**Chalk pits: *Stig of the Dump***

The downland of Kent is pocked with small abandoned chalk pits. The chalk was converted to ‘lime’ and used to improve agricultural soils on clay. Lime burning was probably introduced during the Roman period, when lime was originally used in mortar and as a stabiliser for mud floors and render.

These abandoned pits were often left to grow old gracefully, festooned with old man’s beard (clematis) and other plants of the chalk. Sometimes used as casual dumping grounds, they also became Edenic spaces for children of those generations given free rein to explore. Free from the prying eyes of adults, these pits became places of imagination and education; from building camps to hunting for insects and fossils.

This childhood freedom is evoked in Clive King’s classic 1963 children’s book \_*Stig of the Dump\_*. Born in Surrey in 1924, Clive and his family moved to Ash in west Kent, close enough to Rochester for him to attend the King's School. Old OS maps show the area around Ash peppered with small chalk pits and it was his time in Kent that provided the basis for \_*Stig\_*.

In an interview for \_*The Guardian\_*, King states 'Ash was a boring place. It needed something to wake it up, so I invented Stig.' \_*Stig\_* was written many years later when King had children of his own, the models for Barney and Lou. While staying with their grandparents Barney explores the surrounding countryside. One day he tumbles into an old chalk pit that is used as a local dumping ground. Here he encounters a ‘cave boy’ who recycles the materials discarded by others to create his home, tools, and other paraphernalia. While unable to speak the same language (Stig barely utters a sound throughout), the boys form a strong friendship. Explaining Stig to his sister and grandmother Barney simply states:

‘He’s a sort of boy, … He just wears rabbit-skins and lives in a cave. He gets his water through a vacuum cleaner and puts chalk in the bath. He’s my friend.’

The book has had an enduring appeal and sold over two million copies, despite first being rejected by twelve publishers. King told \_The Guardian\_ his depiction of free-range children was ‘frowned upon’, even then… ‘*It was beginning to be rather improper to let a child run wild like that*’.

"… *the book's depiction of the vivid interior life and imagination of a child, the delight of roaming free, making shelters and dens away from the grown-ups, as well as ideas such as the universal language of friendship - and even the importance of recycling - feel as fresh and relevant today as they did when Puffin first published it*.” Francesca Dow, Penguin Random House Children's.

*Stig* evokes a world before anyone needed to invent ‘Nature-deficit Disorder’ and create ‘forest schools’ to compensate. Barney is free to engage in adventures from hunting with bow and arrow, fighting and befriending the local kids (the Snarget gang), foiling burglars, and finally, the biggest adventure of all when Barney and Lou, on Midsummer’s night, find themselves in Stig’s time, meet his people, and help to cap a stone monument. Some time later, Barney, Lou and their parents picnic at the same megalithic site on the North Downs; while not named it is in all probability Kit’s Coty House, consisting of three large slabs of sarsen stone capped by a fourth slab, part of an ancient long barrow.

*\_Stig\_* was beautifully illustrated by Edward Ardizzone, who lived and worked on the chalk at Rodmersham Green, Kent, from the 1960s until his death in 1979.

Article written by Peter Vujakovic, who spent his school years haunting Kent’s chalk pits.

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