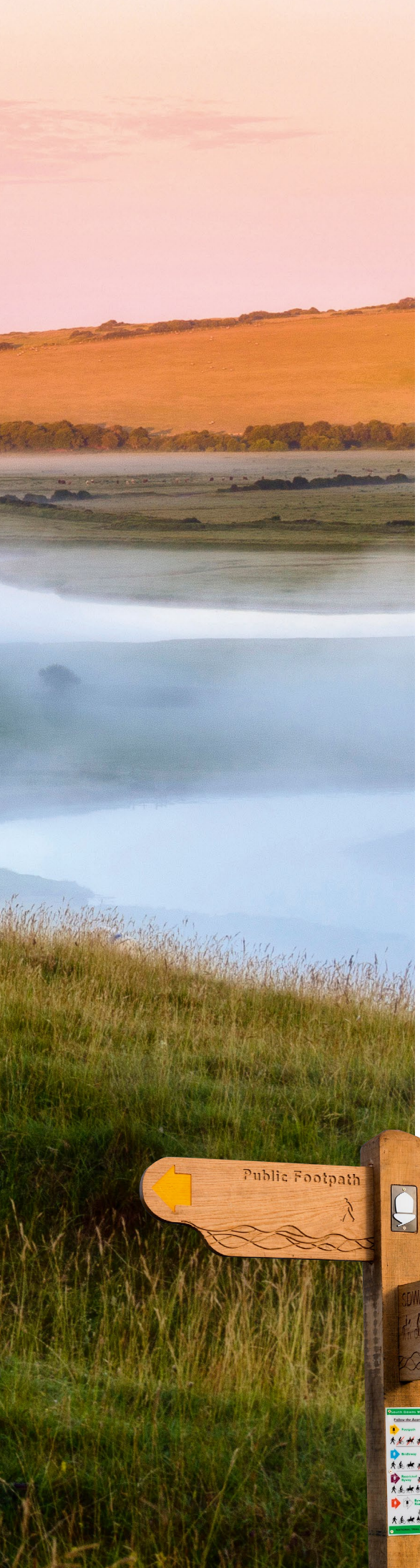
‘So noble and so bare’

Having grown up in the South Downs—as The Duchess of Cornwall did—
William Shawcross knows only too well the lure of these chalk hills,
which stretch for 80 miles across a magical corner of England



The unveiling of summer: dawn mist lies on the Cuckmere at Seaford

I AM one of those lucky people who remembers childhood very fondly. One of the main reasons, apart from my family, is that it was spent in the beautiful and exhilarating South Downs in 'Sussex by the Sea'.

The South Downs rise majestically out of the English Channel near Eastbourne, East Sussex. The towering white cliff of Beachy Head leads into the only slightly less tall, magnificent and world-famous Seven Sisters cliffs along the sea. Then, the gentle, undulating, flinty chalk hills sweep almost 80 miles westwards towards Winchester, where they come back down to earth and spread their chalk into the Salisbury Plain.

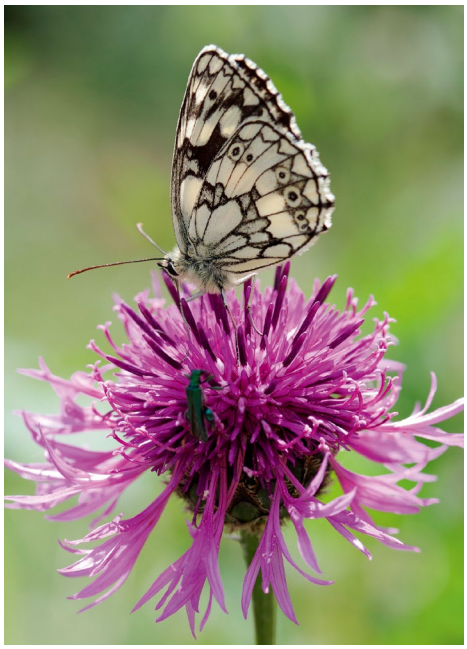
The Downs are not mountains, but they are magical, with hidden valleys, deep-set chalk and flinty paths and cool dark woods, especially in the western parts. They have inspired poets and dreamers and farmers and shepherds for centuries.

> 'The Downs are not mountains, but they are magical'

They certainly inspired me growing up among them. There was nothing lovelier than walking dogs over crests of hills, following pathways into deep valleys, exploring woods, walking to a pub for lunch, listening for the skylarks or wheatears. I am not surprised that there is now a very popular South Downs Way, a walk from Beachy Head to Winchester.

Rudyard Kipling—one of many great poets who celebrated Sussex and whose home, Bateman's, is only a few miles north of the Downs—wrote of the Seven Sisters: 'Clean of officious fence or hedge,/Half wild and wholly tame,/The wise turf cloaks the white cliff edge,/As when the Romans came.'

Another more recent prolific lover of the Downs, Peter Brandon, wrote of the joy 'downs people' feel when coming south from London and see 'the steep northward facing escarpment of the Downs… this great wall is the familiar backdrop to their daily lives'. I know exactly what he means. On the train from London, before the village halt of Plumpton, the view suddenly opens and the hills rise up and fill one with loving memories of gentle, but steep, chalky paths in a world of their own, with tangy sea air,



Preceding pages: **The spectacular Seven Sisters.** *Above:* **Marbled white on knapweed**

tantalising views of the Channel and Downland friends. Plumpton is where our childhood friends Camilla Shand, the esteemed Guest Editor of this special edition, and her sister, Annabel, now a distinguished interior designer, lived, riding ponies across the Downs and swimming with us in Cuckmere Haven under the Seven Sisters. Seven chalk Sisters plus two Shand sisters—what more could one ask?

H. G. Wells noted 'the greatness of effect' the Downs can have. 'There is something in these downland views which, like sea views, lifts a mind out to the skies.' Indeed, when Wells and Kipling walked here, the most numerous inhabitants were flocks of Southdown sheep, hung with tinkling bells and protected by their ancient shepherds with their dogs.

Since then, much has changed, as the modern world has constantly tried to invade the heart of the Downs. The Southdown sheep is a breed native to the Downs since medieval times. At the beginning of the 19th century, it was improved through crossbreeding by John Ellman, a conscientious sheep farmer in the village of Glynde (near where the glorious opera house Glyndebourne was built by another Downland family, the Christies, in 1934). Ellman transformed a tall, lean animal into a smaller one, which has a wonderful fleece (very like Merino wool) and provides great mutton (*Masterpiece*, *February 23*). Its popularity spread throughout the country, including to the monarchy, and later to Australia, New Zealand and the US.

In the 19th century, the shepherds tending their Southdowns were among the most important custodians of the traditional purity of the Downs and they passed their love and skills down through generations. The sheep →

The Duchess says *'My idyllic childhood was spent in the shadow of the magical South Downs. The names are ingrained in my heart... Ditchling Beacon and Breaky Bottom (which always made us laugh). And the chalk pit, almost opposite our house. Every Friday in summertime, we'd embark upon a Nature walk, from our school in Ditchling, up the precipitously steep road to the top of the beacon, where, en route, we gathered wildflowers to press into our notebooks. I still remember the thrill of spotting the green man orchid and being forbidden to pick it by our very strict teacher—an early lesson in conservation. Then there was the joy of riding our ponies, on languid summer days, up the chalk slopes, and galloping through the gorse-covered paths into deep valleys, carpeted with willow head, campion and bracken. It's that smell, the sweet heady scent of the South Downs, that will remain with me forever…'* →

were a joy in themselves, but the way in which they munched and fertilised the grass helped produce carpets of wildflowers that attracted millions of different butterflies.

One remarkable shepherd was John Dudeney (1782–1852) from Lewes, whose wages were £6 a year. He made a little money selling wool and small birds, with which he was able to buy books, teach himself Hebrew and Greek, study geometry and maths and, eventually, he became a schoolmaster.

Perhaps one of the most loving 20th-century chroniclers of Downland mores was Barclay Wills, a skilled natural and amateur archaeologist. He befriended many traditional shepherds, typically large men with baggy clothes, battered trilbys and long beards, often carrying bells for those sheep that had lost them, their dogs always at their command.

Preceding page: **Sussex is riven with surprisingly unfrequented, always beguiling paths.** *Above:* **Kipling's home, Bateman's.** *Below:* **A skylark sings the song of the South Downs**

> 'Sheep eat and control and fertilise the grass more effectively than any machine'

Wills was bewitched by them and their lives spent in primitive huts with their flocks, and by the flora and fauna of the Downs, especially the butterflies. Thus, 'the cornfield by the path was alive with butterflies. I stayed to watch them. The Blues were most numerous and I tried the experiment of feeding one of them with a raisin… At last a female Blue accepted my gift, stood on the raisin... She evidently enjoyed the meal and stood there so long that my finger and thumb were cramped. So I set her down on the raisin among the cornstalks'.

Yet nothing entranced him more than the sheep. He described one flock 'calling to each other in a bewildering variety of tones. Mixed with their voices was wafted the sound of their ancient belles and these formed my orchestra—the same soft and pleasing one which has played for a hundred years or more'.

Throughout his life on the Downs, Wills carefully collected and catalogued sheep's bells, shepherds' crooks and many other artefacts, as well as historic arrow-head flints and other stones. These treasured mementoes of a time gone by are now in the Worthing Museum. However, his books, *Bypaths in Downland*, *Downland Treasure* and especially *Shepherds of Sussex*, often illustrated by fellow naturalist Gordon Beningfield, form a rare and exquisite history of an extraordinary and valuable, vanished way of life.

Wills's love affair with the Downs was punctuated with horror at the inter-war building of shanty towns, such as Peacehaven on the cliffs near Newhaven. (Fortunately, much of the cliff edge was saved by public money in the 1930s.) After the Second World War, he lamented: 'When we ramble we meet hundreds of metal pylons, built to carry miles of cables, which could have been laid underground. Large areas are enclosed with barbed wire, old footpaths and tracks are ploughed in. The birthright of the public... untouched for thousands of years cannot ever be replaced. It is obliterated.'

I recently visited a shepherd friend, who has a large flock of Southdown sheep on the Downs, perhaps some 500 ewes. He and his wife look after them year in, year out, without any help. At the time of my visit, it was lambing season and they had been up and down every night for weeks. The fourth generation to have Southdowns on the South Downs, his grandfather fought in the Royal Bucks Hussars throughout the First World War and raised flocks on the Downs between the wars, until his father took them over. He admits that, despite the work of Ellman and others, the Southdown breed is not perfect. 'They are small and don't have much milk, so lambing is difficult for them and for us shepherds. The gestation period for sheep is six months, but Southdowns could do with an extra month. The lambs would be much stronger then.

'On the other hand, their meat is wonderful, partly because the grass is perfect; often, it's full of tiny snails, which they munch up merrily.' My friend thinks sheep grazing is a major reason the Downs are so beguiling. 'This is the way we've raised sheep for hundreds of years, very successfully. Look at the turf they have lived on. Isn't it beautiful and great to walk on? They eat and control and fertilise the grass far more effectively than any other animal or machine could do. That's what creates wildflowers and butterflies. Some of the modern ideas are out of politics, not Nature—stick with what has worked for centuries!'

As did Wills before him, my friend worries that a combination of official neglect of actual food production and fashions such as rewilding, the ever-growing number of tourists (350,000 a year on the Seven Sisters, now a cult destination for many) and the thousands of mountain bikers eroding the paths, not to mention the widening of roads, could soon mean the end not only of the last remaining shepherds and of flocks, but of the unique nature of the Downs themselves.

The unofficial poet laureate of Sussex, Hilaire Belloc—who enjoyed the West Downs as much as I (no poet) enjoy the East Downs—wrote in his poem *The South Country*:

I never get between the pines
But I smell the Sussex air,
Nor I never come on a belt of sand
But my home is there.
And along the sky the line of the Downs
So noble and so bare.

William Shawcross CVO is a former chairman of the Charity Commission for England and Wales

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