

This book is about discovering the romance of the English countryside through the relationship between man, his environment and his horse, a relationship that has existed throughout history. Over the last two years we have ridden all over England. Our rides have taken us past Thomas Hardy's cottage and great stately houses, through Cotswold villages and along beaches. We have taken the bridle paths Anne Boleyn followed on her way to the Tower, crossed beech woods where Henry V hunted and stopped at cottages where Elizabeth I spent the night.

The human race's long partnership with the horse is entwined in the annals of history: it is wonderful to continue to live it.

Cranborne Chase
Known as the 'wheat basket of England' Cranborne Chase lies across the hills of Dorset, the plains of Wiltshire and the moorland of the New Forest. Once a royal hunting reserve, the rolling chalk grassland, huge hedgeless fields, ancient woodlands and

shallow valleys give this area its unique and recognizable character. Roman roads and drovers' tracks form the backbone of the bridleways that make Cranborne Chase such wonderful riding country.

Day 1 Cranborne to Sutton Mandeville (15 miles)

Having deviated from the map, ridden through arable fields for an hour and waved goodbye to their escort, Zara Colchester and Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice discover that they are lost...

Nothing on our map seemed to correspond to where we were. Retracing our steps we eventually found ourselves riding into the quiet village of Pentridge, often referred to as the 'gateway to Dorset'. Pentridge's flint and peachy brick cottages hide behind crumbling walls bordered by hollyhocks and roses. This is quintessential England.

Relieved to be back on track, we rode into an open area known as Martin Down, crossing the ancient rampart of Bokerley Dyke. No one knows why it was built but the local people suspect that it was intended to keep the Saxon invaders out and for hundreds of years this area remained Saxon-free. This snake-like bank would have been an amazing engineering feat when it was built over a thousand years ago.

Martin Down is a windswept and chalky reserve that is home to unusual plants including various orchids, toadflax and fleawort as well as rare bats, birds and bumblebees. We saw none of these, however, as we only had eyes for our map until we finally found our way out through the maze of paths and over the busy

main road into the old hunting grounds of Vernditch Chase [in Wiltshire]. Originally part of Cranborne Chase, Vernditch was separated in 1630 in a feud between the earls of Salisbury and Pembroke. Peace descended again as we passed through its grassland pastures and ancient broadleaf woods, following dusty sun-dappled tracks deep into the fairytale forest, half expecting the Earl of Pembroke on his hunter to come thundering around the corner.

Eventually we crossed the Ox Drove, a medieval drovers' road that ran from Shaftesbury to Salisbury. For hundreds of years these roads were used to transport livestock to markets and towns, many of them dating back

to before the Romans. Cattle, sheep, geese, turkeys and horses were driven from one end of England to the other along these ancient tracks. Cattle were fitted with iron shoes; geese and turkeys' feet were tarred and sanded. A drover, whose job was to ensure that the animals reached the marketplace in good health, would accompany the livestock on foot or horseback. This was no easy task for the animals all had to be fed, watered and sheltered along the way. Many of these journeys took months and were hazardous. The drover had to be on constant lookout for thieves.

Droving declined during the 19th century with the coming of the railway and more intensive use of the countryside. Many of the old routes fell into disuse but although no longer used for transport they are still very much in existence and accessible to walkers or riders today.

Leaving the Ox Drove, we made a gentle descent through Church Bottom between the dry and dusty chalk downs to the Ebbles Valley to our lunch stop in the pretty village of Broad Chalke. After lunch we climbed up between lush hedges and

View from the saddle



The authors, Zara Colchester (left) and Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice

Zara Colchester and Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice, riding the length and breadth of England, reflect on the rural landscape of Cranborne Chase, as viewed through a fine pair of ears

Photographs by Charles Sainsbury-Plaice

'Best of all, if you can, get out on horseback. Being at one with an animal can be the beginning of being at one with all things...'
FROM THE FOREWORD BY JEREMY IRONS

Taking a moment to enjoy the quiet beauty of this ancient countryside

along field margins enjoying wide-open views of wheat and barley fields stretching away into the distance. On reaching the ridge top we crossed the old Coach Road that runs for about 13 miles along the top of the downs between Salisbury and Shaftesbury, built high like many old drovers' routes to prevent the coaches getting stuck in the clay soil in the valley bottom.

It was early evening by now and the light was warm and incandescent with the dust of harvest. We turned off into a large field overlooking stunning views of Buxbury Hill and the Nadder Valley, our destination. To the right we could see the faint outlines of the famous regimental badges cut into the chalky side of the downs by American troops stationed there in the First World War.

We wound our way downhill. Expansive views of the harvest below, the scale of the fields breathtaking, the machines working the great fields like diminutive toys dotted on the landscape. We descended a leafy gully to reach the A30. Our stop, Cromwell Manor in the village of Sutton Mandeville, was situated a mile or so on the other side of the road which cut through the valley like a sharp knife.

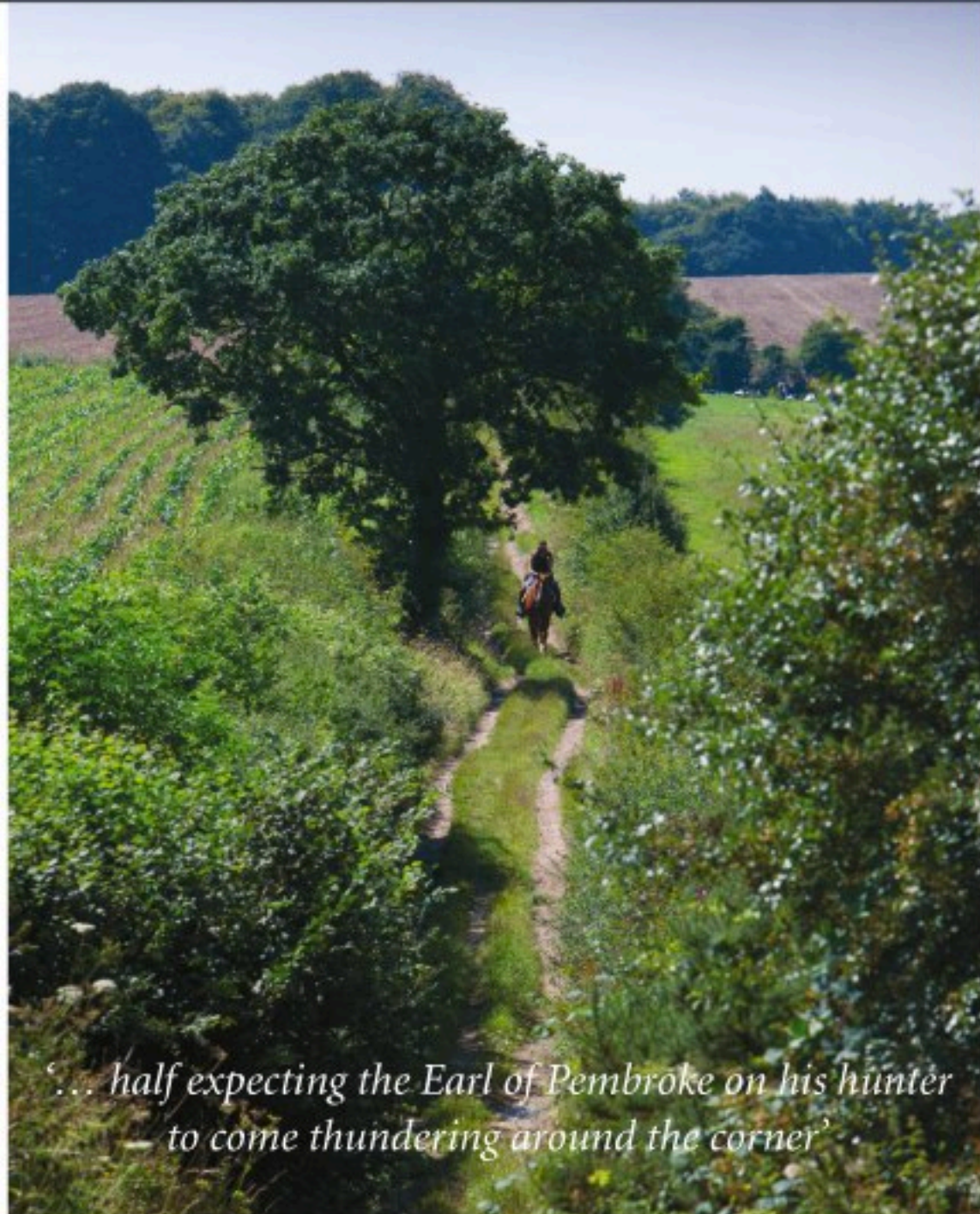
Josie, a colourful local councillor, and her husband Martin, a retired dairy farmer, welcomed us warmly. We rather regretted not having organised to stay for dinner for it would have been delicious and fun. Instead we headed to the King John in Tollard Royal.

Day 2 – Sutton Mandeville to Rockbourne (15 miles)

Next morning, after breakfast in Josie's pretty dining room, we mounted up and made our way down a dark, tree-lined bridleway to Buxbury Hill. From the top we could see all the way to Salisbury Plain as well as the transforming effects of modern agriculture on the landscape. Huge prairie-like fields stretched out into the horizon, their original contours ripped out and the new boundaries dictated by the turns of the great modern harvesters. Undisturbed chalk down land is usually extremely rich in archaeological remains but over the last 50 years, much of the countryside has been ploughed up for intensive farming. Circles of standing stones, henges, hill forts, burial chambers and other such relics of history have been lost forever.

We rode on up hill and down steep descents into the valleys below. At one point we passed through a small gate into a crop of dense game cover. It towered over us eerily but the horses took this jungle of tall vegetation in their stride and pushed their way through until we emerged to a clear view of the harvest in full swing below. Huge combines worked the sides of the valley opposite as we dropped like needles in a haystack down through the remaining standing wheat fields to the road.

Following narrow lanes lined with dense hedgerows that weaved through the valley bottom we rode past traditional brick and flint cottages, the scent of mown grass welcoming us after the exposed downs and hillsides. At midday, we found a shady glade for a picnic



*'... half expecting the Earl of Pembroke on his hunter
to come thundering around the corner'*

Sun-dappled tracks bordered by high hedgerows pass between the great cornfields

lunch and tethered the hot and grateful horses to the trees.

Afterwards, we climbed up through some beautiful old chalk lands, late summer wild flowers hanging on beside the ancient track that zigzagged deep into the hillsides. The air was hot, silent and balmy. Pale, dry grasses grew out of the white soil, the sky bright blue above. This was England burning in the embers of late summer but it could have been central Spain.

We were then reunited with the Ox Drove, our route taking us back into Vernditch Chase where we followed Bokerley Dyke for nearly two miles to the village of Martin. The road wound on through Tidpit among gentle pastoral views of meadows and church spires and on to the long dark drive of Tenantry Farm.

An impressive tree-lined drive led us to expect a bleak and austere house but instead we came upon a modest, welcoming farmhouse, made all the more special by Ailsa and Robin Macleod who have lived on the farm for the last 40 years. Harvest was in full swing and Robin was tense: rain was on its way and he had another 20 acres of hay to cut. The weather forecast was terrible. The next day, apparently, it was supposed to tip down. As we sat at the kitchen table enjoying our cup of tea and discussing the weather, it seemed not remotely surprising that this will always be a particularly English pastime. Only in England can the weather be this unpredictable.

After a delicious dinner at the local pub, we collapsed into bed. Outside, the relentless din of the grain dryer whirled away in the large shed across the yard. I thought I would never sleep the noise was so loud. The following day our worst fears were confirmed and we awoke to lashing, horizontal rain. The skies were dark and the clouds loomed angry and black above us. We reflected that in all our rides we had never cancelled a day for the weather but Robin had predicted the storm and was gloomily confident it would last all day. We threw in the towel, boxed up [the horses] and despondently drove home through the downpour. ▼

Abridged from *England on Horseback* by Zara Colchester and Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice. Photography by Charles Sainsbury-Plaice. Foreword by Jeremy Irons. Published by Clearview Books £25.

Twelve rides through the ancient lanes of England with maps of the routes, and details of overnight stays.

