Are there any genuinely wild places left in Britain and Ireland? Or have we tarmacked, farmed and built ourselves out of wildness? In this celebrated book Robert Macfarlane embarks on a series of beautifully described journeys in search of the wildness that remains in these islands. Written in a style and form as unusual as the places with which it is concerned, The Wild Places mixes history, memory and landscape in a strange and bewitching evocation of wildness and its importance.

'A magical, masterly call to the wild that asks us to think about what we have in these isles – and what we have to lose' Metro

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'A wonderful evocation of Britain's natural beauty and a reminder of our need to connect with the wilderness' The Times
Also by Robert Macfarlane

Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination
I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.

JOHN MUIR
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Up near where the falls began, on one of the last plateaux of ice, at the foot of a crag, I lay down and put my ear to the river’s hard brim, and I could hear dark loose water glugging somewhere far beneath the surface. And when I put my eye to the ice and gazed down into it, I could just see formations of rods and quills, which caught the last light and concentrated it into bright spines and feathered cones, and between them I could also see numberless air bubbles, which in their silver chains resembled constellations.
For months after the Cumbrian night walk, I was unable to travel, kept in Cambridge by work and my young daughter. I watched spring come and go in the city – crocuses bursting on the Backs, white cherries blossoming on the avenues, blackcaps singing their hearts out – frustrated not to be getting away, up to the Ribble and the Lune. I walked or ran up to the beechwood several times, and climbed my tree. Then one day in early June, Roger rang. I was pleased to hear from him, because I had been having some difficulty getting through to him at Walnut Tree Farm. Squirrels, he said. Squirrels had been the problem. His phone line had first gone crackly, then dead, and he had called in the engineers. The engineers had found that squirrels had been nibbling the phone line. Apparently, Roger explained, this was becoming quite a common occurrence. Squirrels are highly intelligent, agile enough to tightrope-walk along telephone wires, and poor conductors of electricity. Somehow they have realised that by biting through to the bare wires and short-circuiting the fifty volts that run through them into their own bodies, they can heat themselves up. In this way, said Roger, each squirrel becomes a sort of low-voltage electric blanket – and will sit up on the wires with a stoned smile for hours.

But the point of Roger’s call, it eventually transpired, was to propose an expedition down to Dorset, in order to explore the holloway network of that county.
Holloway: from the Anglo-Saxon *hola weg*, meaning a 'harrowed path', a 'sunken road'. A route that centuries of use has eroded down into the bedrock, so that it is recessed beneath the level of the surrounding landscape. Most will have started out as drove roads, paths to market. Some as Saxon or pre-Saxon boundary ditches. And some, like the holloway near Bury St Edmunds, as pilgrim paths.

The oldest holloways date back to the early Iron Age. None is younger than 300 years old. Over the course of centuries, the passage of cartwheels, hooves and feet wore away at the floor of these roads, grooving ruts into the exposed stone. As the roads deepened, they became natural waterways. Rain drained into and down them, storms turned them into temporary rivers, sluicing away the loose rock debris and cutting the roads still further below the meadows and the fields.

Holloways do not exist on the unyielding rock regions of the archipelago, where the roads and paths stay high, riding the hard surface of the ground. But in the soft-stone counties of southern England—in the chalk of Kent, Wiltshire and East Anglia, in the yellow sandstone of Dorset and Somerset, in the greensand of Surrey and in the malmstone of Hampshire and Sussex—many holloways are to be found, some of them twenty feet deep: more ravine than road. They go by different names in different regions—bostels, grundles, shutes—but they are most usually known as holloways.

These holloways are humbling, for they are landmarks that speak of habit rather than suddenness. Trodden by innumerable feet, cut by innumerable wheels, they are the records of journeys to market, to worship, to sea. Like creases in the hand, or the wear on the stone sill of a doorstep or stair, they are the consequence of tradition, of repeated action. Like old trees—the details of whose spiralling and kinked branches indicate the wind history of a region, and whose growth rings record each year’s richness or poverty of sun—they archive the past customs of a place. Their age chastens without crushing.

Gilbert White, in his *Natural History of Selborne* (1788), made a typically attentive study of the holloways in his Hampshire parish. ‘Two rocky hollow lanes’, he recorded, ran through the parish, ‘the one to Alton, and the other to the forest’.

These roads, running through the malm lands are, by the traffic of ages, and the fretting of water, worn down through the . . . freestone . . . so that they look more like water-courses than roads . . . In many places they are reduced sixteen or eighteen feet beneath the level of the fields; and after floods, and in frost, exhibit very grotesque and wild appearances, from the tangled roots that are twisted among the strata, and from the torrents rushing down their broken sides . . . These rugged gloomy scenes affright the ladies when they peep down into them from the paths above, and make timid horsemen shudder while they ride along them.

To enter these holloways, White said, was to access a world of deep history; an unexpectedly wild world, buried amid the familiar and close-at-hand. He visited his holloways in different weathers, to see how their moods altered with the changing climate. During the fiercely cold January of 1768, when the temperature in Selborne dropped to −34°C, and the leaves of laurel bushes were scorched brown by the cold, and when the snow fell thickly enough to fill the holloways, White observed how it there became sculpted by the wind into shapes ‘so striking to the imagination so as not to be seen without wonder and
pleasure'. When the sun shone that winter, reflected sunlight from the snow was bright enough to dazzle animals and birds. Poultry sat in their roosts all day long, stupefied into inaction by the land's lustre.

Few holloways are in use now: they are too narrow and too slow to suit modern travel. But they are also too deep to be filled in and farmed over. So it is that, set about by some of the most intensively farmed countryside in the world, the holloways have come to constitute a sunken labyrinth of wildness in the heart of arable England. Most have thrown up their own defences, becoming so overgrown by nettles and briars that they are unwalkable, and have gone unexplored for decades. On their steep damp sides ferns and trailing plants flourish: bright bursts of cranesbill, or hart's tongue, spilling out of and over the exposed network of tree roots that supports the walls.

I think of these holloways as being familial with cliffs and slopes and edges throughout Britain and Ireland – with the Cliffs of Moher in County Clare, or the inland prow of Sron Ulladale on the Isle of Harris, or the sides of Cheddar Gorge or Avon Gorge, where peregrines nest. Conventional plan-view maps are poor at registering and representing land that exists on the vertical plane. Cliffs, riverbanks, holloways: these aspects of the country go unnoticed in most cartographies, for the axis upon which they exist is all but invisible to the conventional mapping eye. Unseen by maps, untenanted by the human, undeveloped because of their steepness, these vertical worlds add thousands of square miles to the area of Britain and Ireland – and many of them are its wildest miles.

Dorset is rich in holloways: they seam the landscape cardinally, leaving the coast and moving northwards, uphill and inland, cutting into the Jurassic lias, the Permian sandstones and mudstones, the oolites and the chalks of the region. Along these routes dray horses, carts and carriages would have moved to and from the harbours and bays, supplying and evacuating the incoming ships. Roger had been tipped off by a friend of a Dorset friend about an especially deep and forgotten holloway, in which he thought we could begin our exploration: it was near the village of North Chideock, which lies in a small lush valley, cupped by a half-moon of low green rabbit-cropped hills, the horns of which rest upon the sea.

So on a hot July day, we set off for Dorset to see if we could find wildness amid the dairy farms.

We drove down in Roger's dark-green Audi, and as we left the outskirts of Cambridge I felt a lift of excitement at having escaped the city and at being on an adventure. The Audi had moss growing in its foot-wells, and in the grykes between the seats. 'Three different sorts,' he said proudly, when I pointed this out. In the glove-box were a variety of knives. The boot held, as it always did, a bivouac bag, a trenching tool of some sort, and a towel and trunks, in case he passed somewhere interesting to sleep, dig or swim.

We got lost several times on the way. When he was unsure of the correct exit to take on a roundabout, which was nearly always, Roger tended to slow almost to a halt, and squint up at the exit signs, while I assumed the crash position in the passenger seat.

We reached Chideock – a one-song drive west of Bridport – in the early afternoon, left the car, and began walking up along the village's main road, keeping where we could to the shade cast by the big
green-gold laurel bushes which lapped at the road. The sun roared soundlessly in a blue sky. Hot light glared off every leaf and surface. Dust puffed up from the road wherever we stepped. There was the smell of charred stone.

Where the road ran to its end, we found an emblem for our adventure. Just to the east of the road, set back amid oak trees and laurel bushes, was a small Catholic chapel, built of pale sandstone in a Romanesque style. We pushed open a wooden gate, and walked down a leaf-strewn path to the chapel’s porch. Its door was huge, of ridged oak, studded with black square-headed bolts. It opened with an ease that belied its weight, its bottom edge gliding above the flagstones of the porch, which were dipped by the passage of many feet.

The air inside the church was cool, and the sandstone of its walls and pillars was chilly to the touch. There was a faint odour of must, and everywhere the glint of gilt: saints in their niches, a golden altar rail, a gleaming candlestick at either end of the mensa. Striking through the air at angles were needles and poles of sunlight, sieved by the windows, in which dust motes rose and fell slowly, like gold leaf in warm water.

The Chideock Valley has a recusant past. After the Act of Supremacy in 1558, when Catholic priests were banned from Britain, missionaries began to re-infiltrate England in order to keep the faith alive. Chideock had long been a Catholic enclave, and several priests came to the area to offer clandestine ministry. A high-stakes game of hide-and-seek began. The priests went fugitive in the landscape, taking asylum in the woods, caves, copses and holloways of the area. Soldiers combed the countryside for them and their supplicants. Mass was held in secret in a hayloft in one of the Chideock farmhouses. Over the course of fifty years of this recusancy, at least three laymen and two priests were caught, tortured and executed. The chapel had been built in the nineteenth century as a memorial to these ‘Chideock Martyrs’.

One of the priests, John Cornelius, had returned in secret to Chideock from Rome in order to act as chaplain to Lady Arundell, the lady of the manor. He was arrested at Chideock Castle on 24 April 1594, being dragged out bareheaded. A relative of the Arundell family, Thomas Bosgrave, was outside the castle that day, and in a spontaneous gesture of solidarity he offered Cornelius his hat. Bosgrave himself was immediately arrested, as were two of the castle servants, John Carey and Patrick Salmon, who were rightly suspected of having assisted Cornelius. Cornelius was taken to London, and tortured, before being transported back to Dorset. And on 4 July he, Bosgrave, Salmon and Carey were hanged in Dorchester. Carey was the first to ascend the scaffold, and before he died he kissed the rope, praising it as a ‘precious collar’. Bosgrave delivered a brief and passionate address concerning the rectitude of his faith. Cornelius kissed the gallows, and uttered the words of St Andrew: ‘O Cross, long desired’, before praying for his executioners and for the queen. After hanging, the body of each man was quartered, and Cornelius’s head was nailed to the gibbet.

We left the church’s golden cool and set off up into the heat of the hills, to find and follow the holloways. Knowledge of the valley’s violent past, of the priests who had gone to ground here for their faith, and the laymen who had died for it, had altered my sense of the landscape and of our adventure.

This was another unexpected change of atmosphere for my journeys: the cold exigent Protestant north had given way, via Ireland, to a sinuous southern Catholicism. In one sense, I thought, all of recusant Britain could be conceived of as a kind of holloway labyrinth: sunk
down, almost unnoticeably, into the cultural landscape. In Lancashire, Aberdeenshire, parts of Dorset and Devon, and the other recusant heartlands, existed an alternative culture that was intensely British, but which possessed different strata of custom, language and history. That history was at once real, but also an utinam, an ‘if only’ history, and so it had to keep itself hidden, wild. Even London had its recusant holloways, of which vestiges remained: Tyburn, the shrine of Thomas More off Kingsway, the Bavarian Embassy chapel behind Piccadilly . . . many other recusant routes could still be traced through the city. I thought of a secret map of which I had been told, made by Jesuits around 1590, that showed the Catholic safe-houses in Scotland, and of which one leaf was in an archive in Rome, the second in Salamanca. There were also the Sheldon Tapestries, huge woven hanging maps of Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire, into which red threads had been discreetly insinuated to mark many known recusant hide-outs.

The path that Roger and I followed up into the hills was itself the beginnings of a holloway, cut down ten feet or more into the caramel sandstone of the area. Though no traffic other than walkers now passed this way, the road was still being deepened by water. Heavy rain had fallen the previous week, and the holloway floor bore evidence of the water rush that must have flooded it. Leaf and branch jetsam was tangled around tree roots, and here and there patches of smooth surface stone had been rinsed clean and exposed to the air, so that they lay glowing in their first sunlight for nearly 200 million years.

At some point in the history of the road, hedging trees had been planted to either side of it, partly to make way-finding easier in poor weather, and partly to provide shelter from the winds and sea storms that beat in off the English Channel. Over centuries, these hedges had grown, died, reseeded, grown again, and now, unchecked, they had thrust up and out and over the holloway.

One thinks of hedges as nothing more than bristly partitions; field Mohicans. But these hedges had become linear forests, leaning into one another and meshing above the old sunken road to form an interlocking canopy or roof, turning road into tunnel.

Near the summit of the western horn of the half-moon of hills, the road became so overgrown that we had to leave it. We scrambled up its steep eastern side, and into the pollinuous air of the flower meadow that bordered it. I looked back over my shoulder, to where the sea lay blue. The heat bred mirages out over the water; false promises of islands and mountain ranges. A few hundred yards further along, in a gap in the hedge by a towering ash tree, we found a way back down into the holloway, and descended into its shadowy depth, abseiling down the sandstone sides using ivy as a rappel-rope. It felt as though we were dropping into a lost world, or a giant version of the gryke in the Burren.

Few people knew as much about hedges as Roger. The twelve acres of his land were separated into four meadows and a small wood by almost a mile of old hedgerow, laid out on a medieval pattern. In certain places – the brink of his woodland, the edge of his moat – Roger had laid his hedges into beautiful lateral structures, which tightened their own meshes as they grew. But mostly he had let the hedges run wild. In places, they had reached twenty feet high and fifteen feet wide. Elder,
maple, hazel and ash trees for the most part formed their central structures; dog rose, blackthorn and bramble billowed spikily outwards; and bryony, honeysuckle and hop draped and wove themselves around everything, giving the hedges differing densities and colours through the year. So thick were some areas of hedge that elms grew there to an uncommon height, protected from the death-carrying beetles by the thicket of briars and roses. Elsewhere flourished sloes, crab-apples, hollies, oaks and spindle trees. In autumn, the hedges produced hundreds of pounds of fruit, which Roger would harvest.

Roger's hedgerows were exceptional, in the sense of rare. For thirty years he had kept them and let them run to jungle, while on neighbouring farms, mile after mile of hedgerow had been destroyed. Using a series of old maps, he had researched the changing hedgerow extent in his parish. In 1970, just after he moved to Walnut Tree Farm, he estimated there to be four miles of hedge within half a mile of his house, excluding his land, and a total of thirty-seven miles of hedge in the parish itself. Now only one and a half miles were left in his vicinity, and no more than eight miles in the entire parish.

All this was a version in miniature of the hedgerow loss that occurred across England in the decades after the Second World War. The drive to maximise agricultural productivity, especially in cereals, meant that vast areas of land – in the Midland and East Anglian shires in particular – were opened out into increasingly large fields, for the bigger the field, the more efficiently combine-harvesters and tractors were able to work it. Farmers were financially encouraged to plough out the woodlands and grub up hedgerows that divided their land. Nearly a quarter of a million miles of hedgerow were lost during this conversion; 2,000 miles are still being lost each year. On the Wessex Downlands and the Essex marshes, hedgerow systems were destroyed in their entirety. And with the loss of the hedgerows came the loss of the wildlife that thrived in them: tree sparrows, grey partridges and corn buntings, among other species, were brought close to extinction.

Shortly before we left for Dorset, I had driven over to Walnut Tree Farm to plan the trip. That day, by way of rehearsal for our Dorset adventure, we went out exploring Roger's hedgerows. Walking the fields, we reached an unusually deep and thick area of hedge. Roger said he had seen a weasel emerge more than once from there, so we decided to try to crawl inside the hedge, to find what world it held. Pulling our sleeves up over our hands, we pushed under the first row of boughs, trying to avoid the biting blackthorns. A few yards in, we reached a natural hollow, where the trunks of the main trees rose, and we sat there, with our backs against a trunk, looking out into the meadow through the skein of briar and leaves, and listening to the life of the hedge. Paths through the leaf-litter around us testified to the hedge's interior as a high-use animal roadway.

'There is wildness everywhere,' Roger had written once, 'if we only stop in our tracks and look around us.' To him, the present-day and the close-at-hand were as astonishing as the long-gone and the far-afield. He was an explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby.

Writing in 1938, the painter Paul Nash spoke of the 'unseen landscapes' of England. 'The landscapes I have in mind,' he wrote, 'are not part of the unseen world in a psychic sense, nor are they part of the Unconscious. They belong to the world that lies, visibly, about us.
They are unseen merely because they are not perceived; only in that way can they be regarded as invisible.' Nash found his archetype for these unseen landscapes in the Wittenham Clumps - a hill in Oxfordshire, ring-marked by Bronze and Iron Age earthworks, and topped by an eighteenth-century beech grove. The hill is little more than 300 feet high, and of gently sloping sides; the sort of landform over which your eye might easily slide. But for Nash the Clumps possessed a numinous beauty.

Perhaps it was the effect of my return to England, after the vast wild spaces of Scotland. Perhaps it was reading of Edward Thomas's walking tours, and looking at Palmer's mystical canvases. Perhaps it was living with my daughter Lily, and watching her intense scrutiny of a snail, or a mushroom or a patch of briar. Certainly, it was Roger's influence, and the glimpse into the gryke in the Burren: that miniature wildwood, no more than an arm's-length long and a hand's-span wide. Whatever the combination of causes, I had started to refocus. I was becoming increasingly interested in this understanding of wildness not as something which was hived off from human life, but which existed unexpectedly around and within it: in cities, backyards, roadsides, hedges, field boundaries or spinnies.

Certainly, these islands possessed wild places on massive scales - the Cairngorm massif is greater in area than Luxembourg, and its weather systems can be polar in their severity. But my original idea that a wild place had to be somehow outside history, which had failed to fit the complicated pasts of the Scottish and Irish landscapes, seemed even more improper in an English context. English wildness existed in the main as Nash's 'unseen landscapes': it was there, if carefully looked for, in the bend of a stream valley, in the undercut of a riverbank, in copses and peat hags, hedgerows and quicksand pools. And it was there in the margins, interzones and rough cusps of the country: quarry rim, derelict factory and motorway verge. I had not expected to find this when I had begun, had been all but blind to such places. But now a myopia was setting in, a myopia of a good sort, replacing the long-sight of the early northern and western journeys. Or a thawing of vision - perhaps that was a better way of thinking of it, now that summer had come.

That margins should be a redoubt of wildness, I knew, was proof of the devastation of the land: the extent to which nature had been squeezed to the territory's edges, repressed almost to extinction. But it seemed like proof, as well, of the resilience of the wild - of its instinct for resurgence, its irrepressibility. And a recognition that wildness weaved with the human world, rather than existing only in cleaved-off areas, in National Parks and on distant peninsulas and peaks; maybe such a recognition was what was needed 'to help us end the opposition between culture and nature, the garden and the wilderness, and to come to recognize ourselves at last as at home in both', as an American philosopher, Val Plumwood, had put it.

An artistic tradition has long existed in England concerning the idea of the 'unseen landscape', the small-scale wild place. Artists who have hallowed the detail of landscape and found it hallowing in return, who have found the boundless in the bounded, and seen visions in ditches.

William Blake perceived the world in a grain of sand. John Ruskin was captivated by the growth of lichens and mosses on trunks and rocks. Dorothy Wordsworth kept a series of elegantly attentive journals - the Alfoxden Journal, written when the Wordsworths were living in Somerset in 1797–8, and the Grasmere Journal, kept at Dove
Cottage from 1800–1803, whose precision of observation supports Wordsworth’s allusion in ‘Tintern Abbey’ to his sister’s ‘wild eyes’. John Clare – from an early age a lane-haunter, a birds’-nester, a night-walker and a field-farer – wrote his artfully simple poems of praise for the landscape around his Northamptonshire home: poems that still carry the suddenness and surprise of the encounters he had during his years of countryside foray.

Over the summer of 1805, the young watercolourist John Sell Cotman spent nearly four months living at Brandsby Hall, north of York, where he was employed as drawing master to the four daughters of Mrs Cholmeley, the Hall’s owner. During that time, Cotman began to explore the nearby landscapes: the rivers, fells and woodlands of Durham and North Yorkshire. He took his brush and colours, and went on foot, pushing further and further up the River Greta, and into the fell country near Kirkham. In this period, something remarkable happened to his painting. Cotman’s fame had previously come from his grand subjects: Cadair Idris, Newburgh Priory, Durham Cathedral. But that summer, he became fascinated by the local, the small-scale: a drop-gate over a stream arm, a boulder beneath a bridge, a copse of trees, smoke rising discreetly above a river pool. The images he made in those months are subtly close-toned, attentive. He wrote to his patron Dawson Turner to explain that he had spent the summer chiefly ‘coloring [sic] from nature’, making ‘close copies of that ficle [sic] Dame consequently valuable on that account’. He had been converted to the beauty of the parochial.

The late-Victorian writer Richard Jefferies spent much of his life studying and describing the rural southern counties of Wiltshire, Sussex, Gloucestershire and Somerset: counties that were, to Jefferies, teeming with wildness. Jefferies had no interest in the nineteenth-century North American idea of ‘wilderness’ on a grand scale – a phenomenon to be experienced only amid the red-rock citadels of the desert or the glacier-ground peaks. For Jefferies, wildness of an equal intensity existed in the spinneys and hills of England, and he wrote about those places with the same wonder that his contemporaries were expressing in their reports on the Amazon, the Pacific, the Rockies and the Rub al-Khali. He found wildness joyful, but also minatory; the vigour of natural wildness was to him a reminder of the fragility of human tenure on the earth. In 1885 he published After London, or Wild England, a futuristic fantasia set in the 1980s, by which time, following an unspecified ecological catastrophe, much of Southern England has been flooded, and London has been reclaimed by swamp, scrub and tree:

Brambles and briars ... met in the centre of the largest fields. Hawthorn bushes sprang up among them, and, protected by the briars and thorns from grazing animals, the suckers of elm-trees rose and flourished. Sapling ashes, oaks, sycamores, and horse-chestnuts, lifted their heads ... and these thickets and the young trees had converted most part of the country into an immense forest.

Then there was Stephen Graham. Graham, who died in 1975 at the age of ninety, was one of the most famous walkers of his age. He walked across America once, Russia twice and Britain several times, and his 1923 book The Gentle Art of Tramping was a hymn to the wildness of the British Isles. ‘One is inclined,’ wrote Graham, ‘to think of England
as a network of motor roads interspersed with public-houses, placarded by petrol advertisements, and broken by smoky industrial towns.’ What he tried to prove in *The Gentle Art*, however, was that wildness was still ubiquitous.

Graham devoted his life to escaping what he called ‘the curbed ways and the tarred roads’, and he did so by walking, exploring, swimming, climbing, sleeping out, trespassing and ‘vagabonding’ – his verb – round the world. He came at landscapes diagonally, always trying to find new ways to move in or through them. ‘Tramping is a straying from the obvious,’ he wrote, ‘even the crookedest road is sometimes too straight.’ In Britain and Ireland, ‘straying from the obvious’ brought him into contact with landscapes that were, as he put it, ‘unnamed – wild, woody, marshy’. In *The Gentle Art* he described how he drew up a ‘fairy-tale’ map of the glades, fields and forests he reached: its network of little-known wild places.

There was an Edwardian innocence about Graham – an innocence, not a blitheness – which appealed deeply to me. Anyone who could sincerely observe that ‘There are thrills unspeakable in Rutland, more perhaps than on the road to Khiva’ was, in my opinion, to be cherished. Graham was also one among a line of pedestrians who saw that wandering and wondering had long gone together; that their kinship as activities extended beyond their half-rhyme. And his book was a hymn to the subversive power of pedestrianism: its ability to make a stale world seem fresh, surprising and wondrous again, to discover astonishment on the terrain of the familiar. My 1929 edition of his book was well bound in stiff board and green leather, with gold imprinted lettering. Its corners were bashed and its cover scuffed: it had clearly been in a lot of pockets and knapsacks before I acquired it.

That July day, as Roger and I dropped into the hazy light of our Chideock holloway, one of Graham’s remarks came back to me. ‘As you sit on the hillside, or lie prone under the trees of the forest, or sprawl wet-legged by a mountain stream, the great door, that does not look like a door, opens.’

Down in the holloway, the bright hot surface world was forgotten. So close was the latticework of leaves and branches, and so tall the sides of the holloway that light penetrated its depths only in thin lances. Roger and I moved slowly up the bed of the roadway, forcing a way through the undergrowth, through clumps of chest-high nettles, past big strongholds of bramble, and over hawthorns that had grown together, enmeshing across the roadbed. Occasionally we came to small clearings in the holloway, where light fell and grass grew. From thorn thickets, there was the scuttle of unseen creatures. Any noise we made thudded into the banks, and was lost. A person might hide out undetected in such a place for weeks or months, I thought.

Lines of spider’s silk criss-crossed the air in their scores, and light ran like drops of bright liquid down them when we moved. In the windless warm air, groups of black flies bobbed and weaved, each dancing around a set point, like vibrating atoms held in a matrix. I had the sense of being in the nave of a church: the joined vaulting of the trees above, the stone sides of the cutting which were cold when I laid a hand against them, the spindles of sunlight, the incantations of the flies.

I would like to see a map that represented the country only according
to these old ways, and that was blind to the newer routes, to the roads which take so little notice of the shape of the land through which they pass. These old ways, these tradeworn cantons, tended to work round woodlands, to follow the curve of a valley or the surge of a hill. They existed in compromise with the land through which they passed. Many of them had evolved from footpaths that had, both for ease of movement and ease of orientation, attended to the twisting courses of streams and rivers, or the natural curves of rising and falling land. This relationship of accommodation between way and landform has now been largely abandoned: bypasses and motorways strike through old woodlands and hillsides.

My own map was filling out, moving towards a state not of completion—it would never achieve that—but of coherence. I did not want it to be definitive, only to have caught and absorbed something of the places I had passed through, and something of how they had changed me, brought me to think differently. Reading the French philosopher of space and matter Gaston Bachelard, I had come across a paragraph that summed up my hope for the journeys. 'Each one of us should make a surveyor's map of his lost fields and meadows,' Bachelard had written. 'In this way we cover the universe with drawings we have lived. These drawings need not be exact. But they need to be written according to the shapes of our inner landscapes.'

Later, after our first exploration of the main holloway, Roger and I set out on a wider reconnaissance of the area. Back at the old ash tree, using exposed roots for handholds, and the ivy again for a rope, we climbed up out of the road, and emerged into the lush meadow. After the greeny dusk of the roadbed, the meadow was startlingly bright. The grass blades flashed like steel in the sunshine. We stood blinking, wringing the light from our eyes.

That afternoon, we walked along the curved ridge of the hills that extended east and south of the holloway—Copper Hill, Denhay Hill, Jan's Hill. Sunlight skidded white off every surface. Everywhere we saw evidence of creatures taking refuge in the soil: mason bees, wasps, rabbits—successors to the fugitive priests. Where the sandstone was exposed, it was riddled with burrows of different sizes, with piles of ochreous silt marking the tunnelling work. There were networks of burrows through the gorsy undergrowth, too: miniature green holloways, no bigger in cross-section than a croquet hoop, which had been made by badgers. Following one such tunnel down into a steep copse, we found a badger metropolis. The animals must have been there for many generations, for the earthworks they had thrown up were substantial and long-term: ramparts, tumuli, barrows. I counted ten separate setts. Near the entrance to one of them lay a badger skull. I picked it up, saw the clamp-and-vice of its jaws, and the bulky orbit bones that protected its absent eyes.

As we walked, buzzards turned above us like spotter-planes. Once, a roe deer picked its way nervously into the middle of a field, until something startled it and it escaped in urgent, arched bounds. Hours later, as the air was hazing up, we returned to our holloway hide-out, dropping down by the old ash tree again into the near-darkness. We cleared nettles and briars, moved loose trunks to make seats, and then Roger built a fire to cook supper on—a pyramid of small sticks, with a hot centre of tinder, that produced an intense and almost smokeless fire. We ate a
spicy tagine that Roger had made in advance and carried up with him. Firelight flickered off the walls of the holloway and on the hedge canopy above us, and set complicated shadows moving in the leaves. As we sat there in the thickening dark, talking, the day seemed to convene itself around the furnace-point of the flames.

Campfires prompt storytelling, and Roger, never slow to start a story, told me how he had once been shot at by a hunter in the Polish woods, because the hunter had thought he was a bear. The conclusion of the story, it turned out, was not Roger’s outrage at having been fired on, but his delight at having been mistaken for an animal. Then we each read out bits from a copy of Geoffrey Household’s classic 1939 novel, *Rogue Male*, in which the hero, pursued by Nazi agents, goes to ground in a Dorset holloway almost identical to our own. ‘The deep sandstone cutting, its hedges grown together across the top, is still there,’ Household had written, ‘anyone who wishes can dive under the sentinel thorns at the entrance, and push his way through . . . But who would wish? Where there is light, the nettles grow as high as a man’s shoulder; where there is not, the lane is choked with dead wood. The interior of the double hedge is of no conceivable use to the two farmers whose boundary fence it is, and nobody but an adventurous child would want to explore it.’

I chose to sleep not in the holloway itself, but in the deep grass of the upper meadow. I lay in the warm darkness, breathing in the scents of the field, brought out by the gentle dew that had settled after nightfall. I could hear the ongoing business of the meadow – the shifting of grass stalks, the shy movements of animals and insects – and again I felt a sense of wildness as process, something continually at work in the world, something tumultuous, green, joyous. This was a wildness quite different from the sterile winter asperities of Ben Hope, and perhaps, I thought for the first time, more powerful too.

I woke at dawn. The air was cool, but the sky was cloudless, and held the promise of great heat to come. So Roger and I walked back down the holloway, off the half-moon of hills, and past the chapel hidden in the laurels. Then we drove to the coast – to Burton Bradstock, where a pebble beach shelves steeply away from high sandstone cliffs.

The sea was already warm, so we swam straight away, backstroking out for a hundred yards or so, and then treading the blue water. I looked back at the ochre sandstone cliffs, and the green hills rising behind them, and watched my arms and legs moving like phantom limbs beneath the surface of the sea.

After the swim, we sat on the shingle, talking about Iris Murdoch, who used to bathe off Chesil Bank, just along the coast, and about Roger’s friend Oliver Bernard, who had inadvertently managed to so offend the owner of the public house on the nearby cliff-tops that he had been obliged to run for his life. We gathered piles of flints, and made Andy Goldsworthyish towers with them. Time passed languidly in the heat. Roger went for another swim. I lay on the hot shingle, watching overhead clouds, thinking about Cotman’s paintings and about Stephen Graham’s map of his ‘unnamed’ wild places.

In so many of the landscapes I had reached on my journeys, I had found testimonies to the affection they inspired. Poems tacked up on the walls of bothies; benches set on lakesides, cliff-tops or low hill passes, commemorating the favourite viewpoint of someone now dead;
a graffito cut into the bark of an oak. Once, stooping to drink from a pool near a Cumbrian waterfall, I had seen a brass plaque set discreetly beneath a rock: 'In memory of George Walker, who so loved this place.' I loved that 'so'.

These were the markers, I realised, of a process that was continuously at work throughout these islands, and presumably throughout the world: the drawing of happiness from landscapes both large and small. Happiness, and the emotions that go by the collective noun of 'happiness': hope, joy, wonder, grace, tranquillity and others. Every day, millions of people found themselves deepened and dignified by their encounters with particular places.

Most of these places, however, were not marked as special on any map. But they became special by personal acquaintance. A bend in a river, the junction of four fields, a climbing tree, a stretch of old hedgerow or a fragment of woodland glimpsed from a road regularly driven along – these might be enough. Or fleeting experiences, transitory, but still site-specific: a sparrowhawk sculling low over a garden or street, or the fall of evening light on a stone, or a pigeon feather caught on a strand of spider's silk, and twirling in mid-air like a magic trick. Daily, people were brought to sudden states of awe by encounters such as these: encounters whose power to move us was beyond expression but also beyond denial. I remembered what Ishmael had said in Moby-Dick about the island of Kokovoko: 'It is not down in any map; true places never are.'

Little is said publicly about these encounters. This is partly because it is hard to put language to such experiences. And partly, I guessed, because those who experience them feel no strong need to broadcast their feelings. A word might be exchanged with a friend or partner, a photograph might be kept, a note made in a journal, a line added to a letter. Many encounters would not even attain this degree of voice. They would stay unarticulated, part of private thought. They would return to people as memories, recalled while standing on a station platform packed tightly as a football crowd, or lying in bed in a city, unable to sleep, while the headlights of passing cars pan round the room.

It seemed to me that these nameless places might in fact be more important than the grander wild lands that for so many years had gripped my imagination. Taken together, the little places would make a map that could never be drawn by anyone, but which nevertheless existed in the experience of countless people. I began to make a list in my head of what would be on my own map of private or small-scale wild places.

There would be the 'Dumble', the steep-sided ditchway in Nottinghamshire, in which I had played with my brother when we were young. There would be the little birch grove near Langdale in Cumbria, whose trees I had climbed and swung between. There would be the narrow strip of broadleaf woodland at the base of the Okement valley in Devon, where I saw a blue-backed falcon slip from an oak and glide off out of sight – a merlin! Such a good guardian for such a magical place.

There would be the patch of moss – soft and intricate as a rug, starred with sea-pinks – on a North Cornish sea cliff, on which I had once spent a night. I had reached the cliff along the coastal path as the day ended, and there, a hundred feet above the breaking sea, I had found my sleeping place. It was just large enough to hold me, and it sloped back inland, so that I did not feel tipped out towards the cliff edge. I lay awake until midnight in my comfortable niche, watching the weather out over the Atlantic. It was a night of odd temperatures: the air cold enough for my breath to show white in it, but warm enough for
lightning to gather and strike, bright wires standing again and again far out to sea, their light strobing on the cliffs around me.

There would be the little beach in the intricate terraqueous lands that lie on the southern flank of Suilven, in Sutherland. The beach was two yards wide and three long, made of finely milled yellow gravel, and near it an anonymous waterfall gave into an anonymous loch. The gravel showed deer-hoof prints, in which water welled like ink. It was summer, and at that latitude the northern light was fine and persistent. I washed under the waterfall, and then swam, looking back from the loch's centre at the bactrian form of Suilven. Later, I sat on the beach, when a red-breasted merganser cruised round a corner of the loch. It saw me, and watched me, and then dived, and its dive was almost rippleless, as if it had bored a hole in the water and slid down it beak-first.

And there would be the tree ring I came across by chance in Northumbria, on a summer day so hot that the air shimmered and bare rock was burning to the touch. It was a rough circle of old beeches, unmarked on the map, but within 500 yards of a main road. The earth within it was thick and soft with green moss and golden grass that had been closely cropped by rabbits. In Ireland it would have been called a rath, in Scotland a fairy-mound: Celtic folklore elected these tree circles as the doorways between the human world and the otherworld. Relatively few tree rings remain now; most have been ploughed out. I stepped into the cool shade of the ring, and lay there for half an hour, watching the business of the moor. When I left it, I walked south for two miles over heather, until I found a small black lake, near the edge of a spruce plantation, into whose sun-heated dark water I slipped, and in which my skin showed bronze, like the scales of a carp.