

"There's your water", declared Edmund, and he was proved to be right. As a token of his gratitude for this discovery, Sir George presented a gold half-hunter watch to the family which, when I last spoke to them, still remained in their possession.

~

The farm building is similar in design to a number of other farms scattered across the parish, together with the old vicarage and school rooms. During the 19th century, the Beauforts (who by then were lords of the manor), commissioned George Godwin to replace the older buildings with these shining new creations – indeed, throughout the country, old farmhouses were being replaced with more spacious constructions. These Victorian edifices still adorn our neighbourhood. They are handsome buildings but I sometimes wish that I could travel back in time and see the farmsteads that existed before them. They would have some tales to tell.

Webbs Farm, whose site we have already visited, may once have been the principal farm in this area, although Baileys Court eventually took over this role. No trace remains of the former although I do remember a few of its outbuildings still standing before the town was built. One of those buildings was an old stable and full of very well rotted manure. At that time, our new church building of Christ the King had just been built and we were in the process of establishing a garden around it. We sought permission to use that manure to enrich our beds (the standard Bradley Stoke clay) and having received it, spent an interesting Saturday morning loading and unloading wheelbarrows.

I once spoke to a couple who had once lived in the old farm building and they recalled how the staircase was so narrow and twisting that their bed had to be lifted into the bedroom by being hoisted up and through the window. An antiquarian once visited them and conjectured that their home may have been the oldest domestic building in that part of Gloucestershire.

I do not know what kind of building preceded Bailey's Court but it is evident that farming has been practised here for a very long time. And if we recall that the foundations of a Roman villa lie next door to the inn, then it is just possible that farming has taken place continuously on this spot for millennia.

~

The line of the old track can be followed by walking along Webbs Wood Road, between Baileys Court to the right and The Bluebells (where Webbs Farm once stood) to the left. Eventually our route is interrupted by the line of Bradley Stoke Way and the junction is marked by a large and busy traffic roundabout. Cross with care and you will see a continuation of the track although you can no longer follow it. A green lane, reminiscent of how Meade Lane used to look, runs into the shady unknown, its grassy floor cradled within the protective arms of hedgerow trees. But a locked gate stands at its threshold. so we can only travel along it in our imaginations. I remember walking it many years ago before the town was built and finding a rather abandoned-looking badger sett along there.

It is just possible to continue tracing the route of this old lane, even though it is now fragmented by new roads. Much of the accompanying hedgerows still remain, running between the backs of houses, and they can be followed rather indirectly by moving from road to road, keeping the tree line in sight. Eventually, the lane comes to a stop at the grassy bank that overlooks the motorway but the track once continued all the way to the Old Gloucester Road, close to where Henroost Farm still stands and Matford Bridge crosses Bradley Brook. Doubtless, it is possible to find the route along the hedgerows along the other side of the motorway but I have yet to attempt that.

Recently some relatives of ours rented one of the houses whose gardens flanked a fragment of the old track. It was inaccessible from both ends and also from their garden, a fence separating them from it. It was the same situation with the garden that ran to meet it on the other side. But lost in the darkness of the fencing and the overgrown hedgerow, that little stretch of track persisted although it no longer really went anywhere. I told the family all about it and they began to eagerly anticipate the sound of ghostly horses being driven through there at midnight. But as far as I am aware, they experienced nothing peculiar during their stay there. All that happened was that their cat would climb to the top of the hedgerow trees and then sit there, wondering how to get down again.

~

And so, this is as far as we can follow the old track before the motorway cuts across our path. But all is not lost. If, on reaching the grassy bank that protects local housing from the sound of the motorway and follow the path there to the left, you

will eventually descend to Bradley Brook, which is crossed by the old stone bridge I mentioned earlier. From there, it is a short walk to the duck pond and the rest of the local nature reserve.

However, if you follow that same path in the opposite direction, you can enjoy a rather beautiful path that will eventually take you back to Meade Road and the very start of Saxonpath. But before doing that, it might be good just to stand here for a moment or two and pay homage to the old track we have been tracing, which is now little more than a vague impression left upon the landscape. But everything that has ever existed surely leaves its resonances and so in a way we cannot fathom, it is still present in its entirety.

I remember when it still ran in all its glory across the open fields. One October day, I walked through those fields just as the redwings had arrived from Scandinavia to spend the winter with us. A great flock of them descended upon the hedgerows that surrounded the track, chattering with the joy of finding a place to rest after their long journey. And they then proceeded to gorge themselves upon the haws and other hedgerow treasures, replacing the energy they had lost in order to reach us. And so, just as with my encounter with that flock of sparrows one silent spring morning so I was reminded again of how important our hedgerow network is to the survival of our fellow creatures.

~

The path back to the start of Saxonpath continues beside the motorway for a while, drawing the eye to the distant Cotswolds, blue as Delft china upon the horizon. Then it curves away and follows yet another rich old hedgerow network which is briefly interrupted by Bradley Stoke Way before leading the walker into Huckley Way.

The deep ditches that accompany these hedgerows are usually quiet and innocent places, relatively dry and deep in leaf litter. Birds flit about the trees above them, intent upon their business as they call to each other. Yet this peaceful place can also be perilous at certain times.

One August, a little group of us went walking, gathering the windfall plums along Saxonpath as we went. It was a sticky, sultry afternoon and we were glad of the shade that the hedgerows afforded.

When we reached the path described above, a violent thunderstorm broke out, accompanied by torrential rain that pelted us with great violence. Instinctively, we ducked beneath the hedgerow, clambering half way down the ditch.

We paused there for a few minutes, relieved to find some shelter from the storm. But then we were scrabbling back out again, and it felt like we were fleeing for our lives. For the rain had swept across the roads and rushed straight into the land drains and now it was roaring, like a tidal wave, along the ditch where we were standing. The dry hollow was suddenly transformed into a raging river. We only just managed to get out in time.

At the end of the hedge path, our route continues along Huckley Way as it rises above the valley. Close to the summit of that small hill, tucked away in its own green glade half-hidden by houses, is an old farm pond. Doubtless the cattle from Knightwood Farm came to drink from it in days gone by. Now it is fenced for safety and it is a very quiet place, and it is a good, green spot in which to stand and dream. There is often a mallard or two to watch whilst the dreaming is taking place.

A little further along Huckley Way will bring us to the underpass that once offered safe passage to those cattle returning to the farm across the Winterbourne Road for milking. Now it provides an equally safe passage for us, descending deeply between the swathes of greenery that now drape the entrance to the tunnel. It emerges into Oxbarton and from that vantage point, you can gaze across to the high wall that borders the back garden of the old farm building. Silvery-barked walnut trees still grow there.

A few more steps will take us back to the top of Meade Road and the very start of Saxonpath. Or we could meander along North Road for a few more yards until we reach an old stile that leads into a narrow lane running between the walls of 18th century cottages – yet another little path that links Saxonpath to the ancient heart of the village. We can follow this path through the twists and turns of later settlements until we once again stand in the little glade along Brickyard Lane and gaze into the quiet pond, in the hope of catching sight of a newt or two.

~

But before we complete our journey, I realise that there is still some unfinished business to which we need to attend. For we never did discover exactly why the elegant old manor house in Stoke Gifford was left to rack and ruin. Nor why the high

and haughty Brimpsfield Castle was not only laid low but seemed to disappear entirely from the land.

~

When we last encountered the Giffards, we were standing in the twilight shadows of Leckhampton Church next to the silvery stone effigy of Sir John le Riche and his wife Margaret. Sir John's career proved to be the apogee of the Giffard's fortunes.

Katherine, as we already know, retired from the world and chose instead the life of an anchoress, hidden in a tiny cell in the town of Ledbury.

She can be found in the records for she is described as 'a recluse of Ledbury' in the documents of 1323. And perhaps that was the best place for her to be, for that year proved to be a disastrous one for her family.

Indeed, it proved to be tumultuous for the entire nation. I have already described the succession of natural disasters that afflicted the land at that time, and how this triggered unrest amongst the people who had to endure those crises. And quite a bit of that unrest was directed towards Edward the 2nd, who by then had succeeded his very able – if ruthless – father.

It would seem that Edward the 2nd inherited few of his father's characteristics. Indeed, it is possible that he deeply resented the fate that had been thrust upon him. He seemed to care little for matters of state and preferred a simpler, more rustic way of life. It is said that what he enjoyed more than anything else was a spot of thatching or hedging and ditching.

And so it would appear that his heart was not really in his work. Certainly, some of his political decisions seem to reflect this. For he was accused by his enemies of making unwise appointments, bestowing important offices upon his cronies rather upon those best fitted to carry out the necessary tasks. However, this seems to have been a perennial problem that arose between the monarchy and the lords of the land.

Edward though, seemed to irritate his subjects far more than his predecessors had. Perhaps the earthquakes and the disastrous weather made people even less tolerant than they might have usually been. Indeed, many fold believed that the failed harvests and the subsequent famines and plagues were a punishment upon the king for his weakness and self-indulgence.

Matters became so serious that Britain was in danger of collapsing into something akin to civil war. And, as always seemed to be the case, the Giffards were well in the thick of the politics of the day.

Edward the 2nd had made the De Spencer father and son his particular favourites, arousing the ire of the nobles of the land. These same nobles united to put such pressure upon the king that the de Spencers were eventually forced into exile, where they chose to enrich themselves through acts of piracy conducted along the Bristol Channel. And eventually, the king allowed them to return to the mainland which only exacerbated the ire felt by so many in that land.

John Giffard, son and heir of Sir John le Riche, certainly let his own feelings be known. From Brimpsfield Castle, he was able to keep vigil upon the comings and goings along ancient Ermine Street. And so, when he spied the kings baggage train lumbering along it, he set out with his men to conduct a raid upon it.

His passions roused, he then joined with a number of nobles, including Katherine's son. They rode out together and ravaged the lands allotted to the De Spencers, effectively reducing them to starvation. In retaliation, the king seized John Giffard's land, increasing the anger and frustration which was now approaching boiling point.

~

In March 1322, matters deteriorated even further.

John Giffard and his fellow-rebels rode north, intending to join with other rebels stationed beyond the Scottish border.

However, they did not complete their journey. Word of their intentions must have got out because on March the 17th as the rebels arrived at Borough Bridge in Yorkshire, they found the king's men waiting for them.

Battle broke out and the rebels were defeated. Their fate was an unhappy one. The Earl of Hereford was killed and the Earl of Lancaster was captured and beheaded. Katherine's son however, was fortunate. Because he was married to the king's niece, he received a pardon.

But John Giffard's fate was probably the most unpleasant of them all.

He was dragged all the way to Gloucester, where he suffered a traitor's death.

First of all, he was disembowelled before being taken – half-dead by this time – outside the city walls. He was then hanged, his helpless body a terrible warning to anyone else who might contemplate taking up arms against the king.

~

Once again, the Giffard lands were confiscated by the crown. But there was something chillingly final about that particular confiscation. For order were issued, decreeing that Brimpsfield Castle – the symbol of the Giffard's strength – should be destroyed so completely that not one stone should be left standing upon another.

One wonders what the inhabitants of Brimpsfield felt as they witnessed the demise of their proud overlords. Perhaps the stealthy but wholesale appropriation of the castle rubble for their personal building projects offers us the broadest hint with regards to their thoughts at this time.

And it was at this moment of crisis that Stoke Gifford's manor house appears to have been abandoned, never to be inhabited again. It was almost as if the Giffards and all they represented was tainted in some way, and the village sensed that a new beginning was required.

To add insult to injury, the Giffard lands fell into the hands of the despised De Spencers. However, as we shall see, that situation did not continue for very long.

And so the powerful Giffard dynasty appeared to have reached an end, fading from the light of day and leaving behind only a handful of place names to remind us that they had ever played an important role in the life of this land.

How different was Katherine's career when compared with the adventures of the other members of her family. It would be too easy to say that Sir John and her relatives engaged fully with the affairs of their times whilst Katherine seemed to have escaped into safety and seclusion, evading the pressing issues of the times.

Yet I sense that this is far from the truth. In the solitude of her small, dimly-lit cell, Katherine also battled, fighting against the powers of darkness on behalf of the townsfolk who she loved in the name of Christ, engaging in warfare at the meeting-place between time and eternity as she focused the essence of her soul upon the contemplation of her Lord. And for her heroic efforts, she was held in enormous affection by the people of Ledbury for many, many years after her days on earth.

~

I once attended the funeral of a very devout and humble lady who had managed to avoid public scrutiny throughout most of her long life. However, at that funeral, one person after another witnessed to her small acts of sacrificial kindness, until then known only to their recipients. As story was added to story, we each became aware of the enormous legacy that this self-effacing woman had left behind.

Afterwards, as I chatted to one of her relatives he commented, "Well, when all's said and done, it's better to be famous in heaven than on earth."

I am certain that Katherine, along with this particular lady and all the other humble saints I have encountered through the years in my own neighbourhood would agree with her. And I would include the cheerful Mabel amongst their number as well. But then again, perhaps I shouldn't say that at all. I can imagine each one of these good people being so overwhelmed with wonder, love and joy in the presence of their Lord that once again, they would forget all about themselves in their overwhelming appreciation of the beauty and holiness that stood before them.

~

But we return now to more secular matters.

Edward the 2nd was such an unpopular king that even his own wife turned against him. Eventually, Queen Isabella sailed to France, took a lover and returned to confront him. The outcome of her actions was the capture of the king and his subsequent imprisonment in Berkeley Castle which led to his murder in a most unpleasant and painful manner.

At least this is what the history books tell us. But if you would like to consider an alternative version, you might enjoy Paul Docherty's book on the life and times of this unhappy monarch and his wife.

And so, the former Giffard lands passed from the despised De Spencers and eventually became the property of the Berkeleys – although not the branch of the family associated with the king's demise. And there it remained until it passed by marriage to the Beauforts in the 19th century. And there it remained until the early 20th century, when it was sold (mostly to existing tenants) by auction.

And to return to another part of this story, you may recall my mention of Katherine Swynford who became the lover of John of Gaunt. The Beauforts were descended from this couple.

~

The remaining Giffards never seemed to regain their original position in society. One of the last documents I discovered relating to them originated from John's widow. In it, she pleaded rather poignantly that the Stoke manor of Wallscourt – the poorest part of the parish – might be inhabited by her son. I do not know whether or not her pleas proved successful.

~

But where did the Berkeley family establish their new manor house, having abandoned the headquarters of their predecessors?

If you commute along the M32 into Bristol you will pass it every working day of your life. High upon the ridge of land that becomes Purdown in one direction and the village of Stoke Gifford in the other, Stoke Park looms across the landscape, gazing across the leafy Frome valley and the land that was once the ancient Forest of Kingswood. It is painted a rich ochre, in keeping with the styles adopted during the 18th century when it had its heyday. Build by Sir John Berkeley during the reign of Queen Elizabeth the 1st, it was further embellished by Norborne Berkeley during the 18th century. It later became a hospital and now houses a number of luxury private apartments.

But where did the Berkeleys base themselves before Queen Elizabeth's time?

Nobody seems to know for sure but I have my own theory.

It was during the 14th century that the old Norman church was substantially rebuilt so that much of the fabric of the existing parish church now dates primarily from this era. Perhaps this was when the village green was fully established as the new heart of Stoke Gifford as the old heart with its decaying manor house, gently losing its significance.

During the reign of King ? there was a great outcry against Sir Maurice Berkeley. He had chosen to enclose an area of common land for his own personal use as a deer park. The villagers were outraged and rioted against their lord. So calamitous and affair did it become, it was eventually brought before the king. He decreed that Sir Maurice was quite in the wrong. However, that didn't seem to deliver the expected justice to the aggrieved villagers. A number of them were punished for riotous behaviour and, by all accounts, it would seem that Sir Maurice kept his deer park.

The old records seem to suggest that this park lay close to where Parkway Station still stands – which again, links it with the village green in its current position. And

standing close by is Court Farm, which seems to me to be another intriguing link with the past.

Court Farm was one of the structures that was rebuilt by the Beauforts during Queen Victoria's reign. But what did that new building replace? It was, of course, rebuilt in the days before photographic records but how wonderful it would be to go back in time and gaze upon its predecessor. For its name – and its proximity to the parish church, the green and the old deer park – suggest that this could have been the old Berkeley manor house before they turned their attentions to Stoke Park.

At the end of its agricultural career, Court Farm was converted into business premises. As I write this, I am aware that its outbuildings are now undergoing another great change. The old village church is now struggling to accommodate the needs of the large population of Stoke Gifford and so a new worship and community centre is being constructed on this site. Which in a sense, returns this ancient manor house to its original position at the very heart of the community.

~

Thus, our journey through a few square miles of space and millennia of time is now drawing to an end. You may wish to rest for a moment upon Dave Griffith's bench, looking around and remembering him. And you may like to remember all the other stories as well, and consider all the stories that are yet to come. Dave's heart was big enough not to begrudge us that speculation.

And then, when you have taken your repose, you may wish to refresh yourself at the Beaufort Arms which still does a roaring trade. Or you can cross the green to the old school rooms which have since become a coffee shop run by the church. There you can complete your pilgrimage with a slice of lemon drizzle cake and a cup of cappuccino.

E P I L O G U E

I have now spent most of my adult life in the Stokes. And before that, I dwelt in a neighbouring parish within walking distance of my present home.

This is probably no picture postcard parish. Coach loads of people do not descend upon it, eventually departing with mugs or t shirts or car stickers to celebrate the fact that they have been here. It never was like that here and it probably never will be.

This place is – well, ordinary. But as I have already asserted, the ordinary can be the most extraordinary place of all.

As I sit here in my favourite writing chair, I can hear our neighbourhood blackbird singing his heart out. He has become so tame that he is happy to peck up the sultanas that I strew around my feet before him.

Sherbourne's Brake is now in its full green glory – a great, vernal, verdant billowing, living presence. Around the parish, the cow parsley and the May blossom adorn the lanes like silver fairy foam. This is a good place to live.

I think of my regular pilgrimages – to the primroses beside the little brook that runs alongside Braydon Avenue. And the snowdrops spreading through the wood in Meade Park. Each February, I gaze upon those crystal-silver blooms demurely hanging their heads through the most inclement time of the year and rejoice that they are permitted to thrive, even in a difficult world.

And I think about my annual pilgrimage to see the bluebells in Sherbourne's Brake. Last year, as the great tide lapped at my ankles, I stumbled across a family at the very heart of the wood. They were sat in the midst of the flowers, clinging to bunches of them, laughing and taking photos of each other.

Normally I am saddened to see the bluebells being picked because they wilt so quickly and then they are lost for another year. But on this occasion, my heart soared because this little family, in the midst of their revelry, possessed a kind of reverence. They deeply appreciated the miraculous presence of that sea of blooms and therefore came very close indeed to understanding their deep meaning. And there was such joy in that encounter. It was like stumbling across something from a fairy tale.

And perhaps this is what it is all about. To pause for a while. To begin to know a place and to then begin to love it. And then to be surprised by the richness of the

everyday and easily overlooked features of a neighbourhood that it would be so easy to take for granted.

I try to think like that as I walk along Saxonpath. As the birds sing from the hedges I try to imagine all the people who have walked this path before me and all the people who will walk along here in the future. And as I consider all those folk, each with their tale to tell, I remember with a lovely sense of homecoming that I can count myself amongst this great body of pilgrims upon this earth.

S A X O N P A T H - T H E R O U T E

The route begins in Stoke Gifford and ends at Patchway Common.

However, the routes of two additional walks are also given, and all three walks can be combined to create a combined circular walk.

And feel free to begin and end at whatever places suit you best!

STARTING POINT – THE OLD FARM POND, STOKE GIFFORD

The pond lies in a grassy dell between Field Farm Close and Brickyard Lane.

To reach Field Farm Close:-

From the green at Stoke Gifford, walk along North Road (the road that runs through the old part of the village), with the green and the old school rooms to your right.

Continue walking along North Road for a few minutes.

You will pass the Poplar Rooms and their playing fields on your right.

The next turning takes you into Rock Lane (you will see the Baptist Church on the corner).

Turn into Rock Lane. Once you have passed the edge of the playing fields and a couple of houses, you will find Field Farm Close on your right.

Turn into Field Farm Close.

Take the second turning on the left and follow it to the end. Facing you, and just to the right (next to No 54 on the left), you will see a lane running between the houses (it is flanked by a driveway to the right).

Follow this lane into the grassy dell.

The pond is in a dip to your right.

ROCK LANE TO WINTERBOURNE ROAD

Continue along the lane as it passes through the dell, until it reaches the far end. There, you will see a lane running at right angles to you.

Turn left on to this lane and follow it into the rear end of Rock Lane. Follow the pavement on the right as Rock Lane veers to the left, straightens and then – at Beaufort House – turns to the right.

Follow Rock Lane until it emerges on to North Road, at a point several metres further along from our original entry point by the Baptist Church.

Cross North Road.

On the far side, you will see the entrance to Court Avenue.

Walk to the bottom of Court Avenue.

At the far end, the road extends at right angles in front of you.

Cross the road and turn right.

Immediately to your left, you will see the entrance to a lane.

Follow this lane as it turns sharply to the right, descends a couple of steps and then enters a residential area. Turn right and follow another lane into a grassy area flanked by rear gardens.

Turn right and follow the path until you reach the entrance to another lane.

Follow this winding lane into Mead Road.

At Mead Road, turn left and follow the road downhill.

To your right, a limestone wall and hedge follow the line of the road. This is the "official" start of Saxonpath.

At the bottom of Mead Road, walk through the gap in the fence to Winterbourne Road.

Use the pelican crossing to reach the far side of this busy road.

MEAD LANE TO THREE BROOKS NATURE RESERVE

On the far side of the road, you will see the entrance to a lane immediately in front of you.

This is Mead Lane, which was once, more obviously a continuation of Mead Road.

Follow this lane, keeping straight ahead. You will cross a road. Continue on the other side until you emerge on to a main road (Baileys Court Road).

Cross Baileys Court Road.

On the far side, you will see a post box. Next to it, is a pedestrian access point into a branch of Sherbourne Avenue (no road sign here).

Turn into this road, and using the pavement on the right, walk straight ahead until you reach the next junction.

It is now necessary to take a diversion from the original Saxonpath route.

At the junction, turn right and walk straight ahead.

Walk through a short alleyway flanked by evergreens. This alleyway crosses the line of Saxonpath. At the end, if you turn round and look back, you may glimpse some of the old hedgerow half hidden by houses. Note the landmark ash to your right.

This alley leads into Meadow Way (no road sign here).

You will shortly arrive at the entrance to a lane on your left

(Note: the line of this lane crosses the road and continues on your right into a branch of The Bluebells, close to where Webbs Farm once stood).

Turn left into the lane and follow it into another branch of Sherbourne Avenue (no road sign here).

When you reach the end of the lane, look to your left to see a row of mature oaks. These trees mark the original line of Saxonpath.

Turn right. Walk straight ahead and pass through the pedestrian entrance into the end of The Bluebells (no road sign here).

Keeping to the pavement on the left hand side of the road, walk straight ahead.

You will soon reach the entrance to a lane on your left.

Follow the lane as it descends, and then cross Stoke Brook via the wooden bridge (note – the slope and bridge can get slippery at times).

In front of you is the track that runs through Three Brooks Nature Reserve.

With the bridge behind you, turn left.

Walk straight ahead for a few metres until you reach a turning to your right. This turning steeply ascends along the edge of Saxon Gully.

(We are now back on the original line of Saxonpath. To your left, the line crosses Stoke Brook via a metal bridge. You can see the route on the far side marked by a row of mature trees ascending the slope and heading towards a garden fence.)

THREE BROOKS NATURE RESERVE TO SAVAGES WOOD ROAD

From the nature reserve trackway, turn right and follow the steep path flanking the Saxon gully.

This path will take you into Diana Gardens (no road sign here).

Veer slightly to the left and follow the pavement in front of you.

Cross the turning to the left, and on the far side, turn into the alleyway straight in front of you. Follow it into Snowberry Close (no road sign here).

At Snowberry Close, cross the road.

Turn right and follow the pavement. It will run in a straight line for a few metres and then curve to the left, pass a grassy hollow to your left and then follow Saxonpath – here represented by a broad grassy verge flanked by double hedgerow.

At the far end of the grassy area, the path curves to the left and then continues through a lane to the left. Follow this lane, which runs behind the grounds of Meadowbrook School.

This lane will take you on to busy Savages Wood Road.

SAVAGES WOOD ROAD TO THE PARISH BOUNDARY HEDGE

At Savages Wood Road, turn left and use the pelican crossing to reach the far side.

On the far side, turn (keep going?-jn) left and walk until you reach the end of Bluebell Gardens.

Turn right and follow the pavement through the Three Brooks car park.

(You will see a row of ornamental trees crossing the car park, which marks the route of Saxonpath. If you look beyond the pub and to the right of it, you may be able to discern the route of the old hedgerow as it heads off in the distance. It is now flanked by houses on its left side.)

Continue along this pavement, using the zebra crossing to reach the path as it continues into the Willow Brook centre (Tesco is now on your right).

When you reach the main entrance to the Willow Brook centre, turn left and walk past Costa and KFC. Between KFC and the Harvester, there is a gap.

Turn left and walk through this gap.

Use the zebra crossing to reach the pavement on the far side of the road.

Turn right and follow the pavement, which is flanked by a tall fence to the left. The pavement curves to the left, leaving the road behind. Follow it as it runs between the tall fence and a lower fence on your right.

This path will eventually reach a small stretch of tall fence on your right, shortly followed by a row of flats. The tall fence to your right stops at this point, and you will find yourself once again walking beside the Saxonpath hedge.

Follow this path beside the hedge, crossing the junction next to the litter bin.

At the end of the hedge, you will see another hedgerow curving round in front of you. This is the old parish boundary hedge that once separated Stoke Gifford from Patchway.

(If you would like a brief diversion, follow this hedge to the left for a few metres, where you will find Dewfalls Pond).

BOUNDARY HEDGE TO PATCHWAY COMMON

From the junction of Saxonpath and the boundary hedge, and with the Saxonpath hedge behind you, turn right and follow the path, keeping the boundary hedge to your left.

You will shortly arrive at a gap in the boundary hedge.

Pass through this gap and enter Dewfalls Drive.

In front of you and to your left, you will see an expanse of grass.

Follow the pavement flanking this grass, with the grass to your left.

The pavement will eventually curve to the left and leave the area of grassland. There are now houses to your left, as well as on the far side of the road.

Cross the road (still Dewfalls Drive) and turn left.

After a few metres, you will see an entrance to a lane on your right (next to no 41).

Follow this lane to Wheatfield Drive.

Cross Wheatfield Drive and continue along the lane on the far side.

This lane will lead you to Patchway Common. The pond is to your left. Around its edge, you will find information boards and seating.

YOU HAVE NOW COMPLETED THE SAXONPATH WALK.

FEEL FREE TO CELEBRATE!!!

WALK TWO: PATCHWAY COMMON - LITTLE STOKE - MEAD LANE

Begin this walk at Patchway Common, next to the pond and the Saxonpath and Patchway Common information boards.

With the pond to your left and the road behind you, follow the path across the grass towards the entrance of the lane in front of you.

Enter this lane and follow it all the way to Cornfield Close.

Cross Cornfield Close and turn left. Pass the first house (no 77) and turn into the lane immediately next to it on the right. Follow this lane to Wheatfield Drive.

Cross Wheatfield Drive and the follow the lane on the far side. It will take you into a cul-de-sac of Dewfalls Drive.

Turn left and walk to the main junction with Dewfalls Drive.

At this junction, turn right and walk to the next junction on your right. Turn into this junction and follow it to Brook Way.

At Brook Way, turn right and use the pedestrian refuge to cross the road.

Continuing right, follow Brook Way until you reach Courtlands.

Cross Courtlands, turn left and follow the pavement into this road. Cross the junction leading to no.s 20-112. Continue along this pavement, which will eventually take you across a small grassy area bordered by a hedge.

Cross the hedge, using the gap between the hedgerow to your right and the housing to your left.

On the far side, turn slightly to the right and then walk straight ahead.

You are now approaching the rear of Bourton Avenue, which runs roughly at right angles to the road you are in (Saxon Way).

As you approach the far end of this road, you will see the entrance to a lane in front of you.

Enter this lane, and when you reach the T junction, turn right and continue to follow it. After a few metres, it will turn sharply to the left. Continue to follow the lane, which will lead you into Bourton Avenue.

At Bourton Avenue, turn left and follow the pavement downhill.

Cross School Close on your left and pass Dyrham Parade on your right.

At the bottom of Bourton Avenue, you will find a pedestrian entrance on to Braydon Avenue. This thoroughfare crosses the line of the old parish boundary which we crossed earlier, when following the Saxonpath route into Dewfalls Drive.

On Braydon Avenue, turn right and descend to the underpass. Use this underpass to reach the far side of the road.

At the end of the underpass, take the exit to your right.

In front of you, you will see a wide grassy avenue running between houses.

Follow the path to the left as it crosses the grass.

You will eventually meet with another path. Choose the route to the right and walk straight ahead until you reach the first turning on your right. It is signposted as Farley Close, and it marks the meeting place of Ormsley Close, Farley Close and Stratton Close.

Take this turning and follow the path for a few metres until you see a lane just slightly to your left. (Note: This is NOT the turning which takes a sharp left, leading into Stratton Close).

Follow this lane. A hedge runs along its left-hand side, bordering the gardens belonging to the red brick farm houses.

The lane emerges on to Little Stoke Lane. Turn right and use the pedestrian refuge to cross the road. Then turn left and follow the pavement until you reach the entrance to Clay Lane.

Here, you will find an information board, telling you all about Little Stoke Farm.

Cross Clay Lane and, walking straight ahead, pass though the gap in the hedge and enter Little Stoke Park.

Turn left and follow the path through the park running parallel with Little Stoke Lane. Note the old hedge between the path and the main road.

This path takes you into a car park.

Leave the park using the exit to your left.

Then turn right and walk a few steps until you reach a narrow crossing point for Little Stoke Lane.

Cross Little Stoke Lane.

In front of you, is a playing field. Turn left to reach the corner of this field.

Enter the field at this corner, cross it diagonally and exit at the far corner through the gap between two hedges. Take a few steps across the grassy area beyond it until you reach a path. Turn right on this path.

(Alternatively, if you prefer not to cross the field, you can follow the lanes that run around it.)

Take the path to the left of the playing field. When the path reaches the far end of the field, turn right on to a path that runs between the field on your right and a row of garden fences on your left.

Follow this path as it runs alongside the field and then exits it. Continue to follow it as it crosses a grassy expanse beyond the hedges).

At this point, both alternatives routes meet. Continue to follow this path until it meets the pavement, with the houses of Oak Close on your left and the grassy expanse on your right.

Cross the lane which links Elm Close with Hercules Close and continue along the path as it runs downhill through a broad grassy area between two rows of houses (Elm Close on your left, Hercules Close on your right).

At the bottom of the slope, you will see Orpheus Avenue in front of you.

Take a few steps along the pavement and then descend the short slope to your right. At the bottom of the slope, use the pedestrian refuge to cross Orpheus Avenue.

On the far side, turn right and walk a few metres until you reach a metal bridge on your left.

Use this bridge to cross Stoke Brook. Climb the path on the far side until you reach another path at the top of the slope, running at right angles to your path.

Turn left, take a few steps and enter the lane on your right.

Follow this lane.

Cross Watch Elm Close and follow the lane as it continues on the far side.

At the end of this lane, you will find yourself at a junction with Mead Lane. You have now returned to the Saxonpath.

This marks the end of Walk Two. You can either use Saxonpath to return to your starting point or you can begin Walk Three.

WALK 3 - TO BAILEYS COURT AND BEYOND...

This walk begins where Walk 2 ends, ie at the junction of Mead Lane with the lane that ascends from Stoke Brook.

With the Stoke Brook lane behind you, turn right and walk along Mead Lane as if heading towards Winterbourne Road.

Pass the turning on the left and the turning on the right.

Pass another turning on your right, some bollards, and Little Leaze on your left.

Just before you reach Winterbourne Road, you will see a path to your left.

Follow this path into Pursey Drive.

Cross Pursey Drive. On the far side, turn right and continue walking until you reach the next junction.

At the next junction, turn left. Follow the pavement until you reach the next junction, cross the road and turn right. At this point, you will arrive at the main 'spine' of Pursey Drive.

Turn left and follow Pursey Drive until you reach Baileys Court Road. There is a roundabout to your right.

Use the pedestrian refuge to the left of the roundabout to cross Baileys Court Road.

On the far side, and immediately to your right, is the entrance to Webbs Wood Road (on the other side of this road, you will see Baileys Court Inn and Tesco Express).

Walk straight ahead along Webbs Wood Road.

Cross the entrance to The Bluebells (Webbs Farm once stood where this road now stands) and continue to walk straight ahead.

You will soon arrive at the point where Bradley Stoke Way intersects with Webbs Wood Road. There is a roundabout to your right.

Turn left and use the pedestrian refuge to cross Bradley Stoke Way.

On the far side, turn right. After a few steps, you will see a green lane behind a locked gate. This is the lane that once ran roughly north-east across the fields towards Trench Lane and the surrounding countryside.

The line of this path is now broken. The M4 crosses it, and it is also fragmented by the residential roads in this area. Because of this, it is necessary to follow the path at a distance, sometimes finding the way by looking out for the hedgerows that mark its line but which now run between back gardens.

Continue walking along Webbs Wood Road as it passes the green lane and then curves away from it.

If you look to your left, you will catch glimpses of the lane as it runs through Marjoram Place.

You will soon reach the entrance to Marjoram Place on your left. Turn into this road and walk straight ahead. In front of you and slightly to the right (next to the sign for house numbers 8-20), you will see another section of the green lane.

Cross the road to reach the pavement where this section begins, and follow this pavement as it passes the lane and veers to the right.

Continue to follow this pavement as it descends the slope until you reach Juniper Way.

At Juniper Way, turn right and walk along the pavement until you reach a turning to your right (leading to house numbers 171-207).

Cross this turning and then turn into it. Follow the pavement up the slope.

Continue until you arrive at a lane on your left between house numbers 175 and 177. Turn into this lane.

Pass the bollard at the end of the lane and follow the pavement to your right. It will curve to the right and then ascend a slope.

When you reach house number 33, you will see that the road has been narrowed to make it easier to cross. Cross here, and look to your right to see the hedge line at the top of the road. Then walk through the lane between house numbers 52 and 50 (If

you look to your right, you will see the hedgerow belonging to the green lane just beyond the fence).

At the end of the lane, look across the road and slightly to your left, where you will see the continuation of the green lane.

Cross over to this side, turn left and follow the pavement as it veers to the right.

Turn right at the turning leading to house numbers 52-72 and walk through this cul-de-sac (no pavements here). Just before this road curves more sharply to the right and comes to an end, you will see a gap in the fence on the far side (and you can also catch another glimpse of the hedgerow belonging to the lane).

Walk through the gap in the fence. In front of you, is a high bank surmounted by a fence, which shields the town from the M4.

Turn right along this path and follow it. After just a few metres, you will see the end of a hedge beyond the fencing to your right. This marks the furthest point of the green lane before it is intersected by the motorway.

This path will take you past a small play park and the grounds of St Mary's School, both on your right.

The path then continues along the back of Palmers Leaze (also to your right), passing Chequers Court.

Eventually, the path will descend and then veer towards the right, leaving the motorway bank behind. Continue to follow it.

You will pass a sunken grassy area on your left. After that, the left hand side of the path is accompanied by a hedge and a ditch.

Continue along the path as it crosses Palmers Leaze, following the signpost for Parkway Station.

Cross Ellan Hay Road and continue to walk straight ahead. You will see another signpost for Parkway Station, which is still in the direction in which you are heading.

The lane will soon turn to the right and ascend a slope. At the top, you will see the junction of Bradley Stoke Way with Baileys Court Road. There is a roundabout to your right.

At this junction, use the pedestrian refuge to the left of the roundabout to cross Bradley Stoke Way.

On the far side, you will see a path descending a slope to your left.

Follow this path as it descends, and continue along it. The path at the bottom of the slope is flanked to your left by a hedge and ditch.

This path eventually joins up with the lower end of Huckley Way. Turn right and walk up Huckley Way.

(f you would like a small but interesting diversion, look out for the grassy lane between house numbers 11 and 9 on your right. If you take a few steps along this lane, you will find an old farm pond.)

If you have taken this diversion, return to Huckley Way. Cross the road, turn right and walk a few metres down the hill until you reach the entrance to an underpass on your right. It is signposted as being en route to Parkway.

Use this underpass to safely cross Winterbourne Road.

The underpass emerges in Oxbarton, Stoke Gifford. From the exit, you can look straight ahead and slightly to your right to see the back of Knightwood Farm.

Turn left and follow the pavement until you reach Knightwood Road. Turn right, cross Oxbarton and continue along Knightwood Road.

Mead Road is the next turning on your right. To see the front of Knightwood Farm, turn into this road and the farmhouse is immediately to your right.

THIS COMPLETES WALK 3

If you have some energy to spare, you may wish to continue for a little further so that you can finish this walk at the beginning of Walk One.

If you decide to accept this challenge, with Knightwood Road behind you, cross Mead Road.

Continue straight ahead. When you are opposite house number 260, cross to the same side, turn right and continue for a few metres along North Road. After house number 250, you will see a narrow alleyway.

Use this alleyway to reach Parsons Avenue.

With the alleyway behind you, follow the pavement to the right. When you reach the junction of Parsons Avenue with Couzens Place to your right (and a roundabout to your left), cross the road. You will find yourself in front of house number 15.

To your right, you will see a lane. Follow this lane until it enters a driveway via a stone stile. Cross the driveway and use the gap in the fence on the far side to join a footpath that enters Great Stoke.

Almost immediately, turn right on to a side path and follow it to the next junction. You will see an entrance to Rock Lane in front of you (marked by metal safety gates). Ignore this entrance and instead, turn left and follow the path signposted for Bristol Parkway. Walk approx ¼ mile along this path.

You will eventually see a path to your right heading back diagonally and very roughly parallel with the path you have been following.

Follow this path for a few metres until you see a gap in the hedge to your left. Go through this gap to find yourself in the dell with the pond where our very first walk began.

And if you don't celebrate with a cup of tea and a chocolate digestive after all that, then you really are missing out on life!

LINKS

Links to an online map of Saxonpath that you can follow, and two of Sharon's blogs.

The Saxonpath website where you can find more information about Sharon and her writing:

http://www.saxonpath.com/

The Saxonpath route on Google Maps:

http://bit.ly/saxonpath-map

Sharon's Knit 2 Together blog:

https://knit2together.wordpress.com

Sharon's Dayrider blog:

https://dayriderblog.wordpress.com