

THIS PAMPHLET IS ONE OF A SERIES

SPONSORED BY

SHERE AND DISTRICT RURAL PRESERVATION SOCIETY

To all who visit this lovely countryside

WE APPEAL

Please help to keep its natural beauty unspoilt by litter.
Tissues and tins, cigarette packets, bottles, sweet-papers
and the like—thoughtlessly thrown down or left behind
on the ground—disfigure the paths and glades and spoil
the enjoyment of others.

Friend when you stray

Or sit and take your ease

On down or heath

Or under spreading trees,

Pray leave no traces

Of your wayside meal:

No paper bag

Or scattered orange peel.

Let no one say,

And say it to your shame,

That all was beauty here

Until *you* came.

Any enquiries about these pamphlets will be forwarded to
the Society by the Printers.



THE STORY OF MERROW DOWNS AND ST. MARTHA'S CHAPEL

The Oldest Road in England.

"There runs a road by Merrow Down

A grassy track to-day it is,

An hour out of Guildford town,

Above the River Wey it is."

Rudyard Kipling wrote this of the old road which goes
over the Downs, and, according to Hilaire Belloc, is part of the
oldest road in England.

The grove of yew trees which shades the green track near
Newlands Corner is mentioned in the Domesday Book; but long
before that was compiled (and it was begun in 1086) there was a
green road on the top of these Downs.

No one knows when it was first used, probably by men so
primitive that they lived in caves, and for their only weapons
had axes, spearheads and arrow points made of flints, for there
are traces of these in the chalk downs.

Among the first users of the Road that we know anything about were the Phoenicians, traders from the Levant, who landed in Cornwall and went eastward and northward over the green track, trading as they went.

A little later the Road was used by the Cornish miners bringing their tin to London, and so for a time became known as "The Tinway."

About a hundred years later came the Romans: they landed in Kent and made their way, by hard fighting, along the green track to Winchester. Here and there their traces can be found in coins and bits of pottery.

Now look to the south of the Road, and you see on a rounded hill the squat, strong tower of St. Martha's Chapel; its twin Chapel, St. Catherine's, is about two miles away on the other side of the river Wey on a little hill overlooking the old ferry no longer used. A story says that two giant sisters agreed to build these chapels to expiate some sin: they had but one hammer between them, and when one had finished with it on St. Martha's she tossed it across the valley to her sister on St. Catherine's, and so day by day the hammer flew upon its business and the chapels were built. Alas! so incredulous is the present age that this is now not generally believed.

Certain it is that in the old days St. Martha's Hill was a holy place for Druidic worship, and human sacrifice may have been practised there. If some of the early Christians suffered at their hands, the first chapel, built in Saxon times, was perhaps dedicated to their memory.

Later, in 1170, came the murder of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury, followed by the Pilgrimages to his tomb which lasted for three centuries. We can picture the long processions from Winchester winding up through the Chantry Woods and halting at St. Martha's to say a prayer. From there the track which has become known as "The Pilgrims' Way" runs eastward towards Kent, with yew trees beside it here and there said to have been planted originally by the Pilgrims.

In Norman times the Saxon chapel became attached to Newark, an ancient Priory near Pyrford, now a ruin, and early in the 13th century the Norman chancel and transepts were added, parts of which still remain. The Prior and Canons of Newark no doubt profited from the offerings of pious Pilgrims, but being shrewd people and owning considerable property around St. Martha's they also instituted a system of tolls, to which the names Halfpenny Lane and Farthing Copse still bear witness. The chapel at that time was dedicated to St. Martha the Virgin and all the Holy Martyrs.

After the dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538 the building fell into ruin, and was further damaged by an explosion at the famous Chilworth Gunpowder Factory in the 18th century. It was rebuilt in 1848 on the old foundations, but with a central tower in place of the former one at the west end, and was re-dedicated—this time to St. Martha only. So most people think that at last dear homely Martha of St. Luke's Gospel has had a church erected in her name. Sad to say, the antiquarians give no support to this. It has been suggested that Martha originally could have been a corruption of martyr; but others have noted the existence of an early British martyr of that name, said to have been the first of her sex so to suffer in this country. The dedication at the time of the Pilgrimages lends colour to that.

During the 1914/18 War the Chapel disappeared from view altogether. It served as a landmark to the German Zeppelins who came seeking the powder mills at the foot of the hill, and the Rector of Albury was obliged to decorate the Chapel with fir saplings till it was indistinguishable from its surroundings.

The Oldest Road in England which once was worn by the feet of pilgrims to the Druids' Temple on Salisbury Plain, and after by traders from afar, by Roman invaders and a host of later travellers, is now trodden by other pilgrims, walkers and people from the towns, who come to the country seeking beauty in the sun, the sky, the woods and the distant hills. Though changed in purpose, how rewarding is this ancient highway still! There can be few lovelier views in southern England than from the crest of the Downs at Newlands Corner, where the hills, valleys and ever-changing woodlands merge into a pattern of line and colour which is a glorious reminder of the heritage that is ours to care for.