**Sheila Kaye-Smith: Welcome to Delmonden.**

Delmonden is a village in Kent that doesn’t actually exist except in \_*Shepherd’s In Sackcloth\_* by Sheila Kaye-Smith. However, there is a real village in the location Kaye-Smith has chosen for her creation; should you wish to visit, it is called Newenden and it lies just across the county border, marked by the River Rother, on the edge of Kent, close to Kaye-Smith’s home village of Northiam. Kaye-Smith was dubbed the ‘Sussex Hardy’ in the 1920s, but this in no way constrained her fluid use of geography when it came to locations for her novels. In a guide she wrote to the Weald of Kent and Sussex she stated that ‘the border between Kent and Sussex is purely artificial’. In her survey of Newenden she notes its ancient history – reputed to have been the site of a Carmelite Priory, a Summer Palace for Edward I and to have had a Castle on Castle Toll. By the 1950s it was ‘little more than a straggle of houses, an inn and a church’, and so it is today.

In \_*Shepherd’s In Sackcloth\_* the village ‘lay between the church and the Rectory’ and was a small ‘homely street running downhill towards the Rother’ with the church almost on the marsh and the ‘last one in Kent’. To serve her purpose Kaye-Smith needs Delmonden to be larger than Newenden

and thus she ‘moves’ farms from other villages into her community and amalgamates the nearby village of Sandhurst with Newenden to form a sprawling settlement. The ancient manor of Lossenham gets a mention but is no longer the ancient manor close to the river but instead ‘a tiny collection of houses’, the Non Conformist Chapel is that of Sandhurst, ‘weatherboarded in white …. a roof of brownish tiles … small casement windows’ and she has excelled herself in her ‘fluid’ use of authorial and geographical licence when she adopts the name of a farm near Piltdown, Sussex for her Manor of Goldstrow . Likewise, the distances from place to place are elastic in their relationship to the actuality, farm names are borrowed from villages several miles away; an elderly parishioner from Wittersham – a village some seven miles from Newenden – walks a short distance to the church.

Whatever the shortcomings of Kaye-Smith’s geographical locating of her village, her descriptions of and evocation of place are faultless. On a summer evening ‘the marshes were yellow with sunshine and buttercups, and on the hills the young woods lifted torches of green fire to the sky. The white of the hawthorn and the wild cherry flashed from their borders, and from the hedges … of the road that crossed the Rother at Delmonden bridge’. A grassy track is bordered by a ‘milky way of chervil and cow-parsley’, and swallows swooped ‘over the low, yellow fields’. In March rain the hills of Kent become ‘leaden-grey, with iron-black woods and hedges’, in winter ‘frost snapped the leaves from green to red … blackened the roses’ and ‘Fogs hung salty and half frozen above the Rother’.

**Article by Dr Pat Argar**

**Bibliography**

Kaye-Smith, Sheila. *Shepherds in Sackcloth.*London: Cassell and Company Ltd, 1933.

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