

The Countryman's Guide to the South-East

John Talbot White

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Routledge & Kegan Paul
London, Henley and Boston

*First published in 1978
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
39 Store Street,
London WC1E 7DD,
Broadway House,
Newtown Road,
Henley-on-Thames,
Oxon RG9 1EN and
9 Park Street,
Boston, Mass. 02108, USA
Set in 10 on 12 Baskerville by
Kelly and Wright, Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire
and printed in Great Britain by
Lowe & Brydone Ltd
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

White, John Talbot

The countryman's guide to the South-East.

1. Seasons 2. England – Climate

I. Title

574.5'43'09422

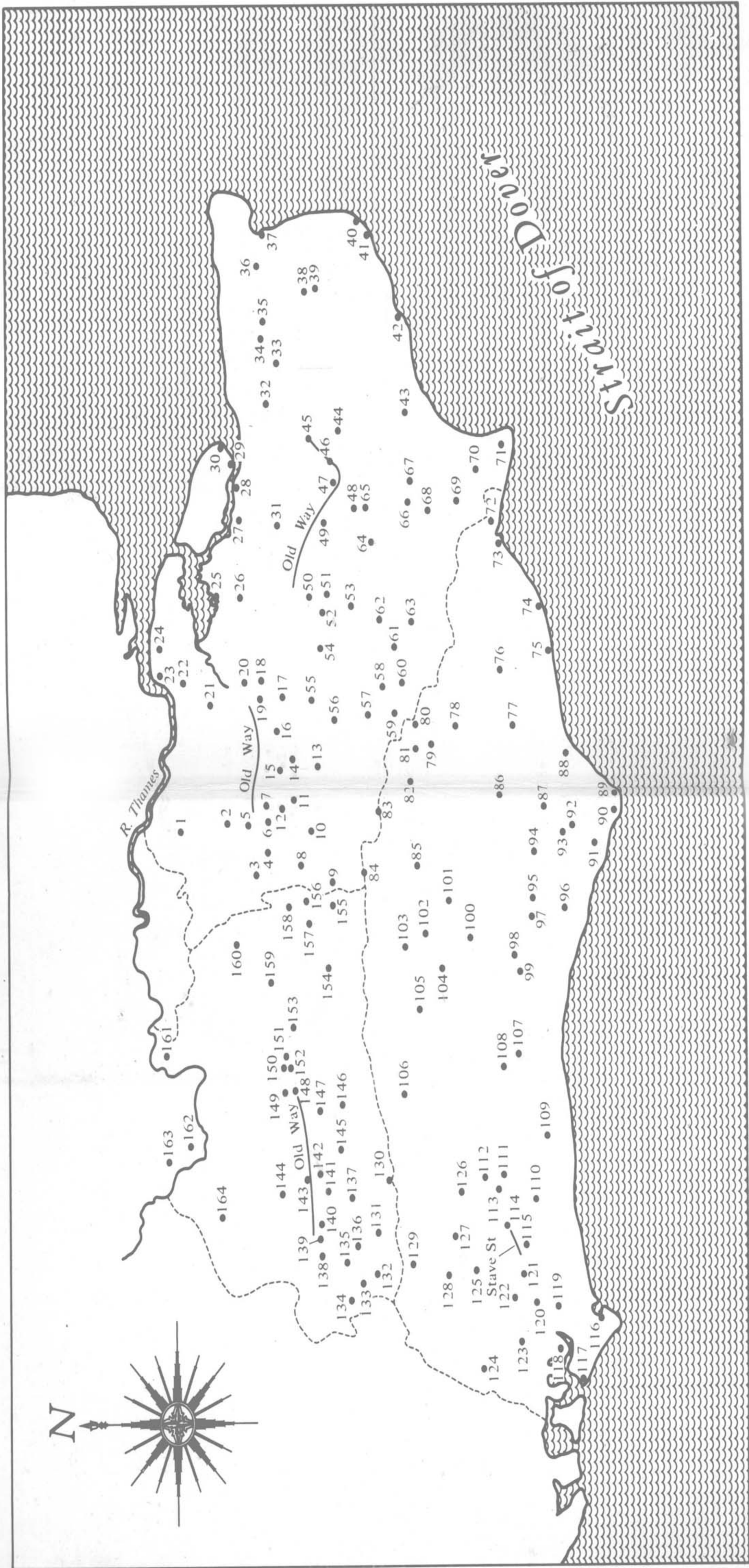
QH138

77-30547

ISBN 0-7100-8838-8

The Countryman's Guide to the South-East





To the memory of my mother, Elizabeth,
who had green fingers

Preface

The seasonal round of the countryside, from seed-time to harvest, from summer's bounty to winter's quiescence, is an abiding source of stimulation and pleasure recorded by many observers. The rich diversity of the south-eastern counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, that most humanised of regions, has been the subject of many guide-books. It is seldom that the two aspects have been brought together in one book. For many years now I have had the pleasure of writing about both the countryside and the region in all its aspects and, in the course of assembling notes and observations, I have found myself quite unconsciously fashioning a personal pattern of the year, returning time and time again to specific places at particular times. Each month has become linked with places that show to greatest advantage the seasonal drama. For me, January and the Kent marshes are inseparable. February sees the herons returning to nest and the first brave show of flowers on the forest floor. March is memorable on the Sussex Downs and August on the Surrey heathlands. The deer parks are at their most majestic in October. December is made for pilgrimages along the Old Ways.

All time flows over all places and fortunate are they who find sufficient richness in the constant observation of their own parish. Such studies have been amongst the greatest in our language. Others need a change of scene, a constant exploration over new horizons. There is always so much to be learnt. I have set out for a day's delight on chalk flora and found myself completely absorbed by the behaviour of a spotted flycatcher in a churchyard. I have tramped the Pilgrims' Way looking for the winter activity of birds and returned home with my mind full of sarsen stones and the riddles of prehistory.

PREFACE

The natural world has been constantly modified by human activity, the countryside of the south-east is as much the work of man as of the natural elements that compose it. Ultimately the observer of the countryside becomes involved with the problems of conservation, whether of a footpath, an old mill or of a tract of land. The landscape is under pressure from new activities, the growth of urban areas, new roads, new forms of recreation, new modes of farming and forestry. Yesterday's hedgerow becomes today's barrier to the harvester. It is no accident that many of the places mentioned in this study are of such importance that they have gained some degree of protection as areas of outstanding natural beauty, as nature reserves, bird sanctuaries and sites of special scientific interest. Others have merited the development of nature trails and other forms of controlled public access.

Despite its location so close to the most heavily populated part of England, the countryside of the south-east is still an inexhaustible source of delight for those who seek the quiet ways, the quiet days in that most significant of pursuits, the recreation of our links with the natural world. The migration of birds, the rut of the red deer, the changing flora of down and weald and marsh, lambing time and autumn sales, fruit blossom and corn harvest, all find their setting in time and in place. Selective and personal as the book may be it penetrates to every corner of the region. I hope it will be of interest both to the armchair reader and to active explorers of the country byways.

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CHAPTER I

January



On the Norman font at Brookland church in Romney Marsh images of the twelve months of the year are beaten into durable lead. January is depicted as a two-headed figure, Janus the god, facing both ways. The countryside, also has two faces, one replete with images of the old year, seed heads, the last berries and dead leaves hanging on young oak trees. The other face looks to a new season of growing, new buds swelling on the trees, new stirring of life under the leaf litter, snowdrops emerging before the month is out.

Inland the temperatures fall to their lowest of the year, the land losing more heat than the low sun can replenish. The mean monthly reading in the High Weald at Bedgebury is just above freezing point, but when the wind turns to the east, cold air slides in from the continent bringing a reminder that only a short sea crossing divides

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this southernmost angle of the country from the land mass. Then the innermost valleys can record temperatures as low as -20°C . The earth turns to iron, the hammer ponds freeze over and even the sea water in shallow bays round the coast, such as Pegwell, may carry small floes of ice, no good for man, beast or bird. The countryside seems to hold its breath until the barometer falls again and warmer air moves up channel from the west.

Nowhere is the duality of January more apparent than in North Kent, between the Downs and the Thames estuary. A wet, cold mist drapes over the high ground, hedgerows caked with rime, each leaf bearing a crystalline halo. Dead seed heads flower anew with white frost. Icicles drip from barn roofs and freeze again into menacing knives. The woodcutter's breath hangs in the air and the sound of the saw rips through the woodland. A gunshot echoes from a copse, triggering off a flurry of birds' wings. Yet, only a few miles away to the north of the sheltered shores of the estuary, the landscape bears a kinder face. The sea holds its store of warmth longer than the land. Frosts are less severe and snow rarely lies for long. The flora is greener and fresher and there is always the chance of some of the commoner plants like ragwort, groundsel, chickweed and the dead nettles enjoying a late flowering. The bristly ox-tongue, one of the dandelion family, is usually in evidence, often flowering in the winter months. The fleshy leaves are covered with whitish pimples and bristles, an unwholesome combination but one which seems well adapted to the coastal wastes.

There are several rights-of-way following the sea walls, threading between mud-flats and marshes with just sufficient height to give vantage points for observing January's greatest bonus, the wild birds of sea and coast. As good a starting point as any is the church of St. Margaret at Lower Halstow, an old Saxon foundation with a name signifying the holy place. Its stonework incorporates Roman tiles and bricks. One of the medieval murals on the splay of an arch in the south aisle depicts a ship tossing on the waves and, above it, a dark figure looms with arms outstretched, recalling the perils of the sea. In the creeks and mud-flats beyond the church are many rotting hulks trapped in the mud, their broken ribs doing service as perching places for the inevitable gulls, but generally, in winter, this is a welcoming haven, the starting point of a two-mile walk that leads north-west towards the deserted islands of the Medway mouth.

The start is inauspicious, through a large area of wasteland in a derelict brickyard, full of wet hollows and scrub; but this is no desert for the flocks of larks, tits, finches, sparrows and wagtails darting from cover or a lapwing rising in consternation from the shelter of a broken kiln. Beyond the brickworks, reedy channels trace the boundaries of orchards sweeping down to the shoreline. The dead stalks of phragmites sway with the momentary passage of meadow pipits and sparrows and the swooping flight of reed buntings. A circler bunting preens on a hawthorn bush exhibiting its yellow colouring before skimming down to join the flocks feeding on seeds and berries and flies.

The low-lying meadows towards the headland are sparkling with patches of standing water, favourite haunt of a flock of 200 or 300 lapwings, joined by oyster-catchers sweeping in from the sea with their staccato warning. Two dozen curlew circle sedately before joining the throng. The cries of the marshland birds all seem to have the same haunting quality, a hint of melancholy so much in tune with the sense of space and solitude that even the distant silhouette of oil refinery and power station cannot dispel. The cries get wilder still as the sea wall nears the headland. A herd of mute swans beat up the channel with vibrant wings. With the tide ebbing to reveal vast acres of shimmering mud-flats a mass of birds settle on the silky surface, all shapes and sizes from the tiny knot to the fat geese, dunlin, turnstone, redshank, shelduck, pochard, gadwall and black-backed gull. Far out on the sea's edge is a gathering of Brent geese. A small skein rises and circles several times with loud noises before splashing down on the inland pastures, causing a moment's disturbance amongst the lapwings, gulls and curlew. The Brents have deserted their Arctic homelands for these hospitable shores, rich with the eel grass which is their main food. The Medway is a major oil port and spillages in the past have contaminated the feeding grounds, but the estuary has a sufficient diversity of food to make this a wintering ground of international importance, one of the key links in a chain of European wetlands with regular counts at the January peak of more than 10,000 birds.

Each species of bird has its own favoured feeding area, the salt marsh, the brackish channels or the intertidal zone. Most numerous are the widgeon, shelduck, teal and mallard. The widgeon population can reach 7,000, feeding, like the Brent geese, on eel grass which is particularly rich in protein. They also graze on seaweeds and

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marsh samphire. For the teal, also numbered in thousands, this is one of the main habitats, the most important in England. They feed on the seed heads of many plants but especially the marsh samphire and seablite. Their varied diet includes the mollusc, *Hydrobia ulvae*, which is also the favourite food of the shelduck, one of the most strikingly coloured of the birds, digging with strong red bill into the mud. The large population of mallard is maintained by regular releases by the wildfowlers' associations which combine their sport with a passionate interest in the general conservation of the coastal habitats and their wildlife. Much of our knowledge of the area is due to their regular observations. They are responsible, for example, for setting up a 2,000-acre reserve on the south side of the Medway for greylag geese, one of the rarer migrants, arriving from the Baltic by way of the Dutch coast. Other regular visitors include barnacle geese, goosander, goldeneye, velvet scoter, long-tailed duck and the eider. More than twenty such species are regularly recorded. One of the favourite spots for the goldeneye are the channels between the headland and the islands, ducking into the fast-flowing water for up to a minute at a time.

One of the most attractive parts of the complex Medway mouth lies to the east, sheltered from the open sea by the Isle of Sheppey, the broad channel of the Swale. The coastline here is almost devoid of housing and industry, a rarity in the south-east. In the present structure plan for the county of Kent, the Swale is planned as conservation area, making it an even more promising habitat for birds. There are several old quays and wharfs along the shoreline, such as Teynham, Oare, Graveney and Faversham, each with its quota of derelict hulks, relics of the nineteenth-century heyday of the carrying trade. The present landscape is almost entirely rural, with extensive areas of pasture and marsh. Drainage of the marshes is increasing with every year and much of the pasture is going under the plough, but, for the moment, a varied land use persists. The shoreline between Faversham Creek to the east and the Graveney Marshes to the west is signposted as the South Swale Nature Reserve with access from Graveney along the sea wall. Two miles across the estuary, on the eastern extremity of Sheppey, is another reserve at Shellness which can be reached, again by sea wall, from the isolated church at Harty. Between them lies a channel with great tidal variations, now a roaring water with yachts tacking in the fierce winds, now a calm horizon of exposed mud-flats.

The marshland churches are amongst the most interesting in the region, usually isolated and each with its own special character, tempting enough to delay even the most ardent naturalist from winter pursuits. Amongst Harty's treasures, for example, is a rare fourteenth-century wooden chest with a medieval joust, superbly carved on one side.

Shellness is a spit of shingle and shells curling in the shape of a comma to the south and west, away from the long-shore drift. There are literally millions of shells gathered on the ness, oyster, otter shells, cockles, mussels, sand gapers and whelks, a paradise for children but also for the birds that feed on shellfish; a haunt, too, of plovers scuttling amongst the stones.

Similar features are found on the south side of the estuary in the South Swale Reserve. About a mile west of the mouth of Faversham Creek is a succession of shelly ridges showing a sequence of plant colonisation. The outer ridges are still barren and unstable, being freshly formed by high tides and storms. The innermost and oldest ridges are almost entirely covered with creeping willow, wild carrot, sea mayweed, stonecrop, sea-beet and ragwort. Between the two extremes are ridges showing the intermediate stages of the succession. The presence of lime from the shells in an otherwise clayey area adds to the floral possibilities. On a recent January day, amongst the eight different flowers in bloom on these ridges was one head of viper's bugloss, its blues and reds brilliant against the white background.

On the seaward side, the ebbing tide leaves the mud-flats clear and dozens of dark figures are at work in the cold morning, fishermen digging for bait with fork and pail. The early birds catching the worms. Man in competition with the birds. The men use forks, disturbing large patches. The birds are more delicate, each with a bill designed to reach and open the food vital to its sustenance. The turnstone, tough and pointed, literally turns over shells and stones. The oyster-catcher, long and bright red, can reach down six or seven centimetres to its prey. The godwit beats that with ten centimetres while the curlew can reach the fat lugworms and deep-burrowing clams at a depth of fifteen centimetres. Intensive bait digging can affect bird numbers adversely and attempts have been made in some areas to control it. Birds and their feeding grounds are part of the same natural unity. You cannot conserve one without the other.

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Yet it is precisely the adaptability of birds that is most heartening and maintains such a prolific wildlife in this built-up corner of England. Right in the heart of the industrial complex of refinery and cement works on the Hoo peninsula, there is a group of slurry pits at Cliffe, separated from the river only by the sea wall. In January those extraction pits are almost as exciting as the open shore. The sheltered areas of fresh water attract numbers of tufted duck, pochard and scaup, drifting on the rippling water with coot and moorhen cackling round the reedy fringes. The two latter tend to flock in winter and frequently congregate on the estuarine marshes, the moorhen feeding on land quite as much as in the water. On the artificial islands in the middle of the pits gulls gather and a line of cormorants hold their wings out like black sails. The most surprising inhabitants, however, are the flamingos, about seven of them, which have been seen for at least five years and have remained for the breeding season.

Flamingos have been reported in several places such as the Cuckmere river on the Sussex coast and at Sandwich Bay where an attempt is being made to preserve their breeding area. The all-pink plumage of the large male suggests that they are escapees from private collections, perhaps from one of the London parks. Whatever their origin, they bring a nice touch of the warm south to the darker, colder shores of the estuary. Standing on stilt-like legs, they feed by thrusting their long necks into the water and turning their large bills upside down, scooping through the water. They are exotic enough to take attention away from the herons which are always in the vicinity, either standing silently, heads hunched down, in a quiet corner of the pits, or floating gently on the air currents with long legs held back like rudders, honking as they pass.

Comparable with the North Kent marshes in size and attraction is the indented shoreline at the other extremity of the region in West Sussex, between the Selsey peninsula and Hayling Island. On the saltings and creeks of Selsey, Thorney and the complex channel of Chichester Harbour, the usual wintering birds are joined by thousands of passerines. More than fifteen species of the common wading birds are present, though in a good year that number may double. Regular visitors include whimbrels, a variety of sandpipers, green-shanks, spotted redshanks, little stints, adding to a total population of waders in excess of 25,000.

The most numerous of the duck, as in Kent, are the shelduck and widgeon, both numbered in thousands, but teal, Brent geese, pintail, goldeneye and red-breasted merganser are usually present. One of the many attractions of the area is the nature reserve at Pagham Harbour on the east side of the Selsey peninsula with grebe, eider and scoter riding on the water out to sea, as well as the varied bird life within the shelter of the extensive harbour. The birds seem equally at home on the deserted airfield that covers much of Thorney Island where curlew, lapwing and herons stalk around almost tamely, in complete charge of the runways. Even the little egret, another resident of Southern Europe, has been seen in the reedbeds of the deep that divides the island from the mainland. But the island rightfully belongs to the peewit; its image is the centre-piece of the RAF commemorative window in the Norman church by the shore of Thorney. A public footpath follows the entire shoreline of Thorney, all eight miles of it, and another follows the shore of Selsey from the village of West Itchenor round to the sand dunes of East Head, a National Trust Reserve, and West Wittering.

The activities of wintering birds are not confined to the coasts. Many of the inland water surfaces, lakes, reservoirs, hammer ponds have become havens. There are several flooded extraction pits along the Medway upstream from the estuary. The Leybourne lakes to the west of the river are the centre features for conversion to a country park, but the deep sand pit across the river near the gatehouse of Aylesford Priory is a foretaste of things to come. The company extracting sand is landscaping the pit as it works across it, and that one small pit can be crowded with mute swans, mallard, Canada geese, tufted ducks and pochards, herring gulls, black-backed gulls, black-headed gulls, coot, moorhen, cormorant and heron. The noise in a confined space is memorable, the loudest being the black-headed gulls, constantly bickering.

Follow the Medway far inland towards its headwaters beyond Tonbridge and there, just to the north of Penshurst, one of its small tributary streams leading down from Ide Hill has been dammed to form the Bough Beech reservoir, more than a mile long. It has become such a haunt of birds that although part of it is used for boating and angling, much of the east side, adjacent to the road, has been designated as a nature reserve. A pearly-grey January morning can attract as many bird-watchers as birds, lined up along