

HISTORY SNIPS FROM THE BRANSCOMBE PROJECT – AUGUST 2021

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We had some nice feedback after we wrote the piece on Sea View and Millers Lea, so here's another example of sleuthing, curious coincidences, cul-de-sacs – and, alas, the fallibility of memory!

To begin at the beginning: in February 2019 a woman emailed us -

I'm a writer working on a story that relates to Branscombe, and would be very grateful for any help that you can give me.

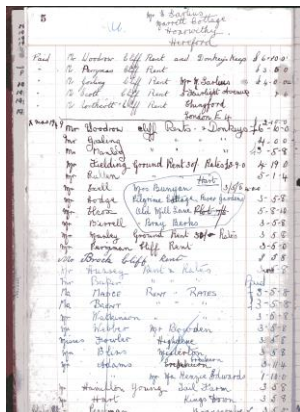
My interest is in a family called the Fieldings, who moved to Branscombe in 1940 -- they built a bungalow on one of the cliff plats, and later lived in a cottage near the church. Les Fielding and his son Don served with the Home Guard during the war, and worked in the munitions factory. ... He died in 1973, and his wife -- Alma, sometimes known as Pat -- in 1976.

I visited Branscombe a couple of years ago and met a villager who knew the Fieldings [we later established that this was Sid Sweetland]. I'd be very interested to know if there's anyone else who might remember them ...

Sue Dymond and I trawled our memories, and talked with Betty Rowson. We emailed back:

Dear Kate ...

Well – of-course we know who you are ... and we both much admired Mr Whicher [The Suspicions of Mr Whicher] ...



So, yes, ... we know a bit about the Fieldings ... They built a hut ... out on the cliffs at Littlecombe. We're pretty sure we have some photographs. The huts were rented out by the Whites at Berry Farm and we've got some of the rent books.

We took an old friend [Betty!] out for tea today, and she remembered Les and Don working in the munitions factory. She admitted that, because he rented the cliff hut, there were rumours that he was spy. When asked, she was adamant – 'No', she said, 'no, no, he was a very nice man.'

Tom White's rent book 1949

Kate Summerscale, wrote back, adding more detail:

Les and Don joined the Home Guard. Les took charge of the nightly patrol along the cliff top and of the machine-gun emplacement above the beach, while Alma volunteered as a nurse with the St John Ambulance brigade, tending convalescent soldiers in Sidmouth.

Sue then remembered that when she was researching *Branscombe at War* she found a list of the Branscombe home-guard which included Les at the Devon Heritage Centre.

She also remembered Alan Gosling (Cliffy Gosling's son) telling her about building the huts out on the cliffs:

Those huts they've been out there since before the war you know ... We used to get paid 6d to carry them (the chalet sections) down from the top of the cliffs. We'd put a ladder down and then put a rope on and slide them down.

Alan's sister Peggy – married to Sid Sweetland – also remembered

Father [Cliffy Gosling] let [Les Fielding] built the hut there. I think it was part of New Plat. But there was always a hedge between ...

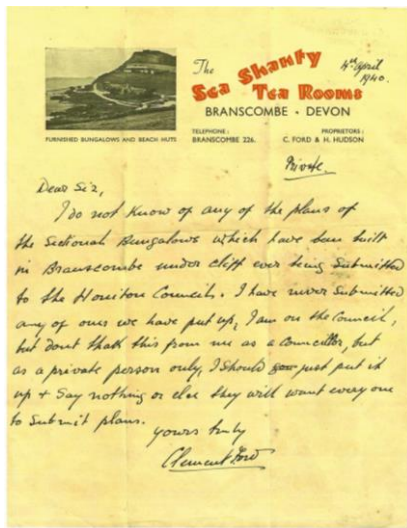
Sue had been lent some photographs and papers by Mr Reid who took over the Fieldings' hut in the '60s. There was a plan of the hut drawn by Les Fielding, a couple of photos showing how they camouflaged the roof to foil enemy bombers, a letter from 'Squire' Clem Ford suggesting it would be better if Les *didn't* apply for planning permission, and a list of arms and ammunition that Les had dumped over the cliff at the end of the war.



FIVE GUNS THROWN OVER CLIFF FROM FRONT GARDEN AFTER
THE WAR - SURPLUS TO REQUIREMENTS

- ① BIRD GUN BOLT ACTION
- ② AMERICAN CARBINE
- ③ 4 10 SHOTGUN - BOLT ACTION
- ④ .22 RIFLE
- ⑤ 12 BORE SHOTGUN

*List of arms & ammunition thrown
over the cliff at the end of the war*



Clem Ford's letter suggesting that Les Fielding should not apply for planning permission

Sue and I invited Kate Summerscale to tea and when we'd settled down she told us the story of Alma Fielding. She was born in 1903. By the early '30s she was living with her husband Les and son Don in a modest terrace-house in Croydon. Over the years she'd experienced several mental and physical traumas and had begun to have psychic experiences. Then, in 1938, a poltergeist 'materialised' in the house - things flew off walls and shelves and out of cupboards. She reported what was happening to the *Sunday Pictorial*.

Kate pointed out that during, and even before, the First World War, huge numbers of people from all classes had lost lovers, sons, husbands, and friends. Often they turned to spiritualism in an attempt to make contact beyond the grave. Of course, there were 'spiritual' charlatans and a great deal of fakery, and Societies were set up to record and 'test' the evidence. Nandor Fodor, a refugee from Hungary, was a member of the International Institute of Psychical Research, and when Alma reported her poltergeist, he got in touch. He took her seriously, he *wanted* her to be the real thing. He put her through different tests and each time she passed - or, at least, she didn't fail. But the pressure was on and she became more and more stressed. Finally, at a significant 'scientific' meeting in 1938, in front of a room full of doubters and believers, she was body-searched and x-rayed. Two small objects were found secreted in her corset.

Alma was utterly humiliated; Fodor was devastated. He still didn't entirely doubt her - although she had resorted to fakery, some of the things that happened to her might still be genuine. Kate Summerscale, in telling Alma's story, keeps her powder dry. After all - as Shakespeare said - or got Hamlet to say - *'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'*.

Alma had a nervous break-down and in 1939/40 she and her family packed their bags and came to live in Branscombe.

After talking with us, Kate went up to Berry Barton and Mark White took her out on the cliff and showed her the hut. She talked with Jean Brimson; she found the Fieldings' gravestone in the churchyard.

Sue and I pressed on, trying to find out more about what happened after the Fieldings arrived. We found that, despite her traumatic experiences in London, Alma occasionally held séances. Alan Gosling told Sue he'd gone to one and *there was jingling and spirit voices, and he felt a great heaviness in his legs and upon his shoulders*. Someone else said that the table thumped excitedly and knives and forks leapt in the air. On another occasion pennies rained down from the ceiling. But Alan was in two minds about it, he said that there was an occasion when a bell fell out of her sleeve, and it had a Woolworth's tag on it! He said that there were rumours that the séances were being held to scare people away from the cliffs, and there was talk of a spy - but he wouldn't say any more.

Betty Rowson (as was her wont) was sceptical. She corroborated Alan's story. Alma? She was a funny person, used to hold séances, but, Betty said, *'She was a fake. See, one time, a bell fell out of her sleeve. Even had a price tag on it!'*

And there we left it. Kate found out that they'd moved to Church Row in the 'sixties, and had both died in the 'seventies. Some of what we'd told her appeared in her book *'The Haunting of Alma Fielding'* (Bloomsbury Circus) published to much acclaim in 2020.

There was one question that Kate hadn't ask - why had Alma and her family chosen to move to Branscombe - which was, after all, a long way from London and not at all well known before the Second World War.

Kate said that they'd come on a camping holiday the year before they moved; Betty thought that Alma might have been related to the Smiths at Hole Mill, but she wasn't sure.

In February of this year, after the book was published, Sue received an email from someone called Graham Dudley. He said that he was related to Charlie and Ivy Smith and wanted to find out more about them.

Emails went back and forth, and he and Sue began to piece things together. Ivy's maiden name was Oliver, she and her brother Gilbert had bought Hole Mill some time before the outbreak of the Second World War. Ivy and her husband Charlie, and presumably Gilbert, tried to run it as a B&B but didn't have much success. Apparently Charlie was a gambling man and in the end they'd had to sell the Mill and they and Gilbert moved to 1 Tithe Barn Cottages.

A bit later, Graham Dudley provided a small but significant bit of information:

[The Smiths] *originally came from Croydon* [which, of course, was where Alma and Les lived ...]

And later again, he added:

I have just spoken to my mother, who confirms that my relatives (the Smiths/Olivers) were, indeed, very much interested in spiritualism. Her memory is somewhat vague, although she says she remembers visiting Charlie and Ivy in Croydon, where she went into a small room, and strange things were happening: objects moving etc. and that there was a medium or spiritualist there – that must have been Mrs. Fielding.

He then made an important discovery:

Alma Fielding was Charlie Smith's sister [!]

Meanwhile, Sue, looking through our oral history accounts seemed to find that Tom and Dolly Oliver had also arrived in the village sometime before the war. They lived at Hooknell, now a ruin, and Tom was by turn a market gardener, builder, and bus conductor. Later they moved to Beckham. It's not clear which couple arrived first – the Olivers at Hooknell or the Smiths and Gilbert Oliver at Hole Mill. Nor do we know whether Tom and Dolly were interested in spiritualism - but it seems possible.

It seems to fall into place. Alma is Charlie Smith's younger sister. Charlie is married to Ivy neé Oliver. Charlie and Ivy are interested in spiritualism. The Olivers and Smiths live in Branscombe and so, when Alma, Les and Don want to get away from London, they join their relatives. Les rents a plot out on the cliff and he and his son Don put up a chalet.

An important postscript:

My memory is pretty bad these days - I put it down to age, and other things besides – but whilst writing this piece I suddenly remembered that, late last year, Kate Summerscale had, at our instigation, written a piece for the Parish Mag! I apologise – no doubt some of you will remember Kate's piece. It ended on a happy-ever-after note:

Les described the years after the war as the happiest of his life. He and Alma lived simply on their plat. They used a hand pump to draw water from a spring, planted peach and apple trees on the rich green turf in front of the bungalow, and a vine at the entrance. For fuel, Les bought Calor gas cylinders in the village and carted them through the cliff paths in a wheelbarrow purchased with John Player's cigarette coupons.

In her book, Kate added a few more details:

Les sometimes worked on local farms and Alma occasionally made flowers from crêpe paper and wire, which she sent by train to a shop in south London. The bills were low – rent and rates were less than £5 a year – and the housework minimal.

What Kate didn't mention in the Parish Mag piece, but did mention in her book, was that by the late 'forties, early 'fifties, life became a little more complicated. Alma regularly returned to London. She had a lover, Frank Martin, who lived above a junk shop. Les apparently knew, but put up with it. Maybe – who knows – having time to himself when his highly strung wife was away wasn't the worst thing that could happen ...

Botheration: another postscript

You think that you've sorted things, and then, looking again, you find you haven't.

Sue's oral history suggested that the Smiths and Olivers arrived in the village *before* the Fieldings. But she couldn't find any evidence. Kate Summerscale, in her book, suggested that both families arrived *after* the Fieldings, towards the end, or after the war. Sue, looking through the Parish Registers, seems to find evidence that corroborates this: The Olivers' children were born in Branscombe in '47 and '49, the Smiths' in '49 and '51.

Graham Dudley called Mrs Oliver 'Dolly'; Kate Summerscale called her 'Dorrie'. Kate says that Dorrie was actually 'Doris', and Doris was Alma's older sister (whom she didn't much like!). We know that Dorrie/Doris was in London in '44 living in the house that she'd inherited from her mother. But, in that year, the house was badly damaged by a 'doodlebug' - which may have precipitated the arrival of Dorrie neé Smith and her husband Tom in the village.

So, at the end of the day, we haven't discovered *why* the Fieldings landed in Branscombe. All we know is that, after the war, there's a veritable nest of Olivers and Smiths living in the village. There's Tom Oliver married to Dorrie (Doris/Dolly) neé Smith, Charlie Smith married to Ivy neé Oliver, Les Fielding married to Alma neé Smith, plus Gilbert, an extra Oliver sibling. Which is a rather minimal finding – which is what sometimes happens!