

BRANSCOMBE: 'MAKING HISTORY'

A dozen boxes... six thousand years and more... objects that reflect past and present.

The stories chosen are often less about people with means and power - big land-owners, church dignitaries - and more about villagers getting on with their lives ... just getting by.

[Box 1] **The rock in place** ... You can't box up landscape - the deep valleys to the east, the plateau to the west, cliffs and long shingle beach to the south – but much of it is created by Branscombe's wonderfully varied geology, and, from the start, people recognized the different qualities of the rocks and found ways to work with them.

[A] *Red Mudstone* (over 200 million years old) is found at the base of the cliff to the east of Branscombe Mouth and makes up almost the entire cliff to the west. It's good for making bricks. When the great land-owner John Stuckey died in 1810, an inventory of his estate mentioned a field called Brick field, and a stack of 5000 bricks. They were probably made from mudstone quarried from Weston coombe.



[B] Within the Mudstone are intrusions of *gypsum* – most easily seen beyond the chalets west of the Sea Shanty. It can be made into Plaster of Paris and there were times when it fetched a good price. In the 1850s, William Wheaton set up a gypsum mill close to the beach. It wasn't a great success. A small section remains near the Sea Shanty.

[C] Next comes *Upper Greensand* (100 million years old). Most clearly visible in Hooken undercliff. Great for building. Look closely behind many of the old houses in the village and you'll see evidence of quarrying.

[D] Within the green sandstone are layers of reddish *chert*. Stone-age farmers generally preferred flint, but sometimes they used chert.

[E] Next, *Lower Limestone* (Chalk. 80 – 100 million years old). Fine-grained, excellent for mullions, window traceries, carvings - Exeter Cathedral ... the East window of Branscombe Church... The Romans opened up the Beer quarry caves, and it's been worked and reworked down the centuries.

[F] *Chalk with flint* is clearly visible above the Greensand in the Undercliff. Prehistoric farmers and earlier gatherer-hunters knew a good thing when they saw it. They gathered flint nodules from the beach, maybe even shinned down the cliffs, or dug pits ... and made a great range of tools – scrapers, points, arrowheads, axes. Some were traded down-the-line to places as far away as Bodmin



Moor.

Much later, in the eighteenth century, it became the vogue to spread lime on fields in order to break up the claggy clay. They burnt the chalk-with-flint in lime kilns and carted the lime away. Look hard at a map, and you'll see that almost every outcrop of chalk, small or large, was exploited. Look hard on the ground and you'll see the remains of quarrying, spills of flints, derelict kilns ... Some of the flints were picked over and used for building, or made into flint-locks for pistols, or skilfully squared to create decorative house facades.

[Box 2] **Below the cliff, the beach.** A busy place! Stone-age people foraged for flint; men fished or came ashore with smuggled goods; cliff-farmers cut seaweed off the rocks in winter; coal boats came in from



Wales; boys collected pebbles that were used in the production of toothpaste, paint, and pottery. Most recently, the great container ship, the *Napoli*, at risk of breaking up, was run aground at Branscombe. In time-honoured fashion, people, local and 'from away', scavenged the shore.

[Box 3/3a] This donkey-crub and tools were used by Cliffy Gosling. He was one of the last **cliff-farmers**. A map of 1763 shows a few cliff plats at Littlecombe Shute, but mostly they date to the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth. To the west of Branscombe Mouth, plats were



created by smaller and larger land-slips; to the east, the great landslide of 1792 created a long spit of land below the cliffs. Farm-labourers, trying to find ways to feed their families, paid small rents for them. The heat of the sun coming off the cliffs created a warm micro-environment, and seaweed from the shore fertilised the crops. As transport improved and markets opened, the cliff-farmers took their early

potatoes, veg and flowers to Sidmouth and Exeter and even sent them on their way to London.

It was hard work and after the Second World War the plats started to go out of use. Some of the donkey linhays became holiday homes.

Today, with rising sea levels, violent storms, and the effects of groyne building further down the coast, cliff and plat are eroding...

[Box 4] In Medieval times there were sheep ranges and a cottage industry where the women carded and spun the wool, which was then carted to the fulling mill at Manor Mill, after which the cloth went on its way to Exeter. But the industry died out. Slowly the manorial estate was broken up and farms, small and large, proliferated. Right through to the twentieth century wages were part paid in cider – not great for the domestic economy... In the 1950s there were still 20 farms, now there are four and the remaining farmers have to supplement their incomes – with caravan parks or contract work. Manor Mill has responded to the new environmental urgencies by farming organically and encouraging biodiversity.



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[ps: We couldn't find a local cow skull – the one on display looks more like an American steer than a peaceful Branscombe cow!]



[Box 5] Nowadays farm houses have become separated from their land and are mainly private dwellings. In response, organic **small- holdings** have taken up 'in between' bits of land – chickens and eggs, flowers and veg, sheep and cattle, succulents. But it's a precarious way of life and very dependent on local support.

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[Box 6] **Lace-making** got under way in Branscombe in the late



seventeenth century, declined by the early nineteenth century, rallied, and finally declined in the 1860s – although, even after the Second World War, a few village lace-makers remained. It has always been a cottage industry and, weather permitting, the women sat outside working their pillows. They had to sell to middle-men, first the Chicks,

then the Tuckers, who controlled the industry - and the prices. Even so, lace-making was a thing to be proud of, especially if you helped make lace for the wedding outfits of Queen Victoria or Princess Alexandra.

[Box 7] **Forges** were the hubs of the farming world. In the nineteenth century there was a small one at Hole Bottom, a medium-sized one at



Street (next to the Fountain Head), and a big one close to the village hall. Oxen, horses, donkeys all had to be shoed, cart-wheels, and all the iron-work used on farm gates and in houses, even children's hoops, were created and repaired by the smiths. The arrival of cars and farm mechanisation changed all that... now only the smithy close to the village hall remains and specialises in ornamental iron-work.



[Box 8] The **pubs** were - at least for the men - social hubs. Gossip passed, and occasional insurrection was plotted. The Masons Arms on the Square, the Fountain Head at Street, and the Three Horseshoes, on the A3052 just outside the parish, all date to the early nineteenth century. The Three Horseshoes has gone, the others still survive.

There were fewer places for women to gather. They met informally, working in the fields, fetching water, sitting together over their pillows, taking their lace to the middle-men, and visiting the tiny front-room shops along the village street.

[Box 9] **People arrive... people leave.** So it has always been... People arriving in search of work... marrying-in... People leaving, particularly after WW11, to find work in factories or on the railways. And, nowadays, with Branscombe designated an 'iconic' village, retired people arrive, second-homers, air b&bs... People leave because they can't afford to buy or rent. Sometimes people arrive seeking refuge...

[Box 10] **Things found and kept.** An old shoe found in the rafters at Woodhead - said to keep the witches at bay. A china guinea pig rescued when the Three Horseshoes was demolished. Bottles, mainly from the 1930s and 40s, from tips in the old quarries behind Woodhouse.

[Box 11] **Church and Chapel** rubbed along well enough. They were the hubs of Sunday worship... and places where, before and after service, families and friends met and chatted ...



The Methodists started in a farm kitchen, then built a small Chapel up at Street, and then, in 1901, built the big one further down the road. They had a school house, and great fêtes were held in the field across the road. The Chapel closed in 1983.



The Church was built and rebuilt over the centuries, using both local greenstone and high-quality Beer stone. *There's a fine carved capital on the floor by the Installation.* In 1539/40, John Taylor, Protestant and ardent anti-papist, pulled down many of the earlier church fittings and white-washed the frescoes. Eventually he was burnt at the stake. In the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century, the Rev. Puddicombe, an irascible but kind-hearted man, tore out the old benches and installed 'horse-boxes' and a three-decker pulpit so that he could keep his eye on his noisome congregation. *Look across at the three-decker pulpit and beyond to a few forlorn horse-boxes in the north transept.*

In Church and Chapel, community festivals marking the seasons have always been important. This Autumnal Arts Festival follows in their wake - whilst over at Bulstone and Elbow farm, seasonal celebrations salute the Solstice and Equinox.

[Box 12] Children's box ...

[Box 13] We have left this empty... an acknowledgment that the future, with global warming and all the other ills that face us, looks precarious. Perhaps, looking back, there are things to be learnt about how to live more modestly, how to use what's to hand, and find ways to get by. A past/present, a past/ future ...

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