



THE COUNTRY OF LARKS

A CHILTERN JOURNEY

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON AND THE FOOTPRINT HS2

By Gail Simmons

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“The fields below were still as Stevenson described them... a collage of greens and browns, a rumpled patchwork of muted autumn colours. The English landscape, intricate as the finest lace, cannot be rushed. It is best absorbed at walking pace. All around, if you look hard enough, you notice traces of our forebears – in the copses, the hedges and the fields – reaching back through the centuries, each landmark telling its own story... A child of the Chilterns, I too was a thread in that tapestry, part of its warp and its weft.”

In the autumn of 1874 a young, unknown author called Robert Louis Stevenson walked from High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire to Tring in Hertfordshire. His account of his three-day journey, written before he found fame as a novelist, included his observations of the natural world and reflections on the experience of walking across this landscape at a time when England was still largely agrarian and when most people still earned their living from working the land.

Almost 150 years later, travel writer and journalist Gail Simmons follows in Stevenson’s footsteps. Retracing his journey via Great Missenden and Wendover, her overwhelming impression is of a fast-changing landscape, with the loss of flora, fauna and a whole rural way of life. Soon, the arrival of HS2, the high-speed railway from London to Birmingham, will bring other changes as it slashes through the heart of the Chilterns tearing up ancient woodland, historic sites, centuries-old field systems and long-standing boundaries.

Just as Stevenson spoke to people he met along the way, Simmons encounters those whose lives will be affected by HS2: a tenant farmer, a campaigner, a historian, a conservationist and a commuter. Throughout the book, she interweaves their narratives and her own recollections of growing up in the Chilterns with a detailed exploration of this distinctive landscape of English chalk downland and asks what HS2 will mean for the people and wildlife along its route.

An eloquent, evocative and timely contemplation of the changing nature of life and landscape in the English countryside, the book is both a pilgrimage in honour of Robert Louis Stevenson and an homage to the Chilterns, a land that was once so rich and diverse, so bursting with birdsong, that Stevenson named it ‘The Country of Larks’.

‘The Country of Larks is both a lyrical account of a walk through place and time, and an elegy to a very special part of the English landscape – now threatened in the name of progress.’

Stephen Moss, author and naturalist

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ABOUT GAIL SIMMONS



After a peripatetic army childhood, Gail Simmons settled with her family in a Chiltern village. Like most eighteen year-olds, she couldn't wait to leave home and spread her wings. Decades later – having lived in a Cumbrian castle, listed historic buildings in Warwickshire, led walking groups in Italy and the Middle East, and written about travel for national newspapers – she returned to rediscover the landscape of her youth. Now that the Chilterns are threatened by HS2, she realises how important these modest hills are to her.

Gail holds an MA in medieval history and a PhD in creative writing, and teaches travel writing at Bath Spa and Cambridge universities. *The Country of Larks* is her first book. For more about Gail, visit:

www.travelscribe.uk

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