

THE BRANSCOMBE PROJECT: SMALL SNIPS OF HISTORY

Strange times! We socially distance or self isolate and yet there's probably more communication with other people, and more sharing, than ever before. Here we'll share two bits of village history – one old, one new. One has nothing to do with Lockdown, and one has a lot.

John Torrance: We recently discovered that from 1500 to nearly 1800 there was a fulling mill next to the old grist mill at Manor Mill Farm. Fulling was a way of cleaning and softening bales of wool by soaking it and beating it with heavy wooden hammers rotated by the mill-wheel. Branscombe was sheep country, part of the Exeter woollen trade.

After fulling, wool was dried on racks in the fields, known as tenterhooks (hence our phrase 'on tenterhooks'). Now Barbara has found a note she made in the 1980s, when she lived at Bartlett's Cob at Bank, opposite the mill, of an old deed for the cottage. Dated 22 March 1805, it granted the cottage to Joel Bartlett, carpenter, and described it as 'lying on the west side of a field called Rackpark parcel of Mill estate'.



Here's a picture of what the racks might have looked like ...

'Park' was a common name for a field in Branscombe, and names like Rack Close, Rack Piece, etc are found all over the country for land that once contained tentering racks. This was then the only field belonging to Mill Farm on the sunny side of the valley, suitable for drying, so as you pass along the road today you can imagine it once full of racks of wool. Since they'd been soaked in urine, it was probably quite smelly!

Barbara Farquharson: Our Project diaries have emptied – no Winter talks, no Spring exhibition. We had hoped, as part of the Exhibition, to talk about how smallholdings and Manor Mill Farm had responded to issues around bio-diversity and climate change. During the Winter and early Spring we'd talked with Nicky at Manor Mill, Laura and Jon at Bulstone Springs Farm, Jenny and Ian at Alderwood Barn, Georgie and Joe at Elbow Farm (Beer), Rob Skinner, National Trust, and Chris Woodruff, AONB.

We discussed organic farming, conservation grazing, woodland planting, biodiversity hot-spots, and the difficulties that young people encounter when they want to make a living from the land — the cost of land, planning permission, and marketing. At the beginning of this year, the Branscombe smallholdings were getting by. They are very labour-intensive and organic production is more costly, so their prices cannot compete with supermarkets. There was an irony: the smallholders work very hard and live frugal lives, but their product is sought after by chefs in high-end restaurants! The

smallholders were hoping to persuade local people that they'd be 'better off' buying locally – better quality, less wastage, huge environmental benefits etc. They were planning to set up a cooperative called 'In My Back Yard'.



Then, in March, came coronavirus and lockdown. Panic buying. Long queues outside supermarkets. Weeks of waiting for delivery supplies. People self-isolating and not able to go to the shops. Suddenly our on-your-doorstep producers became visible and desirable. The 'In My Backyard' coop got under way. People discovered that instead of cheap chicken – reared under horrible conditions – they could buy – a bit less often – a chicken that had led a good life and tasted much nicer, more like the 'special occasion' chicken they remembered from long ago. Or fresh salads that had little edible flowers in them and that, because they were hand-picked and washed, lasted far longer than those in supermarket bags.

As you can see, John and I are converts, and we're pretty sure that many of you are as well. When – if – the exhibition goes up next year, we'd like to include some of your accounts. How did your shopping habits, and your perceptions, change? What do you think might happen when life returns to normal? Or – perhaps – not to 'normal', but to something more in touch with the environment, that recognizes the value of local production for local consumption. If you're in the mood, we'd like to hear from you: b.bender@zen.co.uk.