



Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize 2022 Written entries

Losing time: a muddle of walks on the South Dorset Ridgeway

In *The History Boys*, Hector, perplexed about the singularity of Remembrance Day celebrations, asks, ‘what do we do the rest of the time about those who have left?’ Last Remembrance Sunday, walking up and onto the South Dorset Ridgeway, I look back on St Martin’s Church nestled in the eponymous village of Winterborne St Martin. Had it been another season, the church may have been difficult to see amongst so many leafy trees, but even from these foothills, I can make out the vicar welcoming her diminished flock through today’s threadbare branches.

And had it been another year, we might be remembering those that died for our country in war. This year, we also salute those that died in battle against a viral monster that came unexpectedly charging over the neolithic hills of our county from distant climes. Suspicious of the future after so much stopping and starting, I move forward falteringly, ever accompanied by my own bereavements. It’s been neither a good time to die or seemingly to be alive. In looking for spiritual respite, I’m better stepping much further back on a more reliable path.

The first time I passed this way was the beginning of yet a different year, one in which to rejoice in a new walk through the oldest of times. So often I’ve driven between Dorchester and Bridport with my eyes anywhere except on the road. Here are huge skies in which large birds soar, glide and hover over a sacred topography, harmoniously mapped by nature and the ancients who lived within. To my left, the countryside is especially alluring with an abundance of prehistoric barrows, both long and round, and rings aplenty. Maiden Castle, the largest hillfort in Europe, looms; seemingly aligned with other haunting sites both near and far in this primordial landscape. The Nine Stones, lay discarded alongside the road at a point so dangerous as to thwart the most intrepid travellers from discovering prehistory. Once, because it seemed the right thing to do, I held hands with strangers and danced there.

I’d never previously traversed the South Dorset Ridgeway on foot: it’s an awfully long way up there and I tend to avoid inclines if possible. On that first sortie, the churchyard, green from winter rains, was clothed in the delicacy of early snowdrops that emerged in unseasonal mildness; although in these globally warmed days it’s difficult to remember what the seasons should look like. Best to just enjoy unexpected blooms. Then, the clock-face on the tower reported 10.35 so I should have easily been back in time for lunch. Interestingly, on the subsequent outing, the clock face had moved only ten minutes forward as if to say that our temporal existence will soon become meaningless once on the path to an other-worldly plane. Climbing onto the Ridgeway ensures the irrelevance of timepieces. Like pushing through wardrobes on the way to Narnia, the lives we think we live are of little consequence, even if the chords of hymns ancient, but seldom modern, attempt to claim something more tangible.

In proper spring, which is to say, in the older days, the cottages that guard this steep path are quintessentially overwhelmed with blossom. Today, the gardens sit quietly mulling the

indiscriminate weather, wondering whether tomorrow might be an apt time to flower in the face of potential late frost.

Forging a way up the initially tarmacked slope, I discover that my freshly printed sheets of directions have somehow meshed with my water bottle and like the future, the words are blurred. By the time I reach instruction number two I am already lost, and the only way forward involves cows. I feel a little despondent: I haven't yet reached prehistory, the meadows are muddy from modern-day rain, and I don't much care for such big beasts. Fortuitously, Steven and Linda have arrived in the same field at the same time on their way from Maiden Castle to who-knows-where. I look at their map and they look at my water-logged instructions. Linda and I discuss possibilities, Steven yawns, and, unaware of what's coming, we all wish each other a better year than the last. Whilst the cows have their backs turned, I scamper across the stodgy field, through a handy gate and into the woods. There's a rumpus in the trees to my left: I hope it will be a very big bird. In these wild environs, buzzards lounge around nonchalantly, although, sadly, the red kites that haunt the Ridgeway further up country have yet to fly this far south.

Two pigeons scatter away. Pigeons are too loud with their ghostly cooing and interminable crashing about the place. Today's pair, for example, make so much noise in their departure you'd think a bigger specimen was at hand. And feeling no need to reach for the camera, I miss a huge brown bird of prey that emerges and flies all the way down the path in front of me before disappearing into the ages. I suspect it might have been waiting patiently for hundreds of years to find someone to tease.

My irritatingly damp directives remind me of Marty McFly's photographs in *Back to the Future*: every time I look at them, a bit more has faded away. Soon, nothing tangible from the ever-fading present, the here-and-now, will exist. The wet words, prompts in a surreal pantomime, tempt me to look back if I want to see Clandon Bowl Barrow: altogether now - 'it's behind you'; because, here, everything is behind you and, on the Ridgeway, there's nothing in the future except the past. And there it is, the enormous barrow resting like a huge breast on the verdant skyline. Too late, Marty, the present has gone. And so has the past in one sense for what remains of Clandon is merely a stunning but empty shell of its former self. In a time when antiquarians roamed the land, 1882 in this instance, Clandon Barrow was excavated by Edward Cunnington who discovered a gold studded mace, a bronze dagger, a golden lozenge decorated with geometric patterns and some pieces of an amber cup within. Not a bad day's work and fortunately for us, he didn't take the goods and run like many barrow robbers, for they are now held within the Dorset County Museum.

On leaving the woods, the track through the valley is a pleasant precursor to the higher climb ahead. To the left is a brown field, ploughed and waiting for what lies beneath to surface in warmer weather. Possibly winter barley, but as yet there are no green shoots. On the far side, in another coppice, climbs a different slope and from within its hidden depths I hear the occasional alarming screech of a lonely, company-seeking pheasant. I'm not yet at the summit of the Ridgeway but, on these lower stretches, sheltered from whatever the temperamental sea chooses to send inland, birds feel safe in emitting their forlorn calls to would-be partners. The pheasant's plea is almost raw, whilst the buzzard, soaring above sparse treetops, screeches painfully.

Now, to my right, there is evidence of recent upward cultivation; not quite the strip lynchets that prevail in neolithic landscapes of the south, but not bad in terms of agrarian adaptation: a

small, yet neatly maintained vineyard is guarded by a large, dilapidated metal owl perched high in a nearby tree. Perhaps it was originally placed there to ward off grape-seeking intruders, although today, like a bottle of cheap wine, it's well past its sell-by date. And further on I see what, on first appearance, looks like an alien, or one of those people brought into places of danger to remove toxic substances. Clothed from head to foot in white, and sporting protective head and face gear, the being remains gender neutral and without a defined purpose. Like a phantom of the Ridgeway, the ghost-like enigma epitomises mystery until I spot the beehives. Having bypassed the ages, someone is still making traditional use of the foothills.

On my previous journey, I emerged from the trees whence all wildlife had disappeared. It was disappointing and initially inexplicable. Changing environs on the Ridgeway create an ephemeral and unsteady state of mind; in particular, leaving a wood behind, having become used to the relative darkness, can be strangely disturbing. I recall walking out of the last of the trees on the Ridgeway south of Marlborough. I'd been uneasy in the quietness, then confounded by the open landscape until I was comforted in finding the almost pristine feather of a hidden hawk. Evidence of life.

On this day, I'm baffled by the unexpected numbers of people dotted around. As I climb higher these apparitions multiply until it seems the whole landscape is populated by sometimes single folk, and often pairs. From a distant field, I can hear the shouts of men and women alerting others to some new find. It's as though I've walked into an ancient shooting party or a massive game of hide and seek. I've unwittingly chosen the one day in the year when metal detectorists have permission to roam the land. Sorry folks, Cunnington has long since been and gone.

The path now begins an exceptionally steep ascent. The twists and turns already undertaken were little more than tricks and teases played on those facing a final demanding battle with the terrain. Ahead is a particularly precipitous hill but I've found my stride at last and am now in tune with the senses of the Ridgeway. In any case, what's facing me is made more attractive than it might otherwise have been by the presence of two round tumuli atop. Increasing numbers of these barrows are now becoming visible in the wider landscape adding other dimensions to my atmospheric travels. There are 118 recorded barrows in this parish and what was once a ramble in the countryside is fast becoming a walk into a long-ago culture.

Meanwhile, what's left of my paperwork comprises unhelpful directions such as 'ignore this track, 'look for this gate, 'turn right at this barrow. In my world there are only tracks, gates, and barrows... and sheep. One is evocatively surrounded by the spiritual and on this most glorious of sun-soaked mornings, what a fabulous existence it remains, even if it's something of a struggle to locate the right track, gate, and barrow. Suddenly, as promised, I'm alone on the Ridgeway overlooking the vast ocean, the lagoon, Chesil Beach, Weymouth, or Budmouth as Hardy would have it. I am Eustacia Vye. I am Tess. I am Bathsheba. Amongst all the Wessex women, I'm the unknown heroine of a modern, yet timeless literary world. Hardy owned this Dorset landscape, whilst simultaneously recognising his secular place within it. His greatest skill was to draw the topography and the history of place in words, far more authentically than any visual artist, for those who never came to the county. Hardy's women stride defiantly through the equivalent of an aerial photograph: over hillfort, around tumuli and long barrows, and along ancient paths constructed on Celtic ways built, in turn, on animal tracks.

‘Excuse me, says the man who dares to break my reverie. ‘Are you an archaeologist?’ I’m holding the gate open for this unexpected and unwanted intruder. That’s all. Why does he ascribe this profession to me? Could it be my lime green knitted hat? I’ve observed that archaeologists on television sometimes wear bold clothing. ‘No,’ I confess. ‘Have you discovered something?’ He mutters incomprehensibly. I discern the word ‘tumuli’ but little else. As I’m about to ascend Bronkham Hill, I graciously share my limited knowledge of this well-known Bronze Age cemetery. I tell him it’s the most famous of its type in the world. As far as I know, this is close to a lie, but it does the trick and he’s off.

I don’t tell him Bronkham Hill is a timeless dream.

Bronkham Hill is a mile long, linear cemetery housing thirty barrows, including those of the ball and bowl varieties. Dating its construction has proven impossible: geologists and archaeologists conclude it to have been built around 1700Bc -10000BC. In the beginning It was the focal point of movement from this world to the next and sited such that nearby inhabitants would be assured of subsequently safe journeys. It’s worth reflecting that all our cemeteries are thus placed within sight of life’s habitude and that up until the latter part of the last century folk could be reassured of the next transition. Even though people moved from their homelands in the industrial revolution, they continued to identify new sanctuaries. It was only when we began travelling indiscriminately and frequently that our final resting place became detached from our previous history and necessitated far-flung pilgrimages. My father wasn’t a believer in either burials or scatterings so I can only visit my mother in my mind. Only when you have nowhere to go does the significance of what is left of others become absolute.

And speaking of what’s left, my instruction sheet suggests I explore the cemetery but beware of the shake holes. I don’t know what a shake hole is, so I ask a passer-by. This part of the Ridgeway has suddenly become rather busy this fine day, particularly with men in Lycra pushing bicycles. Here’s one now: ‘excuse-me my good fellow, do you know what a shake hole is?’ His face is expressionless. I imagine he’s probably up here, far from the madding crowd, with the specific intention of avoiding old women in lime green knitted hats. Helpfully, I read him my instructions and reiterate my anxieties regarding the ground suddenly opening up. Sergeant Troy tells me to wave if I fall down a hole and I will then be assured of rescue. I ask him if he’s ever heard of Stevie Smith.

Next, I see a middle-aged couple on their way down Bronkham Hill. I don’t really know what middle age looks like anymore although I’ve more than a fleeting suspicion that I no longer qualify. These two look older than me but not yet in elderly territory. She is striding ahead purposefully with a couple of those tall sticks that are apparently all the rage in Norway. He, meanwhile, is some way behind with a mobile phone clamped to his ear. Why would you bother to climb to the top of the world (where there’s unlikely to be any sort of signal) to have a chat on a phone? ‘Hope he’s not ringing for a pizza’, I remark on passing stick woman, who ignores me. As he approaches, I can hear the conversation he’s having: ‘the lord be with you and with thy spirit. Amen, amen.’ What’s going on? Has he forgotten he’s supposed to be elsewhere and is now conducting a service by phone? Has he come up here to be nearer to his god with whom he’s currently communing? It’s a surreal experience which I fail to rationalise. Perhaps stick woman was never with him in the first place, having simply overtaken him on a solitary walk.

I'm perilously near the onset of shake hole country and still no wiser. A final couple of healthy-looking types are close to hand. I accost them politely but without context: 'Any idea what a shake hole looks like?' She immediately, and likewise feeling no need for any kind of framework, launches into total recall of a holiday once spent in North Yorkshire. Just as I'm wondering whether she's about to show me some snaps of this pleasant interlude, they both commence a discourse on the many and varied differences between the swallow holes and sink holes that proliferate in those distant climes. After this, I'm educated on the effects of acidic rainfall on calciferous limestone in the Jurassic. They are clearly in possession of a lifetime subscription to *National Geographic*. 'Don't worry', she titters, 'I'm sure your family will miss you and come looking if you disappear'. My family are dispersed and eclectic; they don't even know where I am. I suspect it would take them some time to notice I'm missing in action.

Shake holes come in all sizes and it might be wise to simply avoid the larger ones. On the other hand, one of the smaller varieties could just as easily cause havoc to a person not looking where they're going by tripping them up and breaking an ankle or two: walking across Bronkham Hill, ignoring the spectacular views and prehistoric tumuli, whilst maintaining an earth-bound gaze might seem the prudent option. However, even this is fraught with danger as shake holes have a propensity to open up new fissures in the ground without warning. For example, in May 2019, reports of a new one hundred feet wide hole hereabouts made the national news thereby illustrating how landscapes designated as prehistoric can still change and evolve unexpectedly. On Bronkham Hill (which sounds like the title of a novel, possibly by Ian McEwan), there are about two hundred grassy pits called Dolines which have formed from sink holes that opened over the centuries. Once, they may well have been considered portals to the underworld. In other parts, the limestone realm has, like the land, evolved to become considerably less esoteric and more prosaically useful to cavers and suchlike seeking a way to who knows where. On this hill there's one deep portal in particular that houses a cave-like entrance. Inside, before the darkness becomes blinding, I can see the agricultural detritus that a local farmer has dumped. No spiritual underworld for him or her, but a handy extra barn.

The land on the ocean side of the barrows is a scrubby affair through which the path wanders indecisively. There is gorse and nettles a-plenty to prick and sting the traveller whose eyes are busy examining history rather than their feet. However, there is heather which will later cloak the ground in regal purple; and pretty pink campion, the avant-garde precursor to a multitude of spring flowers yet to surface. Meanwhile, the summit of the ridge is cropped by a flock of sheep to a neatly preserved garden. These quiet animals expertly side-step the shake holes, thereby maintaining a path for those of us not yet cloven-hoofed.

The path now wanders across a field that in early spring will be carpeted with dandelions. They are a poor, much derided species, often blamed for bed-wetting if one had the temerity to even smell them; pick a dandelion and you could be embarrassingly incapacitated all day and night. Yet, like the rape seed fields that I used to warn my daughter against entering for fear they would enhance her asthma— don't look, don't touch, and don't dare to breathe — they are glorious in the boldness of their colour. Perhaps with the decline of wildflower meadows, we might be a little more generous towards them. Dandelions are one of the very few flowers left to provide natural colour on roadside verges and on concrete-based roundabouts, along with oxeye daisies: one denigrated for its diuretic abilities and the other for its unattractive smell. Today, however, bright red toadstools stand defiantly, apparently proliferating in our

climatically changed countryside. Stand back and absorb the colour which surely cannot be real and may disappear the minute you dare to turn your back.

I descend more rapidly than my knees might care for given a choice. I am truly sorry to leave the primary Ridgeway path and the company of the sea although, for a while, I have the pleasure of seeing the barrows from another side. When initially constructed, they would've been shiny and white from freshly excavated chalk. Sometimes, they were territorial markers and not always funereal. My logical but uneducated guess is that, given Bronkham is a cemetery, these might've fulfilled a dual purpose. Something of the track, the barrows, and an indeterminable pre-history clings longingly to body and soul. Stay with us, the Ridgeway might be saying, but I look towards the sky where a beautiful buzzard is making a graceful path towards the sea. Sadly, it wasn't some innate ornithological awareness that allowed me to share a moment with her, but the tedious whir of a drone that, on approach, disturbs the bird which suddenly wakes from its dreamtime and quickly departs. It's abhorrent and as I walk down towards the road, I see the hooded controller, draped carelessly across the gate, drone navigator clasped in his otherwise useless hand.

The torn fragments of paper tell me to traverse the path alongside Ballarat Farm until I come to a tarmac path. Nowhere is any indication of the length of this track given. It goes on and on and on through other eons with no sign of life until I see a woman of indiscernible age by an ancient wooden gate. She has long unkempt hair, a black shawl, and an old full-length, mud-splattered skirt. It's difficult to say which of us is the most surprised at this meeting. She smiles awkwardly and even though I know I've walked into a lesser-known Hardy novel, where tragedy is all pervasive, I offer a polite greeting: few words are exchanged but it's as though we're speaking in forgotten tongues. I can feel her hopeful eyes on my back as I continue down the interminable trajectory, and I am unaccountably disturbed. Only the welcome sight of a little egret in a field of cows breaks the temporary gloom that has inexplicably enveloped me.

The remainder of the walk involves a bewildering number of stiles, all of which are in an horrendous state of rotting decay. It's as much as I can do to drag my aching legs up and over them and my trousers become caked in unattractive green slime that contrasts nicely with the knitted hat. The penultimate field is a bumpy affair with rutted, uneven ground. This is all that's left of the mediaeval village of Rew, long since abandoned and which only those having undertaken a little research beforehand would recognise as something more than what it superficially seems. It's a secret hidden in plain sight. An apposite emblem set furtively below the enigmatic Ridgeway.

I arrive back at the now closed church exactly four hours after I first left. A final oddity to end this most excellent of walks: as I was sitting sideways on in the driver's seat, door open, struggling to remove my muddy walking boots, a leopard skin cat appeared from nowhere, jumped into the car, leaped over the passenger seat, and briefly sat on the parcel ledge before leaving again without so much as a purr or miaow. It was a beautiful Bengal cat. I like cats nearly as much as I like hills but were I ever forced into a feline choice this would be mine.

Alison Jane Green
