



Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize 2021 Written entries 2021

THE TRAVELLER

Winter.

I could see my breath as I exhaled hard at the effort in climbing the hill to the uppermost ridge. The Great Chalk Way.

I had woken with the cock-crow as the cold dawn sparkled with crystals of rimy frost edging the leaves of ivy growing around the house. It made me shiver just to see it. But a clear, bright beginning with a rose-coloured sky . The maid in my lodgings cooked me a filling breakfast of eggs and bread to see me on my way. I think she had a soft spot for me as she had given me an extra egg . But my mind was on other things and I had forgotten to give her my usual squeeze as a thank you.

I had dressed warmly to ward off the penetrating cold wind but had to remove my cloak on the climb as I began to sweat. My pack, slung round my shoulders, was heavy and unwieldy. The path to the top was barely visible through the trees and undergrowth but on reaching the trackway it opened out into a well-worn roadway with travellers walking in both directions even at that time of day. All ages, some like me on foot and others on donkeys or mules . The occasional cart stuck fast in the pot-holes, a wheel broken and much cursing coming from its owner. At the side of the track ice still held in puddles but mostly it had been smashed by hobnailed boots.

From the summit I could see for miles. I looked back towards Avebury and could see the great stones of the Circle. Pagan stones we believed, bringers of bad luck. For many years the villagers had tried to bury them but one of the stones had slipped and buried a man, a barber-surgeon. Tales in the village told of his screams as he realised the stone was falling but his efforts to escape were fruitless and the screams were replaced by a deafening silence as the monstrous weight entombed him forever. After that the villagers had no heart to continue burying the pagan monsters , the village was truly cursed. In the distance I could see the ditches on the top of Windmill Hill and the strange white cap of chalk on Silbury Hill. An odd feature its origin unknown to us. In summer the cattle would graze on its lower slopes whilst sheep followed winding paths to the summit.

I joined a small party of men all around my own age. It was better to travel in company as there are thieves and ragged vagabonds who would likely slit your throat, take your valuables and any money you are carrying and throw you into the bushes at the side of the track. These lowlife ambush lone travellers, appearing suddenly out of the scrub. I didn't have any valuables and I had carefully sewn my money into the hem of my shirt and only carried a few groats in a small leather pouch around my neck hidden by my leather jerkin. I had walked this highway before and knew of its perils. I carried a small dagger in a leather sheath inside my jerkin which I could reach easily if needed.

To my right there was an area which had been cleared of trees. I could see into the valley and across an area of lowland. Buzzards soared high on the rising thermals, mewing their distinctive call to each other. Small hamlets were dotted in the landscape, a few brown fields close to dwellings waiting, as was I, for the warmth of Spring to swell the sown grain and ripen it in the heat of Summer. Thin streaks of smoke rose over the hamlets and I could imagine the work taking place in the houses and yards. The husband seeing to his animals, the wife churning butter or making a rough bread, the children collecting eggs and firewood. All the jobs essential in maintaining a healthy, if short life.

The banter amongst my companions increased and some groups had spontaneously burst into song. I joined in making me forget the small leak in my right boot, the pain from my chilblains and the itch between my toes. The miles started to quickly slip by. The sky had changed from its rosy hue and was now a clear blue, reflecting in the puddles where the ice had melted. Cloudless, with the slightest warmth on my face from the distant sun.

Hunger pains nagged in my stomach. We had climbed up to the old Barbury camp and walked through the ditches into an open area. The old folk talked of a battle here between our people and the invading Saxons. The Saxons won.

Our small group came to a stop and we found rocks by the side of the track where we could perch and tuck into our victuals. I had paid my landlord for a very large hunk of bread, cheese and ale which I carried in my leather bottle. A pair of kestrels hovered above us looking for their lunch.

I exchanged news with my new-found friends. Others travelling in the opposite direction stopped by us to eat and we gained information they had gathered en route. The best places to stay the night and the outrageous prices landlords charged for a straw mattress in a room occupied by a dozen other men. What the food was like- stale or riddled with weevil, did it give you a pain in your gut or worse still a trip to the outside midden in the middle of the night, kicking at the rats as they scampered past your legs annoyed at being disturbed. I had flinched at the thought.

News filtered through that our Gracious King Edward III was in mourning as his favourite daughter Joan had died in Bordeaux during the summer of 1348 on her way to marry Prince Pedro of Castille. Two of the King's infant sons had also died, such tragedy. His Queen, Phillipa of Hainault was in charge of the country during his absence, the Warrior King still warring.

I thought of my parents and my small nieces who had been taken by the Great Pestilence. The summer had been a terrible time for our village as the Pestilence made its way north from Melcombe near Weymouth. Many of the old folk and very young infants had been taken, enduring a painful but thankfully short time of suffering. My two brothers and I were spared. We were young and fit and fought the disease, but my parents and our priest, who nursed them, succumbed. I had not seen them for some time and as we were all sick at the same time I was unable to say goodbye to them. A great regret on my part. Many villages were completely wiped out during this plague and remained abandoned in fear of the disease lurking in the fabric of the homes.

Now, wintertime, it seemed to be abating and its spread had declined. Travellers from the North told us which places to avoid where the Pestilence had been at its worst. Luckily where I was heading, about thirty miles from my lodgings in Avebury, life had begun to return to a semblance of normality. But now there was a great shortage of labour as so many had died. Many fields remained unploughed and some animals had become wild with no-one to care for them. But with God's Grace our good life would return.

We picked up our pace. I wanted to cover about twelve miles on my first day and to find lodgings away from the path before darkness descended. I was expecting a three day walk to my destination but with dry weather and good drainage from the chalk track I should achieve that easily. We stood aside as a drover and his son, together with two dogs, tried to keep their twenty-strong gaggle of geese disappearing off the track into the undergrowth on either side of the path. They pecked at late berries on withering plants and pulled at the long trailing leaves of grass which still held some goodness. The drovers were heading to market and hoped the geese would not lose too much weight on the walk. They were looking for top price for their flock. On their backs they carried withy hurdles to pen the gaggle at night. They would make camp overnight on the Way, lighting a small fire for warmth and to cook a meagre meal. It might be several days before they reached the market town of Wantage, at goose pace, to sell their Christmas fowl, live and very fresh.

I had recently completed my seven years apprenticeship indentured to Master Wright. He was a fair and knowledgeable Master and I felt confident in my skills. It hadn't been easy. Long hours, sore fingers, not much food for a lad that grew too fast and only a few days at Christmastide to see my sweetheart. She would be waiting for me at the end of my trek. We are to be married on Christmas Day and we will return to my home village of Ledcombe Regis where we will live in my parents' cottage and pay our rent each quarter to our new Lord of the Manor, Nicholas de Oterbourne. A brook runs through the village where we can grow watercress and I will work for a new Master carpenter in Wantage only a mile away.

It was mid-afternoon and would soon be dark. I could see the village of Chiseldon down in the stony valley where I had lodged overnight before. I bade farewell to my band of companions and turned down the slope towards the old Icknield Way and headed for the small hostelry where I knew I would get a warm welcome, hot food and an itchy mattress. I would sleep like the dead unaware of what was feeding on me in the night or what scampered across my body in the small hours. As I looked back to the Ridgeway I could see thin plumes of smoke rising above the woodland as other travellers made small fires and prepared to settle in for a cold, bleak night, full of strange noises and rustlings. I was pleased I could afford to stay in modest comfort. As I approached my nights' rest a white shadow quartered across rough ground. Silent, hungry. It hovered and dove to ground and slowly rose, a small body writhing in its talons. I had seen many barn owls where I live, some nesting in the barns I had helped to make while indentured as a young carpenter.

Next morning there was a slight smattering of snow dusting the tops of the trees which deepened as I climbed back up to the Ridgeway. I disturbed a hare which shot out of the undergrowth and sped across an unploughed field. I watched as it hunkered down behind a mound of snow-covered grass, the black tips of its long ears just visible, contrasting against the white background. It was freezing and I pulled my cloak closely about me, covering my nose. If I walked fast I would keep warm until the sun appeared and the temperature increased. The wind was light and we were sheltered by bands of trees. The dawn chorus had

finished but I recognised the calls of some birds. Robins and blackbirds searching for berries on holly and hawthorn or turning over dead leaves in the hope of a juicy slug or hidden earthworm. A songthrush hidden in a tall bush sang loud and sweetly whilst a family of goldfinches flew in a tight knot before landing on the tall stems of last summer's teasels.

The track was busy , everyone going about their own business. I passed a cart being pulled by a bag of bones. An ancient mule, emaciated , its head down and its eyes sad and pained. The owner prodded it with a stick and a well-aimed kick. As I looked back the animal fell on its side, pulling the cart and its contents over with it. Dead as a doornail. The cruel owner ranted and cursed , repeatedly kicking the accursed animal. The mule was past caring and out of pain. "What a life" I thought to myself and picked up my pace to get away from the two wretches.

I slowed down for a while and engaged in conversation with two young couples . The womens' skirts were wet and muddied making them heavy as they walked. We exchanged talk of the Pestilence and their experience of the disease, the effect on their village and their families, what's left of them. We compared treatments we had had-the bloodletting which left us weak and the use of a pigeon's tail feather to lance our buboes. The endless sweating and vomiting. None of us knew how we survived. Since she had recovered one woman had given birth and she carried the scrawny child in a sling on her back . We all gave thanks for God's mercy. As the track went downhill towards some crossing paths they bade me safe journey and turned off for their homesteads.

There were beggars too on the trackway, congregations of them where paths led up from the small villages and hamlets. Some were old soldiers returned from wars fought long ago. Ragged and bony, peg-legged or missing an arm or an eye. Many wishing they had died on the battlefield instead of dragging out this painful, accursed existence. My heart went out to them but my few groats were accounted for and I walked quickly past them looking straight ahead. Guilt on my conscience.

The Way took me across another ancient camp at a high point with lovely views. It seemed to me these ancient camps are connected by this track which I was told leads all the way to a distant place called Norwich. But I needed to reach Kingston del Isle before dark and the days were short at this time of year so I increased my pace passing many slower travellers.

The route passed a collection of huge stones laid out in a long rectangle. Some of the stones had tumbled and there was a small access into the chamber which appeared to be two stories high. Set back into the recesses there were still some human long bones and skulls. It was a strange place in the middle of nowhere, set along this ancient roadway. It's somewhere I did not want to linger and I pressed on a short way to the Chalk Horse.

I sat on the Horse's eye for a while to rest and eat my victuals. A fat friar on a small pony stopped to join me. I wondered why all friars seemed to be fat and always rode an animal far too small to carry their magnificent weight. Luckily he had his own fine lunch and I noticed he had no intention of sharing his good fortune with the likes of me. As I got up to move on he blessed me whilst chewing an enormous mouthful. The words were garbled but no doubt well intentioned.

The walking was good here and I was intrigued by the views of the undulating folds in the landscape. I turned off at Blowingstone Hill and made my way down into Kingston. As I passed the Blowingstone itself I looked around. No-one was in sight so I blew through the holes as King Alfred was said to have done to summons his troops to the Battle of Ashdown. Unfortunately for me my blow was more of a squeak than a trumpet.

I could hear owls beginning to call to each other and as I approached the lodgings in Kingston del Isle streams of bats poured from an old barn. Instinctively I ducked my head in case they bumped into me as they swirled and screamed past me. Such strange creatures of the night. A hot meal and a place to rest was all I wanted.

My third day on the road and I was nearing the end of my journey. I traced my steps back up Blowingstone Hill and rubbed the Blowingstone for luck as I passed it. The weather was glorious and if I made good progress I might reach my sweetheart's home in the afternoon. There were fewer travellers today to hamper my progress but I walked with three like-minded fellows who wanted to press on as fast as possible. My chilblains were causing me much pain and one of my new friends had tripped in a pothole and had bloodied his knee and nose when he hit the ground. We stumbled on together.

A band of about twenty soldiers, ragged peasants more likely, marched wearily past us. They carried their weapons of war ; pike staves and pitch forks. Perhaps they were heading for Weymouth and a free trip to France to join the King in his latest fight. Rather them than me. Through the clearings alongside the track I could see farmsteads and homesteads in the distance that I recognised and a collection of houses clustered around a small church. Only a few miles until my journey's end and a new beginning with a wife by my side. Again I quickened my pace and in another hour I could see my uncle's farmstead close by the market place. I would rest here for a day before I was married. My sweetheart Blanche was my aunt's niece and although we had been intended for many years this was very much a love match. Walking down from the Ridgeway into the small town of Wantage I could hear the lowing of the cattle in the byres and the bleating of sheep which had been brought off the hillsides for the winter and Spring lambing. Such comforting sounds.

As I entered my uncle's house I could feel the warmth emanating from the hearth. The family were going about their work preparing their meal but rushed to greet me and pulled me to the fire where a cooking pot hung above the logs . A delicious smell tickled my tastebuds. At last a hot meal, a jug of ale and a chance to wash my mud-caked hose. My intended wife, dabs of flour on her nose and forehead, came running excitedly towards me and kissed my cheeks. We had not seen each other for a year.

On Christmas Day my intended and I, warmly dressed , were in the Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul exchanging our vows . We gave thanks for being spared from the Pestilence and prayed for our departed loved ones. Later at uncle's house there was much merriment and the ale flowed very freely. The next day my new, pretty wife and I walked the mile from her home to our home in Ledecombe Regis where ,in time, new generations would occupy the house where my family had already lived for three generations.