Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: ‘The singular Stiperstones’: geology, landscape and etymology

Chapter 2: ‘Wold ancient mines’: miners and mining

Chapter 3: Of railway and ropeway: transport, from ‘car’ to coach

Chapter 4: The natural Webb: Mary Webb and natural history

Chapter 5: ‘Diafol Mountain’: lore and legend

Chapter 6: The ‘aboriginal’ hill: literature and tourism

Chapter 7: ‘Back to purple’: nature conservation and habitat restoration

Sources and notes

Index
Introduction

There is not, perhaps, a more singular feature in the physical geography of England than the Stiper Stones.

Roderick Murchison The Silurian System (1839)

The Stiperstones, an 8km (5 mile) long ridge in South Shropshire, is the most distinctive wild skyline in the county. It is one to which the eye is drawn from miles around and to which over the millennia successive generations have turned in pursuit of survival or enrichment, mystery or science, beauty and wildlife, exercise and pleasure. Its grazing and berry crops have been exploited by man since, it is assumed, the Bronze Age, when it was chosen too as a place to bury the dead. Iron Age man found a fine site here for a hill-fort. Miners from Roman times onwards have dug in search of its minerals. And Edric, a Saxon warrior, was attracted perhaps by its remoteness, as may be the Devil and Shropshire’s ghosts and witches. More recently, geologists have come to investigate its rocks and topography, mine historians its adits and shafts and naturalists its wildlife. Meanwhile writers of fiction and travelogues have found inspiration in its spectacular landscape and its overlays of human history, legend and natural history.

The Singular Stiperstones explores the principal facets of this Shropshire icon by delving into the publications and memories of the many who have written and reminisced about The Stiperstones, using fiction to illuminate fact and vice versa. For some The Stiperstones has provided a dramatic backdrop for fictional events, for others a research site, a home, a workplace, a holiday retreat or somewhere visited in passing. Their perceptions, both fictional and factual, provide the framework for this book and the personal histories of the more significant amongst them are outlined.

Whilst The Singular Stiperstones seeks to be a well-informed guide to some of the more important aspects of this special place, it does not pretend to be an exhaustive account or to offer the results of original research. Indeed its purpose is to gather in one place some of the wide ranging observations, experience and insights of others, to sketch the main lines of the story of the successive generations who have made their mark here and to introduce the many writers who have described The Stiperstones and left their own intangible patina upon it. Hopefully, in doing so, this book conveys something of the alchemy that flows from man’s endeavours and creativity amidst an exceptional landscape. In the words of Mary Webb from The Golden Arrow ‘the personality of a man reacting upon the spirit of a place produces something which is neither the man nor the place, but fiercer or more beautiful than either. This third entity, born of the union, becomes a power and a haunting presence – non-human, non-material.’

Visitors frequently ask what the name ‘Stiperstones’ means. Those who are seeking an answer should refer to the first chapter, but with a warning that they may not be entirely satisfied. But this is the place to define the area to which this unusual name applies. The Stiperstones, known locally simply as ‘the hill’, is, essentially a topographic feature (figure Intro x, map showing the local geography and
naming the beaches and tors), a ridge running from south-west to north-east surmounted by rock outcrops, and cut on its western flank by a series of steep-sided ‘beaches’ or ‘dingles’: Tankerville Hollow, Perkins Beach, Mytton Dingle, Black Hole, Crowsnest Dingle and Snailbeach.

We have taken Black Rhadley Hill as the southern extremity of the area we cover and The Hollies near Lordshill as the northern one. In doing so we truncate the geology, but conform to long usage, as confirmed in 1839 by the geologist Roderick Murchison (see Chapter 1): ‘Although the Heathmont [Heath Mynd], west of Linley, constitutes geologically the south-western termination of this ridge of quartz rock, and Pontesbury the north-eastern extremity, thus giving the range a length of ten miles, the central or lofty portion for about four miles is alone known in the country under the name of the Stiper Stones’.

And where do we draw our western and eastern boundaries? On the west side the boundary is the road running north from Black Rhadley Hill through the Bog and the village of Stiperstones, to Snailbeach. On the east side the boundary is marked by the tracks and roads that run discontinuously north from Great Wood House to The Knolls, passing below the former Gatten Plantation and along the eastern side of The Paddock through to Upper Vessons. But from time to time, particularly when the story is a good one, we stray a little over these nominal boundaries.

The Singular Stiperstones draws on a wide range of published sources, but two in particular require early acknowledgement: firstly the novels of Mary Webb (see Chapter 4), principally The Golden Arrow (1916) and Gone to Earth (1917); and secondly Never on a Sunday: memories of the Stiperstones mining communities (2000) which is a distillation of lengthy interviews of 61 local residents born between 1907 and 1946; the interviews were carried out between 1998 and 2000. But there are many other sources, not least the memoirs of George Evans, Bill Francis and Jeanette Merry. When to these main sources various works of fiction are added, along with travelogues and books about the mines, The Stiperstones has generated a literary canon equalled by few places of comparable size.

We bring the perspectives of a life-long resident and long-term incomer to this book. Peter Francis has lived in the Stiperstones area most of his life, as have generations of his family. He has a long-standing interest in local history about which he has written extensively. Tom Wall was brought to The Stiperstones as a child in the 1960s but cannot now claim any recollection of the visit. He renewed acquaintances in the mid 1980s as first warden of The Stiperstones National Nature Reserve.

We are pleased to acknowledge etc etc Librarians, Peter Howell, Julia Ionides, Chris Hogarth, Margaret Gelling, Richard Beaumond, Elizabeth Wall, Shropshire Library Service, Muriel Lewis, Ivor J Brown, Jennifer Westwood, Frances and John Williams, Ken Lucas, Jack Foley, Mark O’Hanlon, Kelvin Lake, Susan Higginbotham, Peggy Chidley, Doris Hewitt, Margaret Price etc etc We acknowledge too permission granted by the Shropshire Mines Trust to quote from Never on a Sunday (plus other such acknowledgements) Michael Rosenbaum and Peter Toghill kindly suggested a number of changes to the Geology chapter, but here, as elsewhere, any residual errors of fact or interpretation are down to us.
Chapter 1

‘The singular Stiperstones’: geology, landscape and etymology

‘There ben a drove of stwone-tappers gon up to the Cheir this mornin’,
 a man working in the little barytes mine told me.
‘Stone-tappers?’ I queried, ‘what are they?’
‘They ben gon up to tap the stwones,’
he replied with a smile full of indulgence for a harmless pastime.

Magdalene Weale Through the Highlands of Shropshire on Horseback (1935)

The Stiperstones and Sir Roderick Impey Murchison

The Stiperstones is a geological curiosity brooding over a county renowned for its
geological diversity; it is much visited by ‘stwone-tappers’.

Sir Roderick Impey Murchison (1792-1871) (Figure 1.x, see DNB? Or Collie and
Diemer) was amongst the first of a series of celebrated geologists drawn to this
extraordinary place, maybe hammer in hand, to tap its stones.7 He was to offer
the opinion that ‘there is not, perhaps, a more singular feature in the physical geography
of England than the Stiper Stones.’ Murchison described the ridge of The
Stiperstones as ‘being made up of a number of broken and serrated edges, jutting
out from the summits of the hills which flank the volcanized mining district of Shelve …. They stand out on the crest of the ridge at short intervals, like rugged cyclopean
ruins, some of the principal of which are about 50 or 60 feet high and about 120 or
130 feet in width’. (figure 1.x from oppo page 283 of The Silurian System)

Murchison travelled widely in Britain and Europe, but his principal area of study in
the 1830s was Shropshire and surrounding counties.8 He was drawn to the county,
as many geologists have been since, because of its geological diversity. As today’s
best-known interpreter of Shropshire geology, Peter Toghill9 recounts, ‘of the 12
geological periods recognised, 10 are represented in Shropshire … this is
remarkable when one considers that in an area like Snowdonia only three geological
periods are represented.’

Murchison’s particular strength was discerning the sequence of rocks, and it was
said that he could read the geology of an area with remarkable rapidity. His reading
of the landscape of Shropshire and nearby counties led, in 1839, to the publication of
his magisterial work The Silurian System; it was in two parts and ran in all to some
800 pages. He revised the work several times and it was re-published in 1854 under
the title Siluria.

The ‘cyclopean ruins’

Murchison called the upstanding tors of The Stiperstones ‘cyclopean ruins’; later
writers have offered a plethora of other images, but impregnability and ruggedness
are recurring themes. Fellow geologist G H Morton (1869) writes of ‘… a succession
of projecting crags which stand out in towering grandeur …’. For A G Bradley (1905) they are ‘uncanny monoliths’. Magdalene Weale (1935) writes of ‘… that gaunt range … virile and hard with the hardness of immense age, and crowned with its strange outcrops of black quartzite like so many ruined fortresses’, and of ‘… the great black saw-like ridge’, ‘…rugged and grim …’. S P B Mais (1939) describes the ‘… black quartzite crags rising along the ridge of the Stiperstones like the fin of a fish’. For H W Timperley (1947) it is ‘… the sombre crag-notched spine of the Stiperstones … harsh and often saturnine… like a barren and jagged wilderness on the edge of the world’; and for Jeanette Merry (1979) ‘… these ancient Stiperstones rocks jut out like watching monsters keeping guard over the slopes below’. In a poem of 1983 Allister Fraser evokes ‘these castled stones’ which ‘protrude through Shropshire soil like shattered bones’. Ellis Peters (1992) refers to ‘the antediluvian lizard-length of The Stiperstones’ and Jim Perrin (2003) arrests and troubles by describing ‘the long ridge … capped and crested … by shattered tors of quartzite, their faces black-crannied, sightless eyes on the road to Basra …’.

The ‘cyclopean ruins’ have cropped up in fiction too (see Chapter 6). For D H Lawrence, in his novella St Mawr (1925), the ridge was ‘one of those places where the spirit of aboriginal England still lingers, the old savage England’. Malcolm Saville in his children’s adventure story Seven White Gates’ (1944) describes ‘… the great bulk of the Stiperstones crowned with the black, sinister quartzite rocks…’.

Mary Webb, in her novel The Golden Arrow (1916), focuses on the most celebrated of these rocks, the Devil’s Chair:

‘Nothing ever altered its look. Dawn quickened over it in pearl and emerald; summer sent the armies of heather to its very foot; snow rested there as doves nest in cliffs. It remained inviolable, taciturn, evil. It glowered darkly on the dawn; it came through the snow like jagged bones through flesh; before its hardness even the venturesome cranberries were discouraged’.

The Devil’s Chair has received musical acclaim too, thanks to an annual music festival held at Leasowes Bank, a hill-top a mile and half to the east of The Stiperstones, from where the tors etch a jagged horizon. Each July since 1981 it has been the venue for ‘Music at Leasowes Bank’, a series of concerts offering an eclectic range of predominantly English music. In the early days concerts were held in the former farmhouse; subsequently, expanding audiences have squeezed into a stone barn, around which a bat patrols as night falls.

In 1987 ‘Music at Leasowes Bank’ commissioned a jazz suite from two up-and-coming young composers, Clark Tracey and Steve Melling; their composition, Stiperstones, was performed at the Festival that year by the Clark Tracey Quintet, iv and later recorded. Some of the jagged-ness of the tors reverberates in the six vigorous movements of the suite, full of crackling trumpet, virtuoso piano and vibrant saxophone. Each movement is named after one of the outcrops, and the music certainly rocks.v

But not everyone responds positively to The Stiperstones. Mary Webb’s mother, who visited in July 1877, was not enthused. Webb’s biographer, Gladys Mary Coles,
quotes a passage from the diary of the then twenty-five year old Alice Scott, who came on a geological society outing from Worcestershire:

‘... We were finally deposited at the foot of some hills which we climbed and were enveloped in mist. When we reached the top however, the object of the day was achieved, i.e. to look at some rocks called the Stiperstones. We walked some way through heather and then met the carriages which took us to the station. We were very wet and having had nothing to interest us, felt anything but pleasant when we arrived back at 11pm’.

Quartzite, flags and shales

A recurring literary theme is the blackness of the quartzite rocks. This is poetic licence. They may appear black against the light, and from a distance, but they are in fact grey, and then only because of a surface film of lichen. As H W Timperley points out ‘... if the weather-stains and the lichen were cleaned from [the] rocks .... how the hill-top would dazzle in the sunlight!’ This is because the Stiperstones Quartzite is actually whitish in colour and includes sparkling crystals, described by Murchison as ‘numerous small white facets of quartz crystals, presenting a vivid contrast to the dull brown heath over which they are strewn’. The point was not lost on Mary Webb: in *The Golden Arrow*, John Arden tells Stephen Southernwood, who can’t see beyond the blackness of the Devil’s Chair, that ‘If you only look you can see all colours in that black rock, all colours and sparkling white.’

When and how were these white rocks (often pink too) formed? They were attributed by Murchison to what he called the ‘Silurian’ period. The name came from the tribe known as the Silures which once inhabited the Marches and it was adopted by Murchison as ‘expressive of the deposits which lie between the old red sandstone and the slaty rocks of Wales’.

The latter rocks were given the name ‘Cambrian’ by Murchison’s sometimes collaborator, sometimes rival, the Reverend Professor Adam Sedgwick. However, it was later found that the lower part of the Silurian of Murchison and the upper part of the Cambrian of Sedgwick were in part equivalent, and in 1887 Professor Lapworth, yet another geologist of note, proposed the name ‘Ordovician’ for the overlapping sequence, naming the rocks after the ‘Ordovices’, a tribe which inhabited North Wales.

Today the Stiperstones Quartzite is attributed, following Lapworth, to the Ordovician period (495-443 million years ago), when it was laid down in shallow water, possibly as a beach of quartz sand and pebbles. Peter Toghill explains how the sand and pebbles of this beach have been bonded by a quartz cement to form a very hard white quartz sandstone, technically described as a quartz arenite. He points out that the term quartzite is in fact a misnomer, because Stiperstones Quartzite is simply a very hard sandstone; quartzite is a term normally reserved for sandstones which have been metamorphosed by heat and pressure. Wrekin Quartzite is a similar misnomer, but because these historic names are so well entrenched in the literature, geologists have chosen not to correct them.

Earth movements at the end of the Ordovician period, referred to by Peter Toghill as ‘the Shelveian event’ folded up the local Ordovician rocks, including the Stiperstones
Quartzite, into quite tight folds, tilting the former beach up at a sharp angle, 80 degrees in places, so that it poked skywards forming the ridge of the hill.

When first laid down, this beach was on the southern margin of what geologists call the ‘Iapetus Ocean’; along with the rest of what is now southern Britain, it was then 65° south of the equator. There followed an extraordinary transglobal migration, a journey of 12,000km in more than 450 million years at an average rate of 2.4cm (1 inch) a year, an imperceptible creep over unimaginable aeons of time which eventually brought ‘Shropshire’ north from the Antarctic Circle through the tropics and across the equator to its latitude today, over 50° north.

The Stiperstones Quartzite is some 150-280m thick; above it and to a depth of up to 1,000m lie the Mytton Flags, and then 240m thickness of Hope Shales. The flagstones are muddier and weaker than the quartzite and were laid down in deeper water; the shales are made up of very fine particles deposited at still greater depth (fig 1.x geological section; ? figure 85 from Toghill 2006)

In The Golden Arrow Stephen Southernwood, immature, overwrought, and cowed by landscape and circumstance, fantasises about reducing the quartzite of the Devil’s Chair to powder in the rock crusher at the ‘Lostwithin Spar Mine’. And despite, or indeed because of its hardness - ‘harder than steel, impervious to fire’ - Stiperstones quartzite has been widely used. It was the stone from which houses on and immediately adjacent to the ridge were built, even though its somewhat haphazard angularity makes it less than ideal as a building stone – only rare examples offer good right-angled faces, and because of its integrity and hardness, splitting and cutting are impractical. In consequence, brick was sometimes used for corners, chimneys and around doors and windows (fig x). And it is this awkwardness in the stone that doubtless explains why, despite this being such a stony place, there are surprisingly few dry-stone walls and why, away from the highest ground, Mytton Flags are preferred as a building stone.

The Stiperstones Quartzite has however been used as the base for many miles of local roads. In Never on a Sunday Henry Jones remembers that it was taken to Shawbury, Sleap and Cosford airfields too: ‘For a couple of years there was a team of men with sledge hammers breaking the stone … to about six inches in size … they worked all along the ridge’. Evidence of stone breaking for roads and airfields can still be seen at several places today, most obviously at Nipstone Rock, in the form of piles of stone reduced typically to three inch pieces [check] – what soul-destroying work it must have been! Along the ridge the stone for breaking was simply picked off the surface; but at the Nills, Pontesbury, it was quarried, and here mechanical rock crushers were brought into play, but the quarry was eventually abandoned because of the rapid rate of wear to the crusher heads. [check]

Where does the name ‘Stiperstones’ come from?

The Rev C H Hartshorne drawing on research for his ‘Salopia Antiqua’ is reported by Murchison as telling him that the name ‘Stiper Stones’ (Murchison always rendered the name in two words) ‘had its origin in the Icelandic “steypa” (fusio metallorum), a term singularly well applied to the fused and altered rocks of the metalliferous tract’.
Richard Morgan (1997) does not include this possibility in his discussion of the derivation, and it would not fit with any of the old names that he lists, which start with *Tenfrestanes* (dating from 1190, and perhaps lacking an initial *S* due to French influence), and include *Stenuretames* (1226), *Steyfrestanes* (1300) and *Stipperston* (1612), before the first documented use of *Stiperstones* in 1695. The Old English words *stīpere*,[[^1] is this symbol correct?] meaning ‘a prop or post’, or *stīpele*, ‘a tower’ might appear plausible as a source for the name but Morgan doubts a derivation directly from either because although these words pre-date the medieval names for the place, the medieval names are clearly not derived from them. He speculates however that Stiperstones could be derived from a personal name, *Stænfriþ*, with the Old English *stīpere* somehow exerting an influence and accounting for the development of the name into *Stiperstones*.

Murchison splits the name in two – ‘Stiper’ and ‘Stones’ – as if they are adjective and noun, and refers to the unusual or singular nature of the place. Today the name is always rendered as one word only – ‘Stiperstones’. It is the name given to the ridge, and as such it is a singular noun. But the name also conveys plurality, seeming, whatever its derivation, to be referring to the ‘tors’ or ‘stones’ that punctuate the skyline, or the stripes of stones that calibrate its flanks.

Unlike ‘Stiperstones’, most of the place-names that crop up in this book seem to have straightforward derivations. ‘Shepherd’s Rock’, ‘The Hollies’ or ‘Crowsnest’ are cases in point, although in matters of etymology things are sometimes less straightforward than they at first appear. Amongst other, more puzzling names, is ‘beach’. All of the ‘beaches’ lie on the west side of The Stiperstones: Perkins Beach and Myttons Beach are both steep-sided valleys; Snailbeach is the name applied to the settlement associated with another steep-sided valley, and Wagbeach, a mile to the northwest, is a valley location too. These names have parallels on the east side of The Long Mynd, where ‘batch’ recurs frequently in the names of the more abrupt valleys such as Nut Batch, Minton Batch and Small Batch. The Anglo-Saxon *bœc*, denoting a valley with a small stream, the north-country word ‘beck,’ and the German word ‘bach’, also meaning a brook or stream, may well be related to beach and batch. ‘Dingle’, as in Crowsnest Dingle, is synonymous with ‘beach’ and interchangeable with it, so that some will say Myttons Beach, others Mytton Dingle, and while the not infrequently heard ‘Perkins Beach Dingle’ rolls easily off the tongue, it is tautological.

But there is another puzzle about the ‘beaches’ (figure xx; aerial view): how were these very impressive, short, steep-sided valleys formed? Malcolm Saville, the children’s writer (see chapter 6), describes ‘the almost precipitous walls of Mytton Dingle thrusting into the side of The Stiperstones as if the Devil, who has made this mountain his own, had cut a great wedge from it.’ Turning to more rational explanations, as G H Morton observed in 1869, ‘The present rivulets and streams seem to be very inadequate to cause any great change in the valleys along which they flow’. But in glacial times much larger volumes of water would have flowed down the hillsides during periods of thaw, and the topography would have given velocity and erosive power to these melt waters. On several occasions over recent centuries there have been telling reminders of the immense force of flood waters.
The ‘Shrewsbury Chronicle’ reported that on 27 May 1811 there was a violent storm of hail, such that

‘... near the Snailbach [sic], hailstones two inches in circumference lay almost a foot deep. About five o’clock in the afternoon, a cloud burst upon the ridge of hills called the Stiperstones, and a torrent of water, with irresistible force, and thundering sound, rushing down the hill side, swept away several cottages belonging to the Snailbach miners’.

Downstream, three people from Minsterley lost their lives and nine from Pontesford. So much water flowed down the Rea Brook that when it reached the English Bridge at Shrewsbury, the Severn is said to have risen four feet in less than ten minutes.

An indication of the erosive power of flood can also be gained from the so called ‘flooded wires’ at the head of Myttons Beach. These are four deep scars running, in parallel, straight down the steep hillside; they are said to have been carved virtually overnight by storm-water. The date they were sculpted is not certainly known, but local opinion favours the early years of the last century. (Clifford Evans in SDN Dec ’89 refers to a storm on 27 May 1911, but does not mention flooded wires and is he confused as to the century?) In The Golden Arrow (1916) Mary Webb writes of Stephen and Deborah gathering foxgloves – a plant of recently disturbed ground – from what could well be Myttons Beach, at a place where ‘the hill was gashed for nearly its whole height, and a tide of foxgloves rolled sheer from top to bottom like arterial blood.’

The tors

The technical term for the Devil’s Chair and the other ‘rugged cyclopean ruins’ of The Stiperstones is ‘tor’. Allister Fraser, in his poem ‘On The Stiperstones’ describes them as ‘These brooding crags, born in the remorseless grind/ Of ice…’, and ice certainly played its part in shaping them, though it did not actually grind them. The consensus is that they took on their present outline during the Devensian (Last) Glaciation, which peaked 18,000 years ago when The Stiperstones was close to, but not over-topped, by the ice sheet, which reached the Strettons, 10km to the east and the Rea Valley 5km to the west. Climatic conditions were nevertheless extremely severe, with the hill locked in the vice of a permafrost which, working on moisture trapped in the joints of the quartzite and expanding it by 10% as it froze, jacked out piece after piece of the rock. Gradually, over millennia, this process wore away the less resistant areas particularly where the rocks were most intensely jointed, leaving the less intensely jointed rock-masses upstanding and surviving as the tors. They are impressive features, but by the end of the glacial period, erosion had taken a massive toll. It has been suggested that the surface of the ridge had been lowered by up to 18m, and even in the area from Cranberry Rock to Shepherd’s Rock, where the tors are of most frequent incidence, it has been calculated that they occupy only some 15% of the line of the ridge.

A roll-call of the tors from south to north runs as follows (see also figure XX): There is no tor as such on ‘Black Rhadley Hill’ but there are some cliff-like exposures just
southwest of its summit. At the former Rock Farm and ‘The Rock’ are two outcrops from which chaotic masses of stone run down steep slopes. From there, going northeast, the ridge runs on via a modest exposure to ‘Nipstone Rock’ and then through an un-named outcrop to ‘Cranberry Rock’. The Ordnance Survey records no name for the next two tors but the first is sometimes referred to locally as ‘Diamond Rock’ and the second ‘Saddle Rock’; ‘Manstone Rock’, the summit of The Stiperstones, is the next tor named on the OS map. Running on northeast an un-named tor, lying on the east side of the path along the ridge, is followed, almost immediately on the west side by ‘The Devil’s Chair’. Thereafter ‘Scattered Rocks’ describes a discontinuous series of small exposures, followed by ‘Shepherd’s Rock’ and a run of smaller tors the most impressive of which is called ‘Habberley Rock’.

The names of some of the tors are self explanatory, such is the case with ‘The Rock’ and ‘Scattered Rocks’; ‘Shepherd’s Rock’ may have been regarded by graziers as a useful lookout from which to survey their flocks, and from ‘Habberley Rock’ there are paths leading on to the village of that name.

And how have they earned their names? ‘Cranberry Rock’ is a good place for finding the red berries of the ‘dwarf-shrub’ locally referred to as Cranberry but which in flower books is called Cowberry Vaccinium vitis-idaea. ‘Cranberry Rock’ is sometimes called ‘Lion Rock’, and when viewed from the side one can pick out the profile of a lion lying down with its head pointing to the southwest (figure 1.x).

Next comes a small but photogenic pile of monoliths; the angularity of the proudest of them endowing the group as a whole with the name ‘Diamond Rock’.

South of ‘Manstone Rock’ is a tor sometimes referred to as ‘Saddle Rock’, presumably because of the lie of the adjacent ground: from here running north to ‘Manstone Rock’, the profile of the hill appears smooth before it rises sharply to ‘Manstone Rock’ itself, and when viewed as a whole the it looks like a saddle, with ‘Saddle Rock’ forming the pommel. Doubtless ‘Manstone Rock’ is so-called because of the natural detached pillar close to its northern end, which juts up like an Easter Island statue or ‘man stone’. But the name ‘Pinnacle Rock’ is sometimes used too, presumably because of the upstanding man-made triangulation pillar on the summit of the tor, marking the highest point of The Stiperstones, 536 metres (1,760 feet) above sea level.

At the north end of the ‘Devil’s Chair’ there is a wide, grassy, chair-like depression with two arm-rests, large enough to seat a devil of gargantuan proportions. Why the Chair should have the Devil’s name on it is the matter of legend rather than logic, but as Ellis Peters (Edith Pargeter) remarks, when it comes to the naming of eye-catching outcrops ‘The Devil is always liable to take a hand, claiming all the best landmarks as well as all the best tunes’.

‘Stone stripes’

The tors were shaped in the vicinity of, but not by, glacial action; as such they are referred to as ‘periglacial’ features. Today The Stiperstones is described as a ‘relict landscape’: weathering continues almost imperceptibly, but the major processes by
which the landscape was formed are no longer active and therefore can only be inferred from observations of what remains in situ and comparisons with other parts of the world where periglacial processes are still active.

Mary Webb is right therefore in her take on this fossilised landscape: ‘this [the quartzite] wore so slowly that many centuries would do no perceptible work on it; minor erosion events might occasionally occur, but ‘such pieces as sometimes broke off and crashed down the slope were only, compared with the pile, like marbles dropped from a palace window.’

As to the much more dynamic processes active in glacial times a lot remains speculative or unexplained. For example, where has all the debris created by the erosion and lowering of so much of the ridge gone? And where is all the material that was prized off the surviving tors by frost action? Where the tors rise above steep rock-strewn slopes, as at The Rock, the answer is obvious. But in the case of, for example, the Devil’s Chair, which stands on very gently inclined ground, gravity alone cannot have carried the material away. What were the processes of ice or water movement which removed so much debris, leaving the tors as such up-standing features?

Richard Clark, who over recent years has studied the periglacial features in considerable detail, draws attention to their similarity to landforms occupying much more extensive areas on the Falkland Islands. He describes not just the tors but also ‘rock platforms’ and ‘stone stripes’, comparing the latter, for which The Stiperstones is particularly well-known amongst geologists, with the ‘stone-rivers’ of the Falklands. (see also MRosenbaum’s reference to Darwin – this needs substantiating if it is to be used).

Aerial photographs of the ridge taken after the severe fires of the very hot, dry summer of 1976 had burned off significant areas of vegetation and peat (figure xx), illustrate the phenomenon well. Areas spared by the fire show stripes of stones alternating with bands of vegetation. Where the fire has burned off most plant growth the initial impression is of an undifferentiated sheet of stone. On closer inspection however a pattern emerges, one of stripes of large stones running down the hillside in parallel lines, alternating with areas where the stone cover appears more dense and uniform, either because the stones are smaller, or because smaller stones are mixed in with the larger ones. And some have looked speculatively to this ‘patterned’ or ‘striped’ ground as the provenance of the hill’s name: ‘Striped Stones’ leading to ‘Stiperstones’.

The stripes in the central area of the ridge between Cranberry Rock and the Devil’s Chair were mapped by A Goudie and N Piggott (figure xx). They found that the stone stripes have mean widths of about 3m, as do the intervening strips of vegetated ground, although some stripes are as much as 7-10m wide. Most of the stones in the stripes are 0.2 to 0.8m in length, but many are bigger, attaining lengths of as much as 2.5m. They are heavy and angular, never rounded, and the slopes over which they have spread are shallow, typically inclined at only 7-12 degrees. Today the material is stable – it is made up of large, angular blocks which are going nowhere – yet in the past they have moved long distances. Although individual stripes can generally only be traced over distances of up to 50-70m, material has
migrated down-slope as far as 300m from its presumed point of origin on the ridge. Goudie and Piggott also found ‘stone polygons’ on the flatter parts; these have diameters of 7-9m, with their centres composed of relatively fine material colonised by plants, and an outer ring of angular boulders.

What forces created this chaos and then imposed a pattern on it? They were clearly elemental, and were not applied at random, but they are not easily explained. There is of course the theory that the stones simply tumbled down the slopes when the strings of the apron in which the Devil carried them broke. It is a beguiling notion, but even taken as a metaphor it is inadequate: a random release of a jumble of stones, by whatever means, cannot explain the patterning of the ground.

Despite a timescale of more than 10,000 years it is difficult to comprehend the forces which could have distributed so much material relatively evenly over such wide and gentle slopes, and in the process sorted it into stripes. Great depths of snow melting during periods of warmer weather could have led to floods of melt-water. However, it is more likely that the water bound within the soil thawed during the brief summers and, unable to percolate downwards due to the permanently frozen sub-soil, the water-logged ground became a slurry of large and small stones together with finer material, which flowed very slowly down the slopes. Bear in mind that as little as 2.5cm of movement per year would amount to 250m over a period of 10,000 years.

But how were the stones sorted into stripes? To the layman explanations for this ‘patterned ground’ appear at best tentative. Nina Piggott gives an explanation in an article entitled *Witches’ stones on Shropshire crags*. During periods of thaw, melt water accumulated in surface cracks and percolated downwards. Intense freezing created wedges of expanding ice which forced the ground between the cracks to heave upwards. This caused larger rock fragments to fall away from the centre and accumulate along the lines of the ice wedges, thereby creating parallel lines on slopes and polygonal shapes on flatter ground.

Richard Clark suggests an explanation based on the development of sub-surface drainage flows which progressively washed away the finer material. The stone stripes are the expression of these sub-surface flows; here all the finer material has been removed, leaving nothing in which heather and other plants can take root. Between the stripes finer material remained in place and here plants can gain a foothold.

Both writers offer these explanations as hypotheses rather than established fact, and their conclusions remain tentative. Neither explanation appears entirely convincing to a layman; even given the undoubtedly unremitting and immensely powerful forces that may work over centuries and millennia in periglacial conditions, it remains difficult to understand how they have worked in such a discriminating way. The question of how the surface debris has come to be so relatively evenly spread, both down-slope and across the hill sides, persists, and why should the pattern of drainage which has created the stripes be so regularly and evenly spaced?
Richard Clark draws attention to another feature of which The Stiperstones provides particularly good examples, analogous again to features found in the Falkland Islands: ‘Crestline Rock Platforms’. These are bare, near-horizontal platforms some 10-20m wide, which cut across the dominant structures in the quartzite (figure 1.x). Such platforms have been described from various locations in England and elsewhere, and several theories have been advanced to explain their formation. These theories seek to overcome the difficulty, amongst others, of understanding how the rock eroded to form these platforms was removed across such gently inclined gradients thereby revealing the platforms themselves.

Clark refers to these platforms as ‘cryoplanation surfaces’, a term which indicates once more an origin consequent upon frost action in periglacial conditions. But he notes that ‘widespread recognition of platforms designated “cryoplanation” has not been accompanied by complete elucidation of formative processes even in areas of active periglacial activity’. In other words no one really knows how they were formed.

Fossils

Whilst over the last few decades geological studies in the area of The Stiperstones have concentrated on relatively recent periglacial landforms, earlier researchers concentrated on much older phenomena. Notable amongst these researchers were the successors to Murchison: Professor C Lapworth and W W Watts (a Shropshire lad who became Professor of Geology at Imperial College, London), to be followed by Professor W F Whittard and his assistants and collaborators, notably Messrs T R Fry, M White and W T Dean. Their principal area of study was the Ordovician rocks of what became known as ‘the Shelve Inlier’.

An ‘inlier’ is an area where old rocks are surrounded by younger ones. The Ordovician rocks of the Shelve inlier form an irregular area running to 111 square km (43 square miles), centred approximately on Shelve, which lies two miles west of The Stiperstones. To the south and west of the inlier are rocks of the Silurian period and to the north are the Upper Coal Measures of the Carboniferous; all of these rocks were laid down more recently than the rocks of the Ordovician, but to the east lie older, Cambrian and Precambrian rocks. This is a ‘classic’ geological locality, one that forms a standard or model of its kind – a ‘type area’. So the name Shelve, described aptly enough by Dean as ‘an otherwise obscure hamlet’, appears in the geological text books and is known to students of the subject across the world.

During the formation of the rocks of this inlier – rocks which show a continuous geological sequence through much of the Ordovician period – the area lay under the sea. On the sea floor the rocks were laid down as sediments within which were embedded the remains of sea creatures which lived and died in the sea and on the sea bed. These are the fossils which can be found today and which were the bread and butter of researchers such as Whittard and his assistants. Their efforts
concentrated on finding and describing fossil remains so as to identify the species characteristic of the successive layers of rocks, each of which corresponds to a particular time period and particular oceanic conditions.

The Stiperstones Quartzite provided scant material however. Murchison noted worm tubes or burrows (figure XX from Siluria), G H Morton states that ‘… casts of seaweeds, Crusiana, have been found’ and Peter Toghill refers to rare specimens of the trilobite Neseuretus. The Mytton Flags were more productive, yet, as W T Dean says, even these are not obviously fossiliferous, and the casual fossil hunter will find them unrewarding. It takes an expert to home in on them, one such as Whittard’s research assistant Tom Fry, who ‘displayed a remarkable aptitude for obtaining faunas from even the most unpromising strata’. In the Mytton Flags he found trilobites (of which more later) graptolites (small, floating, colonial organisms, now extinct) and gastropods (molluscs).

Between 1955 and 1966 Whittard published an eight part monograph on the trilobites of the inlier, to which Dean added a concluding part in 1967 (Whittard having died the previous year). Trilobites were primitive sea creatures with jointed limbs; they ranged in size from 0.55mm to nearly 1m in length, but were typically 3-10cm long. They are amongst our most familiar fossils (figure xx) and more than 3,900 species have been described. They had their widest distribution and greatest diversity in the Cambrian and Ordovician periods (545 to 443 million years ago), but became extinct in the Permian (some 275 million years ago). Whittard and his assistants found some 6,000 trilobites in the Shelve inlier, identifying 119 species and 8 subspecies of which 62 species and 3 subspecies were new to science. Some bear scientific names indicative of the locations in which they were found, including Myttonia confusa and Myttonia multiplex, Bergamia matura and Bergamia rhodesi, Lordshillia confinalis and Rorringtonia flabelliforme (denoting the Mytton, Bergam, Lordshill and Rorrington areas, all of which lie on the west flank of The Stiperstones).

Mining Geology

The Stiperstones was once at the heart of major mining activity. For hundreds of years miners burrowed into mineral veins to west and east of The Stiperstones. The veins, which may be anything from 1cm to 3-5m across, are thought to have been deposited from hot (100° to 500° C) aqueous solutions and vapours rich in dissolved minerals.

The origin of these hydrothermal solutions is debated, but the current theory, as explained by Peter Toghill, is that many originate as mineral-rich brines derived from saline seawater circulating in the earth’s crust; these brines might have penetrated as much as 5km below the surface, gaining more minerals on the way before rising up and being injected as veins into the parent rock, which in the immediate vicinity of The Stiperstones is the Mytton Flags (refer back to figure 85 from P Toghill); the veins do not extend into the Stiperstones Quartzite.

The minerals of greatest economic importance over the years have been galena and barytes. Galena (lead sulphide) is a heavy mineral, blue/grey in colour, cubic in form and with a definite metallic look to it. Barytes or barite (barium sulphate) is a very dense, white, opaque mineral, tabular in shape and remarkably heavy. A number of
other minerals occur, the commonest are sphalerite, calcite and quartz. Sphalerite (zinc sulphide) sometimes called blende or zinc blende, has a bronze metallic look and is complex in shape. Calcite (calcium carbonate) like barytes, is white, but it is translucent, noticeably light in weight and rhomboid in shape. Quartz (silicone dioxide) is very hard, transparent and pyramidal. Amongst rarer minerals are silver, cadmium, iron and copper pyrite, witherite, calamine and cerussite.

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Michael Rosenbaum and Peter Toghill have pointed out that both Arthur Aikin and James Yates had published descriptions of the area in the Transactions of the Geological Society of London before Murchison’s first visit.

Though born in Scotland, Murchison was at school in Durham where he ‘led in mischief’ rather than application. He was groomed for a career in the army, serving during the Peninsular War before resigning in 1815, marrying and settling in England. The years up to 1824 he later described as his ‘fox-hunting period’, but thereafter, with strong support from his wife, ‘who saved him from becoming a mere idler’, he devoted his considerable energies to the pursuit of geology. He had wealth and social position, and the manner and bearing to go with them. Indeed he seems to have been somewhat over-bearing and he gained an unfortunate reputation for giving inadequate credit to his co-workers and helpers. His contemporary, Dr Henry Bull, the Herefordshire polymath, once referred to him as ‘… that Old Grumpy conceited Sir Rodk Murchison’.

Church Stretton resident, Birmingham University lecturer, formerly a geologist with the British Geological Survey and the Natural History Museum and author of Geology of Britain (2000) as well as Geology of Shropshire, various guides and numerous papers. In 2001 he was awarded the Geological Society of London’s R K Worth Prize for the promotion of the public understanding of geology.

Clark Tracey is a percussionist, son of pianist Stan Tracey, ‘the God Father of British jazz’; the other members of the Quintet who performed at Leasowes Bank were Steve Melling (piano), Guy Barker (trumpet), Jamie Talbot (tenor saxophone) and Alec Dankworth (double bass); Alec is son of John Dankworth and Cleo Laine, two other major figures in British jazz. The Quintet recorded ‘Stiperstones’ (Steam SJ115) and subsequently took it on a British Council supported tour which included a number of venues in the Far East. Clark Tracey, with a different line-up, brought ‘Stiperstones’ to the Leasowes Bank Festival again in 2006.

Inspired perhaps by Music at Leasowes Bank, a pop festival has sprung up a mile or so to the south at Near Gatten Farm, where since …. a miniature Glastonbury has erupted each ?August. (two items to check)

Whilst acknowledging that the ‘Silurian kingdom’ was centred on South Wales, Murchison argued that its limits probably extended north and east to the banks of the Severn. Sinclair & Fenn (1999) point out that Murchison benefited from the practical support, patronage and hospitality of ‘the border squires’, not least the Lewises of Harpton Court on the Radnorshire-Herefordshire border, who owned a farm and farmhouse built of the local limestone; the farm was, and still is, called Siluria, leading to speculation that this was at the origin of Murchison’s naming of the geological period.

Brown (1971).

Clark (1994).

The Golden Arrow (1916).
Chapter 2

‘Wold ancient mines’: miners and mining

Wold ancient mines they be, and a vast of lead’s been took from ’em, time and agen.

Mary Webb *The Golden Arrow* (1916)

The Centurion: chain-ganger

‘Beneath The Stiperstones, clothed in woods of oak and pine, is a small clearing, close to the village now called Snailbeach. This is the entrance to the Roman lead mine, one of the chief causes, it is said, for the Roman settlement in Shropshire … Outside the mine, on this autumn morning [of about 125AD] … stands a young Centurion of the Thracian cohort, hawk nosed and dark of eye, waiting impatiently for the moment when the convoy will be ready to start.’

Mary Webb, the novelist (see Chapter 3), imagines this convoy of lead setting out from Snailbeach on its journey to Uriconium (Wroxeter), the Roman city which lies 7km (4 miles) south-east of Shrewsbury and 20km (12½ miles) from Snailbeach. Mary Webb was fascinated both by The Stiperstones, where, as she knew, the Romans had mined for lead, and by Uriconium, and brings the two together in her essay ‘The Return of the Romans: a dream of Uriconium’.

The Romans obtained lead by the quarrying of outcropping veins. They may have done so at Snailbeach but any evidence has long been obscured by subsequent workings. Their main area of activity was probably at a mine later called ‘Roman Gravels’, which lies 3km (2¼ miles) west of The Stiperstones (figure 2.x showing the ore fields and mine locations). It is likely that the Centurion oversaw the work of chain-gangs of slaves and prisoners. Amongst their implements may have been ‘ancient wooden spades’, as shown in 1856 to Thomas Wright, the antiquarian, by the Rev T F More of Linley Hall. These were said to have come from Roman lead workings and they feature in an article by Wright in *The Illustrated London News* (figure 2.x).

But apparently the Romans mined as well as quarried. Roderick Murchison mentions reports that they had reached a depth of more than 100 yards. Fred Brook and Martin Allbutt, twentieth century historians of the lead mines, state that in the 1870s miners broke into workings 50 feet below the surface which contained pottery and tools from the Roman period.

The lead which they unearthed was presumably smelted in the immediate vicinity of the mines. William Hooson in his *Miner’s Dictionary* of 1747 mentions ancient smelting sites called ‘boles’: ‘… upon the hills, called Stiperstones in Shropshire there may be found very common, and are very little places, and they seem to have done their business by laying a round row of stones on the ground, and placing the fire in the middle; they picked the ore on, or near the surface of, the ground on those hills, and perhaps melted not one hundred weight in one place’. In 2004, when carrying out a ‘walk-over’ archaeological survey, Hugh Hannaford found what he thought might possibly be examples of such ‘boles’ at The Hollies, overlooking Lordshill.
The Centurion will have been overseeing the transport of ‘pigs’ (moulded bars) of lead. Roger White, a leading expert on Uriconium, describes three Roman ‘pigs’ found in Shropshire – at Snailbeach and at Aston and Snead, respectively 5km (3 miles) north-west and 3km (2 miles) north of Bishop’s Castle. All have identical inscriptions IMP[eratoris] HADRIANI AVG[vsti], i.e. [Property] of the Emperor Hadrian Augustus (figure 2.x) (Hadrian was Emperor from 117 to 138 A.D) and each is marked with a palm branch (a symbol of unknown significance). The Aston pig carries the initials ‘MINB’ and that from Snailbeach ‘NSI’, thought likely, in each case, to be the initials of the mining official responsible for their production. Each is a real ‘lead weight’, coming in at 86 kg (190 lb). Members of the Shropshire Mines Trust cast a replica ‘pig’ in 2003; it is kept in the ‘Miners’ Dry’ at Snailbeach.\(^{10}\) (check that this is correct)

The Romans used lead for water pipes, to line pools, cover roofs, make coffins, and as a constituent of pewter. But above all perhaps, they were in search of silver, which can be refined from some lead ores by a process known as cupellation. Shropshire ores will have proved a disappointment to them however, as they have a low silver content. So the silver for the Roman spoon and ‘Greystone Treasure’ in Malcolm Saville’s Lone Pine Five (see Chapter 5) will have come from further afield.

The history of the Stiperstones lead and barytes\(^{16}\) mines from Roman times onwards has been researched and recorded in writings, drawings and collections of photographs by, amongst others, Fred Brook, Martin Allbutt, Ivor J Brown, Ken Lock, Roger White, Malcolm Newton, Adrian Pearce, the Shropshire Caving and Mining Club and Shropshire Mines Trust. It is on their researches, and Never on a Sunday, that this chapter is based. It seeks to explain something of the workings of the mines through the activities of those who owned, managed and toiled in them, but aims also to touch on the lives of the miners. It draws, where possible, on the experience of known individuals in order to personalise what was effectively the occupation of an entire community and, in common with the rest of this book, it uses literary sources to add colour to the narrative.

**Madoc ap Einion, Lawrence and Lovett: tenants and entrepreneurs**

After the Roman period, it is not until the twelfth century that there is further substantive evidence of mining activity. In 1181 Hugh Pentulf, Sheriff of Shropshire, received £55 for ‘the King’s lead’ from mines at ‘Schelfe’ (Shelve). In the same year Madoc ap Einion paid 40 marks for a five-year lease on the same mine and a year later 110 cart-loads of lead were sent to Gloucester for repairs to the church roof at Amesbury. During the reign of Henry II (1154-1189) activity was significant enough for him to lay down laws specific to the mining of lead in the Stiperstones Forest.\(^{16}\) Much later (1552), a John Clifton is recorded as holding a mine in Hogstow Forest, possibly at Snailbeach. It is probable that throughout this period ‘mining’ continued to be essentially a quarrying activity and that it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth century that lengthy tunnels and shafts were dug underground.

In 1676 and again in 1686 a group of Derbyshire miners took out leases at Snailbeach. In 1739 a company from Coalbrookdale in east Shropshire sank a shaft at The Bog. The Grit Mine (near Shelve) was first sunk in 1750, Snailbeach came into its own in the 1780s and, one by one, the other lead mines of the area were sunk. Eventually there were in excess of 50 mine sites, although many were speculative rather than productive ventures.
Amongst the leading families and entrepreneurs were the Lawrences. Fred Brook and Martin Allbutt describe how the family held a series of leases on mines at the Grit from the early seventeenth century up until 1825. John Lawrence, a local man, worked his way to the fore and, by the end of the eighteenth century, he had established a controlling influence over every major mine in the area with the exception of Snailbeach.

Lawrence and his partners established the White Grit Company in the 1760s and by 1800 it was the biggest enterprise in the area. By 1783 the workings were deep enough to require a pumping engine to keep them dry and one was purchased at a price of £900 from the firm of Boulton and Watt in Birmingham; it operated to a depth of 60 yards (figure 2.x Brown 01 p 12). But we learn that two years later the engine was sold and John Lawrence resorted to taking easily-won ore from mines at Roman Gravels, Batholes, Pennerley and The Bog, working from adits (horizontal excavations into hill-sides) rather than digging deep shafts in which water accumulated. Lawrence also set up smelt mills at Malehurst and Pontesbury and controlled four collieries in the Shrewsbury Coalfield.

Meanwhile, the Grit mine became neglected, and in 1825 the landlord refused to renew the Lawrence lease which passed instead to Messrs Lewis and Phillips. They were both involved in the Leigh Tunnel Drainage Company which proposed to drive a five-mile long level to drain all the mines in the areas of the Gravels and the Grit. John Lawrence junior took the matter to court where he won four lawsuits but impoverished himself and was obliged to sell all his mining and smelting interests. By 1835 the Lawrence possessions had all been lost.

While the Lawrences’ fortunes foundered, those of Thomas Lovett and his nine partners in the ‘Snailbeach Company’ prospered and Snailbeach became the principal mine in the area. The company was formed in 1783 and its business expanded to the point where it employed some 500 workers. The evidence of their extraordinary labours is tangible – mine shafts and adits, a complex and far-reaching network of deep underground workings and huge surface mounds of spoil – yet we know the life histories of few of the individuals involved. An exception is Samuel Hughes, whose story touches on many aspects of community life, others include members of the Hewitt family. This narrative draws on their lives and work.

**Samuel Hughes: miner**

Samuel Hughes was born at Habberley in 1809. At the age of 12 he was put to work underground at the Snailbeach Mine where he toiled for most of his life. In 1878, the year of his death, a Memoir of the late Samuel Hughes, a Shropshire Miner was published.ix Samuel’s life story is of course unique, but it includes elements common to hundreds of those working at mines around The Stiperstones. It is used here to shed some light on the unchronicled and forgotten lives of nineteenth century miners and their families and as a cue for outlining working practices in the mines. Samuel Hughes’s story is supplemented with details from the lives of others with connections to the mines, whether as miners, owners, managers or mine historians, and recollections from Never on a Sunday.

The young Samuel walked to work from Habberley 1¾ miles (2.5 km) to the north-west of Snailbeach. By the standards of the time it was a modest distance, but once at the mine, there was still a lot of leg work to do. Until the 1870s access within the mines was usually by timber ladderways built into the shafts. In 1863 Samuel Hughes’s contemporary, Samuel
Jones of Snailbeach, reported that it took him 30 minutes to climb down to his workplace each day and an hour to climb back out. Underground the two Samuels and their like worked to free the mineral from its surrounding rock: drilling holes, mostly by hand, but from the early 1880s with drills powered by compressed air (figure 2.x Brown 01 p96); filling the holes with explosive and then firing them, thereby loosening the mineral; loading it into barrows or wagons; pushing or hauling these along tramways to where the level met the main shaft; then transferring the mineral into ‘kibbles’ (figure 2.x Brown 01 p4) or other containers for winding up to the surface.

Some of the miners were referred to as ‘tutworkers’: they sank shafts, drove tunnels and hauled materials, and were often paid by distance gained – so much per yard. Others were ‘tributers’: they won the ore and were paid on the amount, and sometimes the quality, of the ore obtained – so much per ton. By agreement with the mine company the miners worked between six and eight hours per shift, which included getting to and from the underground workplace, with up to an hour’s break for food. The work was gruelling but the hours shorter than we might have assumed. Candles provided the only light. They were lodged on ledges within the mines as well as being fixed with a ‘gob of clay’ to the hats the miners wore – bowlers hardened with resin. This head gear (figure 2.x poss Brown 01 p90 though this is Wotherton Mine or 95) may have been of some use for getting to and from work sites but can hardly have been practical during active work.

**Samuel Hughes: reveller**

Samuel Hughes confessed in later life, that at about the age of 18, following the death of his father, ‘he gave loose to the reins of folly and wickedness; the wake, the fair, the races and sometimes even fights were the objects of his delight’. It may be that the fights were at the local inns. If so, he may have frequented ‘The Crown’ which stood 415m (1,362 feet) above sea level on the eastern flank of The Stiperstones overlooking Pennerley and The Bog. Licensed ‘out of memory’ as a ‘beer house’, ‘The Crown’ appears to have closed in about 1902, but its ruins can still be found and its reputation has been handed down. Nearly a hundred years later Les Hotchkiss (born nearby in 1927), reminiscing for Never on a Sunday, recalled being told that ‘… men used to come [to ‘The Crown’] from the Bridges for bare knuckle fights’. Henry Jones (born 1930), another Pennerley resident, remembered that ‘It was said they could hear for a mile the miners singing in The Crown on a Saturday night … Mrs Chidley [the landlady] used to sweep the beer that had been spilt on the floor out through the door with a broom after they’d gone.’

Other drinking places serving the mining community included ‘The Miners’ Arms’, ‘The Stiperstones Inn’ and ‘The Cross Guns’; all were the property of the mine owners. ‘The Miners’ Arms’ at The Bog was first licensed in about 1845; it finally closed in the early 1960s and is now a private house, as is ‘The Cross Guns’ at Crowsnest, which was open from about 1838 to 1934.

Henry Owen (born 1918) recalls ‘The Miners’ Arms’ as ‘a wonderful meeting place’ where rents were paid and ‘three parts of the tenants would get drunk’ on rent day, and Les Hotchkiss remembers that it was ‘a rare place in the old days’. Clifford Lewis (born 1923), and himself a peaceable man, recalled it as ‘a good fighting place’ and Jim Booth (born 1928), whilst acknowledging a degree of hyperbole, recollects that ‘every other weekend they used to reckon the ditches down from The Bog pub would be running with blood!’
But Henry Owen remembers it too as a place for playing dominoes, quoits and tippet. Tippet was played by teams of four or five sitting opposite each other. The team holding the tippet, a button, would put their hands on the table and their opponents would have to guess in which hand the tippet was held. Les Hotchkiss recalls that there were ‘some very good tippet players, they’d study the expressions on people’s faces’. But this was an exclusively male pursuit, as was billiards and other games played in the club houses at Crowsnest, Tankerville and The Bog. As Graham France (born 1921) recalls ‘It was men only – no ladies. They would be at home doing the housework. Any woman going to the pub was [considered to be] a slut!’

According to the 1901 ‘Returns of Licensed Houses’, the original licence for ‘The Stiperstones Inn’ dates back ‘out of memory’; it continues to serve residents and visitors to this day. In 1901 it is recorded as being owned by the Earl of Tankerville, and as having six bedrooms and stabling for 14 horses. Today it is owned by the Sproson family, has how many? bedrooms and stables two race horses owned by former publican John Sproson.

**Samuel Hughes: house-builder**

Samuel Hughes married at 22 and started a family, but where to live? The mines were busy, operations labour-intensive, and employment high: Snailbeach Mine is said to have employed 550 in 1851 and there were probably in the order of 1,000 working at the Stiperstones mines at that period. It had become a busy area. Many of the miners were itinerants and according to the evidence of Captain Henwood of Snailbeach (i.e. mine captain?) in the Kinnaird Commission Report of 1863: (more detail) ‘…during the week the miners use cabins and barracks near the shaft and the smelters have bedrooms in the smelting house yard’. Other miners were ‘scattered over the hill’, but housing was scarce and land was sought after for the grazing of animals and growing of crops to supplement mining wages and sustain growing families.

To find accommodation the miners moved up the valleys and onto the hill (figure 2.x David Pannett’s map showing occupied dwellings as against the position 100 years later). The highest dwelling on The Stiperstones was occupied at this time. It stands at 465 metres (1,526 feet) above sea level, overlooking Perkins Beach; today it is a complete ruin but is still referred to by name as ‘Tin House’, presumably because latterly corrugated iron (‘tin’) covered the roof. Others call it ‘Mary Webb’s Cottage’, (figure 2.x from Reid Chappell) and though never lived in or owned by Mary Webb, it is a good candidate for Stephen Southernwood and Deborah Arden’s cottage in *The Golden Arrow*, ‘standing wide-eyed facing the Devil’s Chair’, and this may perhaps account for the name.

In Perkins Beach itself, a hill settlement developed running up the steep gradient to a point almost as high as ‘Mary Webb’s Cottage’; presumably its residents worked in the adjacent Perkins Beach and New Venture mines. It is surely to the now long-abandoned cottages of this settlement that Mary Webb refers in *The Golden Arrow*: ‘Below Stephen’s cottage … the hamlet of Lostwithin clung to the slope of the hill with frenzied tenacity; the cottages looked like small stones taking part in a huge landslip.’

However, Samuel Hughes found somewhere to live which was closer to his work and at lower altitude, building a cottage in Crowsnest Dingle (find out where). What sort of house
did he build? We don’t know, but some indications of the housing of this period (the 1830s) come from A Short History of Perkins Beach Mine, an anonymous essay of 1898, which describes the period just prior to 1860:

‘In those days it was customary with the mining population for want of better accommodation to select a site on the mountain, then obtain assistance of a few of their fellow workmen. Some … would then repair to the adjoining plantations and for a nominal price purchase a quantity of larch … Meantime the other portion of men could be employed building walls with sods. The first consignment of timber arriving, one or two, who were considered to be the most expert with axe and saw, would commence forming a roof to the habitation. This would be ‘slated’ with the class of material the walls were built of. When convenient a scanty coat of straw, generally mixed with heather, may be laid on the top to ensure it was waterproof. The ground floor [would] consist of the natural subsoil.’

This, then, was the ‘Squatter’s Cottage’, a crude structure of sods, ‘thatch’ and poles. The ‘Short History’ reports that by next morning the Lord of the Manor or his Agent would arrive to demand a rent, albeit nominal, granting an allotment adjoining for a garden plot. ‘Many of these structures as time went on, and with an agreement between the Landlord and the squatter, have been made into convenient dwellings and a cow, sometimes two, have been kept, thereby greatly enhancing the value of what aforetime was nominally a barren mountain.’

Over time then, the original crude structure would presumably have been replaced with stone walls and a roof of thatch, slate or tiles. So the very few so called ‘squatters’ cottages’ that survive today, built of stone, squared timber and tile, though cramped and basic, are far removed from their antecedents (Figure 2.x Ian Newton’s drawings of the cottages at BMG). The process was described to Magdalen Weale in the 1930s by ‘old Mrs Pugh’ who told her ‘the history of her little home’:

‘Hastily and by night her husband built it, first a hovel with a turfed roof and an impoverished chimney. Then they kindled the precious fire which was to give them the right to live; for if by morning smoke was seen issuing from the chimney, “I see smoke!” the neighbours would cry and the word would go round that a newcomer had earned the right to live among them. Then with stones from the Chair a cottage arose, next a patch of wild moorland was reclaimed, and now two cows graze in fields fenced against the ever-watchful heather eager to come back into its own.’

And why did the Lord of the Manor allow these squatters living space? The explanation is provided in an interview for Never on a Sunday with Mr Roger Hulton-Harrop whose family formerly owned mineworkings: ‘… you get nothing for nothing. To get the minerals you needed miners and they needed somewhere to live with their families … The miners needed somewhere to live so that the family [i.e. the landowners] could make a profit from the land’.

Samuel Hughes: believer

One day, when in his mid-twenties, it will have been 1833 or 1834, Samuel Hughes saw people building Lordshill Baptist Chapel; amongst them was the minister gathering stones. Samuel was surprised and thought ‘There certainly must be something more in religion than I have ever been aware of.’ He heard the first sermon in the new chapel and ‘became a regular
hearer’. Eventually, after much doubt, soul-searching and torment, he became a member at the little chapel, began to teach in the Sunday school and to speak at the prayer-meetings, becoming a lay preacher. His Memoir contains the words he wrote of 37 hymns and spiritual songs. One, written in 1848, records the death of Mary and Annie, two of his children; they died on the same day.

It is clear from Never on a Sunday that such tragedies were not exceptional. Diphtheria, scarlet fever, tuberculosis and measles in particular, killed many, especially the young. Emily Griffiths (1917-1999) recounts how

‘… there was a terrible scourge, they said it was scarlet fever but I should think it was something more virulent than that, probably diphtheria; but every small child in the area died and my grandmother lost her three little boys within a fortnight, there was the five year old, the two and a half year old and the baby, a few weeks old.’

Given the religious persuasions of the community, Samuel Hughes’s involvement with the Baptist church is unsurprising. Never on a Sunday explains how, in common with many other mining districts, nonconformism took a strong hold from the early years of the nineteenth century. By 1803 Baptists were meeting at a house in Snailbeach; some years later they started using the blacksmith’s shop of the Snailbeach mine and after meeting there for 15 years were in the throes of building their own chapel at Lordshill when seen by Samuel Hughes.

From 1840 attempts were made to hold regular Methodist services in Snailbeach; by 1859 a permanent congregation had been established and in 1876 the Methodist Chapel was finally built. At the same time other chapels were being established at Pennerley and Perkins Beach, as well as a Meeting House, long since ruined, at The Paddock, a settlement on the north-eastern fringe of the ridge abandoned in the mid twentieth century.

The building, in 1872, of St Luke’s Church, on the edge of Snailbeach, was an attempt by the Anglicans to establish a ‘mission’ church, but it had little early success; a note in the register recorded that the Church ‘… has unfortunately been closed on and off owing to the utter indifference of the people up here’. By contrast the local chapels grew in strength, probably reaching their peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, meeting spiritual and moral needs and providing an important focus for the life of the community.

Samuel Hughes’s religious devotion was no exception; the mining communities as a whole were devout. Three of the seven miners killed at Snailbeach on 6 March 1895, when the winding rope lowering their cage down Old Shaft broke, were lay preachers.

Stephen Southernwood, foreman at the Lostwithin Mine in Mary Webb’s The Golden Arrow was a lay preacher too, though his faith proved fickle. Webb’s description of the ugly red-brick chapel where Stephen preaches and is first seen by Deborah Arden, appears however to be based on none of The Stiperstones chapels: ‘Above the door, with a nervous and pardonable shuffling of responsibility (apparently by the architect) were the words, “This is the Lord’s doing”’.

By contrast, the charming chapel and minister’s house at God’s Little Mountain in Mary Webb’s Gone to Earth, is evidently, both by location and synonymity, if not by architecture
Lordshill Chapel (figure 2.x Brown 2001 p22): it became in turn the setting for the film of the same name (see Chapter 4). It was the building of this chapel that had so moved Samuel Hughes in the 1830s, though it had been rebuilt by Mary Webb’s day, and by then ‘the graveyard, where stones, flat, erect, and askew took the place of a flower-garden’ included the grave of Arthur Wardman, one of the lay preachers killed in 1895.

(is there any family or residence connection between Samuel Hughes and Hewitts or Robert’s – where did Samuel live in CND?)

**Tankerville, Bath and More: landowners**

Land for the building of Lordshill Chapel had been provided by Lord Tankerville (where from?), plus link to Dennis?) who, along with the Marquis of Bath (of Longleat in Wiltshire), the Mores of Linley, near Bishop’s Castle and the Lister family, Lords of Rowton (where from?), were the principal mine owners. As landlords they let their mining rights and received in return rents and royalties, an important source of income. It was not perhaps surprising therefore that in 1907, with production on the wane, the Seventh Earl of Tankerville stayed in the area for a short time trying to promote the mines, though the promotional value of the photographs he handed out of himself and his wife, Lady Leonora, in Coronation robes is unclear (figure 2.x, Brown 2001 p 13).

The Earl and Lady Leonora associated with evangelists and participated in services in chapels and the open air. An earlier Earl (which one?) had, in the 1830s, provided the land for the building of Lordshill Chapel. Whilst he may have been swayed by evangelism the opportunity to get one over on the Marquis of Bath, who owned the neighbouring land, is said to have been persuasive too. The Marquis was ‘high church’ and had refused to allow the Baptists to build on his land. They approached Lord Tankerville instead, in the hope that a recent dispute with the Marquis over shooting rights might make him more sympathetic. The outcome was permission to build their chapel just across the stream which separated Tankerville’s land from that of the Marquis, and apparently the Earl of Tankerville both preached and sang in the new chapel. The original chapel of the 1830s was practically rebuilt in 1873, being enlarged to its present seating capacity of 350 (can this be right?). Today services are only occasional, the congregation meeting instead in the ‘Ore House’ (where crushed lead was formerly stored) at Snailbeach.

The seventh Earl of Tankerville was not the only landowner to seek to promote the mines. In his memoir *A Tale of Two Houses* (1978) Jasper More MP (1907-1987) of Linley recounts with humour and gusto the vain hopes of his impoverished father (T J Mytton More) that the mines, which had been a major asset to his family in the nineteenth century, would rescue the More family fortunes in the twentieth. Jasper recalls that ‘Part I’ of his father’s annual summer holiday ‘Talk’ to his sons majored on how remarkable it was that so few people realised the antiquity and importance of the More family. ‘Part II’ was the ‘Whole Sad Story’ detailing his father’s grievances against family and government. ‘Part III’ was the extraordinary failure of mining companies to appreciate the great wealth that lay under the turf of the Linley Estate. According to Jasper’s father:

‘A company was now [circa 1918] interested in the mines and talking in big figures, but these people never took proper advice and now they had started at the wrong end, not actually on the Linley Estate and everyone who knew anything about it knew that our mines were the
most productive and our lead was the best. Incidentally he was having a diviner over in a day or two and I must come and watch him. But there wasn’t only lead, there was also barytes and also probably lots of other minerals. And then the timber …. And then there was the quarry …

In honour of the diviner we would be taken by motor to the northern end of the estate and would alight on one of the old slag heaps. Maps would be produced and there would be much talk of veins and lodes and faults … The diviner would get his bearings and set out with measured tread while we watched spell bound. Suddenly the metal semicircle would heel over and hit the diviner smartly in the stomach … “There’s surely metal here,” he would say; and my father’s face would glow with satisfaction. After a few more similar performances my father would commission a Report. These Reports, of which my father ordered several in his life and which must have cost him a sizeable sum, were all to the same effect; that the metal was undoubtedly there and that all that was needed was someone with the sense and the money to come and work it.’

**Henry Dennis: mine manager**

‘Adventurers’ such as the Lawrences and Lovetts and their business partners were needed for a mining enterprise to get underway. Individuals such as these, who were willing to advance the necessary capital, were vital, but critical to success was the employment of a capable mine manager. He needed to be a man of calibre and experience, with a high degree of engineering, commercial and management skills; it appears that Henry Dennis (1825-1906), who took over at Snailbeach in 1871, was just such a man. He was described by mine historians Martin Albutt and Fred Brook as ‘a veritable dynamo of initiative and drive’. *(figure 2.x Brown 01 p54.)*

Henry Dennis was born at Bodmin, Cornwall, where he first worked for the Cornish Railway Company. In 1850 he came to Wales, setting up in Ruabon in 1857 as an independent surveyor and mining engineer. By the close of his career in 1906 he had ‘surveyed the Glynn Valley Tramway and the Snailbeach District Railway, sunk various collieries, worked his own Legacy colliery from 1870 to 1875, built gas and water works near Ruabon, founded the present day brick and tile firm of Dennis Ruabon, operated lead mines at Llangynog and, with his son, conceived the famous Gresford colliery sunk in 1908’. Engaged initially as general manager of the Snailbeach Company, Henry Dennis along with Thomas Heaton Lovett and John Jones, was to head the company which took over the Snailbeach Mine in 1885.

**?Dennis and the chapel**

From 1871 onwards Henry Dennis carried out extensive modernisation of the mine and its services, including surveying the route of the Snailbeach District Railway (see Chapter 3). Other innovations included the Compressor House supplying compressed air to winches and drills operating underground. Such mechanisation led to a reduction in the work force from 500 in 1851 to 130 in 1878, but by the end of the nineteenth century the mine still struggled to be competitive against lead now being imported from open-cast workings in Spain and Australia.

A particular problem, addressed by Henry Dennis through the construction in 1872 of the ‘New’ Reservoir at Snailbeach, was the provision of water. The element that was such a
nuisance below ground was nevertheless, in the words of Ivor Brown, ‘an essential commodity for all working mines … needed often as a source of power, for dressing ore and for the steam engine boilers … on a mine surface there was rarely sufficient of it.’ At Snailbeach, a gathering system of ditches and culverts brought water to the Reservoir from more than a kilometre away at the north end of the Stiperstones ridge, where channels were dug to bring the water from east to west against the lie of the land. Smaller reservoirs may be seen at all the significant mine sites; a number of them are now important for wildlife.  figure 2.x Cover of Gordon Dickens literary guide

John Hewitt, Alfred Hewitt and Jack Hewitt: mine workers

By the time that Henry Dennis became manager of Snailbeach Mine, Samuel Hughes had moved on. We learn that ‘when [his] health and strength began to fail, he removed to the mining district near St Asaph in North Wales, where the prospect of lighter and more profitable employment was held out to him; and afterwards to the coal district near Mold’. He returned however to end his days in his cottage in Crowsnest Dingle.

But amongst the many who did work under Henry Dennis were members of the Hewitt family. A photograph of the Hewitts taken in the 1890s (Figure 2.x Brown 2001 p 36) shows three generations of this mining family. The grandfather, John Hewitt, born in 1835, sits sightless, his eyes covered by a bandage, the result of a mining accident which occurred in 1883. In 1881 compressed air drilling machines had been introduced by Henry Dennis to Snailbeach Mine, and by 1882 four such machines were in use. Long steel drills were used to make holes into which dynamite was introduced and fired, preparing the way for extraction of the minerals. On 15 May 1883 remnants of dynamite in a previously drilled shot-hole exploded when a new hole was being drilled alongside. John Odgers, ‘the foreman of boring machines’, was killed and several miners were seriously injured; amongst them was John Hewitt, whose eyes were so badly injured that thereafter he always wore a bandage across his face.

The young Alfred Hewitt (1878–1974), son of John, and one of 10 children, stands at the right hand end of the back row of the photograph, handsome, smart and doubtless fashionably dressed. Alfred lived well into his 90s, earning the title ‘the last true Shropshire lead mine worker’, but, marked by the accident to his father, he always refused to work underground. He worked on the surface plant at the mine, and also as a servant in the mine manager’s house, and it was on his way there on 6 March 1895 that Alfred saw men stretching out the remnants of the broken rope that had caused the loss of seven lives when the cage it was lowering crashed to the bottom of the mine.

Outside working hours Alfred took part in activities which were common to many of his fellows. As a boy he walked three times each Sunday to Lords Hill Baptist Chapel for Sunday School and services. He was a member of the congregation throughout his life and a founder member of the Snailbeach Brass Band in which he played the cornet; the band still performs today. He sang in the chapel choir and his tenor voice can be heard in the baptismal scene in the film of Mary Webb’s Gone to Earth (see Chapter 4). Check

At the age of 91 Alfred Hewitt (figure 2.x Brown 01 p 36 or better perhaps top photo from page 87 of Pearce 2008) explained to Ivor Brown, the mining historian, the workings of the Lords Hill Pumping Engine where he worked from the mid 1890s until the closure of
the Snailbeach lead mine in 1911. The engine, referred to by Alfred, for reasons now unknown, as ‘Lady Mary Deborah’, pumped water out of the mine, because, as mining progressed and shafts deepened, excess water became a problem. Previously, drainage levels had been dug to evacuate water, but where the topography did not lend itself to this solution, horse-powered winding engines (‘gins’) brought water to the surface in barrels; water wheels were used too, and even man-operated capstans. But in the late eighteenth century steam engines, manufactured by Boulton and Watt in Birmingham, were introduced, and nine are recorded at local mines by 1800. From the 1830s these were replaced by the ‘Cornish type’ of pumping engine which was more powerful and cheaper to operate. These steam engines were housed in massive stone engine-houses which numbered a dozen by 1850, each with a chimney alongside (figure 2.x Pearce p 87 or modern photo, Brown 01 p68 with legend). Their power was used to pump the lower reaches of the mines free of water, and in some cases to carry the miners up and down the shafts and bring the mineral ore to the surface (a process known as ‘winding’) (figure 2.x Pearce p72).

Fred Brook and Martin Allbutt describe how, by the 1870s, the western flank of The Stiperstones was ‘a landscape dotted with the smoking chimney stacks of Cornish pumping engines and with the wooden headgear above the many shafts’. The visitor would have seen ‘large dressing floors where the lead ores were crushed and separated, and at Snailbeach … the large refinery where the ores were smelted into lead. The roads would have been busy with wagons taking coal from the Pontesbury coalfield up to the mines and conveying ore to the railhead at Minsterley from where it was carried to Wales, Deeside and Bristol to be smelted’.

Not all of this was men’s work. Once it reached the surface the ore passed through a variety of processes on the nearby ‘dressing floors’, where some of the work was carried out by women and children working in all weathers with very little cover. The ore was first washed and large pieces were broken down to a manageable size by hand. It then passed though a ‘crusher’. It was presumably to this machine that Mary Webb alludes in The Golden Arrow:

‘From the yard at the spar mine came weird, plaintive sounds, as the rock-crusher ground the body of the mountain to fragments. These sounds were so wild and eerie that they might have been the forlorn music of fairy players sitting, shadowy and huge, in the dim rock-foundations, fiddling madly of nameless terror, fluting of unreachable beauties and rocky immortals, harping on their own heartstrings to the deaf ears of men.’

Alfred Hewitt’s life encompassed the decline and eventual closure of the Snailbeach Mine. He was just 33 in 1911 when the Snailbeach Cornish Engine ceased working and the lead mine closed. It was at this time that he married, so it was particularly fortunate that Black Tom Shaft, right by his home in Snailbeach, was opened for the mining of barytes. He worked there on the ‘horizontal engine’ until its closure in the early 1920s, when he went on to work at the Huglith Barytes Mine before finishing his working life at the County Council quarry at Callow Hill.

It is for lead that the Stiperstones mines are best known, but barytes was latterly of greater importance. During the period for which there are reliable records (1845-1938) Shropshire produced 30% of the UK’s output, almost all of it from the Stiperstones area. Barytes (barium sulphate) has many uses, notably as an inert filler in paint and paper production, in coal washing plants and for barium meals. George Evans (1908-1993) remembers lugging lorry
loads to Liverpool’s many paint mills and says that it was hauled as far as Tonbridge Wells to the Imperial Gramophone Record Company, apparently for mixing with resin for the making of records. Major extraction did not start until the 1850s but by the 1890s barytes had become the most important substance mined in the area as a whole. Extraction continued until the late 1940s and barytes was still being recovered from the spoil heaps at Snailbeach in the 1950s and ’60s, indeed in 1957 a quantity was taken from there to smother fuel cells following an incident at Windscale Nuclear Power Station.

Alfred and his wife Jane had four children. His one son, Jack (1915-1991) worked first at the Burgam Mine and then in the Huglith Barytes Mine. Unlike his father, Jack worked underground, where he ran similar risks to those of his grandfather, John, including that of suffering from silicosis through dust inhalation, a particular issue in the barytes mines. This was not a new problem, but it had become more prevalent from the 1880s onwards with the introduction of the compressed air drill. This blew dust out of the shot holes into the miners’ faces and became known as ‘the widow maker’.

Silicosis caused the premature and agonising death of many miners. The dangers were obvious, but, as W Reid Chappell observed in *The Shropshire of Mary Webb* (1930) ‘The mine meant comparative wealth, even on the chance of a shortened life’, and there was almost no alternative employment. Dorothy Trow (born 1915) recalled the death of her father, Elijah Parry, in 1933 at the age of 45: ‘It was no age, but when you saw him suffering you wished for the Lord to take him, he was gasping for his breath all the time.’ In the light of tragic cases such as this, and the example of his grandfather, it is little wonder that Jack Hewitt soon found employment away from the mines.

**Joe Roberts, Ivor Brown and Ken Lock: scavenging pebble-dash and salvaging heritage**

Jack Hewitt (incidentally he too played the cornet) provides a link with the final phase of mining activity at Snailbeach through his marriage to Doris, daughter of Joseph (‘Joe’) Roberts (1894-1998) (who played the euphonium). Joe’s father, William (c1862-c1935), had started work on the mineral dressing floors at Snailbeach at the age of 13. After one year’s service he was promoted to the position of clerk in the Snailbeach Lead Mining Company’s office, later becoming secretary, serving the company for 37 years in all, up until its liquidation in 1912. Joe himself was to become manager for the Gravels Trading Company, which during the inter-war years worked the upper parts of the Snailbeach Mine for barytes. After 1945 this work was taken over by the Snailbeach Barytes Company which was ‘to all intents and purposes, a one man enterprise in which Mr J Roberts … cleaned out what was left in the upper levels’.

Joe Roberts persevered with underground working up until 1955. He had acquired the mine site (but not the mineral rights) from the Marquis of Bath and was the principal character in these the last years of the Snailbeach Mine. The imprecision of the deeds of conveyance led inevitably to various disputes; in these Joe Roberts was reluctant to beat about the bush. In a dispute with the Snailbeach District Railway he cut off the water supply to the locomotive shed and removed two rails, trapping two of the three locomotives inside. The terms of a subsequent injunction obliged him to release them.

After 1955 Joe Roberts concentrated on working the spoil heaps for the translucent white rhomboids of calcite used as ‘pebble-dash’ in decorative finishes on rendered house fronts.
The salvaging of material previously regarded as waste was to continue at Snailbeach into the 1970s. Similar activity had gone on elsewhere, and in the early days it was all hand work. George Evans remembers that ‘spar’, as it was called, was salvaged from spoil heaps at the Oven Pipe (Tankerville Mine), Round Hill, the Wood Mine and Pennerley, as well as at Snailbeach: ‘You had to turn the tip over, pick out the lump spar, put it in a bucket, carry it up to the top and put it in a ruck – a heap – and you were paid for it by the square yard.’

During Joe Roberts’ lifetime the Stiperstones mines mutated from profitable production to inexorable decline to neglected relic to historical curiosity to valued heritage. When Joe Roberts was born the mines were still active, but by the 1930s Magdalene Weale was labelling this ‘the land of dereliction’, a landscape in which ‘the ruined mine-shafts look utterly forlorn … [and] grey mounds and decayed workings dot the country in mournful profusion’. Her contemporary W Reid Chappell described ‘the road to Pennerley’ as being ‘strewn with the black, mocking mouths of disused mine shafts, broken rusty machinery, derelict tin sheds, set in the cold glitter of the abandoned barytes’. But in Joe Roberts’ later years this wasteland was beginning to excite the interest of mine historians and by the time of his death concerted efforts were being made to conserve the mining remains. This was one of the reasons why Shropshire County Council acquired the Snailbeach mine from his estate in 1990.

That we know something of the mines, mine managers and mine workers of The Stiperstones is thanks in particular to those historians who, starting in the 1950s, had the foresight to salvage memories, photos, artefacts and archives at a time when they were too recent to be properly cherished, when it was difficult to see beyond the scars, ruins and waste heaps to the industrial and community history lying beneath. These enthusiasts safeguarded and researched the history which has since informed the conservation of a significant part of the mining heritage.

Ivor Brown (figure 2.x Brown 01 p71) is perhaps the most industrious of the historians of the Stiperstones mines, and he is notably well qualified. He was born in 1937 into a family of miners who had worked at Madeley Wood Colliery (south of Telford) since at least 1780; Ivor himself worked there from 1952 to 1962. Mining soon became more than just his job. He remembers first visiting the mines of the Snailbeach area on a scooter in 1957. He gave a ‘helping hand’ at Burgam, near Tankerville, the area’s last working metal mine, and at Lordshill Mine too, but more often spent time gleaning what information he could from the old mine workers, in particular Alfred Hewitt. In 1962 he became a mining lecturer, and in 1977 a mining engineer for Telford Development Corporation. Ivor Brown has published well over 300 papers including a number about The Stiperstones mines, as well as books, notably *The Mines of Shropshire* (1976) and *West Shropshire Mining Fields* (2001), which provide an unrivalled pictorial record of the mines of the area, supplemented by his own authoritative annotations.

Ken Lock (19xx–2008) (insert biographical details)

Encouraged by Ivor Brown, Ken Lock and others, a new generation of researchers has explored and documented what survives above and below ground, and has done much to safeguard and make accessible the oral, written and physical remains. Representations to Shropshire County Council made by Shropshire Mining Club (now the Shropshire Caving and Mining Club) and others helped make due regard for the industrial heritage an element of
policy in land reclamation of the type carried out by the County Council at The Bog Mine in the 1980s. This was doubtless a helpful trial-run prior to the much more demanding work carried out at Snailbeach Mine in the 1990s by the County Council and English Heritage. Subsequently Shropshire Mines Trust has taken over management of the Snailbeach Mine site which is now said to have ‘the best set of preserved lead mine buildings in Britain’; ix the Trust has done important work at the Tankerville Mine too and this, like Snailbeach, is open to visitors who can now appreciate something of the grind and grandeur of this remarkable phase of the Stiperstones story.

TW 4/10/08

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ix This is one of two short stories published in 1923 under the title ‘Glimpses of Old Shropshire’, first in the Transactions of the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club and subsequently in the Shrewsbury Chronicle; the other story is entitled ‘Shrewsbury’s Abbey Fair’. Uriconium was being excavated at the time.

ix White’s assumption is based on the discovery of chains in the gold mines worked by the Romans at Dolaucothi, Wales.

ix This building which dates from the mid nineteenth century, was used by as a barracks where men who lived some distance away stayed during the week; it also served as a place where the miners changed before and after their shift. Today it is used to house artefacts and a display and is opened for the use of visiting parties. (check)
Although nowadays called barite, the name barytes is retained here, as it was used throughout the mining period. Lead and barytes were by far and away the most important minerals mined in the Stiperstones mine area but zinc, fluorspar, copper and small quantities of silver were produced too.

‘A ‘Forest’ is land on which the king (or some other magnate) has the right to keep deer. This is the original sense of the word: to the medievals a Forest was a place of deer, not a place of trees.’ (Oliver Rackham (1986) *The History of the Countryside*). About a third of the 142 royal and private Forests, including The Stiperstones, were chiefly moorland.

The *Memoir* was edited by W Benson of Hertford. He knew Samuel Hughes through his family relationship to the Gilpins of Pulverbatch. The Reverend William Gilpin (1757-1848), rector there for 42 years, was the son of the Reverend William Gilpin *dates*, celebrated exponent of ‘the picturesque’ in landscape appreciation. The pious lives of the younger Gilpin’s children and those of their relatives and acquaintances, including Samuel Hughes, are related in *More Than Notion* by J H Alexander (1964).

The Earl of Tankerville also owned ‘The Crown’; the Marquis of Bath owned ‘The Cross Guns’ and Lord Rowton ‘The Miners’ Arms’. This and other information comes from the ‘Return of Licensed Houses’ for 1901 and an exhibition about the pubs and inns of south west Shropshire put together in 2006 by David and Janet Preshous on behalf of the South-West Shropshire Historical and Archaeological Society for Bishop’s Castle’s Michaelmas Fair.

John Sproson continues to manage the adjacent Post Office and Stores. He is truly a legend in his own lifetime, well known for his maverick behaviour and his individuality as a retailer. He keeps his two racehorses adjacent to the Inn, trots around with them in his wake and rides, and falls from them, over The Stiperstones. An earlier celebrity resident was William Humphrey, whose wife, Esther, ran the Inn in the 1930s and ’40s. He was a renowned dog breeder, particularly of the famous Llewellyn *spelling?* Setters, and a falconer, whose mews included ‘Lady Ben Nevis’, a Golden Eagle, which he flew on The Long Mynd and elsewhere. This was courtesy of Max Wenner of Betchcott Hall who owned The Long Mynd at the time and from whom William Humphreys inherited this hill when Wenner died mysteriously in a fall from an aeroplane. George Evans (see Chapter 3) worked for some time as chauffeur to Max Wenner.

Seeking to tie novelists’ descriptions to specific locations can be pointless as they will often be amalgams, translocations or largely imaginary. This description suggests however that Stephen Southernwood’s Cottage was ‘Tin House’ and his work place the mines in Perkins Beach, rather than The Bog, to which Mary Webb’s name ‘Lostwithin’ is normally attached.

Also known as George’s Shaft – the engineman for 21 years at the time of the disaster was George Williams.

Brook (1976)

This is thought to be a site at the Gravels.

Pearce (2008)

Chapter 3

Of railway and ropeway: transport, from ‘car’ to coach

*Everything was done in those days with a horse and cart or pushbike.*

George Evans (1992)
Cars and stretchers

The Snailbeach District News was first published in June 1987 under the editorship of Jack Foley. It consisted of XXX A4 sheets copied on an old ‘Roneo’ duplicating machine (figure 3.x title page from first SDN). From the start it was a free local newsletter delivered by hand to all the residents of Snailbeach and immediately adjacent areas, with copies being sent further afield, even overseas, to former residents. Twenty years and several editors later it still remains required reading for local residents. The News has grown in size, coverage and distribution, but remains free, surviving on goodwill, faithful volunteer editors and distributors, voluntary contributions and local advertisers.

Many of the early editions of the News carried reminiscences by older local residents including, between 1990 and 1994, those of George Evans (1908-1993); these appeared in 45 instalments under the title ‘Recalling the past’, they were subsequently collated and privately published under the title A voice from the hills. ix

Throughout his life George Evans (figure 3.x photo from cover of A voice from the hills) was interested in transport, particularly motorised transport. In an appreciation which appeared in the News following George’s death, Jack Foley refers to him as ‘one of the last generation of horse-drawn carters and one of the first generation of professional motor vehicle drivers’.

George Evans’s reminiscences start with the words ‘As a boy I remember going to Shrewsbury by train [from Minsterley] with my mother and aunt …’, but from there on he concentrates on horse and cart, push-bike, traction engine, lorry and bus. It is a fascinating account, full of historical interest, but it is entertaining too, with many of George’s best stories told against himself – ‘So that was one of the first damn silly things I did … and it’s been like that ever since really’ – mixed with tricks for keeping temperamental engines running and accounts of village life in the first half of the twentieth century.

George Evans’s early recollections include the so-called ‘car’, a device commonly used to move minerals around steep hill-sides: ‘At the Ventor mine, they brought the material out of the level in a tram, which they pushed on lines which they had laid on the floor of the tunnel … it was then re-loaded into a horse-drawn car, as they called it …The car that the horse pulled down the hill had heavy iron runners like a sledge. It weighed about half a ton empty and when loaded they would put a ton or more in it.’ Henry Jones (born 1930) remembers watching an old shire horse called Jack pulling it back up the hill: ‘It was really hard tushing it up – like he’d walk forty yards and he’d stop and pant, he’d walk another forty yards and have a puff.’

Underground there was much ‘tushing’ done by the miners. And above ground there was ‘tushing’ to be done by one and all. Much of the hay was carried by horse and cart, but Doris Hewitt (born 1916) and others remember that in some places it was also carted on two poles: ‘… we carted it on two poles at the Crownsnest but we used horses at Lordshill’. Mary Webb includes an account of this in The Golden Arrow: ‘A twill sheet on two poles reminiscent of an ambulance stretcher, was piled with hay and carried by Joe and John as carefully as if it really were an invalid.’ (fig.3.x ‘Never’ page 67 – name people and provide date)
There was a lot of such carrying and leg work in the past. George Evans recalls that when he was going to school at Stiperstones village ‘it was nothing to walk over the hill to and from school or work – everyone did.’ Phyllis Jones (born 1936) recalls the post round that her mother did on foot from Snailbeach Post Office: ‘Lower Works … Upper Works … Lordshill, to the Vessons, over to the Hollies, up to Blakemoorflat then right over the back of the hill and back down Perkins Beach Dingle, finish the Dingles and walk back home.’ Elsie Rowson (born 1924) recalls that the complete round was 11 miles and 6 furlongs and on occasion she had to carry two ten pound electrical batteries all the way to Gittinshay. (Say post lady and when)

George Evans recounts that, on flatter ground, if you had something to transport ‘you’d see people, women sometimes or young boys, going with some old thing they’d rigged up with wheels on, some old pram perhaps, to the station to fetch a half hundredweight or a hundredweight of coal … and at the same time you would see horses with drays around there collecting and carting the milk.’

Horse transport of minerals, goods and people was of course of crucial importance. (fig 3.x from p74, left, of Never on a Sunday) George Evans remembers for example his grandfather, father and uncle hauling minerals from The Bog Mine and later from the Ventor Mine in Perkins Beach to Minsterley, and Johnny Butler (born 1920) and Della Pugh (born 1916) recall watching horse-drawn timber carriages with four horses in a team hauling timber following the felling in 1925 of trees between Crowsnest and Granham’s Moor.

Push bikes were used for transport, but for recreation too. George Evans remembers that ‘most of us young lads would find an old frame, a wheel and other parts here and there. Usually there would be no spindle in the wheel so a bit of rusty plain fencing wire would have to do. There would be no tyres on the wheels, or brakes, or pedals and it would only go downhill. We would push it up the bank to ride down time and time again.’

**Dennis the engineer and Dennis the tank engine**

Trains had first reached Pontesbury and Minsterley in 1861 following the opening of an extension of the branchline from Shrewsbury, carrying both passengers and freight. This was still some way from the lead and barytes mines of The Stiperstones, but brought opportunities for commercial rail transport within reasonable reach and stimulated thoughts as to how the weighty raw materials clawed out of the mines could be transported onward more efficiently for processing elsewhere in the Midlands.

In 1872 the Snailbeach District Railways Company was incorporated by Act of Parliament; it was authorised to consist of two railways of 2 foot 4 inch gauge. Railway No.1, 3 miles, 2 furlongs, 5.44 chains in length (5.3km), was to run from a junction just west of Pontesbury station, the penultimate stop on the branchline, to Crownsnest (figure 3b.x from Tonks 1974 p 14). The engineer was Henry Dennis (1825-1906), the manager of Snailbeach Mine (see Chapter 2) (figure 3.b.x from Brown 2001, p 54); it was built by a local contractor, Elias Griffiths. This first instalment of the Snailbeach District Railway (SDR) opened for traffic in July 1877; it included a branch serving a smelting works, and another which climbed into the heart of the Snailbeach Mine, as well as serving the railway’s engine shed. It ran at an uninterrupted gradient from Pontesbury to Crownsnest and without any level crossings, so it was ideally suited to the gravity transit of the heavy minerals from the mines back to
Pontesbury. Here there were transhipment sidings allowing freight to be moved from the narrow gauge of the SDR to the standard gauge of the main line and vice versa. Officially, at least, the SDR never carried any passengers.

At the Shrewsbury Smithfield Sale on 4 September 1877, two months after the opening of the railway, one lot was ‘10 carthorses, powerful, upstanding, seasoned, of good ages, 17 hands high etc., for sale in consequence of the completion of the Snailbeach District Railway which will render haulage by road unnecessary’.

Railway No.2 was to be a continuation of the line, working its way across Crowsnest Dingle then along a shelf cut into the hillside and round Mytton Dingle and Perkins Beach, terminating at Pennerley. Bridges 65 feet and 46 feet high were planned to carry the rail line across Crowsnest Dingle and Perkins Beach.

More ambitious still was the proposed Shropshire Minerals Light Railway (SMLR) for which royal assent was given in 1891. The intended course is shown in figure 3b.x (see above). For the first half mile, as far as Crowsnest, it was to run parallel with the Snailbeach District Railway, from where it was to follow, more or less, the route of Railway No.2, with viaducts 100 yards and 93 yards long at Mytton Dingle and Perkins Beach. However, short of the planned terminus at Pennerley of Railway No. 2, it was to head south to The Bog, on round The Rock and then up the east side of The Stiperstones to Gatten Lodge, presumably with a view to serving the barytes mines on this side of The Stiperstones; there was also a branch line planned to the Gravels.

In the words of the late Eric S Tonks, historian of the various Snailbeach District Railways and one time President of the Industrial Railway Society, on whose researches this account largely depends, ‘The SMLR was from the start a much more ambitious scheme than the parent Snailbeach line, totalling more than 11 route miles of track and wending its circuitous way within siding distance of practically every lead mine in the district … a proper switchback throughout … and with but a few hundred yards of level track in the whole of its tortuous length’.

But difficulties had been encountered generating the capital even for Railway No.1, and neither Railway No.2 nor the SMLR got beyond the drawing board. By the time that the SMLR received royal assent, lead mining was in severe decline and though the mining of barytes was filling some of the void, the capital required for such ambitious projects was never forthcoming.

Indeed the history of the SDR is one intimately tied to the ups and downs of the mining and quarrying industries. For many years it was run largely as a subsidiary of the Snailbeach Lead Mining Company, its principal customer, and with the slump in lead mining in the last two decades of the nineteenth century the Railway came close to closure. However, following the opening of the Granham’s Moor Quarry at Eastridge, a new spur of the SDR was constructed and came into service in 1905, this, coupled with the transport of barytes and of materials salvaged from the spoilheaps at Snailbeach by the Halvans Company, led to an upturn in traffic. Over 20,000 tons was transported in 1906, a record for the Railway, and this rose to over 38,000 tons in 1909, before falling away again.
Locomotives named ‘Belmont’, ‘Fernhill’ and ‘Sir Theodore’ worked on the SDR over the years. ‘Dennis’ (also referred to as Number 1) manufactured by Messrs WG Bagnall Ltd of Stafford was delivered in February 1906; its name was a tribute to the engineer of the SDR, Henry Dennis, who died in that year, by his son, Henry Dyke Dennis, now Board Chairman.

**Colonel Stephens and Driver Gatford**

D H Lawrence saw the railway in 1924 on his visit to The Stiperstones in the company of Frederick Carter (see Chapter 6), and it earns a brief mention in his novella *St Mawr* (1925):

‘They [the principal characters, on horseback] rode on slowly, up the steep rise of the wood, then down into a glade where ran a little railway built for hauling some mysterious mineral out of the hill, in war-time, and now already abandoned. Even on this countryside, the dead hand of the war was like a corpse decomposing’.

Lawrence’s account was fictional; in fact, as detailed above, the railway pre-dated the First World War by many years, and by the time that Lawrence saw the SDR, rather than being abandoned, there was an upward trend in its fortunes after some years of decline. There had been a slump in quarry traffic which had almost brought about its closure in 1913 but it limped on through the war years. In 1920 ‘Dennis’, the sole surviving locomotive, had to be taken out of service, leaving the Railway dependent for a time on horse power and gravity prior to temporary closure in about 1921. However, in 1923 a new Board was formed under the chairmanship of Colonel Stephens ‘the first and foremost advocate of the minor railway’ (figure 3.x portrait from p5 of Morgan 1999) and improvements were made to the line and its rolling stock. These increased efficiency and led to a growth in traffic which reached 26,352 tons in 1938; this was of barytes, and more importantly of road stone from a new quarry at Callow Hill.

Lt-Col Holman Fred Stephens (1868-1931), son of a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of painters, showed an interest in railways from an early age and studied engineering before commencing the construction of minor railways. From 1914-1916 he served with the Royal Engineers in Britain (hence his military title). Over his lifetime he had a direct involvement with 16 railway lines, now referred to as ‘the Colonel Stephens’ Railways’, whether as engineer and founder, re-constructor, consultant engineer, operator, chairman or managing director. According to John Scott Morgan, writing of those lines in which Stephens was directly involved in construction works, the common threads were ‘harsh gradients, lightly engineered with numerous level crossings, stations constructed from cheap materials (wood and corrugated iron) and, above all, a rustic charm that was always going to lead to financial decline once alternative means of transport appeared’. Given these predilections it is little surprise that the SDR appealed to him, even though it had no level crossings.

‘Dennis’ was the only engine surviving when Colonel Stephens took over the railway, but it was in sore need of an overhaul, so Stephens acquired ‘Skylark’ (No. 2) second-hand in 1922, and, in 1923, the nameless locomotives Nos 3 and 4, manufactured in the United States and rebuilt after War service in France. ‘Dennis’, despite its intended overhaul, was never to run again. According to Eric Tonks, though this is questioned by other authorities, the railway’s driver, named Gatford, seems to have taken a dislike to the engine and ‘in the course of some
occasionally caustic correspondence with his chief, put forward a number of reasons why the repairs to ‘Dennis’ were delayed’. ‘Dennis’ remained partly in bits outside the engine shed before being officially withdrawn from service in 1936. From about 1940 the track between Callow Hill and Snailbeach was used for light engine workings only, not for haulage. But traffic continued between Callow Hill and Pontesbury and locomotives 2, 3 and 4 remained in operation up until 1946 when the boilers of all three were condemned by an inspector, and steam working finally ended. The railway however continued in operation, albeit by unconventional means, but before covering this aspect of the history of the SDR, more needs to be said about Driver Gatford.

In Eric Tonks’s account Driver Gatford emerges as the long-standing kingpin and hero of the SDR. He hails what he views as his all-important contribution to the railway and acknowledges ‘Fitter-Driver Gatford’ in his foreword, presumably because he had provided him with information. Yet Eric Tonks offers no biographical details of Gatford, no indication as to place and date of birth or death, indeed no Christian name, not even an initial. This despite the beguiling account he offers of Gatford’s contribution, one which we will follow, at least to start with.

By the mid 1930s the railway was, according to Eric Tonks, being run single-handed by Driver Gatford, making for what Tonks describes as ‘a unique achievement’. Gatford, he says, had previously worked on the Bishop’s Castle Railway and, despite his heel-dragging over ‘Dennis’, proved to be a conscientious employee who kept things running as best he could, acting as driver and also stoker, footplate man, fitter and handy-man. His cottage backed onto the railway just below the engine shed, and, when into his seventies, Driver Gatford permitted himself the perk of leaving the engine outside his garden gate each evening, having first taken on coal and water; it stood there overnight ready for the next day’s work.

Driver Gatford’s versatility was to be tested further. In 1946 Nos 2, 3 and 4 were all withdrawn from service having been condemned by the boiler inspector, so Gatford was required to take the wheel of a Fordson tractor, registration BUX 174, which hauled wagons between Pontesbury and Callow Hill. The tractor ran with two wheels between the rails and two outside. This proved possible because, whilst the SDR operated on narrow gauge track, the Act of 1873, under which the railway was established, required that the earthworks on which the track was laid should be wide enough to accommodate standard gauge track. (Figure 3.x from Ivor Brown 2001 p 62, lower or Tonks p36). Eric Tonks recounts that ‘For a time, Driver Gatford continued in charge of the ‘loco’, but soon afterwards retired to his cottage at Snailbeach, to watch the weeds creeping over the metals beyond the hedge.’

So runs Eric Tonks’s account of Driver Gatford’s involvement with the SDR. Others, writing on behalf of the Colonel Stephens Museum and the Bishop’s Castle Railway Society (BCRS), have added personal details of the railwayman and provided a very different account of his curriculum vitae.

Starting with the personal details, Albyn Austin of the BCRS has discovered that his full name was Thomas (Tom) James Gatford, that he was born in Surrey in 1874 and died in Kent in 1946. What did he look like? Well, he is identified in two particular photographs. One, in Eric Tonks’s book, shows him at Callow Hill in 1940, the other, in a book about the Weston, Clevedon and Portishead Railway (WC&P) in Somerset, shows him at Clevedon in 1937
As to the rest of his CV, we learn that there is no record of Tom Gatford having worked on the Bishop’s Castle Railway and that his time on the SDR was neither lonesome nor particularly long. Apparently the railway generally had four staff, including Driver Gatford, who worked there in the 1920s, being transferred temporarily to the Shropshire and Montgomeryshire Railway before becoming senior driver on the WC&P from 1936, driving ‘Terrier No. 4’ on the Railway’s final run in 1940. It was a more varied life than that recounted by Eric Tonks, but a less demanding and less romantic one.

Returning to the history of the SDR, from 1947 the Pontesbury to Callow Hill section was leased to Shropshire County Council and thus, after 70 years, the SDR as such ceased to operate any service, but the Council persevered with tractor haulage until 1959. In the interim, rolling stock and track started to be scrapped and lifted. Eric Tonks, in the first edition of *The Snailbeach District Railways*, published in 1950, describes, regretfully, the scene:

‘The track leading from Snailbeach station [the ‘station’ is shown in Figure 3.x from Tonks 1974 p 19, lower or Brown 2001 p56 lower] is now overgrown and in parts obliterated, and at the top of the slope passes under a frail bridge to the stone engine shed. Loco No. 3 stands outside, cold and rusty but covered with a tarpaulin, and Nos 2 and 4 behind the much-patched doors (figure 3b. from Brown 2001 p 55). The shed is an eerie and desolate place in winter, with the wind moaning in the cowl and banging the loose patches of corrugated iron, and how sad it is to look upon the forsaken and silent engines! No more will they snortingly push their trains up the bank to the mines or even clank their way down the curves to Pontesbury; instead, here they are, stranded … awaiting the end’.

The end was imminent: in May 1950 they were cut up on site. The track between Snailbeach and Callow Hill was lifted shortly afterwards, but a short stretch to the loco shed was left intact, as was the loco shed itself, and both survive today. Indeed, when it came to the 1990s and works to consolidate and restore some of the mining remains, the loco shed was the first building to be repaired.

For Eric Tonks the SDR and its setting ‘inevitably bring to mind some of the Welsh narrow gauge systems, more than any other the Talyllyn, with its climb up the hillside through the woods at Dolgoch’, so it was appropriate that when, in 1961, the track from Callow Hill towards Pontesbury was lifted, some of it went to the Talyllyn Railway which had been kept going thanks to the efforts of railway enthusiasts such as L T C (Tom) Rolt who knew Snailbeach and had indeed written a ghost story set there (see Chapter 5). And, a few years ago two wagons from the SDR were found at Talyllyn; they have been brought back home for renovation.
But, have we heard the last of the Snailbeach District Railway? Perhaps not …. Mention new plans for the SDR

Traction Engines

Whilst the Railway provided transport for minerals won at Snailbeach, the failure to extend the line on to other mines obliged them to use other means of haulage. George Evans mentions teams of horses and wagons and later,

‘Foster steam traction engines purchased to convey the minerals [from The Bog Mine to Minsterley railway station] in a truck attached to the traction engine with a draw bar. The tractor and truck were on iron wheels and carried 6 tons … later, Bog Mines hired another traction engine … it pulled two trucks, each carrying 10 tons. It was named Shamrock and it made ruts in the road all the way from The Bog to Plox Green so deep that a man could lie down in them and not be seen.’ (fig 3.x page 83 of Pearce 1995 Mining in Shropshire)

Whatever the principal cargo, according to Mary Webb, traction engine trailers were never so full that they couldn’t accommodate a passenger or two. So in Gone to Earth Mrs Marston and Hazel Woodus book a place for a journey to ‘the little country station’ (presumably Minsterley) on their way to Silverton (Shrewsbury) to purchase clothes for the wedding of Hazel and Edward Marston:

‘At last the traction engine appeared, and Mrs Marston was hoisted into the trailer … They started in a whirl of good-byes, shrieks of delight from Hazel, and advice of Mrs Marston to the driver to put the brake on and keep it on… They rounded a turn with great dignity, the trailer, with Mrs Marston as its figure-head – wearing an expression of pride, fear, and resignation – swinging along majestically… They went gallantly, if slowly, on through narrow ways … Carts had to back into gates to let them go by, and when they came into the main road horses reared and had to be led past. Hazel found it all delightful.’

Ropeways and Boats

The billeting of German prisoners in the area during the First World War provided a labour force for the construction of The Bog Mine’s alternative to the SDR – an aerial ropeway running from the mine to the Malehurst barytes crushing mill lying between Pontesbury and Minsterley, a distance of nearly 9km (5½ miles). The ropeway was built under the managership of Colonel James Ramsden; George Evans remembered men named Gilderson and Fountain as surveyor and engineer, and Mollie Rowson (born 1908) a Jim Williams who oiled the wheels – literally. Today little knowledge survives of the German labour force, but George Evans reported that they were ‘a decent lot of chaps’ with one in particular, named Paul Measler, a school teacher, recalled with particular respect. Henry Jones says they were billeted in a big shed called ‘the Cabin’ (since demolished) on the edge of the hill above Tankerville, ‘an outstanding building in its day … one of the biggest and the best’.

The ropeway was built to carry bucket loads of barytes down to Malehurst and bring coal back up. The buckets were attached to a steel rope strung between pylons, or ‘trestles’ as they were called locally, mostly of wood, set in concrete bases (fig 3.x from Never on a Sunday p 110); examples of these bases survive today in a number of places (fig 3.x TW photo). The route ran from near the school at The Bog, crossing over the school yard on its way to
Pennerley Hill before dropping down through a cutting in the hillside to the back of the Stiperstones school then crossing over the road and skirting the west side of the hill on its way to Malehurst. Branches off the ropeway were built serving a quarry at Buxton and the Ventor Mine in Perkins Beach, the latter requiring a pylon as much as 90 feet tall.

According to George Evans there were 127 buckets and each carried ½ ton of barytes down to Malehurst and ¼ ton of coal back up to The Bog. Henry Jones remembers his granny telling him of a time when their family were ‘so poor they couldn’t afford any coal … the weather was very bad [and] one of the Germans would get a stick and tip one of the overhead buckets of coal … Then granny had 4 cwt of coal free’.

The ropeway was taken down some time before 1930, but another, serving the Huglith Mine, ran for a further 20 years. It is probably to this that W Reid Chappell refers in his The Shropshire of Mary Webb (1930); he describes the ‘peculiar wailing hum’ and the ‘whirring high-pitched rumble’ of the buckets passing along ‘a spider thread of cable’ strung between the ‘gaunt, gallows-like steel masts’.

Perhaps it was knowledge of the Huglith ropeway that inspired the children’s writer, Malcolm Saville (see Chapter 6), in his adventure story Seven White Gates (1944), to hark back to the ropeway serving the Ventor mine, and re-invent it as a ‘cable railway’ strung across Black Dingle (fig 3.x map from end paper of Seven White Gates) on which ran a ‘cable car – a big round iron container, with two steps or ledges on the outside large enough for a man to stand upon … suspended by a rather complicated pulley block upon which were two short levers.’ The ‘cable car’ provides a hair-rising ride for Tom Ingle and Petronella (Peter) Sterling (fig 3.x cover picture from Seven White Gates) in their attempt to rescue Dickie and Mary Morton: ‘… suddenly they were out in the evening sunshine … deep, deep below them the tops of the trees were careering madly backwards and every second the speed of the car increased … [it] swayed violently and the pulley block over Peter’s head screeched as the wires tore through it … She screamed … as the great jagged black hole in the rock rushed towards them … and ducked on to the floor of the car as it careered madly into the blackness.’

And what of water-borne transport? In the 1790s a drainage adit, referred to as the Boat Level, was driven from a point north of Tankerville in a southerly direction for 1¾ miles (2.8km), serving the mines at Burgam, Tankerville, Potter’s Pit, Pennerley and The Bog, beyond which it was subsequently extended to attain a length of about 2 miles. Its primary purpose was as a drainage adit and, despite its name, the evidence for its use by boats is limited, indeed Fred Brook and Martin Allbutt in their authoritative account The Shropshire Lead Mines (1973) state that ‘Its name suggests that boats were used in it as a means of transport but its twisting route and narrow section, together with an absence of any mineral spoil near its portal indicate that it was used for drainage only.’

Their scepticism seems well-founded, but in Lone Pine Five (1949), Malcolm Saville’s locally-born character Charles Sterling, when recounting some of the history and legends of The Stiperstones, refers to a story ‘of an underground waterway which was built originally to drain one of the mines and later used as a sort of subterranean canal to carry loads of minerals from the mines’. Saville was presumably drawing on what he had been told locally. And in his West Shropshire Mining Fields of 2001, Ivor Brown reproduces an advert from The Salopian Journal of 1830 giving details of the auction of the lease of the Bog Lead Mines
which included ‘Steam Engine, Gins, Boats etc’; the advertisement goes on to list ‘3 Wood Boats and 1 Iron Boat’ (fig 3.x advert from Salopian Journal of 1830 re Auction of Bog Mine Lease. See Brown 2001, p 78). Ivor Brown comments that this ‘seems to remove all arguments that the ‘Boat’ Level was never actually used as such’. But his guarded wording suggests that despite the evidence that he himself has produced, he remains sceptical.

**Pony and trap, bikes, motor cars, lorries, charabancs and buses**

Prior to motor cars and buses, travel to and from Minsterley station to catch the train to Shrewsbury might have been in some form of light horse-drawn two-wheeled carriage or trap (fig 3.x Edwin Davies and cart Never p 74). There were a number of operators using such traps which, according to Stanley Evans (See SDN March 1990; his dates?), might take as many as 16 passengers. George Evans remembers that though still a school-boy he used to run fitters and clerks employed at The Bog Mine to and from the station in a horse and trap when they went home at weekends.

He recalls the first three motor cars he saw using the local roads. The first, a model T Ford was owned by ‘the then Manager of the Bog Mines, a Mr Pulean’. Later, he says, ‘Colonel Ramsden, who was a Director of the Bog Mines, started coming to and from the mines with a little two-seater air-cooled Rover with a dickey seat at the back’. The next car was owned by Dr Jameson from Pontesbury.

George Evans himself needed a push bike to get to and from Shrewsbury, when, as a 16 year old he went to work at Withers’ Garage, where he learned driving and running repairs. But driving in those days was very different from nowadays. The Model T Ford ‘had to be started with a starting handle … there was no gear lever … there was no accelerator, you had a [manual] throttle under the steering wheel … there was one lever on each side of the steering column, one for the ignition and one for the fuel … when you took the hand-brake off, the car was in neutral and right off you were in top gear … the lights were bright according to the speed you were going … if you were going slowly round a corner, you had no lights.’

George himself graduated from a pushbike done up by his Uncle Tom to a brand new ‘Rudge Whitworth’ bought on HP from Mr Tom Parry at Central Stores, Crowsnest, then to a second-hand ‘Premier’ motorbike and later a ‘Douglas Flat Twin’. In due course George became part owner of an ‘old Chev’ motor car, then chauffeur of ‘a nice little Rover car with a fabric body’ before becoming the chauffeur of a Rolls owned by the mysterious Max Wenner (add detail)

The first lorries that George Evans mentions were ‘Peerless’, reconditioned after the First World War, and in due course he was to drive one. (fig 3.x Peerless from Shrewsbury Chronicle, see ad on page 18 of NAMHO proceedings, article by M Shaw) But like with the Model T Ford this was a very different driving experience to that enjoyed by the modern lorry driver: ‘The ‘Peerless’ lorries were chain driven and had solid rubber tyres … a wooden cab … I’m not sure whether they had a windshield but there were no side windows … if you had the foot brake on long, it used to set the body on fire … you wanted a bucket of water to put it out … we had to use the hand brake and that was very little use … it was a good job there was not much traffic on the road in those days.’
Sarah Ann Evans (born 1911) remembers that the earliest buses were not tailor-made: ‘I remember the first bus, and that was started off by Mr Edwin Hotchkiss from the Cold Hill, him and his son had an old lorry and they put a body on it and two seats across, so the people sat facing one another. That was the first Bog bus.’ (fig 3.x ?? Hotchkiss family photo from ‘Never’ p 91 – is this Edwin?)

Graham France (born 1921) remembers that such vehicles could indeed be multi-functional: ‘George Williams had a haulage business up the Ventor. He had a lorry that would lug barytes down to Minsterley during the week but on a Saturday he would fasten a container with windows in it on the flat-bottomed lorry. He would then take people to shop in Shrewsbury’. T C R Parry (Christian name; dates?) recalls ‘Charabancs’ which had ‘rows of transverse seats with doors at the ends of each row of seats … open to the weather, but a covering hood could be pulled over … and attached to the front windscreen to form some kind of protection … cans of petrol and water were strapped on to the running boards … solid tyres made a ride in them very bumpy.’ A school excursion to Aberystwyth was a great adventure: ‘Frequently [on the steep ascent over Plynlimon] the charabanc stopped for the engine to cool and to be topped up with water. On these occasions, to lighten the load, we walked to the top of the incline.’

George Evans recalls some of the early buses he drove such as the 26 seater ‘Vulcan Duchess’. The carriage of passengers and goods to and from various local markets was a key part of the job. Duties included climbing up the ladder at the back and loading market baskets weighing up to half a hundredweight ‘in a double layer almost across the top of the bus’, indeed ‘one old chap turned up with a calf in a hessian bag with only its head out’.

Conclude with later history of George Evans, 3 or more coach companies at The Stiperstones, current history of these companies and speculate as to why they took root here

Sources


Evans G circa 1994 A voice from the hills. Privately published, Minsterley


Pearce A (ed) 2008 Snailbeach Lead Mine. Shropshire Mines Trust

Chapter 4

The natural Webb: Mary Webb and natural history

Then there are the high spots, complete with cliffs and quarries and mine spoil and the glories of The Stiperstones.

David Bellamy (1991)

Mary Webb

Mary Webb (1881-1927) is often referred to, and often belittled, as ‘the Shropshire novelist’. True, she was born and bred in the county, lived there much of her short life, and was only really happy when in sight of its hills. What’s more, all of her six novels are set in identifiable settings in rural Shropshire (two of them on The Stiperstones) and she made extensive use of Shropshire dialect and folklore. Yet she was so much more than ‘just’ a regional writer.

Mary Webb (fig 4.x from oppo title page to The Flower of Light) was born Mary Gladys Meredith at Leighton, under The Wrekin, in 1881. Subsequently her family moved near to Much Wenlock and later to Staunton-on-Hine Heath, north of Shrewsbury, and then to Meole
Brace, at that time a village separated from Shrewsbury by fields, but now embraced by the town. The story of her short and difficult life, her inspiration and her novels is told by Gladys Mary Coles in *The Flower of Light*. At the age of 20 she suffered the onset of Graves Disease, in which an overactive thyroid gland triggers a range of disorders, most obviously protruding eyes and enlargement of the thyroid gland at the base of the neck. At that time there was no effective treatment and she was seriously ill for six months. There were other crises, the unsightly symptoms never entirely left her, and the disease contributed to her early death. Ironically it was doubtless this illness that gave Mary Webb the understanding and the inspiration for her best-known novel, *Precious Bane* (1924), the story of Prudence Sarn, disfigured by a ‘hare-shotten lip’.

In 1912 Mary married Henry Bertram Law (1885-1939), Cambridge graduate, linguist, philosopher, writer and teacher. It was a marriage that started so well and brought much mutual happiness, but was to end in separation and heartache. They lived in Weston-super-Mare, Pontesbury, Chester, London and Lyth Hill near Shrewsbury, where they had a cottage built within sight of the Shropshire Hills. Mary Webb published poetry, short stories, essays and reviews but it is for her novels that she is best known. During her lifetime she published five: *The Golden Arrow* (1916), *Gone to Earth* (1917), *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920), *Seven for a Secret* (1922) and *Precious Bane* (1924); the incomplete *Armour wherein he Trusted* (1929) was published posthumously. All have rural settings, and though both *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth* make passing reference to the mines and mining of The Stiperstones, which would have dominated the local economy and scarred the local landscape of the period in which both novels are set, Webb turned her back on industry and concentrated on the rural.

Webb’s is a unique voice, speaking with a prodigal richness of language and imagery about universal themes of love, lust, fidelity, cruelty, compassion, generosity and greed. Some readers are entranced; just as many find her writing over-blown and melodramatic. And critics unsure of how to react to her exuberant descriptions of the countryside, are liable to pigeonhole her as ‘the Shropshire novelist’. The other regular Mary Webb put-down is to point out that she was parodied in Stella Gibbons’ *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), a hugely entertaining satire of the rural novel. Indeed she was, but so too were D H Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and others.

Mary Webb’s novels are certainly ‘rural’. They are steeped in the countryside. Most events of consequence occur outdoors, or in houses where the wind whistles under the door or ‘mews in the chimney like a great cat’. Weather, seasons, topography and natural features influence events and outcomes. The novels could equally well have been set in counties other than Shropshire, but Mary Webb always drew on her own county, and not least that part of it which she knew best, the Shropshire hills. She and her husband Henry lived for much of the years 1914-1916 in Pontesbury, latterly in a cottage at the Nills, built of and built on [check] the Stiperstones quartzite which was quarried nearby. At Pontesbury she was within walking distance of The Stiperstones, and it was here that her two novels set on and around The Stiperstones, *The Golden Arrow* (1916) and *Gone to Earth* (1917) were written.

*The Golden Arrow, Thomas Hardy and Gone to Earth*
The Golden Arrow opens with a description of the view from John Arden’s stone cottage set on the ‘Wilderhope Range’ (The Long Mynd). But it reads more like the view from a building on The Stiperstones sometimes called, for unknown reasons, ‘Mary Webb’s Cottage’, but more often ‘Tin House’, because though now a complete ruin, some still remember its roof of corrugated iron, otherwise referred to as ‘tin’.

It lies 250 metres to the northwest of the Devil’s Chair above the southern flank of Perkins Beach on ‘Diafol Mountain’ (The Stiperstones):

‘John Arden’s cottage stood in the midst of the hill plateau, higher than the streams began, shelterless to the four winds. While washing dishes Deborah [John Arden’s daughter and heroine of the story] could see, through the small age-misted pane, counties and blue ranges lying beneath the transparent or hazy air in the bright, unfading beauty of inviolate nature. She would gaze out between the low window-frame and the lank geraniums, forgetting the half-dried china, when grey rainstorms raced across from far Cader Idris, ignoring in their majestic progress the humble variegated plains of grass and grain, breaking like a tide on the unyielding heather and the staunch cottage.’

Deborah leaves the security of her snug home and loving father to live with her lover Stephen Southernwood, foreman at the Lostwithin Spar Mine, in a cottage ‘close agen’ the Devil’s Chair – a menacing presence throughout the novel. The proximity of this building to the unyielding quartzite tor suggests that it may have been modelled on the cottage towards the southern end of the Stiperstones ridge at The Rock, subject of a memoir by Jeanette Merry (see chapter 7). Prior to its demolition, this cottage stood tight up against the quartzite.

In locating Deborah and Stephen close by the Devil’s Chair, Mary Webb submerged them and her narrative in the upland heathland environment. A similar one-ness with the natural context is to be found in Thomas Hardy’s Return of the Native (1878) where the protagonists live surrounded by Egdon Heath. Hardy was considerably older than Mary Webb – he was born 41 years before her – but he survived her by a year. She regarded him as the greatest living novelist and was delighted by his praise and his consent to her dedication of Seven for a Secret to him.

Both Mary Webb’s Diafol Mountain and Thomas Hardy’s Egdon Heath become more than just malign presences; they are protagonists in the drama. Yet the two novelists describe their respective contexts very differently. For Hardy the heath is sombre, ‘embrowned’, ‘Titanic’; it repels Eustacia Vye, the vibrant and seductive in-comer who pines for gaiety and glamour and ‘cannot endure the heath, except in its purple season’. To suit his purpose Hardy portrays the ‘grim old face’ of the heathland as uniform, lacking in variety, light and colour and with few plant and animal species.

In Mary Webb’s novel the satanic presence of the Devil’s Chair weighs on the mind and spirit of Stephen Southernwood (like Eustacia Vye an incomer) with golden hair, ‘excited blue eyes and radiant bearing’. It ‘towers in gigantic aloofness a mass of quartzite, blackened and hardened by uncountable ages’. Yet, in just one paragraph describing the Chair, Mary Webb mentions Heather, Holly, Cranberry, Curlew, Doves and Black Grouse. She cannot resist drawing on a palate crowded in particular with plants and birds.

Stephen and Deborah become oppressed by the Chair, the chorus of grouse ‘laughter’ that goes with it and ‘the desolate acres of burnt heather, each bush charred and left like a
skeleton above the black-strewn ground’. As the nights draw in, the leaves fall and the frosts bite, Stephen, who is ‘lost within’, feels imprisoned by his environment and situation, hemmed in by an ‘enforced intimacy with every mood of Nature’, ‘homesick for lighted towns’, ‘chained to the ridge’ by his recent marriage to Deborah. He absconds, leaving Deborah near to suicidal despair. But eventually he returns, wiser, more mature and at last together they clasp the metaphorical ‘golden arrow’, the symbol of enduring love.

For some it is the finest of Mary Webb’s novels. It is a tale of a girl’s love, her sexual longing and fulfilment, her fidelity and maturity; of her father’s tenderness, understanding and constancy; of her lover’s fickleness, weakness and immaturity; and, after all is nearly lost, of an eventual coming together. It is a narrative of modest, insignificant lives played out in a forgotten corner of England, yet Mary Webb’s flood of poetic description and her evocation of The Stiperstones as a place of portent, grandeur and malevolence, creates a backdrop against which these little lives assume dignity and weight and resonate with a wider significance.

The principal setting for Gone to Earth is ‘God’s Little Mountain’, modelled closely on Lordshill Chapel, which stands, 1,000 feet (310m) above sea level behind Snailbeach, at the north-western extremity of The Stiperstones (fig 4.x). Whilst the denomination is not made clear in the novel, this is a Baptist chapel, built in 1833 and enlarged in 1873; it served, in life, as in the novel, as a combined chapel and house for the minister. It was to serve too as a film set, when, in 1949, Gone to Earth was filmed.

Comparisons can again be made with Thomas Hardy, because Gone to Earth, like Tess of the D’Urbevilles (1891), is about innocence, its loss and how this impacts on lovers who cherish that innocence; and in both novels there is a degree of redemption, followed by tragedy. In Gone to Earth Hazel Woodus is a near wild thing, ‘elvish’, a child of wood and meadow, yet, at eighteen, she emerges a ‘ooman growed’, for whom ‘to be admired was a wonderful new sensation’. She has become a creature of fascination and beauty who entrances both the gentle, milk-and-water minister, Edward Marston, and the rough, red-blooded squire, Jack Reddin, but she is bemused by her response to both, and resorts for guidance to ‘an old, dirty, partially illegible manuscript-book of spells and charms and other gipsy lore’ inherited from her gypsy mother. She marries Marston; he wishes to consummate their marriage but fails to do so through his own timidity and out of an exaggerated reverence for Hazel’s innocence. By contrast Reddin chases her, stalks her. He is ‘so very much alive’, exerting both ‘a terror and a fascination’, triggering her sexual awakening, drawing her to him ‘like a jacksnipe fetches his mate out o’ the grass’, before forcing himself on her. She then has little choice but to go with him, but eventually recoils from his brutishness, his casual cruelties both to people and to the wild creatures which she cherishes – he is a huntsman, she the befriender of a fox cub. She returns twice to Edward. On the second occasion he is at last obliged to acknowledge her loss of innocence, but he nevertheless takes her back and they enjoy a brief, tentative, tender but celibate conciliation before the final tragic dénouement.

At times laboured, often improbable, sometimes melodramatic, nonetheless Gone to Earth exerts a fascination on many readers. Hazel, whose ‘ways were graceful and covert as a wild creature’s’, captivates them as she does Marston and Reddin, and, as the pages turn, the reader’s dread deepens as the inevitable tragedy unfolds. Indeed, early on, Mary Webb has forewarned us, describing Hazel and her Foxy as both ‘fiercely beautiful’, ‘facing destiny with pathetic courage’ with ‘a look as of those predestined to grief, almost an air of
martyrdom’, identifying them as victims of the casual cruelty that drives the story. But, as always with Mary Webb, one is carried along by a forceful tide of nature writing, a nostalgic glimpse of a time when ‘the brilliantly varnished buttercups’ glowed in all the meadows and ‘silver-crested peewits circled and cried with their melancholy cadences’, when there was some point in calling ‘Thuckoo!’ because there were cuckoos to imitate, and stronger hopes of finding ‘the little spring musherooms as come wi’ the warm rain’. The delusion that ‘Mary Webb’s countryside’ lives on, little changed, is often promoted – if only it were true! Much of the texture, the diversity, the sheer profusion has been lost.

But, there is more than nostalgia here. There is a debate about sexuality, female and male; there is a passionate polemic about man and his cruelty to his fellows and to nature; and there is a tortured enquiry into the existence, or otherwise, of God. This was, after all, a novel written during the First World War, when the carnage in the trenches was a daily anxiety to Mary Webb, whose brothers were in the front line.

‘The Wild Heart’ and ‘La Renarde’

Thirty years later, not long after another war, the summer and autumn of 1949 saw the filming of Gone to Earth at various locations in South Shropshire, including Much Wenlock (as ‘the town’), Pontesford Hill (as ‘Hunter’s Spinney’), Longnor Hall (as ‘Undern Hall’) and on The Stiperstones, but most significantly at Lords Hill Chapel, clearly the inspiration for Mary Webb’s ‘God’s Little Mountain’. Here a fake window was added to the gable end of the chapel house; it was subsequently removed, but a new porch and a pool dug for Hazel’s baptism, a scene unique to the film, both survive, the silted shape of the latter defined now by ‘the yellow cradles of the mimulus’.

The film was ‘written, produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’, a partnership described by Philip French – doyen of British film critics – as ‘amongst the greatest in movie history’. (fig 4.x Film poster) Powell, the director, ‘an archetypal Englishman’, and Pressburger, the screenwriter, a Hungarian-born, Jewish German émigré, collaborated on 19 films in the 1940s and 1950s, encompassing ‘some of the finest pictures about a nation at war and the prospects for the post-war world’. ‘Gone to Earth’ is not regarded as one of their best films, but it captures something of the magical, ominous, troubling quality of Mary Webb’s novel and of the dishevelled, only part-tamed texture of the Shropshire countryside that Mary Webb described, some of which survived until the middle of the twentieth century. The film was released in Great Britain in 1950, but it was not until 1952 that it appeared in the United States, significantly shortened (from 110 minutes down to 82), under the title ‘The Wild Heart’; it is said to have been a particular success in France, where it was called ‘La Renarde’ (The Vixen).

Casting posed two significant challenges: who was to play the beautiful, innocent, elfin, all but wild, eighteen-year-old Hazel Woodus? And what about her ‘Foxy’?

The first challenge was soon resolved. Powell and Pressburger were working for Alexander Korda and David O Selznick, two of the biggest names in film production, and Selznick was, according to Michael Powell, ‘looking for a European subject for Jennifer Jones [the star he had recently married], whom he was parading about Europe at his chariot wheels’. Jennifer Jones was beautiful and a star, but could she capture Hazel’s wildness and youth? What about her accent? And what about Hazel’s feyness and her complete sexual innocence,
followed by her gradual, aching, sexual awakening, factors on which the credibility of the narrative leans so heavily?

It was a tall order for an American woman of 30, with two children, now married for the second time. But Michael Powell recounts how Jennifer Jones threw herself into the role: ‘She had lost several pounds for the part, and had had corsets specially designed to pinch her in and to push her out ... from the moment that she arrived she threw her shoes away and went barefoot ... she asked interminable questions about everything she saw, felt and smelt ... she wanted to know everything that Hazel, who had been born and bred in the countryside would know ... she never tired of talking to the local people and picking out their accent and their words for everything ...she went through the film as if she were the real Hazel, playing herself'.

Michael Powell’s judgement may be biased, but David Thomson, one of cinema’s senior historians, backs him up: ‘Jennifer’s Hazel is a daring performance, in many ways her freest and least self-conscious ... ‘Gone to Earth’ is often beautiful, eerie, and emotionally powerful, and its vision of a remote rural world where magic and destiny are at work depends upon the barefoot, feral intuitiveness of Jennifer’. Both are perhaps in thrall to the star. Yes, she gives a creditable performance, but not surprisingly, she fails fully to capture Hazel’s nymphlike quality, to appear so completely naïve, such a child of nature. And she is directed towards an interpretation in which she appears a more willing victim than the novel suggests, prey to a muscular seduction rather than rape, as in the novel, and thereafter displaying more tenderness to her assailant than is suggested in the text (fig 4.x possibly Reddin and Hazel, page 147 from Showman by David Thomson).

The film had a strong cast, with David Farrar as Jack Reddin and Cyril Cusack as Edward Marston, supported by Esmond Knight as Abel Woodus (Hazel’s father), Hugh Griffith as Andrew Vessons (Reddin’s servant), Sybil Thorndike as Mrs Marston (Edward’s mother) and George Cole as Hazel’s cousin Albert. And these actors revelled in the rich supporting roles that Mary Webb had provided, characters full of quirkiness and humour (fig 4.x possibly figs 5 and 6 from Powell ‘Million Dollar Movie’).

And what about Foxy? Clearly a tame fox was a requirement, but Michael Powell ‘had visions of our Foxy in the film being gobbled up by the hounds before she had started playing her part’, so he ordered that three should be found. Apparently it proved easy enough to recruit one tame fox but the second was difficult to find and, though signed up, did not inspire confidence; a third could not be located. The animal-handlers came up with an unlikely fallback: ‘... they suggested that they should train and hold in support two or three corgis, a foxy-looking little dog with a low wheel-base, much favoured by our gracious Queen’. Powell was aware of their dissimilar physique and yet he was persuaded that the corgis ‘would make a very passable double for a fox, provided that a fox’s brush were first attached to the corgi’s short and stumpy tail. The proposal was greeted with enthusiasm by me, but not by the corgis... When they found themselves held between the property man’s knees while a fox’s brush was taped to what other people might call a short, stumpy tail but which was, after all, their tail, down it went like a railroad signal and no amount of persuasion could encourage them to lift the hated fox’s brush from the dust in which it trailed’. A close viewing of the film suggests however that fortunately these unpromising stand-ins never had to be called upon.

Evidence of Pressburger??

No such casting problem need trouble directors of the play ‘Gone to Earth’ because Foxy, and much else besides, has been written out of the script. Helen Edmundson’s play had its first performance in 2004 and she admits to having ‘taken great liberties with the narrative, changing the way the story is told’. Reduced to words on a page, the play, which had its first
performance in 2004, appears limp and insubstantial, and some of the language sounds laughably anachronistic. But the kernel of the tale is there and it appears to have provided a moving theatrical experience in a production that gained enthusiastic reviews. The part of Hazel Woodus, that other potentially taxing casting problem, went to 19 year Natalia Tena. It was her professional stage debut and she is reported to have given a ‘phenomenal’ performance – ‘fierce, graceful, apparently guileless ... with the urgency of childhood’ but ‘never girlish, coy or watchful’. But to return to the film, its re-issue in the mid 1980s, with many showings at local venues, burnished abiding memories of the making of the film amongst the survivors of the 300 or so local people who were ‘extras’ and those who had assisted or witnessed the filming on location in Shropshire. (fig 4.x Photo of extras eg those on pages 85 and 86 of Never on Sunday) A rich seam of reminiscence was mined for a 75 minute video entitled ‘Hollywood Comes to Shropshire’, an entertaining collage of scenes from the film, of anecdote and of factual detail. More recently ‘The Lordshill Project’ has released two CDs under the title ‘Gone to Earth Remembered and Revisited’, a fascinating compilation including the recollections of extras and observers. It is full of charm and warmth, of fond recollection of an event that still evokes wonder and excitement in those that it touched. More than 50 years have passed since the film was made, yet, in the words of ‘The Lordshill Project’ for those involved ‘the experience is still a vital part of community and family history’.

Mary Webb and the natural world

The importance of the natural world to Mary Webb is brought out by further comparison between her work and that of Thomas Hardy. Although a mechanistic analysis reveals nothing about their respective merits as writers, it is telling that Mary Webb names 47 flowering plants and 23 birds in the course of The Golden Arrow, whilst for Thomas Hardy in The Return of the Native the count is respectively 22 and 14, despite the book being almost twice as long. When all wildlife references are enumerated and the difference in the lengths of the two books is taken into account, Webb names three times as many species as Hardy. Clearly Mary Webb was fascinated by the natural world, though, like many of us, her knowledge other than of birds and plants appears to have been very sketchy. This is suggested by a close reading of her three ‘upland’ novels: The Golden Arrow, which is set on The Stiperstones and The Long Mynd; Gone to Earth, much of which takes place on the north-western end of the Stiperstones ridge at Lordshill (‘God’s Little Mountain’); and Seven for a Secret, for which the setting is the Clun Forest (‘Digsyfas on the Moors’). Throughout these three novels she never names a single butterfly and only two moths, as against 50 species of birds and 96 of flowering plants.

But, despite the frequency of these wildlife references, they remain relevant to the setting of each novel, they are not simply thrown in for poetic effect but used to give a sense of ecological place. Thus, for example, heather and bilberry, both classic upland species, are mentioned 21 and 11 times respectively in The Golden Arrow, which is set amongst the upland heathland of The Stiperstones and The Long Mynd, whereas there is no reference to heather and only one to bilberry in Gone to Earth, which is set in softer, more low-lying country, one of woods, pastures and river valleys. By contrast Bluebell and Wood Sorrel rate eight and four mentions respectively in the latter novel, but none in the former. Similarly for birds: Red and Black Grouse, both heathland specialists, appear in The Golden Arrow but not
in *Gone to Earth*, whilst it is vice versa for Grey Wagtail and Dipper, both of which are river birds.

There is also an historical dimension to Mary Webb’s wildlife references. In none of her upland novels does she mention Raven or Buzzard; why is this? Both are common today in the Shropshire Hills, and both are striking birds with, particularly in the case of Raven, rich potential for symbolism and poetic allusion. But, during the greater part of Mary Webb’s life the Raven was extinct as a breeding species in the Shropshire Hills, driven out by relentless persecution through nest destruction, shooting and poisoning. The last breeding record in the county had been in 1884, the next was not until 1918, by which time four years of war had decimated the population of gamekeepers. The story was similar for Buzzard; once common, it was all but extinct by 1900 and did not start to recover until after the Great War.

However, Mary Webb mentions other species which have, since her day, become extinct or increasingly rare in Shropshire. One example is Black Grouse; they were present on The Stiperstones in her day, but have not been found breeding in the county for some 50 years. Another is Woodlark, a bird of bare ground and short vegetation with scattered trees; it rates five mentions in *Gone to Earth*. Mary Webb lived at a time when the population was expanding to occupy suitable habitats across much of the southern half of Britain, but a marked contraction southwards was underway by the late 1950s and it is now some 40 years since it has been possible to hold out much hope of hearing and observing ‘their hurried ripple of notes and their vacillating flights’ in Shropshire.

A further example is the Lapwing or Peewit, a common sight in the Shropshire hills in Mary Webb’s day. In *Gone to Earth* Reddin curses until ‘the peewits arose mewing all about him’. Some twenty-five years later, in Malcolm Saville’s *Mystery at Witchend* (1943) – see chapter 6 – it is Tom Ingles, a London evacuee working on a Shropshire hill farm, who suggests the ‘pee-wit’ whistle as the Lone Pine Club’s secret signal. The Lapwing was still at that time a common breeding species in the Shropshire hills and remained so until thirty or forty years ago; it is now a rarity.

**Heathers and others**

Plants common on the heathland in Mary Webb’s time remain so today. The open hill ground is still covered largely with heather (*fig 4.x showing all three heathers*). Confusingly, ‘heather’ is both a generic name, referring to a group of similar plants, and a specific one, being the name given to the commonest of its type, a plant otherwise known as ‘common heather’, ‘ling’, or ‘grig’ and, botanically, as *Calluna vulgaris*. Ling, as we shall call it here, dominates the vegetation of the hill, as it does many other upland areas, as well as lowland heaths. It is most at home on poor, acid and peaty soils, but its success is due in part to its tolerance of a wide range of conditions: dry to damp; cold to warm; coastline to mountain; pH 3 to pH7; moderate woodland shade to full hill-top exposure. What it will not tolerate is excessive grazing, cultivation, blanket afforestation, persistent trampling and soil improvements.

The habitat range of Ling is wider than that of two other heathers which occur on The Stiperstones – Cross-leaved Heath and Bell Heather. The former is a plant of wet areas, the latter of dry. Ling’s requirements are intermediate between and overlapping those of the other
two. Bell Heather comes to prominence on the thin soils of the south-facing slopes, notably of Mytton Dingle and Perkins Beach (fig 4x photo by Paul Glendell). The name is derived from its bell-like flowers which are red-pink and appear earlier than those of Ling, giving these slopes a vibrancy in July contrasting with the rich but more sober pink-purple of the August-flowering Ling. There is little wet ground on The Stiperstones and few places, therefore, where Cross-leaved Heath flourishes, but the shy-pink of its downy flowers may be found from June onwards in boggy spots on both the west and east-facing flanks of the hill.

The ‘National Vegetation Classification’ describes plant communities according to the relative abundance of the more frequently occurring species. Almost all of the heathland vegetation of The Stiperstones falls within the community referred to as ‘H12 Calluna vulgaris-Vaccinium myrtillus’, reflecting the general dominance of Ling and of Bilberry V myrtillus, known locally as Whinberry, which is virtually as ubiquitous as Ling, forming dense stands in places, and elsewhere growing alongside or beneath its co-dominant. Indeed, there are areas where, over recent decades, Whinberry seems to have started taking over from Ling. This joint tenure of the hill is reflected in Mary Webb’s description: ‘The budding heather was round them like a dull crimson sea, encroached upon by patches of vivid wimberries flecked with leaves of ladybird red’. Explain ladybird red When fresh, the leaves are, as Mary Webb says, ‘startlingly bright green’, sprouting from the tough stems aptly referred to locally as ‘whinberry wires’. For her, the flowers are like ‘small, rose-coloured tulips upside down, very magical and clear of colour’ and in Gone to Earth her Hazel Woodus picked them and ‘sucked out the drop of honey from each flower like a bee’. The small, rounded, deep-purple fruits (fig 4.x photo by Ben Osborn?) ripen from July onwards; they carry a belly-button like scar at their base, and, as explained below, the berries and The Stiperstones community were once umbilically linked.

Amongst other heathland plants of note are Cowberry and Crowberry. Both are classified, like the heathers and Bilberry, as ‘dwarf-shrubs’, and both are common here but virtually unknown throughout the rest of the county. Mary Webb refers to Cowberry buds as ‘of most waxen whiteness’ (though once open the flowers are often flushed pink) and describes them as ‘venturesome’ reflecting their tolerance of the highest, stoniest parts of the site. The fruits are scarlet-red and similar in size to those of the Whinberry; they ripen a month or so later. Cowberry is evergreen, Whinberry deciduous, but they are closely related and the hybrid V x intermedium has been found at a number of locations, and not just by botanists: Doris Hewitt (born 1916) recalls that ‘Emily Griffiths found a Whinberry crossed with a Cranberry [= Cowberry] once, and brought it to Girl Guides.’

The last of this trio of fruiting shrubs is the Crowberry. It has straggling stems and heather-like leaves; the flowers are tiny and pink; the fruits smaller than those of the Bilberry and deep black. Male and female flowers are on separate plants and, judging by the low and patchy incidence of the fruits, female plants would seem to be in the minority. Though edible, the berries are rather insipid and pippy; in quantity they are said to be fearfully flatulent.

Other common plants include Wavy Hair-grass, present throughout, and often a prolific early colonist after the burning or cutting of Ling. Pale carpets of Cladonia lichens cover patches of bare ground looking like beds of tiny corals or forests of miniature leafless trees. In June, wetter areas are whitened by tufts of cotton grass; there are two species and both are in fact sedges rather than grasses: the multi-tufted Common Cottongrass and the less frequent and single-tufted Hare’s-tail Cottongrass. As the seed-bearing plumes come loose they are swept
away by the wind, catching here and there on the stems of heather. In the closing pages of *The Golden Arrow* Stephen Southernwood notices his child for the first time: ‘the white bundle, frail as the cotton-grass down that wandered from hill to hill, a poor white waif blown along the steep, dark mountains.’

Colourful carpets of flowering heather bring the hill to life in summer, but, come winter, it can look dark and drab, enriched only by the rusty brown of frosted bracken fronds and, dotted about here and there on the lower slopes, the intense yellow of gorse. The adage ‘When gorse is in blossom, kissing’s in season’ is rooted in the knowledge that European Gorse *Ulex europaeus* produces pioneer flowers as early as mid-winter then builds towards a glowing climax in May/June after which the plant can’t quite give up and continues to brighten the heath with the occasional flower right through to the year end.

But on The Stiperstones the perpetuity of the kissing season is assured by the abundance of another species, Western Gorse *Ulex gallii*, with a flowering season which peaks in July/August and continues sporadically through autumn into winter. Like the Bell Heather it basks in the warmth of the south facing slopes, and in July its flowers, glinting golden amongst the crimson of the heather bells, etch the eye. Here the plant community tends towards what is referred to as ‘H8 Calluna vulgaris-Ulex gallii’.

Richard Mabey, in his cultural compendium *Flora Britannica*, suggests that there is a ‘where’ implied in the ‘when’ of the gorse adage because ‘gorse is one of the great signature plants of commonland and rough open space, places where lovers can meet, walk freely and lose themselves, if need be, in its dense thickets’. But there are better places for getting lost than amongst the censorious spineyness of gorse. Bracken, known here as ‘Fern’, grows in patches where the soil is deeper, and may, in prime sites, reach six feet in height; this is the place where one may wish for the licence to get lost, and it is doubtless the reason why a condom is referred to locally as a ‘fern ticket’.

**Meadows and woods**

Mary Webb was not averse to modifying or changing the name of plants or birds to suit her poetic purpose. In *The Golden Arrow*, John Arden and his daughter Deborah come ‘to the slopes of short grass from which the round yellow heartsease was disappearing like a currency withdrawn – as the old mintage of painless and raptureless peace was disappearing from Deborah’s being’. Location and habitat indicate that the ‘round yellow’ flower was actually Mountain Pansy *Viola lutea* (figure 4.x), not Heartsease *V tricolor*. Here on The Stiperstones, the former is, in general, uniformly yellow, the latter as its Latin name suggests, is normally three-coloured, but the poetic similes on which Mary Webb is playing, require what is, presumably, a deliberate misnomer.

Mountain Pansy is a signature plant for the herb-rich grasslands growing on the moderately acidic soils which fringe the heathland. These grasslands were won from the heath in the past. They were areas where soils were perhaps deeper and water was available, permitting human habitation. Here miners and their families succeeded in carving out tiny smallholdings. Crops were grown, hay cut, livestock grazed, and, with applications of manure, and perhaps of mine waste with a calcium content higher than the heathland soil, the agricultural fertility was improved, if only marginally.
These mildly acidic grasslands, won from the heath, survive on former smallholdings at Blakemoor, Blakemoorflat and Pennerley. At their best they are a spring-time joy – not a riot of colour, but a restrained palette principally of yellows, whites and blues. The plant community found here is described by botanists as ‘U4 Festuca ovina-Agrostis capillaris-Galium saxatile’. In this grassland of fescue (Festuca) and bent (Agrostis), Mountain Pansy flourishes amongst the white of Mary Webb’s ‘minute starry carpet’ of Heath Bedstraw (Galium saxatile), ‘the blue Milkwort’ (sometimes purple too, or pink or white) and the yellow and orange which give Common Bird’s-foot-trefoil its popular name of ‘Eggs and Bacon’. Germander Speedwell beams blue, outdoing the pale lilac of its demure cousin Heath Speedwell, Pignut opens white umbels in spring and Harebell blue pendants in high summer. Tormentil glows gold and Mouse-ear Hawkweed lemon yellow, its flowers sprouting from a ring of small, hairy, felted leaves that give the plant its name.

Each smallholding would have had its hay meadow; doubtless they were flower-rich too, and some survive. The best, at Pennerley, have been notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, but other still-colourful meadows flourish outside the designated area. Such meadows are described technically as ‘MG5 Cynosurus cristatus-Centaurea nigra’ grasslands. The hay yields, dominated by grasses such as Crested Dog’s-tail Cynosurus cristatus, Common Bent, Red Fescue and Sweet Vernal Grass are sparse, but in terms of flower power the returns are prodigal (Fig 4.x), indeed flower-rich hay from these meadows has often been sold, at a premium, for the creation of new flowery meadows, particularly in the Wolverhampton area. (reference to Ian Trueman)

In these meadows Cowslips are the April harbingers, followed by a succession of other flowers through to late July, Harebell time, when the hay is cut. Between times whites and yellows predominate: Oxeye Daisy over-tops the rest, but look down through the galaxy of blooms and the white of the low-growing Eyebright pierces through; layered in between are the yellows of Cat’s-ear and Yellow-rattle, and later in the season the red-purple of Common Knapweed (the Centaurea nigra of the plant community’s name). The Oxeye Daisy and Yellow Rattle, whose ripe seeds rattle in their pods, are the ‘dog daisies’ and ‘rattle boxes’ that Tom Pinches (born 1924) remembers as such a feature of hay meadows prior to war-time ploughing. Amongst these commoner plants are notables such as Moonwort, a miniature fern with half-moon-shaped leaflets, and Greater Butterfly Orchid, whose flowers, though modestly coloured green and cream, sprout a jumble of extravagantly long lips and spurs.

The former smallholdings are places to look for a tree that is a particular feature of The Stiperstones, the Laburnum. This is not a native plant, it comes originally from the mountains of central Europe, and, though naturalised, its presence here is due largely to deliberate planting. There are in fact two species, the ‘Common’ and the ‘Scottish’, Laburnum anagyroides and L alpinum. The latter is much less frequent, flowers a little later and when mature is more imposing, with a robust trunk. It was not formally recorded here by botanists until 2002 but had been noted by an acute local observer and Pennerley resident, Cliff Lewis (1923-2004), some years previously. Perhaps it was to this species that Mary Webb referred in her description of Abel Woodus’s cottage at ‘The Callow’ in Gone to Earth: ‘Two laburnums, forked and huge of trunk, fingered the roof with their lower branches and dripped gold on it.’

There are many single Laburnums, and few of the abandoned holdings on and around the hill are without one, but at Pennerley there are entire hedgerows too. Yet, despite much
conjecture, no one has come up with a convincing explanation as to why Laburnums should have been planted here, particularly as their seeds are highly poisonous. The assumption is that the purpose was utilitarian, but could it in fact have been ornamental? What a joy it must have been in the June flowering time to emerge from the blackness of the mines to see what Deborah Arden calls ‘the seynty tree …we call it golden showers about our way, from the shine of it’ (fig 4.x).

Woodland fringes the hill ground. Here Silver Birch and Mountain Ash (Rowan) are early colonists and form wooded belts in the side valleys, particularly on the deeper soils of the damper, north-facing slopes, where germination is favoured. At Resting Hill the woodland is older and more extensive. Here there is a virtual mono-culture of oak and it may well be that other tree species were once weeded, or grazed, out of existence. The community type is described as ‘W16 Quercus-Betula-Deschampsia flexuosa’ reflecting the abundance of what in this case is Sessile Oak (Quercus petraea) along with its normal companion, birch (here the species is Silver Birch Betula pendula), over a sparse ground flora in which Wavy Hairgrass (Deschampsia flexuosa) is frequent. The trees have been coppiced in the past and have come again, multi-stemmed – straight and leggy on the lower ground, contorted and squat nearer the top of the slope. Shade and livestock grazing have virtually eliminated any understorey, but where light is let in and livestock excluded, Holly soon flourishes. The herb layer is heathy, with Bell Heather, Ling and Bilberry in evidence as well as Common Cowwheat and Wavy Hair-grass. Elsewhere there are panoramas of Bluebell and vignettes of Wood Sorrel.

Close-by the chapel gate of Mary Webb’s ‘God’s Little Mountain’ lies a relict landscape, a ‘ragged holly spinney’, an area of veteran holly trees, one of the oldest stands of holly in Britain (fig 4.x The Hollies). ‘The Hollies’, as it is called, is a survival from the period prior to the last century when it was common in the north and west to use lopped holly as winter fodder for stock, and in some sites for deer. Locally, such holly wood-pastures (often marked as ‘Hollins’ on maps) were extensive, but most have now been cleared.

The significance of ‘The Hollies’ was recognised in the 1960s by Charles Sinker, doyen of Shropshire ecologists, then Warden of Preston Montford Field Centre near Shrewsbury, and by George Peterken, who was researching hollies and has since become a leading national authority on woodlands. As Peterken observed, ‘The antiquity of the Hollies is not the only remarkable feature of the site, for Rowans have become established in the holly crotchtes, giving a chimerical effect, part evergreen, part deciduous, to the crown of the composite “individual”.’ They are seen to best effect in spring when the creamy blossoms of the Rowans stand out, or in August and September when the ‘witan-trees’, as Mary Webb calls them, are ‘burning with scarlet berries’ (Fig 4.x). The Hollies has recently become a nature reserve owned and managed by Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

Birds and insects

Amongst the many references to birds in The Golden Arrow there are six to Whimbrel, and, according to Mary Webb, they were breeding on The Stiperstones:

‘Summer drooped warm wings over the moor. The blossom fell, the fruit set. The grass lengthened … Haying began. The blackbirds grew silent. The whimbrels rang their elfin
peals less often and their pencilled chickens ran amongst the heather near the springs. The wimberries ripened…’

Yet, as H E Forrest states in *The Fauna of Shropshire* (1899), a book which Mary Webb will surely have known, the Whimbrel is ‘A rare visitor to Shropshire Moors on its Spring and Autumn migrations. It has never bred here’; nor has it since. By contrast, Forrest states that the very similar Curlew ‘is numerous on our Shropshire moorlands and breeds regularly…’

Could Mary Webb have confused the Whimbrel and its close relative the Curlew? No. She would have been familiar with the Curlew and known it well from its onomatopoeic call; clearly she chose to use the name Whimbrel for poetic reasons. And it works so well in the above passage, with the alliteration of ‘warm wings’ followed by that of ‘whimbrels’ and ‘wimberries’. Moreover the passage conveys so well the passage of the seasons and the drowsiness of high summer.

Curlews will have been common on these hills in Mary Webb’s day; numbers are much reduced but they still thrill us each spring with their wild, eerie song. Snipe ‘drum’ in some years over wetter spots and we listen eagerly each April for ‘the Cuckoo’, individualising the songster as if there is just one that calls throughout the district; sadly, with numbers in decline, this may soon be so! Here Cuckoos parasitize Meadow Pipits, the commonest of the heathland birds; Skylarks are next in frequency and some 25 pairs of Red Grouse hold out at what is the southern extremity of their natural range in England – they are thought to have been introduced to Exmoor and Dartmoor.

Amongst other heathland birds, Stonechats (fig 4.x), whose numbers plummet when the weather is hard, have benefited from a long run of mild winters; today there are at least 25 pairs and wherever one walks in summer they pop up, ‘chatting’ neurotically from gorse bush or bracken frond; twenty years ago there were probably a mere five pairs on the National Nature Reserve and only 25 pairs in the entire county. The related, and almost equally neurotic Whinchat, escapes the winters but runs a migratory gauntlet instead; there are probably eight pairs. They favour areas where there is both Bracken and damper ground, which they share with a few pairs of Reed Buntings. Wheatears are migrants too, homing in on close-cropped grassland with stony areas or rabbity banks offering nesting holes. Whitethroats, Tree Pipits and Redstarts (the last being ‘chats’ too and the ultimate neurotics) are other animators of the heathland fringe, needing areas where there are scrub and trees.

In the woods there is a scattering of Pied Flycatchers, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Nuthatches. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are rare, but Green Woodpeckers less so; in Crowsnest Dingle they raid the nests of the Upland (or Hairy) Wood Ant, something of a speciality here at the southern edge of its distribution. Speckled Wood butterflies flit through woodland glades and Holly Blues flutter round the tree’s blossoms in April and May. In wet patches on the eastern side of the hill the rufous-winged Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterfly dances between the flowers of Marsh Thistle and Ragged Robin, laying its eggs on the leaves of Marsh Violet; The Stiperstones is a hot-spot for this uncommon butterfly. On the heathland itself May is the month to look for Green Hairstreak butterflies; even the vivid
green of the young Bilberry leaves pales beside the emerald of the Green Hairstreak’s underwings as the butterfly alights on the foliage, closing its wings for concealment as it does so (fig 4x Small Pearl-bordered, Grayling, Green Hairstreak, Holly Blue).

The heathland is favoured by a trio of large moths: the Emperor, Fox and Northern Eggar. (Fig 4.x showing all three?) The males of all three may be glimpsed as they career over the heather in search of females; but you are more likely to see their caterpillars. The full-grown Emperor Moth caterpillar is long (60mm or more), plump, bright green with black bands spotted pink or yellow. Is this the ‘huge green caterpillar crowned with gold’ that Stephen Southernwood threatens to squash unless Deborah Arden allows him to kiss her – on the arm? The Fox and Eggar caterpillars are big too; both are brown and hairy.

An interesting footnote concerns a moth that has a Latin name only, Olethreutes mygindiana; one of the numerous so-called micro moths, it had not been recorded in Shropshire before being found on The Stiperstones by David Poynton in 1994. That it should be rare in Shropshire is dictated by its choice of Cowberry as the plant on which to lay its eggs, meaning that it is effectively restricted to The Stiperstones. The following year David Poynton found a host-specific parasite of the larvae of this moth – Glypta gracilis – a species new to Britain.

Mines and spoil-heaps

Destructive though mining is, and barren though the spoil may remain even a hundred years after it was discarded, there are a number of wildlife species particularly associated with the mining landscape.

Just inside the old mine-workings, where light remains strong, but dampness prevails, is the place to look for ferns – give examples. If you look into the darker recesses you may spot the luminous glow of the moss Schistostega pennata, but the greatest importance of the mineworkings lies beyond the point to which the eye penetrates, for here are winter roost sites for bats. In some sites dozens of the uncommon Lesser Horseshoe Bat hang, plum-like, from the ceilings, elsewhere there are smaller numbers of Long-eared, Daubenton’s, Natterer’s and Whiskered Bats. Where, for safety reasons, access to the mineshafts and adits is blocked, grilles have been installed to allow use by the bats to continue.

Mines are over-wintering sites too for the Herald moth and Small Tortoishell butterfly. Come high summer the Grayling, a butterfly of restricted distribution in Shropshire, may be found on and around spoil heaps throughout the mining area, as well as on the fringes of the heathland, but always seeking out bare sun-baked ground on which to bask, wings closed, cryptically-coloured underside exposed.

The need for water at the mines, whether for the steam engines or for the washing of minerals, led to the creation of mine reservoirs. Some hold water still today, others are now just muddy, rushy hollows, all are important wildlife features in what tends otherwise to be a dry and quick-draining landscape. The best of the pools are at The Bog where there are Frogs and Palmate Newts, Emperor Dragonflies, Black Darters and Azure Damselflies and much other aquatic wildlife.
Heathland harvest: Whinberries and Cranberries

In the past, virtually all of the heathland plants were harvested for one purpose or another by the families of miners and their descendants, but the Whinberry harvest was of particular importance. Anyone born locally before 1950 has Whinberry picking locked in the memory. One such is Wilfred Andrews (born 1925): ‘We’d go whinberrying and cranberrying up by the Devil’s Chair. We’d have a little fire and cook bacon and have a picnic. It was right nice. They’d say we’d have to pick our clothes off the hill – pick whinberries to sell to buy clothes to go back to school’.

Wilfred’s testimony is repeated time and again amongst people of his generation. Enjoyable though he found it, this was no idle past-time, Wilfred was making a vital contribution to the family budget: ‘picking his clothes off the hill’. And Doug Boulter (born 1939) points out that this was a community activity: ‘The hill would be covered with people, they’d come in droves’, or in the words of Mary Webb’s Mrs Arden ‘There’s a power of folks coming, greedy as rooks in the fowl yard.’ For many a youngster, such as Les Hotchkiss (born 1927), picking was a penance: ‘I hated whinberry picking. You never got a wet day them summers’, and even if you did, Susie Hartshorn (born 1920) remembers that a truce wasn’t necessarily called: ‘Granny would go whinberry picking with a big old umbrella and all of the children. If it rained they thought they’d be going back home but “Oh no! Come and get here under the ‘yeth’ [heather]”. She’d put this great big umbrella up and all these kids would scuttle underneath it. “Get under me apron”, she’d say, if it was only a shower, and it would dry up and they’d go on picking.’

Emily Griffiths (1917-1999) whose eloquence and clear recollections of life on The Stiperstones in the first half of the twentieth century made her the acknowledged and admired oral historian of the period, recalls the use to which the Whinberries were put: ‘The Whinberries were mostly used for dyes … Buyers, known locally as ‘higglers’, collected with a horse and cart. The ripe fruit was packed into small round wicker hampers, known as ‘wiskets’, which were lined with newspaper and taken for despatch to Minsterley Station.’

And, according to Mary Webb’s The Golden Arrow, quantities found their way to Silverton (Shrewsbury) to ‘the great wimberry market … in hampers that needed two men to lift them, and the purple juice dripped from them as in a wine-vat’. But of course they were consumed at the point of harvest too, and still are today. Indeed, courtesy of several large deepfreezes, they are available as pie or crumble throughout the year at the Stiperstones Inn.

As well as being delicious, many medicinal properties have, justifiably or not, been ascribed to Whinberries. These include the treatment of bladder stones, lung and liver disorders, diarrhoea, gout and rheumatism. They have been used as a diuretic as well as to induce menstruation, sooth mouth ulcers and relieve symptoms of typhoid fever. And they are said to improve vision – a quality remarked on apparently by Second World War pilots and since demonstrated, it is said, by a number of experiments. Further experiments have demonstrated that consuming Whinberries improves brainpower – in rats.
But it is the presence of organic chemicals in the skin of the fruit acting as antioxidants, helping to cleanse the body of toxins, which have led many to recommend the eating of Whinberries. Jennifer Trehane advocates at least half a cup a day, claiming that this should provide benefits in terms of general health and a delay in the onset of degenerative diseases associated with aging. Fair to say that as a grower she has a vested interested, but few would find her recommendation a hardship.

The fruits of Cowberry (fig 4.x Ben Osborne) are tart and rarely picked nowadays. But they used to be, and were referred to, as by Wilfred Andrews and Doris Hewitt, as ‘Cranberries’, hence the tor known as Cranberry Rock. This local name can lead to confusion with another relative Vaccinium oxycoccos which botanists call Cranberry; it is confined to bogs and very wet heaths, including in the Shropshire hills, but is no longer to be found on The Stiperstones.

It is strange that the picking of Cowberries has virtually died out, because they have a number of culinary uses and are easier to pick than Whinberries – rather than fruiting singly they tend to occur in little bunches of twos and threes. In Sweden, where it is known as ‘Lingonberry’ from ‘Lingon’, the Swedish name for the plant, it is harvested in huge quantities, up to 200,000 tons in a good year, and is known as the ‘red gold of the forest’; indeed there is farmed production in a number of European countries.

On The Stiperstones, as in Sweden, Cowberries were kept fresh by simply immersing them in spring water. This was possible because ascorbic and benzoic acid in the fruit gives it good keeping qualities. When they were used, the water was poured off and drunk, providing, like the fruit themselves, a valuable supplement of vitamins A and C. Pride of place in Sweden goes to the use of Lingonberry jam as an accompaniment to meatballs. Such use of the jam as a relish is reminiscent of our own use of the north American cranberry Vaccinium macrocarpon to accompany Christmas turkey. But the jam is excellent too as a spread or filling, and, provided not too much sugar is added, the natural sourness of the fruit comes through, teasing the palate with bitter/sweet contrasts. This delight is lost in commercial versions such as those sold by Ikea where the sweetness overwhelms the piquancy of the fruit.

Blackberries growing round the heathland fringe provided a prolific harvest too. Doris Hewitt remembers picking blackberries for 1d a pound … ‘We’d pick bucketfuls, seventy years ago they were very plentiful,’ and George Evans (born 1908) recalled that ‘the buyers would put them on the train by the hundredweight’.

Other harvests

But, as George Evans related, the hill harvest went far beyond the picking of wild fruits: ‘we seemed to be part of them [the hills], and we used them for whatever purpose we required’.

He remembered how his father would cut turves to protect tumps of potatoes from the frost, going amongst the ‘whinberry wires’ to cut a sod about two foot wide by three foot long and rolling it up like a carpet. It is a fair assumption that, particularly perhaps amongst the peatier
parts, turves have been cut for fuel too. And hay stacks were thatched with rushes, as were
stacks of bedding, as George Evans recalled: ‘When I was a boy, straw was a thing unheard
of in this part of the country. We used to go on to the hills and cut with the scythe loads and
loads of fern or what is now better known as Bracken, for winter bedding for the animals.
This was another stack we used to get rushes to thatch.’

Betty Hordley (born 1933) recalls that her parents ‘… would gather moss up on Rhadley
[Black Rhadley Hill], fill sacks of moss, they used to supply Murrell’s, Weaver’s and
Nichols’ with moss. They would go twice a week to Shrewsbury with moss because in those
days funeral wreaths were made with wreath frames and moss.’ In Gone to Earth Hazel
Woodus returns from Silvertown (Shrewsbury) with ‘a threes wreath frames’; her father, Abel,
cuts holly and she makes a ‘prickly wreath, sewing on the variegated holly-leaves one by one,
with clusters of berries at intervals’ for the coffin of ‘old Samson at the Yeath’. (fig 4.x Plate
41 from ‘Fenn’s and Whixall Mosses’)

Doug Boulter (born 1939) remembers as a 12 year old the cutting of holly at the north end of
the hill, in the area known as the ‘The Hollies’, for sending to Manchester for the Christmas
market. Sometimes outsiders would come on harvesting trips to the area: Bill Allmark (born
circa 1942) recalls how in the 1960s he used to travel down from his home at Fenn’s and
Whixall Moss near Whitchurch to cut berried holly at The Hollies for the making of
Christmas wreaths. Wreath making using bogmoss (Sphagna) has for almost a century been
an important source of income for ‘peat families’ at Fenn’s, Whixall and Bettisfield Moss,
with thousands sold each year; in common with The Stiperstones, the Moss is a National
Nature Reserve.

Prior to the spread, in the 1950s, of myxomatosis, Rabbits were exceedingly common in the
fields around the hill. George Evans recalled that ‘there were that many Rabbits that we were
almost walking over the top of them’; Wilfred Andrews that ‘the fields were walking with
them’. They were an important source of food and of income too, both as meat and for their
skins, and were hunted with dogs and ferrets and shot as well.

Wilfred Andrews was less successful with other quarry, recalling that: ‘In the bad winter of
1947 there was grouse all under the rocks, hundreds of them there were and there was
nothing for them to eat. We thought we’d creep up on them with a .410 but they heard us.’
(Fig 4x Red Grouse) Others had more luck, and the Gatten Estate’s game book shows a total
bag of 115 brace for The Stiperstones in 1911 (the first year for which records survive). The
strong population at this period is reflected in the frequent allusions made to Red Grouse by
Mary Webb in The Golden Arrow. Their cackling call, ‘a load, raucous, mocking laugh’,
becomes a malevolent motif in the novel. Other birds did figure however in the poor man’s
diet: George Balmer (born 1916) recalled enjoying Rook pie; Gordon Cook (born 1920)
roasting Fieldfares (or ‘Feldefars’ as he called them) and Johnny Butler (born 1920) that the
Pheasant had ‘only got to squawk and he was signing his death warrant.’

Timber was harvested from Resting Hill where older members of the community remember a
major felling in 1925. On these steep and often wind-swept slopes, with their thin dry soils
one couldn’t hope to grow quality timber, but there would have been a strong market for
locally grown poles for everyday uses. (Fig 4.x Oak coppice at Resting Hill) Elsewhere the
harvest was more modest, but birch and hawthorn were cut for firewood, and the tough stems
of old bushes of European Gorse were a valued burning wood too. It is only the hottest of
heathland fires that burns the heather stalks right down and quantities left over from cooler fires (‘each bush charred and left’, in Mary Webb’s words, ‘as a skeleton above black-strewn ground’) were gathered and stored for use as tinder, to make a quick fire for boiling a kettle, or, as John Francis recalled, for firing the bread oven. George Evans even remembered the dead stalks of nettle being gathered up and tied in little bundles for use as fire lighters: nothing was wasted.

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TW

23/9/07

ix Whilst Lostwithin is generally considered to be The Bog Mine, Perkins Beach Mine seems equally probable. Other locations have been suggested including both Snailbeach Mine and Cothercott Mine which lies to the east of The Stiperstones. See Chapter 2.

ix The production, by the Shared Experience Theatre Company, opened in Brighton on 25 March 2004 and toured to Guildford, Southampton, Cambridge, Thoresby, Bristol, London and Oxford, where it had its last performance on 12 June. Helen Edmundson has also adapted *Anna Karenina* and *The Mill on the Floss* for the stage.

ix From the review by Susannah Clapp in *The Observer*, 16 May 2004.


ix The Lordshill Project began in 2005 and aimed to record the memories of those who took part in or watched the filming; the two CDs were released in 2006, further material is archived.

ix This analysis was done for a lecture given by TW, at the invitation of Margaret Austin, to the summer school of the Mary Webb Society in 1995.

ix The ‘pencilled chickens’ are the Whimbrel chicks with pencil-like markings on their plumage.

ix A fair assumption, because not only was Mary Webb a naturalist, but also, according to W Reid Chappell (1930), H E Forrest was ‘a great friend’ of hers.
Rodwell 1991-2000. ‘H’ indicates heathland; ‘MG’ mesotrophic grassland i.e. grassland growing on soils which are moderately well endowed with plant nutrients; ‘U’ upland; ‘W’ woodland.

Other spellings include Whimberry, Winberry and Wimberry, the last two being the main ones given by Georgina Jackson in her *Shropshire Word-Book* of 1879; she maintains that ‘Winberry is a contraction of Wineberry, an old name for the fruit’. Mary Webb favoured Wimberry. Amongst names used elsewhere in the country are Whortleberry, Blueberry, Whorts, Hurts and Urts.

In *Fern Ticket to the Magic Forest of The Wrekin* (2004), George Evans provides a more oblique reference: ‘Fern ticket is an ancient joke that’s worth renewing. Any couple seen slipping out of the Forest Glen during a dance, heading for the woods, were asked by friends, “Have you got a fern ticket?”’.

*Lutea* = yellow. However, some populations, notably in the Pennines, are purple or purple and yellow, and though on The Stiperstones part-purple flowers have been seen in the past, nowadays at least, flowers are almost all just yellow.

Recorded by John and Kate Thorne, see Shropshire Botanical Society Newsletter, Autumn 2002.

The ‘pencilled chickens’ are the Whimbrel chicks with pencil-like markings on their plumage.

A fair assumption, because not only was Mary Webb a naturalist, but also, according to W Reid Chappell (1930), H E Forrest was ‘a great friend’ of hers.

The nearest breeding location is in northern Scotland.

### Chapter 5

**‘Diafol Mountain’: lore and legend**

> Round such aloof and haunting places legends gather as naturally as cloud on the summits.

Ellis Peters *Ellis Peters’ Shropshire* (1992)

**Charlotte Sophia Burne and Georgina Frederica Jackson**

Charlotte (Lotty) Burne (1850-1923) was born in north Shropshire (check), the eldest of six children, daughter of the heir to a country estate. She was a very bookish child, who by the age of seven was already collecting details of folklore and customs. In her mid twenties she met Georgina Jackson (1823/4-1895) author of *Shropshire word-book, a glossary of archaic and provincial words etc., used in the county* (1879), a major and meticulous compilation. By the time of its publication Georgina Jackson was an invalid and unable to complete her next projected work, about Shropshire folklore, but she passed the material she had gathered to Charlotte Burne, and the years 1883-6 saw the publication of *Shropshire folk-lore: a sheaf of gleanings edited by Charlotte Sophia Burne from the collections of Georgina F Jackson*. It is clear however that Charlotte Burne added considerably to Georgina Jackson’s work and was author, as well as editor, of the final text. It has been described as ‘perhaps the best county folklore book we possess as well as the most monumental’.ix

Charlotte Burne was to become a mainstay of the Folklore Society, editor of its journal *Folklore* and later its President. She certainly looks presidential in the surviving portrait photo of
her in her prime (figure 4.x from Folk-lore 2001), but there is also a suggestion of the obesity that, in later years, when travelling by train, required her to be wheeled down station platforms on a porter’s trolley.

The compilation of works such as Shropshire folk-lore implies that belief in this lore was widely and deeply held. Perhaps it was; it certainly served the novelist Mary Webb’s purpose to suggest so, indeed she grounded a series of novels on the assumption that many in the rural communities of Shropshire were in thrall to the supernatural, so that lore and legend, charm and spell dictate conduct and shape destinies. When, early on in The Golden Arrow Mary Webb describes the Devil’s Chair, the core feature of her ‘Diafol Mountain’, The Stiperstones, she establishes this over-arching context:

‘For miles around, in the plains, the valleys, the mountain dwellings it was feared … So the throne stood – black, massive, untenanted, yet with a well-worn air. It had the look of a chair from which the occupant has just risen, to which he will shortly return. It was understood that only when vacant could the throne be seen. Whenever rain or driving sleet or mist made a grey schechinah there people said, ‘There’s harm brewing.’ ‘He’s in his chair.’ Not that they talked of it much; they simply felt it as sheep feel the coming of snow.’

Shropshire folk-lore is a work which Mary Webb credited in her Foreword to Precious Bane and on which she appears to have drawn freely, embellishing and supplementing its content so as to support her narratives. Gladys Mary Coles (Webb’s biographer) states that she wove approximately 30 legends and superstitions into The Golden Arrow and almost 200 into Precious Bane; there were many in Gone to Earth too. The following account of the lore and legend of ‘Diafol Mountain’ owes most to the work of Charlotte Burne and Georgina Jackson, but draws on the research of other folklorists too, notably Jennifer Westwood, and it explores the way in which Mary Webb incorporates Stiperstones legends into her novels.

Edricus Saluage

Of the many legends linked to The Stiperstones, those attached to Wild Edric are the most interesting, the most individual but also the most universal. Edric is an historical figure round whom legends accumulated, legends with local colour, but legends that fall too into well-known patterns or ‘tale types’ with oft-recurring themes or ‘motifs’ found elsewhere in Britain and indeed abroad.

To start with history, as recounted by Charlotte Burne: Edricus Saluage of Domesday, (figure 4 x, extract from Domesday ??) ‘the savage’, ‘the wild’ Edric, was a Saxon nobleman, Lord of Ledbury (Lydbury) North (near Bishop’s Castle), a powerful Saxon landowner, with many manors in Shropshire and neighbouring counties to his name. In 1067, Edric, in alliance with the Welsh kings Bleddyn and Rhiwallon, fought the Normans, overcoming their garrison at Hereford, and in 1069, with Bleddyn (now the sole King of Wales), he besieged Shrewsbury. Although in 1070 Edric made peace with William, he was later to rebel again, when he may have died in battle, been imprisoned (where he later died), or he may have bowed to the inevitable and ended his days peacefully somewhere in the Marches.

Wild Edric was, according to Walter Map, writing in about 1180, ‘a man of great prowess’ named ‘from his bodily activity, and his rollicking talk and deeds’. In his De Nugis Curialium
Trifles of the Court

Map recounts the best known of these deeds, and in doing so leads us from history into legend:

‘…he when returning late from hunting through wild country … came upon a large building at the edge of the forest … he looked in and saw a great dance of numbers of noble ladies … most comely to look on … greater and taller than our women. The knight remarked one among all the rest as excelling in form and face, desirable beyond any favourite of a king … At the sight the knight received a wound to the very heart, and ill could bear the fires driven in by Cupid’s bow; the whole of him kindled and blazed up … He rushes in, catches her by whom he has been caught … took her with him, and for three days and nights used her as he would, yet could not wring a word from her. She yielded quietly to his will.’

Despite this violent beginning, the first words uttered by this woman, whose ‘fairy nature’ was apparently proven by her beauty, ‘the like of which had never been seen or heard of’, are: ‘Hail to you my dearest!’ She tells Edric that he will enjoy health and prosperity ‘until you reproach me either with the sisters from whom you snatched me, or the place … from which I come’.

Edric vows fidelity and marries her. They are summoned to London by William the Conqueror who is eager to see this prodigy of beauty and she duly excites ‘the amazement of all’ before the two of them are sent home again. After many years the inevitable happens: returning one night from hunting Edric fails to find her; she is summoned but is slow to come, drawing from Edric the fateful reproach: ‘Was it your sisters that kept you so long?’ She vanishes, and despite much searching, Edric fails to find her and eventually dies ‘in unceasing sorrow’.

Discussing Wild Edric in her Folklore of the Welsh Border Jacqueline Simpson observes that: ‘One remarkable pattern of belief and tale springs from the persistent loyalty with which a dead leader’s followers may reject the bitter truth of his death, and cling to a hope that he has only mysteriously vanished.’

The loyalty shown by Edric’s followers was indeed persistent; it endured it seems for 800 years! Charlotte Burne, writing in the 1880s, reported that it was ‘not many years since … there were people to be found, if there are not some now, who believed Wild Edric to be still alive …. He [Edric] cannot die, they say, till all the wrong [wrought by William the Conqueror] has been made right, and England has returned to the same state in which it was before the troubles of his days. Meanwhile he is condemned to inhabit the lead mines as a punishment for having allowed himself to be deceived by the Conqueror’s fair words. So there he dwells, with his wife and his whole train.’

Another thread in this rich fabric of legend is that whilst incarcerated, Edric and his followers sometimes knocked to indicate to the miners where the best lodes of lead were to be found. Such knockers, or ‘fairy miners’, were a particular feature of the Cornish tin mines, from where some of those working in the Stiperstones lead mines are said to have originated.

The Wild Hunt, The Death Pack

Edric and his followers are best known however as harbingers of war. According to Charlotte Burne ‘Now and then they are allowed to show themselves. Whenever war is going to break
out, they ride over the hills in the direction of the enemy’s country, and if they appear, it is a sign that the war will be serious.’

Charlotte Burne reported on a sighting at Minsterley of Wild Edric and his men at Minsterley by an illiterate miner’s daughter (or the illiterate daughter of a miner?) in 1853 or 1854, shortly before the outbreak of the Crimean War. Her description was detailed: they were dressed in medieval clothes, green and white with gold ornaments; the dark-haired Edric rode a white horse, and the hair of his wife, named Lady Godda in this account, was golden and reached to her waist. The miner himself was present too, bidding his daughter to cover her face, except for her eyes, and on no account to speak, or she would go mad. The miner’s daughter reported that her father had seen Edric prior to the Napoleonic Wars, and it is said that there were sightings before the Boer War and both World Wars, including, according to Malcolm Saville’s Seven White Gates (see Chapter 6), before the evacuation from Dunkirk.

The miner’s entreaty to his daughter provides a link with another recurrent theme of English folklore and indeed that of many countries, the so-called ‘Wild Hunt’: to see the hunt (or, in this case, connect with it through speech) brings death or madness. It is this fearsome element that Mary Webb draws on in Gone to Earth (see Chapter 4), in which Hazel Woodus has a recurrent terror of the appearance of what she calls ‘the jeath pack’. Mary Webb explains: ‘It was said that the death pack, phantom hounds of a bad squire … scoured the country on dark stormy nights. Harm was for the houses past which it streamed, death for those that heard it give tongue. This was the legend, and Hazel believed it implicitly’. Later Hazel expands on her beliefs: ‘First comes the Black Huntsman, crouching low on his horse and horse going belly to earth … And the jeath pac’s with him, great hound-dogs, real as real, only no eyes, but sockets with a light behind ’em. Ne’er a one knows what they’m after. If I seed ’em I’d die.’

For the sensible John Arden in The Golden Arrow the ‘Dark Riders’ represented one of ‘them wold, unrighteous tales’. Perhaps this is recognition by Mary Webb that she was writing at, or beyond the point, where a rural society swayed by superstition was giving way to one guided by rationality. She wrote her novels between 1915 and 1924, but, excluding the posthumously published and incomplete novel Armour wherein he Trusted, which is grounded in medieval times, and Gone to Earth, they are set in the nineteenth century. It was a period when the myth and superstition on which her plots sometimes depend, might perhaps be seen as more believable drivers of action than if she had set them in the twentieth. However, the events of Gone to Earth, which was published in 1917, are set some time after 1909. Here, in an effort to make Hazel Woodus’s reliance on the supernatural credible, Webb gives her gypsy blood, an apparent lack of education, unworldliness, and no worldly guidance other than that of her late mother’s ‘old, dirty, partially illegible manuscript-book of spells and charms and other gypsy lore’. Interestingly, the makers of the film of Gone to Earth moved the events back to 1897, reasoning perhaps that rooting them in the nineteenth century might make them more credible.

Seven Whistling Birds

In July 1987, when walking up to Cranberry Rock, TW saw six large birds in flight and heard their whistling call. According to the legend of the ‘Seven Whistling Birds’, if a seventh bird had risen from the marshy ground beneath them the world would have ended. Charlotte
Burne refers to this as ‘the wildest, vaguest, most imaginative of all the superstitions concerning birds’.

There are various conjectures as to the specific identity of these seven mythical birds: geese, Golden Plover and Curlew are amongst the candidates. Another strong one is Wigeon, a duck of inland waters and estuaries, which, perhaps pre-eminently amongst British birds, has a call most obviously like a human whistle. It is to this resemblance that Mary Webb alludes in Precious Bane when, at a portentous moment in the novel, Gideon and Prue Sarn, living amongst the meres of north Shropshire, hear ‘a sweet scattered whistling … falling from the dim, moony sky’. Gideon, sure that it is ‘The Seven Whistlers’, takes it is an evil omen; Prue ‘mortally afeard to think of those … ghostly birds’ seeks to convince herself it is ‘only some magpie-widgeon we’d disturbed at the end of the mere …’.

But another possibility is Whimbrel, the species seen, heard and recognised in July 1987. A close relative of the Curlew, the Whimbrel visits Shropshire only on migration to and from its northern breeding grounds. Its flight call is a repetitious whistle, described as having seven notes. Edward Armstrong, foremost authority on the folklore of birds, seeks to dismiss the candidature of Whimbrel, describing it as ‘almost certainly merely a sophisticated modern attempt to pin a name to the Seven Whistlers’, arguing that ‘the numeral referred originally to the number of the whistlers, not the character of their utterance.’ Yet, how neat if it referred to both? And why not? Other than in the extreme north of Scotland, Whimbrels are birds seen, or heard, only when flying over on migration, their repetitive call suggestive of an anxious search or enquiry, their appearances interpreted perhaps as a quest.

Variations of this legend crop up in many parts of the country, and indeed the world. Students of folklore link the ‘Seven Whistlers’ legend to that of the ‘Wild Hunt’ or ‘death pack’ and also to the phantom or ‘Gabriel’ hounds—the vision of an aerial, night-time hunting pack seemingly conjured up as an explanation for the nocturnal gabbling of migratory geese.

**The Devil’s Chair**

The Devil’s Chair is neither the highest nor perhaps the most spectacular of the quartzite tors that jut up from the ridge of The Stiperstones, but it is undoubtedly the most celebrated. And it might be the most visited were its actual location not wishfully anticipated by visitors—tired of the ankle-wrenching walk along the spine of the ridge, exposed to the wind and rain blowing in from Wales, they are very ready to assume that one or other of the preceding tors is the object of their search. So they return home satisfied but without having actually sat in the remote, broad, north-facing, chair-like depression towards the end of the otherwise knife-like crest of the elongated outcrop that is the Devil’s Chair.

The name and the legends attached to the Chair, make for its celebrity. There are many variations, but there are two principal tales as told to Charlotte Burne:

‘Once upon a time the Devil was coming from Ireland with an apronful of stones. Where he was going I cannot say; some say it was the Wrekin he was carrying in his leather apron, some say he was going to fill up Hell [sic] Gutter, on the side of the Stiperstones Hill. But any way he had to cross the Stiperstones, and it was a very hot day, and he was very tired, so he sat down to rest on the highest rock. And as he got up again to go on his way, his apron-string broke, and down went the stones, and very badly he cursed them too, so I’ve heard.'
They lie there to this day, scattered on the ground all round the Devil’s Chair, and if you go up there in hot weather you may smell the brimstone still, as strong as possible!’

Charlotte Burne learned the second version from ‘old Netherley’, ‘a lame old man who used to “lug coal” with a cart and two donkeys’ who had been told it by lead miners; he recounted that

‘… of all the countries in the world the Devil hates England the most, because we are good Protestants and read the Bible. Now if ever the Stiperstones sink into the earth, England will be ruined. The Devil knows this very well, so he goes whenever he can, and sits in his chair on the top of the hill, in hopes that his weight will flatten it down and thrust it back into the earth, but he hasn’t managed it yet, and it is to be hoped he never will!’

His Chair is a fine view-point with wide views to the north over The Stiperstones and way beyond. It is benign on a fine day but grim on a bad one and frequently atmospheric. In October 1986, relatively new to The Stiperstones but well-versed in Mary Webb, TW found himself on a lone overnight fire-watch over the embers of a ‘wild fire’ which, progressing uphill from the west on a broad front, had been fortuitously blocked by the wide expanse of the Chair. A look-out location on the Chair itself seemed at sun-down to be both a strategic and relatively comfortable choice, but as night fell, stars sparkled, smoke wafted and sparks flew, atmosphere enveloped the watcher, superstition undermined rationality and a retreat was beaten.

It is the reputation but also the scenic splendour of the Devil’s Chair that draws worshippers of the occult and indeed the divine. Shortest and longest days may still sometimes be marked by the former (see below). As to the latter, on one occasion TW was asked to guide a group who, on Rogation Day, had chosen to walk to the Chair for an outdoor gathering, prayer and period of contemplation. This was not intended as an exorcism, or the re-capture of a satanic outpost for Christianity, but as a celebration of God’s creation.

The Devil and Slashrags the tailor

*By trade he was a swindler born  
And worked hard at it, night and morn,  
He did no sewing, used no thread  
Together gummed his suits instead…*

These are the opening lines of a ballad entitled ‘… to follow…’ published in 1937 by the Reverend ‘Richard Ridge of Ridge’ from his home at Corndon Lodge, The Gravels near Shelve.

Slashrags was a dishonest, greedy and lazy tailor. He nearly got his come-uppance however when a dark stranger on The Stiperstones ordered a suit. Slashrags couldn’t but notice the stranger’s cloven hooves, long tail and sulphurous odour and realised with horror that he was to dress the Devil himself. Unable nonetheless to resist the temptation of making more money, he arranged to meet his new client again in a week’s time to fit his suit. But on returning home Slashrags lost his nerve and decided to enlist the help of the Reverend
Brewster of Middleton to whom he confessed his many sins. Believing Slashrags to be truly repentant, the Reverend Brewster went with him to meet his client.

The Devil grinned and paid his bill
Then set the Tailor for the kill,
But saw with horror in his look
That parson reading his Prayer Book.
He dropped the clothes with an awful yell
And in a jiffy took his hook
And hid himself in the lowest hell.

The involvement of the Reverend Brewster is an interesting example of how the fictional and the factual can come together. Brewster was indeed vicar of Middleton-in-Chirbury during the 1870s and ’80s and is well known for his amazing carvings on the pew-ends and stone columns in the church there.

To be edited : The topographical aspects of this are interesting. Somerville in ‘Best Wild Places’ has the fateful meeting taking place near Cranberry Rock, though he doesn’t give his source for this. Ridge however states that Slashrags lived in Priestweston and describes how he swindled miners at the ‘Bog Reckoning’ (a monthly event at which they were paid their wages). Later in the poem we find Slashrags riding around by Flenny Bank (near Shelve Pool), Ritton Castle and Shelve before meeting his demonic adversary at midnight at “White medale gate”. This gate was on the road between Pennerley and Shelve where it makes a sharp bend in a deep hollow. PF’s grandfather always called it White Way Dale and spoke about his own supernatural experience there during his youth (see ‘Hasty Pudding & Kettle Broth’).

Slashrags often figures in story tellings today, notably those of Sally Tonge and Mythstories of Wem.

The Needle’s Eye

Charlotte Burne also refers to the ‘Needle’s Eye’, ‘a long narrow channel accidentally formed among the huge fragments of rock which lie heaped round the Devil’s Chair. Through this passage visitors must crawl, but I have been unable to learn particulars of person, occasion, or consequences.’ No such passage is known today.

In his novella St Mawr (see Chapter 6), D H Lawrence’s describes ‘the Needle’s Eye’ rather differently, as ‘a hole in the ancient grey rock, like a window, looking to England.’ Clearly he is referring to the point part-way along the crest of the tor where a pillar of rock has fallen side-ways and lies jammed across a gap, forming an angular opening, or eye of a needle. (figure 4.x, photo today or reproduce photo c 1890 from David Trumper ‘South Shropshire’ 2001, Sutton Publishing, ‘Britain in Old Photographs’ series)

‘The Golden Arrow’

In Mary Webb’s The Golden Arrow John Arden tells Stephen Southernwood of an ‘old ancient custom’ and a related song;18 they lend their names to the novel. But John Arden conveys uncertainty about the origin of this custom, expressing thereby the uncertainty of
Mary Webb and of those, such as Charlotte Burne (presumed to be Mary Webb’s source) who had sought to connect the disparate strands of a fading legend; his tentative account runs as follows:

‘In time gone by the lads and wenches in these parts was used to go about Easter and look for the golden arrow. It met be along of them getting sally-blossom for Palm Sunday as the story came; but howsoever, they was used to go. And it was said that if two as were walking out found the arrow they’d cling to it fast though it met wound them sore. And it was said that there’d be a charm on ’em, and sorrow, and a vast of joy. And nought could part ’em, neither in the flower of life nor in the brown winrow.’

‘Seeking the Golden Arrow on Ponsert [Pontesford] Hill’ was apparently a very long-established custom, but it was dying out by the 1880s when Charlotte Burne was writing. The hill, which lies three miles north east of The Stiperstones, has two humps, Pontesford Hill proper, and Earl’s Hill, the taller by 100 feet or so. Charlotte Burne relates that ‘Every year on Palm Sunday crowds of people were wont to ascend Pontesford Hill “to look for the Golden Arrow” and … a regular “wake” or merry-making was carried on there, with games and dancing and drinking … a great annual picnic. Every household was occupied beforehand in baking cakes and packing up kettles and crockery in preparation for “going palming”, as it was called.’

The ‘palm’ was a spray from a solitary ancient ‘haunted’ yew-tree growing on the hill, though on which part is not related. The lucky gatherer of the first palm, provided he or she kept it safe, would suffer no misfortune over the coming year. Clearly this first trial was worth winning, but to be rewarded, as one might wish for the second such trial, would require some scheming: the first to run at full speed down the hill and dip the fourth finger of his or her right hand into the water of a deep pool on its east side would be certain to marry the first person of the opposite sex whom they happened to meet.

But, what of the ‘Golden Arrow’? By the time that Charlotte Burne was writing, recollections of the substance of the legend had withered away: ‘What the Golden Arrow is, the search for which is the professed object of the Wake, or how it came there, none of the folk can tell. Though many very old people have been questioned on the subject for the purposes of the present work, little has been elicited beyond a hazy idea that it was dropped by some great one in days gone by and never found.’

Into this vacuum of recollection Mary Webb inserted her own appropriately imprecise narration, as offered by John Arden in the passage cited above. According to this version, the ‘Golden Arrow’ is ‘true love’, a symbol of love found, of love enduring. Deborah Arden and Stephen Southernwood find the ‘Golden Arrow’. She clings to it and is wounded; he turns from it and goes away before finally turning back and grasping it for good: ‘D’you mind the tale of them that found the Golden Arrow, and went with apple-blow scent round ’em, and a mort o’ bees, and warmship, and wanted nought of any man?’

**Ghosts, Witches, a Wizard and Nancy Corra**

Thomas Wright, the celebrated antiquarian from Ludlow, writing in 1862, identifies The Stiperstones as the annual meeting place of Shropshire’s ghosts, and may be its witches too:
‘It is, I understand, still believed in that neighbourhood that, every year on the longest night, all the ghosts (including, I suppose, spiritual beings of all kinds, and perhaps witches) of Shropshire “and the counties beyond” assemble round the highest of the Stiperstones to choose their King’.

Wright is referring to the Devil’s Chair, wrongly assuming, in common with many others, that this, rather than Manstone Rock, is the highest point of The Stiperstones.

Mary Webb picks up these devilish connections in *The Golden Arrow*, telling us how in their cottage, just below the Chair, on the longest night of the year, when ‘all the ghosses in Shropshire’ are meeting, Deborah learns that she has been deserted by Stephen. Deranged by grief she sets fire to all their possessions before stumbling through the night to the sanctuary of her father’s cottage on the Wilderhope Range (The Long Mynd). And in *Precious Bane*, Gideon Sarn rises angrily to the gibe that his sister Prue will be dancing with him on Diafol Mountain at ‘Thomastide’, the implication being that Prue, his ‘hare-shotten’ (hareclipped) sister is a witch (‘Thomastide’ embraces St Thomas’s Day, 21 December, and marks the shortest day and longest night of the year).

Other writers have framed stories round the annual gathering of witches and ghosts round the Devil’s Chair. There is John Macklin’s *The Dancing Demons of Stiperstones* in which a geologist, George Vardy investigating the quartzite rocks, becomes conscious of a dramatic change of atmosphere and finds himself witnessing a ritual dance by shadowy figures of both sexes, some naked, all oblivious of his presence.

George Vardy was alarmed, but lived to tell his bizarre tale, not so Harry Wentworth in *The Eve of St Thomas* by W Howard Williams. Wentworth makes light of local advice not to venture onto the hill on this of all nights. Next day a search party finds his unmarked corpse at the foot of the Devil’s Chair; his hand still clutched a torch but the bulb and batteries were burned out, there was a film of smoke on the lens and all was pervaded by the scent of brimstone.

In ‘The Mine’ a ghost story by L T C (Tom) Rolt the action moves to Snailbeach, where a creature of human shape ‘terrible tall and thin’ and ‘dirty white all over’ is seen crouching on top of the cage bringing up a miner, Joe Beecher, from work on a new level where there have been mysterious goings on. The miner hares off ‘for all the world as though Old Nick himself were after him’ pursued by the creature which is ‘as quick and quiet as a cat after a sparrow’. Joe is later found dead at the bottom of an old quarry, his face horribly contorted.

Magdalene Weale, whose *Through the highlands of Shropshire on horseback* was published in 1935 (see Chapters 2 and 6), encountered ‘the local wizard’ who lived near the Boat Level, but in effecting a cure for jaundice he seemed to be exercising the skills of a faith-healer rather than anything more occult. In *The Golden Arrow* we encounter the herbalist Nancy Corra whose cottage ‘stood amongst the white mounds’ of mining spoil. Her ‘acknowledged patients’ were treated for minor ailments. For the ‘unacknowledged’ ones, who ‘came in the evening, closely shawled’, she offered a service which according to Mary Webb was viewed by some as being ‘unmixed evil’, by others as helping ‘to right the balance of punishment between the sexes for the sin of “going too far”’. Elsie Rowson, an interviewee for *Never on a Sunday*, recalls her mother saying of the fictional Nancy Corra “‘That’s Granny Jones, that’s your Granny Jones’, the lady who lived behind the mounds that grew no grass’.
John Mytton

John (Jack) Mytton (1796-1834) was a country squire with a seat at Halston, three miles from Oswestry, and an estate at Habberley, just to the north of The Stiperstones. He was one of Shropshire’s great characters and greatest reprobates, someone around whom legends accumulate, yet someone who was seemingly more eccentric, more extravagant, more outrageous than the most daring romancier could have invented. That we have some grasp of the facts of his life is thanks to his biographer and contemporary Charles James Apperley (1778-1843), known as ‘Nimrod’, gentleman hunting correspondent of the Sporting Magazine.

Jack Mytton was generous to the point of prodigality, warm-hearted but quick tempered, extravagant in his virtues and his vices, blind to reason, impervious to advice, spendthrift, fearless, and, perhaps above all, reckless. He is said to have drunk four to six bottles of Port daily; he raced, he hunted, was one of the most daring of horsemen and an excellent shot; he lost a fortune but spent £10,000 to obtain a seat in Parliament where apparently he sat for no more than half an hour.

A neighbour christened him ‘Mango, King of the Pickles’ and, as Nimrod says, ‘he proved his title to the honour even to the end of his life’. When in Calais escaping from his creditors, he set fire to his night shirt in order to frighten away the hiccups. He suffered severe burns and his recovery was slow and painful; deprived of brandy he drank eau de Cologne instead. On return to England he was jailed, and a life of wilful self-abuse finally caught up with him. Despite his extraordinarily wanton life, or perhaps in some measure because of it, his funeral was attended by some 3,000 people Check Shrewsbury Chronicle 4 and 11 April 1834

Local reminders of this extraordinary man include the ‘Mytton Arms’ (in Habberley) and the steep-sided valley known as Mytton Dingle (or Mytton’s Beach) on The Stiperstones. The association with the latter is not clear cut, as it has been suggested that the name is derived from the similarity between the shape of the valley and that of a ‘leg of mutton’. TW knows a 90 year old whose pronunciation is clearly ‘Mutton’ not ‘Mytton’, but Roy Palmer, in his Folklore of Shropshire confidently links man and place, though, as so often, he fails to name his source. Apparently Mad Jack drove his second wife down it at speed in a two-wheeled carriage drawn by two horses. Those who have stumbled down the Dingle, or toiled up it, including the final taxing haul, the steepest ascent on The Stiperstones, will understand why it is known locally as ‘Jacob’s Ladder’, and they will either wonder at the recklessness of the man or dismiss the tale as apocryphal. If true, it is surprising that Mad Jack and his wife survived the experience, but little wonder that for her it was at the expense of a broken leg and a permanent loss of nerve.

Whose folklore?

The lore and legends of The Stiperstones are a source of fascination to many, but any hold that they may have exerted on the local community appears to be long passed. TW remembers 20 years ago being told by a local lady in her sixties that it was bad luck to cut down ‘Witty’ (Rowan), but the advice was delivered as a recollection of something learned decades previously, a throw-back rather than a current belief – he has, incidentally, ignored the advice on very many subsequent occasions with no self-evident ill effect.
Today the lore and legend of the place is largely the stuff of tourist brochures and media hype, and a guided walk with a ‘myths and legends’ theme is a sure-fire success. The ‘folklore’ is cherished by incomers and visitors more perhaps than by the indigenous community and as such it has lost its authenticity. It is no longer part of an oral tradition on which some degree of superstitious belief hung, but has been written up (including here), as an historical curiosity; as such it is in danger of becoming codified and fossilised.

Nevertheless the old legends reappear in new guises. In 1990, the opera *Wild Edric* (music by Charles Dakin, libretto by Peter Cann), had its première at the Ludlow Festival (*figure 4.x Programme cover for Wild Edric*). It was performed by a combination of local musicians, children’s choirs and London-based professionals totalling more than 100 participants in all. It was very much a community project, and Charles Dakin could hardly believe it when walking round Bishop’s Castle he heard children singing his catchy chorus ‘Wild Edric, bold Edric, rebel hero proud and free’.

Another guise is the ‘Wild Edric’ Rose, a rugosa hybrid introduced by David Austin Roses of Albrighton, Shropshire in 2005. Clearly this must be a rose of wild, rambling, indeed rollicking habit, somewhat unkempt, blood red, with a pungent and earthy fragrance. Well, almost. According to the description in the company’s catalogue it is ‘unusually tough and reliable … ideal for semi-wild planting’; it has a fragrance which is ‘strong and delicious’; the golden-yellow stamens carrying a scent of ‘pure clove’ and the deep velvety pink petals of ‘classic Old Rose with hints of watercress and cucumber’ (*figure 4 x Austin Roses photo*).

And there is more: ‘Wild Edric’, a narrative poem by Nigel Sustins was published in book form in 2008 giving new twists to the tale. Edric appears on its cover in one from a contemporary sequence of paintings by Rod Shaw; another of these haunting canvases is reproduced here (*Rod Shaw painting*). The Wood Brewery of Wistanstow marked this publication with a celebratory ale ‘Wild Edric Legendary Bitter’. Last word goes however to local story teller Val Littlehales, who, in gentle mockery, tells the tale of the less well known ‘Mild Cedric’. (*get more detail from Val*)

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Wright T 1862 On the local legends of Shropshire. *Collectanea Achaiologica*, 1,50-66

5/10/08
ix Katherine M Briggs (1978) in an essay on the history of the Folklore Society introducing a volume marking the Society’s centenary.

ix Charlotte Burne notes that she ‘never succeeded in getting a second version of this curious story’, nor could she trace the woman who had told it to her, let alone her maid whose story it was. Jennifer Westwood suggests that ‘we might well be chary of accepting at face value some of the features of her tale, which includes details of Saxon costume which sound as if they have been added on for “authenticity”’. Charlotte Burne notes that ‘the name given to Edric’s wife, the “Lady Godda” curiously coincides with that of Frau Gauden or Gode’, the German huntress whose declaration ‘The chase is better than Heaven’ condemned her to follow it to eternity. Jennifer Westwood is reluctant to accept that the name Lady Godda is derived from English tradition and speculates that it may have been added in by someone familiar with Jacob Grimm’s account of Frau Gauden published in 1835.

ix Hughes (1977)

ix For a detailed discussion see Armstrong (1970)

ix Context and call make clear that Mary Webb is referring to Wigeon, yet in her Shropshire Word Book (1879) Georgina Jackson states that the name ‘Magpie Widgeon’ is used for a very different duck, the Goosander.

ix Mary Webb’s words for this song are:
‘We have sought it, we have sought the golden arrow!
(Bright the sally-willows sway)
Two and two by paths low and narrow,
Arm in crook along the mountain way,
Break o’ frost and break o’ day!
Some were sobbing through the gloom
When we found it, when we found the golden arrow –
Wand of willow in the secret cwm.’
W Reid Chappell states that Mary Webb wrote the words having heard a rendering of ‘a semi-revivalist hymn popular in these parts, “God be with you till we meet again”,’ and that the words of the ‘Golden Arrow Song’ fit the tune perfectly.

ix This information comes from an article published in the Shrewsbury Chronicle of 8 June 2000.

ix Rolt (1910-1974) was an engineering historian, a professional author of more than 30 books, and devotee of vintage cars, canal boats, narrow gauge railways and industrial archaeology. He played a major part in the rescue of the Talyllyn Railway; at a later date (the 1960s) rails removed from the defunct Snailbeach District Railway saw further service on the Talyllyn.

Chapter 6
The ‘aboriginal’ hill: literature and tourism

I think it’s frantically lovely up here.

D H Lawrence St Mawr (1925)

D H Lawrence, Frederick Carter and the Devil’s Chair
D H Lawrence (1885-1930) (fig 6.x Carter’s portrait drawing of DHL) was a close contemporary of Mary Webb (1881-1927); one wonders whether they read each other’s work. But Lawrence’s visit in 1924 to Pontesbury and The Stiperstones had nothing to do with his fellow author; he came to visit Frederick Carter (1883-1967) an artist who also had aspirations as a writer.

Carter was born in Yorkshire; he trained as a ‘surveyor-architect’, but became a book illustrator, took up etching and exhibited at leading galleries at home and abroad. He had a particular interest in apocalyptic symbols, the zodiac and the Book of Revelation, and prepared a manuscript and drawings on these subjects which, in April 1923, he sent to Lawrence, who was at that time living in Mexico. Lawrence was by then an established writer whose published works included Sons and Lovers and Women in Love.

Although not previously aware of Frederick Carter, or his work, Lawrence expressed pleasure and interest in the manuscript. Further correspondence ensued, in which Lawrence suggested they meet when next he visited England. They did so in January 1924, by which time Frederick Carter had moved to Pontesbury 5km (3 miles) north east of The Stiperstones, where he rented the Manor House, an elegant building which dated back to 1661; it was demolished in 1977. Carter’s decision to move to Pontesbury was influenced by his friendship with the artists Walter and Dorothea Clement, who lived on Habberley Road. Walter made the altar in St George’s Church; it was carved by Dorothea. The altar incorporates three panels painted, rather crudely, by Frederick Carter.

Carter met Lawrence at Shrewsbury station, from where he, and Lawrence, something of the tourist in Shropshire, travelled to Pontesbury on the Minsterley branch line. During Lawrence’s stay in Shropshire, they discussed the possibility of joint research and publication; they also walked together to The Stiperstones. It seems that their route took them over Pontesbury Hill, through Poles Coppice and along Eastridge to Lord’s Hill Chapel; from there they went to the top of Crowsnest Dingle and on to the Devil’s Chair.

By the spring of 1924 Lawrence and his wife Frieda were in America living on a small, partly derelict ranch close to Taos, near Santa Fe in New Mexico. Once the ranch had been made habitable, Lawrence quickly wrote St Mawr, The Woman Who Rode Away and The Princess. St Mawr was published in 1925; it is a novella running to some 175 pages. The story starts in London, moves to Shropshire and finally over to New Mexico and the Rocky Mountains, but the pivotal moment occurs close to the Devil’s Chair on The Stiperstones.

The influence of St Mawr – a stallion with ‘big, black, brilliant eyes, with a sharp questioning glint, and that air of tense, alert quietness which betrays an animal that can be dangerous’ – is evident almost throughout, not least in the inter-play of the principal human characters: the American Mrs Rachel Witt, her daughter Lou Carrington and her Australian son-in-law Rico.

St Mawr is an essay about the wild and the tame – the wild, instinctive, animal spirit of the stallion, and the tame, mannered, self-conscious attitudes of upper class men. The sight of St Mawr makes Lou Carrington want to cry: ‘He burns with life. Most men have a deadness in them … Why can’t men get their life straight, like St Mawr…’. But it is also about the wildness of nature, whether on The Stiperstones or in the Rocky Mountains: ‘the marvellous beauty and fascination of natural wild things’ contrasted with ‘the horror of man’s unnatural life, his heaped-up civilisation’.
The bored, idle cast of characters and their horses head from London (where St Mawr has already proved a handful) as upper-crust tourists to Shropshire. They travel to Shrewsbury and then out to ‘a village of thatched cottages – some of them with corrugated iron over the thatch’ (Pontesbury) where Mrs Witt has taken ‘a tall red-brick Georgian house looking straight on to the churchyard’; presumably the house was modelled on Frederick Carter’s.

Carter later commented that St Mawr caused great amusement in Pontesbury because the locals, following up their own clues, ‘discovered the identity of every other character in the story’. Doubtless they recognised Carter himself in Lawrence’s Cartwright, an artist who was ‘just beginning to accept himself as a failure, as far as making money goes’, who ‘studied esoteric matters like astrology and alchemy’ and had a face ‘curiously like Pan’s’ (as indeed has Lawrence in Carter’s drawing!) And what about Mr Jones the postmaster, who ‘delivered his message in the mayonnaise of his own unction’? And then there was ‘the wicked little group of cottagers’ … ‘famous for ill-living’ … ‘in-bred’ … the ‘result of working through the centuries at the Quarry, and living isolated there at Mile End’;

presumably this was the Stiperstones Quartzite quarry at the Nills, near where Mary Webb once lived.

‘An excursion on horseback’ is arranged ‘to two old groups of rocks, called the Angel’s Chair and the Devil’s Chair, which crowed the moor-like hills looking into ‘Wales’. Though the name is never used, this is clearly The Stiperstones; perhaps the Angel’s Chair is Lawrence’s name for Shepherd’s Rock. The route followed by the riding party is that taken by Carter and Lawrence in January 1924: ‘down into a glade where a little railway [had been] built for hauling some mysterious mineral out of the hill’ (clearly the Snailbeach District Railway), and past ‘the hollow where the old Aldecar Chapel hid in damp isolation’ (Lord’s Hill Chapel). But it is now high summer and there is a ‘sea of bracken’ …‘distant bilberry-pickers’ …‘the pinky tops of heather and ling’ …and ‘tufts of hare-bells blue as bubbles’. On the skyline there is ‘a bunch of rocks: and away to the right another bunch’; they head for the Devil’s Chair:

‘They came at last, trotting in file along a narrow track between heather, along the saddle of a hill, to where the knot of pale granite suddenly cropped out. It was one of those places where the spirit of aboriginal England still lingers, the old savage England, whose last blood flows still in a few Englishmen, Welshmen, Cornishmen.’

They dismount and scramble over the Devil’s Chair and locate ‘the famous Needle’s Eye’; some at least of the party enter into the spirit of tourism and find it ‘frantically lovely up here’ (figure 6.x The Needle’s Eye c 1890 from page 123 of ‘South Shropshire’ David Trumper 2001). Then, back in the saddle, they head on, but soon St Mawr shies, backs and rears at the sight of an Adder. His rider, Rico, who has come to hate the horse, tugs viciously at the reins. He pulls the horse over backwards on top of himself. Ribs are broken, an ankle crushed. Another young man is disfigured by a kick in the face.

Should St Mawr be shot? Or gelded? He is saved from both fates by Mrs Witt and her daughter who take the stallion away, pack their bags and, eventually, along with St Mawr, but without Rico, head back to their native America. Lou buys a little, semi-derelict ranch, at over 8,000 ft … ‘man’s last effort towards the wild heart of the Rockies’. The ranch is described in detail – it is modelled on the Lawrences’ own Kiowa Ranch where St Mawr was written.
Lawrence’s principal characters lead privileged, vacuous lives. They are egotistical and self-absorbed, tedious in their constant self analysis and analysis of others. And their vacuity rubs off on the novella, but it is saved and illuminated by Lawrence’s vibrant descriptions, his wit and intelligence.

And what of Frederick Carter? His stay in Pontesbury was short, probably less than two years, and he had returned to Liverpool by the end of 1925. The following year he published *The Dragon of the Alchemists*, a series of drawings of figures and symbols preceded by several essays, the preliminary chapters it seems from the manuscript he had originally sent to Lawrence. In 1929 there was a concentrated exchange of letters between the two men, and late in the year Carter visited Lawrence in the south of France. By this time Lawrence, whose health had been fragile throughout his life, was terminally ill; he died of tuberculosis on 2 March 1930.

Prior to his death, Lawrence had been working on an introduction to what was to be Carter’s second book, *The Dragon of Revelation*. But it seems that Lawrence’s pen ran away with him (he drafted some 25,000 words and deleted a further 20,000) and, not surprisingly, he abandoned the notion of this manuscript as an introduction; instead it became his final book, *Apocalypse*, ‘a radical and searching criticism of the political, religious and social structures which have shaped our materialistic and technological age’; it was published posthumously in 1931.

Lawrence had, however, written a new, short, introduction for Carter, but, perhaps because it was not altogether complimentary, it was not made use of when, also in 1931, *The Dragon of Revelation* was published. Instead Carter’s publisher includes a note telling the story of Lawrence’s involvement with Carter and how it had led to the writing of *Apocalypse*. Carter’s *D H Lawrence and the Body Mystical* (1932) describes their relationship and planned literary collaboration. It is a relationship which merits something more than a literary footnote: it played a part in the writing of *St Mawr*, and if, in 1923, Carter had not sent Lawrence his manuscript, and had not remained in contact with him, visiting him in the south of France in the months before his death, *Apocalypse* would surely not have been written.

**Stanley Baldwin, Mary Webb and her pilgrims**

In 1924, at the time that D H Lawrence was visiting Frederick Carter, Mary Webb was completing *Precious Bane* which was published later that year. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (1867-1947) was to read this, the best known of Mary Webb’s novels, over the Christmas of 1926 when staying at his home in Worcestershire, from which he could see Shropshire’s Clee Hills. In the New Year Baldwin wrote to Webb telling her of the ‘keen delight’ with which he had read ‘a first-class piece of work’. Webb responded, delighted in her turn at receiving praise from someone ‘notably versed in the classics’, and clearly flattered that the man who, she supposed, had the ‘least leisure … of anybody in the British Empire’, had taken the trouble to write to her. She asked if she might be allowed to dedicate to Baldwin the novel on which she was then working and promised to post to him next day a ‘little bunch of violets for your writing-table’.
At this time Mary Webb had only a small band of admirers and her novels were not commercially successful, but, as Gladys Mary Coles recounts in her biography of Mary Webb, Stanley Baldwin was to be instrumental in establishing her as a popular novelist, albeit posthumously. Her death in October 1927, a mere nine months after her correspondence with Baldwin, went largely unrecorded, and it was only the day before a speech to the Royal Literary Fund dinner in April 1928, at which Baldwin intended to talk of Mary Webb’s work, that he learned that she had died. He went on to speak of his surprise that he had seen no obituaries, and paid testimony to ‘the extreme pleasure’ her writing had given him. Next day’s papers gave prominence to Baldwin’s tribute, under headlines which included ‘Neglected Genius’. In an astute move, Jonathan Cape hurriedly bought the rights in all her works, rushing them into print in a new Collected Edition. Mary Webb’s novels, which had sold slowly in her life-time, now became best-sellers: *The Golden Arrow*, re-issued in May 1928, had to be reprinted six times by March 1930, as had *Gone to Earth*, while within a six month period in 1928 *Precious Bane* was reprinted five times.

Some of the many new readers were keen to visit the settings of these novels. According to W Reid Chappell, ‘English and American pilgrims commenced to pay homage in the summer of 1928, and it is apparent that what was once a secluded bit of England far from the macadamised track will become the scene of many pilgrimages’; and he was the first into print with a pilgrim’s guide: *The Shropshire of Mary Webb* (1930). It is an entertaining mix of history, travel guidance, philosophy, homily, nationalism, anecdote, and the life and times of Mary Webb, including a description of the locations of each of the novels. The book retains some historical interest, not least in the photographs with which it is illustrated. The text includes descriptions of individuals and homesteads, the debilitating work in the mines and the desperate poverty that followed when, inexorably, industrial disease overcame the bread winner.

Over the next few decades other guides were to follow, notably those of Magdalene Weale, H W Timperley, W Byford-Jones and Vincent Waite, all of whom dedicated a chapter or more to describing The Stiperstones.

Magdalene Weale’s *Through the Highlands of Shropshire on Horseback* (1935) is the most characterful. Weale had previously stayed in various parts of Shropshire and had covered some of the highlands when hunting with The United, but she determined ‘to weld my various experiences into a connected whole’ and decided that the best way of ‘doing justice’ to the area was to see it from horseback. But rather than a hunter, she chose a local pony, Sandy, from Hogstow Hall, just west of Crowsnest. She was ‘the racing pony of the Mary Webb country, a bright chestnut, trim and elegant and full of idiosyncrasies’. Sandy’s idiosyncrasies included an ability to open gates, and part way through the itinerary, while her rider was staying at the Buffalo Inn at Clun, she effected an overnight escape and returned to The Stiperstones from where she had to be retrieved before Magdalene Weale could re-start her travels.

The original departure from Hogstow Hall had previously been delayed because of Sandy who had had a racing engagement at Minsterley, and whilst on tour she ran also at Kerry, coming in ‘a good second’. But despite her various accomplishments, Sandy has a smaller part to play in the events than did the donkey in Stevenson’s celebrated travels, and Magdalene Weale’s account is more of a guidebook than a travelogue. Indeed its final
By the time that Magdalene Weale was writing, mining activity was petering out, leaving behind what she describes as ‘The Land of Dereliction’, ‘a great stretch of desolate moorland and bog’ where ‘from amid the purple gold-flecked heather the gaunt arms of ruined mineshafts rise like ghostly memorials to the futile cupidity of man’. Her portrait of The Stiperstones and its people gives due weight to the scars and debris of mining, to the stark hardness, as well as the character and beauty of the landscape, and to the poverty and grind of life here at that time.

*Shropshire Haunts of Mary Webb* by W Byford-Jones (1907-1977), a journalist who often wrote under the name ‘Quaestor’, was published in 1937. It had originally appeared as articles in the *Express and Star*, Wolverhampton, and it is essentially a series of journalistic yarns, ghost stories and legends coloured by deeply conservative sentiments and nostalgia for a countryside seen as under attack from urban sprawl. He provides a few biographical details and descriptions of Mary Webb’s various homes interspersed with *fait divers* and traveller’s tales. He adds little more than anecdote to the store of knowledge about Mary Webb or The Stiperstones. When visiting the latter he comments, accurately perhaps, that ‘One is nearer to Mary Webb on the Devil’s Chair … than anywhere else in Shropshire’. He also visits Rose Cottage, Pontesbury, where Mary Webb wrote *The Golden Arrow*, and it is indicative of the post-Baldwin popularity of her work and her countryside that he reports that under the guise of ‘Roseville’ it had been made into a boarding house on the strength of its literary connections.

In *Shropshire Hills* (1947) H W Timperley offers a lyrical portrait of this part of his native county. He regrets the time that he has been obliged to spend away from Shropshire, even though this had given him the opportunity to write *Ridge Way Country* and *A Cotswold Book*. He concedes that ‘with me the habit of gradual approach seems ingrained … I would rather not go straight to a place at first sight but come to it in roundabout stages’. Timperley’s writing mirrors his navigation, but despite a tendency to go ‘all round the Wrekin’, he eventually homes in on the essentials, offering some colourful and evocative portraits of Shropshire hill country, not least The Stiperstones, without, incidentally, a single mention of Mary Webb. For Timperley ‘the hill is harsh and often saturnine’ and ‘against a sky glowing with the rising sun … its crestline stacks of rocks simplified to a black or purple-toned silhouette … loom like a barren and jagged wilderness on the edge of the world’. To share this perspective, approach the hill at dawn from Shelve and observe the long crest, etched, pin-sharp, against the eastern glow.

H W Timperley includes knowledgeable observations of the birds and plants of the hills, some of which assume historical significance today. Note, for example, his comments on the ubiquity of Curlews, which are now in decline, and, by contrast, his surprise at seeing three Buzzards ‘which must have drifted across from the Welsh mountains’; today such a sighting is commonplace and invariably involves locally-bred birds rather than Welsh strays.

Vincent Waite’s *Shropshire Hill Country* (1970) tends towards the scholarly, drawing on history, literature and myth, as befits perhaps a barrister-at-law who, for nearly 20 years, had been a teacher. Clearly Waite was a busy man, who wrote a quantity of books including several about other hill country (the Malverns, Quantocks and Mendips) and he observes The
Stiperstones only from its periphery and through the eyes of others: Murchison, ‘Nimrod’, Walter White (who is he?) and, of course, Mary Webb, about whom he includes extensive biographical notes together with brief critiques of her novels. He neglects ‘the hill’ skirting round The Stiperstones without ever pulling on his walking boots, and before long he’s off to comment on the celebrated ‘maidens’ garlands at Minsterleyix, observing that ‘it was a wise precaution to cover them with polythene so that these relics of the past may long be preserved for posterity’.

Some claim to have been reluctant pilgrims of Mary Webb; one such is the revered mountain writer Jim Perrin. Whilst acknowledging his debt to ‘a balding, slight, fierce, acerbic master, gowned and intense’ who, in the 1960s, had drawn his attention to Mary Webb, Perrin did not become a devotee. He recognises the ‘haunting and memorable’ nature of some of her writing, but he is not alone in finding her work ‘slightly repellant’.ix Perrin tells us that for twenty-odd years he shunned her hills, which seemed to him ‘doom-laden, bleak and primitive – to be avoided if you wish to keep your peace of mind’. But by then The Stiperstones had become for him one of those places which ‘before you ever visit them and whilst they are still tabula rasa to the physical eye, are written upon in the most vivid terms by the imagination’.

One passage in particular of Mary Webb’s, from The Golden Arrow, is writ large for Perrin, so that in his mind’s eye he sees The Stiperstones, in Mary Webb’s words, as a hill of ‘flat, white stones that lay about … like tombstones with no name, no date, no word of hope, fit … for the nameless, dateless dead, beasts and men, who had gone into the silence of annihilation’. Little wonder then that when finally he drags himself there he finds a hill ‘capped and crested by shattered tors of quartzite, their faces black-crannied, sightless eyes on the road to Basra, blocks and shards lying everywhere about like innumerable white jagged tombstones among the cowberry and the heather’.

Malcolm Saville and the Lone Pine Club

By contrast, an enthusiastic Mary Webb pilgrim from an earlier generation was the children’s author, Malcolm Saville (1901-82) (figure x), who declared that ‘…nothing has influenced me more than the work of Mary Webb’. Saville, who was born in Sussex and was a London commuter, working in publishing, first visited Shropshire in 1936, when he and Dorothy, his wife, stayed at the south end of The Long Mynd, at Cwm Head House, a mile from Prior’s Holt. It was to here that Dorothy and three of their four children (the eldest was at boarding school) were evacuated for a year in 1941.

Saville was a part-time writer, but a highly prolific one, author between 1937 and 1981 of 93 books. He is best known for the twenty books relating the adventures of the Lone Pine Club, so-named because the founders of the Club signed oaths of allegiance in their own blood under a lone Scots Pine, ‘H.Q.1’, overlooking ‘Witchend’ (Priors Holt at the mouth of Nut Batch).

Saville’s first Lone Pine Book, Mystery at Witchend, published in 1943, chronicles amongst other things the formation of the Lone Pine Club by the three Morton children, David (club captain) and the twins Dickie and Mary, fictional evacuees to Witchend, together with two children they encounter locally, Petronella (Peter) Sterling and Tom Ingles.
The second Lone Pine adventure, *Seven White Gates* (1944), takes the Club to what was to become its ‘H.Q.2’, a barn at an imaginary farm known as Seven Gates, standing in the shadow of The Stiperstones. Here Jenny Harman, who lives at the shop in ‘Barton Beach’ (Stiperstones village), is enrolled. *Seven White Gates*, was, like *Mystery at Witchend*, serialised for the BBC Radio’s ‘Children’s Hour’ and editions were published in Australia, and, in translation, in the Netherlands, Spain and Finland.\(^i\) Seven Gates farm figures in six more of the series: *Lone Pine Five* (1949), *The Neglected Mountain* (1953), *The Secret of the Gorge* (1958), *Not Scarlet But Gold* (1962), *Strangers at Witchend* (1970) and *Home to Witchend* (1978).

Mine workings figure prominently in *Seven White Gates, Lone Pine Five, The Neglected Mountain and Not Scarlet But Gold*, and members of the Club tend to get stuck in them. Underground rivers are a recurrent theme, as is rain and the ominous bulk of The Stiperstones. The older members of the Club are generally too plucky for their own good. The young twins Dickie and Mary are consistently tiresome. There are always villains, to whom the black Scottie dog Macbeth (Mackie) usually takes an instant dislike. But they are generally petty and ineffectual, and, although there are moments of tension and excitement, a satisfactory outcome is never really in doubt.

Our heroes are always doughty and adventurous, friendly and loyal. Indeed David and Peter, Tom and Jenny are obviously couples in the making, although it is not until the twentieth and last book of the series, published 35 years after the first, during which time the protagonists age by just four years, that they finally get engaged. Today the Club’s adventures seem somewhat tame, slow-moving and repetitive but the link to landscape and local history make for an enduring interest and the stories tell us something of the attitudes, language and culture of the educated middle classes in the mid twentieth century.

Saville, in his turn, inspired a new generation of pilgrims, including one of the authors of this book (TW). He and his sister were keen readers of the Lone Pine books and they were brought to The Stiperstones in 1960 when on a family holiday; sadly he has no recollection of the visit. The other author (PF) remembers reading the books in the 1960s just a few miles from The Stiperstones at his home in Minsterley; he pored over the maps illustrating the scenes of the children’s adventures that appear as endpapers, seeking similarities with the maps of the Ordnance Survey and his own knowledge of the area.

Whatever their limitations, the Lone Pine books gained an enthusiastic and loyal audience and are still remembered today with great affection by many who read them decades ago. New editions are now being published and perhaps a new generation of readers will take to them. If so, it will be because the key ingredients of adventure, camaraderie and a hint of romance are enduring ones, and because the appeal of being party to the exploits of a club whose members are brave, stalwart and attractive, and who get caught up in exciting events in exciting places is surely as strong as it was when the books were first written.

A particular strength of the adventures was that Saville rooted them firmly in real locations, whether the South Shropshire Hills, Rye, Romney Marsh, Dartmoor, Walberswick, North York Moors or London. A crucial ingredient was the map showing the location of each adventure printed inside both front and back covers for easy reference, a feature omitted by witless publishers from some of the later reprints. Armed with the maps one could visit the
locations and disentangle fact and fiction in terms of topography and place names. Many did so and Saville encouraged correspondence from his readers who told him: ‘It’s just as you said’.

Malcolm Saville and Mary Webb

And, to a fair extent it was ‘just as Malcolm Saville said’. The map from *The Neglected Mountain* reproduced here (fig x), illustrates the point well. In his foreword Saville states: ‘You will find the Stiperstones and the Long Mynd with its Gliding Station … and you can go to Shrewsbury, to Clun and Craven Arms and Bishop’s Castle and explore them for yourself’. Disingenuously he adds ‘But you will not find Black Dingle or Greystone Dingle or Barton Beach, for these places are as imaginary as are all the characters in this story’. On the map inside the book’s cover the topography is condensed and somewhat re-orientated, however, Barton Beach is clearly Stiperstones Village and Black Dingle and Greystone Dingle correspond topographically to Perkins Beach and Mytton Dingle.

Saville normally researched his locations in person, but in this case the research was through books and maps, because although *Seven White Gates* was published in 1944, Saville didn’t visit The Stiperstones until 1948. In the absence of first hand knowledge, his sources were Magdalene Weale’s *Through the Highlands of Shropshire on Horseback* and Mary Webb’s novels, whose influence is evident in the atmosphere and the detail of *Seven White Gates*. The Devil’s Chair is a malign black presence throughout Webb’s *The Golden Arrow*: ‘For miles around, in the plains, the valleys, the mountain dwellings it was feared’. Saville, in his turn, refers to ‘the great bulk of the Stiperstones crowned with the black, sinister quartzite rocks of the Devil’s Chair’, and the superstitious awe of the local people lives on in Jenny Harman. And is there perhaps a hint of Hazel Woodus of *Gone to Earth* in Jenny? They don’t have quite the same hair colour (respectively auburn and red) but they share a terror of ‘the Black Riders’ – Wild Edric and his huntsmen (see Chapter 5) – whose sorties presage dreadful happenings. Hazel, almost a wild creature herself, would not have been troubled by bats, but Jenny was, referring to them, like Lily Huntbatch in *The Golden Arrow*, as ‘bit-bats’.

In addition to rehearsing the Wild Edric legend, Saville borrows, presumably from Mary Webb, that of the ‘Seven Whistlers’ (from *Precious Bane*) and the tale (from *The Golden Arrow*) that The Stiperstones was, on the longest night of the year, the meeting place of ‘all the ghosses in Shropshire’.

The case for other borrowings are more speculative, but does the pub name the ‘Hope Anchor’ (*Seven White Gates* and *The Neglected Mountain*) echo perhaps that other maritime erratic in landlocked Shropshire ‘The Mermaid’s Rest’ (in Mary Webb’s *Seven for a Secret*)? These Inns are modelled respectively on ‘The Horseshoe’ at Ratlinghope and ‘The Anchor’ above Clun. And what about ‘Gypsy Johnson’, Robert Rideout’s friend in *Seven for a Secret*, as the inspiration for another gypsy, Reuben, who first appears in *Seven White Gates*? Both are helpful to our heroes as discrete and observant nomads and as authorial agents in the plot.

And finally, what about a borrowed phrase? *The Golden Arrow* begins with a description of John Arden’s stone cottage which stood ‘higher than the streams began’, while Saville refers
to Peter in *Seven White Gates* as one ‘who had climbed the hills and picked bilberries higher than the streams began.’

**Ellis Peters, Pauline Fisk and Ida Gandy**

In *Shropshire Haunts of Mary Webb* (1937) W Byford-Jones writes of his meeting with another Shropshire-born writer, Miss Edith Pargeter (1913-1995). A mere twenty-three years old at the time (fig x from *Shropshire Star*), this serous-minded assistant at a Dawley chemist’s had already published the portentously titled novel *Hortensius, Friend of Nero*; she went on to write more than 70 other books and publish 16 volumes of translations of Czech poetry and prose. Many of her books were published under the pen name of Ellis Peters, and one series in particular was to gain an international readership: it related the unravelling of twelfth century crime mysteries by Brother Cadfael, a former crusader, subsequently Benedictine monk and herbalist at Shrewsbury Abbey. Oddly however, although the countryside around Shrewsbury figures in many of the Cadfael Chronicles, The Stiperstones, seemingly an unrivalled back-drop for medieval murder and mystery, never gets a mention.

The Stiperstones does however appear, albeit under the name ‘the Hallowmount’, in *Flight of a Witch* (1964), a novel in Ellis Peters’ less well-known detective series ‘George Felse Investigates’. Here we find a boulder-strewn hill, an Iron Age hill fort, a quartzite ‘Altar’ which is the meeting place of a witch-coven, and, to seal the link, there are lead mines which are home to Wild Edric and his fairy wife Godda. Yet, in her *Shropshire* (1992), Ellis Peters equivocates: ‘I had more than one Shropshire hill in mind when I described the Hallowmount, in *Flight of a Witch*. It is a little too gentle for the antediluvian lizard-length of the Stiperstones, but has something of the same menace … I think the Callow [Bromlow Callow, 4km west of The Stiperstones] comes closest to the image.’ But her appreciation of The Stiperstones is unequivocal:

‘The Stiperstones, for me, is the most awesome of all our hills, and the most unmistakably imbued with that sense of generations of human habitation, in a silence and a solitude. Even from the distance, sharp against the sky, its very outline, the long, stark ridge crowned by the jagged outcrops of the Devil’s Chair and Cranberry Rock, has a force and significance bordering on the sinister, yet in sunlight, with the sunlight stroking every fold of ground and sharpening every edge of rock, and the heather and gorse colouring the slopes, it has a variety and beauty impossible to resist.’

And it proved irresistible to Pauline Fisk as a setting for *Midnight Blue* (1990), a book written for children which has captivated many an adult. It is the story of Bonnie, a lonely single child, whose urban existence with her weak single-parent mother is dominated by the malevolent and domineering Grandbag (her grandmother). Bonnie escapes into a parallel world in a giant balloon (Midnight Blue) exchanging a home in a block of flats (Highholly House Nos 1-79) for Highholly Farm, an isolated farmhouse from where a sheep track leads through a mass of bracken and heather, brambles and whinberries onto Edric’s Throne on Highholly Hill (The Stiperstones). Here, battling against her own insecurity and jealousy, she finds, at least for a while, the security of a loving adoptive mother, father and sister and the help of the mysterious Shadow Boy, and of Eric and Godda too.

The name ‘Highholly Farm’ may well owe something to the area of elevated holly ‘parkland’ known as The Hollies, which lies adjacent to Lords Hill Chapel at the north end of the hill.
The chapel and The Hollies are thought to appear in the 1930s novels of Samuel Horton. Rainbow Farm and The Chapel on the Hill as the Rainbow Chapel and Hollis Hill. Horton wrote books of a type popular at the time, in which the world is neatly divided into the godly and the ungodly (the former always triumphing). Geoffrey Stuart is one of the former and when he sees the chapel for the first time it is framed by a rainbow and he learns that it earned its name ‘because rainbows often encircled the hill on which it stood’.

Ida Gandy, her doctor husband and three children moved to Clunbury, in south Shropshire, in the 1930s, where they stayed for 15 years. It was not until 1970 that Ida Gandy published her memoir of those days – An Idler on the Shropshire Borders – but despite the passage of time, the book has the freshness and excitement of a daily diary of discovery. One of the entries is entitled ‘On the Stiperstones’, a day of walking, of immersion in the ‘immensely desolate’ landscape, but of encounters too. These included a ‘patient-faced farmer … raking together his sodden hay, with a dejected cow and her calf to keep him company’, and a ‘a rosy-cheeked young woman’, wife of one of the last miners at the Bog, now on the dole, who provided a tea of home-made bread, butter, whinberry jam and cake. Apparently several people had asked for tea recently ‘all because of that woman Mary Webb’.

**The Stiperstones as a tourist destination**

And to this day people come to experience The Stiperstones ‘because of that woman Mary Webb’, and, indeed, because of that man Malcolm Saville. Then, as now, their visits do not meet with the universal approval of the residents. This is an extract from a letter written in 1934 by T.J. Mytton More of Linley to the Rt. Hon. Stanley Baldwin MP, no longer PM by this time but Lord President of the Council, number two to Ramsay MacDonal in the National Government of the day. It is taken from A Tale of Two Houses (1978) the highly readable memoir written by T J Mytton More’s son, Jasper More of Linley Hall, near Bishop’s Castle.

‘My family made many miles of roads: one over Shelve Hill and thence to Stiperstones. This is the Mary Webb road. It was dedicated to the public on condition that the five gates should be kept shut. So they were until the Mary Webb public began to arrive. Their mind was directed on to Mary Webb and could not reasonably be directed to closing of gates. Limited to time, the chara patrons had no minute to spare in which to close a gate, still less to open it. So the chara crashed through the gate, to the intense hilarity of the passengers. The grasping Landlord – myself – put up new gates …. Fortunately there was at hand a County Council steam roller and the driver … undertook to charge the gate and a further sum was raised to induce him to charge the gate-posts. It is much to his credit that he was able so to loosen them and throw them into the valley below. The upshot was that the grasping Landlord had to reduce his rents, his tenants pleading that they farmed for a living and could not spend their time searching for sheep on the other side of the Stiperstones.’

Baldwin replied from 11 Downing Street in his own hand:

‘The unforeseen results of my remarks on Mary Webb have been a lesson to me … I can only hope that in time you may forgive though you may never forget. But seriously I should have thought that you could have got damages from the charabanc company. Their behaviour is quite intolerable. But it is tragic to think there are millions in our towns who believe a gate is
put up of malice to stop passage; they never think of beasts straying or if they did they wouldn’t think it mattered. They probably think a walk is good for them and that they always come back to tea … I remember your father well …’

Magdalene Weale tells us that ‘hearing of charabancs marked To the Mary Webb country, Mr Baldwin regretted his great tribute to the novelist’ and this appears to be borne out by the above exchange. Weale did not share Baldwin’s concerns however, and felt that if her own book ‘adds to the number of those seeking healthy and beautiful surroundings as well as literary and historical interest in the hill country of Shropshire, I shall feel but little compunction, for this part of England is wild and spacious enough to suffer no real injury therefrom’.

As we know, Malcolm Saville was drawn to Shropshire by the writings of Mary Webb, and in The Silent Hills of Shropshire he acknowledges the influence of Magdalene Weale too. She felt ‘little compunction’ at adding to the numbers of visitors, but Saville went further: he was ‘happy to know that my Shropshire stories have sent thousands of families to explore country which means so much to me’.

Amongst Saville’s explorers was a group of Lone Pine enthusiasts who, in February 1994, met outside The Lion Hotel, in Shrewsbury. Led by the late Richard Walker, storyteller and freelance radio programme producer, they boarded a 1950s coach and headed for the hills; their progress is recounted by Mark O’Hanlon in his Beyond the Lone Pine (2001). Reaching the Long Mynd was no problem, but the nearer they got to The Stiperstones the slower their progress, indeed they had to get out and walk while, relieved of its burden, the ailing vintage bus was coaxed up the steep hills. Unsurprisingly, the Devil’s Chair was shrouded in mist, and in any case time was running short, so the intended ascent was postponed and the party headed on, before a definitive breakdown at Pontesbury, where they transferred to a 1990s coach for tea and crumpets back at The Lion. Amongst those present was Chris Eldon-Lee, another radio producer, and, in collaboration with Richard Walker, he put together a BBC Radio 4 Kaleidoscope feature entitled Witchend Once More, which included an account of the day. From this was born the Malcolm Saville Society which now has a world-wide membership of hundreds and continues to thrive, organising trips to many Lone Pine locations, not least The Stiperstones.

In Quietest under the Sun (1944) John Wood offers a take on countryside access far more radical than that of Magdalene Weale or, indeed, Malcolm Saville. He invokes the spirit of Wild Edric in suggesting that the descendants of the Saxons should ‘throw off that remaining relic of the Norman Conquest: class privilege … The day that the English – or Scots or Welsh – tramper [i.e. ‘walker’] can cross the moors of his native Britain without fear of impediment from game-preserving landholders or their hirelings, that day will the Devil be finally foiled and the spirit of Wild Edric be liberated for ever from its dungeon beneath the Stiperstones’. Perhaps then, with the passage of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000), which confers the so-called ‘right to roam’ over The Stiperstones, and other areas of mountain, moor and common up and down the country, we have seen the last of Wild Edric! (fig 6.x from page 45 of ‘Quietest under the sun’ include caption plus point out the outline of The Stiperstones in the background)
But was Magdalene Weale right in thinking that Shropshire was wild and spacious enough to suffer no real injury from tourism? Some think not. But are they simply keen to keep a good thing to themselves?

Potential ‘injuries’ might include caravan sites and car parks – but neither is a significant issue in the Shropshire Hills. There can, undeniably however, be issues about gates being left open, dogs running wild and vehicles obstructing gateways, leading to significant problems on occasions for farmers. But it can be argued that these are occasional, not invariable problems and that by a wide sharing of special places such as The Stiperstones, a consensus for their conservation is established and for the funding needed to sustain them.

But what about the impact on plants and soils? The path from the car park at The Knolls to Cranberry Rock and on to Manstone Rock is broad, as much as 10m wide in places, and worn, and getting wider and more worn with the passage of time and feet. It is the first experience that most visitors have of the pathways over the hill and it concerns some of them, who may conclude that the plant life and soils of The Stiperstones are under threat from relentless trampling. But this path is not typical, some paths are less than a metre wide and despite there being some 18km of rights of way through or alongside heathland, paths occupy less than 1% of the total heathland area. Eroded paths may be regarded as unsightly and can be awkward to walk on, but they have a very limited impact overall on the plant life of the hill.

What then of the impact on birdlife? This issue raises even more difficult questions. There is little doubt that if all visitors were to be excluded from The Stiperstones then crag-nesting birds, most notably Peregrine Falcon and Raven, would, within a year or two, start to nest on one or other of the tors. But such a total exclusion is neither feasible or desirable. Some bird species are notably resilient to disturbance, others notably susceptible. An example of the former is Red Grouse which may sometimes be found nesting close to paths. At the latter extreme is the Curlew, which, it is said, may be disturbed when a walker with a dog are still as much as 1,000 metres away. Curlews have undoubtedly decreased in the area over recent years and a number of factors are likely to be involved, but dog walking may have played a part. It would certainly help to safeguard bird life and livestock if dogs were kept on a lead to stop them straying but in the case of Curlew this would not be a complete answer.

And, like them, or not, visitors make an important contribution to the local economy. A study commissioned by English Nature in 1999 concluded that the total number of jobs supported by visitors’ expenditure to The Stiperstones area as a whole might be in the order of 20. And tourism and the ‘tourist industry’ is no new phenomenon. Referring presumably to the 1930s, Walton Humphrey (1921-1999) remembered how his mother, who ran the Stiperstones Inn, ‘used to rely on the visitors … We would be sleeping in the garden shed so she could make money in the summer months. They used to advertise in the Liverpool Echo, bed and breakfast, lunch and evening meal’.

Walton Humphrey’s contemporary, Sir Jasper More (1907-1987) brought a different perspective to the issue. Like his father, Stanley Baldwin’s correspondent of the 1930s, he must have suffered some exasperation at the hand of tourists. In More’s obituary in The Independent, his nephew, Justin Coldwell, the current owner of Linley Hall, records that Sir Jasper, was ‘Ever ingenious with ways of discouraging unwanted intruders without wishing
to give obvious offence; he was … reputed to have posted signs in his woodlands admonishing visitors to refrain from feeding the snakes.’

Artists and illustrators

Despite inspiring a number of works of fiction, including three of distinction, this spectacular landscape has exerted no such inspiration in the world of art. There are many canvasses in which The Stiperstones figures, but none, to our knowledge, by an artist of renown, and none that has earned renown for its creator. Perhaps it is too extensive, too austere a landscape, not painterly enough. Nevertheless, today, as doubtless in earlier generations, local artists have painted works of quality here, succeeding in capturing something of the spirit of the place. A prime example is Fred Hollands, formerly of Tankerville, on the west side of the ridge, now of Pontesbury, who has painted many fine water-colours of the hill (see for example fig 5.x). Another Tankerville artist is Patricia A Evans whose Poetic Landscapes (2002) matches her watercolours, including half a dozen of The Stiperstones (see for example figure 5.x) with extracts from the prose and poetry of Mary Webb. And there are examples galore of highly artistic landscape photographs, a number of which illustrate this book.

Book illustration has however given some better-known artists a connection with The Stiperstones. The illustrated edition of the works of Mary Webb which Jonathan Cape published from 1929 onwards, drew in the talents of Norman Hepple and, in the case of Precious Bane, Rowland Hilder. Hepple’s angular vignettes top and tail the chapters of The Golden Arrow with distinction (see for example figure 5 x suggest illustration from page 59) but one doubts that he had ever visited The Stiperstones. His tors are docile slabs rather than chaotic jumbles of rock (figure 5 x page 24); John Arden’s ‘cottage’ runs to three stories, four gables and umpteen chimneys; and whilst his illustration of whinberry picking may work as art, it is laughable as rural record (figure 5 x opposite page 46).

Rowland Hilder was one of England’s most popular artists of the twentieth century, yet many of his drawings for Precious Bane are curiously small, sombre and lifeless. However, we do know that he, at least, had visited Shropshire, ix and one colour illustration shows a skyline strongly suggestive of the view looking south from Lea Cross near Pontesbury. It appears to show the outlines, albeit transposed, of Pontesford and Earl’s Hills and of The Stiperstones, outlines onto which D H Lawrence and Frederick Carter may have looked as in 1924 they travelled to Pontesbury on the Minsterley branch line. (figure 5 x from oppo page 114).

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Precious Bane


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Lawrence named it Kiowa Ranch after the Indian tribe which had once camped in the area.


It was however published as an essay in *The London Mercury* of July 1930. *The Dragon of Revelation* was later revised and reissued as *Symbols of Revelation* (1934). See Mara Kalnins for this and other information on the complicated history of *Apocalypse*, of Carter’s work and of his association with Lawrence. She notes *inter alia* that the immediate fruits of their early contacts had been essays by Lawrence entitled ‘On Being Religious’ and ‘On Human Destiny’ published in the Adelphi magazine in February and March 1924. She adds that their discussion of the dragon emblem in Revelation clearly influenced Lawrence to make it the central symbol of his novel *The Plumed Serpent*.

*Precious Bane* is generally acknowledged to be the finest of Mary Webb’s novels; it has been adapted for television and the theatre. It is set amongst the Shropshire meres, but Felena, one of its minor characters, comes from the Shropshire hills.

Entitled *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, it remained incomplete when Mary Webb died in October 1927. However, what survives is a fragment complete in itself; it was published in 1929. The novel is centred on ‘Polrebec’, which is Castle Pulverbatch, 5km to the north east of The Stiperstones.

*The Flower of Light* (1978)

Garlands placed on the coffins of young girls who had died unmarried – especially if they were engaged to be married at the time of their death – and then displayed in the church; the custom is said to have died out at the end of the eighteenth century.

However, in a later article, Jim Perrin says that having first read Mary Webb in his youth he still re-reads her with pleasure. Perrin was born in Manchester, he was a leading British rock-climber of the ‘60s and ‘70s and today writes prolifically on mountaineering and environmental topics.


Jasper More (1907-1987) was conservative MP for Ludlow; he was knighted on his retirement from politics in 1979. He did much to restore the flagging fortunes of his long-established Shropshire family and their estate and residence at Linley. The demise and restoration of his family’s affairs is told with much charm and humour in *A Tale of Two Houses*, these being Linley Hall and Westport House in County Mayo, the seat of his mother’s family, the Brownes, Marquesses of Sligo.

This quotation is from the Introduction to *The Silent Hills of Shropshire* which was written by Malcolm Saville in 1978. He produced a synopsis, wrote parts of all seven chapters, but completed only the Introduction and the first chapter before his death in 1982. The book was eventually completed and published in 1998 by Mark O’Hanlon, a co-founder, in 1994, of the Malcolm Saville Society. In 2001 Mark’s biography of Malcolm Saville entitled *Beyond the Lone Pine* was published; this followed on from his *The Complete Lone Pine* (1996), a literary gazetteer and exploration of Lone Pine fiction and Lone Pine country.
Rowland Hilder was later to state ‘My life had taken a decisive turn, meanwhile, when Jonathan Cape commissioned me to illustrate a special edition of Precious Bane, that enormously popular novel by Mary Webb, in 1928’ (Hilder 1987). Wren Howard of Jonathan Cape arranged for Hilder to stay for several weeks in Mary Webb’s former home, Spring Cottage at Lyth Hill (Lewis 1978). It was a seminal time: ‘…. the experience of working as an artist in the depths of an English winter opened my eyes to an aspect of landscape painting which, so far as I could see, no English painter had tackled before. It was an opportunity to look at landscape that appealed to my draughtsman’s eye – showing the bare bones of winter – and to set off, at last, on the road to becoming a painter’ (Hilder 1987) and it is for his paintings of the English countryside in winter – ‘Hilderscapes’ – that he became renowned.

Precious Bane was published in 1924. It is generally acknowledged to be the finest of Mary Webb’s novels and is certainly the best known; it has been adapted for television and the theatre. It is set amongst the Shropshire meres, but Felena, one of its minor characters, comes from the Shropshire hills.

Chapter 7

‘Back to purple’: nature, man and heath

And here a boundless heath before me lies,
Warmed by the sun and watered from the skies.

Bill Francis Hasty Pudding and Kettle Broth (1992)

Bill Francis

Bill Francis (1896-1989) (figure XX) was born at Rock Farm, at the extreme southern end of The Stiperstones, where four generations of the Francis family had lived and farmed since the 1780s. He served with the King’s Shropshire Light Infantry throughout the First World War, and in the 1920s he worked in the Bog Mine; thereafter he was a bricklayer and jobbing builder, living at the Grit, Asterley and later Minsterley.

Bill Francis kept a diary over the last seven years of his life. In 1992 extracts were edited and published by his grandson, Peter, joint author of the present book, under the title Hasty Pudding and Kettle Broth; the title honours two basic but nutritious staples of Bill’s youth. The diary is wonderfully forthright, highly entertaining, full of love for humanity and scorn for hypocrisy and humbug; it is nostalgic but tries not to romanticise the past.

In a diary entry for 9 July 1986 Bill Francis reminisces about his youth at Rock Farm:

During this summer weather and the loneliness of old age, one’s thoughts revert to the days of one’s childhood, remembering the good things and forgetting the bad […] I had a thousand acres of mountain and moorland and field to wander in […] one hundred springs of pure water to satisfy a thirst and above all the pure air of heaven.

Bill Francis recalls the dairy at Rock Farm, where there would be a barrel or two of home-brewed beer, shallow pans of milk and a large dish of cold potatoes to be taken at will when hungry. He also recalls the lack of money, the patched clothes, the darned socks and shoes with worn out soles, the midden in the yard and the smelly earth closet. Yet beyond the midden and the earth closet lay his thousand acre playground, to which he refers again in his
This concluding chapter recounts something of the origins and history of the heath that Bill Francis knew, and looks to its future.

The ‘boundless heath’: origins and extent

In this area ‘heath’ – land where heather dominates – is not an ancient, natural habitat, but one derived from man’s activities over recent millennia. The abundant plants of heathland – notably heathers, other dwarf-shrubs and gorse – are plants that were here long before man arrived, but they would have grown in an essentially wooded setting and less abundantly than today. Bronze Age man striding the rocky ridge between Cranberry Rock and the Devil’s Chair four thousand years ago, would have looked out through a thin cover of hardy, stunted trees, below which there lay more densely wooded slopes. This was broad-leaved woodland, in which Birch in particular flourished, Oak was frequent and Hazel widespread, along, doubtless, with Rowan (Mountain Ash) and Holly; Lime and Elm may have occurred in places on the lower slopes but Pine, though it may have been present in earlier times, had probably died out by now.

Bit by bit, starting presumably with Bronze and Iron Age man (there is no direct evidence of human activity on the hill before the early Bronze Age period, circa 2400-1400 BC), this woodland was cleared for, and by, grazing animals. The evidence of Bronze Age presence along the ridge is to be found in what Shropshire archaeologist Michael Watson has described as ‘the remains of a cairn cemetery spread along its spine’. Some of these cairns are small, as little as 0.4m tall and 5.2m in diameter, and are easily overlooked as natural humps and bumps, but the largest is imposing, ‘an island of bare stones gleaming in a wine-dark sea of heather; this great cairn stands 1.7m high and 24m in diameter’ ([fig 7.x from Watson page 15]). None of the X Bronze Age cairns on The Stiperstones, now Scheduled Monuments, has been excavated, but, by analogy with cairns excavated elsewhere, experts confidently identify those on The Stiperstones as funerary monuments covering single or multiple burials dating from the second millennium BC.

Castle Ring, standing on the summit of Oak Hill, at the north end of The Stiperstones, is of later date. It is a large univallate (one-banked) Iron Age hill fort constructed some time between the fourth century BC and the first century AD ([fig 7.x from VCH?]). Described succinctly in the Victoria County History of Shropshire as ‘a stronghold, simply contrived in an impregnable position’, it takes advantage of a narrow rocky isthmus across which was thrown a defensive ditch and bank of impressive size; elsewhere the already steep slopes were cut back and defences mounded up, re-enforcing the natural protection afforded by the precipitous promontory. The earthworks are imposing, suggesting construction by a numerous and cohesive social group able to mobilise and sustain a significant work force. Although the fort has not been excavated, archaeological investigations of similar forts elsewhere suggest that Castle Ring will have been inhabited.

These Bronze and Iron Age settlers initiated an ongoing cycle of felling, burning and grazing. Progressively, over the centuries, the woodland cover was removed, making way for the dominance of dwarf-shrub heathland on the poor stony soils of the hill. Areas they cleared will have been extended in Roman and later times, creating an open landscape. Nevertheless,
floral reminders of the former woodland survive here and there. Wood Sorrel, Wood Anemone and Great Wood-rush lurk still, particularly in shadier, cooler spots; Bluebell persists in un-ploughed enclaves round the heathland fringe; and the fragile fronds of Oak Fern were spotted recently on the ridge.

Over subsequent centuries there will have been an ebb and flow of heathland and woodland. The status of The Stiperstones as a medieval hunting forest could be taken as evidence that the hill was more wooded at that time, when deer, probably both Red and Fallow (check), were chased over this hazardous terrain. However, the term ‘forest’ indicated then a place of deer rather than a wooded landscape, and it may be that the higher ground of the thirteenth century Stiperstones Forest was no more wooded than the Stiperstones hillscape that Bill Francis’s ancestors knew when they set up home at Rock Farm in the 1780s.

**The fragile heath**

Heathland is a transitional habitat: leave it alone and what ecologists refer to as ‘succession’ will take place, shrubs and trees will colonise and woodland will take over; manage it too intensively, through grazing and burning, and it will become grassland. This dynamic is illustrated by the notion of heathland as a ball of habitat rolling down an incline, at the bottom of which lies woodland. In order to sustain heathland conditions, management needs to hold the ball on the incline, but not to push it too hard, or it will move up the slope to the grassland habitat which lies above (fig 7.x Heathland diagram from p 118 of Legg).

In recent years at least, conversion of heath to grass has not been an issue on The Stiperstones, but trees and woodland hover round the heathland periphery, creeping, and indeed jumping back in at every opportunity. Given half a chance broadleaved woodland would, without any human assistance, engulf the hill again within a few decades. Here, as on many heathlands, Birch takes advantage of any relaxation in grazing and burning, its dust-like seed, blown far from the parent tree, germinating in gaps amongst the heather. By contrast, Rowan berries drop straight from branch to ground; what chance have their seeds got of distant colonisation? Plenty. The seductive red berry tempts us once only, but the extreme acidity which causes us to wince and spit, clearly appeals to Foxes – they hoover up fallen fruits the pips of which reappear in undigested clusters in their scats dropped far and wide over the hill. Doubtless Red Grouse shop and drop too, and if any berries are left come the arrival from Scandinavia of the wintering Fieldfares, they are swallowed and air-freighted to distant roosting sites in deep heather, where the seeds are discharged overnight to earn their chance to germinate. With all this assistance it is not surprising that seedling Rowans crop up all over the hill, including in the highest and stoniest of locations. Comparable itineraries could be mapped for the seeds of other common local colonists such as Holly, Crab and Oak, so, given a relaxation in grazing, with too few animals to nip off the shoots of pioneer trees, woodland will soon invade.

**The bounded heath**

When the ancestors of Bill Francis occupied Rock Farm in the 1780s, much of the hill land for miles around would have been very open. The earliest Ordnance Survey mapping of 1816 shows extensive areas of unenclosed land, presumed to have been common (i.e. land with some communal as well as private use), which, on the poorer upland soils, are likely to have
been heath. It has been described by the local geographer and land-use historian David Pannett:

On the ridge of the Stiperstones itself, about 1,400 acres (560ha) stretched the 4½ miles (7km) [band of unenclosed land] from Habberley Office [by Snailbeach], to Black Rhadley Hill, beyond which detached blocks also existed on isolated hills in More, Linley and Norbury … To the west a parallel band of over 2,000 acres (800ha) stretched … from Bromlow Callow across the hills of Stapeley, Shelve and Mucklewick and the intervening marshes as far as the Montgomeryshire (Powys) border. Here, further open land spread over Corndon Hill and Hyssington Marsh and down to Todleth Hill in Churchstoke.18

Subsequent enclosures and encroachments progressively took in much of this open land. The process accelerated with the expansion of mining in the nineteenth century when this became a populous area. Settlers spilled out from the mines of The Bog, Pennerley, Tankerville, Perkins Beach and Snailbeach, occupying land at the heathland fringe, nibbling away at it and founding smallholder settlements at places like Perkins Beach, Blakemoorgate and The Paddock. But while the area of heathland was reduced, that which survived remained a vital and hard-worked resource, providing grazing, fuel, food and more (see Chapter 4).

By the time that Bill Francis was born, the mines were in decline, the more remote settlements were beginning to dwindle and encroachments ceased. To Bill Francis the heath appeared ‘boundless’. It was indeed extensive, and it probably changed little in extent during the first half of his lifetime, but it was a much smaller area than that known by his forbears when they first occupied Rock Farm in the 1780s.

**Working the heath: sheep and shooting**

The importance that the hill once had to the livelihoods of many local people is reflected in 19 registrations of a right of common grazing being made in 1972, running to a total of three ponies and 807 sheep (or 146 cattle), along with four registrations of a right to cut and take bracken, and two to cut and take heath; there were also 84 registrations of a right to pick Whinberries, a number of which included ‘other wild fruits’. Although the Commons Commissioner found in favour of only three claimants, all of grazing rights, the extent of the claims on which he adjudicated suggests a previously active small-holder economy. Indeed Gordon Cook (1920-1999), one of the successful claimants, remembered a time in his youth when grazing levels were much higher than in the last decades of the century.

It seems likely that the nurturing of Red Grouse for shooting would at one time have had a considerable impact too. The Gatten Estate’s game book shows a bag of 115 brace for The Stiperstones in 1911, the first year for which there are records, but not, presumably, the first year of shooting (**check**). These are good numbers and adequate to justify significant input to game keeping and heather burning. It can be assumed that at this time much of the flatter land of the hill would have been burned on a short rotation, of perhaps 8-10 years’ duration, stimulating the heather to produce plenty of young shoots for the grouse to eat. It was a ‘driven’ grouse moor, one on which the birds were sufficiently numerous to justify the deployment of beaters walking in line in order to flush and drive the grouse to guns waiting in rows of shooting butts strategically placed across the hill.15
The record in the Estate’s game book is discontinuous, but it shows that here, as in many parts of the country, grouse numbers declined during the twentieth century. Nevertheless Henry Owen (born 1918), when recalling the 1930s, says ‘There was a lot of grouse on The Stiperstones then … You could drive grouse easily … We could make up four or five good drives’. Over the years 1932-1935 the numbers of brace shot per season ranged between 17 and 55, but fewer were shot in later decades: 2-32 brace in the 1950s and 4-15 brace in the 1970s/1980s. With the decline in shooting bags, there would no longer have been the justification for intensive management, and aerial photographs of The Stiperstones, the earliest of which date from the mid 1940s, don’t show the intricate patchwork of heather burns typical of well-managed grouse moors. Any reduction in management will presumably in turn have led to a further decline in grouse.

Along with the relaxation in the intensity of management for grouse there was a reduction in grazing levels. One possible consequence was the establishment of areas of self-seeded woodland round the edge of the hill. These are most noticeable in Mytton Dingle and Perkins Beach, where significant patches of trees (largely birch) now grow on the lower, north facing slopes; the drier, south-facing slopes are less conducive to tree germination and survival. These woodlands look as though they may have become established in the 1950s or ’60s. They may mark a relaxation in livestock grazing, coupled perhaps with the decimation of the rabbit population in the mid-’50s as a consequence of myxomatosis. Whatever their origin, these new woods are now well-established and ever eager to expand.

Jeanette Merry

The enthusiasm that Bill Francis expressed for the ‘boundless heath’ was shared by an incomer, Miss Jeanette Merry [????-1982], who, in 1948, took a let on Rock Cottage, which stood just a few hundred yards from Rock Farm.

On her first visit to The Stiperstones, in the 1930s, [check with Sybil Cook] Miss Merry chanced upon the area further to the north known as Rigmoreoak. She remembered this and later visits in The Rock: reminiscences to share with those who enjoy the Stiperstones (1979):

There was not a house in sight nor sign of habitation, only God’s earth created as at the beginning, timeless, peaceful, soul satisfying. I fell in love with the Stiperstones […] we slept on camp beds in the heather and the brilliant stars seemed to drop out of a dark purple velvet sky onto us. Each night we saw shooting stars. Sheep were our only companions and the call of the grouse.

They played Beethoven’s ‘Fifth’ and Handel’s Messiah on a wind-up record player, only to find next morning that the sheep had trampled the records, breaking two of them, one of which included the passage All we like sheep have gone astray. ix (figure xx: the old photo of bilberry pickers with a gramophone on the hill)

Miss Merry recalls Mrs Hotchkiss of Rigmoreoak ‘on a clear and windy day in the farm yard outside the kitchen with her four lovely children holding between them at all four corners, a sheet. Their mother held above it … buckets of whinberries and poured them into the sheet … allowing the wind to blow away the loose whinberry leaves and chaff, to leave the berries as clean as possible for market.’ Three of these children survive, all are now in the 80s.
At one time Miss Merry had been District Nursing Organiser for the area, and in this capacity visited Charlotte Hand, District Nurse, who served the community from 1922 until her death in 1953; she lived in Snailbeach in what is still known locally as the Nurse’s Bungalow. But by the time that she leased Rock Cottage, Miss Merry was living in London and working in public health administration. She travelled widely on behalf of the World Health Organisation, including to Malta, Singapore, Malaya, Jamaica and British Honduras. It was presumably this work that earned her an MBE.

Recollections of holidays at Rock Cottage occupy the bulk of Miss Merry’s short memoir. We learn that the Cottage was tucked up hard against a quartzite tor, and in that respect could well have been the model, in part at least, for the cottage that Stephen Southernwood and Deborah Arden occupied in *The Golden Arrow* (see Chapter 4). The rental was £3 per year, plus a further £2 for an adjacent one and three-quarter acres of ground.

When Miss Merry leased the cottage, the surrounding land would have looked rather different from what we see today, and some of the wildlife would have differed too, both in species and abundance. Miss Merry observed masses of heather all around… from the marsh below came the sound of Curlews, Snipe and many Peewits [Lapwings]… Buzzards mewed … on rare occasions a Raven cronked … a Nightjar reeled and she chanced upon one brooding two eggs. It

The cottage *(figure 7.x slide by David Pannett or shot from Jeanette Merry)*, although not ‘partially ruined’, like the fictional one near the Devil’s Chair taken on by Stephen and Deborah, still needed work to make it habitable, and the ‘bare necessities’ had to be added, including installing an Elsan toilet in the hut up the abandoned garden. Water was drawn from 180 paces away at what Miss Merry knew as ‘Bessie’s Well’ (Bill Francis called it ‘The Well of Salvation’); for tea-making it was boiled in the kettle hanging from a chain over the fire *(figure xx of water being drawn or carried from a well)*. Living conditions were primitive – much like those of the resident population – but, fresh from the strains of work and London, Miss Merry felt she was in ‘Paradise’, and she had no greater delight than spending a day picking Whinberries and Cowberries, pausing from time to time to look round and enjoy the beauty of the hills.

Paradise did not endure. Jeanette Merry chronicles the changes that took place: the ‘bog land’ attached to Brookshill Farm, to the west of the cottage, was drained, limed and seeded with grass; ‘The Miner’s Arms’ ceased trading; the school at the Bog was closed and the cottages there were demolished. And what Miss Merry calls ‘the final devastation’ came in 1969, when the land around the cottage was planted with conifers: ‘small fir trees sprang up wherever the ground made planting possible … in rows, orderly, artificially regimented’; ten years on they were ‘as tall as human beings and the ground beneath them like waste land’. Miss Merry had by then retired, and along with her sister *[check]* had settled in Minsterley. It ‘The conifers grew bigger and bigger and the area was transformed and no longer had the same natural unspoilt beauty’. Jeanette Merry surrendered the tenancy.

**Further forestry frustrated**

‘The final devastation’ was the work of a private landowner, but elsewhere on The Stiperstones the Forestry Commission was carrying out similar works and planning further
planting. Indeed, as early as 1962, the Forestry Commission had planted land surrounding the tor known as Nipstone Rock, just to the north of The Rock. Miss Merry tells us that ‘wonderful were the whinberries there until afforestation choked them out’. In 1966, the Forestry Commission went on to lease some 350 acres out of the 1,000 or so between The Knolls and Crowsnest which make up the major part of what is now the National Nature Reserve. Most of the Commission’s leasehold was on the west side of the ridge, and the intention was to plant conifers on the lower slopes from below Cranberry Rock through to Blakemoorgate, including the flanks of Perkins Beach, Mytton Dingle and Crowsnest Dingle. This was in addition to the re-planting of the Gatten Plantation on the east side, which had been afforested with pine and larch in the nineteenth century, but had been left as open ground since the felling of that timber crop in the 1930s. Only the rock-strewn heights of The Stiperstones were to be left unplanted.

The re-planting of the Gatten Plantation went ahead in 1968-1970, predominantly with Sitka Spruce, but the first-time planting of the remainder of the Forestry Commission’s leasehold was put on hold pending the resolution of local claims of common status for the land; this was consequent upon the Commons Registration Act of 1965. There was significant local opposition to the Forestry Commission’s plans (add details of preservation society), and achieving recognition of common land status and the right of common grazing was the route to frustrating them. In 1979 the Commons Commissioner concluded that common rights existed over 608 acres, out of a total of xxxx acres of open hill land, including the major part of the Forestry Commission’s leasehold. Thanks to the representations of local people the core of The Stiperstones had been saved from afforestation.

**Jolly Green Giant declares heathland National Nature Reserve**

Following the decision by the Commons Commissioner there was little point in the Forestry Commission maintaining its leasehold interest; furthermore the freehold owners, the Hulton-Harrop family of Gatten Lodge, were increasingly conscious of the responsibilities and liabilities of the land. The Stiperstones had long been recognised as of particular importance for its heathland and geology, indeed as early as 1953 the Nature Conservancy had notified a considerable acreage as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. So, in the light of the new situation the Nature Conservancy Council (predecessor of English Nature and Natural England) negotiated for the surrender of most of the Forestry Commission’s lease and for the purchase of the freehold of this and additional land amounting in all to 1,015 acres. Purchase was completed in 1981; it was subject to the rights of common and the retention of the shooting rights by the Hulton-Harrop family; a further 63 acres at Resting Hill and Crowsnest were purchased from Shropshire County Council. The land was declared a National Nature Reserve in 1982 and opened by Professor David Bellamy. Bellamy the academic, was by then the ‘jolly green giant’, a leading presenter of natural history programmes; he gave a starring role to children from the Stiperstones School (figures 7.x and 7.x Bellamy with child on shoulders; Bellamy cartoon). He was a particularly appropriate person to open this botanical refuge, the first National Nature Reserve in Shropshire because he records that it was ‘on the flower-decked habitat [of Shropshire] that I first cut my botanical wisdom teeth’.
Managing the heath for nature conservation: wildlife and sheep

The importance of The Stiperstones for nature conservation lies in the outstanding quality of its heathland and its singular geological interest. The open heathland and exciting terrain mark out its quality as landscape and provide opportunities for grazing and field sports too. This open landscape will have come about through sustained levels of grazing, through the scavenging of the many woody products that a small-holder economy would have needed, and by heather burning in order to maintain a high population of Red Grouse.

By the time that The Stiperstones became a National Nature Reserve these traditional activities were losing their economic purpose. The Nature Conservancy Council took on a landscape shaped by economic activities which were no longer mainstream. Small scale grazing enterprises were becoming uneconomic, small-holding and part-time farming had ceased to be a necessity for local people, and grouse shooting was no longer profitable. The Nature Conservancy Council needed, with the help of the Commoners, to continue to manage the hill actively, as it had been in the past, instituting nature conservation management, where necessary, as a replacement for what had previously been self-sustaining activities carried out in pursuit of livelihood and profit.

It is a surprise to some that nature reserves need management – are they not natural places where nature should be left to get on with it? In fact in this country, where man’s hand is omni-present, they are in general places fashioned by man through the use and exploitation of naturally occurring species. As has been explained above, a cessation of human activity would soon allow woodland to re-colonise, taking this countryside back to a semblance of its pre-Bronze Age wooded state. The result would be fascinating and exciting, but it would see the loss of the special qualities that identified The Stiperstones as a place that needed to be safeguarded as a National Nature Reserve. The sweeps of purple heather and banks of golden gorse would be lost, Red Grouse would dwindle to extinction, Skylarks would sing over other hills, Grayling butterflies would bask no longer on open ground, and Cowberry and Crowberry would retreat to the rocky ridge from where the visitor would peer out through tree branches striving to discern landmarks and landform. It would be a very different place.

Numbers of livestock need to be kept up in order to manage the heath, and currently the aim is to graze 440 ewes and their lambs on the hill from May to October. This is being achieved by agreements with the Commoners through which they are paid to run the required numbers. But the livestock graze some areas preferentially and neglect others, where trees soon get away and then have to be cut down and their stumps treated with herbicide to prevent regrowth. Large areas, mostly on hillsides, have been tackled over recent years with the assistance of the Commoners.

When management for nature conservation started in a concerted way in 1986 it was some years since much had been done in the way of controlled burning. There was a lot of old and leggy heather in which fires can soon get out of hand and few areas of short heather where fire control is much easier and which can therefore be used as firebreaks. It was decided therefore to cut some of the heather in order to speed up the management and to create a network of firebreaks. Cutting, with a tractor and swipe (a mower with blades that rotate...
horizontally), can, unlike burning, be done in most weathers. But, for obvious reasons, it can’t be done on steep slopes or stony ground, conditions typical of much of The Stiperstones. Nevertheless, cutting is a useful technique and one which continues alongside burning.

The purpose of cutting and burning is to stimulate new growth. This is readily achieved in the case of young heather plants which sprout again quickly from the base (fig 7.x heather regenerating after a burn/cut). By contrast, plants more than 12 or 15 years old fail to do so and die. In this case regeneration of the heather stand depends on the successful germination of seedlings. This happens more quickly where the heather has been burned successfully rather than cut. A good burn clears the litter, bares the ground and creates good conditions for germination. Currently the aim is to cut or burn 600 acres of heather on a 12 year rotation, this deliberately leaves a fair amount unmanaged because old heather has a particular value, notably for lichens and invertebrates.

One of the species favoured by burning is the Red Grouse which persists in small numbers on The Stiperstones. It has real nature conservation importance as a signature bird of upland heathland, present here, and on The Long Mynd, at southerly outposts. Grouse like short heather for feeding (heather shoots make up some 90% of their diet) and longer heather for cover and nest sites. They are said to be reluctant to feed more than about 15m from cover, which means that cuts and burns should be no more than 30m wide. When cutting, sinuous shapes are preferred to straight-sided ones, and cuts are made following the contours rather than up and down the slopes. Whilst this looks odd from the air (fig xx), viewed from the ground this style of management fits well with the landscape.

As has been mentioned above, a decline in grouse numbers was evident by the 1930s and it continued up until the 1990s by which time there were so few birds left that shooting ceased. With perhaps just 5-10 pairs hanging on, the extinction of Red Grouse on The Stiperstones which, along with The Long Mynd, is the only Shropshire location on which they now survive, seemed a real possibility. There was no suggestion that the population had been ‘shot out’ but clearly it had not prospered under the guardianship of the owner’s sporting tenants.

Requests made on a number of occasions by the Nature Conservancy Council and English Nature for the opportunity to purchase the sporting rights had never been acceded to, but in the 1990s several short-term leases were signed. This meant that English Nature was secure in the knowledge that no more grouse would be shot whilst it put in hand the recommendation of leading experts that the culling of Foxes and Carrion Crows, the main predators of Red Grouse, was necessary in order to improve breeding success. English Nature persisted with this policy for a number of years, and although the really rigorous control that might have had a major impact proved impractical, there was a small increase in the breeding population.

After 10 years the owner of the sporting rights declined to negotiate either a further renewal of lease, or a sale to English Nature, and instead sold the rights to another private individual. He has stepped up the predator control and the further increase in the population may be a result of this; it is estimated that there are now some 20-25 pairs. Now that the population is more secure, the sporting rights are being exercised again through shooting and falconry, but very few birds are taken. Paradoxically, the likelihood of the long-term survival of Red
Grouse on The Stiperstones is enhanced rather than diminished by this resumption of shooting. In order to have birds to shoot the sporting rights owner contributes to a range of management work which favours the population as a whole, and he is as keen as anyone that at the end of the shooting season a worthwhile number survive so as to sustain the breeding population.

Other management work includes the control of Bracken, a native species, but one with much less value as wildlife habitat than the dwarf-shrub heathland that it tends to displace, thereby also reducing the area available for both sheep and grouse. Control is by the application of Asulam, a herbicide which whilst it kills all fern species, not just bracken, and members of the dock family check, normally has little effect on other plants. On large, rough or steep areas, helicopter application is the only practical technique and a remarkably economical one. Knapsack sprayers are used where smaller areas are treated. In both cases other fern species are safeguarded wherever possible. But it is not the intention to eliminate bracken – even if that were feasible – particularly because Whinchat, a bird in decline, favours some areas of bracken, normally those where it occurs in conjunction with wet ground and heathland.

By contrast little can be done to combat another problem species, the Heather Beetle (fig 7.x from Heather Trust literature). Always present, the numbers of this small dark-coloured beetle reach plague proportions from time to time and their tiny larvae (smaller than a grain of rice) are then so numerous that they can decimate hundreds of acres of heather. The plants turn foxy red, and then, as the foliage dies off, a depressing grey. All being well, after two or three years, the numbers of a small parasitic wasp name it, build up too and lay their eggs in a high proportion of the larvae, thereby acting as an effective biological control; the Heather Beetle population crashes and the heather recovers. Whilst in theory insecticides or summer burning might help tackle the problem, the former would kill many other species, not least the parasitic wasp, and the latter would affect ground nesting birds and could easily get out of control at what is a potentially dry time of year.

‘Back to purple: conserving and restoring The Stiperstones’

When she lived at Pontesbury in 1914-16 and walked the Shropshire Hills, Mary Webb would have reached The Stiperstones at its north end near Lordshill. She could have walked from there right along the ridge and on to Black Rhadley Hill and Heath Mynd, near Bishop’s Castle, a distance of 10km (6 miles), through a virtually continuous cove of heathland. The heathland would have occupied a broad swathe across the hill, running well down its flanks and grading into gorse and herb-rich grassland, bog and flush, hay meadows and holly brakes.

This situation persisted without dramatic change until the 1950s, but by the 1990s the heathland had been fragmented and narrowed (figure xx showing comparative views from Black Rhadley and Nipstone). Agriculture had pushed its way up the hillsides, draining, cultivating and fertilising. It had completely breached the heath across the low-lying saddle of The Knolls, while forestry had engulfed areas to the south, as witnessed by Miss Merry. It was to this situation that English Nature responded in 1995 with a restoration strategy which
developed into the project known as *Back to purple: conserving and restoring The Stiperstones*.

The principal objective of this project is to ‘re-establish the ridge of The Stiperstones as a broad and virtually continuous run of lightly grazed heathland, stretching from Heath Mynd in the south to The Hollies (near Lordshill) in the north’. Thanks to a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, work started in 1998 on realising this objective through a project run jointly by English Nature, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and the Forestry Commission. The first phase concentrated on clearing the Gatten Plantation, which lies on the east side of The Stiperstones below Cranberry and Manstone Rocks, and removing conifers surrounding Nipstone Rock. At the Gatten Plantation some 30 hectares of conifers were cleared, as were a further 13 hectares at Nipstone Rock.

Following felling, the timber was extracted and sold; but then the real work began, with huge volumes of branchwood to be cleared. Consideration was given to stump removal, but this would have greatly disturbed soil profiles and created a major disposal problem; so, whilst the rootplates of windblown trees have been removed, stumps have been left *in situ*.

When it comes to re-creating heathland it is fortunate that heather produces an abundance of seed; it has been estimated that a mature heather canopy can produce between 188,000 and 350,000 seeds per square metre per year. By no means all of these almost microscopic seeds will survive, but studies have revealed large, if variable, banks of germinable seed. At The Stiperstones, trials carried out by the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology for *Back to purple*, gave estimates of 1,840 to 15,560 germinable seeds per square metre. A proportion of seeds will survive a long time, indeed viable seeds of heather have been found under conifer plantations after 60 years. The trees felled at the Gatten Plantation and Nipstone Rock were younger than this, so good results could be expected and have been achieved. But there were complicating factors such as the quantity of needle litter, the long history of conifers at the Gatten (a first conifer crop is thought to have been planted here as long ago as 1850), and the disturbance to soils and seed banks because of forestry ploughing prior to tree planting. Consequently in places a ‘belt and braces’ approach was followed: some areas were scarified to disturb the needle litter, let light in and stimulate germination, and in some places seed harvested from elsewhere on The Stiperstones was sown.

Scarification on the flatter ground at Nipstone was done with a tracked excavator, but at the Gatten Plantation a horse and harrow was tried (*figure xx*). Here, on steep, ploughed and stump-ridden terrain, a horse could go where an excavator or a tractor would soon be ‘stumped’. But conventional agricultural harrows snagged on stumps or simply bounced over the undulating terrain, so, in a throw-back to what may well have been Neolithic man’s first harrow, a hawthorn bush was tried. The bush had all the flexibility, angularity and scratchiness that was needed, and it followed the contours well, but it proved insufficiently durable, so a metal version was designed. This was no look-alike but it shared the essential properties of the original to which it added durability. It was christened the ‘Heathland Rehabilitation Horse Harrow’ (or HRH Harrow for short). It excited some considerable interest and HRH the Prince Wales asked to see it on a subsequent visit to Powys Castle (*figure xx*).ix

By contrast, modern technology, in the form of a helicopter, is invaluable when applying seed. The tiny seeds are mixed in water and sprayed out through booms slung beneath the
helicopter (fig xx). Forty acres (16 hectares) were seeded at the Gatten. Just 9 kilograms of seed was applied, equivalent to spreading four and a half bags of sugar over thirty or so football pitches, yet the seed is so small that an estimated 100 million seeds were spread at a rate of 600-700 per square metre. At Nipstone Rock approximately 7 hectares were seeded, and here bilberry, cowberry and crowberry seed were mixed with the heather. Additionally, thousands of heather and bilberry plants have been grown from cuttings taken on the site, and these have been trowelled in by volunteers.

Results are by no means uniform, and some of the areas where heather has re-established itself most successfully have been neither harrowed nor seeded. But within three years of the trees being felled, carpets of flowering heather could be found over extensive areas (figure xx). Each year sees further progress, but grazing is needed to keep tree and gorse growth in check, push back brambles and control grasses. At the former Gatten Plantation, English Nature is grazing stock of its own. Here there are Exmoor ponies and Hebridean sheep, a combination of browsing animals which, it is hoped, will prove successful in keeping back the woody vegetation (fig 7.x Exmoors and/or Hebrideans).

Where have all the flowers gone?

So, by 1982, through a combination of local and national initiative, the best known parts of The Stiperstones, including Cranberry Rock, Manstone Rock and the Devil’s Chair, had been safeguarded from afforestation or other major change, and became a National Nature Reserve. And, since 1998, progress has been made in reversing the afforestation of parts of the ridge. But the wildlife interest of the area is by no means restricted to the heathland, and the wildlife habitats of the surrounding area have been much diminished since the 1940s. Drainage, ploughing, liming and re-seeding, stimulated by government grants, proceeded apace in the second half of the twentieth century, in the very understandable pursuit of livelihood and profit.

As a consequence, were Mary Webb to return today, she would notice enormous changes. The topography remains the same of course, but the loss of the detail, the warp and weave of the countryside, has been dramatic. In terms of agricultural livelihoods there have been considerable improvements – production has greatly increased and subsidies have underwritten profitability. But in terms of habitats and wildlife, texture and colour, pattern and detail of the countryside has been severely impoverished.

A telling example of how things have changed in the area surrounding the National Nature Reserve is provided by the Mountain Pansy, (figure 7.x) the perky and endearing yellow grassland pansy of the uplands. It is described by Mary Webb in The Golden Arrow (1916), albeit under a different name (see Chapter 4), and it is said that in the 1940s the Mountain Pansy was so widespread that it was possible to walk from Ratlinghope via Squirrel and Shelve to Bromlow Callow, a distance of some 6 miles (10 km), through field after field washed pale with pansy flowers. They were still around in 1964 when the well-known Shrewsbury rose-grower and botanist, Hilda Murrell, came across them when driving up the road to The Stiperstones from Bridges. Her diary entry for 16 May records how she sought out a grassy bank and had a good snooze – a nap in the sun and brewing tea outdoors were amongst her greatest pleasures – and there she found ‘beautiful little clumps of Yellow
Pansies in the grass’. Today one would have to look hard to find a single Mountain Pansy along the entire route from Bridges to Bromlow Callow.

Curlows provide another example of wildlife in decline. In *Shropshire Hills* (1947), H W Timperley writes about the valley between The Long Mynd and The Stiperstones as one of Shropshire’s ‘curlew places’:

All through the spring and early summer there are few moments when no curlew can be heard there. If one is not close by, beating round in circles over the rushy roughs, or hovering just clear of the ground where his mate is down, then there will be one above a far hillside or away behind a hill-shoulder. When the mating frenzy is at its height the valleys often resound with the wild calling which, though still finding an echoing wildness in the land, suggests other times, far off, when these valleys that man can now scarcely hold for his cultivation were wilderness untouched.

Farm machinery has improved enormously since then, and man no longer has a problem holding this land for his cultivation. Almost all of it has now been drained, ploughed, limed and re-seeded, reducing habitat for many of the birds of the upland edge, including Curlows. They often nest in mowing fields and these are harvested earlier than previously, leading to nests being lost. Small numbers persist, but sadly today there are many moments in the spring and early summer when none can be heard. Unless new nature conservation initiatives come to fruition, the Curlew may well be lost to the Shropshire Hills over the next decade.

Lapwing is another bird in steep decline. It prefers damp ground and would have benefited from the mixed farming regimes of the past when occasional root crops and cereals were grown; today there is a monoculture of grass. Now close to extinction in the Shropshire Hills, Bill Tuer recounts that in the 1930s, when his father Ted was gamekeeper on The Long Mynd, there were so many to be found in the Ratlinghope area that their eggs, an acknowledged delicacy, were collected and sent to Fortnum and Mason’s, London, in boxes of 36 at a time, yet the birds returned each year in good numbers. Today none nest in this area.

Recognising that heathland re-creation made scant contribution to the reversal of wildlife losses in surrounding habitats, *Back to purple* sought and gained the ready support of Defra’s Rural Development Service and their predecessors who negotiated Environmentally Sensitive Area agreements with many local farmers in an effort to stem further losses. Particular effort continues to be applied to addressing issues of farming and wildlife in the valley between The Long Mynd and The Stiperstones, sometimes referred to as ‘LongStones’. A major boost to this work has been the work of the Upper Onny Wildlife Group which is surveying a range of wildlife species in the area, most notably Curlew and Lapwing, and working for their conservation.

Reversing ‘the final devastation’

*Back to purple* was always regarded as a long term project, unlikely to be realised in full in less than 20 years, but progress over the first decade has been good. Following on from its early successes there was a major boost when, in 2004/05, the Linley Estate undertook to restore 30 ha to heathland through the felling of conifers at The Rock and Rock Cottage. This
was Miss Merry’s former retreat, the very ground she saw planted in 1969. Subsequently Shropshire Wildlife Trust has felled a further XXha at Nipstone.

When Miss Merry surrendered her tenancy, her landlord declined to re-let the cottage. On a visit in 1979, she bemoaned its neglected state but speculated that it might stand for another 200 years. However, in 1984 Bill Francis described it as ‘a wreck’, and within a few years it had been knocked flat. This act of destruction may never be reversed, but the planting of the conifers, what Miss Merry called ‘the final devastation’, has been. The felling of these trees has revealed anew a wonderful skyline of rocky tors and the splendid chaos of their adjacent boulder fields (fig 7.x rock scenery at The Rock). With further work, there will, once again, be the ‘masses of heather all around’ that Jeanette Merry described, and another step will have been taken in restoring the ‘boundless heath’ of the singular Stiperstones in which the young Bill Francis wandered.

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ix ‘Hasty Pudding was made hanging a pot of skimmed milk over the fire and mixing into it a cupful or so of plain flour (often home grown) and a little salt. Nourishing and filling. But I hardly imagine today’s children giving it a welcome as we did. Kettle Broth was also a filling meal. Here we had bread broken into a basin, a few chopped chives, a lump of bacon fat or beef dripping (both plentiful in those days) and hot water poured over the lot. Kettle Broth. Well, sneer if you may, but still better than the diet of the workhouse where so many of my parents’ generation ended their pitiful lives’. From Bill Francis’s diary entry for 26 September 1988.

ix Between the two main blocks of open land lie the areas still identified today as the parish wards of Upper and Nether Heath suggesting that heathland had once dominated a huge tract of land.

ix Some of the butts may still be found today, notably east of the Devil’s Chair.

ix This was the era of 78 revolutions per minute; there were no ‘long playing records’ and many discs would have been needed to provide a complete recording of Messiah.

ix The subsequent planting of conifers stifled the ‘masses of heather’, while Curlews are fewer than in Jeanette Merry’s day and Snipe, Lapwing and Nightjar no longer occur in the vicinity. However Raven and Buzzard are both now frequent.

ix Jeanette Merry’s sister, Miss D T Merry, was to publish The History of Minsterley (1976).

ix Nature reserves managed directly by Britain’s official nature conservation bodies (in England this is Natural England), or with their formal approval, are ‘declared’ to be National Nature Reserves; they exist to protect and manage the most important wildlife habitats and geological formations in the country.
Red Grouse once occurred on several hills in Shropshire, but by the 1990s The Stiperstones (including Heath Mynd), The Long Mynd and Brown Clee were the only surviving locations. Nowadays records on Brown Clee are only occasional and it is not thought that birds breed there.

Results from use of the harrow at The Stiperstones have been inconclusive and more trials would be needed to develop this technique into a reliable one.

This observation comes from *The Ecological Flora of Shropshire*. Its leading author, Charles Sinker, was a pupil at Shrewsbury School in the 1940s where he acquired a lasting interest in the landscape and natural history of Shropshire. He was to become the first warden of the Field Studies Council’s Field Centre at Preston Montford. He edited Hilda Murrell’s nature diaries (see below).

Hilda Murrell (1906-1984) had a deep love for the countryside, especially that of the Marches and Wales. Extracts from her nature diaries were published following her much publicised murder.

For information on H W Timperley see Chapter 6.

In October 2006 the Rural Development Service and the major part of the Countryside Agency joined with English Nature to form Natural England.