

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06676-1 - Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772, on Several Parts of England: Particularly the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland: Volume 1

William Gilpin

Excerpt

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O B S E R V A T I O N S

O N

Several PARTS of ENGLAND,

ESPECIALLY

The L A K E S, &c.

SECTION I.

BEFORE we make any observations on the picturesque beauty of particular places, it may not be amiss to take a slight view of those great features, on which picturesque beauty in landscape so much depends.

Almost the whole of the *western* coast of England is mountainous, and rocky: and, as

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it approaches the sea, it is often scooped into large bays, and inlets, invironed by promontories.

On the *eastern* side, the coast consists chiefly of low, flat, sandy shores; from the mouth of the Thames, as far as Scarborough in Yorkshire; where the coast first becomes rocky. At this point, it deviates so much from the general character, it has thus far maintained; that the river Derwent, which rises very near the sea, instead of entering it directly, retires from it; and joins the Humber, at the distance of forty miles.—From Scarborough the eastern coast assumes the character of the western; and is more or less rocky, as far as the Tweed.

The *southern* coast, lying between countries of such different characters, participates of both.

Such is the general idea of the great *boundaries* of England.

If we leave the coast; and take a view of the internal parts of the country, we find the *southern* counties much varied with hill and dale. The *western* rather approach the mountainous character; almost the whole of Wales is

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is in that style of landscape. But in the *mid-land*, and *eastern* parts, we scarce find any elevation that deserves to be mentioned: they are generally level; till we arrive near the centre of the island.

In Derbyshire the first mountainous country begins. There the high lands forming themselves by degrees into a chain of mountains, direct their course towards the north-west. They first divide Lancashire from Yorkshire: then entering Westmoreland, they spread themselves over the whole of that county, and a part of Cumberland. Again contracting themselves into a chain, and forming the limits between Cumberland, and Northumberland, they continue their course northward; and enter Scotland.—It is in the various parts of this vast combination of mountains, to which we may add those of Wales, where the admirers of the beautiful and sublime in English landscape are chiefly gratified.

There is another grand feature, that may be noticed in the internal parts of England; and that is, the vast beds of chalk, which are found in various parts.

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A chalky

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A chalky soil has indeed not so great an effect on the picturesque form of a country, as rocks and mountains; and yet its effect is not inconsiderable. It generally produces a peculiar style of landscape—an impoverished kind; without the grandeur of the rocky country; or the cheerful luxuriance of the sylvan. It runs out commonly into wide, diffusive downs; swelling into frequent elevations. These are its usual characters, where the chalk approaches nearest the surface: but as it runs at various depths; it has, of course, in many places very little effect on landscape. In the lower grounds, where the rains, through a succession of ages, have washed the soil from the higher, you see often a very luxuriant vegetation.

The great central *patria* of chalk, if I may so phrase it, seems to be in the contiguous parts of Berkshire, Wiltshire, Dorsetshire, and Hampshire. From this vast bed, three principal ridges of it extend.

The first leaving Berkshire, crosses the Thames; and running northward through Buckinghamshire, enters Bedfordshire, and ends about Dunstable; beyond which, chalk is never found.

A second running eastward, occupies great part of Surrey; and turning near Dartford to
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the south-east, continues in that direction, forming high grounds, till it meet the sea abruptly at Dover.

The third great ridge takes a more southerly course, occupying a vast tract, near eighty miles in length, tho scarce any where above four miles broad, which is known by the name of the South-downs of Suffex. Ports-down may be considered as a branch of this ridge.

Besides these three great ridges, it appears in a few other detached parts; but very rarely.

Similar remarks might be made, with some accuracy, on the effects, which other soils have on landscape. But as these effects, are not so striking; I wish not to appear refined. I shall only observe in general, that the variety and intermixture of soils, and strata, in this island, are very great.

From whatever cause it proceeds, certain, I believe, it is, that this country exceeds most countries in the *variety* of it's picturesque beauties. I should not wish to speak merely as an Englishman: the suffrages of many travellers,

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and foreigners, of taste, I doubt not, might be adduced.

In some or other of the *particular species* of landscape, it may probably be excelled. Switzerland may perhaps exceed it in the beauty of its wooded vallies; Germany, in its river-views; and Italy, in its lake-scenes. But if it yield to some of these countries in *particular* beauties; I should suppose, that on the *whole*, it transcends them all. It exhibits perhaps more variety of hill, and dale, and level ground, than is any where to be seen in so small a compass. Its rivers assume every character, diffusive, winding and rapid. Its estuaries, and coast-views are varied, of course, from the form, and rockiness of its shores. Its mountains, and lakes, tho they cannot perhaps rival, as I have just observed, some of the choice lakes of Italy—about Tivoli especially, where the most perfect models of this kind of landscape are said to be presented; are yet in *variety*, I presume, equal to the lake-scenery of any country.

But besides the *variety* of its beauties, in some or other of which it may be rivalled; it possesses

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possesses some beauties, which are *peculiar* to itself.

One of these peculiar features arises from the *intermixture* of wood and cultivation, which is found oftener in English landscape, than in the landscape of other countries. In France, in Italy, in Spain, and in most other places, cultivation, and wood have their separate limits. Trees grow in detached woods; and cultivation occupies vast, unbounded common fields. But in England, the custom of dividing property by hedges, and of planting hedge-rows, so universally prevails, that almost wherever you have cultivation, there also you have wood,

Now altho this regular intermixture produces often deformity on the nearer grounds; yet, at a distance it is the source of great beauty. On the spot, no doubt, and even in the first distances, the marks of the spade, and the plough; the hedge, and the ditch; together with all the formalities of hedge-row trees, and square divisions of property, are disgusting in a high degree. But when all these regular forms are softened by distance—when hedge-row trees begin to unite, and lengthen into streaks along

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the horizon—when farm-houses, and ordinary buildings lose all their vulgarity of shape, and are scattered about, in formless spots, through the several parts of a distance—it is inconceivable what richness, and beauty, this mass of deformity, when melted together, adds to landscape. One vast tract of wild, uncultivated country, unless either varied by large parts, or under some peculiar circumstances of light, cannot produce the effect. Nor is it produced by unbounded tracts of cultivation; which, without the intermixture of wood, cannot give richness to distance.—Thus English landscape affords a species of *rich distance*, which is rarely to be found in any other country.—You have likewise from this intermixture of wood and cultivation, the advantage of being sure to find a tree or two, on the foreground, to adorn any beautiful view you may meet with in the distance.

Another peculiar feature in the landscape of this country, arises from the great quantity of English oak, with which it abounds. The oak of no country has equal beauty: nor does any tree answer all the purposes of scenery so well. The oak is the noblest ornament of a fore-

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fore-ground; spreading, from side to side, it's tortuous branches; and foliage, rich with some autumnal tint. In a distance also it appears with equal advantage; forming itself into beautiful clumps, varied more in shape; and perhaps more in colour, than the clumps of any other tree. The pine of Italy has it's beauty, hanging over the broken pediment of some ruined temple. The chefnut of Calabria is consecrated by adorning the fore-grounds of Saviour. The elm, the ash, and the beech, have all their respective beauties: but no tree in the forest is adapted to all the purposes of landscape, like English oak.

Among the peculiar features of English landscape, may be added the embellished garden, and park-scene. In other countries the environs of great houses are yet under the direction of formality. The wonder-working hand of art, with it's regular cascades, spouting fountains, flights of terraces, and other achievements, have still possession of the gardens of kings, and princes. In England alone the model of nature is adopted.

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This is a mode of scenery intirely of the sylvan kind. As we seek among the wild works of nature for the sublime, we seek here for the beautiful: and where there is a variety of lawn, wood, and water; and these naturally combined; and not too much decorated with buildings, nor disgraced by fantastic ornaments; we find a species of landscape, which no country, but England, can display in such perfection: not only because this just species of taste prevails no where else; but also, because no where else are found such proper materials. The want of English oak, as we have just observed, can never be made up, in this kind of landscape especially. Nor do we any where find so close and rich a verdure. An easy swell may, every where, be given to ground: but it cannot every where be covered with a velvet turf, which constitutes the beauty of an embellished lawn.

The moisture, and vapoury heaviness of our atmosphere, which produces the rich verdure of our lawns; gives birth also to another peculiar feature in English landscape—that obscurity, which is often thrown over distance. In warmer climates especially, the air is purer. Those mists
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