The Singing Places

Virginia Astley

PhD 2025

The Singing Places

Virginia Astley

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of Manchester Metropolitan University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

2025

The Singing Places

Abstract

The Singing Places is a threefold thesis comprising a collection of poetry, a book-length work of creative non-fiction essays and an extended musical composition. My overarching aim is to fully explore how acoustic and emotional resonance influences our creative engagement with place. In creating this work, I demonstrate the way in which sonic landscapes embed themselves deep within us and how the aural environment is as significant in shaping our experience of place as physical or visual elements. My objective is to contribute to, and expand, the advancement of contemporary place writing by emphasising the often-overlooked role of the acoustic environment, positioning it at the forefront of our understanding and appreciation of place. The original intention was to focus my research on the upper reaches of the river Thames, however, due to Covid, I based the initial part of my project in West Dorset where I live. This is an area that was written about, and known intimately, by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). My research methods have included walking, conversations, investigating church porches, playing music in outdoor locations, making field-recordings and conducting archival research. I worked collaboratively with my twin sister, a conservation architect, and with my daughter, a musician. As I was able to explore what it means to think about a single idea – resonance – *through* different processes and several representational forms, this thesis makes a significant contribution to current debates in the development of practice-based knowledge. Sound is intrinsic to our experience of place and, if we take the time to tune in to this, we gain a richer experience of the landscapes through which we travel.

The Singing Places

Table of Contents

The Singing Places – An Introduction

The original aim of this multi-disciplinary practice-based thesis was to examine the characteristic of resonance within the landscape, with particular reference to the upper reaches of the river Thames. I wanted to understand something of the nature of this place that, over the years, has drawn me to return, this remembered landscape stored in my earliest self. The genesis for this began back in 2012 when, during the wettest summer on record, I worked as a lock keeper's assistant on the river. As time went on, a combination of tiredness, continual rain, and the dredging up of all kinds of memories from the river, increasingly unsettled me. In this state, I became aware of restorative places I needed to go to at the end of each working day. Benson Lock, where I was based, felt heavy with an intangible sadness, something beyond words. To me, places are seldom neutral: they are weighted, weighted with stuff, and sometimes, even arriving fresh to somewhere new, we pick up these reverberations, these lingering echoes. Sometimes it's hard to work out what belongs to us, or whether we are tuning into something else – a kind of sympathetic resonance. Why did I feel this sadness at Benson, but Cleeve felt comforting and easy to be at, with a sense of coming home? In the never-ending rain I started to think about inner/outer, past/present, imagined/real worlds, finding out what belonged together. In the evenings I would linger by the river, held by the familiarity of a soundscape I knew from long ago: the syncopated coo of the collared dove, the honking fly-past of the Canada geese, the two-note call of the high-speed train, the church bells from across the river in South Stoke. All these were made more resonant within the riverine landscape as they were reflected and amplified across the water's surface. These, and many other acoustic experiences that summer, and since, led me to the decision to examine this characteristic of resonance within the landscape. Drawing on a variety of methodologies and immersing myself in the sounds and reverberations of these spaces, my research aimed to examine the ways in which certain locations become what I have called 'Singing Places' – spaces that hold a profound sonic presence and emotional resonance.

Initially, with my overarching aim of investigating these upper reaches of the Thames, its soundscape and places of emotional and acoustic resonance, my research questions were:

1: What is it about particular places on the Upper Thames that causes them to have significant resonance?

2: How do those who live and work on the river experience this resonance?

3: What is the link between acoustic resonance and emotional resonance?

4: How can sound transform our relationship with place?

5: How does a certain location become a 'Singing Place'?

6: How do sound and emotion intertwine to create a profound connection?

7: How do I respond and find a language and form to translate this resonance – this characteristic of place – into poetry, music, and creative non-fiction?

As a musician and poet my previous work has extended across different forms. *The Singing Places* would build on earlier work including *From Gardens Where We Feel Secure* (1983) – an instrumental album incorporating field recordings; my MA project, *Keeping the River* (2012) – a work of creative non-fiction; *The Curative Harp* (2015) – a poetry chapbook; *The English River* (2018) – a poetry and photo collection; and *Maiden Newton Ecliptic* (2019) – an album of music and poetry.

I intended to approach and respond to the phenomenon of resonance in my creative practice and critical thinking and, drawing upon my background, set out to find creative expressions for this resonance and to form a body of work around poetry, music, creative non-fiction, and field-recordings. I decided that my thesis would form a threefold work that would comprise: a creative non-fiction book attempting to capture these Singing Places through a combination of immersive, personal experience with considerable academic/critical reflection permeating throughout; secondly, an audio composition based around field recordings and expressing the sonic distillation and acoustic qualities of these places; and finally, a collection of poetry evoking the physical and emotional landscapes of these Singing Places. In creating this work, I would demonstrate the way in which sonic landscapes embed themselves deep within us and how the aural environment is just as significant in shaping our experience of place as physical or visual elements.

Establishing what I mean by resonance in this context I looked to the *Oxford English Dictionary* which lists six definitions. Looking closely, the meanings are linked by words and ideas such as shared frequency, vibration, and sympathetic

response. For the purposes of this project, I focus on the first, second and fourth meanings from the *OED*. These are:

> 1a – The re-inforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection or by the synchronous vibration of a surrounding space or a neighbouring object. Also: a sound, or quality of sound, resulting from this.
>
> 1b – The property of an object of giving rise to this phenomenon.
>
> 2 – Corresponding or sympathetic response; an instance of this. In later use also: the power or quality of evoking or suggesting images, memories, and emotion; an allusion, connotation, or overtone.
>
> 4 – The condition in which an oscillating or periodic force acting on an object or system has a frequency close to that of a natural vibration of the object, a resulting amplification of the natural vibration. This is the phenomenon which gives rise to the resonance of sound (sense 1a).

1a, 1b, and 4 are what I would define as Acoustic Resonance, and 2 as Emotional or Sympathetic Resonance. Bearing in mind that when a sound generated in one way creates vibration in another system, it's possible to see this second meaning of resonance as a kind of reverberation in our memory, our body, and our feelings: the way in which something has more emotional weight because of what it is connecting with in our past (a conscious or unconscious process). The two are linked and there is a rich metaphorical language which we borrow, without thinking, from acoustic theory when talking about something that touches us in a deep and significant way. We talk about something *resonating* for us, *chiming* with how we feel, *striking or touching a chord*, and *ringing a bell* or *ringing true*. Even the word 'overtone', when applied to a subtle connotation in speech, has been borrowed from acoustics. Overtones or harmonics are not the note that's actually heard (i.e. the note you would sing if someone asked you to sing back a note being played on an instrument) but they are subtly there (in different ratios) and affect the overall timbre of the instrument's sound. These overtones are part of the harmonic series. Some music requires these harmonics themselves to be played and the sound is of a very different quality – ethereal and very pure, half-there. The parallel with things hinted at, half-said, alluded to, is clear. As both types of resonance are related, I would argue that, in the same way that the evocative power of Proust's *petites madeleines* brought back his childhood so vividly through their taste and smell, a long-ago familiar soundscape can similarly activate these profound responses.

However, to be clear, the original sounds do not need to be particularly resonant in themselves. It's more that they are, 'creating a vibration in another system' – they are making us feel a certain way. In general, outdoor spaces tend not to be particularly resonant: for example, an open meadow has few nearby surfaces to reflect sound. However, frequently, in my practice I am in more reflective outdoor spaces, such as beside the river where the sound is carried further, or I am listening at night when much of the world is silenced.

Research methods and focus

For an artist working across multiple art forms, walking and place have always driven my work. Walking forms an intrinsic part of my creative practice, as a composer, poet, and musician. The majority of my work has been based around a sense of place, of walking in places of significance and by talking to people along the path. There is too a continual internal dialogue whereby I am sifting experience, thoughts, and emotions, working out what belongs together and identifying points of tension. In certain instances, the connection between my work and the environment is unmistakable: for example, *Maiden Newton Ecliptic* was based entirely on a twenty-four-hour work around the extreme perimeter of the village where I live.

Over the years I have recorded and collected while out walking. These records are made as sound recordings, notes or photographs. These are things that remind me of the walk, and this process of gathering generates a sense of immersion and of being open to what arises. These elements are part of my method in developing a body of work. Soundscapes are stored by recording, either on my phone or Sony PCM D100 recorder. Most of my work has been conceived, initiated, and based outdoors if not always completed there.

For many years I would set out early and walk before the working day. I would make notes that I would quickly type up at home and print out, keeping this sheet in my pocket throughout the day, glancing at it when I got chance. In the evenings I would write these notes into some kind of first draft. These walk-poems, poem-walks, have been a constant over the years.

I planned to interview those who lives were based on the river such as the lock keepers who lived and worked at the same site, sometimes for as long as fifty years. Besides looking after their lock, these people were also weir-keepers, and it was their weirs that kept them busy during the lonely winter months. Frequently they would

talk of their work, saying: 'it's not a job, it's a way of life.' Through the seasons I planned to make walks along the same familiar stretches of riverbank, recording these and interweaving the dialogue of the river dwellers into creative non-fiction essays. Focusing on the auditory, I also planned to make field-recordings that would map the soundscape of the area.

Through this interdisciplinary exploration and creative expression, the thesis would explore the rich narratives, histories and emotions that intertwine in these Singing Places, re-defining what it means to belong to a place and how the soundscape influences our relationship with the spaces we inhabit. By working across different forms, there was the possibility of creating work that had distinct qualities, but which shared frequencies and reverberations. Common themes would echo throughout: place-based sound, early aural memories, birdsong, people from my past, lock keepers on the river, the natural world, childhood, family, time, portals, silence.

However, the research aims of my project evolved and changed over the last three and a half years. This was largely due to the geographical restrictions brought about by Covid 19 that were put in place shortly after I started my PhD programme. Initially, I had begun work in rural Oxfordshire, visiting sites that held a powerful emotional resonance for myself. Two of these were Cleeve, in South Oxfordshire, and Kelmscott, home of William Morris, in West Oxfordshire – both Thames-side locations. From these visits a sequence of local poems was written. This felt like preliminary work, a kind of reconnecting to the river and a following-on from the writing that formed my collection, *The English River*. However, from March 2020 all visits to the Thames ended. Clearly, the limitations of lockdowns had created significant obstacles for the fieldwork that is integral to my practice. At first, it was suggested in supervision I could stay at home in West Dorset and produce work that was memory-based, possibly adding an additional research question: how does this resonance change when it is memory-based? This however felt impossible. My work is very much site-based and immersive. Even if I could continue developing something away from its place of origin, I needed to have the basis there. For example, the music for *The Singing Places* needed to be written around field recordings that were at this point unrecorded.

Initially, I used this time to familiarise myself with those working, or who had previously worked, in a similar or connected field: R. Murray Schafer; Seán Street; Barry Blesser & Linda-Ruth Salter; John Cage; Pauline Oliveros; Hildegard

Westerkamp; Janet Cardiff; Hamish Fulton and Richard Long. By engaging with these, and the work of other writers and artists, I was able to develop my thinking, and work towards situating my own project within a wider academic/theoretical context. Set against this research I listened to and read the work of those who have continued to inspire me: Louise Glück; W.S. Merwin; Wendell Berry; Kathleen Jamie; Rebecca Solnit; and Annie Dillard.

I thought about climate change and crisis too. It was striking that, while governments were being quick to implement vaccines and lockdowns against the threat of Covid, little action seemed to be being taken against this principal challenge to our world. As most of our lives ground to a halt, and, appreciating the lack of traffic and plane noise, we turned to nature. In our West Dorset village, adders were out basking on the empty roads, and I liked to imagine water voles and otters returning to the Thames. With the traffic stopped, and in this quieter world with human life dropped to a whisper, we gained a heightened sensitivity to the birds and wildlife, the weather and water. The awareness that we were entering a climate and ecological emergency increased, on a more global scale, during this time. I was aware of the decline in songbirds in my lifetime and I wondered about extreme weather events and how these might impact the soundscapes I would be researching.

Schafer, the foremost Canadian acoustic ecologist, first used the term soundscape in his influential *The Soundscape – Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, which was originally published in 1977. Schafer used the expression when describing any acoustic field of study and for him its meaning was a broad one: 'Soundscape' could refer to a radio programme, a musical composition, or an acoustic environment (1994: 7). But it is within this last context that his thinking has most greatly challenged and shaped our understanding of our aural surroundings and their influence on our lives. Schafer identifies *keynote sounds, signals* and *soundmarks*. His description of keynotes sounds is particularly relevant:

> The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, insects and animals. Many of these sounds may possess archetypal significance; that is, they may have imprinted themselves so deeply on the people hearing them that life without them would be sensed as a distinct impoverishment. (1994: 10)

Schafer also examined how, as our aural environment changes, this is reflected in our music. He proposed that, within Classical music, the solo flute and hunting horn – for example in Haydn's Symphony No 73 La Chasse – reflected bygone pastoral soundscapes. As society underwent industrialisation, Schafer noted a parallel expansion in music, with the symphony orchestra growing ever larger, and ever louder (1994: 108). Importantly, Schafer introduced the concept of a 'balanced soundscape' – an auditory experience free from excessive noise pollution, one where natural sounds can be heard. Schafer describes rural landscapes as having a hi-fi soundscape – one where 'discrete sounds can be heard because of the low ambient noise level' (1994: 43). Reflecting on my walks on Rainbarrows – the round bowl barrows on Thomas Hardy's Egdon Heath – where the whirr of the A35 becomes an almost constant companion, I wonder where white noise fits into all of this. The difficulty in achieving a 'balanced soundscape' is highlighted and I realise just how personal and individual this is. Even now, as I write in the library, my attention is drawn to the annoying hum of the ventilation, causing me to consider how sensitive I am to 'ambient noise'.

Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter develop Schafer's concepts further and explore the idea of aural architecture in their *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* The authors differentiate between the two key terms: soundscape and aural architecture. In a soundscape the 'sounds are important in themselves' (2009: 16), whereas in aural architecture the emphasis is different. In the latter there is a sense of an auditory dialogue between a space and the sounds occurring within it: 'Snap your fingers, and the space responds […] Remain silent, and the space remains silent. The listener is immersed in the space's aural response' (2009: 16).

Blesser and Salter's ideas encouraged me to not only focus on attentive listening but to make sounds within the landscape myself, generally by speaking aloud and sometimes by singing. Their ideas about 'hearing space' (2009: 20) and human echolocation (2009: 43) brought back memories of working with a young man at Dartington Summer School a few years ago. We were making improvised music outside and one of the group, Mark, was blind. We had made our way to a far corner of the estate and, before we began to set up and work, Mark turned to the vast green bowl behind us. He called out in a loud deep boom, asking us all to be quiet as he did so. Gradually he moved his head round, all the time repeating his call. He was listening for the reflection of his voice off the buildings on the far side of the bowl.

Mark could point to exactly where the buildings were and knew that the ground dipped substantially; it seemed that the whole process was necessary for him to perform, that he was hearing space to enable him to place himself in the landscape.

John Cage, the American composer and leading figure in the American musical avant-garde, blurred the line between environmental sounds and music by literally opening the windows of the concert hall to the outside world, thus breaking down the division between the two. He believed that music should not be constrained to traditional ideas of melody and rhythm but *include* ambient sound, noise and silence. In his view, music was not separate from the environment but part of it – that it was a way to connect and engage with the world about us. Cage's performances were dynamic and unpredictable. He allowed music to reflect the world as it is. Cage had been influenced by Erik Satie who first experimented with his ambient background, *musique d'ameublement* (furniture music), in the early twentieth century (2009: 76). I cannot claim to have been influenced by Cage in my earlier work (*From Gardens*) as I had not read his theories at this point. However, Cage did experiment with chance, using the I Ching in his work (2009: 57) and there are elements of this in the making of any field recordings. Chance and unpredictability play their part: natural sounds, conversation, trains and passing traffic.

However, the recordings I eventually made for *The Singing Places* were each an hour in length, so I could afford to be selective in which sections I chose to use. I also feel that my desire to place the field-recordings at the centre of my compositions, as the essence of each place, and to write music *around* these, puts emphasis on the ambient sound of a place. The sounds of the environment are not added afterwards as an afterthought to add 'atmosphere', instead they carry the fundamental tones, the acoustic resonance, of the place. In this way the original ambient sound is of equal, if not more, importance than the composed music.

Pauline Oliveros was an American composer who, from the 1960s onwards, was working in the developing field of electronic and experimental music. She was interested in the attentional process of listening, as opposed to hearing, and over the years developed her theories based around Deep Listening. Her book *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (2005) documents her practice and offers readers ways to experience profound, immersive listening, an example being 'Extreme Slow Walk' (2005: 20), which challenges 'your normal pattern or rhythm of walking so that you can learn to reconnect with very subtle energies in the body.' She also advocated

keeping a listening journal and to listen 24/7. As I write this in the library a family history group are chatting at a nearby table: a bigamist grandfather, lack of contraception, and photographs being doctored to take people out of them, are all being discussed. I am aware of typing sounds, not just my own, and of the rain outside. Oliveros also believed that: 'Sounds carry intelligence. Ideas, feelings and memories are triggered by sounds' (2005: xxv). I quote her instructions for Urban/Country Meditations:

> **Urban**
>
> Listen to a roadway – eyes closed – distinguish size shape make of car by sound – also speed and health of engine.
>
> **Country**
>
> Sit by the trees – what kind of tree makes what kind of sound?
>
> (1988: 52)

Oliveros's contrast of the urban and the rural and her suggestions on ways to engage in Deep Listening were both helpful and influential as my work progressed.

Holding in mind the long association between walking and writing in my own practice, I examined the ways in which other artists have used walking in their creative work. The central characteristic of the walking artists Richard Long and Hamish Fulton's creative practice is their physical engagement with landscape. Long's *Selected Statements and Interviews* (2007) and Fulton's insights expressed in his show, *Walking Between Walks – Connecting the Invisible Footprints of Seven Previous Walks* at Kestle Barton (2018), influenced my perspective on the part that walking plays in my own creative practice. For walking art, like a live musical performance, like sound itself, moves through time, through life. 'It is physical but afterwards invisible' (2007: 26). Long, in an interview with Yuko Hasegawa in 1995, when asked about what made him go beyond traditional forms, says: 'I had an intuition that art could also be about things like clouds, leaves, water, snow, grass etc in a real way, not a representational way' (2007: 105).

I was also particularly struck by Fulton's statement: 'If I do not make a walk, I cannot make any art.' Fulton makes clear that, although art historians have, since the 1970s, defined him as a land artist, he describes himself as a walking artist: 'From my side in 2018, as a symbolic gesture of respect for nature, I wish no association with any form of art that intentionally remodels the land, or introduces pure natural objects into the art market' (Fulton: 2018). Fulton uses his camera and notebooks to record

his walks. In *Words from Walks* 2019 he writes: 'I am what I call a "walking artist" […] I'm not a conceptual artist. I am an artist who walks, not a walker who makes art […] When I say that "the walk is the art", I simply mean that "the walk", is my contribution to contemporary art' adding: 'Walking is the constant, the art medium is variable' (2019: 2-14). Fulton's walks are made with self-imposed rules that are decided beforehand, a kind of protocol that is followed throughout – a predefined procedural methodology. There is the feel of an experiment about them.

The texts and photographs that Fulton presents in exhibitions are kept to a minimum. What Fulton leaves us are tokens. Maybe they are like the faintest of brush strokes or a Japanese haiku. Maybe they are enough for us to fill in the gaps, to make our own walks in our imagination. Maybe they are inspiration to create new walks.

CUCKOO DOVES PUDDLES
A RABBIT CROSSES THE ROAD
SWIFTS CIRCLING IN A GREY SKY
PUDDLES AND SPARROWS WET FEET
A PATH BEWTEEN CHESTNUT TREES CUCKOO

(Stour Valley Art Project 15-21 June 1998)

I was also drawn to the audio walks of Janet Cardiff, a Canadian artist who began working with sound in the 1990s after using a Dictaphone to record her impressions as she walked through a graveyard. Accidentally rewinding the tape, she played it back to where she had left off. Hearing her footsteps, her words and her breathing, she began to walk with her 'virtual body' 'I had found a way to be in two different places at once […] to simulate space and time travel in a very simple way' (Cardiff and Schaub: 2005). Cardiff's binaural multi-tracked sound walks (accompanied by photographs) depend upon the listener moving through space rather as they would with a museum audio guide. These audio tours take the participant into situations they wouldn't necessarily encounter and are immersive and engaging for others in a way that Fulton's work is not always. Possibly they are easier for the audience to engage with as the listener is participating by walking and experiencing the same environment that Cardiff is describing. Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) took six years to complete and weaves and juxtaposes different strands of fragmented narrative and historical detail. It runs for forty-six minutes and was

written for, and largely in, Central Park. The title comes from a Baudelaire poem, 'La Chevelure' (The head of hair) writes Karen O'Rourke in *Mapping and Walking – Artists as Cartographers* (2013: 34-40). Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet* is a 'reworking of *Spem in Alium* – Thomas Tallis – 1573'. This work holds a great resonance for me, and, having sung in it as a fourteen-year-old in Manchester Cathedral, I am interested in Cardiff's statement on her website (2025):

> While listening to a concert you are normally seated in front of the choir, in traditional audience position. With this piece I want the audience to be able to experience a piece of music from the viewpoint of the singers. Every performer hears a unique mix of the piece of music. Enabling the audience to move through the space allows them to be intimately connected with the voices. It also reveals the piece of music as a changing construct. As well I am interested in how sound may physically construct a space in a sculptural way and how a viewer may choose a path through this physical yet virtual space.

I'm also reminded of hearing *Spem in Alium* in Sherborne Abbey some years ago, and how it was overwhelming. There was no clarity, only everything blurring and the sound building up to a loud but indistinct jumble, what Blesser and Salter would term as 'enveloping reverberation' (2009: 62). Frequently, my personal experience of music in this abbey is like this. However, all those years ago, singing *Spem in Alium* in Manchester Cathedral was very different. All forty 'parts' were spaced about the building. I remember coming in (from behind a pillar) on the first entry and being aware of my lone voice amongst the forty parts but how it was also possible, to hear everyone's entries with clarity. Whether this is because Manchester Cathedral is less resonant than Sherborne Abbey or whether it was the spacing of the choir around the cathedral is impossible to know. I suspect it was the spacing, and possibly the taking part and the close proximity to the other performers, and therefore the actual sound source, not to its reverberant reflection.

Research in Covid: Hardyscapes, Performances and Church Porch Project

As days became weeks, and weeks became months, a shift of direction was needed in my creative practice. I decided to redefine the geographical focus of my project and to study resonance in two contrasting landscapes: the near-at-hand

topographies around my home; and later, when it was permitted, the upper reaches of the Thames. Because I was based in West Dorset, this became my research area. It was a matter of working with what *was* possible. My world (as everyone's) had become smaller, but I drew inspiration from Thomas Hardy who in August 1922 (when he was 82) wrote in his notebook, 'I am convinced that it is better for a writer to know a little bit of the world remarkably well than to know a great part of the world remarkably little' (1955: 95). It seemed Hardy never tired of his patch. Earlier, in a letter to his great friend Edmund Gosse in October 1913, and now held in Dorset History Centre, he had written, 'I believe it is fifteen years since I saw Paris or Brussels […] what's the use of going far, when there is more within a mile of me than I shall ever comprehend.' Earlier, (1871) he had also written: 'Lonely places in the country have each their own peculiar silences' (1955: 36).

These thoughts of Hardy's stayed with me throughout my research. I already had a deep understanding of the writer through living in the area for twenty years and from working for the National Trust at Hardy's house, Max Gate. It was in many ways an unexpected gift to stay in one place, to slow down and to connect to Hardy, the English writer who arguably pays most attention to music/sound in his writing. Schafer wrote that novelists such as Hardy and Tolstoy had, 'captured the soundscapes of their own places and times' (1994: 9). If I was to be confined to West Dorset then I could immerse myself in his environment, travel the paths he trod, visit the churches he worked on as a young architect, and read his books and poems in the landscape where they originated. Hardy, like the Thames lock keepers, had been shaped by his landscape, and he in turn used landscape as a force that shaped his characters. Giles and Marty's lives in *The Woodlanders* (1887) blur with the natural world about them: Marty is said to hear the pine trees' 'soft musical breathing' as she and Giles plant together. She comments, 'It seems to me they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest – just as we be' (1986: 106). Later, Hardy describes Giles who, 'looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as cornflowers, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips …' (1986: 261). These quotations illustrate the depth of connection between his characters and the natural world about them through their continued immersion in their environment. There are parallels with the extreme walks of Fulton and Long, who like Marty and Giles, become one with the landscape they pass through with their commitment and deep engagement. Marty's ability to

hear the pines breathing also reminds me of the Thames lock keeper who, tied to their patch day and night, year upon year, will know exactly what the water is doing. All these illustrations demonstrate how lives lived outdoors braid with their surroundings, how a merging of person and place occurs.

Hardy's lifelong connection to Dorset, and its extended form, Wessex, ran deep. The cottage at Higher Bockhampton, where he was born in 1840, was the kernel of that world – a world to which he remained faithful. Born into a family of church musicians, it is perhaps not surprising that Hardy was tuned to his soundscape. Although *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) could be said to be the novel most filled with music in the traditional sense – tracing the lives of the Melstock Quire – I would argue that it is *The Return of the Native* (1878) that is the most musical of Hardy's work. The ever-present soundworld of the heath, with what Hardy terms its 'linguistic peculiarity' (1971: 68), runs as a force throughout the book:

> Gusts in innumerable series followed each other from the north-west […] below these in force, above them in pitch, a dwindled voice strove hard at a husky tune, which was the peculiar local sound alluded to […] Throughout the blowing of these plaintive November winds that note bore a great resemblance to the ruins of human song which remain to the throat of fourscore and ten. It was a worn whisper, dry and papery, and it brushed so distinctly across the ear that, by the accustomed, the material minutiae in which it originated could be realised as by touch (1971: 68).

As someone who was always listening, and for whom music and sound were on a continuum, it felt as though Hardy would have been sympathetic to Schafer, Cage and Oliveros. Hardy heard music in the trees, in the wind, in the birdsong, in the mummified heath bells of Egdon Heath. This landscape and Rainbarrows were places that drew him back again and again, from his first 'infant steps' on the Roman Road to taking Gustav Holst to visit, at the age of eighty-seven.

Through my own work, Rainbarrows became a place that I frequently returned to. I was aware that I was now also under its influence, unable to resist its pull. I began to write creative non-fiction essays about this and other such places, frequently focusing on the soundscape, and I started to create walks that were directly related to Hardy's life. One such example was the walk I made from Maiden Newton to

Melbury Osmund retracing the steps Hardy's mother, Jemima, took as a young girl in service, walking home each week on her day off. I was aware that it was as if my ears were listening two centuries apart: the present day soundworld juxtaposed against the sounds of two hundred years earlier that I could hear in my 'mind's ear'. This kinesthetic and sonic exploration led to a deep bodily experience of time and place and to what still rings across the centuries.

Prior to Covid, the National Trust had commissioned a Conservation Management Plan for Max Gate. Freya, the surveyor who was writing this extensive document, lived some distance away, and, when Covid arrived, I was asked if I would read through the archive boxes that had been sent from Swindon and scan and email any relevant documents to her. Given that I had worked as a cleaner at Max Gate, I was familiar with the security and could work in the attics alone sorting through the eight large boxes of archival material. These documents dated back to 1940, when Kate, Hardy's sister, gave the house to the Trust. This reading and sifting process, over three months, allowed me to further my knowledge of the house and its inhabitants since the time of Hardy. In the attics were also copies of monographs, published in the 1960s, featuring interviews with some of those that had close contact with Hardy such as Nellie Titterington, his maid. I was able to use the time to read these, to wander the house, which to an extent had been 'mothballed', and to write in some of my favourite rooms. I had always been drawn to the room where Hardy wrote *The Woodlanders* – my favourite novel – and to be in this room, quite alone, the bypass silenced, was to slip into another time. Again, essays were produced, and I began to look backwards and to write memoir material that could be incorporated into *The Singing Places* – the creative non-fiction element of my finished thesis. More recently, I have been able to access the Hardy Archive at the Dorset History Centre to continue this research and extend my knowledge.

Alongside writing about these Hardyscapes, my daughter Florence and I began to perform live-streamed concerts during the summer of 2020, and in subsequent lockdowns, from these locations. Performances were given by Rushy Pond, on Egdon Heath, outside Sherborne Abbey, at Hardy's Cottage and Max Gate, in Maiden Newton House (formerly the rectory where Jemima had worked) and at Winterborne Came Church (where Hardy's friend and mentor William Barnes had served as priest). It was possible to experience not only the acoustic resonances of these different sites but also the emotional resonance. Of special note was the performance

inside Hardy's Cottage (August 2020), which had been empty of visitors and staff for some months and stripped of all its paraphernalia (the pastiche clutter that normally fills the place). For me, the 'dressing' of rooms in this way does an injustice to the essence of Hardy and his family. With all the pots and pans, books and ancient nightgowns gone, a space was created where in some sense time was thinner. Something special happened, something I have struggled to find words for: reading 'Domicilium' in the room where Hardy was born; playing the Hardy tunes, on flute and harp, in front of the fireplace where they would have been played a thousand times before; 'Enrico', Hardy's favourite tune, ringing through the house as time closed like a fan.

This experience of connecting with Hardy on multiple levels developed my ideas about the multi-sensory experiencing of places and created a foundational basis for my river recordings. I always expected to feel a connection to Hardy and something of his presence, but the experience was deeper than imagined. On another occasion, my daughter and I performed a live-streamed Christmas concert at Max Gate. Once again, the place was empty, and, besides all the West Gallery carols, we played 'Long, Long Ago' and 'Isle of Beauty' both written by Thomas Haynes Bayley (1797-1830). These were once popular songs sung by the mothers of Hardy, Florence and Emma. Particularly poignant was at the end of the evening when we sat on the stairs and read Hardy's 'The Strange House – Max Gate, A.D. 2000' as a conversation between the two of us, with its opening stanza:

'I hear the piano playing –
Just as a ghost might play.'
'– O, but what are you saying?
There's no piano to-day;
Their old one was sold and broken;
Years past it went amiss'
'– I heard it or wouldn't have spoken;
A strange house, this!'
(2001: 580)

During this time I continued to work with my twin sister, Alison, a conservation and Diocesan architect. In the earlier part of my PhD programme we had decided to visit

the porches of West Dorset churches. Due to Covid restraints, the churches themselves were locked and inaccessible. However, spending time in these threshold spaces – neither fully sacred nor fully secular – seemed resonant with the experience we were all living through. The sense of pausing in what is normally a transitory space, confronted by the unknown, without being allowed to go any further, intensified our experience. Each week we spent prolonged time in these in-between places, attuning ourselves to each individual porch, writing and drawing, producing a collection of poems and architectural drawings that spans an entire year. The aural aspect, with the opportunity to practise attentive listening, was an important consideration to this work – from the sounds of the outside world to the quieter more cut-off ambience within the porches. The resonant qualities of the porches varied depending on their size and whether they were empty or cluttered. We noticed that frequently north facing porches would have some kind of mat or floor covering. North porches are always colder and damper, and the mats had been strategically placed to try and warm the place, to add a little comfort; but they also created an acoustic dampening effect. Many of these churches had been restored during the Victorian era and were worked on by Hardy in his younger days when, on leaving school, he had been articled to John Hicks, the architects in Dorchester.

By the summer of 2021 I was finally able to return to the Thames and to write at length at some of my key places. I began to experiment with how *The Singing Places*, the creative non-fiction part of my thesis, might be structured, addressing questions such as whether the material should be arranged chronologically or according to which area I was writing about. Increasingly I was drawn to arrange the essays chronologically as I felt this made more sense for the reader, despite this resulting in the chapters moving between the two landscapes. I also finally began making field recordings by the river and started researching some of the traditional songs of the region. For my research, I used the folk songs collected by Alfred Williams in his *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* (1923). Williams (1877-1930) was a writer and folklorist who documented the songs, stories and traditions of the people in his local area – the Upper Thames Valley. At this point I was considering using these songs and tunes in some way as part of the musical expression of the Singing Places. As Williams was not able to notate music, only the words had been recorded. I had no idea what tunes they would be set to. This led me to talk at length with Ted Morse, a traditional musician whom I have known since childhood. Ted grew up in Oxford and

as a teenager was in the Cowley Road Folk Club. Ted knew many of the melodies for the songs and I had a memorable afternoon sitting, in the sunshine, in his garden in Moulsford, Oxfordshire, listening as Ted went through the book singing his favourite songs. However, I wanted to be sure about the songs and whether they were truly from the area. This question took me to the Swindon and Wiltshire History Centre where I spent time researching Williams, gaining an insight into the lives and artistic expression of those in rural, riverside communities during a time of great social and economic change.

From a rural, working-class background, Williams differed from other folksong collectors of the time such as Ralph Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharp. Crossed out, in his original Introduction to *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames*, Williams had written:

> Consequently, the average collector, when he has obtained any piece, never thinks of restoring them to the peasantry, to whom they belong, but carries them off into a new atmosphere, exhibits them to a few intellectuals and is satisfied with that. In reality, the pieces are lost about as completely as they were before […] And folk songs never belonged to the intellectuals. They were the property of the people. And if they have any chance of being remembered and held as cherished possessions it will be by the simple peasant folks, those who have not been educated out of their nature … Give them back to the people. Schools and universities do not want them. They are lost amid our great towns and cities, they cannot live in the atmosphere … It is in the villages and the small country towns they would be welcomed.
> (Family correspondence and literary MSS: Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre)

It's possible to see from this just how much Williams' attitude set him at odds with other collectors such as Sharp and Vaughan Williams. These men were of a different social class and had other motives in collecting folk song. For Williams the songs had far more personal significance – they were the songs of his people. Williams heard and collected over 800 songs from his neighbourhood but, despite this, he believed that only ten or twelve originated in the Thames Valley itself. On reflection, I realised that, although these songs had, at one time, resonated throughout the region, they had

never been truly original to this place. In honesty, part of me had struggled to feel connected to the songs and this realisation provided the confirmation I needed to know I couldn't use these songs to influence my composition. I needed to pursue a different path.

I therefore set out with my notebook and recorder to spend an hour each evening at my chosen riverside locations. Below Oxford I made field recordings at Cleeve, Moulsford, South Stoke, Dorchester and Days Lock. Above Oxford I recorded at Grafton, Buscot and Kelmscott. The sites I chose below Oxford were significant places that I knew as a child, each holding a distinctive resonance. Those in the upper reaches, above Oxford, are Singing Places that I have identified in more recent years.

Sound interacts with the space it is sounding into, and it is this dynamic process that Seán Street investigates fully in *The Sound of a Room*: *Memory and Auditory Presence of Place* (2020). This was a key text in developing my ideas further. For the purpose of this work, Street describes any space that a sound is sounding into as a 'room'. This includes such diverse landscapes as the seashore or the forest, to buildings ranging from his small study to the magnitude of St Pancras Station. For Street, a room is more than an inhabited physical space, 'it is a field of consciousness, a sonic field with us at the centre' (2020: 3). There is a clear correlation between the spatial characteristics of a space and the way a sound behaves in it.

Street writes movingly of a transcendent experience in Lincoln Cathedral where, because a service was going on, he was taken in through a small door on the south side of the building:

> what I walked into was not so much a physical space, as pure enveloping sound […] the cathedral choir was singing an anthem, and it rang through the cathedral from the space we could not see, rising into the roof, weaving through intricacies of stonework, reverberating, echoing and resonating on every surface and flowing into each crevice. […] It was a transcendent moment […] in which as the song occurred – and since in memory – the building that is Lincoln Cathedral actually seemed to be translated into pure sound (2020: 54).

For Street, listening while recording (with headphones) can also initiate an overwhelming sense of immersion: ‘of oneness with the environment that releases new layers of perception' (2020: 111). He describes it as the opposite of taking a photo, where one can feel they have ‘missed the moment’ in ‘the very act of seeking to capture it’. But for Street, as he listens while he records, the converse is true: ‘a sense of being in the moment, rather than standing outside it as an observer’ (2020: 111). For myself – making recordings on a lonely riverbank in the evenings – I found it difficult to listen with headphones while I was recording. I became hyper-alert to the audio and began to interpret the smallest of sounds as possible danger. With this heightened focus on the sonic world, I felt cut-off, with less visual awareness and an increasing sense of isolation and vulnerability.

Playing with Resonance

Resonance is the key word in the world of cathedral architects, auditorium builders and instrument makers. One day, while working in a church porch, Alison had related to me how, when she was a young architecture student, she went into an anechoic chamber, in the basement, at her architecture school. This is a room designed to absorb all reflections of sound. The experience was disorientating, and she stayed only very briefly. The heartbeat can be heard and then other bodily sounds. It is as though without any external sounds the body starts to hear itself. It is an experience that Cage also describes in his work *Indeterminacy*: an account of his visit to the anechoic chamber at Harvard University (1959: Smithsonian Folkways). The opposite of this is a space such as the Inchindown underground fuel depot near Invergordon, Scotland. Completed in 1941, this man-made structure holds the record for length of reverberation, or delay, at 112 seconds. This space gained attention in two recent and very different television documentaries: ‘Using Sound’, part two of BBC4’s *Soundwaves: The Symphony of Physics (2022)* and ‘Grampian and the Central Highlands’ (2020) from Susan Calman’s *Secret Scotland.* It was interesting to note how the presenters were affected by the extraordinarily long delay. Conversation became impossible and even a saxophone sounding into the space was almost too much. I became determined at some point to visit Inchindown and experience and play with the resonance myself.

As a performer, the resonance of the space you are playing or singing into is vitally important and affects how you play. This is particularly true with improvised

music. In 2022 my sister Karen's partner, Tim, was playing improvised music in Gloucester Cathedral with the cello player Matthew Barley. Before the concert the performers had established there was a nine second delay on the piano sound. In a performance environment this is a very long reverberation. I asked Tim how this had affected his improvisation. Tim told me: 'Each note had so much time and body that we were forced delightfully to play less and listen more.' Tim was improvising an introduction to a Beethoven Sonata with Matthew and in this they could allow the delay to work with their music. This is a clear example of Schafer's claim that 'the size and shape of interior space will always control the tempo of activities within it' (1994: 219). Of course, this is possible with improvised music, but the delay was much harder to work with, and disturbing, for the pianist Ivana Gavric who, following the improvisation, replaced Tim at the piano to play the Beethoven (Sonata in F) with Matthew. The opening bars require the cellist and pianist to play exactly the same rhythm – something that was hard to do with a long reverberation blurring everything. These performances were originally to have taken place in 2020 – Beethoven's 250th anniversary – and Matthew spoke to the audience about the composer. At times it was hard to make out his words with the lengthy delay but when the vicar climbed the pulpit to speak, her voice was distinct and audible. The pulpit was designed some five hundred years after the cathedral was built, when possibly the acoustics workings of the space were more understood.

Research has been carried out and published by Braxton Boran and Malcolm S. Longair in *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* into questions such as these. The researchers looked at the Venetian Renaissance as a 'Confluence of innovative expression across many artistic disciplines' (Boran and Longair:2011), when architects such as Palladio and Sansovino were designing churches, and composers such as Willaert, the Gabriellis and Monteverdi were composing polyphonic works for split-choir ensembles. These churches have long reverberation times and it's hard to imagine how the polyphonic music would be anything other than a blurry wash of sound with the individual lines indistinguishable. By using modern acoustic simulation Boran and Longair were able to investigate the acoustics of these large Venetian churches as they would have existed during the Renaissance. The Redentore, built by Palladio for the city's festival of the same name, had, like other churches, a long reverberation time. However, in consultation with architectural historians, the researchers discovered that on feast days these spaces were decorated,

hung with tapestries and filled with extra seating and large crowds. These things all provided extra absorption making the sound less loud but far clearer. For the rest of the year, the Capuchin friars who lived at the Redentore had an empty church, but Palladio had designed a plain friars' choir for them behind the high altar which served as a space where they chanted the Office through the days of the year. With its undecorated wooden stalls this relatively unadorned simpler space lacks the grandeur of the nave (designed for the Doge's processional events), and therefore fits with the Capuchin's more austere values. Here, there would be far less reverberation and the resonance much less overwhelming, again more in keeping with the friars' life of simplicity.

These three examples of the Inchindown fuel depot, Gloucester Cathedral, and the Redentore, all demonstrate how too much resonance is overwhelming and presents difficulties for speakers, musicians and audience alike. However, playing into a space that is resonant but not too resonant creates a very satisfying experience. The performer is aware of a fullness of tone that is achieved by the dialogue between their instrument and reflected sound, but there is not the extreme delay and muddying of sound produced by an extreme length of decay. A kind of positive feedback loop is created through which the performance is altered. The opposite has occurred for me many times when playing in care homes. The sheer number of soft furnishings and an audience (frequently in woolly cardigans!) sitting very close-up means having to work hard to produce a good enough sound. This was also, pre-Covid, our experience of playing to a crowded drawing room at Hardy's house, Max Gate. On the one hand, I was pleased a large crowd had turned up; but, on the other, I was aware that the room's acoustic would not be forgiving. I needed to try and end notes well; the anxiety about this usually meant I didn't.

When Street discusses the legendary acoustic of the great Hagia Sophia in Istanbul being reproduced and wrapped around singers performing in Stanford's Bing Concert Hall (2020: 61), he does not say if this was something the performers were aware of during their live performance (and would therefore interact with), or whether this was something added later. This is an important distinction, but further reading revealed that this performance was part of an experiment with digital technology to transform the Bing Concert Hall, opening in 2013, into the reverberant soundscape of Hagia Sophia and was part of Stanford's larger *Icons of Sound* project (Pentcheva and Abel: 2017). The exceptional acoustics of the Byzantine masterpiece were recreated

using twenty-four loudspeakers placed around the singers – the renowned American vocal ensemble Capella Romana – producing a fully immersive experience for the singers and their audience. The choir was also able to rehearse beforehand with sixteen speakers, I imagine giving some degree of authenticity, and a practice run at working *with* something similar to the performance acoustic.

These examples emphasise how all sound tells us something about the space it is sounding into. In many ways our sense of place is governed by this and yet we are hardly aware of it. Most of it seems to happen at a subliminal, barely perceptible level for much of the time. For example, if we sleep with the window open, we wake knowing there has been a snowfall. Even before we open the curtains, we can tell that the soundworld outside is muffled and under its own duvet.

There is a beautiful and evocative description in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* where on a warm June evening Tess goes into the garden at the dairy and hears Angel Clare, who has taken his harp outside to play:

> The soundlessness impressed her as a positive entity rather than a mere negation of noise. It was broken by the strumming of strings. Tess had heard those notes in the attic above her head. Dim, flattened, constrained by their confinement, they had never appealed to her as now, when they wandered in the still air with a stark quality like that of nudity […] Tess was neither conscious of time nor space […] she undulated upon the notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes […] Though near nightfall, the rank smelling weed-flowers glowed as if they would not close for intentness, and the waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound (1991: 127-128).

In this passage, Hardy clearly grasps the emotional effect of the acoustic environment he has created. The harp, outside in the evening air, takes on a singing quality and Tess's emotional state intertwines with the natural world as sight, smell and sound weave together producing a profound, almost synaesthetic effect. As a reader, I wonder if Angel Clare was aware of the effect that playing his harp outdoors might produce? Was Hardy wanting us to suspect some calculation on Clare's part?

Hardy was aware of his own highly sensitive, observational and listening skills, and in his poem 'Afterwards', written in 1917, he wonders whether others will comment on these:

> When the present has latchd its postern behind my tremulous stay,
> And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
> Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,
> 'He was a man who used to notice such things'?
>
> And will they say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,
> And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,
> Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,
> 'He hears it not now, but used to notice such things'?
> (2001: 521)

Here, besides highlighting his own precise observation as he details the life force of May, Hardy gives us a sense of moving through time, projecting himself into an imagined future, much as he does in his approach to, 'The Strange House – Max Gate, A.D. 2000'. It's of note that Hardy mentions the bells in the last stanza. Every 31 December he liked to hear the bells at nearby Fordington bring in the new year. When he lay ill in bed, shortly before his death, the window was opened so that he might hear the bells ringing in the new year of 1928.

In summary, the Singing Places has involved a deep exploration, both critically and artistically, of the emotional impact of our acoustic environment. Throughout, I have continually strived to investigate the intricate and interwoven relationship between sound, memory, emotion and place, and to understand this, and respond to it, through my own creative practice. By working in several forms, and drawing on my background as musician and poet, I have been able to approach the Singing Places and the idea of resonance from diverse angles. Because of the unexpected interruption caused by Covid I was able to broaden my research area, working collaboratively with my twin sister, and playing music with my daughter throughout West Dorset's Hardyscapes. Throughout this threefold work, I have managed to demonstrate how, from our earliest days, our soundscapes imprint themselves on us and bring us solace in quiet unspoken ways.

The Poetics of Listening: Place Writing, Sound, and Creative Practice

As I outlined in the Introduction, *The Singing Places* is a threefold work that broadens the concept of place writing to include the forms of creative non-fiction, music and poetry. I argue that creative non-fiction is not the *only* element of place writing in this thesis – its three constituent parts, (music, poetry and creative non-fiction) are held in balance, working with each other and supporting each other. In examining sound and the theme of resonance, these are investigated more fully by their exploration through my three forms of creative practice. To return to an idea mentioned in the Introduction, resonance occurs when a sound created in one system creates a vibration in another. Building on this core definition, the creative elements of this thesis need to be considered as a holistic, interconnected work where all three parts emphasise acoustic exploration and contribute to a deeper understanding of sound and place. Implicit within this more expansive definition of place writing is the suggestion that, when different art forms are brought together as a heterogeneous whole, the body of creative work can achieve something beyond the scope of a single form. As ideas and themes are explored, interwoven and presented in different ways, an amplification is achieved and the whole project takes on resonant qualities. Subsequently, the reader/listener is offered a multi-dimensional, sensory and embodied experience – one that directly parallels our experience of place.

Initially in this chapter I discuss existing understandings of place writing and defend this new heterogeneous understanding of the term that moves beyond the confines of creative non-fiction to include poetry, music and visual art, as well as combinations of these forms such as songs, and poems accompanied by drawings. I then go on to examine my own critical engagement with work in the fields of creative non-fiction, poetry and music. The co-ordinates guiding my project are memory, sound, place and emotion, reflecting my preoccupation with acoustic and emotional resonance within landscape. In the final section of this chapter, focusing on the themes I've presented, I reflect on the creative decisions I've taken in each of my place writing practices. I consider the three elements in turn and how they work together, each allowing a different emphasis to be made, but, in conjunction, producing echoes and resonances that contribute to a threefold work that speaks of place as much through the auditory as the visual.

Understanding Place Writing

In reflecting on my own critical engagement with place it is necessary to think about my personal understanding of the term place writing, to map out something of its development and to explore whether there is such a thing as 'traditional' place writing. For me, there has been a difficulty in drawing clear lines, because – in my critical analysis – place writing is a messy, difficult-to-disentangle, multi-media field of practice.

Looking back over the last two decades it is evident that the prevailing form of place writing has been creative non-fiction, and that one writer – Robert Macfarlane – has led the way in popularising place with books such as *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), *The Wild Places* (2007) and *The Old Ways* (2012). In his more recent *Landmarks* (2015), Macfarlane states:

> Placeless events are inconceivable, in that everything that happens must happen somewhere, and so history issues from geography in the same way that water issues from a spring: unpredictably but site-specifically (2015: 21).

For Macfarlane place and events are intrinsically linked and his sense of history, and the layering of time, always comes through in his work. This has been useful to reflect on in connection with what I term resonant landscapes. In *The Old Ways*, Macfarlane writes of 'a double insistence of old landscapes; that they be read in the *then* but felt in the now*'* (2012: 33). Macfarlane frequently acknowledges his debt to earlier writers such as Edward Thomas, Nan Shepherd, and to his friend the late Roger Deakin, but has himself set a benchmark for contemporary place writing.

Alongside Macfarlane, there has been a line of place writers evolving from a naturalist/nature writing background. Jos Smith, in the Introduction to his *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (2017), cites Richard Mabey as hugely important and influential as 'an author whose work has consistently pioneered new ways of thinking about landscape, nature, place, culture and the range of interconnections that all of these share' (2017: 1). Smith takes the view that 'new nature writing' – a term famously coined by Jason Cowley in a 2008 special issue of *Granta* – is not that new but began back in the 1970s following the founding of groups such as Friends of the Earth in 1971, and the huge surge in environmental activism at that time. He cites Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* and

Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside,* both published in 1973, as two books that 'would fundamentally change the way people thought and wrote about landscape in Britain' (2017: 4).

Over the years, Mabey's writing has consistently foregrounded his, and our, emotional bonds and connection to the places we inhabit. This was evident in his groundbreaking *Flora Brittanica* (1996) with its extensive research and community input into the naming of plants and their part in our folklore, social life and customs. His first-person narratives, in for example *Nature Cure* (2006) and *Beechcombings* (2007), demonstrate his immersion in, and love for, his own particular places, such as the beech woods of Buckinghamshire. For Mabey, observing a kite flying above the Chilterns becomes a visceral experience: 'It was so poised, so effortlessly muscular that I could feel my own shoulders flexing in sympathy' (2000: 114). For me, Mabey's first-person presence in his narratives, and his sharing of his emotional connection to places, define key features of place writing.

Since its earliest days Mabey has also collaborated closely with the Dorset-based charity Common Ground, founded in 1983 by Sue Clifford, Angela King, and Roger Deakin. In line with Mabey's beliefs, Common Ground has always focused on championing the local, setting out to help people to develop a deep sense of place within their communities. On their website (2023), King and Clifford encourage people to 'uncover intimate attachments to places for themselves, developing the kind of enjoyment and resolve that strengthens community resilience and cohesion in uncertain times' (2023: para.1). Through their innovative projects, Common Ground has quietly built a grassroots appreciation for the environment, evidenced by such things as the many community orchards and apple days that thrive here in the Southwest. Another arts project 'Confluence', which ran from 1997 to 2000, was based along the River Stour in Dorset. This expansive work used the whole river catchment with its geology and history, its people, its wildlife, flowers and trees in what the charity described as an 'assemblage' (1999: 8). This word is one that we will see recurring in place writing.

In 1984, Mabey, King and Clifford produced the collection, *Second Nature*. This selection of work by forty-two writers and artists is described in the preface as an exploration of 'the idea that our relationship with land and with the natural word is a vital part of our imaginative, social and cultural life' (1984: n.p.n.). This aim aligns the work with much that we now understand place writing to be about. Writers

featured include Norman Nicholson, Raymond Williams, Peter Levi, Michael Berkeley, Ronald Blythe and Kim Taplin. Between the commissioned essays are photographs and reproductions of artworks by, among others, James Ravilious, Henry Moore, Richard Long, Fay Godwin, and David Nash. In writing of the artwork they have selected, Clifford and Young say: 'The visual works do not "illustrate" the essays, they are individual statements in another language' (1984: vii). 'Statements in another language' is an interesting choice of phrase to describe artworks but it demonstrates there are other ways of experiencing and telling of place other than creative non-fiction. In this chapter, it has been important initially to look at the works of some of those leading the way in creative non-fiction place writing as this has been, within the first two decades of this century, the prevailing form. However, it is also interesting to note that, when thinking about place writing, we often quickly move away from thinking *exclusively* about creative non-fictional writing, as with the example of *Second Nature* and its inclusion of artworks.

Looking back on the history of place writing we glimpse invisible threads: how Macfarlane's work connects him to Edward Thomas, Mabey's work to Annie Dillard (*Tinker's Creek* 1974), Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts's *Edgelands* (2011) to Mabey's *Unofficial Countryside* (1973) and Iain Sinclair's *The Last London* (2017) to the complex hybridity of W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (1998). Sebald provides an early example of heterogeneous place writing where he combines travel writing, memoir and history with black and white photographs, enriching his eighty mile walk across his familiar East Anglian landscape. As Sebald weaves environment, memory, and past and present events, he also, additionally, blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction so we, as readers, are never quite sure what is true and what is not. Since Sebald, alongside Sinclair, we've seen many creative non-fiction writers continue to blend forms and to use additional material in their creative non-fiction. Rachel Lichtenstein and Macfarlane both use maps and photographs in their work – these visual elements helping to create a more immersive experience for the reader. Reflecting on this diversity, cultural historian Joe Moran, in his article, 'A Virtual Island Journey: Place and Place Writing in Lockdown' published in *cultural geographies* (2021), writes:

> Place writing is a fluid and polymorphous genre of creative nonfiction that typically interweaves personal witness, family memoir, amateur field biology,

> folklore, social and cultural history, ecocriticism and nature and topographical writing (2021: 1).

Moran has been writing about Scattery, a small island off the west coast of Ireland, which during lockdown he had been unable to physically visit. However, through his memory and imagination he was able to access this loved place, demonstrating the adaptability and fluidity of place writing. This expansive perspective of Moran's resonates with my own understanding, which has been additionally enriched by key texts such as *The Routledge Handbook of Place* (2020) and from insights gained from Manchester Metropolitan University's Centre for Place Writing's PLACE 2020-2021 project. Particularly influential in seeking to appreciate the point we have arrived at in understanding place writing now, has been David Cooper's chapter 'Contemporary British Place Writing: Towards a Definition' (2020), which looks closely at the emergence and preoccupation with place in contemporary British literature, and its significance. According to Cooper, the evidence for this growing interest over the last twenty years is borne out by the rise and success of independent publishers such as Little Toller, along with Penned in the Margins, the journal *Archipelago,* and online sites, including *Caught by the River* and *The Clearing*. By looking at these publications it is possible to see an inclusivity that reflects the multiple ways in which place is now being explored and articulated. For example, music, art, poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction are all regularly posted on *Caught by the River*.

Cooper further explores the definition of place writing by turning to two landmark publications. The first, *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings* is a collection of new writing edited by Gareth Evans and Di Robson (2010). Contributors, besides Macfarlane, Mabey, and Sinclair, include established writers such as Kathleen Jamie, Ken Worpole, and Alice Oswald. The other key work named by Cooper is also an anthology, published eight years later, *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People*, edited by Tim Dee and featuring the work of thirty-one artists and writers (2018). Although *Towards Re-Enchantment* has no formal introduction Dee does provide a lengthy one for *Ground Work*. Here he looks back to two books that led the way for this collection. Firstly, *Places*: *An Anthology of Britain* edited by Ronald Blythe and published in 1981. Dee writes that its 'prevailing mood is wistful and elegiac' (2020: 4). The other book is the previously mentioned *Second Nature.* Of this latter collection, Dee states that most of the writing, 'still looks back' (2020: 5).

In writing about *Ground Work*, he says, 'We now understand that the paved world can be as articulate as the vegetated' (2020: 6). Dee goes on to make the salient point that very few of the places described in *Ground Work* could be thought of as 'special other than to their describers' (2020: 8). However, rural landscapes still dominate in Dee's book, with only a few exceptions, (for example the contributions by Tessa Hadley and Paul Farley). Other writers and artists include Adam Thorpe, Mark Cocker, John Burnside, Richard Long and Helen Macdonald. Their inclusion exemplifies the wide range of approach to place in Dee's collection. By the date of its publication in 2018, Cooper believes that Dee's confident use of the term place writing is indicative of the term having 'flowed into the literary mainstream' (2020: 636). Cooper states that the writers and artists represent a range of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, and their work demonstrates breadth and diversity, but there is no clear conclusion (within Dee's Introduction) as to what literary form(s) place writing takes. Despite this, following his close analysis, Cooper believes *Towards Re-Enchantment* and *Ground Work* both project the overriding sense that, 'the prose exploration of the authorial self-in-place is the dominant and defining mode of contemporary place writing' (2020: 638).

Yasmin Chopin, in her unpublished doctoral thesis *Memorial Benches: Conversations in the Landscape* (2023), contends that place writing is a 'difficult concept to grasp' and for it to become a 'recognised genre, understood by all […] it is necessary to take the key elements debated in recent years and distil them down to formulate a clear and concise definition' (2024: 181). Chopin goes on to develop nine key provocations. These are as follows:

1. Parameters: Boundaries, identifiable locations.
2. Being-in-place Immersion in place. Engagement. Belonging.
3. Authorial self: First-person narrative.
4. Repetitive practice.
5. Observation
6. Layering: The multi-disciplinary effect. Deep mapping
7. Distance: The distance, either temporal or physical, after being-in-place before writing.
8. Assemblage: The inclusion of other textural forms – maps, handwritten notes, photographs, drawings, poetry.
9. Critical thinking: Creating new ideas from a set of facts or experiences

(2023: 193-201).

These nine provocations of Chopin's are useful in clarifying the key elements of place writing and they provide a framework for analysing and understanding the genre, emphasising its connection to geography, memory, subjective exploration and creativity. It is possible, when looking back over the last two decades to see many writers of creative non-fiction whose work embodies most, or all, of these characteristics.

Yet, it could be said, prose essays based exclusively on personal geographical experience leave little scope for the writer to stray into more imaginative fictional or semi-fictional worlds. One example in Dee's book stands out as work that *does* differ from the archetypal approach and goes beyond Chopin's strict definition and challenges its boundaries: 'Bodleian Library, Oxford; Aubrey Manuscript 17, Folio 12R', by the art historian Peter Davidson, who writes about imagined landscapes brought to him by his handling of archival objects. Davidson opens with the startling line: 'I am writing about a place which I have never seen and which I know by heart' (2018: 71). He is describing the family house, grounds and farmland of Easton Piers, in Wiltshire – the estate that John Aubrey (1627-1697) would have inherited had he not been hit by financial ruin at the age of forty-four. Davidson tells us how the coloured drawings in this small book capture the landscape but with a tenderness and intensification brought about by its impending loss:

> Depth of feeling is embedded in these coloured drawings, a sense of devotion to the sheep-cropped slopes and stream-scoured upland valleys. Memory inhabits their coppices, stone shelters and field gates (2018: 72).

Aubrey's identification with this landscape is amplified by his small pencil notes in the margins: 'my grandfather Lyte's chamber wherein I drew my first breath' (2018: 72). Later, Aubrey was at Oxford, and as Davidson finishes his research for the day and walks out into the fading light – 'bicycles whisper swiftly through the dusk' – there is a strong sense of Davidson carrying Aubrey with him. Something has resonated deeply. Aching echoes persist throughout the work, and I find it compelling for several reasons. Firstly, Dee has included someone writing about a place that he (Davidson) has never experienced first-hand but has formed a deep sense of connection to. Secondly, the work within the work – Aubrey's book of coloured

drawings – could also be place writing. Thirdly, there is a resonance that exists between the two men over almost four centuries. Davidson's relationship to Oxford has taken on a new dimension as he leaves the Bodleian and enters the damp evening, and the night encroaching on his college allows him to fall back through time, or time falls away, to John Aubrey's lost manor. The genre is stretched and enriched by Dee's inclusion of this work in his collection, whereby the writer's intense emotional engagement with an archival object brings the reader an evocative expression of place writing. For me, this alternative way of looking at place writing is a particularly resonant one, and chimes with much of my work in the archival collections of both Hardy and Alfred Williams.

Another engaging contribution in *Ground Work* is Fiona Sampson's 'About Time'. Sampson, more known for her poetry, describes the experience of moving to a new place as being like a return to her childhood, 'I don't know what tomorrow will be like, or the winter. I don't know the order in which the orchard trees will turn yellow' (2018: 229). This is refreshing in place writing, where more frequently the writer describes an old haunt or place of particular attachment or significance to them. The other striking and memorable thing about Sampson's piece is her attention to sound, including a moving description of the valley at night, haunted by the echoing groans, shouts and howls from the cows that have been recently separated from their calves; the calls of owl and nightjar and the 'returning lapwing, faint and electric in a March wind' (2022: 229). Perhaps it is relevant that Sampson trained as a concert violinist, for not only is she used to listening acutely but possesses the vocabulary to describe what she hears.

Despite creative non-fiction dominating *Towards Re-Enchantment* and *Ground Work*, both collections do include poetry. The first collection contains Robin Robertson's 'Tillydrone Motte' where the poet reflects on his childhood place, Seaton Park in Aberdeen (2010: 9). Robertson revisits the fifteen years spent 'here on this highest edge,/this hill, in this park; my garden/spread out before me two hundred feet below' (2010: 9). Similarly, *Ground Work* features a long poem by Andrew Motion 'Waders', which again looks back to the speaker's childhood home. Frequently, loco-specific poems and creative non-fiction share concerns with memory and childhood, and there are many writers who will use both prose and poetry to articulate their feelings about their places. Jamie, Jean Sprackland, Sampson, Helen Mort, Farley and Symmons Roberts all exemplify this moving between forms, and an ease and fluidity

in doing so. Collectively, they demonstrate a non-dogmatic approach to their work and highlight a genre that transcends rigid convention, allowing writers and artists to engage deeply with place through whatever creative practice seems appropriate. In her thesis *'*Creative Writing on Place and Nature' (2016), Sprackland explores this broader view of place writing and how both her poetry and prose work are situated within the genre. Indeed, Sprackland in her *Strands: A Year of Discoveries on the Beach* (2012*)*, exemplifies this approach as she interweaves poetry extracts from writers as various as Shakespeare, Elizabeth Bishop and Michael Symmons Roberts in her creative non-fiction without making any distinctions.

Towards Re-Enchantment also includes the more radical landscape poetry of Elizabeth Bletsoe with her 'Votives to St Wite'. This long poem in neo-Modernist free verse concerns St Wite whose relics are at Whitchurch Canonicorum church in Dorset. Bletsoe conjures this evocative place with its roof like an upturned boat, its pilgrim paths, nearby holy spring and imagines the voice of St Wite speaking in Middle English. Bletsoe pays close attention to geology and ecology, and the sound of the nearby sea. It is a very different poem to those by Robertson and Motion but clearly place writing. Each contribution to *Re-Enchantment* is prefaced by a black and white image and the opening lines of Bletsoe's poem appear opposite a painting, 'CLOUD PIERCING: Charmouth' by Frances Hatch (2010: 82). Bletsoe has also worked with Hatch providing textural responses to her collages and with the Cambridge-based musician, Kim B. Ashton who has set some of her 'Birds of Sherborne Missal' (2021) to music. These collaborations, once again, highlight the potential of interpretating place through different media.

Alice Oswald is another poet who combines art forms in her *Weeds and Wild Flowers* (2009), a collection that includes etchings by Jessica Greenman, again emphasising the potential of a multidisciplinary approach. But it is Oswald's two long river poems that I will focus on here: *Dart* (2002) and *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009). I consider both works to be place writing. Oswald's poetry, in a similar way to that of Bletsoe's, follows a line of Modernist experimentation and of Eliot's 'impersonality' of the poet expressed in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). As such, there is no discernible 'I' in *Dart*, however, there is a great attentiveness to sound and polyphony throughout and an alertness to the textural particularities of specific sites along the river. Oswald also uses assemblage and achieves a deep mapping of the riverine landscape and its inhabitants, all features of

place writing. *Dart* was formed from two years of research by Oswald, talking and listening to people who know the river: a ferryman and a sewage worker, a milk worker, a forester, swimmers and canoeists. The voices are varied and idiomatic and include more other-worldly presences too. The poem links 'their voices into a sound and map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea'. 'All voices should be read as mutterings' states Oswald in her prefatory note (n.p.n.).

In the later work, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, Oswald is preoccupied with the different phases of the moon and how the river landscape and its people change and respond to these. As the Severn is a river with a huge tidal range, the moon's effect is powerful. Again, space and sound are important and, as in *Dart,* the voices of the river people are captured: the fisherman, the birdwatcher and the sailor, along with the wind and the moon. It was an influential work for me, being set on a long river and concerning those whose lives are determined by this. Lastly, and importantly, everything takes place at night. Oswald creates an atmosphere of otherworldliness where things are half seen, or, in the case of the moonless night when 'the moon comes up blind' and 'an old woman in black/Slipping out at nightfall in the rain', gropes for 'the threshold of sight/ […] till she can just make out/A dark place next door to a dark place' (2009: 23). Oswald's choice of a nighttime setting was relevant as I was drawn to recording by the Thames at night and her work demonstrates how our places are transfigured by the light, the hour and the season.

Oswald's long poem reminds me of *Once Upon a River* by Diane Setterfield (2018), a novel set on the upper reaches of the Thames where much of the action takes place at night. This is a landscape and a riverside pub I know intimately, and the place is powerfully evoked by Setterfield. I wondered how this fictional work would sit in terms of place writing. Cooper makes the point that neither of the collections he has analysed contain any overtly fictionalised work and that, although the division between fiction and non-fictional is understandable, it is artificial since Elizabeth Bletsoe's poem 'gives voice to people from a place's deep past' (2020: 641). Cooper concludes 'Given these textural uncertainties and instabilities, it seems reasonable that the term place writing could be applied to *any* kind of writing […] that places place at its centre' (2020: 641).

In his Routledge chapter, Cooper has led the way in providing a broad, heterogeneous definition of place writing. However, it feels as if the term is still open to evolving

further, to an even more expansive and inclusive interpretation. With this diversity in mind, Cooper was instrumental in establishing Manchester Metropolitan University's Centre for Place Writing in 2019. Cooper along with Rachel Lichtenstein invited other writers, creatives and academics from the Department of English to work alongside them promoting and thinking about place writing. Under this umbrella, during 2020-2021, Cooper, in collaboration with Lichtenstein, created the PLACE project. This provided 'a platform to discuss, develop and showcase new thinking, writing and other creative outputs with a sustained focus on place' (Cooper and Lichtenstein 2020: para.1). There was a great diversity in the landscapes explored, from cities to the rural and to liminal places such as those investigated by poets Farley and Symmons Roberts in their prose book *Edgelands* (2011). Submissions came from writers and creatives such as, Andrew Kötting, Ken Worpole, Richard Skelton, Anita Sethi and Sukhdev Sandhu – each writer/artist responding to the place they were in, during the suspended time we were living through. The call for submissions was repeated in 2021 and once again a broad and heterogeneous range of work was produced and published online.

The PLACE project has enabled me to encounter various writers of place and to appreciate the huge diversity of approach and form. Of particular interest are the inclusion of Paul Scraton's 'Arrival/Departure' with its audio essay of Berlin's Schönefeld airport and Jessica Lee's work, 'An Ecology'. My own contribution also features a spoken account made at Grafton Lock on the upper reaches of the Thames. Audio essays emphasise listening and this is important to note in the context of my developing argument for music to be considered place writing. This diversity of approach continues with Sinclair's 'The Silence in the Forest', which includes his photographs of the Amazon, and Richard Skelton's 'Mother River', whereby maps of the rivers of Manchester accompany the text. 'Foxglove' by Ken Worpole talks about the gardens of both Ian Hamilton Finlay and Derek Jarman. 'Foxglove' is undisputably place writing, but could the term also more generously be applied to Hamilton Finlay's garden itself – Little Sparta? I believe we need to look at the garden in its entirety. I would not want to see *only* the words carved in stone or wood to be considered as place writing. For me, having visited, the whole garden and its creation are an act of place writing. The sculptures with their carved words are integral to the garden and placed carefully within the landscape and planting. Little Sparta needs to be seen and read as a whole.

If, as argued, we accept poetry as place writing then it follows that song lyrics could be as well. I would go further and suggest that the whole song – providing its central focus is place – is place writing. Many of the great song writers are considered poets, for example Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. Dylan, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, has been written about extensively by the critic Christopher Ricks. In an interview, for the *Dylan Review* (Winter 2019) Ricks raises some salient points:

> The argument about whether they are poems or not seems to me idle. A song is a combination of words and of a voice, […] and of music. No one of those, as I've tried to spell out, is more important than the others, because it is in the nature of a compound that all the things that are in it are indispensable. It'd be like saying, are the wings more important than the tail of an airplane? […] They're not poems but this is because their medium is not words alone. And it's not true that the medium is the message – the medium changes the message (2019).

Ricks has highlighted a key issue, that we hear a song in its entirety: voice, lyrics and music. For me when I write songs, I frequently write the words and music together. I will always use the verb 'writing'. A small point but maybe indicative of how I experience the process. If we consider writing to be the border between internal and external words, then music we write lies on that border too.

Cohen's 'Chelsea Hotel' is an evocative example of place writing in song form. Cohen lived at the iconic New York hotel, home to many writers, artists and musicians, and the song describes his relationship with Janis Joplin starting in the elevator there. The hotel is central to Cohen's story and his emotional landscape. Cohen's words (half spoken at times) are clear and at the forefront of the mix creating an intimacy and invitation to listen. The hotel's cultural history, bohemian atmosphere and relationships played out there resonate throughout the song. Joni Mitchell also writes of the hotel, in her song 'Chelsea Morning', as did Lou Reed. For me, songs such as these demonstrate how songwriting can function as a form of place writing. We only need to hear songs like The Beatles' 'Penny Lane', with its line 'Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes' to understand the significance of place to the songwriting team of John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

Looking again at *Second Nature*, the composer and presenter of Radio 3's *Private Passions*, Michael Berkeley, talks of gathering musical stimulation from the landscape and keeping a notebook with him to record 'fragments […] the sounds of new continents and the ideas that those sounds suggested to me' (1984: 58). He writes about Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* with its libretto based on George Crabbe's poem long poem *The Borough* and asks, 'could the full force of a North Sea gale have been so tellingly portrayed by someone who had not stood in the face of it?' (57). He continues by comparing Crabbe and Britten's close identification and immersion in their place to that of artists such as Monet and Turner, describing 'a special quality of communication which comes only from direct experience. It is the becoming a part of your landscape as opposed to merely witnessing it' (57).

Rebecca Solnit writes about song in her chapter 'The Blue of Distance', in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* which as originally published in 2005. Solnit describes how, some years ago, she was in the habit of making compilation tapes for long car journeys. In trying to define what it was that moved her in the songs she had selected, she 'tried to get at something about the evocation of place and its emotional resonance' (2017: 113):

> The songs that worked their way into my blood were like short stories compressed into a few stanzas; they always spanned and layered time. The music was haunted, was about distant memory (…) Like writing, the music was solitary, talking to itself in that solitude of composition and contemplation, in the free flow of time that is before, after, between (…) (114).

In this quote Solnit is referring to Country songs and the sense of memory and layered time contained within them, but she is also, importantly, linking the writing of songs to the process of writing prose. A little later Solnit writes:

> The places in which any significant event occurred become embedded with some of that emotion, and so to recover the memory of the place is to recover the emotion, and sometimes to revisit the place uncovers the emotion. Every love has its landscape (118).

For me, here, Solnit is describing one of the ways somewhere becomes, through emotional resonance, what I term, a Singing Place.

Sound

The relationship between sound and place has been largely neglected in creative non-fictional place writing and yet place *is* an auditory experience. I have explored the work of the Canadian composer and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer in the Introduction, but it is worth returning to him here. Schafer, in *The Soundscape – Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977) describes the visual as having taken precedence over the audio in the Renaissance (1994: 10). This was something Schafer sought to address with his World Soundscape Project, established in the 1970s with the aim to raise people's consciousness of the effects of sound on the human world. Soundscape, in its most straightforward interpretation, can be thought of as the aural equivalent of landscape. Within the soundscape, Schafer identifies three types of sounds: keynote, signals and soundmarks. For my purposes now, I will focus on keynote, a term that Schafer has borrowed from music:

> 'It is the anchor or fundamental tone […] it is in reference to this point that everything else takes on its special meaning […] Even though keynote sounds may not be always heard consciously, the fact that they are ubiquitously there suggests the possibility of a deep and pervasive influence on our behaviours and moods' (1994: 9).

The soundscapes of places alter how we feel about them and, as Schafer has described, often this is at a subliminal and subtle level. Possibly it is this that has contributed to how little attention has been paid to sound in place writing. The visual retains its dominance. There is a need to bring our listening into more conscious awareness.

Even a writer as experienced as Jamie – known for her close observations – is persistently more focused on the visual. Her chapter 'The Gannetry' in *Sightlines* (2012) would be the perfect opportunity to convey something of what must be a completely overwhelming mix of bird cries, screeches, wings flapping and possibly the wind and sea and yet no sense of this cacophony comes through in her description. Jamie does attend to conversations with those about her but doesn't engage with the

broader soundscape which is essential to convey a full sensory experience to the reader and to enable them to hear the gannetry in their 'mind's ear'. It is perhaps more challenging to convey sound, and, as noted, certainly something we are less practised in doing, but it is a vital component in the experiencing of place. Yet we continue to privilege sight over other senses, and sound is frequently missing in contemporary place writing.

Looking further back there are exceptions in literature: writers and poets who have *not* ignored their soundworlds. Hardy, as mentioned in my Introduction, has been a key figure throughout this thesis and his attention to the sound and music of place, particularly in a novel such as *The Return of the Native*, is outstanding. There is something about Egdon Heath and Hardy's description of it that makes me think it was one of his Singing Places and a strong non-verbal element to his multi-sensory awareness connects, I believe, to how as a very young child, it must have acted upon him. It was a place he returned to again and again. For Hardy, Egdon is scent and touch, sight and sound. When, in Book One, Eustacia and Wildeve are on the heath, Hardy writes:

> Compound utterances addressed themselves to their senses, and it was possible to view by ear the features of the neighbourhood. Acoustic pictures were returned from the darkened scenery; they could hear where the tracts of heather began and ended; Where the furze was growing stalky and tall; where it had been recently cut; in what direction the fir clump lay; and how near was the pit in which the hollies grew; for these differing features had their voices no less than their shapes and contours. (1971: 100)

This passage is one of many where Hardy demonstrates his deep connection to the soundscape of the heath, and its previously mentioned 'linguistic peculiarity'. This is a term I refer to several times as I believe it draws the reader's attention to how each place has its own individual soundscape, and how personal our connections to these can be.

Sound is a dynamic force that moves through time, as do Hardy's characters' emotions. Sound, place and emotional state are all fused in *The Return of the Native*. I have previously mentioned Marty South's identification and attunement to the pine trees' 'soft musical breathing' as she and Giles plant together but Marty's father also

identifies with the soundworld around him as he sits and watches a tall elm rocking, ‘listening to the melancholy Gregorian melodies which the air wrung out of it’ (1986: 138). These examples demonstrate Hardy’s ability to connect the external soundscape to his characters’ internal, emotional world. He understands not only the ability of sound to enhance the world he is describing but also its ability to convey emotional resonance. Music, place, emotion and memory are all combined in poems such as ‘Church Romance’ and ‘Afternoon Service at Mellstock’.

Afternoon Service at Mellstock
(Circa 1850)

On afternoons of drowsy calm
We stood in the panelled pew,
Singing one-voiced a Tate-and-Brady psalm
To the tune of "Cambridge New."

We watched the elms, we watched the rooks,
The clouds upon the breeze,
Between the whiles of glancing at our books,
And swaying like the trees.

So mindless were those outpourings! -
Though I am not aware
That I have gained by subtle thought on things
Since we stood psalming there. (2001: 429)

Maybe it is no coincidence that Hardy was born into a family of musicians. Similarly, the poet John Clare – writing in the first half of the nineteenth century – came from a musical family. From their earliest days, music was woven into both of their lives with traditional songs and fiddle music played in front of the fire for the seasonal feasts of the year that they would have celebrated. Clare brings sound to our attention with his inventiveness in language, for example in his transcript of the nightingale’s singing in the orchard outside his window ‘The Nightingale’ (May 1832) published in

his *Natural History Prose* (1983). One summer, Clare attempted to take down the notes of a nightingale that had been singing 'constantly as it were at my very door' (1983: 312). Clare captures phonetically the vast repertoire of the bird, with lines such as 'tee rew tee rew tee rew/gur – chew rit chew rit – chur-chur-chur/chur will-will will-will tweet-em/tweet em jug jug jug jug/grig grig grig chew chew.' Both Hardy and Clare were aware of how music and sound can provoke emotional responses in a way that the visual may not.

Henry David Thoreau's close attention to, and immersion in, one place over two years is described in his classic *Walden* (1854), where his chapter on sound underscores his deep engagement with the auditory world he experiences there. Thoreau describes the noises of night at Walden Pond – the trains, their whistles, the owls. He also describes the sounds of the day – the faraway church bells carrying when the wind is favourable, the pheasant, the bleating of calves. The list goes on. But it's not just a simple list, as Thoreau talks about the near and the faraway sounds – the distant rattling wagons over bridges, the close scuffling of squirrels rummaging under the floorboards – and, unusually, he describes echoes. In writing about the church bells, he tells us about a melody and its echo:

> There came to me a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood […] The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood (1995: 80).

This auditory dialogue between a sound and the space into which it is sounding links back to themes explored in the first chapter of this thesis where the ideas of Seán Street, Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Slater were introduced. And, once again, I wonder why sound is so often overlooked in contemporary place writing, especially, as demonstrated by Thoreau, it is such a powerful component in the exploration and experiencing of place.

A notable exception of contemporary creative non-fiction that foregrounds sound is Jennifer Lucy Allan's *The Foghorn's Lament* (2021). There are four sections in Allan's book: Attack, Decay, Sustain and Decay. As these are technical terms to describe the journey of a sound from its start to its finish, the reader feels immediately

confident that Allan knows what she is writing about. Allan, interested in both music and technology, becomes obsessed with foghorns after hearing one as part of a performance, *Foghorn Requiem*, at Souter Point lighthouse in South Shields. Her obsession takes her around the coast of Britain and over to North America. In her epilogue Allan writes: 'Sound is always invisibly in motion, is always transient, and the sounds of our surroundings come with baggage, with associations, with the shapes and memories of a place and its history' (2021: 283). It is clear Allan understands the poignancy of sound, of what it can carry.

Possibly the most direct and immediate way to capture the soundscape of place is through field recordings. The value of these as a sonic methodology is emphasised in Jamie's anthology *Antlers of Water* (2020), where the Scots writer Alec Finlay, in his chapter 'From a Place-Aware Dictionary', states, 'Field recordings are the concertos of place-awareness' (2020: 251). As a concerto is a work for a solo instrument against the backdrop of a full orchestra and frequently demonstrating virtuosity, it is possible to see, in Finlay's quote, the importance of field recordings in place writing.

Over the course of writing this thesis, I have listened to and studied various musical compositions that have been formed from, or around, place recordings. These have included works by Barry Truax– *Steam* (2001), using alto flute and recordings of Canadian railroad whistles and foghorns; Janet Cardiff – *Her Long Black Hair* (2004), a journey through Central Park in New York, using audio recording and photographs; and Cardiff – *The Forty Part Motet* (2001) based on Tallis' *Spem in Alium* and Hildegard Westerkamp – *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), where the small sounds of barnacles are blended with the noise of the city.

Cities and Memory (2015), created by Stuart Fowkes, is a website that describes itself as a 'global, collaborative sound art and field recording programme with the aim of remixing the world, one sound at a time' (2015: para1). The creators invite artists from around the world to respond and write music to the field recordings that have already been made and placed online. These can be anything from sounds recorded inside the Sistine Chapel to deer and owls calling in the middle of the night. The invitation, to me, is a curious one. I would want to be writing music to a field recording of my own, or at least to a place I have an emotional connection with; but there are parallels in this approach to Peter Davidson's response to John Aubrey's coloured drawings and, listening again to the owls and deer, it is tempting to respond.

Would this be place writing? I would still be engaged with the essence of the place but at one step removed, filtered through someone else's experience and determined by the choices they had made in their recording.

It is evident by the existence of online sites such as *Cities and Memories* that there has been an exponential increase in the use of field recordings since digital recording technology became readily available and easy to transport. Interdisciplinary fields have developed: acoustic ecology, ecological sound art, audio geography and acoustemology to name but a few. Collaborations are formed that can play an important part in awareness of climate crisis, mitigation and adaption. The exploration of these ideas lies beyond the scope of this thesis but as Westerkamp said, the value of soundscape composition (whereby she uses field-recordings), 'is the artistic, sonic transmission of meanings about place, time, environment and listening perception' (Westerkamp 2002: 52).

Another good example of more personal contemporary work directly engaging with sound and place is *The Resonant Viaduct* (2024) by Tommy Perman and Rob St John. This work is based round the Castlefield Viaduct on the southern edge of Manchester city centre. Castlefield is the oldest part of Manchester where there was once a Roman fort. Later, during the Industrial Revolution, the area became a central hub and includes the viaduct, linking the obsolete (since 1969) Central Station with the Port of Manchester – now Salford Quays. Perman's composition consists of five tracks based around field recordings recorded around the site by Raz Ullah. St John writes:

> Listening to the 'The Resonant Viaduct' on the viaduct itself is a process of sonic call-and-response with the surroundings. The whir and rumble of trains, clatter of construction work and coo of nesting pigeons ebb up from below and around, seeping into Tommy's washes of synthesised sound (2024).

To listen to the work while walking over the re-opened viaduct is, I imagine, a deeply immersive experience and, for me, highlights the potential of a multi-dimensional approach to place writing, and for the re-imagining of derelict, neglected places in our cities. This blurring of the division between music and sound links back to John Cage's ideas explored in the Introduction – that music is not separate from the environment but part of it.

Practising

Having established my heterogeneous understanding of place writing, and critically reflected on both song and sound, I want to end this chapter by turning to my own creative practice. As already stated, my thesis is characterised by its holistic, interdependent nature. Thinking of my overarching theme of resonance and my four co-ordinates of sound, place, memory and emotion, I will initially look at each form (creative non-fiction, poetry, music) individually. Undeniably Covid, and the subsequent restrictions, led to an unforeseen change of plan. One major outcome is that my thesis now spanned two different locations, and this led eventually to a larger and more expansive project than originally anticipated. My fieldwork and choice of collaborators was largely determined by Covid; however, themes of place and memory may have been enhanced given the impact of the pandemic on our personal and collective experiences of place at this time.

The creative non-fiction element of *The Singing Places* has focused on sound-in-place, from early chapters re-visiting the landscape of my childhood – The Thames – to playing the tunes of Thomas Hardy's family at his childhood haunt, Rushy Pond, in West Dorset. As I was initially restricted to staying in West Dorset this meant I turned to my daughter as a collaborator. This was a fruitful partnership as we were used to playing the music and poetry of Hardy, having performed at his house Max Gate on many occasions. By taking this music outside we could experience how the natural architecture of these locations shaped our sound and the merging of this outdoor world with our music, as the wild ponies (Hardy's 'heathcroppers') came to drink and the wood pigeons called. Time concertinaed as past and present dissolved. This was especially pronounced when, following invitation from the manager of the properties, we took our programmes indoors to the now empty spaces of Max Gate and the Cottage. Reading Hardy's first poem, 'Domicilium', in the room where he was born was a profound experience.

I also thought about the resonance of instruments themselves and interviewed a neighbour who is a violin maker and repairer and asked him what he experienced when holding an old violin – an instrument holding its own history and memory of the hands that had once held it. I was curious as to whether any of this would be transmitted to the repairer as he worked on it. Later, when restrictions were lifted, I could return to the river, the old sounds stirring memories and providing a sense of

familiar ‘melancholy comfort’. By reconnecting with old friends and making field recordings alongside the river in what I termed Singing Places I could document these special places of acoustic and emotional significance. The processes of making recordings at Cleeve, Moulsford and Dorchester-on-Thames were all described in the essays ‘Recording the River’ and ‘Dorchester-on-Thames’. I also investigated resonance by interviewing friends and family about their early soundscapes and the sounds that remained embedded in their memory. This would provide evidence of what acoustically stays with us from early childhood and the significance of this, thereby underscoring the overarching theme of resonance throughout the project.

Alongside this, I wrote about the listening walk that I made retracing Hardy’s mother Jemima’s route when, as a young servant, she made her way home each week from our village to Melbury Osmund, some eight miles away. This extended my exploration of sound-in-place with an attempt to listen to the world two centuries apart. In ‘Walking with Jemima’, as I recreated the sounds in my mind’s ear of Jemima’s time these were overlaid with the sounds I heard as I walked. By creating an imagined, historical soundscape, I was led to wonder about what in the audio world would remain unchanged – for example the whirr of wind in the trees, the crunch of footsteps on gravel, the call of a blackbird – and how these sounds act as a bridge between past and present. This walk deepened my engagement with the theme of resonance and how sound echoes through time providing a temporal link to the past.

Two chapters of my creative non-fiction describe the development and making of the poetry collection, *West Dorset Church Porches* that forms one third of *The Singing Places*. This collection formed the initial part of my project and, as such, embodies themes of resonance, liminality and attentive listening. Working with my sister was an easy collaboration. It was what we are used to doing – we are used to sharing, as twins it is our default. There is a resonant connection that goes back to our earliest days when we would see our actions mirrored by the other. However, the time itself was very different as our working patterns ceased and the noise of our everyday lives dropped to a whisper. Visiting these porches when the churches themselves were locked and inaccessible provided an unusual opportunity to engage with threshold spaces, areas that are neither wholly sacred nor wholly secular, that hold a liminal in-between quality. We were paused in what is normally a transitory space. This echoed the experience we were all going through. It was also a time of great quietness and

freedom from some of the usual work responsibilities and ties. These factors led to us finding space and time for deep reflection and heightened awareness. The physical and aural qualities of each porch varied, affected by the size, the amount of clutter, or the acoustic dampening effect of mats. There was also a significant link to Hardy in that many of the churches we visited had been worked on by Hardy as a young architect when he was training with John Hicks– the church architect in Dorchester. This link with Hardy provided another form of resonance, and again one where past and present overlapped.

Listening attentively, I explored how the sound of our footsteps changed when stepping over into these places and how the sounds of outside still reached us. The poems emphasise these small details of the soundscape alongside Alison's attention to tiny architectural details. The theme of resonance was amplified by working together and Alison's drawings, in combination with my poems, created a resonance between visual and verbal, similar to that of sound and place. Interestingly, we both commented on our sharing of skills. Alison felt her listening skills increased and that she was listening more carefully each time we met. I'm not sure my drawing skills increased but my appreciation of architectural terms did, with a new knowledge of quatrefoils and spandrels, lierne vault ceilings and the *farewells* being the top row of the *diminishing* row of limestone roof slabs. There was also much humour as we lugged our ever-expanding 'library' of reference books with us, setting them up on church benches or inside the porches themselves. These included the *Royal Commission on Historic Monuments – County of Dorset Vol 1 – West*; John Hutchins' *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, published in 1774; the obligatory *Pevsner;* John Piper and John Betjeman's *Church Poems;* and an ancient book that Alison found somewhere – the only book in existence on church porches, and published in 1912 – *Porches and Fonts* by Charles J. Wall. This collaboration with Alison held a deep personal resonance, our efforts taking us back to our childhood junior school projects. Our conversations were filled with shared memories and now we both look back on this immersive time with great love.

The third part of *The Singing Places* by necessity could only be approached towards the end of the research. I had to wait a long time before I could return to the river and make the field recordings that were to form the heart of my compositions. As described in the Introduction, I had originally intended to write songs and to possibly use folk songs of the area. I had read extensively about the folklorist and

collector Alfred Williams and conducted archival research into his collection but, on discovering the songs were not original to the Thames Valley, I decided to change my plans. Songs that were not intrinsic to the place would, I felt, not resonate with the field recordings in the way I had hoped. I also felt that as I had the, originally unplanned, West Dorset Church Project collection of poems that it would be good to work with music and field recordings alone to convey the acoustic and emotional resonance of the Thames landscape and something of what it meant to me. There was a deep connection with my very early instrumental work *From Gardens Where We Feel Secure* (1983) – an album based around field recordings made on the Thames, taking the listener through a day, from early dawn to the depths of a summer's night: bird song, sheep bleating, a gate creaking, oars in water, church bells, crickets, a clock ticking. I had wanted to make an album that immersed the listener in a sense of lying back in the grass on a hot summer's day, or the restlessness of a sleepless night, capturing a certain place at a certain time. With *The Singing Places*, I again wished to capture the soundworld of the river, but this time I would record the evening, moving through to the dawn.

By using musicians who themselves had lifelong connections to the river, an emotional depth was gained that would not have occurred had I used session musicians. I asked Ted Morse, the traditional musician from our village of Moulsford, if he would contribute and happily, he agreed. I also managed to persuade my friend and local lock keeper Jon, to play harmonica. It felt important that Jon's playing was recorded, knowing how the river had been a source of emotional solace for him since growing up in a children's home in Abingdon. I played my dad's old piano – my childhood friend – and my daughter Florence played harp. The field recordings formed the heart of each track with familiar riverine sounds: the Canada geese, the wood doves, the high-speed train racing over Brunel's bridge in Moulsford, the voices carrying over the river as the day drew to a close. I cross-faded each track so that the music flowed continually, taking the listener from a summer's evening through a rainy night to the following dawn.

In conclusion, *The Singing Places* has involved a deep exploration, both critically and artistically, of the emotional impact of our acoustic environment. Throughout, I have continually strived to investigate the deep and interwoven relationship between sound, emotion, memory and place, and to understand the relationship through my own creative practice which moves between poetry, creative

non-fiction and musical composition. By working in several forms, and drawing on my background as musician and poet, I have been able to approach *The Singing Places* and the idea of resonance from diverse angles. Because of the unexpected interruption caused by Covid I was able to broaden my research area, working collaboratively with my twin sister, and playing music with my daughter throughout West Dorset's Hardyscapes. When I was able to return to the river, I could record at significant places alongside the Thames making recordings that would form the basis of *The Singing Place*'s musical component. I believe that as a threefold work *The Singing Places* sits clearly within the broad heterogeneous definition of place writing explored within this chapter and that, throughout this work, informed by my preoccupation with sound, I have demonstrated how, since our earliest days, our soundscapes imprint themselves on us and bring us solace in quiet unspoken ways.

Re-sounding

Looking back over the past four years, now that my thesis is complete, there is much to reflect on. Recognising that a sound created in one way creates a vibration in another system, it has always made sense to follow a multi-disciplinary approach to investigate the idea of emotional and acoustic resonance in *The Singing Places.* Having created a threefold work comprising poetry, creative non-fiction and music-composition, I believe my work has the potential to reach wide and diverse audiences. All three strands of the thesis form a dialogue with the soundscapes they were created within, and ultimately with each other. As all the work has been broadly created around the theme of resonance, a feeling of affinity exists between the related forms and, as an interplay of echoes and reverberations ricochets between them, the reader and listener are drawn to engage in a deep and immersive way.

For me, music is a very direct form of communication, it by-passes words and goes straight to the heart. I recall being a student at the Guildhall School in the early 1980s where, waiting in the corridor before my flute lessons, I would sometimes engage in conversation with Alfred Nieman, professor of piano and composition. Nieman also taught improvisation to music therapy students, and his insights are quoted eloquently by Mary Priestly (1994: 17):

> Music faces us with the realisation that there are two worlds: the inner and the outer. The inner is often incommunicable, a spiritual world which is difficult to enter from the outer world where we normally speak to one another. Music is a bridge for us by which we can reach this inner world. That is why this free expression is so vital for music therapy. You are privileged people to be able to communicate with this deepest part of human beings.

Some years later, I myself trained as a music therapist and would come to know experientially what Nieman had meant. In the latter part of the twentieth century, psychoanalysts such as Winnicott, Bion and Stern developed much of our thinking around infant development with their theories of holding, mirroring, containing and attunement. In music therapy, these processes happen within the music improvisation

between the child and therapist. Through this shared music a relationship is built. These ideas are clearly related and relevant to thinking about resonance and its role in pre- and non-verbal worlds.

'Melancholy comfort' is the phrase I have come to use when attempting to express the emotion experienced at certain places on the upper Thames and Rainbarrows. However, it has only been by making the field recordings, and writing music that builds on these, that I have been able to reflect on just how precisely the resulting recordings can express these nuanced and finely tuned atmospheres. Additionally, music, being non-verbal, facilitates an easier transcultural, more universal exchange. Creative non-fiction, in contrast, could be characterised as more cerebral, provoking thinking and discussion, and presenting a depth of knowledge that is harder to express in the other two creative forms. Poetry is a dream-like, minimal form where the space in the poem – what is left unsaid – allows the reader's own imagination to fill in the gaps in a way that is personal. They are enabled to find what resonates for them. It is also frequently a spoken form; its use of assonance and its unhurried pace of delivery highlighting its audible, resonant qualities. By accessing, exploring, and revealing resonance through these distinct forms, it could be argued that there are very different voices speaking. However, I feel that as an artist I am essentially using the same part of myself to create each part. This is something I have often thought about in my professional practice and is born out in experience: when I am writing poetry it is hard to write music, when I am writing music it is hard to write prose.

In my work, navigating the terminology surrounding practice-related research has proved to be a challenge. Questions have arisen: is it practice-based, practice-led, practice-as-research, or simply practice research? While these terms initially appear to be interchangeable, emphasis and nuance distinguish them. Linda Candy's (2006) guide to practice-related research brings some clarity by defining two types. These illuminating definitions are worth quoting at length:

> 1: Practice-based Research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. In a doctoral thesis, claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes in the form of designs, music, digital media, performances and exhibitions. Whilst the

> significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes.
>
> 2: Practice-led Research is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice. In a doctoral thesis, the results of practice-led research may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative work. The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice. Such research includes practice as an integral part of its method and often falls within the general area of action research.

R. Lyle Skains, commenting on Candy's work, reflects that these clear distinctions can often in actuality be more blurry. Skains believes we, 'create art to connect to others, to connect with ourselves, and often just for the sake of it' (2018: 82-87). Traditionally, it has been the role of the critic to analyse and deconstruct an artist's work, to place it in a context and reveal how it relates to the world about us. However, practice-based/led researchers must do not only this, but also go a step further by analysing and observing their own intimate processes, making them explicit and framing them within a scholarly field.

I am aware through discussion with fellow researchers, that in some fields, particularly music, practice-as-research is another approach. Here, the research will consist only of the creative practice and there will be no accompanying critical reflection. The creative work itself *is* the embodiment of the new knowledge with emphasis placed on creative exploration and innovation. Some universities may require accompanying statements for compositions submitted but Michael Cawood Green and Tony Williams in their paper, 'On Reflection: The Role, Mode and Medium of the Reflective Component in Practice as Research', quote Camden Reeves, head of Music at the University of Manchester, who believes:

> The requirement of 300-word statements is in many cases not simply unnecessary; making this a requirement is actually detrimental to the future progress of compositional research […] Some composers can think that way, as they are dealing with a research agenda for which a written mode of discourse with which to discuss it already exists. But for others this is not the

> case. And some composers just don't think that way. They think about music in terms of music, and respond to music through music.

This dynamic balance between creative work and critical reflection clearly varies between disciplines, between universities, and amongst researchers themselves. The question, then, has been where to situate my own work. I have wrestled with this as it has not previously been a part of my creative practice to reflect on process, and I have discovered an almost superstitious reluctance to do so, as though, if I stop to think about what I am doing I would no longer be able to do it. The immersive, all-consuming process of creative work is hard to step back from, to form insights into the work, and to find the language to express these. Even everyday household tasks are attended to in a dreamlike state much of the time. Nevertheless, I have always kept notebooks and journals so, once I decided to focus on a critical analysis, I did at least have the documentational evidence. But it has felt like entering another psychological space to be able to do this.

The Singing Places is predominantly practice-based with the music part of the work defined as practice-as-research. However, as explained in the Introduction, rather than have a lengthy accompanying text, much of the critical thinking is embedded within the creative non-fiction element of the thesis. It is within this strand that immersive personal experience is combined with considerable academic/critical reflection. Much of this is based around my deep knowledge of Hardy, the landscape he loved, and the music his family collected and played. Hardy, like myself, was not only a poet and writer but also a musician. He also held a deep love for the rural landscape of his native place, something I also share. The soundworld of Egdon, its link with his earliest days, and the sonic thread that it provided throughout his life led me to investigate my own and others early soundscapes.

I listened as friends recalled the haunting sound of trains at night; to a fire grate being cleared in the early morning; and Ted's memory of the various bells of the churches and colleges in wartime Oxford chiming the hours of the night, combined with the rumble of convoys, as troops were moved during the darkened streets.

To explore resonance and resonant landscapes more fully I also examined instrument making, walking artists, the concept of portals, the work of Alfred Williams and English folk song. Underpinning this work are the theories and contributions of many artists and musicians that I have discussed in the previous

chapters of this thesis, including John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, Murray Schafer, Hildegard Westerkamp, Paul Nash, Bill Brandt, Hamish Fulton and Janet Cardiff. As I continued researching, I became aware of the many interconnections between these musicians and artists. A striking example of this is evident in Bill Brandt's photograph of the Roman Road on Egdon Heath and how accurately it captures its desolate nature. This resonates deeply with Hardy's insistence that the composer Holst, who was visiting in August, should return at night so that he would know something of the November nature of the heath. Likewise, throughout his whole life, the artist Paul Nash returned again and again to the Thames to paint Wittenham Clumps, demonstrating his lifelong commitment and connection to this landscape. This was one of the locations I used for my field recordings. I recall how, many years ago, my twin sister painted the hills for her A level Art exam.

Reflecting on the West Dorset church porch project, I am aware that this is not something I would have envisaged making or working on without the limitations imposed by the restrictions of the time we were all living through. But the situation presented an opportunity to work with my twin, and share something of her love of old churches. In a set-apart time in these set-apart places, we had time to listen, to absorb, to talk, draw and write. I was initially concerned that the project did not sit with the rest of my work. But, on reflection, I can see that this practice of pausing, of listening, was something I carried with me throughout my entire research; that this close attention to the intertwining of the aural and physical environment made it easier to identify resonance. There were some places where we simply did not feel able to generate any work. An example of this was Ryme Intrinseca where, after some ten minutes, I was thinking how stuck I felt when Alison said quietly, 'I don't think I can find anything I want to draw here.' Being twins there is undoubtably an intuitive sense of affinity, or resonance, between us. Within this work, though, I also gained an understanding of church architecture and a feeling for local stone. As we entered a porch it was possible to notice how much the sound world changed with just one step. Sometimes, crossing the threshold, I would close my eyes and step in and out of the porch, attuning myself to the slight echoes deflecting off the walls as I walked onto the stone floor. As stated earlier, many of the churches we visited were those that would have been worked on by Hardy when he was employed as a young architect's assistant for Hicks, the Dorchester architect who was involved in the restoration of these buildings. There is hardly a West Dorset church that has escaped this, something

that Hardy regretted later in life. But this tangible link with Hardy provided further echoes to investigate. In the finished work, having my twin sister's architectural drawings placed alongside each poem, another resonance, or amplification, is also present.

Through the process of reflection, I have identified many imaginative and conceptual links between the three strands of *The Singing Places*. Crucially, for example, each part of my thesis was begun outdoors and underlines a deep connection with the landscape. This is immersive, site-based work, a preference that has become integral to my creative practice where it feels largely impossible for me to work in any other way. The outdoors is my creative habitat. Even the church porches themselves, although providing shelter, were open to the external environment. So, although, as mentioned, the soundworld was noticeably different on entering a porch, we were still able to hear the churchyard jackdaws clattering in the branches.

However, I did discover when I was inside that, due to Covid, there was a significant shift in how places were being utilised. Some were simply not being used, for example Hardy's Cottage and Max Gate. Here, there were no visitors, no staff, and even their contents had been removed or were pushed aside and covered. The houses were slumbering. Everything was stilled. This made it easier to access the sense of deep time held in their walls. I allowed myself to attune to this layering, of moving backwards and forwards in time, of pausing in a space normally moved through. Playing in an empty room in a deserted house, to an iPhone screen to an unknown audience, is something that could only have happened because of lockdown. In a church porch on a cold morning, we could see the centuries – the juxtaposition of fifteenth-century stone carving, against a Victorian boot-scraper, alongside notices about the local foodbank.

Outside, in locations that were important to Hardy, playing the tunes played by his father and grandfather introduced another dimension to this layering of time: the remembrance of tunes, of echoes, of recapitulation. Walking Jemima's route from Maiden Newton to Melbury Osmund, hearing the see-sawing call of the great tit, a clatter of rooks, sheep bleating, water bubbling over stones, and knowing these auditory experiences would have been shared two centuries earlier with her, offered a profound embodied connection. And subsequently, much later, in the Dorset History Centre, discovering Jemima's mother's letters filled with her concern for her children and how this evoked an emotional resonance with my concern for my daughter and

brought back further echoes of a letter found in my mother's bedroom after she had died, from her own mother to her eldest daughter – once again filled and weighted with maternal worry.

During lockdowns, the river was closed to boat traffic and the wildlife returned. Lock keepers I spoke to about this time mentioned the number of people swimming, rowing and using paddle boards. There was a sense of a simpler life as we struggled to make our own bread and the sale of fishing licenses increased exponentially. When I eventually managed to return to the river, it was still a much quieter place, and I witnessed my first sighting of an otter. When I did record, I made the recordings in the evenings. I had initially intended to record at each of my chosen locations for an hour each throughout the night. However, after a few evenings I realised that, as it grew dark, the riverbank was far too lonely a place to be and wearing headphones only increased my sense of vulnerability. I decided to only record in the evenings or very early mornings. Dusk and dawn felt like thresholds and this aspect linked with the church porches and our sense of pausing on a border, in a liminal space that was neither sacred nor secular – an in-between space. Making field recordings on the river, hearing again the long-ago familiar sounds – the call of the coot, voices carrying across water, the sound of the fast speed train, an outboard motor – old childhood memories flooded back provoking that old melancholy comfort. Recently, I played Alison the recording made at Hobbs Boathouse, a childhood haunt. With no prompting, the recaptured sounds meant that, within seconds, she knew where she was. The recording took her back instantly to long childhood days spent outdoors and confirmed for me the power of specific sounds to take us back to where we first heard them, and to the feelings we experienced at the time.

By slowing down and spending time in these outdoor environments I was being open to whatever arose, a good example being when the wild ponies – the heath croppers – appeared during Florence and my outdoor lockdown performances on the heath. One evening the ponies gently lapped water from Rushy Pond, another time they cantered by, hooves thundering, as we faced an incoming storm on the Roman Road. A sense of improvisation is created by being open to chance and writing about, or recording, what occurs audibly in the moment, whether these are sounds that reach the church porches or the bird calls on the Thames. The field recordings are improvisatory too; there is no controlling what sounds will occur. However, some

sense of choice is returned once it comes to deciding which sections to use as the basis for my tracks. As each recording was an hour long, and I only needed about five minutes for each track, I therefore selected sections where the soundscape resonated most strongly.

All the creative work has been about trying to understand something: what it is that calls us back to certain places and why are we called to make these repeated returns? For example, Hardy's attachment to Lower Bockhampton and to Stinsford, and my own to Rainbarrows and to the river, all share an essential driving force, a longing to make sense of something, to understand something peripheral, just out of reach. I believe that the acoustic and emotional resonance that we experience in these places is what causes them to sing. By taking time to attune ourselves to our aural environments we can become sensitive to those we resonate with.

One question I continue to ask is whether a place can cease to be a Singing Place? I think about how a china cup will ring if it is tapped and yet if the cup becomes cracked, even if this is not visible, it will no longer sing. These thoughts take me to a visit I made recently to Tarrant Rushton Church near Blandford Forum. Here, set in the eastern face of the chancel wall, are the earliest known examples of medieval amplifiers: earthenware vessels that would have amplified the priest's voice. These must have been successful as there is an entry in Wimborne Minster's church warden's accounts reading: 'payd for 2 potts of clay for the wyndfylling of the Church 8d' (1986: 11). On a dismal day at the back end of the year, I entered the darkened church. As I walked up the nave, I spoke out loud to myself. Approaching the altar I turned, seeing the ancient pots set high-up in their niches on the chancel wall. I continued to speak and curiously, despite the jars now being considerably cracked and broken, it appeared that my voice was amplified. Some things, despite investigation, are beyond explanation.

However, reflecting on places that do no longer sing returns me to Jennifer Lucy Allan's, *The Foghorn's Lament.* Here*,* Allan presents a full investigation into the foghorns that once surrounded our coast and the loss of them and, crucially, their sound: 'the foghorn is a sound with an emotional power and resonance, the rhythmic soundtrack to fog and heavy weather' (2021: 197). Although nostalgia for their haunting boom persists, Allan makes the point that, 'the RSPB worry that re-sounding foghorns might disturb reproductive cycles, as some lighthouse sites where old horns have been restored are also crucial for nesting seabirds' (2021: 243).

With climate emergency and species extinction upon us, I have been increasingly aware of how this may affect the Singing Places. There may be the same birds on the Thames as when I was a child but as many of 50% species are in decline. The balance has shifted too. There are far more cormorants but many less coots and moorhens. It's possible that the cormorants predate the young of these smaller species. I wonder if, as each song ends, the place will cease to sing. As I've mentioned before, I am aware that the 'linguistic peculiarity' of Egdon Heath, that Hardy knew and described in such detail, no longer exists. I have spent many a gusty November day up on Rainbarrows, trying to hear the sound he alluded to – that of the husky wind driving through the mummified heath bells. Instead, nowadays the noise of the A35 infiltrates the heath, especially in winter when there are no leaves to absorb and muffle the sound. Luckily, it is not too loud, and I feel my experience of the heath is still a resonant one. Unfortunately, this is less true in the garden at Max Gate where last weekend I led a party of visitors. They were dismayed by the road noise of the adjacent dual carriageway, that same A35. I recall again that day my sister Karen and I walked the traditional hay meadow at Cricklade, an SSSI where 80% of Britain's snake's head fritillaries flower each April. During our whole walk we were conscious of the loud road noise of the A419, as Florence and I had been when we walked there many years ago. In contrast to these experiences, this morning I walked early to a remote ancient woodland to see the last of the snowdrops that edge the perimeter. This is a place that, so far, road noise has not reached. Instead, I heard coal tit, robin, marsh tit, blue tit, blackbird, tree creeper, goldfinch, goldcrest, thrush, wren, chaffinch and greater spotted woodpecker. Truly a Singing Place.

My objective has always been to contribute to, and expand, the advancement of contemporary place writing by emphasising the often-overlooked role of the acoustic environment, and its role in our understanding and appreciation of place. My deep knowledge of Hardy and his attention to the soundscape in his work led me to focus keenly on the aural worlds of both West Dorset and the Thames. By engaging with these creative works I intend the reader and listener to take away a desire to discover or revisit places that hold deep resonance for them and that when, out in the landscape, they will pause to listen, to attune to the acoustic environment, noticing how they feel, and how the soundscape significantly defines and shapes their relationship to place. These experiences will, I hope, encourage them to create, or discover again, their own Singing Places.

West Dorset Church Porches

Preface

This collection of drawings and poems was the result of an extended project that began in lockdown. During this time, most churches were closed but their porches remained open and often had become places of community and exchange: providing bedding for homeless people, foodbanks, enterprising flower arrangements or newspaper drop off/collection points. In the past, these in-between spaces were where the village met the church, neither wholly nor secular in nature, yet often small architectural masterpieces in their own right – liminal thresholds that are usually moved through, not paused within. Over a year, twin sisters, Virginia Astley and Alison Bunning, a poet and architect, spent extending time in these porches, writing and drawing, producing a unique record that documents the changing seasons and these neglected but beautiful places. There was something about pausing and spending time in these unsung spaces, with their locked doors to the church beyond, that directly paralleled the restrictions and limitations of the time we were all living through.

West Dorset Church Porches

An exploration in drawing and poems by
Virginia Astley and Alison Bunning

Link to West Dorset Church Porches

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RDOSZbCoE0cOVGxb9UzF7P9LvQCcjO5G/view

The Liminal Space of West Dorset Churches

The West Dorset Porch Project arose out of necessity and adaption. As explained elsewhere in this thesis, when Covid arrived, it was impossible to follow my original plan and base my research on the upper reaches of the River Thames. Therefore, it was under lockdown restrictions that the West Dorset Church Porch was initiated in 2020 and, over a year, evolved into a deeply reflective collaboration. I had always intended to investigate place and sound and to what I had come to think of as 'emotional resonance' – how somewhere could become what I termed a 'Singing Place'. The challenge was to bring some of these ideas into our collaborative project and to see how thinking about and with church porches could complicate and enrich my practice-based research.

Historically church porches have been used in a variety of ways, reflecting their role as both sacred and secular spaces. Centuries ago, baptisms would have taken place in the porch, with the font still placed here. Marriages too were sealed in this space before proceeding into the church for the celebration of Mass. At one time burials would have taken place in the porch. They were also places of sanctuary and refuge and where people in need of protection would find shelter. Ultimately, justice would be administered here and legal contracts also signed. Porches held an educational role too, where teaching would have occurred, sometimes in an upstairs room above. These upper chambers could also serve as libraries and treasuries. On a profound social level, church porches were frequently somewhere foundlings would be left, as they provided shelter and were a place of relative safety. Village fairs originated in the church porches too, from pre-Reformation days when each church would have had a stature of its patron saint in a niche above the door. From this list alone, we can begin to grasp the importance these places held in people's lives. Neither fully secular nor fully sacred, they were liminal, transitional spaces. Particularly useful for enriching our knowledge of church porches and their uses was the ancient book Alison had found – Charles Wall's *Porches and Fonts* published in 1912. In more recent times, porches have served as little more than the entrance to the church and where the noticeboard is situated. They are spaces that are moved through, not generally paused in.

However, armed with our ever-expanding 'travelling library' – including Wall's book, volumes of Hutchings, and Betjeman and Piper's collaboration – and our flasks of tea and hot chocolate, Alison and I did pause here, spending extended time in these places, immersing ourselves in attentive listening and close observation as we visited around eighty churches over the space of that year. Both of us were increasingly conscious of the layers of time and generations of people that had gone before. In many ways, the porches acted as portals for us, bringing us closer to the stonemasons who had worked on them and those whose lives had been intrinsically linked to these unsung places. Alison was deeply attuned to the architectural details and the fine workmanship we discovered – of how there could be so many centuries of work in one small space, each porch an architectural miniature reflecting its own blend of influences and history. For me, these ancient thresholds were not only physical but also temporal meeting points. The convergence of times and styles paralleled the diverse, sometimes tangential, paths my thesis took. Each porch reverberated with the resonant traces of lives and past events: from the visible graffiti of 1589 at Melcombe Horsey, to Marjorie's photographs of young men from Loders, killed in the First World War, to the less tangible, felt sense of those who had passed through earlier.

Alison still produces all her architectural drawings by hand: a method that connects her physically with the building and one that she says she finds is the best way to 'gain a proper understanding of a building'. As Alison drew, I would take time to close my eyes, attuning to the emotional atmosphere of the place while listening attentively to the world around us. On reflection, I can see how this contemplative grounding by us both, in the sensory, physical and emotional dimensions of place aligned with my overarching theme of resonance and how my four coordinates of sound, memory, place and emotion became an essential framework for my thesis and informed my ongoing methodology as *The Singing Places* evolved.

Another resonant link in our church project was with Thomas Hardy, whose influence on my own life and work I have written about at various points in this thesis. From the moment that Hardy, at the age of sixteen, was articled to work for John Hicks, a church architect in Dorchester, his was a 'life twisted of three strands – the professional life, the scholar's life, and the rustic life, combined in the twenty-four hours of one day' (1928: 12). By 'rustic life' Hardy was referring to his playing of the fiddle for all the weddings and seasonal events that occurred in the rural area

surrounding his family home. By 'scholar's life' he was meaning his study of Greek, early in the mornings before he set off for his 'professional life', which was largely taken up with the Victorian Gothic revival that was happening in church architecture at this time. It is possible to see how all three strands informed, and were woven into, Hardy's writing. His novels provide numerous traces of his architectural life and the tactile connection between stone and layered time, such as when Jude feels the contours and shapes of Christminster's medieval buildings, or when George Somerset in *A Laodicean*, takes Paula Power's hand and guides it, so she can feel the differences between early and later work, within the layered walls of her castle (1991: 91). The experiences of Alison and myself in the porches were a modern echo of Hardy's and just as his characters had reached out to touch the stone, so did we. We were aware that Hardy was working for Hicks during the years he worked on the churches at Bridport, North Poorton, Rampisham, Long Bredy and Powerstock. We know Hardy also visited Fordington as he was great friends with the Moule brothers whose father was the vicar there. In these places, the connection to Hardy and his work felt particularly strong.

In the unprecedented situation we found ourselves in, our project unfolded gently and organically. Alison and I would never decide beforehand where we intended to visit. We would simply meet at my house and go where we felt drawn, letting instinct guide our day rather than following a set route. In some respects, it was something of a psychogeographic journey. Throughout our work together, Alison and I continued to value intuition and responding, over order and planning. Our method was always collaborative, spontaneous and digressive. When eventually it came time to organize the book, we chose to arrange the church porches seasonally, inspired by the rhythm of the year rather than geographical proximity. Our improvised approach – with its roots in exploration, seeing where things might lead and seeking out echoes and resonance – went on to become the foundation for the rest of my thesis.

The Singing Places

Creative Non-fiction

Preface

The Singing Places

As previously described, *The Singing Places* began as a project investigating the upper reaches of the River Thames. I wished to understand something more of the nature of this landscape, a place where my earlier work had been situated. Building on this, I wanted to go further. The Singing Places themselves are places where I experience a deep emotional connection. Initial questions focused on whether this was about something held in the place itself, something intrinsic, possibly its nature, its geography, its soundworld? Perhaps it was something to do with the music that I had heard or played, or maybe written there, music that in some sense belonged to the place. Possibly the connection was caused by association with personal events that had occurred there. Or maybe it was a sensing of something significant that had taken place in the past. I needed to discover what it was compelling me to return again and again to this remembered landscape, this place stored in my earliest self, to find what lay behind this desire to return, to be continually rewinding, replaying, continuing this quiet exchange. I recalled working on the river in that wet summer of 2012 and how old memories were braided with new as I continued to replay my earlier life in a landscape where I belonged.

One evening I sat outside the Beetle and Wedge pub in Moulsford, a couple of miles upstream from Cleeve. Cricketers from the Freddie Flintoff Cricket Academy, taking place at the nearby school, were drinking away on the next table, making the most of a rare dry evening. Moulsford, the village where I grew up – a far from neutral place. As I sat looking upstream, aware of the smell of BBQ grilling and the babbling conversation, I saw overhead the Canada geese come in low on their unswerving flight path, their necks outstretched, their honking accompanied by the soft shushing of their wings. I couldn't say it was nostalgia, more the weight of intense sadness, the physicality of loss, a feeling of constriction in my chest, the way Chopin's E major Étude makes me feel. I struggled not to break down as I sat on the bench gazing across the river. The geese were followed by two dozen mallards coming ashore. They pecked at the dandelion and chickweed, preening themselves,

briskly wagging their tails, until taken over by the dying light, their eyelids started to close. One quickly settled down, her neck turned back, and her head tucked under her soft feathers. Others started to rest their heads while still standing. The whole process was something I had never taken time to witness before. It was deeply soporific, especially after a day walking up and down the lock and combined with a glass of wine. Above, the wind in the sycamores sounded like a brook and from across the flood meadows came the mournful two-note call of a train. From somewhere else entered the syncopated call of a wood pigeon and the soundworld was complete; time folded like a concertina and I was my nine-year old self, product of hands-off parenting, child of the river.

Returning to the River in March

Cleeve, Inglesham

The wind has increased further, causing the silver birch to sigh as I make my way down the familiar path to Benson Lock, memories returning of the first time I came here. It was the day I started as Summer Assistant at the lock. I remember walking up the track and that mounting fear of going over the weir itself. I had seen online photos of the long narrow walkway winding above. The wind today is against my back, but its sound is quickly replaced by the overriding white noise of the weir. I follow the path, entering a kind of liminal space where it's impossible to tell the difference between anxiety and excitement, like riding a rollercoaster. It is similar in some ways to performance anxiety, where I try to convince myself that the nerves I feel before playing are exhilarating. Usually not very successfully. Across the white water sits the white solid lock house with its plaque: Thames Conservancy 1913. I aim for the house aware of the sound of the weirs increasing but phasing as the wind gusts, holding my breath while everything around me is on full volume. On one side, the water is a Wedgewood green sheen, and the other is a mass of eddies and whirlpools. To my right a whole tree is shoved up against the weir, an alder – its fissured trunk bathing in the flow. When I get close, I realise there's a submerged boat too. How long has that been there? Don't the Environment Agency intend to move it? A whole tree and a boat. I stop above the far radials and finally breathe. The fresh spinach smell somehow grounds me and my fists unclench as I grasp the rail. The sound directly above the weir is quieter. But there is still that overwhelming poignancy and my chest feels tight.

In the lock office I know there's a small wooden board with metal pegs, a little like a misshapen Solitaire game. Bob, the previous resident lock keeper, carved this and it served as a visual reminder for how the weirs were running. No doubt Kate, the present lock keeper, uses it. On the lock island, the weeping willow is breaking into new leaf – that pale but lurid colour. It reminds me of the very first time I went to Buscot Lock, way upstream, with the willow there coming out, and how much Jon the resident liked that tree, how he thought of it as some kind of mammoth. It was this same time of year, March. I was staying in a little cottage by the lock and had been curious to see if the resident lock keepers I remembered from my childhood were still

a presence on the river. It took me three days to find the courage to speak to Jon. It was well over ten years ago now and we are still close friends.

A crisp hedge of brown beech crackles in the wind. The lock lavender has new growth. Last year's has not been picked. Celia, Bob's wife, would have had that all cut and dried. When I left the lock, Celia gave me a patchwork owl she had made. It was stuffed with lavender. It sits bedside my desk at home. Most trees are still leafless, but the blackthorn is erupting – little white stars dust bare branches.

The wind is stronger than ever now. How deserted it all is – so different to summer. At this time of year, you might expect to find someone out painting bollards or weeding, once the traditional winter jobs. The place looks unloved, neglected. It would have looked more cared for in Bob's winters. However, daffodils are coming out and even the daisies are braving the cold and I'm glad to be here, to witness the river at this time. The level's high though. When I came over Wallingford Bridge, I could see just how high, on the brink of breaking its banks. Canal boats are moored by the deserted campsite, waiting for the water to go down.

Blackthorn and privet edge the lock, ivy furls along the old parkland fence. The field beyond is saturated, pools of water like mirrors – the solitary oak standing on one, the weathered pillbox squatting beside it. I remember the day the Second World War re-enactment society came, Bob saying they'd be better off down the pub than in a pillbox reeking of piss: 'I'm sure the home-guard enjoyed a pint…'A stream runs along the back of the lock – an alder has been shorn off three feet from the ground. It seems the whole tree line has been thinned, maybe it's how it looks in winter … I'm sure there used to be more trees here. Two Canada geese are sat on the island, a couple of mallards have tucked up under the willow and a pair of cormorants have settled on the very end. An alder tree is slung with two kinds of catkins, female and male. It's good to see an alder in one piece! Walking back to the far side of the river, the white noise fades quickly as the pure line of a blackbird's song surfaces.

I had planned to walk today but it's now too cold and too late and I wonder whether to go to the Waterfront or the Beetle – maybe both. I drove up this morning from Dorset and had left the A34 at the Chilton turn, reaching the summit of a small hill where ahead the Thames Valley stretched before me. I was home. My eyes were drawn to a spot in the grey sky where the cooling towers of Didcot Power Station should have been. I was disorientated by their absence. You could always place where

you were by those towers, their hyperboloid structures visible for miles. Demolished early one morning last summer I keep forgetting they are no longer with us. It's the same way I will catch myself looking up at the windows of my mother's old flat, wondering why her ornaments are not on the windowsill.

I had made a right turn and, seeing a pothole, tried to avoid it. A few metres later the car was wobbling and shaking**.** Surely, I was imagining it. Wishful thinking … I pulled over. I'd wondered who to call but there was no one and I didn't have the physical strength to unbolt the wheel nuts. The entire journey had been stressful. I had started out from the village of Maiden Newton, where I live, in thick fog and on the A303 had almost turned back several times. But I wanted to get up here to the river while I still could, before the coronavirus spreads and we are all held in lockdown.

I rang Green Flag and in less than an hour later a man from a local garage was changing the tyre for the space-saving one. But I needed a proper one for driving back tomorrow. My brother Gareth was at work when I called him.

'There's a garage if you go into Wallingford via the Didcot road. Ask for Reg. Reg will sort it out. Mum used to use them.'

I'd thought about her quite a bit on this journey. The times I drove up to sort something out for her. Never really getting it right.

Reg swiftly fitted the new tyre and, as he did, he told me his dad used to play snooker with my brother and that my mother was last there in 2011. This made sense as she didn't drive again after she was sectioned at the back end of 2012.

'Your brother's Harbour Master down in Southampton, isn't he?' Reg asked.

'Well, he works at a marina – as a bosun.'

I had liked the fact Gareth had been promoted in his absence.

But the day has now turned grey, and the earlier delay means I don't have enough time to walk before it starts to get dark. I decide instead to head for Benson Waterfront. The last time I was here was two summers ago when I hired a kayak for an afternoon – paddled up to the Shillingford Bridge Hotel. I hadn't been there since the days of taking my dad there on Sunday nights for egg and chips, after he became unwell. Walking under the silver birches I see someone coming towards me. It's Fred the relief keeper. Fred has been a relief for ten years and lives up at Thame. He's on the phone.

'Ok Tim, Bye for now.' He puts his phone away and smiles.

‘Was that Tim at Whitchurch?’

‘Yes, that was him. Telling him the levels are down, it’s all gone a bit wobbly because the hydro’s off at Culham.’

Fred is covering everywhere between Oxford and Reading at the moment. We talk about our favourite places on the river.

‘Cleeve’s my favourite place on earth.’

‘Whitchurch is pretty idyllic too, a bit shady,’ replies Fred.

‘I know – one end of the lock’s Norway and the other the South of France. But it’s a close second.’

Whitchurch is special. However, my relationship with Cleeve stretches far back, is long and enduring.

The river became part of my life when I was five and significantly the first place that I saw the Thames from was a small Victorian cottage on the riverbank opposite Cleeve Lock. My dad had rented the place for a week's holiday. My brothers, and my elder sister Karen, had previously all been on a boating holiday on the Thames with Dad, but this was the first time I came to the river, at Cleeve, a riverside hamlet in Oxfordshire. I remember very little, except the cottage stairs were open wooden slats and my twin sister Alison, who I thought was a complete baby (I am after all an important ten minutes older), had to be carried upstairs to bed because she was scared of the gaps. These days she tells me that what she remembers is how the cottage smelt of wood. But the place must have kindled a desire in my father, as within a couple of years he had bought a house, Barley Break, a mile and a half upriver. Dad never wanted to leave the place: he called it his ‘heaven on earth’.

From the Waterfront I’m surprised by the far-reaching views; I forget how much further you can see in winter. Beyond the skeletal willow on the other bank there’s the farm and grey smoke rising from a distant bonfire. Further up on this side are the neat wooden chalets behind neat, pollarded willows. I order a tea and sit under the awning. There is an elderly couple at another table. I saw the pair earlier when I went over to the lock – the man was pushing the woman along the lane in a wheelchair. We get talking and they tell me that once they walked the full length of the Thames Path.

‘We did twenty-three miles on the last day!’ exclaims the man, ‘made it to the Thames Barrier …’

‘And then the Visitor Centre was closed,’ adds his wife. I remember reaching the Thames Barrier myself when my daughter Florence and I walked the river from the source. The next day we went across the water on the Woolwich ferry. I was hoping to see Scott, one of the Royal Swan uppers. He’s master of the Woolwich ferry, but sadly he was off that day. I ask the couple which are their favourite places on the river. The woman says, ‘Well, they are all so different!’

Her husband is more decisive,

‘Between Cricklade and Kelmscott.’

Aha, the upper reaches – my kind of man.

‘Do you remember the lovely little church?’ he asks me.

‘Inglesham?’

‘That’s it!’ he smiles.

It’s on my list of places to return to. I remember the first time I visited, near the start of mine and Florence’s travels. It had snowed. I remember the stillness, and that quietness that only snow brings.

A strange thing happens as I’m driving back through Crowmarsh towards Streatley, when instead of noticing everything that has changed, as I usually would, and how different it all feels, I notice everything that has stayed the same. The old penny-farthing stuck on the front of a cottage, the beautiful brickwork of Georgian Wallingford – once a Saxon burg, the red brick with its patterning of vitrified headers, the old street signs, and the daffodils all coming up. It reminds me of first coming down here as a seven-year old, of seeing daffodils and wild rabbits. Of the snow at Easter and the daffodils poking their heads through. That bleak emptiness has gone. It must be the weir, the negative ions and talking to Fred, that old sense of belonging, the community, the river looking after its own.

Moulsford to Cleeve

The towpath from Moulsford to Cleeve

I stay the night at The Swan in Streatley. This feels hard – it's the first time I've stayed here since my mother died. As I re-run those awful weeks I become increasingly immobilized. I can't get rid of the picture of the hospital bed lying where her dining table once stood – placed there so that she might be able to see the sun setting behind the hills on the far side of the river. And that night the whole flat filling with a smell of burning. My sisters arriving, and after them my brothers. My eldest brother saying *She needs a walk-in shower.* Us all sitting around waiting for her to die – like a long slow art film. Except I'm mostly the only one who sat with her. My sisters were fixed to their iPads – Killer Sudoku and Patience. They said they *need* to do this. Mum breathing more harshly, one brother deciding: *I must get home, to avoid the traffic.* Returning to that last evening, that last meal, I see my sisters with their salad with its chilli and nectarines, their wine made from grapes picked at night. I wonder how they could eat, my mother gasping and me sitting with her. I picture the list I'd found in her safe, of who she wanted contacting if she was dying. The list on which I was the last. All my failsafe ways of dealing with these things have failed – they are not failsafe after all – sorrow and regret are weighing in. It's taken a year to sell her flat and I have frequently come up and stayed. At nights I've stood by the picture window, looking out at the dark, listening to the Canada geese – their wing beats – as they came in to roost, and then those wakeful nights in the spare room at the back of her flat hearing the night trains haunting the cut. Her bedroom next door, the cream bedspread pulled over her empty bed.

These memories combined with feeling slightly paranoid about the new coronavirus that has now reached us, and of its exponential spread, mean I have hardly slept last night. Acutely aware of every door handle I touch I leave the Swan.

I decide the best solution is to walk – to walk to Cleeve. But it's too flooded so I need to drive upstream to Moulsford and walk back from there. I set out about 7.30am, from behind the Beetle and Wedge.

The Beetle is closed for refurbishment. The sky is bluer than yesterday, but the river has taken on its dull opaque look today, like paint that has been over-mixed and lost any sense of a definite colour, except perhaps a shade of seventies sludge-green.

Suds float on its broad expanse and I wonder if these have been carried all the way from the weir at Benson. It's all familiar: a train on the far side of the river, a plane overhead, even walking towards the sunlight. Winter's washed-out pallet and puddles the size of garden ponds. To my right, in a scrap of wood and shrub, some Lodden lilies are just starting to come into flower. When the towpath breaks out into the meadow, it turns to a marsh. I creep up to the hedge, startling Canada geese who in turn startle me. The broad grey trunks of once-pollarded willows stand up to their knees in water. I squelch along. It's slow going and I'm unconvinced this is the right walk to do today. I'm tempted to head back along the main road, but it would be too busy. However, the sun's out and there's a peacefulness – that quiet lull before spring takes off. The grass is washed clean from winter floods and flocks of greylag geese are picking their way across the molehills and celandines like a search party. On the opposite bank smoke trails from a liveaboard moored outside the Leatherne Bottel. Once again, I imagine another life – a small narrowboat, a wood burner and being on the river all year. Up to my right is the Ridgeway path and I'm thinking back to the years when they burnt the stubble. Many years ago, one evening after dinner, my mother sat at the table recounting a dream she'd had the night before,

'I dreamt they were burning the stubble, and it got out of control. There were fire engines racing through the village and when we went out the whole skyline was lit up by the fire …'

Mum had hardly finished before we heard the siren, and then another. We went to the front door and it was just as she described – the fields as far as we could see all blazing. The skyline burning. It's an account I tried to recreate in one of the tracks on my album *From Gardens Where We Feel Secure*, speeding up the sound of a xylophone to recreate the lapping sound of the fire spreading across the fields.

The boats moored on the other bank all look okay and as though they've come to no harm in the recent floods. I wonder if Steve, Cleeve's resident lock keeper, has had to do much rescuing this winter. A row of more recently pollarded willow, their new shoots bolting upright like punk haircuts, line the edge of the field. I have reached Cleeve Lock.

Across the river, behind the lock on the opposite bank, was once the old Victorian cottage we stayed in on that first childhood holiday here. Now long gone it has been replaced by an oversized and ugly Huf Haus. Behind this I can see the white of the chalk cliff and the red-tiled roof of what was once the laundry. The cottage, the

old laundry and another house were all on land known as the Temple. Behind the chalk cliff is the railway cutting.

A few years after my dad bought our house at Moulsford, my sister Karen and her husband Pete bought the Temple at Cleeve and I would spend the next few years trailing alongside the river between the two places. Karen and Pete stayed in the Victorian cottage at first, while they had a spacious wooden house built. That house now stands on stilts, its large glass windows overlooking the lock island and the Cleeve house weirs. I take a photo and text it to Pete. He messages me back and tells me he recorded the Cleeve weirs for The Who album *Quadrophenia*. He regrets selling the place. The house has grown into its surroundings, the wood has darkened, and the willows are much larger. The original boathouse, looking like a log cabin, sits at the water's edge.

I wonder why the Temple was so named. With Elvendon Priory, just up the road, and the old land where Nun's Acre once stood, a little way up-river, there was clearly at one time a strong spiritual presence on the riverbank around Goring. I remember years ago Pete telling me, not only was their house at Cleeve built where ley lines crossed, but there was once a perpetual choir at the Temple. Who were they and what was their purpose? Besides the cottage there was also a large Victorian house on the site until the 1960s, and photographs taken by Henry Taunt in the late nineteenth century, as he rowed the river with his portable studio on board a skiff, show the house looking over the water. Tall willows line the bank, as they still do. The garden runs alongside the weir stream, opposite the lock island, down to an old mill beyond the middle weirs. Every summer Karen and Pete had what they called a garden party where all kinds of musician friends played; I remember Ronnie Lane, Thunderclap Newman and Medicine Head and the lawns spilling with people. But mostly I remember the excitement of the days leading up, as we planned and decorated with our little nieces, Emma and Minta. But I also recall a hot summer when Pete bought his young brothers a small hovercraft and my twin sister and I would watch in awe and horror as they careered off the riverbank and pummelled up the river, snapping through fishing lines, causing every bird to take flight and every boater to scream at them.

The lock keeper in those days was Harry, and his access to the riverbank was by dinghy, to a mooring by the cottage, on the north bank. Nowadays Steve has access granted across the farmland on the same side as the lock. His red lock brick

house was built in 1958 and is typical of a few on the river built around the same time. Before Steve the previous resident was Ian, and as with so much river folklore, his tale lives on. Ian did things his own way: he had his summer assistants ironing his shirts, cooking his breakfasts, even manning the lock in the afternoon when he went up the pub. The Environment Agency wanted him gone but were only able to sack him when they finally found he kept an air rifle in his lock office. I remember the happy days I worked here with Joe, a 'temporary relief', and how he'd liven the day with tales of his fishing adventures. He'd describe how to make boilies – a complicated mix of bird food, milk, grain and eggs, moulded into hard round balls. These he would use to tempt the fish on his and his friends' riverside vigils, waiting for Joe's beloved barbel. There was such a contrast between the desire to catch the fish and, once he had, the tenderness and care as it was unhooked and, after taking a photo, placed gently back in the flowing water.

I'm sat at the lockside picnic table when a car comes across the farmland. When it pulls up, I see Fred, the relief I saw yesterday at Benson. He's come to measure the water levels as Steve has a day off. 'I'm not stalking you' I say, and we laugh. But it's time to be setting off. I must get back to West Dorset. A rowing eight are out on the water and a runner is coming towards me with a black lab. 'Bit boggy', he calls cheerily as he passes, mud splattering in his wake. Somewhere I hear a red kite. A curious call, a little like a backwards wolf whistle. It's not a bird I'd like to record. The bird I prize is the curlew. I've not heard them round here, but Jon hears them further upriver. Across the water is where Sam Saunders once had his boatyard, now a nature reserve and where a moorhen scrap is taking place. Saunders was born at the Swan in Streatley and, after building his first boat at a very young age, went onto to become a pioneer of the craft. His boat *Consuta* was a steam launch with a lightweight construction, its innovative hull being laminated strips stitched together with copper wire. Consuta is Latin for 'sewn-together'.

I remember well the excitement when the boat came into Cleeve Lock one afternoon. But that wet summer we were excited when anything came into the lock. I recall one afternoon of torrential rain, reading the 'Incident Book', of abandoned couches in the weir pool, of a little lost dog on the doorstep. Tom, who I was working with that day, had studied social anthropology, and decided to explain why the First

and Second World Wars occurred; how Germany was made up of lots of little kingdoms – that the First World War was about state building. My mind blurred as he went into detail of the Prussian's pointy helmets. Damp and miserable, the day dragged. He mentioned things I vaguely remembered hearing about in 'O' level history; but as it was a double lesson Friday afternoon, I'd slept through most of it. Later in the afternoon, Tom had resumed the 'Incident book' and I was pretending to read Edward Thomas when I glanced upriver and saw a canoe approaching. I went out and, as they drew nearer, saw two Dickensian characters, as though the rogues from *Our Mutual Friend* – Rogue Riderhood and Bradley Headstone in 'rough water-side second-hand clothing' – were approaching Plashwater Weir Mill Lock. Dickens based this lock on Shepperton and I imagined in 1865 it would not that have been dissimilar to Cleeve:

> Plashwater Weir Mill Lock looked tranquil and pretty on an evening in the summer time. A soft air stirred the leaves of the fresh green trees, and passed like a smooth shadow over the river, and like a smoother shadow over the yielding grass. The voice of the falling water, like the voices of the sea and the wind, were as an outer memory to a contemplative listener; but not particularly so to Mr Riderhood, who sat on one of the blunt wooden levers of his lock-gates, dozing. Wine must be got into a butt by some agency before it can be drawn out; and the wine of sentiment never having been got into Mr Riderhood by any agency, nothing in nature tapped him.

These men had big green waterproof capes on and as they stopped to fill their bottles with water, they'd told me in heavy London accents that they'd been drinking rainwater. A pile of river mussels lay strewn on the floor. They told me they wanted to find somewhere to hang their hammocks for the night, that they would like to find an island.

Finally, after much squelching, I'm back at the Beetle sitting on the bench looking over the water to the flood meadows. I'm glad it's closed and there's no one about. I remember the days of the village pub before it turned into a fancy restaurant. Dad would slip us money for the fruit machine and if we won, he'd whisper, 'Walk away … Always walk away when you're winning.' I look upriver at the unchanged view, the sky unable to make up its mind, another train speeding towards the Brunel bridge.

Lockdown

Towards the end of March the first Coronavirus Act is passed and comes into force. We are ordered by the prime minister to 'Stay at home.' It is impossible to go to the river as the days stretch into weeks, into months. My plans to investigate the Singing Places of the Thames must be put aside. I, like many others, engage with the close-at-hand – the place I have lived for the last twenty years – West Dorset. It is a matter of working with what is possible. My world has become smaller, but I draw inspiration from Hardy who, in August 1922 (when he was 82), wrote in his notebook:

> I am convinced it is better for a writer to know a little bit of the world remarkably well than to know a great part of the world remarkably little.

Hardy's connection and love of Dorset, and his extended version Wessex, was deep and lifelong. Born into a family of musicians, it is perhaps not surprising that of all English novelists it's Hardy who pays most attention to the sound and music of the world about him. I get the sense that to Hardy all sound *is* music; that he is always hearing music, be it in the trees, in the wind passing through the landscape, in the birdsong. Egdon Heath, Rushy Pond and Rainbarrows were places that drew him back again and again, from his first infant steps on the Roman Road until, when he was 87, taking Holst to visit the heath.

Maybe by slowing down, spending time in, and listening carefully to these Hardyscapes, I will come to understand something of what it is about them that acoustically and emotionally resonates deeply inside me. As time goes on, I will sense which places have the greatest pull, the places I am most in tune with.

A Summer's Evening by Rushy Pond

Rushy Pond

'Daddy, there they are!' the little girl shouted as she ran towards us.

'We could hear you from miles away,' she added as she stood, hands on hips, at our feet. She was a tiny blond thing, and looked no more than two, but her language skills were clearly that of an older child. She told us her name was Lumi. Her dad introduced himself as James, adding they could hear us all the way from the car park. This was alarming. I hadn't anticipated our sound would reach quite as far. We had gone up to Rushy Pond in Thorncombe Woods to rehearse and try out the camera on my daughter Florence's phone before our first live streamed performance that's happening *this* evening. We finished our run-through but we'd played 'Enrico', Thomas Hardy's favourite tune, one last time for our new friends. Seeing little Lumi by the pond it had been easy to imagine Hardy and his sister Mary playing up here, him helping her climb trees, them throwing sticks in the water. How they had imagined fairies might live nearby.

It was starting to rain when we set off to return down the track to the back of Hardy's cottage where my car was parked. James had offered to carry Florence's harp, which was kind as it could have gone on its trolley. But it was better for the harp not to be bumped over the rough ground though not, I imagined, for James's back. By the time we reached the car the rain was falling steadily.

'Daddy, I need you to carry me now,' said Lumi as James dutifully scooped her up, turning back to return up the slope, this time with her on his shoulders.

That evening Florence and I had waited until we were home before playing back our short performance on her phone. Although the sound was good, Florence had chopped off my head. Tonight, we must try and get us both fully in the frame.

My friend Martin has been live streaming gigs from the living room of his little cottage in Barbaraville on the far Northeast coast of Scotland since lockdown began. He's told Florence exactly how he does it. For years, Martin has been a highly organised one-man cottage industry. He is a hard-working generous man and someone I've felt an affinity with since we first met in our early twenties when Martin

played guitar in my band and I in return would sing and play with his band when they toured in Scotland. It always feels good to be around Martin.

We saw each other in Bath earlier this year before lockdown. Martin had flown down from Inverness to Bristol and we met up in the town, going round the guitar shop. The first guitar that caught his eye was a Louis Panormo. Panormo was a luthier who had come from Sicily with his father, a violin maker. Martin has one of his guitars back home – spruce and rosewood and two hundred years old. 'Long before jazz', Martin had told me, 'and better condition than this one,' adding in a conspiratorial whisper '… it's been on a hell of a journey.' But how do we know what journey an instrument has been on, what secrets are held in their resonant bodies?

It was a strange alien world to me and not one I had felt particularly comfortable in. Martin picked out another guitar, its label read: Gibson ES 175. The letters and numbers were shorthand for Electric, Spanish and 175 dollars – its original selling price. Martin had one of these at home too, a 1963 guitar, in mint condition and with only one previous owner. After the candy tangerine Fender Strat and a Japanese Lawsuit Era Ibanez, I was feeling awkward and bored when the man who worked in the shop smiled at me. He pointed to a little guitar hung on the wall behind him, 'Old Gibsons were always built with Adirondack spruce', he told me.

Now this interested me, and for a couple of reasons: I'd wondered about the Adirondacks for a few years since reading about Dr Trudeau and his 'cure cottages' on Saranac Lake for tuberculosis sufferers; it also reminded me of hearing about the spruce for Stradavari instruments, how it needed to be quite dense, therefore not grown too fast and that it was floated down after felling to Cremona where the luthiers were based. I decided that when I got back to Maiden Newton, I needed to visit John Dike, a violin maker who lives round the corner from me. I wanted to understand a little of instrument building, of what causes an instrument to resonate.

However, with Covid, this visit has yet to happen. In the meantime, Martin is busy live-streaming gigs from home and now, having had our rehearsal, we are returning to Rushy Pond to try and do the same. So tonight, Florence is using her Facebook account and I have set up a Paypal account which will we copy and paste as a link when we live stream. Martin does this and calls it his 'tip jar'. We are basically copying him. Since the pandemic all our live performances with audiences are a thing

of the past so it would be good if we could do something that resembles a kind of show and reach people online. We'll see.

All morning and afternoon we've had gorgeous summer weather but since first thing I've had that gig day feeling. I woke with it and was curious that the thought of performing to a tiny phone could induce the same feelings as an upcoming performance to a live audience. Florence went out for a short walk with her friend Alistair this afternoon and I went round to Richard's briefly and sat on the lawn amongst the lady's bedstraw. We drank tea and caught up in the sunshine. Richard, a long-ago ex, lives round the corner in Maiden Newton House, once the rectory where Hardy's mother Jemima worked as a servant from the age of thirteen. She would walk back every week on her day off to the village of her birth – Melbury Osmund. A walk that I plan to do one day. As I lay back on the grass there was the feeling of heading for that languid exhausted quality of late summer. I felt like we should have practised more. I couldn't think of much else other than the show tonight. There is so much to think about, I'm focused on getting it right and wish I felt Florence was as committed. The irony is Florence will undoubtedly be ok, but I will probably make mistakes. It always feels too much is on my shoulders.

Once again, we've driven up the rough lane that leads to the edge of Puddletown Forest to the place where the trees meet the track, and the dirt lane becomes a sandy path that will eventually take you to Puddletown. This is the place where the cottage lies. We've parked at the back and walked up through the woods – Florence's clarsach on its rusty trolley this time, but it hasn't taken long for her to start grumbling. I offer to take the harp and give her my bag with flute and essential supplies. We've stopped at Poundbury for these: a large bar of Dairy Milk and tins of gin and tonic. It's a perfect summer evening. We've set up the camera on Florence's phone so that we can see ourselves; it means the audience will see us in reverse. I remember the first live stream show of Martin's that Florence watched.

'I never realised Martin was left-handed,' Florence observed.

'He's not,' I replied but looking at the screen it appeared he was. It took us a while to figure it out. But it's a good plan for Martin as he can see comments as they appear on his screen. This evening, we are too far away from Florence's phone and, although we can see ouselves, we can't read our viewers'comments.

Florence is smiling and I'm smiling – it feels wonderful to be here in the wood, still light at seven thirty and a long time until sunset – how I love summer evenings. We decided it was a good idea to present a show about Thomas Hardy's early life when we are within earshot of the cottage – Hardy's birthplace, the heart of his young world – where he lived with his grandmother, parents and three siblings until his twenties. Before lockdown we used to play regularly at weekends for visitors to Max Gate, the house on the edge of Dorchester that Hardy lived in later. But as we begin my mouth feels dry. I feel intimidated. I start to talk about Hardy's early life, all the time aware of just how close the cottage is, how Hardy and his sister Mary played by this pond, climbed the trees.

'Hardy was given a small accordion at the age of four and a violin when he was six.' I introduce our first tune.

'This is Hardy's favourite, favourite tune.' We launch into 'Enrico'. Over the years we have done so much busking and this stands us in good stead for this performance. We are used to performing when there is no one visible, always aware that as soon as you go onto automatic pilot anyone who is even half-listening can tell. It's something I learnt when I was sixteen and first busked in London. But right now, I feel our sound is taking up the whole woods and I wonder who might mind. I think of my friend Jonny who lives in the woods and wonder if he feels the same when he practises here. I am feeling intimidated, losing my confidence.

As we play, I am aware of the evening stillness around us, there is no wind at all. A few birds are singing, a chaffinch, a blackbird, but most beautiful is the wood dove's cooing. A text comes through on my phone lying on the ground by me; I glance down and see it's my friend Matt letting me know he can see and hear us ok.

I talk about Hardy's father and mother: how legend has it that Hardy's father, also Thomas, seduced Jemima on the banks of the Frome. Hardy chose to portray a more respectable account in his poem, 'A Church Romance'. Maybe both accounts are true. I love the poem for the feeling between the musician Thomas, playing up in the gallery and Jemima, presumably with the family for whom she worked, in the pew below. It captures that electricity of first love, and the charm of a musician, although Jemima had strong reasons to hold her feelings back. Her independence had been hard won, having grown up in poverty with a father who abrogated his responsibilities, her leaving home at thirteen. As I read the last line, 'Bowing New Sabbath or Mount

Ephraim', Florence starts to play the latter on her harp. This sets off the dove, its syncopated notes accompanied by the harp chords.

Most of the tunes we play are from the manuscripts held at the Dorchester Museum. There are two little notebooks there. One belonged to Hardy's grandfather and the other to his father. I remember well the day Florence and I went to the museum and were allowed to handle the books. I remember how we sat in a tiny space – more a cupboard than a room – turning the thin pages carefully. The tunes are handwritten or, as they would say back then, had been taken down by 'note-pricking'. In the front of the books are the psalms and church music but, turning the book over and starting from the back, you find the dance tunes of the day. A very physical and tangible example of the musicians' lives – one night playing until the small hours for a dance, the next morning grouped together in the west gallery, playing for the church service. Musicians had to make sure they had their music books the right way up and to remember where they were playing. Hardy's hilarious story, 'Absentmindedness in a Parish Choir', tells of an occasion when this didn't happen, with sorry results.

I've often thought about these church musicians and how a huge part of their musical lives came to an end when what became known as West Gallery music making was replaced, in the early 1800s, first by the barrel organ and then by the harmonium or organ. A few years ago, on another trip to Dorchester Museum, I wound my way to the back, where tucked into a corner in the basement, was a reconstructed 'Dorset Kitchen'. Despite the advertising – I'd seen a few posters around town – I was the only person at Gordon's barrel organ demonstration. The kitchen seemed a strange place for a barrel organ, but undeterred, Gordon turned out 'O Worship the King'. However, even with his best efforts there was no discernable regular beat. He offered me a turn and the experience was nothing but demoralising. To go from having live musicians to this would have been heart-breaking for congregation and musicians alike. This particular barrel organ had been built for the vicar of Puddletown and cost £75 when it was installed in 1845. Puddletown was the village that Hardy's grandfather, also Thomas, had been born and grew up in, playing cello in the west gallery. When he married and moved to the cottage here at Higher Bockhampton he found one solitary oboist in the local church at Stinsford. Over the following years, Thomas senior set about building up a strong musical tradition. As time went on, he was joined by his sons, Thomas (Hardy's father) and James, and then in 1822 by a new vicar, Edward Murray, who was a keen musician. Two or three

evenings a week they would rehearse in Murray's study at Stinsford House. They were considered the best instrumentalists in the area and, although parishes such as Maiden Newton had more players, these included clarionets and serpents which Hardy claimed, 'were apt to be a little too sonorous, even strident, when zealously blown.' The 'well-practised violists' meant that for nearly forty years there was happy music-making at Stinsford, ending a year or so after of Hardy's birth. It is a story immortalized by Hardy in his novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* and in his Preface to this book he tells how:

> the change has tended to stultify the professed aims of the clergy, its direct result being to curtail and extinguish the interest of parishioners in church doings. Under the old plan, from half a dozen to ten full-grown players, in addition to the numerous more or less grown-up singers, were officially occupied with the Sunday routine, and concerned in trying their best to make it an artistic outcome of the combined musical taste of the congregation.

Of course, the introduction of a barrel organ meant the clergy had much more control, but I picture the band tramping miles, the warm bodies of their fiddles tucked under their arms ready with anthems and Tate and Brady psalms, walking through all weathers to the church. They must have been keen. They would have traipsed along the dirt tracks and paths, close to where Florence and I are standing now, making their way to the church. How miserable they must have felt to be ousted by a mechanical box.

We have paused for a minute while Florence retunes a couple of strings. All around spangles with the golden evening light and there is a perfect mirror image of the full leafed trees falling on the pond behind us. Sunset is hours off. I adore these stretching days, full of warmth, sunlight and time.

We must continue our programme – who knows what our unseen audience have been up to? Florence launches into the first bars of 'Haste to the Wedding' with its cheerful 6/8 time. I announce to our unseen audience that 'We're playing this for Jilly and Marjorie.' It's a tune that everyone enjoyed when we used to go to Coneygar Lodge in Bridport to play. It all seems a long time ago now, playing in care homes. Marjorie was one of the most positive people I have ever met. We used to vary our

programmes considerably, but Marjorie loved them all. She would sit on the settee with her pusher in front of her always making sure the other residents were ok and always knitting. When our village was making-up bags of essential items and toys for Syrian children, I asked Marjorie if I could buy any of the very cute little teddies she had made. Marjorie would not accept money and instead became involved in the whole project. At her funeral at Loders last year the church was packed. Afterwards, in the village hall, I spoke with a man who told me how committed to the local history society Marjorie had been. When it was the centenary of the start of the First World War, Marjorie had been determined to research all the lives behind the names of the men on the village war memorial. She had literally taken 'We shall remember them' at face value and done just that. On the walls were photos of many of the young men and written beside these were details of their all too brief lives.

I start to read part of the poem 'Domicilium' – it seems particularly right to read this, the first known poem by Hardy, where he is asking his grandmother how this place looked when she first came to live here. Mary Head had been born and was living in Fawley on the Berkshire Downs before marrying Hardy's grandfather and moving to the newly built cottage on the edge of the heathland around 1800. A couple of years ago I found Fawley, an out-of-the-way place near Lambourn and the Ridgeway. In some ways there are similarities of landscapes between those chalk downlands and the chalk escarpment of West Dorset, but I wonder if Mary felt the differences more keenly, the last line of the poem being 'How wild it was when first we settled here.' I've only read a few lines when I'm aware of a sound to my left. Looking over, the wild ponies – brown and grey Dartmoors that wander freely up here – are making their way towards us. I watch them closely as we play, worrying in case they decide to canter through. They pass right in front of us, ambling behind the camera, and turning they come up to the edge of the pond. As we play, they are quietly lapping the water. I am reading the penultimate line, 'Heathcroppers lived on the hills and were our only friends' – the wild ponies have appeared right on cue. This feels very significant and, once again, I have the feeling of time falling away. We chose our programme to reflect Hardy's early life and at this moment it feels as if he and Mary could suddenly appear, scampering up from their cottage.

Florence plays the 'Sheep Shearing Song', a song that Hardy has Dick Dewy singing in the opening pages of 'Under the Greenwood Tree' and I reflect on how

Hardy always picks music or songs in his novels for a specific reason. I feel that Dick is singing a song more associated with one of summer's main events to keep his spirits up as he makes his way along the lane on a dark winter's night. But maybe the song demonstrates that sense of collaborative effort too, of a party of people with a common goal. Tonight, the various members of the Melstock choir are 'Going the Rounds'. I join in with Florence on the chorus and am aware how we're playing the song more slowly than usual. Somehow this suits the stillness of the evening, of being held in a spell. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* after the sheep shearing supper, Bathsheba Everdene sings, 'On the Banks of Allen Water', with its beautiful miller's daughter and soldier with his 'winning tongue'. The links with Sergeant Troy and his mistreatment of Fanny Robin are all too obvious. Florence and I play, 'Allen Water' next and it occurs to me I should probably be singing it. It's a song I love to hear Tim Laycock sing when he performs at Max Gate. Those days all seem a long time ago too now.

We follow this with 'Garçon Volage', a quadrille. Hardy loved to dance and took dancing classes with another young architect in his office. After he returned from working in London in his early twenties, he worked for Crickmay in Weymouth and once commented that the girls in this town were heavier on the arm than those in London. I've always thought this very mean to the girls of Weymouth and so we play the dance for them. I am playing various harmony lines – things originally improvised on days we busked in Sherborne. Yet another thing that feels so long ago.

Florence plays 'College Hornpipe', another *Under the Greenwood Tree* tune, which takes me back to the days of Max Gate performances and how I'd tell our audiences how Hardy had been able to recall the steps to this dance when he was in his eighties. I listen to the fast notes as they fly from the harp and the water on the pond seems to shimmer in time. Finally, I read 'Afternoon Service at Mellstock'. This last poem looks back to a time before the next vicar Arthur Shirley, set to with his renovations. Hardy's frustration at the Victorians replacing the old plain glass windows of the churches with stained glass is understandable – the outside could no longer come in, something beautiful was lost. I will always prefer to go in a church with plain glass, one where you can see the distant hills, the trees, not that there are elms to see, as Hardy mentions in his poem – 'We watched the elms, we watched the rooks, the clouds upon the breeze'. It's easy to imagine him as a child singing, half in

the music and half in the natural world all about him, in some ways much as we've been all evening.

I switch the recording off on my phone. All around us are dusk-singing birds. Florence and I look at each other and smile.

'I was a bit worried when the ponies turned up …' she laughs.

Duxford and The Runaway Fair

Duxford, Chimney, Shifford and Grafton Lock

I arrive at Duxford, a small hamlet on the south bank of the upper reaches of the Thames, at about 1pm and park in a lay-by alongside a farm. A text from Florence tells me there is torrential rain in Bridport. She asks me if I will watch her live streamed gig that she is going to do this evening from her boyfriend's house in Bridport. Here the sky is grey – nothing too alarming. I walk along the dusty track that threads its way through the hamlet, remembering the tall, thatched cottage by the footpath to the river. When I came here with Florence, six years ago or so, it was being renovated. It looks as though the builders might still be working on it. That's a long project.

I've wanted to walk across this ford ever since that day. I tried at the beginning of June – when I came up here on a day of great heat and walked over across the nature reserve at Chimney on the other side of the river. I had just visited the little church of St Mary's at Shifford. Something about lockdown seems to have made us all more acutely aware of nature and our interconnectedness. We have had continual gorgeous weather and to be static, in one place, as spring moved through us, was an unexpected joy. Likewise, to be able to return to the river, even just briefly, filled me with a sense of relief. Everything that day smelt so intense: the elderflower trees at the churchyard, then later along by the lock, after crossing the nature reserve, the scents of honeysuckle and wild roses alternating, and all the time accompanied by that wistful sound of wind in the poplars. I crossed the cut by Shifford Lock where a tribe of gangly teenagers had thrown their bikes down and were dive-bombing, shrieking, into the river. Pausing at the information board, I read up on the eight species of bat that may be found there: Brown longeared, Daubenton's, Barbastelle, Noctule, Pipistrelle – common and soprano, Leisler's and Natterer's. Larks were singing high up in the blue and somewhere, closer by, blue tits called and rooks were constantly squabbling. All the while I was accompanied by turquoise damselflies – known as the devil's darning needle – frequently in mating pairs, as I made my way through three fields, having followed the sign for Duxford and knowing that the ford in the river probably lay beyond that distant stand of trees. There was a buttercup field bordered by a ditch of willow and wild rose. This was followed by one with more

buttercups but teamed with oxeye daisies and thirdly, I entered a glowing field lit by masses of birds foot trefoil. But then there came the fourth field … and the cattle. They were all massed together by the gate on the far side and to my eyes looked a bit flighty. I didn't feel brave enough despite my desire to wade across the Thames, and how amazing that might be. I remember David Collins, who I'd met back in 2012 alongside Goring Lock, when I was working on the river, telling me there has been a ford here since Roman times. He'd said:

'Still today Roman law is law. You cannot dig that ford up or dredge it because the Romans say you must be able to cross the river with your sword, or your shield and spear. So they had to dig the cut to make the new navigation channel.'

David would know as he was born at Shifford Lock where his grandfather had been the first lockkeeper and who he'd been named after. He grew up here (his mother in service nearby) with his grandparents and 'battalions of children'. David had told me too about a Roman sword they had found when dredging the river near here and that his grandfather gave to the Ashmolean in Oxford.

Today a man is fishing from the bank. He says it's his first time here, he's just joined the fishing club that has the rights from here in the backwater to Shifford Lock, not far downstream. I wonder if he's new to fishing – maybe he began during lockdown. The Environment Agency has seen an amazing recovery in fishing license sales since lockdown restrictions were lifted in May. Before this, license sales were only half of previous years but now they are already well over the total for the previous year. I take off my shoes and pull up my leggings. The slabs below are covered in algae, and it looks like it could be slippery but thankfully the water flow isn't too strong. I inch my way through the tiddlers.

'Is it cold?' yells the man from the bank

'Not cold, just slippy.'

I concentrate on trying to get across and resolve to find a stout stick for the return journey. As I reach the other side a man and his teenage daughter appear. As they slip down the sandy bank there's lots of laughter and banter. The man has come prepared in his shorts and crocs; his daughter takes her trainers off.

As I leave the canopy of trees it's a relief to see the cattle are not in the field, their presence having previously deterred me. I cross the field and see that they have only moved to the next field. I quietly open the gate and they carry on their idle chewing and doing nothing much. They haven't noticed me. I pause to write on the

wooden bridge that spans a deep cutting, probably a river in wintertime. I climb down the bank as it's raining now and shelter under a large willow. It's not long before the pages of my notebook are sticking together. There's little point in carrying on. I decide to head back but I've been too absorbed to notice the large cows that have moved onto the bridge and are now coming down the slope. I'm trapped. I'm feeling panicked. I keep thinking I must stay calm, that the cows will sense if I'm alarmed. But I am … they are right up against me and the only thing to do is thread my way through them to the gate. I pick up a stick and they look at me. If they decide they don't like me, a willow wand might not be enough. The rain is now torrential and by the time I reach the trees by the riverbank I am soaked through. I step into the doorway of a pillbox under the trees. Standing watching the rain I feel everything calming and myself connecting to the area, falling into that familiar timeless state. As soon as I arrived today, I could feel the place pulling at me. That sense of refuge returning. The sound of the rain, gentle and soothing. There are a few places on the river which affect me like this. Cleeve and Kelmscott draw me to return again and again. Somehow, though, each is subtly different and different at various times. I remember feeling almost blissful here on that hot day in June. There are certain places round here where it's particularly pronounced. Bampton is another one.

The river has come up in just the time I've been across the fields. No wonder, it's been a real cloudburst, but to be honest, I'm not entirely sure how long I stood for watching the rain. But worse than the raised level is how fast it's flowing now. There's no kind fisherman anymore on the bank to notice if I'm bowled over and dragged downriver. I use the stick and push slowly through the racing current, my face flushed with concentration and alarm. I reach my car, which is now in its own small river. My spare clothes are in the boot and unreachable. I manage to wade over and open the driver's door. My trusty car starts and, sopping wet, I head off for Longworth church, passing my fisherman friend who is standing in the lane, changing. I open the window and we exchange goodbyes.

Although the church itself is locked, the porch is open and there are proper full height wooden doors, rather than metal gates. I enter dripping, puddles rapidly forming round my feet. I've been here once before too – the same day that I came to the ford with Florence. I'd wanted to find the grave of David Edward Collins – the original Shifford lock keeper. I'd found it and that of his wife, Edith Ellen, who was buried there too. She died two years after him. He died in April 1959, age 83. I

remember their grandson, David, telling me he'd died soon after he retired. He had started in 1898. I reflect on him living and working all those years at Shifford and the depth of his connection to this place.

I peel off my drenched clothes and reach in my bag for my towel and spare clothes. Looking down I see sweet angels with round faces are smiling up at me and realise I'm standing on some beautiful eighteenth century graves with their delicate carving and lettering. As I'm changing, I'm hoping that the vicar doesn't turn up or, possibly worse, the churchwarden.

It takes a while to warm up; outside the rain is unrelenting and I plug my phone in to charge. This I know is taking liberties and the church's hospitality too far. Next time I visit, if the church is open, and if it has one of those little boxes in the wall, I shall be generous. It would have been good to walk along the river today, but I can't get these, my only dry clothes, wet and I know my 'waterproofs' are not. Without looking out I can tell from the sound of the rain on the porch roof that it is not lessening at all. A sense of peace begins to fall and I'm thankful I can camp at Jon's lock, though this will be the last time. For the last couple of years Jon has lived at Grafton, one lock downstream from Buscot, but now he is retiring. I wonder how he will be without the river. He's only moving to Thames Street in Lechlade, but it won't be the same.

'Anywhere I can hang these?' I ask as I arrive clutching Prosecco and clothes that look like they've been pulled out the river. I drape my clothes on the radiators as it's still raining. Last time we ate outside but tonight we sit in the spartan room and Jon and eat I tasty heat-up meals left over from his freezer. He is giving me his fridge-freezer as it won't fit in his new house at Lechlade. Tomorrow, we have the task of getting it into my car. Rain is running off the tent in the garden but after we eat it's stopped, and we take Maggie for her evening walk up the river as far as we can go before we meet cows. She doesn't like cows and refuses to go past them, so this is the determining factor of the walk. We head back and while chatting discover we'd both gone youth hostelling in the Cotswolds as teenagers. But whereas I was fourteen and went off with a friend for an unaccompanied adventure, Jon and his friends were accompanied by the 'aunties' from the children's home. I don't think it was much fun. But we discover we'd stayed in some of the same hostels.

Back at the lock house we drink the Prosecco and I suggest we watch Martin, who's live streaming another gig later from his living room up in Scotland. A muntjac

deer comes in the garden and Jon throws him some peanuts. It isn't the usual male. This one is stocky, and less tame but nonetheless he knows we are watching him and is happy to stay a while. Jon is going to miss the wildlife here. After a couple of glasses, I manage to persuade Jon to get his harmonicas out, but I think I make him anxious and sense he would rather just play for himself. But it's nice for me to hear the sound of the harp. The box is beautiful – an alpine scene, a chalet and mountains. We get to talking about Jon and the children's home, where he learnt to play, how Larry Adler taught him and how he'd play hymns in school assemblies. Jon plays 'Alleluia Sing to Jesus'. When he finishes neither of us speak. Finally, it is Jon who breaks the silence.

'I used to play that in school assemblies when I was only this high … with Miss Williams on piano.' He holds his hand to waist height. I'd like Jon to improvise and ask,

'Can you play me something like the wind in the reeds?'

Jon plays some long haunting notes and I'm enjoying it when he stops,

'I'm rubbish when it comes to performing.'

Jon starts to tell me about the fairs that came to Abingdon. There was the main hiring one first, The Michaelmas Fair, and then, a week later, The Runaway Fair. Originally, this second event had been an opportunity for anyone who had signed up to a cruel master or intolerable conditions at the first event to run away. In Jon's day it must have seemed like a chance of escape for some of the kids. He tells me how one year he and his friend from the children's home sneaked out to help the fair people pack up. They'd expected to be paid but all they got in return were cheap alabaster ornaments ... Jon hid his in a safe place, but his friend hid his in the fish tank.

'What happened?' I ask.

'The water changed a funny colour and the fish died.'

When Jon left the children's home, he moved in with his older sister to a flat in Ock Street. When the fair came their living room window was on a level with the people riding on the parachute. They'd watch them whirling round, laughing, legs flying. I pour us another drink and we watch first Florence's live-streamed gig and then Martin's. It's great to see Florence looking confident and playing well.

It's begun to rain again, and Jon suggests I camp in the house. I go to bed quite early making myself cosy on the living room floor with the sofa cushions I've brought from home and my sleeping bag and duvet. Most of Jon's things are at

Lechlade now so there's just his Victorian mantle mirror and some box files. I put my cushions and the Beatrix Potter duvet under the bow window. The lace curtains, the wisteria and outside the sound of the weir drifting over. Restful. But again, I have that creeping sadness. But I'm ok – it's good to hear the weir, somehow carrying me to happy times of sleeping at Karen's at the Temple and hearing Cleeve weirs.

The rain didn't let up all night. It's first thing and I have come along the river towards Radcot. I'm not sure why Jon doesn't ever walk this way, but suspect Maggie would take off. There are a few tents pitched in the field by the lock. One of the tents appears to be snoring. This field is where the cruiser boats get craned out in October, sitting all winter on the bank, like giant bath toys. There is a wide beam moored, *Gentle Highway* – the name given to the river. I stop by a stand of poplars, their very distinct sound causing me to pause – a rustle as every heart-shaped leaf moves. On the riverbank the teasels are purple or really more lilac, their florets appearing as it comes into its prime. And always the willow. But even before 7am on a Sunday there's the sound of the road. I think of my friend Andrew in Somerset saying how he is nostalgic for lockdown. But as the river turns a corner the road noise drops and I can see a shepherd's hut on the bank opposite – a large fancy one – and also Faringdon Folly in the distance downriver. The river is still, there's a swan still dozing, mostly cruising with its head tucked into its wings, oblivious to the moorhen skating over the water.

On the opposite bank cows are moving along slowly through the long grass. On this side everything seems purple right now, with three kinds of thistle, along with the buddleia, willowherb, and the Himalayan balsam. The wind stirs again in the poplars. I like the way they move, as an instrument shaken. The pylons that mark this area make me think of Florence and how she likes them, says she finds something about their presence reassuring. The lines between are sagging like a giant's game of French skipping. The reeds, the willow, the rippled river, the pillbox, the cabbage white, and now two swans sleeping with their heads tucked in. It's only apparent how much the river twists on walking back. I'm heading for cows but know they are on the left bank. If I walked a little further, I would come to the Swan at Radcot. A memory surfaces of a very creepy night there once. As I was only charged fifteen pounds, I should have been warned. With the light turning itself on and off, I had driven away before midnight. It's a shame Jon wasn't at Grafton back then.

The field by the lock is full of cars and men now. A fishing club I wonder? I pass the snoring tent – still no one about. The leftovers litter the table: Vintage Weston bottles, Pringle tubes, Prosecco, a small jembe, a chimera and a baby's cup – everything you need for a good night out. And that snoring sounds contented, the snoring of a good night. I can't imagine taking a chimera camping but who am I to talk when I brought the Peter Rabbit duvet and sofa cushions. And they would have had to get warm with all that rain. In the lock garden Jon has a plaque on the yew tree: 'I just need some time in a beautiful place to clear my head', (William Morris). His house, Kelmscott is only a couple of miles upstream. It was his, 'Heaven on earth'.

The house martins have begun their daily feeding quite low this morning. I look at the flood mark above the head gates. *Flood Mark Jan 2003*. I wonder what I was doing in January 2003, if I'd got up to the river at all? I take a last look at the front of the lock cottage: the wisteria, the lace curtains, the painted sign – *Grafton lock 1896*. And listen: the house martins, the leaking lock gate, the wind on the river, the wood pigeons. Storing all this, I go indoors.

We load up my car with the fridge-freezer and I head home – going slow. I don't know how I will be able to get up here again. I feel sad writing this. I must find some kind of boat for sale, a boat that doesn't need to come out of the river. A liveaboard. This surely means a narrow boat. I'm nervous about the whole thing. But I miss the river. I need to be on the river for a while.

Max Gate

Woodlanders room, Poetry study

Back here in West Dorset I have come to Max Gate, the house that Hardy designed for himself and lived in from 1885. Underneath where I'm sitting, on the floor below, is the Woodlander's room. When I came past the door was ajar – just as I left it – and up here in the attic, my mug remains on the drying rack. The house feels as if no one has entered since I was last here. Downstairs the hall floor was still unhoovered but it has been like this for weeks. The cobwebs are gathering in every corner and although the House Steward is not furloughed and still working, she must feel cleaning isn't part of her job description. Instead, everything is covered in dust cloths, all the curtains drawn. It creates a very sombre and gloomy mood in the house, far too Miss Havisham. In Emma's rooms, in the other attic, there are now moisture gauges. This will all be to 'protect the collection', but what collection? There's virtually nothing of Hardy's here. The two chairs that are original are stuck up here in the old servants' attics. There's that oak table in the sitting room too. I'm always surprised by how small it is for Hardy to have entertained his famous visitors around. His famous guests were numerous and included Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, W.B.Yeats, A.E.Housman, Siefried Sassoon, H.G.Wells, Gustav Holst, Sir James Barrie, Virginia Woolf, Marie Stopes, T. E. Lawrence, Edward, the Prince of Wales and many others. But I think one of his favourite visitors would have been William Barnes. This was the Dorset dialect priest and poet who lived just along the road from Max Gate at Came Rectory. Hardy had known and looked up to the older man as a mentor since his school days, appreciating his quality of 'loving-kindness'. I'm not really sure if Barnes ever visited Hardy here, or if it was only the other way round.

It would be nice if the house smelt of polish or the stairs were hoovered. Maybe it's that 'putting the house to bed' idea … but even in the days when the house closed over winter this didn't happen. Then I notice there are egg boxes piled on the bookcase and think someone must have been in after all. It's a bit like that game from years ago in childhood comics, 'Spot the Difference'.

I'm in the servants' accommodation, that is how these rooms were used in Hardy's day. Over the last couple of years, they have become offices with workstations crammed under the eaves but, before, this was still a separate flat when Rowan, the ranger, lived here. For several years, when I worked as the cleaner here, it

would be good to know he was in sometimes when I was cleaning late. The rooms form part of the original build, high up in the eaves at the front of the house. Not that you can see out the windows, they are too high, but I guess the servants only slept up here. In the daytime they'd be downstairs well before dawn at this time of year, pumping water, laying fires. On their days off I imagine they'd want to get away. I think once more of Jemima, Hardy's mother, as a young girl working as a servant and her long walk home to Melbury Osmund on her day off – eight miles each way. I still intend to make this walk but will wait until it's a little warmer. Hardy used the village as his original inspiration for *The Woodlanders*.

When Florence and I first moved to Dorset we took a winter let in Melbury. I was immersed in writing a musical based on *The Woodlanders* and used to feel I was half in the novel, half in my present life. A sense of enchantment suffused those winter months. The village is still very much an estate village with its dark blue front doors and feeling of benevolent feudalism hanging in the air. Opposite us lived an older couple, Peg and Gerald. Gerald was a dairyman for the estate, and I remember dear Peg standing on her doorstep every morning waving the children off to school. There were some evenings they'd come across to have a drink and Florence would play them the harp. When Peg died a few years ago, Florence played harp at her wake in the village hall.

I'm tempted to go downstairs right now and read some of the novel in the room directly below, where he wrote it, and where he later died one winter's day, just into the new year of 1928. But for now, I must continue with sorting through these folders.

It's been good to spend so much time alone in the house. My official reason for being here is that I'm scanning these documents for Freya, who is writing the conservation management report for the house. I grandly tell people, 'I'm archiving at Max Gate', but all I'm actually doing is standing at the photocopier and scanning old letters, leases, invoices and odd newspaper articles. I've had to search for these in the archival boxes sent from National Trust's headquarters in Swindon. There are eight of them and the folders inside range from Mompesson House to Montacute, Tyntesfield to Tintagel, Lytes Cary to Golden Cap. But, hidden amongst these, there are folders which relate to Max Gate and Freya needs to document details of the garden, house repairs and so on, and the tenants that have lived here since 1940 when Kate Hardy, Thomas Hardy's younger sister, gave the house to the National Trust. Not that the

Trust was ever grateful for Max Gate. Among the many derogatory adjectives, I've seen the house described by various senior members of the Trust as: 'dull and ugly, badly designed and badly built, a horrible house'. They continued to misinterpret Kate Hardy's will and were for many years keen to sell. An example of this was when the chief agent wrote to Eardley Knollys back in 1947: 'I have waded through the file and it seems abundantly clear that it was Miss Hardy's wish that we should dispose of Max Gate if and when the opportunity came to buy Hardy's birthplace at Bockhampton.' What Kate Hardy's will actually says is:

> 'I give and devise the freehold house and garden known as "Max Gate" Dorchester aforesaid which formed the residence of my late brother Thomas Hardy unto The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty of no.7 Buckingham Place Gardens London Upon trust to retain the same in its present condition so far as possible and to use the income thereof for its maintenance and so far as they are able to do so for the preservation and protection of the House at Higher Bockhampton Stinsford Dorset in which my said brother and I were born in order that so far as practicable the same may be preserved for all time as at present and so far as the income may not be required for those purposes then to apply the balance of the income for the general purposes of the trust.'

Poor Hardy. He had designed the house himself, and his father and brother's family firm had built the place, though I think Hardy had misgivings after he moved in, wondering whether he had done the right thing ever embarking on such a project. I suspect Hardy was a man who felt misgivings keenly. Given all the NT negative views, it's a wonder the house was never sold. Luckily it was finally declared inalienable in 1966.

Without realizing, Hardy built the house in the middle of a neolithic henge. In March 1891 builders discovered a large sarsen stone on the site which Hardy named the Druid Stone. Another was discovered in the 1980s when the Dorchester bypass was dug adjacent to the house. There had been talk of a dig to discover if any of more of this henge could be found but that was in pre-Covid days.

Although it has taken hours of standing at the photocopier, it has meant the chance to be here alone and to think. Sometimes I have taken my flute and played in

the third study. The room has a perfect resonance and to play the tunes that Hardy would have played in the same room creates a sense of time folding, of Hardy having simply slipped away for a while. Somehow, it's different from when I worked here as the cleaner. For a start, there's not the cleaning to do (although at this point, I'm increasingly tempted to find Henry Hoover) and I'm not beholden to anyone. I'm not having to lug Henry up and down stairs, always worrying that someone will complain about something. I'm the only person in the house, and, entering a dreamlike brooding state, I barely notice the hours pass.

For me, the Woodlanders room feels the most comfortable and enjoyable to be in as it's not full of the 'the Collection' as the House Steward calls it. I think pastiche is a better term. Somehow the whole house has been converted to a place where things are not to be touched and visitors can't sit down. Only a few years ago the atmosphere was entirely different, relaxed and happy, and all the visitors loved it for this. I think back to even last summer when I helped Rose, the young writer-in-residence, run a children's workshop: kids flying up and downstairs; me in the attic rapidly stuffing myself into a too-small Emma outfit, trying to get it off again to run down from her attic rooms to watch Rod entertaining a room overflowing with laughter; Rod fully in role, method acting the great man in what was originally Hardy and Emma's bedroom. I remember when John still worked here, and the children's Easter and Christmas activities held in the Woodlanders room. How there'd be glue and glitter everywhere along with parts of blackbirds or Victorian decorations and paper chains. I was a Scrooge then, only thinking of the cleaning-up: sponging glue out of the carpet, rubbing felt pen from the modern chairs. The furniture that was in the room was contemporary and functional, not 'of the period'. The Woodlanders room was always chosen for these activities because it's the only room that has survived not being 'dressed', is not a mock-up. Sometimes I wonder if this room feels easier to be in precisely because it is not full of other people's old stuff. The rest of the house isn't even full of *one* person's things, it's a motley assortment, like one of those mixed lots that will go for next to nothing at the auction house. All these items with their own back stories hanging round in the ether. It feels enough to be dealing with the Hardys without this. The Woodlanders room remains clear. There is space to imagine. The fireplace, where he liked his bacon cooked, is easy to see, not hidden behind furniture. So far, the room has avoided being turned into 'Hardy's Bedroom' or his 'First Study'. I know some volunteers want it furnished as his bedroom, but it

would be with some unknown person's bed and filled with slightly moldy, dingy things like poor Emma's rooms in the attic. Bleak enough as they are – resonating with their history of Emma's lonely days and nights, isolated and unloved – but the armless doll, invalid feeding cup and chamber pot don't help. Copies of Emma's paintings of the local landscape once balanced above the tiny fireplace. These were one of the few things that had a genuine connection to her, but they've gone – moved as 'they might fade'. They were only photocopies mounted on polystyrene and could have been easily replaced had they faded. At least they gave us some sense of her. Likewise, editions of Hardy novels, sent from Emma's maid Dolly's descendants in Canada, have been moved. They were not from Hardy's time but one day they suddenly became 'too valuable' to be allowed to stay – this tenuous link with Dolly, and thereby with Emma, severed.

***

In all my years of coming here I have never, until now, sat and written in the Woodlanders room. When I was volunteering, I was always talking to visitors and usually in the hall downstairs, and when I was cleaning I was in here with the beeswax and Henry and, because of the lack of furniture and dusting, couldn't justify lingering. It was always a room I was in and out of. When Florence and I have played music in the house over the past few years, I've been too busy thinking about the performances. So, it's good to have a legitimate reason to be here and be still.

I have always felt that Hardy would be glad that this room with its view south, out to the garden at the front, has been left simple. Admittedly there is the huge wardrobe but that's been here since the Jestys lived here between 1971 and 1993. Too big to move, it now stores the New Hardy Players' costumes. I know the wardrobe belonged to them as they told Freya and myself when they visited a couple of years ago. Vera told us too how, when they lived here, some of Hardy's old servants had visited them. One related how Florence had offered them things of Hardy's after he died. The gardener chose a wardrobe and the maid, Hardy's bed. Her mother was horrified, saying 'What do you want some old man's bed for?' Vera also recalled Ted Hughes turning up unannounced one day; she was podding peas in the garden. The Jestys were here twenty-two years, but not as long as Hardy, who lived here for forty-three.

Sometimes I imagine Hardy must have loved living in this house for so long. How it must have felt such a home to him. It would be like me staying in Maiden Newton until I'm 87. But maybe he was ambivalent, as I am. He did after all spend nearly forty years going up to London every spring for the 'Season'. Maybe his misgivings about building the house continued. With this room being devoid of dowdy furniture it gives us a chance to imagine how it might have been as his first study when he and Emma moved in and he was editing *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Or to picture how it was when it became his bedroom, after Emma died and he had married Florence. How cosy it might have been with the coal fire and the little snappy dog Wessex, running between his and Florence's room. I wonder who slept here when the Jestys lived here or before them, the days of Sumpter the vet or Colonel Symonds, the estate agent whose offices are still in town. I have loved reading Symonds' letters to the land agent in the archives. He is always inviting the land agent to lunch, providing he can 'Come any day other than Wednesday, as that is the market day' – as it was in Hardy's time and still is. The Jestys too entertained their land agent. One in particular was interested in their business – watercress growing – and Bill took him to see their extensive beds, the surrounding countryside and its chalk streams making the perfect environment for watercress.

I'd always have loved to do some kind of performance in this room but have never got myself organized to do so. I remember well when Tim Laycock wrote something for the New Hardy Players. Tim organized and directed different scenes to take place over the whole house and I, in character as Kate Hardy, was to be one of the guides. In a long red silk dress, I led my group between the scenes as they were being acted out in the drawing room, the kitchen, the third study, the attic and here. In this room was a scene where the New Hardy players were taking the parts of the original Hardy Players rehearsing scenes from *The Woodlanders*: Grace and Marty visiting Giles's grave, Grammer Oliver in a state having sold her brain, after her death, to Fitzpiers. We had Hermann Lee and Hardy in the drawing room, planning their outing in Lee's car, the cook making Hardy's favourite mutton broth, laughing with the kitchen maids, musicians playing old 'Enrico' and 'Dribbles of Brandy' in the third study and Emma, alone up in her attic.

My phone goes and it's Rod, a good friend and volunteer at Max Gate, telling me how much he didn't enjoy our performance at Winterborne Came. This was another more recent lockdown performance that Florence and I gave from the church

where William Barnes had been priest and where he lies buried. I'm wondering why Rod's telling me. I feel like saying 'you try ...' He goes on about the sound not being right, not enough middle, not enough bass etc. 'For God's sake' I want to say, '… it was recorded on a phone'. Instead, I listen as he tells me at length how good the William Barnes CD, he's just been part of, sounds. It was professionally recorded. It doesn't help us that Florence sometimes plays like a mouse. I always feel I have to play loud as she is so quiet, trying to encourage her to project more, but wearing myself out in the process and forgetting to concentrate on finer nuances. If I play quieter, she drops her level further. It is frustrating, but then working together is frustrating, probably for both of us. I'm tired of suggesting everything, initiating everything, and driving it all. On a deep level I'm exhausted and need to take a step back. I look out at the large heart-shaped flowerbed and remember how Hardy was sensitive to criticism. There are molehills across the lawn, beech leaves in deep drifts and spread thickly all over the drive. I long to see a bonfire smouldering in the corner, how comforting that would somehow be.

I have to sort through another folder and have promoted myself, this time moving to the room Hardy had built as his third study. I have lifted the irritating dust cloths off the desk and put the light on as it's a dark autumnal day. Hardy never had electricity in this house – Florence, his second wife, had it put in after he died in 1928. It is here where Hardy wrote the vast majority of his poetry after he gave up on novels. Some people say this was because of the public reaction to *Jude* when the critics were harsh and unrelenting. But Hardy always thought of himself as a poet, so maybe he was finally allowing himself to write what he wanted to write and could afford to do so.

The only things that Florence saved after Hardy's death were the original contents of this study. They were all given to the museum and can be seen there, behind glass, in a mock-up of this room. Here – this study – is like a forgery of itself, its contents modelled on those in the museum. But even full of other people's stuff – most of this furniture came from the old Shell building near Waterloo – I'm able to sense how this room must have suited Hardy to write in. Quite honestly I don't know how anyone would find it hard *not* to work in here. It's as though Hardy, by the time he had it built in 1894-95, had worked out what he needed. Even the window has been designed with larger panes of glass in the centre, perfectly framing the garden views. Today, I can see the amber gold trees and the sturdy leeks flourishing in their beds.

How must it have felt for Hardy, hearing the distant chatter of Emma in her rooms above, perhaps talking to Dolly her maid, to smell the stew rising up through the floorboards from the kitchen below? I imagine there would have been a fire in winter and the fireplace is a generous one, but I know too that Hardy was meagre with his fuel allowance and wrote wrapped in his shawl. The room facing east, the sun all morning, the fields and earthworks beyond the garden wall, the sense of his servants and Emma close by. There were twenty-seven years of this before early one November morning Emma died unexpectedly in the room above. This study became the place where Hardy could outpour his grief. He returned to Cornwall after Emma died, something they had never done when she was alive, revisiting the place where they first met – a kind of pilgrimage. The poems from this time (1912-13) form an elegiac sequence, full of regret. Hardy elevates Emma to a status she never knew in later years. This room must have felt, and still does feel, like a sanctuary, out the back and along the corridor, slightly apart from the original build. But still part of the whole, all built in the same red brick. Sometimes, when I had finished cleaning, I would get my flute out and play in this room, usually one of the Hardy tunes, looking out to the garden as I played.

I remember too volunteering here with a bad migraine one Saturday. I had to take one of my strong prescription tablets and was consequently trying my hardest not to fall asleep as I sat by this desk smiling at visitors. Briefly the room was empty, and I was aware I simply could no longer stay awake. At this time, I was still cleaning the house regularly and knew there was room on the floor in the cupboard in the corner, next to Henry Hoover, to lie down. Quickly I made my way across the room and, pulling the door to after me, lay down in the dark, in what turned out to be a very small space. I must have slept about ten minutes when I became aware of voices in the room and suddenly realized that if the visitors were the curious type and opened the door, they would be so shocked to see a body on the floor. But how could I come out of a small cupboard into a room of visitors? I waited until the room was quiet before, hoping for the best, opening the door. There was one man in the room but luckily, he was too preoccupied with the microscope slides on ‘Hardy’s desk to notice a pale woman slide out of the wardrobe.

Archiving

Brunel's bridge, Well Barn

Having spent weeks in the archive boxes at Max Gate there's an increasing sense of order missing from my own life. I'm not an organized person and although I've written diaries every year since I was eight, I'm not sure at this point where they are. It has started to bother me.

So, this morning at home I opened the wardrobe and, after unearthing boxes of old photos and getting waylaid in Paris, I found some of them, along with a blue notebook: Middlesex County Council printed on the front and inside probably my first attempts at poems. I would have been about six or seven. One 'poem' describes how my brother Jon gave me 'twenty smacks', whereas I wrote my other brother was 'lovly'. There are some old diaries too and I started to go through them. They were from the time after Florence was born and I had severe post-natal depression. I found a notebook from around '89. I was still an outpatient at the local hospital, the Gordon in Westminster and have seen the same psychiatrist for over two years. Much of it is written in the third person, probably because for much of the time I felt outside my body. I always kept the balcony doors of my flat locked. I couldn't trust myself. My psychiatrist told me to call him if I needed to. I don't remember if I ever did. But the hospital itself was a refuge, a place of safety despite its location on the busy Vauxhall Bridge Road. I write about my teenage years, about my teenage relationship with a teacher at Chethams Music School. I describe how songwriting became a means of holding myself together, as playing the piano had always been. But some kind of chasm had opened when I had my daughter and there was no sense of connection to the person I had been previously. I could walk past the basement flat I had previously lived in at Victoria, unable to believe I was the same person.

With jobs to do, I put the lid back on the box and placed it on its shelf in the cupboard, going downstairs to make a cup of tea. But something was stirred.

I grew up with a sense of not being able to change anything. I remember learning from Delmoors, the newsagent across the street, that you could get a job delivering papers when you were twelve. I needed to have money to run away and it felt like an eternity until I would be twelve ... If I complained or was unhappy, I was ignored or told I was wrong. I was always wrong. At mealtimes the whole family would fall on

me, like a row of dominoes. I turned to the outdoors, but also to the piano, a relationship that was wholly mine, which I didn't need to share with my sister Alison or any of my siblings. I remember the day the piano arrived, being six years old and lying on the carpet tiles under it. My father was always working, writing music at the piano, so it was very difficult to have enough time to play, but, when he took a break, I would be there. Later, as his work dried up and he relocated to the vegetable plot – his refuge – I could spend more time playing, always feeling better for it. The piano is a Bluthner, known for their soft tone, there is nothing harsh about it. I'm sorry my mother didn't let me have the piano after my father's death saying she was going to learn herself, and later saying she needed it to keep her photos on. It was her way of feeling close to him. Only after her death was I able to be reunited with the piano, something which has always felt like mine since I was six, that I've had a relationship with since that age.

And I wrote. I continued to keep a diary. It has been a chance every day to try and make sense of things. A place to rally against people and situations. There isn't always a great deal of joy there but maybe there has been more joy in my lived life because of it.

Many talk about it, and, even if they don't, will nod their head, when someone mentions the pull of the river. It's almost a cliché, such a well-worn phrase. But what is it and what function does the river play? Is it some kind of parental role, a substitute filling a void? Is it an escape from a home life where you are always the misfit, the black sheep? For many it's a portal to childhood holidays, when hiring a boat for a week was a popular holiday. This is certainly what Jon thinks, and he would know, with all those returning holiday boaters passing through his lock each year, each trying to recreate an easier, simpler time. A time when a holiday meant mooring up a hire boat under a willow with the rain on the roof all night with just a straightforward bowl of cornflakes for breakfast before setting off again. I always remember the Sunday fishermen and how, as a child, I suspected the fishing was legitimising a need to spend time alone by the river.

I have missed the Thames during lockdown. Is there the equivalent of homesickness for when you miss a landscape on such a deep level? It isn't a homesickness for a house or the people in it but for a place and for how being in that place can be relied upon to restore you. Where you can be without any expectations,

where you can be silent without accusation, no judgment, no contradiction. My mother was a great contradicter; you only had to say something for her to say the opposite – like a nervous tic – but I don't think she knew she did it. If you had gently told her she did, she would have denied it.

I miss my reach – Moulsford to Cleeve – the stretch of Thames that is most familiar and has the most powerful effect on me. The place I always return to, the place where formative friendships were made, relationships played out. A landscape stored in my earliest self. Over the last few years I have returned repeatedly, partly for the melancholy comfort it provides, partly to try and understand something of what is happening and partly to make sense of my past. But after all this time I'm not any closer to understanding what exactly the river does to me, no further in putting it into words. It is always just out of reach, something on the water floating away from my grasp, like the fresh smell rising from a fast-flowing weir – so familiar but I can't remember why. I reflected on this frequently when I walked the length of the Thames with Florence and further when I was working as a Bob's Summer Assistant. It isn't only the river, it's also the landscape through which it flows: the Brunel railway bridge, the wide hedgeless corn fields, the chalk downs, the willows and the Canada geese, the swans, and the solitary heron never taking his eye off it all.

I remember Florence and I walking into the village from Wallingford one baking hot summer's day. We reached the welcome cool of the bridge, a long-ago familiar place for me. Designed by Brunel, it's a double bridge that crosses the river at a slant. Even as children, Alison and I appreciated this feat of engineering with its diagonal brickwork when we would row here. I recall how the sound would change as we entered the space under the bridge, how the splash of the oars was exaggerated and how our voices were suddenly louder. This in turn would make us want to shout, for the simple pleasure of hearing our returning echo. That summer's day Florence and I took photos as trains clamoured above our heads, the sun bleaching through the central gap. The red bricks were stained white and green with mould and algae. As long as I can remember this arch was not navigable and this was still the case, what water there was, shallow and filled with rubble and river debris, branches, bottles, stagnant.

Moulsford had acquired the feel of a village somewhere far away – stifling hot and, like the water under the bridge, the air seemed to have paused. Swallows swept into the barn ahead, still feeding young. They reminded me of Larry the lock keeper's house martins at Clifton Lock. A pair that reared three families that year despite the grim conditions. Despite the hot weather that day it had been the wettest summer on record. Larry – defying health and safety – built a swift nest box and placed it high under the front eaves of his lock house. No swifts came, and no bats either despite Larry having constructed the box so that bats might climb behind it to roost. Instead, the house martins arrived. It's the same this year at Jon's lock at Grafton; when I've managed to camp there the odd night this summer, the house martins were collaboratively building their nests under every possible eave.

That sultry day, Florence and I ate our bread and cheese in the shade by the old wooden cricket shed, no longer used but unbelievably the same hut that's been there since Alison and I were kids. We used to scramble up and lie on its hot roof in the sun – the asphalt roof bending and moulding to our skinny bodies. Down the adjacent edge of the Rec there was the old cricket pitch roller we'd once played on, still resting in the shade beneath the tree, half concealed by nettles and far more rusted.

We followed the path behind the Rec, next to a field with ponies and came out into Underhill. Opposite was the house where mine and Alison's childhood friend Karen, once lived. One Sunday evening, I think it was autumn, we were watching 'Candid Camera' with her and then later the same evening she was rushed back into hospital where she died. She had lung cancer. She was twelve. It was hard to make sense of – we had thought she would get better, would return to school, be there at the bus stop. That last evening, we had all laughed and laughed watching the programme. I remember how much it hurt Karen to laugh. After she'd gone I would long to see her washing on the line outside their house on the corner.

Taking the ash track, we cut down to the main road, following the tall flint wall that hides the Great Meadow – a centuries old acre of, at that point, unchanged undeveloped land with the riverbank forming one boundary. At the bottom of Ferry Lane – the route to the old river crossing to South Stoke – we arrived at the Beetle and Wedge. The house to our left overlooking the river was once the village inn but is now a private house; the glass conservatory where the fruit machine once was, gone. I told Florence the tale of my dad slipping us coins, of his: 'Walk away. Walk away

while you're winning.' The pub was where Jerome K Jerome spent time chronicling the adventures of the infamous boating holiday he took on the river with his friends. One Sunday evening, after finishing work at Benson Lock, I went to discover his grave in the peaceful churchyard at Ewelme. This village was once famous for its watercress beds, but these were shut down some time at the end of the last century. Thinking about watercress reminds me of the Jestys and their watercress business. Watercress is native to chalk streams, and this is something the landscape of the Thames and Hardy's landscape of Dorset share. Chalk and flint. Traipsing the dry flint filled fields up near Hog Cliff by my home in West Dorset, I am seven again collecting flints at Well Barn. I remember Yoko, our neighbour, and how she would take Alison and I up on the downs. When they were out, we would collect primroses too, for our Nana who was married on Primrose Day – 19 April. All the men had worn buttonholes of primroses, but I remember how sad the flowers would make her too, of how she'd stand at the sink filling a tiny vase and wipe her eyes with the hanky she always kept tucked into her sleeve.

Next door to what was once the Beetle and Wedge was an old boathouse that is now a small bar. It's the sort of place that might be cosy in winter but on that hot summer's day I longed for the tables and chairs out on the grass by the river next door. Exhausted and bad-tempered, we stepped into the cool of the boathouse and ordered Appletisers. There were olives and crisps. No slot machines. When I was young there was a small basic shop here, selling milk and bread to the boaters. Outside stood a single, diesel pump. My brother Gareth worked here in his school holidays. For a while my friend Steve worked as a washer-up, after his gardening job at Mrs Moore's. Mrs Moore, or 'Auntie Joan' as she referred to herself, and her basset hound 'Laughter', had moved into the converted village school after it closed. I briefly had a Saturday job as her cleaner, which I liked as Steve was outside in the garden.

Florence and I continued our walk that day as far as my mother's flat, two miles downriver, where she had moved after my father died. There are two sounds that when combined together make one place – the high-speed trains across the river and the wood doves. On this stretch of river, you frequently hear them in counterpoint and as we set off for Cleeve we heard the gasping rush of the train and its two-note minor third call. It was too hot for the doves that afternoon, but the Canada geese

passed overheard in formation, owning the air, the sound of their wings audible beneath them.

Church Porches

Puddletown, Stockwood

Alison and I enter the churchyard by the gate with its ornate lantern and head past the pale limestone, lichened 1700s graves that circle St Mary's Church in Puddletown. Above us a slip of a moon still lolls in the autumnal blue. A delicious smell of new cut grass hangs in the air. Two large buttresses lean outwards like welcoming arms. But Alison stops and points to the ground,

'I think we should do a project about those!' She is pointing at the Victorian boot scraper to the left of the pointed arch and I understand exactly why she is saying this as nearly every church we visit has one, and they are all unique.

'Maybe they could be in an appendix,' I suggest as we enter the in-between space of the porch with its oak benches and pale limewashed walls reaching up to the roof beams, 'And maybe another appendix could be those signs that say, "Please close the porch doors to stop the little birds flying in and becoming trapped."'

Most porches face south but this one faces north which means it feels distinctly chilly. Alison and I have been taking one day each week to visit the porches of West Dorset churches. She is making a measured drawing and I'm trying to write a poem in each space. Richard, her husband, has packed her off with a flask of soup and I have a flask of hot chocolate. It's the kind of project that could only have originated in lockdown: a 'What-on-earth-shall-we-do-with-ourselves?' project, where, with no proper work to do, and the idea of painting the house or sorting cupboards increasingly dreary, we came up with this idea. The churches themselves have mostly been locked but their porches, these liminal spaces that are neither wholly sacred nor wholly secular, are open and being used in all kinds of interesting ways. We are pausing in a place that is normally walked through and there's a strong parallel with the time we are living in.

Alison in her role as a conservation architect looks after some fifty churches, carrying out their quinquennial inspections and any work that may be needed. She says this is often putting in toilets and kitchens. Leaky roofs are a common problem, 'I know so many churches that have buckets in their aisles.' She continues, 'If a church needs funding for a leaky roof, it always helps to have a photo of that!' But there are some other fascinating projects she has been involved in, such as the uncovering of a rood screen and wall paintings at one church.

Alison begins measuring and drawing and I sit down next to a beautiful flower arrangement – a basket filled with chrysanthemum, sedums, Michaelmas daisies and seed heads of agapanthus. We've discovered porches are being decorated with the flowers that would usually fill the church. I'm flicking through Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* to find the passage about Troy coming to visit Fanny, newly buried in her grave here. Puddletown is Hardy's Weatherbury and as I reach the lines that describe grief-stricken Troy arriving at ten o'clock at night, I picture him hanging his lantern on a low branch of the yew and begin to plant the armfuls of bulbs, lily of the valley, forget-me-not and summer's farewell he has carried here. Hardy describes Troy then sleeping the night in the porch where I am sitting. There are wooden porch gates, but they wouldn't provide much protection from the elements. Alison tells me they are, 'raised and fielded panels with turned balusters'. I love the way she knows the terms for everything in this small space. Hardy would have been the same. He notes the square fourteenth century tower and its 'gurgoyles' – his name for the gargoyles that protrude from each corner of the tower. He writes:

> A beholder was convinced that nothing on earth could be more hideous than those he saw on the north side until he went round to the south … It was too human to be called like a dragon, too impish to be like a man, too animal to be like a fiend, and not enough like a bird to be called griffin […] Here and thus, jutting a couple of feet from the wall against which its toes rested as a support the creature had for four hundred years laughed at the surrounding landscape, voicelessly in dry weather, and in wet with a gurgling and snorting sound.

As Troy sleeps:

> The persistence torrent from the gurgoyle's jaws directed all its vengeance into the grave. The rich tawny mould was stirred into motion, and boiled like chocolate […] The flowers so carefully planted by Fanny's repentant lover began to move and writhe in their bed. The winter-violets turned slowly upside down, and became a mere mat of mud. […] plants of the tufted species were loosened, rose to the surface, and floated off.

By the time Troy wakes there is nothing left of his planting.

Inside the porch, a Tudor Hamstone arch frames an oak-boarded door. It is decorated with shaped cover strips and studs and has a giant keyhole. I kneel down on

the stone floor to see if I can see in. I can't make out much but I know that there is still a magnificent west gallery that survived Victorian restorations, and that Hardy brought Gustav Holst here in the summer of 1927. Hardy, an old man of 87, led Holst up the steep gallery stairs to show him where his grandfather had played, sharing his own musical roots with the composer. Hardy also insisted that Holst drive out to Egdon Heath that night. Because, although he'd taken him there in the afternoon, it was August and he thought that at night Holst would better experience something of the elemental nature of the heath, of how the place sounded in November, and of what Hardy called its 'linguistic peculiarity'.

From the posters on the walls, it looks like this was once an active parish, pre-Covid. I begin to read one about 'The Living Churchyard Project', which sounds like an oxymoron, but I think is about protecting the churchyard's eco-system, and then another poster requesting people to listen to children read. A 'Ring the Changes' notice invites people to take up bellringing – 'new skills, new friends, new places, all ages.' Another suggests popping into the community room on a Thursday for coffee and chat. Once upon a time it was all possible. Now the only thing is 'The Daily Hope', a free phone line of 'hymns, reflections and prayers'. I look at the worn old oak stand next to me and read its inscription: 'To the glory of God and in grateful memory of kindness'. On the walls are also two boards with names of past vicars. I work out that John Gibbons MA would have been the vicar here when Hardy's grandfather was playing cello in the west gallery. Richard Archdeacon of Dorset 1195 is the first, and last on the list is Sarah Catherine Hillman 2011. I met Sarah one day when I had walked from Hardy's cottage through the forest to Puddletown. There were people milling about the churchyard and music drifted from the community room at the back under the trees. They were here to celebrate Sarah's fiftieth birthday. I asked someone if I might have a glass of water and was invited in, feeling a total gatecrasher, to join the party.

Alison and I eat our picnic sitting on the bench at the back of the tower, on the south side of the church. I sense Alison is in her element here. She doesn't even seem to feel the chill wind that wraps around the tower. I reach for my map and we plan where we will visit next.

We follow the quiet lane along the valley to Melbury Bubb. This hamlet below Bubb Down, is a set apart place. Tall yews guide visitors up the path by the ancient manor house but, when we reach the church, the porch is guarded by latticed

metal porch doors, painted in hammerite silver. Firmly padlocked. There is an abandoned, suspended feeling in the air. Following the lane another mile or so we come to Chetnole and here the church sits at the heart of the village, opposite the pub. After Florence and I left our winter let in Melbury Osmund we spent six weeks in an annex in Chetnole, so it's a village I know a little. These are the words we find scrawled in block letters on the corner of a small poster in the porch of St Andrew's, Chetnole:

'Blessed are the wayfarers for they walk with God each day and seek nothing but love and understanding and respect for they are pure of heart.'

The poster is a cartoon titled 'Beatitudes for a Global Pandemic' and I imagine the scrawled addition was written by someone who'd slept the night in the porch. For years this was a wayfarers' route as the friary at St Francis is within striking distance. The cartoon starts with 'Blessed are those who stay indoors …', and continues with the self-employed, unemployed teachers, refuse collectors, hospital workers and several other categories. I particularly like 'Blessed are the shopkeepers for they are the purveyors of scarce things.' Talking of food, this porch is also the village food bank. There is a bag filled with dried goods and a narrowboat jigsaw puzzle waits on the bench as the 'Book and Puzzle Exchange' is based here too. A few gardeners who've been tending the churchyard say hello to us as they make their way home and we try to describe what we're doing. It's a difficult project to explain. A heap of plums spills from one of the benches and again autumn flower arrangements decorate the Hamstone benches. Blue kneelers from the church itself line each side of the porch. In some ways it's like a miniature church and there's a sense of a caring community all looking out for each other. Alison describes the church as 'being all of one style' but struggles to know what to draw. She settles in the end for a measured drawing of the door itself, capturing the detail of its studding, its ornate hinge and door fastening.

It's only a short distance from Chetnole to Stockwood. The afternoon is drawing to a close as we walk down from the hill towards the Georgian farmhouse and the tiny church tucked behind into the lee of Bubb Down ahead. This is St Edwolds, the smallest church in Dorset and as such we're not even sure it needs a porch. We cross the Elizabethan footbridge passing a baby swing hanging from the bough of an outstretched yew. The turning leaves on the sycamore are echoed in the colour of the Hamstone that once again forms the arch to the porch. Two wagtails are

dipping in the stream and far above a buzzard is circling. Two kneeler stones support the gable and at the top is a jewelled keystone Above this is set a datestone which reads:

W. B. 1636

The sixes are leaning in that way that old sixes do and there's something satisfying about copying them into my notebook. Alison points to the limestone slabs on the roof of the porch.

'Those are called diminishing courses,' she tells me and when I look carefully, I see how each ascending layer of slabs is narrower than the previous.

'The top course are called farewells,' she adds.

The limestone has been split by ice. Water was poured onto the stone when a frost was due and then as the temperature dropped below freezing the ice would crack the stone into slabs. The farewells are catching the late afternoon light and from somewhere a robin is extending his song.

The air has a distinct chill now and it's not just from thinking about freezing temperatures; but, as I cross the threshold, the sound of the A37 drops and it's noticeably warmer too. The striped sally of a bell rope hangs down in the porch, its end looped up like the tail of an exotic animal. The bell is in the cupola above – a later architectural addition. The walls are of flint and rubble and, sometime in the past, have been badly pointed. I sit down on one of the Hamstone benches. There is nothing here – no signs, no boards of vicars' names, no safe-guarding notices. It is refreshingly bare. Alison is outside making a measured drawing of the front elevation. I lean back against the cool wall and think how easy it feels to spend this time with Alison. Growing up in a large family with parents of the hands-off school of parenting we were very much left to our own devices. I think, going back even earlier, we shared a pram. There must have been so many joint experiences – seeing ourselves in the other, our language developing at the same time, our communication constant. Everything is shared and mirrored. Everything experienced is seen happening out there too. It's a very different experience to being a single baby and one that I feel has resonance implications and fundamentally shaped us. Closing my eyes, I think of the homeless person who wrote in Chetnole porch and wonder where they are as the nights start to draw in.

Hermitage – this lone green place

Hermitage

Beneath the chalk escarpment of Batcombe ridge and High Stoy, autumn is clearly in her stride, flinging leaves wide across the Blackmore Vale, a place made famous by Hardy as Tess's home landscape – 'The Vale of the Little Dairies'. I take the winding lane off the Sherborne road, twisting back and to, passing small farms strung along the way: Rymehorn, Melbury, Almshouse, each at one time its own self-sufficient world. I remember staying at this last farm many years ago, before moving to Leweston, when it was also a bed and breakfast. In the morning a fire blazed in the large open inglenook as we ate our hearty breakfasts.

This is a remote out-of-the way place. These hamlets and villages on the green, luscious land that lies below Batcombe, edged by the Dorchester to Sherborne and the Dorchester to Yeovil roads, all have that distinct quality of another time. I pass almost derelict sheds – half rusting corrugated iron and half whatever has chosen to spring up: flowering ivy, dead nettle, saplings of ash. Low cloud – a white-grey marl – hangs over the hamlet making the yellow and russet colours dowdy, like an old master tarnished with dust and dirt. Just after Summerlands farm and 'fishing' signs I park alongside the village green.

Hermitage takes its name from the friar hermits that once had a house in the Forest of Blakemore that covered this land. Edmund, Earl of Cornwall, at his death in 1300 held this hermitage but his father before him had given land to the friars too. This was a time when the Plantagenet kings built and endowed many religious houses. It is also one of the possible locations for Hardy's *Woodlanders*, and as such has drawn me to visit many times.

I make my way along the shingle track that crosses the village green. As I push against the kissing gate it opens with a warm squeak. Two green woodpeckers take flight from the corner of the churchyard where I imagine they were digging for ants. Yaffle is the old English name for the bird because of its distinctive laughing call, but they are silent as they cross the neighbouring meadow in undulating flight, almost bouncing. I recall the very first time I came here, the English yew had branches growing everywhere, it seemed to have taken over the entire churchyard.

Between its outstretched limbs and the leaning graves, sheep were grazing. Today the yew has been cut back drastically but hopefully it will survive.

The church is a blend of centuries and a blend of building materials, built with whatever was available. The east wall is particularly beautiful with its blend of honey-coloured Todber stone and chert. Chert, like a pale brown version of flint, makes the perfect blend with the warm limestone quarried from Todber near Marnhull. High above, a small medieval face looks down from the apex of the roof. The roof itself is covered with, what I now know to be, diminishing courses of stone slabs. Lifting the latch of the grey painted porch gates I enter. As I close them, I notice a small brass plaque:

David Chutter of this village designed these gates as an exact copy of those that stood here in 1939

August 2008

I remember David Chutter as it was his building firm that was finishing off work at the lodge in Leweston when we first rented it. Inside the porch on the limewashed wall hangs a curious wheel, constructed in oak and worn pale. I'm unsure what it could have been used for until I see another tiny plaque. This one reads:

David Chutter of this village built a new bell wheel,
restored the bell tower and re-hung the ancient bell
in the year of our Lord
MCMXC

I like how simple it all is. The notices are straightforward, mostly relating to safeguarding, security and Covid. There is the QR code and Protected Property Warning. I sit on the Hamstone bench, as overhead a Yeovilton helicopter passes, and I've a sense of everything falling away. This tiny space becomes a pause, a breathing space and I think again of Hardy writing, 'Lonely places in the country have each their own peculiar silences.'

Beyond the church a path rises up the hill towards Prince's Wood and Lyons Gate. Cows are grazing in the field below the wood. They must have been moved recently as there were none here last week when Alison and I went up to try and find Lady's Well. We had seen the well clearly marked on the OS map but, as is often the way, finding it proved trickier. Unlike today, the sky was cornflower blue as we made our way along the narrow path, passed the pond and stream, and onto the muddy field.

My canvas boots were soon waterlogged. It was slow going. We were following the footpath for Lyon's Gate and found a footpath through the wood but soon stopped.

'I think we've come too far,' Alison said. I felt she was right. It was getting late – that golden hour when the shadows are long, the light filmic. Since the hour changed, dusk comes quickly, catches you unawares and I knew we wanted to look at a couple more churches on our way home. We turned back. As we reached the field again I wandered off to the right, a romantic notion running through my mind.

'I'll find the well telepathically,' I announced pompously as Alison set off to the left. Two fields further on and I could hear her faintly calling. I turned back, realising the sun was about to sink below the hill. We would have to give up. After further map study, Alison was convinced the well lay near the western corner of Prince's wood. This was where we were now standing but we couldn't see anything remotely well-like.

'Why don't you Google it?' I had suggested, my own phone being flat. Immediately a photo came up of the well; at least now we knew what we were looking for. Lifting the barbed wire for each other we threaded our way into the copse. The field maple glowed rose-gold in the late light and the dank smell of decay and autumn rose as we trod over the ivy, harts tongue and stinking iris. Finally, by wands of coppiced hazel, under an oak we saw three mossy slabs of stone.

'That's it,' Alison spoke excitedly. The stones were arranged to form two sides and a cover for the spring. We shone her torch inside and could see a small shelf on the left-hand wall for offerings. It was empty. There was no sign of anyone having visited recently. It felt like our secret. I dipped my hand in, the water was surprisingly warm. I washed my hands, my face.

Today, I walk back round the church, where four Irish yews are keeping each other company. I pause to stand in their centre, feeling welcomed in this evergreen grove. A holly tree, heavy with berries, grows from one of the yews. Opposite the western end of the church an alcove has been cut in the privet hedge and a bench placed. Weather-worn and lichen-crusted, with ivy weaving its way through the slats, the name Gwen Smith has been carved on the back. Starting to feel the impending storm, I sit on the damp bench looking to the western end of the church with its date stones and plain glass windows. I've read that once the curate lived here. The entrance was at this end and I imagine there must have been a taller tower with spaces for the bell and his

wood store too. There's a gargoyle on the western end along with date stones: F. R CW 1799 and I. M CW and T. G 1682. Last week when we were here, I commented to Alison on the number of people that seemed to have the initials C. W. You always see them carved into the walls, or on oak chests. 'That'll be for church warden,' Alison told me, and suddenly it all made sense.

By my feet lies a pool of deep chocolate-coloured leaves, all in a drift and sinking into the dips where the graves have subsided. They are from the pin oak, an unusual non-native tree normally found in Canada. I wonder who could have planted it. But, as I leave, I notice another spill of leaves by the kissing gate, softer and smaller than the pin oak, they are yellow and starting to blow in the wind that's picking up. I'm happy to see they are elm. Although the larger trees all died long ago, somehow smaller ones are surviving.

Rainbarrows

Puddletown Forest, Hardy's cottage

Still here in West Dorset, I set off in a terrible storm. It probably has a name but I don't need to know it. What I do know is there's driving rain, a gale force wind and I'm tempted to turn round and head back down the hill. Stopping at the farm shop-come-bakery, Patrick cheerily announces from behind his mask, 'It's going to be sunny by two!' Setting off, windscreen wipers going like the clappers, I'm unconvinced. I'm on my way to Max Gate again, anxious to return to working on the archiving/scanning. Driving along I can't resist the pizza slice beside me. Or the lardy cake. By the time I reach Max Gate I'm feeling sick from overeating.

The tall beeches are swaying alarmingly and many small branches have now joined the beech leaves massed in the drive. There have been days in the last few years with weather like this when the house would be shut to the public due to the danger of falling branches. Interestingly, looking back over the archives there are a few records of storm damage here. The other day I found a letter about a cyclone that passed through the garden just missing the house. It seems quite often trees would come down. Then there would be the debate about who would pay for the damage, the Trust frequently getting away with not paying. Even when the garden wall fell down, they didn't think it was their responsibility.

Letting myself in, I make my way through the dark house resisting the temptation to draw back all the curtains and let the natural light in. Up in the servants' attic I start going through the folders. Today I chose 1971, the year Col Symonds and his wife leave and the Jestys take on the lease. After scanning documents for a couple of hours my headache is far worse. I need a detox following my sugar overload. Glass of water in hand, I notice the room is suddenly less dingy and looking out of the only window not set high in the walls, I realise that Patrick was right, the storm has cleared, the trees are no longer bending and the sky is a tempting Wedgewood blue. I will head over to Hardy's cottage and Thorncombe Woods.

***

Halloween on Rainbarrows! I've been here several times before at this time of year – it seems to draw me back. Run-off from the heath is forming new gulleys as it makes its way down the gravel track leading from the car park to the cottage. Over the fence the cottage looks peaceful, unperturbed by the morning's storm. I let myself into the orchard. There are still plenty of apples, many on the ground following the high winds. The birds will have a good store of food. Florence and I picked four carrier bags a few weeks back and took them to Godmanstone where our friend Nigel made them into apple juice. Two years ago, I did this myself up in North Dorset at Peace and Plenty farm but I think with Covid it's probably not happening there this year. There have been so many cider orchards left unpicked too. I pick up a couple of russets from under the nearest tree to eat as I start to climb up along the edge of the woods towards Rushy Pond. A tawny owl calls out through a rigging of leafless branches. These days the woods are thinner, sparser, still green in odd patches, catching the afternoon light, falling low at the back end of the year. The pond is deserted, so different in atmosphere to that still July evening with its green reflective water forming our backdrop.

A little way up beyond the pond the path meets the Roman road. A little further and I'm looking through the Scots pines to Rainbarrows. This is the spot, at the edge of the hill with the ground falling away sharply behind us, that we chose for our second live streaming. It was only two weeks after the first but this time the weather was very different. The dark clouds gathered and by the time we started it had begun to spit. However, the show-must-go-on mentality having set in, we continued to play, rain ever more insistent, until the end of our programme. This was stupid, as it would be so bad for our instruments, especially Florence's harp. I take full responsibility – Florence would have wanted to finish far earlier. At one point the wild ponies joined us but this time they were cantering by, spooked by the wind. Or maybe sensibly heading for shelter.

I remember coming up here three years ago too. Once again it was Halloween and I was trying to find a new route onto Rainbarrows. Back then, beyond the pines were great high walls of rhododendron. Somewhere I hoped there'd be a gap and, once finding this, I threaded my way through onto a high plateau, following the paths made by the heathcroppers and littered with their dung, towards an unusual tree on the horizon. The moon was still up, pale and wan in an unblemished sky. Close-up the tree revealed itself as a silver birch with what looked like small baskets that had been

hurled up and were now wedged in the branches. I thought maybe it was a kind of mistletoe but Kath, the ranger at Thorncombe Woods, told me later told me they were hexenbesens, witches' broom. Very appropriate for Halloween. The following day, All Saints, I brought my writing group up here and, after reading extracts from *The Return of the Native* and hearing about the 'linguistic peculiarity' of the wind in the heathbells, we spread out to write. I remember Carolyn lying on the ground with her ear to the earth. Afterwards at the Visitor Centre we compiled our 'Nine ways of looking at Rainbarrows'. It was the last workshop that autumn.

The Forestry Commission has been restoring the heath. All the tall walls of rhododendron are gone and I shouldn't say it but I miss something of them: the sense of being able to get lost up here, the long walks which required weaving in and out, the protection they provided in gales. I know they have left them, for now at least, on the Puddletown side of the forest, where the road is called Rhododendron Drive. Jonny, my friend who lives rough in the forest, must be finding it harder and harder to find a safe, isolated place to stay. I wonder about him practising his fiddle and worry once again how people don't hear him. Maybe he plays at night, long after the visitors have gone. On a warmer day a couple of months ago we met by chance. He took me to his camp and brewed us yarrow tea before massaging my back and shoulders that were stiff from playing. All around us his sheet music hung pegged from lines that threaded between the trees. We lay looking at the sky, 'Tonight there'll be a meteor shower,' he promised. It was like a scene from John Clare.

There are tiny self-seeded hollies, fern, furze and heather all interwoven in a mesh stretching over the barrows before the land falls away to a swath of pine crop – as yet still standing – and below this, the flat fields, and further still the Dorset Ridgeway that forms the horizon. I think the hollies must have grown here like this for centuries. I recently read a letter from one of the Moule brothers to Hardy's mother, Jemima. It was dated Christmas Day 1899 and in it he thanked her for the Christmas card:

> I value the card much; the idea of it is so good. I take it to represent the evening look of the heath, with its hollies. The heath, so seen, is full of poetry […] I wonder if Miss Hardy had anything to do with the making of it.

It is signed H. J. Moule. This was Henry Joseph, the eldest of the brothers who was himself a watercolour artist and the first curator of the County Museum. Even Domesday described this place as a: 'heathy, furzy, briary wilderness.' There are

pinecones everywhere, left from when this area was more densely populated and here and there, among the hollies, small self-seeded pines have now sprung up, like perfect Christmas trees. There used to be many more trees up here and especially those birches with hexenbexens. I pause under a group of pines, their needles in pairs on twigs forming a soft mat beneath my feet. It's barely half past three but from somewhere through the fretwork I hear again the call of the tawny owl. It's that strange time of year when you hear the chiffchaff and the owl, when the moon stays in the sky half the day, when dead nettles remerge, and the cyclamen and clematis flowers reappear. The ivy flowers come out and on rare warm days bees are feeding.

I reach the furthest barrow and find a place to sit looking out to the distant ridge. But I'm uneasy with the strongest feeling of being watched. My head is now throbbing. I need to make my way home before it's too dark and get my migraine drug. The wind is getting up and the ever-present A35 grinds away across the forest. Gone are the silent days of the first lockdown. There is that autumn odour of damp, and the sadness that comes with the shortening days. Down the sandy track I see Hardy's cottage ahead. How comforting it must have been crossing the heath on a day like today, to be out of the wind under the beeches, to go indoors and get warm by the fireside.

A couple of months ago, the day after we had played up on the Roman Road as a storm came in, Martin, the manager of the properties – the cottage and Max Gate – called me and asked if we'd like to play inside them as they were empty and closed to visitors because of lockdown. The cottage had been empty of visitors and staff for some months and stripped of all its paraphernalia. All this created a space where in some sense time was thinner. As we were in the cottage, we decided to base our programme around Hardy's young life. Writing about these early years in *The Life*, Hardy described himself as having an ecstatic temperament and how he would be very moved by music, certain tunes reducing him to tears.

That afternoon we were in the kernel of the place that Hardy loved with all his heart – his singing place. Hardy once wrote in his notebook: 'I'm convinced that it is better for a writer to know a little part of the world remarkably well than to know a great part remarkably little.' His life and work bore out the truth of this.

We played in the parlour, sitting ourselves on a settle in front of the fireplace, the rush matting smelling like straw as the sun shone outside. I started our programme by reading 'The Self-Unseeing', a poem where Hardy describes his father playing the

fiddle, his mother by the fire and he, as a child, dancing to the tunes. Florence followed this by playing Astley's Hornpipe and I could picture Hardy's father leg-hopping and leg-crossing in the old style. Hardy wrote that his mother, Jemima discouraged her husband from teaching the children these steps as more genteel dances were coming in. Always observant, I'm sure that Hardy would have noticed every step of his father's dance!

Afterwards I took the curving elm stairs to the room above where Hardy was born. I sat in the window and read 'Domicilium', feeling very close to Hardy but also strangely close to my ex, Richard, this room being so like the upstairs bedroom of the cottage in Frome St Quintin where we used to stay when Florence was small.

Return to the river in November

Brunel's bridge, Moulsford

I tell myself I know November frequently fells me. What was a creeping sadness in August is now that much harder to shake off. Maybe this is what lies behind my trip to the river at the end of November just before the second lockdown ends. Feeling bad at home I'd need to escape, but I know full well I can't escape myself. Driving up here I'd imagined my mother was still alive and that I was coming up to sort out her care, something I was always doing. Leaving Maiden Newton, it was blue but only a little way along the A37 I'd entered the cloud and grey. I should have stayed at home. Maybe that's the problem, I don't feel 'at home' at home.

So, on probably the dreariest greyest day of the year, I'm by the church in Moulsford just in time to hear the clock on the tower of the self-styled Moulsford Manor strike one thirty. It's a dull automated sound, not how you'd imagine. Not the kind of archetypal bell that the Canadian acoustic ecologist, R. Murray Schafer would call a 'signal', ringing its message out into the landscape. Perhaps I am also guilty of what he would call 'attractively fictionalising the sounds of the past, smoothing them out into peaceful fantasies.' But I don't think I am. Years ago, bells could always be heard on Sundays. I remember well the sound of the bells being rung in South Stoke and how they would carry across the river to us in Moulsford. I recorded them with Russell for my album *From Gardens Where We Feel Secure.* The track was called 'A Summer Long Since Passed' and I got my nieces Emma and Minta to sing on it. It's the only singing on the whole album. But that sound of bells, and the way they ring out across the landscape is something I want to investigate further. I'm reminded of Hardy, how he'd love to hear the bells ringing in each new year.

Parking next to the church I pull my boots on and head up to the main road, turning right out of the village. All the berries are out along here but even on a lockdown Sunday the road is busy. Opposite the Victorian farm cottage where my friend Steve once lived, I turn down a track thick with mud. Ahead are the river and the old GWR Brunel railway bridge. I pass the open-sided barn where all the house martins were nesting that baking summer's day when Florence and I walked from Wallingford.

Today, dishevelled boats are moored along the bank. Their covers pool with water, abandoned and neglected. I remember boats like these alongside the river when I was sixteen and living near my sister Karen in Twickenham. In those days the odd half-sunk boat was inhabited and I'd feel so sorry for the occupant. As I continue, I notice horrible new green metallic fences have gone up each side of the path just before the bridge. I don't know what this is about. But they look vicious with their sharp points all along the top. Finally, by the river itself I have that sense of return. But return to what? A reverberating sadness. The path leads under the third arch, the one where the river ceased to flow long ago. Now land has reclaimed it. A train passes overhead and, remembering this as the signal to make a wish, I look up once again to the white and green stained bricks above. A new notice has gone up: 'Cholsey Marsh Nature Reserve'. Since when has this been Cholsey Marsh Nature Reserve – who even made up this name? I don't think we had a name for the land just here. If we tied up anywhere it was on the opposite bank or the islands themselves. Here was Private.

The path is thick and clarty, and my boots heavier with every step. Masses of bedraggled willows are tipping themselves into the water, there are brown bulrushes, a tree with its freight of sloes and lots of brown, dead willow herb. Most things are brown but occasionally there's a surprise: amongst the willow herb some tenacious sprigs of meadowsweet and the late flowering purple aster which looks suspiciously like it might have been planted, maybe by the same people who invented Cholsey Marsh. There is berried hawthorn and a coot calls briefly, a rarer sound these days but again takes me back to childhood. I'm by the islands now. These small patches of muddy scrub are where we would land – I always wanted to camp here but we never did. I pass the small jetty Florence and I posed on when we walked that baking day. The silence now is eerie, a grey low cloud muffling everything, only the passing trains breaking the spell, so loud it's impossible to think. Years ago, when they were testing the Intercity 125s on this line, the two-note minor third of their call would sound across the dark at night and through our open bedroom window. It seemed the driver always sounded their whistle going over this bridge. And once that self-contained world had passed with its mystery unknown passengers, my night world would somehow seem lonelier than ever. Up the bank and across the field I can see what was once the old Waterloo pub. Years ago, our dad would come down here for a drink.

The willows here are up to their ankles in water and attended by lines of young straight willow wands. Alongside, the path looks ravaged and rotten – everything muddy, the snapped-off reeds, the hogweed still flowering. The river itself is a deep green and ripples slightly as a lone fisherman casts off, lost in his thoughts. I remember how it was always possible to hear fisherman talking to each other on the far side of the river. The way the water carried their voices gave the impression they were standing only a few feet away, instead of a least a hundred metres. Eventually the path enters onto Ferry Lane where a sign states:

This reserve is suffering from increased visitor numbers
and anti-social behaviour.

The first part of this sign makes me wonder: what are people meant to do? Across the track are the Victorian towers and outline of the old Fairmile Hospital. Completed in 1868 this county asylum was built in red brick with a slate roof to the fashionable Tudor gothic style. Fairmile had its own chapel and farm, and until 2003 there were still patients here. Today the skyline has been re-drawn, developers have taken over and have crammed in housing. I can't imagine buying a property here – the whole area feels tainted and sad beyond words. From our childhood house we could hear the old siren wailing when a patient escaped, the sound itself almost human, a cry of torment. I remember going by on the school bus one time when the siren sounded and hysteria broke out. Tragically, patients would sometimes drown themselves in the river. One of the psychiatrists lived in our village and would cycle to work every day, his hair standing in a crazy shock like Bart Simpson's. I remember the old rusting signpost along the riverbank a little further on the towpath:

PRIVATE FISHING
FAIRMILE HOSPITAL ANGLING CLUB.
NO DAY TICKETS.

The last line was hand-painted and must have been added later. Almost an afterthought – its irony carrying most weight. But Cholsey Marsh's sign saying the reserve 'is suffering from increased visitor numbers' still bothers me: all this new housing has gone up on the site of the old psychiatric hospital and now there are complaints that during lockdown people have been out on the riverbank. Are we supposed to be online all day? Where are we meant to go? And surely when the

Thames long distance path was created it was for people to walk or run along, not just for rare snails.

A woman in pink tracksuit and trainers comes through the gate as I'm reading yet another sign, this time an information board about the rare snail itself: the Desmoulins whorl snail – a snail I learn that loves the reed sweet grass – and the Lodden lily. For the last few years, I have read about this flower and had been determined to visit Withymead reserve near South Stoke at the right time of year to witness it. Earlier this year I was walking from Moulsford to Cleeve when I noticed a large snowdrop-type flower I've seen many times before over the years. This time I decided to look up its name – Loddon lily. I didn't need to make a special trip after all.

Back at the churchyard I visit my parents' grave and that of our childhood friend, Karen. A simple white heart with a bird sitting on top. Driving home I realise how relieved I am to have been able to be up at the river, even just for a day. I long for a time when I can stay up here again, embed myself in the place. I start to think about my repeated returns to the river and the familiarity and reassurance of this aural world. I wonder what it is I'm trying to work out, what the revisiting and replaying is all about. I think about the emotional link between the sound of a place and our connection to it and how, when heard later in another time and place, the same sounds or signals can act as sonic shortcuts, taking us back to these places. What do acoustic and emotional resonance mean and how may they be connected?

Our Early Soundscapes

Thinking about acoustic and emotional resonance I decide to ask my family what the sounds and signals of their early lives are. I call my niece Minta who tells me that for her it is a 'tramp' coughing, a woman screaming and a plane overhead. She also remembers how on Sundays the Salvation Army would play by the river. I'd forgotten this but, as soon as Minta mentions it, I remember the band too. Indoor sounds that she recalls were the toilet door scraping on the quarry tiled floor and the rattling of the bakelite door handles. Minta grew up at the edge of the Thames in Twickenham. The small wasteland next to the house had been bombed during the Second World War and never rebuilt on, beyond this was the outdoor swimming pool and opposite was Eel Pie Island. The house was tall and thin with weatherboard on one wall and – with the river and wasteland – a sense of space surrounding it. I ask Minta, if she should hear similar sounds now, does she in some sense return to her childhood home? When an old man coughs outside somewhere near, does it take her back to hearing the rough sleeper at night outside 'Number Two'?

'Yes, if the sound was near identical to the original it would definitely trigger the memory.'

She goes on to tell me that the planes overhead were always taking off rather than landing:

'They make a different noise. They used to take off over number two.'

A memory returns to me – that of taking my music A level aural exam. We were given extra time because our college was under the flight path too. Minta feels the experience of time-travelling with sound is something that requires more processing than when something similar happens with taste and smell – that the Proust p*etites madeleines* type of experience is more instantaneous. I'm not so sure. I think in particular of smells and how there are certain smells that I'm suddenly aware of, that are deeply familiar, and yet I am totally unable to place them. Minta talks of how she went back to stay in the house – 'Number Two' – after her much younger brother was born – this being possible as her uncle lives there now – and how her childhood returned, not just from being in the same place, but from hearing those same night-time sounds. These echoes and reverberations seem significant. I wonder if there is a

particular poignancy to hearing the sounds in the place where we heard them first long ago, that there is an intensity of amplification, and time somehow concertinas as our bodies become emotional sounding boards.

I text Florence, who, unusually for her, writes me a long, detailed email with all her early sound-memories. For Florence, the sound of rain falling on windows or a glass roof 'transports me to my aunt Karen, and uncle Pete's conservatory at their home in Twickenham. I recollect being very young and lost in a daydream as I listened to the rhythmic sound of the rain dropping … I can visualise this, my aunt Karen, uncle Pete, my mum and I all seated at the table, and it being afternoon.' Thunder is significant too and takes her back to the flat where she and I lived in Pimlico, and we would stand at the balcony windows watching the streaks of lightening before the thunder clapped. 'Now I hear thunder, I always recall the same feeling from my childhood … excitement.' Another evocative memory for her is the sound of the wood pigeon: 'I was very young, and I am at my Grandma and Grandad's house. My mum and I are in the pink bedroom with the old-fashioned throws on the beds and that peeling, faded roses wallpaper. It's sunrise, and I remember that stillness as I'm listening to the sound of the wood pigeon's call.' I imagine this to be a very familiar sound to many of us in the extended family. It is one of my instant sonic short-cuts, and combined with the Canada geese calling and the two-note signal of the high-speed train, I could be nowhere else but by the river in rural Oxfordshire. There is a great poignancy in hearing these sounds. For me, this is a soundworld that treads a line between melancholy and comfort – a no-man's land. But it is something about the wide river valley, the open spaces and the river too. The silent river, always accepting you as you are. Reflecting your moods, containing them. I remember in recent years hearing the train searing through the cut behind my mother's flat in Goring, the geese coming in to roost in the reeds at night. These sounds together fill me with sadness or, more accurately, a bleakness.

On a mission, I ring Alison to ask her about her remembered soundworld. Our childhood soundscape was very much a shared one and as soon as she tells me school playgrounds do it for her, a memory returns for me. When Alison was first a student and living in Camden Road the sound of playtime somewhere close by would take her back to our house on Stanmore Hill, as children, before we moved away. I know what she means as we could hear the playground very clearly from home. I remember being ill and how comforting it was to hear the familiar sound drifting across the busy

road from our infant school. I hear that sound too in Maiden Newton, and am aware, when at home, of the day being punctuated by playtimes, and again the comfort of that sound. The valley between the school and my house seems to amplify the children's voices. Another memory surfaces:

'Do you remember how at nights the windowpanes would sing as lorries went up the hill?' I ask.

'Yes, I remember that.'

'It makes me think of how Florence's harp resonates when certain notes are played on the piano. I wish she still played …'

We continue exchanging sound memories and I am aware of distant planes, traffic and then a chainsaw. This makes me think of our dad. He was forever chopping up logs and I remember when he died and going to the crematorium in Oxford, how coincidentally someone outside started one up as his coffin disappeared. The blend of the chainsaw with Barber's *Adagio for Strings* seemed appropriate somehow. One of his favourite pieces of music combined with the sound of one of his favourite activities. I ask my brother Gareth about his early sound memories but he can only think of songs that link with places which isn't really the same thing. Although most of us remember hearing songs in certain places, it is music that is detached from the place and not of the place.

Deciding to broaden my search I text Jon, my lock keeping friend, who tells me that he was born between Bracknell and Ascot. Opposite where they lived were miles of Crown pine forest.

'Going through the woods about a mile away was the main railway to London.' He remembers lying in bed listening 'to the metallic sound of the train as it disappeared into the night.'

I send out a brief questionnaire to my friends. Graham, who tunes pianos, grew up near Heathrow Airport. Like Minta, he remembers the sounds of planes but also of his mother singing to him and playing the piano. His dad would sing him to sleep. Catherine grew up in Shaftesbury and tells me:

> 'there was a pigeon loft in a neighbouring garden, and I remember that clapping sound when the birds left the loft in the mornings and the swish they made as they passed over as a group. Also, the sound of tawny owls hooting from the hill and cows mooing. My dad used to do a lot of teaching work using reel to reel – so the sound of French being spoken from the tape.'

The sounds of tawny owls and clapping pigeons will always carry her back to that time. I asked Catherine if there was any sound she found particularly comforting.

> 'The sound of water moving quietly, steadily. I lived near springs and used to play down there a lot – quite a subtle, under played water noise. I love where the springs rise at Springhead for the same reason.'

Springhead Gardens lie at the foot of the north Dorset downland and Catherine works in the gardens there. She then sends me a clip that she recorded the previous week of the gentle bubbling spring water.

Su, a beautiful flute player that I went to music school with, tells me that in Kincardine on Forth her earliest sound memories are of her parents talking, of her mum's piano pupils, of the fire crackling and of it 'being cleaned out in the morning by Dad'. Outside sounds were: 'the farmer's tractor, Dad mowing the grass, cats miaowing and purring, the blackbird and other birds' songs. The rain and the wind in the trees.' She adds that later sound memories, from when she was seven or more, are the chimes on her grandma's front door and the sounds of her gran and Auntie Meg knitting and chatting. I love how comprehensive Su's list is and when I ask if there are any sounds that, if she heard now, would take her back she tells me: 'the piano playing, the fire sounds, Grandma's chimes. Rain on the windows and Scottish accents and vocabulary.'

A few days later Su sends me a text:

'I wanted to add something ... I totally love that complete silence that you get when you wake up in the morning and it has snowed or is still snowing gently with big, fat snowflakes! As a child you know you're going to have a great day. As an adult you hope you'll get day off work!' This is a great example and is one I frequently use to demonstrate how we are aware of our sonic environment in a constant but subliminal way, not giving it much thought until it is altered, for example by a deep fall of snow. It was something I was very aware of the day when Florence and I visited Inglesham Church on the Thames: 'there is the quiet of snow and the quiet of church, the south arcade of arches and the north's gothic … snow-light illuminates the creed.'

I talk to Su's husband Jonathan, another fine flute player. He tells me of:

'… attending rehearsals from the age of three with my mother when she was playing in the BBC (Bristol) West of England Orchestra as a violinist.' He also remembers his mother playing him classical recordings from this age. I ask him what

she played: 'Peter and the Wolf by Prokofiev; Britten's Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra and Tubby the Tuba with Danny Kaye narrating.'

A memory returns to me of my mother playing music when she ironed. I think she must have liked violin concertos as I remember the Bruch, the Mendelsohn and the Tchaikovsky, all accompanying her ironing. I wonder if this experience led to my love of ironing. I'm serious, it's the only kind of housework I enjoy!

Other friends recall the sound of the fire being cleaned in the morning, including Angela who grew up in Moulsford. Angela also tells me of hearing the cuckoo. I'm not sure you'd hear a cuckoo in the village now but maybe you would as I have heard one up near Chimney. Another friend in Moulsford, the musician Ted, was born in Oxford in 1942. For his first ten years, Ted lived off the Cowley Road about three quarters of a mile from the centre of the city. He describes:

> 'I remember well lying in bed and listening to the bells of the various churches and colleges chiming the hours through the night. Of course, they were not all perfectly synchronised and used to sound one after the other for the smaller hours and overlap for the longer ones, creating a cacophony of sound. I never knew which bell belonged to which clock.'

I wonder if this early memory of bells led to Ted's collection and interest in handbells. I remember him and his wife telling me how back in the 1970s they'd rescued the village school's set of handbells after the school was closed. The bells had been unceremoniously dumped in a skip on the Rec.

Ted continues, relating how Oxford escaped much of the bombing during the Second World War as it was rumoured that Hitler had decided to make the city his capital when he was victorious:

> 'Little did he know that the great Cowley car factories had been turned over to wartime production. The factories had been camouflaged and "cardboard" factories were built on Shotover Hill to the east of the city. There were no ring roads round the city in the 1940s so when troops were being moved, they had to travel through the centre and the lorries carrying troops and equipment had wheels with very knobbly tyres which made a rumbling sound on the road. I can remember asking what the noise was and being told it was a convoy. I had no idea what a convoy was, but I remember the sound of it.'

Thinking about the soundscapes of our early lives takes me back to Schaffer and the World Soundscape Project. Schaffer was nostalgic – he called our personal

aural recollections of our past, ‘sound romances’. But I have become aware, in talking to people about their early soundscapes, that not everyone’s recollections are happy ones and when a friend says she’d rather not relate her sound memories as her childhood was unhappy, I try to become more sensitive in my enquiries, more tuned-in.

Frequently nowadays, our soundworld is filled to overflowing and often with sound that is harsh, abrasive, hard on the ear. One of the things many of us have been amazed by is the silence of lockdowns, to walk and not hear any road noise, or any planes. The first lockdown, although terrifying, was on an audio level so restful, so calming. I particularly liked the sky silenced of planes, and the lack of road noise. Gradually as the world ‘opened up’, the sound increased. Now everyday there is more and more, and our world is a filled-in sound world, there is no space for anything. Schaffer defined his idealistic model as the Balanced Soundscape. Hildegard Westerkamp, who worked with him, says he described this as: ‘A soundscape where you can hear your own voice and your own footsteps.’ Schaffer notices how if you read ancient books, for example the Bible, there is so much more reference to the sound of the world around but now, ‘the aural imagination of western man is weak.’ Perhaps we have been overwhelmed.

Westerkamp talks of how Murray had a way of inspiring the five colleagues who worked on the project: ‘I felt like we were doing something very important.’ Maybe now with the emphasis on Slow, as in ‘Slow Travel’, we might return to a more careful way of listening and more awareness of the effect of our aural environment. By tuning in to what we value in the soundscape, maybe we will take steps to preserve it.

Playing at Max Gate at Christmas

The Woodlanders room

We've just passed the winter solstice and Florence and I are going to perform a Christmas show at Max Gate. The drive in front of the house is a sea of unswept wet leaves and there is that smell of damp that brings an aching sense of loss, a void. We leave the car at the front and I go round the back to let myself in. The house is freezing. I don't think anyone has been in since last week and it's now Wednesday.

For a few years now we've played here at this time of year, usually over two different weekends, frequently the second one falling around the solstice. We usually do three different performances each day. Today it's just the one show and, as there's no-one else in the house, there'll be no live audience. There probably won't be much of an online one either as we haven't promoted this gig. I've felt too anxious that Florence would find some reason not to do it or storm off in rage at the gates. That's happened before.

Once we've got everything in and arranged the drawing room a little, I leave Florence to tune and go upstairs to change. I go to the room above – my beloved Woodlanders room – but today my thoughts are more with Hardy at the end of his life, how this was his bedroom in his later years, how he took ill just after Christmas and died in this room on 11 January. I think of the window of the dressing room being opened on New Year's Eve, that Hardy might hear the bells of Fordington pealing for one last time. There is something about bells, how they mark both joyful and sad occasions. I remember Alison and I going to the porch of Powerstock Church and finding the framed sheet of the bellringers' prayers. The first one read:

> O heavenly Father we give thanks for this opportunity to worship
> Before a peel or quarter peel attempt
> may the Holy Spirit inspire us with perseverance
> and integrity in this peal/quarter peel attempt,
> and grant that in success or failure
> we may only seek to promote your glory,
> through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen

Hardy loved the bells in Dorchester and visited the bell tower at St Peter's in the centre of town from time to time. I'm glad that the English tradition of change ringing continues, that it's still possible to hear that joyful sound resonating across towns and countryside. And I'm relieved that the bellringings haven't been replaced by automatons, as the poor west gallery musicians were with the dreaded barrel organ.

I have that feeling of not having been away though it was a couple of months ago since I was last here finishing off the archiving. I remember sitting here one day with a folder I'd brought down from the attics. It was about the then proposed bypass: the bypass that is only a few feet from the boundary – the garden wall that hems the western side of the house – and responsible for the constant whirr always present in the garden. More furniture seems to have ended up here since then, a worrying sign. The peaceful empty room from my cleaning days is fast becoming a memory. I put my flute down on a low oak table, an old one of Hardy's that has recently come back to the house, and gaze out to the garden. I watch the lights of the cars going along the glistening wet road beyond the trees and the garden wall. It's been cold and wet all day. It's warmer in here than the other rooms, maybe with it being south facing, but it's also probably psychological because it's not filled with old slightly creepy things – like Emma's rooms – and the greeny-yellow walls and the dim overhead light make it feel cosy. But there are no curtains and I'm aware that the people in the houses in Syward Road must see the light on and wonder who is here. I picture bacon being griddled on the fire to tempt the ailing Hardy. It's getting dark outside and after playing some long notes in the middle octave I turn off the light and change in the almost-dark, still watching the cars and the droplets of rain streaming down the windowpanes. I need two cardigans over my dress as it's so cold. But this makes me feel bulky and might make playing uncomfortable. I pick up my flute and start to play *Enrico*, Hardy's favourite tune. I'm playing it for him but I definitely feel overdressed and I also seem to have made the keys of my flute sticky with hand-sanitizer.

As I play, I'm running over the events of the previous weekend. I always remember when my father was seriously ill how my mother would say I was so lucky to be able to sit down at the piano and 'forget about it all'. I could never explain that I was there and more present than she'd ever understand. Florence has left her previous boyfriend in Bridport and now run off with another much older man who lives in his car which is stuffed high with secondhand clothes and broken ornaments. It's like an Alan Bennett play except it's her life and I'm so sad at her no longer playing, of

having no ambition. All her energy and attention are given over to this manipulative bully. I've only recently met him, but he is stalker material. I had rented a cottage in Oxfordshire for five nights. He was invited for the weekend but somehow didn't seem to grasp the concept. No, of course, he did but chose to deliberately ignore the specific invitation. He left at just before midnight on the Sunday but unknown to us slept in a lay-by, only to turn up and hound her all day Monday before 'leaving' again. On Tuesday I overheard her in the bathroom sounding upset and defending herself on her phone. My phone didn't work in the cottage, so I set out to walk up the track to the corner, to call a friend. I turned the corner and there he was, in his red Peugeot, piled to the roof with stuff.

'What on earth are you doing here?'

'I'm here to see someone about some tree work,' he lied.

I hated him. Florence told me later he'd expected her to go out at three-thirty in the morning and sit in his car. She hadn't woken, hence his anger. Why is she staying with him?

So, all this is going through my mind and the feelings of frustration with Florence who seems to have gone from one predatory older man to another. I don't even know how I've managed to get her to agree to this show today. Gig days used to feel sacrosanct, I wouldn't arrange to do anything much other than be at home and practise, sort out last-minute things. But, of course, Florence's new boyfriend insisted on coming over this morning, claiming the evening was 'difficult'. He insists that her ex is 'tracking' her phone. That he's somehow able to log into her laptop. That he's spying on her all the time. I think it's more him, Frank, who is spying on her, never letting her out of his sight. All I've experienced so far is his drama-making, all calculated to leave Florence more and more anxious. And why it necessitated a visit this morning I don't understand. I was up early to decorate the Christmas tree, trying to hold to some sense of tradition. We didn't start rehearsing together until 11am. Hopeless. It's all taking its toll on me. I am exhausted.

I go downstairs and half expect his face to be leering through the large ceiling to floor windows of the drawing room

'Let's pull the curtains to,' I suggest. It doesn't take us long to set up, we plan to start at four thirty.

Florence has arranged her harp so that she is hiding behind it but I'm not going to argue. I know I'm the one who has to work at all the presenting, but her

playing is great and she knows the material so well. Our start is delayed as I'm trying to get my phone to work but it won't. I want to see the live comments from people as we play; it's good to be able to say hello and also someone can tell us if the sound isn't working. Ever since a disastrous gig in the summer outside Hardy's Cottage when there was no sound, I want to be able to do this. But my phone won't play the Facebook livestream. I give up. Already aware I'm feeling defeated.

The drawing room is so familiar and, although cold, it's comforting to be here. My thoughts drift back to the days when John still looked after the house, when we'd have fires in both the downstairs rooms. I remember the times when Ted and Pat Morse came from Moulsford to watch and how Ted sent us some Christmas music and then unexpectedly showed up for one of the performances, singing heartily, bringing the whole room alive with his wide smile and sense of joy. As teenagers Alison and I went caroling singing around the village every year with Ted, so it seemed very appropriate for him to be here. I talk to my invisible audience about the Melstock Quire of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and how they'd spend Christmas Eve 'Going the rounds'. The Melstock band was based on the original musicians that played in the west gallery at Stinsford church. They were all string players but Michael Mail talks of the year he went the rounds with the Weatherbury Quire: 'Twas a hard frosty night, and the keys of all the clar'nets froze – ah, they did freeze, 'twas like drawing a cork every time a key was opened … an icicle of spet hung down from the end of every man's clar'net a span long; and as to fingers – well there, if ye'll believe me, we had no fingers at all, to our knowing.' I recall the carol singing in Moulsford – a whole gang of us with Ted and his accordion – Alison and I singing the descants.

Florence begins with the 'Sheep-Shearing Song' – the song young Dick Dewy sings at the start of the novel as he makes his way to Melstock Cross, being joined by other members of the parish choir as they journey together. We were never sure of the tune for this song but after hearing Bonny Sartin of the Yetties speak at Weymouth Library a few years back I asked him about it. He was sure of the tune Hardy would have known**.** The next day he sent us a photocopy of the music and it's this Florence is now playing. Bonny and his wife Cynthia used to look after the library at Halsway Manor, the South-West Centre for Folk Arts. I will play in the chorus but am out of practice and struggling. It's hard work performing to a tiny phone screen and I'm missing not only the warmth of a fire but the warmth of a real audience.

Something I always would tell our audience was how the Puritans banned Christmas. From 1644 until the Restoration in 1660 it was to be a day of 'fasting and humiliation'. This always makes me sad when I think of a generation growing up in that austerity. Even though, because of Covid, Christmas is different for everyone this year, at least we can celebrate in a small way. Maybe it's a relief for some people to have a simpler, scaled-down version. But I've heard many say they are missing singing carols. The Puritans didn't just ban carols: there were no gifts, no feasting, no plum puddings or nativity pies, no prayers or church services on Christmas day and no one could hang rosemary, holly, bay or any other 'superstitious herb' without a five shilling fine. Miserable. At least our Christmas is not banned entirely. I imagine though that in Puritan times, indoors, in people's homes in private, Christmas still went on, the yule log brought indoors, and delicious food served.

We play 'While Shepherds Watched' after I have explained to our audience (and I have no idea how many are watching) that when carols were first allowed to be sung again, following the Restoration, they had to have only words from the Bible. 'While Shepherds Watched' is based on the text from St Luke's Gospel so initially these were the only words that were sung. Consequently, there are over four hundred known versions of the carol in existence in the UK so we can be sure there were once many more. This is a West Gallery tune and has the typical fugal entries, each voice coming in and imitating at another register what has just been sung by another part. Hardy loved the West Gallery tradition, calling its music the 'Full-fugued song of the universe unending.'

I tell our invisible audience of the travelling pedlar who brought manuscript, strings and rosin to the community and of the year he couldn't get through because of deep snow. As there was an important Christmas anthem to play the musicians had to make do with bits of whip cord and twine. I'm not sure how this would have sounded … Hardy tells us too of his grandmother and how she'd recount the tale of the year there was so much snow she had to walk into Dorchester *on top* of the hedges. We follow this with 'Me Thinks I Hear a Still Small Voice' and 'Shepherd's Arise', both West Gallery carols. I'm starting to enjoy playing more. Florence is playing out and my flute, now warmed up, feeling easier to play.

I'm glad we drew the curtains. We take a break from playing for me to read 'The Oxen', Hardy's poem about the animals kneeling down on Old Christmas Eve. I remember the time a few years back when an elderly man from Portesham came up to

me after our performance: ‘I think Hardy based that on what happened at my father’s farm down at Portesham.’ He went on to tell me how his father had gone out to the cowsheds that Christmas Eve and sure enough the animals were all kneeling down. Portesham is only a few miles away so it’s possible Hardy did hear of it, but the legend is widespread. That was the first time though I’d met anyone with a direct (well almost) experience of it. I like the way Hardy uses the two gentle dialect words: *Barton* and *Coomb*. An aching for his lost faith comes through the entire poem.

Usually, we play at Barrington Court at this time of year, another National Trust property but on an entirely different scale: a vast Tudor house left to its own devices until Colonel Lyle (of Tate and Lyle fame) restored it in the 1920s. When we perform there, we play in the empty library, the music carrying through the house as the footsteps of visitors reverberate. The orchards outside are filled with globes of mistletoe, such old symbols of Somerset. When we leave, I’ll cut a small piece of mistletoe from one of the apple trees. This year we have had no Christmas gigs. It feels very strange. In the past we would have a string of care home gigs interspersed with other seasonal parties and church events.

Florence plays ‘Sussex Carol’ as a solo and this gives me a chance to check the screen of her phone that we’re recording on. Thankfully, there’s still enough light. I remember one time by the end we were almost in darkness. I think it was when we played at Richard’s house, the old rectory in Maiden Newton – a suitable place to perform a Hardy Show with its links to Jemima, Hardy’s mother, and her days as a servant there. It’s good to see a few friends are watching. Florence’s ex is too. A relief she doesn’t know. Frank wouldn’t like that. It’s all so difficult and has been like this for a long, long time. It’s hard to keep up the energy to perform, there are moments I’d just like to stop. But ‘Sussex Carol’ has a cheering 6/4 lilt and it’s good, as Florence plays the first verse solo, to step away from the camera on the phone for a minute. Vaughan Williams collected the tune on one of his cycling, folksong collecting tours where he heard Mrs Vervall sing it, unsurprisingly in Sussex. Vaughan Williams never met Hardy but his first published work was a setting of ‘Linden Lea’. It’s something we’ve often played here at Max Gate, the words being by William Barnes. When Hardy and Emma first moved here in 1885 Barnes was still alive and living at the rectory down the road. I sometimes wonder if Hardy partly chose the land, which he bought from the Duchy, because of its proximity to Barnes.

Vaughan Williams wrote to Hardy after 'Linden Lea' was published apologizing for his publisher's standardization of Barnes' dialect words.

We move onto another West Gallery carol, 'Wrapt in the Silence of the Light', one that Florence particularly likes; but, as we are playing, I suddenly become aware that maybe it's not enough to be playing these harp and flute arrangements of something originally sung. The tenor line tends to lead and Florence generally has the alto, tenor and bass lines arranged for harp. I take the soprano line on the flute. Usually, we will swop tenor and soprano at some point. I start to imagine a time when the house is open again, when visitors and volunteers will return.

We play 'Christmas 1859' which I adore. But again, I miss someone singing it. I remember in other years printing off the words for our audiences to join in. This is another song that came from Ted Morse and describes industrial action taken in 1859 by masons at Messrs Trollope & Co in London. This led to a major strike and a lock out in the building trade. The masons wanted their working day reduced while the masters refused to employ anyone who wouldn't sign their declaration. This was a promise not to join a trade union. The tune is called 'Courting in the Kitchen' and the manuscript is held at the Bodleian library. I wish Ted was here and Rod too. I enjoy playing it but wonder if next year I could organize some willing volunteers into The Max Gate Singers.

It seems not much had been achieved since the Tolpuddle Martyrs action of 1834 when the men there were deported for organising a trade union in the village just up the road. They were protesting against their meagre pay and a third pay cut in three years. Even for the masons twenty-five years later it was still difficult for workers to be granted decent work conditions. I visited Tolpuddle recently. That afternoon had been bleak. I'd sat in the church porch as the wind seared across bringing with it sheets of rain. A storm was coming in. I watched the trees flex and arch as the sky turned to pewter and I'd thought of the martyrs and James Hammett, the only one to return to the village. A bunch of roses lay withered and faded on his grave.

We finish with 'The Triumph'. Along with 'Haste to the Wedding' and 'College Hornpipe' these country dances were popular around 1840 in Hardy's 'Melstock'. It's a very joyful piece and another of his favourites. It's always good to finish with this one and I enjoy playing the harmony part I've written. I look across at Florence and our eyes meet. I know she is enjoying playing the intricate variation she has improvised over her harp part. 'The Triumph' links the end of our programme

with the start as it’s the tune the assembled party play at the Tranter’s house after the clock has struck midnight and Christmas Day has passed. Old William will not have any dancing on Christmas Day itself but as soon as the ‘clock had whizzed forth the last stroke’ he’s quick as anyone to take his bass viol of its hook, ‘touching the strings as irreligiously as could be desired’. It's also the tune Alison loves best, but I’m not sure she’s listening. However, it’s good to finish with one of Hardy’s favourites and maybe somehow he might be listening. I’m ‘hoping it might be so’.

Compton Valence and Long Bredy

I set off early to walk to Compton Valence. It's Imbolc, or Candlemas, traditionally a cross quarter day and midway between winter and spring. The landscape today illustrates this perfectly. There has been a sharp frost and everywhere that's still in shade has a thick white coating – yet where the sun falls is almost spring-like.

I'm heading to meet Alison for another day of working on our church porch project. The small village lies due south and is about four miles away but there is steep downland between here and there. The place is famous for its displays of snowdrops and usually at this time of year a 'Snowdrop Café' would open in the tiny village hall, serving soup and cakes and selling postcards of the flowers lining the lanes and filling the churchyard. Not this year.

I pass the hedge laid that day by Graham many years ago, where shoots of hazel reach upwards, laden with pale yellow catkins, and, turning the corner, I cross the iron bridge. The banks of the river are frosted and the hills are smooth white sheets until the sun moves round. At Frome Vauchurch, by the bulging flint wall of the churchyard, I hear the ravens that live in the cedar tree here. Even the yews are frosted. I walk towards the low winter sun, the ground underfoot winter-hard. I'm heading towards the River Frome, and the sound changes as I reach the small weir. Dairy cows once grazed all these fields. Orange flares of willow ignite the river's edge where even the barbed wire and cobwebs are frosted. Everything is crystallised – a blanched world, rigid with frost. Parts of the meadow that were recently flooded are now small ice rinks. The sound of the water undulates with deep gurgles and high gushes as I pause on the small wooden footbridge to listen. A wren watches from a frozen branch. Beyond, the weir pool itself is in sunlight. If I had grown up round here, I would have loved to come to this pool as a teenager. It's the kind of place where kids can swim with relative safety, a place that feels remote but isn't far from the security of the village. Over another frosted field and I notice large mounds of newly turned earth. Moles! I remember how much my dad hated the moles for digging up his lawn. They must be tough though, to turn all this earth when it's so cold and hard. From somewhere a cockerel announces the day. I breathe deeply the chill air and from Cruxton, turning south, take the old concrete ridged track to begin

the long climb over the downs. Wood pigeons are getting into gear with their gentle, but insistent, five-note syncopation and I look across the small valley to the next hill, a route I sometimes take, where there are empty partridge pens – silver against the white. Diagonally behind me, on the furthest hill, is Richard's shepherd's hut. A white van winds its way up by his field. The view reminds me Maiden Newton is at the bottom of five valleys – the church tower reaching up from the foot of the rolling hills.

Climbing one field after another, I keep close to the hedge – the other side a frosted border of an old maize field, its dried stalks washed out, still standing. Ahead, another raven crosses the field. I remember its strange call from when I've walked here before. It is the raven that snorts – more like a pig than a bird. At the top I pause, hanging my hat and scarf on the budding ash and, unscrewing my flask, survey an almost 360 degree view before me. It's a relief to stop briefly and pause before pushing on, crossing horizontally to another ancient hedge – laid many moons ago – its weird root system creating all kinds of habitat. Finally, at Notton Barn, I've reached the top and, as I start to descend, to my left is the sweeping curve of the beautiful coombe that leads down to Southover, the long shadows of the trees meaning its half-glacial, half-sunlit. And I'd forgotten but there is yet another climb to the *very* top where, beyond an illegible old worn oak signpost, I finally see the village pressed into the hills. Like a Ravilious painting: the scored chalk slopes, the sheep, the shade and light, the pylons lacing the top of the escarpment. Very, very peaceful. It's views like this that make me understand how perfectly villages are placed – that there is such logic to why they grew up where there did. Not like King Charles' Poundbury, placed on the top of a freezing cold hill.

I wind down through the hills – as though I'm walking through the painting and there are sheep on these lower slopes all appearing very confident, for sheep. I send Alison a photo and she texts me back telling me she thinks they're a kind of cross breed, where a hill sheep, maybe a Scottish Blackface, has been crossed with a lowland breed. Amongst them are seagulls and jackdaws – and then suddenly, like an anacrusis, a flock of starlings lifts, moves as one over the hillside. It has started to sleet and I'm shivering as I walk.

The church clock strikes eleven as I come down from the hills onto a winding farm track and at the end of this track, I open a gate. In an instant I go from wilderness into village – the transition is so dramatic, and I don't quite understand it.

One thing is, thankfully, it's a few degrees warmer and as I climb the small lane, passing banks of snowdrops surrounded by ivy, there are bumble bees feeding. I pass the tiny community hall where two years ago I'd have stopped for soup and cakes and continue to the small church, following the curving path from the gate, past lichened graves to the wide church porch filled with sunlight. Snowdrops are not the only flower, celandines and primroses decorate the graves too. There is not a car to be heard but instead the short, upward, staccato phrases of the song thrush mingle with the squabbling and protesting of the churchyard rooks. Beyond large sturdy buttresses is a Hamstone arch and at each end are label-stops – a king and queen. Inside, on the broad Hamstone benches, a couple are sat.

'Hello, looks like you've got the same idea as us,' says the man with a smile.

'I'm Mark, and this is my wife, Hester.'

Mark goes on to explain that they are from Sherborne where he is a lay minister and that they have been visiting local church porches too. I'm explaining about our project when I see Alison coming up the path. After exchanging greetings, Alison unpacks her bag. I'm glad to see a large flask emerge. I'm wondering what soup her husband Richard has made for us today. But first we start with what remains of my hot chocolate. After hanging my damp scarf, gloves and hat on the cherry tree to dry in the sunshine, I pour us some each. Mark and Hester have gone on and we quickly settle into the rhythm of drawing and writing. A peace settles around us as we allow the atmosphere to speak, becoming so absorbed we barely notice the clock striking twelve above our heads.

There is something special about this time of year. I always remember meeting Jonny around now. We'd known each other through busking in the same places, but this was the first time we'd spent a few hours together. Having finished playing for the day we walked out to the hill above the town. 'We have everything ahead …' he'd said as we sat on a bench at the top of the hill, looking out towards the sea. I stand in the porch today and it's so good to feel the sun on my face. Two buzzards circle far above.

From Compton Valence, Alison and I decide to drive over the hill, towards the sea and Long Bredy. Although I've been to the village before I've never visited the church. It is in the north part of the village and separated from the south by a long lane. The church is clasped in the green bowl of Long Barrow, next door to the old schoolmaster's house, sheep looking over the wall. There is no car sound, only some

plaintive rooks. A lantern swings above the gate and a gravelled path between pollarded limes leads us to the porch. This forms part of the south aisle. Inside, the limestone blocks of the walls are chiselled with vertical and horizontal lines.

'These are tooling marks,' says Alison tracing a line with her finger.

'They'd have been worked at the quarry itself. Masons that did this work were called banksmen. I've only seen these marks twice before, once in a church in Bodmin, and one in a quarry near Falmouth.'

I trace the lines too. They feel mysterious. It's sleeting outside and I'm still feeling cold. Alison as usual is impervious, she has spent so long working in churches. Once again there is a gorgeous flower arrangement, this time tall, dried teasels and slivered branches stand below a carved memorial.

'I think I'll draw that,' says Alison pointing to the skull and crossbones, laurel wreath, hourglass and angels. Outside the wind circles the church and sleet begins to fall.

Long Bredy

In the green bowl of Long Barrow
by the old schoolmaster's house

a lantern is swinging above the gate
where a gravel path between pollarded limes

ringed with snowdrops
leads to the porch of St Michael's,

part of the south aisle,
its limestone walls chiselled

with vertical and horizontal lines –
tooling marks of the banksman.

Dried teasels and slivered branches
stand below a carved memorial:

skull and crossbones, laurel wreath,
an hourglass and angels.

Outside the wind circles the church,
sleet begins to fall.

Listening and Walking with Jemima and Gemma

Maiden Newton, Chilfrome, A green lane, Evershot, Melbury Osmund

A few weeks later and winter and spring are still held in balance. Imbolc has passed and, although spring is waiting in the wings, the days are yet to have any real warmth. It will be a few weeks until the clocks change. Some fine days recently I've sat on a bench on the south side of Maiden Newton churchyard, opposite the gap in the yew hedge through which, many years ago, the rector would appear to make his way to church. The rectory was where Hardy's mother was a servant from the age of thirteen and the rector at this time was Charles Fox Strangways who was in post here for fifty years. I imagine the household would accompany him to his church on Sundays and can picture them, like some Jane Austen period drama, neatly dressed, tiptoeing after him. I'm sure the jackdaws would have been here then, as rowdy as they are today. Behind the church, to the north, at the edge of the flood meadows, the Frome divides and down the mossy bank at the back of the church, a leat runs in a straight line to the water mill beyond the garden.

The original Jacobean house, the rectory of Jemima's time, no longer stands, but Richard's house, built by Benjamin Ferrey in 1842 for Fox Strangways successor, William Hugh Scott, is on the same site. A Victorian mill was built too, replacing the medieval one. Ferrey was Dorset born, a Victorian architect who studied with Pugin and worked on many parish churches, rectories, and private houses. The church that Alison and I visited recently at Compton Valence had been restored by him. Richard's house has very similar carved faces, or label-stops, at the ends of the arch over his front door. The leat was built at the same time as the 'new' house, in the 1840s. I imagine some of the stone of the original house was used and possibly the Hamstone windows, but I'm speculating. I remember our Hardy Show in the house last year and how, as dusk fell, the light played through the Victorian gothic window behind us and how eventually we were playing in near darkness. With just Richard rambling about it's a lonely old house, and always near freezing.

I have decided to retrace Jemima's route to Melbury Osmond from Maiden Newton. Born in 1813, she was thirteen when she came to work here and would have walked home on her day off. My friend Gemma is keen to come on the walk too and I'm pleased to have her company for what will be an eight-mile trek. It's a cold, grey

Saturday, there's a biting, easterly wind and I'm wrapped up in a woolly jumper and wearing a long skirt and boots. I'm determined we'll keep Jemima firmly in mind as we walk and that we'll try and hear the sounds she would have heard two hundred years ago, while being fully aware of the soundscape today. Our feet are walking, and our ears are listening, two centuries apart.

In Jemima's day the mill would be working, and maybe the sound of the flaps being pushed by the water would accompany her as she made her way towards Chilfrome. The mill went up for sale in 1825. An announcement in the *The Morning Chronicle* advertised the mill along with 'dwelling house', yard, garden, stable for ten horses, bake house, brew house and 'excellent meadow'. Jemima would have come here to work in around 1826. As we set off, we wonder which route she took, maybe up Chilfrome Lane. But Gemma and I strike out up Cattistock Road and then cut onto the old railway track. This was once the branch line for the Maiden Newton to Bridport line – a much-missed route. A few years ago, I interviewed older people down in Bridport for an oral history project. I was meant to be finding out about the traditional rope and net industries but what most people talked about, and lamented the loss of, was this scenic line that made its way through Powerstock Common and Loders. I imagine in Jemima's pre-railway day it was all flood meadow and withy beds.

We leave the raised path to cut down across the fields heading for the church, its tower visible in the hamlet ahead.

'Do you think there would have been many people about?' I ask.

'At this time of year, they would be getting the fields ready for sowing. There might be the sound of the chains as the horses pulled the plough and the leather straps hitting against the horses as they trudged the field.'

'I guess once they were sown there would have been children here bird scaring,' I suggest.

This was something John Clare was employed to do as a child at the start of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, Alfred Williams, who wrote about the upper reaches of the Thames, did the same job towards the end of the same century. It would have been hard, working in these fields, filled as they are with chalk and flint. Our fields are almost silent, and it's not just a lack of people working, it's the decline of our wildlife. I can hear the A37 faintly and, from somewhere in the woods, a woodpecker

is working away. There's also the persistent two-note see-sawing of the great tit, and the wind in the treetops.

'I think there might have been sheep and dairy cows grazing on the flood meadows along here as there are all kinds of small weirs and streams hidden away and they would have irrigated the land. Luscious grass,' I tell Gemma.

Recently, I have spoken to my friend John, a naturalist who lives close by, and he has told me that, back in the late eighteenth century, 50,000 acres of the 775,000 acres that made up the old county of Dorset were occupied by water meadows. Apparently when first flooded in December, the ground was 'reputed to sing as the water filled a million wormholes'.

The Frome and the Hooke both wind their way through Maiden Newton and today, walking the fields that surround the village, you will come across remnants of these old irrigation systems: weirs, sluices and little bridges across channels. But now Gemma and I are entering the churchyard at Chilfrome where the snowdrops are giving way to daffodils, pussy willow and primroses, all signs that spring is about to take off on its exponential curve. The distant but omnipresent whirr of the A37, is briefly obliterated as the striking of the bell at nearby Cattistock rings out across the fields, announcing 11 o'clock.

I remember Florence and I performing one September evening in the church here, probably nearly ten years ago now. The planned programme was Florence would play some harp solos and we would follow these with 'Maiden Newton Ecliptic'. This long poem accompanied by flute and harp is based on a twenty-four hour walk that I made some years ago around the extreme perimeter of the village. Luckily the piece is only twenty-two minutes long and not twenty-four hours … That evening the church was packed, its walls still warm from the summer's heat but already that desolate feeling of autumn was hanging in the air outside. Florence was only a few bars into 'Watching the Wheat', her first solo, when there was a gunshot. Florence stopped playing and in the shocked hush everyone looked behind them. In a second all tranquility had gone.

'It's ok everyone, it's just a string that has snapped,' announced Florence. She seemed calm but I could see how thrown she was. As it was a low string it meant quite a complicated procedure to replace before we could continue. Our audience waited politely in stiff silence. I could see Florence's hands shaking as she tried to fix the new string. Gradually, to our relief, everyone resumed their chatter. Eventually we

finished our programme with ‘Maiden Newton Ecliptic’, and I was pleased to have performed it here, in the heart of the place I was writing about. It’s an intense piece to perform and for it to work means me getting in touch with deep feelings. I have always felt the need to head off home after playing anywhere, instead of the standing around politely chatting – where I will always feel out of my depth. I remember many years ago Martin and I playing at St James in Piccadilly and how we sneaked out and grabbed the first cab, back to my flat in Pimlico. All a long time ago now, but the thought of not playing live is hard. I know I could try and work with someone other than Florence, but Martin is north of Inverness and has his own full schedule.

I look at the enormous red cedars in the churchyard and wonder. These must have been planted after Jemima was here. Were they put in at the time of the Victorian restoration in 1864? The first of these giant trees from the Pacific Northwest were planted in England in 1853, so it seems to fit they might have planted these particular ones as a celebration of the completed work. I wonder if earlier there was an ash or oak perhaps, or a beautiful elm. Victorian church restoration was a huge thing in its time. Many churches were in a terrible state of disrepair, but these works often went far beyond simple repairs. I’ve seen in the archives Hardy’s own architectural specification for Turnworth church, and it runs to five sides of small italic writing. The very first line reads: ‘To take down the whole of the present building except the tower’. This dramatic opener is followed by separate instructions for excavator, mason, painter, plumber and glazier, carpenter and joiner, tiler and plasterer. Alison and I have found many churches worked on by Hicks in our Church Porch project and Pevsner writes that this church here at Chilfrome was restored by him too. Hardy worked for Hicks from the age of seventeen but by 1864 had moved to London to work for Arthur Blomfield, an architect who, besides working on many churches, also designed the Royal College of Music.

Inside the church there is a board of rectors dating back to William Wyle in 1267 but the settlement is mentioned in Doomsday and back then had a population of seventeen and there are strip lynchets – signs of medieval agriculture – visible on the nearby hills. I am almost overwhelmed with the thoughts of the continuing generations, of all these lives lived here. I imagine straightforward, uncomplicated lives, but of course this wouldn’t be the case. Suddenly my thoughts are broken by the sound of a football being kicked in the lane and Gemma and I head for the church gate, aware we must carry on with our journey.

Along the lane another sound comes into focus – the squeaking of a wheelbarrow.

'I'm sorry about this noise,' says the man as he glances across.

'Don't worry, I'm writing about the sounds of the country, it's perfect.'

We pass Groom's Cottage and again this provides us with another hint as to the number of horses there would have been. A few years ago, there was a lad living in this cottage who had set up a small forge in the farm buildings on the corner opposite. There's no sign of it now and I wonder where he could be. In the 1841 census, a blacksmith is recorded as living here so it seems highly likely there would have been one, ten to fifteen years earlier, as Jemima made her way through. What would that sound like, the beating of metal on metal, that high pitched ching ringing out into the air? Besides the sound of horses' hoof beats and the blacksmith there would also be the sound of the bells that working horses wore. Hardy describes these in *The Woodlanders*:

> The horses wore their bells that day. There were sixteen to the team, carried on a frame above each animals' shoulders, and tuned to a scale, so as to form two octaves, running from the highest note on the right or off-side of the leader to the lowest on the left or near-side of the shaft-horse. Melbury was among the last to retain horse-bells in that neighbourhood […] these sound-signals were still as useful to him and his neighbours as they had ever been in former times. Much backing was saved in the course of a year by the warning notes they cast ahead; moreover the tunes of all the teams in the district being known to the carter of each, they could tell a long way off in a dark night whether they were about to encounter friends or strangers.

I try to imagine how it would sound to hear these horses' bells ringing into the darkness, and to recognize who was coming by their distinctive melody.

'I expect there'd be the smell of baking …' says Gemma, tilting her head back as though trying to catch a waft that has travelled the centuries.

Gemma saying this makes me hungry and I reach for my Mini Cheddars. They're not really quite good enough and I think nostalgically of the days of the bakery in the centre of Maiden Newton and how coming back late at night I would smell the bread baking. I remember meeting the baker Graham sometimes, close to where we are

today, on his way to Cattsitock – him in his white clothes with trays of loaves and pasties in the back of the car. We pass the banded chalk and flint cottages with their thatched roofs and mullioned window before turning right at the fingerpost and heading up a sunken green lane. This holloway is a secret route. The tall banks, draped in harts tongue, reach up either side and for once there is no road sound. The mood changes as soon as we enter and, despite the trees reaching overhead being leafless just now and letting in light, the temperature has dropped a few degrees. In summer this is a dark, cool track and this thought takes me once again to *The Woodlanders* and how in their summers the people of Little Hintock were in near darkness, when 'the woodland seemed to change from an open filigree to an opaque body'.

> Melbury declared that gardens in such places were no good at all. Except at midday the sun was not seen complete by the Hintock people, but rather in the form of numerous little stars staring through the trees.

If Jemima had walked up Chilfrome Lane, and not gone via Cattistock, I'm sure she would have continued up here. It makes sense as it is the most direct way to Evershot Lane. It's nearly always very muddy and even with the driest February in years it's still fairly hard going. How was it almost two hundred years ago? Would many people be using it? I imagine horse riders would have taken this way, and there are horseshoe prints in the mud. But I don't know about ordinary working people needing to get from A to B.

Hardy said that later in life his mother didn't enjoy walking. I wonder if all these early years of trudging these tracks and lanes had put her off. However, he also said that, when out walking, from behind many people would mistake her for a much younger woman. She must have been sprightly, and she lived to a good old age of 91. Maybe walking had something to do with that. Hardy himself, however, did like walking. As a nine-year old he enjoyed his three mile walk to school in Dorchester and back, and even in his eighties would walk from Max Gate across the water meadows to the church at Stinsford.

Gemma and I continue talking about the sounds that would have made up this walk – along here maybe it was only Jemima's boots squelching, as unfortunately

mine are beginning to do. We have arrived at what I imagine to be a small tributary of the Frome.

'If you can stand here, you can hear the water there, and it flowing over rocks to the left as well.'

Gemma points and I do as she says and hear the water gulping over the stones to my right and a slightly stronger glugging a little further to the left as the stream makes its way. It's stereo or rather omni-directional and I'm listening carefully becoming aware of a far-off whispering, that crescendos quickly as a train sweeps in from the left. I can see the two carriages over the hedge, and I think of sound and it always being all around and how immersive that is.

So many people, when asked, will remember the sounds of trains in their childhood. This reminds me to ask Gemma what her distinctive childhood soundscape might be, and her answer isn't a surprise.

'I remember the sound of trains from my Nan's flat on Abbey Road.'

We hear voices and around the corner come a family, the little girl and boy both wrapped up and the parents pink-cheeked and cheery.

'It's lovely to meet other people!'

'Yes, we're doing a circular walk with lunch at the pub at Cattistock.'

'This is a great secret route, isn't it?' I smile.

'Lost Dorset,' agrees the man nodding.

Ahead a group of black and white faces are pushed against the gate, 'Young stock,' Gemma tells me. These are cows that have been recently separated from their mums and we can see a lone dairy cow, in a field on the other side of the track. One of the calves lets out a gentle moo and her mother instantly answers. This call and response – that sadness of separation – reminds me of years ago when living in East Coker and hearing the young bereft calves calling into the night for their mothers. From somewhere a bull bellows and above, from the telegraph wire, comes the whistling ripple of a robin in full song. I watch him and notice the more he opens his beak the higher the notes are. We've reached a low flat concrete bridge and I remember that this is where my friend Graham was taught fishing by his mum, when he was a little boy of four. The water is barely making a sound and thankfully once again the A37 has been silenced by landscape. At Sandhills crossroads we take the long lane to Evershot. On the tall bank to our right wild garlic is starting to break out and we eat the tender green shoots as we walk. Did Jemima enjoy these strong pungent leaves?

There are primroses too and the odd celandine. I think there would be the sound of sheep and lambs. Sue, Graham's sister, is lambing at the moment, and I know spends much of her day and night with her sheep in Maiden Newton, but out here we see no one. Fifty years ago, there would have been far more people and animals out in the fields. Now so many are empty. However, having thought this, we immediately see a small flock of sheep next to a farmhouse on our left. They are quietly grazing, no demanding lambs here yet.

'I wonder who Jemima might have met … if she ever got a lift?' I ask Gemma and tell her about Marty South in *The Woodlanders* and about pattens, a kind of overshoe that was worn back then. These fitted over the person's shoes or boots and protected them. John Clare describes them in several poems: 'The Forest Maid', 'My Mary' and 'November' from The Shepherd's Calendar (1826). From this last poem with its lines, 'The cleanly maiden thro the village streets/in pattens clicks down causeways never dry', we gather some impression of their sound. Jane Austen in *Persuasion* also mentions the 'Ceaseless clink of pattens' on the streets of Bath and, as late as the 1880s, Flora Thompson in *Larkrise to Candleford* tells us:

> To avoid bringing in more [mud] during the day, the women wore pattens over their shoes to go to the well or the pigsty. The patten consisted of a wooden sole with a leather toepiece, raised about two inches from the ground on an iron ring. *Clack! Clack! Clack!* over the stones, and *Slush! Slush! Slush!* through the mud went the patten rings. You could not keep your movements secret if you wore pattens to keep yourself dry shod.

As pattens were also banned in churches it's clear they made quite a racket. Would Jemima have been wearing pattens? I hope not, but am not entirely certain as Hardy used Melbury Osmund as inspiration for Little Hintock and I wonder if he thought about his mother and the family of her birth when he was writing. In this passage from *The Woodlanders,* Giles Winterborne is on his way to Sherborne:

> He saw before him the trim figure of a young woman in pattens, journeying with that steadfast concentration which means purpose and not pleasure. He was soon near enough to see that she was Marty South. Click, click, click went the pattens; and she did not turn her head.

> Yet she had seen him, and shrunk from being overtaken by him thus; but as it was inevitable, she braced herself up for his inspection by closing her lips so as to make her mouth quite unemotional, and by throwing an additional firmness into her tread.
>
> 'Why do you wear pattens, Marty? The turnpike is clean although the lanes are muddy.'
>
> 'They save my boots.'
>
> 'But 12 miles in pattens Marty – 'twill twist your feet off. Come, get up and ride with me.'
>
> She hesitated, removed her pattens, knocked the gravel out of them against the wheel, and mounted in front of the nodding specimen apple tree.

The Woodlanders, Hardy's own favourite work, is very much about social class, about land ownership and tenants holding their properties for their lifetimes. In the Hardy archives there is a statement of the property owned by the 'Late Thomas Hardy of Higher Bockhampton deceased 1837'. This is Hardy's cello-playing grandfather. The first line reads: 'Supposed value of house garden situated at Higher Bockhampton now held for two lives – £180'. Giles himself lost his house on Old South's death as he had failed to renew the leases which were for three lives.

Hardy wrote the novel after he moved into Max Gate. It was serialised from 1886 and published in 1887, but Hardy was writing about a time fifty years earlier, only a little later than the time his mother was making these journeys on foot. The class distinctions still resonate in this area today. Much of the land around here is owned by the Ilchester Estates. The front doors of Abottsbury, Evershot and Melbury are all a deep blue – the estate colour. The Honourable Mrs Charlotte Townsend is the present owner and lives in the large house at Melbury Sampford. This is the estate which our route will cross on our way to Melbury Osmund on the far side. I think originally Hardy based his character of Mrs Charmond, on the then owner of the house. He later moved the location of the action and changed topographical details, eventually claiming mysteriously that even he could not find the place. As he gives very precise details of the true locations in other novels, for example *Jude* and *The Trumpet Major*, this seems strange. Hardy's name does appear in the visitors' book at the Melbury House around the time *The Woodlanders* was published. Is it possible he was anxious not to offend someone?

In the archives I have also come across a letter from Jemima's mother, Betty Hand in Melbury Osmund, to one her other daughters, Mary (known as Poll) in Puddletown. In this three-page letter, dated 17 January, 1842, Betty frets about the quality of some calico she has bought for making clothes. She tells Poll what cut of beef she had for Christmas and writes of how happy she would be to see Jemima and her family, and the new baby Mary, who she hopes will 'not be as tiresome as Tomey'. But she cannot visit as 'poverty separates chiefest friends.' She is going to send Jemima an old petticoat to make a 'pitch' for the baby. She worries that she will not be able to keep paying her house rent and tells Poll if she (Betty) dies who is to have which bed and that there are seven sheets to be divided between Jemima, Chris and Poll. Dick Pitcher's wife is going to be brought from Beaminster Union (the workhouse) to be buried in Melbury and their son Jack was caught stealing flour from the baking trough. She adds he was going to be put in jail but instead lost his job. She worries about her son drinking and if it will affect his unborn child. Set against all these stories which tell of the desperate poverty of the time – a time when Dorset and Norfolk were the poorest counties in England – is the mention of a baptism of a baby from the Digby family at Melbury Samford Church. Betty recounts how this was a private event but afterwards the baby was brought outside for the villagers to see. She writes that the baby's cap was trimmed with silver 'as I was told – but it is all vanity to me.'

The sadness of this letter stays with me and something about it echoes with another letter – a letter my mother had kept with her all her life and that I found in her safe after she died. A hundred years apart but a similar yellowy-cream paper, flowing ink handwriting and heartache. My mother never knew her father, who died when she was four, and her mother was always ill, eventually dying when Mum was thirteen. The letter is from my mother's mother to her eldest daughter (Mum was the youngest). Again, it is full of concerns for her children. She worries about her eldest son's teeth, thanks her daughter for the cake she sent. I buried the letter with her.

The hunt was well established back in Jemima's day and, despite foxhunting being banned, this is still fox-hunting country. Lady Charlotte is Master of the Cattistock Hunt. There are hunt kennels in the village. Sometimes at night I hear the hounds barking – again a desolate and haunting sound carrying up the valley and one that may well have been familiar to Jemima. I am imagining this when Gemma asks me what I think the tunes are that may have been going through Jemima's head as she

walked. I know that Hardy told his friend and diarist Sydney Cockerel that she used to sing T. H. Bayley's 'Isle of Beauty – Fare Thee Well.' As Bayley died in 1839, it's possible that the song had been published and Jemima would have heard it by the time she was walking this lane. It's a beautiful song with its descending sequential phrases and one we used to perform at Max Gate, but I hadn't realised its popularity with military bands until recently. Much later, Hardy would record in *The Life* that his mother, 'had been a woman with an extraordinary store of local memories, reaching back to the days when ancient ballads were everywhere heard at country feasts, in weaving shops, and at spinning wheels.'

'But she'd have been going to church …' Gemma cuts into my thoughts, 'What would she have heard there?'

Suddenly I am excited.

'There was a West Gallery band at Maiden Newton. They weren't meant to be as good as the players at Stinsford, but there were clarinets and serpents in it!'

In his story 'The Grave by the Handpost,' Hardy writes that the Chalk Newton (Maiden Newton) band one Christmas was made up of 'two or three violins, two 'cellos, a tenor viol, double bass, hautboy, clarionets, serpent and seven singers.' These instruments made a raucous sound but one that would have filled the church to its rafters and been audible from outside. Some evenings I can hear the organ being practised when I walk by our church, and I wonder how much more exciting it would have been, hearing the band rehearsing for Sundays. There is no sign nowadays of where the west galley was, but I've been told that it came halfway across the west window, shutting out some of the light. The church here is considerably larger than the one at Stinsford where the Hardy family formed the small string band. I imagine their sound there was far less strident, more polished, but somehow fitting that humble church with its medieval origins.

It's never occurred to me until this moment that, here in Maiden Newton, they would have been playing some of the same West Gallery music that Hardy's father, grandfather and uncle were playing a few miles away. This feels significant as it means that Jemima would have been hearing these tunes in her formative teenage years. Later, when she was working at Stinsford and attending the church there, she encountered Hardy's father, where he was playing fiddle for the Sunday service. Hardy wrote the following poem about their meeting:

A Church Romance

(Mellstock circa 1835)

She turned in the high pew, until her sight
Swept the west gallery, and caught its row
Of music-men with viol, book, and bow
Against the sinking sad tower-window light.

She turned again; and in her pride's despite
One strenuous viol's inspirer seemed to throw
A message from his string to her below,
Which said: 'I claim thee as my own forthright!'

Thus their hearts' bond began, in due time signed.
And long years thence, when Age had scared Romance,
At some old attitude of his or glance
That gallery-scene would break upon her mind,
With him as minstrel, ardent, young, and trim,
Bowing 'New Sabbath' or 'Mount Ephraim'.

It's probable that Jemima first heard 'New Sabbath' and 'Mount Ephraim' in Maiden Newton Church. How would she have felt to hear them again at Stinsford Church? And how would she feel to catch the eyes of the man she would fall in love with as he played them? I imagine these tunes would forever hold something far beyond the notes for her. It's true too that it was Jemima who kept alive the stories of her husband and his playing days in the quire after it came to an end. Despite the musicians being disbanded Jemima would tell her son of his relatives and their West Gallery days. She'd describe their outfits to him and that they were, 'always hurrying, being rather late, their fiddles and violincello in green baize under their left arms. They wore top-hats, stick-up shirt collars, dark blue coats with great coolars and gilt buttons, deep cuffs and black silk 'stocks' or necherchiefs. Had curly hair and carried

their heads to one side as they walked … he wore drab cloth breeches and buckled shoes, but his son wore trousers and wellington boots.' It was from these accounts that Hardy was able to write about, and recreate, that time in *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

Gemma and I are walking up a long, gentle hill. It goes on forever – my phone tells me it is two and half miles. The sound of the A37 returns and there are occasional planes and accompanying these twenty-first century sounds is the overriding stench of dairy cow manure followed by silage. Gemma wonders out loud about the sound of milk churning but I'm tuning into the syncopated coo– coooo – coo of a collared dove on the road ahead. The bird is busy in a cloud of dust and, with the road surface almost an identical colour, I'm glad of the lack of traffic. On the whole route to Evershot, only two cars and two cyclists pass us. But Jemima wouldn't have seen cyclists as it wasn't until the 1890s that this became a popular pastime.

We are walking along a wide verge I remember from many years ago. In those days it would be embroidered with wildflowers in the summer. I remember one evening Alison and I stopping with the children when they were very little, just to see the sheer numbers of flowers. The lanes were always filled at night with tractors bringing in the harvest. Today, from over the hedge, I can hear a lark's spiralling song. Jemima would have heard this, but I'm sure there would have been more than one – an exaltation of them. The noisy rooks too would have accompanied her. Was there singing in the field? Did Jemima sing, or possibly whistle? I remember as a child many people whistled as they worked outdoors – window cleaners and builders for example. Now we seldom hear anyone whistling. Recalling John Clare and the gypsies at Swordy Well, I wonder if there were gypsies around here or if there were people like Giles, living out in the woods, burning charcoal and making hurdles. Giles' life is based outside in the woodlands, but it is Marty who works with him who seems to have the deepest connection to her environment. It may be Giles that is 'Autumn's very brother,' but it is Marty who hears the pines sighing in earnest as she and Giles plant them together.

> 'How they sigh directly we put 'em upright, though while they are lying down they don't sigh at all,' said Marty.
>
> 'Do they?' said Giles. 'I've never noticed it.'
>
> She erected one of the young pines into its hole, and held up her finger; the

> soft musical breathing instantly set in, which was not to cease night or day till the grown tree should be felled – probably long after the two planters should be felled themselves.

Gemma and I cut down a footpath that leads us to Evershot – blue tits are feeding on the dangling hazel catkins and a wood pigeon startles me as it launches from a laurel, inches from my head. And then a strange thing happens, the same kind of transition that I noted at Compton Valence the other week. When, after walking for miles across countryside, the atmosphere completely changes on entering the village. At Compton Valence it was when I passed through a gate, after a long track that led from the hills I'd crossed. Here it is when we go through an alley way and come out on the main street. It's the strangest thing but that's twice I've noticed it now, as though these places are portals.

Evershot was used as a location for Jane Austen's *Emma* – the version with Gwyneth Paltrow – this street can't have changed much in two hundred years. The only thing that dates it is the cars. In the Hardy archive I once came upon a photo of this street where it looked as if everyone owned a Morris Minor van. I guess it was from the 1950s. At the bottom of the street lies the village hall, another venue I've played at. It's not much more than a tin hut and unchanged since Martin and I played here nearly twenty years ago. In fact, it was the last time Martin and I played together. At last, Gemma and I have reached Melbury Park and once again there is such a shift in atmosphere as we leave the village and climb the stone stile into the parkland. There are new wrought iron gates with foxes on them. It's strange to have these very cute looking foxes when the people here spend their time hunting them down. Parkland has such a different feel to the open countryside and there are tall deer fences that have gone up since I last walked this way. The A37 is loud now – it's partly the time of year, the trees not yet in leaf. As we pass the big house, I glance across at the small estate church. This is another place Florence and I have played. We had left Melbury Osmund the spring before, but our old neighbours asked if we would come back and play a concert to raise funds for a safety surface to go under the play equipment on the field. For some reason, and I don't remember why, the parish council didn't want us to play in the church in the village and after much investigation of other local churches I wrote to Lady Charlotte and asked if we could perform in her church. A letter came back immediately offering us the church and a date was

arranged. Christmas Eve. I spoke with Lady Charlotte on the phone.

'My daughter is playing the concert harp. It's quite large so I wondered if we could park near the church.'

'Of course, and I'll get my butler to help you,' came her swift reply.
As promised the butler helped and we played Christmas carols by candlelight, our friends serving mulled wine and mince pies. I think Florence was still playing her teacher's harp – a beautiful instrument made by Erard and possibly dating from around the time Jemima was making this walk. Sebastien Erard was responsible for devising the double action harp, the design of which remains unchanged to this day. That Christmas Eve the concert went well, our audience were generous, and the safety surface was purchased.

There are so many sheep out in the park today as we make our way down the long drive into the village of Melbury Osmund. Gemma and I are feeling tired, and we wonder if Jemima would make this walk after she finished a day's work or if she set off at first light. I think probably the latter. Because the road through the village only leads to the estate, it is traffic free and the only sound is of a few noisy sparrows bustling in the hedge as we turn a corner and see ahead of us Monmouth Cottage – the house where Jemima's mother was born and home of the Swetmans, a yeoman family. That winter we spent here, Florence and I joined the village carol singers, and this cottage was where we ended up after visiting a dozen or so houses, each place serving their own personal recipes of mulled wine and mince pies. I'm not sure I was aware of its Hardy connection that night, but I remember the warmth of the fire and mulled wine, the feeling of having taken part in something timeless. As we made our way home in the pitch black, I told Florence about those Christmas nights that Alison and I would join the carol-singing group, us singing the descants as we made our around Moulsford, Ted always smiling as he played his accordion.

Third lockdown

On 6 January the prime minister ordered another national lockdown. This lockdown has felt harder than the previous two. For one thing it's a miserable time of year, and we are all tired. I am without a car, which in the scheme of things is minor, and I'm grateful to live in the place that I do and to be able to walk. I'm glad too that Alison and I are continuing our porch project. I worry endlessly about Florence. In early March the children finally went back to school. And it's good to hear the voices of Luke and Jake, and Imogen and Wilfred as they set off each day from behind my house. The government announced there would be a 'roadmap' out of lockdown and each phase seems to come with its own slogan – we have gone from 'Stay at Home' to 'Hands, Face, Space'. But nothing honestly feels like the old pre-Covid days. Once again, for months it is impossible to get to the river.

John Dike – violin making and repairs

It's almost a year and a half since I first thought of talking to John about instrument building. At last, I manage to catch up with him and, on a sunny late spring morning, after months of lockdown, we are drinking tea in his workshop.

John was born in Dorchester and studied violin making at the London College of Furniture in the 1970s. He'd seen an exhibition at the Craftsmen Gallery and had been bowled over by a newly crafted violin 'in the white' – without any varnish. It had looked fantastic and led him to think: 'That's something I could have a crack at' … I'd always enjoyed Airfix kits so knew I had a lot of patience.'

Before he was allowed to attend the full-time course, he took woodworking evening classes at the college. Besides instrument-making, the course had a component of instrument repair and he and the five other students in his year were taught by Harold Hearn who had worked for forty years at Hills – the most respected of violin repairers and restorers. John tells me how the woodwind department of the college was the hotbed of traditional music at the time. '… people like John Swain and Dave Armitage – that's where Blowzabella came out of.'

I ask John if he thinks instrument making can be taught or if it's something you learn by trial and error.

'Well, when you think of the old Italian makers they used to begin when they were ten or eleven … the knowledge got passed down through families.'

I take this opportunity to ask John about the spruce travelling downstream in the river to the Cremona workshops.

'There are all sorts of stories to be honest. I think the wood was treated somehow. Some people used to store it next door where the animals used to live, to get the ammonium treatment which gives the slight staining to start off with. It's a well-known thing with wood carvers that if its ammonia treated it carves better.'

John picks up two wedge-shaped pieces of wood from his workbench and hands them to me. There are pencil drawings on them – half violin shapes. One is much heavier than the other.

'Basically, there's two different sorts of wood: maple, and a softer wood … spruce. Maple is used for the back and the sides of the instrument. The much lighter wood is the spruce, that's used for the front.'

I examine the grain in the pale maple as John continues,

'This is cut like a cake – that's near the centre of the tree and then it gets a bit wider out towards the edge of the tree.'

'Where's your wood from?'

'It comes from the continent; the spruce comes from Switzerland or Germany. If it's higher altitude it will be a bit closer together because the summers aren't as long. You haven't got the sappy bit in the middle. I've never gone out to sawmills. There are quite a few specialists, but you can't be a specialist in everything.'

I remember reading that Stradivari's spruce all came from one particular Alpine Forest, but John has an intriguing tale for the wood for the backs of the instruments:

'Apparently, for the back, Stradivari used to go to the dockyards in Venice and get some of the broken oars from the galley ships that had been dipped in salted water and changed in that way … but then on the other hand you've got to have it really well-seasoned after that.'

John shows me a viola he has made over the last six months during lockdown. The previous instrument he made was some twenty years ago now. His work as an instrument repairer has been so in demand that John hasn't had the time for instrument building, until now. He tells me his experience of making a viola over the last six months has been so different to making instruments twenty years ago, 'There's so much advice available online now'. This makes me laugh as it reminds me of how a friend tried to fix the toilet following a YouTube video.

'I think the front is probably more important than the back although you want a good strong back. The maple's strong both ways. You tend to sort of flex the plates as you're thinning them out and that's important in terms of getting the right sort of responsiveness of instrument. If it doesn't vibrate at all then you're going to get an instrument that's going to be a bit dull.'

I'm keen to know if John can ever sense anything from an instrument, for example an anonymous violin that he might pick up at an auction.

'Not really…' he shakes his head but then adds, 'Certainly when I've lent instruments out to people and it's a professional, you know they are going to be playing it for six hours a day and when it comes back it will sound completely different.'

‘Does it come back singing?’

John nods in agreement: ‘Conversely, most instruments I get have been sitting in a loft for twenty or thirty years and probably weren’t set up properly in the first place. Something I do look for and like, is when I see grooves in the finger board where somebody’s played it a lot … I think “this must have been treasured” and also you can see by the finger patterns if they’re just stuck in first position – probably a fiddle player – or they’ve been pretty good or a classical player if they’re all over the fingerboard … occasionally you get fag marks – then I’ll imagine it’s been played in a smoky jazz dive.’

John is holding his new viola up looking across the bridge.

‘I’ve got a few adjustments to make.’

‘It’s beautiful,’

‘I’m quite pleased with it,’ he says with a beam.

***

Some months later I’m walking through Maiden Newton when I meet Colin, my musician friend, outside his house.

‘You must come in; I’ve got a Hardy cello upstairs …’

This is too good an invitation to miss and following Colin into the house we go up to the spare room where, lent against the corner, rests a rather battered-looking cello, a big hole in its front.

‘Wow, where’s it come from?’

‘It was found above Herrings, the art shop in High West Street.’

I really want to touch the cello but think I will look silly. Colin continues,

‘Frank Herring mentioned to a carpenter across the road, near Grey School Passage, that he’d like to play the violin. He was offered the cello, and Colin doesn’t know if Frank ever learnt, but that is how it appeared. No one knows when the woodworm first got in there …’

We both stare at the cello.

‘John’s going to fix it up … quite a job for him.’

I’m glad the cello is going to John and I’m looking forward to finding out more in the coming weeks.

When I do eventually catch up with John, we are sat next to each other at a talk about stained-glass. Poor John since, as soon as the talk's finished, I begin,

'I hear you fixed that cello, the one that was meant to come from the Hardy family,'

John looks at me and literally raises an eyebrow. I continue,

'Was it Hardy's grandfather's?'

'Meant to be … when I took it apart there was writing on both sides of the inside of the front. Nothing grand just tiny notes: John Antell was written inside in pencil – he was one of Hardy's cousins. There was Nathaniel Sparks name too – another cousin who fixed instruments in Bristol – and a repairer in Upwey. I pencilled my name at the end. Just so that, if it's opened up in a hundred years' time, they'll know who fixed it last. We're calling it the Stinsford cello.'

'What was it like to fix?' I'm keen to know.

'It was terrible … absolutely full of wood worm, thought it was going to fall apart in front of my eyes.'

Recording the River

Culham Lock, Cleeve Lock, Hobbs boathouse Brunel bridge

It's the very end of June before I manage to set off on my planned escape. Much as I love West Dorset, I've needed to get back to the river for a long time now and finally, with lockdown restrictions lifted, I'm able to return for more than an illicit couple of days. One of these stolen times was when I managed to visit Sutton Courtenay back in May. At the end of a row of houses, I'd followed a path that led to a still backwater. The air was filled with the scent of hawthorn, made more intense by the previous night's rain. I caught a glimpse of the main weirs ahead and could see three large caterpillar-shaped awnings over the furthest ones and realised they were the new hydro system. I was instantly taken back to working at Osney Lock at Oxford in the summer of 2013, when plans to install a hydro system there were being fiercely debated. I paused on the bridge above the weir and breathed deeply, the air rich with negative ions. Scientifically, this is one of the reasons its feels good to stand there but it's something I've known since childhood. With a renewed sense of equilibrium, I continued to Culham Lock to catch up with Keith, a wonderful lock keeper who has been there for fifty-five years. There is something very attractive about this calm quiet man. Often people will say of Keith, 'he is the river'.

> 'River's quiet,' I commented.
>
> 'Might get busier now,' replied Keith as we stood and gazed at the water.
>
> With so little river traffic it was the clearest I'd ever seen it. Two swans were out, gliding silently upstream.

I'm keen to discover what is it about the river landscape that calls me back, lets me know I have arrived home, and what part the soundscape plays in all of this. I've decided to revert to my original plan of making field recordings in chosen places – places where I feel an emotional resonance. I'll make these in the evenings, spending an hour in each location, writing as I listen. I've arranged to stay at Twinks' Airbnb in Moulsford and wonder if it will feel strange to stay the night at another house in the village rather than our old home. Arriving early on a gorgeous sun-filled day, I head to the Beetle for a coke and crisps. The river lies idling in the sun, scattered reflections of willow and cumulous cloud broken on its puckered surface.

Feeling restored, I set off walking up the main road to Twinks' bungalow in Glebe Close. Twinks is the mother of my oldest friend, Steve, who I have known since I was eight. When we were young Steve lived in a house on the hill by the pig farm, at the other end of the village. Our teenage holidays were spent walking on the downs, digging up Victorian bottles from an old dump and climbing through brambles and nettles to explore decayed and broken old cottages. Sometimes we would roam further, taking to the river under darkness, rowing across to South Stoke like dubious characters from *Our Mutual Friend*.

Twinks shows me a room at the end of her bungalow. Steve and his wife Jill's paintings are hung on the walls, and I immediately feel at home. At the back of the house lies a large walled garden brimming with summer flowers and beyond this an ancient, wooden door leads to the Cranford House field and the Rec. The sound of children playing on the fields carries across as Twinks tells me that her grandparents lived in a brick cottage on the other side of the main road and when she was a child this was all a market garden. Twinks and her sister Ann were friends with the market gardener's son and pear and apple orchards once grew where her house now stands. This was their playground.

I think if I set up my recorder for an hour in each of my chosen sites, I will use the time while recording to attune to the river and the landscape about me, to the sense of return and what it means to be here. This will help me in my effort to seek out what this connection is about. I also need to try and understand how and why each site feels different. – how much is the aural architecture, how much the visual, what part does past association play? And how will I write about this, something that is this peripheral, only half-tangible? It's like listening for music that is barely audible.

There is an added problem in that I've hurt my ankle. I've recently returned from a walking trip in Northumberland and on the last day walked fast, running at times – trying to beat the incoming tide – across the sands of the old pilgrim route from Lindisfarne to the mainland. I must have twisted my ankle at some point and, as I'm planning to walk along the towpath to Cleeve tonight, I hope it won't play up too much.

***

Despite my ankle hurting it does feel good to be back on my favourite reach of the river**.** Out on the water – beyond nettles, water dropwort and bright yellow meadow vetchling – a flock of greylag geese are paused midstream, not appearing to be doing anything much other than floating along together. Finally, I reach the lock and decide to set up just downstream where sheep are grazing alongside the river. I lay my Sony PCM D100 recorder on the grass and sit down. This digital recorder makes high quality recordings and just about fits into a pocket. Well, a largish one. Once I've decided on a spot, I don't plan to move it during any of the recordings I'll be making. Here I'm directly opposite the weirs and beyond these is Karen and Pete's old house, The Temple. A red and white sign stands in the river above the weirs: DANGER KEEP AWAY. As a child these signs terrified me. There is a commotion going on at the lock as a family with a hire boat try to fathom how to open the gates. The hydraulics should be on 'public power', but it looks as though the family are trying to work the lock by hand.

I am unsure at this point if I will use these sound recordings for anything other than my own research. Initially, I want to be able to play them back, to listen and explore what sounds are present and the world they conjure. What have I not heard in the moment when perhaps my attention has been on the visual or tuned into my thoughts? Are there sounds that are barely audible but significant? How do sounds behave in the landscape? A sound doesn't exist in isolation but is part of a temporal and interactive process whereby the resonant qualities of where it is sounding into play their part. Both the attack and decay are also influenced by the surrounding space. What does the resonance of the sound tell me about the place where it is playing? Which sounds produce the strongest physiological and emotional responses? I am not making soundscape compositions but am engaged in a careful close listening and, as I record, my focus narrows to the auditory world encountered. I may eventually use some of the material for the basis of my *Night-Visiting Songs,* but it will very much depend on what I manage to record. I reflect on how easy it is to make field recordings these days, compared to making *From Gardens* in a pre-digital age with Russell, all those years ago, lugging a hired Uher along the riverbank and recording directly onto quarter inch tape.

Here at Cleeve, the constant sound of the weir forms an ambient backdrop, occasionally drowned by the metallic rattling and sweeping gasp as a train passes through the chalk cut that lies behind The Temple. 'Ambient backdrop' is

downplaying the weir as it's hard to hear much else above it. The weir and the trains are almost the only sounds. There is a snatch of blackbird and a brief 'jack' from a jackdaw. From far, far away, comes the oscillating see-sawing of a great tit.

The weir makes me think about Jon and how attached he was to his when he was the resident lock keeper at Buscot. His lockhouse was right beside the weir and strangely, at night, Jon would hear voices intermingled and rising out of the white noise. I asked Jon recently if, now he's moved, he finds the traffic noise at Lechlade too much when trying to sleep, but he's told me it's surprisingly quiet – so quiet in fact, and without the weir sound that he's heard for the last twenty years, that he realises he has tinnitus.

This 'problem' of the omnipresent weir and how we listen in these circumstances is an issue Hildegard Westerkamp responds to in her piece 'Kits Beach Soundwalk (1989)'. Westerkamp describes herself as a composer, radio artist and sound ecologist and this particular work is based on the sounds recorded at a beach in Vancouver. Initially, the listener hears quite a bit of background hum with some sounds of water against this. Westerkamp's voice enters, describing the ocean, the weather, the water moving between the rocks and the barnacles 'putting out their fingers to feed on the water.' As she has told us the day is 'wind-still' you know the other sounds can't be the wind. She continues: 'The tiny clicking sounds that you hear are the meeting of the water and the barnacles […] The city is roaring around these tiny sounds but it's not masking them.' Westerkamp contends that because the view is 'spectacular' the hum of the city appears quieter: 'it doesn't feel that loud.' However, when she tries to listen more carefully to the barnacle, the city sounds louder and 'occupies all acoustic space […] it seems too much effort to filter the city out. Luckily, we have band pass filters and equalizers. We can just go into the studio and get rid of the city.' The entire piece is really an experiment in our perception of sound and imagination and relates directly to my experience of the weir this evening. However, at this point I don't intend to take the recording into a studio and make the weir sound vanish. My approach is more purist – it feels important to work with a true audio representation of a landscape, not a doctored one. Only by doing this will I be working with, and responding to, the sonic essence of a place.

On the distant edge of the field, I know there is a very small stream. This is where, as children, Alison and I would frequently see water voles. I don't think they

will still be there but, if they were, I wonder what tiny sounds they might make? What exactly does a water vole swimming sound like?

As I listen through headphones to what I'm recording, I write, wondering why I am going over old ground, whether I have invested the place with all this stuff that is more about me than is intrinsic to Cleeve. That old feeling returns, a feeling like that of trying to remember a dream on waking or of encountering a smell that is so familiar but you can't place where from, other than knowing it's something well-known from a long time ago. I feel as though I am on a threshold, but a threshold of what?

A little further downstream, near where the water voles once swam, a bunch of lads are swimming and messing about in the river. Briefly, I'd thought the boys were right behind me. It's astonishing how loud they are through my headphones, and I recall how water affects voices in this way, deflecting and carrying them much further than solid land would. I decide to take the headphones off as it's not at all restful with everything amplified.

The constant sound of the weir could be the sound of a road, such as the A419 that Florence and I heard when we visited 'The Organ of Corti' at the Cotswold Water Park all those years ago. We had made a long detour from our route that day to visit this sound installation set up by one of the lakes and consisting of rows of four-metre high acrylic tubes or 'sonic crystals'. The composer, David Prior, claimed he was using:

> the acoustic technology of sonic crystals to accentuate and attenuate frequencies within the broad range of sound present in road traffic or falling water. By recycling surplus sounds from our environment, we hope to challenge expectations of what might constitute a piece of music by adding nothing to the existing soundscape but rather offering new ways of listening to what is already there, reducing sonic pollution to a sort of impassive, near silent, but cleansing and possible soulful hum.

We had walked round the lake to the structure, all the time aware of the deafening white noise from the A419. The composer was meant to be leading a Listening Walk and at this point I'd felt sorry for him. How would anyone hear anything over the road sound? I remember we reached the installation where a chatty woman, sitting in a deckchair under a plastic gazebo, handed us a leaflet and suggested we read it before we entered. Firmly gripping a notebook, she told us she was recording people's

reactions to the work. While I had tried to engage with the work, Florence, sensibly, had given up and sat chatting to the woman under the gazebo.

I tried very hard. I walked through the plastic cylinders in each direction. I closed my eyes. I paused at various points. All the while it was impossible not to be aware of the roar of white noise from the A419 dual carriageway. It could *not* be described as a 'soulful hum'. But, detached and without visual cues, the sounds of cars on a road surface and falling water are within the same realm, much as the sound of chips frying and recorded applause are incredibly similar.

Isolated, and on its own in my headphones, I realise I don't enjoy the weir sound, that what is required is the whole immersive weir experience: the negative ions, the sense of the river's onward flow, the view looking west over the fields towards the downs, the smell of earth and air. I remembered, as soon as I sat here this evening, how strong that smell is. I'm convinced it's something every lock keeper is addicted to and I know my brother-in-law it misses it too. And looking across at the wooden house – after all these years so perfectly blended with the trees surrounding it – I understand. I and can make out an older couple on the verandah. They are dressed in pink and blue. There's a white cruiser moored against the bank by the weeping willow.

For the first half-hour I haven't written anything; I've tried hard to settle but as usual I've been worrying about Florence. I never know where she is anymore, other than that she is living in a car piled high with stuff, with a sociopath, and they might be in Bournemouth. I keep checking my phone, unable to simply turn it off. It's all in my head the whole time. I rerun how she was to me on Monday and my head aches. Looking up I see the boat is finally going through the lock. It has taken them this long. The fall here at Cleeve is only a couple of feet, it's part of its charm, it isn't intimidating like some of the other locks. The fall at Benson, the next lock upstream, is well over six foot and you certainly feel that depth, standing lockside as it empties, looking down into the lock chamber. Suddenly, from somewhere close by, come singular, short staccato calls from a coot and against this the distant chatter of mallards. These sounds remind me to be more attentive but also of how we slip in and out of concentration, that attentive listening is hard work. Of course, it's nonsense to say this. What could be more pleasant than having a legitimate reason for laying on the riverbank doing very little other than listening?

The couple on the verandah have gone in and, feeling itchy, I look down to see ants all around me. Some paddle boarders carry their boards through the lock, but the cruisers have all now mostly moored up for the night. The river has taken on another atmosphere, one I know so well from all the times I would come to the water's edge at the end of the day. Stillness. It's 7pm and, itchy and headachy, it's time to head back upstream to Moulsford. A last train goes by, searing through the cut, as I turn off my recorder hoping I can get my headache to go as I make my way back along the towpath. As I walk, I breathe deeply – the river is quiet, also listening.

***

The following morning I try to buy a camping stool at Champions, the hardware store in Wallingford. No luck. However, it feels very good to go into the shop, at once enveloped by its familiar smell and the flood of memories of going there with my dad. It was one of his favourite shops. Later I visit Mima, who grew up in the house next door to us. For the last few years she has been caring for her mum, Yoko, who died just after Christmas. I last visited Mima back in May.

It had been a sunny day with the elderflower coming out and voices drifting over from our old garden. I remembered that a honeysuckle flowered on the other side of the fence, a plant we had transferred from my Nana's bungalow in Warrington. I had felt daunted by the task that Mima had ahead of her. She needed to clear the house of books and there were more books than I have ever seen in a house. Mima wanted to keep every one that her father had written in. The books were divided into sections: art, esoteric religions, gardening, architecture, Cambridge, nature, China, Japan. There were quite a few that he had written in. We'd also rescued the apple tree ladder from where her brothers had thrown it at the bottom of the skip they had hired. I helped Mima retrieve other items and then we had sat in the garden enjoying a chickpea and sausage stew and looking through old photos Mima had found of an early birthday party – Alison with long blond hair and nice yellowy mustardy trousers and shirt, me in red clogs, long white socks and flowery dress that I didn't recognize. I remembered how much I liked those red clogs. Karen had bought them for me.

***

Today, we sit in Mima's garden once more. Again, we are wrapped in sunshine and, as we eat a picnic under the apple tree, a memory surfaces: of Yoko carefully wrapping the apples in newspaper every autumn and storing them in boxes. From somewhere an owl hoots – so strange to hear one in the afternoon but we heard one last time I was here too. I ask Mima what sounds she remembers from her childhood.

'The owl!' she laughs, before adding,

'Oh, and the woodpecker … '

At this point we hear the train on the other side of the river,

'Oh yes … the train too … and the Canada geese in the evening,'

'That's such a melancholy sound, I can hardly bear to hear them,' I add before Mima continues,

> 'The sound of oars in water … and I remember when the river had almost frozen over and the unbelievable sounds of the slabs of ice as they brushed against each other.'

Unsurprisingly, Mima's remembered sounds are very similar to mine and Alison's. Since I last saw her, Mima has continued slowly clearing the house and carefully sorting the various books for different people. After our picnic I place a stack of Japanese ones in my car to take back to Dorset for my neighbour. We set off along the village street on a mission to redistribute some more of these books, stopping first at Twinks' neighbour, Janet, where Mima leaves a book about Jerusalem and the *Book of Kells* on the doorstep. We walk back down the street, and I suggest we call on Ted and Pat Morse. I have with me Alfred Williams' *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames.* This isn't a book from Mima but comes instead from my friend Peter who was originally from a farming family in Cricklade.

Peter had known I was writing about the upper Thames and had arrived on my doorstep one day with a carrier of books. 'I thought these might help you,' he'd said handing me the books. I'd opened the bag and the first book I'd taken out was an old green volume, published by Duckworth and looking remarkably like a Hardy first edition. This was *Round About the Upper Thames,* written by Williams during the early part of 1914 but not published until 1922. 'Upper Thames' covers the first twenty-five miles of the river – from its source to Radcot Bridge. That afternoon, as I read, a sense grew of a writer who intimately knew, and loved in a deep way, the place and its people. His preface stated: 'The scope of the book is principally nature

and life, speech, story, tradition, and humorous incident. Whatever of this is contained in the chapters was gleaned on the ground.' Williams' folksong collecting followed on from this. To him, it was a completion of the work he had started in the other book: 'Above all, I wanted to describe how the people spent their days and nights, in what employments, recreations, and amusements. In a word, I wished to show how they lived.'

Inspired and driven, he'd set out late in 1914 to collect the songs, cycling more than 13,000 miles in less than two years, gradually winning the trust of people so that they would sing their songs to him:

> What we love most of all about the folksongs, is not their beauty […] but their old-fashionedness. They are like the quaint figures and ornaments we find on the mantelpieces in the cottages, that were bought centuries ago and handed on from generation to generation, clear and delightful by reason of the association with the time that is past, and the memories they awaken in us.

However, because Williams was not able to transcribe the tunes, he only wrote down the words. I am keen to know the actual tunes as I am thinking I may be able to interweave some of the songs with my field recordings to create the musical part of my project. This is where I hope Ted may be able to help. His and Pat's house is on the main street, almost opposite the Rec.

Ted and Pat, Mima and I are all sat in the back garden, cups of tea in hand.

'What have you got there?' asks Ted looking down at the book.

'I wondered if you know any of these?' I ask, passing it to him.

Ted opens the book and grins,

'Oh yes, I know these,' he says turning the pages. He starts to sing:

'Oh Nancy, my heart!
Don't you hear the sweet lark?
Don't you hear the sweet nightingale sing?
Don't you hear the fond tale of the sweet nightingale,
How she sings in the valley below?
How she sings in the valley below?'

He follows this with a song about a weasel which has us all laughing. I start to think about the modal character of many old tunes, of how, conventionally, major keys equal 'happy' and minor ones 'sad'. Somehow the modes work between these and

something about this echoes with the river – how it's comforting and often, on sunny days especially, joyous. But it also holds a deep melancholy, as Alison summed up recently when she asked me, 'Why is the river always so sad?' For me it's not necessarily sad but it certainly holds a poignancy – an indistinct, blurry emotional space filled with heartache and love, with the wood doves and the train whistling through. For me it was a place to come to in the evening, to escape my family and their various crazinesses. Ted is now singing 'When Joan's Ale was New.' He tells us the tune he knows is one that was sung by Jim Phillips of Headington Quarry in the 1950s. I'm wishing I had my Sony recorder with me when Ted, seeming to read my mind, looks over at me,

'I'll write them up for you on Sibelius,' he says.

This generous offer is so typical of Ted and much appreciated.

***

Later that evening I leave Twinks' and, heading down towards the church, take the track that leads behind to Hobbs Boathouse. Of course, it's not called that these days and hasn't been for years – it is Sheridan Marine – but to me it will always be Hobbs. This was an old river family, and you can still find 'Hobbs of Henley' hiring boats out. But here in Moulsford you could also hire rowing boats when we were children. On the riverbank I am greeted by a Calor Gas sign and a Walls Twister sign:'You want me,' it states. Not a question – but an instruction. The words, 'Gluten free, 76 calories,' are added just in case either were your excuses for declining. I remember coming here and buying ice creams when my mother was dying. She is buried with my father in the churchyard up the slope behind.

Out on the river a flotilla of Canada Geese is on a late evening parade upstream, overseen by two girls standing upright on their paddleboards. There is that languid feeling in the air, a feeling I sense more usually in August. The clock on the 'manor' sounds 7pm and it's time to begin my recording. The sky is unblemished blue, just as it was this morning. Wood doves flutter in the shrubs and mayflies bob up and down at the water's edge but once again it feels hard to settle and I'm feeling chilled. Tomorrow night I plan to be under the Brunel bridge, and already I feel anxious about this. I must remember to take a coat. Maybe walking up on the opposite

bank will feel less lonely, less creepy. It would all be better if I was doing this by boat.

I start to record and immediately hear a sound I recognise – the familiar sound of oars creaking in their rollocks and, above this, the splash as they hit the water. The first river bird in my headphones is the moorhen. It doesn't really have a song, more of an abrupt cluck, which is followed by a squawk from a coot. I hope I've got the birds the right way round. When I next see Alison I will ask her to check my identification – she's good at this. There is a beautiful moment of a wood pigeon's five-note syncopated coo-ing over the watery sound of the rowing. From the right a greenfinch is trilling away but within a minute there is the train, filling my head, taking a long time before it fully fades followed by the coot and then another train, accompanied this time by a chiffchaff. A kind of reverberant gargle phases in and out, gradually crescendoing, and a small boat with an outboard motor comes into hearing and then sight. This is the sound that my brother-in-law loves. A mallard accompanies the sound and, from somewhere, far-off voices and briefly a dog. I think the voices might be those of the children out playing at the far end of the village. From somewhere there is talking – it could come from anywhere … this is how it is with the river, its ability to diffuse sound. A mallard is quaking, and a crow calls from, I imagine, the churchyard behind. There is a sedge warbler and possibly somewhere a reed warbler too. As I'm listening to all this, I notice a family go by in a kayak while another boat pauses alongside, trying to take their picture.

'Does it look like we're sinking?' the kayakers ask.
The only reply is laughter from the other boat.

The opposite side of the river catches the late sunlight. The bank is a thick mass of hemlock, blue meadow geranium, dried grass, bramble, and willowherb yet to flower. I feel in a strange, maudlin state and, checking for ants first – and the recorder levels as yet another train goes by – I lie down on the bank, trying to still my mind. I notice the boat names as they go up and downstream, catching the last of the day: *Wagtail III, Temple Toy* and *Sassy's Delight* all disturbing the surface as the river sinks to its familiar evening stillness. *Temple Toy* must be the boat I saw moored outside Karen and Pete's old house last night.

I'm watching a man going slowly upriver in a small dinghy with an outboard. He has three little kids, all in orange life jackets. I wonder if these sounds are laying themselves down in the children's aural memory.

‘Lovely night,’ he calls out to me.

‘Very nice isn’t it? … Perfect!’

Again, there is the gentle sound of oars and then another train – this concentration of familiar sounds somehow so nostalgic and deeply comforting.

All I do when I’m here is be stuck in the past. But, for the moment, it’s where I want to be. It’s why I need a job here again, as I did when I worked as a lock keeper’s summer assistant. Unfortunately, this paid job has now been replaced by volunteers. I’m aware that as the hour has progressed there has been a sense of myself slowing, of gradual unwinding. Suddenly, a loud, metallic, phasing throb comes into my head and looking up a helicopter is passing. This is unusual and not a sound I would associate with here. It is immediately replaced by the caw of the rook – a familiar and comforting sound. The mallards are chattering away, surely they must come ashore soon? Finally, into my headphones comes the clock striking eight. It is time to pack up for the night when words from Hardy’s poem, ‘Friends Beyond,’ drift into my mind. These words I’ve recently seen in the archive, written in Hardy’s own hand on one of his illustrations for *Wessex Poems*. The drawing is of Stinsford Church viewed from over the gate, the lines he has chosen are: ‘… At mothy curfew-tide/ They’ve a way of whispering to me.’ These poignant words still ring in my head as I walk back up the slope passing my parents’ grave lying the other side of the hedge.

***

As I lie in bed, I realise I’m itching. I must have been bitten by midges, something that always happened to us as kids if we went down to the river in the evening. Alison used to be bitten more than me – our mother said it was because she had sweeter blood.

I reflect on the evening and wonder what it is about hearing sounds outdoors, about the continuum of sound and music and where does one end and the other begin? I think of how sound-music carries in strange unpredictable ways, how the aural architecture here isn’t that of buildings or auditoriums but of woods and fields, and the river. A memory returns: being young and practising in the garden and how the sound of the flute went nowhere. And the opposite: of music that is not meant for you

but that drifts in from somewhere, music that comes across you. Time collapses as I play back the recording from Hobbs. It is a summer's evening. There are family staying. My dad has cooked a BBQ and all is well.

***

This evening when I left for the Brunel bridge Twinks was heading off to the village 'bar'. She told me she and two friends had set this up in the pavilion on the Rec. For three weeks running there was just the three of them, but on the fourth week two others appeared and it's gone from strength to strength ever since.

'It's just like youth club!' I laughed.

Years ago, when we were young, Twinks set up a youth club in the village. It was in the same place, the pavilion on the Rec and, although the original building has been extended in recent years, it's much the same. Youth club was the highlight of our week.

'Do you remember that film that Rick borrowed?' Twinks asked.

She reminded me. Rick, her brother-in-law, worked in film and had managed to borrow a James Bond film for us. The first reel went well but when Rick put on the second reel it was a sex film.

'Rick had to explain the missing part of the Bond story to everyone before he could put on the third reel, which luckily was the right one …'

I've decided to base my recording tonight from right under the bridge. I've driven all the way round via Goring to South Stoke and walked through the meadow – comfrey and meadowsweet brushing against me all the way. The church and Hobbs, where I was last night, are visible on the opposite bank. Having set up the recorder and walked beyond the arches to the far side, I'm trying to decide where to base myself for the next hour. I don't want to listen through the headphones as I know the trains thundering overhead will be deafening. I went to Wallingford again today but forgot to try somewhere else for a camping stool, buying instead turquoise leggings from the market and taking out an electric boat on the river for an hour.

Each recording I've planned to make for a full hour and each night I start at the time I finished on the preceding night. Therefore, tonight, I will be here until 9pm. At this point I really wish I had a boat. It's lonely being here on the bank. It's not long before three men come along on bikes, slowing as they pass. I feel vulnerable, alone. They must wonder what on earth I'm doing. Looking downriver the arch of the bridge and its reflection form a perfect oval eye shape. On this side of bridge, the brickwork starts off flat then goes in steps, where the colouration of the bricks causes an almost rainbow-like effect on them. There are actually two bridges and, as I know only one is Brunel's original, I think this must be it. Paddle boarders come up and go behind the islands. If I was young now, I'd be up here paddle boarding behind the islands. It's much more popular than kayaking ever was. I wonder if it's relatively cheaper to have a paddle board than it was to have a kayak. Again, mayflies are bouncing up and down on their invisible elastic. Beyond the bridge is a sign on the gate that reads:

Hanwell
Prince of Wales
Angling Society
Private Fishing
No Day Tickets

It seems astonishing that there should be a fishing club in Hanwell and that they have the fishing rights all the way up here, but there's no one from Hanwell, or anywhere else, out here tonight and I'm feeling more anxious than ever. I'm wondering it's something to do with the overwhelming sound of the trains and the physical sensation as they thunder overhead. In between, everything is more peaceful but the trains themselves are almost unbearably loud. Overpowering on so many levels.

I hear the clock of Moulsford Manor strike the quarter hour. This hour is going to feel long. It's ridiculous to write Moulsford Manor, it would be better to say the old nurses' home. A couple and a dog go past but the woman's perfume is so strong that I'm now overwhelmed by that too. I try to distract myself by studying where, under the bridge in the concrete, a heart has been drawn and inside written: P&L. I wonder if it was inscribed by the person who laid the concrete. It looks very fancy with its stylish ampersand. Personally, I have never understood ampersands, especially in poems that use 'and' too. Their subtlety is something I can't grasp. Someone tried explained them to me once, but it was like my friend Ray explaining Quantum

Physics, or years ago Pete trying to define the intricacies of Watergate by the river at Cleeve. Some things are beyond me.

I'm getting tired of the train and tired of my inability to relax on these evenings on the river. Suddenly a fish jumps out of the water and I almost leap in. Then from somewhere there are rooks and just that familiar sound again helps me relax a little. I wonder if the paddle boarders will come back down or if that was them going home. A Canadian canoe comes upstream, and the sound of the couple's paddles is amplified immediately as they come under the arch. I walk away and pretend to be busy – which isn't that easy – as I don't want them to have a conversation with me over the sound of their paddles entering the water. Not that I think this recording is going to be useable in any way other than as a reference – perhaps as a sonic shortcut to anxiety. In which case I won't be replaying it. Far off downstream is a rowing boat. It's great to see how many people are using the river in the evenings, especially since lockdown, but here right now there is an avalanche of sound: two helicopters – one either side of the bridge – and yet another train. Why are there so many helicopters about? A couple aboard a cruiser called *Dom Pedro* come downstream, waving to the canoeists who wave back. It's all very friendly under the bridge but to me something feels menacing – the water is darkening and a moorhen croaks as a lone silent swan swims into this mysterious, reverberating world. It's getting dark, my ankle hurts and I'm getting bitten again. I'd rather be in the Perch and Pike with a vodka and tonic, or maybe that should be the Perch & Pike.

I'm wondering if I should get a small skiff or kayak to travel down the river in. This, I realise, is a ridiculous fantasy as how on earth would I manage sleeping by the riverbank when I can't even manage an hour here tonight. But the sadness of dusk is getting to me. I've only recorded 48 minutes but that will be enough. I turn off my recorder and pack up. As I start to walk away a fleet of Canada geese in a long string come under the bridge. This is what happens when you skive off. But I've realised I don't want to sit in these remote places at night with headphones on. A rethink is necessary. I reach for my mobile phone but know I should still have been recording, capturing these small soft sounds of the geese on my Sony. Without looking back, I leave the bridge, following the path strewn with the white and blue of water dropwort and meadow geranium, all closing in on itself for the night. By the gate to Ferry Lane there is an astonishing sight – the willow covered in pink blooms. It has flowered.

Only when I get up close can I see that a wild rose has intertwined itself, is now enveloped with the tree.

Dorchester-on-Thames

Wittenham Clumps

It is mid-August when I manage to return to the river once more. Again, I only have only a few days and this time I decide to stay a little further upstream, basing myself at Dorchester-on-Thames. The town sits on the confluence of the river and its tributary, the Thame, and is dominated by the abbey, appropriately, as this was a site of early Christianity. Before the present abbey there was a Saxon cathedral, followed by a medieval monastery. It was St Birinus who was responsible for the conversion of Wessex to Christianity back in the 7th century. I remember the boys' school at Didcot was called St Birinus.

I've booked a room at the Fleur de Lys Inn. There's no one around when I arrive and, strangely, the number for the key safe is plastered on the front door. It all feels slightly deserted. My room is called Abbey View, which would be accurate if it were not for the very large horse chestnut blocking the view. It is however a splendid looking tree and, despite not being able to see the abbey, I'm aware it is there as its clock chimes every quarter of an hour. I wonder if it continues all night. The room looks out over the medieval street. When I was a child, this was still the main road to Oxford filled with traffic and noise. Its atmosphere changed completely once the by-pass was built – the town becoming the peaceful backwater it is today. I'm sure there used to be more shops and antique dealers but there is still a Co-Op. I have also seen the sweet, little café called Lily's that I used to bring my mum to, but it looks like it's no longer open. I suspect Covid may have caused it to shut down.

At 6pm I decide I must make myself walk to the river. The heat has had a soporific effect on me, and it is some way off over fields to Days Lock. Feeling lethargic I head slowly south down a fenced-in path, passing hot-looking sheep grazing on non-existent grass, and a walnut tree weighed down with its freight. I skim the edge of the earthworks, eventually coming to the lock where I stand on the metal path above the weir, allowing the sound to run over me, breathing deeply that familiar, rich smell of earth and air. This is where I will record tomorrow night, I decide. That is until I remember recording at Cleeve and how the weir overwhelms any other sound.

When I get back, I find there is no food served at the Fleur de Lys and spend a listless evening texting, eating crisps and resigned to watching rubbish TV, when suddenly I hear a single bell tolling from the abbey tower. Another joins in and I realise the bells are in the process of being rung-up. I only know these small details from Alison who has recently started to ring. The bells slow until eventually there is a silence, broken only by the calling of the collared dove, and I wonder what is going to happen. Is this the start of a practice? After a couple of minutes, the bells begin. There are six and at first there is just the falling scale but, after roughly twenty rounds of this, the ringers' patterns start to alter. From my limited knowledge I believe these are call changes. Eventually, for a few seconds, they are rising and I particularly love this: the way the phrase ends on the leading note creating a brief sense of yearning. It's a pattern I make a note of, thinking maybe I can write something that will incorporate this. There is a break after a while, and I wonder if the ringers are having a cup of tea or possibly something stronger. When they resume, someone must have left as we are down to only five bells. However, it's still very restorative and, in a strange way, peaceful. I think it's their hypnotic effect. After about forty minutes, the sixth ringer must have returned, and the session ends with all six bells. This sounds better – five didn't sound quite right. As the session draws to its close the bells are all rung closer together, until great clanging chords are sounding, reverberating round the village. This, I've been told, is the process of the bells being rung down, which is how they will be left until they are next rung. By the time I finally get into bed, despite having the strong suspicion I'm the only person in the building, I fall asleep straight away. The abbey, however, continues to make its presence known. All night. Every quarter of an hour in fact. This is less relaxing and more disruptive than the continuous ringing. At about 3am I decide to record the chimes. I set up my Sony on the window ledge and after checking the levels go back to sleep. For another fifteen minutes … and another.

The following morning, I set out to walk to the river again, taking a slightly different route, passing an octagonal toll house where I cut down a quiet lane. Two old pubs have been converted into houses and there are some fine brick and flint banded houses. I pass a bench and a sign: Tea and Cake x 2 £5 but there is no one around. The only sign of life is a brood of hens scuffling about under giant sunflowers. Eventually I see an unusual angular brick pill box and know the river

can't be far away. I cross a bridge over the entrance to a tributary which must be the Thame. It looks overgrown and unnavigable these days. Finally, I'm by the Thames where a small cruiser with the mysterious name *Water Elm* is moored and, just a little further, a large live-aboard, *Lady Emma*. On my right, across the water, Wittenham Clumps – also known as Sinodun Hills – can be seen rising above the river. Along with Didcot Power Station, these were the landmarks of our childhood. Again, like the power station, they helped us orientate ourselves in the landscape, gave us an idea of where we were on our first independent journeys. Some years ago, the trees on the top died and although some more trees and shrubs have grown, they don't have the same silhouettes. It doesn't really resemble the mental picture I have stored. This was the view that the artist Paul Nash painted repeatedly. He visited in 1911, staying with relatives in Sinodun House, just outside Wallingford, and was charmed by the two wooded hills rising from the fields. He wrote to his friend Mercia Oakley:

> The country about is marvellous – Grey hollowed hills crowned by old, old trees, Pan-ish places down by the river wonderful to think on, full of strange enchantment …

Nash returned in 1912 when he drew the Clumps for the first time: 'I wanted an image of them that would express what they meant to me.' This was a defining moment for Nash as the hills and his intense feeling for them, his relationship with them, were bound up in his finding his path as a landscape painter:

> Ever since I remember them the Clumps had meant something to me. I felt their importance long before I knew their history. They eclipsed the impression of all the early landscapes I knew […] They were the Pyramids of my small world.

Nash was drawn again and again to the hills, painting them for over thirty years. His last pictures were of them too, this time viewed from much further away – from Boars Hill, outside Oxford. Seen from a friend's house the Clumps were so distant that Nash used field glasses to bring them nearer. This was, and had been from the first, his Singing Place.

At last, by the river itself, my shoulders relax and I breathe slower, inhaling the river air. I hadn't realised how tense I had become. The first boat to go downstream is one that was moored above the lock last night – the one I'm always seeing – *Nautiboy*. From far away drifts the drone of a combine harvester. It's that time of year. A large white butterfly flickers among nettles and the willowherb that has started to go over. Convolvulus has wrapped itself everywhere, its ice cream-coloured trumpets adorning everything. A hire boat goes downstream far too fast and, as I hear the slap of its wake hitting the bank, I worry about nests. Hopefully, the river birds and ducklings will all have fledged by now.

From far above comes the curious whistle of a red kite as it cuts the air, passing over the Queen Anne house that Alison always loved. We would see it across the field, waiting patiently like some perfect unplayed-with dolls house. I cross the river at Shillingford Bridge and decide to have a cup of tea in the riverside garden of the hotel. This is the hotel that, many years ago, my brother Gareth and his wife Deborah had their wedding reception. The place is deserted today, and I'm wondering if it has actually re-opened, but eventually someone appears and I order a pot of tea. Outside I chat to Daver, who's mowing the grass down to the river, realising it's the first conversation I've had in two days. There's a vintage boat moored up. This is the *Charles Cooper Henderson*, originally a beach-launched lifeboat based in Dungeness. It was one of the Dunkirk Little Ships and a transcript from the skipper at the time suggests she saved more than two thousand troops.

'That boat holds some stories,' I say to Daver as I think about all the lives connected to the boat and what must still resonate within her, the echoes of dramatic rescues. Looking at my phone, and realising I must carry on, I ask Daver the way to Wittenham Clumps.

'Keep to the towpath at the end here, and when you can go no further there'll be a permissive path to your left. Head up there and around the fields and you'll come to the woods. Just keep going and you'll come out at the hill.'

Thanking Daver, I set off, grateful for his directions. It feels good to be walking by the river again. Normally it feels cooler by the water but not today. Rounding a corner, I suddenly stop. A couple have erected a small table on the towpath and are sat drinking glasses of Prosecco.

'This is the way to live,' the man says smiling.

'Cheers!' the woman adds, raising her glass as I squeeze past.

In this heat I'm relieved to reach the cool of the woods but nonetheless I feel cautious as I enter their darkness. Once again there is no one about. I walk briskly and am grateful to reach the sunlight beyond and be making my way to the summit. Up here all I can hear is the wind in the trees and a few rooks. Most birds are silent. It's too hot to sing. But it's amazing to be at the top with views all around.

Last time I was here was nearly ten years ago when Florence and I were walking the river after I'd finished working at Benson Lock. We'd stayed the night at a B&B in Long Wittenham and having suggested Sinodun Hills to an Israeli couple, who had asked where was good to walk, it had occurred to me that maybe Florence and I should climb the hill. It's somewhere Alison and I came to as children, and Alison eventually painted the hills for her A level art. For years her painting lent against the wall in our old bedroom, fading in the sunlight – a shame as it was such a beautiful thing. But the skyline is so very different now. I was pleased to find an old postcard recently in KP, the stationers in Wallingford, it shows the view as it was, with the original beech trees planted in the 1740s. Many of the trees were lost in the great storm of 1987 and, just a few weeks before Florence and I visited, the famous 'poem tree' had fallen. It had been the wettest May to July on record followed by extreme heat. The poem was carved into a beech by Joseph Tubb of Warborough Green back in 1844. Luckily, to the eastern side of the hill, Florence and I came across a stone carved with the words of his poem:

> As up the hill with labr'ing steps we tread
> Where the twin Clumps their sheltering branches spread
> The summit gain'd at ease reclining lay
> And all around the wide spread scene survey
> Point out each object and instructive tell
> The various changes that the land befell
> Where the low bank the country wide surrounds
> That ancient earthwork form'd old Mercia's bounds
> In misty distance see the barrow heave
> There lies forgotten lonely Cwichelm's grave.
>
> Around this hill the ruthless Danes intrenched
> And these fair plains with gory slaughter drench'd

While at our feet where stands that stately tower
In days gone by up rose the Roman power
And yonder, there where Thames smooth waters glide
In later days appeared monastic pride.
Within that field where lies the grazing herd
Huge walls were found, some coffins disinter'd
Such is the course of time, the wreck which fate
And awful doom award the earthly great.

That day we had walked around the summit passing the asymmetric memorial benches placed at intervals looking out over all of Oxfordshire. Like today, the river ran ribbon-like – north to south – the lock and lock house were visible below and the red tiled roof of Dorchester Abbey to the north-east. However, back then the hyperboloid cooling towers of Didcot Power Station still dominated the skyline to the west. I'd told Florence about the close-up view of these that Alison and I had from the windows of Didcot Girls' School. Far more poignant was the bunch of red roses beneath a hawthorn tree. Attached was a tiny weather-stained card from someone called Dan to his dad. He asked Dad to look down on him when he received his exam results.

Eventually I descend from the hill, coming down to Little Wittenham Church, and decide this is definitely where I'll come back tonight to record. It's not so near the weir and I wonder what sounds there'll be. I cross the river by Days lock-house and back in Dorchester manage to buy some tea and fruit cake from the abbey tea rooms and have a wander about the grounds and graves before deciding to walk to the water meadows that border the Thame.

***

Here, at the river's edge on the Wittenham bank, it's almost dark. The trees are moving in a strange way, like pantomime trees with actors in them who, at any minute, might leave and head across to somewhere else, all in tight-fitting black outfits, as though they're invisible, which of course they never are. It all feels far too creepy and lonely. I'm shivering, the air is getting colder and there are weird sounds from the undergrowth. I wonder what on earth is lurking there. Much as I like the idea

of recording at night, I had forgotten how gloomy and menacing it had felt under the railway bridge at Moulsford and this time it's even worse. I'll only make evening and dusk recordings from now on, unless I can find a boat and make recordings from that. Somehow, I suspect I'd be anxious. Possibly Covid has caused levels of anxiety to increase for many people. I don't recall feeling this way by the river before. As the temperature drops, I'm aware, with it having been such a hot day, I am not wearing enough clothes. Still shivering, I decide to get in the car and make the recording from here. I open the windows and, placing the recorder on the dashboard, turn it on.

As I listen through the headphones it becomes apparent there is very little to hear. The river is peaceful tonight. I note the distant weir and occasional geese, a plane far overhead, some barely audible voices and then, as a single jackdaw calls, it starts to rain. How very peaceful and soporific the sound of night rain is. Leaning back against the seat in the dark, I close my eyes and listen to the way it falls on the track, the way it sounds in the trees, on the car. I put my arm out of the window and, feeling the cool splashes on my hand, drift off.

The next day, when I leave, I decide to go home via Moulsford. Once again, I return to the churchyard and sit behind the church. The hedge has been cut back and it's possible to see the river from here now. And the river's sonic world is audible too. I sit for a while, listening to summer.

Confluence

Newbridge, the Windrush, Standlake and Rushy Commons

I'm sat in the large bay window of The Rose Revived studying the old glass bottles on the windowsill, thinking of Moulsford and the old bottle dump, as I eat breakfast. Suddenly the room is brighter, filled with a solar glare that makes the overhead light appear like a nightlight fluttering against a volcano. Looking downriver, I watch as the sun rises above the Thames to the east, its piercing low light, cutting through the bare branches and pouring on Newbridge, setting fire its orange Taynton stone. The workmen at the next table were talking about their construction site but something about the transfiguration happening outside on the water seems to have touched them as they've started to talk about the river. They think it might be a tributary of the Thames. One of them, who has clearly read the sign outside, announces,

'No, it's the Thames and the source is forty miles that way,' he points upriver towards the glowing bridge.

'Hmm …' the younger lad replies and returns to his mushroom omelette. It strikes me that none of them feel the same way as I do about the river. To them it is just *a* river. I've spoken to the men previously and know they are from Leeds and Nottingham. I'd probably not feel much for the Aire or the Trent. Maybe they're thinking of their long day ahead. It's Friday and they're tired.

Outside, I stand in one of the lichen-coated inlets on the bridge and look upstream. A landscape whittled by winter, stripped back to its minimum. To my left three swans are feeding by The Maybush*,* to my right the Windrush flows in just before the first arc. There is a distinct line where the two rivers meet, the tributary paler in colour than the Thames, its surface shifting in the wind – first dimpled, then eddying, like moods on a face, nothing hidden. In contrast, the Thames is velvet, silent, until a bitter wind breathes through the Norfolk reeds, bows their coffee-coloured, feathered heads to the north-east, causing the river to ripple until it's an elephant or rhino's skin. A heron hauls himself into the air, he flies midstream, his colour blue-grey, the same blue-grey of the cumulous clouds, of the old Conservancy gate, of the corrugated barn. A cormorant circles above the reed flapping fast and suddenly from my right, below the landmark giant pylons, a noisy skein of greylag geese is coming across. In contrast, below on the water, nine Canada geese are

processing upriver in a silent and orderly line, as though a honk would never emit from their beaks.

I remember walking here with Florence, over ten years ago now. It was autumn and just upstream the bank was littered with crab apples. I miss her company. She would have enjoyed going over to the community-owned pub at Northmoor yesterday. The village is set back from the river, which, because of flooding, all the villages up here are. Outside The Red Lion an A board advertised the community Book Swap and the coffee mornings on a Thursday with 'Yummy Pastries'. Inside, a fire was going and the place was filled with regulars. Everything was straightforward, nothing complicated, as a pub should be. I had cheese on toast.

I went into the church next door too. Beneath the pale blue chancel roof a bunch of double snowdrops had been placed on the altar. A piano rested on the parquet floor in the South transept. Covered in a salmon pink wool blanket – the same colour and texture of a wool coat my mum had when I as a child – the piano was made by C. Goethe St Petersburg of Berlin. I felt for it, ending its days here, in a cold church, rarely played. Falling into another realm I sat down and played through the first part of Chopin's Db prelude. Again, I missed Florence, remembering his Barcarolle she used to play. As I left, I glanced up to see a gallery. It reminded me of the west gallery at Puddletown and in the wood was carved an inscription, dedicated to the memory of a man who had donated a bell in 1707.

From Northmoor I followed the road down to the Ferryman at Bablock Hythe. Next door to a desolate caravan park, the pub was shut but I could see clearly where the ferry once crossed – the ferry winch is still there with its rusting chains of large links. I've seen a photograph of the ferry taken by the Victorian photographer Henry Taunt showing the old wide punt-type craft, not much more than a simple wooden platform, and the ferryman pulling it across by a rope that spanned the water. Historians have found a crossing recorded here as early as 946. The earliest mention of an actual ferry was in 1279 when the Benedictines used the route for travel between Eynsham Abbey, Northmoor church and Abingdon Abbey. There was still a vehicle ferry here until at least the 1960s, but the vehicle license was taken away in 1964, after the ferry had sunk four times in as many years. Once, the landlord of the Ferryman ran a pedestrian summer service, but this too came to an end in the floods of 2007 when the ferry was lifted out onto the bank and damaged. The ferry featured in Matthew Arnold's long poem, 'The Scholar Gipsy', a pastoral elegy telling the tale

of an Oxford scholar who leaves academia for a life in the countryside with gypsies. The scholar wishes to learn the gypsy arts and I'm reminded of how so many lock keepers will talk about weir-keeping as a dark art.

While by the old crossing, I thought about my friend Cheryl, who grew up in Didcot, telling me about her mum Beryl who'd been part of the all-female Car Service at AERE Harwell after the war, driving a big black Humber car. She told Cheryl about having to take a group of American scientists across on the ferry. She had driven on and then said an 'old lady on the other side' pulled their vehicle across. 'The Americans were fascinated by the contraption and stunned by the beauty of the place. Apparently, they were hanging out of the windows, and one even got on the roof,' Cheryl told me. Cheryl's mum, however, was a non-swimmer and, although her Harwell passengers were enjoying themselves so much, she was extremely relieved when they got to the other side. 'The larks they had up here, and at The Rose Revived', Cheryl had reminisced. These ancient crossing sites on the river felt very important and the thought drew me back to Cleeve. I thought of the wooden remains of the ferryman's hut and of Pete telling me of the ancient ley lines crossing at Cleeve. I could picture another Henry Taunt photo of the old house there, looking over the water too, with tall willows lining the bank, as they still do.

Opposite the Ferryman Inn, out on the grass, there was a large pile of what looked like bits of old caravan, perhaps waiting all year for 5 November to be set alight. A riverside beacon. Three hungry moorhens were pecking at the grass. I'd thought how good it was to see so many moorhens up here, far more than down at Moulsford. But no coots. It seems you never see coots anymore. Although I do remember the one I heard when recording at Hobbs last year.

***

Jon arrives at the Rose Revived at ten thirty and after a coffee and a fair amount of indecision we set off to walk the Windrush Path. We think it'll be more sheltered from the biting wind. I have so little energy compared to usual – I don't really know why. Like a sluggish river I am dragging myself along. A large fallen willow lies across the Windrush. Birds are singing and, once again, geese honking loudly overhead. Possibly nearby RAF Fairford sets a bad example to the geese with the noisy B-52s coming in.

We walk on a raised mossy boardwalk through an old unkempt coppice, every branch and twig covered in yellow lichen. There are taller trees too – poplars with deep inverted 'V's on their trunks. We are bounded by barbed wire on our right and nature's equivalent – a hawthorn and blackthorn hedge – on our left. Shortly after this, the ground and trees on the right have been cleared and a flock of chickens are muttering away to themselves as they snuffle about the well-pecked earth. We are now following what must be a small tributary of the Windrush. All at once, to the right, beyond tiny unfurling scrolls of elder and a mesh of catkins dangling from thin wands, is a reservoir. Jon stops.

'I recognise that,' he says, 'This is where we used to come sailing when I was at the children's home.'

We look out towards the reservoir, towards an island with a pylon on it. These pylons are what help you find your way over here and I always remember Keith telling me to 'turn left by the pylons' down to his lock at Grafton when I first went to visit him there. Above the sky is blue and wide, always the wide sky.

The sunlight falling on the water is mesmerising but I wonder how this is for Jon, being in this place where past and present combine. I know the children's home wasn't a happy time for him. I don't know whether to stay with this or talk about something else.

'Do you miss the river?' I ask, immediately thinking this might be a terrible question.

'People ask me that quite often … No, not really Gin. I think the thing was I was always in the moment when I was on the lock. Always enjoying every season for what it was. Never fed up. Being aware of how good it was. I loved this time of year too. After the winter everything starting to grow and then the boaters returning.'

'And I guess you've still got the river at the end of your road,' I announce cheerfully.

'Yes, I walk round to St John's quite often. I have to make sure I don't interfere though. There was a whole lot of branches on the weir recently and I was about to call someone. Luckily, I'd deleted all the old work numbers off my phone.'

I think by choosing to live in Lechlade, Jon maintains his link with the river. It's a strong bond they have. It's a bond Jon and I share too. I remember again Jon telling me how he thought the river was a portal for people. How boaters will frequently have had childhood holidays in a rented boat on the river. Or maybe they canoed or

rowed. Or maybe like David Collins, who I met at Goring Lock, they grew up here. I won't forget David talking about Shifford lock island saying, 'There's never been a place where I've been more at peace.' There is something about Shifford that resonates with me too. I'll always remember the enchanted night when Florence, Catherine and I moored our hired narrowboat close by and reading Keats in the twilight as two swans drifted past: 'As when upon a tranced summer's night/ Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars/Dream, and so dream all night without a stir.'

I would like us to have reached Old Shifford Farm today but without an OS map Jon and I are not certain how much further it is. We decide to turn back and are walking in silence when Jon speaks,

'What I've noticed lately is that there are no coots on the river anymore.' It's strange Jon mentioning the lack of coots when I'd been thinking the same thing yesterday. At this moment we notice a path leading off to our left and we can see what looks like a bird hide at the end. Excited, we make our way to the door at the end but when we try and open it we realise it's locked. You need a special key. Jon says he's going to send for one. We look through a gap in the featheredge fence at another reservoir … and what do we see? A coot! Perhaps this is where all the coots are. I suspect the cormorants myself for the decline in numbers on the Thames. I think they eat the young cootlings. I remember exactly this happening down at Cleeve. One brood washed away at Benson during a weekend of torrential rain and the others taken by the cormorant at Cleeve.

Returning to the Rose Revived we are walking into the cold wind and the sun is straight in my face. A solitary crow flaps and croaks at us, warning us off his patch. What was that amongst the woodland and snowdrops to our left? It's a rabbit. I close my eyes, feel the warmth of the sun, its promise. We are by the Windrush again. The river flows fast despite the obstacles of fallen trees. Even more of an obstacle is the giant hexagonal block of concrete that has tipped into the water, its door opening now into the river. It's a Second World War pillbox that somehow has become uprooted: one of the eighteen thousand built by the Royal Engineers, Jon tells me, and manned by the Home Guard – Dad's Army – during the war. I'll always remember the pillbox opposite Benson Lock and the day the Home Guard re-enactors came and how Bob, the lock keeper, was unimpressed. 'Don't know why they want to go in there ...

smells of piss,' he'd muttered, 'They'd be better off down the pub – I'm sure the Home Guard went down the pub.'

This toppled-over pillbox has filled with water; I wonder what makes its home in here these days. Maybe an otter? The early morning frost on the fields has melted in the sun and we make our way back through damp grass and last year's straw-like, colourless reeds. In the afternoon I set off in the car to meet Mima at Streatley. Mima has been living in London since January, when the house was finally sold.

Rainbarrow

Back in Dorset, rather than sitting at home and thinking about work, or worse, cleaning the house, I decide it's time to return to Rainbarrow while the sun is out. I park in Thorncombe Woods and, as the café will close in half an hour, I've time to have a drink there before I set off. I can't work out when, or how, Rainbarrow has become special yet over the last few years I've returned again and again, usually alone. Despite its close proximity to Hardy's Cottage, it is almost always deserted. There is something significant, which I'm not able to identify, about this bowl barrow at the edge of a ridge with the land falling away below, the expanse of stretching fields, the distant ridgeway and the wide sky.

'Only doing takeaways now,' a woman yells to me from the kitchen of Under the Greenwood Tree Café.

'That's ok,' I reply before taking my latte and heading up the lane towards Hardy's Cottage – this is my Rainbarrow route in reverse. I'm busy avoiding puddles when I notice a figure coming briskly down the track. As she approaches, I realise it's Cathy who came to my writing group in the woodshed at the cottage several years ago. It's over two years since I've seen her. She tells me that after a break she's gone back to volunteering at the cottage. She's finished early this afternoon as there were no more visitors.

'I nearly didn't go today, I was feeling so out of sorts. But then I reminded myself how restorative it is. The walk up the lane and back, that's part of it too.'

'I know what you mean,' I reply, 'I find the same thing at Max Gate.'

I tell Cathy I'm off to Rainbarrow and we start to talk about restorative places, and those others, the ones that feel the exact opposite.

'Can I join you?' she asks.

I nod. I had planned to write when I reached my special place but, as I have Rory with me and will be distracted by needing to watch him, it will be nice to have Cathy's company. All three of the bowl barrows are known collectively as Rainbarrows but it's the third one, the most northwestern of the three that Hardy referred to in the singular. Because of its prominent position on the edge of a ridge it was used as a

beacon during the threat of Napoleonic invasion between 1800 and 1813. It's believed it could also have been used at the time of the Spanish Armada of 1588 and possibly even earlier. Hardy claimed to have seen the remains of the beacon keeper's hut adjoining the barrow and to have spoken with descendants of the beacon keeper.

We set off, passing the cottage and continuing straight up the sandy track towards the forest. As we walk, I tell Cathy about my research and she tells me about a project she has recently begun.

'I'm making artworks … they're based around a game I used to play with Harry when he was little: *The National Trust Ghost Game'*.

She stops walking and reaching for her phone swipes a couple of times before passing it to me. I'm greeted by an image of the classic headless coachman, all in creepy blue and grey hues. This is the cover of the box. Cathy has seen the game up for sale on eBay at the moment. An astonishing £85.

'Harry loved the game. I remember we changed Wyndham to Mr Windybum of Felbrigg Hall.'

Cathy goes on to tell me she and her husband Raj have recently visited Packwood Hall in Birmingham.

'Last time I was there was when I was thirteen. I won a school prize, the only one I ever won, and they took us there!'

She describes how the place is reputedly haunted by a woman in white carrying a key. Allegedly, the woman is frequently seen in the porch.

'I've been reading a book, *The Spectralities Reader* … about hauntings and spectral places. Did you know it was an academic subject?'

'I wonder what Hardy would think?' I ask as we continue to walk. Hardy lived through an age fascinated with ghosts and other supernatural phenomenon. Folklore, superstition and the other-worldly are all present throughout his writing. In 1904 Hardy told a journalist: 'I seriously assure you that I would give ten years of my life – well, perhaps that offer is beyond my means – but when I was a younger man, I would cheerfully have given ten years of my life to see a ghost – an authentic, indubitable spectre.' Fifteen years later, Florence related in a letter to a friend that Hardy had seen a ghost that Christmas Eve: '… his sister Kate says it must have been their grandfather upon whose grave T.H. had just placed a sprig of holly – the first time he had ever done so.'

As we walk, I notice how the gorse, or furze, is all coming into bloom – its bright yellow lights up the heathland and as I squeeze my fingers around the new pods a familiar coconut scent is released. We have paused while Cathy shows me a photo of her woman from Packwood Hall – a mannequin dressed in white and holding a key. Cathy has put a filter on the photo and the image is suitably ghostly.

Cathy lost her mother, just before the first lockdown, and she wonders if it was something about loss that made her send for the mannequins and start her project in the first place. She has called the project 'The Wan Wistless Ones' after a line from Hardy's poem, 'The Voice', part of the series written between 1912 and 1913, in an outpouring of grief following the death of Emma.

'Are you going to visit the places from the game?' I ask.

'Yes, for all the ones I decide to make. There's something very special about talking to the volunteers too. They're the ones with all the knowledge.'

Cathy talking about the volunteers makes me realise how much we appreciate meeting people face to face after the restrictive lives we've been leading. We turn right, making our way along the track that will eventually open out onto Rainbarrow. A cyclist rings his bell and we step back as a mud-splattered young man races by.

Cathy and I are sat on the furthest bowl barrow, a place I always return to, here, and underneath the nearby stand of Scots pines. From where we sit on a worn-smooth tree stump, the land drops away and great swathes of the forest have now been cut down leaving huge bald patches. Bare, except for many small rhododendrons that are returning. The pines are what Jonny, my friend who lives in the woods, calls the 'cash-crop'. I imagine the felling is part of the heath restoration project. A sketch at Dorchester Museum dated 5 March 1894, and by Hardy's friend Henry Moule, shows all three Rainbarrows on a heath devoid of trees. I've also seen a very early painting by Hardy of the heath. This was a familiar and important landscape to him, and its features and sounds resonate throughout his novel *The Return of the Native*. It is here the novel opens, where Diggory Venn the reddleman, stops to rest his tired ponies in the shadow of Rainbarrow:

> The traveller's eye […] finally settled upon one noteworthy object up there. It was a barrow. The bossy projection of earth above its natural height occupied the loftiest ground of the loneliest height the heath contained.

The majority of the novel takes place on the heath, during the space of a year and a day. It opens on Bonfire Night. Some critics comment that the novel's opening reads more like an ending but for Hardy dusk was a portal into the world of the heath:

> Precisely at this transitional point of its nightly roll into darkness the great and particular glory of the Egdon waste began, and nobody who could be said to understand the heath had not been there at such a time.

It was here too that Tess rested, comparing the view that lay before her with that of her native Blackmoor Vale:

> The world was drawn on a larger pattern here. The enclosures numbered fifty acres rather than ten …

What was it that drew Hardy back to this place time and time again? I feel it was the connection he felt with the environment of his earliest childhood in the same way that I have a deep connection and love for the area of Thames where I grew up. This landscape and nearby Rushy Pond had formed Hardy, something of the place ran through him, and like a sediment lay deep in him waiting to be stirred. This is the heath where he would accompany his mother when she would cross to visit her sister in Puddletown. Hardy mentions it in his poem 'The Roman Road' where he describes his mother 'guiding my infant steps' as they walked the 'ancient thoroughfare'. I imagine him returning now, how nothing significant would have changed: the heather, the furze, birdcalls, slow worms and adders, all still the same. Once the pine trees have all been cut down it will be entirely as he knew it. But, on further reflection, I realise it won't be at all. One major thing is the significant decline in the number of birds and reptiles. In *The Return of the Native* Hardy writes:

> Though these shaggy hills were apparently so solitary, several round keen eyes were always ready on such a wintry morning as this to converge upon a passer-by. Feathered species sojourned here in hiding which would have created wonder if found elsewhere. A bustard haunted the spot, and not many years before this five and twenty might have been seen in Egdon at one time. Marsh harriers looked up the valley by Wildeve's. A cream coloured courser had used to visit this hill …

Hardy was aware of the decline in bird numbers back then. Imagine how it would upset him now – the silenced heath.

Cathy is telling me how recently she and Raj have also been down to St Juliot and stayed in the rectory where Emma was living when Hardy arrived to work on the restoration of the church.

'They met in the porch!' she exclaims and reaching for her phone quickly scrolls to a photo of a slate stone house with sash windows and a porch fronted by ornate, blue grey bargeboards. Strange to think of Hardy standing on that threshold, about to enter the next phase of his life.

Remembering I have a flask of tea, I pour us some as we talk more about edges, liminality and portals. It's my turn to pick up my phone as I show Cathy some of the work Alison and I have been doing in the local church porches. A photo of a boot-scraper comes up and I tell her how Alison always notices and comments on them. Generally, these would be a small affair but this one, at the church at Stoke Abbott, next to the daffodils and celandines opening in the scurvy grass, is so large it must have been forged for a giant.

We are walking back, following one of the pony paths through the furze and heather.

'Have you ever come up here at night?' Cathy asks.

'No, never at night but I've been up here at dusk quite often and somehow, I seem to have come up here at Halloween a few times. And Christmas Eve to collect the holly. That's the tree there that has all the holly.'

I point to a holly that has now reached the status of a tree. It stands alongside the Roman Road. Typically, Hardy was absolutely right when he described this track as like a parting through hair. I would like to come up here at night, but not alone. When we had our writing workshops, Cathy wrote so beautifully of teenage nights spent out on the Malverns at midsummer. I wonder if, when the weather's warmer, she'd be a willing accomplice for a night visit.

I describe to Cathy visiting here at Halloween, that strange time of year when you hear the chiffchaff and the owl, how, on a windswept evening, with the hexenbesens rustling in the silver birches, another world feels very close at hand. The two nights of the year that possess this otherworldly quality are Halloween and the night before Easter. I much prefer the latter. The words sung in church at the Easter Vigil include: *The power of this holy night dispels all evil … night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth*.

I like the idea of a spring night up here. Hardy liked November time but a warm spring night is more tempting. I'd like to hear the nightjars churring.

Meeting a Storyteller

Stonehenge, Rainbarrows

We have just celebrated the spring equinox when I meet Anthony in the bar of the Holiday Inn in Bath. Due to Covid, we're both keen to meet in a large space and the bar is a good choice. For many years Florence and I would come to Bath just before Christmas, to celebrate her birthday and get in the Christmas spirit. I remember my mum and sisters meeting us here once, the spangle of lights and decorations, the shoppers coming in from the cold, shedding their coats and bags of gifts. Today, though, winter is definitely behind us. There is that feeling of early spring, of being on the cusp, of everything lying ahead. Anthony and I find a table by the large glass windows looking out on the street and settle in with a pot of tea. I'm pouring as Anthony takes books from his bag, placing them on the table. We start to talk about my project, about resonant places, when Anthony asks:

'How open-minded are you about invisible energies?'

I nod as he continues.

'The reason I ask is that in 2019 I had this weird gig, being a tour guide at Stonehenge for the four solar festivals. On the equinoxes and solstices there is free access. Did you know you can go inside the stones at these times?'

'Yes, I did,' I smile.

'Well, I'd never been inside the circle of Stonehenge. At the solstices there are huge numbers, and I had an experience in there of a force field or something. It sets the whole body vibrating. Through the gap in the stones you could see the sun going down and I tried to move towards the centre and suddenly there was this terrific bang in my solar plexus. This sensation, right in my solar plexus just by moving a couple of feet.'

Anthony clenches a fist to the centre of his chest before he carries on,

'With the equinox it was less, just a tingling in the fingers. A group of us held hands and the feeling intensified. But it's hard to separate out if it's to do with the people, or the place itself.'

I can remember going to the solstice at Stonehenge when I was in my early twenties. I thought it was going to be myself, my boyfriend Russell and our little dog Caspar. I hadn't realised that it would be an entire festival. It seemed impossible to

get any normal food or tea. Everything was laced with marijuana and Hawkwind seemed to play all night. I was unimpressed. Definitely felt no invisible energy that night. We were so fed up the next day that, when we left, we gave our tent to another young couple who'd been sleeping in the open air. I keep these memories to myself and instead ask Anthony,

'Did you feel the same invisible energy each time you went to Stonehenge?'

'I felt something, but it was different each time, and each part of the circle felt different.'

Anthony picks up one of his books, *Storytelling and Ecology*, from the table as he continues, 'In this book, in the last chapter, which I've called 'Supernatural Ecology', I've gone into some of this energy stuff, knowing that it's academically non-acceptable. But I try to offer a robust framework of reasoning'

Anthony asks if I've come across Martin Palmer, his book, *The Sacred History of Britain,* and his definitions of what he calls Sacred Landscapes. I've not but he tells me how when Palmer touched the worn stones of a stone circle, stood on an Iron Age burial mound, or visited Wells Cathedral, he found himself, 'held in a stream of awareness that this world is not all that there is.' Anthony goes on to describe Palmer's definitions of Sacred Landscapes. He has adapted them slightly and whereas Palmer has only three, Anthony tells me he has four categories.

'The first is somewhere like Paul Nash's chosen 'Places', a place that is personally special.' I'm pleased Anthony has mentioned Paul Nash.

I think of Nash's relationship with Wittenham and how the hilltop trees provided such solace for him, particularly when he returned from his work in battle-scarred Ypres as a war artist. Anthony carries on:

'The next category is where the numinous breaks through nature's splendour. There is something natural, something intrinsic to the place itself, where Palmer says, "the veil between heaven and earth is gossamer thin. The sacred breaks through into the natural in ways that defy words." These also tend to be intensely personal places, "where emotions and associations combine with the actual view or scenery"'.

These two categories feel very similar to me and I'm not sure I have grasped the difference. I'm wondering if these ideas of sacred places have something in common with my thoughts of resonant or singing places. But to me a place can feel resonant, without a personal connection. By personal connection, I mean an event taking place there which I've been part of, or that by having visited frequently over

time a bank of memories has built up, based around the place. I think of Rainbarrow and of how I'm drawn back again and again. What is it that is drawing me back? It's a place I didn't even know less than five years ago. There was originally no personal connection. Maybe it has to do with Hardy, but there's something about the walk over the heathland, the three round barrows – the last of these clinging on with the ground falling away – the bocage of fields and hedgerows, the distant ridgeway. Yes, there is the connection with Hardy's *The Return of the Native.* But despite Hardy's intense description of the sound world of Egdon Heath, not much of that exists now. Instead, there is the very distant but persistent hum of the A35, and sometimes a chainsaw. There is nothing of his 'linguistic peculiarity' of the heath, of the wind entering and scouring the mummied heath bells. But as you climb up through the woods, reach the Roman Road and, view that stretching expanse of heathland ahead with its stand of Scots pines and, glimpsed through them, the fields below, you are fully aware of the 'watchful intentness' of the heath:

> Intensity was more usually reached by way of the solemn than by way of the brilliant, and such a sort of intensity was often arrived at during winter darkness, tempests, and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend … It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature - neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly … but like man, slighted and enduring.

Hardy wrote how no one could be said to understand the heath who had not been there at the 'transitional point of its nightly roll into darkness'. Yes, I may never have slept out the night there (yet) but there are many times I've visited at dusk when something of the heath and Rainbarrow resonates with the weary sadness deep within me.

I tell Anthony about Florence and I live-streaming our Thomas Hardy Shows during lockdown, how after the first idyllic summer's evening at Rushy Pond we'd had our second performance two weeks later out on the heath, just beyond where the path from the pond meets the Roman Road. I describe my alarm when the wild ponies – the heathcoppers – came cantering by, spooked by the incoming storm.

A third kind of sacred place is one that has been touched by a story. In his book, Palmer gives an example of St Ninian's Cave in Dumfries and Galloway, where something of the holiness of St Ninian is 'fused with the beauty of the natural

environment'. Palmer says he himself recognises the sacred 'every time I look at a First World War memorial in some little village.'

This last example reminds me of Marjorie, who I've mentioned before in connection with her research into the soldiers that had died from her village, Loders, in the First World War. Recently, when Alison and I were carrying out our church porch project, we went one winter's day to St Mary Magdalene Church in Loders, where Marjorie is buried. In the porch – opposite laminates detailing the Saxons and Normans, the west-gallery music and the black-robed cider-making monks – was a poster with the words 'Remember Them' alongside photos of twelve of the young men.

The last kind of sacred place is somewhere T. S Eliot seemed to be describing when he wrote, in his poem 'Little Gidding', 'Where prayer has been valid'. These are places hallowed by a tradition of praise: stone circles, burial mounds, churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and chapels. For Palmer, Iona in Scotland is one such place.

Thinking about my own chosen places takes me straight back to the upper reaches of the river. I'm wondering if it's about familiar elements, familiar vegetation, smells and sounds. In France, the emotional accuracy and identification with Proust's little cake dipped in lime tea leading to a stream of forgotten childhood memories has created a common expression: madeleine de Proust. This refers to a smell, taste or sound which dredges up a long-lost memory. Maybe there has to be a degree of concordance between what is stimulating the different senses. I'm reminded of when my sister Karen and I visited the fritillaries at Cricklade and how the beauty of the shimmering hay meadow was diminished by the ever-present road noise of the A419 – the same road that featured in much of the Florence's and my Thames Path walk some years ago. However, if in one place, all a person's senses are stimulated in a sympathetic way, maybe that encourages that place to become special to them. To become 'chosen'. This multi-sensory experience is something I wrote about at the weir at Cleeve and how a lock keeper will talk about 'my' weir. Standing on their weir they have a view of the white water and the river beyond, a fresh green-leafy smell, the sound of white water, the water spraying up, the negative ions charging the air.

A natural storyteller, Anthony is full of tales and I spend a happy couple of hours hearing about an entire brass band witnessing a ghost in Almondsbury, about

ghosts in Gloucestershire manor houses, ghosts in Bath pubs, and a passenger ferry in Southwold where the ferry was rowed by an ancient man with leathery skin who held out his hand for Anthony's silver coin. Mysteriously, the next time Anthony used the ferry a young woman was rowing it. He tells me stories of a Welsh saint and of a woman in Gloucestershire accused of being a witch. Both women have caused springs to flow. Betty Barstow was the name of the Gloucestershire woman and her spring sprang up near Fairford.

'I spent a lot of time searching round the area for pools or a spring and there was a lot of trespassing, but I did find the spring. After a couple of fields, I found a wild gnarled spot. It felt like a wild place, a place I shouldn't be.'

Anthony goes on to reveal one of main sources of the Betty Barstow story as Alfred Williams.

'I love Alfred Williams,' I exclaim, as we discover this mutual admiration.

'Do you know about him collecting the folksongs too?' I ask Anthony, and of course he does. But Anthony has to be getting home and, as it's a couple of hours until my train leaves, I wander slowly through the streets of Bath. It is such a long time since I've done anything like this and it feels very different, and almost brave to do so. I find a place for a cup of tea and a snack, enjoying the sense of being away from home, of being in the city, of the evening stretching out. Since Covid lockdowns, things that once seemed so ordinary are charged with that mixture of anxiety and adventure.

On the train home a text comes through from Jon. 'Managed to get the key!' Attached is a photo of a key in a plastic wallet. In the wallet is an information sheet 'Visiting Standlake Common and Rushy Common Nature Reserves — information for bird hide key holders.'

Birdwatching from the Rose Revived along the Windrush Way with Jon

'I knew I shouldn't drink at lunchtime,' declares Jon.

To our right, an emu is trotting along the path. It seems to be quite tame, posing nicely as I call to it and we take photos. But what exactly is an emu doing in Standlake? We are baffled.

'Perhaps it's escaped from somewhere,' I suggest.

'But where from?' asks Jon.

We are by the reservoir where Jon would come sailing when he was at the children's home. As we continue, he tells me how the geese they had there would sometimes escape. How the kids all had to get their canoes out and paddle up the Ock to the Thames and recapture the truant geese.

We met for lunch at the Rose Revived. The warmth of the sun streamed in as we sat by the window and brought back memories of staying in February and watching the winter sun rise on the water.

Crossing the road, we took the Windrush Path, as we did back in February. Everything has come on – the entrance to the path now framed by the blackthorn, all white. I love how the still semi-skeletal landscape is decorated with these bridal hedgerows. The hawthorn's unfolding too, its hints of pink still clasped tightly. The trees we couldn't identify last time but thought might be poplars, now, two months later, have tender green, heart-shaped leaves. The elder is doing well. Underfoot the celandines are flowering. The birds are singing: the cliff chaff, the green woodpecker, the great tit. Spring is here.

A couple of greylag geese fly over and are followed by a plane. Jon tells me the B52 activity has increased at Fairford since the war in Ukraine. The other night, one came over three miles off course and flying thirty foot lower than it should. Alarmed, Jon had stood at his bedroom window, ducking instinctively as the plane careered over the town. Most of Lechlade had thought it would crash into them.

'Have you ever been to the air show?' asks Jon.

'No, I've been up at Buscot visiting you when they've been coming in before, but never over to Fairford itself.'

'You'll have to come.'

This makes me think of Yeovil Airshow and taking Florence when she was small. I always felt with her having no father, I should try and do some of these more 'traditionally-male' pursuits. I'm not sure why. It's not as if my dad ever took us to airshows, or kayaking, or hedgelaying. When I was a child, my brother took me to Heathrow once as he was babysitting, and he'd wanted to go plane-spotting. I was very bored. To be honest, and this doesn't feel a good thing to admit, I've always been a bit bored by the idea of bird-watching too. I can count on one hand the number of bird-hides I've been into. Four.

***

The Windrush flows a milky green today. Jon shows me where the gravel and shingle has deposited just downstream from the toppled pillbox, its large concrete structure slowing that part of the stream. The rest of the river is flowing fast and the other side of the bridge the water bubbles with eddies and patterns. I would like to swim here in the summer. As we continue walking, Jon shifts the black bag on his shoulder.

'What's in your bag?' I ask.

'It's a new bird-watching telescope I bought.'

I love the fact Jon has bought a new telescope specially for the occasion.

'Have you got the bird-hide key?' I ask unnecessarily.

'Yes, it was surprisingly easy to get.'

This is one of the many things I like about Jon. How when he says he'll do something, he does. I'm always well-intentioned but fall short on the following through. He said he'd send for the key and he did. And we have the special bird-watching telescope. I think this will be a good thing to have. Help us see the birds.

'Do we go down here?' Jon asks when we see a sign to a bird hide. It's not the way we went before but we can see on the map they sent with the key that there are two hides. We set off down the green track. No one about. Turning right, we take a path between fencing down to the door. A wooden plaque with a kingfisher tells us this is Langley Lane Bird Hide.

Jon takes the key from his pocket. He turns the key and the door opens slowly allowing us to enter the dark space. There is the familiar smell of wood and, as my eyes slowly adjust, I can make out wooden hinged hatches on the three walls facing us. Avoiding sleepy wasps, we open these to a glittering expanse of ruffled lake.

Gravel was extracted in the 1990s but, when this process ceased in 2000, the twenty-five-acre site became a nature reserve. A poster tells me that there is a sluice somewhere enabling some control of water levels.

Today at Standlake there is no road noise, no one about. We are quite close to Shifford and Chimney and it's as though the peacefulness of those places drifts over the fields to here. I start to study the bird identifying posters. I've read recently that the RSPB have been challenged as to why the female birds are shown as smaller inserts on their posters and whether it is a result of sexism. There are posters for wading birds, shore birds and ducks. I'm reading these and the instructions on what to write in the bird logbook while Jon struggles with the telescope. It has a small tripod, but the shelf is too narrow for it. The telescope itself is strangely shaped with a bend in it. Like a spy tool for seeing round corners.

'It might be good for seeing round corners but I'm not sure it's going to be any good for seeing birds,' says Jon as he struggles to position the thing.
It does seem badly designed. We can't understand why it's not straight. Why it has a bend. Jon persists while I look up the black and white roundish ducks. I find them: tufted ducks. Over to our left is a raised bit of land peering out of the water. There are about eighteen cormorants. This is a bird that we would never see on the Thames when we were young. I worry again that they are responsible for the coot demise. Dotted between their stark silhouettes are some smaller birds. Eventually Jon passes the telescope to me. All I can see is sky. It's a grey day but I'm enjoying the cosiness of the bird hide and the fact that the door locked behind us means we won't suddenly be disturbed by anyone.

'Find the shore and work down,' instructs Jon.

Eventually I find what we are now calling 'the island' and make out the other birds. I check on the poster. They are lapwing. Suddenly we hear a plaintive calling and two birds come in low in front of us, landing on the island.

'Curlew,' says Jon, 'they take me back to when I had the house at Laugharne. You'd hear them all the time there. All night. It's a lonesome sound.'
The curlews' call is a sonic shortcut for Jon instantly taking him to his much-loved home in Carmarthenshire, where he had originally planned to retire. We find them on the edge of the island, at least Jon does. I may have seen curlew before, but I wouldn't have known what they were. They're beautiful. Speckled feathers, slender long legs, long curling beak, but it's their desolate call that is so memorable. A two note upward

glissando, a perfect fourth. How quickly a sound can take us back to somewhere, can represent that place, in the same way that, for me, the high-speed train and wood dove are shorthand for early mornings in Moulsford.

I fill in the logbook according to the instructions. I am counting the number of tufted ducks when Jon asks,

'What do you think that is?' He is pointing to the bank on the right-hand side below the pylons. Eventually, crouched at an awkward angle, I can make out the bird with red legs and red beak. I can't find it on the poster but realise I'm looking at the wrong one – the duck poster instead of the wader one. There it is – it's an oystercatcher.

After closing all the hatches, we make our way round to the second hide.

'Next time we need a flask,' I suggest 'Maybe sloe gin?'

We plan our next trip as we walk. The path down to the second hide is littered with catkins and I remember how they were all still hanging everywhere in February. It's been a good year for them. This hide is the one we saw originally: North Shore. It's smaller than the first, no wall space for posters, but still the logbook. We open the hatches, but I instantly close the left-hand ones when a chill east wind blasts straight through. 'It's colder here,' I say. But once again this hide is perfectly sited in front of a small heart-shaped island. On the water are two ducks and two coots.

'I'm wondering what they are,' Jon points to the ducks.

From here they look smaller than the coots. The wind ripples the water, scatters the sunlight. Very peaceful. I'm thankful for the lack of road noise as I concentrate on trying to get the telescope to work. 'Start with the edge' says Jon. Briefly, I have the far-off edge of the lake, the reed and poplars. A swan spreads its wings like some kind of heraldic emblem. I can't find either the coots or the ducks we can't name.

'Is that a pill box?' Jon asks.

'Yes,' I answer without looking, still trying to find something other than sky.

'That must be the Thames there. The pill box will be on the riverbank.'

Unfortunately, there are only limited paths on the reserve, but I know the Thames is there from looking at a map before. I'd like to walk on to Chimney and Shifford, but for now we must identify these ducks.

'Maybe they're mallards,' I suggest unhelpfully.

Jon has found a bird book. He hands it to me and takes the telescope.

'You look in there, Gin!'

‘Could they be pintail?’ asks Jon.

I look at the book and then squint out the hatch to the ducks. They don’t seem to have the right tail.

‘What about Gadwall? Do they have black under their tail?’ I ask.

‘Don’t think so,’ says Jon.

I turn the page and find a drawing of teal.

‘Have they got an orange and green head with a stripe in the middle?’

‘I can’t tell Gin. I’m colourblind.’

‘I tell you what’ he continues, ‘I’ll hold the telescope still and you look.’ Jon holds the telescope as I crouch in a totally awkward position to try and see the ducks. Hurrah! They have green and orange heads with a little horizontal stripe. They’re teal. Jon is delighted as he’s not seen teal before.

‘Perhaps we should stick to boats Gin. We’re not very good twitchers.’

But I’m surprised by how enjoyable the whole thing has been. Also, how good it feels to look things up on a poster or in a book. Not on my phone. I think we’re going to enjoy birdwatching expeditions. I like the fact we have the bird hides to ourselves too. That we can chatter away.

It starts to rain as we walk back and it’s probably just as well we didn’t go on to Shifford. But I must get back to Shifford and Chimney soon. I said this last time I was here too. I’m wondering what the invisible strings are drawing me to these particular places. And once again I think of the encounter with David Collins at Goring, ten years ago now, and him relaying his love for Shifford – a love so intense it had stayed with him throughout his life, since leaving the lock as a young man for Australia. I remember going to the John Barleycorn at lunchtime with him, how he had told me all about his grandfather’s self-sufficient life at Shifford Lock, during the Second World War. I recall again that first time we came upon Chimney, when we moored there that summer’s night. The barn owls calling as they hunted. The bend of the river. The poplars’ white trunks glowing in the moonlight.

Jon and I head back to the Rose Revived for lattes by the fire. While enjoying the warmth we look at the list of birds we have seen:

1 emu

1 little egret

2 coots

18 cormorants
2 shovellers
10 tufted ducks
3 common terns
2 herons
1 swan
2 mallards
12 lapwing
5 greylag geese

1 great crested grebe
2 curlews
1 oystercatcher
2 teal

***

Reading our list takes me back to meeting with the old resident lock keeper at St John's Lock some years ago. Peter had left behind his career as a bank manager to come and work on the river in 2002 and become the resident at St John's in 2004. He had always been a keen ornithologist since his schooldays, when his headmaster was a birdwatcher and bird ringer. Peter's lists of birds and mammals seen at the lock were extensive and I decide I'll ask Florence's friend, Hugh, another keen ornithologist to look through them. Hugh tells me that many of the birds are common sightings all year round – birds such as the blue tits and grey tits, the goldfinch and chaffinch, the kingfisher and kestrel. Common summer migrants on the list are birds like the house martin, swallow and swifts, the cuckoo and willow warbler. Redwing, fieldfare and siskin would be winter visitors. I ask Hugh which birds are rarer,

'The little grebe, these will be resident but not in large numbers. The little egret, muscovy duck. Pochard, these have massively declined over the last ten years.' Hugh continues to list the goosander, wigeon, teal, curlew, lapwing and snipe as rarer birds to see, along with barn owls, little owls and the hobby. Grey wagtails and treecreeper are less common too.

'It's a bit unusual to see a common gull inland,' Hugh tells me.

‘I think I’ve seen them,’

‘I’m surprised by the tree sparrow, the little gull and the red-breasted merganser.’

‘I remember Jon had tree sparrows at Grafton,’ I say, and continue

‘And I remember the day when Peter called Jon, when he was still at Grafton, to tell him to look out for the merganser.’

‘I love the idea of the lock phones in winter being hot with sightings of rare birds.’ Hugh smiles.

Peter’s list of mammals at St John’s is less extensive and reads as follows:

Hedgehog mole common shrew pygmy shrew bank vole field vole wood mouse house mouse brown rat grey squirrel rabbit brown hare stoat mink otter fox badger muntjac deer roe deer fallow deer water vole

It’s good to see the water vole making his appearance at the end. Emma at Kelmscott, who farms Manor House Farm with her husband says they have increased around there, and she frequently sees them now. I wonder if perhaps lockdown helped them when the river was closed to all boats (apart from kayaks and rowing boats).

Midsummer

Rainbarrows, the Roman Road, the Frome

First thing Sunday, there'd been cars and vans arriving in the field. At first, I'd thought it was a car boot sale but then this seemed unlikely in a place so totally uninhabited. I'd gone over to chat to a friendly-looking couple who were setting up some kind of tripod contraption and discovered they were all metal detectorists. Everyone seemed very cheerful and there was a genuine collaborative feeling to the whole enterprise. It felt like an alternative to belonging to a church. I was out all day out catching up with my cousin but from time to time my thoughts drifted to the field. What would they find? When I went back in the evening the place was deserted, the only sign of their presence being a small area of disturbed earth. It didn't look like they'd found a treasure trove.

The following day – the eve of the solstice – was baking hot, sweltering. As I walked in the very late evening, my shadow, as tall as a poplar tree, stretched to the length of the field. Rory's shadow was almost as long and there was that stillness – the heat of the day still held in the earth, the sheep on the opposite hillside motionless. Three blocks of newly cut hay, rolled into giant wheels, rested in the field waiting to be collected.

I hardly slept that night. I was staying in the showman's wagon and, as the sun poured through its clerestory windows at 4 a.m., I knew it wasn't a morning to be lying in. Not on the 21st – the solstice. Pulling on leggings and fleece, I'd gone along to the same field for 5 a.m. as the sun filtered through the trees and slowly rose over the woods, beyond the grazing sheep, bringing yet another day of soaring heat. Later, I'd managed to get to the river. The marina at Lechlade was quiet, just a few people around on their boats. Jon and I had sat in his back garden, drinking tea and catching up. With lanterns and mobiles and bird feeders of every size, the small back garden has become an oasis for the Lechlade bird population. A jackdaw landed above the shed to drink from a bowl of water, a robin popped into the kitchen. They've all learnt that Jon is a man to be trusted. I think he might be missing the lock as there was even a new water feature.

'It's nice to hear water trickling again,' he smiled before adding, 'It makes the right noises.'

It reminded me of the sound of the leaking lock gates at Whitchurch. I wondered how Tim was, how the river was down there.

Back home I've decided to come up to Rainbarrow for Midsummer's Day, the 24th. The good thing about observing both days is that, if the weather is bad on the first celebration, it may well be fair for the second. This year it's the other way round and brings to mind *The Return of the Native,* when, the day after walking up here in gorgeous sunshine – inspiring Clym to propose Eustacia – it has turned overnight to 'one of those not infrequent days in June which are as wet and boisterous as November'. Hardy describes how the trees of the new plantation, heavily laden with new growth, are battling with the storm: 'Each stem was wrenched at the root, where it moved like a bone in its socket, and at every onset of the gale convulsive sounds came from the branches, as if pain were felt'. A few yards to Clym's left on the open heath those gusts which tore the trees, 'merely waved the furze and heather in a light caress. Egdon was made for such times as these.'

Coming along the narrow road to the woods I pass two yellow balloons tied to gateposts. There must be some kind of party, but in the car park are only two cars. The woods are deserted because of the wind and threatened rain. It's late in the afternoon too, the darkened sky bringing evening much sooner today. There are strange willow structures lurking in the woods. Half-hiding in the shadows are a badger with a mouse, and a raven, their presences unsettling. Maybe it's the wind, but I'm glad, and calmer, when I walk through the hollow on this side and am out of it. Sometimes it's like this here. That autumn I was writer-in-residence at the cottage, the only time I got any peace was when a storm came in and the cottage was closed to the public. The woods were meant to be dangerous but under the trees – the very heart of the wood – felt safe and peaceful. The eye of the storm. As I walk today, every squeaky gate forms a transition, a margin between one place and the next: from Thorncombe through the first gate, at the edge of the heath, to where the ground rises more steeply and frequently the wild ponies linger motionless under the low branches; another gate and a narrow path climbs steadily between barbed wire and post fences while underfoot a mass of dry leaf mast, skeletal holly; further still the varicose veins of beech roots lying in wait. A single chiffchaff calls from somewhere and I'm suddenly aware of how weary I am. Beyond the sound of the gusting wind comes the

neighing of a pony, stirred and spooked by the wind. The weather was very similar the time Florence and I played at the top, out in the open, as that storm came in – black clouds moving steadily closer and us playing the Sheep-Shearing Song. The tune that Bonny Sartin sent me by post when I'd asked him what tune Hardy might have known for this title. It's nearly two years ago now and these days it feels an impossibility that Florence and I will play again. I must reconcile myself to this. I have had to cancel the performance we were meant to do at the end of July for the Hardy Conference. The organiser told me that people had booked tickets specially to see us. I hate not playing, but worse still is never seeing Florence and, on the odd occasion I do, how unwell she seems. But the programme I was planning based on Hardy's line, 'Lonely places in the country have each their own peculiar silences', is still on my mind. My friend Kim, an art therapist, has told me about the atmosphere between herself and a client and how she will sense this before any words are spoken. It's the same with moods: how someone can walk into a room and bring silent rage. It's something I remember from childhood. So maybe it is the same with places, that inherent in the silence is something beyond the silence.

I go through another gate and turn right, out into the open, high up now and on the chalky Roman Road. Another atmosphere. The view reminds me of Hardy's painting of cattle grazing on a deserted heath, not a tree in sight. Also, a Bill Brandt photograph – 'The White Highway of Egdon Heath' – with the road glittering out of a landscape so desolate it could be Brontë Country. Brandt: a master of wilderness, eeriness. There's another Brandt photograph too, one we used to have at home, of a miner pushing his bike along another white track. This time in Jarrow. A photo that reduces me to tears. Brandt once said: 'I have to become obsessed with a particular scene. I have to feel as if I've been to this place long ago, and am trying to recapture how it used to look.'

Up here pinecones lie scattered, imprinted in the dust are hoof prints, tall stems of purple foxgloves give in the wind. I'd like to come up here at dusk, to wait until dark, to see glow-worms, to hear the nightjar take over from the wind. Three kinds of heather form a mat: ling, bell-heather and cross-leaved heath. There are three types of pine too and I wish I was better at identifying trees as there's nothing on the information board about them. A pony follows me along the track, snorting as he trots. I pause by the holly and oak, each of a similar size – two companions rooted side by side on the Roman road. I cut to my right and start to worry about adders.

Luckily, with this weather they won't be basking in the sun. The information board proudly claims that every British reptile is resident here. Something that does not thrill me. My anxiety has increased today as I've just reread the accounts of poor Mrs Yeobright's adder bite and her subsequent demise. Poor broken-hearted woman. Her words ring true:

> Why is it that a woman can see from a distance what a man cannot see close? Clym must do as he will – he is nothing more to me. And this maternity – to give one's best years and best love to ensure the fate of being despised.

She continues by reflecting on how, if she had remarried after losing her husband, she might have had another family by this time: 'And have been comforted by them for the failure of this one son.'

Everywhere is so green. Again, I'm reminded of Hardy, his ferns, their saw-like edges with nothing else visible, no other colour but green. The yellow flowers of gorse, or furze, from earlier in the year have all gone now. However, the heather is starting to bloom, lighting up the thin pony paths littered with peaty horse dung. I make my way from the fern and cut across to the stand of pine, admiring more foxgloves artfully dispersed here and there – the heath's own floral arrangements. I notice the self-seeded hollies; Hardy describes these shrubs as the birds' bedroom. I imagine him in the small cottage with his sisters rustling about in the bedroom as he was working at his desk, looking westwards over the cottage garden. Despite drastic heath-clearing, self-seeded pines, the size of Christmas trees, are sprouting up everywhere.

I head for the first of the three rainbarrows, the earth underfoot so soft it gives with every step. On the first bowl barrow, avoiding sawn-off tree stumps, I climb as the music from the party, at the edge of the wood, carries over. The bass disturbs me – I hate its visceral effect, how it puts me on edge. Among the tufts and tussocks of the heath, dried wood is scattered everywhere, left, I imagine, from when they took all the trees down. I stuff my pockets with pine-cones, fill my rucksack with the dried wood – so pale and even lighter than drift wood. We would call this collecting of firewood 'bunny wooding' when we were kids. I don't even know if this is a proper term. I Google it but only find lots of photos of carved rabbits. At the top of the barrow there is a dip and, in the bottom of this, a single wild honeysuckle flower. Yellow. It's then that I notice them … ants, giant ones. Time to move on. As I walk to the second barrow it starts to rain. This mound is more substantial than the first and, when I stand

on the top, it appears to be the highest of the three. There are no giant ants but I'm more exposed to the wind and rain. Somehow this suits my mood. The unintelligible tones of a DJ float across and then the nasty, brittle sound of the snare. None of this is helping me get a sense of the characters of the barrows. Instead, I'm thinking of Glastonbury and wondering (as I often do when it's on) at the attraction. I was there the year of the mud (one of the many). Rain and music played too loud are a miserable combination. I make my way through another path of unfurling green to the third barrow – the one I, and others, refer to as Rainbarrow itself. This is the one that was used as the beacon. Rhododendron is starting to grow at the base of the mound. I should feel upset that this 'invasive' species they've been attempting to clear from the heath has sprung up. Instead, I feel pleased. 'Well done little shrub,' I tell it. This barrow, in the most majestic position, is of a perfect height, and pleasantly rounded with a slight dip on its summit. It's just right. But I wouldn't want to sleep out here on my own. On the other hand, this would be the time of year to try, with the long days and, mostly, warmer nights. But just now the weather's getting worse and I drop down to the bench in the southwest corner. I wonder if this is where the beacon keeper's hut was?

Sitting on the bench overlooking the scarred landscape I take out *The Return of the Native* and start to read. There is something unbearable about Mrs Yeobright and how she feels about her son Clym marrying Eustacia. Who needs psychoanalysts when we have Hardy? He nails it. I identify so closely with her feeling that she should have remarried after she lost her husband, that having more children may have lessened the sadness she feels at her son, Clym marrying someone she feels very strongly isn't good, or right for him. I think about the awful man Florence is living in a car with, that she no longer plays piano or harp, that every year I've had to adjust to these sadnesses. Now she is with someone who has almost killed her dog through neglect. I knew he was dangerous when he changed Rory's name. Who does that? And there is Clym's neglect of his mother. He loves her but neglects her feelings. Thinks she is indestructible.

I'm reading when I'm aware of footsteps behind me. Getting up I look behind the bush. There is no one there. I don't want to stay any longer and decide to make my way back following the quickest route. I stop at the spot by heath-hemmed Rushy, where we did our gig that first Covid summer. This feels a more protected place – so

close to Rainbarrow, to the Roman Road and yet entirely different. I breathe deeply, slowing my breath, aware of the accumulated tension in my shoulders.

Back at home I head down to the Frome where spring has fused with summer, Meadowsweet is running wild and I remember that first evening last week I came down and smelt it all in full bloom. Such a subtle scent, something like marzipan. Love and Marriage is the old folk name for the plant. 'It starts off smelling sweet and eventually goes rank,' my friend Catherine, a Dorset girl, once told me. The long days are still with us yet it's gloomier in the woods now, the open filigree of spring replaced by something darker as the leaves unfurl and fill the sky. It's like this walking by the river at the moment: a profusion of green crowding in on each side, and overhead. At the holy well at Cerne Abbas the seven lime trees are in full bloom the tall beech a little apart, taller still, guarding the limes. By the spring, one tree is bent over, laden with pale keys. There is a new sign requesting that any offering left at the well is biodegradable. I'm not sure people are paying attention. There are still ribbons tied to the lower branches of the tree. I wash my hands. I wash my face. Somewhere a bee is humming. From further away comes the coo of the steadfast wood dove, yet even he is more subdued now. There is the sound of the slightest breeze, but the water is almost still. Not yet stagnant, as it will be by the end of August. Beyond the low wall there are giant gunnera. In the field are ox eye daisies and poppies beneath the sycamore. It's the perfect temperature, twenty-three degrees. And as I walk down the street, a solitary swift makes a low pass in front of the half-timbered cottages. From the church comes a clarinet. Beautifully played. A line of Brahms slips into a repeated passage from Messiaen.

Alfred Williams Archives

It's been a year and a half since I was last in the attics at Max Gate claiming to be 'archiving'. Until today, that has been my only experience of anything like this. Back then there was something intensely pleasurably about being in Hardy's house alone – going through the boxes, scanning and photocopying. Something felt so right about reading through those items above the room where he wrote *The Woodlanders*, his presence lingering with me.

Now today I am very much on my own. I'm driving out to Chippenham where the Alfred Williams archive is stored at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre. I have visited his village, South Marsden, seen the three different houses he lived in, and wandered the churchyard where he and his wife are buried. I have been wondering about Williams and his writing focused on the upper reaches of the river, and about his subsequent collection, *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames*: the published result of his epic cycling and song-gathering – thousands of miles covered and over 800 songs collected. Often, he was visiting his singers in the winter months when, due to the dark evenings, the people were indoors and free to sing to him. I've a feeling that Williams was not a half-hearted man, that nothing less than a full representative collection would do.

On the way I listen to Delius' 'Summer Night on the River': a good choice as daily temperatures soar, each day hotter than the one before. There's something open and fresh about the music, the woodwind and strings, the answering phrases, the step-by-step passages, chromatic passages, the solo cello and the final detached woodwind chords against the sustained strings as the piece comes to a close. There's something restorative too. Florence was meant to be joining me today and hasn't rung or texted. I have had to make a last-minute arrangement for Rory with my neighbour. As always, these days, I'm anxious.

From outside the History Centre looks like a factory or industrial unit. Inside the air-conditioned space, I make my way across the vast carpeted room to the help desk. On the far wall is a large, ancient wooden clock and, on a shelf below, a wooden calendar, the kind where you turn little dials to set it to the correct date and year. These two items are the only clues to what lies behind the walls and below the floor. I wonder who they once belonged to. There was a calendar like this we had at Max

Gate, on Hardy's desk in his poetry study. It was always set to 7 March, the date Hardy met Emma.

Max, the archivist shows me to my desk, number twelve.

'Your first item is there,' he says as he points to a pristine, white envelope, before continuing,

'Bring that back when you're ready and we'll bring out the next item. Do you mind what order they come?'

'No, it's fine,' I reply, wishing that perhaps I'd looked at my list and been a little more forthright. But I tell myself that this will be exciting, not knowing what will be brought up next …

Max takes off and I'm left in relative peace. Two women opposite me are discussing Latin and the man to my right, who has in front of him what looks like a medieval map on a giant squidgy cushion, goes to join them.

'Sorry,' he says and smiles over at me as I tentatively undo the bow of the flat white ribbon around the envelope. This ribbon is exactly the same kind of one that the House Steward always wanted me to tie round the falling-apart books at Hardy's cottage. The books she used to insist were part of 'the collection'.

The letters are all written in pencil, all on flimsy sheets folded once and in tiny envelopes. They are addressed to:

Mrs A. Williams
Dryden Cottage
South Marsden
Swindon,
Wilts

They date from November to December 1917. It feels wrong to be reading them, too invasive, as though I am reading his diary. He always addresses his wife Mary as Mim and signs off as Alf. Before long I am thinking of him as Alf and can no longer write about 'Williams' without sounding like I'm some teacher at a public school. He is Alf, or at least Alfred, to me. His first letter is posted from Devizes and he tells her he feels he has made the right choice in joining the Royal Field Artillery and not munitions (which may have seemed the logical choice given his work at the forge in the Great Western Railway factory). He tells her he has a straw mattress, pillow and three blankets. Two days later he's in High Wycombe and is billeted in the town. He wants to offer the people an extra shilling a week so that he can keep his room for

himself alone, ‘Otherwise I shall get no chance whatsoever to do a bit of scribbling.’ Gradually I learn about Alfred’s army life. There’s frequent mention of the food: ‘Don’t worry about food. We get heaps. It is splendid, and plenty of it. Sausages for breakfast. Today we had hot beef mince, baked (as we had at home) for breakfast. They are just setting tea. Salmon […] It really is a splendid life here, don’t worry old duck, we are getting quite used to it.’

Happily, he quickly makes friends with the cook, making the pots ‘shine like day.’ As this point, he describes the sergeants: ‘They are an awful lot but a fine set of fellows, fat and strong, and as keen as needle, one may not altogether like them (though some are real gentlemen) but admire them you must.’

Small pleasures are cakes sent. He writes to Mary almost every other day. The following year’s letters – 1917 – are far less cheery. There are another two packages wrapped in ribbon: January to May (43 letters) and May to September 1917 (40 letters). I’m starting to realise I’m far off the folk-song track, but, like someone who has lost their way, I’m determined to keep going until I come to somewhere I recognise. Besides, I am enjoying getting to know Alf’s personality. In January he is reminding Mary of what needs doing in the garden, requesting that she ask Mr May, ‘if he doesn’t join up before Feb, will you ask him to do my pruning, redcurrants, gooseberries, plums and the pyramid apple tree.’ He mentions that the broad beans need to be planted in February, which reminds me that’s something I’ve missed this year.

I’m astonished how Alf and his pals never know where they are going to be from one week to the next. They are always thinking they are about to be sent off to France but by May they are in Ireland.

5th May ’17 On the train at Cashal.

> I am at last able to pen you a line, thought I was lost no doubt! We have had a terrible week, absolutely no time. We could not write at all. Gun drills, gas drills (gun drills in gas helmets) Rifle drill, marching drill, stables, stables, stables, kit inspections, gun inspections, marching order and I can’t tell you the rest. Besides this, we gunners have had to clean our guns, and repaint them and do our other work in between […] Everyone is much disgusted we wish our old major would come back […] I expect he is getting us ready for the front. I suppose we shall be there before autumn. I tell you this dear, to be prepared: it is of no use for me to let you think we shall always stay at home

here. But in France we should at least have a little peace and not be driven as we are now.

In an earlier letter he had described having a 'madman for a major now'. The previous day they had a gun inspection from 5.30 am to 7pm. He makes the point that, 'It is alright when you have decent officers, but when you get a crew such as we have now, you might as well be a ghost.'

He goes on to relate how he has managed to wangle his trip to Cashal, asking to see 'our lieutenant. I told him the tale – author, lecturer etc. Told him I must get to Cashal, and was to lecture about Irish Archaeology. Told him I was to write for the War Office.'

He tells his wife that he had read about Cashal and Cormac when he was in hospital and had wanted to experience it for himself. This takes me back to the day Florence and I went to Cashal a few years ago, of seeing three young girls arriving with their board, changing out of their trainers and into their dancing shoes, and, with their battered ghetto blaster blaring out an accordion jig, dancing to earn themselves some money.

The letters are making me feel very sad. Alf asks Mary to let his mother and the others know he won't be able to write, 'I've got the fair blues about it.'

I must get on with finding the folk songs but, before I do, there are the final two letters. The first is postmarked Devonport, dated 26 September. In here, Alf writes they are about to set off for India. He was hoping to go to Europe, and it sounds as though he has been writing a book he had hoped Duckworth would take. He tells her: 'I cannot write you many lines as we are now under the censor.' By the next day they have set sail and in this, his last letter, Alf reassuringly falls back on food to tell his tale, 'We are having splendid food: lovely bread, fine salt butter, a good dinner of roast leg of mutton, potatoes and rice, or duff. The duff is splendid. We've never had such good food in any camp I've yet been in.'

After witnessing all this one-sided exchange I'm wondering how Mary must have felt. Was she excited to hear the letters fall through the box? How anxious-making was it for her, never knowing where he was going to be sent, and when? I imagine her return letters. But what happened when he was in India? He didn't return to England until 1919.

Again, I get the strangest feeling putting the letter back in its tiny envelope. The strangest sadness of how lives are – how all this emotion, this love, evaporates. Or is something left in a place like this? It feels like a graveyard. I don't even know what I want to say. It occurs to me that it's not a good idea to go down to Cleeve, as I had been planning, that I am too raw. My dad always used to say that I have one skin too few. This is how I feel at the moment, this sadness, how I need to be hugged tightly.

The next item brought out to me is a thick cream folder, again tied with white ribbon. Tentatively, I loosen the white ribbon and am relieved to see a small brown notebook and many sheets of newspaper cuttings that have been stuck on thicker paper and stapled together. I realise this must be something to do with the manuscript for *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames*. However, there is no proper manuscript as such and what I gradually establish is that the songs were published in the local newspaper and the cuttings were taken from here. The whole lot was eventually compiled, and this is what is serving as the manuscript. There is also Williams's Introduction to the work. There are sections of this that Williams has drawn a line through. Here and there I can make out sentences:

> 'And folk songs never belonged to the intellectuals. They were the property of the people … those who have not been educated out of their nature … Give them back to the people. Schools and universities do not want them. They are lost amid our great towns and cities …'

It's possible to see from reading this how much Williams's attitude set him at odds with collectors such as Cecil Sharp and Vaughan Williams. These men were of a different social class and had other motives in collecting folk song. Composers such as Holst, Butterworth and Vaughan Williams were gathering the material for their own work such as Butterworth's exquisite 'Banks of Green Willow' and Vaughan Williams 'English Folk Song Suite'.

When studying the little notes that Williams has written in red biro by the extracts it becomes apparent how important the singers were to him. He usually gave their profession and exact address, including the house or farm name, but later these more personal details were deleted by him before the finished publication. Again, something happens as I read his alterations. I was feeling close to him since reading

his letters but now it's as if I am feeling the way he might have been – that he doesn't want to invade people's privacy too much. For example, he wants them to have a credit but not their house names printed. Steve Roud in his *Folk Song of England* is critical of Williams saying that, although he accused others of editing songs, it is something he did himself. I find very little evidence of this. Sometimes a repeated chorus is crossed out, but this doesn't feel to me like excessive editing. And he is very exact in telling us if a song is a composite of two singers' versions.

One of the most compelling things is that, out of over 800 songs, Williams believed only about ten or twelve may have originated in the Thames area itself. One of these was 'Tom and the Parson'. Williams had written: 'I heard it of an old man Joseph Kite of Curbridge near Witney. The Kites were notable singers in times past, they have now almost entirely died out.' And another was 'As I was in the Fields One Day' – sung by Frank Cook of Burford, who gave Alfred a further five songs including 'Three Blind Mice'! Looking through the folk songs I find the Southrop poaching song and Williams's original note which states:

> When I first met with the following piece I imagined it might be of purely local origin, and labelled it, in my mind, of that class. Two months ago, however, I found another song, or rather, the same song in a different guise, at Eynsham, near Oxford, and was thereby furnished with an illustration of what I have several times pointed out, that is, the difficulty of saying with certainty what is or is not, of strictly local value. At the same time the song may have belonged to the Upper Thames district. I have not seen or heard of it anywhere else. Obtained of William King, Castle Eaton. One of the King Family.

The first version begins:

> Three Southrop chaps went out one day
> To Hatherop Park they beat their way

There is then a chorus which doesn't exist in the Eynsham version:

> Laddy I O
> Foddy I O
> Fol the rol lara laddy I O

Followed by:

> The first we met was a bulldog bold

The next was a spaniel six months old.

The Eynsham song, which Williams says is perhaps the better, begins:

Three Eynsham chaps went out one day
To Lord Abingdon's Manor they made their way:
They took some dogs to catch some game
And soon to Wytham Woods they came

Long Jimmy the keeper in the Southrop version is replaced by Barrett the keeper in the Wyndham song. Hatherop brook becomes Cassington Brook.

Although it appears so few songs originated locally, Williams was very definite that every song he included had to have at least been heard in his neighbourhood and the area he'd mapped out as his 'ground'. The songs may also have been sung from Cornwall to Aberdeenshire, 'but as long as I have proof that they were also popular in the Thames Valley I am satisfied'. Williams introduces each of his songs in his completed book with the name of who sang it to him and where. Sometimes there are stories associated with the song. One example is 'The Parson and the Sucking Pig'. This widely known tale was one that Old Elijah of Inglesham related. Williams was very fond of this old man who had once told him he'd seen a pictorial depiction of the event in his childhood: 'the parson in the act of grabbing the young porker, and the sow running at him open-mouthed.'

In his Introduction, Williams explains how initially the existence of the songs was not obvious – they were hidden in 'nooks and crannies' escaping observation and it was only by becoming 'thoroughly intimate' with the villagers that he discovered them. 'A countryman never sings to a stranger', he'd say, and how sometimes the singers would be surprised that he was interested in 'such thing as a country ballad', being told more than once that 'only fools and fiddlers learn old songs.' He recounts how it was common, when the weather was bad and outdoor work was at a standstill, 'for the rustics to assemble at the inns and have singing matches, in order to see — not which could sing *best,* but which could sing most.'

He goes on to describe these singing matches where there were seldom more than two competing in a day and usually only one, as singers would declare they could sing for

twelve hours continuously from morning til night. Every song would be different and the next day the next singer would take his place. ‘Doubtless the singers got very tired, and the music grated, before the twelve hour were up. But they were very strong and had voices like organs, while their throats were lubricated with frequent draughts of ale.’

Sadly, he does not tell us if he ever witnessed one of these contests, but he names four champions that he knew, including Gabriel Zillard of Hannington of whom it was said:

> would unbutton his shirt-collar at six in the morning and sing for twelve or even eighteen hours, if necessary, with the perspiration streaming down his cheeks.’ Williams describes their remarkable acquisitive abilities: ‘Very few of the agricultural labourers of a hundred years ago could read or write. They consequently could not learn the songs from the ballad-sheets … if they chanced to hear a song sung several times they had it. I have heard old labourers say that if they could hear a song clearly once only they were able to remember it completely.

Very often entire members of a family had for generations been famed for their singing. Williams gives as an example the Kings from Castle Eaton: ‘The entire choir of the church was comprised of the Kings, male and female … Their songs were uniformly of the sweet and original kind, such as ‘The Rifles’ and ‘To Milk in the Valley Below’. Williams makes a point that the characters of the people in the villages north of the river were very different to those south. People from Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire were, he found, gentler, easier and less harsh, softer in manner but ‘less sturdy’. South of the river in Wiltshire and Berkshire the inhabitants were more boisterous and spontaneous, strong, blunt and ‘a little less musical’. Here, the amusements were back-swording and wrestling – the men that much rougher. Interestingly, Castle Eaton is in Wiltshire and so I think the King family must have been the exception to the rule. I’m not convinced about Berkshire people being more ‘boisterous’ either. The Berkshire people I knew as a child were very gentle.

Williams goes on to describe the morris-dancing. He writes that he found no evidence of the morris south of the river but found there had been teams in many of the north bank villages including: Eynsham, Standlake, Bampton, Filkins, Latton and

Fairford. In Williams's time, as now, the only village continuing with the morris was Bampton, although some of his singers had danced in their village teams within their lifetimes. I remember visiting Bampton as a young child, how it was like entering a dream: all the dancers in white, the music, the fool with his pig's bladder. I make a note for my travels, to consider the different characters of the north and south banks when I'm recording and writing on the river, to see if any of these personality differences are still discernible.

In his gathering, Williams found certain villages were also celebrated for the number of their singers and quality of their songs: 'In several of these about every other person might have sung to you some piece. It is worthy of note that the most dull of all villages are those in which there is not and has not been an inn, and, consequently, no, or very limited, means of association to the inhabitants. The village reading-room is insufficient. The atmosphere of that has, and is meant to have, a certain curbing and correcting influence … the folk-song could live and thrive only in a state of freedom and independence.'

Williams also makes the important point that different people will choose songs of different character: 'The strong and the sweet, the stirring and the soothing.' He quotes an old man of ninety from Cirencester telling him: 'You can allus tell a man by the songs he sings.' He goes on to describe how he himself would be anxious meeting a new singer, waiting to know what kind of songs he is about to discover. He likens it to waiting for a negative to develop in a photographic darkroom.

Williams puts the decline and disappearance of folk-song down to several reasons: the restricting of the fairs and therefore the decimation of the ballad-sheets; the closing of village inns; the discontinuance of harvest-home and other feasts; the 'suspension and decay' of May games, morris dancing, mumming and wassailing. Interestingly, he also cites the advent of the church organ and the breaking up of the village bands. With all the work I've done around Hardy and music in creating programmes for Max Gate I believe this to be true. Hardy's own introduction to *Under the Greenwood Tree* says as much:

> One is inclined to regret the displacement of these ecclesiastical bandsmen by an isolated organist (often at first a barrel-organist) or harmonium player … the change has tended to stultify the

> professed aims of the clergy, its direct result being to curtail and extinguish the interest of parishioners in church doings. Under the old plan, from half a dozen to ten full-grown players, in addition to the numerous more or less grown-up singers, were officially occupied with the Sunday routine, and concerned in trying their best to make it an artistic outcome of the combined musical taste of the congregation. With a musical executive limited, as it mostly is limited now, to the parson's wife or daughter and the school-children, or to the school-teacher and the children, an important union of interests has disappeared.

Hardy's own uncle James went from his days playing the fiddle in church to turning the barrel-organ handle. Williams also describes how previously the musicians had to be continually practising for playing every Sunday in church. However, importantly, he stresses, 'they did not solely belong to the church'. Before the installation of the barrel organs and church organs, 'every little village and hamlet had its band.' Williams also mentions the attitude of the police not helping the folk-song. 'They practically forbade singing. The places at which it was held, i.e. those at which the poor labourers gathered, were marked as disorderly places; the police 'looked upon song-singing as a species of rowdyism.'

I'm brought back to the present by the man next to me with his medieval map on its big puffy pillow sighing. I look across at him.

'It's not going very well,' he says.

'What are you looking at?' I ask.

'I'm doing some research into South Benger and this is an old map of leaseholds on the Draycot estate. It was in the same family from the fourteen-hundreds to the 18th century. I've had to learn a whole new language.'

'I heard you asking about the Latin.'

'Oh yes, those ladies, they're proper experts,' he smiles.

I leave him to his plots and apportionments and start placing the newspaper cutting folksongs back in their folder and tying the white ribbon round. What is it about old things? About handling old things, their poignancy, their weight, how it is almost

unbearable when they are a dead person's? My chest feels tight with the heartbreak of it all. I think of my dad's little box of pastels that I've been using, how I can hardly bear to break them. I think of the message, 'Speak clearly,' that he had printed on Dymo tape and stuck on the lid, decades ago. I remember finding my mother's little circus poem in her chest of drawers.

Slowly, I head over to the help desk. On the way I can't help noticing an Edward Thomas section under the Local Author shelf.

'I didn't realise Edward Thomas was from here,' I say to man who is busy putting books back. He has a 'Volunteer' lanyard around his neck.

'I don't know who he is, but he must be local to be here,' says the man without pausing from his work.

I place the folder on the help desk and while I'm waiting for the next mysterious item to appear I return to the Local Author section and pull out a green Thomas biography. I look in the index and find Swindon. Turning to the relevant page I read that Thomas came to the Downs and was reading the Chiseldon parish records trying to establish, among the numerous Jefferies, which family the Swindon-born writer, Richard Jefferies originated from. Thomas writes:

> Occasionally most touching things come in the records – a 'travelling woman' has a child born, baptised, and dead the same day; or an old man from Oxfordshire is found dead in a field in February, 'due to severity of the weather and his advanced age.'

As someone who has struggled with depression I identify with Thomas. I think of my father and the one skin too few. I think Thomas might have been the same. Robert Macfarlane in *The Old Ways* talks of the Downs 'bequeathing' to both Thomas and Ravilious 'shades of melancholy'. For me, I believe it is the other way round – that something in that landscape resonated deeply with Thomas's internal world, something that attuned with deep intensity to a feeling that was already within him. When writing about Jeffries, Thomas writes about the Downs:

> There is something oceanic in their magnitude, their ease, their solitude – above all, in their liquid forms, that combine apparent mobility with placidity … Here, it sometimes appears, especially when the land has taken all arms of twilight, the creative forces must have reposed after mighty labours, and have had their dreams which their deeds have not equalled elsewhere.

Much later, back in Dorset, I decide to go to Cerne Abbas. It is still light as I drive over the hill to listen to Messian's 'Quartet for the End of Time' played by the Guadier Ensemble. Messian, a French Catholic, was captured early in the Second World War and sent to a concentration camp. One of the guards, realising who he was, smuggled him manuscript paper and pencils. The church is candlelit. There are eight movements and some are very hard to listen to – unrelenting chromaticism and nothing soothing, understandably. However, the two louanges are of a different quality. The fifth movement, 'Louange a l'eternite de Jesus', is for cello and piano, and the audience stills with the slow repeated piano chords as in the candlelight I notice a grey cat slinking between our legs. I don't think I've ever heard the clarinet played so quietly. The violinist stands to play the eighth movement, the last, and Susan Tomes, the most attentive of pianists, closely watches her, making sure they finish every chord exactly together. But I never know fully what to make of this music. To me it sounds anguished, which is hardly surprising given its compositional context. Even the birdsong elements sound discordant and unrelenting. But it is important. Outside it's dark as we spill on the street, just about avoiding tripping on traffic cones, and soon I'm heading for home, more out of sorts than ever.

Memories of the Thames Resurface

Waylands Smithy, the source of the Thames, Tadpole Bridge, Chimney and Shifford Lock

The same man is at the desk next to me with what looks like the same medieval map as yesterday. I too have yesterday's folk song folder waiting for me and within a few minutes it feels as if we've never been away. Outside the temperature is rising but in here it's beautifully cool. Inside the folder, beside the newspaper cutting-manuscript I studied yesterday, there's a small brown leather notebook which I didn't open. This, I think, will be the only surviving notebook from Alfred Williams' folksong-collecting days. It must have been out in all weathers, have covered hundreds of miles in his pocket as he cycled. I open the book carefully. Inside the front cover at the very top in ink, in tiny italics, is written:

Notebook used by Alfred Williams when collecting folk songs H Byett.

H Byett was Alfred Williams' biographer and friend. His writing is so small, but it's legible. Below this, in sloping pencil, in Alfred's hand is written: 'Logan Berry Mrs Miles'. Turning the book sideways I read an address:

Bassett

Woodstock

Minchinhampton Glos.

Little random clues. Like an archeologist with a sieve, I begin to turn the pages. Alfred's pencilled script is large, but extremely difficult to decipher. To be fair, he must have been writing at speed, taking down the songs as they were sung to him. On the opposite side of the front cover is written:

Began May 19th 1916 -
Went to
Bampton
Aston
Stanton Harcourt
Hardwick
Kingston Bapuize
Southmoor

The 19 May is a resonant day for me – the day my brother-in-law was born and the day my father died. Although it's a lined, portrait style notebook, about six inches by three, Alfred has frequently turned it sideways and written across the wider part of the pages. I think this must be because the lines of the songs are often long. The first pencilled song Alfred has drawn lines through and written diagonally across, 'copied'. On page three there is a note:

'Mr Webb's father Alvecot sang this song'

However, below there are speech marks and the words:

'Mr Williams, if you don't go and get me a bottle of whisky I shall die'. I'm not sure if it *does* read 'Mr Williams'. I'm not even sure it's a song. But I remember I have read in his Introduction about Alfred giving his singers small gifts in exchange for their songs. A bottle of whisky seems a bit demanding, though, especially when Alfred himself was so poor. There are names and places, a person's occupation, and snippets:

Joe the sweep (Bampton) A thigh for the stocking, a foot for the shoe
And a leg for the bonny green garter.

This is a song I know from Bampton Morris. The tune is in 6/8 and only four bars long. I can hear it repeated over and over as I picture the men starting to circle, taking off their hats and holding them high in their right hands as they stream off, their dancing pausing briefly as they move onto the next garden or pub. It makes me suddenly very nostalgic for Whit Monday.

I continue to look through the book finding a few lines of 'The First Day of Christmas' followed by 'The Agricultural Show' – a tune that Florence and I have played with Tim Laycock in Dorset. These add credibility to Alfred's claim that he believed only ten or twelve songs were truly from the Thames Valley. I find a Michaelmas Song which takes ages to decipher but reads something like this:

Come ye men and maidens, come listen to me
I'll tell you a sight you never did see
Oh, helter skelter, off you trot
On the road to Tetbury Mop

Oh, Michaelmas was drawing round
And we poor slaves drawn off the ground
There's many a farmer I'll be bound
Will try to pull your wages down

They'll say they cannot sell their grain
To get the wages down again
But of these men if you remark
There's good and bad of every sort

Bad ones you know it is true
But good ones you can find but few

The next page I persist in trying to read has CAROL scrawled in blue crayon:

3 drops of our sweet saviour's blood was shed and spilt for we
We shall now do for our sweet saviour as he has done for we
My song is done, we met before
We stay no longer here
So I wish you all a merry merry xmas
And a happy new year

It doesn't really scan properly. At the bottom is written 'Mrs Jane Ockwell (George Hobbes) (150 years old)' I'm guessing Alfred's been told the song is that age – at first I'd thought it was the singer. I remember when Florence and I walked down the Thames and discovered that Ewen, near the source, was once the place for venerable inhabitants, most being over a hundred years old! I'd love to be walking down the river again, but, on reflection, it would be hard-going in this stifling heat. On the very last page I find a recipe:

Simmer for 12 hours
Ingredients one ounce:
Treacle (black)
Butter aloes

Spiral liquorice
Gentian root
Oil of aniseed (put in after cool)
Cayenne pepper
Turkey(?) Rhubarb
I pint water
15-30 drops
Wineglass of water

I wonder what this makes, and why it's here? I imagine one of his singers giving Alfred home-made sweets and then offering the recipe. And what is Turkey Rhubarb? Sweet-making is far too far off my research but it does take me back to finding May Morris's recipe for Orange Cake in the attics at Kelmscott. And that's another thing: I tipped up an envelope of photographs this morning and, among those of Ranniket in India, and one of the South Marston vicar who burnt Alfred's book, one of Kelmscott fell out, dated 1 July 1922 and looking much the same as it does now one hundred years later. Kelmscott, a key place for me, a singing place. Wayland's Smithy was there too, again a photograph from 1922 – these same places that draw us. As a child, Waylands Smithy was completely magical and when I walked there from Goring in 2019, and again around the autumn equinox the following year, it still retained all its mysteriousness.

That autumn day I had walked the length of the Early Neolithic barrow within the protected circle of the beeches. It was windy – a low tenor in the leaves. I'd paused on the long barrow in a patch of sunlight, imagining the dig back in 1963 when 14 people were found to have been buried here in the space of 15 years: 11 men, 2 women and 1 child. I thought too of Wayland, the blacksmith who would shoe horses in the night in exchange for coins left for him. The long barrow is similar to the one made 200 years earlier at Kennet. The trees were carved with initials, and I'd wished many years ago, when we were kids, I had put my own in this place. Out of the wind at the southern end, Florence and I sat on a fallen knotted beech log, where someone long ago had nailed a horseshoe, now rusted. The entrance to the barrow, angled south, was marked by four tall stones. Some beeches had fallen, and newer ones were growing up, taking their place. From far above came the sound of a small

plane, audible but invisible, and once again here in this time apart, into this strange light, a tawny owl had called.

I put Alf's notebook aside and return to the newspaper-cutting manuscript of *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames*, beginning to compare it to my copy of the published book. Towards the end of the book there are fragments and catches. Page 239 solves the whisky problem when I come to a fragment that Alfred says he encountered several times. It begins:

> 'Says Mrs Millburn to her husband one morning: 'If you don't get up and get me a bottle of whisky I shall die.'

Aha, so it wasn't Mr Williams! What follows is a tale of a woman outwitting her husband, sending him off to Woodstock to buy whisky while, back at home, she invites the priest in for food, and something extra … I'm relieved to find that Alfred wasn't being asked for bottles of whisky in exchange for songs.

There is something pitiful about the manuscript being made up of old newspaper cuttings. It reminds me of the scrapbooks we'd make as kids, everything stuck in with flour and water paste. Carefully turning the final pages, I come to the very end where I find: 'Catches and Fragments found on the line of the Thames from Standlake to Kempsford'. A catch is the same thing as a round and these are some of our oldest songs, however, the penultimate song is the glee, 'Hail, Smiling Morn'. This was written by Reginald Spofforth as recently as 1810 and is still sung in Yorkshire pubs as part of their Christmas tradition.

I'm feeling rather stuck. I'd hoped to find songs that were truly from the Thames Valley and what I've discovered is there are virtually none. Or at least none that we know of. I'd thought I would use them as a starting point for my *Night-Visiting Songs* work and recording. I'm reluctant to do this now. I take the manuscript and, trying to line up all the frayed edges, place it back in its cardboard folder. Again, I'm feeling overcome. I glance to my right as my companion looks up,

'You ok?' he asks kindly.

'Yes, just tired …' I answer, and we smile before returning to our respective material.

The next folder is very slim. Inside are only two sheets of paper. These are Alfred's 'Lecture Notes on the Thames Villages'. They open with a curious message: 'Education: Lucky Boys: My Early Days:' It takes a while for me to work out that

these are notes for a lecture that Alfred gave to a boys' school. Written in a very abbreviated style, they start logically with the source, or at least various contenders for that title: 'Local people say the Thames rises at Culkerton and flows under ground'; 'Cherrington pond is traditional'. According to Alfred another possible source is 'Trouble House'. Co-incidentally, I passed the pub called Trouble House just last week, on the road west of Kemble heading out to Tetbury. I imagine this is where he means but, looking at an up-to-date Ordnance Survey map, I can see no sign of a spring. Another sentence describes the route to the place most people these days acknowledge as the true source. 'Down the old canal path to the little dell beneath the ash tree.' Again then, as now, there was no water there. Alfred writes: 'There was much more water before the forests were felled and the GWR pumps raising 4,000,000 galls a day.'

I remember well that August evening, over ten years ago now, when Florence and I walked from the Thames Head Inn down to the source. We had a couple of hours before dark to find the spring. Picking our way through tangled nettle and willowherb, we followed the railway and, after crossing the line, descended through fields of pale wheat bordered by drystone walls to a vast green meadow. Our shadows stretched in the late light as we made our way to the edge of a small wood. Here, in the shade of the trees stood a waymarker post, twisted in yellow satin ribbon, telling us we had 184 miles to go before we'd reach the Thames Flood Barrier. I remembered reading W. Senior's description of the place in his *Rivers of Great Britain:* '… and the grove resounds with bird-music set in the rapturous key of the bridal season.'

It seems water, or the lack of it, was always a problem and, as far back as five hundred years ago, the antiquary John Leland, in his *Itinerary*, commented, 'in a great somer drought there appereth very little or no water.' I remember when Alison, and I were about seven, and we went to find the source with our mother. We ran ahead, expecting to find a bubbling spring, to find only a pile of grey stones. Old Father Thames was there though, guarding the spot. He was moved sometime in the 1970s to St John's, the first lock on the river, down at Lechlade. Much later, Alison carved her own version out of a breeze block, painting his hair a lurid green.

Besides the lack of water at the source, Alfred also noted the amount of water in the river proper to tell the boys: '230,000,000 normal, 79,000,00 Sept, 1760,000,000 Flood'. I'm curious to know how these figures were arrived at, I wonder if the EA today would offer me similar data. And like Peter, the lock keeper

at St John's, Alfred listed his birds and fish. I text Alison Alfred's list of birds and ask her which would be rare now. She texts me back, telling me she's not heard of the whistling plover but that the golden oriole is very rare as is the butcher bird – which she thinks is another name for a shrike. 'Osprey are rare, golden plover not so rare, peregrines a bit'. I saw peregrines nesting on Salisbury Cathedral a couple of weeks ago. The young had just fledged. It brought to mind that time on the upper river too, when, after mooring at Chimney for the night, we saw peregrines hunting from the pylons that straddle the fields, as we continued our journey the following day.

Eels are listed under Alfred's fish list and there's a tiny ringed ink note 'to skin an eel hold its head in teeth' … I shudder. Then there's another line about viper's fat and eel's fat being used in medicine and 'eel's liver' to be 'rubbed on the chest for a cold.' There's a sentence on the pleasure of walking the Thames and once again another small note ringed in red biro: 'I like especially the part between Radcot and Newbridge, Tadpole and Chimney.' I smile, I'm taken aback for this is my favourite stretch too. I start to daydream of a little boat moored on the bend of the river, under the poplars at Chimney, the place we moored on our narrowboat trip. Once more, my thoughts drift back to the night we stayed there.

I was very pleased with the solitary place we'd found, the emptiness of the reach. No houses, boats or roads nearby. The only building we could see was a tumbledown barn – all broken tiles and rusted corrugated iron. Across the river was a small stand of trees, their trunks becoming more luminous as the day darkened. After a giant salad and some sparkling cider we turned off the boat lights, wrapped ourselves in blankets and watched the river. Two swans glided by, the moon came up and the poplars on the opposite bank appeared charmed. A pair of owls called to each other across the nature reserve close by. All night I was half-aware of their calling, both reassuring and utterly lonely. Pulling back the curtain the following morning, a wispy layer of mist clung on the water. How Turner would have loved this, I thought, as I watched the two swans that were there again, silently slipping through the vapour. There was that stillness I remember so well, will always associate with early morning on the river. Everything so very, very quiet and settled. Above us, the sky a summer blue with a few slurred, cirrus clouds. The reeds, the willows, and their watery inversions. The poplars motionless, the place paused. I noticed some flickering about the reeds. They were damselflies – the devil's darning needle – tempted out by the warmth, the sun catching their metallic, turquoise brilliance. Before we set off on the

boat again, we followed the towpath through a sparse copse towards the two hundred and fifty hectares of hedgerow, floodplain, meadow and woodland that make Chimney nature reserve – once all farmland – and still surrounded by endlessly stretching, fields of corn.

The first written recorded evidence of Chimney is from around AD 955-957 when King Eadwig gave the land to the monastic community at Bampton. Bampton at this point being the largest town in the area. Chimney's name evolved in the Anglo-Saxon period when it was known as the island belonging to 'Ceomma'. Ceomma was the river that flowed into the Thames at this point. True to its island name it does seem a little higher than the surrounding area. There are few buildings – maybe only three or four isolated old cottages, some farm buildings, and the lock house at Shifford. Alfred the Great held the first recorded English parliament at Shifford in about AD 890. 'There sate at Shifford many thanes, many bishops and many learned men, wise earls and awful knights,' states the Anglo Saxon Chronicle. This was a site of considerable importance, possibly due to its geographical location close to the border with the Danelaw – the land that the Danes held. In the fields there remain traces of earthworks and an ancient cross. These important meetings would often take place at a specific tree, and higher ground was always a safer place to meet.

There is a church at Shifford too. It stands alone, set back, and desolate in the middle of a field. The land between the bank and the church is believed to have been used for burials. From the river it's not possible to see all the church, but I remember from the narrowboat we could see its red roof forming the centre of our view, framed by long-bladed grass and buttercups, the stretching pylons above, and to the side, feathered willows. These were catching in the breeze revealing the underside of their leaves: the hoar-leaves, their pale whitish, silvery colour. What is it that draws me back to these places time and time again?

I return to Alfred's notes telling me just how common little owls were in his day. He writes that the keeper at Buckland caught 40 of them. Why would the keeper do that? It's heartbreaking. Needless to say, little owls are not common today. A few years ago, there was often one in the tall lime tree at the edge of the churchyard in Maiden Newton. He's gone now.

Maybe because he's giving the lecture at a boys' school, Alfred has focused on where he imagines their interests may lie. Again, in list form, we have Battles: Cricklade, Kempsford, Eaton Hastings, Radcot, Eynsham. These are followed by Castles at Faringdon, Castle Eaton, Kempsford. There are tributaries too: Churn, Ray, Swill Brook, Calcutt Brook, Colne, Leach, Isle of Wight Brook, Windrush, Evenlode. I think of the old Conservancy launches, how they are named after these tributaries. I think I've even seen the 'Churn' at Cleeve. I know I've seen the 'Lambourn' there and the 'Colne'. Even writing these words I start to miss Cleeve in a deep way. I long to be in that landscape yet I know it's a fine line between being there and it being a consolation and of being tipped into something aching and wordless. The answer is to have a small boat.

I imagine Alfred was using these notes as cues, filling in as he went along, listening for what roused his audience's interest. 'Ever been to Chimney? Duxford?' reads another little note. I wonder how many of the boys had. It seems unlikely they would. David Collins's words come to me: 'Never have I been more at peace.'

My first time at Chimney was when we stayed on the narrowboat, so when I met David a couple of years later when I was working at Goring Lock, and he asked if I'd ever heard of Chimney, I remember how surprised he was to learn that I had. He had grown up at the lock house there, his grandfather – David Edward Collins – being the first lock keeper. Because the river was closed to boats, due to the excess rainfall and the high levels, Steve, the relief lock keeper at Goring, didn't object to my spending lunch time at the John Barleycorn with David. Later, David had sent me a description of his grandfather's life at Shifford during the Second World War.

David Edward Collins and Life at Shifford Lock

> Grandfather ran everything like a clock. He would get up every day at six-thirty and light the fire. Then he'd go out the back to the outhouse. He'd come back in, put the kettle on and the radio for the news. Then he'd go off to check the two weirs, all were paddle and rhymers, top weir as well. When he went up to the top one he would take his gun with him; this was a single barrel, twelve gauge shotgun – cousin Gerard, a gamekeeper, has it now – the gun had no sight on it but grandfather never missed. You didn't want to get in front of it. He'd shoot pigeon and hare and then he'd come back and go and

feed his stock; we had pigs, chicken, geese, ducks – we were entirely self-contained. We only had candles and a kerosene lamp. In the war all the lock keepers were issued with a 303 and five round of ammunition. You didn't have to show a lock keeper on the Thames how to fire a rifle. Grandfather sold fresh chicken to the boat people. We grew all our veg, and milk came from Tommy Gauntlet at Shifford farm.

In the winter months my grandfather would go and help Tommy. They'd go cutting the thistles with scythes or go ferreting for rabbit. The coal barges would be drawn upriver by the *Kennet* and deliver our coal. The *Kennet* was built in 1932 and could pull four barges of soil – lots of grunt in that tug. Alfie Turner was her first skipper and Jack Collings was the engineer. They came in the lock one day and in the back of the towed barge my grandfather saw a bronze sword; they'd been dredging down by Old Shifford and had bought it up. Grandfather took it and handed it to the Thames Conservancy. It's now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. They never gave him anything for it; I'd have kept it.

My uncles used to fish; you could just go to the lock with a rod and line and a no.13 hook and worms, and you'd get a bucket of perch. My uncle Jack held the record for the upper reaches of the Thames – a twenty-eight and three-quarter pound pike. He was fishing for live bait, saw this pike rise, didn't have real pike gear but the pike was so old and lazy it just surrendered. There was so much perch, it was like bread. A delicacy was moorhens' eggs. Or you'd catch eel and Grandmother, Edith Collins, would fry it.

By the front door there was this big beige clay urn with charcoal and stones in it. You'd put the water from the river in the top and it came out the bottom. That was our water supply. Shifford was the last lock to get mains water as when Tommy Gauntlet died, Betty Gauntlet took over and she was completely different; she wouldn't allow the pipes to be laid over her land. She was opposite to her father but was very friendly with my Uncle George. George left Rushey and went onto the farm when Tommy passed on. He and Betty were very close. Let's say he didn't have to go out at night. When he died, he was buried in the Gauntlet plot.

Grandfather was at Shifford lock for fifty odd years. In that little house they raised eight children, and God knows how many battalions of

grandchildren. It was a happy home – life was really good in those days. At Shifford back then, they used to have a horse punt, it could take six horses across to the other bank and my grandfather taught me to swim off the horse punt using a pole with a loop round it – right off the bottom of the island. We were doing this one day and I said to him, "Do you think I can swim yet?" and he said, "You've been doing it for the last hour." We were all porpoises, except for my mother; if she got water up to her waist she couldn't breathe.

My mother was a single parent and really my grandparents bought me up. I adored them. But she went into service. She was at Bampton, and I'd go and visit her there. I remember my grandfather would give me a penny a week pocket money. One Saturday I was about to go and he was busy at the lock with the *Kennet*, so I went in the kitchen and his purse was on the side so I took the money from there. I went out and shouted, 'Goodbye Gramp.' He said to wait, as he hadn't given me my pocket money. I told him I'd taken it already and he took off his belt and belted me for that.

Every Friday night, no matter what the weather was, Grandfather would take his punt over to the other side, to Berkshire, and walk to the pub at Longworth over the fields: the New Inn – it's not there now. The landlord was Arthur Hobbs and when Gramp died, the day he was buried the pub refused to open, even the village shop closed its doors for an hour. He was well-respected. After he was made to retire, he'd had to leave the lock and go to live in Longworth – but he only lasted another six months. He and Gran are buried in Longworth churchyard, overlooking the river.

Shifford was so peaceful and tranquil. When I go, I want my ashes spread on the island there. It's the only place I've been so at peace.

***

It's good to think about David Edward Collins and the way his river world resonates with the stories that Alfred writes about. I decide to take a break from going through Alfred's things and head for the drinks machine. With a powdery hot chocolate, I head outside and into the wall of heat. It is so hot, stifling, a temperature I've not experienced in England before. I sit at a bench but can't stay out for longer than a few

minutes and, returning inside to an air-conditioned coolness, I'm looking forward to what will be left on the desk for me.

I open the next grey folder 2598/27. Inside are eight small notebooks, rather like old school exercise books, all in a blue kind of satiny material that changes as you tilt it in the light. These are the original manuscripts for two of Alfred's books: *Life in a Factory* and *A Wiltshire Village*. I'm aware of how much time I'm spending in the archives and am wondering how this is helping me think about the Singing Places on the river, that once again I'm straying off the beaten track. It occurs to me I don't really know what my track is, that often I am simply trying to occupy my mind and stop myself from being overwhelmed with anxiety. Feeling out of sorts I pick up a book and find it is the first of the four that make up *A Wiltshire Village*. Upon the first page is written: 'Life in the Village begun Dec 23rd 1911'. I like the idea that Alfred started his venture at the end of the year. A good time to start a project. As always, it's the people that Alfred writes about: the road mender, the shoesmith, the school-teacher. He laments the decline in village sports and feasts, in fairs and mumming, whereas in the towns he notes activities are on the increase, with concerts and the theatre increasingly popular.

Previously I have discovered the Cherry Feast, celebrated on the second Sunday in July, and as that was last Sunday, I bought a big box of cherries and sat on the beach at West Bay and shared them with a friend. I'm not entirely sure how it was celebrated back in Alfred's day but sitting in the sun on the beach, eating cherries with my friend and her kids seems as good a way as any. Today, I come across another feast I've never heard of: Chick Chack Day. Slowly my eyes are getting used to his pencil writing and as this wasn't written at speed it's much more legible. Alfred notes that there were three types of chick chack to be worn in their buttonholes: young maple leaves, ash and oak. Maple and ash were to be worn until noon and oak alone in the evening. He writes:

'If one wearing chick chack encountered another without it, he accosted him with the old rhyme

"(you're) chick chack powder monkey

Thee bist the biggest fool all round the county"

He adds that when he was young, 'I knew all the best boughs for obtaining chick chack early. I was an enthusiastic supporter of the old rustic tradition.'

I manage to find the date of the celebration and it's the 29th of May. This rings a bell as it's the name of a tune Florence and I used to play – a similar melody to 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. May 29th, more commonly known as Oak Apple Day, was once a national holiday to commemorate the restoration of the monarchy on that date in 1660. When I lived in East Coker, I had a wonderful elderly neighbour, Charles was his name, and every year he would search for the small apple-like gall to wear proudly and celebrate that day. When he was frail and in hospital our other neighbour, Alan, went out and made sure he found an oak apple to take to him.

Before I leave, I want to look at one last folder. It is 'suggested chapter headings for Round about the Middle Thames'. I write down a few of the headings.

Chapter VII:

The Duxford Loop – Perils of Navigation – Grievances of Watermen – The Vanished Village – Winter Visitor to the Meadows – The Extraordinary (fearless) water rail – Arrival of the Swallows – Lore of the Cuckoo – Peewits – A Disease in Fish – Perch and Trout – Frogs – The Gluttonous Pike – Excavating Eels – A 'horned' Snake – Slow-worms – Cause of the River's Rising – The Little Grebe – Wild Ducks and Magpies

Chapter X:

The River Below Newbridge – The Backwaters – Migration of Small Fry – Swifts and Sand Martins – Kingfishers – The Weirkeeper – His Powers and Responsibilities – Restrictions of the Weirkeeper – Bessibleigh – Comfortable Worship – The Marten Cat – a Strange Monster – Appleton – The Village Bell Tuners – a Remarkable Family – The Blewbury Bell – Age of Bells – Popular Errors – The Appleton Ringers – The Old Manor House – Cement – Made of Bull's Blood – Job Lane's Adventures

Chapter XVI:

Overheard at the Inn – The Swallow's Tail – Starlings – The Intelligence of Sparrows – The Best Perch – Gipsy Fisherfolk – 'Livey' the Gipsy – Rustic Medicines – Uses of the Carrot – 'Rainwater Poultice ' – 'Tea-kettle Broth' – Vanished Villages – Old Shifford – Aston and Cote – Holyende Field – Rats and Bats – A Strange Belief of the Bat – A one legged Rat – Rats and Guinea Pigs – The Water Shrew – Wild cats - A Hedghog Fight – Haunts of the Hedgehog – The Hedgehog and the Pimpernel

I adore reading these Chapter headings. I read them again and again. In a way they are all I need. Like a poem they condense the river into a few lines. These words feel so much closer to the river, its landscape and its inhabitants, than any of the folk songs.

Before heading outside, I wash my hands and am suddenly aware that I'm scrubbing very hard. It's as though I don't want to take anything away with me. I come out of the building and am hit once more by the intense wall of heat. I'm going to drive over to Kelmscott, thankfully with air-con, and stay the night at the Plough. As I travel, I reflect on my three days in the archive and what I have to show for it. What I have gleaned, if anything, is that the folk song, which was dying out when Alfred collected it, is not the music of the Thames. It is generic song that has not come from the area. What is far more of the area are the lists of birds and battles, Alfred's own chapter headings, and the feeling he has for his people and the people's own connection with the river, their landscape and their customs.

At the Plough I'm shown to a room in the attic. Although extremely hot, and the room tiny, there is something about the four-hundred-year old inn that is immensely comforting. I lie back on the bed, thinking of the manor around the corner with its mullioned windows, its leaded casements, and recall Morris's thoughts:

> A house that I love; with a reasonable love I think: for though my words may give you no idea of any special charm about it, yet I assure you that the charm is there; so much has the old house grown up out of the soil and the lives of those that live on it: some thin thread of tradition, a half-anxious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river.

For him, Kelmscott was ‘Heaven on Earth – the loveliest haunt of ancient peace.’

The next morning, I walk in the heat up to Kelmscott church. Even the steadfast wood dove has lost some of his coo-ing ability. Churches are the only buildings that are cool today. Inside, the hymn books and Morris cushions are covered in plastic, bat droppings are everywhere. It reminds me of a church Alison and I visited during our West Dorset church porch project. Unusually it was open, but had been completely taken over by bats, as though humans had given up on it. I wondered if some of the churches that Hardy went out to when working for Hicks were like this?

I drive on from Kelmscott to Clanfield, heading towards Chimney, David Collins’s words ‘Never have I felt so at peace,’ ringing in my head. Going through Clanfield, I remember that there were two songs that Alfred collected from here. Only one made it into his book. This was ‘My Old Wife’s a Good Creature’ and sung by Mrs Brunsden. The song that was omitted has, to me, a far more alluring and mysterious title, ‘I traced her little footprints in the snow,’ from Mr Clark of Clanfield. It’s very hard to imagine Clanfield in snow at this point. I intend to walk on the reserve at Chimney and maybe down to Shifford Lock and the ford at Duxford. Last time I was here, it was the end of the first lockdown, and it was a boiling hot day too. But today it is just too hot and, when I arrive, I realise it’s impossible to walk. Instead, I drive through the vast fields of ripening gold wheat. Not a breath of wind, the wheat motionless under a cloudless sky, the heat increasing.

A man is sitting in his deck chair next to his parked-up, silver camper van. We wave to each other. This must be a place that calls people to stop, for I remember there was someone stopped in precisely this spot surrounded by the sea of wheat last time. Once again, the church at Shifford is padlocked. I’ve yet to see inside this isolated building on its small hillock with its boundary of elderflower and beyond, the chain of pylons like guards. I know the river is there, sunk low at this point, this place where the first parliament was held. This is a landscape with riches. I think of the field at home and its metal detectorists finding so little and I wonder what a dig might unearth here, the river at the edge of the field forming a centuries old thoroughfare, the long narrow river community, who always look after their own. I find David Collins’s uncle’s grave and from somewhere close-by comes again the subdued wood dove.

I'm soon at the Rose Revived and entering I find the bar completely empty. Everyone is outside. It's good that all the outside structures built during Covid are being used again. But I'm happy to stay inside, drink lime and soda and pause, reflecting on Williams's headings, his lists of birds, those places that drew him.

***

Christmas at Kelmscott

Kelmscott village, river, church and boat

Six months later I am back at Kelmscott and this time with Florence. It's Boxing Day and we are staying at the Plough. Florence has the same tiny room where I stayed back in the heat of last summer, and I'm in the room next door. It's a great comfort and relief to know she is here as she has been living in a car for the last eighteen months. She tells me she and Frank spent last Christmas parked on the fly-tipping site at the back of Tesco's in Dorchester. We were to have gone to my sister Karen's for this Christmas but, sadly, everyone is ill at her house.

In the morning I walk down to the river at first light. It's a clear morning, the air cold and downriver the sun rises – a glowing orange orb. Skeletal trees shroud the grey manor, the river beyond a glinting curve of dimples and creases. From somewhere there is gunshot and the rooks rise as one: *kaah kaah* as their protest turns biaural. A bike lies flung in the mud on the towpath by two narrow boats – 'Laura' and 'Bison'. There is no one about this early, only mallards and two swans silently feeding, one floating downstream as he shakes weed from his beak.

We have Florence's small harp in the car and, after breakfast at the pub, she is keen on the idea of us going into the little church here and making a recording of her playing. Luckily, I have my Sony recorder with me. The church, which dates back to the twelfth century, has been virtually unaltered since the fifteenth, largely due to William Morris who lies buried in the churchyard with his wife, Jane. In the north transept are medieval wall paintings, all in red ochre. Unlike Inglesham, that Morris also helped save from Victorian restoration, this church is still in occasional use. It's good to hear Florence playing and the church, being small, provides a perfect resonance for her improvising.

After we finish, we decide to spend the day on the boat I have bought, and that Jon has helped me to find a mooring for, at Lechlade, at the marina. I tell Florence about the first night I stayed on board – how good it had felt, after chips and mushy peas on the riverbank, to come to this floating home. I remember hearing the geese honking and the familiar sight of them flying overhead in formation as they came in to roost. I watched people on the opposite bank night-fishing and thought of Joe and those times

he would sleep in his bivouac at Cleeve. In the night I'd been woken by a loud plane overhead. Jon said it was B52 taking off from Fairford.

'There's one every night Gin. You get used to it.'

He went on to tell me how the pilot must wear a space suit as they touch the limits of space gravity. The thought of all this happening far above every night seemed incredible.

In the spring I will set out recording and re-visiting and hopefully Florence might come on some of these trips too, continuing this sonic journey. But for now, it's Christmas and Florence and I sit and watch the river through the small boat windows, drinking tea and eating our way through a packet of Jaffa cakes.

***

Reflections on Creative Non-fiction and the Overarching Theme of Resonance

As outlined in the Introduction, my initial project aimed to explore our connection to sound and resonance within the landscape. I wished to understand how a certain place becomes what I term a Singing Place – somewhere which evokes a strong, sometimes intangible, emotional connection. I aimed to discover how soundscapes embed themselves deep within us, influencing our attachment and emotional response to places.

My own Singing Places are located on the upper reaches of the River Thames and my original research plan was to return to this landscape and investigate further. I wanted to talk to those who lived and worked alongside the river, particularly the resident lock keepers who are based at their specific locks, twenty-four hours a day, frequently for many decades. By talking with them about their long-term experience and exposure to the riverine soundscape I would gain some sense of how the aural world shaped their perception of, and amplified their relationship to, place. Alongside collecting these oral accounts, I planned to make field recordings at specific sites along the river and to research the traditional folk songs of the area and interweave these tunes, my own original music, and the field recordings, to create a rich expression of how Singing Places resonant around us and within us.

Adapting to Covid

Covid forced me to reconsider my entire project. This required significant adaption of my plans and research methods. Imposed lockdowns meant it was necessary to work within ever-changing limitations of place and access. As it was never possible to predict how long a lockdown would last, or how stringent it might be, I *had* to be flexible. There was little point in mapping out a plan that I would not be able to adhere to. As demonstrated with the church porch project, an improvisatory approach was required as I allowed myself to be led by instinct and creativity within the changing parameters of the time.

Therefore, over the first eighteen months, most of my initial work was conducted in West Dorset, where I now live. Nonetheless, the concept of Singing Places and the overarching theme of Resonance remained central to my project. I am

focussed here on the series of creative non-fiction essays which form the central part of my thesis. Of the 26 essays, 12 are based in Oxfordshire, 12 are set in West Dorset and the remaining two are in other locations. The fact that I was able to return to the Thames from mid-2021 is reflected in this distribution. It also demonstrates the equal significance of each location – West Dorset and the upper Thames – in shaping the final thesis. Both landscapes, and their soundworlds, contributed equally.

Exploring and Creating Resonance through Essays

By using the creative non-fiction essay form, I was able to explore and demonstrate the immersive and innovative ways I investigated resonance. Expressed through a combination of memoir, archival material, nature writing and first-hand accounts, the independent but interlinked essays connect memory, sound, place and emotion – the four co-ordinates of my project. Each essay builds on these elements to create a connected whole. For a sense of cohesiveness, the work is arranged chronologically but moves between my two distinct locations. Initially, in March 2020, I had started out by returning to the river, but Covid was already a black cloud overhead. By the third essay, I was firmly in West Dorset, with my daughter, playing Hardy tunes by Rushy Pond on a June Evening, trying to the make the best of this very strange time.

A central essay is 'Our Early Soundscapes', where I asked family and friends about the sounds they remembered most clearly from their early lives and whether, if they heard those sounds now, they were affected. Many people recalled the sounds of trains at night, or the brushing and scraping of fire grates in the early morning. These sounds are held deep within us, ready to reverberate when triggered in later life, taking us back to those early places. This principle is reflected when, using language borrowed from acoustic theory, we speak of things that 'touch a chord', 'ringing true' or even 'resonating with us' to describe deeply felt connections.

The essay, 'Listening and Walking with Jemima and Gemma,' describes a walk between the West Dorset villages of Maiden Newton and Melbury Osmund. This walk held historical and personal significance as it retraced the steps of Thomas Hardy's mother Jemima, who, at thirteen, walked from the rectory where she was employed, home to her mother. As we walked, we imagined the soundscape of two hundred years ago but juxtaposed against this were more recent musical memories as we passed four separate locations where my daughter and I had performed over recent

years. Having read a letter in the Hardy Archive from Jemima's mother to her sister, I reflected on the sadness it held and the details of the extreme poverty of Dorset's rural poor at that time. This resonated with a letter my own mother's mother sent to her sister and similarly filled with maternal concern and the hardships of poverty. The walk became not only an exploration of past and present soundworlds but also amplified the struggles and connections between mothers and daughters and the landscapes they inhabit.

This convergence of time and place was very much the experience I describe in the essay 'Alfred Williams Archive'. I had gone to the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre to research Williams' folk song collecting but was soon immersed in his letters to his wife, sent during the First World War. After reading a couple of these intimate communications, I could only think of him as Alf, and his wife as Mim. I felt guilty intruding on their life in this way. As I handled Williams' manuscripts and lecture notes, his photographs and notebooks, each became a fragment or remnant of the world he lived in, and the time he lived through. His regret at the loss of old folk customs, village bands, and the rhythms of rural life, resounded with Hardy's feeling about a fading way of life. As I continued to examine the artifacts brought to me, my own memories of the Thames were stirred by the places, stories, music and silence they held. When I opened a small envelope and tipped out photographs of William Morris's Kelmscott and Wayland's Smithy – my Singing Places – the ever-spreading resonance felt almost unbearable, and I was overwhelmed with emotion. Taking a break, I took an Edward Thomas volume down from a shelf. Opening it, I began to read, only to discover Thomas talking about his own poignant experience, in the same archive, when wanting to research Richard Jefferies.

Echoing Themes

These examples above demonstrate the immersive and relatively unstructured way in which I worked and how this method gave me a certain freedom to follow resonant links as they appeared. As a result, there are many reoccurring themes within the work: the outdoors, time, childhood, family, lock keepers, Hardy, archives, portals, music, the sound of bells, instruments, birdsong and silence. Taking just one of these – bells – to illustrate my point, these are mentioned in the following essays: 'Our Early Soundscapes', 'Playing at Max Gate at Christmas', 'Walking with Jemima', 'Dorchester-on-Thames', and 'Memories of the Thames Resurface'. Of

course, they are different bells but, as R. Murray Schafer says, there are certain sounds that are 'archetypal' (1997:9) and the sound of bells ringing across landscape is one of them. I have intentionally kept these connections implicit so that the reader can discover them for themselves and so that the reoccurring mention of bells may evoke a subliminal effect such as that of the distant resonance of a peal carrying across the landscape.

Empty Spaces

During the pandemic, I realised I would need to seize opportunities when they arose and try to form my thinking and writing around these. One such opportunity, described in 'Max Gate', was the chance to work on the National Trust archive boxes in Hardy's house. Another opportunity arose after one of our live-streamed performances when a storm blew in as we were playing by the Roman Road that cuts across Hardy's Egdon Heath. Martin Stephen, the manager of Max Gate and Hardy's cottage, rang me and asked if we would like to take our live-streamed events into the empty properties. Our performance in the deserted cottage is described in 'Rainbarrows', and our Christmas concert in 'Playing at Max Gate at Christmas'.

Max Gate, where my daughter and I previously used to perform to a crowded drawing room, and where I worked as a cleaner, was now devoid of visitors and staff. The furniture was pushed to the sides and covered in dust cloths. The fussy 'dressing' of the rooms had gone and somehow it was easier to access an earlier time. With no staff at their offices in the attic, no lingering echoes of visitors, the connection to Hardy was powerful, as though he might have been upstairs asleep or working in his study. With the carpets rolled up and no soft furnishings, the acoustic of the house was considerably changed. Standing in this deserted, echoing house playing 'The Triumph' or reading Hardy's poem, 'The Oxen', I felt the past meet the present, maybe experiencing something similar to that which Myfanwy Evans wrote of Paul Nash in *Axis* (1937): 'He has no interest in the past as *past*, but the accumulated intenseness of the past as *present* is his special concern and joy.' So, not a layering of time but a falling away. It was eerie when Florence and I sat on the stairs, taking different parts as we read aloud Hardy's poem The Strange House:

The Strange House

(Max Gate, A.D. 2000)

‘I hear the piano playing –
  Just as a ghost might play.’
‘ – O, but what are you saying?
  There's no piano to-day;
Their old one was sold and broken;
  Years past it went amiss.’
‘ – I heard it, or shouldn't have spoken:
    A strange house, this!

(2001: 580)

The poem’s sense of strange familiarity, of sounds that transcend time, echoes my own experience of these places during lockdown. On another occasion, we played outside a closed and deserted Sherborne Abbey. By performing in the presence of emptiness, we connected with the deeper resonances of these buildings and landscapes, bringing to mind Hardy’s observant words, worth repeating again here: ‘Lonely places in the country have each their own peculiar silences’ (1955:36).

Yet another unexpected opportunity arose when I was able to spend twenty-four hours upriver at Grafton Lock. The river was transformed: boat traffic was almost non-existent, the locks were closed, otters had returned, and fishing had surged. The military planes that usually fly over were silent. I slept in the garden and at night woke to hear the otters barking in the lock, set against the white noise of the weir. Being close to Kelmscott, Chimney and Shifford, I had returned to another resonant landscape. These were Singing Places for William Morris, Alfred Williams, David Edward Collins, and his grandson Edward Collins. Walking at Shifford Lock and the hamlet of Chimney it was possible to slip into an earlier time such as that described by Edward Collins about his grandfather’s wartime experience as lock keeper there. All these reverberant connections were explored in the later essay ‘Memories of the Thames Resurface’. These remote upper reaches stirred memories of a journey my daughter and I made downriver, some years earlier. They also held a poignancy for my lock keeping friend, Jon. When we went birdwatching, he recalled trips to the reservoir there, from the children’s home where he had grown up. The sound of the lapwings encapsulated a melancholy comfort held in the place as, once

again, time fell away. The lapwings also provided Jon with a sonic shortcut to Laugharne where he had spent happier times in his younger adult life. This continual replaying of past in the present allowed for a resonance to build up in the overlapping space, a space filled with echoes and reverberation. Sometimes it was easier to try and express this in music rather than words.

Memory and Emotion

Recognising memory and emotion as fundamental to emotional resonance I decided early on to approach my creative non-fiction with an openness and honesty about my own personal life. I was inspired by other writers that had navigated similar paths. Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016*)*, Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* (2014), and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling* (2019) are all deeply personal works of creative non-fiction that explore the relationship between inner struggle and healing brought about by the natural world. Similarly, Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* and Rob Cowan's *Common Ground*: *Encounters with Nature* (2015), demonstrate that, by sharing our inner lives on the page, we allow the reader the chance to discover what resonates for them. This approach allowed me to explore how certain locations draw us to them during challenging times. For instance, for me, Cleeve Lock, where the synthesis of the ever-present sound of the weir, the Canada geese, the trains speeding through the cut, all blend with memories of happy times with my dearest sister Karen and her family, to create a particularly resonant and restorative singing place – the riverbank of my childhood. Sometimes these are places where others have experienced a similar attachment, for example the previously mentioned Kelmscott. Sometimes, as with the example of Cleeve above, they are individual. I was recently in Oxfam, glancing though an illustrated vintage book from the 1940s about the Thames. In here, the river from Cleeve to Moulsford – my reach – was described as 'dull'.

In conclusion, this collection of creative non-fiction essays is the result of several years practice-based research immersed in two landscapes – West Dorset and the upper Thames. By walking, talking to those who live and work there, playing music, conducting relevant archival research, and simply being present and listening, this work explores the deep connection between sound, place, memory and emotion expressed here as acoustic and emotional resonance. Singing Places are points where we feel a heightened emotional response due to a combination of these factors.

However, I am keen not to privilege the creative non-fiction work over the poetry and musical elements of this thesis as I believe that collectively they demonstrate the existence of Singing Places and highlight their profound relevance to our lives.

The Singing Places – Music of The Upper Reaches

The Singing Places – Music of the Upper Reaches

Sleeve notes:

The Singing Places – music of the upper reaches, consists of five tracks that cross fade into each other. The music interweaves with field recordings made in different locations on the upper reaches of the Thames. The titles reveal where these places are: Hobbs Boathouse, Lapwings at Shifford, Summer Rain & Bells at Dorchester, Water over Stones and Grafton Dawn. The field recordings were made either in the evenings or early hours of the day and are the essence of the tracks. My old friend from Moulsford, Ted Morse, played the baritone horn and Jon Bowyer, my lock keeping friend, played the harmonica. I'm very grateful to my daughter, Florence for playing her beautiful harp. I'm playing my dad's old piano, my flute, and a field harmonium I came across on my travels. I used a Sony PCM D100 for the outdoor recordings and recorded the music on my laptop. It was mixed at Mill Farm Studio in Bradford Abbas with Tom Jobling. The birds in order of appearance are: chiffchaff, moorhen, woodpigeon, greenfinch, little grebe, lapwings, oystercatcher, Canada geese (mixed in with the lapwings), tawny owl, collared dove, robin, jackdaw, blackbird, house sparrows, carrion crow, rook, magpie, wren …blackbird/wren exchange.

The Singing Places – Music of the Upper Reaches

https://virginiaastley.bandcamp.com/album/the-singing-places

Traditional Music of West Dorset and Original Music of the Upper Reaches

The Singing Places – Music of the Upper Reaches represents the musical expression of my multi-disciplinary thesis. Over four years of research, I have explored various musical approaches to investigate our relationship with sound and place. These included deep listening, playing traditional tunes from Thomas Hardy's family books in places that were significant to him, instrument making and repair, researching folk songs of the upper Thames, making field recordings and writing original music. These processes have all been critically examined within the creative non-fiction element of the thesis. Here I will focus on two: playing the tunes of Thomas Hardy in West Dorset, and the making of field recordings and original music based on the upper reaches of the Thames.

As described elsewhere in this thesis, I adapted to the challenges of Covid by live-streaming performances of folk tunes familiar to Hardy, along with his poems. These 'Hardy Shows', performed with my daughter, presented us with a new way of working. We had to create a performance atmosphere, with an unknown audience of an unknown size, while outdoors and playing to a tiny phone screen. However, it meant we were able to continue playing together and my connection to Hardy was deepened as we performed in, and to, these deserted spaces. By not having a physical audience present, the link with Hardy felt stronger. At our first performance by Rushy Pond – where Hardy had played with his sister – we acknowledged the sounds of the place, for example when the heath-croppers came and lapped from the pool; but our primary focus was to bring the tunes into the landscape. This merging of sound and place created a sense of continuity, compressing generations and blending Hardy's world and our own. Likewise, when we moved indoors to the cottage and Max Gate, time concertinaed as we brought the music home.

Hardy had two main fascinations: time and music (or sound). His poem 'In a Museum', captures his preoccupation with both.

In a Museum

Here's the mould of a musical bill passed from light,
Which over the earth before man came was winging;

There's a contralto voice I heard last night,
That lodges in me still with its sweet singing.

Such a dream is Time that the coo of this ancient bird
Has perished not, but is blent, or will be blending
Mid visionless wilds of space with the voice that I heard
In the full-fugued song of the universe unending.

(2001: 430)

In my research, I encountered similar themes when I interviewed John, an instrument repairer, who, during this time, was asked to repair a worm-eaten old cello that was believed to have belonged to Hardy's grandfather. This caused me to wonder about instruments and what they might carry in their resonant bodies. I also made the Listening Walk, focussing on the sounds that Jemima, Hardy's mother, may have heard two hundred years earlier, and I interviewed friends and family about their early aural memories and the significance of these.

It was two years before I could return to the Thames and make the field recordings that would form the heart of my musical compositions. I had ambitious plans to record throughout the night – from dusk to dawn for an hour at each of my chosen locations. However, as I have written about in 'Re-sounding', this proved too challenging. I therefore limited the making of my recordings to solely dusk and dawn. The five recordings that I eventually chose to use, include one made at the old Hobbs boathouse in Moulsford – very much a childhood singing place. It was evening and the chiff chaff, the coot and the Canada goose calls intermingled with the soft purr of outboard engines, the trains hurtling over the Brunel railway bridge and various voices carrying over the water. Of all the recordings I made, this is the one that holds the most emotional weight for me. Both my parents are buried just up the slope in the churchyard behind Hobbs. The second recording I used was made much further upriver by an old gravel pit near Chimney nature reserve. This is a place where, thankfully, lapwings overwinter in huge numbers. Hannah Copley's 2024 book-length sequence of poems, *Lapwing*, gives some sense of their sound with its lines: 'otherwise known as/wailer, otherwise known as waverer, as imp/liar, as shrill green sky (…)' (2024: 6). 'Shrill green sky' summed up the overwhelming feeling as the lapwings (or peewits) rose in one cacophony of shrieking. Over this was the high pitched, intermittent whistling and piping of the oystercatcher. There was something

profoundly melancholic in these sounds, but it was winter-time and something about the birds' cries resonated with the stark beauty all around. When I came to write music for this field recording, I modulated to the major key halfway through to bring a sense of hope to the music. It ends with a simple solo piano line with the massed lapwings still calling. Of the other three field recordings I used, one was made in the small hours, of the bells and rain at Dorchester on Thames. This was recorded from my room at a pub, opposite the abbey. The last two recordings were made at Grafton Lock, where my friend Jon was then the resident lock keeper.

It was some months after making the field recordings that I wrote and recorded the music to interweave with them. I did this at home in West Dorset, and, in some respects, this process had echoes of the work Seán Street describes in *The Sound of a Room*: *Memory and Auditory Presence of Place*. Like Street, I was listening carefully to the recordings *away* from where they were made. But they were the essence of the river and to write music to them was to connect to something held deeply within me. I was able to enlist both Ted Morse and Jon as instrumentalists. Both men have lived all their lives in the area. Ted played his baritone horn on 'Hobbs Boathouse', and Jon harmonica on 'Water over Stones'.

As I have described elsewhere in this thesis, I had originally intended to use folk songs within my Thames musical composition and, had I done this, the music would have echoed the playing of Hardy tunes in his West Dorset places. However, during my research into the folk songs collected from the Upper Thames Valley, I discovered that virtually none originated from the area. I know that this *may* also have been the case for the Hardy tunes. However, the fact that these melodies were handwritten into the notebooks of Hardy's father and grandfather, along with Hardy's numerous references to various tunes and hymns throughout his work, his recollecting of his father playing fiddle at home, and his mother's passed-down memories of the West Gallery band, all meant that I *felt* the connection and legacy between this music and the landscape where we performed. As I felt no connection to the folk songs collected by the Thames, I made the decision to use the field recordings to form the heart of *The Singing Places – Music of the Upper Reaches* and to write original music around these. This resulted in two very distinct methods of working with music in landscape and provided me with two profound experiences.

Playing the Hardy family tunes in West Dorset, in the landscape that had raised and inspired him, provided me with a new depth of connection to Hardy and

the soundscape of his time. I like to imagine that, if he'd been able to, Hardy would have enjoyed making field recordings of his places, and I feel in many ways his novels, such as *The Return of the Native*, are a very precise and accurate record of his soundscape.

But, on reflection, the Thames experience was the richer one for me. This personal and immersive connection felt fundamentally different from that to the work on Hardy in West Dorset. By making field recordings on the Thames, I had captured the river's aural world that I have known intimately and that could exist nowhere else. And the music, although written away from the upper reaches, holds the essence of my child-of-the-river self, *my* Singing Places.

Bibliography

Allan, J, L. (2021) *The Foghorn's Lament*. London: White Rabbit.

Bate, J. (2003) *John Clare*. London: Picador.

Bayly, T. H. (1843) *Long, Long Ago!* New York: Firth & Hall.

Bayly, T. H. (1845) *Isle of Beauty Fare Thee Well*. New York: E. Riley & Co.

Berkeley, M. (1984) 'From Flint to Shale', in Mabey, R., Clifford, S. & King, A. (eds.) *Second Nature*. London: Jonathan Cape

Betjeman, J. & Piper, J. (1981) *Church Poems*. London: John Murray.

Blesser, B., & Salter, L. R. (2009) *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

Bletsoe, E. (2021) *Birds of the Sherborne Missal*. Exeter: Shearsman Books.

Blythe, R. (ed.) (1981) *Places: An Anthology of Britain.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Braxton, B. & Longair, M. S. (2011) 'Acoustic Simulation of Renaissance Venetian Churches', *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America.* Vol: 30 Issue 4 (Supplement).

Burnett, E. J. (2019) *The Grassling*. London: Penguin Random House UK.

Cage, J. ([1939]2009) *Silence*. London: Marion Boyars.

Cage, J. ([1959]1992) *Indeterminacy* [album]. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Candy, L. (2006) *Practice Based Research: A Guide*. Sydney: University of Technology. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257944497_Practice_Based_Research_A_Guide [Accessed 21 January 2025].

Cardiff, J. (2004) *Her Long Black Hair*. Available at: https://soundcloud.com/incredibleworksofart/sets/janet-cardiff [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Cardiff, J. and Schaub, M. (2005) *Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book*. Vienna and New York: Thyssen Bornemisza Contemporary in collaboration with Public Art Fund, New York.

Cardiff, J. (2001) *The Forty Part Motet*. Available at: https://cardiffmiller.com/installations/the-forty-part-motet/ [Accessed 21 January 2025].

Cawood Green, M. & Williams, T. (2018) On Reflection: The role, mode and medium of the reflective component in practice as research. Available at: https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/25106-on-reflection-the-role-mode-and-medium-of-the-reflective-component-in-practice-as-research [Accessed 21 January 2025]

Caught by the River (n.d.) Available at: https://www.caughtbytheriver.net [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Chopin, Y. (2023) *Memorial Benches: Conversations in the Landscape*. Ph.D. Manchester Metropolitan University.

Clare, J. (2007) *John Clare: Poems Selected by Paul Farley*. London: Faber and Faber.

Clare, J. ([1832] 1983) 'The Nightingale', in M. Grainger, (ed.) *Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clark, L. (1969) *Alfred Williams: His Life and Work*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles.

The Clearing. (n.d.) Available at: https://www.littletoller.co.uk/the-clearing/ [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Cohen, L. (1974) 'Chelsea Hotel.' (Song) on *New Skin for the Old Ceremony.* Columbia.

Common Ground. (1983) Available at: https://www.commonground.org.uk [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Common Ground. (1999) *Confluence*. An environmental and community arts project. Available at: https://www.commonground.org.uk/confluence/ [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Cooper, D. (2020) 'Contemporary British place writing: Towards a definition', in T. Edensor,
(ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Place*. London: Routledge.

Cooper, D. and Lichtenstein, R. (2020) *PLACE* Available at: https://www.placewriting.co.uk/about [Accessed 23 January 2025]

Copley, H. (2024) *Lapwing.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Cowen, R. (2015) *Common Ground*. London: Hutchinson.

Dee, T. (ed.) (2018) *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Evans, G. and Robson, D. (eds.) (2010) *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings.* London: ArtEvents.

Davidson, P. (2018) 'Bodleian Library, Oxford; Aubrey Manuscript 17, Folio 12R', in T. Dee, (ed.) *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Deakin, R. ([1999] 2014) *Waterlog*. London: Vintage.

Dillard, A. (1974) *Tinker's Creek.* New York: Harper's Magazine Press.

Edensor, T. (ed.) (2020) *The Routledge Handbook of Place*. London: Routledge.

Eliot, T. S. (1919) 'Tradition and the Individuality of Talent.' In Kermode, F. (ed) (1975) *Selected prose of T. S. Eliot*. New York: Farra, Straus and Giroux.

Evans, G. and Robson, D. (eds.) (2010) *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings.* London: ArtEvents.

Farley, P. & Symmons Roberts, M. (2011) *Edgelands*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Fowkes, S. (2015) *Cities and Memory*. Available at: https://citiesandmemory.com/?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=2023&gad_source=1&gbraid=0AAAAAomjuSBM3My9JHcZZHyhCuAA-Xgqo&gclid=Cj0KCQiA7se8BhCAARIsAKnF3rzzDzo61MdPBtcji2jIJAsmo9VYsa5zZfZwvCgrxojza0Mr6gbcJDQaAs5iEALw_wcB [Accessed 23 January 2025]

Fulton, H. (2018) *Walking Between Walks*. Kestle Barton, Cornwall, 14th July – 2nd Sept 2018.

Fulton, H. (2018) Artist statement. Available at: http://www.kestlebarton.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/hamish-fulton-artist-statement.pdf [Accessed 21 January 2025].

Fulton, H. (2019) *Words from Walks 2019*. Available at: https://gallery.mailchimp.com/7ab73766ea18df50bf862a85e/files/04db6cd0-e5ab-4543-85bc-9b5596a58ec8/Words_from_Walks_HamishFulton.pdf [Accessed 21 January 2025].

Glazer, T. (1964) *A New Treasury of Folk Songs*. New York: Bantam Books.

Grainger, M. (ed.) (1983) *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hardy, T. ([1881] 1991*) A Laodicean.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hardy, T. ([1878]1971) *The Return of the Native*. Bath: The Folio Society.

Hardy, T. ([1891]1991) *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Bath: The Folio Society.

Hardy, T. ([1872] 1989) *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Bath: The Folio Society.

Hardy, T. ([1887]1986) *The Woodlanders*. London: Penguin.

Hardy, T. (1955) *Thomas Hardy's Notebooks*. London: The Hogarth Press.

Hardy, T. ed Gibson, J. ([1976]2001) *The Complete Poems*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Harper, P & Kroll, J. ([2013]2019) *Research Methods in Creative Writing*. London: Springer Nature Limited.

Heddon, D., Lavery, C. and Smith, P. (2009) *Walking, Writing and Performance*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Holst, I. (1974) *Holst*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hutchins, J. (1774) *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset.* London: W. Bowyer and J. Nichols.

Jamie, K. (2012) *Sightlines*. London: Penguin Group.

Jamie, K. (2020) *Antlers of Water*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

Lee, J. J. (2020) *An Ecology.* Available at: https://www.placewriting.co.uk/place2020/jessica-j-lee [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Liptrot, A. (2016) *The Outrun.* London: Canongate.

Long, R. (2007) *Selected Statements & Interviews*. London: Haunch of Venison.

Lyle Skains, R. (2018) Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175 [Accessed 21 January 2025].

Mabey, R. (1996) *Flora Britannica*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Mabey, R. (2006) *Nature Cure.* London: Pimlico.

Mabey, R. (1973) *The Unofficial Countryside*. London: Sphere books.

Mabey, R. (2008) *Beechcombings*. London: Vintage.

Mabey, R., Clifford, S. & King, A. (eds) (1984) *Second Nature*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Macfarlane, R. (2015) *Landmarks*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Macfarlane, R. (2003) *Mountains of the Mind*. London: Granta.

Macfarlane, R. (2012) *The Old Ways.* London: Hamish Hamilton.

Macfarlane, R. (2007) *The Wild Places*. London: Granta.

Macdonald, H. (2014) *H is for Hawk*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Merwin, W.S. (2016) *Garden Time*. Hexham: Bloodaxe.

Mitchell, J. (1969) 'Chelsea Morning.' (Song) on *Clouds*. Reprise.

Moran, J. (2021) 'A virtual island journey: place and place writing in lockdown.' In *cultural geographies*. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14744740211029288 [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Nash, P. (2016) *Paul Nash: Outline, An Autobiography.* London: Lund Humphries.

Oliveros, P. (2005) *Deep Listening – A Composer's Sound Practice*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

O'Rourke, K. (2016) *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Osborn, G. (1986) *Dorset Curiosities*. Wimborne: The Dovecote Press.

Oswald, A. ([2002] 2010) *Dart*. London: Faber and Faber.

Oswald, A. (2009) *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. London: Faber and Faber.

Palmer, M. (2002) *The Sacred History of Britain*. London: Piatkus.

Pentcheva, B, V. and Abel, J, S. (2017) 'Icons of Sound: Auralizing the Lost Voice of Hagia Sophia', *Speculum*, 92(S1), pp. S336-S360.

Perman, T and St John, R. (2024) *The Resonant Viaduct*. (sound recording) Available at: https://tommyperman.bandcamp.com/album/the-resonant-viaduct [Accessed 23 January 2025]

Pevsner, N. & Newman, J. (1972) *The Buildings of England Dorset*. London: Penguin Books.

Priestly, M. (1994) *Essays on Analytical Music Therapy.* Barcelona: Barcelona Publishers.

Ricks, C. (2019) 'Interview with Christopher Ricks about the Lyrics.' *Dylan Review* Vol.1.2. Winter 2019. Available at: https://thedylanreview.org/category/dylan-review-vol-1-2-winter-2019/ [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Roud, S. (2017) *Folk Songs in England*. London: Faber and Faber.

Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. (1952) *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Dorset. Vol 1: WEST.* London: HMSO.

Sampson, F. (2018) 'About Time.' In *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Scraton, P. (2021) *Arrival/ Departure*. Available at: https://www.placewriting.co.uk/place-2021-blog/paul-scraton [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Schaffer, R. M. ([1977]1994) *The Soundscape – Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Vermont: Destiny Books.

Setterfield, D. (2018) *Once Upon a River*. New York: Doubleday.

Sinclair, I. (2002) *London Orbital*. London: Penguin.

Sinclair, I. (2017) *The Last London*. London: Oneworld Publications.

Sinclair, I. (2020) 'The Silence in the Forest'. Available at: https://www.placewriting.co.uk/place2020/the-silence-in-the-forest-by-ian-sinclair [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Smith, J. (2017) *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place.* Available at: *https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph-detail?docid=b-*

9781474275040&pdfid=9781474275040.0006.pdf&tocid=b-9781474275040-intro#page-5 [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Street, S. (2020) *The Sound of a Room*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Solnit, R. (2017) *A Field Guide to Getting Lost.* Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd.

Sprackland, J. (2012) *Strands.* London: Jonathan Cape.

Sprackland, J. (2016) *Creative Writing on Place and Nature.* Ph.D. Manchester Metropolitan University.

Thomas, E. (1928) *The Pocket Book of Poems and Songs for the Open Air*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Thoreau, H. D. ([1854] 1995) *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. New York: Dover Publications.

Traux, B (2001) *Steam* (sound recording). Available at: https://greywingensemble.bandcamp.com/track/steam-barry-truax-2001[Accessed 23 January 2025]

Wall, J. C. (1912) *Porches and Fonts*. London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co.

Westerkamp, H. (1989) *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (sound recording). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg96nU6ltLk. [Accessed 22 January 2025]

Westerkamp, H. (2002) 'Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology'. *Organised Sound.* Vol: 7 Issue 1 April 2002.

Williams, A. (1922) *Round About the Upper Thames*. London: Duckworth.

Williams, A. (1923) *Folk-Songs of the Upper Thames*. London: Duckworth.

Williams, A. Unpublished draft Introduction to *Folk-Songs of the Upper Thames*. (2598 – NRA 34132) Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre: Chippenham.

Williams, R. (1973) *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Wright, K. (2009) *Mirroring and Attunement*. East Sussex: Routledge.

'Grampian and the Central Highlands' (2020) *Secret Scotland*. (Television) CH5, 16 October 2020.

‘Using Sound’, *Soundwaves: The Symphony of Physics* (2022) (Television) BBC4, 27 June 2022.