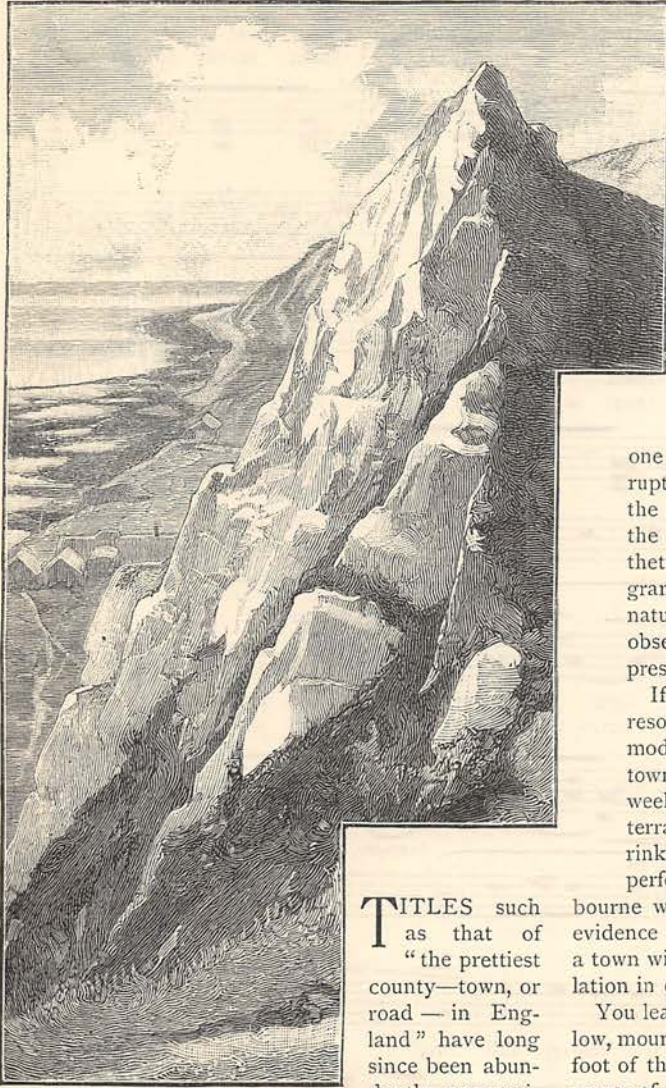


A GEM OF THE SOUTH DOWNS.



THE CLIFFS AT MEADS.

loveliness of our island landscapes becomes the topic of conversation in a mixed assembly, divergence of opinion is sure to be disclosed. Every participator in the general argument has a fondness for the home of his or her youth, and can detect subtlest beauty where others, it may be, see only a barren monotony. Every wayfarer harbours a special predilection for some nook of sylvan solitude and grace, for which he or she is daring enough to claim the merit of discovery. Here—as with pictures, books, types of feminine loveliness, harmonies of all kinds—tastes widely differ, and the gathering together of many minds implies of necessity the presence of many ideals.

It is in no spirit of dogmatism, or vaunting of the

claims of one locality to admiration above and beyond all others, that the writer invites attention to a village which in site, surroundings, and individuality, is surely a gem of the Sussex Downs. The desire is rather that others—"strangers yet"—may come to share the charm and improve upon the praise.

The village is that known to inhabitants and visitors as Meads, a brief walk out of the thriving and fashionable watering-place of Eastbourne, and on the direct road to Beachy Head.

In his inimitable story of "The Old Curiosity Shop" Dickens has obtained one of his finest effects, by the contrast he abruptly sets between town and country, between the mingled pomp and squalor of London, and the idyllic freshness of green fields, on the pathetic outward journey of Little Nell and her grandfather; and here the proximity of freest nature and elaborate art is also to the casual observer one of the most striking features of the presentment.

If any English sea-side resort is of to-day, and resolute in the struggle to be abreast of all modern innovations and improvements, that town is surely Eastbourne. On Sunday and week-day, morning, noon, and night, with triple-terraced sea-frontage, with pier and public park, rink and concert-halls, with costly and all but perfect water-supply, with electric lighting, Eastbourne woos the fickle fashionable throng, and, as evidence of success, is written of in guide-books as a town with a knack—hitherto—of doubling its population in every decade.

You leave esplanade, hotels, churches, in the plain below, mount slowly upwards, through a leafy lane, to the foot of the undulating Downs—rolling inland like the waves of a gigantic earth-sea—and, as though by the transporting influence of some veritable magician's wand, you are in a hamlet of one of the first Georges, at latest—a hamlet where a British Rip Van Winkle might have calmly dozed away his century for all the removing of ancient landmarks that is perceptible. Quaint and old-fashioned to a degree is Meads; quaint and, in its suggestions of summer peace and content, infinitely grateful to the gaze of the jaded and dispirited city toiler. Now, as when Charlotte Smith wrote,

"Those lowly roofs of thatch are half conceal'd
By the rude arms of trees, lovely in Spring,
When on each bough the rosy-tinctur'd bloom
Sits thick, and promises autumnal plenty."

The origin of the name "Meads," as applied to this particular grouping of farm-buildings and cottages, it is hard to discover. Explanations vary, and who

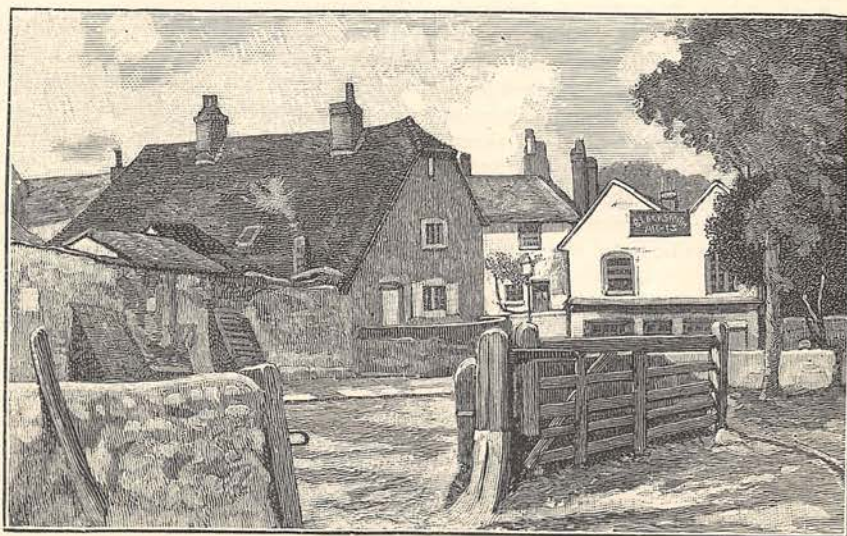
shall venture to decide where professed etymologists differ? The Rev. G. M. Cooper says that the name is a corruption of "Medesey"—low, grassy lands, or islets near the sea. But, as Mr. Geo. F. Chambers remarks, "To accept this theory, we must accept another as well, namely, that the designation no longer applies to the same exact locality it did when given." Certainly no physical convulsion can have occurred since the bestowal of the title which would reasonably account for the transference of a distinctly lowland name to these uplands. Here lingers one other mystery for the knight-errant of nomenclature to attack.

It is from the leafy lane already mentioned and from the various acclivities of the Downs (culminating at Beachy Head) that the real beauty of this section of Sussex can be alone adequately seen. Those visitors—numbered by the thousand—who "take a run" to Eastbourne in the height of the season, to inhale salt breezes on the crowded parade and to mix in the current gaieties, and who are content with this measure of achievement, miss what should be one of the chief charms of their holiday. They come and go in an ignorance (which is scarcely bliss) of the vision of entrancing delight which Nature proffers through her wondrous kaleidoscope of light and shade for the mere trouble of a hillside climb. Each capricious curve of these winding paths reveals new witchery in the harmonious blending of sea and shore, town and country, curving down and smiling plain into one perfect picture. Standing on the edge of the formidable upper heights, the landscape sweeps brilliantly away from the antique little village clustered at the tourist's feet over and beyond the glittering roofs of the adjacent town to the flats of Pevensey—famous in history as the landing-place of the Conqueror—and to the distant, blurred horizon of

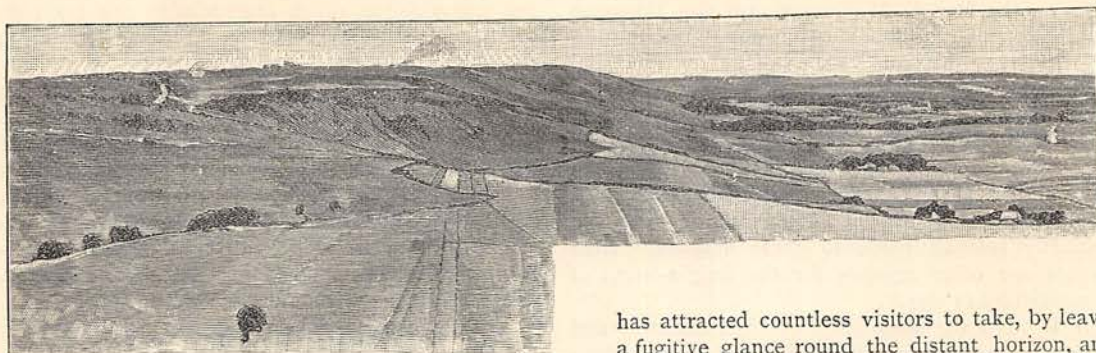
the Hastings hills. To the left roll away into space the grassy slopes, which are probably the joy alike of horse and rider, and are said to constitute the best arena for equestrian exercise in the whole of England. To the right meanders down the broken and picturesque coast-line, now rough and unsophisticated by any art of man's device, anon chiselled and enfiladed at prodigious cost for the behoof of the human birds of passage who, summer in, summer out, air their gay plumage thereupon; and lipping on the sands, or thundering against the milk-white rocks—beyond and contemptuous of all, yet the chief enchantment of all—shimmers old ocean.

A little below Meads stands an institution which has done, and is doing, good work, in the earnest methodical—yet far from mechanical—manner dear to the British heart. The Convalescent Hospital, erected at a cost of £42,000, and opened some fifteen years back, offers shelter and assistance to 200 sufferers, and has large demands made upon its accommodation. It is a touching sight—vibrating with both "hope and heartbreak"—to the visitor to Meads, on a warm sunshiny morning, to come suddenly upon a group of these wan and feeble convalescents, basking in the genial rays of King Sol, and drinking in renewed life and vigour with every ozone-laden breath. Well would it be for the hospital funds if every hale and happy observer would exhibit his or her instinctive thankfulness for the continued blessing of a robust frame by a donation to this charity. A better or more pleasant site for such a building could scarcely have been selected on the whole southern coast. Free air, free sky, free sea, are at the patients' disposal in practically limitless quantities, and what that means to the invalid poor of a great city, let the missionary of "outcast London" tell.

Meads was at one time the residence of Mr. R. M.



THE VILLAGE OF MEADS.



THE DOWNS FROM MEADS, LOOKING INLAND.

Caldicott, a collector of geological and general curiosities, whose stores now form the Eastbourne Caldicott Museum, in Lismore Road.

Something must be said, in passing, of the frowning headland which forms the imposing background of this old-world Sussex hamlet. The great majority of those who—on foot, on horseback, or in carriages—cast a cursory, possibly half-sneering, glance at the grotesque weather-beaten grouping of this survival of the years before railways, do so on their journey to or from Beachy Head. It is, of course, more or less understood that this southernmost elevation of the Downs is the lion of the district. Visitors who can spare the time, make the trip from Eastbourne in the season in shoals. They pay perfunctory homage and return to the fuller, more congenial animation of the stretch before their hotel window.

But Beachy Head, and the view from Beachy Head, will repay a closer, more affectionate study—such a study as a residence for awhile at Meads would allow time and opportunity for.

The geological "back-bone" of Sussex, familiarly spoken of as the South Down range of hills, sweeps abruptly up at last into this grand headland, whose highest point is some 575 feet above the sea-level. The slope beyond Meads is very steep and treacherous, tempting the stranger to climb by doubtful sheep-tracks into positions from whence advance or retreat is equally dangerous. Many sad accidents have occurred here to the unwary and the over-venturesome; a long and ghastly list may be found in local guide-books.

Beachy Head is naturally an important coast-guard station; and the big telescope fixed in the official garden

has attracted countless visitors to take, by leave, a fugitive glance round the distant horizon, and has attracted by way of recompense much *back-sheesh* into the white jean pockets.

To comprehend its full majesty and beauty, Beachy Head should be scanned both from above and beneath. To achieve the latter aim a safe descent offers to the beach from a place called, not very euphonyously, "Cow Gap." On the shore, iron pyrites may be picked up by the curious and energetic seeker.

A second delightful expedition from Meads is along the Downs into Old Eastbourne, another quaint old place, passed altogether on one side by myriads of flitting hotel occupants in the Eastbourne of to-day.

Here the very air seems thick with an aroma of the past, and memories of bygone eras strike the pedestrian at every corner. "The Lamb" Inn—still a well-kept, comfortable hostelry—is probably one of the oldest houses of public accommodation in Sussex, if not also in England. Beneath it is a vaulted chamber of distinctively Early English architecture, even yet in fair preservation.

The church is likewise a structure hoary with antiquity, and a happy hunting-ground of local archaeologists. Its probable date has been given by Sharpe as 1145-90. On the eastern side of the church-yard is an ancient remembrancer of the flight of time in the shape of an old sun-dial.

Back again to Meads over "The Links," the exquisite beauty of the sea-scape, stretching onwards to the Channel sky-line, or on an especially clear day breaking on the coast of France, is before the journeyer. On these quiet heights, between two relics of the past like Meads and Old Eastbourne, with Beachy Head for the sentinel of the fleeting centuries, and the giddy new town shimmering below by way of contrast, restful communion with the great heart of nature is surely possible for the most harassed of the sons and daughters of Adam. Let them test the recipe.

WILLIAM J. LACEY.

