Snape Hill is what passes for a hill round here. Motor vehicles used to change gear as they climbed it. Horses would sweat a bit more. It is the highest point of a shoulder of land, the watershed between the two stream valleys. It is Chalk bedrock with a capping of Ice Age sands and clays. Snape, Snaep, parcel of land for some Saxon farmer. Crowning the summit, Snape Farm is anchored in the ancient meadows of Snape Green with its spring-fed pond and gnarled oaks; it has two overgrown chalk pits for company, and a nineteenth century plantation called The Grove. A mobile telephone relay tower completes the picture.

The Hill creates its own climate. Locals swear that Hinderclay enjoys wetter weather than Rickinghall. Rain clouds blown from the west rear up when they meet the mass of Snape Hill, baulk at its bulk and veer away northwards. They dump on Hinderclay. The clay is wetter here, much stickier (though most of the soils round here are clay). Since Hinderclay Wood was skinned by bulldozers there are no trees to soak up the water. The bald ridge with its wig of a wood (three trees and a runty rind of overgrown coppice) sheds water into the empty valley.

Across the valley stands the Chalk Pit. Chalk rock reaches the surface here. Time scribbles over the traces of the industry that delved this great hole, cut tunnels, and barrowed their contents away by donkey load. Wood from local coppices once creaked onto the site by the cartload to feed the glowing kiln, fire reducing the chalk to quicklime. Today the kiln is a cool, dry, earthy-scented vault, a prey of tree roots and the fantasies of boys who dare its darkness. The lime-burner’s cottage ground puts forth a profusion of nettles and elder trees; its well is hidden in a deep thicket, discovered only by hapless small animals. Until the 1970’s there was an immemorial colony of Roman snails. Basil Brown said they were living relics of the Roman period. Found in only two other places in Suffolk, they thrived in the chalky warp, the last of them sheltering in the damp and mossy dells of the overgrown Pit until the bulldozers moved in there also. Looking for snails there is like looking for God; creamy-white, their empty shells are emanations of the pure maternal Chalk.

Calke Wood, Chalk Wood, is a pretty piece of ancient woodland; its ground has a long history of being rummaged by humans. Earthenware pottery waste last dumped there 30 years ago is gradually being reclaimed by nature, fired clay dissolving back into its native earth. The old pit has a strange, glittering,
pale blue clay used by the Romans for their pottery, and by Watson’s until it became easier to import clay from the Midlands. The dells and hollows in the wood tell a story of centuries of extraction and local settlement. Basil found a deep hole containing prehistoric pot sherds which he mistook for a ritual shaft of the Beaker period. It was just a solution hole. But there really was Beaker settlement here, and Iron Age, as well as Romano-British. The evidence is in the pot sherds, prehistoric flints, kiln debris and burned patches he found. His forty years of rovings and delvings on local farmland made a major contribution to ploughsoil archaeology in Suffolk.

Sparkes Lane or Back Lane survives as a green track running from Snape Hill to Howe Hill corner. Other byways have not been so fortunate. A process of natural selection has worked on them; while some have been exalted as highways, others have dwindled to mere footpaths, or have become extinct. Some have changed their names, others have been mutilated; Tydeman’s Road has become Briar Lane, which has been chopped off at its root by the new Rickinghall bypass. The Enclosure Award map of 1819 shows lost trackways, lanes and paths crossing the area, all now beyond living memory. Cutting across the elements of today’s landscape, they follow their own deep inscrutable logic linked to the lives of the dead. Tracing them we must trespass over other people’s fields, gardens, hedges, ditches and thickets; we must disregard modern boundaries. We may go straight from Rickinghall Church to Snape Common, or take ‘Parsonage Road’ from East Lodge to the old Rectory. Beyond it we may pursue our way to Mill Mount and beyond it take ‘Fen Head Lane’ down to the low meadows of Paddlers Fen where the trout lake now is. None of these lanes now exist. Walking these ancient ways we have an ancient right to Rome, as it were, for all roads lead there, and time curls back on itself.

Water lurks beneath the summit of the Hill. It spewed out with a vengeance when they cut the new course for the main road, bringing work to a standstill. But for centuries it has been benignly feeding the large pond on Common Meadow with fresh water. Other ponds are not so pleasant however; surrounded by trees and fed by ditches they are sinks for dead leaves and twiggy debris. Sparkes Lane passes two ponds, the Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean, where moorhens boldly nest on stick-thick sargasso castles and the water is very black. Not so black as Smiler’s Pond in the lower farm yard however; Vic Race said it would swallow a horse and cart.

The bells of St Mary’s church cast their Christian spell over the village. The sound floats up from the valley as far as Snape Hill, if the wind is right or the air is still. There was a time when the bells were a battle-call to demons of wood and swamp. Today they fall a bit flat. Things do float in the valley though. The graveyard holds its liquor so well that the plague pit is a pond in winter, and coffins have to be weighted to make them stay down. The stream gathers its load from fields as far away as West Hall and shoots it through the gap between the church and road, sometimes starting a flood. Upstream it passes
through Ducking Stool Meadow, once witness to pitiful cries and shameful satisfactions. Downstream it used to be called the Swimming Ditch, for locals to bathe in - or was it for ‘swimming’ witches and other misfits? (They sink if they are innocent.) “Witches? There aint such things!”, as Arthur Stannard said, “but I’ll tell you a story”. Eric Culley once saw thirteen hares sitting facing each other in a circle near the old Rectory. Until earlier this century, people say, the spectral light of hobby lanterns could sometimes be seen at dusk shivering over the meadows behind The Street. Drainage has put paid to such gassy emanations.

Viewed from other parishes Snape Hill is a shapely coronal of greenery. Its trees were planted for business and beauty; many of them go hand in hand with the grazing meadows and parkland which survive here. The estate-grown oaks of the Grove. The black poplar at the top of Back Croft. The willows along Sparkes Lane planted by John Holt Wilson for cricket bats. Snape Green has the oldest trees in Rickinghall: antique pollarded oaks which must have been young in Tudor times; hollowed and craggy, more trunk than branches, more burr than trunk; each a priceless habitat for dead-wood fauna. The old Rectory has elegant evergreens: its solemn yews and turkey oaks, the Wellingtonia with its top blown off by lightning. Hill House has grand Victorian trees: a pair of majestic planes and a copper beech; older still are the ancient mulberry on its big lawn and the huge lime bristling with witches’ nests in its front park. Consider the beech toppling into Snape Hill Pit: its roots are one of the Four Wonders of Rickinghall.

Hill House is a bold and prestigious statement in white brick. But for all its ambitions it has never been able to escape its farming roots. House and farm developed together hand in hand for hundreds of years, as an owner-occupied farming unit. The story begins before 1700 with a substantial red-brick yeoman’s farmhouse and a large thatched barn. In the eighteenth century the house was fashionably redesigned in white brick for a gentleman farmer, with a view east across parkland. Thus gentrified, it was known as the ‘Mansion House’. The big barn, granaries and bullock yards were built at this time, perhaps by the Amys family, making the farmyard one of the finest in the district. In 1876 it fell victim to high Victorian fashion; the roof was raised and the facade was remodelled with a stone balustrade, and a French turret added to one end. The effect was lopsided and preposterous. Locals poked fun at this folie de grandeur by calling it ‘The Pill Box’, a swipe at the Lacy Scott family who made a fortune selling patent pills. In 1909 house and farm became part of the Redgrave Estate and the house became the residence of the ‘Little Squire’. In 1915 he let the farm separately. Thereafter the two became functionally separate and pursued divergent paths, the one as a high-status ‘country house’, the other as part of Snape Farm. This is the situation today. Hill House is the smartest house in the district, but it will never be able to escape the rustic embrace of the farmyard. The yards and buildings lap against the house and gardens; they exchange sounds, smells and atmospheres with one another. By way of compensation for too much enforced togetherness, each now has
its own front drive, twelve feet apart separated by a hedge. Nothing illustrates more clearly their mutual discomfort - and the impossibility of divorce.

Upper Waits, Gostlings and G-Roberts are fields with intriguing names. North Field and Mill Field beside Mill Lane have boring names but are even more interesting. They are all that is left of the Mediaeval great fields on the north side of the village; their last remaining strips were parcelled out in 1819 under the Enclosure Award, mostly to the Rectory or John Amys Esq.. 1819 was a good year for Amys: he also got the Galley Field strips on the northern slopes of the Hill, which hint of a Mediaeval hamlet in the area, probably beside the Common Meadow. The vanished track from the church leads straight towards it.

Howe Hill is sister to Snape Hill, both sprung from the same buried body of Chalk, but Howe Hill is the steeper. As if to stress her exceptional hilliness, ‘Howe’ comes from Viking haugr, hill. As if to emphasise her beauty, she is enhanced from top to bottom by a sinuous line of Scots pines, planted by someone with a taste for romance - or partridge shooting. A gentleman of the road used to set up camp in a small hollow among the trees on her shoulder.

How many people would walk in Murder Plantation at midnight? Shades of a gypsy woman murdered there with a twisted handkerchief. A red-spotted one perhaps. An illegitimate child. A saga of love and brutality, desire and death, that happened so long ago on the Hill that nobody knows quite where it took place, nor whether the murderer once swung at the Galley Field. Place it where you will, the triangle of oaks on the hill-crest, or Snape Hill Plantation, the drama of a name remains.

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Snape Hill has been defined here as the highest parts of the tongue of land having its tip at Broom Hills. It is bounded by two streams, nameless today, except where it merges seamlessly into the clayland plateau out towards West Street and Wattisfield. It is an area where the landscape has for the most part escaped the government-funded destruction meted out to hedges, woods and meadows in so many parts of East Anglia during the 1970’s, exemplified so perfectly by the fate of Hinderclay Hall Farm. Snape Farm has essentially preserved the diverse local landscape of the nineteenth century. A key factor in maintaining this diversity has been the mixed farming which is still carried out by the Miles family at Snape Farm, which they have held since 1909. The Farm thus represents environmental and social continuity at a time of acute change. Rickinghall has seen more flux in the last thirty years than the last three hundred. Old reference points have shifted: the Church no longer occupies the Rectory; Redgrave Estate has dissolved; the population base has altered rapidly. The village has proved the proverb that only change is constant.
It is said that the landscape in East Anglia undergoes a sea change once every 500 years or so. A visitor from the time of Henry VIII would be hard put to place himself in today’s landscape. Hopefully, with the maps we now have, a viewer in the year 2500 will be able to envisage the geography of Snape Hill as it was at the turn of the millennium. Hopefully, with the above ‘Notes’, he will also be able to see this area as a lived-in landscape which answered a human need for meaning.

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