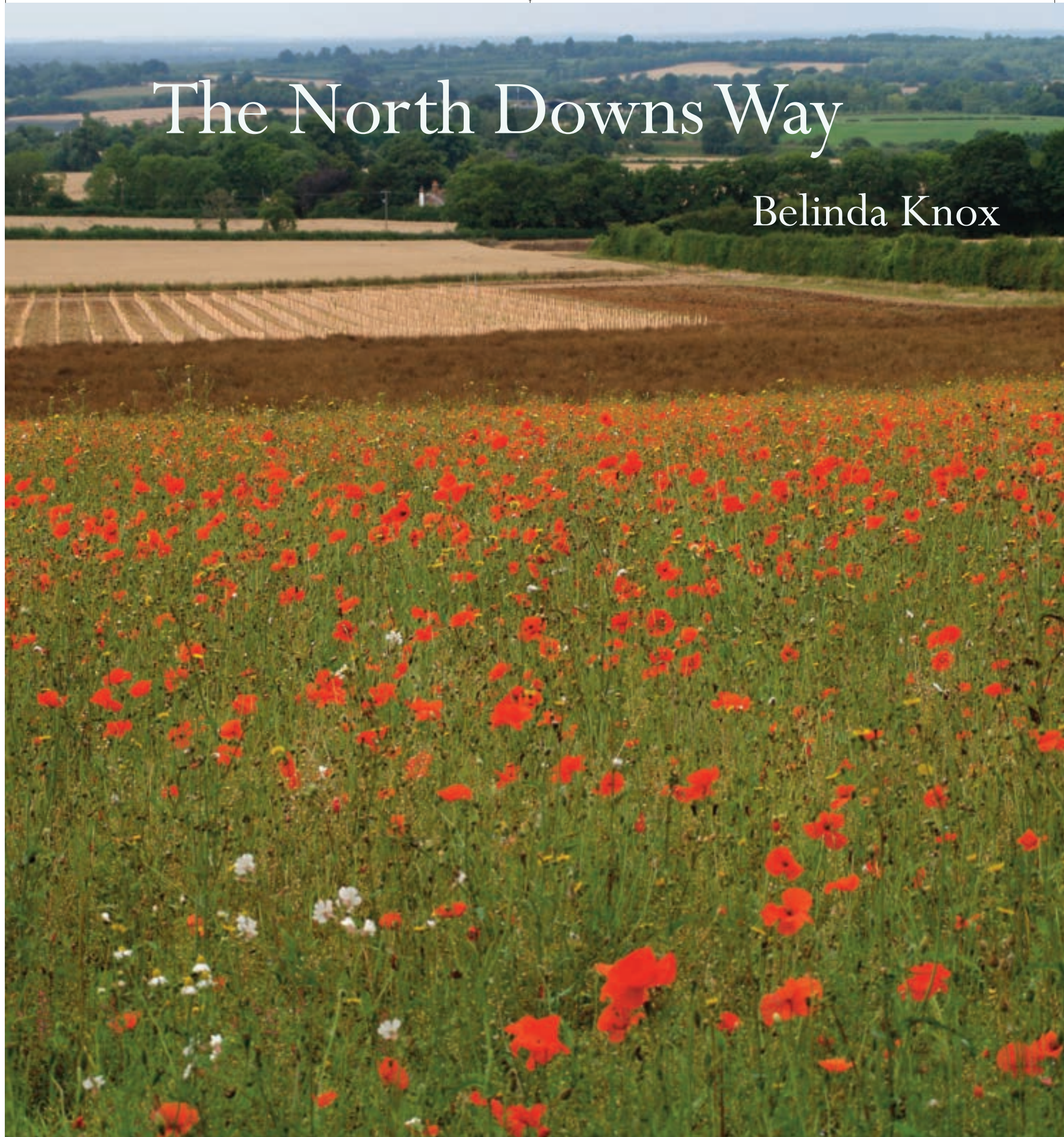




# The North Downs Way

Belinda Knox









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Kneading Publications







**To my wonderful mother who often walks her dogs along the North Downs Way.**

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The North Downs Way  
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*Half title page:* Poppies on the North Downs Way.  
*Title page:* Sunrise from Newlands Corner.  
*Right:* A life aspiration in Gatton Park, part of the sculpture installations.



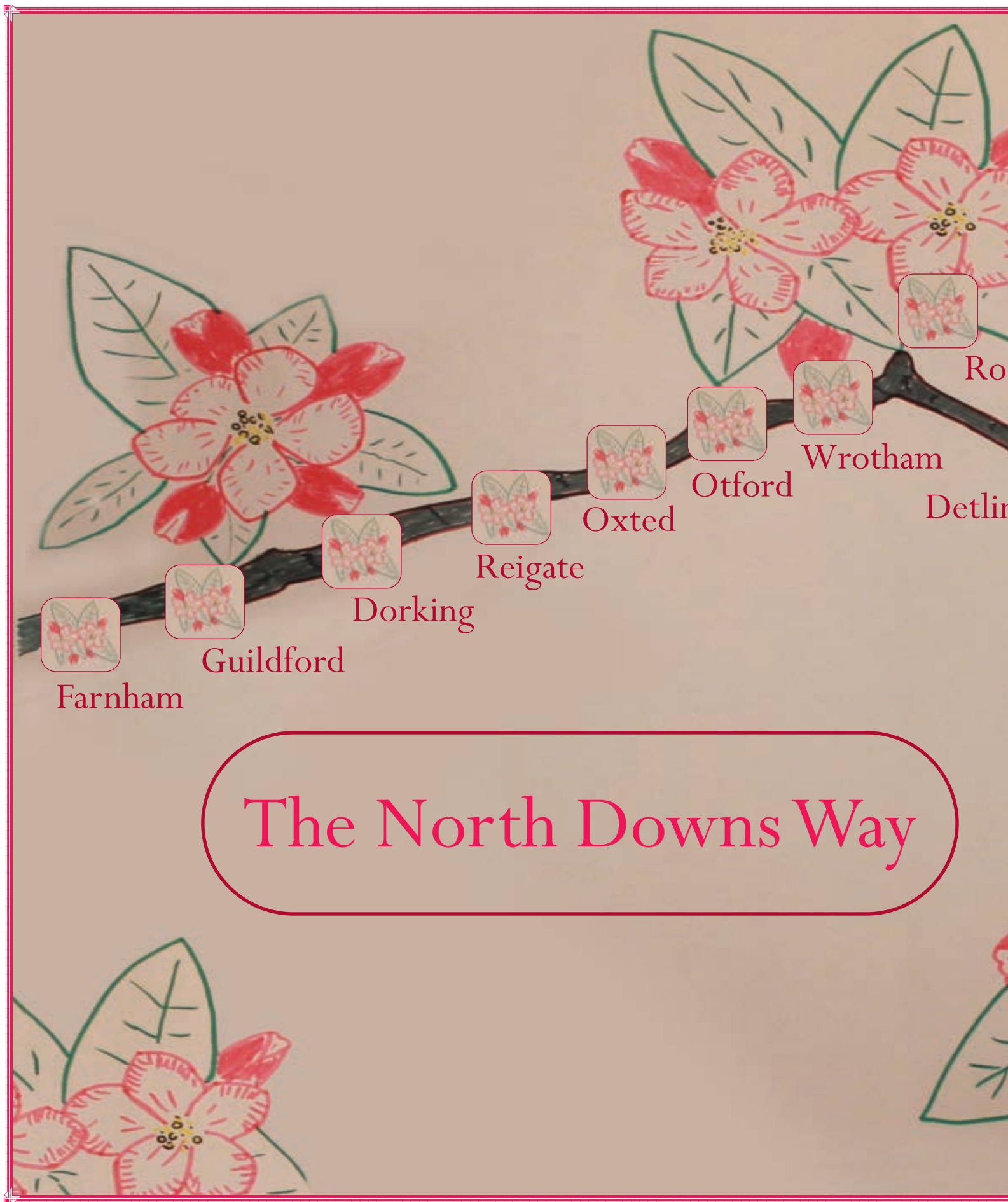


# Contents

<b>The Map</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Trees</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Natural Inspiration</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Cultivation</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Happiness is the Way</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Along the Way</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Steam and Stamps</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>The Odyssey</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>120</b>







Farnham



Guildford



Dorking



Reigate



Oxted



Otford



Wrotham

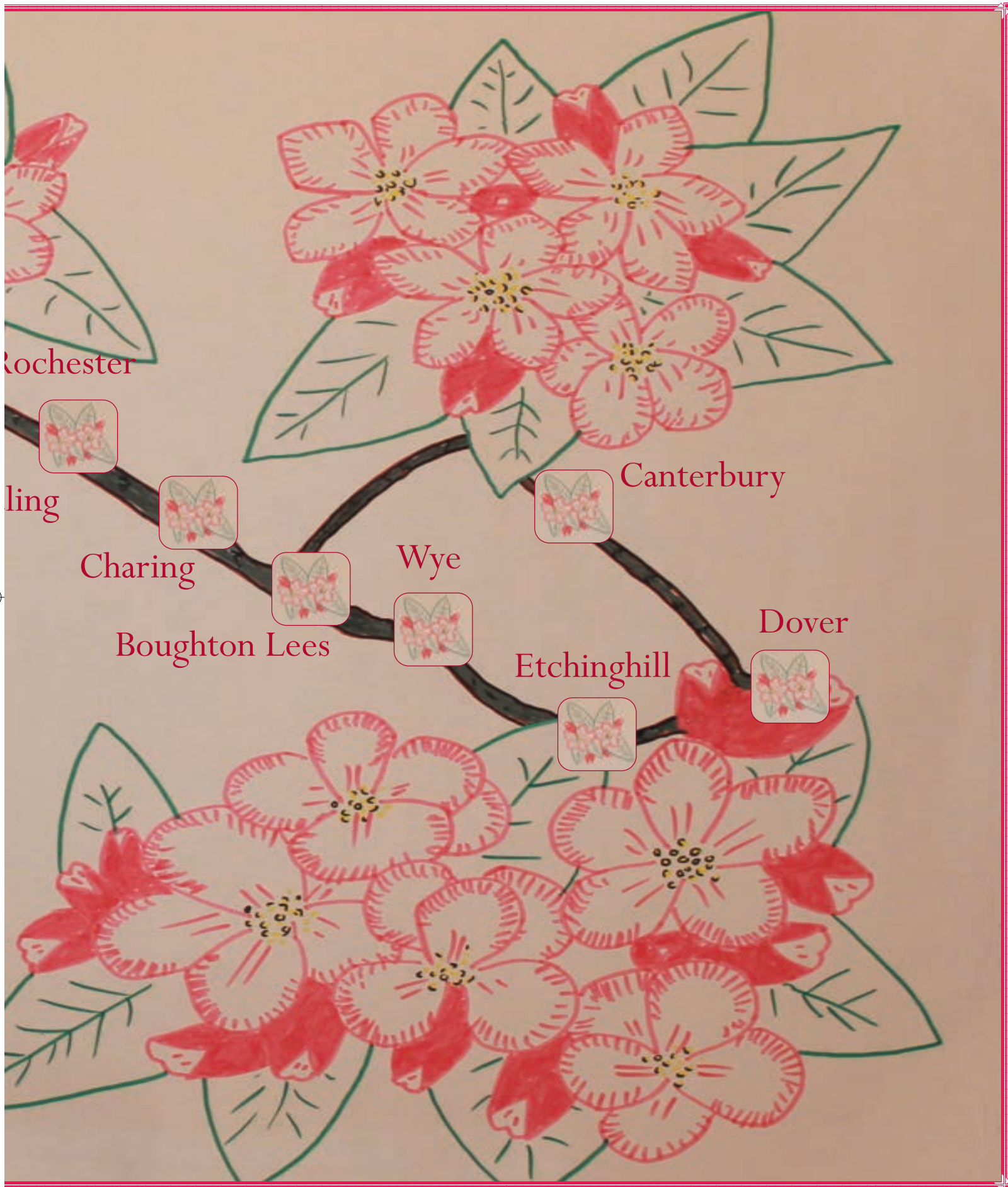


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Detlin

# The North Downs Way





Rochester

Charing

Boughton Lees

Wye

Etchinghill

Canterbury

Dover









# Foreword

*by Stephen Venables, mountaineer, writer, broadcaster and public speaker. He was the first Briton to climb Everest without supplementary oxygen.*



*photo by Mike Banks*

**T**he North Downs were the first hills I ever saw, the horizon of my childhood. The pale scars of the Reigate chalk quarries seemed like huge cliffs. Box Hill, during the long freeze of 1963, was an exhilarating toboggan run. In summer we played and picked bilberries at Friday Street. The hills were a place to escape to – a lighter, brighter, wilder landscape of chalk and sandstone, rising above the mundane clay fields where we lived.

Fifty years on, I have explored some of the most remote mountains on earth and stood on the highest summit of all. These days when I see the North Downs it is usually through a car windscreen, driving along the M25 that has replaced the interminable childhood traffic jams of the old A25; or, better, riding right along the foot of the Downs on the wonderful train line from Reading to Gatwick, passing Shere, Dorking, Brockham, Betchworth and Reigate. And each time I am amazed at how much we take for granted this apparently unexceptional landscape, so rich in associations.

The dry chalk and sand once provided the only passable highway above the impenetrable marsh and forest of the valleys. Arcing all the way to Canterbury, this great ridge was a pilgrimage route, just as sacred as the Galician trail to Santiago de Compostela or the great Himalayan pilgrim routes revered by Hindus and Buddhists. In more recent times, Box Hill was the scene of the most tetchy picnic in literary history, when Jane Austen's Emma was spitefully rude to the tedious Miss Bates. Leith Hill, with its strangely mysterious tower, is linked indelibly with the music of Vaughan Williams.

The psalmist sang, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help.' Whether, like him, you are seeking spiritual sustenance, or just a breath of fresh air, the hills are a place of solace and rejuvenation, nowhere more so than in the crowded southeast corner of England, straining under the pressure of insane government housing policies. Their very proximity to London makes the North Downs extra precious – a place to cherish and re-discover, as Belinda Knox has done in this beautiful book.



# Introduction

‘When the sweet showers of April have pierced to the root the dryness of March and bathed every vein in moisture by which strength are the flowers brought forth; when Zephyr also with his sweet breath has given spirit to the tender new shoots in the grove and field, and the young sun has run half his course through Aries the Ram, and little birds make melody and sleep all night with an open eye, so nature pricks them in their hearts; then people long to go on pilgrimages.’

*Geoffrey Chaucer:*

*The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.*



**T**hese golden words from the Father of English Literature, Geoffrey Chaucer, renowned as the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages, seem as true today as when first penned back in 1387. Were they able to look forward in time, the pilgrims of yore would easily identify with the 500,000 folk who enjoy the delights of the North Downs Way every year, as it winds its way from the ancient Surrey town of Farnham in the West, via the sacred city of Canterbury or by the southern route through the picturesque village of Wye, to the historic Kent port of Dover in the East. The trail stretches over 125 miles through buttercup strewn meadows, under the shade of venerable trees, over airy hilltops, past blossom laden fruit trees, amongst fields of ripening wheat and along mighty chalk cliffs buffeted by salt sea breezes.

While the rural idyll would be familiar to Pilgrims of yesteryear, clothing worn by modern day hikers and the sophisticated mountain bikes swishing past them through muddy puddles would seem most strange, along with the busy roads and bustling communities just out of sight and earshot. Although it runs right through the heart of London’s southern commuter belt, much of the Way is remarkably untouched by the hurly burly of modern life. Those in search of spiritual comfort have been drawn east along the trail since Archbishop Thomas à Beckett was brutally slain in Canterbury





Cathedral in 1170. Having fallen out with Henry II he was killed by hot headed knights loyal to the king. This 'political blunder' made Thomas an instant martyr and the monarch a religious pariah. The faithful flocked to do penance and seek solace where the saint fell. Even the word canter dates back to the Middle Ages and is short for the Canterbury gallop - the brisk pace at which pilgrims hastened on horseback to the shrine.

Many followed the tracks over the North Downs that have been used for over 250,000 years, first by hunters from before the Ice Age and later, as the glaciers melted away, by generations of hardy traders and drovers. By sticking to the high ground they avoided being slowed by the dense woodland below and meeting the robbers hiding among the trees. The great whaleback of chalk, like its sister The South Downs, dates





back 30 million years when the formation of the Alps caused ripples in the surface of the earth further north. Strong links with Canterbury were cemented in 1978 when The North Downs Way Trail was officially inaugurated by Archbishop Donald Coggan. Proposed by the Countryside Commission as a way of linking the Surrey Hills and Kent Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, it took over a decade of painstaking negotiation with landowners to bring

to fruition. Now regarded as a wonderful way to see the countryside, the route is still a spiritual highway. Indeed, whilst striding the Way ourselves, we encountered a devout walking group toiling up the steep flanks of Box Hill, wooden staves in hand, wearing large wooden crosses round their necks. Although red in face and damp of brow from their exertions they still managed a smile and a cheery greeting to their fellow travellers.



*Pictured above:* Dawn contemplation at St Martha's. *Pictured Right:* Bathed in sunlight Canterbury Cathedral looks magnificent. It is the mother church of the Anglican Community and the seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Rebuilt completely by the Normans in 1070, it is now a world heritage site. There have been many additions to the building over the last 900 years, but parts of the quire and some of the windows and their stained glass date from the 12th century. After the murder of Archbishop Thomas à Becket in 1170, Canterbury Cathedral attracted pilgrims from all over Europe. It is likely Henry II did not intend his former friend to be killed. The King certainly publicly atoned for the sin by walking barefoot to Canterbury and allowing himself to be flogged by all 70 cathedral monks. Pilgrimages were later immortalized by Geoffrey Chaucer in his bawdy, 14th Century, Canterbury Tales. The shrine to murdered Archbishop Thomas à Becket was placed in the Trinity Chapel in 1220 and destroyed in 1538 on the orders of King Henry VIII following his fall-out with Rome. A candle now marks the place where it once stood and the pink stone in front bears the imprint of thousands of pilgrims' knees. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom chooses the next Archbishop.







# Trees

‘Under the greenwood tree  
Who loves to lie with me,  
And turn his merry note  
Unto the sweet bird's throat,  
Come hither, come hither, come hither:  
Here shall he see  
No enemy  
But winter and rough weather.’  
*William Shakespeare: As You Like It.*



When it comes to greenwood trees you cannot beat the county of Surrey. Shakespeare would have been quite at home, quill pen in hand, composing a sonnet under a shady bough on the North Downs Way. The sheer number and variety of stately trees along the route is remarkable. One encounters giant specimens of silver trunked beech soaring over 60 feet above the path, their branches outspread giving light and airy shade in the summer and blanketing the forest floors with a carpet of dazzling auburn hues in the autumn.

On the steep hillsides their roots cling firmly to the shallow soil like giant gnarled fingers. They help to make Surrey England's most wooded county. Despite centuries of felling for fuel, building timber and to make way for agriculture, it still has fifty times more trees than people and a quarter of the county is covered in leafy branches. They thrive on the North Downs thanks to the steep south facing escarpments that catch the sun. In amongst the beech can be found ancient, weathered oaks, some bearing the scars of lightning strikes and others hollowed out over time by fungi, insects and nesting creatures. Ash trees too stretch up into the woodland canopies, their feathery leaves dancing in the wind. Slender white stands of silver birch can also be seen adorned with yellow catkins in the springtime along with wild cherry, rowan and horse chestnut blossom. The churchyards along the Way are guarded by old yew trees planted to discourage grazing animals from disturbing the gravestones. These evergreens can live for over 1,000 years and many of the oldest trees are







in Surrey. When growing together alongside the path they can cast deep, dark, almost sinister shadows, their trunks often distended and roots twisting together like nests of serpents. Yews like these can be found growing on the side of Ranmore

Common and along the slopes of Box Hill, which takes its name from the large specimens of *Buxus Sempervirens* trees that grow wild. While Box is more normally associated with neatly clipped little hedges it has a more robust reputation







among experts as the weightiest and toughest of Europe's woods. Toss a branch into a river and it will sink like a lump of iron! Finding running water along the Way is not difficult as it is cut by the River Wey near Guildford, the Mole by Dorking and the mightier Medway at Cuxton. The towpaths are home to thirsty willows and stands of alder. Pollarded willows have long been a source of pliable wood for weaving. The same applies to the stands of hazel found along the trail, particularly at King's Wood near Chilham. Regularly cut to the ground, they then produce slender straight stems used for bean poles and even water divining.



Daintier, but no less important are the hedgerow trees, blackthorn and hawthorn. As well as providing a prickly refuge from predators and the elements for birds, their spring blossom is beautiful to the eye and the herald of mellow autumn fruitfulness for a variety of creatures. As the chalk of the North Downs gives way to the richer, deeper soil of Kent, orchards of apple, pear and plum trees abound. Apples have been cultivated in the South

East since Roman times for the table and for making cider. Historic varieties like Laxton's Superb and the Cox's Orange Pippin owe their fame to the 'Garden of England'.







*Top centre:* Box Hill is so named because of the Box growing on its slopes.

*Bottom left:* If this tree could talk, it could tell us about hundreds of years of history at Waverley.

*Above:* A 'womping' willow in Etchingill.







*Pictured above:* A bouquet of spring blossom adorns these hedgerow thornbushes. *Pictured below:* A veteran of many summers, this apple tree was planted in No Man's Orchard over 60 years ago. It includes



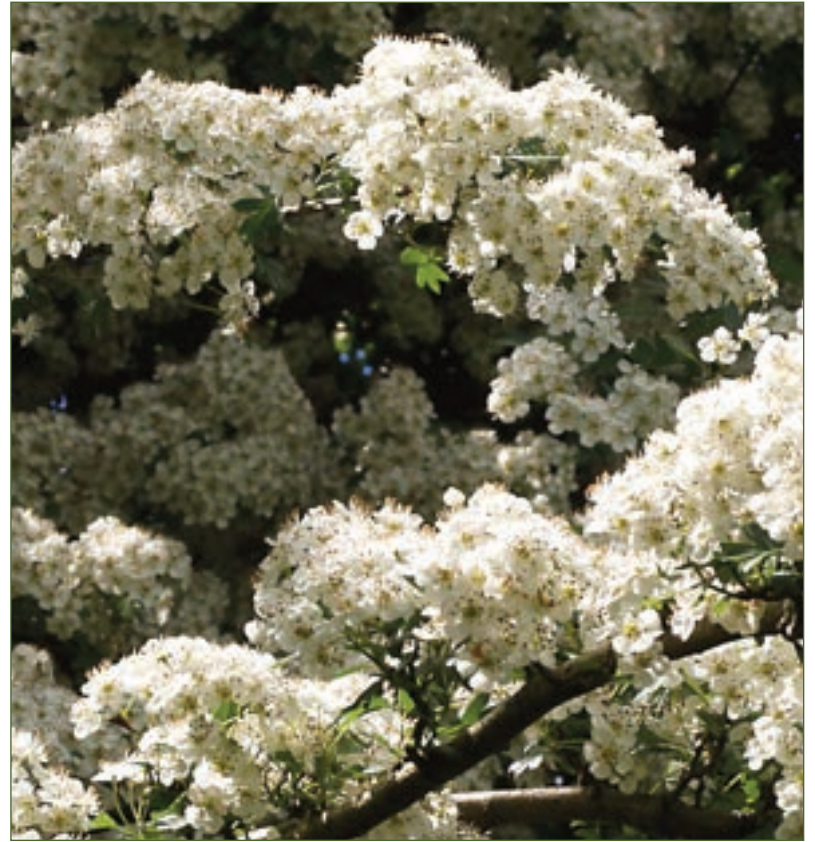
some classic varieties such as Bramley, Worcester and James Grieve. *Pictured above:* The Kentish sunshine has ripened these rotund apples to a rosy hue.







*Pictured above:* The delicately marbled skin of these fruit contrasts well with their bright red cousins. Nature's bounty is rich and varied.  
*Pictured below:* Crocuses coming into early bloom in Wrotham.



*Pictured above:* Swathes of white cherry blossom - *Prunus Avium*.  
*Below:* Burnished autumn leaves dangle like elegant earrings from a flowering cherry tree in the churchyard in Wye.





# Natural Inspiration



‘For singing till his heaven fills,  
T’is love of earth that he instils,  
And ever winging up and up,  
Our valley is his golden cup,  
And he the wine  
which overflows to lift us with  
him as he goes:  
The woods and brooks, the  
sheep and kine  
He is, the hills, the human line,  
The meadows green, the fallows  
brown...’

*George Meredith:  
The Lark Ascending.*

**B**eautiful birdsong filling the air over the North Downs inspired the celebrated writer George Meredith to commit these words to paper. In turn, his poem about the skylark moved another famous lover of the countryside, Ralph Vaughan Williams, to compose one of his most adored works bearing the same title – *The Lark Ascending*. Both men made Surrey their home. Meredith, who lived until 1909, aged 81, in Flint Cottage on Box Hill, the perfect base from which to explore the North Downs. Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958, spent much of his life nearby at Leith Hill. Sights and sounds to touch the soul and lift the spirits were many and splendid, right outside their front doors. It is hardly surprising that a stroll along the North Downs Way can be so inspiring when you realize it is teeming with wildlife. The high ground forms a natural resting place for passing birds and insects, particularly the steep, sun-kissed





southern slopes. It has been estimated that there are as many as 300 different types of plants to be found and in some places around 40 species of butterflies. How joyful is the sight of a red admiral butterfly dipping its long tongue into nectar filled blossom, (*pictured overleaf*) while opening elegantly patterned wings to catch the sun. Or bees, buzzing from flower to flower in their eternal quest for the ingredients to make sweet honey. Even a spider's web can become a bejewelled veil thanks to drops of early morning dew. Who cannot be moved by the sight of a pair of brightly coloured Burnett moths (*pictured overleaf*) courting on a wildflower by the path? Another snappy dresser is the Cinnabar caterpillar (*pictured overleaf*). Wearing black and yellow hoops it would look quite at home in a soccer team. Pausing to watch a snail carry its house slowly across the path gives us time to reflect on the pace of modern life. Or marvelling at the acrobatic antics of a squirrel looking for nuts (*pictured overleaf*) and the speed of a startled hare. There are many inspiring blooms on The North Downs Way too. Bluebells carpet the woods in spring along with primroses and anemones, swathes of red poppies light up the fields in summer, roses, fuschias, alliums, smoke bushes (*pictured overleaf*) and a host of exotica fill the gardens, purple heather and yellow gorse adorn the heathland and, in Kent, lavender bushes line up to be admired and turned into perfume. Everywhere you look there is something delightful to see, to stir the soul, touch the heart and perhaps impel the fingers to compose a symphony, draft a poem or write a book.























## Cultivation

**W**hen you think of the North Downs Way the word champagne doesn't readily spring to mind. At least not until journey's end at Dover. Indeed, it may come as a surprise to learn the sunny slopes under Box Hill have often been compared to the celebrated French wine region by international experts. The soil and climate are so similar that it is now home to the world renowned vineyard – Denbies. Heading downhill along the Way from Ranmore Common, 265 acres of grapes suddenly appear from behind the screen of trees, laid out below in serried ranks. With Dorking's church spire and the prow of Box Hill in the middle distance, it is an impressive sight. Many linger at the spot to marvel at the view. On one occasion my husband and I found someone had laid out the letters 'S' and 'B' in small stones just close to the







pathway which, by charming coincidence, are our own initials. As well as producing award winning wine to rival the world's finest, Denbies once played host to a life-sized house made of lego bricks! Although grapes have been planted in Surrey since the Roman era, this is the first time it has been done on such a grand scale. The vineyard has now become a big tourist attraction, selling fine food as well as wine in its visitor centre - the perfect place for a spot of lunch.

Cultivation along The Way began 3,000 years ago when Neolithic man started chopping down the trees that covered the fertile land for building timber and fuel. The farming is now mixed depending on the terrain. Livestock graze on the open downland and enclosed sloping pastures and dry valleys. Tough rare breeds, such as the distinctive black and white striped Belted Galloways or 'panda cows' and black welsh mountain

sheep can be seen munching away on the steeper, rougher grassland. Horses and ponies are often seen grazing in the fields. Arable farming includes cereals and horticultural crops. The chalky soil also supports fields of sweet smelling lavender. The area around Banstead and Mitcham was a world leader in production of the blooms right up until the end of the Victorian era. As the downland gives way to the richer soil of Kent, 'The Garden of England,' fields of hops for the brewing industry and fruit and nut orchards begin to appear. Farmers are reviving rural skills like hedge laying, coppicing, pond and woodland management too. Times have certainly changed as a consequence of mechanization. In the 1930's eight people would be needed to look after 350 acres. Now just five workers cope with a staggering 3,000 acres and thus at harvest time they often use large tractors with huge trailers in preference to the old, more familiar red variety.















*Pictured above left:* Cleverly concealed in the shape of a tree, a phone mast blends into the landscape near Denbies, Dorking. *Pictured Top right:* Heartening the walker en route, a solid stone marker. *Pictured centre:* Harking back to The Garden of Eden, a wooden snake in No Man's Orchard, close to Canterbury. *Bottom left:* This waymarker is also a memorial. *Bottom right:* The Greenwich Meridian Line near Oxted.

