

I am sitting in my study in the school at the moment. It is a truly beautiful morning; my window is open and the sunshine is gleaming on the Cotswold stone of Pembroke College. The stone was dug out of the quarries near Burford, just twenty miles away, and is the loveliest building material on earth, its creamy colour varying in shade from the silver of the southern villages to the honey colour of Northamptonshire. Here in Oxford, the colour is light cream, a backdrop upon which the sun plays beautifully, sparkling in its early Spring freshness. Somehow in this unusual time, when our horizons have become more restricted, it is easier to notice the little details of what surrounds us. After your lengthy stay in your houses, I suspect you will know your homes a bit better; if you are lucky enough to have a garden, I suspect you will get to know it very well too. Do take time to look carefully at what is there. Savour the flowers coming into bloom; keep an eye out for the trees – what are they up to? Look carefully at your house. What material is it made from? Is it stone or brick? If brick, what hues of red can you see? If stone, is it the lovely limestone of the local hills? Has it begun to wear away with age as limestone often does? What about the pictures in your house? I suspect you pass them every day without noticing them. Have a look at them carefully. What are they of? Are they photos or paintings? Are they of people or places? What do the pictures tell you about your family?

Please do take the time to notice things close to you. The world really is a fascinating place. Because of the speed of global travel, we tend to think about the world growing ever smaller. You can now fly nonstop to Australia; the Choristers went earlier this month to Oman for four days, a place where the time was different and the weather hotter than it would be at the height of our summer. But what this time of isolation should remind us of is that the world really is a place of infinite size if looked at closely. There is just so much to be seen if you will only get out your magnifying glass.

I am very interested in a writer called Robert McFarlane. He writes about the natural world, in particular about the countryside of the British Isles. In a book called “The Wild Places,” he visits some of the most remote places left in this fascinating land. Many, of course are in Scotland and Wales, on the coast or up in the mountains, but one of the most interesting chapters is about a meadow in Dorset. He allows himself to become absorbed in the grasses and begins to adjust his focus until, instead of grass and a few flowers, he sees petals and pollen, he also sees insects and worms. Suddenly the meadow becomes a place of variety and of horizons, no longer a gentle scene but a place of colour and interest, in its own way, of wildness.

It’s like my American friends who came to visit me here in Oxford once. I asked them what they wanted to do for the day. “We’d love to go to Cornwall,” they answered. “But we can’t go there in a day,” I responded, “That’s the sort of place one goes to for Summer holidays.” “But it’s only 180 miles away,” they replied amazed, “Back home in the US that wouldn’t even be out of State.” But of course, here in England, everything is on a smaller scale and you would miss a great deal if one travelled too quickly, if one didn’t look closely. How many counties would one have to travel through to get to Cornwall? How many cities would one pass? How many towns, villages and hamlets? As the great writer on architecture, Alec Clifton-Taylor once said, “There is so much to see in this little country. One can never get to the end of England.”

So, take your time to readjust your focus. At a time when a microscopic organism has temporarily changed the world, when tiny things have proved how powerful they are, focus on the detail of what lies around you and find delight in it all.