Notes from a Devon Village

Barbara Bender

Until recently I lived in Branscombe, a small seaside village in East Devon. I lived there for nearly thirty years, which is the longest I've ever lived anywhere. As the child of German refugees who arrived in London in 1939, I never felt much at home, or that I really belonged. My mother did her best, but I always seemed to wear the wrong clothes, never seemed to know the right way to use a soup-spoon or fork, and, longing to conform, was mortified by my school friends' remarks about my mother's accent. My suburban childhood was, in retrospect, very lonely. Things got better, of course, as I got older. But Branscombe is the nearest I'll ever get to 'belonging' or being in place. I'll never be an 'insider': for that you'd have to be born in the parish, or have married in, but that's all right.

What's it like, this place? A tucked-away 'picturesque' landscape. Small streams from three steep valleys flow together a mile or so from the sea, to meander through a narrow flood plain, skirt a high shingle bank that almost blocks the valley mouth, and peter out amongst the pebbles on the beach. The bay is a wide-open scoop with tricky currents that makes fishing difficult. To the east of Branscombe Mouth, chalk and sandstone cliffs rise steeply above an almost sub-tropical undercliff created in 1792 when a large stretch of land slipped down. You can take a narrow path through the undercliff lined in May with gentian-blue gromwell flowers, and if you're lucky watch peregrine falcons and ravens disputing the crags overhead. In contrast, to the west, the cliffs

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 15 21/11/17 7:06 PM

are dark red marl with a thin topping of chalk and sandstone. During the great gales of 2014, slides of red mud came down and glistening bands of pink gypsum suddenly appeared.

Inland, the valley slopes are parcelled into small odd-shaped fields. It's pasture land, and the slopes are so steep that there's never been a reason to uproot hedgerows or enlarge fields. On the higher slopes, and along much of the cliff top, the grass gives way to unkempt woodland. Only the segments of plateau between the valleys have larger fields – now, more often than not, slobby pig-lands.

Once upon a time five hamlets dotted the main valley, but over the centuries they were stitched together by small terraces of houses. Even so, there's still a strong distinction – if you live 'up' Street your pub is the Fountain Head; if you live 'down' Square, it's the Masons Arms.

These words don't begin to describe what season or weather does to this place – a dusting of snow with footprints of birds or foxes, moon paths across the sea, long winter shadows sharpening tump and hollow, low sun haloing sheep. It is heart-wrenchingly beautiful. And yet, a couple of years ago, we moved over the hill to the next village. Why? Partly because, as we got older, the hills got steeper and the garden larger. More acutely, there was a sense of malaise. Branscombe had been 'discovered'; in estate agents' parlance it had become 'iconic'. The kiss of death. More and more houses have become second or third homes or holiday lets. Thirty-five per cent of the houses are unoccupied for most of the year. Come the winter, most of the cottage windows at Street are dark, the lanes eerily quiet. It feels as if the village is hollowing out.

Finally, two years ago, the Post Office was sold. The old owner had wanted to find a buyer who would take it on; the new owners said they would. But they'd just wanted a cheaper house, and after six months they closed it. It was the end of a long, drawn-out process. Talk to the old villagers and they'll tell you stories about half a dozen small shops:

> **Wynne Clarke & Rita Saunders:** Mrs Hopkins, she used to wear a shawl around her shoulders and a little sort of hat. She didn't use to walk like we do; she was more of a shuffler. She'd go out

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 16 21/11/17 7:06 PM

> for the paraffin, then come in – didn't wash her hands – for the cheese. She'd cut the bacon with the knife, she'd dig the sweets out of the bottle with the same knife ...[1]

Shops and front-room tea rooms, a bakery, blacksmiths and cobblers, carpenters and coffin makers, fishmonger and market gardeners. By the time we arrived, in the late 1980s, they'd mostly gone, but the Post Office-cum-shop, hub of the long, straggling village, where you met and caught up with the news, where, alongside pensions and stamps, tickets were sold for village entertainments, was still there. Now a visiting post office sets up in the Village Hall for a couple of hours once a week.

One of the reasons the place is 'iconic' is because it appears 'timeless', and that's because much of it is 'owned' by the National Trust. They've preserved it, and pickled it. They say that they want to work with, and for, the community, which may once have been true, but isn't now. They used to let their cottages to villagers, but the rents have soared far beyond the range of local people. They used to house their warden in the village and pay local people to do conservation work. Proposals that they might offer – at a reasonable rent – a small building to serve as Post Office or farm shop or exhibition space are brushed aside. Time, energy and money is spent stamping their corporate image on their properties and, by extension, the village, but contact and consultation are minimal (and, more often than not, bad-tempered). Not good for them, nor us.

So we decamped to the neighbouring village of Beer – less tidy, more mixed, much busier, with shops, a doctor's surgery and a Post Office.

Beer is a good place to live, but Branscombe is still *my* place. Partly, of course, it's about knowing people. Partly because my heart still lifts when, taking the steep road down into the village, I catch a first glimpse of the hillside and hedgerows rearing up on the far side of the valley, or, swinging seaward, wait for the moment when the sea – and our old house – comes into view. But more, it's because I *know* so much about this place. My Branscombe landscape is a *depthy* place ingrained with stories that go back thousands of years.

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 17 21/11/17 7:06 PM

Twenty-five years ago, a group of us set up the Branscombe Project. We were aware that the old villagers were getting older and that their children had often moved away. When we started there were at least forty people who had lived in the village all their lives; now, perhaps, there are ten. Alongside the affluent incomers, they have often seemed marginalised.

We began to record their voices and memories. Lillie Gush, the first person I ever recorded, was born in 'an hundred and one' (1901). With no teeth and a strong Devon accent, she wasn't easy to understand, but it was clear she was very angry. She'd lived in the village all her life, she'd looked after her family. Now there was no one left and no place for her, and she'd been sent to a care home some distance away. Not really anyone's fault, but still she felt it was unjust. She knew all about inequality and village class divisions. She remembered when the first water pipes were laid and how, though they passed through her parents' garden, 'they didn't even give we a tap. But', she added, 'they'll get their deserts where they've gone now!'

We wanted to do more than just siphon people's memories into cassettes. So we began to unwind their stories into annual exhibitions, wrote and published booklets, and ended up with a capacious website.[2] We also host well-attended winter talks.

Some of the best moments come as we pore over old photographs or postcards, or manipulate a digitised map[3] so that people can mark their favourite places or landscapes and wonder at each other's choices:

John Marchant: Pits, School Lane – the view to the sea and the sea of wild garlic flowers in the spring.
David Strange: South end of Stockhams Hill – a fantastic spot for star-gazing.
Betty Rowson: Goosemoor, where I lived as a child. I was happy there.
Mike Fielden: Up at Weston – as a kid going there. My father used to launch his glider up there – with an elastic band and a Jag.

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 18 21/11/17 7:06 PM

Other good times are spent walking the landscape, stopping and poking around, old villagers and incomers talking with one another, remembering things they'd quite forgotten, often contradicting each other. Moments of communal gathering-in; theoretical or techy know-how twining with people's intimate local knowledge.

After we'd transcribed the old gravestones in the churchyard we put on a performance. Masked ghosts (old villagers and new) emerged from behind the gravestones to recount the life-stories of the deceased. At one point, Ralph Cox suddenly stopped, swept out his arms to embrace the graves – 'Thirty-five of them, thirty-five, all my relatives!'

We went on from oral history to working in the archives, and to field-walking. We pieced together stories that went back 700, even 5,000 years. Where the chalk-lands of southern England come to an end, on the east side of Branscombe Mouth, you can see the bands of flint nodules in the cliff face. It's a beautiful black flint highly prized by prehistoric people; they would have scavenged the beach and scaled the cliffs for it. Inland, you find spreads of waste flakes, cores, scrapers and points. Once, when I was walking with a fellow archaeologist on Bodmin Moor, he pulled out a flint point from the side of the path – Branscombe flint! Even 5,000 years ago, people and things moved long distances.

Working with maps is another way of exploring time and space. Recently we ran workshops[4] with about thirty people in which we compared the 1840 tithe map, an early Ordnance Survey map and a current map, and plotted changes in the social and economic landscape. For example, on the 1840 and 1880 maps every farmstead was surrounded by orchards. In spring the parish would be flushed with sweet-smelling apple blossom. But, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the farmers turned the apples into fairly gut-rotting rough cider which then formed part of the farm workers' wages. Not great news for the household economy. By the 1960s farmers were being subsidised to grub up old orchards.

We also used maps to trace the changing fortunes of footpaths and tracks. They leave the best traces of past generations of men and women going about their daily business. Paths taken by the farm workers as

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 19 21/11/17 7:06 PM

they walked to and from the farms and fields, climbed the hills to the quarries and lime kilns, or made their way down the zig-zag paths to the cliff-plats or beach. The five shutes[5] that mark the spring-line along the lane through the village were where the women came to fetch water and gossip. Other paths took them to work in service in the big houses, or to Barnells where John Tucker, the mean-spirited entrepreneur who enforced a monopoly on their Honiton lace-making, lived. He paid them a pittance, and made them buy their goods at his overpriced truck shop.

Although many of these paths have gone and those that remain are often deserted, it's still true that the best way to get a feel for the topography of a place, what was in view and out of view, the activities that went into the making of landscape, is by walking the footpaths. If you take the coast path from the beach, up the steep west hill to the cliff top, you're following the donkeys that carried the coal landed from Welsh colliers up to the Berry lime kilns. Further along the cliff top the path broadens out into Kiln Lane and you'll find huge flint spills, debris from the old lime quarries, or occasional pieces of coal or brick from one of the long-dismantled kilns. Eventually Kiln Lane meets the lane by which farmers 'from away' came by horse and cart to fetch the lime.

Most of the old zig-zag paths down the cliff to east and west of the Mouth have fallen away or become overgrown, but a few remain. At Littlecombe Shoot you're walking smugglers' paths that date back to the eighteenth century. Littlecombe Shoot, wrote a Customs officer in 1807, 'is a good landing place, and a road [Kiln Lane] leading up to the head of Branscombe Village. The fences in general very indifferent, so that the smugglers may cross them in any direction that best suits their purpose to avoid the Officers.'

An old smuggler recounted this story late in the nineteenth century:

> My brother was landing tobacco at Littlecombe, when the coastguard boat rowed out gently from the shadow of the cliff . . . The three men hearing the noise turned round & rowed smack out

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 20 21/11/17 7:06 PM

> to sea. That was Friday night, & by Sunday afternoon they had rowed to Jersey and sent the goods back to the consigners. I call that acting honest.[6]

Some of the smugglers, and many others as well, put these same paths to more legitimate use. On the cliff faces where the land had slipped, there were patches of soil which, aided by sea breezes and the sun on the cliff face, and manured with seaweed from the shore, produced very early crops. Farm workers renting the plots could grow early potatoes, vegetables and flowers. They called themselves cliff farmers and used their donkeys to carry the produce up the cliff and off to market. It gave them a modest, but much prized, independence. But it was hard work, and by the mid twentieth century the plats were abandoned.

But not quite. Some of the stone linhays the cliff farmers had built for their donkeys were turned into holiday huts. When these new cliff-dwellers were asked to mark their favourite places on our map, it was nearly always 'their hut':

> **Flo Pearson:** It's our hut – it's been part of my life always and is my favourite place in the world. My dad's ashes are there, plus years of plants we've tried to protect from the brambles.
> **Adrian Symons:** Recently my mother and my sister counted about thirty or forty different types of wild flowers.

And that's not the end of it. In 2007 a startling bit of Branscombe history was made when a huge container ship, the *Napoli*, breaking up in the channel, was beached at Branscombe below Littlecombe. Overnight the wind came up and nearly 200 containers slipped into the sea, many washing up on the shore. They contained an eclectic assortment of BMW engines, motorbikes, cosmetics, personal belongings, oak barrels, nappies, dog food and Xhosa Bibles. A microcosm of world trade.

The popular press castigated the white-van people 'from away' who arrived a couple of days later, for the wild scenes on the beach. Before

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 21 21/11/17 7:06 PM

that, however, the local lads had already appropriated most things of value. They easily avoided police cordons and guards by using the same old cliff paths. One night, Jamie Lambert and his mate were scouting the containers at Littlecombe when they suddenly saw the guards:

> 'Run!! Let's get the hell out of here!' The search lights were going and the people were chasing us. Pulled ourselves up the rope, started going up the cliff. We didn't use torches and we managed to run zig-zag all the way up the path. But, obviously, those security guards ain't local, they would struggle to believe that anyone could negotiate those cliff paths without a torch, so they spent the next twenty minutes ripping apart the chalets, going through the hedgerows. We were long gone!

Same footpaths; different histories.

Final story: not long ago we took an inland walk with a group of villagers. We were walking in the footsteps of Harry Layzell, village blacksmith-cum-chimney-sweep-cum-postman. Sometimes he'd deliver the post by bike, but mainly he walked, and sometimes it was a good eight miles. Jenny Newton, now in her seventies, used to ride on his shoulders, and as they went along he'd be singing Methodist hymns at the top of his voice. So, with Jenny, we walked part of his round. Down the steep hill to Hole Bottom where the owner of the former mill came out to tell us about the ghost of a lady in a red cloak, another man showed us the millstone that marks his threshold, and Angela Lambert brought out a polished chert axe found in the stream-bed behind her house. Then up the steep hill to the disappeared farmhouse at Hooknell. Ross, the farmer's son from up the road, remembered that his grandma had lived here and that, each day, she'd walk up to the farm to fetch her bread. We stopped at another disappeared cottage – faint traces of wall foundations, different sorts of vegetation where the postman's path was barely visible – then trudged up to Hill Arrish for tea and buns.

Hill Arrish is a grand new house built on the footprint of a 1930s Indian-style bungalow. Pulling down the bungalow revealed a cache of

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 22 21/11/17 7:06 PM

newspapers. Copies of the *Black Shirt* and *Action* dating from 1935 to early 1940. Sitting out in the sun, reading these obscene anti-Semitic rags, the hairs rose on the back of my neck. The then owners of Hill Arrish, Rafe Temple-Cotton and his mother, Lucy, had been ardent fascists, and Rafe was chief south-west organiser for Mosley.[7] He ran a large market garden and was considered a good employer, but his innocuous white delivery van also served as a grandstand for him to spout his fascist views – in Sidmouth and Hyde Park. Villagers still remember him and some at least were not unsympathetic. In Sidmouth the locals threw him in the river.

It's a truism that history's always in the making and that we're part of the making. Sometimes, being on the spot, you can offer small interventions.

In 2014 came gales so fierce you couldn't stand up, a sea so wild that spume from the waves topped the Sea Shanty café. The waves took out the foundations of the beach chalets to the east and tore away the trackway to the west. Natural England and the National Trust showed little sympathy. For them, the wooden chalets were a blot on the landscape. Far better, and all part of the national Shoreline Management Plan, to allow cliff and beach to revert to their 'natural' state. The owners of the chalets and café offered to pay the costs of reinstatement. To no avail: the pebbles were not to be moved because they might disturb the elusive scaly cricket (which, it seems, had not been much disturbed by the beaching of the *Napoli* or the heavy clean-up operation that followed). No 'foreign' stone could be imported to shore up the trackway. They envisaged that as sea levels rose and breached the pebble bank, a fine estuarine habitat would be created. In the longer term they may well be right, but in the meantime the chalets are part of the landscape, much loved, and they and the café are important to the local economy.

Moreover, just as we recognise that the gale and its aftermath are not 'natural' but are caused by climate change due to human activity, so the notion that the cliffs should be returned to a pre-chalet 'natural' state is nonsense. So we have helped make the case for a *cultural* landscape. Had they not noticed, for example, the stands of white buddleia

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 23 21/11/17 7:06 PM

that mark the old cliff plats? Permission has reluctantly been given for 'temporary' repairs.[8]

That's it. For me love of place comes with the detail, and in trying to understand the stories and histories that go to make a living landscape; comes, too, with a sense of belonging.

Bringing this piece to a close, I realise that I've hardly cited any significant landscape literature. And thinking about it, I find myself wanting to bypass more recent writings, to return to the people who first fired my imagination and helped form my understanding of place and scape. To W. G. Hoskins[9] for his pleasure and skill in explaining why a road takes a particular bend, or what a faint field trace might mean. For insisting that 'Any small tract of England [makes] a marvellous study under the microscope of the local historian'. And to Raymond Williams[10] for teasing out the way cultural perceptions and social and economic relations play off one another, and for shifting easily between micro and macro: 'history active and continuous: the relations are not only of ideas and experiences, but of rent and interest, of situation and power; a wider system'.

And John Berger for not only insisting on how subjective our understanding of the world is, and how caught up in unequal social relations, but for his ability to 'hold things dear', to feel gratitude, and to engage with other people.[11]

Perhaps, before we uprooted from Branscombe, we should have reminded ourselves that history *is* always in the making. Our sombre assessment of parish and community is already open to question. For example, it's noticeable that, being able to work from home, and with the council making efforts to rent out council houses to local people, there are now more young people in the village. The primary school begins to look less like a basket case. The young ones have successfully fudged traditional events – Apple Pie Fayre, Harvest Festival – with new ones to create a Harvest Fair that's re-enthused the community. New stewardship schemes have begun to address environmental and social issues. A local environmental group is in the making, wanting to talk within the community about climate change, bio-diversity and sustainable energy. 'Bad times' spur new energies.

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 24 21/11/17 7:06 PM

Notes

1. Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern (eds), *Branscombe Shops, Trades & Getting By* (Branscombe Project, 2000). In the context of village and Project I use my married name, Farquharson. It seems more comfortable than Bender, my professional maiden name.
2. www.branscombeproject.org.uk
3. The digitised 'Favourite Places, Favourite Landscape' map, and a discussion of what it was that people chose, and why, is posted on the Project website.
4. This project, undertaken in conjunction with the East Devon AONB and English Heritage, was known as the HEAPS project – Historic Environment Action Plan.
5. The shutes are pipes let into the roadside banks to tap the spring-line water.
6. Ephraim Perryman, talking to J. A. Morshead in 1893.
7. Todd Gray, *Blackshirts in Devon* (Mint Press, 2006).
8. These issues are taken up in the last chapter of *Cliff and Beach at Branscombe* by Barbara Farquharson and Sue Dymond (Branscombe Project, 2014).
9. W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (Pelican, 1955).
10. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973).
11. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (BBC & Penguin, 1972); with Jean Mohr, *A Fortunate Man* (Canongate, new edition 2016); with Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man* (Penguin, 1975).

001_288_Ground_Work.indd 25 21/11/17 7:06 PM