



Horsell Common: Exploring a Liminal Landscape

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"Close at hand in those days was a pretty and rarely used canal amidst pine-woods, a weedy canal, beset with loose-strife, spiraea, forget-me-nots and yellow water lilies, upon which one could be happy for hours in a hired canoe, and in all directions stretched open and undeveloped heathland, so that we could walk and presently learn to ride bicycles and restore our broken contact with the open air". (H.G. Wells, 1934)

Introduction

There are Bronze Age barrows in one part, unusually for the area. The Common's Sand Pit is a small part of the Bagshot Sands which were formed in the Upper Eocene era of the Paleogene Period around 33 to 56 million years ago. The "Great Bagshot River" flowed from the South West through a very large part of southern England to Essex where it flowed into the North Sea. It's almost surreal to be on the Sand Pits – a strange kind of sea-less beach - whilst modern Woking life carries on outside it and skyscrapers begin to dominate the town centre.

The author H. G. Wells moved to Woking, Surrey in May 1895, accompanied by his future wife, Amy Catherine Robins. They rented a house in the Maybury area of Woking - opposite the railway line - staying there for almost eighteen months. It has been suggested that the time spent in Woking was the most productive and creative of Wells's writing career. He seemed to enjoy living there, viewing it as a cheerful adventure; spending his time writing in the morning and, in the afternoons rowing a canoe on the nearby rarely used canal and walking on what was then open and undeveloped heathland.

Whilst living in Woking Wells completed his book "The Time Machine" and also wrote "The War of the Worlds". The idea for the latter book developed from a discussion Wells had with his older brother, Frank whilst they were out walking. They had been discussing the terrible effects on the indigenous Tasmanian population following the building of the first white settlement there in 1803. During the discussion Frank remarked, "Suppose some beings from another planet were to drop out of the sky suddenly and begin laying about them here", and this inspired Wells with an idea for a new science fiction novel; later writing, "I wheeled about the district marking down suitable places and people for destruction by my Martians."

Wells used his knowledge of the area and people living there, to make what happens in the story believable. His Martians land their machine in the Sand Pit on Horsell Common and set off on a course of destruction of the south of England and beyond, roaming the shattered landscape for several years.

The original intention of my project was to explore the Horsell Common areas, with my camera, to gain a sense of what it was about the area itself that inspired H.G. Wells to use the Sand Pit as the Martian landing area. I decided to take photographs of anything that caught my attention rather than plan to walk in specific areas. I realised what an unusual environment this is with its curious and striking features. This protected space delineates the edge/boundary of the town of Woking whilst being a place apart through its history and geological features; thus providing a limen (threshold) between the past, present and possible future. Perhaps its protected status speaks to that too.

The feeling of being in a distanced place on the Common is also amplified by the twisted tree roots, gnarled barks of silver birch trees, tall, waving pines and feathery grasses and pale clumps of heather. This is a liminal space that lends itself to leaps of imagination and story-telling.

































