

as I mounted my bicycle once more and pedalled off in the direction of Fradley village, encountering Route 54 again in the process, but not being tempted to follow it directly to Alrewas because I hankered after exploring the isolated tract of land which lies east of the A38.

New housing has seen Fradley expand in recent years, but it still has a quaint little chapel-like church called St Stephens, and I paused to take a photograph of its charming doorway which bears the advice of King Solomon: 'KEEP THY FOOT WHEN THOU GOEST TO THE HOUSE OF GOD'. A flyover carried me safely across the A38. I was not envious of the hurrying motorists below.

Then commenced a strange interlude as I embarked on a ride through a curiously remote parcel of countryside, well off the beaten track, between the A38 and the River Tame. It seemed appropriate that I should have to pass through a gate to reach this forgotten world. It may have been merely a railway level-crossing to some unromantic observers, an irritating obstacle in their mad dash to their next appointment, but to me it had all the intrigue of a border post. In fact I was rather sorry that I didn't have a car with me, because had I done so, the attendant would have had to come out of his cabin and open the wider of the two pairs of timber gates for my benefit. As it was he was able to call a cheery greeting and tell me that the line was clear for me to push my way through the narrower pedestrian gates. I rather envied him his idyllic occupation. Along the tracks, in the direction of Lichfield, a little knot of day-glo coloured track-workers shimmered in the heat.

Beyond the level-crossing the landscape lay Fenland-like in its flatness. The fields either side of me were given over to barley and wheat. A few early foxgloves sprouted from neighbouring ditches. A sign proclaimed that the road ahead was 'unsuitable for motors', I can confirm that it was hardly suitable for bicycles either. I passed a fellow cyclist gingerly proceeding in the opposite direction. 'Bumpy isn't it!' he observed. 'Y-y-you can-n-n s-s-say that-t-t ag-g-gain,' I joked, but he was downwind and already out of earshot-t-t.

An equally bumpy mode of transport, in the shape of a microlight, was taking off from a neighbouring field, its occupant had chosen a fine day for his flight. At Whitemoor Haye an abandoned farmhouse presented a melancholy sight. 'Haye' is the old Saxon word for a hunting park. Nowadays they hunt here for gravel, not game. Some of the abandoned workings were being used unsavourily as a landfill site. The lane rose briefly to cross a conveyor belt.

The National Memorial Arboretum has come a long way in a short time. By the time its woodland has fully matured it will be a very special place indeed. And its location, between two railway lines and between two rivers, cuts it off nicely from the outside world, lending it just the right level of quietude





for introspection and reflection. To do it full justice you need more time than I had at my disposal – the quick and the dead it commemorates deserve all the time you can give them. But I was determined, at least, to follow the pathways which wend their way through the arboretum to see the confluence of the rivers Trent and Tame. Out of respect I abandoned my bicycle at the cycle park and set out on foot, though when I saw that the centre now boasted a ‘road train’ I did have second thoughts.

In the business of remembering man’s inhumanity to man, less – I always find – is more. A simple plaque on a tree commemorating a single individual is equally as poignant as a huge installation such as the centre’s dominant feature, the Armed Forces Memorial, which remembers

those who have died in conflict since the end of the Second World War.

I progressed via various pathways to the far end of the arboretum where it peters out almost imperceptibly in thistly meadows where the Tame gives itself up to the Trent. This fluvial sacrifice sort of echoes all the other sacrifices recalled throughout the arboretum. I paused for a moment or two to think about that, before a train rushed by on its way towards Birmingham and broke the spell, and I wondered how many of its passengers had any idea as to the nature and purpose of the site they were hurrying through. Perhaps the trains should be made to stop for a minute out of respect.

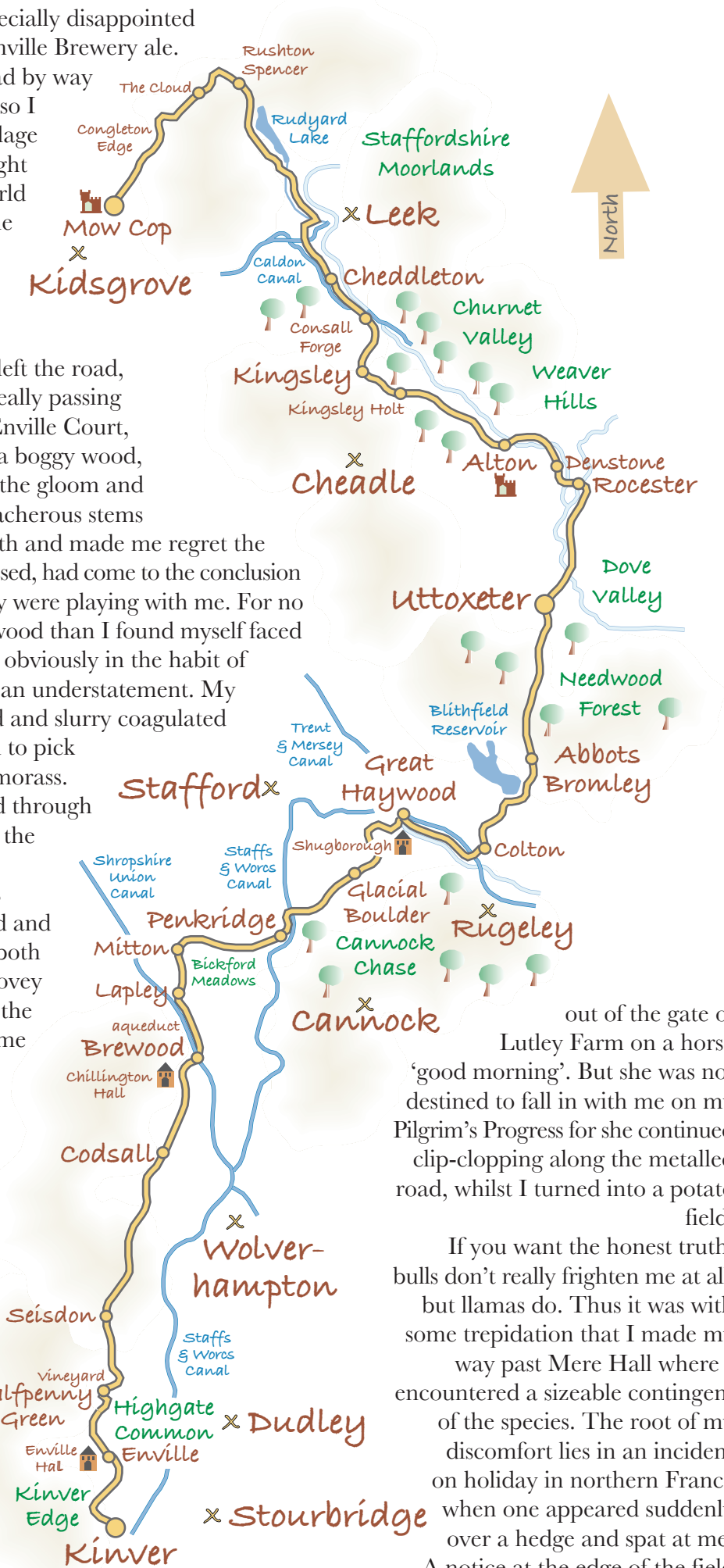
On my way back I came upon an old Second World War pill box on the banks of the Tame. This was no commemorative ‘installation’, but rather a

early for The Cat Inn, being especially disappointed not to be able to sample some Enville Brewery ale. Neither was there much to be had by way of sustenance at the Post Office, so I pressed on, passing out of the village on the A458, which briefly brought me back into the unwelcome world of speeding cars and vans. On the edge of the village stands the imposing church of St Mary, rubicundly built of local sandstone.

It was with some relief that I left the road, but it was relief short-lived. Surreally passing through the private grounds of Enville Court, the Way promptly plunged into a boggy wood, squelchy underfoot. Thriving in the gloom and damp, nettles stretched their treacherous stems and stinging leaves across the path and made me regret the wearing of shorts. The gods, I guessed, had come to the conclusion that I'd had things too easy. They were playing with me. For no sooner had I emerged from the wood than I found myself faced with a farm gate that cattle were obviously in the habit of congregating by. Quagmire was an understatement. My trainers were swallowed up, mud and slurry coagulated around my ankles. At first I tried to pick my way judiciously around this morass. In the end I gave up and trudged through it. Up in their Olympian heights the gods wet themselves laughing.

Presently I emerged from this Bunyanesque Slough of Despond and found myself on firmer ground, both literally and metaphorically. A covey of female pheasants came out of the undergrowth and accompanied me for a few yards; twittering handmaidens, like something out of a novel by Barbara Pym. A brief woodland interlude ensued, climaxed by a timber bridge spanning Philley Brook. In the next field I had company, a herd of cattle marshalled by a hefty bull with a nursery tale ring through his nose. Two alpha males in one field, something had to give. But for the cowpats, I'd have shown him a clean pair of heels.

I'd got my breath and dignity sufficiently back to bid the young girl who came



out of the gate of Lutley Farm on a horse 'good morning'. But she was not destined to fall in with me on my Pilgrim's Progress for she continued clip-clopping along the metalled road, whilst I turned into a potato field.

If you want the honest truth, bulls don't really frighten me at all, but llamas do. Thus it was with some trepidation that I made my way past Mere Hall where I encountered a sizeable contingent of the species. The root of my discomfort lies in an incident on holiday in northern France when one appeared suddenly over a hedge and spat at me. A notice at the edge of the field

beside the Staffordshire Way jocularly reassured passers-by that one of Mere Hall's llamas, by the name of 'Guinness', didn't spit, but that, as far as I was concerned, implied that the rest did, and it was with some relief that I put two irrigation pools between me and those expectorating Peruvian interlopers.

Stability returned with the stucco frontage of Leaton Hall, and beyond it, what I took to be The Wrekin. Then my focus fell upon the undulating runways and assorted hangars of Halfpenny Green aerodrome, laid out during the Second World War, and still made use of by light aircraft, helicopters and sky-divers. Expansion of the site commensurate with commercial flying has been on the cards for a number of years, though not without hostility from the natives. All a far cry from its early years as a base for the ponderous Blackburn Botha reconnaissance plane and torpedo bomber. Prince William of Gloucester died in an air race at Halfpenny Green in 1972.

I was growing hungry and thirsty and it was slowly dawning on me that if I stayed true to the Staffordshire Way the opportunity of responding to

either need would not arise until I reached Seisdon, five miles and the best part of two hours further on, and even that relied on the pub being open. Scanning the map, I was intrigued by the existence of a vineyard at Halfpenny Green, so I decided to head there. The waymarked route would take me reasonably close to the vineyard, and I would have been happy sticking with it had it not been overgrown with bracken fronds on reaching the entrance to Highgate Common. That made my mind up for me, I took to the road, skirting the perimeter of the aerodrome through Gospel Ash.

The Royal Oak was open at Halfpenny Green itself, but by that point, I had pictured raising a glass of chilled local wine

to my lips and was not about to be sidetracked. Half a mile's brisk walking brought me to the eponymous vineyard, reassuringly advertising refreshments. Goodness it looked busy too. As I made my way up the drive a number of cars drove in and out. The restaurant and tea rooms appeared equally busy, mostly with what looked like retired couples tucking into generously portioned plated meals.

'I was wondering if I could just have a snack in the garden,' I confided to the woman behind the counter.

'We only serve cakes and teas in the garden, sir,' came her well-rehearsed reply.

I assumed my little-boy-lost look and her maternal instincts kicked in.

'Tell you what,' she suggested, in a delightful, western edge of Black Country burr, 'we'll call it a takeaway. Choose something from the sandwich menu and we'll quietly slip it out to you.'

'And do you serve your own wine by the glass?' I asked, rewarding her enterprise with my seasoned man-of-the-world look.

'What size would that be, sir?'

'Oh, large I think: very large.'

The wine was so large it cost more than the smoked salmon sandwich, but it was chilled and delicious and dry in equal measure. I sat in the garden against a backdrop of vines half suspecting I must have been suffocated by bracken on Highgate Common and arrived in heaven's waiting room. Surreptitiously I pinched myself, but didn't feel a thing, though I did notice my glass was already half empty. They've been tending vines at Halfpenny Green since 1983 and the estate now runs to twenty-five acres. They also offer guided tours and self-guided tours, as well as craft workshops and coarse fishing. Indeed I suspect for many regulars the business does represent an earthly heaven.

An outfit on the

