


A FALL
TOUR OF
THE
BERKSHIRES

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

When I think of the Berkshires in autumn, I think of Tyringham Cobble, a rocky hill just up from the little town of Tyringham, Massachusetts. To walk up, you pass through a creaky wooden gate; only blue sky is ahead as you climb. Behind you, a broad valley is slung between hills—all farmland, as it has been since the first settlers arrived two centuries ago. A few hay silos gleam in the sun. In fall, once the crops are in, the fields are dark earth, but across the

A photograph of four horses in a pasture. The horses are of various colors: a light-colored horse on the left, a dark brown horse in the center, a black horse in the foreground, and a light-colored horse on the right. They are standing in a grassy field. In the background, there are trees with autumn foliage in shades of orange, red, and green. The scene is captured in a natural, outdoor setting.

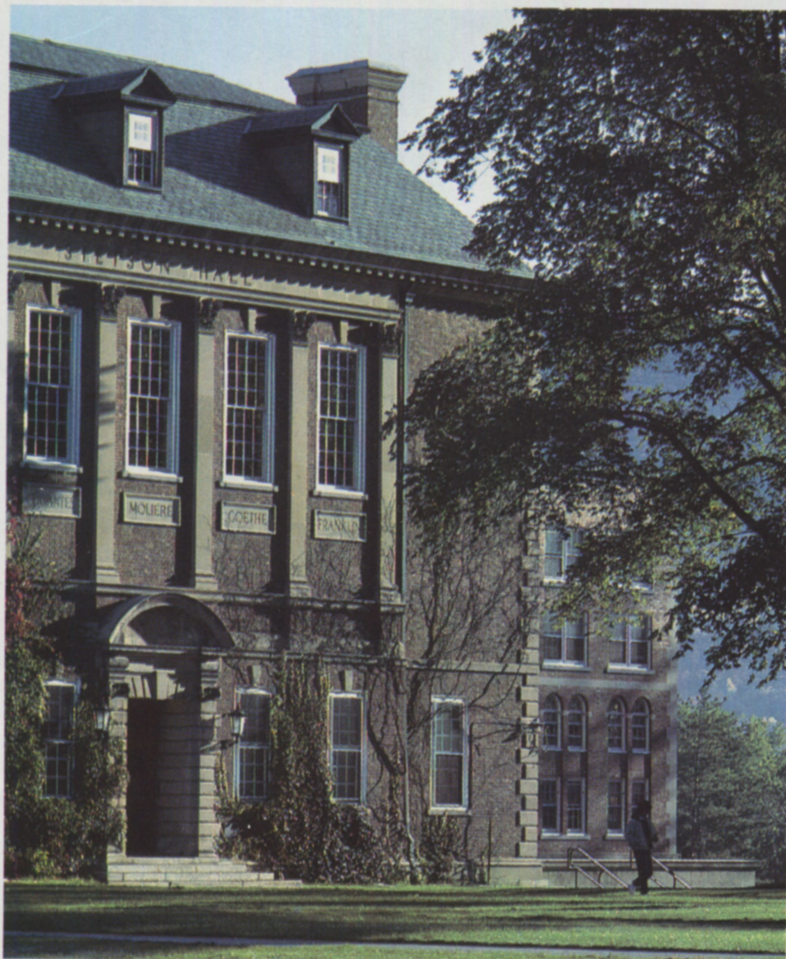
Surrounded by the russet
colors of autumn, horses
graze in a pasture outside
Sheffield, Massachusetts.

HANK MORGAN / RAINBOW



CLEMENS KAUSCHER

Stockbridge children (above) paint windows in anxious anticipation of Halloween. Stetson Hall (below) will soon be bustling with Williams College students.



A. BLAKE GARDNER

valley the hills are a blaze of foliage: scarlet, rose, lemon yellow, burnt sienna. You sit on a rock and draw breath, trying to take in all this beauty.

There is something otherworldly about the Berkshires, a unique character that the region has drawn from these magnificent hills. Geographically, the Berkshires are a stretch of the Appalachian range, which runs from Georgia to Maine. Truth be told, the Berkshires are not lofty; only Mount Greylock, to the north, breaks 3,000 feet. But they are distinguished—their brooding shapes sway over the region like gods.

Cut off from the settlements along the Connecticut River to the east by the Hoosac Mountains, and from the villages along the Hudson River to the west by the Taconic range, the valley of the Berkshires has always been naturally secluded, a place all its own. It wasn't until the early 1700s that the first settlers ventured into this wilderness. They purchased two townships from the Indians in 1722 for the grand sum of 460 English pounds, three barrels of cider and 30 quarts of rum, making the site considerably more valuable than Manhattan. (It is unclear which element of the purchase price the Indians found most enticing.) Nevertheless, in 1755 William Williams still found the place so frightening that he built a fort to guard the town of Pittsfield, with heavy ramparts and walls four inches thick.

Now that the surroundings have become less formidable, the Berkshires are a meeting point of two cultures—Boston's and New York's. From Boston the region has drawn an impressive literary and artistic tradition, starting with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Henry David Thoreau and branching out to Edith Wharton, Henry James, Daniel Chester French and, perhaps most famous of all, Norman Rockwell.

From New York it has absorbed a lot of money. The Berkshires enjoyed their greatest social flowering in the Gilded Age from 1870 to 1898 when it rivaled Newport and the Hudson River shore as the leading summer resort for the robber barons.



Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield preserves the spirit and ambiance of rural Shaker life. A cornucopia of garden herbs awaits packaging in the seed room (left). When traveling on to Stockbridge, visitors seeking lodging with old-fashioned charm should keep an eye out for the Red Lion Inn (below).

HANK MORGAN/RAINBOW

Many of the mansions, familiarly termed cottages, put up by these moneyed summer folk still stand in Stockbridge and Lenox and bear such evocative names as Wheatleigh and Windermere.

Yet despite these outside influences, the Berkshires retain their own unmistakable character. You can see it as you stroll down Main Street in Stockbridge, which has a lovely collection of quirky buildings at the town's center, or as you stop in at the many taverns unchanged since the days of horse and buggy. You feel it as you bed down in the wonderfully creaky old inns, take a turn in the exotic gardens or, most important, admire the elms, beeches, oaks, birches and maples burning like torches in the cool fall air.

Route 7 is the main road through the Berkshires, and it is the most sensible route to take for any tour. Starting in the south, down by the Connecticut border, stop first at the oldest dwelling still standing in Berkshire County, the house of Colonel John Ashley. Ashley was a lawyer, politician, soldier and businessman. The house, built in 1735, contains many 18th-century household artifacts.

Adjoining the property is another

of the Berkshires' distinctive cobbles, this one a smaller version of Tyringham's. Along with attractive views, it features an extraordinary profusion of plant life. Its 800 species of plants include 55 different types of ferns, the highest concentration in a continental United States area.

Returning to Route 7 and heading north, you soon come to Sheffield, the oldest village in the Berkshires,

founded in 1733. Along with neighboring South Egremont, Sheffield is famous for its many antique shops, selling everything from Colonial candlesticks to Kentucky armoires. The biggest, and probably the priciest, dealer in the region is the Twin Fires Antique Shop, which houses room after room of treasures. My own favorite is Douglas Antiques, which sells antique quilts and oak furniture at affordable prices. It's in back of the Weathervane Inn, a charming hostelry that would also make a good stop for lunch or dinner. Or you could dine at the Old Mill Restaurant in nearby South Egremont, which is perched over the Green River, a tributary of the Housatonic.

Great Barrington, a few miles along, looks oddly Midwestern after these cozy hamlets, with its row of high buildings lining the main street. It was in Great Barrington that William Stanley, later the founder of General Electric in nearby Pittsfield, demonstrated the use of alternating current. The town was one of the first to be lit by electricity. On Main Street is Searles Castle, now John Dewey Academy, a genuine castle that could have been transported block by granite block from some Scottish moor. It



EVERETT C. JOHNSON/DE WVS

From Boston the region has drawn an impressive literary and



PATTI McCONVILLE/THE IMAGE BANK

is not open to the public, but you should peer in the gateway as you go by.

Now to Stockbridge. You might consider putting up for the night in the Red Lion Inn, an immense but charming hotel that takes up a good portion of the downtown area. You'll want to putter around the town a bit, perhaps eyeing the citizenry for any resemblances to the models of Norman Rockwell's many paintings of the town and its people. The Norman Rockwell museum is located in the Old Corner House, a restored 18th-

century Georgian house containing many Rockwell paintings. Take a look in the Mission House on Main Street, which was built in 1739 for the Reverend John Sergeant, a Yale graduate who was the first missionary to the Stockbridge Indians. Up Prospect Hill to the north of Stockbridge sits Naumkeag, or "Haven of Peace," one of the area's many handsome summer cottages. Naumkeag was built by Stanford White in 1886 for Joseph Hodges Choate, U.S. ambassador to Great Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria and a prominent New York lawyer. Handsome as the building is, the grounds are even more fantastic, with a Chinese garden, linden walk and rose terrace.

East of Stockbridge off Route 7 on Tyringham Main Road you come to Tyringham. Its enchanting cobble is up Jerusalem Road from the center of town; park on the edge of the road to hike up. The views are heavenly.

Farther up Route 7 lies Lenox, chockablock with grand estates right in the town center. You can stay in one of them: Orleton, built for Harley Procter of Procter and Gamble, which is now the Gateways Inn. Rectangular and white, it looks not a little like a bar of Ivory Soap. Nearby is the Candlelight Inn, with a lovely dark-wood restaurant that looks much as it did at the turn of the century. Tanglewood, the famous summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, is closed in the fall, but you might drive by to admire the high pines that wave gently above the spreading lawn. Near it is Hawthorne's Little Red House where he wrote *Tanglewood Tales* and other books during his years in the Berkshires.

His colleague Melville favored Pittsfield, farther to the north on Route 7. In a mustard-yellow house called Arrowhead looking out at the line of distant hills that always reminded him of a squally ocean, he wrote the American classic *Moby Dick*. The house is now preserved



CLEMENS KAUSCHER

The Princeton Student (top) greets visitors to Chesterwood, once the summer home and studio of sculptor Daniel Chester French, now a museum in Stockbridge. Nestled in the glorious hills of Lenox is Wheatleigh (above), a European-style hotel in a 16th-century palazzo.

artistic tradition. From New York it has absorbed a lot of money.

as the headquarters of the Berkshire County Historical Society, which opens the residence to visitors during the summer and early autumn.

West of Pittsfield on Route 20 you come to an unusual museum of religious history in the Hancock Shaker Village. The Shakers believed in community property, equality between the sexes, celibacy, and an architectural functionalism that has proved remarkably enduring. A collection of Shaker buildings has been preserved on the property, including a round stone barn that allowed one farmhand to feed an entire herd of cattle by himself.

Beyond Pittsfield, the delights of the region thin out until you reach Williamstown up by the Vermont border. The town is named for Colonel Ephraim Williams, who left it money to start a public school on the condition that the town change its name to Williamstown. The school became Williams College in 1793. It's a lovely campus with a high-spired Gothic church, Thompson Memorial Chapel, and several Georgian dormitories and administration buildings. Stroll around for a while and then head out to the Clark Art Institute, surely one of the best small museums in the country.

You might want to spend the night in a new inn called The Orchards. It offers very comfortable and refined hospitality in a convenient setting off Route 2.

In the morning rise early to climb 3,491-foot Mount Greylock. There is a road to the summit. When Thoreau climbed it early one morning in 1849, he imagined himself "in the dazzling halls of Aurora playing with the rosy fingers of dawn." The air is clear and fresh up there, and the views are remarkable. You can see well into neighboring Vermont and New York, and even across to New Hampshire. But your fondest view will be of the Berkshires, sun-spangled with their autumnal colors, which are now, sadly, behind you. ■



HARRY WILKYSTOCK BOSTON