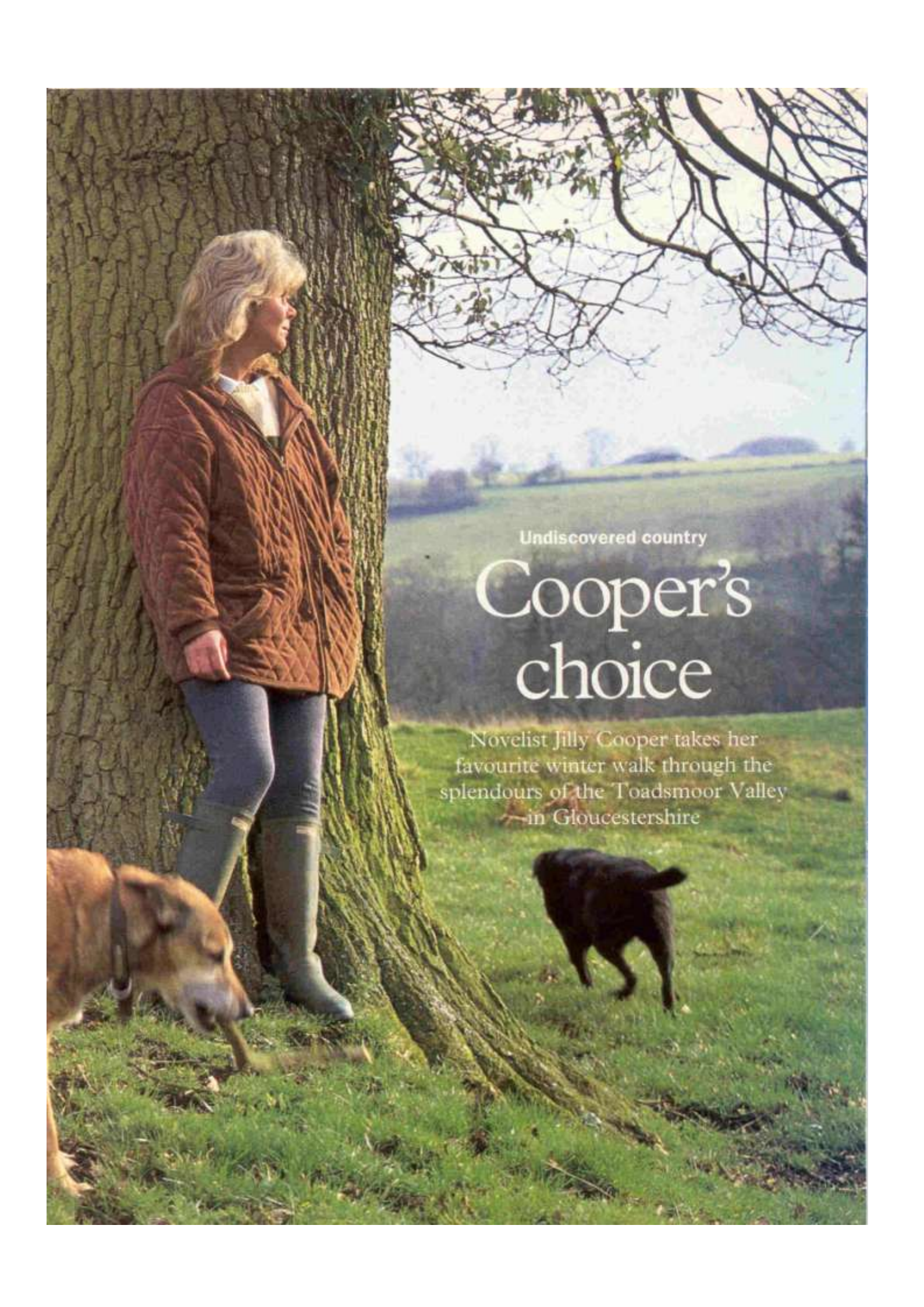
A black and white dog stands alertly in a grassy field, looking towards the right. A tan dog is partially visible in the foreground on the right. A large tree trunk is on the right side of the frame. The background shows a valley with rolling hills and trees under a cloudy sky.

With three of her regular walking companions, Jilly surveys the valley from a vantage point near the end of the route

Photographs · Jane Gifford



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a brown quilted jacket, blue jeans, and green rubber boots, stands leaning against the trunk of a large tree. She is looking out over a green valley. In the foreground, a tan dog is sniffing the ground on the left, and a black dog is walking on the right. The background shows rolling green hills under a clear sky.

Undiscovered country

# Cooper's choice

Novelist Jilly Cooper takes her  
favourite winter walk through the  
splendours of the Toadsmoor Valley  
in Gloucestershire





Several times a week, I walk four dogs – two portly old yellow mongrels, an adolescent lurcher and a young black Labrador – down the Toadsmoor Valley. In frenzied excitement, they charge down a tree tunnel out on to a grassy path. On the left is a field which has been turned into a sanctuary for rescued battery hens. When they were set free a few years back, they seemed to be clucking: 'Oh Brave New World'.

Over the fence to the right, a chestnut mare accepts chopped carrot with pleasure but, refusing to let her dapple grey male companion have a share, she has obviously been picking up tips on henpecking from across the way.

Chugging its way through marsh marigolds along the bottom of the hens' field is the Toadsmoor Stream. On

**Above:** a stile over Toadsmoor Stream leads directly into the ride, a paradise for dogs young and old.

**Below:** Jilly Cooper's Cotswold home – the beginning and end of her regular route.

**Opposite:** pale yellow primroses are harbingers of spring along the slopes of the quarter mile long ride, which will later be blanketed with flowers



its banks tower balsam poplars which gently waft their sweet scent during the spring.

Following the stream through two gates and over a stile, we pass a lovely old mill before we reach the valley proper, a green ride which slopes steeply downwards for a quarter of a mile. Snorting joyfully, the old dogs break into a canter. The young dogs take off into the woods on either side. Undetectable against the fawns and umbers of winter undergrowth, the lurcher crackles maniacally through the pale ghosts of last year's hogweed, ragwort and nettle.

In spring, the ride, which has never been sprayed, is adrift with violets and primroses, whilst summer brings everything from scabious to spotted ▷









< orchids growing thicker than buttercups.

In winter the valley is lit by the sulphur blur of hazel catkins, and every 50 yards, like a street musician, a robin sings from the branches of a thorn tree. The grass is pockmarked by the hoofprints of a herd of Highland ponies. Rumbustious and inquisitive, they thunder down to frisk my pockets for more carrots. Seeing them now with mud caked coats and long manes rakishly held back by burrs, it is hard to believe that in summer they win rosettes all over England.

Having watched the Toadsmoor Stream reduced to a trickle in the past, I can only rejoice at the recent downpours which have transformed it into a torrent, thundering louder than the ponies' hoofbeats. Crashing over logs and rocks, it vanishes every so often into caverns of bramble and wild rose.

At the bottom of the ride, the stream slows, choked by forget-me-nots, and the grass levels out into a sweep of flat land – a jousting meadow where perhaps



**Top:** an old oak clings tenaciously to the steep, crumbling banks of the valley.

**Above:** Jilly takes chopped carrots with her for the horses and ponies she meets along the way.

**Below:** the monotony of a flowerless landscape is broken by the sulphur blur of hazel catkins against a sharp winter sky



medieval knights once battled for some beautiful lady. The surrounding woods are festooned with old man's beard, like some druids' amphitheatre. One can imagine the grey elders shuffling into their seats to gaze down on the knights tourneying below.

Leaving the jousting meadow and the stream to chatter down the valley, we fork to the right into a beautiful wood, where all around us logs and rocks are being re-upholstered in the acid green plush of spring moss. Passing a little lake with a boat, across which the victorious knight might have rowed his lady, we reach the home of the dogs' pin-up, a big, rangy collie called Mot. Mot enjoys a KitKat with excited squeaks, and on red letter days is allowed to join us on the walk home.

We mount a path known as the nettle tunnel, because in summer it becomes too overgrown to walk through with bare legs; then up a field so steep it silences even the most relentless chatterbox. The climb is worth it, for turning at the top you can see the full glory of the Toadsmoor unrolling: khaki fields dotted with ash blond farms and crisscrossed by hedgerows. And on the great procession of bare trees that accompanies the stream down the valley can be detected the first garnet and amethyst glow of new buds, as mist rises opal blue in a thousand smoke signals.

Completing the circle we plunge into the little wood which leads back to our house. Even on the very bleakest, greyest day, the path is lit by the beacons of little beeches still clinging to their red leaves. But, already, bluebells, wild garlic, celandine and violets, sadly beloved of slugs, are thrusting their way through the sodden, russet leaf mould, and badgers are burrowing in the cocoa brown earth. Soon spring will join us on our walk. □

