

Seeing Places : **Landscape History and the Imagination**

Have you ever spent a journey – perhaps as a child – waiting in high anticipation for that moment when you top a slight incline, and suddenly ... breath almost taken away ... you shout, "I can see the sea!"? Yes – I'm sure you have. And as an adult, do those magical moments still happen? Those glimpses around a corner, perhaps, or even from the escalator in John Lewis, for goodness sake! across a valley, of the far sea, or the far hills, or – better! – of the moor itself, fifteen miles away, but visible when the weather is right?

It doesn't seem to matter how well you know the route, or how often you travel it, or how much you expect a particular thing to happen, but certain places and views and moments still catch you every time. They still surprise you, despite knowing in your head that they are there. Something in your everyday thinking *seems* to know, but also – weirdly – to forget. So that each time that glimpse happens, it feels like the first time. Something in you is amazed all over again. Something in you says "Wow!", or "That's really beautiful!" – every single time. Something springs up vividly in you, just as Spring itself astounds you every single year. That's how it is for me, anyway, and maybe for you, too.

Memories and the everyday environment both pivot around such places and moments – precious pearls in our regular rounds. The car journey to my grandmother's house on the coast was counted off by those first glimpses – of a particular river cliff at a certain bend in the road, of the Sussex Weald opening out over a certain rise, of a far distant hill-fort appearing – fleetingly – through a certain field-gate ... each marking our progress with cries of, "I can see ...!" And still today, a certain bend in a local lane, or a gap in a hedge, or a particular but unremarkable spot on the path – with their views of light glancing off water a couple of miles away, or of the city nestled between the hills – these *always* astonish me.

Let's call such spots 'Seeing' Places ... places where our seeing is sensitised and intensified. Places where we see with our physical eyes, but before the rational brain has even registered it, the heart already knows. It has already sighed and remembered and responded afresh with the newness of the moment, of *this* time here. Our body has already experienced it. And this kind of heart-knowing and body-knowing is Wisdom. This kind of heart-*eye* is Wisdom. The ancient root word of 'wise' means 'to see', and hence 'to know.' So let's call these places 'Wisdom Places,' too – where there is an intuitive knowing that doesn't need words.

But you probably do go on to say anyway, “Wow - it's really clear today, you can see as far as,” or, “Oh, the weather’s rather different where I’m heading,” or some such, the words not matching what you actually feel. Maybe you stop, however briefly, or maybe you have to keep going. But, in that instant, you feel refreshed, enlivened. For some time longer your day will be brightened.

This is some kind of magic. Perhaps it's in the distance to the far horizon, or in the way the horizon itself seems to call or beckon you. Perhaps it's in the space between you and your nearing goal. Perhaps it's in the beauty of the scene, or the quality of the light. But now you are on high alert, you are buzzing, you are excited – this feels *so* special, even if you saw it yesterday, or earlier today – it's already different, it’s new again ... and its freshness surges up towards you and within you.

There is an un-marked car-park on a high point of heathland near my home, adjacent to an ancient ridgeway. It has far-reaching views across to the moor, up and down the river valley, and along the coast. Even though it has a name – ‘Estuary View’ – and appears on the OS map as a ‘viewpoint’, you have to work hard to find it, and not many people do. In a recent survey of local residents – to discover what landscape features people most appreciate, and where they would be most likely to take a visitor – this unassuming car-park was mentioned over and over again. We love it. We love to be astonished there, every single time. It’s in our hearts.

Did our ancestors feel this, too, I wonder? Did they perhaps feel it *more*? It's one thing to enjoy the gradual reveal of the Exe valley, as you drive down – radio on – from the ridge of the East Devon Heaths, a few hours after leaving London. But what if you had travelled for days, or weeks, or months even – on foot, on horseback? What if that reveal was felt in your whole body? Was measured by human and animal footsteps, breaths and heartbeats, hunger and fatigue? By the minutiae of the terrain underfoot, the amount of shade or shelter, the time of day, and the vagaries of the weather?

When our ancestors – travelling along the ridgeway – caught that first glimpse of their destination, or were rewarded by the view opening out, would their hearts perhaps have burst with feeling even *more*? Would they have *loved* these places more? Felt in *awe* of them? Would they have *rested* here? *Lingered* to wait for other folk, or just to see what might happen? Would they have been *grateful* for such places, *honoured* them more, marked their *regard* for them somehow?

And – even though transport, and social change, and building developments, and a different sense of time, have eroded our folk memories of many such places – might our ancestors nevertheless have left subtle traces that we still respond to today? Might that catch of breath – as you round the corner by the church, or arrive at the road junction and suddenly see the hills beyond the city – might it be the breath of

your ancestors, too? Might it speak to you somehow of their breathing presence here, once upon a time? Might it spark something in you? Might it inspire you to trust your own gut-reaction as a guide and insight into our past – into *their* present? Might their wisdom become your own?

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Here's why I'm thinking about these things – and something a bit like this could happen for you, too.

This time I'm travelling in my imagination. One minute, I'm at my computer, 'googling' (ogging?) a certain place of historic interest. It's at a busy urban road junction, and I am walking around it in the virtual realm, wondering The next instant, my mind is soaring, taking flight. In that strange reality – where things not physical can nevertheless appear real – my eye has caught (or been caught by) a glimpse, a gleam. From a slight turn in the road, where it starts to dip, between the buildings and the traffic, suddenly "I can see ..." those distant hills on the far side of the city! Their glint is small, almost crowded out by the paraphernalia of the street-scene – but it's enough to stop me metaphorically in my tracks.

Suddenly I see that *this*, perhaps, is what this place is about ... *was* about is why two minds synchronously have been drawn to it tonight. It's not about the history, as such, but that the journey to this point has suddenly revealed the heart – so close I can almost touch it – of the city itself, encircled by glistening hills. My antennae are out, my senses are alert, I am receptive to whatever comes, to whatever news arrives, in this scintillating moment. Despite being at my desk, I seem to see all of this not only as myself actually there – perhaps from the higher vantage-point of the Park-and-Ride bus – but also as those ancestors might have done. My heart is bursting with surprise, my breath is caught, I feel inspired. And now I'm wondering, might our ancestors' *vision* therefore become ours, too? Might these 'Seeing Places' in fact be 'Visionary' or 'Visioning Places' as well? That one virtual glimpse was potent enough to set off this whole out-pouring of wondering words that you are reading. I seem to be grasping something I had not seen or understood before. ...

Lying down, eyes closed, I re-visit the scene in my imagination, the insights still fresh and flowing. Suddenly I am flying up and out – seeing from high above, sensing how this place sits in the landscape of and around the city. I start to wonder how many other such places there might be like this – how many ridges, and turns in the road, and slight inclines, and special corners where you feel dazzled, drawn into something huge by a simple glance?

And in the vision those places seem to reveal themselves, to stir in the land, to swell up towards me, arranged around the city on all its approaches. They name themselves

to me as ‘mothers,’ powerful, over-arching presences watching over the heart of the city and its inhabitants. This feels beautiful and incredible ... so now I want to see what happens if we call them ‘Guardian Places’, too.

Perhaps they are in conversation with each other, with the sacred places in and around the city, and with the people who live and travel there. Might those people feel their over-seeing, and over-see them back? Might folk know how to listen to them and to speak with them? Might they understand infinitely more than we think we know? What if these words tumbling out tonight are part of that conversation, that way of understanding, and all that was needed was for someone – me, right now, or you another time – to open their eyes and ears and imagining, and to see, to listen and respond?

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And now a new realisation dawns....

I don’t know this place well, and have never physically walked around it, but like thousands of others I drive through it very often, from every direction. It’s an important and well-used set of cross-roads, as the frequent traffic jams show. Five roads – ancient ones – meet here, and I seem now to remember that somewhere on each of them there is a spot where similar glimpses occur. I go back to my virtual walking and awakening. Sure enough – from behind, beyond and between the buildings, boundary walls, and buses on each of these roads – there are tiny snap-shot views of the hills all around, encircling the city both near and far.

This road junction I am talking about is called Livery Dole corner, on the east side of the city of Exeter, in the suburb of Heavitree. Around it is a cluster of ecclesiastical buildings of various ages – also a few suggestive field-names, and some so-far-unexplained curvilinear boundaries behind a distinctive Heavitree stone wall. Those rounded shapes on the old maps raise the question of what they were – and I wonder immediately about a possible Medieval manorial centre, of which such boundaries were characteristic. But I do not yet understand *why* that was so, and wonder if – in general – they might be relics of much earlier enclosures, or even, in some cases, of older sacred sites.

I look further, and discover what I should have registered before – that this spot is the southern tip of a finger of land extending from larger hills to the north. In fact, it is exactly due east of the cathedral, and east to west it is halfway between the cathedral and an ancient river crossing at Wonford. North to south it is halfway between the high ground in Pennsylvania at the head of the Duryard Valley (an ancient hunting ground) and the mouth of the Wonford stream, where it enters the Exe.

That watercourse gave its name (perhaps meaning ‘*Fair Stream*’) to a huge Saxon Hundred that extended from here all around Exeter to the north and west as far as the River Taw, twenty miles away. It was a royal estate, enclosing Exeter on three sides (the fourth being the river), and was imagined by the great local historian W G Hoskins as a ‘large fleshy peach round a tiny stone.’ [‘*Two Thousand Years in Exeter*’ (2004) p17]. Hoskins believed that, long before Saxon times, Wonford might have been part of the royal estate of the Celtic kings of Dumnonia, for whom Exeter was the tribal capital. A place of some significance, then.

This flattened finger-end of land is bounded to the east by that Wonford stream, to the north by the ridge extending to the slopes of Stoke Hill, to the west by the valley of the Larkbeare stream which separates it from the city centre, and to the south by gentle slopes down to the River Exe – the essence and life-blood of the region. Back in less developed times, iconic higher skylines would have been visible from here in every direction – Stoke Hill with its Iron Age fort in the north; the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths in the east with another Iron Age fort at Woodbury Common, and older burial mounds rising clearly from the ridge; the heaths extending southwards through Black Hill to the mouth of the Exe Estuary; the long ridge of the Haldon Hills coming up from the south on the opposite side of the river (some say they are ‘*Holy*’ hills); the Whitestone ridge in the West, terminating abruptly at the river in Exwick Hill (again, some say that ‘wick’, too, means a ‘*sacred hill*’).

Thinking back to a time when every hill-top and valley, every spring, brook and river, every tree and distinctive rock, was experienced and revered as being full of divine presence, these details and names matter.

So, is it too far-fetched to re-imagine that this busy road junction, at this certain place, might been a place of *sacred* meaning? Was it the ‘Estuary View car-park’ for people of ancient times – a place to go and to gather, to pause in their travels, to enjoy, and to visit just to experience their place in the landscape – a divine landscape? Certainly, as I’ve said, five ancient route-ways meet here, linking between the centre of the city and high ground, safe river crossings, and the river mouth, and heading northwards and eastwards up-country. Old field-names remember Nine Paths here. Maybe there really were more than I can count today? Or maybe the number nine was symbolic, evoking, perhaps, the Nine Ladies stone circle in Derbyshire, or any of its meanings in myth?

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I enjoy wondering about this – and surely it is enough for one day? ...

But the name derivation for Heavitree is bothering me. Locals theorise that, as Heavitree was “the common place of execution for malefactors” [I haven’t got round to mentioning that, yet!], this might signify “the ‘heavy’ or ‘sorrowful tree’”. Another

possibility is that it refers to the ‘head tree’, from the Old English word *haefod* meaning ‘head’. “Most place-name experts now agree, however, that it probably derives from the personal name *Hefa* and the Old English word *treow* meaning a tree, post or beam” ... a tree being a natural boundary marker or associated with a meeting-place. [<http://www.heavitree.localhistorysociety.co.uk/articles.html> - [articles_origin](#)]

Back in 1932, the English Place-Name Society came down on the other side in interpreting it (conveniently) as “a tree on which the heads of criminals were placed.”[English Place-Name Society, *The Place Names of Devon*, vol IX, part II, (1932) pp 439-440]

Now it is certainly very interesting that, in medieval times, Livery Dole was the execution site for Exeter. At the intersection of so many roads, and highly visible from round about, it was an ideal spot to attract the crowds and make a point. It was our own ‘Calvary’ or ‘Golgotha’, both words deriving from an ancient Greek root meaning ‘skull.’

But here are some other experts – Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, in their *Landscape of Place-Names* (2000) – telling it rather differently. In their discussion of names pertaining to hills, slopes and ridges, they say about *haefod*:

“In ancient settlement-names the only sense [of *haefod*] observed is ‘projecting piece of land’. It probably did not mean ‘peak’ or ‘summit’, as no instance has been noted in which it clearly refers to the highest part of a feature. There are a number of instances in which it clearly refers to a piece of land which juts out below the level of the rest of a massif, and this may be connected with the manner in which some animals ... habitually carry their heads below the level of their shoulders.” [p175]

Now, although Heavitree is not included in their examples, doesn’t this describe *exactly* the end – the ‘head’, perhaps – of the ridge that I am describing?

“A piece of land which juts out [the ridgeway of Polsloe Road] below the level of the rest of a massif [Stoke Hill]”?

I feel excited by this – it feels like new news, but maybe I haven’t been looking in the right places till now.

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And what about that Tree – the famous Heavitree meeting tree – the one that no-one is quite sure where it was, but assumes the old yew tree in the church yard (which just so happens still to be there) to be it? Here’s a different possibility....

At Livery Dole – adjacent to and partly surrounded by several ‘Nine-Path-Fields’ on the 1813 map – there is one field called ‘Tree-Field’. Now, in my own nearby parish of Woodbury, which was one of the largest in the County at the time, the 1839 Tithe Map has not a single field of that name, although there are several that include the variety of tree (thorn, elm, ash), or the woodland practice (coppice), both of which would have been economically significant in those days. But a single unspecified tree in a field-name? Is it possible, I wonder, that – in the case of Livery Dole – there was a particular, distinctive or meaningful ‘Tree’ that gave its name, at some time, to this piece of land in such a prominent position, at a meeting of nine ways?

I’m just posing the question Please pause before your cynical self dismisses it out-of-hand. I am looking at this *imaginatively*. I do not believe that two hundred years ago there was literally an ancient meeting-tree at that spot, which we now don’t know about (though might there have been...?). But, seriously – just as the execution site at Livery Dole carries strange linguistic echoes of a different, much older interpretation for ‘head’ tree – might this ‘Tree-Field’ be a metaphorical signpost to something more ancient?

Maybe it really was just any old tree, or trees, or maybe it was a folk memory. But what if *places themselves* carry memory? What if our own remembering is giving form to something inherent in the place, or even in the land itself? What if places continue to reveal their essential natures through time, in highly creative ways – sometimes comical? (I’m thinking now of the decades-old flooring shop, ‘Walter Wall’ next to the Heavitree stone *wall* that triggered this whole line of inquiry!)

Could our ancestors see and know this? Could these strangely coincidental names be subtle traces of them and their ways, that we are responding to today? What if “Tree Field’ really was once occupied by a meeting Tree, long before the Saxons held court under the churchyard yew – if, indeed, they did?

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I am simply putting these inspirations and possibilities to you, as they revealed themselves to me.... after a virtual but vital glimpse of a certain something in a certain place. Maybe one day *you* will find again the glint and gleam of just such a precious place, seize on it, or be seized by it, as I was. Maybe you will see it as if for the first time – but *this* time more openly, more receptively, more knowingly ... and you will wonder

The way I see it is that there is *so* much wisdom to be reclaimed – to be remembered, restored, revised, and reconnected. While it is fresh, I am presenting this as just one example of one particular re-imagining in an inter-woven field

‘Seeing Places’...

‘Wisdom Places’...

‘Visioning Places’...

‘Guardian Places’...

“I can see!”

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“How will you walk along this trail of wisdom? Wisdom sits in places. It’s like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don’t you? Well you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names. You must remember what happened at them long ago. You must think about it and keep on thinking about it. Then ... you will be wise.”

Paterson, Western Apache Indian, speaking with Keith Basso, anthropologist, from ‘*Wisdom Sits in Places*’ by Keith Basso, in ‘*Senses of Place*’, (ed) Steven Feld and Keith Basso (1996)

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The way I see it as well, is that somewhere between the well-intended (but sadly dry and cheerless) phenomenological approaches to archaeology, and the wilder fantasies of the New Age spiritual fringe, there is a *heart-centred* path into our histories, in which the imagination is a real place. It is a joyous but challenging path into a deep and subtle realm ... a rich and powerful resource offering a juicy journey of passion, poetry and creativity. I myself am a visual artist, and choose that more revelatory way, taking the imagination seriously but not literally (as the psychologist James Hillman puts it).

In that realm, it pays to attend to the smallest of signs, the slightest shifts of perception or mood, the plays of light around an idea, an image, a sensation or an

impulse. It pays to attend to synchronicity and spontaneity. When two minds seem to come up with the same idea at the same time – as happened last night – let's imagine that it is the idea *itself* that is coming up into awareness, presenting itself, wanting to be taken seriously – and that, for its purposes, two minds really are better than one! They affirm each other and assert the vitality, the reality, of the idea. The spark becomes a flame, taking shape and dancing in the space between itself and consciousness. It has a life of its own, finding expression in the inter-weave with, between and through us.

When ideas or images come, that seem to have rightness, or beauty, or persistence, my working hypothesis is to act as if they were true – to allow them to grow, to take form and voice, and to see where that leads. Thus, when two of us at the same time start to wonder about the area around Livery Dole, we both know we have to take seriously the flow and synchronicity and power of interconnecting ideas and images to allow them to take us where they want us to go. Maybe the Heavitree stone itself – the earth beneath our feet – is acting as our travel guide in this supporting our steps, showing us the way, and telling its stories as we go along. Maybe all we need to do is to follow with open, receptive and responsive hearts, and with the willingness to act on our intuitions ...

Let's go and 'see'

Diana Wackerbarth
16 July 2017

For JoJo Spinks of Interwoven Productions,
and everyone in the Heavitree Stone inquiry
within the Heavitree Squilometre Project

Post-script

I found it difficult to download a helpful topographical map, but the one at this link below is good for zooming in on detail, especially if you click on the 'outdoors' option where the topography is overlaid on the street map.

<http://en-gb.topographic-map.com/places/Exeter-273677/>

This downloadable one just about makes my point

<http://www.floodmap.net/Elevation/ElevationMap/?gi=2649808>