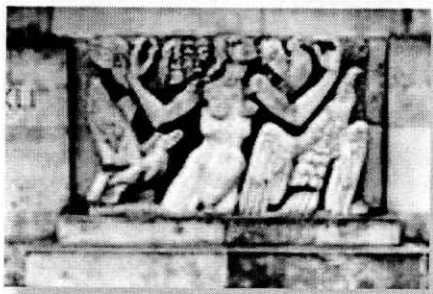


## TALES FROM THE HILLS (Ashmansworth and Crux Easton)



This last month or two we seem to have been buried in fog here on the hills while the parishes below are bathed in sunshine. But it isn't always so.

Some 120 years ago, the naturalist WH Hudson climbed up our hill through a dense fog and came out suddenly into bright sunshine at Crux Easton. Here he found himself in "a hilltop village consisting of some low farm buildings, cottages, and a church not much bigger than a cottage." He goes on to describe a ploughed field nearby as "the camping ground of an army of peewits quietly resting, sprinkled over the whole area.

"More abundant were the small birds in mixed flocks or hordes – finches, buntings, and larks in thousands and thousands, with a sprinkling of pipits and pied and grey wagtails, all busy feeding on the stubble and fresh ploughed land ... it was a rare pleasure to be in this company, to revel in their astonishing numbers."

After spending two hours at Crux Easton with that dense immovable fog close by, he took the plunge to get to Highclere. "What a change! I was at once where all form and colour were blotted out. My clothes were hoary with clinging mist, my fingers numb with cold, and Highclere, its scattered cottages appearing like dim smudges through the whiteness, was the dreariest village on earth. I fled on to Newbury in quest of warmth and light, and found it indoors, but the town was deep in the fog."

Today we still have peewits up here, though rather fewer of them. There are small birds in mixed flocks on the stubble, but they number hundreds rather than Hudson's thousands and thousands. Perhaps though, with a bright winter sun backed by a dense lowland fog, we might enjoy those astonishing numbers once more.

There is an interesting memorial to Hudson, entitled "Rima", in Hyde Park. It was sculpted by Jacob Epstein and caused some controversy when it was first unveiled by Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister. It stands, appropriately enough, in a small nature reserve for birds.

*Agricola*