

The background of the cover is a watercolor-style landscape painting. It depicts a wide river valley with a winding river in the foreground. The middle ground shows rolling green hills and fields. In the background, there are dark, jagged mountain ranges under a cloudy, overcast sky. The overall color palette is muted, featuring greens, blues, greys, and earthy tones.

The Singular Stiperstones

Landscape, reminiscence, literature and wildlife

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Front page photo courtesy of Gordon Dickins

*Illustration on opposite page by Anne Gilbert
from the 'Ecological Flora of the Shropshire Region'*

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In Mary Webb's novel the satanic presence of the Devil's Chair weighs on the mind and spirit of Stephen Southernwood (also an incomer) with golden hair, 'excited blue eyes and radiant bearing'. It 'towers in gigantic aloofness a mass of quartzite, blackened and hardened by uncountable ages'. Yet, in just one paragraph describing the Chair, Mary Webb mentions Heather, Holly, Cranberry, Curlew, Doves and Black Grouse. She cannot resist drawing on a rich lexicon of plants and birds. And her heath is coloured by the 'startling bright green' of the Whinberry (Bilberry), the 'dull crimson sea of heather' and the 'waxen whiteness' of the Cranberry (Cowberry) buds.

Stephen and Deborah become oppressed by the Chair, the chorus of grouse 'laughter' that goes with it and 'the desolate acres of burnt heather, each bush charred and left like a skeleton above the black-strewn ground'. As the nights draw in, the leaves fall and the frosts bite, Stephen, who is 'lost within', feels imprisoned by his environment and situation, hemmed in by an 'enforced intimacy with every mood of Nature', 'homesick for lighted towns', 'chained to the ridge' by his recent marriage to Deborah. He absconds to America, leaving Deborah near to suicidal despair. But eventually he returns, wiser, more mature, and at last together they clasp the metaphorical 'golden arrow', the symbol of enduring love.

For some, it is the finest of Mary Webb's novels. It is a tale of a girl's love, her sexual longing and fulfilment, her fidelity and maturity; of her father's tenderness, understanding and constancy; of her lover's fickleness, weakness and immaturity; and, after all is nearly lost, it tells of an eventual cautious reunion. It is a narrative of modest, insignificant lives played out in a forgotten corner of England, yet Mary Webb's flood of poetic description and her evocation of The Stiperstones as a place of portent, grandeur and malevolence, creates a backdrop against which these small lives assume dignity and weight, and resonate with a wider significance.

Gone to Earth

The principal setting for *Gone to Earth* is 'God's Little Mountain', modelled closely on Lordshill and Lordshill Chapel, which stand, 1,000 feet above sea level, at the northwestern extremity of The Stiperstones, close to Snailbeach. Whilst the denomination is not made clear in the novel, this is a Baptist chapel, built in 1833 and enlarged in 1873 (see Chapter 2). And in life, the novel and the subsequent film: 'The chapel and the minister's house at God's Little Mountain were all in one'.

Comparisons can again be made with Thomas Hardy, because *Gone to Earth*, like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), is about innocence, its loss, and how this impacts on lovers who cherish that innocence; and in both novels there is a degree of redemption, followed by tragedy. In *Gone to Earth* Hazel Woodus is a near wild thing, 'elvish', a child of wood and meadow, yet, at eighteen, she emerges a 'ooman growed', for whom 'to be admired was a wonderful new sensation'. She has become a creature of fascination and beauty who entrances

and her 'Foxy' as victims of the casual cruelty that drives the story, describing both as 'fiercely beautiful', 'facing destiny with pathetic courage' with 'a look as of those predestined to grief, almost an air of martyrdom'. Predestined perhaps, but it is a mark of Mary Webb's skill that time and again the engaged reader still wants to cry out to Hazel: 'Don't do it!'.

As always with Mary Webb, her readership is carried along by a forceful tide of nature writing, a nostalgic glimpse of a time when 'the brilliantly varnished buttercups' glowed in all the meadows, when 'silver-crested peewits circled and cried with their melancholy cadences', when there was some point in calling 'Thuckoo!' because there were cuckoos to imitate, and when there was a good chance of finding 'the little spring musherrooms as come wi' the warm rain'. Times have changed, but those who seek to promote 'the Mary Webb country' often pedal the notion that a hundred years on it survives, unspoilt, unchanging – if only! It remains a compelling landscape, but much of the texture, the diversity of creatures and plants, the sheer profusion, has been lost.

There is more to this novel however, than a feast of nostalgia and drama. There is a debate about sexuality, female and male; a passionate polemic about man and his cruelty to his fellows and to nature; and a tortured enquiry into the existence, or otherwise, of God. The last was a consequence, perhaps, of the carnage of the First World War which was being fought while Mary Webb, who had brothers on the Western Front, was writing.

'Gone to Earth', 'The Wild Heart', 'La Renarde'

Thirty years later, not long after another war, the summer and autumn of 1949 saw the filming of 'Gone to Earth' at various locations in South Shropshire, including Much Wenlock (as 'the town'), Pontesford Hill (as 'Hunter's Spinney'), Longnor Hall (as 'Undern Hall') and on The Stiperstones, but, most significantly,



**Hazel Woodus
(Jennifer Jones)
at 'Hunter's
Spinney'
(Pontesford Hill)**

From the filming of 'Gone to Earth', 1949. Supplied by the British Film Institute, photographer unknown. These conifers are the ones just visible near the top of Pontesford Hill in the photo on page 105.

Yet, despite the frequency of these wildlife references, they remain relevant to the setting of each novel, they are not simply thrown in for poetic effect but used to give a sense of ecological place. Thus, for example, Heather and Bilberry, both classic upland species, are mentioned 21 and 11 times respectively in *The Golden Arrow*, which is set amongst the upland heathland of The Stiperstones and The Long Mynd. But when it comes to *Gone to Earth*, which is set on the fringe of the hills, in somewhat softer, more low-lying country, one of woods, pastures and river valleys, there is no reference to Heather and only one to Bilberry. By contrast Bluebell and Wood Sorrel rate eight and four mentions respectively in the latter novel, but none in the former. Similarly for birds: Red and Black Grouse, both heathland and moorland specialists, appear in *The Golden Arrow* but not in *Gone to Earth*, whilst it is vice versa for Grey Wagtail and Dipper, both of which are river birds.

Birds: then and now

There is also a historical dimension to Mary Webb's wildlife references. In none of her upland novels does she mention Raven or Buzzard; why is this? Both are common today in the Shropshire Hills, and both are striking birds with, particularly in the case of Raven, rich potential for symbolism and poetic allusion. However, during the greater part of Mary Webb's life, the Raven was extinct as a breeding species in the Shropshire Hills, driven out by relentless persecution through nest destruction, shooting and poisoning. The last breeding record was in 1884, and it was not until 1918, after four years of the Great War, in which many gamekeepers had fought and died, that Ravens bred again in the county. The story was similar for Buzzard; once common, it was all but extinct in Shropshire by 1900 and did not start to recover until after the Great War.

By contrast, Mary Webb mentions other species which, though to be found when she was alive, have since become rare or extinct in Shropshire. One such is Black Grouse: they were present on The Stiperstones in her day, but have not now been found breeding in the county for some 60 years. Another is Woodlark, mentioned five times by Mary Webb in *Gone to Earth*. They are birds of bare ground and short vegetation with scattered trees, and with 'their hurried ripple of notes and their vacillating flights' they accompanied Hazel Woodus as she walked amongst the Whinberries above the chapel. Mary Webb lived at a time when the Woodlark population was expanding to occupy suitable habitats across much of the southern half of Britain, and the heathland fringe above Lordshill Chapel would have been ideal, but a marked contraction southwards was underway by the late 1950s. It is now some 60 years since there was much chance of observing Woodlarks in Shropshire.

Lapwing or Peewit would have been a common sight in the Shropshire Hills in Mary Webb's day. In *Gone to Earth* Reddin curses until 'the peewits arose mewing all about him'. Some twenty-five years later, in Malcolm Saville's *Mystery at Witchend* (1943) – see Chapter 6 – it is Tom Ingles, a London evacuee working on a Shropshire hill farm, who suggests the 'pee-wit' whistle as the Lone Pine Club's secret signal. At that time the Lapwing was still a common

breeding species in the Shropshire Hills, it remained so until the 1960s; it is now a rarity.

Whimbrel and Curlew

Amongst the many references to birds in *The Golden Arrow* there are six to Whimbrel. It figures too in another of her novels *Seven for a Secret*, set in the Clun Forest area of southwest Shropshire, and in the following passage evoking high summer she describes the Whimbrels' recently hatched young:

'The blackbirds grew silent. The whimbrels rang their elfin peals less often and their pencilled chickens¹⁰ ran amongst the heather near the springs. The wimberries ripened...'

Yet, as H E Forrest states in *The Fauna of Shropshire* (1899), a book which Mary Webb will surely have known,¹¹ the Whimbrel is 'a rare visitor to Shropshire Moors on its Spring and Autumn migrations. It has never bred here'; nor has it since.¹² By contrast, Forrest states that the very similar Curlew 'is numerous on our Shropshire moorlands and breeds regularly'.

Could Mary Webb have confused the Whimbrel and its close relative the Curlew? No, she would have been familiar with the Curlew and known it well from its onomatopoeic call; clearly she chose to use the name Whimbrel for poetic reasons. The alliteration of 'whimbrels' and 'wimberries' works well in the above quotation, and it comes from a passage which opens with 'Summer drooped warm wings over the moor'. Understandably, in her writing of fiction, poetry weighs more heavily for Mary Webb than science, so with a little 'natural magic' she spirits in the Whimbrel to impersonate the Curlew.¹³

W Byford-Jones and H W Timperley

Shropshire Haunts of Mary Webb by W Byford-Jones (1907-1977), a journalist who often wrote under the name 'Quaestor', was published in 1937. It had originally appeared as articles in the *Express and Star*, Wolverhampton, and it is essentially a series of journalistic yarns, ghost stories and legends, coloured by deeply conservative sentiments and nostalgia for a countryside seen as being under attack from urban sprawl. He provides a few biographical details of Mary Webb and descriptions of her homes, interspersed with *faits divers* and traveller's tales. He adds little more than anecdote to the store of knowledge about Mary Webb or The Stiperstones. When visiting the latter he comments, accurately perhaps, that 'One is nearer to Mary Webb on the Devil's Chair ... than anywhere else in Shropshire'. He also visits Rose Cottage, Pontesbury, where Mary Webb wrote *The Golden Arrow*, and it is indicative of the post-Baldwin popularity of her work and her countryside that he reports that under the guise of 'Roseville' it had been made into a boarding house on the strength of its literary connections.

In *Shropshire Hills* (1947), H W Timperley (1890-1964) offers a lyrical portrait of this part of his native county. He regrets the time that he has been obliged to spend away from Shropshire, even though this had given him the opportunity to write *Ridge Way Country* and *A Cotswold Book*. He concedes that 'with me the habit of gradual approach seems ingrained ... I would rather not go straight to a place at first sight but come to it in roundabout stages'. Timperley's writing mirrors his navigation, but despite a tendency to go 'all round the Wrekin', he eventually homes in on the essentials, offering some colourful and evocative portraits of Shropshire hill country, not least The Stiperstones, without, incidentally, a single mention of Mary Webb. For Timperley 'the hill is harsh and often saturnine' and 'against a sky glowing with the rising sun ... its crestline stacks of rocks simplified to a black or purple-toned silhouette ... loom like a barren and jagged wilderness on the edge of the world'. If you wish to share this perspective, approach the hill at dawn from Shelve and observe the long crest, etched, pin-sharp, against the eastern glow.

H W Timperley includes knowledgeable observations of the birds and plants of the hills, some of which assume historical significance today. Note, for example, his comments on the ubiquity of Curlews, which are now in decline, and, by contrast, his surprise at seeing three Buzzards 'which must have drifted across from the Welsh mountains'; today such a sighting is commonplace and invariably involves locally-bred birds rather than strays from Wales.

Vincent Waite and Jim Perrin

Vincent Waite's *Shropshire Hill Country* (1970) tends towards the scholarly, drawing on history, literature and myth, as befits perhaps a barrister-at-law who, for nearly 20 years, had been a teacher. Clearly Waite was a busy man, who wrote a quantity of books including several about other hill country (the Malverns, Quantocks and Mendips), consequently, perhaps, he observes The

tagging along. Tim Davies, the quickest of the 'dashers', returned a time of just 20 minutes and 46 seconds in 2006 for the 5km-long course. Some of the 'dawdlers' do just that, but 250 or so complete the course within an hour.³²

Paths, birds and dogs

These annual events are soon over, but what about the day-in day-out impact of 30,000 visitors? The path from the car park at The Knolls to Cranberry Rock and on to Manstone Rock is broad, over 30 feet wide in places, and worn, and getting wider and more worn with the passage of time, feet and water. It is the first experience that most visitors have of the pathways over the hill and it concerns some of them, who may conclude that the plant life and soils of The Stiperstones are under threat from relentless trampling. But this path is not typical, some paths are less than three feet wide and despite there being more than 11 miles of rights of way running through or alongside the heathland, paths occupy less than one per cent of the total heathland area. Eroded paths may be regarded as unsightly and can be awkward to walk on, but they have a limited impact overall on the plant life of the hill.

What then of the impact on birdlife? This issue raises more difficult questions. There is little doubt that if all visitors were to be excluded from The Stiperstones then crag-nesting birds, most notably Peregrine Falcon and Raven, would, within a year or two, start to nest on one or other of the tors. Other birdlife might benefit too, particularly from the exclusion of dogs, as would the sheep which on occasion they chase. An English Nature review of disturbance to breeding birds at sites up and down the country by visitors and their dogs, concluded that it exposes eggs and young to a greater risk of loss to opportunistic predators, especially the crow family, and that this is the greatest risk arising from disturbance at sites like The Stiperstones where visitor and dog numbers are high.³³ But clearly it is not feasible, nor desirable, to exclude visitors. Furthermore, a walker has a legal right to be accompanied by a dog provided it remains on the right of way.

Some bird species are notably resilient to disturbance, others are notably susceptible. An example of the former is Red Grouse which, despite its obvious vulnerability to straying dogs, may sometimes be found nesting close to paths. At the latter extreme is the Curlew, which, it is said, may be disturbed when a walker with a dog is still as much as 1,000 metres away.³⁴ Curlews have decreased markedly in the area over recent years; a number of factors are involved, but dog walking is likely to have played a part. It would certainly help to safeguard bird life and livestock if dogs were kept on a lead, but clearly in the case of Curlew this would not be a complete answer.

Here, as on other nature reserves, it proves difficult to convince dog-walkers that, in the interest both of livestock and of wildlife, they should keep their pets on leads. Peremptory notices have been tried, persuasive ones too, and humorous cartoons as well, but the problem persists. Lateral thinking may be required along the lines of the novel approach to visitor management adopted

Chapter 7

'The natural web': habitats and wildlife

*Once more the bracken pushed out soft fingers,
and cuckoos cried from orchards at the foot of the cwms.
The snipe summoned his love from his airy circles,
and curlews ran along the hilltops with their forlorn, elfin music.*

Mary Webb *The Golden Arrow* (1916)

Charles Sinker



This photo of Charles Sinker was taken at Preston Montford Field Centre in 1961. He has his son Mark on his shoulders and a botanist's lens around his neck. Reproduced courtesy of his daughter, Rebecca.

Charles Sinker (1931-2010), a botanist and teacher of distinction, had a particular liking for The Stiperstones and contributed much to our knowledge of the place and to its conservation. Born in Cambridge, he was a pupil at Shrewsbury School from 1944 until 1949 when he returned to Cambridge as a student. After graduation he worked for the Field Studies Council (FSC) at Malham Tarn, where he developed his talents as an inspiring teacher. He came back to Shropshire in 1956 as the first Warden of the FSC's Preston Montford Field Centre, a post he held for 16 years before becoming the FSC's first director.¹ Parkinson's Disease forced his early retirement, in 1983. He was a founder of the Shropshire Conservation Trust (1962), its first Secretary, then its President and for many years its Patron.² In 1979 he was appointed OBE for his services to nature conservation.

Right from the start Preston Montford Field Centre made extensive use of The Stiperstones as a site for fieldwork, and over the years thousands of students and children have come to experience and learn about the hill. In his introductory talks Charles Sinker drew on the cultural as well as the natural aspects of The Stiperstones, and

Pastures

As explained in Chapter 5, Mary Webb was not averse to tinkering with the names of Curlew and Whimbrel to suit her poetic purpose, and it was the same with flowers. In *The Golden Arrow*, John Arden and his daughter Deborah come to 'the slopes of short grass from which the round yellow heartsease was disappearing like a currency withdrawn – as the old mintage of painless and raptureless peace was disappearing from Deborah's being'. The 'round yellow' flower would actually have been Mountain Pansy *Viola lutea* for which old grasslands round The Stiperstones are well-known.²² Heartsease *V tricolor* has not been recorded on The Stiperstones and, as its Latin name suggests, is normally three-coloured, but the poetic similes on which Mary Webb is playing, require what is, presumably, a deliberate misnomer.

Mountain Pansy is a signature plant for the herb-rich grasslands growing on the moderately acidic soils which fringe the heathland. These grasslands will have been won in the past from heathy, gorsy and bracken ground, in areas where soils were perhaps deeper and marginally better and, most importantly, water was available, permitting human habitation. Here miners and their families succeeded in carving out tiny smallholdings. Hay was cut, livestock grazed and,



Plants of unimproved hill pastures

Plate by Anne Gilbert from the *Ecological Flora of Shropshire*, illustrating, with the Devil's Chair in the background, the characteristic species of The Stiperstones. From left to right, in colour: Heath Speedwell, Mountain Pansy, Heath Milkwort, Bitter Vetch, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Moonwort; as line-drawing: Sweet Vernal-grass, Moonwort; as line-drawing: Common Bent and Sheep's Fescue. Reproduced courtesy of Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

The Hollies lay within the so-called 'prison farm' (for years Upper Vessons Farm had been worked by trusty prisoners from Shrewsbury jail), but in 1968 the Home Office decided to sell up. An attempt by the Shropshire Conservation Trust to purchase some of the site came to nought, but, when ownership changed, Charles Sinker helped persuade the County Council to impose a temporary Tree Preservation Order whilst an understanding was reached with the new owners. They retained the trees, entering into an agreement with the Nature Conservancy Council for their safeguard, and, in 2008, forty years after its first attempt, the Trust, now known as the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, was able to purchase much of The Hollies, which it now manages as a nature reserve: 'If at first you don't succeed ...'.

Birds

Many of us listen eagerly each April for 'the Cuckoo', individualising the songster as if there is just one that calls throughout the district; sadly, with numbers in decline, this may soon be so! On The Stiperstones, Cuckoos parasitise Meadow Pipits. This is the commonest of the heathland birds, Skylarks are next in frequency, and twenty or so pairs of Red Grouse hold out at what is the southern extremity of their natural range in England – they were introduced to Exmoor and Dartmoor. Their 'go-back, go-back' calls, interpreted by the protagonists of Mary Webb's *The Golden Arrow* as laughing and mocking, ironic and derisive, punctuate the novel.

Curlews were once common breeding birds on and around these hills. Local poet Brenda Shaw spoke for many in the community when she described their 'plaintive yet familiar cry' as 'that sure and steadfast symbol' of Spring.³¹ Today numbers are much reduced, but they still thrill resident and visitor alike each spring, with what Mary Webb called their 'forlorn, elfin music', as do the Snipe which in some years 'bleat' in 'airy circles' over wetter spots.

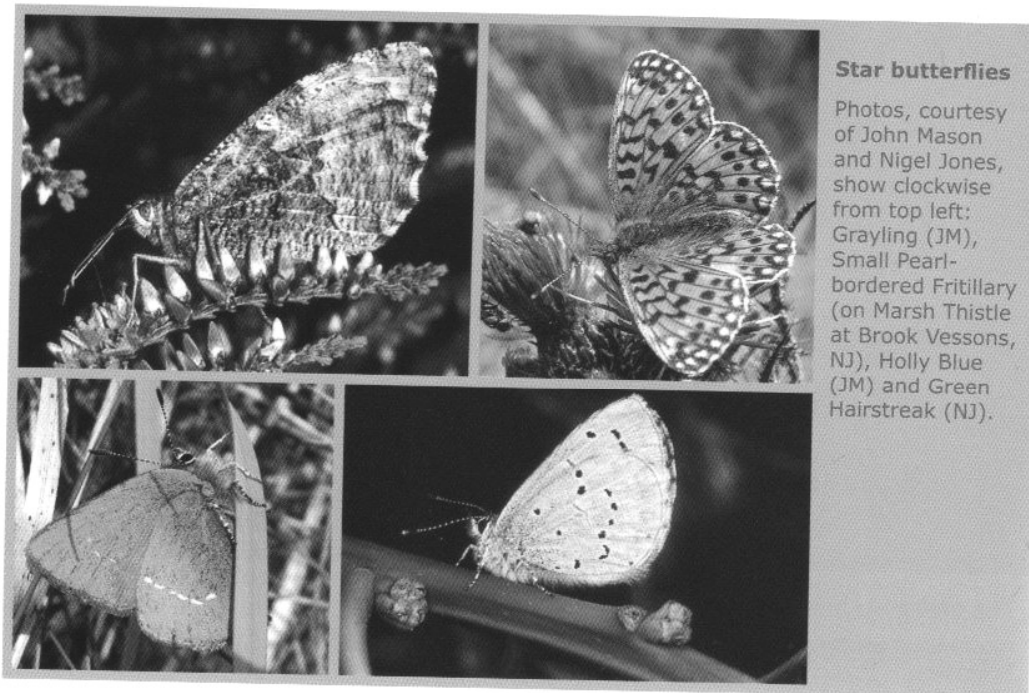
Amongst other heathland birds, Stonechats, whose numbers plummet when winter weather is hard, have benefited until recently from a run of generally mild winters; in good years there are at least 25 pairs and wherever one walks in summer they pop up, 'chatting' frantically from Gorse bush or Bracken frond; 25 years ago there were probably a mere five pairs on the National Nature Reserve and only 25 pairs in the entire county. The related, and almost equally neurotic Whinchat escapes the winters but runs a migratory gauntlet instead. This may be a factor in the recent steep decline nationally, which has reduced numbers on the hill from about eight pairs towards impending or actual extinction. Whinchats favour areas where there is both Bracken and damper ground, terrain which they share with a few pairs of Reed Buntings. Wheatears are migrants too, homing in on close-cropped grassland where relict stone walls or rabbit banks offer nesting holes near which they squeak and tut with anxiety. Whitethroats, Tree Pipits and Redstarts are other migrant animators of the heathland fringe, needing areas where there are scrub and trees. Redstarts are related to Stonechat, Whinchat and Wheatear and are perhaps the most

manic of this anxious quartet, keeping up an almost hysterical succession of alarm calls – ‘huit, huit, huit’ – however negligible the danger.

A genuine source of danger would be a Kestrel, Mary Webb’s ‘windhover’, hanging hopefully over the heathland. It is most likely however to be hunting for small mammals, particularly Field Voles, although Common Shrew and Bank Vole may be taken too, as well as caterpillars, beetles and earthworms. Buzzard and Raven are both now seen frequently and a few pairs nest round the periphery of the hill. In the woods there is a smattering of Pied Flycatchers, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Nuthatches. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers have disappeared, reflecting a significant national decline, but Green Woodpeckers hang on.

Invertebrates

In Crowsnest Dingle the Green Woodpeckers raid the voluminous nests of the Upland (Hairy or Northern) Wood Ant *Formica lugubris*, something of a speciality here at the southern edge of its range. Speckled Wood butterflies flit through woodland glades and Holly Blue butterflies flutter round that tree’s blossoms in April and May. In wet patches on the eastern side of the hill the rufous-winged Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterfly dances between the flowers of Marsh Thistle and Ragged-robin, and lays its eggs on the leaves of Marsh Violet; The Stiperstones is a hot-spot for this uncommon butterfly. On the heathland itself, May is the month to look out for Green Hairstreak butterflies; even the vivid green of the young Bilberry leaves pales beside the emerald of the butterfly’s underwings as it alights on the foliage, closing its wings as it does so.



Star butterflies

Photos, courtesy of John Mason and Nigel Jones, show clockwise from top left: Grayling (JM), Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (on Marsh Thistle at Brook Vessons, NJ), Holly Blue (JM) and Green Hairstreak (NJ).

CHAPTER 7

contrast, Rowan berries drop straight from branch to ground; what chance have their seeds got of distant colonisation? Plenty. The seductive orange-red berry tempts us once only, but the extreme acidity which causes us to wince and spit clearly appeals to Foxes; they Hoover up fallen fruits, the pips of which reappear in undigested clusters in their scats, dropped far and wide over the hill. Doubtless Red Grouse shop and drop too, and, if any berries are left on the arrival from Scandinavia of the over-wintering Fieldfares, they are swallowed and air-freighted to distant roosting sites in deep Common Heather, where the seeds are discharged overnight. With all this assistance, it is not surprising that seedling Rowans crop up all over the hill, including in the highest and stoniest of locations. Comparable itineraries could be mapped for the seeds of other common local colonists such as Holly, Crab and Oak, so, without the habitat management to be described in Chapter 10, the fragile heath would soon become wooded. But in the past this management was carried out not as a deliberate act to further the conservation of nature, but as an integral part of the local subsistence economy, elements of which are outlined in the next chapter.

she picked the flowers, then 'she sucked out the drop of honey from each flower like a bee ... when she found an unusually large globe of honey in a flower, she sang'.

Prior to the spread of myxomatosis in the 1950s, Rabbits were exceedingly common in the fields around the hill. George Evans recalls that 'there were that many Rabbits that we were almost walking over the top of them'. Henry Owen (born 1918) remembers that 'a lot of people lived on Rabbit, especially the big families. The skins would be dried and hung up, then sold to people that came round, and Mole skins, I've sold hundreds'. Wilfred Andrews says that: 'I was making more money at home on Rabbits than I was by going to work. The fields was walking with them. We had rabbiting dogs - two hounds and a little lurcher. I'd rear ferrets and sell them at a pound a piece'.

Fair game?

Wilfred Andrews was less successful with other quarry, recalling that 'in the bad winter of 1947 there was grouse all under the rocks, hundreds of them there were and there was nothing for them to eat. We thought we'd creep up on them with a .410 but they heard us'. Others had more luck, and the Gatten Estate's game book shows a total bag of 115 brace of Red Grouse for The Stiperstones in 1911. The strong population at this period is reflected in the frequent allusions made to Red Grouse by Mary Webb in *The Golden Arrow*. Their cackling call, 'a loud, raucous, mocking laugh', becomes a malevolent motif in the novel.

Birds other than Red Grouse did figure however in the poor man's diet: George Balmer (born 1916) recalls enjoying Rook pie; Gordon Cook (born 1920) roasting Fieldfares (or 'Feldefars' as he called them)¹ and Johnny Butler (born 1920) that the Pheasant had 'only got to squawk and he was signing his death warrant'.

Timber, firewood and other firings

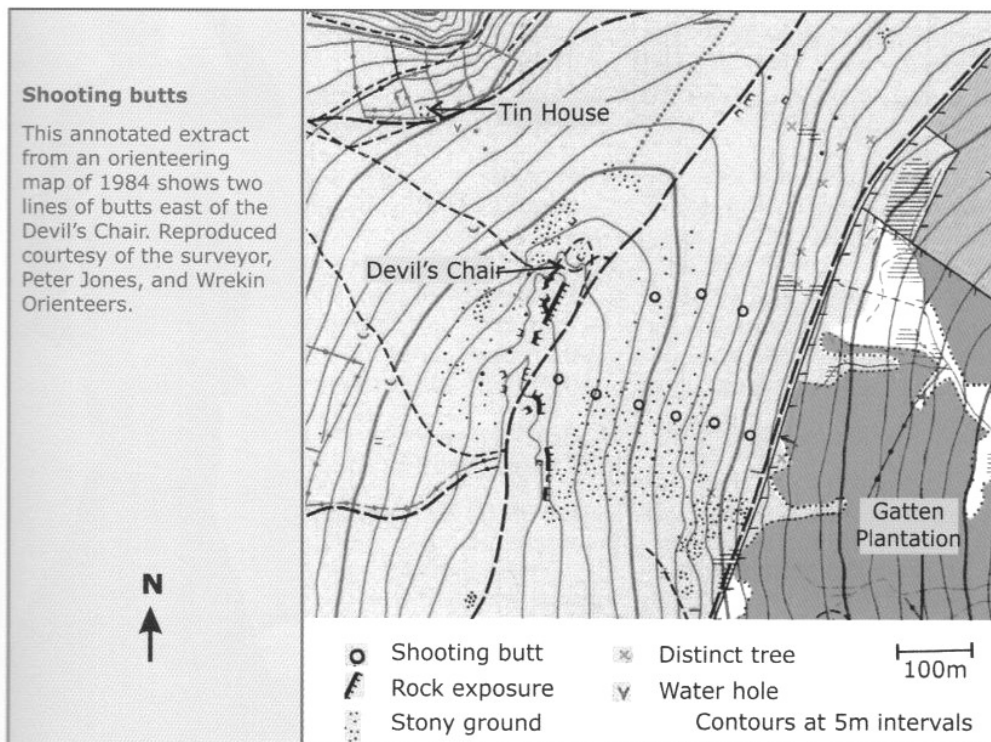
Wilfred Andrews remembers that during the War he worked 'on the forestry', notably in the 'Big Wood'. Many woods have been given this name but this was presumably the Big Wood on the eastern flank of Nipstone. Henry Jones remembers that his mother, Mary, worked there processing felled timber: 'Mr Gilbert Hotchkiss from Welsh Row had some heavy horses and he tushed it up the steep bank on to the flat piece where four women would saw it up into pit props which went to the Lancashire pits'.² Timber was harvested from Resting Hill too, here older members of the community remember major fellings in 1925 and 1946/7.

Elsewhere the returns were more modest, but Birch, Rowan and Hawthorn were all cut for firewood. Heber Rowson (born 1921) remembers how 'we fetched birch trees and I sawed them with a cross-cut saw with my sister to save the coal', while Tom Garner recalls that his cousin Harold Tomlins's first job every night was 'to saw an old birch tree down off the hill and lug it home for firewood'. The tough stems and twigs of gorse bushes were a valued and popular burning wood too: 'We always lit the fire with gorse sticks' says Tom. He also recalls the

economic activity yet to be mentioned: the grazing of livestock. In 1972, 19 registrations were made of a right of common-grazing, running to a total of three ponies and 807 sheep (or 146 cattle), even though by this time fewer small-holdings were being actively worked. There were also four registrations of a right to cut and take Bracken, and two to 'cut and take heath', along with 84 registrations of a right to pick Whinberries, a number of which included 'other wild fruits'. Although the Commons Commissioner found in favour of only three claimants, all of grazing rights, the extent of the claims made at this time reflects the historical importance of the hill as a grazing resource.

The grazing of livestock was important economically and was instrumental in the establishment and retention of the heathland, helping to keep it free from invasion by pioneer trees. Old photos of the hill used to illustrate this book show how very open and un-wooded the landscape was up until the 1960s. And it was a landscape ideal for the nurturing of Red Grouse for shooting. As stated above, 230 grouse were shot in 1911, the first year for which there are records. These are good numbers and adequate to justify significant input to game keeping and heather burning. Johnny Butler, whose father was a keeper, recalls that 'Jones the Gatten would come with a horse and cart to fetch the game that had been shot, there'd be a market for it'.

It is likely that, at this time, much of the flatter land of the hill would have been burned on a short rotation of perhaps 8-10 years' duration, stimulating the



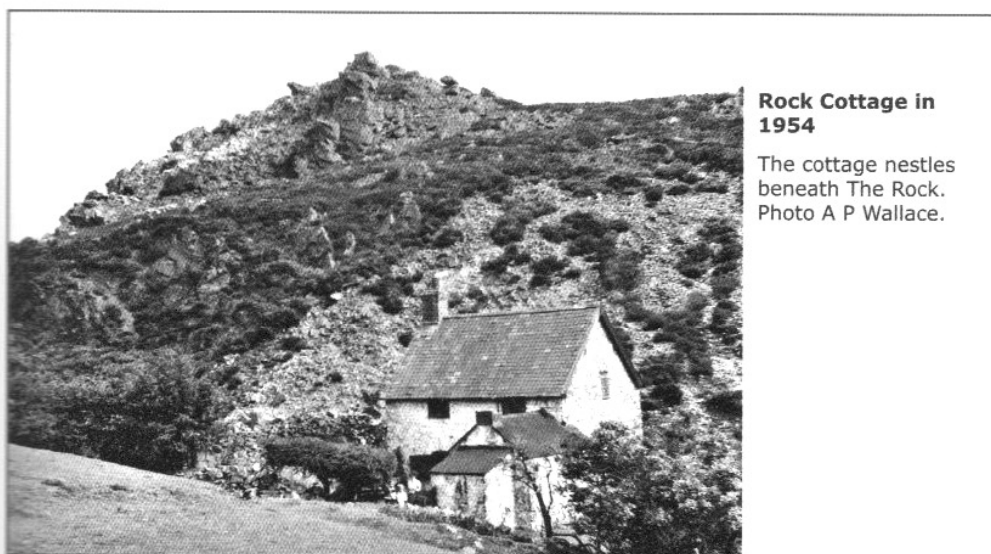
CHAPTER 8

Common Heather to produce plenty of nutritious young shoots for the grouse (and sheep) to eat. It was a 'driven' grouse moor, one on which the birds were sufficiently numerous to justify the deployment of beaters. They walked in line in order to flush and drive the grouse to guns waiting in rows of shooting butts strategically placed across the hill. As many as 25 such butts were identified in a recent survey; the most obvious lie east of the Devil's Chair.⁴ Recalling the 1930s, when he was involved in game-keeping, Henry Owen says: 'There was a lot of grouse on The Stiperstones then ... You could drive grouse easily ... We could make up four or five good drives'. At that time, shooting would have included the area running down to The Rock, where a certain Bill Francis had been born. His story is told in the next chapter.

in 1958. During her career, and after retirement, she travelled widely in an advisory capacity, notably to Malta, Malaysia, Singapore, Jamaica and British Honduras, including, in her own words 'among many primitive peoples living in jungle villages with dwellings made of bamboo and banana leaves'.¹²

Rock Cottage

Recollections of holidays at Rock Cottage occupy the bulk of Miss Merry's short memoir. We learn that the Cottage nestled up against a quartzite tor, and in that respect could well have been the model, in part at least, for the cottage that Stephen Southernwood and Deborah Arden occupied in *The Golden Arrow* (see Chapter 5). The rental was £3 per year, plus a further £2 for an adjacent one and three-quarter acres of ground.¹³



Rock Cottage in 1954

The cottage nestles beneath The Rock.
Photo A P Wallace.

When Miss Merry leased the cottage, it was surrounded by heathland, marsh and rough grazing:

'At times Buzzards flew over ... mewing and wheeling. Rarely one could hear the deep ominous croak of a coal-black Raven ... The Grouse surprised us often by crying "Go back, go back, go back" as they rose in fright ... From the marsh below came the [sound of] Curlews, Snipe and many Peewits. Occasionally we could hear ... the soft purring of the Nightjar.'¹⁴

The cottage, although not 'partially ruined', like the fictional one near the Devil's Chair taken on by Stephen and Deborah, still needed work to make it habitable, and the 'bare necessities' had to be added, including an Elsan toilet in the hut up the abandoned garden. Water was drawn from 180 paces away at what Miss Merry knew as 'Bessie's Well' (Bill Francis called it 'The Well of Salvation'); for tea-making it was boiled in the kettle hanging from a chain over the fire. Despite



Rock Cottage in about 1982

Note the burgeoning conifers to right and left. Photo courtesy of Gordon Dickins.

from Ratlinghope.¹⁶ Her diary entry for 16 May records how she sought out a grassy bank and had a good snooze – a nap in the sun and brewing tea outdoors were amongst her greatest pleasures – and there she found ‘beautiful little clumps of Yellow Pansies in the grass’. But today one would have to look hard to find a single Mountain Pansy along the entire route from Ratlinghope to Bromlow Callow, and the rich mix of associated plants detailed in Chapter 7 has gone too, victim of the agricultural intensification that has swept through the countryside.

Since the Second World War the drainage, ploughing, liming and re-seeding of agricultural land have proceeded apace, not least in the uplands, stimulated by government grants and by the very understandable pursuit by farmers of livelihood and profit. Loss of flower-rich grasslands has been one of the consequences. In a survey of the area surrounding The Stiperstones it was found that just in the years 1979-1982 some 22% of the area of ‘rough’, but flowery, grassland was destroyed.¹⁷ This was neither the start nor the end of the process, and over the period 1979-1989, 35% of Shropshire’s 466 grassland ‘Prime Sites for Nature Conservation’ were damaged or destroyed, amounting to more than 20% by area, a total of 2,280 acres, the equivalent of 84 miles of football pitches laid end to end.¹⁸ The most damaging local loss came in 1983 with the draining of a flush at Marehay Marsh (below the National Nature Reserve car park). It harboured such treasures as Butterwort, Bogbean, Tawny Sedge and Round-leaved Sundew, and was habitat for Snipe, Lapwing and Curlew.

‘One of Shropshire’s Curlew places’

Curlew is another example of wildlife in jeopardy. In the period 1939-42, a young birdwatcher, Ken Stott (born about 1924), was a regular visitor to a Scout camp at Wentnor. He tramped the hill-slope running from Ratlinghope up to The Stiperstones, a slope which included Marehay Marsh. ‘Besotted with Curlew and Snipe’, he remembers finding five Curlew nests in the area in one season, hearing Snipe ‘drumming’ (their mating display) all night and watching the Lapwing that abounded. And he says that across the ridge, the area from The Bog to Shelve Pool was equally alive with these wading birds.¹⁹

In *Shropshire Hills* (1947) H W Timperley (see Chapter 6) describes the valley between The Long Mynd and The Stiperstones (Ken Stott's tramping ground) as one of Shropshire's 'Curlew places':

'All through the spring and early summer there are few moments when no Curlew can be heard there. If one is not close by, beating round in circles over the rushy roughs, or hovering just clear of the ground where his mate is down, then there will be one above a far hillside or away behind a hill-shoulder. When the mating frenzy is at its height the valleys often resound with the wild calling which, though still finding an echoing wildness in the land, suggests other times, far off, when these valleys that man can now scarcely hold for his cultivation were wilderness untouched.'

Farm machinery has improved enormously since then, and man no longer has a problem 'holding this land for his cultivation'. Almost all of it has now been drained, ploughed, limed and re-seeded, reducing habitat for many of the birds of the upland edge, including Curlews. Now they often nest in mowing fields where their nests risk being destroyed when the grass is cut. Small numbers persist, but sadly today there are many moments in the spring and early summer when none can be heard. Unless new nature conservation initiatives come to fruition, the Curlew may well be lost to the Shropshire Hills over the next ten years.

The case of Lapwing is even more pressing. It would have benefited from the mixed farming regimes of the past, when occasional root crops and cereals were grown, but it likes damp ground too; today there is a monoculture of grass and fewer wet patches. It is now close to extinction in the Shropshire Hills, but Bill Tuer recounts that in the 1930s, when his father Ted was gamekeeper on The Long Mynd, there were so many to be found in the Ratlinghope area that their eggs, an acknowledged delicacy, were collected and sent to Fortnum and Mason's, London, in boxes of 36 at a time; yet the birds returned each year in good numbers.²⁰

Snipe are similarly beleaguered. One or two birds 'drum' in some years, on or near the eastern flank of the National Nature Reserve, but they have been lost from swathes of ground to east and west of the ridge which were havens for them until the 1950s.

Ken Stott was born at a time when Mary Webb was writing lyrically about the Shropshire Hills. Were she to return, she would notice enormous changes. The topography remains the same of course, but the loss of the detail, the grain of the countryside, the richness of its wildlife, has been dramatic. In terms of agricultural livelihoods there have been considerable improvements – production has greatly increased and subsidies have underwritten profitability – but in terms of habitats and wildlife, texture and colour, the enriching fabric of the countryside has been torn away. Writing of Mary Webb's Shropshire, Paul Evans, nature writer and broadcaster, observes that 'so much of the ecological weave of the countryside has unravelled that the once commonplace is now extraordinary'.

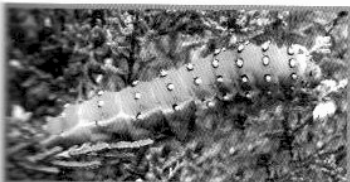
Chapter 10

'Back to (and beyond) purple': conservation and restoration

*To each of us a sacred trust
'Protecting earth' should be,
This heritage preserve we must
For all posterity.*

Emily Griffiths 'A Hymn for Conservation' (1990)¹

Flagships



Each section of this book has started with a single figurehead with which I have kicked off that part of my narrative. All but one, the Man Stone, have been animate, the others have been writers or narrators around whom I have sought to write my own tale.

For this final chapter I am nominating not one, but three figureheads, all illiterate: Emperor Moth, Curlew and Mountain Pansy. Each is a 'flagship' or 'signature' species, nominated to represent and carry the flag for a particular wildlife habitat which is of importance on and around The Stiperstones — conserve this species and a whole innumerable cohort of other species will be conserved as well. The Emperor Moth carries the flag for Bill Francis's 'boundless heath', the Curlew for H W Timperley's 'rushy



Flagship species

Emperor Moth caterpillar (at The Bog, courtesy of Nigel Jones), Curlew (courtesy of John Robinson) and Mountain Pansy (at Blakemoorgate, courtesy of Paul Glendell/Natural England).

roughs' and the Mountain Pansy for what the authors of the *Ecological Flora of the Shropshire Region* refer to as 'living grassland museums'. But first, an exploration of some of the issues surrounding the management of the National Nature Reserve which the Jolly Green Giant had opened in 1982.

Conservation

Managing the heath for nature conservation: wildlife and sheep

The importance of The Stiperstones for nature conservation lies in the outstanding quality of its open heathland landscape and its singular geological interest. This open landscape came about through sustained levels of grazing, through the scavenging of the many woody products that a small-holder economy needed, and by the burning of Common Heather (hereafter referred to simply as 'heather') designed to maintain a high population of Red Grouse for shooting, and to stimulate the growth of fresh browse for livestock. Grouse and grazing were the main drivers in the management of the hill.

By the time that The Stiperstones became a National Nature Reserve these traditional activities were losing their economic purpose. The Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) took on a landscape shaped by activities which were no longer viable. Small-scale grazing enterprises were uneconomic, small-holding and



Sheep at Blakemoorgate

Bob Cook and his son Gordon with their sheep, probably in the late 1930s. Reproduced courtesy of Gordon's daughter, Margaret Tate.

part-time livestock farming had ceased to be a necessity for local people, and grouse shooting was not profitable. The NCC needed to encourage the Commoners to continue grazing the hill, indeed to graze it more intensively, because grazing levels had declined over the years. The relationship between the NCC and the Commoners was not always an easy one. Issues of territoriality and control compromised cooperation in the early years, but recognition of mutual dependence has grown over time.

The NCC also needed to institute nature conservation management as a replacement for what previously had been self-sustaining activities carried out in pursuit of livelihood and profit, such as the felling of invasive trees and the management of Bracken. It is a surprise to some that nature reserves need management – are they not natural places where nature can and should be left to get on with it? In fact, in this country, where man's hand is omnipresent, many nature reserves are places fashioned by man through the exploitation of naturally occurring plant species (think, for example, of coppiced woodland, hay meadows and chalk downland) and this is the case with the heathland of The Stiperstones. A cessation of human activity, above all an end to the 'turning out' of livestock to graze, would soon allow woodland to re-colonise, taking this landscape back to a semblance of its pre-Bronze Age wooded state. The result would be fascinating and exciting, but it would see the loss of the special qualities that marked out The Stiperstones as a place worthy of becoming a National Nature Reserve. The sweeps of purple heather and banks of golden gorse would be lost, Red Grouse exiled and Skylarks silenced. There would be no open ground on which Grayling butterflies could bask, and Cowberry and Crowberry would be confined to the rocky ridge from where the visitor would peer out through tree branches, striving to discern landmarks and landform. It would be a very different place.

Numbers of livestock need to be held at a level which will ensure that the heathland is well grazed, slowing heather growth and keeping trees at bay. Currently the aim is to graze 440 ewes and their lambs on the hill from May to October. This is now being achieved by Higher Level Stewardship agreements with two of the three Commoners, through which they are paid to run the required numbers.² But the livestock graze some areas preferentially and neglect others; here trees soon get away and then have to be uprooted or cut down and their stumps treated with herbicide to prevent re-growth. Large areas, mostly on hillsides, have been tackled, with the assistance in some cases of the Commoners through their Stewardship agreements.

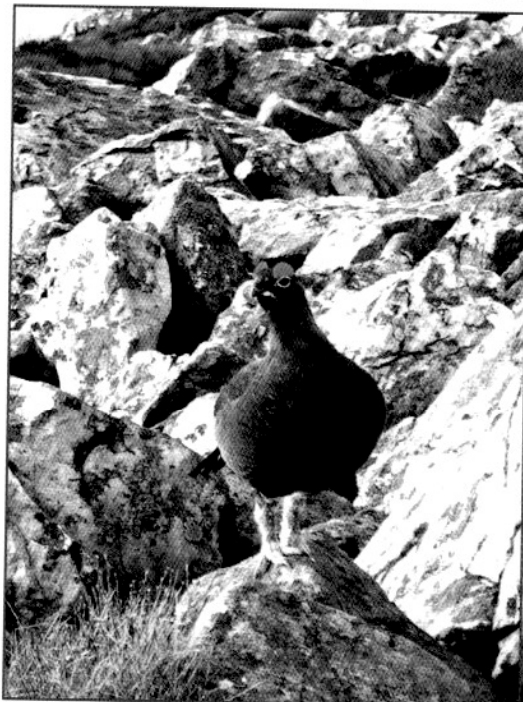
When management for nature conservation started in a concerted way in 1986, it was some years since there had been much controlled burning of patches of heather, though there had been extensive uncontrolled fires. There was a lot of old and leggy heather in which fires can soon get out of hand, and few areas of short heather where fire control is much easier and which can therefore be used as firebreaks. It was decided therefore to cut some of the heather in order to speed up the management and to create a network of firebreaks. Cutting, with a tractor and swipe (a mower with blades that rotate horizontally), can, unlike

burning, be done in most weathers but, for obvious reasons, it can't be done on steep slopes or stony ground, conditions typical of much of The Stiperstones. Nevertheless, cutting is a useful technique and one which continues alongside burning. Currently the aim is to cut or burn 300 acres of heather on a 12-year rotation, this deliberately leaves a fair amount unmanaged, because old heather has a particular value, notably for lichens and invertebrates.

The purpose of cutting and burning is to stimulate new growth. In the case of young heather plants this is readily achieved, as they soon sprout again. By contrast, plants more than 12 or 15 years old fail to do so, and regeneration of the heather depends on the successful germination of seedlings. This happens more quickly where the heather has been burned rather than cut because a good clean burn (though easier to wish for than to achieve) clears the litter, bares the ground and creates good conditions for germination.

Red Grouse

One of the species favoured by heather burning is the Red Grouse which persists in small numbers on The Stiperstones. It has real nature conservation importance as a signature bird of heather-clad hills. The Stiperstones and The Long Mynd are now its only breeding sites in Shropshire, and these two hills are southerly outliers of its range in England.³ Grouse like short heather for feeding (heather shoots make up some 90% of their diet), and longer heather for cover and nest sites. They are said to be reluctant to feed more than about 15 yards from cover, which means that cuts and burns should be no more than 30 yards wide. On The Stiperstones, cuts with sinuous shapes are preferred to



Shropshire Red Grouse

Male on The Stiperstones, photo courtesy of Christopher Sutcliffe; female on The Long Mynd, photo John Hawkins/flpa-images.co.uk



straight-sided ones, and they are made following the contours rather than up and down the slopes. Although the result looks very odd from the air, viewed from the ground this pattern of management fits well with the landscape and it creates lots of 'edge', a transitional zone considered to be of particular value to wildlife.

A decline in Grouse numbers was evident by the 1930s and it continued up until the 1990s, by which time there were so few birds left that shooting ceased. With perhaps just 5-10 pairs hanging on, the extinction of Red Grouse on The Stiperstones seemed a real possibility. The NCC did not hold the sporting (ie shooting) rights, which had been retained by the previous landowner, but there was no suggestion that the population had been 'shot out' by his sporting tenants. Clearly, however, the birds had not prospered under their guardianship.

Requests made on a number of occasions by the NCC and its successor body, English Nature, for the opportunity to purchase the sporting rights had never



Heather and grassland management

Sinuous strips cut out of uniform stands of Common Heather show up strongly in this aerial photograph taken at the north end of the hill in July 1996. The more amorphous shapes mark where heather has been burnt some years previously. In both cases, Bilberry, showing pale green, is typically an early beneficiary. The rectangular grasslands of Blakemoorflat appear in the foreground and those of Blakemoorgate at top left. Small 'clearance cairns' of stone removed years ago from the fields can be seen at the bottom edge of the former. The colonisation of the heathland by young trees is evident in the bottom left corner and dark patches of heather creep back into the fields which are, in local parlance, 'going back to the hill'. Here lime has been applied in recent years with the objective of reversing the trend. Photo courtesy of Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (ref CPAT 96-C-1017).

been agreed to, but in the 1990s a series of short-term leases were granted to English Nature. This ensured a moratorium on Grouse shooting while the recommendations of leading experts as to how to increase numbers were put in hand.⁴ These were that Foxes and Carrion Crows, the main predators of Red Grouse, needed to be controlled in order to improve breeding success. English Nature adopted and persisted with this policy for a number of years, in the face of significant local opposition, and although the really rigorous control that might have led to a significant increase in Grouse numbers proved impractical, there was a small increase in the breeding population and this may have been the result of the measures that had been taken.

After 10 years the owner of the sporting rights declined to negotiate either a further renewal of lease, or a sale to English Nature, and instead sold the rights to another private individual. This new sporting rights owner stepped up the predator control for a while, with the intention of reinstating shooting, and a further modest increase in the population to some 20-25 pairs may have been the consequence. Sadly however this improvement was not sustained and the population slipped back to in the order of 10-12 pairs before rallying again with good numbers of young birds fledging in 2013, possibly as a result of an enhanced commitment to predator control. Natural England (successor to English Nature) continues to work with the owner of the sporting rights in order to achieve a level of heathland management and predator control which will hopefully in time lift the population to a more secure level.

Two headaches

Management work carried out with the support of the Commoners includes the control of Bracken, a native species, but one with much less value as wildlife habitat than the dwarf-shrub heathland that it tends to displace. It is a very successful plant, and something of a headache, as it can be invasive and is very difficult to keep in check. Cutting the plant repeatedly can significantly weaken it, but also weakens the heather amongst which it grows, and the most effective method of control is by the application of Asulam, a herbicide which, whilst it kills all fern species, not just Bracken, normally has little effect on other plants apart from members of the dock family. On large, rough, or steep areas, helicopter application is the only practical technique, and a remarkably economical one; knapsack sprayers are used where smaller areas are treated. In both cases other fern species are safeguarded wherever possible. But it is not the intention to eliminate Bracken – even if that were feasible – particularly because Whinchat, a bird in sharp decline, favours some areas of Bracken, notably where these occur in conjunction with wet ground and heathland.

The Heather Beetle is another 'headache species'. Always present, the numbers of this small, brownish beetle reach plague proportions from time to time, and have done so more frequently it seems in recent years, possibly because the deposition of nitrogen through aerial pollution has enriched their feed. The tiny larvae (smaller than a grain of rice) feed almost exclusively on heather, damaging the plant's foliage, which turns foxy-red, and then, as the damaged

Farming and Wildlife: the Curlew and Mountain Pansy

So, by 1982, through a combination of local and national initiative, the best known parts of The Stiperstones, including Cranberry Rock, Manstone Rock and the Devil's Chair, had been safeguarded from afforestation or other major change, and had become a National Nature Reserve. And, since 1998, as outlined above, progress has been made in reversing the afforestation of parts of the ridge. But the wildlife interest of the area is by no means restricted to the heathland, and, as explained in the preceding chapter, the wildlife habitats of the surrounding area have been much diminished since the 1950s.

The loss of wildlife like the Mountain Pansy, Curlew, Lapwing and Snipe convinced the *Back to purple* partnership that in addition to heathland re-creation there was a pressing need to stem wildlife losses in surrounding habitats. They sought and gained the ready support of the Rural Development Service (part of the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs) and their predecessors, who, in an effort to hold the line, negotiated what were then known as Environmentally Sensitive Area agreements with many local farmers.¹¹ These agreements, now superseded by Entry and Higher Level Stewardship, were designed to put a break on further agricultural intensification. They were a step in the right direction but in practice did nothing to restore what had been lost.

In addressing issues of wildlife conservation and restoration on farmland in the valley between The Long Mynd and The Stiperstones (sometimes referred to as 'LongStones'), a major boost has been the work of the Upper Onny Wildlife Group established through 'Down to Earth', an element of 'Blue Remembered Hills', a Heritage Lottery Fund 'Area Partnership' project. The Group is surveying a range of wildlife species in the area, most notably Curlew, Lapwing and Mountain Pansy, and is working for their conservation. It is to be hoped that their efforts will be supported through a new project: the *Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme*, funded by the Lottery and launched in November 2013.

The prescriptions for Curlew, Lapwing and Snipe conservation are well known and not particularly demanding, and there is an urgent need to bring farmers, gamekeeping interests and nature conservationists together to agree on areas where they can be applied. The appropriate remuneration and compensation would have to be put in place in order to offset any loss of agricultural output, but this would be an admirable investment of Stewardship funding. The fields below the National Nature Reserve car park at The Knolls would be a good place to start, restoring something of the 'rushy roughs', the Curlew ground of which H W Timperley wrote in the 1940s.

Prescriptions for Mountain Pansy conservation are being developed through the work of Ian Trueman and Eleanor Cohn of the University of Wolverhampton. Ian was one of the joint authors of the *Ecological Flora of the Shropshire Region*; they sagely observed back in 1985 that 'it is easy to see how ploughing for the improvement of hill grassland destroys this living museum [of Mountain

Tailpiece: towards a singular future

Sir Roderick Murchison's observation about the singularity of The Stiperstones relates just to its physical geography - its geology as modified by natural processes. Hopefully I have shown that this singularity extends to a whole range of aspects - mining, transport, lore and legend, literature, reminiscence, human history, wildlife and conservation. All of this singularity flows from the fundamentals of the site's geology together with its physical structure and soils. Without the geology, there would have been no mining, therefore no railway, no ropeway, and an impoverished human history. Without the physical structure, the layers of lore and legend would be lacking, the literature wanting. Without the site's elevation and soils the wildlife would be less distinctive and would not have been enriched in the same way by mining and smallholding. This whole diverse mix, interleaved and intertwined, has led to a singular bookshelf of travelogue, memoir, literature and reminiscence.

However this multiple singularity comes with no guarantee of perpetuity. It has been threatened and eroded and continues to be so. We only begin to conserve once we see loss occurring, and sometimes we allow debilitating losses to accumulate. A loss may however be a spur to conserve what remains. So the destruction of the Halvans Engine House was a spur to the conservation of the fast-crumbling relics of the Snailbeach Mine, while the afforestation and reclamation of large parts of the southern end of The Stiperstones led to the frustration of further such plans and the subsequent declaration of the National Nature Reserve.

But much has, and continues to be, lost. Think for example of the headframes and shafts of the mines, Mountain Pansies and Curlews, locomotives and their tracks, Cuckoos and Whinchats. Little may be possible locally to turn the tide for the last two, and thoughts of restoring tracks and locos are surely pipe-dreams, but conservation of the principal features of the mines, and access to them, is being constantly improved. Meanwhile, the alert has been sounded for Pansies, Curlews and other wildlife and there is now the chance to ensure their survival and increase.

The hope for the future of The Stiperstones lies not just in the recognition and honouring of its singularity, but through the vigilant safeguard of this quality and the tenacious and energetic clawing back of those elements that have been lost. Such is the purpose of the many restoration projects at the mines, of *Back to purple, Once upon a hill* and of *Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country*.

In the words of Emily Griffiths: 'This heritage preserve we must/ For all posterity'. I can only hope that, through highlighting this heritage, *The Singular Stiperstones* will contribute towards its preservation.

Chapter 4 'Diafol Mountain': lore and legend

Notes

- 1 Katherine M Briggs (1978) in an essay on the history of the Folklore Society introducing a volume marking the Society's centenary.
- 2 A 'shechinah' is 'a radiant light symbolizing God's presence' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Mary Webb's 'grey shechinah' would seem to be a sombre pall symbolizing the presence of the Devil! The notion of a weather-shrouded Chair being tenanted by Beelzebub is taken up by Emily Griffiths who, in addition to reminiscing knowledgeably about The Stiperstones, produced a collection of verse including 'The Devil's Chair Legend':

`So now, when fog obscures the light
Or thunder-clouds hang, black as night
With bated breath folks say "He's there,
The Devil's sitting in his chair".'

Another local poet, Brenda Shaw (1917-1975) , uses 'broad Shropshire' to give expression to the same notion in her poem 'The Devil's Chair':

`When thunder claps re echo
Locals are thought to say,
Each sagely nodding head to head,
"Ee be a wum today".' [He be at home today]
- 3 Charlotte Burne states 'or 1854' but the Crimean War started in 1853.
- 4 Charlotte Burne notes that she 'never succeeded in getting a second version of this curious story', nor could she trace the original teller. Jennifer Westwood (1985) suggests that 'we might well be chary of accepting at face value some of the features of her tale, which includes details of Saxon costume which sound as if they have been added on [by others] for "authenticity"'. Charlotte Burne notes that 'the name given to Edric's wife, the "Lady Godda" curiously coincides with that of Frau Gauden or Gode', the German huntress whose declaration 'The chase is better than Heaven' condemned her to follow it to eternity. Jennifer Westwood is reluctant to accept that the name Lady Godda is derived from English tradition and speculates that it may have been added in by someone familiar with Jacob Grimm's account of Frau Gauden published in 1835.
- 5 Hughes (1977).
- 6 This is evident from Mrs Marston's show exhibits which include: '1906, plums; 1908, gooseberries; 1909, cherries, sugarless'.
- 7 For a detailed discussion see Armstrong (1970).
- 8 Context and call make clear that Mary Webb is referring to Wigeon, yet in her *Shropshire Word Book* (1879) Georgina Jackson states that the name 'Magpie Widgeon' is used for a very different duck, the Goosander. The latter's flight call is a croak not a whistle.
- 9 Outdoor services known as 'camp meetings' were very popular occasions, drawing worshippers from all round the hill.
- 10 Mulroy (no date).
- 11 This comes from an article published in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* of 8 June 2000.
- 12 Rolt (1910-1974) was a historian of engineering, a professional author of more than 30 books, and devotee of vintage cars, canal boats, narrow gauge railways and industrial archaeology.

Chapter 5 'Natural magic': the novels and nature of Mary Webb

Notes

- 1 From the Introduction to *Gone to Earth* in the *Collected Works of Mary Webb* published by Jonathan Cape in 1928. John Buchan (1875-1940) was a writer and politician; he is best known for his novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915).
- 2 W Reid Chappell (1930) provides a photo (reproduced here) which appears to be of 'Tin House', though it shows no tin! He refers to it as the home of Deborah Arden and Stephen Southernwood, though their fictional cottage would have been closer to the Devil's Chair.
- 3 Whilst Lostwithyn is generally considered to be the Bog Mine, the New Venture Mine in Perkins Beach seems to me a better candidate. Other locations have been suggested including both Snailbeach Mine and Cothercott Mine which lies to the east of The Stiperstones.
- 4 Philip French in the *The Observer*, 7 August 2005.
- 5 The production, by the Shared Experience Theatre Company, toured various southern theatres in Spring 2004.
- 6 From the review by Susannah Clapp in *The Observer*, 16 May 2004.
- 7 'Hollywood Comes to Shropshire. The Making of Mary Webb's *Gone to Earth*', QV Productions, 1998.
- 8 The Lordshill Project began in 2005 and aimed to record the memories of those who took part in or watched the filming, as well as providing background information; the two CDs were released in 2006, further material is archived.
- 9 This analysis was done for a lecture given by the author in 1995 to the Summer School of the Mary Webb Society.
- 10 The 'pencilled chickens' are the Whimbrel chicks with pencil-like markings on their plumage.
- 11 A fair assumption, because not only was Mary Webb a student of nature, but also, according to W Reid Chappell (1930), H E Forrest was 'a great friend' of hers.
- 12 The nearest breeding location is in northern Scotland.
- 13 For Mary Webb the two bird names become interchangeable. In *The Golden Arrow* the cries of both Curlew and Whimbrel are likened to the sound of broken glass. The 'elfin peals' of the Whimbrel in *Seven for a Secret* are echoed by the 'elfin music' of the Curlews in *The Golden Arrow*. And in her poem 'On the Wild Hill' (Webb 1987) she refers to 'pencilled Curlew chickens', thereby duplicating the description of 'Whimbrel chickens' from *Seven for a Secret*.

Sources

Coles G M 1978	Hardy T 1878	Thomson D 1993
Coles G M 1990	Hardy T 1891	Wall T 2003
Edmundson H 2004	Powell M 1992	Webb M 1916
Forrest H E 1899	Reid Chappell W 1930	Webb M 1917
Francis P, Price J & Yapp K 2000	Saville M 1943	Webb M 1922
Gibbons S 1932	Sharrock J T R 1976	Webb M 1987

- 31 Brenda Shaw (1917-1975) lived in Curlew country: brought up at the Gravels Post Office she subsequently dwelt at Ritton Place, near The Bog. Her collection of *Shropshire Poems* was published posthumously by her nephew Wynford Wyke and his family.
- 32 Rothamsted Experimental Station in Hertfordshire has been co-ordinating a national network of moth light-traps of standard design since 1968. This has enabled the generation of national population trends for individual species.
- 33 Boardman (2007).
- 34 Kelly (1999); Whild (2002).

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| Mabey R 1996 | Shropshire Botanical Society 2002 | |
| Marren P 2012 | | |

Chapter 8 'Picking our clothes off the hill': heathland harvests

Notes

- 1 The Fieldfare is a Blackbird-sized thrush which nests in northern Europe, wintering further south, including in Shropshire.
- 2 This is the Gilbert Hotchkiss who figures, as a child, in the family photograph on page 90.
- 3 A 'burthin' is an armful.
- 4 Hannaford (2006).

Sources

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|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
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| Francis P, Price J & Yapp K 2000 | | Webb M 1916 |
| Hannaford H R 2006 | | Webb M 1917 |
| Jones I M 2009 | Snailbeach WI 2003 | Whild S & Lockton A 2009 |

Chapter 9 'A boundless heath': paradise, devastation and preservation

Notes

- 1 'Hasty Pudding was made hanging a pot of skimmed milk over the fire and mixing into it a cupful or so of plain flour (often home grown) and a little salt. Nourishing and filling. But I hardly imagine today's children giving it a welcome as we did. Kettle Broth was also a filling meal. Here we had bread broken into a basin, a few chopped chives, a lump of bacon fat or beef dripping (both plentiful in those days) and hot water poured over the lot. Kettle Broth. Well, sneer if you may, but still better than the diet of the workhouse where so many of my parents' generation ended their pitiful lives.' From Bill Francis's diary entry for 26 September 1988.
- 2 Hannaford (2006).
- 3 Watson (2002).
- 4 Chitty (1968).
- 5 Wall (1908).
- 6 Hannaford (2006).
- 7 Pannett (forthcoming). Between the two main blocks of open land lie the areas still identified today as the parish wards of Upper and Nether Heath suggesting that heathland had once dominated a huge tract of land.
- 8 Miss Merry visited the original Rignoreoak which lies above Pennerley, immediately adjacent to the open hill. When, in 2004, Natural England established a base on The Stiperstones much further down the slope, I foolishly named it 'Rignoreoak' too, showing no regard for place-name history and inevitably causing confusion as to which location was meant when the name was used.
- 9 This was the era of 78 revolutions per minute rather than the 33 of the later 'long playing records'. There would have been less than five minutes of music on each side of a disc, so many discs would have been required for a complete recording of *Messiah*.
- 10 The three eldest children had been born in the cottage at Rignoreoak, its location chosen partly, presumably, because of the proximity of water. Apparently this was piped into the house – a significant luxury at the time.
- 11 Nurse Hand lived at Snailbeach in what is still known locally as the Nurse's Bungalow.
- 12 Biographical details are taken from her sister Dorothy's *A Merry Family Omnibus* (1974). Dorothy also published *The History of Minsterley* (1976).
- 13 Price comparisons across time are complex, but the equivalent of a 1948 leasehold cost of £3 would now be in the range of a mere £90 to £380 depending on the terms of tenancy (these figures are for 2011 and come from measuringworth.com).
- 14 The subsequent planting of conifers stifled the 'masses of heather' which Miss Merry described as dominating the surroundings, the Red Grouse disappeared with the heather, while Curlews are increasingly scarce and Snipe, Lapwing (Peewit) and Nightjar no longer breed in the vicinity. However, both Raven and Buzzard are now frequent.
- 15 Shaw (2011).

THE SINGULAR STIPERSTONES

- 16 Hilda Murrell (1906-1984) had a deep love for the countryside, especially that of the Marches and Wales. Extracts from her nature diaries were edited by Charles Sinker and published in 1987. Her mysterious murder had been a national news story.
- 17 Walker *et al* (1983).
- 18 Shropshire Wildlife Trust (1989). The report refers to the loss of 'Prime Site' grassland as equating to 74 miles of football pitches laid end to end, but this appears to be a miscalculation.
- 19 I gathered the information in this paragraph during a discussion with Ken Stott on 9 November 2009.
- 20 The Lapwing Act of 1926 prohibited egg collection, so presumably Ted Tuer's employer was the beneficiary of some form of local exemption.
- 21 From Chapter 51 of *The Golden Arrow* in which Mary Webb compares the 'fir trees' unfavourably with the 'breathless May freshness' of Larch (also a conifer, albeit a deciduous one).
- 22 The proposal is outlined in a letter of 27/1/67 from the BBC to Shropshire County Council of which there is a copy in Natural England files. Apparently the television mast on The Wrekin is a mere 171 feet tall, so perhaps in that location the mast did not need to be as tall, or the proposal was scaled down.
- 23 Nature reserves managed directly by Britain's official nature conservation bodies (in England this is now Natural England), or with their formal approval, are 'declared' to be National Nature Reserves; they exist to protect and manage some of the most important wildlife habitats and geological formations in the country.
- 24 Twenty-five years on, in 2007, the celebration of the anniversary of the opening of the National Nature Reserve included a gathering of some of the primary school children who had been present in 1982. And a new cohort of children, this time from the Mary Webb (secondary) School in Pontesbury, were given the opportunity of working with jazz composer and performer Clark Tracey, in putting together a concert of original music backed by video footage shot by school parent, Ben Osborne, Shell Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2007. Clark then led his quintet in performing *Stiperstones*, the jazz suite which he and pianist Steve Melling had been commissioned to write and perform in 1987 by 'Music at Leasowes Bank' (see Introduction).
- 25 The quotation comes from Bellamy's foreword to Riley 1991.

Sources

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Chitty L F 1968	Pannett D J, Thomas D & Ward R G 1973	Wall J C 1908
Evans P 2011		
Francis P (ed) 1992	Pannett D J (forthcoming)	Watson M 2002

Chapter 10 'Back to (and beyond) purple': conservation and restoration

Notes

- 1 From *Stiperstones and Thereabouts* (1990). A collection of 40 poems; Shropshire Archives C83 v.f. LS26876.
- 2 Environmental Stewardship is a government-funded agri-environment scheme that is designed to deliver good environmental management in return for which farmers receive payments. The part of the scheme known as Higher Level Stewardship relates to potentially more demanding requirements and provides higher payments through agreements tailored to local circumstances.
- 3 Red Grouse once occurred on several hills in Shropshire, but by the 1990s The Stiperstones (including Heath Mynd), The Long Mynd and Brown Clew were the only surviving locations. It is not thought that they breed any longer on Brown Clew. Red Grouse occur sparsely but quite widely in Wales, and the small Black Mountains population of South Wales just creeps over into the upland sliver that lies within Herefordshire but these may be regarded as Welsh rather than English birds. They also occur on Dartmoor and Exmoor but were introduced to both in the twentieth century (Wesley 1988).
- 4 Various reports were commissioned from the Game Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, University of Oxford.
- 5 The most comprehensive review of current knowledge of the Heather Beetle's biology, occurrence and control in the UK is provided by Rosenburgh & Marrs (2010).
- 6 I am indebted to Simon Cooter, Senior Reserve Manager at The Stiperstones National Nature Reserve, for briefing me in relation to *Phytophthora*.
- 7 Pywell *et al* (1997).
- 8 Pywell *et al* (1997).
- 9 A 'chain-harrow' is a standard agricultural harrow designed to scarify the ground and create a good seed bed. It consists of a 'carpet' of inter-linked chains from which a series of short spikes project; it is towed by horse or tractor.
- 10 Results from use of the harrow at The Stiperstones have been inconclusive and more trials would be needed to develop this technique into a reliable one.
- 11 In October 2006 the Rural Development Service and the major part of the Countryside Agency joined with English Nature to form Natural England.
- 12 Trueman & Cohn (2006).
- 13 From 'The Stiperstones' written in 2006, along with others by the Border Poets, as a contribution to 'The Lordshill Project' (see 'Revisiting and remembering 'Gone to Earth' in Chapter 5).
- 14 Other elements of *Once upon a hill* included the conservation of upland grassland, the restoration of stone walls and hedges and the development of self-guided trails from mine sites onto the hill under the title *From mine-shaft to fire-side*.



Tom Wall became the first Warden of The Stiperstones National Nature Reserve in 1986, alongside which he managed nature reserves in Herefordshire. He was the instigator

and project manager of *Back to purple: conserving and restoring The Stiperstones*, and, prior to his retirement in 2010, he set up another conservation project, *Once upon a hill*. He was a member of the team that recorded and published two volumes of oral reminiscence, *Never on a Sunday, memories of the Stiperstones mining communities* (2010) and *Once upon a hill, the lost communities of the Stiperstones* (2011).

With Paul Harding, he part-authored and edited *Moccas: an English deer park, the history, wildlife and management of the first parkland National Nature Reserve* (2000). He has also published extensively about another Herefordshire National Nature Reserve which he managed, Downton Gorge.

Birds are a particular interest, and he is currently contributing text for the forthcoming *Birds of Herefordshire* and *Birds of Shropshire*.