



The Compasses lies on the edge of an old straight track in a hollow that shelters it from the cold south-west wind. It's in the hamlet of Chicks Grove. In the field below, you can still see the outline of an *oppidum*, where Romano-Britons mined for Chilmark stone, and somewhere up on the ridge is an Ancient British fort that I've yet to investigate.

A thatched two-storey inn dating from the fourteenth century, the Compasses is hard to locate on a map, despite its name—not for marine navigation, but after a stonemason's tool for marking out curves and right-angles. "It's one of those places, if you're looking for it, you can't find it," says Rob Hill, a surveyor who lives nearby. "You glimpse it out of the corner of your eye—and it's there."

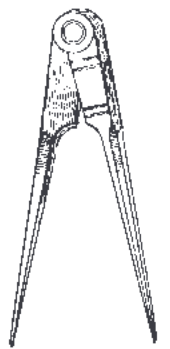
It's sheer luck that one of my favourite pubs is also my local.

I've tramped there on many a sunny evening: a twenty-minute walk that meanders behind the Anglo-Saxon tower of the church where I was married, and my children christened—and then dips across cornfields on a path parallel to the narrow river where no less an angler than Arthur Ransome flicked out his line for small wild Nadder trout.

For thirty years, I have ducked my head, and passed into the low-ceilinged, dark front-room, and ordered a pint of Butcombe.

"A healthy primitive people do not advance far towards civilisation before they develop communal gatherings for special purposes," wrote Alfred Watkins in his classic book on ley lines, *The Old Straight Track*.

Like Stonehenge, fourteen miles away, the Compasses sits at a very ancient cross route—if you take these things seriously. Watkins did. "The old straight track decided the site of almost every branch of human communal activity." The original inn was a meeting point for venting the community's emotional and superstitious requirements and beliefs—a horn lantern to show where the door



▲ The Compasses Inn, Chicks Grove

IMAGE: NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE

was, the welcoming light placed in a window slit that was not made of glass but of polished bone or parchment.

The Compasses came into being out of our need to come together, not merely to fraternise but, loosened by ale, to intellectualise and philosophise. It was to Chicks Grove what the coffee house is to Vienna, the café to Paris, the diner to New York. It was the glue that bound together the immediate neighbourhood; as well, it was an alignment of prehistoric antiquity that reached out to the distantmost points of the known world. Before the medieval traveller who stepped inside was dangled the intoxicating promise of shortly having revealed to him “new facts in other branches of knowledge outside his ken,” in the words of Watkins.

There is a wall to the left of the bar where I like to stand and sip my beer.

My story begins six years ago, opposite that wall, with a discussion about the eminent Australian writer Patrick White. I was chatting to a local poet, Keith Musgrove, whose wife recently had died, and saying how forcibly she had

reminded me of the heroine in White’s masterpiece, *Voss* for the Everyman edition of which I had just written an introduction. Keith had not read *Voss*, but was now intrigued to do so.

A fortnight later, we met on our usual patch of weathered brown carpet, a few feet away from the wall, and clinked glasses. I was keen to know what Keith thought of Laura Trevelyan, and whether he also saw parallels with his late wife Sara. He agreed that Laura had plenty in common with Sara, and that White’s novel was indisputably powerful, although by and by Keith went on to speak with equal fervour of another novel he had read.

A novel as powerful as *Voss*? I was thirsty to hear more.

Keith had come across it by accident. Recommended a book by his niece, he had taken a glance at the opening page and put it back on the shelf only to notice a novel with the same title right next to it. He opened this one and never put it down.

“What’s it called?”

▼ The Compasses Inn, Chicks Grove

IMAGE: NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE



“*The Power of the Dog*,” and promised to drop it off the next day.

The author, Thomas Savage, was new to me, an American novelist from Salt Lake City, who had died in 2003 and whose 1967 novel had appeared only in an American edition.

With some hesitation, I opened the book and started to read. Like Keith, I did not stop.

The following week I was in London having lunch with my paperback publisher who had republished John Williams’s novel *Stoner* to considerable success. She was looking for more overlooked titles, and I didn’t hesitate to suggest *The Power of the Dog*. An exhilarating drama between two brothers set in 1920s Montana, it was better even than *Stoner*, I told her.

On 6 November 2014, she emailed:

“I bought a copy.

“I read it.

“I bought the rights!”

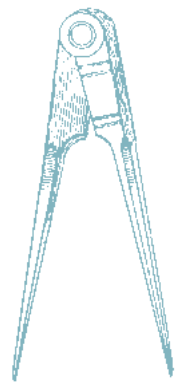
I rang Keith to tell him the glad news that Thomas Savage would now be gaining a posthumous new lease of life, all thanks to our conversation in *The Compasses*.

The Power of the Dog was published by Vintage in 2016; it sold many thousand copies, was judged by critics “entirely deserving of its *Stoner* comparison”, and then, three years later, on Friday 10 May, 2019, another email.

“Some pretty incredible news—ELIZABETH MOSS and BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH are to star in a film adaptation of *The Power of the Dog* and directed by Jane Campion! They go into pre-production at the end of the year. I owe you a lunch Mr Shakespeare.”

In the meantime, *The Compasses* had changed hands.

The new owner turned out to be the son of my former publisher, Tom Maschler. Old hands at the bar watched with falcon eyes to see whether Ben would realign the décor, rip up the carpet, brighten the gloomy (to some) interior. But the only change I observed was an improvement: Ben took down from the wall opposite my habitual standing-spot a soft-focussed photograph of mist rising



▼ Oil painting,
The Compasses

IMAGE: NICHOLAS
SHAKESPEARE



over the fields, and hung in its place a primitive oil painting of an Australian landscape that reminded me for some reason of Tasmania, an island which has long been part of my life, about which one traveller has written: “For Europeans, it represents the literal end of the world: if you travel any further you are on your way home again.”

One weekend, Tom Maschler came to visit, and during his stay I went to talk with him. He reminisced about the writers he’d published—Bruce Chatwin, Ian Fleming, Gabriel García Márquez, Ian McEwan. But there was one writer who had impressed him more than any of his authors. Patrick White.

“When he finished a book, he wanted me alone to come out to Sydney where he lived, and I would go to my hotel and read the manuscript and have dinner with him, and that became a ritual.”

▼ Oil painting on interior wall, The Compasses

IMAGE: NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE



Oh, he loved Patrick, in spite of his gnarliness.

It was invigorating to speak to someone who had known White, and I told Maschler of my own admiration for Australia and its prickly Nobel Laureate, and the strange way this had led, first to the rediscovery of another author, and then to a Hollywood film, after a discussion in his son’s pub (although some years before Ben had bought it) that had kicked off with the subject of White and his great novel *Voss*.

My story jogged a memory. Maschler said, “Patrick gave me a painting that used to hang in his study at the period when he would have been writing *Voss*.”

“Do you still have the painting?” I wanted to see it.

“I’ve given it to Ben. He’s hung it in The Compasses.”

“Really? Where?”

“It’s on the wall to the left of the bar.”

As I had written in my introduction to *Voss*: “White’s favourite painting was by Max Watters, showing ‘the country around Belltrees’. White was felled by that landscape which led him, as ever, back ‘to childhood, the source of creation, when perception is at its sharpest’. Ditto *Voss*. ‘It was the valley itself which drew *Voss*. Achhh! cried *Voss* upon seeing.’”

Early surveyors were called ley man or rod men, and carried sighting staves like wands. Rob, who trained as a building archaeologist, is a member of a mummers’ group that features characters who shuttle seamlessly between ages.

One Christmas evening, I watched Rob's troupe file into The Compasses to perform a medieval miracle play that had since evolved to embrace personalities diverse in time and status, such as Father Christmas, King George, Turkish Knight, and "the Doctor", who, when challenged where he came from, replied: "I've travelled the world, I've been to India, South India and Bendigo."

Over a pint of Butcome, Rob and I discuss the stone wall against which I'd seen his mummers perform their street theatre, interpreted by Rob as an allegory of life, death and resurrection.

"Psychic researchers have a theory of entrapped energy," Rob says. "Maybe the wall is picking up emotional frequencies."

He seems to have some sympathy with the idea. He once surveyed the roof space of an early mental hospital outside Warwick. "I was locked in with my assistant, I'm the only one who has keys, and there's a security guard outside." Suddenly, he heard noises down below. Screams, thumps, bangs, the huge slam of doors. Rob and his assistant looked at each other, as if to say: "What do you expect in a building like this, with so much energy and emotion locked up for 150 years?"

Another time, Rob was surveying a hotel on the River Severn, abandoned for forty years and with the floors falling in. "I had to climb up a ladder to measure, and I heard footsteps and the rustle of what sounded like a silk or crinoline skirt going down the corridor. But the only surviving corridor was a floor below. The door opened onto nothing."

Upon having to listen to a story encompassing Patrick White, Keith Musgrove and his wife, Thomas Savage, Jane Campion and the Australian artist Max Watters, Rob casts another estimating glance at the wall (built out of what Rob describes as "semi-coursed random rubble")—and the painting that Watters had named "House and Sheds Belltrees Turn Off". "A resonance builds up. You can't find a word for it because there isn't a word. You can't put a probe on it and say 'X or Y units of resonance'. It's something our senses feel. An 'atmosphere' is probably the best word. I take off my professional hat because I can't prove it, but I know it's there. I just accept there is something happening."

By way of conclusion, Rob says: "Perhaps the best answer does not come from asking: 'Why am I experiencing this?' Turn it round. What is it about this place that is creating that atmosphere, and where is it coming from? Ask: 'Why is this place here and what makes it survive?' ¶



NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE is an author of both fiction and non-fiction, journalism, essays and various other media. He is resident in both the UK and Australia and three of his books concern Australian topics. His writing often considers personal histories against a backdrop of major world events. His books about Australia have been influential in bringing their topics to international attention. *The Wall Street Journal* described him as 'one of the best English novelists of our time'.
