

T H E   B O O K   O F

Sussex  
Revelations

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**Revelation**

- a striking disclosure of something previously unknown or not realised. -

*Oxford English Dictionary*

Sussex, like every other English county, is a palimpsest wherein one writing lies upon the top of another... [It] has always been a kingdom by itself - obstinate, cut off, slow, unchanging, with a vast looming background of pre-history. These things were so because of the geological structure of the county - which again formed the nature of the inhabitants, their ways and customs and vernacular-building.'

Esther Meynell, *Sussex* [Robert Hale. 1946]

'Each place has its own voice. I really believe in the voice of the land - that the land has a voice before the people who live on top of it do. There are all these voices in our life. They are very weak, and we live amidst a lot of noise, so we don't hear them clearly, but they are there.'

Francesco Clemente

'The historian who telescopes the experience of several thousand years into a few thousand words can only hint at the significance of changing ideas in the daily lives of a few hundred generations.'

John Lowerson, *A Short History of Sussex* [Dawson. 1980]

'Something passes me and cries as it passes  
On the chalk Downland bare'  
- *John Masefield*

## **P**ROLOGUE

So, sing me the song of old Sussex again  
The winds are cold, the air is sharp  
The skies are full of rain

Our fire is bright, the evening long  
Please entertain me if you will  
Oh spirit of the song

The candles flared, the embers shifted  
I felt a presence in the room  
And heard my voice uplifted

'Some revelations are what I seek'  
Then came the reply, words hard and strong  
In a voice both dark and bleak

The land will endure  
Of that we can be sure  
The land will endure

I listened to the sounds of night  
The crackling wood, the scouring tide  
With all my will and might

And suddenly the silent air  
Was full of voices, whispering, whispering  
In my straining ear

I lay my head upon the ground  
And heard the rustle of a beating heart  
A resonant deep earthsound

And in my mind were the words of this song  
I scribbled them down else they vapourised  
Just as they came along

The land will endure  
Of that we can be sure  
The land will endure

The mystic songs of old Sussex contain  
The DNA traces of dreams of the past  
Once held in ancient brains

The traces are also engraved in the land  
Revealed to the eye in an insight's flash  
As on the palm of our hands

Is written our life-story, past and recent  
So 'tis with the Weald, the Downs and the Coast  
All times, at once, ever-present

This is the sense one poet made  
Of these songs and voices of our past  
In these dawning Millennium days

The land will endure  
Of that we can be sure  
The land will endure



## THE PEOPLE OF THE DAWN

The first of us came over by land  
Through the streaming sleet of the tundra cold  
Help me warm my hands

We followed the herds of reindeer and horse  
Who gave us our hides, our picks and our meat  
And also our purpose and course

We hunted the rhinos, the bison and bear  
And butchered them expertly with our flints  
We were hominid; not yet there

Then the Homo Sapiens came  
Hunting with dogs, fishing the rivers  
Learning how to name

The Neolithic humans began  
To settle, to mine, to farm, to weave  
To worship and to plan

They shaped and quarried this unmarked land  
Building vast stone temples, earth rings and mounds  
Which still and forever stand

Flint and bone began to disappear  
And bronze and copper then iron held sway  
Tribes and forts spread fear

This is the song of pre-history  
Remember the dawnmen, we've left you our bones  
To testify to our story





## THE INVADERS

We Romans invaded on your invitation  
You've seen our villas, our roads and our baths  
Give thanks for this visitation

Naviomagus - Chichester - survives  
A testament to our ancient structures  
A tracemap of our lives

We quarried for stone, made tiles and iron  
But the Empire was crumbling, troops were withdrawn  
Our time in Sussex was gone

We Saxons ruled the Southern land  
In ships we came with Aelle our leader  
Prepared to make a stand

We slaughtered all at Pevensey  
They died a bloody death that day  
Noone left to pray

We built in wood, no traces remain  
But most of our place-names survive in your day  
Our spirit sustains

St. Wilfred landed with his Christian faith  
His cathedral at Selsey now under the waves  
Is haunted by mermaids and sea-wraiths

We Normans defeated Aella's spawn  
Harold went down, his eye full of arrow  
The start of a bloody new dawn



## **D**OMESDAY AND BLACK DEATH

William gave five trusted Barons a Rape  
To guard, with a castle, a port or a river  
Lords of their estate

Then came the great reckoning they call Domesday,  
I was a scribe on that huge task  
Tallying who must pay

We counted the ploughs, the salt pans and churches  
The watermills, mines and the Manor's extent  
Our King was most assertive

Our land held cattle, sheep and crops  
Wheat and barley, oats and rye  
The Lords they taxed the lot

Later Simon de Montfort fought the King  
At Lewes, and won a significant battle  
For Parliament and voting

Our Cinque Ports were bustling, shipbuilding thrived  
With a network of pack-horses carrying goods  
To keep inland markets supplied

Villages spread with a church and a pastor  
And we fought with the French in a hundred-year war  
But then came disaster

Our old way of life Black Death tore asunder  
Ports decayed, monasteries declined  
And many villages went under





## THE IRONMASTERS

The Romans forged iron but on a small scale  
With charcoal and iron ore, a 'bloom' was made  
Thereby hangs a tale

In the fifteenth century came tools from France  
The furnace and hammer forge were new technology  
We decided to grab our chance

Powered by great bellows, the fire was so bright  
That iron became liquid and so could be moulded  
The flames lit up the night

We made heavy cannons; demand was so high  
That our furnaces blazed, night and day  
Ash speckled the blue of the sky

Alongside the iron men came the makers of glass  
Who were also competing for the Wealden wood  
Until a law was passed

The endless forest was consumed by the flames  
We turned timber to arms which helped men die  
I did not know their names

Then coal was discovered to do the same thing  
The industry went north, few forges remained  
The fire went out; I lost everything

A barren wilderness is all we have left  
Desperate men with families to feed  
Have to turn to theft





## MARTYRS & CIVIL WAR

Henry the Eighth vowed monasteries to destroy  
The Priory at Lewes was razed to the ground  
I saw it when I was a boy

Mary continued the wars of belief  
Martyrs were burnt in the streets of the town  
I heard their screams and grief

Later Sussex was split by the sad civil war  
Gentry were divided, families torn apart  
Many died I'm sure

Sussex was the entry point for bullion and arms  
That King Charles needed if he was to keep on fighting  
His son fled Shoreham without harm

Arundel and Chichester were held by the King  
'Til General Waller retook them both  
In Parliament's iron ring

The Royalists rallied, Waller came back  
With ten thousand men he took Arundel Castle  
I saw the bloody rack

Fed up with the cost of the brutal mêlée  
The ordinary people protested the levies  
Tried to have their say

Cruelly put down, in this barbarous time  
They became Quakers and Baptists, for comfort and solace  
But were gaoled and whipped for their crime





## LANDSCAPES & FOLLIES

Shaping the landscape was a passion of the age  
Grand avenues and vistas, organised and controlled  
Nature's elegant cage

Many great parks, Wealden and Down  
Were shaped and carved by the influence and work  
Of Capability Brown

The siting of buildings, of lakes and of trees  
Were all to be part of a grandiose plan  
To put observers at ease

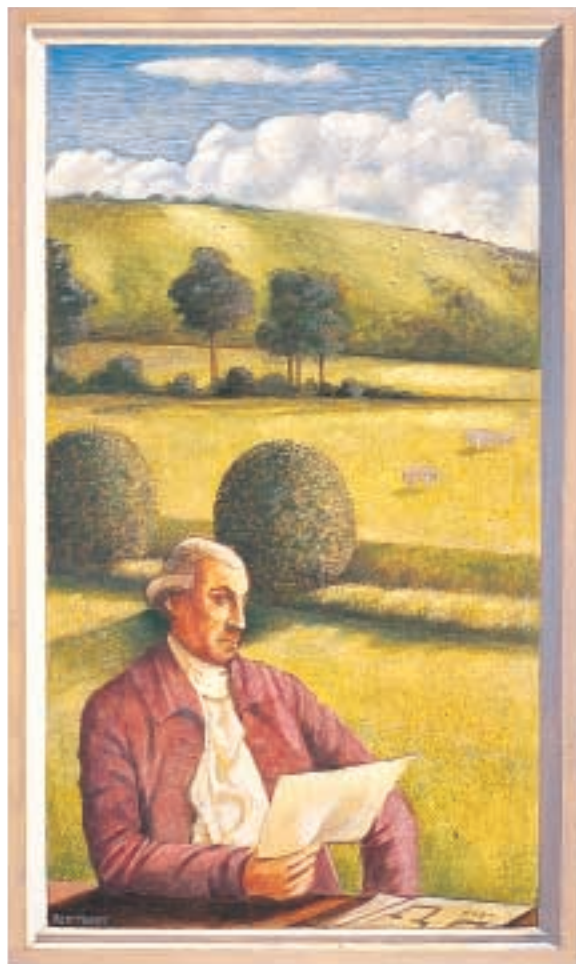
Mad Jack Fuller, not content  
Covered his land with follies that still  
Provide us with amusement

A revolution took place in agricultural methods  
Rotating the crops proved good for both soil,  
Crops, cattle and shepherds

The Ellmans at Glynde were the great sheep-breeders  
The Southdown was famed, for its fleece and its meat  
Which we used to clothe and feed us

A great rebuilding changed village and town  
Our medieval structures were extended, updated  
Or often and sadly torn down

A traveller roaming the Sussex of our day  
Would have marked the variety of the local scene  
Soon to be swept away





## SUSSEX BY THE SEA

Doctor Russell of Lewes forswore pills  
Salt-water and sea bathing was the answer he was sure  
For curing most of our ills

Thus Brighton became the fashionable spot  
For invalids, eccentrics and Regency builders  
Who fortunately covered a lot

Of the seafront with elegant mansions and squares  
Crowned by a Pavilion of oriental design  
With ornate fabrics and stairs

And gold candelabras beyond compare  
A dragon-filled music room and opulent china  
No expense was spared

The stagecoach from London to Brighton was fast  
And a chain pier was built for passengers to France  
Neither were to last

For some twenty years 'til Waterloo  
Napoleon Bonaparte threatened to invade  
I didn't want to fight but you had to

Martello Towers, built in anticipation  
In a coastal string from Eastbourne to Kent  
Still sit in contemplation

Our Regency style began to spread  
Old houses were painted or plastered over  
We buried our past and our dead



## **R** IOTS & UNREST

Captain Swing was a legendary figure  
Struck fear in the hearts of the Sussex elite  
Sending them threatening insignia

Of gibbets and hangmen, to the rich and the landed  
As riots and burning spread over the county  
We starving labourers demanded

The basics of life and were met with force  
Imprisoned, executed and transported  
Without justice or any remorse

The United Brothers of Industry  
Was formed by the workers, to have their say  
And set their souls free

Smuggling was the major industry  
Parsons and peasants were all involved  
Even the judges and gentry

Tax was on everything, smuggling expanded  
Barrels of spirits and packets of tea  
On Sussex beaches landed

Easy to carry, a runner could earn  
One pound a day, ferrying goods from the coast  
Part of an organised firm

Of hundreds of professionals, that Customs couldn't best  
The Navy were freed from wartime duty  
And helped lay the trade to rest





## THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The nineteenth century brought iron and steam  
Change was in the air we breathed  
The Age of the Machine

We built scores of canals in one great burst  
Turnpike roads with a coaching system  
But then there came the first

Railway line from London to Brighton  
Puffing and blowing, it looked like the future,  
A dragon that made us frightened

Canals and turnpikes and coaches disappeared  
As the railways spread their iron net  
In just twenty years

Brighton was the scene of industrial innovation  
The Pavilion had cast-iron beams and columns  
A structural revelation

From the Devil's Dyke downland cable-car system  
To the early South Coast movie-makers  
We were people of style and vision

Conrad Volk's electric railway  
Runs today, his Daddy Longlegs  
Has been and gone the way

Of all things temporal; our lives got faster  
Our Empire reached across the globe  
It ended in disaster





## HE GREAT WARS

War was declared on the Fourth of August  
Over by autumn is what they told us  
Ashes turned to dust

Troops were billeted o'er downs and coast  
In large hutted camps for instant defence  
Meat turned to roast

The wounded soldiers began to arrive  
A network of hospitals helped with the damaged  
Many were barely alive

The heavy guns finally finished the battle  
The sound of their growling was heard in Sussex  
Metal pounded metal

War came again, third of September  
Our land became part of the frontline defences  
It's something I'll always remember

Our Sussex beaches were heavily defended  
Machine guns and trenches, mines and barbed wire  
Defined where the nation ended

Our towns were attacked, our airfields were key  
The forces of invasion trained on our land  
On our beaches, in the sky and at sea

It affected us all, rich and poor  
Memories and memorials, tears and regrets  
We shared, for our life before





## HE VANISHING COUNTRYSIDE

The Sussex idyll was captured by Hudson,  
By Jeffries and Kipling, Belloc and Beckett  
Who sang in glorious unison

It is hard to tell when the feelings began  
But we sensed that our landscape was rapidly dwindling  
Was going down the pan

In the twenties, no planning controls were in place  
Speculative building littered downs and coast  
Thrown up at a furious pace

This led to protection by public and state  
Of parts of the county, to save other rare beauties  
From a similar destructive fate

Yet after the War came the 'new town' of Crawley  
A government vision of Jerusalem remade  
A sad and tragic story

The car of course now was the big thing to have  
We wanted to be modern men  
No outside lav

As more and more people moved to the South-East  
So houses and roads spread out through the county  
And traffic and noise increased

Then an international airport came  
And so the sky, once full of larks,  
Is now filled with planes



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HE VIEW FROM THE AIR

The outlines of Sussex are so clear and distinct  
As I sit in the aircraft, preparing to land  
As if drawn in ink

Creamy waves wash chalk and flint  
Downland green and wealden brown  
Every line and tint

In nature's palette, on display  
And it seemed that time and space contracted  
On this lucid golden day

And I spied the mounds of chalk enduring  
The handiwork of ancient humans  
And it was as if they were waving

To this wide-eyed airman, their distant offspring  
Who, as he passed o'er these primal works  
Believed he heard them sing

Using only flints and horns of deer  
They carved and dug these sacred places  
That have survived, year on year

To our present time, and on and on  
Will distant future Sussex people  
Honour this ancient song ?

The land will endure  
Of that we can be sure  
The land will endure



