# Prologue

## Bishop's Waltham

### I

'I chose Bishop's Waltham Moors as a subject because I'm interested in the area and I'm concerned about its future.' This was the opening sentence of the GCSE Geography 'enquiry' I wrote at the age of fourteen. 'The aim of the enquiry', it went on, 'will be to discover what the state of the Moors will be in twenty years. Will it be the natural haven it is now OR will it be a landscape of red-brick houses with no wetland and therefore no springs and no river Hamble? OR will the springs dry up without the construction of houses and be lost to the water authority?'

It was typewritten with a hate-mailer's fondness for capitals, and scabbed with what used to be called liquid paper. On its cover was a collage of a kingfisher composed of carefully scissored pieces of coloured paper, and, in painstaking Letraset, as if the question were the bird's: 'What is the Future of Bishop's Waltham Moors?'

The market town of Bishop's Waltham lies between Winchester's chalk downs and the London clay of the Hampshire coastal plain. Next to the bypass the mediaeval ruins of the Bishops of Winchester's palace still stand. We moved to the town in 1988, from commuter-belt Berkshire, my father having got a new job in Southampton. On one side of the road were the older houses, built in the twenties. On the other, the two acres of dense young woodland in whose centre stood a derelict bungalow, not long abandoned, its front room fire-blackened, the floorboards wrenched up, the windows smashed. A place where foxes went to eat.

At the end of the lane was the road to the next village, and across that road, not quite opposite the junction, a padlocked five-bar gate clogged with brambles; and beyond it not a lane but a narrow muddy footpath, flanked on one side by a ditch and a bank of dredgings, and on the other side by the adjoining house's overgrown laurel hedge. A hundred yards or so long, this path – and when it opened out, onto the first field, it was like arriving at a tunnel's mouth, and looking out on a new country.

The Moors was the name given to these few acres. The first field was meadow, ancient and unimproved: waist-high by late June, and hazy with flowering grasses. Scattered among the grasses were oxeye daisies and knapweed and yellow rattle, meadowsweet, dyer's greenweed and bird's-foot trefoil, and buttercups, and red clover – red clover dense along the path edge, vibrant with bees – and then, at haymaking time, over the bee-hum, the call of lesser black-backed gulls, circling, two hundred feet up.

The path continued down the meadow's edge, a narrow cutting in the sward, until you passed, beyond the left-hand barbed wire, the first of the two craters – not, as local legend had it, caused by Messerschmitts offloading surplus bombs on the way back to Germany (the Portsmouth docks were nearby), but a flint-pit of unknown antiquity, its sides grown with rowan and elder and oaks, its floor home to badgers and rats and, in summer, thick with wild garlic – thick with its thick smell, too.

A line of hazels marked the end of the first field, and then there was the second meadow – less abundant, less diverse than the first, dominated by rank grass. Marking the left-hand boundary of this field was a much denser and older rank of hazels, whose pollarded boughs formed a passageway too dense for anything but moss to thrive in their shadow.

The hazel hedge led to the far line of woodland – with its four-hundred-year-old boundary oaks and ancient boundary bank. And where the oaks and the hazels met was the way onto the moor.

The moor was the centre of this place, the moor was 'the Moors', but the Moors was also the meadow and the wood. The moor was hard to cross. It was mostly purple moor-grass, tussock sedge and rush; it was a pale, rough, uncultivated place. Even in summer, when the pumping station was active, it was wet enough in parts to give you a trainer-full of slurried peat. Once, as in a dream, I mistook the stream that crossed the moor, with its unbroken surface of green-grey pondweed, for a footpath – out here, where no one came – and plunged to my waist. While the soil was acid, the springs that rose through it were chalk – alkaline – and therefore the moor supported not only acid-loving plants like orchids and even, on its drier tussocks, heather, but, right next to them, chalk species like cowslips and milkwort. I knew that if you added a splash of vinegar to a spoonful of bicarb it fizzed and foamed lividly. And yet here a kind of truce had occurred.

It was on the moor that I began to spend my dusks after school and my before-school dawns, and every weekend, and every holiday. At first I went alone, leaving the house before sunrise and padding across the silent road to the woods at the edge, where, in a wax jacket and an army-surplus scrim scarf, I set up Dad's camera on the Victorian brass-and-lacquer tripod that had belonged to my grandfather (the threaded tripod-hole on a camera's base has remained standard). Until the sun came up, I waited there, with my Thermos, and watched. Sometimes I cycled to the entrance at the other edge of the moor, camera in my rucksack, tripod strapped to the crossbar in its leather case. Occasionally I photographed a distant, enquiring roe deer that had briefly

wandered from the wood. Once, while I was waiting for a heron, a solitary man with a shotgun broken over his shoulder crept across the moor a hundred yards away, and stopped, and gazed, head tipped, into the scrub where I was lying.

Sometimes Dad came with me, and the two of us sat there as the sun rose, on striped camping stools, waiting for deer or herons or kingfishers. He puffed at his pipe (a lesson in the difference between smoke and mist). The hard tapping as he cleared its bole was answered by a woodpecker in the woods behind us. Usually we went home for breakfast having seen nothing but magpies and cows.

Naturally the Moors would be the subject of my 'enquiry'. It preoccupied me for months, though I had hardly thought about its one day being graded and its spellings corrected ('dovelopement', 'signes', 'bieng', 'wether'). One evening, after school, I fixed a row of bamboo canes in a stream's gravel bed, and over the following month went back every day and measured the water level against the centimetred notches. 'Portsmouth Water Authority has a borehole at Hoe pumping station and this is seen by many as the cause of the shrinking area of the moor,' I reported. The pumping station, in one of the fields adjoining the meadow, had been installed during the war to supply water to Gosport, with its naval base. Although over-pumping was apparently 'feircely denied by the water board' (their letter in reply to mine having been lost, its fierceness is unverifiable), my graphs recorded a lagging correlation between periods when the pumping station was active and dips in the level of my stream. I spoke to others who knew the Moors better than me – the couple at Suetts Farm, the council warden – and was told that, following those periods when the pumping station was active, the water levels on the Moors were seen to drop immediately, but would take days to recover. In the early 2000s, following the Moors' designation

as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the pumping station was mothballed, and the water company was paid to go away and sink a borehole elsewhere. The water table rose and rose, until long-empty ditches became wet again, and the old watercress beds refilled, and parts of the moor that had been dry for years were impassable in anything but wellies.

The moor was not so extensive that you ever felt isolated; metres, rather than kilometres, a stroll rather than a hike. No more than a couple of football pitches. The rumble of the B2177 was always audible; on Sundays the bells of St Peter's seemed to sound from a dozen directions at once. And yet, in the land's instability and surprise, in the suddenness of its moods (underfoot was as quick as the sky), its impenetrable wood and flummoxing bog, and the sands that bubbled as the Hamble springs cauldroned through them, there was strangeness, and there was the possibility of death. When the tenants dredged the silted stream that went from the old watercress beds across the moor to the millpond, they uncovered six skeletons – the bones not white but black: Hereford cattle that had stumbled in, over the years. Animals unsuited to wet land like this.

It was soon after we arrived that the Moors changed. The site had been bought by the council, and the council and its volunteers, over one weekend, or so it seemed to me, came with miles of barbed wire and fence posts, and stiles and kissing gates, and fenced off the inner wood, so that only the perimeter footpaths were easily accessible, and bridged damp spots with duckboards, and erected 'interpretation boards'. The wood had become a place you viewed but did not enter – as if something dreadful had happened there. The moor, the place that the meadow and the wood led to, had been fenced off, too, and an interpretation board positioned at one corner. And that was where you were to stand and make your observations.

The Moors did not, at first, impress on me a human history. They were timeless – that was the nature of their tranquillity. The silted millpond and the choked watercress beds were not haunted ruins – you weren't conscious of any abiding ghosts. Any physical remnants were just inconsequential worryings of the Moors' prehistoric surface. It was only when I returned, as an adult, that I realised that, for instance, the moor had remained wet partly because the headwaters of the Hamble had been dammed, generations ago, to power the grain mill that still stood next to the road; and that the wood had only been prevented from smothering the open moor by managed grazing.

I was told by a local historian I spoke to when writing my enquiry that the Moors had a larger history, too – the kind found in books (though not many tell it). In the eighteenth century, the land southeast of Bishop's Waltham, which included what was now the Moors and extended to the ancient Royal Forest of Bere, had been the haunt of the 'Waltham Blacks', men who came at night, faces blackened with gunpowder, to plunder deer from the Bishop of Winchester's chase, and attack the land of gentlemen – breaching the heads of fishponds, burning hayricks and destroying young trees. Their leader called himself 'King John'. In January 1723 he was able to address, unhindered, three hundred locals at the Chase Inn on the edge of 'the more'. At the meeting, 'King John' announced that he and his men ('some in coats made of skins, others with fur caps &c.') 'had no other Design but to do Justice, and to see that the Rich did not insult or oppress the Poor'.

By the commoners, the Blacks were seen not as a posse of thieves and wanton vandals (let alone agents of Jacobitism, as the authorities claimed), but as defenders of their ancient customs of tenure – the right to collect wood and to pasture livestock – which were being curtailed by the Bishop of

Winchester's keepers. 'King John' was 'determined not to leave a deer on the Chase, being well assured it was originally designed to feed cattle, and not fatten deer for the clergy'. Such was the official fear of 'Blacking', which soon spread beyond Hampshire, that four months after 'King John's' address at the Chase Inn, the so-called Black Act was passed, 'for the more effectual punishing wicked and evil-disposed persons', making it a capital offence for anyone to appear in public 'armed with swords, firearms or other offensive weapons, having his or their faces blacked, or being otherwise disguised'. Seven of the Waltham Blacks were apprehended and taken to Tyburn. According to the account of the Ordinary of Newgate (the prison chaplain), the men failed 'to reconcile the greatness of such a punishment as death to the smallness of the crime, which was only making free with a few deer'.

I recognised this strange landscape in the novels I'd begun to read. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Lorna Doone* and *Wuthering Heights* moorland was 'ill-omened', 'sombrous', 'dreary'. It was a place of unreachable loneliness, the stage for sacrifice, exile and the outplay of grievance. It was a setting for love, and what came with love. It was a place of discarded symbols. It was wind strong enough to make a bull kneel. It was rainfall measured in the height of children. It was where you went to hide.

I pictured the Blacks arrayed across the moonlit moor, carbines cradled, eyes bright in their sooted faces, the still-warm hinds slung across their shoulders.

## 2

Twenty years later, living in London and finding myself with time on my hands (I'd lost a job and didn't want another), I

went back to Bishop's Waltham, and learned that the 'moor' was not a moor at all, but a fen, just as the wood was not merely a 'wood', but a 'carr' – a swamped wood. Both fen and moor are boggy and peaty, but while a fen's wetness comes from underground springs, it is chiefly the rain that falls on moors that makes them wet. Fenland is saturated from below, moorland from above. Like marshes, fens tend to be low-lying, while true moorland exists only at high altitudes, where rainfall is heavy. In England, therefore, moorland is confined to the southwest and the north.

The moors were first described in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not by novelists but by horseback topographers and agricultural 'improvers'. They saw a godless affront. For the Board of Agriculture's surveyor in 1794, Exmoor was 'a useless and void space'. Even the execrable 'Bard of Dartmoor', Noel Thomas Carrington, in 1826 chided the moor for 'shaming the map of England' with its barrenness. Charles Cotton in 1681 described the Peak District moors as 'Nature's pudenda'. The moors of England were apt for 'improvement'.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke cited 'greatness of dimension' as a quality approaching his definition of the sublime – 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite ideas of pain, and danger'. 'Privation', 'vastness' and 'infinity' were similarly capable of exciting such ideas, according to Burke's influential thesis. But a moor's magnitude, unlike that of a mountain or a canyon, was chiefly *lateral*. 'An hundred yards of even ground', Burke added, 'will never work such an effect as a tower an hundred yards high.'

Thomas Gray, who'd taken in the Alps during his Grand Tour, saw the Derbyshire moors in 1762 and complained that they were 'not mountainous enough to please one with

[their] horrors'. Yet nor were the moors beautiful: they were, according to Charlotte Brontë, 'far too stern to yield any product so delicate'.

Map the Romantic landscape, then. Beauty lay in the pastoral valley; in the mountains was the sublime – it was between those poles that the undesignated moor stretched out. In Emily Brontë's novel it is moorland that Cathy and Heathcliff must cross to reach lowland Thrushcross Grange, from upland Wuthering Heights. Over moorland R. D. Blackmore's Doones come galloping from their valley lair to raid the Exmoor villages. It is 'the huge expanse of the moor' that lies between Baskerville Hall and the 'mean and melancholy' residence of the villain Stapleton.

In wilderness lived wild things; the desert was inhabited by demons. While God resided in the mountains, and social man in the valley, the moor was where the outcast went – the fugitive, the savage, the misanthrope. 'The wild moors' could have 'no interest' for strangers, wrote Charlotte Brontë. Moorland, it seemed, was merely a 'desert' that you had to slog across to reach your destination. In the valley you sighed; on the mountaintop you gasped. On the moor you merely held your breath.

Examine the satellite imagery and, amid the shimmering green micro-mosaic of the enclosed farmland, the great unfenced expanses of upland moor are as distinctive as urban sprawl. They are divided across two regions, separated by two hundred miles: a handful of neat patches in the southwest – Bodmin Moor, Dartmoor, Exmoor; then, in the north, a wrinkled hide spreading up the Pennine ridge, reaching east into Yorkshire, and extending through the North Pennines to the Scottish border. Whereas the West Country moors are islands jutting from a sea of kinder, cultivated land, northern

moorland is at once more expansive and more dislocated – an archipelago.

I detected deep in me an infinitesimal shying – the old, animal revulsion induced by hostile terrain. 'As you value your life or your reason, keep away from the moor,' Sir Charles Baskerville is warned in Conan Doyle's novel. It was fiction – sonorous melodrama – but the Hound has its flesh-and-blood precedents, and our apprehension of badlands is bred deep as fear of darkness. And yet with that shying there was also a compulsion.

North, according to one lover of moorland, W. H. Auden, is the 'good' direction, 'the way towards heroic adventures'. I would start, I decided, in the southwest, and make my way north via the Pennines and the North York Moors to Northumberland, stopping at the Scottish border – for there the island moors became a moorland sea; and because it was necessary to stop somewhere.

I told myself that no crisis pressed me on my way (or only the unending one of not-knowing) – I wasn't looking for an answer to some question of the heart: it was just that the 'moor' I'd known and studied as a boy had promised something that the meadow, the pasture and the woods had not – if not 'heroic adventures', then a kind of reply to the portion of myself that remained uncultivated. Victorian travellers knew the Sahara's deepest interior as *désert absolu*. I'd *take myself off* – this is the expression I used, as if by the scruff of the neck or bundled into the boot of a car – I'd take myself off, and find my own *désert absolu*, the wild blasted moor I'd read about.