

# **The Birds and The Bees**

**Country Diary Collages**



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**Country Diary Collages**

**Fiona Couling**



10/12/12

### **Claxton, Norfolk**

It was like a last cigarette butt swept up after the party – a bluebottle buzzing at the window. It got me thinking and, as I took my walk across the marsh, I tried to analyse what I miss most in winter. Why should I feel a sense of absence: after all, many of the old favourites are in place regardless of season. The blackbirds are on the lawn as the door closes, and when I pass the last houses the starlings are still along the pot tops to repeat their self-delighting inward song. Beyond the kissing gate, no single tree has yet moved. They're all here and, while they're now stripped bare of foliage, they will make that heroic outstretched stand winter-long. If anything reeds are more beautiful during the dead time, their stems a rich cinnamon and their heads a sparkling floss in the sunlight. There is even a special harvest which is lost once spring arrives. Today I can enjoy it all: the glorious canine music from the pink-footed geese and that special quietness of a stonechat on its fence top.

Yet what I miss most is the insects, those relatives of that bluebottle, whose warmth-loving soft-bodied forms are incinerated in the scorching colour of autumn. Winter is insect-free, and it makes you think about all their gifts through the year: the shapeless clouds of chironomids choring down the dyke at last light; the glancing maypole weave of butterflies and bumblebees around the flowering bramble; then all those sleeping beauties in my moth trap – maybe 60-70 species on a good summer's night – that always add a spoonful of excitement to moth day (Saturday mornings). Thank goodness for the December moth, an insect so subtly beautiful it seems almost purpose-made to remind us of the aesthetic possibilities of chitin. What it also epitomises is the fugitive joys of insects. After all, no more than one in 10,000 of us has probably made the acquaintance of this garden familiar.

**Mark Cocker**

**Beckington, Somerset**

On a damp morning, close to the Wiltshire border, the road to Frome through the misty woodlands of the Duke of Somerset's forest was wet but still easily passable. Our area has been fortunate, relatively flood-free while people elsewhere across Somerset have been suffering desperately.

When I reached the dairy farm at Beckington, I learned that Jersey cows, being relatively small, and not much more than half the weight of Friesians, are better equipped to manage on wet pasture and, can stay out in the fields till early December.

This year, even they came inside in late October. I watched them bent over the rail at the edge of their dry yard, obviously relishing their rations of silage fresh from a hopper. This organic farm grows its own feed, and had been able to make plenty in that almost forgotten sunny spell in the spring. The mix contains red clover and lucerne to give nitrogen, and looks like luxury muesli.

I saw some two-week-old heifers, and one just born, a little unsteady on her feet while the mother cleaned her up. This farm breeds all its own animals, and calving continues the year round.

The creamery, just across from the milking parlour, is where the farm's end products are made. Hi-tech machinery measures the fat content (normally about 5% from Channel Island cattle but a bit higher that morning) of the raw product and then, operated by skilled hands, produces milk and all grades of cream, from pouring to clotted. The buttermilk is itself a valued product.

Two vans leave at midnight three times a week to deliver to discriminating London stores such as Fortnum & Mason. Otherwise, sales are direct to local customers mostly well known to the family, whose sons and daughters are actively engaged in the work and look as if they love it.

**John Vallins**





12/12/12

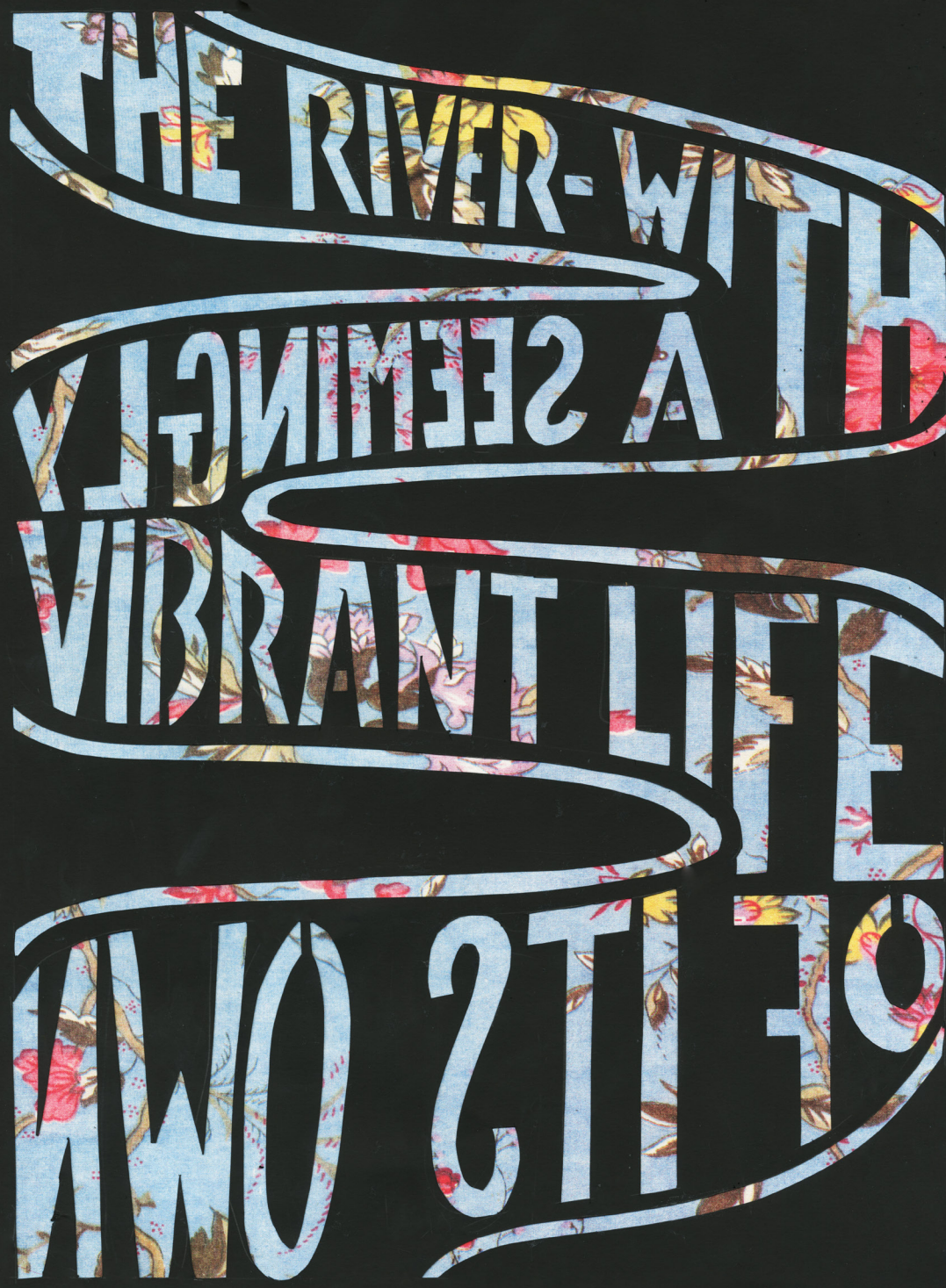
### Wenlock Edge

Full of berry, the hawthorn's splash of red is the brightest thing on Windmill Hill. Why it's so loaded with berries, why they're so brightly red and why they haven't all been stripped by birds yet is a mystery. What is even more mysterious is that the tree appears to be singing. From inside its wind-twisted tangle come little chaffinchy songs, subdued chimings like side-of-the-mouth gossip. Blackbirds and redwings come for the berries but they only take a few and there's no all-out plunder yet. Maybe they're waiting for another spike of frost to perfect the fruit or maybe the tree has a kind of power over the birds and is not ready to deliver its promise.

Inside each pillar-box-red haw are seeds in which the last year is folded like a bus ticket to the next. How many years this tree has been doing this is hard to tell. It has aluminium-grey- and brass-coloured lichens, green tufts of moss and old riven bark. It seems small to be of any great age but it struggles out of limestone with no soil to speak of and its character has been shaped by adversity and exposure.

This tree certainly has presence, and blue tits, wrens and dunnocks hide in it, out of the way of winds and the vast, uncompromising world that could crush them with its gaze. They make their own secret sounds which play into the tree's plainsong. On a day of cold sunshine, which has opened up the hill and the knapweed seedheads, the hawthorn is brilliant but there's a kind of melancholy about it. It's as if the tree's fecundity is a last-ditch attempt to throw itself out of its nailed-down place to pitch its future into the world through the innards of the birds. The hawthorn's blood red is also an omen, a signal for the 12th day of the 12th month of the 12th year.

Paul Evans



13/12/12

### **River Nairn, Highlands**

My route to the river took me under a long, narrow spinney of trees with birch and rowan and an under-storey of hazel and blackthorn. The woodland floor had sufficient snow for tracks to give away the night dwellers that went unseen in the darkness. The fox tracks went along the whole length of the spinney, while the badger and pine marten criss-crossed as though they were searching for something. I used to think it was my track but soon learnt that, apart from the night visitors, it was also a thoroughfare of others such as roe deer, sika deer and brown hares.

Beyond the trees the open fields were wintry-looking, with the snow and ice blanketing the scene; they appeared even more bleak without sight or sound of a single bird. The river came as a welcome relief with a seemingly vibrant life of its own, as if defying the onset of the winter months to come. The music of the waters seemed to take over but what was even more impressive to my ears was the sound of the waterfall. The low cascade of water was formed by rounded boulders and a mini islet with sedges on the top.

Just upstream, the river was relatively quiet and subdued before the watercourse turned sharply and curved back on itself to a bank that could eventually be the start of an island. It was there that I saw the first of the birds. Seven mallards rose with the “quack, quack” of the females (contrary to popular belief it is not the drakes that make this telltale call). Then silence again until the sound I had come to hear, that sharp “zit, zit” of a dipper that carries above the sound of the water rushing by. The bird flew upstream and landed on a water-splashed boulder in the middle of the river’s flow. I turned and left it in peace in its territory it keeps even through the winter.

**Ray Collier**

## North Uist

There is a magic about some birds that makes one long to see them, and the more difficult that is to achieve the stronger their allure seems to become. The gyrfalcon, pale and powerful falcon of the north, bird of tundra, taiga and Arctic coasts, has just that sort of charisma – and the phone message says one has been seen on North Uist. The light is failing by the time we hear the news but next morning, in the hope it may have stayed around, we speed northwards.

The morning is chilly, but be-hatted and be-gloved we search methodically along the fence lines where the previous day the gyrfalcon had obligingly sat out in the open. With that curious mix of hopeful anticipation and rising dread at the prospect of missing out that is so well known to birders, we repeatedly scan the fields, every pale and distant flying bird causing a reflex twitch of the binoculars. Then a chance encounter with a friend reveals the disappointing but not unexpected news: the bird has not been seen that morning. But he does tell us about something he thinks we might find interesting at the lochan. And he's right.

For there, lying atop what in another part of the country could be mistaken for the remains of a bittern's nest, is an otter dozing behind a screen of yellowing reed stems. It's as relaxed as a dog in its basket. As we watch, it stirs and then leans back and begins to groom, running its teeth repeatedly through its throat and belly fur. It's an activity vital for otters for they have little subcutaneous fat and it is the structure of their fur with its dense under-layer and overlying layer of long guard hairs that keeps it warm both on land and in the sea. Satisfied at last with its toilette, the otter curls up again, resumes its nap and we, mightily entertained and having given up all hope of the gyrfalcon, nip off for a quick look at a surf scoter instead.

**Christine Smith**



### Ennerdale, Lake District

The canoeist was explaining to visitors on the shore of the glittering lake that his companion, standing on the foredeck with Great Borne, Bowness Knott, Pillar Rock and Angler's Crag beyond, was the Girt Dog of Ennerdale reincarnated. How it all came back! I once heard a talk during the Christmas holidays on the Girt Dog and at this very spot, near Ennerdale's Bleach Green.

It was here in the late-lamented Angler's Hotel, since controversially demolished so the lake level could be raised, that the tales of the dreaded creature bleeding sheep to death were catalogued in gruesome detail. Thought to be a thylacine (or Tasmanian tiger), it was presumed to have escaped a travelling circus in 1810, slaughtering 300-400 sheep in the Ennerdale region before being hunted down and killed in the river Ehen. But could this really be its re-embodiment? And one that travelled by canoe? On reflection, obviously not.

Martin Whitmill, the paddler in question, put his listeners' minds at rest, adding that Charlie was the name of the dog, which – half labrador, half Jack Russell – was more partial to crisps offered in the village pub than the kind of fare a thylacine favoured. Martin agreed they were an unusual double act – himself "built like Double Goliath and Chips" and Charlie the mongrel balancing like a cat on his canoe foredeck grip mat, oblivious to the dippers, herons or Canada geese that occasionally crossed their path and keeping in balance as the craft knifed forward.

This Charlie did with great aplomb two years ago on their voyage to the Isle of Man in nine hours, complete with lifejacket, safety harness and the back-up of another boat. Recently they paddled all the lakes, waters and meres of Lakeland beneath Coniston Old Man, Gummer's How, Nab Scar, Place Fell, Cat Bells and Red Pike. A Girt Dog indeed, and in the best possible sense.

**Tony Greenbank**



**Farlington Marshes, Hampshire**

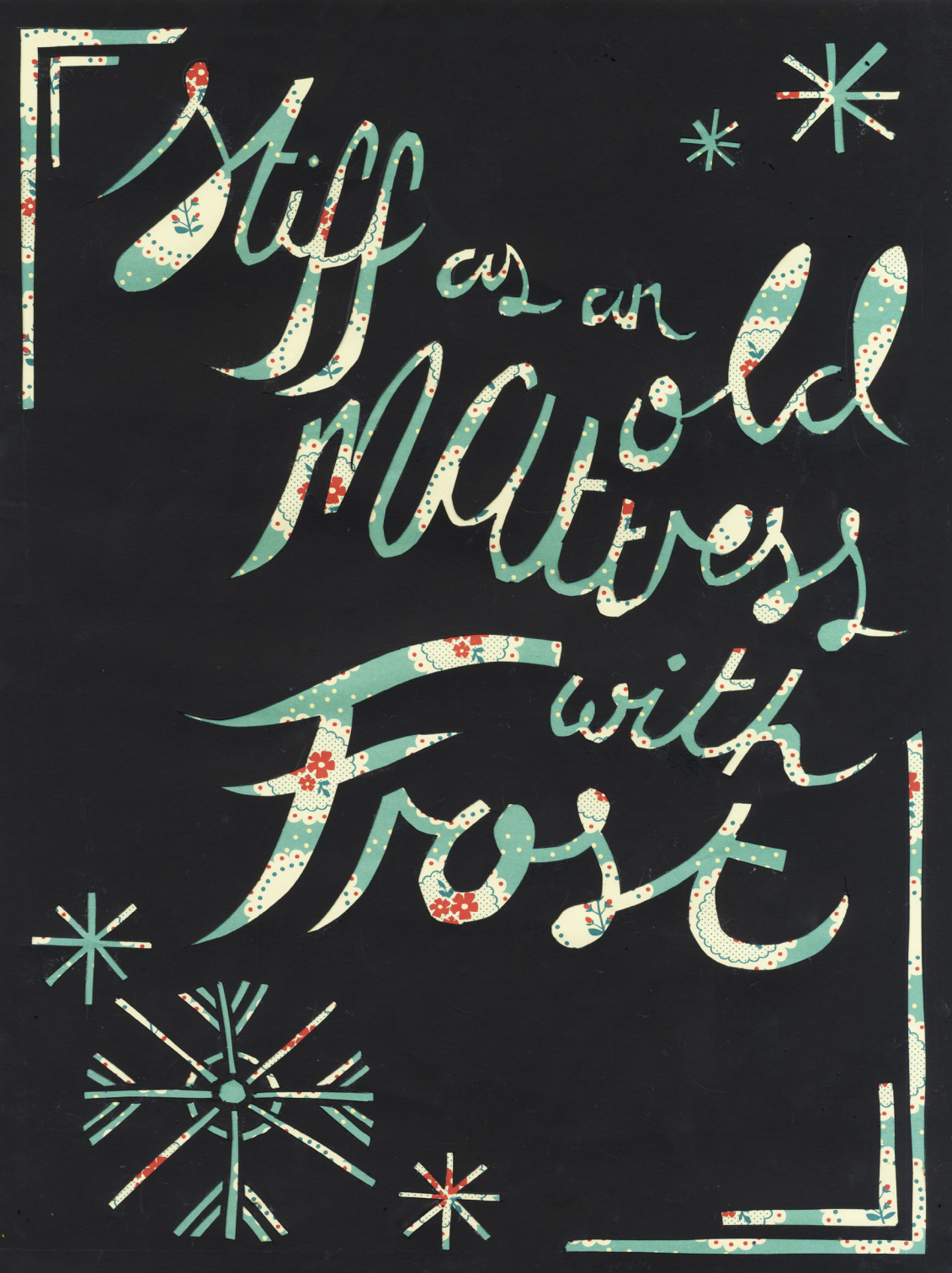
Set back from the sea wall path, screened by hawthorn hedging, is a corner of the reserve known to locals as the Bushes. Here, the unimproved grassland, close-cropped by cattle and Brent geese, is studded with so many anthills that the terrain resembles the rolling chalk hills of the South Downs in miniature. As I walk between them, the low winter sun reveals a tapestry of glinting gossamer threads that top the mounds like spun sugar.

Heavy rain has saturated the grass and sepia-coloured water seeps up from the track, pooling round my boots. I worry how the flooding may have affected the ant colony below ground, but the discovery of chalky white, cigarette butt-like droppings at the base of a large anthill reassures me. As I crumble the droppings between my fingers, they reveal glossy fragments, the colour of polished jet. During autumn and winter green woodpeckers survive almost exclusively on ants, and this is evidence of recent foraging. Close to the pile of droppings, I find a hole where the woodpecker has poked its beak into the soft earth in search of the ants and their larvae. The bird's sticky tongue extends out of its beak by as much as 10cm, gathering insects from deep within the nest. Knowing that woodpeckers will return time and time again to their favourite anthills, I find a vantage point and wait.

Olive green, with a splash of yellow on its rump, a crimson cap, black highwayman's mask and crimson-centred moustachial stripe (which identifies it as male), the woodpecker is unmistakable when it finally crosses the grassland in undulating flight. Cackling, it drops down behind a lichen-scaled blackthorn and hops along like a hunchbacked clockwork toy. There are numerous folk names for the green woodpecker in Britain. In Hampshire it is known as the yaffingale, "yaffle" being imitative of its laughing call. Folklore closely associates it with water, and this is another prominent theme of its names. This "rain bird" appears to deserve its reputation as a rain-bringer. As I watch it probing the ground, the sky clouds over, and drizzle flecks my coat.

**Claire Stares**





19/12/12

### Wenlock Edge

A winter wren looks from the hedge towards the solstice as if it's the weight which holds the scales this side of an axis between one year and another. It looks from wren-shadow into wren-land: an old geography steeped in omen and augury. Who comes, who goes, wren knows. Moss is stiff as an old mattress with frost. Chaffinch and siskin blow from hedge-tops into fields of open soil routed by tines and tyres, each rut running with water so the rolling land looks like woodcuts. The ooze and slop of mud seeps each time the frost gives. Brooks are ardent, their songs stronger, banks scoured back under red root tassels of alder, and streambeds a yellow dawn-grey as if each pebble has been picked out, wiped clean and put back.

When it rained, cold and hard, buzzards looked like glove puppets stuffed up trees. Now a red kite lifts over treetops into a half blue, half grey sky above a pasture with sheep. Free from jackdaw mobs, the kite keeps a slow tack, scanning for carrion. It barely moves its wings but for a twitching balance like a tightrope walker's pole. The wren shifts in its shadow and whistles quietly for the hungry times. "We'll shoot the Cutty Wren, said John the Red Nose." In this song, the wren is cut up with knives and forks and its spare ribs given to the poor. The Cutty Wren song is said to come from the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 when the starving poor resorted to eating small birds: the wren is symbolic of the king.

Restless cave-dwellers of hedge hole and mossy stone, wrens will die. Despite their powerful presence, winter will crush many of them. Although they're our most common breeding bird, hundreds die every day from what we have done to wren-world. This one watches, a peppercorn eye framed by a white stripe for quick seeing. Years come and go, the wren knows. The thrum of its wings, the cock of its tail, the voice now prayerful will turn into a torrent if it survives to tip the solstice balance.

Paul Evans

**Romaldkirk, Teesdale**

The fading glow of the winter afternoon reduced the hedgerow ashes to gaunt silhouettes. A few were well proportioned but some bore ungainly, claw-ended branches that reached out over the footpath. The architect of these open-crowned specimens was most likely the tiny ash bud moth. Its caterpillar consumes the terminal bud of young shoots, triggering growth of buds lower down the stem and generating wide-forked branching patterns. So, even during the five months when the tree is in full leaf, light penetrates easily and encourages rampant growth of ivy. The trunks of many ancient ashes hereabouts are wrapped from root to crown in its glossy evergreen coat, with bare branches protruding like stag antlers.

Under one such decrepit tree we found a decaying limb bearing the coal-black, bun-shaped toadstools that are King Alfred's cakes. They commemorate England's most famously incompetent baker. Legend has it that, while fleeing from a Viking raid and seeking food and shelter from the wife of a swineherd, he was asked to oversee her baking – and let her cakes burn while preoccupied with matters of state.

Now a new invasion has arrived from across the North Sea in the form of airborne spores of pathogenic ash dieback fungus – and King Alfred's cakes will benefit from the destruction it causes. The fungus is harmless and confined to dead ash timber, but there is something of the night about its excrescences. Back in 1955 the eminent mycologist Terence Ingold found it discharges its spores rhythmically and only after nightfall. Even when kept in continuous darkness its biological clock ensures it does not start shooting out spores until the natural day ends. We left our specimens behind in the gathering dusk. By spring they will be ready to disperse spores that will find a new crop of dead ashes. Their time has come.

**Phil Gates**

## Lackford Lakes, Suffolk

After days of heavy rain, a perfect sunny Saturday emerges. The shortest day of the year is just around the corner, so I head to Lackford Lakes — a 121-hectare reserve comprising 11 lakes — to make the most of the light. Formerly gravel pits, the site was re-established as a wildlife haven in the 1970s by an enthusiast named Bernard Tickner.

The ground is still boggy from rain as I follow the route down towards the first lake, which is framed by coppiced willow trees and thick brambles. The water is dotted with birds: a flock of Canada geese is flanked by a lone greylag, three mallards disturb the shallows, and out in the centre, a tufted duck dips its feathered head under the water almost obsessively to preen. A sign says that when the pits were excavated, numerous bones and tusks from the Ice Age were unturned; it seems strange to imagine woolly mammoths and rhinos roaming the countryside. Everything is muted under the winter sun, like a faint watercolour painting in pale gold, russet and greys.

An alder shivers beneath a gang of chirruping siskins, and I watch their flecked chests rising and falling through my binoculars, tiny steam clouds rising from their bills. I reach Bill's Hide, and pull up the shutter to reveal a crowded scene. An enormous flock of teal lifts nervously into the air for a few metres, revealing the white undersides of their wings, before settling again. Several males aggravate one another, nipping at tails and chests, their green eye masks glinting in the light. It's quiet enough to hear every ripple and dabble.

This bickering is overlooked by a set of stoic cormorants, which occupy a small island among the frantic ducks, like a gang of bouncers. Their upturned faces give them a superior expression as they bask, their dark wings spread towards the sun like parasols.

**Lizzy Denning**



**Chee Dale, Derbyshire**

The most forbidding of the dales along the river Wye is a glorious landscape that entails hard-won negotiations between the limestone, the ash woods and ourselves. Through the crags and the brooding moss-smothered chaos of the trees, the Victorians inserted a thread of human order in the shape of the Midland Railway that opened in 1863. It's a mere ghost now. The trains, with all the forward momentum of those steam clouds and steel tracks have gone, but the silent beds of clinker and the succession of dank tunnels under the cliffs still provide a perfect trail all the way to Bakewell.

It's at a point called the Rusher Cutting Tunnel that one can best appreciate the elements that comprise Chee Dale. Aside from the muted gush of the Wye below, and the endless winter drip down the brick-lined mouth of the tunnel, the place is without sound. To the east the far slope is covered in ash and the distance underscores what contradictory trees they are. From afar the million pale twig ends across the canopy all somehow catch the light, giving to the whole mass a feathered or softly flossed quality.

Yet no single mature tree seems more mean-spirited than ash. The coppiced hazel already has catkins, there are quiet buds even now on blackthorn, while the solitary yews are an intense song of green on the crags opposite. But there are no such frivolities on ash. Their mere hue, a kind of bone white, speaks of niggardliness. In fact, if limestone itself could sprout leaves, it would take the form of this magnificent tree. And who does not admire its toughness. At one slope too steep for human footprint, at least 300 ash saplings have scrambled up to the soaring bluffs above, dragging an understorey of ivy and bramble with them, filling the thin seams of soil with life and, come summer, mothering it all in that fine-cut fretted shadow of fresh ash leaves.

**Mark Cocker**



**Brown Willy, Bodmin Moor**

Ruts filled with water sparkle in flashes of midday sun, and behind us a rainbow arches towards the north coast. Belts of dark conifers and the flat greyiness of Crowdy reservoir mark this waterlogged land on the northern edge of Bodmin Moor. In the distance, beyond the potholed runways and ruins of a former RAF Coastal Command base, a modern factory that makes cheese stands out. Ahead, in the opposite direction, some three miles to the south, Brown Willy (420m) sticks up above the intervening moorland.

Near the start of this approach to the highest hill in Cornwall, the isolated outcrop of Lanlavery Rock used to be a popular place for picnics and gatherings of local church groups and schools. Today, the undulating expanse of splashy Davidstow Moor is deserted, swept by squalls and overlooked by a band of cattle looming on a nearby horizon. Tawny grasses are woven with the pale *Cladonia portentosa* lichen – shaped like tiny trees in miniature forests, fluffed up and almost visibly expanding in the damp atmosphere. Beside a fenced plantation of dripping conifers with mossy trunks, sheltering bullocks have left a morass of deep mud. Marshland appears red and brown while the drier slopes of turf and partially submerged granite are scattered with sheep, all startlingly white on the drab hillsides.

Up on Showery Tor, the precariously balanced boulders glisten as sun emerges through storm clouds. The nearby craggy outline of Rough Tor is silhouetted against the brightening sky, and just visible, on the coast to the north-west, are Stepper Point and Trevoise Head. On the distant southern part of the moor, Kilmar, Sharp Tor and Stowes Hill remain gloomy under louring clouds. Across the De Lank valley, the top of Brown Willy is temporarily enveloped in mist but, as we descend towards the river crossing, sunlight glints on wind turbines situated upstream and beyond the watershed. The two-bladed versions ranged across Kittows Moor appear to move jerkily compared with the more stately three-bladed versions at Bowithick.

Across the river, and away from the ancient settlements and enclosures of Roughtor Moor, the eroded path runs with water. It leads uphill, past tumbled walls, narrow gateways between granite posts and tussocks of wind-blown grasses which gleam in the low sun. In front of us, four walkers cross the boggy rushes and ling at the foot of the rocky summit, in advance of the next bout of rain. No time for us to linger on top, but we see sun reflected on Dozmary Pool and Colliford reservoir as dark clouds encroach on the Cornish Alps or china clay country. The Tamar valley remains bathed in sunlight for another few minutes as stinging rain follows us downhill.

**Virginia Spiers**

**Achvaneran, Highlands**

One of the tantalising and intriguing aspects of the acre of garden and paddock is the relatively unseen night life. Admittedly, I have explored some aspects of this, such as running a moth trap, with a mercury vapour bulb, on some summer nights. None of the moths are harmed and the range of species, with some evocative names, is a constant source of wonder. The night-flying bats – pipistrelle and brown long-eared – breed in the loft space, and sometimes I can see them at dusk.

The night mammals I see most are the badgers, as I know where they like to feed in a damp area by the lower fence. Keeping quiet, with a red filtered torch, I can see them in the darkest of nights. Otherwise, as far as the other nocturnal land mammals are concerned, I have to make do with the occasional droppings and tracks in mud by the large pond.

Last week, however, with the snow at the right depth and at the right time, the tracks revealed some of the secrets of these night visitors. A noticeable absence was that of any badger tracks, but it could well be that on such cold nights they wisely stay in their setts. As for a stoat, I have not seen – or had any sign – of any for at least three years, although before that we had regular sightings as they hunt by day and night. So it was a surprise to see the tracks of one: they were only three feet from the back door, in the very area where the five dachshunds regularly exercise.

It is many years since I have seen a fox on this ground, and I have probably only seen one two or three times in 25 years. Yet the snow revealed that one had left the moribund birch and rowan woodland above the house, and then walked past – within three feet of my study door – before jumping over the fence into the paddock. The tracks of foxes are some of the easiest to identify as in their normal gait they place each foot in front of the other so that a long line is revealed.

Just occasionally I have caught the fox's characteristic scent where one has marked its territory. The other giveaway is the occasional scream, especially in the mating season in January. Although it is generally believed to be the vixen, the dog fox will also occasionally scream.

The other surprise in the snow was the pine marten, as again it is many years since I have actually seen one. Yet there under the fruit trees and crisscrossing were the tracks of one. It looked as though it was eying up the bird feeders hanging from the branches.

**Ray Collier**





28/12/12

### South Uist

It's a perfect winter's day for a walk. Though the early morning frost has melted, a dusting of snow still remains on the summits of the three highest hills. The sky, brilliantly blue directly overhead, fades gently to a milkier hue where it meets the curve of the horizon. There is a freshness in the air, a chill that suggests it could become a biting cold should there be anything but this morning's slightest of breezes, and yet there is also just a suggestion of warmth in the winter sun.

From the mirror-bright loch a pair of whooper swans, winter visitors from the far north, take flight. They struggle for lift, wings beating powerfully, their great webbed feet striking the water's surface, each contact creating a brief sunlit splash. Gaining the air at last, they fly past at barely more than head height, the sound of their wing beats clearly audible in the stillness of the day. Their flight lasts only a short distance before they make a long curving descent to the next loch where they join another group of whooper swans and from where the arrival of the newcomers is announced by a babble of musical bugling.

Far less musical is the sound somewhere in the distance of an approaching Land Rover. The cattle on the machair look up from their grazing and one lets out a mighty bellow. As the vehicle draws closer, more and more add their voices and then the whole blaring mass of animals begins a purposeful stroll to meet it in anticipation of a fresh delivery of silage. And it seems their anticipation is justified for the Land Rover turns off the main track and bounces across the machair towards the shiny black wrapped bales, only to pass through a gate and head onwards towards a flock of sheep, leaving the cattle staring disconsolately after it.

On this bright morning the path to the sea crosses a landscape alive with birds. Not far from where the cattle are grazing, a mixed flock of lapwing and golden plover are scattered about the margins of the shallow winter flood pools. A redshank takes off from the water's edge alarm calling loudly. Among the remains of the corn stubble almost a hundred rock doves are foraging industriously. Chattering starlings line the fence wires, a twittering flock of twite are in constant motion and skeins of noisy geese pass overhead. In the distance a flock of waders, disturbed perhaps by the presence of a peregrine, swirls into the air. And from behind the ridge of the dunes where a single buzzard sits motionless atop a fence post comes the beckoning call of the sea, a ceaseless soft whispering against which on this quiet morning can be heard the breaking of individual waves.

**Christine Smith**

**Buttermere, Lake District**

Rarely was a sight more apt than that of a kilted piper seeing in the new year on Honister Pass while filming a documentary some years ago. No other Lakeland pass is as like the Pass of Glencoe as Honister, knifing down between the crags of Fleetwith Pike and Buckstone How to descend under Haystacks, High Crag and Birkness Combe, with Grey Crag and Eagle Crag tinselled sugar-white above Buttermere's icy waters. These hills might not match Gearr Aonach, Aonach Dubh and Bidean nam Bian quite in height, but in presence they certainly do.

Reminiscent even of how Ossian's Cave appears in the cliffs of Glencoe is Gatesgarth Chimney, slashing High Crag like a sabre-cut. It was first climbed in 1913 by Geoffrey Winthrop Young, who was to lose a leg in the first world war (and who in 1924, before 500 assembled souls, dedicated the plaque on Great Gable commemorating the fallen members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club at coincidentally the same time as his friend George Mallory was last seen high on Mount Everest).

How you could imagine the Campbells ambushing the MacDonalds here. Only in this case it was Norman invaders who were diverted and ambushed in Rannerdale (each spring slopes of bluebells are said to flourish from the bloodshed). The result? The dale remained inviolate and does not appear in the Domesday Book.

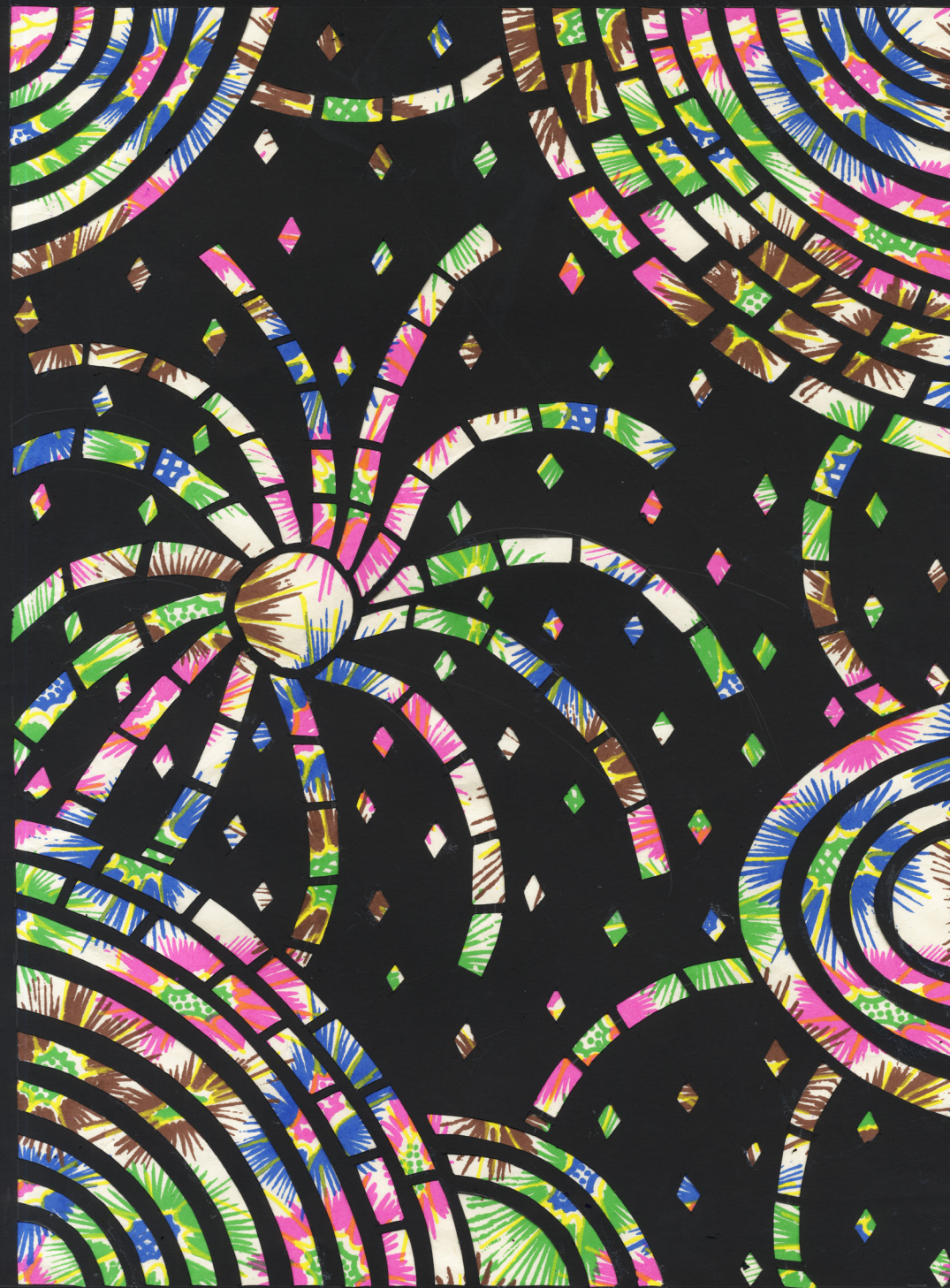
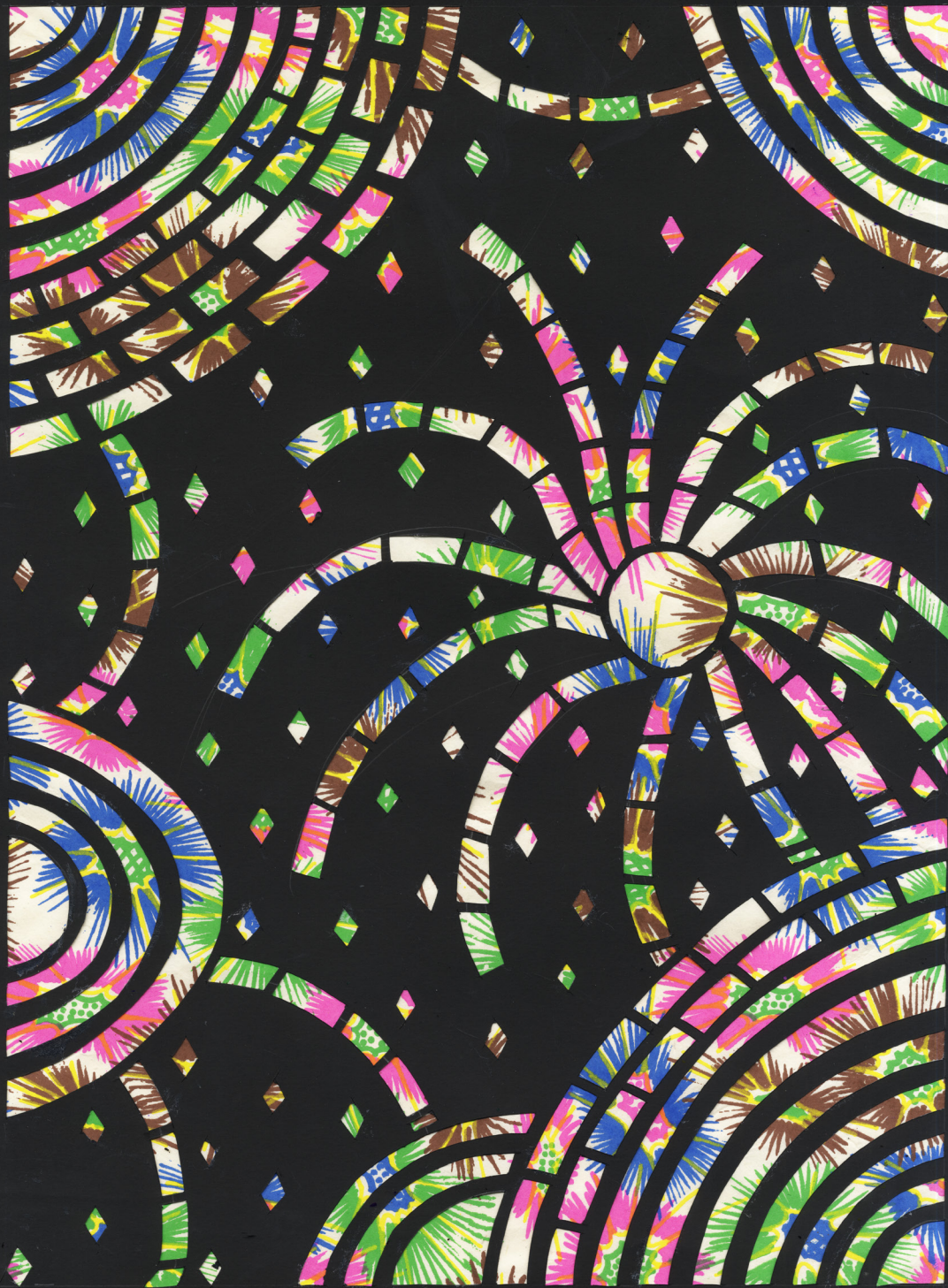
The white cross above Honister is yet another indication of Buttermere's harsh side, and commemorates the death of Fanny Mercer, who tragically fell over a crag in 1887. Many are the "fell-goers" who are drawn up the narrow path below in totally unsuitable high heels and flip-flops to inspect it further.

Life can still be hard. One New Year's Eve in the village consternation arose. The two bells of St James' church in Buttermere failed to ring out at midnight in their turret as traditionally happened. Mischievous village lads had clambered onto the slates of the roof in their stockinged feet and removed the clappers.

Bellringer Rodney Twitchin, the beloved landlord of the Bridge Hotel, was called before the committee. When called to account, he couldn't say. "We think, Rodney," he was told, "you might have been worse for wear." Life is never easy in these God's-own dales. Life here is not easy today, nor was it in Auld Lang Syne.

**Tony Greenbank**







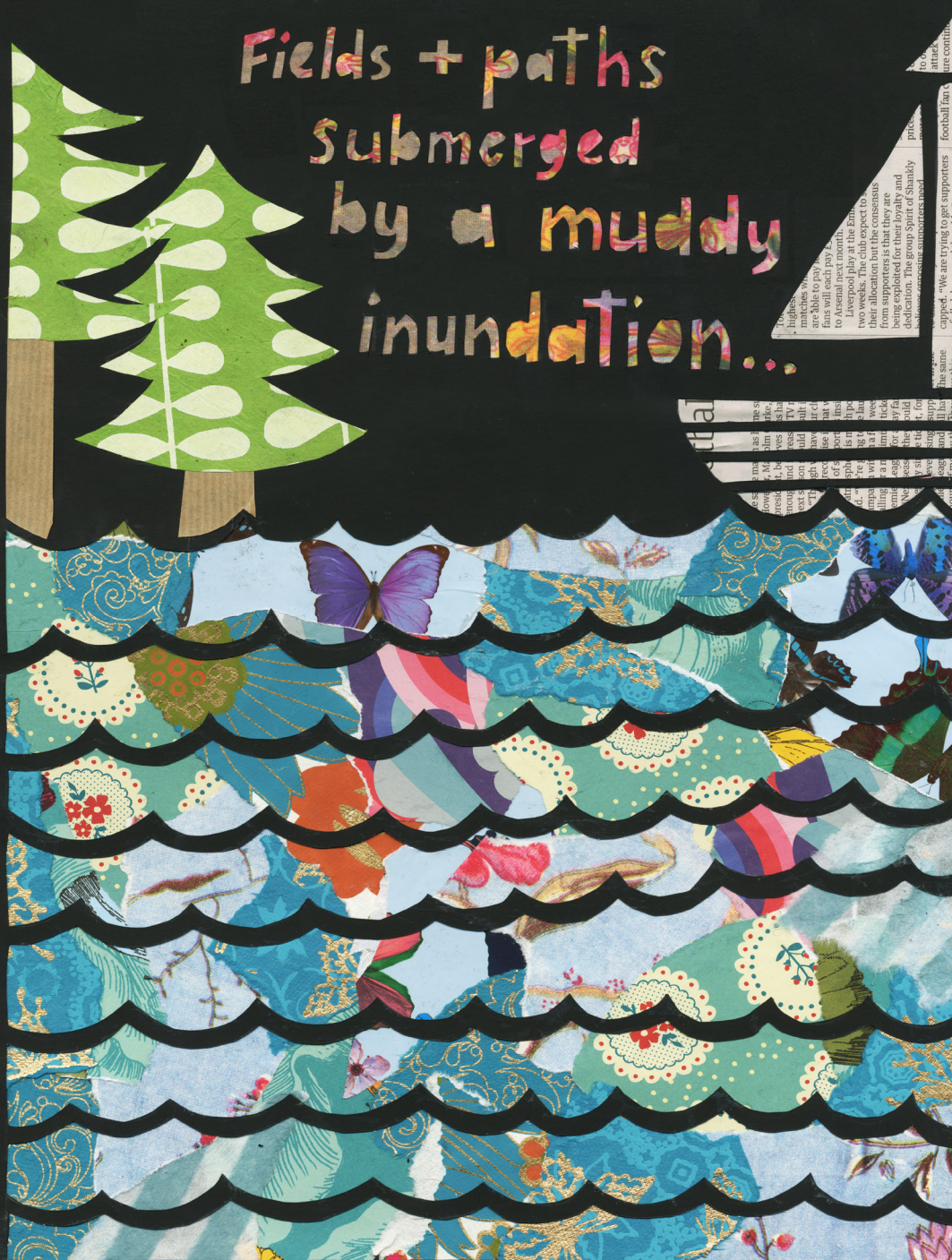
2/1/13

### **Wenlock Edge**

Not so much a deluge as an insistence: constant rain on rain, the wettest year on record, as sodden as it ever could be, flows away. There's no capacity in the land to take more water. Soil is drowned; muddy paths become streams; culverts rumble under streets and pour into the brook. All that rain from the Cambrian mountains, thousands of ditches and the swill from fields, roofs and roads is being drawn by the gravitational force of the river Severn or its Welsh personality – Hafren. From Wenlock Edge looking west, Hafren has reclaimed the riverlands and its floods are a wilderness shining like mercury, even under the greyest rainy sky. It heaved out of the meanders between Leighton and Buildwas bringing huge flocks of black-headed gulls, a strange stillness before crashing through the Ironbridge gorge. At Atcham, where crows and jackdaws pick along its edge, a buzzard hunches in the rain on an old oak in the oxbow, water lapping around its buttresses. From the bridge at Cressage, the river is dirty with Welsh earth and Shrewsbury's sin. It moves across fields with stealth, sloshing like cold tea over gates and fences, an unstoppable force with a crushing indifference. A lone fisherman curses as whatever was bending his rod escapes into the flow. Something catches my eye in the flood by the world war two pillbox.

It's too bright for this scene: cold water, grey sky, mist smothering the Wrekin beyond. The thing sparkles and flashes with light as it slips over the tops of hedges, finding a current. Just as it rolls into the churning and roaring under the bridge arch, I can see it's a mirror ball. On the other side of the bridge, tangled in willow branches, the mirror ball spins slowly, as if intentionally testing the flow for an escape route until it's free, and sparkles off downstream, as TS Eliot says, "a wilderness of mirrors".

**Paul Evans**



3/1/13

## Ferry Meadows, Peterborough

The River Nene meanders through Ferry Meadows, but it has risen over its banks and most of the floodplain is indeed that. Fields and paths are submerged by a muddy inundation, and trees, hedges and bushes mark out what is more usually land. The river itself is in spate; its usually flat, placid surface seethes with currents, shifting liquid sheets, and eddies concoct miniature whirlpools.

Last year was the wettest recorded in England. Flooding rivers are expressive reminders that we cannot shape the countryside just as we like. The patterns of weather and climate have to be accommodated in our crowded landscape. Recently I asked the environment secretary, Owen Paterson, why we were still building on floodplains, and when would we stop hearing news of another “new development” being flooded? He replied that floodplains were there to take excess rain and that building on them was “moronically stupid”. Nevertheless, seemingly short-term optimism enables local councils to permit building for which the nation later picks up the tab on its flood defence bill and home insurance costs. It means that what is locally acceptable often has little correlation with what is beneficial, either locally or nationally.

A spring of five teal trill overhead. In winter teal dabble for floating seeds and these little ducks are probably enjoying expanses of new foraging opportunities. However, the impacts of flooding on wildlife are complicated, and rich ecosystems take time to develop but are easily damaged. A floodplain that stops being flooded loses its special characteristic species. Meanwhile untold harm can be done when habitats that have grown unaccustomed to flooding are inundated for many days.

Floods were more frequent and widespread this year than in any I can recall, and the long-term climate forecast is “wet and windy”. It is essential that the balance between national and local influence on countryside planning decisions is right. The integration of environmental, economic and social knowledge, and concerns, is essential for a happy future for people and wildlife. Perhaps this can be an aim in 2013?

**Matt Shardlow**



4/1/13

## **Coggeshall, Essex**

We head out for a walk-cum-paddle across Coggeshall's flooded countryside. Our route starts on the pot-holed path alongside the St Nicholas' Chapel, and most of what remains of the town's abbey. A lichen-flecked sign says we're on the Essex Way, and we follow the Harwich direction. It's a mild day, but the rain of the season has taken its toll on the fields.

We pass through the 16th-century farmyard built among the abbey's ruins, and out to the former fish pond, which is presently aiming for lake status. Murky water surges under a small bridge, as well as covering much of the land, forming streams and rivulets. The earth has been heavily churned by horses and out on the raised land ahead we're observed closely by one in a winter jacket. The water babbles like a room of people, but I can still make out the trills of long-tailed tits as they dip from tree to tree, unfazed by the flood. I start to adjust to my new pace: taking a tentative step before waiting a second or so just to see how much I slip.

We're greeted by the land's owner, out for a walk with a wiry jack russell. He tells us the flooding is subsiding but warns us about the path ahead and kindly offers us the use of some private routes. I see what he means: where the river Blackwater splits into two, our route of grass path is often submerged by fast-flowing water, and at several points I have to leap over these gracefully into my partner's outstretched arms.

Often the relief of this makes me careless, and I repeatedly lose my footing on the damp banks, before reaching Pointwell Mill, which signifies the return to road. Overhead the sun appears faintly, as if through tissue paper, and herring gulls crisscross delightedly over the sudden wetlands.

**Lizzy Dening**



