

A Rural Ride Through Hampshire

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In the summer of 2018, I drove across the county of Hampshire in England following as near as possible the route that William Cobbett travelled by horse almost two hundred years earlier in 1823.

Cobbett was an English pamphleteer, journalist, farmer, radical anti-Corn Law campaigner and political reformer. He is best known now for his book 'Rural Rides' published in 1830 which documented a series of journeys that he made on horseback through Southeast England and the Midlands in the 1820s. Cobbett's purpose was to see the prevailing conditions in the countryside so that he could better argue his case against the landlords before a Parliamentary Committee using actual observations of agricultural distress.

I set out to document my journey in photographs, capturing what caught my interest; a personal response to the Hampshire landscape that Cobbett travelled across two centuries before.

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This is a landscape defined and dominated by the car. This may well explain the use of fields and verges as advertising platforms for commercial, cultural and leisure activity. Signs abound even at the remotest of crossroads. Cobbett would have approved of this diversification of business as he did of Mrs Mears, the farmers wife in Durley, whom he observed encouraging local girls in the manufacture of dog's tail grass bonnets for sale in Fareham. (Cobbett,p.125)



















In 1823 Cobbett wrote that one of the great objects of his journey was to see the state of the corn along the south foot and on the south side of portsdownHill. 'It is impossible that here can be, anywhere, a better corn country than this'. (Cobbett,p.120) What is noticeable now is the onward creep of housing estates over these wheat fields, from the postwar prefabs rehousing bombed out Portsmouth families to the upmarket new builds on sale today. It is somehow cheering to see the odd field of wheat amongst these houses. Though no doubt Cobbett would be better placed than I to comment on its 'state'.



At the end of my journey I came away with a number of impressions. Firstly, and a surprise, was the extent to which wheat is still grown along the route that I followed and, secondly, how empty of people the rural landscape can be. Cobbett often engaged in conversation with those he came across but he would have been hard put to do this now, his field workers replaced by tractors. I saw very few working people on the land but a great number of cyclists and cars, even in the remotest parts.

This is truly a landscape defined by car and tractor. Away from the larger villages and towns, seemingly prosperous and comfortable communities reveal signs of diverse business and leisure activity. There may still be rural poverty here. But if there is, it is well hidden from view.

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Bibliography

Cobbett, W. (1950) *Rural Rides*. Abridged ed. London: George G. Harrap & Co.

