

COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

MARCH 18, 2026

Spring gardens

How to win at your flower show



Keeping geese: well worth a gander
What made Capability Brown so special
Spring's best poetry by Jacqui Ritchie



A country for all seasons



A Road for All Seasons

Harry Bucknall

(Constable, £25)

Tales from The Mill

Simon Cooper (10 Degrees Publishing, £22.50)



IN order to get to grips with the world, should we travel widely or look closely? Harry Bucknall chooses the former, with a turn around the four corners of the British Isles in 2017 to take the temperature of the nation in the

wake of the Brexit vote. The ex-soldier covers more than 6,500 miles, bedding down on sofas, in dismal B&Bs and a grand country house. Although he was able to call upon an extensive—and amusing—network of friends and boozy fellow veterans, Maj Bucknall is set on uncovering a different, diverse Britain.

‘Brummies are the nicest people; Petworth and Moffat are perfect towns; Leicester is exciting’

It takes a while for this to become apparent. Scotland gets short shrift after an unpromising start in off-season Iona. A wet trudge by Loch Lomond, a night on the lash near Glasgow and a nice glass of wine by the Solway Firth with his old chum Jamie Blackett (of this parish)—and he’s done. Over the border, he’s on firmer ground. Initially playing up minor pratfalls, the author takes key walking routes—Hadrian’s Wall, a section of the Pennine Way and southern coastal paths—in his stride. It is the cities and their people that interest him as he makes incursions into the machinery depots and distribution hubs of Tyneside, the back streets of Leicester and the hindquarters of Brexit-voting Boston in Lincolnshire. Pub familiarity and an open mind allows the author to sup with gel-spiked football fans in Halifax and hunt supporters in Fernie country. London is snapshotted with a Syrian refugee, a Somalian who loves his job on the London Underground, a suave merchant banker and a Russian oligarch.

This affable travel companion is generous in his assessments. Brummies are the nicest



Sketches by Gary Partridge appear throughout Harry Bucknall’s *A Road for All Seasons*

people in Britain; Petworth (West Sussex) and Moffat (Dumfriesshire) are perfect towns; Leicester is exciting. He likes Swindon (Wiltshire) and is pleasant about Portsmouth (Hampshire). Only a few places, such as Stowmarket (Suffolk), and Barnstaple (north Devon)—‘isolated, sinister’—fall short. It is the author’s faith, which emerges quietly, that leads him to the most meaningful encounters. He finds common ground with cricketering imams in Bradford, locates the spiritual heart of Wales and becomes emotional at a Quaker service in Oxford. The writing flourishes when the author can dwell a little: he’s moved to tears in a Belfast he last saw as a soldier 30 years previously, his flashbacks contrasting with the city’s transformation. Most memorably, his former army driver Jock diffidently admits to going for treatment for the PTSD that stemmed from an Ulster tour: ‘I’m just not good around people at the moment, H.’

A Road for All Seasons was written to discover a Britain poised on the brink of change and readers may now find it a little dated, or nostalgic. At journey’s end in Dover, Kent, Maj Bucknall concludes that his trip has reawakened a love for these ‘often-overlooked shores’ and given him a greater understanding of multifaceted Britain than he could ever have imagined.

Simon Cooper’s view of life, *Tales of the Mill*, is circumscribed by water. The streams that flow around and through Nether Wallop Mill in Hampshire teem with life and he becomes immersed in the lives of the patrolling herons,

Arthur the arthritic swan and noisily eek-ing otters. Hedgehogs, hares, rats and wasps all surface in this mix of memoir and Nature journal, plus a tenderly described brown trout, Trutta. There is just enough salting of natural history, for example how all weeping willows can be traced to Alexander Pope sneaking a bit of packaging from China to propagate.

Village life is here, too, in this quintessentially English settlement that formed the backdrop to the *Miss Marple* television series, with its planning struggles, neighbourly tussles over hedges and annual fêtes. In the 1980s, its irresistibly comedic name drew a gathering of stand-up stars, such as Billy Connolly and Rowan Atkinson, to perform in the Nether Wallop International Arts Festival, a one-off that was a precursor to Comic Relief.

The principal character to emerge is the mill itself. From the moment the author wakes on his first morning in residence to hear water pounding against the brickwork, he must step up to caretaking responsibilities: learning to control the flow of water, cure mysterious squeaks, cut the water weed and release blockages dating back to 1700. That this 1,000-year-old building has never flooded, thanks to the genius of 17th-century Dutch engineers, puts everything in perspective. Aware that he is a speck in its existence, lack of insurance can be shrugged off. This is a warm, watery book, but one with a conservationist undercurrent as this fisherman spells out how preserving chalkstreams requires effort.

Laura Parker