

14. The Wood

On a fine day the little wood above the schoolhouse gave us one of the best views in Branscombe - the panorama over the flood plain of the three streams with Stockham's Hill, East Cliff and Branscombe Mouth in the distance. This was a scene of timeless serenity, with sunlit fields, tree studded hedgerows, woods on the valley sides and the ancient Manor Mill in the middle ground. It was quiet and hardly anything moved, but sometimes when conditions were right, you could hear the distant sound of a steam engine puffing away from Seaton Station up towards Seaton Junction, on a railway line closed down in 1966 by the Beeching cuts.

In the 1940s my brother Kingsley and I were not sitting up there in the wood admiring the view. No, we were enjoying a free - range childhood, tearing around this leafy wilderness, playing hide and seek, getting muddy, breathless and tired out. We were learning to avoid hazards like low branches, brambles, bushes and tree roots. Stinging nettles were always a menace when we were in short trousers - we used dock leaves to take the sting away. Losing our balance on the uneven and often slippery slopes, we sometimes ended up with falls, bruised knees and torn clothes. It was a rough and tumble time in the landscape of our early lives.

My father, who kept an eye on us up in the wood, issued a warning: "If you carry on like this up there you'll break your necks". Fortunately, it never came to that - I think he was in favour of our green exercise, which may have helped us to ward off what is now sometimes called Nature - deficit Disorder. No doubt we had our disorders, but that was not one of them - we were getting plenty of Vitamin N. As time went on we learned more about the features of the wood - the old fence around the top edge, the steep slope on the School Lane side, the patches of vegetation, the network of paths.....We even knew the best places for cutting bean poles and pea sticks. Gradually, we were forming our own little mind maps of the wood and a sense of place.

We found that we could climb most of the small trees, but giant larches towered above our heads - no hope of climbing them. Planted at intervals across the wood, probably in the 1870s by Henry Ford, the landowner, they had reached maturity by the 1940s. On windy nights we heard the eerie sound of gusts whooshing through their tops on the exposed hillside. From time to time, no longer able to withstand a violent winter gale, a larch would come crashing down - an exciting event. A fallen larch was a signal for Mr Clem Ford, Henry's son, to send his men up to deal with the trunk and cart it off, probably to his sawmill at Lower House. My father told us that on one of these occasions Mr Ford's man came down from the wood with an urgent question: "'Ave 'e got 'ere a wodge?" My father found him a wedge and off he went, presumably to split up some of the wood prior to putting it in the horse-drawn cart waiting in School Lane.

Sometime after one of those events we found that Mr Ford's men had left a lot of small larch branches lying around. We decided to use them for a tree house. We found a site in a small tree up in the far corner of the wood overlooking School Lane where it sinks into the hillside just above Rising Sun Cottage. We thought a tree house there would give us a clear view of people, cars and animals moving up and down the lane. We got our branches together and put up our modest tree house. We spent a lot of time in it waiting for something to happen.

For much of the time nothing happened - as you might expect. There were only a few cars in Branscombe, but the one we saw quite frequently was DOR 18, owned by someone who lived further up the lane. I can still remember some of those old 1940s Branscombe car numbers and their owners. From the tree house we had a clear view of a pair of robins nesting in the top part of the hedgebank just across the lane. One afternoon we were up there idling our time away, when a well-known local gentleman came walking up the lane. Suddenly he stopped and turned towards the far hedgebank - for a pee. Our parents were astonished when we told them about this incident. They promptly took the opportunity to give us a lecture on what we should not do in public places. I made my first attempts at smoking in the seclusion of the tree house - not cigarettes, but old man's beard. This wild clematis with woody stems grew in the wood and along the lane. Local boys found that they could smoke bits of old man's beard stem but I was never successful. Perhaps my stems were always damp. In any case I was out of order over this as I was not supposed to carry matches.

My next experience of smoking came about ten years later when I was doing my National Service in the RAF. It seemed that everyone was smoking and in that setting cigarettes were playing a big part in social interaction. I found myself behaving like the others and now I wish I'd had nothing whatever to do with smoking.

Scrambling around the wood back in the early 40s we came across patches of moss-covered humps. When we started to dig into them we were surprised to find pits full of old, discarded stuff - rusty cans, broken buckets, smashed plates and dishes....There were lots of unusual bottles in different colours, shapes and sizes, like those sometimes seen in antique shops and museums today. We uncovered the remnants of early radios and batteries full of black, sticky stuff. I got into trouble when my mother found traces of it on my hands and clothes. She said it was poisonous and I'm sure she was right. Sometimes I think that I'm still suffering from the effects of it. It seems that from Victorian and Edwardian times the occupants of the schoolhouse buried some of their rubbish up in the wood. I suppose there were no official rubbish collections in Branscombe at that time.

On the lower edge of the wood we found a sand pit where we whiled away a lot of our time making sand castles. This was something we couldn't do on Branscombe beach because it was all shingle and it was mined and sealed off by barbed wire and concrete pillars during the war. One morning in the spring of 1941 the sand pit was the starting point for a frightening experience. I was playing about in it with John Lithgow, a friend from London who was staying in Branscombe for a while. For some unknown reason, in the middle of the morning, John and I wandered off without telling our parents. We soon left the wood and the familiar patch around the schoolhouse behind us - we drifted on with no idea of where we were going and no thought of retracing our steps. On and on we went, hour after hour, field after field, no houses, nobody to ask for help....We were well and truly lost and I was panic-stricken.

Realising that we were no longer around, our parents organised a big search for two missing seven year old boys. After about eight hours we were found by the police stranded by the side of a road somewhere near Weston, several kilometres from our starting point. I have no idea how they managed to find us - two weepy, unhappy children. My poor mother was utterly distraught. She was convinced that we had wandered towards the cliffs and fallen to our deaths. We all took some time to get over the nightmare of that day. I have never forgotten it.

My brother and I were lucky to have this patch of wild Branscombe at our backdoor. Only a fraction of a hectare in extent, it gave us space for open-air play and the opportunity to stand, stare and listen. We recognised the arrival of the heralds of spring - the tink-tank calls of chiffchaffs and the sweet, rippling sounds of willow warblers. Close to the ground we found their domed nests and from the bushes we heard the longer summer songs of blackcaps and whitethroats. The summer visitors joined in with the local birds to give us a joyful, resounding dawn chorus, at its loudest in May. On warm summer days we sat by the oak tree near the top edge of the wood, surrounded by all sorts of butterflies and moths, while the grassy areas were alive with crickets, grasshoppers and beetles. Now I wonder if the descendants of all these creatures still favour the colourful, sunny slopes and varied habitats of this little wood.

Surrounded by so many living things, we were connected to nature and place. We took away absorbing interests and happy memories. I would like to know more about the history of Branscombe's woods and trees and the good news is that the Branscombe Project has plans for a winter talk about recent research on this topic - there's still a lot to learn about Branscombe!

