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Blue Bell Hill

All of my childhood was spent living in the suburbs of London, with few opportunities to see the countryside around us, other than a rare day out to the seaside, or in later years the annual holiday. If we wanted to be surrounded by greenery, then a trip to the nearest park would provide that experience, and we were fortunate enough to live close to Greenwich Park in South London. Once we were all at work and able to afford a car, that all changed and most Sundays would bring trips out to the countryside, visiting everything that was within an hour or so driving range. My favourites have always been high places with panoramic views. Blue Bell Hill, situated between Maidstone and Rochester in Kent, is just such a place, a south-facing chalk hill overlooking the upper part of the River Medway.

The viewing location is a picnic area with a small car park just off Common Road. One can sit in total silence and look out southwards over the fields and villages of the Medway Valley and over to the small town of Snodland on the far side of the meandering river. The grassy slope beneath the picnic area leads down to a metal paling fence, behind which grow numerous shrubby trees, and below that, just visible at certain angles, is the chalky cliff face of a disused quarry. More quarries can be seen in the near foreground, overgrown and providing an undisturbed home to wildlife. With binoculars you may get a glimpse of rabbits. The chalk quarries were worked in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the scene then would have been brilliant white and noisy, unlike now, almost entirely shades of green and perfectly silent.

At the picnic site there is a large upright memorial stone, erected in memory of three members of Kent Air Ambulance Service who lost their lives in a helicopter crash near the village of Burham. The men's dedicated service with that organisation saved the lives of many people. Sitting in front of the view, I feel I could be looking out from an airplane window or about to take off and fly out over the fields. Seeing the birds gliding to and fro on the rising air currents that such hills produce makes me wish I could see it all from their point of view. They are of course interested only in hunting their next meal hidden in the long grass below. It is more interesting when the bird is a hawk or kestrel, hovering almost motionless with just a slight quivering of the wings, followed by a high speed dive into the vegetation beneath.

To the east, behind a small promontory, is the busy A229 road going into Rochester, and behind the hill is Rochester Airport. In addition the North Downs Tunnel for the high speed trains runs underneath the hill. None of these can be either seen or heard from here and you have to look at the map to know they are there. There is one little noise that cannot be ignored and that is the voice of the camera saying "Take another picture of it, you'll be glad you did," and so of course I always obey. Photos of panoramic views can sometimes be disappointing when seen later on at home and I find that including something in the foreground, such as leaves or bushes, provides depth and distance, as well as a contrast of colour between the nearby greens and the blue distance. As there is no limit to taking photos nowadays, unlike the days of real film, I just end up taking snaps from all angles and viewpoints, in order to avoid a possibly disappointing single picture and the regret that I didn't take a few more.

Blue Bell Hill

To the west, long walks lead off along the North Downs Way with more magnificent views of the "Garden of England". The south west side of Blue Bell Hill has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest in order to provide protection for several rare chalkland plants. I have never seen bluebells here, but the name probably refers to a blue bell which was used to summon horses to draw vehicles up the hill between Maidstone and Chatham, hence the name being two words rather than one. This is a very quiet and peaceful place and on a summer's day I could sit on the wooden plank bench without any desire to move on to the next location. I imagine the scene in other weather conditions, rain and mist, a pink dawn or red sunset, or a sunny day of thick snow, but realise we are not going to be here at such times. Only the desire to avoid rush hour traffic encourages us to leave and head for home. (803 words)