Sketches and words by Tom Bellamy

Strolling South of Bridge

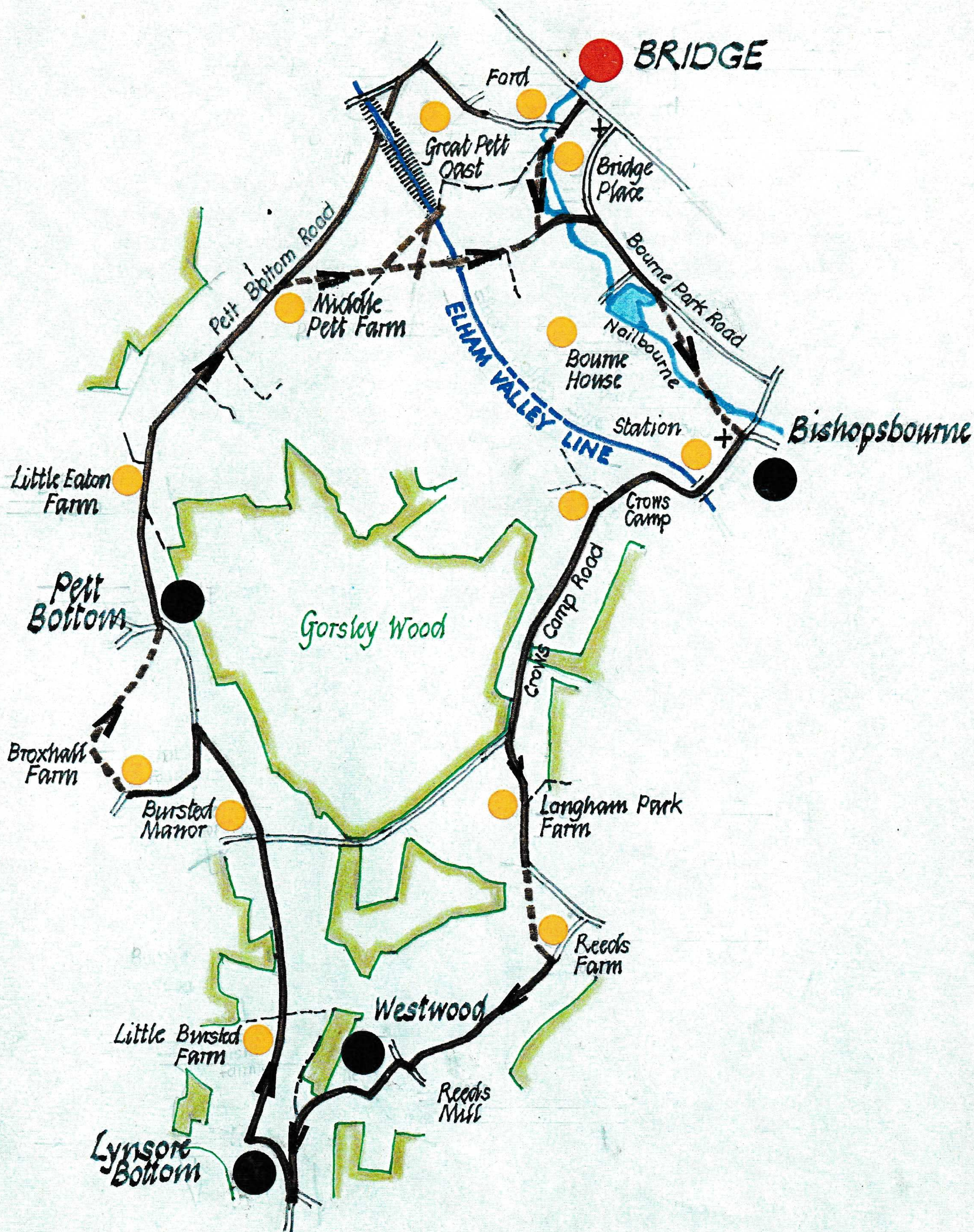
A Justification

In the Pevsner series, the Buildings of England, for North-East and East Kent, John Newman comments that nowhere is it possible to see landscape without building of some kind in view. I think he is wrong about this but then I am fortunate enough to live four miles south of Bridge where the North Downs fragments into a pattern of wooded slopes enclosing sheep-grazed hollows and where the density of building of any kind is still astonishingly low. How long this can last is anybody's guess.

The purpose of these sketches is to try to capture the essence of the landscape and its buildings as seen now before it is too late. My regret is that I should have started sooner. For, with the disappearance of traditional farming practice, the countryside is already becoming more sanitised.

Having completed what I set out to achieve, I now realise that I could have easily doubled the number of sketches. Perhaps there will be another opportunity. I hope so.

Tom Bellamy. 2002.



Strolling South Of Bridge - A sketch map.

The Nailbourne, near Bridge

The Nailbourne, Bourne Park

Bourne Park

St. Mary's Bishopsbourne

Bishopsbourne station

Bishopsbourne station

Barn, Langham Park Farm, Bishopsbourne

Sheds, Langham Park Farm

Stone Cottages, Lynsore Bottom

Lynsore Bottom

Little Bursted Farm, Lynsore Bottom

Little Bursted Farm

Little Eaton Farm, Pett Bottom

Barn, Little Eaton Farm

Broxhall Farm, Pett Bottom

Middle Pett Farm, Pett Bottom

Railway bridge over Pett Bottom Road

Crossing the line near Bridge

Railway embankment, Bridge

Great Pett oast, Bridge

The ford, Bridge

Little Bridge Place, Bridge

Strolling South of Bridge

Those of us who lay down across the street in Bridge in mute protest at the volume of traffic during the early nineteen sixties thought we had won the day when the long-awaited Bridge By-pass came to fruition. But something happened in the last ten years to reverse the good achieved then. Immense lorries deliver pork pies and fizzy lemonade to the village stores. Harassed parents arrive in four-wheel drive monsters to pick up their offspring from school. The elderly step from their more modest conveyances to collect their pensions and their potions. Everywhere, there is the ebb and flow of life generated by people's love affair with the internal combustion engine.

But today it is early spring and the clouds have obligingly rolled back to reveal a benevolent sun. I have turned off Bridge High Street and am walking down Brewery Lane past a row of 19th century artisans' cottages on the left towards a field where sheep stand hunched over their secret agendas. After a sign advising that the road ahead is flooded, I turn through a bizarrely twisted kissing gate into a grassy area much favoured by the dog-walkers of Bridge. That first spring arrival, the chiff-chaff is singing from the direction of Little Bridge Place but almost drowned out by the querulous cacophony of nesting rooks above. Ahead, the Nailbourne is divided and crossed by two footbridges of wooden planks.

The Nailbourne has a sinister reputation locally. For a start, it is not a river in the normal fashion but, fed by sly underground springs at its source near Etchinghill, it can become a turbulent torrent after heavy winter rains, invading its banks into unsuspecting fields and houses alongside. But today, there is no hint of menace about it, plying its course sedately amongst water-weed and exposing a ginger-coloured bed of gravel deposits. A pair of mallards take off in scurrying flight only to plop down in the water a few yards further on. Bridge Place is glimpsed now and again above a boundary wall estate agents would describe as mellow brick, but never seen in its entirety. This may be because, according to Pevsner, it isn't an entire building anyway, only a fragment of a much grander mid-17th century brick house.

One of the divided Nailbourne rivulets had, at the outset, vanished from sight through a low, arched hole in the Bridge Place perimeter wall leaving its companion to trail around outside. My path had run alongside but now the wall has turned a corner and, as if freed at last from its restraint, the two parts had been re-united in a tangle of undergrowth. I had been through one gate and now another looms up and I am in a narrow lane where, in an earlier era, a well-laden horse and cart may well have rumbled by. Before me lies the panoramic splendour of Bourne Park. It is spectacularly beautiful and profoundly peaceful.

I have now turned left along this lane and am poised on a hump-backed brick bridge patched and darned with silver-grey lichen. Below the bridge, the Nailbourne is at rest among pools and boulders. I am heading for Bourne Park Road and ahead, there is a jolly pair of red-faced Victorian cottages which have what we might, today, call an estate corporate identity. They sport green ornamental gabled porches and white diamond paned lattice windows.

I turn right along the road and take in the park's splendour. From a certain position, it is possible to have an uninterrupted view of the waterfall with its shimmering gauze curtain of light and water, a bridge alongside, appropriately grander than the one I crossed earlier, the house itself tucked away behind trees in the distance and the driveway, flanked each side by yards and yards of metal railing. A few steps further on and a stile on the right gives access to the Elham Valley Way running diagonally across the park, over grass cropped by hundreds of sheep with their lambs. From here, there is a closer view of the lake, its polished surface lit by shafts of sunlight between the skeletal limbs of dark trees. It is too large to discern its shape. It is not kidney shaped - that would be too vulgar. But it is a free shape of that order and, from any viewpoint around its edge, there are always new and unexpected twists and turns to conjure with. There are both coot and moorhen bobbing about near the central island whilst a gaggle of geese, too far away to accurately identify, honkingly announce their boisterous presence like bored teenagers looking for kicks. A swan, majestically aloof, swims by with measured strokes like a schooner in full sail. There is a sudden altercation and, as if to show the geese their place in the scheme of things, the swan rushes at them in a flurry of foam and wing feathers. No doubt, he has a mate sitting on eggs nearby.

I move on towards a stile set in a fence crossing the parkland. Bourne House has now emerged from behind its veil of trees. Its 18th century red brick face is impressively wide in relation to its height and divided into three bays, the central one looking almost crushed by the weight of its huge triangular pediment. The idea of welding grand house with pastoral landscape could so easily have backfired but it turned out to be profoundly inspired and so peculiarly English.

I am crossing a wooden footbridge over the Nailbourne and marvel how a small watercourse of uncertain temperament can manage to sustain such an impressive volume of water seen in the lake. There must be some cunning damming process somewhere regulating the lake's water level through the drier parts of the year but none is visible. A ewe marked '115' in red on its back stoops fatly to drink at the water's edge. Another ewe with four lambs in close attendance strolls by; a ewe with a black face and entirely black lamb regards me implacably. These sheep seem so civilised and so unlike their counterparts in wilder areas which, when disturbed, take off in a headlong bid for self-destruction. This is, no doubt, because they are used to the large numbers of people trekking across Bourne Park, like me, enjoying strolling south of Bridge. The shepherd's cottage lies to my far left at the corner of the park, a neat single storey affair with the Bourne Park uniform of green ornamental gables and white lattice windows. Bishopsbourne church tower rears up ahead to the right and, on my near left, Oswalds, made famous by its one-time resident, Joseph Conrad. My path is between the two. I climb the stile to the churchyard clumsily and a green woodpecker cackles derisively. I am entering Bishopsbourne by its back door.

St. Mary's, Bishopsbourne is almost consistently 13th and 14th century, although the tower is later and the windows veer between Decorated and Perpendicular style. There is also some Victorian work carried out by Matthew Bell, a name that crops up again and again in the life of Bishopsbourne. The walls are of knapped flint and in the shadow overlooking Oswalds, remind me of the dark hull of a vessel entering a tight little harbour. As in many other ancient graveyards, the gravestones seem to be conducting some crazily abandoned ballet as they stagger headlong from side to side. Among those especially etched by time and splashed with lichen is one, below which, lie the remains of Richard Pay who died in 1722. The stonework at the head is incised with two rather ghoulishly grinning skulls and I was intrigued by this. What a strange epitaph to a peaceful eternity. And why two skulls for a single person? It looked as though the adjoining grave might have been similar but the forces of time and lichen had done their worst. Before leaving the churchyard, I walked around the outside of the church. At the west end overlooking Bourne Park, there are a couple of bench seats and, as the ground there is some six feet higher, sheep fanciers can have really wonderful elevated views - a simple provision and truly inspired.

I come out of the churchyard through a lych-gate into a beautifully kept little green where there is a memorial to the fallen in World War I and, alongside Oswalds garden wall, an enormous horse-chestnut which, many years ago, rained conkers down upon my exposed back while attending to a puncture on the car. Two cream coloured cottages press against the church wall whilst ahead, some distance away, there are more cream cottages and, opposite, a delightful looking forge with lattice windows still doing a roaring trade. But I turn right up Station Hill. Up to now, the going has been over level ground but this is undeniably a hill. I go past some more of my friends, the sheep, hunched over their sheepish business in a field they share with a timber pavilion built in log cabin fashion. And then, on past ancient, high brick walls both sides, guarding the privacy of their owners with inscrutable faces like veiled Arabian women, behind which, no doubt, are beautiful gardens. There is a gap with open farmland on my right, opposite which stands an old school house with many gables to its roof shape, white lattice windows and a bell-tower under a miniature steeple. The bell is still visible in the tower but silent these days, its summons to announce morning assembly and going home time a lifetime past in the memories of the older villagers. It would be nice to think that, once in a while, the bell is rung to commemorate the patter of feet on dusty floor-boards and the clamour of young voices along ink-stained corridors. So often, buildings that cease to be used any more for their original function become ill-at-ease and sad-looking but the school house gazes out benignly from its hilly position, in its current role as private house. Both bell-tower and front door pediment bear Matthew Bell's initials and the date, 1861, set in stone tablets, which is a shade earlier than the cottages in Bourne Park bearing similar tablets. There was clearly quite a rash of building going on in Bishopsbourne just then and the station which lies

down its own private drive almost opposite the school-house belongs to this period too.

The contrast between school-house and station couldn't be more marked. The station is a strictly functional, no-nonsense structure, clad entirely in corrugated iron with vertical sash windows. It is what we would nowadays ceremoniously describe as "Vernacular Building" whereas the school-house might very well be termed "Beaux Art movement" architecture - we do love classifying things so much. So often domestic ironwork gets "improved" with brick and tile coverings but, in this case, the station happily remains today very much as it would have appeared to a traveller in those far-off days.

I move on to where the road crosses the line for a better view. I look over the top of the bridge as I must have done hundreds of times as a small boy elsewhere when, too small to see over, I remained suspended for minutes on end, elbows dug into the bridge parapet and feet scrabbling for toe-hold in the brickwork as a steam locomotive passed underneath.

Today, it is over fifty years since the last train threaded its way through Bishopsbourne's deep cutting but memories of steam hissing from a locomotive's boiler and smoke spiralling from its chimney still linger powerfully in the imagination. Wainwright's engines that worked the line so faithfully were to survive many years after rail nationalisation in 1948. It was a shame the Elham Valley line didn't quite last that long. If it had, then Doctor Beeching would have axed it later on anyway as the line was never profitable.

At the crest of the hill, the road abruptly twists to the right and narrows to little more than vehicle width. I turn to look back and see just the station roof above the cutting, partly masked by skeletal trees and with the church tower beaming in the background. I ought to be able to see the school-house belfry to complete the picture but an embroidery of tight trees enmeshed with ivy blocks my view. The road now takes a drunken lurch to the left and, at midpoint, spawns a track off right serving a distant farm comprising a cream-coloured Victorian house, grey agricultural buildings and an oast house in a deep red colour which enlivens the group no end. This is Lenhall Farm and, close by, the railway crawls into a tunnel, built at the insistence of Matthew Bell then living in Bourne House, to ensure that the house would be insulated from the noise and disturbance of the new railway.

There is a change now in the character of the landscape - it is more open and undulating. I can't put my finger on the sensation but it could be somewhere like Derbyshire. The road is really an upgraded cart-track thinly disguised with a macadam surface. A peep at the map shows that it is but a small route in a dense network of tiny lanes, tracks and footpaths encompassing the Downs, originally connecting outlying hamlets and farms with one another and with their nearest churches and villages. No wonder then that today's motorist, unfamiliar with the locality, finds progress along unexpected twists and turns a sobering experience. To make the roads more user-friendly perhaps, the authorities have recently installed name-boards. I am now alongside the Crows Camp Road board. Sure enough, Crows Camp itself is on my right nestling in a dip and, seemingly, under siege by enormous beech trees. Crows Camp has a military ring about it and the way the buildings snuggle down among the enclosing foliage reminds me of a barrack room of soldiers tucked up for the night. Four vast chimneys stand bolt upright from the roofs in a regimental fashion like sentries on duty.

From Crows Camp, the road begins to climb steadily again. I'm in a shallow valley and the ground rises each side until it is stopped by distant trees on the sky-line. I stare fascinated at the way one or two individual trees on the right-hand side gather strength and momentum to become full-blooded woodland; I take note of the birches' silvery stems, stark against the purplish-greys and olives of other deciduous trees and the almost black cloaks of conifers. Despite their many varieties, the trees stand in uniform line like seasoned formation dancers before advancing some distance to take up a new line, repeating the process again further on to another new line and finally ending up in line at the roadside. Five or six close-planted larches, looking rather special, are there to applaud this display.

On the other side of the road, the trees perform an equally wonderful display. It is plantation growth rather than woodland and from its sky-line position, a belt of conifers descends to the road in a single bound, the shape of the ground being defined in spectacular pale sweeping curves against the dark coniferous background. I continue on under an overhanging cornice of branches

too high for the hedge-cutting machine to reach and, at a fork in the road, carry straight on. Langham Park Farm lies ahead and the first building in view is a fine oast-house converted with great sensibility into living accommodation more than thirty years ago. It is not the usual pattern of oast-house found in the area as the rounded portion is stopped under a hipped roof rather than going on up with a circular roof and cowl. On the roadside face there are unloading doors on three floors, the top one protected from the elements by its own projecting hipped gable. It is all beautifully done in close-laid knapped flint which reminds me of some gorgeous well-filled black currant cake. There is, alongside, a farmhouse which replaced the original one, tragically burnt down some years ago. On the left-hand side, opposite, there is a real surprise. There are several caves hewn in a sheer white chalk face some 15 feet high like rents in a priceless ball gown. Elder roots fight for a foothold high up like writhing pale-coloured snakes. I look inside one of the caves and find that it has been laboriously hand-cut to form a circular space under a pointed dome. The caves must have served a purpose more important than the storage of farm implements to justify the labour and time involved but for what purpose and when was it done? Its current purpose seems to provide cheap over-night residence and I back out hurriedly. Two other buildings are of significance; a granary with thatched roof and black weather-boarding mounted on staddle-stones appears to be now disused as also a barn on the right, opposite. When the time came to renew barn thatch, a cheaper option was the use of corrugated iron which became available in the mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, many barns in the area were clad accordingly but this barn is roofed with timber shingles, the weight of which would be more comparable with thatch. This is a thoughtful alternative to the use of corrugated iron replacement roofing. It really is an impressive building - this barn - forlorn and neglected but still with great presence. The sheds tacked on to the south side have a quirky charm and I was won over by the big one with the curved roof, formerly used for cattle.

The road steepens slightly and, when a footpath materialises on the right across a field with a stile, I take it. This brings me past Reeds Farm, a rendered house with a rear catslide roof of about 1800, I would guess, and more immediately alongside, a brick building of later date with an upper floor in the roofspace. This has an industrial flavour with its big metal sash windows and I can remember it housing machinery, bearing this impression out. I have recently learned that the machinery installed was used for grinding animal feed, the upstairs being a granary. There is another stile to surmount and I take a right turn along a road, hedged both sides, the right hand one being of enormous conifer and hawthorn. This soon gives way to a newly planted copse of chiefly field maple, hawthorn and whitebeam. The land is relatively flat all round and I am, in fact, on one of the many peaks in this part of the North Downs but, to put things in perspective, some 50 metres below that at Farthing Common with its dramatic views towards Romney Marsh. Even so, I am high enough up to be able to see the cooling towers at far off Richborough looking like shapely, white, upturned beakers. Slow moving clouds process in a dignified fashion across the broad canopy of sky like stately aldermen at a civic function. It sounds as if the sky is full of skylarks weaving their intricate pattern of sound but common-sense tells me there can only be three at the very most. On the left, ahead, the derelict, capless shell of Reed's Mill stands forlorn but still defiant above its skirt of blackthorn and elder, its yawning windows like sightless eyes in its tarred brick face. The house adjoining is just a glimpse among the foliage like a face briefly seen between parted curtains. The end of Reed's Mill's working life came with dramatic suddenness around 1915, a fate common to many windmills when, during repair work to the fantail, a sudden gale-force wind lifted both sails and cap right off. Old pictures show a thatched cottage alongside which may have served as a bakery in the Victorian period. The mill had a working life of about 55 years, some 3 years less than that of Bishopsbourne station.

If Reed's Mill is included in the hamlet of Westwood, there are 7 residences here, two of which are farmhouses of historic interest, probably dating from the seventeenth century. A journey by car through Westwood is accomplished in the blinking of an eye and the driver would be too busy concentrating on the narrow blind bend ahead to be aware of the three cottages arranged in a neighbourly but vulnerable position around that bend comprising the heart of Westwood. Apart from some heavy breathing and shuffling coming from a cattle-shed alongside one of the cottages on my left, it is resoundingly quiet and peaceful. I pause at a single-storey cottage end-on to the

road to my right with a pretty garden at the front and a beaten earth back yard behind, where a horse lay on its back with its legs pummelling the air in an ecstatic frenzy. At the sight of my head over the fence, two goats, one brown, the other white, amble over with implacable expressions and a goose lets out a strident battery of sound. Finally, a guinea-fowl perched on a fence-post fancies a slice of the action and joins in the cacophony. What was, a minute ago, a haven of peace and quiet is now bedlam and, not surprisingly, the householder's head appears enquiringly around the corner of the cottage. Fortunately, he is a friend of mine and I say, "Terry, does your horse often perform antics on his back like that?" Terry replies, "All too frequently, but it's worse in the winter when the mud gets really sticky and sets like concrete on his back. He shares the stable with the two goats and the funny thing is that he will share the hay with the brown one but drives away the white one." Who would have thought there was a colour prejudice in the animal kingdom, I muse to myself. "Still, you can't beat having animals in the country. That's what the country's all about" he adds.

I say Amen to that and move on to where the road descends steeply in an enclosed passage formed by high hedging springing from a bank to my left, its branches extended to form a canopy above, and a belt of woodland on my right. The woodland floor is carpeted with wood anemones, stitchwort and lesser celandine while the road surface is stippled with shadow and bright sunlight. The quiet threshing noise of long-tailed tits has been keeping pace with me from the hedge as I stroll for some time now. Are they trying to tell me something, I wonder, or just being neighbourly? I haven't been able to see very much on my left and the bank is now above my head and so, when a gate appears, I have a view over pasture land to distant woods in the Bossingham direction. It's a delightful prospect. The woodland on my right is thinning out and, with the approach to Stone Cottages, I can see Lynsore Bottom and the grassy slopes on the other side of the valley through peepholes between trees. A little further on and there is the contrast of the flint rear face of Stone Cottages with the other buildings at Lynsore Bottom seen in miniature far away like children's cut-out toy houses pasted on to a classroom wall. I can see the picture only in fragments though because trees get in the way. At one position I can see a fragment of a black and white half-timbered cottage and a bit of oast-house cowl. A few steps on and something different - an impression of a cottage frowning under an eye-brow of thatch. Backwards and forwards in succession now and is that a black gable higher up and a suggestion of red brick far right? I'm taking all this trouble because I've decided to try to draw this scene and am trying to find the best spot to be.

Stone Cottages are a pair of flint cottages built into the slope like a man indulging his children at the seaside with sand up to his chest. Above the roof there is that intoxicating mix of sheep dotted on a distant hill and trees in sail on the horizon. I come to the bottom of the hill at a signpost pointing in four directions. I take the road signed "Bursted Manor 1: Bridge 4" which is a tight right hand turn taking me through Lynsore Bottom, a hamlet the size of Westwood with a similar number of residences. I pass by Stone Cottages on the right again but this time, conversely, they are as high as a monument mounted on a plinth. Around a curve and there are all those places seen in miniature fragments from higher ground, all fitting together like a completed jig-saw puzzle - the black and white half timbered cottage now seen with flint front and the oast too, in flint alongside, the thatched eyebrow over a weather-board face some little distance left and the red brick fragment right ahead, a double-fronted farmhouse 18th century in feeling. With their different styles and periods they all add up to a valuable study of traditional rural building. At that moment, I can't imagine a lovelier spot as I stroll on, facing a valley enclosing the road back to Bridge. There is that winning formula again - the grassy slopes dotted with white pin-pricks of sheep and the trees stacked upon each other like chairs in a village-hall after a W.I. function. I look back at Lynsore Bottom, now a huddle behind me and all the paraphernalia that goes with sheep, the fence-posts leaning drunkenly with their square mesh panels, the hurdles, the troughs on wheels and gates secured with bailer-twine in the foreground. It's the tatty side of the country scene but I don't think I would want it smartened up.

So little would have changed in this valley during the last hundred years that it comes as a mild shock to see pylons supporting main cable supply striding relentlessly through such an attractive setting. A glance at the map is revealing. For much of the distance, there are actually two runs side by side, diverging in different directions near Wheelbarrow Town and individually located over

some of the choicest areas of the North Downs between Brabourne and Stowting on the one hand and the Elham Valley Way between Lyminge and Elham on the other. Both runs are visible at Lynsore Bottom at the top of the slopes each side before closing in together at Pett Bottom and running thus east of Canterbury. That they have been here long enough for people to get used to them does not alter the fact they do nothing to enhance the landscape. Moreover, if by some means or other, alternative methods of routing were devised, it can only be a visual improvement. For the time being then, I try to love pylons and make a mental note to draw one as a dramatic feature in any future drawing in this area.

Little Bursted Farm is visible from Lynsore Bottom and appears as a series of asbestos sheds but in the way they hug the sloping ground, not without a certain charm. But one doesn't remember Little Bursted Farm for its sheds - it's the lovely half-timbered farmhouse in widely spaced pale oak framing with white panels and ancient windows seen against the almost black coniferous background of Bursted Wood. There are other enjoyable things, the first barn encountered being one, with its quirky fenestration and black corrugated iron roof, separated from the road by a grassy pavement. And then there are the marvellous trees in the front garden which grapple with thick entwining ivy branches for supremacy. Finally, there is a second barn, uncompromisingly all black.

Opposite Little Bursted Farm, a muddy track tentatively climbs up to two houses nestling among trees following which, there is a large area given over to horse pursuits. The woodland sweeps back from the road after Little Bursted to display grassy slopes with wild roses and hawthorn in spasmodic clumps hugging the roadside. A white house colonised by Virginia Creeper appears unnoticed, so closely is it enveloped by woodland which has briefly returned to the roadside before stepping back again in a swirl of graceful curves.

The road is a little wider and more purposeful as it sweeps past Bursted Manor, a Victorian style tile-hung house with a prominent central gable, serving as a riding establishment and with the stables behind. There is a road crossing here; the road right climbing tenaciously at about 1 in 4 at its peak to join the one near Langham Park Farm, the left one less steep, bound for Upper Hardres. The road sign at the junction says Bridge 3: Lynsore Bottom 1. There is a little slated building fronting the road with a cheerful, red post-box set in its flint wall face inscribed "VR" and with a last collection time (the only collection?) at 4.30 p.m. Handy for the odd sheep-farmer, one supposes - better for horse people though - there are more of those here. A self-employed businessman would find 4.30 too early for his purposes. But on consideration doesn't the average country person fax everything these days, or use Internet? So who would use it, I wonder? I tell myself there are probably several pensioners glad to use it and holiday-makers sending cards saying "Wish you were here!"

Looking across the valley from Bursted Manor, I can see Gorsley Wood, the other side of which I had earlier strolled past along Crows Camp Road. This woodland is established from now on, ending opposite Little Eaton Farm. To my left hand side, Bursted Wood now finishes and crops and grazing land dotted with trees takes over. There is some pleasant grazing land strewn with cattle at the foot of Gorsley Wood, alongside which, a discreetly sited large house, much gabled with half-timbering, sits barely glimpsed through voluminous trees. A modern bungalow appears on the right, then a patch of mown grass harbouring an aged tractor and a pair of houses set back behind flower-laden gardens. Hospitality lies ahead in the form of "The Duck", Pett Bottom appearing broadside on, set as it is on a sharp bend in the road. Rather perversely though, I am taking a little road to my left, narrower than anything trod so far which curves up hill alongside a meadow to Broxhall Farm. I have no other reason for this apart from the fact that I rather like this farm because it appears today much as it would have looked fifty years ago. I don't know of any other farm where the road seems to get lost in the farmyard among agricultural buildings and machinery before emerging in an unexpected position the other side. Mud can be a problem in winter but today it is dry underfoot as I make my way past open barns, a weatherboarded granary under a tiled roof and other assorted buildings of flint and brick. The farmhouse itself appears to be 18th Century, in brick with patches of flint and with a complex roof of both tile and slate. The farmhouse door is wide open as if guests are expected but no guests seem to be around at this time. There is not a sound anywhere. I make my way to the gate giving access to the public footpath and cross over stiles alongside crops. As I draw nearer to Pett Bottom Road once more, much of what

little there is of Pett Bottom is revealed on my left where just the top halves of a few buildings have appeared above the farmland's curving contours. There is the gable of a little corrugated iron structure which I have always assumed must have originally been a chapel as it reminds me so much of the Bridge Methodist one. I can also see the top windows of the Tapley Farm buildings before it's all obscured by a high hedge. This also blocks my view of the Duck right up till the last few yards when, having crossed a roadside stile, the Duck's serene frontage is right ahead with its benches and tables set outside, among the trees and sunshine.

After a reviving respite in the convivial atmosphere of the Duck, I am ready to step out on the final stage of my stroll and at the fork in the road outside the inn, take the right hand option for Bridge. There is no doubt that the Duck provides a focus for this tiny handful of buildings and I pass by the remaining residences within its orbit, two bungalows on the right and the black tarred end of a cottage high up on the bank left. A footpath that has, for sometime, run roughly parallel with the road high up alongside Gorsley Wood leaves its woodland setting and crosses ploughed fields to join the road where a hedgerow of wild rose and blackberry makes room for a stile.

Most of the farms I've encountered have centuries old origins and most still have an ancient heart. Little Eaton Farm wears its heart on its sleeve and as I approach it from the rear, the various buildings are seen above a low hedge for all to see - a charming brick farmhouse under tiled roof with a similar building alongside and, to the right hugging the road, a wonderfully photogenic thatched barn. From the roadside, the barn takes pride of place, its wall in tarred weatherboarding above a brick plinth and the thatch reflecting the internal function of the barn by dropping down to a lower eaves level nearest to the farm entrance. There is another small tarred building carrying the eye round the corner to the entrance. I look back at the front of the house as I pass and conclude that it might be 18th century but the barn is probably earlier. Ahead of me now, I can see all the undulations of the land, at times the palest of buffs where young seed is beginning to colour the earth's surface merging into the various greens of grassy slopes. I pass by Little Pett Farm, sitting contentedly in its fields of sunshine before coming to a poplar hedge which reaches for the sky with eager fingers. A pair of cottages looms up on my left, at which point, the motion of the poplars cease, giving way to an expanse of building, spread out among grass, trees and sheep. I have come to Middle Pett Farm and an impressive scene it conveys. Superficially, the buildings are not dissimilar to those at Little Eaton but the way they are laid out and the landscaping around them gives the farm an entirely different character.

If I go straight on, I will pass below a bridge on the Elham Valley line, still intact after all these years unlike its companion formerly over Bridge Road nearby, no longer there. I will also come to Great Pett Oast which is yet another impressive building. I have decided, perhaps again perversely, on a shorter route away from the road, across footpaths back to Bridge. The first thing I have to accomplish is to find the point at which I leave the road and this is not so difficult as I imagined. Although partly concealed by an overgrown hawthorn hedge, there is a footpath sign alongside a gap in the hedge with a stile just past the entrance to Middle Pett Farm. There is a similar gap with stile in the hedge at 90° to the road. It needs care in finding this opening. I cross over a field going slightly uphill. The land is very open here and the embankment to the old railway line on my left lessens the higher I go until a patch of brick ahead manifests itself as a railway bridge crossing the line. I should know better by now but I pause here imagining the bark of steam engines that passed below, in days gone by. I am amazed to see the spire of Bridge Church from the bridge as if it was planned that way and, turning right along the footpath, there is Bridge Place seen through trees and finally, the pair of jolly, red-faced cottages in Bourne Park Road seen near the outset of my stroll. But I don't go that far. I turn left over the same path that I came along, past Bridge Place to where I had started.

I have just crossed the two wooden plank bridges over the twin rivulets of the divided Nailbourne. I stop to inspect the tree close by. The tree had not only been bound and gagged by ivy; it was in a straitjacket of the stuff. I was reminded of the many unknown political prisoners of our day similarly trussed up with their arms beating the air in impotent resistance.

I had seen so much while strolling south of Bridge. It had been a worthwhile time.

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