

Derek Nightingale (Resident of Merrow for 35 years)

This book is the 2nd instalment of a series of works about the local area based upon 8 years research to this date.

The first book entitled Merrow Village Then and Now was published in 1990

NEWLANDS CORNER AND ITS ENVIRONS
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NEWLANDS CORNER AND ITS ENVIRONS

A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

DEREK NIGHTINGALE

Welcome to this book.

To all who know and love Newlands Corner as I do, and to those readers who perhaps had never heard of it, I hope you will enjoy a trip through Newlands and the surrounding area. Here infinite variety is to be found - wooded heights and gentle undulating pastures, rugged hills and wild deserted commons, village and hamlet, ruins eloquent of bygone times. I am particularly anxious to share with others my enjoyment of this much loved angle of land.

My special thanks go to the late J. St Loe Strachey, whose book on Newlands Corner provided some of the information reproduced here, to Mr John Janaway of the Surrey Local Studies Library, and to my many friends who have contributed other pieces of information. My thanks also go to Mrs Clare Windsor for her generous help in correcting the manuscripts and designing and typesetting this book.

To chronicle all that can be written about Newlands and its vicinity would require many volumes, but so far as space permits I have compiled the salient points about which visitors to Newlands should be informed.

Derek Nightingale

Rudyard Kipling wrote

There runs a road by Merrow Downs, A grassy track today it is. An hour out of Guildford Town Above the River Wey it is.



The summit of Newlands Corner, 1920

Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

The western section of the North Downs is the highland of West Surrey. Between Dorking and Guildford, it contains some of the most fascinating open country in Great Britain. In this hill country no place is more famous or better deserves its fame than Newlands Corner. Newlands is the summit of the hill.

The picture above was taken from the entrance to the car park of Newlands Corner. The original Barns Cafe is in the background: today there is a new building, run until 1993 by the same family who started it. The finger-pointing signs point to Dorking, Clandon, Merrow and Guildford.

The car is a Morris Cowley "Bullnose", the most popular car of the 1920s.



Newlands Corner, 1904

Publ S Sawyer

Newlands Corner is much more than a wooded hilltop with a fine prospect. The country immediately to the east, to the west and even to the north is largely unenclosed common land, upon which all men and women may roam and ride. You can see beautiful scenery and feel the greenest of green turf under your feet.

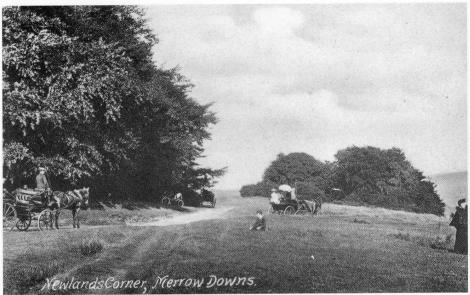
This is the top of the North Downs, which was used as a track from as far back as the Bronze Age. The earliest mention of Newlands Corner is on John Rocque's map of 1762.



View towards Dorking, 1905

Publ Lloyd, Albury

This picture looks across Surrey towards Dorking, with the South Downs in the distance. A cart jolts merrily over the turf of Newlands Corner, just as folk would have travelled a hundred or two hundred years ago, for the track was only metalled in 1910. The young chap with the cart is a Mr Albert Bridger, who used to deliver goods from his off-licence in Down Road, Merrow.



Newlands Corner, Merrow Downs, 1904

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

Carriages were the norm in the early days of this century, but you can just make out a motor vehicle in the bushes. The road from the left of the picture comes up from Clandon, the track continuing round the trees to the North Downs Way. The road to the right leads to Dorking. From the centre to the foreground is what is now called Trodds Lane, leading across Merrow Downs towards Merrow village.



Newlands Farm, 1904

Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

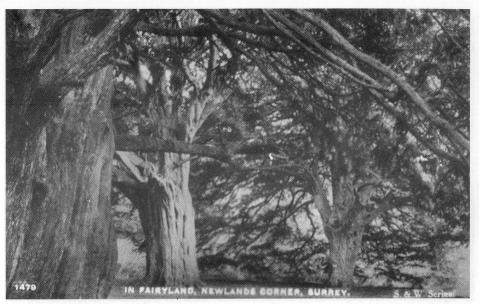
Newlands Farm is situated just before The Manor Hotel on the road descending from Newlands Corner. It dates back about 440 years, and many eminent people have lived here including John Turner, engraver of the first pound note.



The Old Farm House, Newlands Corner, 1920s

Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

This is the same building photographed in the 1920s when it was a restuarant. J St Loe Strachey, proprietor and editor of *The Spectator*, later made this house his first home (before building a new home which is now The Manor Hotel). George Bernard Shaw and President Roosevelt were among some of Mr Strachey's illustrious visitors.

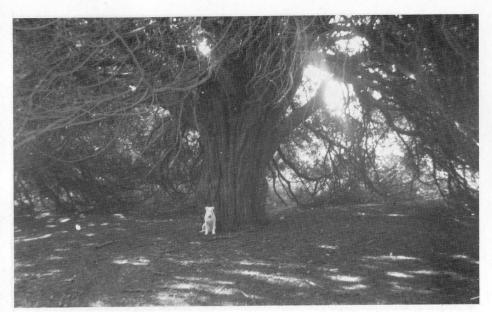


'Fairyland', Newlands Corner

Publ S&W Series

There is a place close to Newlands Corner described on an old Ordnance Survey map as 'Fairyland', which in spite of its sentimental name is of the rarest beauty. It contains groups of yew trees which whether seen by moonlight or sunlight, when the turf is green and covered with flowers or when spread with snow, makes it a place of wonder and delight. 'Fairyland' and the giant yews belonging to Albury, Clandon and Merrow Commons by no means exhaust the more secret beauties of the hilltop; indeed they are only, as it were, sentinels to the charmed land.

There are hundreds of yew trees here, some with girths over 20 feet. It is possible that the habit of planting yews may have survived from a long-forgotten veneration of the yew as a strong evergreen enduring tree, with its own inherent power to protect. Yew trees undoubtedly gave protection against the elements.



Giant yew, Newlands Corner

There are many superstitions held about the yew, but its poison - contained in the leaves, seeds and bark - is no superstition, for many people and even more animals have died from it. Yet the wood was once a military necessity for making archers' bows, and the foliage was cut as 'palm' for Palm Sunday.*

A few of the yews in 'Fairyland' are well over 1000 years old, but the one pictured above is exceptionally old. A document pinned to the tree states "...using all the data we have to hand that the age of the yew tree at Newlands Corner, Merrow Downs is over 2000 years old", and is signed by Dr Robert Runcie (the then Archbishop of Canterbury), David Bellamy, Alan Meredith and Robert Hardy. You can identify the tree by its huge size (my dog Chippy, 500mm to the top of his head, is sitting beside it) and by the service tree growing from the centre of it.

*The Conservation Foundation recognises the importance of the yew in our history, and is aiming to compile a register of every yew in the country.



Merrow Downs, 'Fairyland', 1904

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

All of Merrow Downs - common land stretching from the houses backing the Downs right up to Newlands Corner - used to be called 'Fairyland', but today the name has been forgotten. A small part of the area is shown above.

In 1866 one of England's first golf courses was constructed on 'Fairyland'. Merrow Downs had belonged to the Earl of Onslow until 1967, when Guildford Borough Council purchased the land and leased it to the Golf Club.



Merrow Downs, 'Fairyland', 1907

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

Another part of 'Fairyland' contains a hare warren dating back to the 18th century. It was built by the Earls of Onslow for breeding hares for hunting and for food. This is half-way up Walnut Tree Bottom, between the Merrow Golf Club and Newlands Corner. Walnut Tree Bottom got its name from a) an avenue of walnut trees from Levelsdene House to the hare warren, and b) 'bottom' meaning a low-lying wet or damp place, possibly containing a spring. The picture above shows how the hare warren used to look in 1907.

There is a complete transformation here now, overgrown with trees and with a new storey on top of the old Keeper's Cottage. It still has the six-foot high flint wall with artificial 'meuses' at the bottom of the walls for the hares to run through for relief when hunted.



Newlands Corner, 1961

When West Surrey took to sheep-raising, the road along the spine of the North Downs got the name of 'The Drove Road', so much was it frequented by the shepherds and drovers. It was also used by people taking food and supplies to the upland farms, cottages and other isolated houses, and by traders from afar and a host of latter travellers. It is now trodden by other travellers and walkers, and people from the towns and cities who come to the country seeking beauty in the sun, the sky, the woods and distant hills, just as the people in this picture are doing, looking over the Weald towards the Sussex Downs.



Ranmore Common and Church, 1906

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

I believe a more delightful walk cannot be found in England, let alone in the vicinity of London, than the walk from Newlands Corner by the White Downs and Ranmore Common to the top of the hills above Dorking, a track you can follow across nine miles of open hilltop.

The picture above has not changed from that day to this, with St Barnabas Church in the background. The house on the left used to be the local Post Office. The road going towards the church proceeds to Great Bookham near to Polesden Lacey where King George VI and Queen Elizabeth spent their honeymoon.



Ranmore Common, 1906

Publ Frith & Co Ltd

The Downs at Newlands Corner are about 600 ft above sea level and rise to 700ft at the eastern part of Ranmore Common. There were no forest trees on the Common as it was probably only grazing ground. The church was designed by the famous architect Sir Gilbert Scott, and built by Thomas Cubitt. Mr Cubitt, who lived locally, later became Lord Ashcombe.

There is a place on Ranmore called Denbies where ancient workings provided lime for the building of Somerset House, the Bank of England and London Bridge.

This picture shows a party of Edwardian children on the slopes of Ranmore Common. Parts of the Common are now in the safe hands of the National Trust.



Newlands Corner, 1915

Publ S&W Series

This part of the road must lead to the top of Newlands Corner. The signpost pointing to the right indicates Clandon and Ripley, to the left Merrow and Guildford. Just a few yards from this point there is a barrow or prehistoric burial mound which was ransacked in the 18th century.

The top of the Downs at Newlands merge into a pattern of line and colour, which is a glorious reminder of the heritage that is ours to care for.



Newlands Corner, 1926

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

At one time, approaching Newlands Corner from the east, you would have had enchanting views of St Martha's on the Hill and of the wooded hills and valleys in the Sandhills Range. Trees now obscure the views. St Martha's is just visible on the skyline in this picture. (Coming down the road is another Morris Cowley "Bullnose".)

The Hill was known as Martyr Hill, and tradition has it that early Christian martyrs suffered here. The North Downs Way runs from the soft woods and fields of Hampshire, over the top of Martyr Hill, and on to Kent.

Many a visitor's first excursion out of Guildford is to St Martha's, the little grey church on a windswept hill. You can walk there from the Chantries Lodge, keeping left and following the lane through the woods, crossing a road (Halfpenny Lane) to the final ascent. Another way is via Pewley Hill. Drivers can reach the car park via Warren Road, One Tree Hill Road and Halfpenny Lane.



St Martha's on the Hill, c 1903

Photo by Pan-Aero Films

The date of the church's foundation is unknown. For some time it fell into decay and ruin, but was restored to its present state in 1848. Services are still held there periodically.

During the 1914-18 War the church disappeared from view altogether: realising it would serve as a landmark to the German Zeppelins who were looking for the gunpowder mills at the foot of the hills in Chilworth, the Rector of Albury decorated the church with fir saplings until it was indistinguishable from its surroundings.

You will not be disappointed by the magnificent views you can get from St Martha's.



Leith Hill Tower, 1890

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

The sandhills of the Hurtwood reach their highest point at Leith Hill - the top of the tower is 1,029 feet above sea level. The tower was built in 1766 by Richard Hull in the reign of King George III. Mr Hull died shortly after, and by his desire was buried in the tower. Thirty years later it was bricked up through neglect. Then in 1864 the Lord of the Manor, W J Evelyn of Wotton, made some alterations, slightly increasing its height, and this portion contains the staircase to the summit.

A visit to Leith Hill must have been a great day out, judging by the number of people gathered in the photograph. The view from the top of the tower is a spectacular panorama of woods and farmland, and on a fine day through a gap in the South Downs you can see the coast. There is a steep scramble up to the tower from the road immediately below it, or a gentler approach from about one mile north on the Abinger Road.



Leith Hill

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

Hidden among thick woods are attractive villages like Abinger, Friday Street, Holmbury St Mary and Peaslake. Even the narrow lanes that join the villages are hidden - sunk deep into the soft sandstone, with huge trees joining overhead to make a roof. Squirrels and foxes breed here unmolested.

A considerable number of arrowheads, scrapers and flakes of flint have been found on the slopes near Leith Hill in sufficient quantity to suggest that there was a settlement of flint workers. Flints would have been transported over about four miles.

For more than 100 years Leith Hill has been a favourite picnic place. In 1945 Dr Ralph Vaughan Williams, the composer, and founder of the Leith Hill Music Festival held annually at Dorking, gave Leith Hill Place with over 400 acres of land to the National Trust. The woodlands, which contain fine pine trees, rhododendrons and azaleas in a beautiful natural setting, are open to the public.

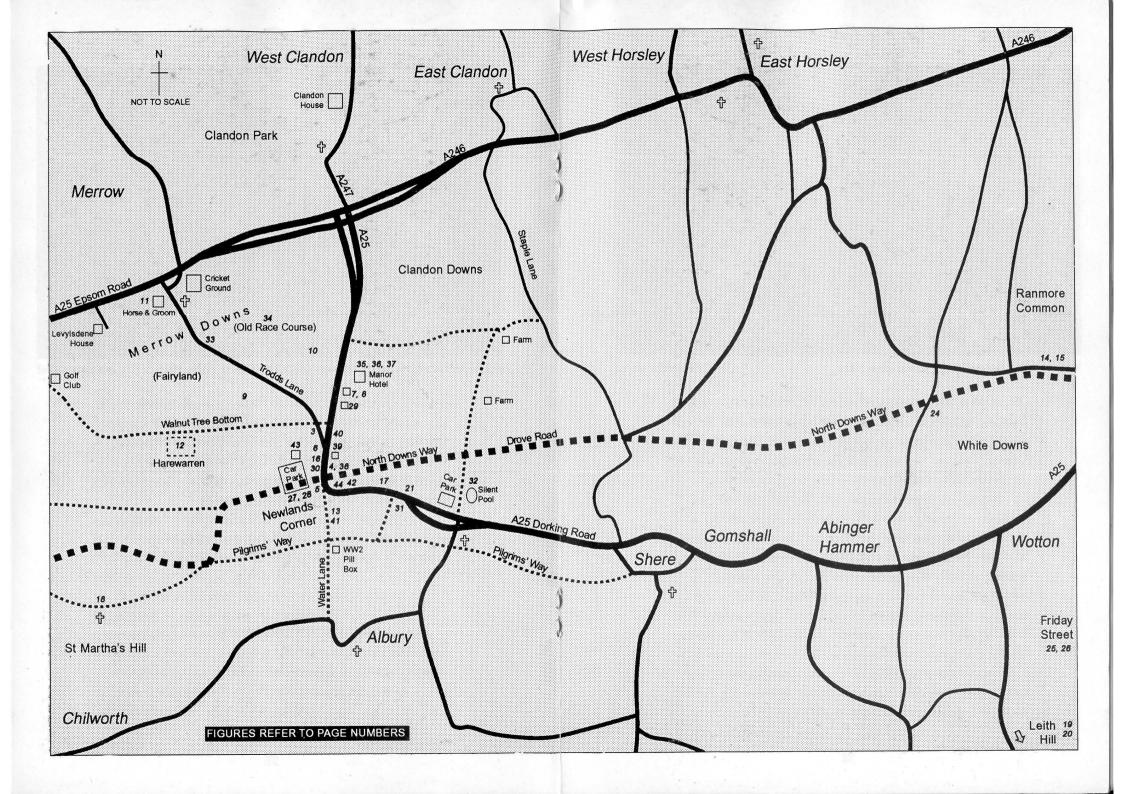


Approach to Newlands Corner from the Silent Pool, 1926

Publ Frith & Co Ltd

There is no place in Surrey which has more oaks, ashes, thorns (black- and white-), service trees, cornel bushes and raspberries than the country around Newlands Corner. What is still more memorable, none has anything like as many giant yew trees. You will also encounter paths, tracks and lanes as well as roads, hikers as well as horseback riders.

The cars in the picture are, from the right, Vauxhall and Humber, and going up the hill is a chain-driven Trojan.





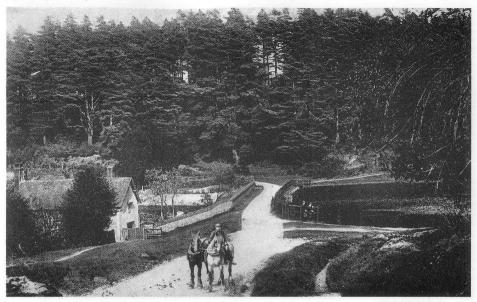
View from Pickets Hole, Ranmore, 1909

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

There are many enticing side valleys. One is called Combe Bottom, another Honeysuckle Bottom, and this one is Pickets Hole (picket being a local name for the sloe). The Guildford/Dorking railway runs to the left, with the North Downs Way in the middle of the picture.

Sheep were once common on the Downs, and with widespread grazing the wildlife flourished. Wild flowers thrived on the open sunny hillsides and a vast range of insects and butterflies depended on this flowery carpet. Then sheep grazing virtually disappeared from the Downs; and rabbits, which had also helped to keep the turf short, became very scarce as the disease myxomatosis reduced their numbers dramatically. Today, everywhere over the Downs and heaths, all the wild flowers and heathers are being choked by scrub.

Nature conservationists endeavour to restore the natural beauty to areas such as Newlands Corner by removing the scrub and encouraging a return to grazing.

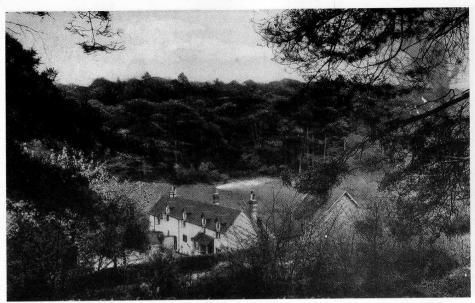


Friday Street, 1906

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

Perhaps the most beautiful valley is known as Friday Street, which holds a string of exquisite ponds. Friday Street is a tiny and lovely hamlet with a lake and pine-clad hills, and deep narrow lanes lead there from Abinger.

This idyllic scene has hardly changed. The road running through the middle goes through a forest to the Abinger and Leith Hill Road.



The 'Stephen Langton' from the hills, Friday Street, 1920

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

There is a popular belief that Stephen Langton was born in Friday Street - indeed an inn is there of that name - but I am sorry to say that he was born at Langton in Lincolnshire. Friday Street was not built until about 1700.



View from Newlands Corner, early 1920s

Publ S&W Series

All the trees and bushes are wild, not the product of man's plantation. Again our flora and fauna are essentially those of wild country. We still have badgers, stoats, weasels, foxes and rabbits on the North Downs, and I have noticed quite a lot of deer roaming Newlands Corner.

This is one of the views you can see from the top of Newlands. Here we have the slopes of the Downs going down to the alleged Pilgrims Way. The other side of the hedge belongs to the Albury estate. The hill on the right is where St Martha's is situated, and the line of hills in the distance is the South Downs.



Newlands Corner, King George V Jubilee bonfire celebrations, 1935

The lorry bringing timber for the bonfire is an American Ford belonging to Alfred Weller, a coal merchant of Shere.

Nine years earlier, Agatha Christie, the inexhaustible mistress of the whodunit, had an accident one December evening at Newlands - her car ran off the road into a bush near a small quarry, and was found abandoned the next day. The novelist was missing for ten days. There were literally hundreds of people searching Newlands for her, including police from all parts of Surrey, special constables and civilians. Silent Pool and other pools were dragged, and two civilian planes were involved in the search.

It transpired that during all that time Agatha Christie had been staying in a hotel in Harrogate.

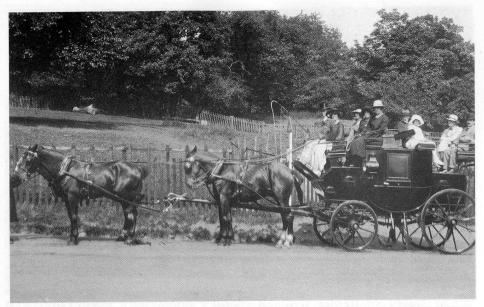


Newlands Corner, The Black Cottage, 1928

Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

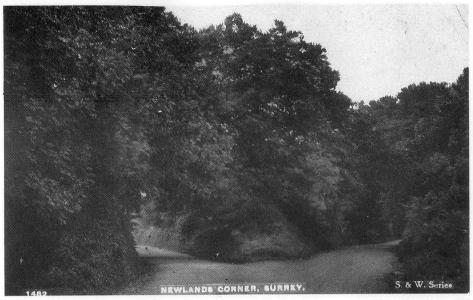
The Black Cottage (in fact a pair of cottages) is over 250 years old and one of the first buildings to be erected at Newlands Corner.

How the inhabitants would have enjoyed hours of listening to my namesake, the bright brown bird of spring, the nightingale. Nightingales can be heard even now in most years singing in every bush and thicket. It seems as if they are trying to compete with each other. After hearing one sing and hold his note with energy and zest, some other bird appears to take it as a challenge. When in full song he seems to be quite oblivious of the world around him. He thinks only of how to produce his notes to best advantage. What a beautiful sound!



Edwardian transport at Newlands Corner

A few hundred years ago, to get about over the Surrey hills, those who could afford it would either ride on horseback or travel by horse-pulled carriage. Sometimes wealthy ladies or the sick used to ride in a horse litter, that is a pallet swung between two horses or ponies trained to keep in step.



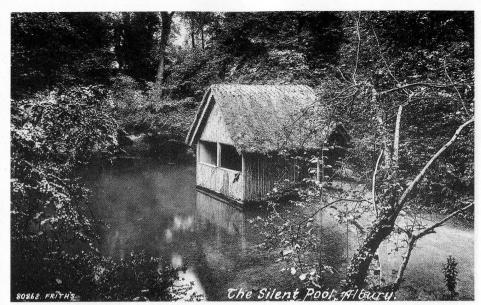
Junction near Silent Pool, early 1900s

Publ S&W Series

All over the hills used to be primitive pack-roads, worn often to look like deep trenches by the pack-horses and donkeys who used them in single file.

There is an ancient road that runs near Newlands Corner called Staple Lane. Wool, as is well known, was called the 'staple' of England, and the woolsack was the emblem of our premier trade. That is why the seat of the highest official in the land, that of the Lord Chancellor, is called 'The Woolsack'. The staple packed in sacks was borne along lanes just like Staple Lane by strings of ponies numbering in their hundreds. Only the first and last pony had a bell.

The picture shows a junction near the Silent Pool. The road is now the A25 to Dorking, with the car park on the left.



Silent Pool, 1928

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

A beauty spot well within reach of Newlands Corner is the Silent Pool. Situated on the A25 Dorking road, the Silent Pool was once called Sherborne Pond. It appears to be a deep chasm in the chalk hillside. The pool is formed from a strong spring which lies at the foot of the North Downs below Newlands Corner. The spring which rises in the Silent Pool flows through the lower pool on its way to Albury and the Tillingbourne, which then joins the Wey at Shalford. The pool has been there since the 1700s, when it was dug out as a chalk pit.

The sad legend of the Silent Pool (not, I'm afraid, true) relates that a local woodman's daughter drowned herself here, after King John had come upon her bathing and tried to capture her.



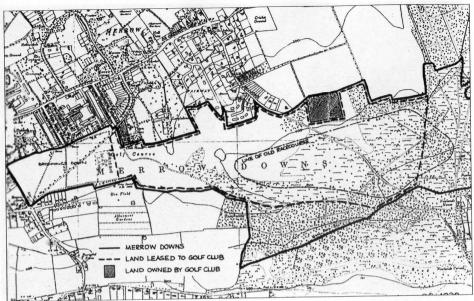
Dorking Road, Merrow, early 1900s

Publ F Elliott

On Merrow Downs, 'Fairyland' was the site of a racecourse from 1701 to 1870, and the Guildford Races (flat and jump racing) were held annually in Whitsun week. William III gave a Kings Plate of 100 guineas, run for on Whit Tuesday, which was renamed the Queens Plate in Victoria's reign. Members of the Borough of Guildford gave a plate of the same sum on the Thursday.

It was not considered a good course, but its situation and the views it commanded were delightful. The last race ran on 26th April 1870, and 16 years later the golf course opened on the same ground.

The picture above was taken in what is now Trodds Lane where golfers cross the road: this would have been in the middle of the racecourse.



Site of the racecourse at Merrow Downs, from map of 1938

The old Merrow racecourse became memorable for a certain magnificent horse - Eclipse - the swiftest, most beautiful, most perfect horse that the world had ever seen. His blood was said to flow in the veins of every racing English thoroughbred. His record had not a single blemish, a thing before thought impossible. Today we have a race called after him, the Coral Eclipse Stakes, which takes place at Sandown during the first week of July.

Eclipse acquired that name from the total eclipse of the sun that occurred on the day he was born (29th April 1764). When jockeys sat on him they could never hold him, never had to use a whip or jab with a spur. He won every race he entered. He died in 1789, and a bronze sculpture by James Osborne was unveiled at Newmarket in 1989 to mark the 200th anniversary of his death. Today you can see his skeleton at the Royal Veterinary College.



Newlands Corner Hotel, 1930s

Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

Newlands Corner Hotel was originally a Victorian country house built in 1892 by J St Loe Strachey. Now there is a new entrance and roundabout in place of the gardens in the picture above.



The Reserve Garden, Newlands Corner Hotel, early 1930s Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

The Hotel, now called The Manor, at Newlands Corner, is on the Clandon to Dorking Road, situated in nine acres of parkland in an area of natural beauty. South-facing bedrooms command magnificent views. It became a hospital during the 1914-18 War.

This picture shows the reserve garden where the house and hotel grew their own vegetables. Today the wall is still there but no garden.



The Library, Newlands Corner Hotel, early 1930s

Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

During its days as a hospital, a report from Mrs Strachey (who was looking after the patients) said that on 15th October 1915 a Zeppelin came over Newlands Corner. It dropped three bombs at a nursery garden near the river, apparently mistaking St Catherines for St Martha's. That's how the story goes - however the truth is that the pilot lost himself, but finally found the Dorking to Horsham railway line for direction to the south to go home.

The room above is today the conference room. Sad to say, the mural at the end of the room has been covered with wallpaper, because it clashed with the colour scheme.



Newlands Corner, between 1910 and 1920

Publ Boots Cash Chemists

Strange as it may seem, though I have wandered so much within a five mile radius of Newlands Corner with my dog Lassie, and now with my new dog Chippie, I still find new ways across the common and make new discoveries of disused chalk pits and sandpits and groves of trees.

There are plenty of things to be discovered, like the other beauties of Newlands Corner, the wild flowers. Here you will see orchids, white violets, Canterbury bells, foxgloves and primroses. In autumn you can relish the splendour of the trees in their changing colours.

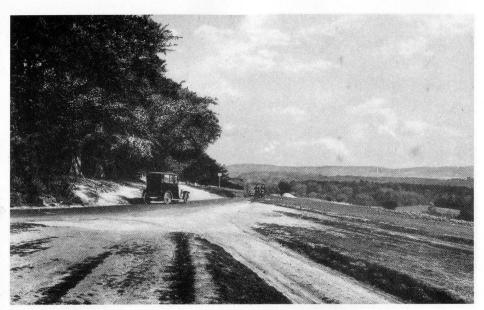
This view looks towards Dorking on the junction of the North Downs Way. It must have been a treat for the gentleman in his boater to go cycling in those days, and not to worry about any other traffic.



The Tea Gardens, Newlands Corner, 1920

Publ Newlands Corner Ltd

Visitors were well catered for in the earlier years of this century, and the Tea Gardens shown above must have done a flourishing trade every summer.

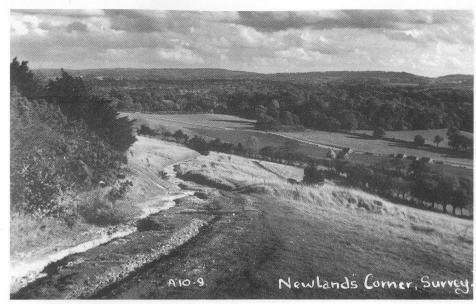


Newlands Corner, 1922

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

Today, as in the 1900s, Newlands Corner is a lovely picnic area. People from London and all over the south of England come here. There are seats and tables at which to enjoy their food and drink. It makes a good stopping-off point when on various walks and rambles, and is also a wonderful area for horse riding.

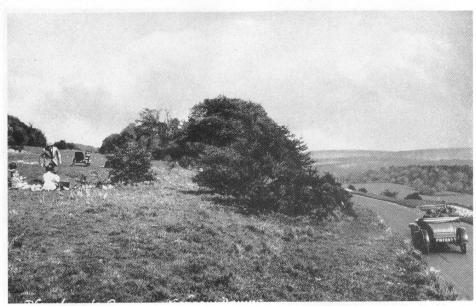
The view above is on the summit looking down towards Dorking. The track in the foreground is called Drove Road, which is the track that goes through the car park. The car in the centre is a 1916 Beardsmore, one of the old London taxis.



Newlands Corner

But I should not be telling you the wonders of Newlands Corner. It is best that you should find walks and rides yourself, out on this area of wild lands so far-stretching, so beautiful and unspoilt. Anyone who merely knows the highway must think that I am exaggerating.

This picture is of Water Lane, which leads from the top of Newlands to Albury Village. Water Lane is as old as the North Downs Way itself. Where Water Lane meets the Albury Estate there is a World War II pill box.



Newlands Corner, Merrow Downs, 1922

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

Don't be put off by ignorant chatterers who declare that the place is being spoiled or overrun, even on a Bank Holiday. Ten minutes walk away from the highway will bring them into true Arcadia.

This view is from the North Downs Way side of Newlands, looking over the weald. The area is overgrown with trees now. The motor bike is called an AJS.



The Countryside Centre, Newlands Corner, 1992

On 29th May 1992 the Countryside Centre was opened by the Chairman of Surrey County Council, Mr Sandy Brigstocke. This Centre shows the wealth of wildlife in the area, and how the open flowery grasslands of Surrey have been managed over the centuries. Younger visitors are catered for, with lots of big paintings showing things which lurk under the surface of ponds, and a table where weird and wonderful objects from the area can be examined.



St Martha's from Newlands Corner, 1922

Publ F Frith & Co Ltd

Here we see a lovely view, with the South Downs in the distance and St Martha's on the right, taken from the North Downs Way across the road from the car park.

If I wanted to give you a characteristic impression of Newlands I should say "yew trees, emerald green ribbons of path between rough grasses, nightingales and owls". Indeed if I were a heraldic artist I should set out for Newlands a yew tree flanked by an owl and a nightingale, with below a small procession of animals 'passant regardant'!

My one word of parting shall be to urge you not to keep near the roadways to Merrow or Clandon Downs except in the very early morning or on late winter evenings, but to use the green paths and tracks along the commons.

To me Newlands Corner is God's window, typical of England at its best - soft, colourful and peaceful.

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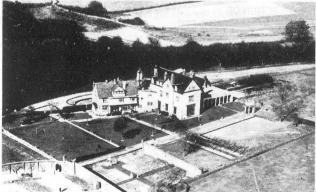
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VISA

Summer is coming on Merrow Downs! Hark to the dear familiar sounds. Summer is coming and spring is here -The cuckoo is calling loud and clear.

Summer is coming on Merrow Downs!

We taste of the joys unknown in towns;

The may is out, and the birds sing in tune
The summer is coming, quite soon, quite soon.

Summer is coming! For see, as we pass,
Daisies are sprinkled o'er emerald grass;
The summer is coming - come out on the Downs:
There are joy and relief from the turmoil of towns.

Summer is coming! Where winter has been, On every tree, new life is seen; The blossoms are out, the hedgerows are green; Come where the breezes are blown so keen.

The nightingale sings near St. Marth's Hill, The lark is heard with pipe so shrill: Come out! Come out! Away from the towns; And welcome the summer on Merrow Downs.

Margery A. Imms