

OVER THE WARDEN HILLS

It was one of those sparkling winter days when the cold northern wind has blown all trace of haze from the air and everything is pin-sharp. I was walking along a track which is part of the Icknield Way, the prehistoric route which runs from the end of the Ridgeway up into Norfolk, and here goes just beneath the tops of the lowly hills at the eastern end of the Chilterns. Approaching me was an elderly walker, evidently also out to enjoy the day.

“Oh, they’re binoculars,” he said, “I couldn’t make out what they were. Do you think there’s less wildlife round here than there used to be?”

I explained that I hadn’t walked this way before, but that there had been some interesting birds; several kestrels on Galley Hill, and skylarks singing above Warden Hill. I thought it was probably too cold for much to be about.

He told me that he quite often walked over the hill from his home nearby and returned along the tracks and field paths. He asked me where I had come from and I told him I was parked in Lilley, a village a mile or two away.

“I went round by Lilley once and saw the pub there, the Lilley Arms, not the other one down by the main road. I thought I’d go in for my lunch. The landlord there’s a marvellous chap. I ordered a ploughman’s lunch, thinking I had a £5 note in my pocket to pay for it. When I felt for it, it wasn’t there. I told the landlord I couldn’t pay for my lunch. Although I’d never been in the pub before, he said it was okay, I could pay what I owed the next time I was passing. You wouldn’t get that in many places these days.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “I thought I would be a bit cheeky, and said that, in that case, could I have a pint as well, and he poured me one. I went back to my seat and a chap said, “Eh, you pensioners are well off these days.” “What do you mean?” I said. “Throwing your money away,” he said, and pointed to the floor. There was my £5 note! So I was able to pay my debts. You ought to try the Lilley Arms, it’s a good place!”

In fact my car was parked right by the Lilley Arms. I had left the village by the track called Wardwood Lane. Evidently frequently used by horses, today it was mostly frozen and not the muddy swamp I guessed it would usually become. The track narrowed between hedgerows, and its age was betrayed by a number of splendid old oak trees silhouetted against the azure sky.





Some of the nearby fields showed the vivid green of a crop of winter wheat; others had recently been ploughed and harrowed. In these the chalky soil and the sheen of the flints combined with the sunlight to create a sparkling golden effect. Where a track went off to Pond Farm over the hill, the combination of the sky and the two types of field reminded me of a Mondrian painting.

My objective was to pass over the tops of Warden and Galley Hills and circle back to Lilley along the Icknield Way. From this side the two hills appeared as nothing more than the culminations of gentle sweeps up to barely discernible high points. I could just about make out the trig point on Warden Hill on my first view of it through the trees. Eventually I left the lane and joined a field path which was part of the Bunyan Trail, a route through the south Bedfordshire countryside which in the seventeenth century had been the haunt of the author of 'The Pilgrim's Progress'.



There was an even more lovely combination of colour as the fieldscape was augmented by the curve of the hedgerow and the sequence of clouds.

A small path led enticingly through the scrub up to a kissing gate on Warden Hill. Kestrels hovered only a few yards away from me, and the unmistakable sound of a skylark soaring, my first of the spring, escorted me to the top of the hill. What a contrast to the gentle deserted country to the side of the hill I had approached from! The scarp falls sharply to a golf course and then the whole of Luton spread out before one's eyes!



I retraced my steps and went on to Galley Hill where signs warned me that sheep would



be grazing until the start of the school holidays in July. I didn't see any sheep, but wondered what the schoolchildren of Luton might be liable to do them in the holidays if the flock was left out to graze. I dropped down to join the Icknield Way and had my conversation with the amiable old gentleman.

North of Lilley a line of electricity pylons marches across the landscape, cutting across to the south of Telegraph Hill. Such pylons and cables generally detract from a scene, but here the way the lines mirrored the contours of the countryside and seemed to proceed purposefully to the vanishing point on the horizon added a certain atmosphere to the view.



Returning to Lilley it was lunchtime, and the recollection of the story told to me by the old gentleman made the temptation too great. I decided to go in for a pint and a sandwich, carefully checking before I did that I had sufficient money. The landlord certainly had the air of being the same one encountered by my friend in the lane. I ordered a ham sandwich and a drink, and proffered a £20 note. When the change came it was for only £10.

“Excuse me”, I said, “that was a £20 note I gave you”

The landlord went and examined his till, and eventually returned with the rest of my change.

“Always worth a try” said the chap standing next to me at the bar.

Roger Cave
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