

## THE HEART OF THE CHILTERNNS.

BY W. PETRIE WATSON.

THE London-wards traveller by the Midland Railway who puts his head out of the window after leaving Bedford, (where so many of us, in the spring of 1915, were wondering what real war was going to be like), sees, on the southern horizon, a long east-to-west line of low ridges. Here and there they should be rather bold and abrupt, elsewhere undulating, or falling gently into the Bedfordshire plain. I am talking "by the map." I have not, myself, put my head out of any carriage window to discover these ridges. But the geography of the region and the railway map indicate that if the traveller acts in the manner described, and at the proper place, he ought really to perceive this line of ridges in the southern distance. Anyhow, the important point is that these ridges, whether so discovered or not, are, in the first place—the Delectable Mountains. The railway traveller, popping his head out of the carriage window, may, indeed, with good warrant, decide that he is really, then and there, "discovering" those Delectable Mountains which the excellent and pious John Bunyan "discovered" on behalf of Christian, the still more excellent and pious child of the glorious tinker's imagination. For Bunyan made many journeys on the south-going road from Bedford, and this road is not very far from the railway.

In the geography books, however, these ridges are the Chiltern Hills. But that is the way of the geography books. Neither the coral strands of India nor Afric's sunny fountains are properly located in the geography books. These brutish productions are fit for nothing but education. And the excellent Bunyan knew something better of the world than they are ever likely to teach. Indeed, he had his Delectable Mountains to discover somewhere, and why not among these Chiltern Hills, the only respectable ridges within hail of Elstow



and that Bedford prison where the Philistines put him because, even in that age, they couldn't speedily stone their prophets before raising their sepulchres? [It goes without saying that there is a worthy statue to Bunyan in the Bedford of to-day].

As a matter of fact, a parson of those parts has put up a readable little book in which not only the "Delectable Mountains" are discovered in the Chilterns, but likewise "Hill of Error" and "Mount Clear," with "Doubting Castle," "House Beautiful," and other features—not far away—of the country through which dauntless Christian passed, with many a hazard, towards Celestial City, for ever the dream of all of us who have to confess that we are sinners. To this little book I may return later.

All the same, one can have nothing to say about these Delectable Mountains to the mountaineer. Here is no game for him. His long-leagued ambitions must take themselves elsewhere. All their Ossas might be piled on all their Pelions, and then we mightn't be able to offer him a really good chance of working up his breakfast appetite. No; this thing can't be done. Altitude he must not look for here. Through some oversight the country was not originally planned that way. These be Mountains of the Moon, perhaps, or mountains of the imagination of tinker Bunyan. But mountains *qua* mountains they cannot be, until some suitable re-arrangement is made of the surface values of the earth as we know it. It is doubtful if they are even hills—hills such as the north-country man means when he speaks of such matters. I should think there isn't even a Brimmond in all the wide range of these Chilterns, straggling in an ill-compacted chain through four counties—Bucks, South Bedfordshire, North Herts and Cambridgeshire. And even where they may run to 700 or 800 feet high, it is scarcely a sheer, isolated, protuberance you will get. You may indeed discover some bold bluff, its "face" looking—say—to the north or to the east; but go the right way about tackling this steep and abrupt fellow, and you are pretty sure to find that you may have a most suave and



courteous introduction to him by way of t'other side of his face. He is probably the mere shoulder or abutment of a tableland piece of country, tapering away very gently indeed, on the reverse of the fierce and precipitous brow which he shows to the wintry north or the biting east. Such a hill—such a single-face hill—is one you encounter quite suddenly four miles out on one of the Hitchin-Bedford roads. Deacon Hill is its name on the map, and it looks quite a hummock, as bold as brass too, when you see it from the road. But climb from the road, and you find, from the top, that on one side you are looking along a stretch of country which runs level with your eye for miles in a southerly direction.

This is then no real, ardent, dour, uncompromising mountaineer's country. Yet, indeed, if these Chilterns be mere honorary mountains, or courtesy-title hills—by Dunstable way, where mayhap there have been honest, literal Scotsmen at the christening, they very rightly call them "downs"—one can say with great enthusiasm that in everything except altitude they are excellent value for an intelligent foot-slog through, let us propose, the country that lies between Luton in South Bedfordshire and Hitchin in North Hertfordshire. This is a mild adventure which might be done by taking a single ticket out of London of a morning, from St. Pancras to Luton, then pivoting the day on Ravensburgh Camp on the Beds-Herts border, and descending into quaint old Hertfordshire Hitchin in the late afternoon to catch the evening train for King's Cross. Besides seeing some country which is indeed a pretty provocation to poetry, and in some places reeks with ancient history, one is able, by this itinerary, to describe a fine large isosceles triangle. The two long legs of the affair will be the railway lines from London—Great Northern and Midland. The base will be a wavy (twelve or fifteen miles) meander in the heart of the Chilterns, and the apex of your isosceles triangle will, of course, "find itself" in the horrid Euston Road, where the houses look like mouldy



coffins set up on their ends, and the gardens in front of them like dank and sunken graves in sunless and forgotten burial-places.

Very well, having cheerfully set out from ugly Euston Road, there is everything to hearten and illumine the soul in this heart of the Chilterns, or, by your leave, in these Delectable Mountains of the glorious tinker of Bedford. You are but thirty or thirty-five miles from Charing Cross, but the land is wonderfully empty of everything except beauty. There are, to be sure, many hamlets, but they are graced with the superb charms of antiquity in a setting of tall elms and poplars, which is often as like antiquity as a tangible image can be. It is thoroughly diverse in contour, too, this country, with many a ten or fifteen minutes' gradient on its mazy woodland ways, and even on its excellent Hertfordshire roads (they have not the same road-making reputation in Bedfordshire, however). And you may emerge, more than once in a day's ramble, upon a high hog's-back, from which a far-extending prospect spreads away across the rather naked flats of Cambridgeshire, or over the more decently-clothed plain of South Bedfordshire.

But I imagine the most remarkable feature of this Chilterns country to a northern stranger must be the extraordinary number, extent, and aspect of the ancient, long-abandoned roads that "happen" almost everywhere. I know nothing like them in Northern Scotland, where the old roads, if they have not been absorbed into arable acres, have long degenerated into bramble and whin-choked pathways, or perhaps been given over to the fearsome uses of the "consumption dyke." In this quiet, heavily-timbered Chiltern country (but there are few real woods), there are miles and miles of these ancient roads, leading from nowhere to nowhere, and used, if at all, only in small sections by farmers to reach their outliers. And such roads! Some of them are wide, very wide—wider than the main highways of to-day. They have good, orderly, quick-set borders,



just like the roads in use to-day. They are level of surface. For considerable stages they are often as straight as an arrow, sited well for gradient—thoughtfully engineered, you might almost say. But—they are covered with close, thick, luxuriant grass.

Suppose you have left the high road of to-day for the delights of one of the many field-paths that criss-cross the country. You follow your field-path over a ridge and drop plump into one of the little woody valleys of the region. You coast a plantation and skirt a piece of remote wire-netted pasture, and then, as suddenly as you might fall into a hole, you emerge upon a wide, level, hedge-bordered roadway, intensely quiet, intensely empty, and covered with a heavy carpet of the greenest of green grass. Probably, if it is particularly wide, you have struck a section of the map-marked Icknield Way, which ran from East Anglia by way of Cambridge, Hitchin, Luton, and Dunstable, into Bucks, or even farther west, so far as I know. The authorities say that though this "Way" looks as Roman as one might think it possible to look, it is really British—that is, I suppose, pre-Roman. The tracks of modern highways have absorbed bits of it, but there are many miles of it which have yielded up the whole of their arterial importance, long, long ago, to the luxuriance of extra-green grass, which seldom seems to outgrow a curt lawn-like decency, and is rarely overspread or overpowered by the usurping bramble, briar, and thorn.

These abandoned roads are a romance to discover, and a delight to pursue. To a Scots habit of mind they might quite well denote an atrocious waste of good arable land, and a good two-handed Scots argument on agricultural economics might be conducted in the midst of them. But Fancy lingers in these old highways, discovering her most innocent happinesses in the delicious prospect of their green vistas. For she is well authorised to people them with many a strange pilgrim. It is quite certain that the Romans used them. They are, in truth, a vivid and substantial memorial of the fact that a busy, well-organ-



ised "social order" made several "appearances" in these regions long before the establishment of the social order of to-day.

Here, perhaps, one finds the text on which to say something of the affluence of historical interest which this Chiltern country possesses. For instance, if you should traverse the "base" of your isosceles triangle by using the main road from Luton to Hitchin, you will, at the sixth mile from Luton, arrive at Offley. This is merely a sizeable hamlet to-day, but it was once a great king's capital. The present scribe freely owns that, before he became familiar with these regions, he may have heard of King Offa, as one hears dim noises in a dream. "Higher" than this, as the lawyers say in their arguments, he dare not put it. Offa, however, he has now found, might fairly enough claim a ranking among the junior, or understudy, Charlemagnes of history. It was the time of the Heptarchy, and Offa, by a few judicious murders, such as inevitably entered into the art of statesmanship in his day, got himself quite a formidable kingdom in these parts. Well, this Offley, this sizeable hamlet of to-day, was Offa's capital. Here King Offa had his palace, and there are traditions which affirm that it was rich and costly, though its site is quite conjectural now. His date was in the seven hundreds A.D.—200 years before Alfred of the burnt cakes, Alfred the Great. Offa gave Offley his name, and there is a phantom air of long-lost grandeur about the place. Its houses are widely scattered, just as if it once were very much bigger than it is to-day. There are many groups of vastly-antlered elms and sycamores, aloof and grave, exchanging whispered memories of things unknown to this generation. There are wide level park-like spaces, which seem to belong to a great precinct, where kingly sports may have been shown. And a mile or two away is Ravensburgh Camp or Castle (there is no stone-work above ground, however), which the authorities declare must have been ancient British in origin and had been



used successively by Romans, Danes, Saxons, and Normans. It is a gigantic fortification on a formidable site, and they say that Offa had his court in Offley, because Ravensburgh was at a handy distance.

These far-off matters are rather beyond the scope of this fugitive writing, but one ought to step over from Offley to look at Offa's stronghold, Ravensburgh Camp. It is a vast rectangular rampart, enclosing fifteen or sixteen acres. The greater part of this area is now cluttered up with tall plantation wood, but the glacis of the rampart still presents an aspect to marvel at. Nowadays, it lies in the heart of a thickly-wooded estate, with not a human habitation in sight. On two sides there are deep combes—ravines, gullies, canons—and, on the whole, one here gets as near an approach to the ruggedness and "terror" of mountain country, as these gentle Chilterns can anywhere pretend to. This, perhaps, explains why the Delectable Mountains have been "discovered" more particularly hereabouts. Here, at any rate, are a few ridges which might masquerade as miniature mountains.

"Sheep are pastured on every part of these downs," writes our parson-explorer of the Delectable Mountains, "and this is a fact of which Bunyan certainly took notice. For the whole scene on the Delectable Mountains is concerned with the Shepherds, Knowledge, Experience, Watchful, and Sincere. . . . Just before the two pilgrims [Christian and Hopeful] left their kind friends, the Shepherds, they were taken to the summit of another hill called Clear, and were bidden to look through the perspective glass and discover the gate of the Celestial City. . . . Perchance, Bunyan once himself stood breathless on one of the chalk ridges, and some friend bade him take a peep through a 'perspective glass' . . . . We may select any hill-top hereabouts as the prototype of Mount Clear, and one may suppose that Bunyan had simply in his mind's eye a view of the plain of Middle Bedfordshire as he had often seen it,



when he gave us the description of the Shepherds and their Delectable Mountains."

It will be seen that this modern discoverer of Bunyan's "sources" has the assurance to be rather precise about the topography of these visionary mountains. But it would hardly do to accept the whole of his "reconstruction." Bunyan's imagination was surely greater than these Delectable Mountains of the Chiltern country, and Celestial City is the dream of a devout soul as well as the creation of a sprightly fancy.

What we can be sure of is that the contour of these hills and the contents of many of their charming valleys were familiar to Bunyan's mortal eyes. He made regular journeys from Bedford to Luton and Hitchin. And if one ends this very slight exploration of the heart of the Chilterns at Hitchin, as originally proposed, one may pay a visit to a church of Bunyan's foundation there. One may even sit on a chair in the vestry of this church, given by Bunyan himself for the use of the pastor, though it is said that modern pastors have grumbled about its straight back and its hard bottom as less suitable to the comfortable doctrine of to-day than to Bunyan's uncompromising theology.

Of the grace, the charm, the antiquity of Hertfordshire Hitchin 'twere possible to write books. A high local authority, who is now engaged in that very labour, tells me that it holds its place among the first twenty towns of all England which are notable for the wealth of their mediæval and Elizabethian remnants, and I, who am no authority, am ready to believe it. There is certainly one street of the town where I am in great expectation of meeting the ghost of Chapman, poet-contemporary of Shakespeare and first great translator of Homer—the Chapman of Keats's "Silent upon a peak of Darien" sonnet. One is particularly encouraged to expect to meet Chapman in this street, partly because much of it is Elizabethian or older, and partly because Chapman lived in it.



Anybody who writes about these Chilterns may be expected to say something about the famous Chiltern "Hundreds," the Stewardship of which one accepts on finding that the House of Commons is not the great place it is cracked up to be. This Stewardship has always been a great mystery to the present scribe. Think of the number of politicians who have "accepted" it! Did each of them attach a postscript resignation of the "appointment" to his letter accepting the same, in order that the next poor fellow, seeking a way of escape from the House of Commons, should not be inconvenienced? A rare succession of Stewards these Hundreds have had too, to be sure! Think of—and—and—! Well, well, there are many ways of crowning the achievements of a proud parliamentary career. But our discoverer of the Delectable Mountains relieves me from the duty of saying anything about the celebrated Stewardship. For in his book I observe a note about another publication of his, "The Chiltern Hundreds," and a convenient synopsis shows that these Hundreds are quite a long way off—by "the valley of the Wyck," and "round Stoke Poges," far from this region, the real heart of the Chilterns.

So one need not bother about the famous Stewardship—at any rate, not until one's time for accepting it comes along, and this is a thing that really need not happen to anybody capable of judging from the newspapers what sort of place they have made of the House of Commons these days!