

## My Wenlock Legacy. Ode to Much Wenlock.

The first thing I noticed was the water. Kind of greasy, it tasted horrid to me, used to the well water of the North Devon cliff top.

Wenlock water, steeped in limestone scaled the arteries of radiators and coated the teeth. It did something funny to my hair too, turned the curl frizzy, wirewoolish.

And I was sad to leave the sea, it brought me to my knees literally. My child painted black pictures, we left our friends. We were following employment. How and why Much Wenlock? I'd never heard of it, Shropshire even, as a county was wedged in the mystery between Midland and Wales, border country, little thought of, only visited in passing.

First viewing of the town's stone and tiled dwellings brought imagined memories of French hamlets, it surely was picturesque but in a way I wasn't sure I could identify with.

Walk. Walk. Walk around and find out. Walk past the Station house and find the railway. Walk down the path of the old tracks lined with trees, ransom soon will pop up by the path, birds fly in and out, squirrels leap alerted by the dog, smell the sticky Linden flowers, hear the bees.

North. Up onto the Edge, find solace in the trees and the sweeping views over flat plains beyond, massive Beech, prolific Holly, magnificent Ash. The trees are comforting after the wild exposure of the coast where light comes pouring over the horizon advancing relentlessly with the waves bringing all the information of the winds in the clouds and in the weather. The comfort of the trees is in their shelter. Grand and magnanimous beings, old and inspiring, young and growing in and around each other they are gazing at the view with their no eyes. Feeling into it all with their branches, they are so effortlessly themselves.

East. Down the railway walking the leafy tunnel, climbing the Windmill hill, I can see the town in its bowl at the top of the bank. One way there's Sequoia, Lime and mown cricket lawn, carpets of bronze beech leaves, clumps of violets, hills of orchids, the other I feel the pull of the river Severn. Peeking the power station chimney in the distant folded hill, I can sense the flow of the water down to the mother river, big wild long one, welsh and wet, scraping through gorges on her way to the sea.

South. Through the town, which stone by stone was built from the rampaged quarries. Human hacking at the earth to build shelter, church and priory and now look! 21<sup>st</sup> century bijou town, everyone wants to live here. Poised on the stile above the fenced in field great conker trees and ruined abbey fill my vision, my neighbour tells me of 60 species of bird spotted between here and the abbey wall in his boyhood years.

West.(well not exactly) but all the way along the edge towards further hills in the distance. Bluebells and wood anemone. Deer and fox. Rabbits and crops. Roads and tracks. Slimy mud, limescaly grease on the stones. Coral full and

mysterious. Once was a sea. Emerging from underwater to breathe air and become high land.

Slowly through the soles of my feet I learned to feel this place and took comfort in this landscape.

By some blessed coincidence I found myself learning how to communicate with the spirits of the trees and plants that have helped me settle as I walked. I was starting to learn how to be in touch with the unseen world, to look into the dream, to dream the reality. And so I learned that plants have voices and hearts, have spirit and medicine. I start to learn to listen. This is the listening beyond the ear to the beating of the great heart, to a life source somewhere beyond the confines of the town, beyond the idea of earth and sky.

My favourite tree becomes a gateway to security, her roots guard a doorway to understanding, her leaves are multifaceted flags of knowledge. Leaning against her gnarly trunk I know peace, am free to grieve, to watch out at the swans. A walk up from the Abbey is at once a stroll through indisputably lovely countryside and a crossing of frontiers. Miles from my idea of sane and bourgeois, life is rippling timeless.

As I delve deeper into unseen territory the town becomes familiar, routines overlay these other worlds. Over the stile, across the field, around by priory hall, through the churchyard past the sequoia and William Penny Brooke's grave, under the guildhall, glance at the clock, stroll by the museum and up the High St, people and faces, friendly, familiar, exchanging encounter, shop and chat. Life goes on.

I start to light a fire. This is a special type of fire.

One that is consecrated.

A Sacred Fire.

One that encourages a way of being that is listening to the Heart.

Things are needing to change.

Much Wenlock, keeper of secrets, place of pilgrimage, layered and veiled I have hardly scratched the surface in knowing you. Walking through a seemingly familiar landscape the tendency now is to shut down, to resist deep listening, to forget to see, I suppose to become fearful.

As the plants communicate with me, I feel beyond, the edge is slippery.

As the Fire burns consecrated I sense the water flowing beneath my home.

The stream runs through my garden. Five underground waterways pour into the heart of Much Wenlock's sacred centre underneath the Priory.

St. Milburga, patron Saint of Much Wenlock and miraculous healer, had her bones publicly burnt on the church's green, they were too well revered.

There are sacred wells in the town, albeit that they are dry: St. Milburga's and St. Owen's. We dressed those wells each year, I helped to press petals and beans into softened clay encased in frames. The finished pictures depicted church and nun and imagery of flowers, fountains and rainbows. They adorned the wells with beauty and honour, something ancient was happening in the gathering of women around the well.

The Fire is speaking. Godda, the West Mercian goddess of water appears behind St. Milburga her Christian front exposed.

As I offer to the Plants, as I offer to the Fire as I offer to the Water, the World starts to come alive for me, I feel it offering back, offering to move me.

And then the Floods came. Sudden and devastating, the water poured off the Edge, it built up down the Sytch, it washed down the road, meeting with the sodden Gaskell Fields and in one definitive deluge a wave surged to pour into my house.

The last thing I noticed was the water. I couldn't help but, it had swamped everything. The water was washing me away. I would return to the Sea.