



*My name is Peggy, I want to tell you a story...*

## Story: Time in the Kent Downs

My name is Peggy I want to tell you a story about when I lived on a farm with my grandparents. We lived at Coombe Downs Farm which nestled in a valley in the Kent Downs. They were reaching retiring age and often needed help, either during harvest or carting small bales of hay for fodder in the winter or with the sheep particularly at lambing time. We produced straw for thatching houses, which is not something which you often see these days since most houses have clay, slate or concrete tiles. One bright hot sunny day my granddad had hitched the binder onto the tractor and pulled it out from its winter resting place. Do you know what a binder is? Granddad took the binder to the field and the machine started trundling around. The long wooden arms turned, and the knotter tied knots around the bundles, 'clackety clack, clackety clack, ping' - out shot a bundle of straw onto the ground. My family and friends had gathered in the field with long sleeves and gloves for our yearly task. It was an exhausting job with many hands needed. We stacked the bundles of straw into 'stooks' so that they could finish drying and then be loaded onto the trailers.

It was on one of these days, after clearing the bundles of straw from the field and my grandmother had made us all a good cup of tea, when I noticed that my arms were sore. Whilst we were quenching our thirst and reminiscing about the day's work, grandmother offered me some cream to soothe the scratches all up my arms where the wheat had wheedled its way in above the gloves and below the bottom of my sleeves. We went into her bedroom and there on her dressing table stood her jewellery box. The lid was open revealing a sparkling array of jewels. To my surprise a ring as white as chalk caught my eye, it stood out from the rest. A sun ray caught it, enveloping it in a halo of glistening light which radiated from the box. I had an eerie feeling, and I was reminded of a saying that I had heard somewhere or had I dreamt it? 'The girl who wears the ring as white as chalk knows all time...'. I asked my wise old grandmother where the ring came from. "My Granny gave it to me." While I rubbed the cream on my arms she saw my eyes looking inquisitively at the ring. "By the way," said my grandmother, "I have been meaning to give this ring to you, when Granny passed it on to me she said that it must follow down through the family to each eldest granddaughter," and she handed me the ring. I slipped it onto a finger on my right hand, it fitted perfectly.

"You have been so helpful to us recently and you know and love this farm; and you know how we farmers must consider conserving the beautiful countryside around us," said my grandmother. She then whispered dreamily "The girl who wears the ring as white

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*...one day  
when morning  
dawned and the  
weather was  
crisp...*

as chalk knows all time..." My thoughts were with the ring and I was overwhelmed to be given such a beautiful white ring, so I did not hear the last few words from my grandmother; instead I had a strange feeling which I didn't understand...

Sadly, my grandmother died soon after that. After her funeral Granddad explained that he would have to sell the farm as he couldn't manage on his own with just my help at weekends. At the same time, the strange feeling I had when my grandmother gave me the ring, came over me again, but this time with flutters in my stomach as well, and I remember her saying, "The girl who wears the ring as white as chalk knows all time..." I did not understand the feeling or the memory, and I was so shocked about the farm being sold that I spent the night trembling with the thought that we would have to move from the area, leaving all that we had worked for behind.

So with a heavy heart, Granddad put the farm on the market for sale by private tender. I shuddered at the thought of somebody taking over the running of the farm and spoiling all of the good work we had put into it to keep the pastures rich with beautiful wild flowers and delicate fluttering butterflies. Butterflies had all but disappeared from the surrounding prairies of corn and oil seed rape farmed by these modern farmers, but I could understand why Granddad wanted to sell. The sale catalogue went out and numerous people came to look over the farm. With each viewing I wondered would my grandfather have to move out and leave the farm I had come to love so much.

Autumn came and one day when the air was crisp with frost, the day of reckoning had arrived. That day the farm was sold, and we were meeting our new landlord who was a very wealthy man. Mr Duke travelled down from London not only telling us he had bought our farm but also indicating that he needed somebody to farm it for him, us. My dreams had come true, my grandfather did not have to move; but there was one stipulation. Mr Duke said that he would have full control over what and how the land was farmed. I wasn't sure I liked him – he seemed a bit of a smarty pants – what did he know about farming? What did he know about my beautiful Kent Downs?

Mr Duke had also bought the Coombe Down Manor, a large manor house just down the road. He moved in the next week and immediately started to annoy us all each time he visited the farm. Despite this, we welcomed him warmly as was our way.

The winter passed and the days were drawing out. It was a bright sunny morning and Mr Duke appeared in the farmyard looking for Granddad, his face held a grimace and I



*All the Downs  
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shake...*

could feel that something was brewing. Finally, the bomb shell was dropped, "You aren't producing enough!" In other words he was not making enough profit and he was going to tell us how to grow more! With great discussion, he finally suggested we buy some hens so we could have our own eggs and sell the rest. I had to admit it was a good idea but what did he know about hens? He said he would buy them when he was next passing the local town market. Suddenly I went very pale and felt this weird sensation and I heard myself whispering....

'All the Downs began to quake and time itself began to shake...'

'I know all about hens, birds and their ancestors the dinosaurs....I know all time and I was here millions of years ago when dinosaurs wandered this land...'

I said that I should accompany him to the market to help him choose the best hens but he glared at me and fumed that it was his farm and to mind my own business. I was so surprised and he was so scary that I didn't say anything and let him go to the market by himself. He knows best! So off he went and he came back with sixteen of the scraggiest hens ever. Over the next few weeks they didn't even lay a single egg so I took them back and exchanged them for fertile and fat young hens.

A few months had passed and I was at home on holiday. I bumped into Mr Duke in the farmyard and he had another suggestion. We should dig a pond for the farm so we would always have enough water for the cattle and sheep since we seemed to be having longer and longer periods of dry weather. He chose a spot just away from the farm buildings but forgot the farm was sited high in the Kent Downs with very little soil covering the chalk. I pointed out that it would be tricky as the earth on the farm was full of chalk and water went through chalk, and at that point I had a funny feeling and heard myself whispering....

'All the Downs began to quake and time itself began to shake...'

'I know all about chalk ...I know all time and I was here millions of years ago when Kent was covered in sea and millions of sea shells fell to the sea bottom and made this chalk in the Kent Downs.....'

Again I said nothing more as he dug a pond at the chosen site. As he was filling it with water the level initially remained the same but slowly over the weeks the level seemed



*I was here  
20,000 years  
ago during an  
ice age...*

to diminish. We left Mr Duke to refill the pond several times, but it didn't seem to hold any water until Granddad went out there and spent the morning lining it with clay to stop the water escaping through the porous chalk.

His ideas went on and on...he said we should get rid of the sheep and plough up the valley sides. When Granddad said that the slopes were too steep and were better for grazing animals.... I had a funny feeling again and heard myself whispering....

'And all the Downs began to quake and time itself began to shake...'

'I was here 20,000 years ago during an ice age and I saw melting ice, frozen chalk and boulders gouge out the steep valleys of the Downs you see today.'

Mr Duke bought a tractor the following month anyway and we tried not to laugh when his brand new tractor couldn't manage the steep slopes. On one particular day he parked it half way up the hill where it came to a halt with the wheels spinning. In the morning when my grandfather drew his curtains, he could not make out what was sitting in the nettles along the chestnut boundary fence. Suddenly it dawned on him; he started to roar with laughter until tears were streaming down his face. It was Mr Duke's beloved tractor, stuck upside down in the mud; luckily no one was on it at the time.

Mr Duke's track record was rather annoying, and his ideas always seemed to create a new problem on the farm. The shooting season was upon us and he decided he wanted to go shooting for deer, he thought that was what you did in the countryside. The deer who roamed wild in the woods often jumped over the fences onto the farm and grazed the grassland. I asked if he had ever used a shotgun before and as I said that I had a funny feeling and heard myself whispering....

'And all the Downs began to quake and time itself began to shake...'

'I was here 8000 years ago when Kent was covered in woodland and Stone Age men hunted deer, wolves and wild boar...'

"I think I can shoot a deer," he said and off he went dressed up in plus fours, (trousers which came to below the knees) and bright red socks. We all laughed. "That looks OK on a proper managed shoot" I thought. When he came back we heard the news, of course he had missed the deer since he had no training but instead had shot the neighbour's



*Kent was covered in woodland and Stone Age men hunted deer...*

dog by accident. Granddad piped up, "We think that's the dog that was worrying the sheep last year." Despite this everyone was sad for the dog and furious at Mr Duke.

After this little episode, the shooting season was over and his thoughts turned to the hedgerows. He had this urge to pull out the hedgerows and make all the fields larger and exactly the same size. Now here I put my foot down. I love all the funny shaped fields, the hedges full of animals and wild berries, insects and birds, and the trees here and there for animals and people to rest under. Anger swelled inside me and I said that I knew a thing or two about time and conservation as well. I knew that over the past 2000 years many different people had made the landscape which I love today. The first farmers cleared some trees from the wood covered landscape, the Romans built roads, the Anglo Saxons made more farms, and the Normans and all the people of Kent made the pattern of fields, villages, pathways and churches that I love today.

After my outburst about the tragedy of removing the hedgerows and leaving nowhere for the mice and birds to live, for the first time ever he didn't overrule me, instead, on this particularly day, he looked at me in a very peculiar way and went quietly back to his manor house. We later noticed him reading a report in my farming journal about how farmers needed to increase habitats for wildlife. After that day and as the weeks passed he didn't have any more crazy ideas and he was in fact very nice to Granddad and me. We all worked hard and I soon forgot his strange behaviour and even grew to like him quite a bit with his hair as white as chalk and eyes dark as flint.

During the following month, Mr Duke said that he was very impressed that I knew all about the people who had made the Kent Downs look how it does today, and he could see I loved the countryside. He said that he had grown to love my ideas but he had noticed my strange whisperings and intrigue had got the better of him. He asked if I knew the history of the strange white ring which I was wearing and why did I always seem to whisper ominously when he suggested something that I disagreed with.

He reached out to touch the white ring on my finger when I suddenly remembered my grandmother saying 'The girl who wears the ring as white as chalk knows all time...' and I shouted, "Don't touch it in case it changes the things I love so much about the countryside."

But it was too late and I began to feel very strange, a white glowing aura began to appear around me and I felt myself travelling very fast round and round through it and



*I saw the Kent Downs that I love today taking shape...*

time... suddenly I realised that it was I who knew all time, I was a time traveller, and the white ring allowed me to travel. I was zooming through the Kent Downs remembering the reasons I felt so odd when he tried to change the way we had been farming for hundreds of years.

(At each bit you can pause to ask if anyone can remember where in time you might go next)

I could see dinosaurs swishing through a swampy and flat Kent.....

I zoomed on and saw Kent covered in sea and the sea shells turning into layers of chalk.....

I saw hills heaving up into the Downs and then.....

I saw a cold Kent with melting ice water and boulders gouging out hills, making steep valleys. I kept zooming and.....

I saw Kent covered in woodland, people arriving to hunt bears and wolves, then.....

I saw people clearing trees and building farmsteads and as I zoomed on and on.....

I saw the Kent Downs that I love today taking shape with fields, settlements, hedges and trees.

Finally when I came back to the present I was back at the farm and I felt exhausted and had to sit down. Mr Duke was still standing there and said that he was so sorry he had not listened to me before and now he really could see why I loved the Kent Downs so much.

The time travelling spell means that I will carry on travelling until all the children here love the Kent Downs or until I can pass the ring on to somebody else.

I haven't travelled to the future yet ..., I wonder what the Kent Downs will be like?