

LYE HILL and The Moors

Cowley to Headington Quarry

Henry Taunt (1915)

Leigh or Lye Hill and the Moors beyond are among the last of the picturesque paths from Cowley Marsh, but its wild solitary beauty is going and in time will be gone. Lye Hill is at its best now the great Elms are in their glory, in a few years the tale of the winter storms or the woodman's axe will mar or sweep them all away, and one of the charms of the stroll here will have disappeared.

Over to the stile on the east side of Cowley Marsh, now devoted to Golf; or along the green lane, Mud Lane as it is in wet weather, which leads also to this stile where a great branch of a tree has been used to form the top rail, looking as if all impediments possible are put there to prevent easy access, if this is so, it is too bad, as the path has existed from time immemorial. The stile is within the Oxford boundary, which winds round with the little stream that trickles along the bottom of the valley, and here is the happy hunting ground for many a youngster who makes his or her way from Cowley Marsh. From the very stile its charms begin, as the path between the rye growing in the field, and the hedge with its overshadowing elms, rises the Hill. Below, round the stream, are Aspens, Aspen Poplars as they are often termed, they belong to that order; with their tremulous leaves, some are in their decadence evidently, as the top branches are dead and stand out gaunt against the sky, and a little way along the stream is the sheep-washing place, now seemingly quite deserted, grown up and never used. Beyond this is Sand Hill, where the varied coloured sand crops out in places, there have been quarries here as the rough ground shows, and the Barracks further on looking over from the hill is partly built with the stone, this is now a continuation of the March Golf ground, making up the eighteen holes, but it really was part of Bullingdon Green.

But we are running away from our path and must trail back along the links to the stile again. There is waste ground between path and hedge over the stile and this was used at one time by the lads to play Banker and other pence games, until rightly

stopped by the police. It is a sunny spot in summer, pleasant and bright, and there is many a trace of children's play in the growing grass, and we were sorry to say also in the standing rye. Two or three children are busy here now making Daisy and Buttercup chains; making a split in the stalks, and drawing the next flower through to the head, all for the dressing up of a toy horse they have brought with them. One of the lassies has bright golden ringlets hanging down her back, but the youngest was in tears at some unkind treatment she had received from another of her companions. It is a pleasant climb up the hill, and we look back to the Marsh Village and Temple Cowley, but these are quickly left behind and hidden by the rise of the hill, all but a few houses on the Barrack's road (how much these villages have grown in the last ten years, and are still extending.) The Barracks stand out from Lye Hill over the second part of the Golf ground, right on the top of the neighbouring hill all part of the old Bullingdon Green; in front of us is Shotover Hill, fairly clear with its crest of trees against the morning sky; but there are no signs to-day of the Chilterns to the South, they are hidden in the haze. How lovely everything looks, the rain and the morning mist and now the sunshine have brought all the vegetation forward although it is only May; ah! and the Hawthorns have their May also, a grand wealth of flower this year, covering the boughs and actually hiding the leaves, and filling the air with its faint scent, while the giant elms line along the hedge-row, until the descent of the hill is reached. Then the stream is met again, still the Oxford boundary, extended here at the last enlargement of the City; but just after the descent into the valley a smaller side stream runs in from a depression turning to the north, and the boundary follows this, up by the Warneford Hospital and beyond. It is not everybody that recognizes the fact that it is the debris of this water-washed valley that has filled up the lake, which in ancient times existed where Cowley Marsh and its adjacent fields are now; the lake becoming a Marsh, while the forest which covered the hills at a later date, was cut down, and the stream has dwindled until now there is only a trickle compared to the large volume of water that carried down the sand and clay which filled up the old lake. Yet curiously, the little stream to-day is, in its small way, doing exactly as its giant forefather did, for where there is a little pot-hole in it there you will see at the upper part a small amount of debris, brought down by the little stream just as the big water

did in the earlier geological times.

What a beauty there is in nature, left to herself and quite wild. No stiff lines, or inartistic squares, she dots down a little bush and covers them with blossom, a few reeds or rushes and an odd tree and lo! A picture, such as few artists could invent. There is not one picture only along these moors, but one after another; someday they will be all swallowed up and then our scenes will convey a faint idea to those who follow us of what they were like. Here is one from the path at the turn, looking back down the valley, along the moor at the lower part; the next is looking the other way up, over the Headington Moor. Alder trees rise from the streamlet's edge where the little northern valley and stream from the left join the larger one, by the Hawthorn covered with May blossom; they seem always to like their roots in the water, but these are all there are. Willows grow up the side valley and bigger trees on the hill side where it gradually closes up as it ascends. Some day there will be nothing but houses along its ridge where now the good folk who are beating the city boundary are congregated, for since this picture was taken, gardens, allotment, and cultivation have begun to extend. These are invariably around Oxford, the predecessors of streets or outskirts residences, which grow over them, and turn the country into town. But unfortunately many of the new houses are garish erections of red brick, and thus the suburbs of Oxford are a decided decadence from the more charming older part of the place, as seen from the hills.

Over the Alders in our scene, up the main valley, is the first encroachment of cultivation as a group of rough outbuildings with a few chimneys from some houses beyond right on the top of the hill shows, the valley winds somewhat to the right from this standpoint and loses itself beyond the little stump of hay, but the foreground is quite rural, and one can note how the path extends wider where there is a marshy place by the streamlet, and beyond where it crosses the side ripple between the bushes. Here the birds sing, Larks, and Blackbirds, and Thrushes, and Yellow-hammers and Finches, and others in endless variety; while now and then a rustle in the grass draws the eye to where a handsome brown grass-snake is speeding out of the way. There used to be many more of these in this district, we have had them in our own garden down in the Marsh many times, but they are growing fewer year by year. They have

but little intelligence; we have had some who would set up their backs to be rubbed, but that is all we could ever seem to teach them in captivity. They are quite harmless, and their only defence seems to be the unpleasant oil which they exude from beneath their scales, but when they get used to anyone and are not frightened, they rather like to be handled, and do not resent it or become unpleasant. In hot weather they are very fond of lying in the water with their heads out of it, or curled round on a sunny bank fast asleep. They are very prettily marked at times, and are different from the black Viper; but these latter are extremely rare round Oxford.

There is a useful spring halfway up the valley, and quite typical of them all, a round sand-covered pot-hole, with the water oozing up in two or three places at the bottom and throwing up a little sand heap a few inches high. They get grown up considerably in the autumn with water plants, such as brooklime, and perhaps water cress. The big stone in front makes it possible to dip the water, the excess of which runs out by the side and down the hill. The frogs make a bath of it and loll there with their heads up, popping under at the slightest movement, but soon up again. It is astonishing how fearless all things are where there is wild solitude, yet how quickly they grow afraid of mankind, no doubt from the inherent tendency universal in men and boys to kill everything, particularly if uncommon and rare. This spring is always running, not much in the driest part of summer, but with a chatter in wet weather. Its gathering ground is not a large one, as the whole of the hill is only small, but there is now no other stream this side of Cowley, this one down the valley gathers up all the water and furrows a deepish channel all down the Marsh until it reaches the river meadows: Then are no Alders anywhere except the few by the stream side in this valley, below the Marsh are Willows only, but the length of the streamlet from its highest spring is less than a couple of miles, and from the Marsh to the top of the hill the ground rises in all a hundred feet. The straight part of the stream past the Marsh was made, the older one ran very crooked behind and by the Cottages which are dotted behind the Marsh road or street.

The Moors continue wild as far as the top spring, the whole of this part and beyond being Headington Glebe land, close by on the rising ground are half a dozen cottages, and allotments take up the remainder. The top spring is like the one we have

illustrated, but not quite so large, while the depression of the valley turns towards Shotover Hill and is crossed by the road, into which the path leads between the cottages. The last part of the moor is very swampy, rough tussocks of *Juncus* Rushes (*Juncus effusus*) – “Bull poles” they are called in some places – stand up here and there amid the rest of the green carpet, some barbed wire is stretched along in places, but all is wild yet, except the rising ground where the allotments are. Someone was saying “What a nice thing it would be if the City were to lay out a path along this Valley”, but No! leave it in its present state as long as possible, it is the last bit of wild land within the City, on this side of Oxford

In the autumn the Grass of Parnassus with its creamy white flowers dot themselves among the vigorous growth in the Centre of the valley where the ground is swampy standing up, “like twinkling stars in the shadowy grass”, just two or three at a time on the root and each with a leaf encircling the stalk halfway down. They are very wax-like and have veins of semi-transparency down each of their five petals; in the centre the seed pods stands upright around it being five  which raise their yellow heads between the opening in the leaves and between each of these radiating from a heart-shaped  with 10, 11, or 12 tiny yellow gems on the top of each staminode.¹ The larger they are magnified the more beautiful they appear.

¹ The structures Taunt is trying to describe (heart-shaped base ‘with 10, 11 or 12 tiny yellow gems’ or shining blobs on thin stalks) are technically sterile stamens called ‘staminodes’. There are only five real stamens which contain pollen in the anthers. The staminodes between the true stamens are there to attract insects to pollinate the flowers, but they do it by lying. The shining blobs look as though they are sticky with nectar, but they are not – no nectar (a deception!). The real nectar production is at the base of each staminode. Another way of describing the situation is that the staminodes have false nectaries at the tips and true nectaries at their bases – they work very well as attractants for pollination, but economise on actual nectar production.