

◆ ‘John Halsham’

THE PERFECT COUNTRYMAN

By Peter Brandon

‘John Halsham’ was the first to advocate landscape protection for Sussex, and his insightful interpretation of the Sussex Weald (1898–1913) has never been matched. He was also a most distinguished recorder of the lives, histories, habits and speech of the working-class Wealden inhabitants who shaped the region. His observations have left an unsurpassed record of change in the Sussex Weald in a period marking the transition between old and new ways of living. As a true countryman, he is representative of a number of contemporary Sussex writers who sought to repel the twentieth-century changes in the county emanating from London and other large cities.

INTRODUCTION

That ‘John Halsham’, the pseudonym of George Forrester Scott (1863–1937), is virtually unknown today is an injustice to his memory, for he was an early champion of countryside protection in the county and, as a most distinguished interpreter of the Sussex Weald, gave readers a ‘sense’ of it and of its old inhabitants which has been unmatched by any other writer. Through his eyes, ears and nose we perceive a vulnerable English landscape of peculiar charm, and this in the most beautiful, whimsical and lucid prose resulting from a long habit of composition in which his beautifully phrased sentences read like a sweet, low, rich, musical voice. He wrote on country topics for London magazines when ‘country writing’ for an urban readership was still in its infancy, being a regular and valued contributor to the *Saturday Review* from 1902. He wrote for *The Times* from 1927 and *The Times Literary Supplement*, the former calling him ‘the perfect countryman’ in its obituary of 13 April 1937. This he had earned with his steadfast, even hermetic, roots in mid-Sussex, his habit of precise observation, passionate love of gardening, absorption in the cultured leisure of the countryside and his life-long curiosity into changing nature and the ways of life lived by his older neighbours to whom he and his family gave much practical help.¹ He also took part in other aspects of local affairs as a bell-ringer, in sport and rifle shooting, and as a member of the Sussex Archaeological Society he contributed notes and

reviews in *Sussex Notes and Queries*, his love of the countryside having led to an interest in practical archaeology and the transcription of parish records. He adopted his pseudonym, the family name of the Halshams of West Grinstead (whose brasses in the parish church include those of a John Halsham), on the understanding that the Scotts of Brabourne in Kent, of whom he wrongly considered himself a descendant, had intermarried with the Halshams in the fifteenth century.²

But he was more than a perfect countryman. He was a perfect representative of a particular type of Sussex person and mind. Reading between the lines of his works and from family papers, he can be recognized on every page as a member of the ‘old school’ of Sussex scholars, a man of learning and observation devoted to the classics, languages and music, and a wide range of culture generally, who was remote from fashion and pretensions of any kind and despaired at the grim auguries of creeping modernity. He was so modest and retiring that he positively hated public praise and, shrinking from a first person volume that would reveal too much of himself, preferred to conceal his identity and location behind a pseudonym. With his distaste for the pursuit of ambition so conspicuous of his times, he also had a passionate concern for the deprived persons of his day (shared with his mother and his brother and sisters) — the poor, the sick, the old and the uneducated. His industrious routine, active sports, hobbies and practical skills (his sister Lily listed more than a score of simple activities he enjoyed doing about the house), his lifelong curiosity about the great

and little in the beauty of everyday moments, his continuous thinking and learning, and the help he gave to friends and strangers brought him a life of happiness, fulfilment and contentment.

Halsham was born at Oulton, between Leeds and Wakefield in Yorkshire, in 1863, his father being the secretary of an assurance company at Leeds and son of a stockbroker, and his mother the daughter of a banker also of Oulton. In *Idlehurst* he mentions, when musing over the family portraits, a little of the rough days in the family's north-country town in his grandfather's time at the hands of Luddites. Scott's move southwards seems to have been due to his father's employment in London. The family were first near Dartford in Kent, and then in Croydon when Scott's father died in 1870, when he was described as 'Secretary to the Liverpool, London and Globe Assurance Company'. By 1881 his mother had removed the family to Thicket Road, Sutton, Surrey where he encountered the 'fatal notice-boards advertising barely finished streets and staked-out estates' and in 1886 they were apparently at the Manor House, Lindfield, which stands grandly in the village street. In 1897/8 Halsham and his mother and sisters were at Lywood House, Ardingly, a large stone-built house on the Borde Hill estate, the Register of Electors suggesting that the Scotts had moved from Lindfield to Ardingly just before the time of the publication of *Idlehurst* in 1898. The family lived comfortably, but were never particularly well off. This progressively outward move from the precincts of London out into deep country suggests that Halsham's interests were given priority. According to the *Alumni Oxoniensis* he attended St Mary Hall and obtained his BA in 1885. After taking his degree Halsham attended art classes in London which were to have important consequences for his perception of transient natural beauty. In the 1901 census Halsham's mother is described as 'living on own means' and no occupation is given for Halsham, then aged 37, or his unmarried sisters. Halsham was corresponding from Lywood House in 1918 and was living there at the time of his death in 1937.³

His circumstances afforded him the leisure which gave him the opportunity for his love of books, which comes through consistently, and for solitary cross-country walks in the Meredithian tradition at all seasons and times of the day. In his youth he had tramped the highways, but

increasing traffic had turned him into field-paths to discover the true spirit of the countryside. On his long walks he would spend many 'an idle hour' observing nature at close hand into the night, and welcomed all changes in the weather. Although he would have been horrified at the suggestion, we should acknowledge him as a self-effacing Sussex man whose literary works hold up a mirror to the leisured life of a country gentleman before the Second World War, who was representative of the many Sussex people in love of life, and who truly knew how to live in a life style and attitudes radically different from a metropolitan's. He was in the mainstream of Sussex writing in his search for survivals in the countryside in default of changes in towns, and his aim to save rural landscapes and his literary achievements generally deserve rescue from oblivion, for they lift him high amongst authors. He was also a superb naturalist, a word-painter of landscape of unusual ability, and his understanding of Wealden ways of life arose from 30 years' experience of living amongst the people and places he loved to write about. He was born to be a recorder, for he was by nature a contemplative outsider.

Halsham was writing short stories from the age of 15. His book *Idlehurst: a Journal Kept in the Country* (1898), reviewed by Clement Shorter in *The Sphere* as 'simply the most beautiful book about the country that has been produced for years and years', has been regarded as his best. This was no mere record of everyday life, but an irregular diary revealing himself intimately in setting down his thoughts, reminiscences and state of mind in encounters with people and nature, and dating the passages by the day or month in which they were written during the year. The editor of the *Saturday Review* wrote of him and his writing on the publication of this book: 'I do not think any living man's writing more entirely delights me. It is a relief to have such a man. He is an antidote to the characteristics of the present age which irritate me'.⁴ A reader, probably summing up the general reaction of others, could not recall any other work which had given him such intellectual enjoyment and the pleasure of its special charm — exquisite style, balanced sentences and every word the inevitable one, the whimsical humour, the wonderful depiction of landscape in varying moods or the word paintings of the inhabitants. Although Halsham's *Idlehurst* did not reach the public to

any extent, an early admirer was Maurice Hewlett, who in 1920 acknowledged it as a minor classic which he would never willingly do without,⁵ and Arthur Beckett thought that no other Sussex book had conveyed so well the 'sense' of the Wealden landscape and its old agricultural labourers as had Halsham's.⁶ *Idlehurst* was reprinted in 2008 after being out of print since 1919.

This was followed by his novel *Kitty Fairhall* (1901), which has a weak plot but fine passages of mid-Sussex landscape description, *Lonewood Corner: a Countryman's Horizons* (1907) and *Old Standards. South Country Sketches* (1913). He also wrote a handyman's guide and on gardening. All are based on life, encounters and reflections in mid-Sussex villages, and include a fine gallery of pen portraits of working people, especially the elderly retired.

Halsham's *Idlehurst* is focused on one village which he calls 'Arnington' and his subsequent book, *Lonewood Corner*, on a neighbouring one named 'Sheringham'. The former can be identified by the topographical detail he supplies as Lindfield, and the other as Ardingly. One can walk along the village street of Lindfield and find much changed, as Halsham himself was reporting, but the long, crooked, 'S'-shaped street, its pond, the widening 'forum' of the old market place, the pleached limes and several inns survive in what is now regarded as one of the most pleasant villages in Sussex. The village has so gentrified itself since the First World War that no-one is to be found remotely resembling Halsham's villagers, and there is little sign of farming and none of woodcrafts and other traditional Wealden trades. At the opening of *Lonewood Corner* Halsham gives a clue to his new village by climbing through a dark postern-tower and up the rickety ladders to the belfry, and considering the village below the monstrous bells. This, and other detail, confirm that we are at Ardingly. *Old Standards. South Country Sketches* is, as its title implies, a more wide-ranging look at the Downs and Weald of mid-Sussex. Thus the world of his three country books and his novel was peculiarly confined to the countryside near his successive homes at Lindfield and Ardingly in the Haywards Heath district of mid-Sussex.

His milieu was the circle of hills affording wide horizons and splendid distances composed of the Forest Ridge which slopes to the wooded plain stretching to the South Downs in a mingling of heathy hills and valley meadows, woodland, turf

and tillage. He drove his stakes most firmly into the 'wood-country' of the clayey Low Weald, and nothing was more naturally endearing to him than that 'one corner of the marvellous earth', but he was also familiarly at ease with the 'hill-country' of the Downs he viewed distantly, and also Lewes and Newhaven. He was one of the few English writers who have made a virtue of a narrow field of vision, as did Gilbert White of Selborne. He was an obstinate homebody at a time when almost everyone had begun to travel and to contemplate exploring the ends of the earth. It was not suffocating, because Halsham instinctively knew, as did Richard Jefferies, that the naturalist was at his best studying a small patch through changing seasons, so he rarely ventured into his unvisited world. He loved the Weald with a demanding passion, although he distinguishes between its good and bad points. His strictly factual geography, both in broad terms and in detail, contrasts with the grim, outlandish characters, titanic passions, often unintelligible dialects, immorality and heightened landscape of Mary Webb, typical of the rural novelists of his day, from which the Sussex novelist Sheila Kaye-Smith was not entirely free.

HALSHAM'S IDEAS OF LANDSCAPE PROTECTION

Halsham's use of the term 'green beginnings' in 1934 to refer to his long relationship with nature must surely be one of the earliest uses of the phrase now in vogue. This was understandable, for in 'green' matters he was well ahead of his time. He became heir to the growing consciousness during the late nineteenth century that England had a remarkable heritage of landscape. Halsham's overall concept of the Weald was that its semi-wildness made it the characteristic England landscape. What he considered to be its defilement in mid-Sussex by the 'constant sap of bricks and mortar' gave him so much anxiety that in *Idlehurst* (1898) he advocated environmental protection, a matter in which he was no reactionary but had solutions to offer, all of which were disregarded for three decades and more before his suggestions began to be taken up seriously by government. In *Idlehurst* he wrote of his favourite view — that from the Forest Ridge of central Sussex extending over ridge after wooded ridge and across the broad levels of the Low Weald to the blue line of

the Downs 20 miles away — and he described its beauty several times in his books, wanting to store the memory for the pleasure of another day. In all English sylvan landscape Halsham thought there was hardly anything richer. As he watched this Sussex pastoral, day after day, he considered it the epitome of the real England, 'not dockyard forests, nor groves of chimneys, nor roaring streets', and that, at bottom, the guns he heard shaking the air from Aldershot were working to save it.⁷

To protect such natural beauty in Sussex he wished to see some of the recent governmental care for ancient monuments extended to the protection of landscapes as steps were being taken in contemporary Germany where, early in the twentieth century, German legislation had begun to protect nature, though in England there was no such legislation until the 1940s.⁸ Halsham envisaged a situation in which it would be possible to take into governmental guardianship whole private heaths and hillsides and rivers in which not only the fauna and flora but also the 'mere beauty of grass and heath, rock and pool' were protected.⁹ He argued that some breadths and corners should be unvexed by 'railway whistles, steam hooters, tall chimneys and forges', and in this respect Halsham can be seen as one of England's forerunners in environmental protection, advocating government legislation for vulnerable landscapes.

Halsham's anxieties about Sussex's rural landscape arose from changes in the social and outward aspect of the Haywards Heath district. He could not take pleasure, as most of his contemporaries apparently did, in seeing the new town swallowing up the countryside. Mark Antony Lower, for example, thought highly of the villas springing up 'like magic',¹⁰ whereas Halsham was distressed that the mid-Sussex landscape at the end of the nineteenth century, naturally most beautiful, was in his opinion being 'steadily and in great part irrevocably defiled' without a word of protest.

The constant sap of brick and mortar, corrugated iron, and match-boarding advances; speculative builders satisfy and foment the desire of the Cockney for a new red villa on a hill; the villages year by year spread their fringe of abominable cottage and backyard. ... All pleasure that is possible in watching Nature lies in survivals.¹¹

In 1898 he had considered that the golden goose was being slaughtered with complacency

and in 1907, in *Lonewood Corner*, he concluded that the frenzy of haste in the destruction of natural beauty was going on at much the same rate as before, but with less protest raised than before.¹² He conceded that the 'general inundation' that he had apprehended earlier showed no sign of breaking over, but that it seemed imminent, a prediction which proved accurately correct because galloping urbanization afflicted the coastal villages and 'progress' marched in great strides throughout Sussex immediately after the Great War of 1914–18. 'Will anything be saved from the wreck?', he thought.

Halsham was clearly well out of step with the thinking of his time. The Londonized wealthy were wanting hill-top villas near a railway station and new roads and utilities at the end of the nineteenth century more than they wanted to conserve the countryside. They had either a contempt for the rural past or a total indifference to it, and this gave them an overwhelming desire to erase its visible presence in what was a doggedly planned, consciously or not, implacable assault on the countryside. This amounted to what Halsham would have called its assassination, apart from what they could see from their windows, and resulting in what might be described as the de-Sussexization of Sussex, tirelessly perceived by the newcomers as an improvement and as another triumph of Progress.

Another theme which greatly concerned him was the decline in agriculture which had taken place since the 'Golden Age' in the 1850s. In *Idlehurst* he vividly describes the shiftless farming on particular ungrateful parts of the central Weald, and the broken hedgerows, waterlogged furrows and weed-choked fallows that had spread generally, and understood that the hungry and obstinate soil was 'always ready to slip back to its natural harvest of oak saplings and six-foot bracken and bramble-tangles'. Halsham also excels in descriptions of harvest operations on the Downs in *Old Standards*, scrupulously capturing every detail of the scene which began at five in the morning and lasted 15 hours.¹³ He resented the ways in which agriculture was being reduced to a 'make-believe' industry largely dependent on shooting game and other sporting activities.

It was Halsham's favourite view of the exceptional beauty of the Sussex landscape in the 'John Halsham' country, coupled with the loss

under building in the Haywards Heath district, that were the germ of his idea in 1898 for ‘Natural Museums’, which we now call National Parks, for the Lake District, Dartmoor, the upper Thames, the Fens and the part of the Downs and Weald where he lived (being unfamiliar with the rest of Sussex).¹⁴ This was more than a generation before Vaughan Cornish, on behalf of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, made a similar proposal for part of the South Downs in 1929, and 112 years will have elapsed since Halsham’s plan before, in 2010, a National Park for the South Downs and part of the Sussex Weald becomes a reality. He also foresaw in 1898 that local authorities would eventually endeavour to replace lost rustic features by such means as planting woods, creating open spaces and ‘greening’ cities generally.¹⁵ He doubted, again correctly as proved by new towns flung off into the rural edges of London by the London County Council, whether the ‘cauldron simmering under its fumes’ would ever be made habitable without spilling its ‘off-scourings’ into the surrounding countryside. In 1907, in the light of insistent urbanization, he advocated a more general protection for the countryside, again in relation to his home district, which we would now term designating Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), and predicted that it would happen eventually, but feared that it would be just too late.¹⁶

Reading *Idlehurst* again in 1920 during the short-lived optimism after the end of the Great War, Maurice Hewlett, in the book already mentioned, was troubled by Halsham’s pessimism about the ‘cockneyfication’ of the English countryside generally, and questioned whether his gloom was fully justified by reality. He correctly pointed out that chalkland Wiltshire, where he was then living, was then relatively untouched by metropolitan London but, in acknowledging that when travelling down to West Sussex from London to his previous home he never felt he was in the country until past Pulborough, and that further east it was the same to Lewes, he conceded Halsham’s case for the district south of London.¹⁷ With hindsight there are no grounds to doubt Halsham’s veracity about the ‘Londonization’ in his day (1898–1913) in mid-Sussex, and the subsequent sub-urbanization and urban sprawl in Sussex generally between the two World Wars vindicate his concerns and predictions. That these

environmental changes were considered adverse by the next generation, and gave rise to attempts at arresting them by means Halsham had himself advocated 20 or more years earlier, suggests that the time is overdue to recognize him as the worthy founder of the conservation movement in Sussex. A born spectator, by brooding observation and quiet reflection he had come to an understanding of the environmental situation in the locality he knew best and, as a self-appointed guardian of a precious heritage, prescribed remedies for it, whereas most people of his time and later, notably Hilaire Belloc, were motivated only by passionate tribulation, and in making their bitter cries offered little by way of positive suggestions for alleviation.

Halsham’s proposals for landscape protection in mid-Sussex in 1898 appear to have been based solely on the grounds of natural beauty, but in the interval between finishing *Idlehurst* and publishing articles in the first decade of the twentieth century which were printed in *Old Standards* (1913) he greatly developed his understanding of the role of man in its making. He deserves the credit for identifying the Sussex Weald as something special in terms of landscape and human life at a time when this was insufficiently recognized. It is commonplace now, thanks largely to W. G. Hoskins, to acknowledge the man-made characteristics of the English landscape, but when Halsham was writing of this in his essay on mid-Sussex, ‘An English Landscape’, in the early twentieth century it was a ground-breaking concept. Sitting on a faggot or the stump of a tree in a thick-standing wood on the Forest Ridge, the longer he looked at the scene the more he came to realize that, beyond the general configuration of the surface, the landscape was due to human interference. He further recognized that this familiar landscape of Weald and Down was of a ‘distinct and uncommon genre’, in that Wealdsmen had existed for generations in conformity with nature and that with ‘unconscious art and imperceptible touch on touch’ man had made a landscape of his own out of the Weald, ‘adapted to his hand at every turn, and yet in perfect accord with Nature’s rule’, as William Cobbett had similarly observed in the 1820s. He considered that this ancient composite beauty must be ‘surely in its entirety one of the most notable pieces of man’s handiwork which the world has seen’. In comparing the Wealden landscape and parts of the Midland plain which

had undergone intensive arable farming, he rejoiced in the diversity of the former, arising from man's not too masterly hand over centuries of labour in which he had not 'tamed' or 'harnessed' the landscape. Halsham went on to consider the qualities of an exceptionally beautiful landscape, identifying horizons and broad prospects of well-wooded hills and valleys, and its cultivation with nothing to do with 'high' farming, and noted that not any large proportion of English ground answered these conditions and that this character could easily be lost by changes in ideals and agriculture departing from the continuance of its traditional activities, coppicing, forestry, small-scale agriculture, handicrafts, etc.¹⁸ His reference to the Sussex Weald as a perfect example of the marriage between man's work and nature is one of the very first of its kind, and a theme which has been taken up generally by the historian G. M. Trevelyan and by endless conservationists since.

Altogether, his essay can be considered the founding document in the history of Sussex conservation, and the origin of ideas about the history and beauty of the county's landscape which underpin English culture to this day.

HALSHAM'S RURAL RECORDINGS

With Halsham we alight on a writer who engages equally with the human predicament and the natural world, and who had the gift not only of sensing the spirit of places but of recording the lives, histories, habits and speech that created those places. This was because he was a miniaturist with a wonderful visual gift, an alert 'seeing eye' for detail, and an ear for local speech in the English vernacular as it was spoken. Moreover, although a classical scholar, Halsham was a rare spirit who had a remarkable empathy with the real working labourer and other 'ordinary' rural people, and took trouble to record their histories and thoughts. It is these vignettes of working people that bring his books to life. He might spend hours smoking a pipe with his interviewees, learning about their careers not merely for his writing needs on the understanding of the land, but with enjoyment and a genuine concern for their well-being. He had the privileged perspective of an outsider who had become an accepted member of the community, and the insight he gained made him an invaluable recorder of social and economic

life in the Weald. He would devote an entire day to contemplating harvest operations in detail, or watch for hours how woodmen, hedgers and ditchers went about their work. Rudyard Kipling must have similarly observed closely local people at Burwash at the same period for his short stories but, for all his idealization of Old Hobden, there is no evidence that he actually had Halsham's close and sympathetic relationship with them.¹⁹

By reason of Halsham's unexpected vision he can be regarded as the George Sturt of Sussex, who, author of *George Bourne, Book of a Lifetime: Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer*, was also a defender of the labourer and had similar views on the condition of the countryside. But Halsham writes with more charm, and his portraits of old labourers are gems of historical writing. As he wryly remarked, he had lived amongst Hodges for 30 years and there was not much to be learnt about them at a full house party in a country mansion or a series of rural weekends. In fact, Halsham was apparently conscious of the need, which Richard Jefferies had also shared but never achieved, of writing a chronicle of the working countryman in his habitat. In this respect he is a worthy successor to Jefferies. He writes with more assurance than Jefferies did until his later maturity, and Halsham's longer experience shows in his greater ability to get 'below the skin' of the working man. Halsham had a particular motivation for his enquiries because he had the conviction that modern men and women in Sussex, the newcomers from towns, were mere strangers and sightseers, conducting excursions into history with cameras and sketch-books, whereas working class people were descendants of Chaucer, Rabelais and Aristophanes and thus the rightful immemorial owners of the present world.²⁰ Virginia Woolf was to come to the same conclusion 20 years later.²¹ Halsham was greatly dismayed, however, that these 'owners' had no conception of the natural and man-made beauty amongst which they worked

As a true countryman, 'pure of the taint of Pall Mall', and reckoning the journey to Town was worth the cost for the mere pleasure of getting back again, he was deeply disturbed at the exodus to towns and cities of the craftsmen, such as the wood-cutters, hedgers, wattle-makers and cow-keepers, and the tradesmen like clock smiths, tailors and shoemakers. He greatly regretted the changes that came with 'Londonization' that undermined once stable rural communities and

led to the loss of much of the meaning of the countryside and half its charm. He noted the extinction of different dialects in Sussex and the demise, with hardly an exception, of all the great families in the county, whose properties had passed into the hands of stockbrokers, bankers and distillers. He despaired of the urban taste and habits which were over-running his rural territory quicker even than the spread of bricks and mortar which made Londoners of everyone from their cradles. He presciently foresaw, under the attrition of London on the one hand and Brighton on the other, that the village street, once a 'university of the arts' would become nothing but a 'place of "branches" of soulless factories and firms no-one knows or cares where ...'. Again and again he draws attention to the old values and ideals and scorns the new, clinging to the Old World which was about to be lost altogether. He found the ancient rule of life in the countryside not reactionary, but steady and calming, and was distressed at the ending of the continuity of custom and skills handed down from generation to generation by such workmen rooted in their own ground as a champion ploughman, a man good with horses, or a skilled hedger or wheelwright. He deplored the fact that Town had 'taken up' Country and, although almost ignorant of its wants and needs, governed it, thought for it, painted it and wrote about it. What he considered to be the defilement of the countryside under modern conditions was a great grief to him. He objected to the current idea that the country was a useful adjunct to town life — 'the air a good tonic, the quiet as making for sleep'. He considered the country as 'something more than a mere appendage of town, a convenient sanatorium, a playground of street-folk, a rubbish heap for your waste of humanity and by product of crime and insanity'.

An example of Halsham's literary technique survives in a grey note-book, apparently from 1911, which includes notes made by his sister Lily, who evidently assisted Halsham. After asking Andrew Stacy, the chimney sweep from Horsted Keynes who was carefully removing soot from the dining room fireplace at Lywood House, whether he remembered boys going up chimneys, the man's reply telling of his fright when he first went up a chimney at the age of 11 and of the cruelty of some of the masters is recorded, word for word, in intense detail.²²

Nevertheless, not even Halsham could bring back the ordinary Sussex countryman in the full because, like every recorder, he saw life through a looking-glass, and therefore incompletely, distortingly and often sentimentally, and in a view necessarily selective. Yet Halsham never thought of the countryside as idyllic. He has vivid passages about shiftless farming on starved little farms with poor thistly pastures, ill-kept ploughs and latchless gates, and was fully aware that the ungrateful Weald was always 'ready to slip back to its natural harvest of oak-saplings, six-foot bracken and bramble-tangles'. He considered farmers' children healthier than those in villages, where they lived in 'stuffy walls, nurseries of dirt and sickness, deadly with bungled drains'. Just as the saying went that 'no good land was to be seen from Grinstead steeple', so Halsham reflected that 'We were never, I judge, at any time a particularly well favoured race hereabouts'. When children trooped out of school he found pale faces, dull looks and undeveloped bodies, and in adults almost universal blunted, flattened and twisted features showing traces of disease and the burden of life. Nevertheless he noted that the hard times of the past had been less severe in Sussex than in other parts of England, as William Cobbett had noted previously.²³

Although he did not see rural life and country people entirely through the sepia-tinted glasses of Miss Mitford's *Our Village* (1824–32) and stressed the suffering grimness of lives, rural poverty and other knock-on effects inflicted on country people, nevertheless, as a countryman through and through, he should be accounted a pioneer of the rich genre in English literary tradition that followed, fed on the nostalgic notion that earlier, the countryside was somehow better, more beautiful and less spoilt, which produced, for example, Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (1908), Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* (1945), Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* (1959) and Larkin's mourning at the passing of country ways which had been previously assumed permanent.

His prose offers a celebration of the values and characters that historically propped up key components of rural life, and he uses these for his sheer persistence in the defence of 'Old Sussex'. Accordingly, almost all his characters, such as old Widow Hoadley, the postmaster, the locksmith and the reaper, are anachronisms of a departed generation who look back nostalgically on

memories of a vanished Sussex, and his buildings, the rural cottages, with scarcely checked decay, the declining water-mill and the almshouse, also have an anachronous existence. Halsham also deals with other disappearing survivals such as wearing the round frock, the rector's cob, and the conveyance to the railway station to be replaced by omnibuses. On innovations, notably in education, he is generally condemnatory. His rural society is thus less than half the whole. Younger people are usually paraded as examples of impending failure, or have misguidedly been tempted to leave the fields for the city, nearest town or village for a 'town' job and be lost to country ways. Nevertheless he systematically heard at first hand from those who recalled the 'old days', and these eye-witness accounts will be a valuable source of information for future generations on the decline of the rural community and its ancient ways of life, which literature has since made so hackneyed.

Halsham's portrait of Mr Mant, who ran the Lindfield post office from his corn chandler's shop, is a gem. Standing behind his bow-windows and bottle-glass panes in his shop redolent of cat's meat and dog biscuits, Mr Mant epitomized the old Sussex by using the lid of a meal-bin for post-office business and acting for the community as registrar of births and deaths, cashing cheques, serving as treasurer to local societies, and writing wills and letters for people, and was the 'accustomed go-between and peace-maker, patching up quarrels about hedges and strays'. Halsham correctly thought that 'he must have a whole secret history of the parish laid up in the close archives of his mind.'²⁴

Simeon Nye, the clock smith, was another tradesman who once flourished in the village. His small stock and austere workshop with its early eighteenth-century clock with a brass face was augmented by sales of tobacco. There was never any hurry about work. At leisure he played the bass-viol and he was a keen gardener and bird-fancier. He began work at his father's bench at the age of nine and self-taught himself in the three Rs by reading a Penny Cyclopaedia. His main customers were those from farms and cottages on the outliers of the parish who came on Saturday nights to do their marketing and shopping. Amongst them was Harry Vinall, who was representative of the dying race of handicraftsmen and a wattle-maker, woodcutter, thatcher, hedger and oak flower. Nye's

friends included the shoemaker and tailor, both of whom were running into competition with the proprietors of a new boot store and the universal outfitter of the Emporium who was selling 'sweated' lines from Whitechapel. There was never to be another apprentice clock maker again, and the boys who rang Nye's bell would be coming for a packet of cigarettes.²⁵

Halsham also sketches Shadrach Beard who for 40 years has driven his tilted carrier's cart — then a hearse-like wagonette — between Lindfield and Lewes. Rival horse-drawn omnibuses had appeared but had failed. Shadrach patiently waited for his passengers to come down the garden path and say farewells at the porch, or pause while a lad came whistling across the fields to pick up medicines, and his conveyance would be detained by flocks of sheep and droves of bullocks. On the somnolent journey passengers would be exchanging gossip amongst themselves in animated voices, but 'you may make a hundred journeys under Shadrach's charge and never hear a word upon affairs that lie beyond the circle of the hills.'²⁶

An example of one of Halsham's realistic sketches of working-class people in his district is this account of villagers.

An old man is at work in the plot, labouring with slow painfulness with his hoe ... His face is of a type too common in the village, with sunk, toothless mouth, rheumy eyes, and sharp grey-stubbed chin, hopelessly mis-featured by birth, and ill-used by later chances; his frame is spare and ungainly — feeble, any one would judge who did not know the power of slow, tireless work in those lean arms and crooked knees. ...

Alice is slight and flat-chested; her round, blunt-featured face, with the weakest mouth that ever simpered, is crowned by a wad of fair, tousled hair. Yet for all this, she is, without much question, the nearest to being pretty of all the girls in the parish. For it is not only the worn eyes and fallen mouth that makes the cottage-folk unlovely; with most rare exceptions the whole race is strangely plain; in the school-children, the lads and girls, the grown men and woman alike, a slack deformity of feature is so general as to large causes perhaps as yet insufficiently explored. ...²⁷

Joe Prevett was a man who could be ‘read’ by the look of his thatched house half hidden behind a holly hedge. Although cramped and out of repair, by all the recognised signs — window curtains, the clothesline, the neat wood pile and well-tended garden — he was tolerably well-to-do. He belonged to the ‘aristocracy of agricultural labour’, known in the district as ‘the steady worker’, the champion plough-man, clever with horses. Even in worst times when as many as 60 unskilled men hung about the weekly cattle market for work, Joe was never out of a job, and a safe sovereign came ineffectually into the hands of his wife, a poor manager. As a ploughman and general farmhand, Joe had little reading matter, did not attend choral societies or handicraft classes. He resented the schoolmasters’ persistent jeering depreciation of country ways and traditions which led pupils to think they were miserable anachronisms drowning in mud. With two children, he was always worried about doctor’s bills. He was also concerned at gipsies and travellers camping on the nearby common, had a complaint against the sanitary inspector who condemned his pigsty but allowed the drains of a row of nearby houses to poison the neighbourhood, and took a hard line on aspiring ‘pushy’ tradesmen and shirking labourers who got benefits from charities and other organisations.²⁸

Amongst farm workers at harvest on the Downs Halsham rivals Richard Jefferies, indeed might be thought to be his superior in perception, style of writing and appreciation of impending change. He evokes the intense fire of the sun in a treeless, hence shadow-less, combe, ‘as few corners of England can hold it ... The whole combe is a furnace or crucible in which the stuff of life is being concocted’. He watches the slow unresting method of harvesting, the pace set by the practice of a thousand years, never slackening, and in a sense writes a moving epitaph to ways of farming akin to Hesiod’s or Numa’s.

At a signal of the long hazel wand the oxen halt or lean into their yokes; the tanned harvesters pitch up their sheaves or build them in courses high on the shaky foothold of the pile wagon ... The creeping wains and

the slowly gathered sheaves are to a few the melancholy signs of a decayed industry, to a few they are archaeological survivals, a glimpse of a vanishing picturesque; to the multitude whose daily bread is dispensed in automatic security by the baker’s cart, they are too rude and barbaric elements ... Honour then, while the mood holds, to the sun-dried troop who — whether they use the ancient tackle, swaphook and yoke and goad, or innovate with an American self-binder ... Honour to the ancient captain of the band, bent and white-haired, who halts a moment, leaning on his fork and wiping the sweat out of his eyes with knuckles sun-freckled and rheumatic-knotted, to consider and compare the slowly clearing stubble and the threat of the rising storm. ...²⁹

As a Wealdsman, Halsham introduces old Quartus Nye, ruddy-faced and white-haired. When he stands in the village street in summer ‘lady artists and the camera folk’ beseech him to pose. He had a small out-pension from the almshouse and at 83 had the leisure to watch children trailing to and from school, and the post-cart, the carrier’s tilt, the doctor’s car, the parson’s cob pass by. He is another of Halsham’s survivors from another world, who is still sent for occasionally by estate carpenters and bailiffs of great estates for he was a woodman, master of his craft,

one of the favoured race which lives under South-country oaks, carrying on the immemorial cycle of felling and clearing which gives the weald its true character, making it a land not of ancient forest, but of copse and shaw.

Old Quartus could do everything in season to do with coppicing, from the cutting of the underwood which began with the new year, to the making of spray-faggots, kiln-faggots, toy-wood, ether-boughs for hedging, stakes, hoops, thatching rods, to the ‘throwing and tan-flawing’, the felling and barking which comes with the rising sap in April.³⁰

In Halsham’s novel *Kitty Fairhall* (1901) are all his themes in *Idlehurst* and his later Sussex books — a vivid sense of place in Weald and Downs (the ‘wood country’ and the ‘hill-country’) and their inter-relationships, the broken hedgerows, waterlogged furrows, weed-choked fields and fallows of declining Wealden farming, the intimate life and attitudes of mid-Sussex country people

unused to London and large towns, contrasting with that of the cultivated voices of the Rector and his colleagues and friends, transient natural phenomena and country walking. The setting is also the same as in *Idlehurst*, the great wooded plain that stretches down to the Downs, 'the wood-country', the corner which spoke to the heroine's senses 'the language most her own'. Vivid descriptions of the floods and storms of a sunless year and its effects on agriculture (1881?) are followed by that of Kitty's walk down the Ouse valley past barges and the ox-team to Newhaven ('Ousehaven') ending with a vivid description of the quays. There is also an account of the 'new world' at Lewes ('Ousebridge'), about Keere Street, around the Castle and a glimpse of the slums of Old Town — 'houses and houses without the room to stretch a clothes-line in and whole streets where they haven't got an oven between them'. The author again reveals his strong grasp of the historical evolution of the Weald.

In the course of his walks Halsham was the first Sussex writer to engage in the study of the transient, fugitive, beauty of Sussex in the shifting light of day and season. His artistic studies were clearly beneficial to him in this regard. In his 'An English Landscape' essay, for example, he noted that the counter-change of light, dark and colour as seen from the Forest Ridge to the Downs had the effect of something like 'body-white mixed with water-colour tints'. He describes with acute awareness sudden changes in nature such as a countryside growing dark under the rapid changes of autumnal twilight, the breeze driving waves across the wheat in elastic curves, the curled crest of thunder-cloud lifting above a ridge of the Downs, light striking on water in disused marl pits, the sunset glow on long-light evenings. In *Lonewood Corner* (1907) he records his sadness at not being able to catch the momentary changes in landscape at the season and the hour, and thought it strange if he could see a landscape twice in the same mood when he went outdoors. About dusk he saw a hillside he had seen a thousand times to find it transformed by some hidden power into a visage it had never showed before and would not show again. The lifted veil quickly fell again and the vision passed. The clouds faded from their last pale purples to cold grey. Just before it passed he wanted to grasp it and hold it the moment it fell away, the uninspired face of the hillside remaining. His sudden pang of

regret at the lost beauty he thought irrational and unaccountable, rather like one who wishes to catch the broken end of a dream.³¹

In 'Nightfall', a chapter which concludes his *Old Standards* (1913), is unquestionably the most exquisite record of his wonderful seeing eye of the minute detail of the effects of changing light in the foreground of the mid-Sussex landscape between a sunset following heavy rain and mist, and autumn twilight. Walking home at sunset in fading light he notes the peculiar light produced on a blackbird's bright black eye, on the faint bars on its dark breast-feathers and on the translucent gold-brown of its half-spread wings, and how a foxglove swayed a little at the stroke of the bird's wings and, as it caught the light, showed the paler speckle through the purple of its bell. A little later the country had grown dark:

The stubbles glimmered in spaces of shadowless grey; the rough pastures scarcely showed their thickets of ragwort and silvery clots of thistledown; but there was still a sheen from the afterglow on the brows and ridges of the fields, and tufted shapes of bush and hedge were outlined with a greenish bloom.³²

Halsham's narrations of how beauty gradually and insensibly stole into his vision is a refreshing change from the Sussex writers' normal passion for beauty which swept one up at once and irresistibly away.

The motion of clouds and cloud colours also fascinated him, as did changing colour in trees and plants. At the coming of Spring in his local woods he noted that, unlike the heavy monotony of colour in summer, spring yielded nameless gradations, varying from the 'foxy tan' on the larch plantations, the bronze-pink of the new oak spray, the full green of grass in shadow, to the dark masses of pine and fir, together with the purples which lay like lakes in the folds of the woods or in the clouds moving across in suffused misty light whose descriptions defied the use of names like hyacinth, amethyst or turquoise.³³ Halsham also had an acute sense of smell. On a visit to the Cotwolds he missed the smell of wood-smoke, of dead leaves and rotting wood, the rising sap of the oaks and that of the ripening gorse of his home district. Virginia Woolf was to take up this matter of transient beauty earnestly, and Habberton Lulham, the Sussex poet, also engaged in the problem.³⁴

Halsham's observations have left an unsurpassed record of change in Sussex between the 1890s and 1913 which marked a period of transition between old and new ways of living. He consciously watched the collision between the old and new, in finding survivals and tracing links with a far-off past before they would be wholly gone a few more years hence, aware that the differences in standpoint between aged labourers and their grandsons was 'greater perhaps than the same interval of generation could show in the world's history'. It is evident that Halsham should be considered a great naturalist, historian, geographer, pioneer conservationist and one of the most distinguished writers on Sussex that the county has produced. In his beautifully written books, which deserve to be more widely read, we can discover the freshness of the Sussex Weald and Downs in the years before the Second World War and derive inspiration to protect its remaining character for posterity.

Halsham was too solitary and independent a person to belong to a 'school' of writers, but the possible influence on him of other scholars and authors merits study. His predilection for the open air and idealization of country life would appear to link him to Richard Jefferies, but there is no evidence that he was directly inspired by him,

as were Henry Williamson, Arthur Beckett and Julian Bell. We are on more certain ground with the poet George Crabbe. On returning from one of his interviews with an old pensioner, Halsham fetched down from his library shelf eight volumes of the poet's verses and told himself once more that there was never any one in the world like him yet in the presentment of the rustic soul.³⁵

Halsham was fond of calling himself an 'ingrained' Tory, and Maurice Hewlett took it for granted that he was. A close reading of his works, however, gives the impression that he was, at least in some respects, exactly the opposite. With his progressive approach to social justice and human rights and his concern for the environmental problems created by large cities he would have found company with the group of liberal-thinking *fin-de-siècle* writers who clustered around rural reformer Charles F. G. Masterman and included the historians G. M. Trevelyan and R. C. K. Ensor, who were themselves inspired by the political economist John Stuart Mill, a tremendous rural walker in his youth who as early as 1850 had deplored the social life brought by the Industrial Revolution and prayed that not every single yard of British soil would be brought under intensive cultivation.³⁶

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NOTES

¹ For this information, and much else, I have drawn on family papers kindly made available to me by Mr John Scott. I also wish to thank Mrs Mary Benson, another member of the Scott family, for her interest and help, and Christopher Whittick for his positive contribution.

² 'John Halsham', Arthur Beckett, *Sussex County Magazine* **11** (5) (May 1937), 271, and personal communication from Mr John Scott.

³ For this biographical information I am indebted to Miss Ann Winsor.

⁴ Correspondence in the possession of Mr John Scott.

⁵ Maurice Hewlett, *In a Green Shade: a Country Commentary* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1920), 1.

⁶ Beckett (1937), 271.

⁷ John Halsham, *Idlehurst: a Journal Kept in the Country* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1898), 259.

⁸ Karl Ditt, 'Nature conservation in England and Germany', *Contemporary European History* **5** (1) (1996), 12–15.

⁹ Halsham (1898), 23.

¹⁰ M. A. Lower, *A Compendious History of Sussex* **1** (Lewes: George P. Bacon, 1870), 225.

¹¹ Halsham (1898), 4–5.

¹² John Halsham, *Lonewood Corner: a Countryman's Horizons* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1907), 7–11.

¹³ John Halsham, *Old Standards. South Country Sketches* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913), 64–70.

¹⁴ Halsham (1898), 23, 259.

¹⁵ Halsham (1898), 4–5.

¹⁶ Halsham (1907), 193.

¹⁷ Hewlett (1920), 1–3. Halsham (1907), 7–11.

¹⁸ 'An English Landscape', in Halsham (1913), 206–14; 6–7.

¹⁹ M. Seymour-Smith, *Rudyard Kipling* (London: Macdonald, 1989), 341.

²⁰ Halsham (1913), 160–61.

²¹ A. Olivier Bell (ed.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III: 1925–30 (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 197.

²² In the possession of Mr John Scott.

²³ Halsham (1907), 174.

²⁴ Halsham (1913), 19–26.

²⁵ Halsham (1913), 106–15.

²⁶ Halsham (1913), 35–45.

²⁷ Halsham (1913), 19–31.

²⁸ Halsham (1913), 97–105.

²⁹ Halsham (1913), 66.

³⁰ Halsham (1913), 248–55.

³¹ Halsham (1907), 185–205.

³² Halsham (1913), 256–62.

³³ *The Saturday Review*, 5 April 1902.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Evening over Sussex', in *The Death of the Moth and other essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942),

7–11; Habberton Lulham, 'On the Downs', in *Songs from the Downs and Dunes* (London: Kegan Paul, 1908).

³⁵ Halsham (1907), 231.

³⁶ The present author has elaborated this theme in his forthcoming work, *The Discovery of Sussex*, Phillimore, Chichester.
