

# BORDER BY-PASS

By MICHAEL BROWN

"The downland of vast distances, sun-dappled ploughland and lonely farms."

## MAIN ROAD DODGING AFFORDS STOLEN TOURING PLEASURES



**N**OW that petrol is "free" only one thing is left to militate against the pure touring jaunt in merely homely country—the high price. I do not know how others regard it, but I think 3s a gallon begins to force one to put an £ s d value on scenery. If the area chosen is famously scenic—Devon or the Lake District, the Highlands or

the South Coast—then the gallons expended may be well worth it even at three and-something apiece. But I think that 60 miles, using two gallons and costing six shillings, may disturb the sense of values of a motorist if the route which he chooses is pleasant without being exciting. He may be disappointed because of the cost.

In order to avoid this sense of disappointment I have been turning once again to maps of familiar places. Called upon by duty to drive from A to B, I have studied the main road line, cast about for parallel routes amongst the side roads, and discovered once again how little I know of England. Those of you who have used A4 between Reading and Newbury, passing quickly through Theale, Woolhampton and Thatcham into the Berkshire market town,

"But artificial or not, it is a handsome pond."



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what do you know of Burghfield, Three Firs, Round Oak, Baughurst and Ramsdell? They lie, most of them, on a parallel route to A4 about four miles to the south, and they made up my by-pass route from Berkshire to Hampshire on a recent sunny morning.

I had to be down in the New Forest by lunchtime, and my normal main road route would have been to join A30 as quickly as possible. If, however, I went through Reading and took the third turn to the left after crossing the railway line under A4 to the west of the town, I reasoned that I could join A30 at Basingstoke via the villages mentioned without expending more than a half-gallon of extra petrol; at 1s 6d it was more than worth it.

After leaving the Bath Road the route is wide and winding through normal Berkshire country. There were elms, willows, distant hills, and the sun rippling over the breeze-imbued young wheat. By the time the car reaches Burghfield it is climbing the once-distant hills and the scene changes abruptly. This point is Burghfield Hill, leading up to Burghfield Common, and by the time you have reached Three Firs (a public house at a cross-roads and a cottage or two) your car is in a wonderful heathland.

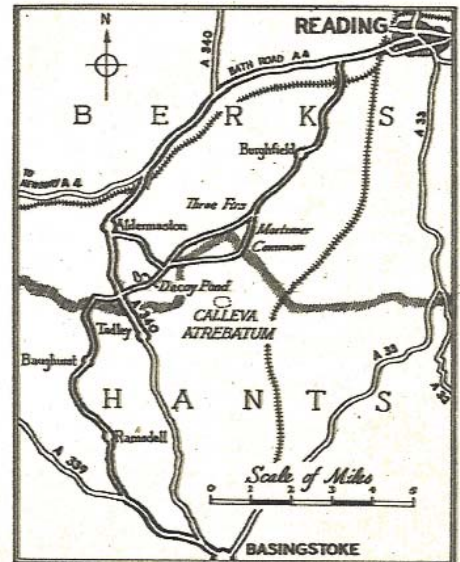
At least, I think so. Heathland to me is an intense pleasure, for my appreciation of hedged fields and meadows, primly secluded gardens and well-defined coppices, does not prevent a faint feeling of claustrophobia. One is shut out by them and confined to the narrow lanes. Up on the heath there is room for the soul to expand; the air is fresher, and tinged with the scent of bracken peat, Scots pines and the ubiquitous heather. Such fences as once existed have mouldered away as landlords' pockets became ever shorter, and the placing of trees is haphazard, for they "just grewed." In such areas there are not many people—a relief in this crowded Home Counties area. So you drive up on to the heathland just south of the Bath Road with a feeling of escape from a cloying intimacy.

In the spring it is at its best. The dark green of the pines is hardly tipped with the new green of this year's needles; full honours for that colour go to the birches, newly shooting. Choose a spot where they back the pineboles, the sun shining through them and adding to their





"A little stream runs down this valley, and a very pleasant little valley it is."



lustre. Sit down on the warm mat of last year's needles and survey the scene; Nature is an artist at setting a stage.

At Three Firs you may go left or right. We went left across Mortimer Common to run off the heath far a moment as the route joins the east-west Aldermaston road at 300ft. A little stream runs, down this valley, and a very pleasant little valley it is. Turn right for Aldermaston.

How straight the road is, and how straight are most of its neighbours! Silchester provides the reason for this rectitude, the Roman Calleva Atrebatum. It is a stone's throw to the south and the roads are no doubt overlaid on the paths that Roman footprints- made.

You are back on the heath again, still more open now, and with something about it that suggests the "blasted" adjective. Wind or fire has felled many a young tree in the, past and its rotten bole, propped up by a spiky dead branch or two, lies starkly, in the heather. The shining

white of rain- and sun-washed "lucky stones," which make up a large part of the gravelly soil, suggests dead bones on a lifeless landscape. The dark green of the more distant pines suddenly becomes sombre, and if a cloud crosses the sun you may well shiver in spite of the warm air. Heathland is like that—a moody land, mood-inspiring.

Near Aldermaston the road passes the Decoy Pond; even the map gives it that name, and the embankment which retains the water proves that it is artificial. But artificial or not it is a handsome pond, alongside which the car can be driven safely over the stones. Better take a last look at red-brick Aldermaston, one of Berkshire's prettiest villages; it is about to become an adjunct to Harwell, farther north, and will disappear in the holocaust of new towns, atom plants and development plans which is being visited on Berkshire. At the end of the war it "was suddenly discovered that this reprehensibly unspoilt county, alone amongst the Home Counties, had not benefited by Progress, and, this deplorable state of affairs is about to be remedied.

**Desolation**

You can see some of the traces of Progress—admittedly war-dictated—in the desolate remnants of Aldermaston's war-time airfield. What Yankee ghosts tumble out of ethereal aircraft on to those cracking runways in the black nights of winter? Does the sound of a juke-box record, playing, perhaps, "I'll never smile again," echo round the tin-roofed huts to disturb the melancholy owls? Deserted airfields are gloomy places when the moon is transformed into an Aldis signal lamp by flying cloud and the wind sighs for the lost years of 1939-1945.

I crossed A340, continued for one mile, and then turned left for Baughurst. The villages on this route—except Aldermaston—are not places in which to linger, though the church at Ramsdell sits prettily atop a hill. The road—now heading south—leaves the heath. Over to the left is Tadley, known locally as "Tadley—God help us". The story goes that an aviator made a forced landing in the early days of aircraft at Tadley. He climbed down from his plane and asked a fearful inhabitant where he was, to receive the answer, "Tadley—God help us." As I was living in the neighbourhood at the time (though I did not see the aircraft!) the laugh is on me as much as it is on Tadley G.H.U. and I cannot be accused of taking the rise out of Berkshire's amiable neighbours over the county border.

The countryside has changed again. When the road once more climbs it is up to the downland of vast distances, sun dappled ploughland and lonely farms. At 500ft A339 comes in on the right and soon you join John Thornycroft in Basingstoke. A by-pass indeed—for both car and spirits for the Bath Road and A340 and A339, however good they are, do not provide the escape from everyday things which belongs to the high heathland and the milky lucky stones.



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