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## **'Sunset over Herne Hill: John Ruskin and South London'**

### **Important new book by Jon Newman and Laurence Marsh**

This is the first book to look with authority and in depth at the importance of South London in shaping the thinking of John Ruskin. Ruskin was one of the most articulate, original and influential critics and thinkers of the Victorian age, yet for all his foreign travels, public lecturing, the academic posts at Oxford, his work for London's museums, and those messianic forays into the new industrial regions of England, Herne Hill was the place where Ruskin spent his childhood and most productive years and where he wrote the books, articles and speeches that made him nationally and indeed globally celebrated and controversial. So it was also from here, and well into his old age, that he observed and pronounced upon his shifting world.

From his early age an acute observer and recorder of nature, Ruskin was intimately familiar with the unspoilt hills, skies, rivers and fields of Herne Hill, Dulwich, and Norwood. But his affectionate memories of this unblemished (but as he discovered, fragile) environment also turned out to be a painful benchmark for what developed in later decades.

So it was in Herne Hill, as the years passed, that Ruskin witnessed and described, with increasing horror, the destruction of the natural environment through railway building and uncontrolled suburban growth. The Crystal Palace, glittering on his skyline after its relocation from South Kensington, came to exemplify philistine capitalism for him, while his despair at the builders who traduced his vision for a "moral" Gothic architecture into a form of stick-on ornament is precisely located in South London. The smoke and growing pollution that he observed from his own windows in the skies of London deeply alarmed him, perhaps a prophet ahead of his time, as likely portents of climate change and the irreversible damage inflicted by an industrialising world on the natural environment – and of the erosion of the progressive social and aesthetic values that he had championed, often controversially, throughout his long life.

This highly readable and meticulously researched book concludes with an examination of the social and historical context of Herne Hill and Denmark Hill during Ruskin's lifetime and his family's place within South London as the 19th century progressed, when London was becoming the most prosperous and populous city in the world, and probably among the most polluted.

**"This illuminating and touching book restores John Ruskin to South London... the authors of *Sunset over Herne Hill* take us back to the neglected roots of the great Victorian romantic's creativity" - Andrew Saint, Professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, and general editor of the *Survey of London*, & author of "*London 1870-1914: a City at its Zenith*".**

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Image: "*Sunset at Herne Hill through the Smoke of London*", John Ruskin, 1876, courtesy of the Ruskin Museum, Coniston

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<https://www.hernehillsociety.org.uk/publications/sunset-over-herne-hill/>

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**Jon Newman** is a writer & archivist who works in & writes about South London. His other recent books have uncovered the courses & histories of its underground rivers & explored the local territories of writers and artists including Ruskin, Whistler & Blake.

**Laurence Marsh** has been a resident of Herne Hill for more than 30 years & is Vice-Chair of the Herne Hill Society. He has a particular interest in the history of the area & through the Society's publications has written extensively on the subject.

The [Herne Hill Society](https://www.hernehillsociety.org.uk/), a charity, works to protect & enhance the environment and amenities of Herne Hill. It also publishes books & a magazine.