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THE ENGLISH FOREST

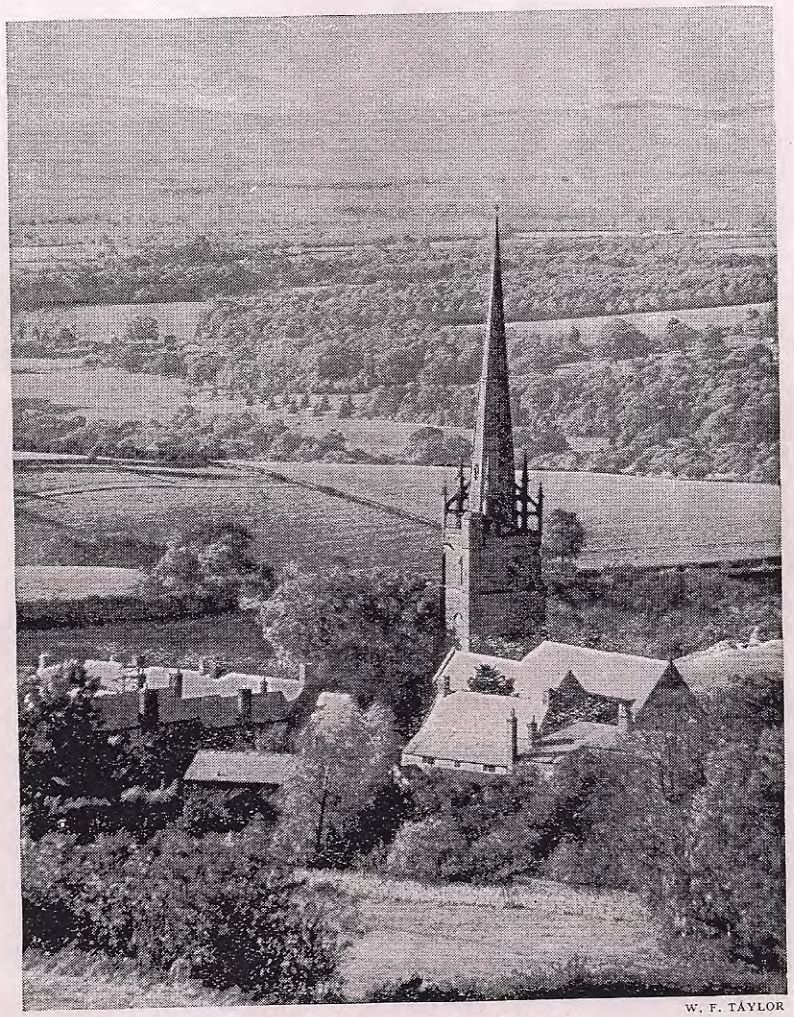
by H. E. BATES

WHEN it comes to a question of assessing the beauties of his country, the Englishman is in a delicate position. Is he to be true to that tradition of sturdy honesty which for no apparent reason time has pinned on him, and honestly call most of his mountains simply hills and most of his hills simply molehills, and most of his rivers simply brooks? or is he to be true to that tradition of dishonesty which glorifies and magnifies anything English, good or bad, simply because it is English, and dishonestly pretend that in the richness and grandeur of her natural scenic beauties England is second to none?

Whichever course he takes —and in typically English fashion he is not likely to take any course at all until the beauties in question have been lost to him for ever, when he will be very appreciative of what he has lost and very angry, and will write to the press about it —there is one aspect of his English scenery which will bother him a lot. This is the question of English forests. It will bother him for two reasons. First, because he will have to make an extra hard choice here between honesty and dishonesty, for although it is all very fine and attractive to talk of English forests it is an altogether different matter to face the fact that they are, with one or two exceptions, not forests any longer. And second, it will bother him because he will, generally speaking, know nothing about them.

Ask him to name half a dozen English forests and he may tell you Sherwood, Dartmoor, Exmoor, Ashdown, Epping and the New Forest. Ask him for another half-dozen and he will look at you with truly English suspicion, as though there were a catch in it and you were trying to make a fool of him. He may even tell you that there are no more. And he will, in a sense, be right.

For the forests of England are gone. It is true that we may still count them, very surprisingly, in scores and in the most unexpected places, on maps that still mark them for us. We know that the State provides a Forestry Commission, and that the work of afforestation goes on. But forests? Except for the New Forest, Dartmoor, Exmoor, Dean, Epping, Savernake,



W. F. TAYLOR

ROYAL FOREST OF DEAN

Most interesting of English woodlands. The Court of Verderers, founded under the Forest Laws of Canute, grant mining rights to those born of a "free father" and who have worked in a mine for a year and a day.

DIXON-SCOTT

SILVER BIRCHES IN SHERWOOD FOREST

"Birches, frail whispering company are these?
Or lovely women rooted into trees?
Daughters of Norsemen, on a foreign shore."—V. SACKVILLE WEST.

Sherwood, the name is a mockery. The rest are the ghosts of forests; these places are merely woods. We have nothing to compare with the Black Forest of Germany, still less the Black Forest of Russia; and when we begin to think of, say, the forests of Brazil and Bolivia our biggest forest, with its 90,000 almost prim acres, begins to seem as significant as a drop of spittle on the face of an ocean.

What is a forest? How does it come into being, magnificent and huge as the forests of Russia and Bolivia still are and as the forest—note the singular—of Britain once was? Of many descriptions I like best that which appears in Camden. It has poetry and aims to describe, I think, only the specifically English forest, the chase, the royal domain as England once knew it. It has nothing to do with the primeval, the huge virginity of uncharted places. What Camden describes is very English indeed: "What a Forrest is, and the reason of that name, if you desire to know (but see you laugh not thereat) take it heere out of the blacke booke of the Exchequer. *A Forrest is a safe harbor, and abiding place of deere or beasts, not of any whatsoever, but of wilde, and such as delight in woods: not in every place, but in some certaine and meet for that purpose, and hereupon a forrest hath the name, as one would say, Feresta,* that *is, a station of wild beasts.*"

This description is very English, rather homely in its civilized gentleness. Apply it to the forest so well described by Mr. Julian Duguid in *Green Hell*, and it seems a little comic. Only in England, where the forests were so long subordinate to the pleasures of kings, could wild beasts and a safe harbour have gone together.

That brings us not only to what a forest was but what, in England at any rate, it contained in the way of savagery. There are, or were, five beasts which were properly beasts of forest, or venery; they were hart, hind, hare, boar and wolf. It is curious that the hare is there but not the fox. It may seem curious, in fact, that the hare is there at all, since hares are not creatures of the woodland, but of open country.

This brings us to something else, to the necessity of revising that poetical definition of Camden, to add that a forest is not necessary a piece of woodland but, according to John Manwood, "a certain territory or circuit of woody grounds or pastures, known in its bonds and privileges . . . to be under the Kings protection for his princely

A. DURRANT

MORNING IN EPPING FOREST

A delightful study of spreading shafts of sunlight in a cool glade, where morning mists still linger. Epping provides a variety of pleasing walks through copse and thicket and beneath the shade of hornbeam, beech and oak. This beautiful sanctuary was saved for the nation by the Corporation of the City of London.

delight." This holds good for the forest of today, for Dartmoor and Exmoor especially, and for the New Forest, in all of which woodland is much broken up by pasture and heath and by villages and private land.

But there was a time, and authorities hold it to have been not so very far distant, before princely delight had its day, when almost the whole of England was forest. Cæsar found it so: the land with any settled agricultural life all being confined to the south coast, the interior being a single great forest, with clearings for habitation.

Born Hunters

It was the Saxons, and not the Romans, who did so much to change all that. Nothing could have delighted them more, as born hunters and lovers of the sword, than those vast and almost barbaric territories abounding with beast and game, and it is in their time that the first records of the enactment of forest laws are to be found, laws which were passed in 1016, in the reign of Canute the Great. They were inexorably cruel and inspired by sadistic savagery. I quote again from Camden, who is in turn quoting *Polycraticon* by John of Salisburie:

". . . that which you may marvell more at, to lay gins for birds, to let snares to allure them with nooze or pipe, or by any waies laying whatever to entrap or take them, is oftentimes by vertue of an Edict, made a crime, and either answered with forfeiture of goods, or punished with losse of limbe or life . . . Husbandmen are debarred their fallow fields which Deeres have libertie to stray abroad, and that their pasture may be augmented, the poor farmer is abridged, and cut short of his grounds. What is sowne, planted, or grassed, they keep for the husbandmen that bee tenants: both pasturage for heardmen, drovers and graziers, and Bee-hives they exclude from floury plots: yea, the very bees themselves are scarcely permitted to use their natural libertie."

These laws, enforced right down to the reign of Henry III, touched not only commoners, but clergy and nobles, and it was the nobles who, fed up at last, drew up the Charta de Forresta, got it signed and brought it into force. That began the most amazingly complex system of forest government, altogether too cluttered up with obsolete legalities and phraseology for the layman of today, with its system of visiting justices, courts of attachment, courts of regard

DIXON-SCOTT

SWAN GREEN IN THE FOREST

Swan Green is a typical hamlet in the New Forest near Lyndhurst. Two miles away the Knightwood Oak is a splendid example of the trees which provided the wood for the ships of Queen Elizabeth's navy. Ruthless cutting three centuries ago, depleted the forest, though some twenty thousand trees still remain.

EDGAR WARD

THE UPPER POND AT BURNHAM BEECHES

This splendid tract of mixed woodland, extending over nearly 500 *acres, is part of East Burnham Common, south of Beaconsfield. It was a favourite haunt of the poet Gray, and it was his letters which first brought it into notice. The woods were purchased by the City of London Corporation and dedicated to the public in* 1883.

and so on which enquired into offences and complaints against the forest laws.

All this went on for a long time. It serves to show how important a part of English life the forest was, and also how important it was not only for kings, for the princely delight, but for the people. William the Conqueror, in order to create the New Forest and to ensure himself a little sport, could demolish thirty-six mother churches, innumerable towns and villages and appropriate an area of something like fifty miles compass and then enforce his wishes with a tyrannical lopping off of disobedient limbs ; but later we get laws, by the demand of the people, which are not only less harsh but also enforced by a proper system of judicial circuit and inquiry. That seems to me one of the most interesting of early English movement towards democracy.

Only a country of very considerable forest area could have needed such a system of government. If you look at the map of England today and draw an imaginary line across it from Rutland to Nottinghamshire and the Isle of Anglesey, you will find that, excluding Scotland, almost all the forests are south of it : Dartmoor, Exmoor, Dean, Epping, Ashdown, the New, Savernake ; and the most famous of the lesser, Rockingham and Salcey, in Northamptonshire, St. Leonards and Wolmer and Alice Holt, in Sussex, and so on.

Yet once, north of that line, there were forests which made the New Forest itself look very small beer. Cumberland and Westmorland contain great forests, with an appropriate conflict of outlaws. Yorkshire had great forests : the forests of Whitby and Knaresborough and, in the West Riding, Hatfield Chase, containing at least 180,000 acres, and, in the centre of the county, the forest of Gaultries, and still others. Lancashire and Cheshire had wild and desolate forests : the forests of Macclesfield, Delamere, Wirrall, of which the last is said to have covered the land between the estuaries of Mersey and Dee.

Legendary Forest of Anderida

South of the line the former extent of forests seems, now, incredible. The whole of Northamptonshire is said to have been forest ; Windsor Forest, of which we now have only Windsor Great Park, was 120 miles in length and thirty miles wide ; the great and almost legendary forest of Anderida, of which we now have Ashdown and a bunch of minor names, stretched for about the same distance right across Sussex ; London is said to have been surrounded by forest ; in Essex there were two great names, Epping and Hainault, of which the last is now a ghost ; in Leicestershire lay the forest of Charnwood, of an antiquity, according to a nineteenth-century authority, " higher than authentic history

will carry us," and in turn part of a still greater forest, the forest of Arden, which is said to have once stretched across the whole of middle England; in Oxfordshire there was Wychwood Forest, over 3,000 acres, disafforested in the nineteenth century; in Staffordshire the royal forest of Needwood was, in 1658, roughly the size of what the New Forest is at the present day, 92,000 acres, and in 1684 contained almost 50,000 trees, not counting holly and underwood. According to an early nineteenth-century observer England then had (*c.* 1801) sixty-nine forests, thirteen chases, and something like 750 parks.

Such an extent of woodland must have been a wonderful thing. The strange thing is that literature, even the literature of the romantic revival, has given us very little in the way of a pictorial record of it. Today, that lovely heritage of woodland would have sent a hundred writers bounding about with an excess of delight. Yet

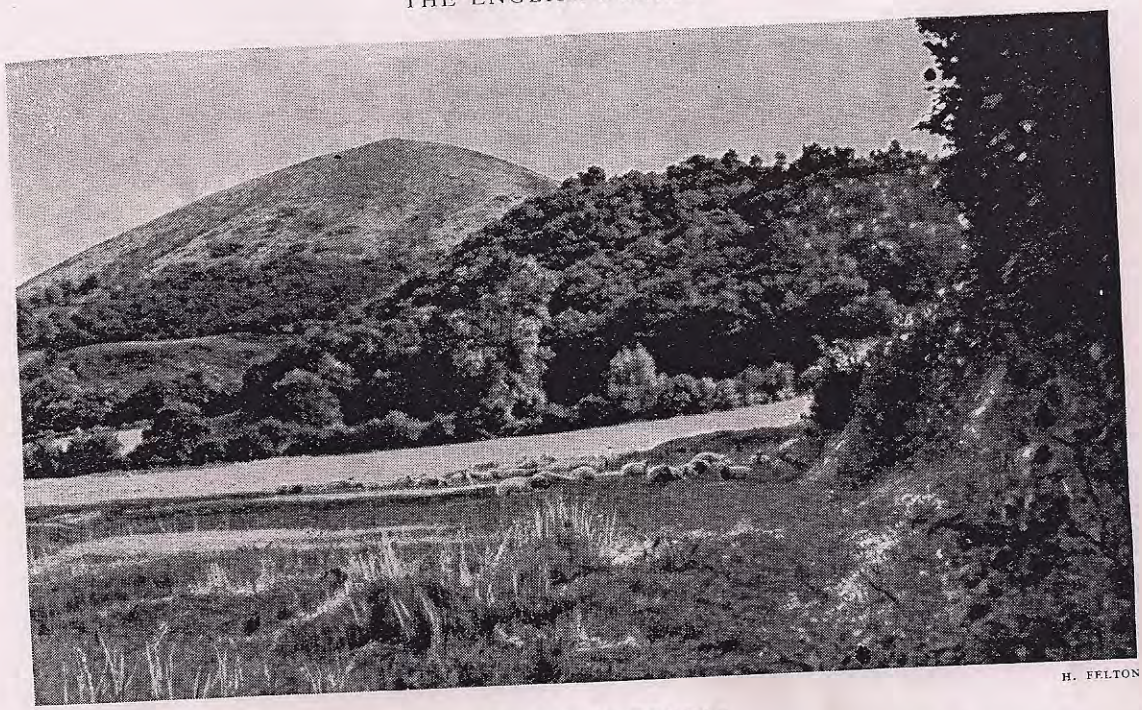
DIXON-SCOTT

THE SPREADING FOREST OF SAVERNAKE

Some sixteen miles in circumference, Savernake Forest, in Wiltshire, is probably the finest expanse of ancient woodland in England. Mighty oaks of venerable age, tall beeches making lovely Gothic aisles, thickets of thorn and many delightful glades give it the true appearance of a forest as it is generally imagined.

In the reign of Elizabeth a list of nearly eighty forests was compiled, with reasonable accuracy, by Sir Henry Spelman, and of these more than half lay in the south, only fifteen counties and those mostly on the east coast, having no forest at all. There were always, too, a great number of parks and chases, many of large extent. A park was an enclosure, in a general way, for deer, the name lapsing if all deer were destroyed. A chase was of the same liberty as a park, but not enclosed and much more like a forest, but having no courts and no judicial machinery at all for the infliction of punishment. Every forest was a chase but every chase was not, however, a forest.

the famous novelists and poets of a hundred years back offer us very little in the way of a picture of rural England. From this I except Crabbe and Clare and Emily Brontë and Hazlitt. Of the rest Keats and Shelley and Byron were more celestially and sensuously occupied; Dickens and Thackeray were devoted, almost entirely, to an exposition of the social life of the day; and it was left to a gentleman—some said *not* a gentleman—named William Cobbett to tour the country on a nag's back and give us such a vivid, downright and forthright picture of rural England in general and some remarks on forests in particular, as had not been done since early times.



H. FELTON

A CROWN FOREST

Delamere Forest, in Cheshire, now Crown Property, is a relic of the ancient spreading Forest of Mara and Mondrum. Much of it has been cleared of timber, but there are still some tracts of woodland, mainly consisting of conifers. Oakmere and Hatchmere are two meres which may have suggested the present name.

DIXON-SCOTT

THE LONG WALK, WINDSOR

Windsor Great Park, traversed by the famous Long Walk, although it covers about 1,800 *acres is but a fragment of the ancient Royal Forest of Windsor. In its glades roamed the ghost of Herne the Hunter, who, according to tradition, having incurred the wrath of Elizabeth, hanged himself on a tree by which she would pass.*

Later Tennyson made a most abortive attempt to put the English countryside on paper in terms of shadowy romance and rose leaves and that special splendour that falls on castle walls. Then, still later, after Hardy had also done something, came a trio of writers who gave us, together, the picture of rural and especially woodland England that we had lacked. W. H. Hudson, Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas filled in that large and hungry gap in our literature with sumptuous and bountiful generosity, and in Hudson we have, to my mind, the loveliest descriptions of the New Forest that have ever been done or are, in fact, ever likely to be done in English.

The New Forest is still our largest, most popular and perhaps most precious forest. It is in some ways an ironical survival. Created out of a viciously selfish demand for royal pleasure, at the cost of a living and pulsating limb of the land, then governed by the harshest possible system of laws at the cost, paid by the offenders, by living and pulsating limbs in reality, it became, much later, the source of supply for staggering quantities of oak for the ships of the Royal Navy and has become, in our day, the haunt of gipsies and naturalists, cricketers playing in the grass glades and a million cars on summer Sundays. An odd fate for a royal domain and a still odder memorial to a piece of royal barbarism. It is difficult to know whether to praise or damn that Conqueror.

DIXON-SCOTT

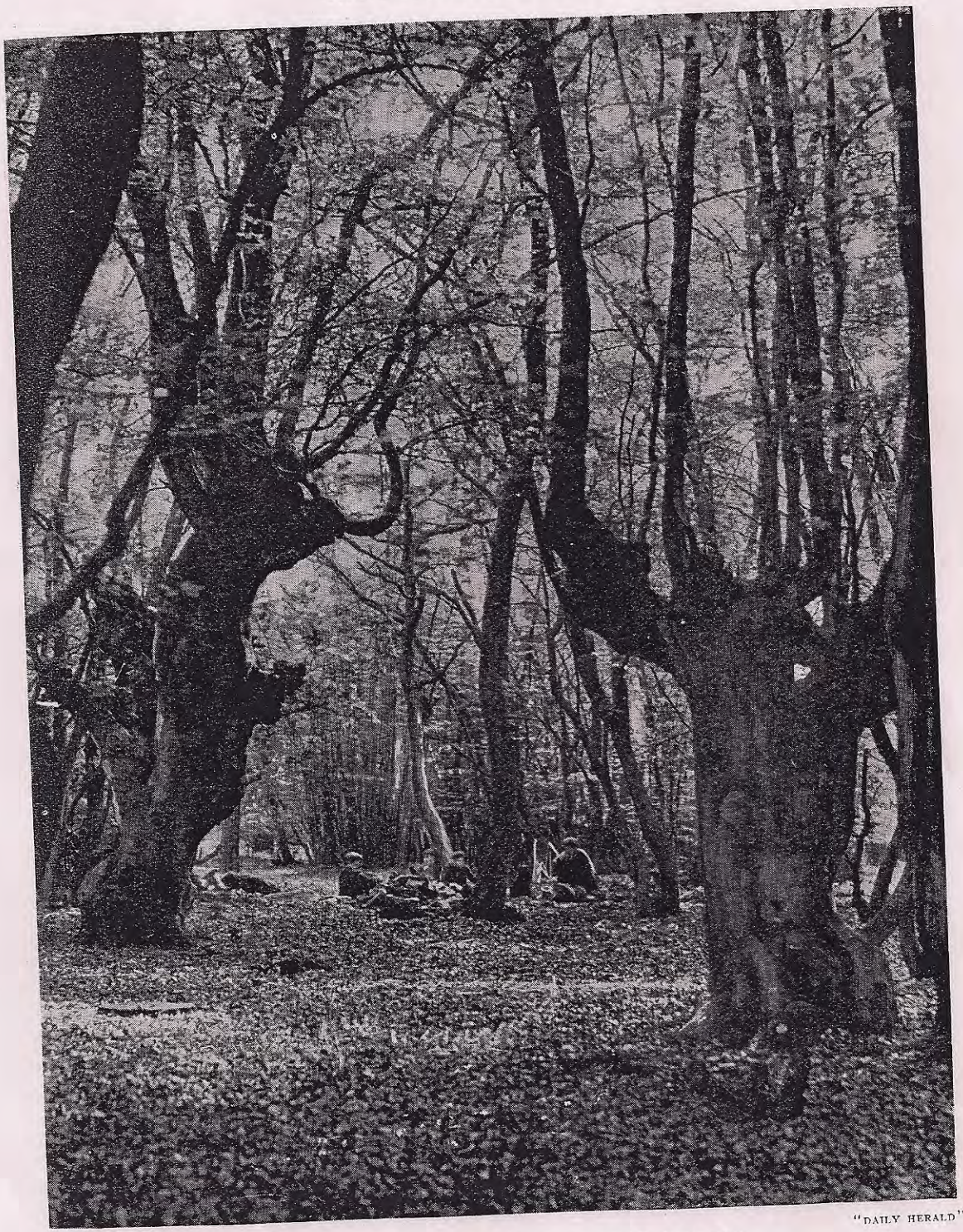
REMNANT OF AN EXTENSIVE FOREST

Ashdown Forest is a shrunken remnant of the Forest of Anderida, which extended from Kert to Hampshire. It was the hunting ground of John of Gaunt to whom it was granted by Edward III.

Secret Places

I have seen the forest in May, when the oaks are in flower and the immense pink clouds of rhododendron are in blossom and when, in secret places, great bushes of wild yellow azalea bloom with almost exotic look and fragrance, and the cotton-grass is like blowing cocoons in the dark heathland; and I have also seen it again in July and February. But I am not sure that it is not seen at its best, at any time, from a distance and from some considerable height. From the hills beyond Romsey the vast extent of trees, in May of all colours from olive and yellow to bottle and emerald, is very impressive. From here you get the effect, as you never get lower down and among the trees, of both width and density, the true impression of a forest, the effect of looking down on something at once beautiful and great and, strangely, quite virgin and unspoilt. In the forest itself the sense of inertia is very great; the trees sap up the air and leave the body and soul limp, with a curious sleepy dejection. The stretches of raw, brown gorse-broken heath have more vigour of life and, to me, a special beauty of their own and a sense of primeval wildness. Cobbett hated them; but then, Cobbett hated potatoes. I feel in them a sense of release, of width and light, after the soporific airs under too many trees.

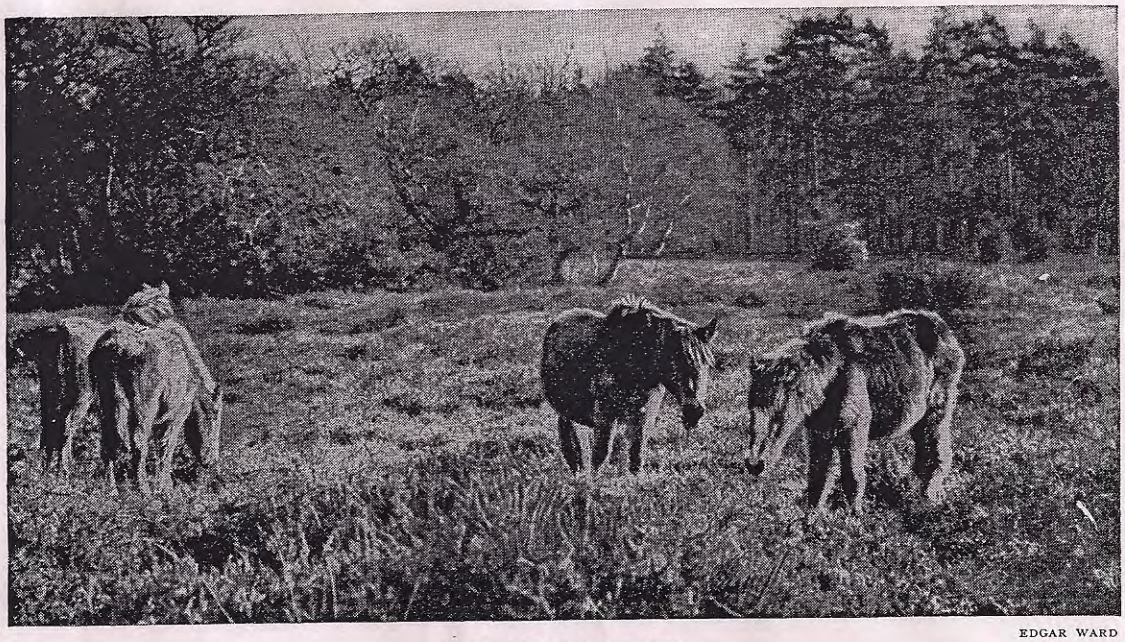
The closeness of sea to forest here is wonderfully attractive too. On a misty May morning I went once, with horse and caravan, from Beaulieu up to Southampton, and in a very still world of mist-gloomed spring trees and heath I heard the boom of ships in Southampton Water. It created a strange sense of solitude, some feeling that the forest was really vast,



"DAILY HERALD"

GNARLED OLD TIMBER IN EPPING FOREST

For a thousand years this Essex woodland has retained its forest character. In Saxon times Edward the Confessor "made Ranger of my forest of Chelmsford Hundred, and Deering Hundred, Ralph Peverell, for him and his heirs for ever; With both the red and fallow deer, hare and fox, otter and badger; wild fowl of all sorts, partridges and pheasants, timber and underwood, roots and tops, with power to preserve the Forest."



EDGAR WARD

THE NEW FOREST

A forest in the widest meaning of the word, covering 62,746 *acres of land in its wild natural state, uncultivated and unenclosed. A delightful variety of scenery is to be found here and a feature of the forest are its shaggy and semi-wild ponies which roam its glades and cross its highways with little regard for passing traffic.*

primitive, cut off from all worlds except the world of sea and sea-sounds. It was a romantic notion, but in some way impressive and, as I think of it now, unreal.

But if the New Forest is the most popular of present-day English forests, there is no doubt at all which is the most romantic. Sherwood has 700 years start in the race of romanticism. No other piece of country in England, except perhaps the country of Hereward the Wake, has ever had such power over the common imagination. Robin Hood is the arch type of all romantic outlaw heroes, and there is no chance of his ever being usurped. The forest in Hood's day must have been immense, stretching over Nottinghamshire, and extending into Yorkshire and Derbyshire. According to Camden it " overshadowed all the Country over with greene leaved branches, and boughs and armes of trees twisted one within another, so implicated the woods together that a man could scarcely goe alone in the beaten pathes : But now the trees grow not so thicke, yet hath it an infinite number of fallow Deere, yea and Stagges with their stately branching heads feeding within it."

Take a map, and look. It is one of the most fascinating forms of stand-still travel to search the map of England for the word forest. It crops up with surprising frequency and in surprising places. It never indicates much more than a large wood or a group of woods, and it may even indicate more heath than wood, and in that sense it is a mockery ; but it indicates, at least, the situation of the treasure we have lost.

Not that all of it has been lost. In Northamptonshire, now much industrialized, it is surprising to find three forests, Salcey and Whittlewood in the south, and Rockingham, once very large, overlooking the great green width of the Welland valley in the north-east. In Sussex the remnants of the great Anderida appear in great and small names : Woolmer, St. Leonards, Alice Holt ; Worth, Tilgate, Sheffield, Pease Pottage and so on. In Hampshire, the forest of Bere, and in Worcestershire the Wyre Forest are still considerable names. Kent still has its forests. Windsor has gone, leaving only the Great Park, but Savernake remains, glorious with beeches. Hainault has gone, but Epping remains.

Departed Glory

And so on. The giants have gone ; the ghosts remain. It seems strange, now, to think of an almost wholly afforested England in the past, and stranger still to imagine an afforested England of the future, a world of lost by-passes and ruined filling stations being replaced by a world of trees so thick " that a man could scarcely goe alone in the beaten paths," a world of outlaw and deer and fox and boar and adder and silence. Yet many stranger things than that have happened in the evolution of this island.