

Lanes and Roads.

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Wash, Chigborough, Sheepcoates, Witham, Post Office, School, Bakers, Sawyers, Scraley, Church, Office, Plains, Green, Loamy Hill. There are many named ways into my village, Little Totham, some obvious, some not. Watery ways too: Penny's Brook, Spicketts, Catchpole. The paper maps show such a tangle of white roads that even now, after twenty years, I'm not sure which one I'm on. I do know that each road is different. Different in their twistiness, their edges, their views and their vegetation.

The 'main' road starts at a junction with the Maldon and Tiptree road. It is there called Loamy Hill Road, which dips down as if towards the estuary. The name is perhaps a reference to a difference in the soil at this point as most of the valley below, on a level with the estuary, is sandy silt, as is my garden. At the top of this road, before it dips down and down, there is a glimpse of the estuary itself. If the sun is shining, its silver sliver of water is seen only for a few seconds. If it's grey or the hedge has grown too high, or you blink, you will miss it. Or if you are looking, as I often am, at the horses in the field on the left-hand side. Always-changing horses, retired or on holiday, munching grass in fields know as Warrior's Rest. Once there were three old sheep who were baa'd at (I always do this on any journey when I see sheep, and I moo at cows: my friends are used to it). Now, years later, I still miss them. Occasionally there is a mule or a donkey – so I change into Eeyore...then they've gone as the dip down into the valley invites me to hurtle down it between hedges and fields.

A swift right-hand turn onto the level, and a bit of a gentle corkscrew journey where I can encounter magpies or a muntjac or even a fox. This is the road which passes through Little Totham, and is the way lorries go to a park in Tolleshunt Major, a fact which residents have grumbled about for years and years. The street is lined with old, restored and new homes, a field for cricket, and the village pond, with its swings and slide. Alongside the village pub, The Swan, which a newish management have turned back into a real community pub, keeping its real ale CAMRA award-winning status, as it was when we first came here over twenty years ago and ate egg and chips every Saturday. This road is the road where people live and ride or cycle, or drive to and from work.

From this road, you can enter the lanes. There is the one to Heybridge, curvy, with edges flattened by wheels as vehicles pass each other hesitantly (or not as the case may be). It is the road which passes All Saints Church, a mile or more outside the village, where my parents lie, in a village country churchyard not unlike the one in Wiltshire where they were married six days before WWII broke out. When I first came here, I travelled on this road home from Chelmsford, because I liked it, and it meant I lived in the country. I thought it was a large *pigeonnier* because of the shape of its roof...It has corncrakes in its yard, with their rasping cries, magpies and all the usual country bird suspects. Outside of services it is a circle of peace, always with the slight whish of wind in the trees overhead. Inside, it is like a Thomas Hardy church, tiny, with two rows of pews, and a door dated back to the twelfth century, made from a tree from a seedling of a century or more before. Wood made a thousand years ago, touched by unnumbered generations of serfs, farm workers, lords of the manor, tea makers – it now leans into the kitchen. A stairway up to the belfry, open to climb on certain days of the year, which my eighty year old mother

once ascended and descended to applause. In the school holidays, children take over the church and the yard for games, painting and making biscuits, and each June there is a Flower Festival alongside the village open gardens, of which mine is one.

The remainder of the road has singular trees which turn into different shapes as you approach them. I look forward to rounding one particular corner to see a certain tree appear in front of me, on a bend. It unfurls as I curve round towards it. In Autumn, then Winter, it has an intricate tracery of branches, first with crumbled black leaves ever-dropping, then stark-black against a grey-white sky. In a mist, it is a tree from a Grimm fairytale, not malevolent, but not quite innocent either: waiting rather than standing. In Spring and Summer this tree is an honest, faultless virgin, gently shaped, an almost symmetrical but-not-quite mophead. Another tree, best seen coming the other way, is a sculpture of white dead branches, its raised arms gathering the blue sky or the mist around and between them as if it has something to say. When swans are on the shallow lake before you get to it, their whiteness is carried by the eye to this tree. Its clean form is unthreatening, benevolent, beautiful, raised in a magnificent focal point above the field border hedge below. If it is ever cut down, I shall cry.

The word fairy echoes again in two other roads, lanes really. 'Fairy' woods, where overlapping branches lace together to form a shaded, dappled archway, keeping a traveller safe from the intrusion of the fields or the heat, or from the dazzlement of the low lying, dying, Autumn sun. One leads to a triangle of grass where often there is a goat tethered. The other leads from a sometimes sheep-filled field which baas and runs towards you as you pass, to the Old Forge, and onto the top of the village.

Another lane, high with mixed hedging and brambles, picked clean in September/October, will lead you to the main Goldhanger Road, where you can find the estuary itself, seen from Heybridge Basin, with its moored, rocking narrow boat homes, its tethered small yachts on a canal which ends in a lock and the open river, draining past the marshes and out to the sea. A coffee and a muffin from The Ship or the tearooms is consumed while watching the magisterial glory of the restored Maldon barges and their rust-coloured sails.

Further on the road back into Maldon, is a farm shop. A barn full of tables and boxes of vegetables and fruit, guarded by Muscovy ducks and their 'lings, bantams and their chicks, and a large tabby cat. Another slice of Thomas Hardy.

There is a narrow lane, called Bakers, from the next village to ours, connecting to Sawyers Road, where I live. The other end of it leads past Sawyers Farm to the road where pigs snuffle and I can buy fresh bacon and sausages.

And there are others...lanes and roads which smell of manure a couple of days a year, where tall grasses waft, corn-on-the-cob stands stiff, where loosestrife and escaped daffodils and rape plants scatter the verges. Where common land is host to vintage cars and fetes, where horses and riders, dogs and owners, will nod and smile, or a horse and cart or tractors with trailers full of beets will slow me down. Where the sunset lights the fields, whether brown or gold or green. Where the churches are.

There are lanes and roads like this all over Essex, but these are mine.

