

Keats country fades into mists of time

The poet wrote his ode To Autumn 200 years ago today. Retracing his steps, **James Marriott** saw a land transformed

Two hundred years ago today, a pale, rather anxious-looking young man slipped out of his poky lodgings in the centre of Winchester and set off for his customary Sunday afternoon walk. The autumn sun was already beginning its descent into the west as he passed in front of the cathedral and headed towards the water meadows on the outskirts of the city.

He was following the route of “walk 6” in his guidebook, Charles Ball’s *Descriptive Walks*. The anxious young man was John Keats and on this stroll he’d compose one of the greatest odes in the English language, *To Autumn*.

The 200th anniversary of the poem will be marked with a talk today by Dr Tim Hands, headmaster of Winchester College, and a guided walk this Sunday. Poets will gather in the water meadows that inspired the poem — it will be “massive”, promises Matthew Oates, who writes *The Times*’ nature notebook.

I set off to follow in Keats’s footsteps. Though the water meadows are the traditionally accepted route of Keats’s walk, some academics argue that he walked up St Giles Hill, nearer to the city centre and now the site of an unlovely multistoried car park.

Keats wrote his poem as Britain stood on the brink of the Industrial Revolution. The countryside was still untouched by the ravages of climate change, pollution and pesticides. Keats’s countryside sounds raucous: in the poem he recorded a “wailful choir”



Winchester Cathedral in the much-changed meadows where apples grow and Keats composed his poem



of gnats, the singing of “hedge crickets”, the “whistles” of a robin and “twitter” of “gathering swallows” in the skies above his head. By his feet, buzzing bees flitted between “late flowers”. Nature is quieter these days.

Bee numbers are in steep decline thanks to climate change, the destruction of their habitats and intensive farming. The robins which thrived in Keats’s day in small fields and plentiful copses have suffered with the advent of

industrial farming. In cities, street lamps trick the birds into believing dawn has broken, causing them to sleeplessly sing themselves to death. Gnat populations have declined too because agricultural pollution means water quality is worse than in the early 19th century. Crickets are in better fettle — but you have to listen hard to hear them. They’re drowned out by a new “wailful choir” — of cars zooming down the M3, which cuts across Keats’s walk.

In a riverside allotment I find swelling gourds and apple trees bent under the weight of their fruit, just as Keats describes. The modern kitchen gardeners of Winchester are more affluent than they were in his day. The impoverished renters living in the cottages Keats found may not even have been allowed to eat the apples from their own gardens — there is evidence to suggest the fruit had to be given up to the local landlord. The middle-class allotment holders of the 21st-century eat every-

thing they grow — and their butternut squashes look positively tumescent.

I don’t spot plump “hazel shells/ With a sweet kernel” however. Nowadays the nuts are eaten up before they are ripe by the grey squirrels that were introduced into the country from America in the 1870s. The poppies whose “drowsy fumes” Keats sniffed out (like most Romantic poets he’d tried opium) have also disappeared. Poppies are one of many cornfield weeds that have been decimated by modern herbicides.

The weather is warmer nowadays too. Keats famously spoke of “mists and mellow fruitfulness” but since 1819, average global temperatures have risen by more than one degree and bookies are offering odds that September 2019 will be one of the hottest on record.

The countryside may have changed since Keats walked through the meadows of Winchester, but thanks to his ode *To Autumn* a sliver of a more pristine natural past is preserved for ever.

The first stanza

*Season of mists and mellow
fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the
maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to
load and bless
With fruit the vines that
round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the
moss’d cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness
to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump
the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set
budding more,
And still more, later flowers
for the bees,
Until they think warm days
will never cease,
For summer has o’er-brimm’d
their clammy cells.*



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