

Hol weg.

Holwy.

Holway.

Holeway.

Holewaye.

Hollowy.

Holloway.

Holloway – the hollow way. A sunken path, a deep & shady lane. A route that centuries of foot-fall, hoof-hit, wheel-roll & rain-run have harrowed into the land. A track worn down *by the traffic of ages & the fretting of water*, and in places *reduced sixteen or eighteen feet beneath the level of the fields*.

Holloways do not exist on the unyielding rock regions of the archipelago, where the paths stay high, riding the hard surface of the land. But where the stone is soft – malmstone, greensand, sandstone, chalk – there are many to be found, some of them more ravines than roads.

They are landmarks that speak of habit rather than of suddenness. Like creases in the hand, or the wear on the stone sill of a doorstep or stair, they are the result of repeated human actions. Their age chastens without crushing. They relate to other old paths & tracks in the landscape – ways that still connect place to place & person to person.

Greenways, droveways, stanways, stoweys, bradways, whiteways, reddaways, radways, rudways, halsways, roundways, trods, foot-paths, field-paths, leys, dykes, drongs, sarns, snickets, bostles, shutes, driftways, lichways, sandways, ridings, halter-paths, cart-ways, carneys, causeways, here-paths – & also fearways, danger-ways, coffin-paths, corpseways & ghostways.

Many of those who have walked these old ways have seen them as places within which one might *slip back out of this world*, or within which ghosts softly flock. Edward Thomas spoke of hearing the voices of long-dead Roman soldiers as he walked an ancient trackway near Trawsfynydd in Wales. In Hampshire, where a stand of aspens whispered at the cross-roads of two old paths, he listened to the speech of a vanished village: *the ringing of hammer, shoe, & anvil* from the smithy, *the clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing* from the inn.

In 1689 the Japanese poet Basho followed his narrow path to the far north, & as he walked he spoke often with the long-dead poets of the past, including his twelfth-century forebear Saigyō, such that he came afterwards to describe his travels as conversations between *a ghost and a ghost-to-be*.

In 1937 the artist Eric Ravilious visited Gilbert White's parish of Selborne in Hampshire & walked the deep holloways that seam that landscape. He made an engraving of the entrance to one of the holloways – engraving itself a kind of track-making, an incision down into the box-wood or the copper – which shows the entrance to a deep lane, over which the trees are leaning & locking. This entrance to the underworld is guarded by a barn owl, white as the paper upon which it is printed. The owl's head is turned out towards the viewer – its eyes sentinel behind its knight's visor of feathers.

One need not be a mystic to accept that certain old paths are linear only in a simple sense. Like trees, they have branches & like rivers they have tributaries. They are rifts within which time might exist as pure surface, prone to recapitulation & rhyme, weird morphologies, uncanny doublings.

Walking such paths, you might walk up strange pasts. This in the hunter's sense of 'walking up' – meaning *to flush out, to disturb what is concealed*.

The oldest holloways date back to the Iron Age. None is younger than 300 years old. Most holloways begin as ways to markets, to the sea, or to sites of pilgrimage, *lanes worn down by the pack-horses of a hundred generations*. Some were boundary markers, & their routes therefore survive as word-maps in Anglo-Saxon charters:

From the ford along the herepath to Wulfric's corner; & from the corner along the fence to the unknown watercourse, then to the bare stump; & from the bare stump along the fence to the great maple-tree, & then to the hedgerow apple-tree, & then to the herepath, & at last south to the holloway. Along the ditch south to the hollow watercourse, along the watercourse & up to the herepath, & along the herepath to the wheel ford once again.

Few holloways are in use now: they are too narrow and slow to suit modern travel, too deep to be filled in & farmed over. They exist – but cryptically. They have thrown up their own defences and disguises: nettles & briars guard their entrances, trees to either side bend over them & lace their topmost branches to form a tunnel or roof. On their sides, between the tree roots that snake *grotesque & wild*, grow the umbrals: hart's tongue fern, shining cranesbill, ivy & *moschatel, the lover of shade*.

This book is about a holloway & its shades, & a clear map of the holloway's finding is not contained within it.

In July 2004, I travelled with my friend Roger Deakin – swimmer; writer; naturalist; collector; worker with wood; writer of books; maker of friends – to explore the holloways of south Dorset.

These were among the things we carried with us: the novel *Rogue Male*, published by Geoffrey Household in 1939; a map of the area; two tents; a trenching tool; penknives (Roger’s blunt, mine blunter); matches & candles; two hipflasks (one of whisky, one of arak).

The holloway we set out to find sits in the horseshoe of the Chideock Valley, cupped by *a half-moon of low green rabbit-cropped hills, the horns of which rest upon the sea*. The Chideock Valley sits within the Marshwood Vale. The Marshwood Vale sits within a further hoop of hills, rising to the high ground of Pilsdon Pen – a chalk summit of 277 metres, ringed by an Iron Age hill-fort.

Imagined from the north, therefore, from Pilsdon Pen, the Chideock holloway exists as a hollow set within a hollow set within a hollow – all of these hollows sloping south towards the sea & the shade of each in turn deepening the shade of the other.

*Rogue Male* was our guide to the holloway’s location. Household’s novel is about a man who – fleeing the mysterious pursuers intent on killing him – decides to go to ground in Dorset, somewhere in the half-moon of hills that encircle Chideock. He searches out a deep holloway that he had discovered earlier in his life, its bottom *a cart’s width across & its sides, with the banks, the hedges above them, & young oaks leaping up front the hedge . . . were fifty feet of blackness*.

*Anyone who wishes can dive under the sentinel thorns at the entrance, Household had written, and push his way through . . . But who would wish?* It is, he warned, *a lane not marked on the map*.

Roger & I set out from the village of North Chideock to find Household's holloway. The blue July air hot & dry. Dust puffing from the road at our footfall; the smell of charred stone. Gold-blaze & rubber-shine from the yellow laurels that bordered the roads of North Chideock.

Only a few hundred yards from the car, where the tarmac began to run to its end, we found a small Catholic chapel of pale stone in the Romanesque style, set back amid oak trees. Roger pushed open its huge front door of ridged & bolt-studded oak. The door opened with an ease that belied its weight, its bottom edge gliding above the flagstones of the porch that were dipped and worn by the passage of many feet.

The air inside the church was cool, & the sandstone of its walls chill to the touch. There was a faint odour of must & everywhere the glint of gilt. Sun-pillars fell at a slant from high windows. *To Illuminate The Church, please place in meter slot £1 coin for 30 mins approx of light.*

The Chideock Valley has a recusant past. After the act of Supremacy in 1558 banned Catholic priests from Britain, missionaries began to re-infiltrate England to keep the faith alive. Several returned to the Chideock Valley & a high-stakes game of hide-&-seek began: the priests fugitive in the landscape, hiding in the woods & holloways; soldiers hunting for them & their supplicants.

The recusancy persisted for around fifty years. In the course of that half-century, five laymen & two priests were caught, tortured & executed. Among them was William Pike, *a simple country man & Chideock carpenter*, who was converted by Father Thomas Pilchard & *became his inseparable companion*. Arrested, tried as a convert & condemned as a traitor, during his execution Pike *was so strong that after he was cut down from the gibbet he stood up again & had to be thrust down & held by soldiers so that the butchery could continue*.

Hugh Green was arrested at Lyme Regis as he attempted to go to France, taken to Dorchester, tried & condemned. On 4 July 1642 he suffered *considerable barbarity, but remained conscious throughout the process of being hanged, drawn & quartered*. Eventually he was beheaded & *his head used as a football by the incensed mob*.

Father Cornelius ascended the scaffold at Dorchester, kissed the gallows, uttered the words of St Andrew – *O Cross, long desired* – & *prayed for his executioner & the queen* as the rope was placed around his neck.

Immediately after the execution of Father Pilchard, *Dorchester was beset with violent storms, which many took to be a judgement*.