

BRANSCOMBE PROJECT HISTORY SNIPS JANUARY 2021

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Oh dear! This is not where we want to be in January 2021! Apart from the roll out of vaccines, the news is dire ...

Nonetheless - we're hoping that you're looking after yourselves ...

... We're hoping that the year goes well for you ...

... We're hoping that we can start the winter talks in the Autumn

... we're hoping we might update the exhibition-that-never-was-last-year and put it on later ...

John and I have been working on a book. I think we've already told you about it. It's set in eighteenth century Branscombe, and it's about the rapacious landlord, John Stuckey, who lived at Weston, and the evangelical parson, Thomas Puddicombe, who went head-to-head with some of his congregation and with John Stuckey. One of the reasons we love writing it is that we have to imagine ourselves in an eighteenth century landscape - which allows us to conjure up walks we know and love and then peel back the centuries.

Here's an extract from a chapter where John Stuckey, as a young boy, is riding with his



two brothers, Robert and William, from the farmhouse in Weston to All Hallows school in Honiton. Along the way, they meet up with other local boys. They take the lane that's still called Grammar Lane, turn into Gatedown Lane (where Oakdown Caravan Park is now), cross the main road and turn right ...

' Crossing to the track (now behind Kingsdown garage) that takes them along the edge of Kingsdown Common, they pass the old boundary stone on the corner of the parishes of Salcombe Regis, Branscombe and Colyton. In 1728, it was described as:

Ye bound stone, twenty foote from Branscom hedge upon wch stone a man may Lay his Belly with his right hand in Branscom; his left hand in Colyton & his foot in Salcom.

Not hard to imagine them stopping and spreadeagling on the stone, trying to get their arms and legs in the right positions. But they wouldn't loiter because they knew that bad things had happened close by. For the same map that described the bound stone also marked a suicide grave where: ... *Brascom men buried a p'son of their p'ish wch Came to an untimely End.* They knew that killing yourself was a crime and a sin, so you couldn't be buried in the churchyard, and the restless souls of suicides often came back to haunt the living. They'd been told how some of the local men had crept out after dark, carried the body out of the parish and buried it

near the crossroads. No funeral ceremonies, just shouting and banging to scare away the dead man's spirit. Maybe a stake had been driven into the body – to skewer his restless soul.

At the end of the Common the boys crossed Rakeway Head bridge over Nanny Water and joined the old Honiton road, partly hedged, but mostly running across wild heathland. This was a dangerous place with more than its fair share of ghosts, ghouls and brigands. There was Roncombe Gurt, a deep gully where later, in 1787,



two excise men were ambushed and killed by smugglers. To left and right lay old burial mounds, larger and more of them than today. No one knew anything about them except that they were supposed to be haunted, or perhaps inhabited by goblins. Then as now, the road was often shrouded in mist and fog, just the sort of weather in which goblins might lure you in with promises of hidden treasure.

Even when you reached the crossroads to Sidbury, Ottery and Honiton, you weren't completely out of this spooky pagan world.



Close by there was another large stone, which it was said, rolled down during the night to the source of the river Sid, either to drink or to wash off its bloodstains. Then, before dawn, it returned to its place. (It used to be at Putts Corner, now it's in front of the Hare and Hounds).

At the crossroads the boys turned east and eventually dropped down the steep hill into Honiton. Honiton was exciting in quite a different way. It was a bustling market town, where cattle and sheep were driven up and down the high street to the market off Silver Street behind the school. At regular times, the stage-coach from Exeter would trundle and clatter into town, bugle blaring. Honiton was a staging post on the Great West Road, and the main street was lined with inns, taverns and shops serving both travellers and marketgoers. The coach would put down and pick up its passengers, collect parcels and cases of lace, and then set off again for London.