

CHANGING TIMES

INSPIRATION

Industry's encroachment on the countryside, and the gradual disappearance of age-old farming techniques, transformed more than the landscape: it changed the nature of rural life.

Writing of his grandfather's Northamptonshire smallholding, outside Higham Ferrers, H. E. Bates recalled in *The Vanished World*, "it afforded me the foundation on which all the joys of childhood, together with all my feeling and love of the countryside is based".

Days long gone

When Bates was a boy, the old Coach and Horses inn in Rushden (right) still served "small beer; which, though not strong enough for men, had body enough for boys or . . . 'bwoy-chaps'". But then the bwoy chaps of, say, 10 years old were already labouring half a day in school, half a day in the shoe factory and the evenings and weekends in the fields.



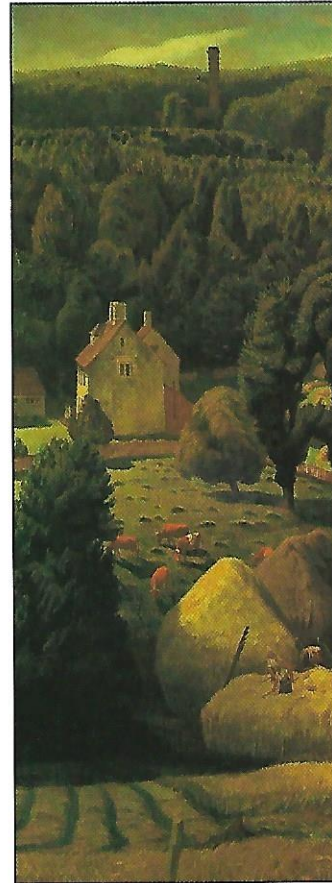
22521 Rushden. Old „Coach and Horses“ Inn.

By contrast, he dismissed nearby Rushden, the shoemaking town where he was born and bred, as a "mixture of blue slate, factory, chapel and that hard Midland red brick which equally oppressed heart, soul, eye and senses."

In Bates' novels real-life Rushden became the unsympathetically viewed town of Evensford. The narrator in *Love for Lydia* is clearly speaking with the author's own voice when he muses "Evensford . . . had taken the pattern of white hawthorn, the gold and the white, the dark steely brown of ploughed earth and the green of corn, and had left us ash-heaps." Bates could not forgive the destruction of the countryside by the encroaching industrial towns.

D. J. Watkins-Pitchford, better known as 'BB', the countryside author and illustrator, was born in 1905, the same year as H. E. Bates, and was also brought up in Northamptonshire. Like Bates he was acutely aware of the changes made to the countryside by the coming of chemical sprays, machinery and motor cars. The sounds and smells

as well as the sights of the countryside were transformed: "in the early days of this century England was a quiet country. There was no sound of lorries, cars, trains, aeroplanes or even tractors." The sounds of the countryside were the tink-tink of the blacksmith's forge, the clip-clop of horses'

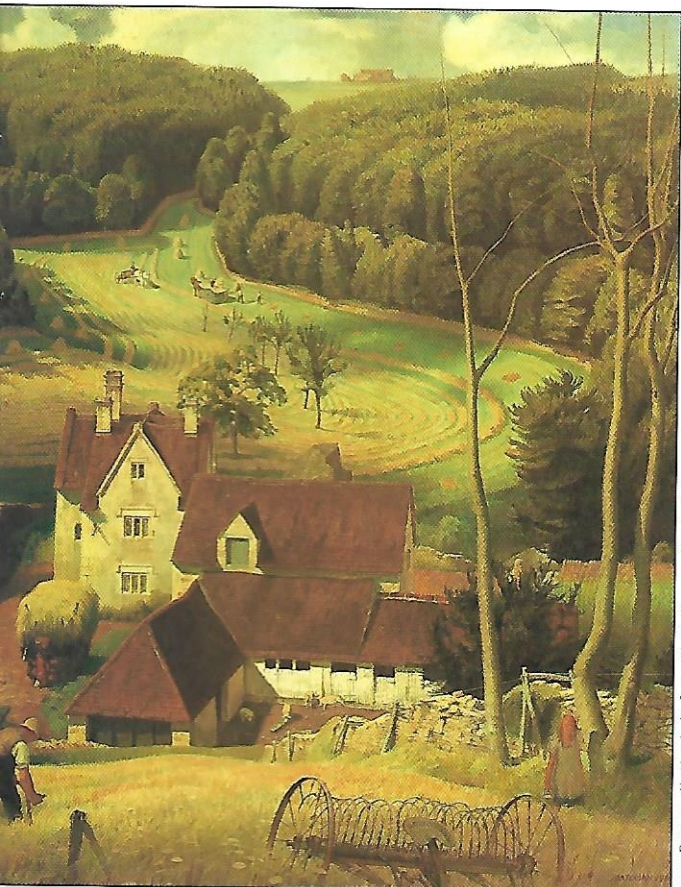


Hand to mouth

At the turn of the century, the seasonal cycle of farm work was done by manual labour (above) and horsepower (below). But as the population grew, old methods could not keep up with its needs.



Gilbert Spencer - A Cotswold Farm/Tate Gallery, London



James Bateman. Haytime in the Cotswolds/Southampton City Art Gallery

driven by the wheel's rotation, dispersed the seed.

Hand- and horse-power were the order of the day in Bates' youth. Threshing engines, however, might be at work in the rick yard and steam ploughing was catching on: "we imported on to that gut-lugging clay of ours two monsters in the shape of great steam engines, one stationed at one headland of a field, one at the other, the plough being drawn back and forth on a steel coil between." (*The Vanished World*). The last recorded instance of steam-tackle ploughing in Northamptonshire was as late as 1946.

BRINGING IN THE SHEAVES

The intractable five acres of heavy clay which Bates' grandfather farmed in the Nene Valley – land upon which horse after horse fell down dead, wearied from overwork – became the setting for *The Fallow Land*, published in 1932. Though times were hard and the work was unremitting, labour was in good supply and the fields were peopled with a lively cast of characters that were grist to a novelist's mill.

Shoemakers and other industrial workers from the towns worked in the harvest fields in the evenings and at weekends, joining "the great gangs of itinerant Irish labourers who had been seasonally invading England ever since Stuart times." Women and children peopled the harvest field too. After the corn was harvested they would glean the

Grandfather's horses
Bates recalls how his grandfather's farm horses, one by one, "fell down dead. Since their unremitting task was to draw plough, harrow, seed-drill, horse-hoe, trap and a truck . . . this was by no means surprising."

Mechanization was far beyond the means of such small-time farmers. The diesel-driven tractor was slow to catch on, though communally hired 'steam-tackle' was an increasingly familiar sight at ploughing time.

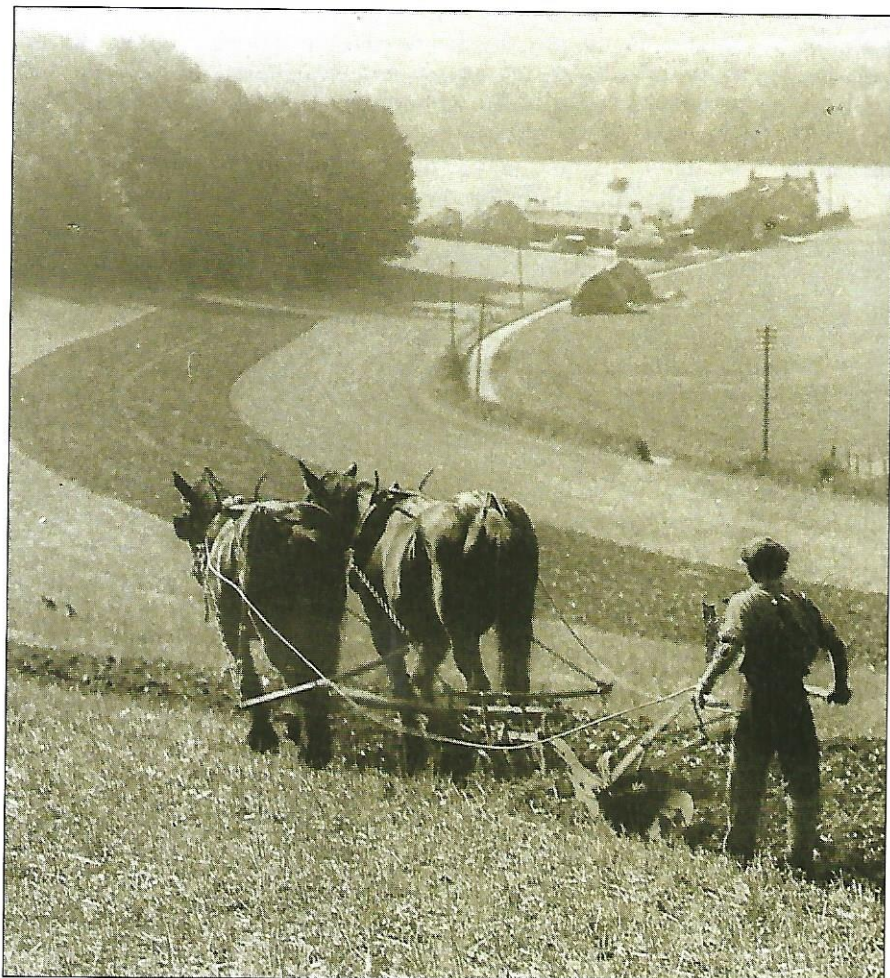
hooves, the barking of dogs and the bleating of sheep. When Bates was a boy, "the cornfield was flowery from end to end", before the use of chemical weed-killers 'ravaged' the countryside. Periwinkles, convolvulus, cowslips, corn-cockles, camomile, cornflower and poppies were abundant in the fields.

LIFE ON THE LAND

Despite the fertility of the land, the period from the late 1870s to 1939 was a time of great stagnation in British agriculture. Farming was in the doldrums (with only brief prosperity during World War I) and Northamptonshire's farmers were particularly badly hit. Between 1872 and 1929, for example, the country lost almost two-thirds of its arable acres as the recession bit deep.

During an era when transport had been revolutionized by the train, the car and the plane, and industry had become heavily mechanized, British agriculture had been left behind. Astonishing as it now seems, the horse was farming's main form of traction right up until 1939. Television and the atom bomb were just around the corner, but the bulk of British farmers had yet to reap the benefit of the petrol engine.

Although the horse-drawn seed drill had been around since the 1850s, in the early 1900s many farmers still walked the fields, broadcasting grain by hand. To sow grass seed the farmer might hand-push a broadcast barrow, which was essentially a long wooden seed hopper mounted on an iron wheelbarrow chassis. Revolving brushes,



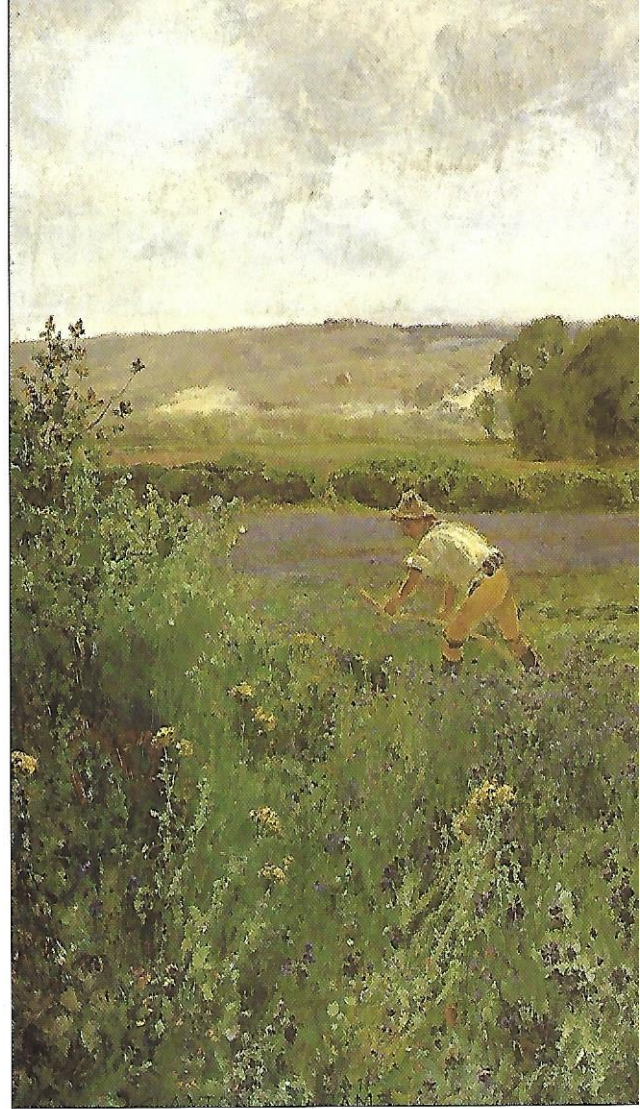


Lost arts
Figures central to the 19th-century rural village, such as the smith (above) and the wheelwright (below), virtually disappeared with the coming of motor transport. Their skills were relegated to those of folk crafts, quaintly irrelevant to the fast-moving, mechanized world of the modern farm and village.

fallen corn from the stubble, descending on the “stook-empty fields like flocks of human hens, . . . gleaning frenziedly from dawn to dusk.” The grain would produce flour enough to provide bread throughout the winter.

A favourite character of the young Bates was ‘Smack’. “Shoemaker by day, he turned into pure peasant countryman by evening, beery, cunning, masterly with whet-stone and scythe.” He turned up regularly to lend Bates’ grandfather a hand at harvest time. Haymaking is thirsty work, and farmers brewed copious quantities of beer to keep their army of harvest workers happy. Smack, the scythesman, and his father apparently drank 25 pints a day in the hay-field or harvest-field.

The countryside provided a ready source of var-



ious kinds of home-brew. Country dwellers of Bates’ ‘Vanished World’ were inveterate winemakers – cowslip and elderberry were great favourites – and Bates recalls that “Old women . . . were still brewing in my boyhood a herb beer, confined solely to summer, made of nettles, . . . dandelions, root ginger and various other wild hedgerow plants.” Cottagers also made sloe-gin, as well as blackberry vinegar which was used as a throat-searing remedy for coughs.

HOOTERS AND HYMNS

Set amid the Nene Valley countryside which represented freedom for Bates, was the town of Rushden – a sort of prison. Its “factories, leather, chapels and factory hooters were a world we somehow had to escape from.” Rushden, like many provincial towns caught up in the Industrial Revolution, had been a mere village of a few hundred people at the beginning of the 19th century. By the start of the 20th century it was a town of 15,000 people, centred around the shoemaking industry. The gas-lit, terraced streets were dreary, the “pattern of house, factory, bake-house and chapel, with here and there little front-room sweet shops, continued all over town.” Children played their games on the street, disturbed occasionally by a bicycle, a tradesman’s cart or a horse-drawn dray delivering leather.

Sundays in Rushden were dominated by Sunday School and numerous visits to the chapel, but they were relieved perhaps by the arrival of the water-cress man selling his produce in the streets or by



Painful nostalgia

"The days in the hayfield were always hot, those in the harvest-field even hotter." But Bates' recollections of childhood summers ache with regret for the lost wild flowers, butterflies and birds which used to co-exist with the farmer's crop of hay (above) or grain. Chemical weedkillers and pesticides eradicated flora and fauna alike. A much greater loss was the wheat customarily gleaned by women and children (right) after hand-reaping and sheaving. With automation, far less grain was scattered. And some needy families had depended on gleanings for their winter bread.

the occasional country ramble. The tenor of week-days was set by the shoe factories.

The shoemakers themselves were "shag-smoking, snuff-taking, stubble-faced working men, muffled and capped" who visited the barber only on Wednesdays and Saturdays for a shave.

Smoking short, nose-warming clay pipes, "they lived very largely on kippers, bloaters, tea, beer, cheese, potatoes and plenty of good bread from the coal-oven'd bake-houses."

The independent hand-craftsmen worked long hours during the week, often "madly stitching and hammering away until midnight and even into the small hours in pursuit of cash." Come Saturday evening much of the money would be squandered in the pubs and there was a good deal of drunken brawling after hours.

By long tradition they did not go to work on Mondays but would head for the countryside to work on farms or go "rabbiting, coursing, mushrooming, following hounds, walking or riding miles by devious routes to secret hide-outs where bare-fisted bruisers bloodily battered themselves to pulp before crowds of gentry and poor alike."

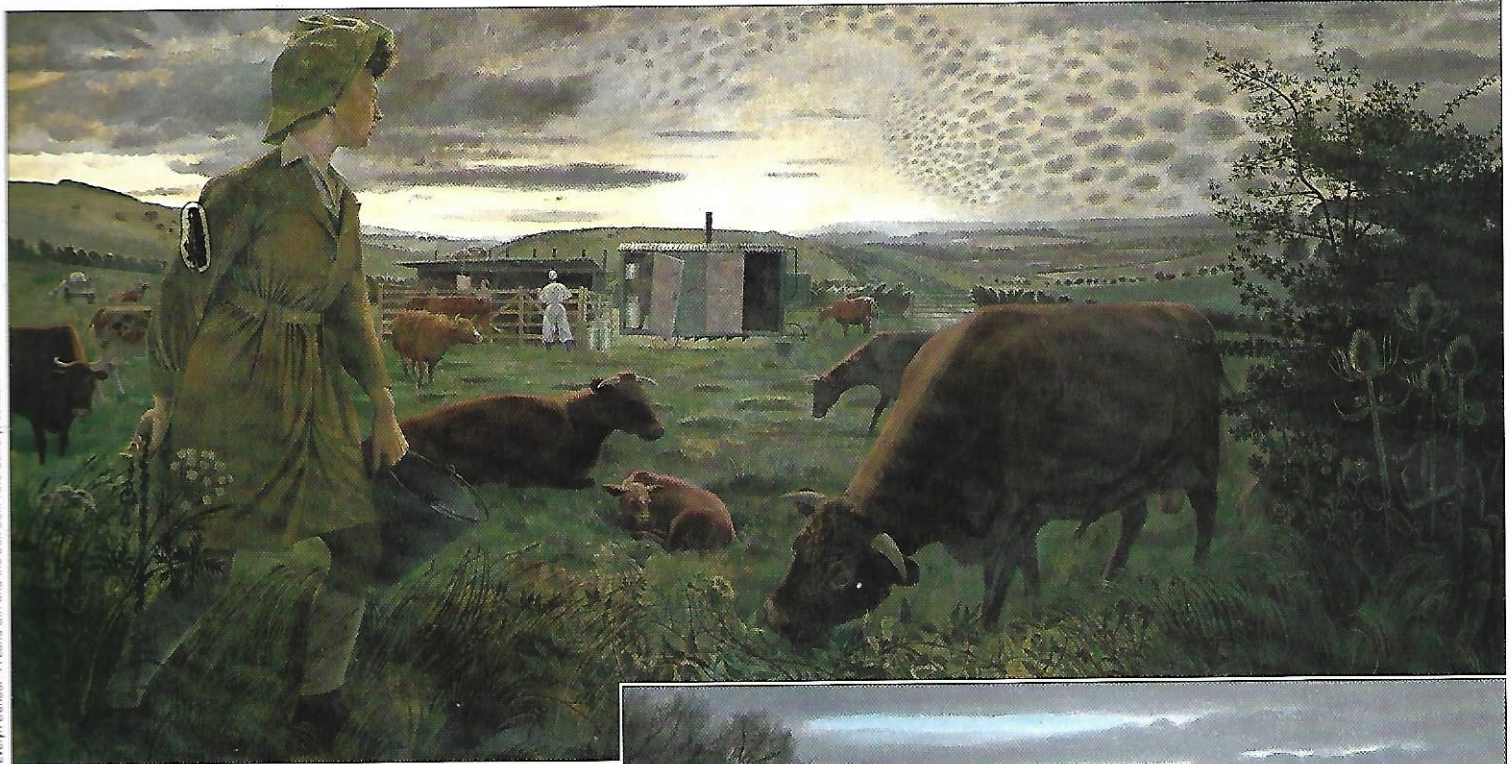
BAD TIMES, GOOD TIMES

Times were changing in town as well as country. And the days of the hand-craftsman shoemaker often working at home, were numbered, as machines and factories took over. One-trade towns like Rushden were severely hit in the 1920s by factory closures and short-time working. In *Love for Lydia* Evensford's "streets were melancholy with three-men bands of shuffling heroes with strips of medal ribbons pinned on narrow chests. Back doors were haunted by slow-footed men carrying suitcases . . . that opened to reveal meagre wardrobes of hanging shoelaces and cards of buttons and rolls of cheap pink and blue ribbon for threading through ladies' underwear."

Before the 1920s, entertainment of an organized kind was minimal. There were village fêtes and



John Clayton Adams: Scripping a Meadow/Fine Art photographic library



Evelyn Dunbar: A Land Girl and the Bull (1945) Tate Gallery, London

chapel concerts, but the big day of the year, aside from Christmas, was Feast Sunday. Each of the Midlands' towns had their own, celebrated in July, August or September. "It was truly a business of feasting. It was an occasion for dressing-up, beer-swilling, parading the streets, family reunions, torchlight processions." The fair would come to town, with its "coconut shies, shooting galleries, hoop-las, helter-skelters, gingerbread, roundabouts and spit-rock."

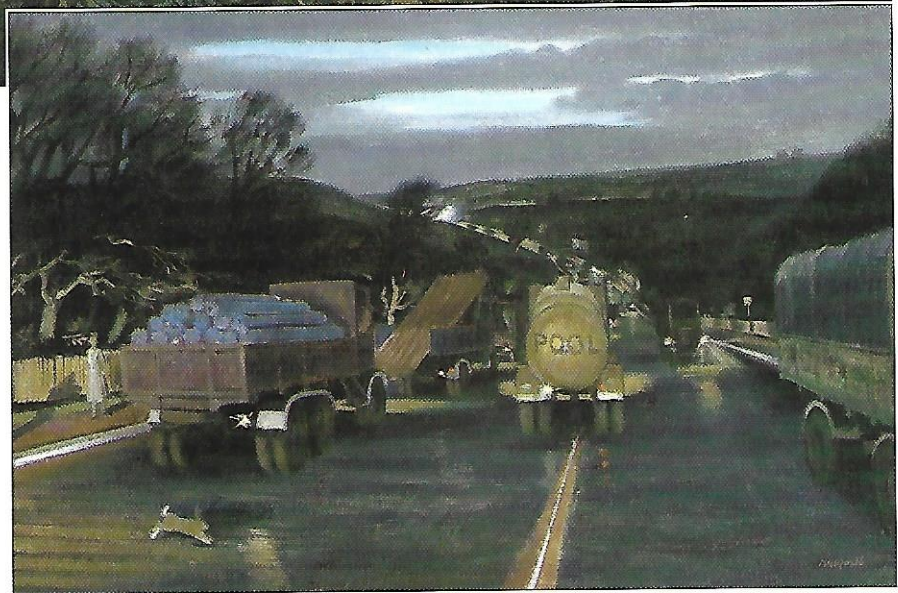
By the 1920s there were shop-outings in charabancs and numerous dances at Parish and Co-op Halls, to which admission was one-and-six. If the dance was some distance away a group of friends might hire a private bus or, as in *Love for Lydia*, an ancient limousine taxi.

NOBLE ESTATES

Any opportunity of getting out of town gave Bates the sense of being let out of prison. It was on journeys by horse-drawn brake with his father's choir, as they travelled to perform at one of the great country houses, that he came to know some of the Halls which crop up so often in his fiction. The serenity and dignity of the noble estates was in marked contrast to the towns and differed also from the farming countryside.

Of the Sanatorium's grounds, in *Love for Lydia*, Richardson comments, "It was possible, up there, above the town . . . to feel, as at the Aspen house, that the town did not exist, that you were far away in clear, undesecrated country." Aspen house itself, of course, was based on Rushden Hall.

In *Spella Ho*, which was published in 1938 and became Bates' first American success, he traces the story of a Great House from 1873 to 1931 and of the uneducated, self-made man who vows to pos-



Vivian Pitchforth: Night Transport (1945) Tate Gallery, London

Sad necessities

The intensification of farming – specialization, mechanization, government intervention, the use of the Land Army in World War II (top) and the never-ending spread of road networks (above) all enhanced productivity. The days recalled so nostalgically by Bates were insecure, inefficient, grindingly hard labour by comparison. But his novels document the vanished beauty of this rural world with a wealth of loving detail.

sess it. The house is seen as a remnant of the old pastoral world standing out against the encroaching industrial world.

H. E. Bates' move to Kent in 1931 enabled him to see "with a clearer, far more objective vision the native Midland land I had left." With distance lending perspective, he wrote a spate of Northamptonshire novels – including *The Poacher* and *A House of Women* – with a keen awareness of the changes affecting the countryside he so loved. And the sights, sounds, smells and characters of Bates' youth proved to be a rich seedbed of inspiration and were vividly evoked time and again, most notably in *The Vanished World*. It is of that vanished world, and particularly its countryside, that he writes so lyrically, capturing in painterly words an idyllic, halcyon period when "Always the air in June seems to have been clotted with the intoxication of mown grass, of may-blossom, of moon-daisies."

GREAT CHARACTERS IN LITERATURE

Lydia epitomizes the gawky adolescent who grows up into a great beauty. "She was always gay and talkative and high-spirited and full of expressive friendliness with us all," but her intoxicating sense of sexual power makes her appear wilful and capricious, as the young men in love with her alternately thrive and languish in her presence.



Lydia Aspen

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