

16. Memories of Branscombe's middle valley (also called the central or northern valley).

Looking north through the window of our living room in the schoolhouse, we had a good view across the middle valley to the woods which extended from Woodhouse Hill up towards Baldash Cottage. One autumn in the early 1940s as the days became shorter and cooler, my mother drew our attention to the gradual colour changes on the trees from the green leaves of summer to tinted masses of yellow, red, gold and brown of autumn. Suddenly, a gale swept up the valley leaving us with leafless trees until the following spring. Every year after that we watched for the spectacular colours of autumn and the leaf fall across the valley and when my father, brother Kingsley and I walked about over there, foraging for hazelnuts and blackberries, I'm sure we heard the crunch of leaves under our feet.

Springtime in the middle valley always came as a pleasant surprise after the long, dark and cold winters of the war, when newspapers and radio bulletins were often full of grim news. In the valley tree buds greened, wild daffodils and primroses appeared and birds, including spring migrants, sang in the clear air. As the days lengthened and temperatures rose in the spring sunshine, everything came back to life. For the first time in months people were out and about.

At this time of year, captivated by spring all around us, my mother would say: "You won't find a place in the world more beautiful than Branscombe". Sometimes she reflected on her favourite "spring music"- the Johann Strauss waltz "Voices of Spring" and "Rustle of Spring", a piano piece composed by Christian Sinding, which was popular in the first half of the last century. She was the pianist for Branscombe Women's Institute meetings in the Village Hall (now Branoc Hall), when they always sang 'Jerusalem', the WI anthem. I listened as she practised Hubert Parry's music for Jerusalem on our piano at home until she got it right.

In the middle valley, spring was the season of awakening and renewal - a little walk up Lockseys Lane behind the Village Hall confirmed it! In spring during the war years, a large part of Bridge Meadow just behind the hall and now the recreation ground, was carpeted with well - established clumps of wild daffodils. Shorter than cultivated daffodils and rather different in colour, over the years they had spread across the meadow from the damp soil near the stream.

This striking display of wild flowers in the spring sunshine attracted sightseers, some of whom were pickers. People talked about this, especially when it was rumoured that some of the people picking daffodils down there were from Beer! Similar concerns arose about the primroses and snowdrops found in the middle valley and other parts of the village - the wild spring flowers in fields, lanes and woods were all very much part of Branscombe's charm.

One day in early spring Kingsley and I were startled by something unusual. Adders! - lots of them, still and basking in the sunshine along a south facing hedgebank not far from the Village Hall. What a moment that was. We could hardly believe our eyes - but there we were, the two of us with all those adders, in that spot, at that time. We had already been warned that an adder bite could kill you and there were so many of them. At home our parents told us not to go near the adders again but the temptation was too great and we returned several times to look at them.

As far as we could tell the adders took no notice of us and we did not disturb them. Kingsley recalled the experience shortly before he died in 2015. Now I know a little more about those adders - they hibernate and are cold blooded. The males come out of their holes earlier than the females to bask in the sun before they can become active - so this probably explains their behaviour in the hedgebank - they were warming up, waiting for the females to arrive. Today it seems that in some parts of the country, adder numbers are declining and their hibernation period is shortening, possibly due to climate change. We know that adders were flourishing at that spot in the middle valley around 80 years ago - I wonder if their descendants are still living there.

Frogspawn in the pools near the stream was another sign that spring had arrived. We learned how to keep frogspawn at home and watched as tadpoles emerged and turned into little frogs. We came across newts but not crested ones. In autumn we found lots of conkers in what was then Barnells drive and as schoolboys we were sent up there to collect fallen leaves. Working in pairs, we stuffed them into big sacks and carried them down Laskeys Lane to the school garden near the Village Hall where we piled up the leaves to make compost for the following year's crops.

The school garden plot occupied the western corner of a large area of allotments bordered by Mill Lane on one side and the road up to Bank on the other. Old picture postcards show that this area was a meadow before the 1920s. Allotment land for about 50 years, it became a residential area in the 1970s. Sue Dymond's study 'Branscombe Allotments Revisited' available on the Project's website, provides new insights into this aspect of Branscombe's past.

Watering! - that's what I remember about the school garden in summer. My main job was hauling up buckets of water from the middle valley stream which ran along the side of Mill Lane, just across the road from the entrance to the garden. Most of the water went around the tomato plants grown every year in a sunny spot behind the tool shed, where the red marl soil quickly dried out. Tomatoes need regular watering and it seems to me that in this spot our tomatoes needed it more than most. I was often told that the exercise was doing me good, but it didn't feel like that at the time. Today it's a lot easier with a hosepipe but in those days there was no tap for watering the school garden. In the early 1940s taps were sparse in Branscombe. For instance, there were no taps at all in the school or in the schoolhouse. Everyone there had to put up with very poor quality water from a creaky old hand pump situated outside our back door. There is more about that in 6. Evacuees. Most Branscombe people did not have tap water for drinking, let alone for watering the garden - with little change until the late 1950s/early 1960s.

Going back up Lockseys Lane again we came to Wobble, where my father, Kingsley and I went for our haircuts - there are more middle valley memories in 15. Mr Freddy Dowell, our friendly barber at Wobble. On our way home after our haircuts we followed the path down across the fields to the stream where we always paused for a while. The big question came up when we looked at the size of the valley around us - did this small stream really make this deep valley? My father's answer was 'yes' and he quoted a few lines from Tennyson's poem 'The Brook' -

'For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever'.

and from the same poem

'I babble into eddying bays,
I babble on the pebbles'.

Just like our stream.

He was also keen on 'Spring the sweet spring is the year's pleasant king' by Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), and its refrain

Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-we, to-witta-woo!

Imitating the calls of the cuckoo, nightingale, lapwing and owl. Are these heard in this valley?

These poems were among those on the Branscombe School curriculum in the early 1940s so he taught us about them in class - a good introduction to Wordsworth's nature poetry which was part of my 'A' Level English course about 10 years later. By then I had a liking for Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and its second movement with the sounds of a brook, the nightingale, cuckoo and quail. Later in life I learned to play April: 'Snowdrop' by Tchaikovsky from his set of piano pieces 'The Seasons'. I found that it was all about Branscombe's middle valley in spring.

These images of the middle valley from my wartime childhood have lingered down the years. Now, more is known about what went on there much longer ago; the lives and culture of the people who left their marks on the valley over the centuries - new perspectives from John Torrance's research and his talks for the Branscombe Project. Illustrated transcripts of these talks can be found on the Project's website.

'Branscombe Blacksmiths' traces the lives and activities of the middle valley blacksmiths who worked at Bridge Forge and the forge upstream at Hole Mill from the 18th and early 19th centuries. 'A Medieval Hydraulic Landscape in Branscombe' is a fascinating study of medieval hydraulic engineers who, by the 1400s, divided the middle valley stream to provide a leat and water power for corn and fulling mills down at the site of Manor Mill - a tremendous achievement without modern instruments. Another window opens on the historical geography of Branscombe - something we knew little about when we were there in the early 1940s.