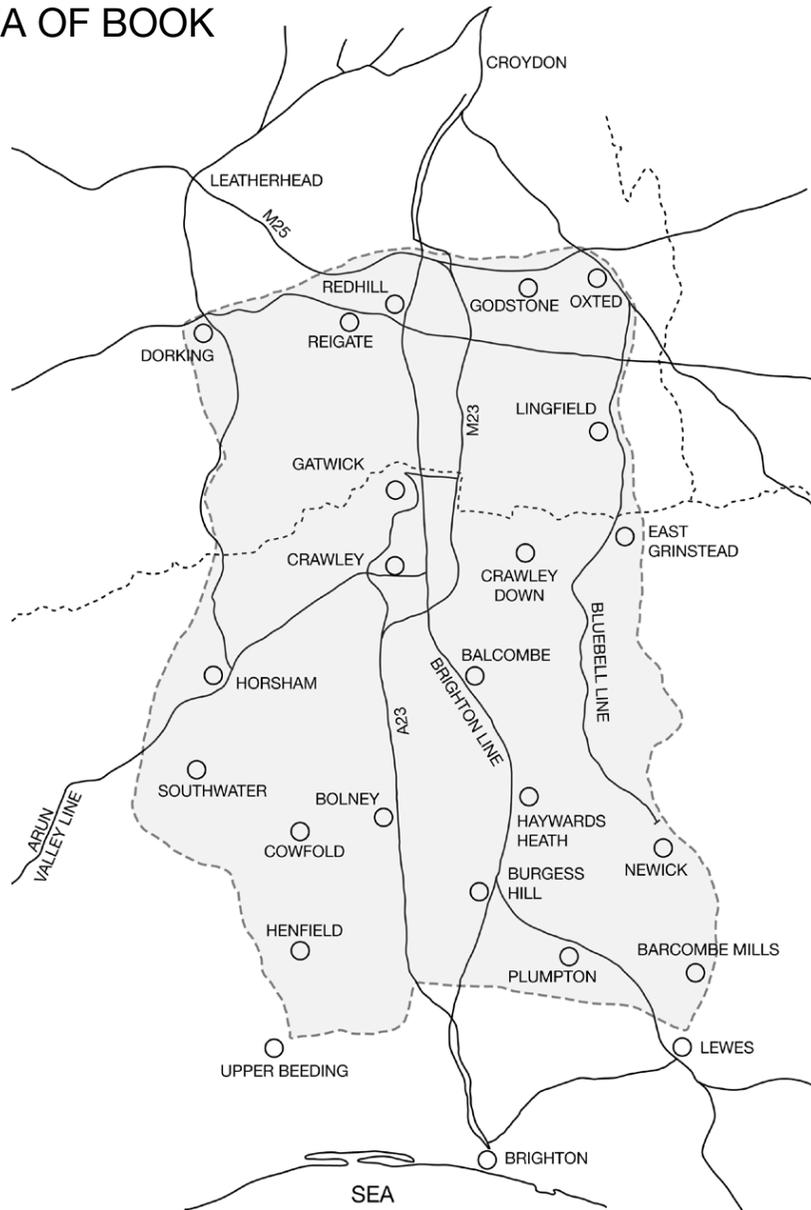


AREA OF BOOK



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INTRODUCTION

When I was a boy I immersed myself in the Sussex Downs and the Weald. They were my delight, my retreat, and my best mate. That was in the 1960's, which was the most dreadful decade we'd seen so far for the fabric of the countryside. Farmers and developers wrought havoc on our woods, hedgerows and ancient pastures, and drained and poisoned our brooks and floodplains.

Yet the Weald has survived better than most other natural regions of Lowland England. It was, and still is greatly more wooded, and, with its heaths, waterlands, and archaic grasslands, it has more semi-natural habitat¹. It is *'Ancient Countryside'*², with a pattern of fields and woods, lanes, green droves and footpaths, unmodified streams, veteran pollard trees, tiny hamlets and isolated farmsteads, going back largely to Saxon, but also Roman and prehistoric times.

There is much about the Weald that is intimate, mixed, and homely, with time havens that take you back to the wildwood, or to the earliest Saxon 'assarters' - settlers of wild land. The wildlife and microclimate of its deep wooded gills and sandrock outcrops are relics of the Atlantic climatic period, warm and wet, which ended and left them isolated some 5,000 years since.

All this is true, too, of the part of the Weald that I know best, which is The Land of the Brighton Line. I have known it since 1958, when our family returned to the town where my mum was born - Hove - taking the train back down the Brighton Line across the Balcombe Viaduct, with its vista of woods and streams, little fields and blue distant hills, and straining to see the Jack and Jill windmills before we whooshed into the Clayton Tunnel.

It may not be true much longer. In the next generation the process of attrition may destroy what is left of the key qualities of this landscape. Its best places may become mere 'precious fragments' in a suburban mess of highways, noise, and urban sprawl. That is the

trajectory that capitalist development is set upon. It has gone a long way down that path already.

It has already thoroughly done its work in the Thames basin, where the London megacity sprawls from the slopes of the Chilterns to the heights of the North Downs. Who now remembers the landscape of the Great North Wood that stretched from Deptford on the Thames to Selhurst, near Croydon, with its dense coppices, wood pastures and commons? Who now remembers the drowsy Middlesex hay meadows, stretching from Camden Town to Harrow Weald, and around the Nightingale haunted slopes of Hampstead Heath and Horsenden Hill? Who can remember the quiet marshy lushness of the vales of the Rivers Colne, the Lea, and the Wandle...or the meadows, orchards, nursery gardens, and gravelly heaths of the Thames vale way along from Chelsea to Brentford, Walton, Windsor? Those landscapes are thoroughly lost and forgotten when we try to weigh the pluses and minuses of the megalopolis³.

A new tranche of London's neighbour landscapes are now being stuffed in its maw. Though naturalists of the Thames Estuary (called by developers the 'Thames Gateway', as though it is only good for passing through) discovered a richness of invertebrate wildlife on its brown field wastes, derelict quarries and sunny rough grasslands that was way over twenty times greater in one square kilometre than the whole of Salisbury Plain⁴, it is now the centre of a giant expansion of the capitalist economy. Tough luck on the Nightingales - some 1.3% of the national population - that find refuge on the Hoo Peninsula.

The Low Weald and our Land of the Brighton Line, together with what's left of the Sussex coastal plain, are amongst the next in capitalism's sights.