

The question arises though that, if the hill is Caburn, why should it be selected as the background? Obviously the intention was to place the scene locally, but why this particular choice? As noted above, the paintings were undertaken in 1941-42, and it happened that this was around the time, or shortly after, Virginia Woolf took her own life in March 1941. Virginia had delighted in the view from her garden of Caburn, which from Rodmell lay to the north up the Ouse valley; and if or when Vanessa became aware that it could also be seen looking west from the perimeter of Charleston it might have been thought of as a link between them. It must be the only feature that can be seen from both places. Also the viewpoint, from the turning off the A27 towards Glynde, is only a little over half a mile from Virginia Woolf's first house in Sussex (before she had met Leonard) which lay at the north end of Firlie village. As such, it is moving to think that Vanessa Bell's depiction of Caburn in *The Nativity*, from this location, might have been in memory and honour of her sister.

After all this exhaustive (and exhausting) effort to identify the hill in the painting as Caburn not Firlie, I discovered that the church guide - in contrast to the greetings card, which is still on sale and citing both hills - identifies it only as Caburn! However, the guide sheds no more light than the greetings card on where Caburn is painted from, and hence where the nativity scene is set.

I believe I have identified this spot. It remains intriguing, though, that the very first appearance of Caburn from this direction is from 'the old coach road' three miles away as it runs along the southern boundary of Charleston Farm. Could Vanessa Bell not have sketched it from this point and simply enlarged it? This is obviously possible, though I think she would have to have photographed



The author's friend Bob Sinclair with Caburn behind. Compare with the detail below.



it with a zoom lens, or looked at it through binoculars, to see (and depict) so clearly the shape of the woodland on its facing slope, and the horizontal line to the left of the continuing South Downs beyond.

My best guess is that the sight of Caburn from the proximity of Charleston may have suggested to the artist a fitting background, but that she sketched it from the same direction but much closer - from the turning off the A27 towards Glynde. It may be by the din and roar of traffic on the A27, but it looks outward and upward to the serene and lofty peak of Caburn. If I am right, this is Vanessa Bell's Bethlehem and, in some kind of way, the Bethlehem of Sussex.

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# Vanessa Bell's Bethlehem

Taken from Phil Pavey's book 'Mysteries of History in Sussex'



Vanessa Bell's Nativity Scene

The Cuckmere valley is an area rich in ancient enigmas and an 'other worldly' atmosphere. But it also has a mystery that is modern, at least in the sense that it dates from just within living memory.

As is well known, in the inter-war years the 'Bloomsbury group' of progressive intellectuals included the writers Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, E.M. Forster and Vita Sackville-West, the art critic Roger Fry, the great economist John Maynard Keynes and the painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.

The Woolfs famously had a country cottage in Sussex at the village of Rodmell, in the valley of the river Ouse as it passes through the South Downs, where they often played host to the others. Similarly Vanessa Bell (who was Virginia Woolf's sister), her partner Duncan Grant and her son Quentin Bell had a country base at Charleston Farmhouse, about seven miles away just north of the South Downs, between the Ouse and Cuckmere valleys. Charleston Farmhouse may be visited today

and is a museum containing many examples of their beautifully coloured and powerful works of decorative and other art.

Early in the second world war the bishop of Chichester was the left-leaning George Bell (no relation to Vanessa or her husband, Clive Bell). He believed in forging links between the church and the arts and proposed that the adornment of medieval churches with murals or wall paintings, which had survived the Reformation in only a few places in Sussex (notably Clayton, Hardham and Coombes) should be revived by modern artists. His attention was drawn to the early Modernist art of Duncan Grant, and it was agreed that Berwick church - a victim of heavy-handed Victorian restoration, and close to Charleston - would be the place to put the aspiration into practice.

Notwithstanding the unconventional nature of the household at Charleston, which if apprehended would surely have been disapproved of at the time (and especially in

church circles), Bell and Grant were commissioned to do the work. The paintings were actually executed on large boards, subsequently brought to the church and fitted closely to the wall space; but it is not clear whether this was to avoid disruption of services while the work was proceeding, or to facilitate removal if the work proved unpopular. Perhaps it was a bit of both. However the work- the initial part of which was carried out in 1941-42 - was widely acclaimed.

As such, further paintings were added by Quentin Bell and Duncan Grant in 1943-44. The whole ensemble makes Berwick to this day the object of pilgrimage on both religious and artistic grounds. Curiously, however, the achievement clearly did not start a trend in Sussex (or really elsewhere) as Bishop Bell seems to have envisaged. Perhaps Berwick was unusual in that the plain leaded lights in its nave did not have figures or colour to clash with the paintings around them, and this was even more pronounced after bomb damage caused them to be replaced with completely plain glass. This gives beautiful views of the surrounding Sussex countryside, which seem to complement rather than compete with the paintings, many of which have the same countryside as their background.

The six larger works are Christ in Glory and a crucifixion scene, The Victory of Calvary, by Duncan Grant; The Supper at Emmaus and The Wise and Foolish Virgins by Quentin Bell; and The Annunciation and The Nativity by Vanessa Bell. The last two contrast in that The Annunciation (albeit set at Charleston's walled garden) has, to me, a sunny Italian atmosphere and pastel shades reminiscent of Fra Angelico; while The Nativity has a background and quality of light which place it firmly in Sussex. While all six paintings are compelling, the finest in my opinion is The Nativity. It is a traditional nativity with the holy family flanked by shepherds and animals, but the former are by their dress and 'Pyecombe' crooks unmistakably contemporary Sussex shepherds. The note on a greetings card on sale in the church tells us the 'stable' is a Sussex barn, which in the painting has a large opening or space rather than a wall behind the figures, through which a green hill can be seen against the sky. From the viewer's perspective the hill

has a gentle upward gradient from left to right, then rises more sharply to the summit, and then starts very gradually to decline away to the right.

What seized me a few years ago was that the greetings card mentioned above, depicting the painting, described the hill as being either Firle Beacon or Mount Caburn. Both of them are prominent peaks in the South Downs, respectively about three miles and about six miles west-north-west of Berwick. I decided to try to find out which of the two it might be, and then with reference to the hill to identify the actual place where the foreground of the painting was set.

As it happens their direction from Berwick is initially followed by a major track running along the bottom of the Downs, signposted as the 'old coach road' and heading roughly westward towards Firle village. (See map right.)

So I set out to walk this route, with the Downs to my left, towards the bottoms of the two hills in question. Firle Beacon, being the nearer of the two, was in view right from the start - but from the direction of Berwick its profile was a mirror image of the hill in the painting. Clearly then if Firle Beacon is the one depicted it must be as viewed when coming from the opposite direction.

After three miles I reached Firle Beacon, which stood above me to my left as I was going

westwards. As I skirted its lower slopes Mount Caburn came into view, about three miles ahead and, excitingly, exactly matching the shape of the hill in the painting. On looking at the map, I was even more struck to see that the spot (OS grid ref. 067/487) was where the track ran along the southern boundary of Charleston Farm. I immediately imagined the artist with her sketchpad or easel coming out from the house and settling at this spot, to draw the view westwards for the very purpose of the painting.

### Vanessa Bell's Bethlehem



However, the question was not to be so conveniently solved. Caburn from this point was very much smaller, i.e. further away, than the hill is in relation to the foreground figures in the painting. If the hill depicted is Caburn it is captured from this direction, certainly, but from a closer viewpoint. I therefore drew a straight line on the map from the point concerned to the summit of Caburn, and tried to keep as close to it as possible as I

headed forward. It is not possible to keep Caburn in view at all times, due to intervening landscape features and dips in ground level, but recurrent sightings showed it growing closer to the apparent size, and hence distance behind the foreground figures, in the painting.

As I walked I also looked backwards towards Firle Beacon. When I was just over half a mile past it, it clearly also matched the shape of the hill in the painting, but was much too close. Beyond that point however the land falls away

as you proceed westwards, i.e. you are going downhill towards Firle village, so that the mature woodland around the base of the Beacon blocks any sight of it. It is not until you emerge beyond Firle village, turn left and westward along the main A27 (Lewes-Eastbourne) road for a short way, and then turn right up the minor road towards Glynde, that you gain altitude so that it reappears. However by now it is about 1¼ miles distant and too small to match the hill in the painting.

It is possible to get a sight of Firle Beacon at about the right distance, which I judge to be about 1-1¼ miles, by moving south off the track to go up the lower slopes of the Downs, or north off the track by entering Firle Park. However, both views are still partially obscured by trees, and neither view is then from quite the angle shown in the painting.

So, what of Caburn? It is intermittently visible from just before Firle village, and then again just after. Following the road out of the village, after half a mile it joins the main A27 (Lewes-Eastbourne) road. If you then turn left and westward along this main road for a short way, and then turn right to take the minor road up towards Glynde, at this junction (OS grid ref. 082/463) Caburn appears to the north-west framed by the open entrance to a field. In my estimation this matches the view of the hill in the Nativity painting in terms of size/distance (the map shows the peak is just over a mile distant).

Two other things are apparent from this spot. Firstly, the wooded patch on the facing hillside of Caburn, which is now clearly visible, broadly matches that shown in the painting. (The similar woodland on the facing hillside of Firle Beacon, when seen from half a mile and again 1¼ miles to its west, is noticeably more a vertical line than a patch). Secondly, to the left of Caburn (as seen by the viewer) there is the distant horizontal line of the South Downs as they resume the other side of the river Ouse. There is no such feature when viewing Firle Beacon from its west. The painting shows a faint horizontal streak here which I had always assumed to be dark cloud. However, closer examination in the church shows it to be grey-green rather than the turquoise I had perceived it to be, suggesting downland not cloud.