



Forest ponies at the cottage gate.

INTRODUCTION

Megan McCubbin



I opened my eyes to sunlight seeping through the bedroom curtains. I had gone to sleep the previous night listening to a male tawny owl, perched on the thatched roof, and the repetitive chur of a European nightjar in the distant heathland. But on this spring morning, the soundscape of the ancient woods surrounding the cottage had dramatically changed, a shift from night to day. Now it was the wren, blackbird and robin jostling for the loudest solo in the dawn chorus, all of them being outdone by a song thrush in the top branches of an old blackthorn tree. Every note was pitched with spellbinding intensity. I listened for a minute, soaking up the trills, warbles, phrases and perfectly timed pauses. Then, just as I had done on so many spring mornings before this one, I jumped out of bed, grabbed my walking boots and headed out into the forest.

I grew up in Southampton, Hampshire. I spent a lot of my time with family in the city and its surrounding suburbs. The New Forest was (and still is) my escape: a piece of wilderness brimming with undiscovered adventures, untrodden paths and yet-to-be-climbed mature oak trees. I spent my teenage years and then the majority of Lockdown in 2020 exploring its vast heathlands, rivers, bogs, grasslands and woods. This patchwork of habitats is what makes the area so unique for flora and fauna alike.

There is one ride through the forest, a wide trackway used for wood management, that I would return to nearly every day, where firecrests were nesting (unusually) in the oak and hazel, near my favourite badger sett. It's only a small patch, but it's one I know like the back of my hand. For years, I would sit under the trees imagining all the people who had walked and explored before me. Who were they? How did the landscape look, sound

and behave? And perhaps most importantly, did they interact with it, and love it, in the same way that I do?

Many tales have been told and ways of life lost with the growth and decay of the forest's leaves each season. But because some, like the stories in this book, are beautifully recorded, they travel through time to teach, inspire and help us reconnect to the places we live and dream in. *Wanderers of the New Forest* captures a moment in time in the New Forest, during the mid-1950s, when its author, Juliette de Bairacli Levy, moved to a cottage 'small enough to put into a pocket' near Abbots Well with her two children, Luz and Rafik, and Afghan hound, Tullipan. Abbots Well, earlier known as Alleynewell, is on an ancient boundary of the New Forest, defined by King Edward I, and was favoured by travellers on their way to and from Southampton, where they would stop to replenish their water supplies from the spring. Just as Juliette would do in the years to come.

Born in 1912 in Manchester, Juliette had big ambitions to become a veterinarian before realizing that she had a passion and natural talent for herbology and holistic medicine. Widely known and loved as the 'grandmother of herbalism', she studied in Israel, North America, Greece and across Europe, living predominantly with Gypsies and farmers, searching for a simple life immersed in nature. She is still described as 'a nomad', 'a pioneer' and 'a student of the earth', as she lived, breathed and died closely connected to the land and plants beneath her feet. She settled in the New Forest for just under three years – and the forest was lucky to have had her!

This book, originally published in 1958, describes what it was like to raise a young family in the woods, and records Juliette's close friendships with local New Forest Gypsies, the Romanies, discussing the loss of their traditions, rituals and language. 'I think they sensed that I was a Gypsy,' Juliette writes, 'not only in my ways but also probably by blood ... liking also the company of flamenco singers and dancers ... and interest in herbs and even in magic! I lived like a Gypsy, always outside my cottage until nightfall unless it poured rain or blew snow; and writing sitting on the ground.'

The writer carries us through the three years that she dwelt in the

New Forest, exploring much of what is now inside the National Park. She describes how her young family lived off the land alongside the semi-wild ponies and the Gypsy community, and how they bathed in Windmill Hill Pond (now long gone), where, at the water's edge, they encountered toads that 'pretended to be stones'. Their forest story is both humbling and inspiring, and relatable to anyone who seeks comfort in nature. And Juliette finds such joy in the details of the forest – the ponds, the foxgloves, the daisies and all the other species that live alongside. Her tiny cottage was in the middle of open moorland, but as a skilled herbalist she wasted no time in starting a garden for all kinds of beautiful and healing plants, 'from raspberry canes, blackcurrant bushes and strawberry plants – all then in a tangled mess – to old-type michaelmas daisies ... and a rosemary bush'. She was especially proud of the apple trees which flourished in the springs of Abbots Well.

Not only skilled in holistic medicine and plants, she is also able to describe the people she meets with conviction and charisma. You, too, get to know their expressions, their happiness and fears, their likes and dislikes about the fast-modernizing world that is interrupting the rhythms of the woods around them. Juliette doesn't shy away from deep conversations. She leans into them, and her writing paints such a clear and honest picture of her thinking and lifestyle in the woods, that she sounds to me like the sort of unassuming, caring, curious-minded individual who longed to understand the natural ways of the world.

After learning what the Gypsies and the New Forest could teach her, in true nomadic style, Juliette packed up her essential plants and possessions to move onto the next adventure: 'this was the end of one place for me, for we are all wanderers in search of happiness, and staying mostly only where we can find it in plenty.' With understanding she writes about culture. With authority she writes about herbology. And with love she writes about her family and friends. It is like an honest and open letter addressed to all, and I sincerely hope you enjoy, as I have, Juliette's wilder spirit.

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