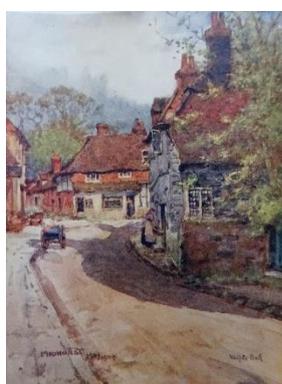
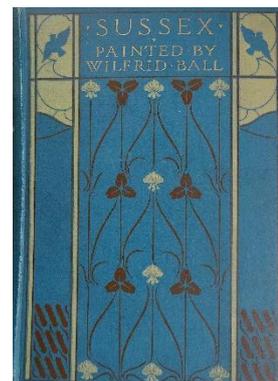


Book Review

Sussex Painted by Wilfrid Ball

published by A&C Black, Soho Square, 1906

You might think that an artist would concentrate on his paintings, with brief notes by way of description, but this book is grand in scope. Not for Wilfrid Ball a look at the flora and fauna or the geology, other than as these subjects affected settlement. This is a perceptive if biased explanation of how and why the people of Sussex established themselves and their way of life. Lavishly illustrated with 75 of Ball's own paintings.



Midhurst - Knockhundred Row, facing page 108

And this is the main reason for buying the book. Perhaps without any great artistic merit, collectively the paintings are a valuable record of a time gone by. Ball started out as an accountant, with minimal art training, although he exhibited to some acclaim in his lifetime.

The book was published in 1906 when Ball, in his fifties, had no doubt about his own knowledge and understanding. He is rather dismissive of so-called experts who don't share his views. But if you go with him he does, indeed, paint a picture.

The early settlements of Sussex developed along the south coast, between the marshy bits around Chichester Harbour in the west and Romney in the east. The ridge of The South Downs was a barrier to northern expansion, and even if you managed to navigate your way along a river you found yourself in The Weald, with forests and quagmires as far as the next barrier, the Surrey Hills. Which were themselves a barrier for people who might have been tempted to venture south from the Thames Valley. And so for centuries The Weald was ignored and Sussex people stayed on the coastal plains. Perhaps they became so entrenched there that they developed the truculent attitude of "we wun't be druv" that persists in some to this day.

There was one exception. The Romans were not easily deterred and Stane Street makes a bee-line from Chichester across all the natural barriers as it heads 90km north-east to London.

Actually, some of the coast-dwellers did move inland, initially following the rivers, each one of which is central to one of what became known as the five rapes of Sussex. In the way of strip farming, the shape of a rape prevented any one administrative area from taking all the good quality land. Each rape was long and narrow, extending northward from the coastal plain through The South Downs and the Weald as far as The North Downs. Each rape is similar in geographical features to the others, and the settlements were



Old Whiting Mill, facing page 168

likewise similar. Each rape has a river and a port or harbour and the beaches are perfect for small fishing boats. The difficulty of east/west travel in The Weald meant that the inland market towns didn't become established until relatively modern times.

Although Ball was a Londoner, he is somewhat scathing of other people who moved down from London and turned the little harbours into modern seaside towns, with their tin bungalows and golf courses. But there is no doubt that Ball knew the county intimately, and he describes in detail several walks or rides that would enable a visitor to see and understand the real Sussex.

Ball posits that the geography of the county determined the development of Sussex in a way not experienced by other counties, and in this respect Wilfrid Ball succeeds in painting a picture of Sussex. Curiously, around the same time and perhaps picking up on the early coastal settlers, William Ward-Higgs wrote what was to become the county's unofficial anthem "Sussex by the Sea".

Harvey Tordoff, Midhurst, 24 August 2021



Mill Pool, Midhurst, facing page 170