

The Branscombe Project: History Snips, May 2021

Out of the blue, Sara Hook sent the Branscombe Project an email. She explained that when she took on the Eyrie on Littlecombe Shoot in 2013, she'd found a note from Geoff Exell saying he'd built the hut with his father in 1937. She got in touch with him and he gave her a copy of his hut memoirs. Here are some excerpts; the full text will be posted on the Branscombe Project website.

My Memories of "The Eyrie" at Littlecombe Shoot Geoffrey Exell

1937: Farmer White of Berry Farm owned the land from the top of the cliffs down to the beach. He rented out a number of plots which were worked by Clifford Gosling. Gosling used seaweed as fertiliser but did not employ crop rotation. Eventually the potato crop failed, due to what Gosling called "potato sick" and he ceased to work those plots.

My father, Alan Exell, who worked in Lloyds Bank in Exeter, was informed by a customer that one of the plots was vacant – was he interested? Of course the answer was yes! He contacted Mr White and was granted the long term rental for the princely sum of £2 per annum!

"We 3" - father, mother and me aged nearly 9 - drove over from Exeter. The site was very overgrown and on a steep slope. We noted 4 huts by the beach but ours was the very first one on the cliff itself.

We set to work and in the course of four weekends cleared and levelled a site large enough to take a modest sized hut. We found 3 large sleepers on the beach and, with difficulty, carried them up the cliff. Father ordered a sectioned hut from a local firm and this was delivered to the top of the cliff.

The Build:



12th May 1937: George VI's coronation and a public holiday. Father organised a party of lads from the village to carry the 14 sections from the cliff top down to the site. This was a difficult task down the narrow path but the lads worked with a will and completed the task by late afternoon. They bolted the sections together and installed the roof. Father covered it with

tarred felt while I was tasked with creosoting all the exterior woodwork. We named the hut EYRIE in recognition of the fabulous coastal view.

The extras:

We obtained a small shed to use as a toilet, with a portable ELSAN “perch” This was emptied into small trenches which we dug on the vegetable patch. It resulted in amazing vegetables!

Father obtained some timber and I helped construct a lean-to. This served as a kitchen, wash place and storage. It was also just large enough to take a bed and consequently was called “*The Matchbox.*” This complemented the toilet shed wryly named “*Wits End!*”

Water, milk, food ...

Water was no problem with the stream nearby. I was tasked as water provider and I carried two water cans back to the hut several times a day. I also became a “milkman” and went to Berry Farm each morning to collect milk in a can. One small problem was the donkeys. These were used by Gosling to carry his potatoes and seaweed. When not being worked they were free to roam on the cliff and sometimes blocked the narrow path. They had a habit of biting or kicking so I had to edge past gingerly!

There was a small shop at the bottom of Berry Hill owned by Mrs Ward, and bread from the Bakery - sold straight out of the oven.

We purchased for £1 an old rowing boat which we repaired. We fished for mackerel and pollock – at least father fished while I did the rowing! We also found a good supply of prawns and shrimp at low tides.

With the vegetables that we grew, and blackberries plentiful along the paths in Summer and Autumn, we were nearly self-sufficient.

Cooking and heating

We had a paraffin Valor stove for cooking inside the lean-to. In order to save fuel (paraffin was heavy and smelly) we also cooked outside on a fire pit which we dug at the bottom of the plot. An Aladdin paraffin lamp that gave off a surprising amount of heat on chilly evenings.

Keeping the path clear

The path down to the hut was steep and difficult. We collected large flat stones from the beach and I helped father cement them into steps. I am gratified they have survived to this day! We also cut a path through the undergrowth at the bottom of the plot which gave us access to the other path to the beach and was an excellent short cut ...

Recreation



We had a swim virtually every day from May through to October ... I remember the joy of drying off lying on the hot pebbles.

On rare wet days we gathered in one of the huts to play cards or mah-jong. If the rain really set in, we set off to Sidmouth for a film at the cinema.

WW2

On 3rd September 1939 we listened on a portable battery radio to the Chamberlain broadcast announcing the start of WW2. Father had served in the trenches in WW1. He told us to pack anything valuable or personal and we drove back to Exeter. We wondered if we would ever see the Eyrie again.

In fact this was the “Phoney War” when nothing much happening so we were able to return occasionally. The only restriction was severe petrol rationing.

All that changed when Dunkirk happened and invasion became a real threat. On one of our rare visits to Eyrie I was on my milk collection walk. As I approached the top of the cliff I found my way barred by a coil of barbed wire. A loud voice shouted “Halt, who goes there!” A section of soldiers were guarding the path. I convinced them that I was not an 11 year old German paratrooper and was allowed to pass to get the milk. It was a scary moment!

Later on during the Battle of Britain I was on the beach when I heard the sound of a dog fight overhead. Suddenly a Spitfire was hit and crashed into the sea just off the beach. A man from one of the beach huts helped me launch the boat and we rowed out. Sadly we found no sign of the pilot.

Very shortly afterwards a German bomber was shot down and crashed on the rocks at the Western end of the beach. Retribution!

One morning we were in Eyrie when several bombs were dropped on the top of the cliff towards Weston. The ground shook and father said that they were probably trying to hit the radar station there.

In 1941 we were at the Eyrie one night and we witnessed the blitz on Plymouth. The sky over Torbay was bright red from the fires and we could see the flashes of bombs exploding. Then on 3rd May 1942 it was Exeter’s turn. Father’s Lloyds Bank was totally destroyed and our own home was

badly damaged. Because of this, coupled with father's Home Guard duties, we were unable to visit Eyrie for several months.

Post War

The WW2 ended in August 1945 when I was 17. We were in Eyrie on VJ Day and we went down to Branscombe to celebrate. The villagers were gathered around the Fountain Head and, suitably lubricated by rough cider, there was much singing, cheering and dancing in which we were happy to join.

Final thoughts and events

In the 1930s and 1940s it was very rare that we met any strangers on the cliff paths. We felt as if we were living in a unique little world of our own. . We never felt the need to lock up ...

The beach was usually deserted. There was one notable exception. In 1940 after Dunkirk, a small military camp was established on a field adjacent to Berry Farm. One day we were on the beach when we were surprised to see a party of soldiers appear. An enterprising young officer had brought his platoon down for a swim. They stripped off - no costumes, of course - and dived in. Mother had to avert her gaze, at least I think she did! ... I often wonder how many of that platoon survived until the end of the war.

I was called up for National Service in 1946. In 1955 my father became ill and died. That ended our involvement in The Eyrie after 18 happy, enjoyable, challenging and eventful years.

Events decreed that I would not see The Eyrie again for over 60 years. When I finally returned I was surprised to find a signpost erected on the cliff top with an arm pointing to Littlecombe Shoot - it was no longer the hidden gem of my early memories!