

Kim Taplin, 'The English Path'
1979, The Boydell Press

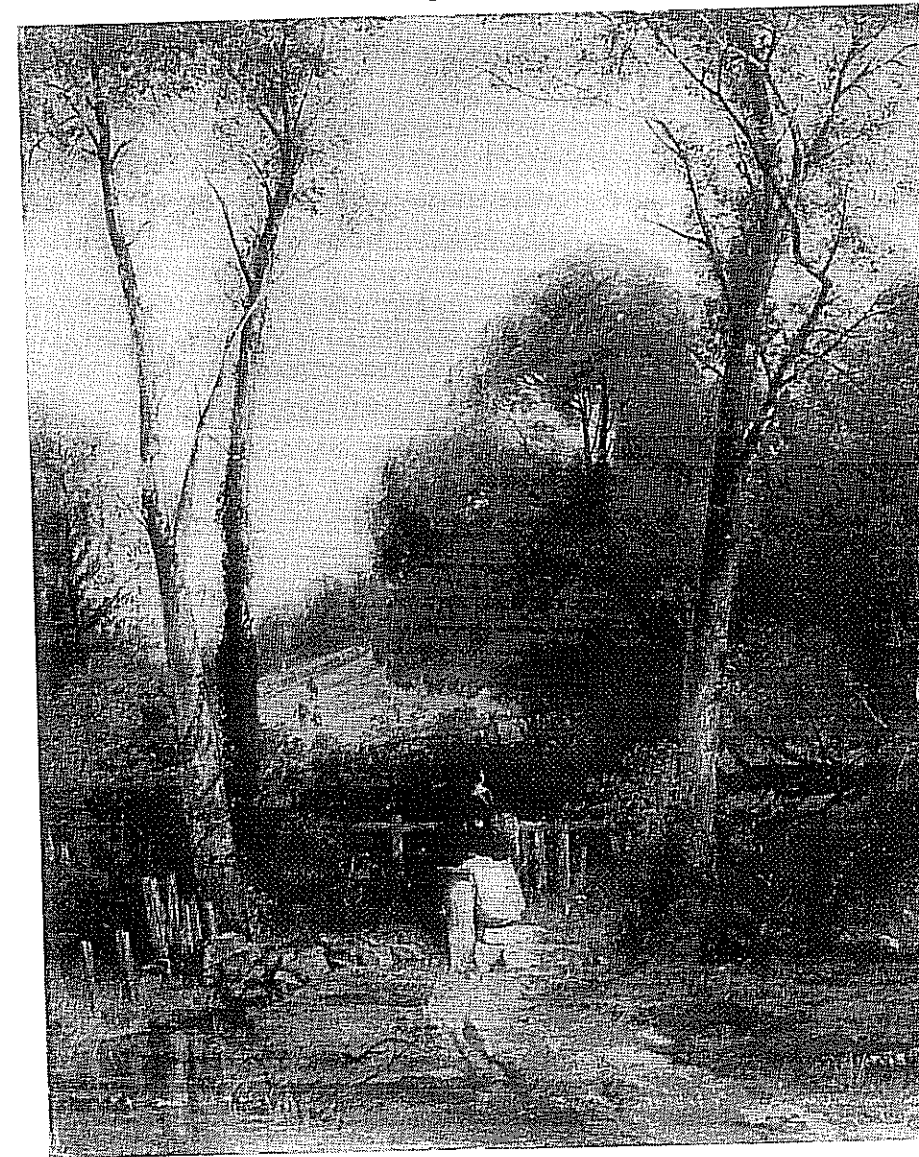
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"Common Thoughts"

BETWEEN the roads, through woods, pastures, parks, arable fields, commons and along waterways there run, all over England, many miles of public paths. Some are much-used and well-defined, and provided with signposts and stiles; but many are all but forgotten, ploughed, obstructed or overgrown, able to be followed only with the help of a map and a desperate determination. At some time nearly all of them have been well-known and well-used. There will be few that someone has not loved, as Robert Southey, though he took little pleasure in walking for its own sake, did his:

. . . when at the holidays
Return'd from school, I visited again
My old accustom'd walks, and found in them
A joy almost like meeting an old friend.

Before this century all country people except the gentry made their short journeys on foot or on horseback, so that locally paths were as important as roads as a means of communication and in providing mental landscapes. Many people, perhaps the majority, never travelled more than a few miles from home; the paths encompassed their world – a world before television and supermarkets, before so many ugly houses, and, above all, before the motor car. This is not



The Pathway to the Village Church: Thomas Creswick.

the beginning of an orgy of nostalgia. Many things died with the first world war that were obviously better dead; but that is no reason not to preserve or revive the best from the past. We can rediscover something of a slower, quieter, and more rooted existence by seeking out and exploring the

familiar paths of the past. Many of the gifts these paths have to give are still there to be enjoyed, and an understanding of their history and original purpose enhances their value.

"Roads, lanes, paths," wrote Geoffrey Grigson, "we use them without reflecting how they are some of man's oldest inscriptions upon the landscape, how they are evidence of the wedding between men and their environment." A good deal has been written about the history of roads, but almost nothing about paths, which led, usually more directly than the roads, from any habitation to anywhere that people habitually went – to other homesteads, hamlets or villages, to churches, schools, inns, mills, barns, quarries, springs, rivers or the coast, heaths and commons and, later, to railways and factories. Up to now Sidney Webb seems to be alone among the historians of roads in taking any interest in footpaths; his book *The Story of the King's Highway* (1906) did devote a few pages to the subject. "We find practically no reference to footpaths (other than footways bordering carriageways) in eighteenth-century highway literature," he wrote, "and the innumerable paths across private land were apparently used by the public without objection." The paths were too slight, too humble and too local to attract the historian: they did not require to be planned, laboured upon, paid for and legislated about nationally, as did the greater highways; nor have the people who chiefly used them been considered suitable subjects for history – until recently. Most "radical" historians have taken an interest in the urban poor, or, if they have discussed the countryside, it has been from an economic rather than a social point of view. Now, however, as interest grows both in local history and in the history of the common man, it will surely not be long before a history of the footpaths is written. The first two chapters of David Sharp's book *Walking in the Countryside* (1978) have made a beginning.

My book is about the place of the footpaths in English literature. English rural writing is full of references to them.

Besides the innumerable paths merely described, or used as settings for conversations (including scores of proposals), they are crowded with incident – escapes, fights, drownings, and even the thrilling denouement of Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* all occur on footpaths. Poems, novels and even plays unconsciously document their social history, and in understanding a little about that we can appreciate more fully the part they have played in the literary imagination. Village writing – the best of which is Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* – biographies, autobiographies, diaries and letters and many forms of pictorial art present the story of the footpaths.

Besides making plain their practical importance and the extent of their use, we realise when we examine this wealth of material that it is these paths, rather than the roads, that provide the real access to the English countryside. They lead the way to unexpected, hidden landscapes and furnish peaceful places from which to absorb them. It was only by being able to walk them that the writers – and landscape painters – could come to understand that especial harmonious relationship between man and nature that was characteristic of rural England, and could present that intimate, affectionate view of the countryside which we prize, and which has been envied and admired by the natives of other countries as they have envied and admired that countryside itself and its fieldpaths.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries refer to paths, and so do a few seventeenth-century writers; but references are thin in the eighteenth century when most poetry was too polite for them. They appear again in the seventeen-eighties with poets like John Scott of Amwell, of whom his friend John Hoole wrote:

The greater part of Mr. Scott's poems are turned upon rural imagery; in which it will be found, that his principal merit is novelty in description, and a laudable endeavour to introduce an occasional simplicity of style, perhaps too much rejected by the present fastidious readers of poetry

. . . living in the country, and being a close and accurate observer, he painted what he saw . . .

The italics are mine, to draw attention to phrases which would fit many of the writers I refer to in this book. To us there seems nothing very startling in *The Amoebian Eclogues*; indeed the cries of "O ye shepherds!" and the automatic choice of words like "strayed" for walked and "azure" for blue seem perhaps all too conventional; but the poet of Amwell did enjoy its real paths, and write about them in lines like these:

In shady lanes the foxglove bells appear,
And golden spikes the downy mulleins rear;
The enclosure ditch luxuriant mallows hide;
And branchy succory crowds the pathway wide.

Though an admirer, John Hoole could not take the shameless modernism that mentioned an "enclosure ditch", masked by mallows though it was. It must have been this kind of thing he had in mind when he referred to the unfortunate admission of "such names and circumstances, as, in my opinion, no versification, however harmonious, can make poetical". In the same way the mud, and brambles, and mere down-to-earth commonness of the paths had made them on the whole unfit subjects for eighteenth-century verse.

Most of the references to footpaths occur in nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing, and the reasons for this are several, but connected. Firstly, rural England in pre-industrial times was largely unenclosed. This meant that access to the countryside was more general, and although there were well-beaten tracks linking regular destinations, one might still wander at will through common or uncultivated land and by a variety of ways along the balks dividing the narrow strips where crops were grown. Secondly, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, pre-industrial literature tended to view the countryside from the standpoint of the wealthy owners of great houses; and these were the few

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