

Extract From William Cobbetts 'Rural Rides' 1 September 1823

Ride through the north-east part of Sussex, and all across Kent, from the Weald of Sussex to Dover

In quitting this Appledore I crossed a canal and entered on **Romney Marsh**. This was grass-land on both sides of me to a great distance. The flocks and herds immense. The sheep are of a breed that takes its name from the marsh. They are called Romney Marsh sheep. Very pretty and large. The wethers, when fat, weigh about twelve stone; or, one hundred pounds. The faces of these sheep are white; and, indeed, the whole sheep is as white as a piece of writing-paper. The wool does not look dirty and oily like that of other sheep. The cattle appear to be all of the Sussex breed. Red, loosed-limbed, and, they say, a great deal better than the Devonshire. How curious is the natural economy of a country! The forests of Sussex; those miserable tracts of heath and fern and bushes and sand, called Ashdown Forest and Saint Leonard's Forest, to which latter Lord Erskine's estate belongs; these wretched tracts and the not much less wretched farms in their neighbourhood, breed the cattle, which we see fattening in Romney Marsh! They are calved in the spring; they are weaned in a little bit of grass-land; they are then put into stubbles and about in the fallows for the first summer; they are brought into the yard to winter on rough hay, peas-haulm, or barley-straw; the next two summers they spend in the rough woods or in the forest; the two winters they live on straw; they then pass another summer on the forest or at work; and then they come here or go elsewhere to be fatted. With cattle of this kind and with sheep such as I have spoken of before, this Marsh abounds in every part of it; and the sight is most beautiful.

At three miles from Appledore I came through [Snargate](#), a village with five houses, and with a church capable of containing two thousand people! The vagabonds tell us, however, that we have a wonderful increase of population! These vagabonds will be hanged by-and-by, or else justice will have fled from the face of the earth.

At [Brenzett](#) (a mile further on) I with great difficulty got a rasher of bacon for breakfast. The few houses that there are are miserable in the extreme. The church here (only a mile from the last) nearly as large; and nobody to go to it. What! will the vagabonds attempt to make us believe that these churches were built for nothing! "Dark ages" indeed those must have been, if these churches were erected without there being any more people than there are now. But who built them? Where did the means, where did the hands come from? This place presents another proof of the truth of my old observation: rich land and poor labourers. From the window of the house, in which I could scarcely get a rasher of bacon, and not an egg, I saw numberless flocks and herds fattening, and the fields loaded with corn!

The next village, which was two miles further on, was [Old Romney](#), and along here I had, for great part of the way, corn-fields on one side of me and grass-land on the other. I asked what the amount of the crop of wheat would be. They told me [Pg 218] better than five quarters to the acre. I thought so myself. I have a sample of the red wheat and another of the white. They are both very fine. They reap the wheat here nearly two feet from the ground; and even then they cut it three feet long! I never saw corn like this before. It very far exceeds the corn under Portsdown Hill, that at Gosport and Tichfield. They have here about eight hundred large, very large, sheaves to an acre. I wonder how long it will be after the end of the world before Mr. Birbeck will see the American "Prairies" half so good as this Marsh. In a garden here I saw some very fine onions, and a prodigious crop; sure sign of most excellent land. At this Old Romney there is a church (two miles only from the last, mind!) fit to contain one thousand five hundred people, and there are, for the people of the parish to live in, twenty-two, or twenty-three, houses! And yet the vagabonds have the impudence to tell us that the population of England has vastly increased! Curious system that depopulates Romney Marsh and peoples Bagshot Heath! It is an unnatural system. It is the vagabond's system. It is a system that must be destroyed, or that will destroy the country.

The rotten borough of [New Romney](#) came next in my way; and here, to my great surprise, I found myself

upon the sea-beach; for I had not looked at a map of Kent for years, and, perhaps, never. I had got a list of places from a friend in Sussex, whom I asked to give me a route to Dover, and to send me through those parts of Kent which he thought would be most interesting to me. Never was I so much surprised as when I saw a sail. This place, now that the squanderings of the thing are over, is, they say, become miserably poor.

From New Romney to [Dimchurch](#) is about four miles: all along I had the sea-beach on my right, and, on my left, sometimes grass-land and sometimes corn-land. They told me here, and also further back in the Marsh, that they were to have 15s. an acre for reaping wheat.

From Dimchurch to Hythe you go on the sea-beach, and nearly the same from Hythe to Sandgate, from which last place you come over the hill to Folkestone. But let me look back. Here has been the squandering! Here has been the pauper-making work! Here we see some of these causes that are now sending some farmers to the workhouse and driving others to flee the country or to cut their throats!

I had baited my horse at New Romney, and was coming jogging along very soberly, now looking at the sea, then looking at the cattle, then the corn, when my eye, in swinging round, lighted upon a great round building standing upon the beach. I had scarcely had time to think about what it could be when [Pg 219] twenty or thirty others, standing along the coast, caught my eye; and, if any one had been behind me, he might have heard me exclaim, in a voice that made my horse bound, "The [Martello Towers](#) by —!" Oh, Lord! To think that I should be destined to behold these monuments of the wisdom of Pitt and Dundas and Perceval! Good God! Here they are, piles of bricks in a circular form about three hundred feet (guess) circumference at the base, about forty feet high, and about one hundred and fifty feet circumference at the top. There is a door-way, about midway up, in each, and each has two windows. Cannons were to be fired from the top of these things in order to defend the country against the French Jacobins!

I think I have counted along here upwards of thirty of these ridiculous things, which, I dare say, cost five, perhaps ten, thousand pounds each; and one of which was, I am told, sold on the coast of Sussex the other day for two hundred pounds! There is, they say, a chain of these things all the way to Hastings! I dare say they cost millions. But far indeed are these from being all, or half, or a quarter of the squanderings along here. Hythe is half barracks; the hills are covered with barracks; and barracks most expensive, most squandering, fill up the side of the hill. Here is a canal (I crossed it at Appledore) made for the length of thirty miles (from Hythe, in Kent, to Rye, in Sussex) to keep out the French; for those armies who had so often crossed the Rhine and the Danube were to be kept back by a canal, made by Pitt, thirty feet wide at the most! All along the coast there are works of some sort or other; incessant sinks of money; walls of immense dimensions; masses of stone brought and put into piles. Then you see some of the walls and buildings falling down; some that have never been finished. The whole thing, all taken together, looks as if a spell had been, all of a sudden, set upon the workmen; or, in the words of the Scripture, here is the "desolation of abomination, standing in high places." However, all is right. These things were made with the hearty good will of those who are now coming to ruin in consequence of the Debt, contracted for the purpose of making these things! This is all just. The load will come, at last, upon the right shoulders.