

Highways & Byways in Sussex

by E. V. Lucas (1904)

CHAPTER XXXIV: EASTBOURNE

Eastbourne is the most select, or least democratic, of the Sussex watering places. Fashion does not resort thither as to Brighton in the season, but the crowds of excursionists that pour into Brighton and Hastings are comparatively unknown at Eastbourne; which is in a sense a private settlement, under the patronage of the Duke of Devonshire. Hastings is of the people; Brighton has a character almost continental; Eastbourne is select. Lawn tennis and golf are its staple products, one played on the very beautiful links behind the town hard by Compton Place, the residence of the Duke; the other in Devonshire Park. It is also an admirable town for horsemanship.

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The Martello towers, which Pitt built during the Napoleonic scare at the beginning of last century, begin at Eastbourne, where the cliffs cease, and continue along the coast into Kent. They were erected probably quite as much to assist in allaying public fear by a tangible and visible symbol of defense as from any idea that they would be a real service in the event of invasion. Many of them have now disappeared.

BEACHY HEAD

Eastbourne's glory is Beachy Head, the last of the Downs, which stop dead at the town

and never reappear in Sussex again. The range takes a sudden turn to the south at Folkington, whence it rolls straight for the sea, Beachy Head being the ultimate eminence. (The name Beachy has, by the way, nothing to do with the beach: it is derived probably from the Normans' description—"beau chef.") About Beachy Head one has the South Downs in perfection: the best turf, the best prospect, the best loneliness, and the best air. Richard Jefferies, in his fine essay, "The Breeze on Beachy Head," has a rapturous word to say of this air—

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“But the glory of these glorious Downs is the breeze. The air in the valleys immediately beneath them is pure and pleasant; but the least climb, even a hundred feet, puts you on a plane with the atmosphere itself, uninterrupted by so much as the tree-tops. It is air without admixture. If it comes from the south, the waves refine it; if inland, the wheat and flowers and grass distil it. The great headland and the whole rib of the promontory is wind-swept and washed with air; the billows of the atmosphere roll over it.

"The sun searches out every crevice amongst the grass, nor is there the smallest fragment of surface which is not sweetened by air and light. Underneath the chalk itself is pure, and the turf thus washed by wind and rain, sun-dried and dew-scented, is a couch prepared with thyme to rest on. Discover some excuse to be up there always, to search for stray mushrooms—they will be stray, for the crop is gathered extremely early in the morning—or to make a list of flowers and grasses; to do anything, and, if not, go always without any pretext. Lands of gold have been found, and lands of spices and precious merchandise: but this is the land of health."

Seated near the edge of the cliff one realizes, as it is possible nowhere else to realize,

except perhaps at Dover, the truth of Edgar's description of the headland in *King Lear*. It seems difficult to think of Shakespeare exploring these or any Downs, and yet the scene must have been in his own experience; nothing but actual sight could have given him the line about the crows and choughs:

Come on, sir; here's the place:—stand still.—How fearful

And dizzy 't is, to cast one's eyes so low!

The crows and choughs, that wing the midway air,

Show scarce so gross as beetles: half way down

Hangs one that gathers samphire—dreadful trade!

Methinks he seems no bigger than his head:

The fishermen, that walk upon the beach,

Appear like mice...

...

PARSON DARBY

The old lighthouse on Beachy Head, the Belle Tout, which first flung its beams abroad in 1831, has just been superseded by the new lighthouse built on the shore under the cliff. Near the new lighthouse is Parson Darby's Hole—a cavern in the cliff said to have been hewed out by the Rev. Jonathan Darby of East Dean as a refuge from the tongue of Mrs. Darby. Another account credits the parson with the wish to provide a sanctuary for shipwrecked sailors, whom he guided thither on stormy nights by torches. In a recent Sussex story by Mr. Horace Hutchinson, called *A Friend of Nelson*, we find the cave in

the hands of a powerful smuggler, mysterious and accomplished as Lavengro, some years after Darby's death.

UNDER BEACHY HEAD

A pleasant walk from Eastbourne is to Birling Gap, a great smuggling centre in the old days, where the Downs dip for a moment to the level of the sea. Here at low tide one may walk under the cliffs. Richard Jefferies, in the essay from which I have already quoted, has a beautiful passage of reflections beneath the great bluff:—..."These breadths draw out the soul; we feel that we have wider thoughts than we knew; the soul has been living, as it were, in a nutshell, all unaware of its own power, and now suddenly finds freedom in the sun and the sky. Straight, as if sawn down from turf to beach, the cliff shuts off the human world, for the sea knows no time and no era; you cannot tell what century it is from the face of the sea. A Roman trireme suddenly rounding the white edge-line of chalk, borne on wind and oar from the Isle of Wight towards the gray castle at Pevensey (already old in olden days), would not seem strange. What wonder could surprise us coming from the wonderful sea?"

EAST DEAN

The road from Birling Gap runs up the valley to East Dean and Friston, two villages among the Downs. Parson Darby's church at East Dean is small and not particularly interesting; but it gave Horsfield, the county historian, the opportunity to make one of his infrequent jokes. "There are three bells," he writes, "and 'if discord's harmony not understood,' truly harmonious ones." Horsfield does not note that one of these three bells bore a Latin motto which being translated signifies

Surely no bell beneath the sky

Can send forth better sounds than I?

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