

# The good air of the Chilterns invites to health by day and to sleep by night<sup>1</sup>

Lee Nelson

Steep valleys, cut by meltwaters not the glacier itself.  
Tree-topped hills, warrens, narrow rights of way  
Romans, Saxons, beacons and Watling Street.

Ancient Countryside, by Rackham's reckon<sup>2</sup>,  
developed slowly, avoiding large-scale changes  
due to the difficult nature of the land.

Domesday records - scarp-foot open fields and dip-slope closes.  
Homes assarted from the greenwood,  
pollarded tree-pasture, measured in pannage<sup>3</sup>.

Earth-beneath – foraminifera, coccoliths - powdered armour of ancient amoebae,  
raw materials of limestone

Sky-above – like anywhere, nitrogen, exhaust fumes, all that stuff

Caught-between – Beech woods, cob-nuts, sloes, blackberries, humans, other beasts

In summary then: Hard to settle, a problem to farm, difficult to cross . . .

If you haven't previously felt comfortable visiting - We are hard to settle

If you haven't previously felt comfortable visiting - We are difficult to cross

Waves of history break on our hoes,  
energy runs up the slopes  
pools and waits,  
and the limestone dissolves . . .

Our chalks hide flint  
Lugus's teeth  
the biters of shapers  
the checks on the church<sup>4</sup>  
the tools of the ancients

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this poem comes from one of the 'Metro-Land' booklets, a series of travel guides published by the Metropolitan Railway over a period of 17 years (1915–1932).

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Rackham – his books include *Ancient Woodland* (1980) and *The History of the Countryside* (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Pannage - the act of pasturing swine in a wood or forest (as in medieval England) – Merriam-Webster

<sup>4</sup> Have a look at the Parish Church of St Mary, right by the Arndale Centre in LU1. OK, it isn't really called The Arndale anymore, but if you renamed Stonehenge 'The Circle – Salisbury Plain' nobody would actually call it that.

If you haven't previously felt comfortable visiting - Look again, beneath your feet  
Our chalkbed is limestone  
Limestone dissolves  
then carried by water  
moves, settles, reforms  
makes beds  
lays foundations  
concretes, abides

Then once more the waters  
Once more waves and tides  
Migrants migrate  
find refuge, survive

Limestone dissolves  
runs downhill (with a smile)  
runs too fast to keep up  
despite stumbles  
and trips  
it pools  
it abides  
connects  
grows  
thrives

Chalk sketches precedents  
makes maquettes  
Marble follows with art  
with columns, with steps

Foraminifera calcify  
Coccoliths decay  
get lost on the waters  
make their way

They pool  
They abide  
Connect  
Grow  
Thrive

*If you haven't previously felt comfortable visiting us:*  
You're already here.  
Have a look.  
Come outside.