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978-1-108-06692-1 - Observations on the Western Parts of England, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty: To Which are Added, a Few Remarks on the Picturesque Beauties of the Isle of Wight

William Gilpin

Excerpt

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OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
WESTERN PARTS OF ENGLAND.

S E C T. I.

OUR road led us first to Epfom through Nonfuch-park. The very vestiges of the splendid palace and sumptuous gardens of Nonfuch, where Henry VIII. and Elizabeth held their royal revelries, cannot now be traced; except here and there, in the form of a canal, or a terrace. Impressions made upon the *ground itself*, are commonly more lasting than any of the *works of art*, which are constructed on its surface. They are generally more enormous; and the materials of no value. Thus we have numberless tumuli--intrenchments--mounds--and ditches, of Roman and Saxon construction, which will probably see as many ages as they have already seen: while

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the architectural remains of those nations are either gone, or falling fast into ruin. The ruin however of Nonfuch had an earlier date than happens to most great houses. The prudent foresight of the duchess of Cleveland, to whom Charles II. presented it, was the cause of its speedy dissolution. She feared a resumption, and pulling it in pieces, sold the materials. It is somewhat remarkable that her father, Lord Francis Villiers, one of the handsomest men of his time, was killed, in the preceding reign, in a skirmish with a party of Cromwell's forces, on this very spot.

But though the building of Nonfuch was splendid, and the gardens sumptuous beyond any of the royal houses of that time, the situation has little merit. At this day, a situation is generally the first point attended to, as indeed it ought, in building a grand house; but formerly the very worst situations seem to have been chosen; as if on purpose to shew the triumphs of art over nature. Indeed our ancestors had little taste for the beauties of nature; but conceived beauty to reside chiefly in the expensive conceits and extravagances of art; in which this palace particularly abounded. The body of the edifice formerly stood in a field,

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field, across the road, opposite to a little farm, now known by the name of the *Cherry-garden*. If it had been carried a quarter of a mile higher, where a detached building appendant upon it, called the *banqueting-room*, formerly stood, its situation would have been much better. It might have commanded a view over a country, which is in some parts pleasing.

Of the numerous appendages of this sumptuous pile, nothing remains but a house, now modernized, which is said to have been formerly the habitation of Queen Elizabeth's maids of honour. In the garden was a large chalk-pit, containing about an acre of ground, which has been planted, and formed into a pleasing little sequestered scene by Mr. Whately, late secretary to the treasury, who wrote *Observations on Modern Gardening*. His brother now possesses that estate, which was formerly the demesne of the palace.

From Nonfuch we pass through Ewel to Epfom. Ewel is chiefly remarkable for a copious spring of limpid water, which arising in several parts of the village, forms itself into a

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considerable stream. The baths collected from it, are chill, and pure in a great degree. Epsom hath been described by the pen of Toland; who exercised the powers of a wanton imagination with more innocence on this subject, than on many others. All that can now be said of it with truth (and it is *now* much improved since the days of Toland) is, that it is a large pleasant village, built in the form of a crescent, in an open country; and that it contains a few elegant houses. Of these the most remarkable is a house belonging to the late Lord Baltimore; though it is now neglected, and the park thrown into farms.

The chief recommendation of Epsom, is its situation on the skirts of that open country, called Banstead-downs, celebrated for hunting, racing, cricket-matches, and mutton. These downs consist of beautiful sweeps of intersecting grounds; disfigured indeed here and there by a chalky foil, but adorned with rich and very picturesque distances.

On these downs stands a hunting-seat of Lord Derby's, called the *Oaks*; which that nobleman

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bleman brought into repute (for it was formerly an inn) by a very expensive summer-evening entertainment, which he gave upon his marriage. General Burgoyne celebrated both the place and the occasion, in a small dramatic piece, called the *Maid of the Oaks*.

Though this little villa is whimsical and singular, it has its beauty. It commands about twenty acres, in an oblong form. In the centre stands the house, which is a kind of tower; but yet unfinished. One half of the ground is laid out in close walks, winding among *oaks*, from whence the place has its name: the other is a hanging lawn, interspersed with fir, flowering shrubs, and beeches. The oaks are ordinary; and the firs scarcely yet half-grown; but some of the beeches are of the grandest form. The whole is surrounded by a sunk fence; and like an enchanted island in a desert, appears a beautiful spot from every part of the downs in its neighbourhood; and has itself a grand view over them, as far as the towers of London.

From Epsom we proceeded to Leatherhead, skirting Lord Suffolk's park at Ashted: which

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is a pleasant scene, including a great variety of ground, and some fine oaks and elms, within a walled circumference of about two miles. The house is not grand; but compact, and comfortable*.

* The house is now rebuilt. Sir Robert Howard, in Charles the Second's time, was the architect of the old house, which I thought, having often seen it, a very good one.

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summit, removed from the sight, as we approach it; though from various parts of the country it is a conspicuous object.

Among other wood, which adorns this ascent, is a profusion of box. This plant grows here in full luxuriance, in its native uncultivated state; marking the road on the right with great beauty. A regular clipped box-wood hedge is an object of deformity: but growing wildly, as it does here, and winding irregularly, at different distances, along the road, it is very ornamental. The box itself also is a pleasing object: in winter it harmonizes with the ground; and, in summer, with the woods, which surround it. Box has a mellow, a more varied, and a more accommodating tint, than any ever-green. One other circumstance of advantage attends it. Almost every species of shrub, in a few years, outgrows its beauty. If the knife be not freely and frequently used, it becomes bare at the bottom; its branches dispart, and it rambles into a form too diffuse for its station. But box-wood long preserves its shape: and in the wild state in which we found it here, is far from regular; though its branches, which are never large, are close and

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and compact. I should, however, mention holly, as having all the picturesque qualities of box, except the variety of its tints. But in the room of these it throws out its beautiful clusters of coral berries, which have a pleasing effect among its dark green polished leaves. Like box it grows slowly, and alters leisurely.

After winding about a mile up the hill, we arrive at the house, which is encircled with groves of lofty, full-grown beech. The *back-front* (if I may be allowed an awkward expression for want of a better) overhangs the steep part of the hill; and commands, as you survey it from the windows of the house, a very grand vale; not like the winding rocky vales of a mountainous country, but such as we sometimes find (though rarely on so ample a scale) among the downy hills of a chalky soil; though here the chalk rarely offends. This vale is a flat area of cultivated ground, about five or six miles in length, and one in breadth. Sometimes indeed, though but rarely, it takes the form of a lake or bay of the sea; which it exactly resembles when it happens to be overspread by a thick white fog, such a fog as from its gravity,
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and the want of air to disturb it, sinks to a level like water; and like water also describes the prominences of the vale around the bases of the hills.

Generally indeed these heavy fogs are mischievous, when they float over sea-marshes, and other moist lands. A gentleman once fitted up a house near the coast of Suffolk, which was often subject to them. It stood on a small eminence, in the midst of a rich woody vale; the whole surrounded by hills. Here the fogs would sometimes appear, in an autumnal evening, winding along the vale like a river, and sometimes like a lake; not with that indistinct and vapourish surface which fogs commonly assume, but flat, clear, and transparent; forming distinctly all those little indentations which a water-line would have described. These beautiful exhibitions, though frequently presented, never failed to please. In the mean time the family were all seized with agues, fevers, and bilious disorders; and in three years found out, that these beautiful fogs were the cause of their complaints. When the master of the scene therefore had just gotten his house and grounds completed, he was constrained to leave them.

Norbury