

BRANSCOMBE POSTCARDS 1900 – 1950

by Geoff Squire

Geoff Squire was one of Stanley Squire, the village school-master's two sons. He lived in Branscombe as a child from 1934 to 1953. He became a Senior Lecturer in Geography Education at Reading University and retired in 1995. Since then he has been collecting postcards of Branscombe and in 2009 he gave two talks to packed audiences in the Village Hall. Here is a slightly more formal version of what he said. The full postcard archive can be viewed under Images – Postcard Archive.

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Postcards in Britain came into being at the time of the 1870 Post Office Act, and from 1902 senders of postcards were allowed to write on the same side as the address, freeing the whole of the front surface for a picture. At about this time summer visitors were beginning to discover Branscombe.

Chapman and Son of Dawlish and other postcard publishers soon took advantage of these developments. From the early years of the century their photographers visited Branscombe on numerous occasions to record dozens of scenes which range from the details of individual people, buildings and neighbourhoods to the wide sweeps of valleys, fields and woodlands so characteristic of Branscombe. A cheap and convenient means of personal communication, the postcards and their messages publicised the attractions of Branscombe to a wide audience.

Today these images tell us a great deal about Branscombe between 60 and 110 years ago. Popular scenes were photographed many times, revealing some marked changes. On the other hand, many cards illustrate the survival and strength of the rural character of the village. So this is a story of both change and continuity.

The Early Postcards

These portray Branscombe as it entered the 20th century. Roads are rough, there is only a bleak stone-walled coalyard at Branscombe Mouth and the upper slopes of the valleys are less wooded than today. There are exterior and interior views of the church prior to the 1911 restoration and cliff plat farmers employ donkeys to bring up their early potatoes and other crops from the sea-facing cliff gardens. As a whole these early picture postcards convey a sense of quiet rural charm.

The 1930s

While the essential elements of rural life survived, by the 1930s relationships between Branscombe and the wider world were gradually changing in ways which began to reshape the lives and prospects of some of those living in the village.

As we can see from accounts such as J B Priestley's *English Journey* (1933), during the 1930s there were some very large geographical variations in prosperity in Britain. Some parts of the country were seriously affected by the Depression and long-term unemployment, while new industries were spreading into parts of the South East and the Midlands. In these regions, some people were enjoying increases in income, leisure and mobility – with holiday visits in new cars to the countryside and beaches. The Holidays With Pay Act meant, as one M.P. put it “the summer holiday, so recently the privilege of a minority, has become the prerogative of a million”. It has been estimated that in 1931 about 1½ million were entitled to a paid holiday each year and that by 1939 the figure had risen to over 11 million.

Branscombe postcards depict some local effects of these trends in wider British society. They show early cars and buses in the village (nationally, car ownership doubled in the 1930s), the attractions of the Sea Shanty tea rooms and rock gardens (developed from the old stone-walled coalyard in the late 1920s), the growing popularity of camping and the spread of beach chalets – all set in a scenic seaside village with the advantages of improved public transport, garage facilities, shops and pubs.

These developments were seasonal and were mainly confined the eastern end of the village in the vicinity of the Square and the area around Branscombe Mouth. However, postcards of the period show that large areas of the parish retained their rural character – the irregularly shaped fields, leafy hedgerows and quiet lanes showing little change.

The Second World War

War broke out in September 1939 Britain and holiday activity in Branscombe was brought to an abrupt halt. Very soon evacuees replaced holidaymakers, the beach was mined and sealed off by lines of concrete defences topped with barbed wire. Pill boxes on each side of Branscombe Mouth were manned by the Home Guard and the scenic coastal walks became the pathways of military patrols. The garage was turned into a munitions factory and photography for picture postcards was discontinued for the duration of the war. Some post-war cards show that the lines of concrete pillars on the beach were still in place at the end of the 1950s and the pill boxes for much longer.

Post-War Development

By the late 1940s, in common with other summer holiday destinations, Branscombe's holiday trade was beginning to revive. In *Austerity Britain 1945 – 1948* (Bloomsbury 2007), the historian David Kynaston explains the wider context of this recovery. He points out that in the hot summer of 1947, with the benefit of the pre-war Holidays With Pay Act, about half the population of the country took a holiday. Those were the days before jet travel and package holidays and there were severe restrictions on money that could be taken abroad, so most people holidayed in Britain with only 3-4% going abroad in that year.

Branscombe had its share in the revival with a new generation of beach chalets, improved facilities and services for visitors, upgraded accommodation and increased provision for car parking.

Postcards from the post-war period illustrate this new phase of holiday activity, again mainly at the eastern end of the village. New car designs and brighter fashions are coming in. The Sea Shanty has queues for ice-creams and a sea-facing eating area decked out with parasols, while people relax on a beach now clear of mines. Gradual change no doubt, but sure signs that at last the war is really over. What a contrast from the stark wartime realities of 1939 – 1945.

Links With Other Sources

This picture postcard story of Branscombe 1900 – 1950 merits further investigation and other sources, including those published by the Branscombe Project, provide opportunities for this. For example, *Branscombe Shops, Trades and Getting By* edited by Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern (The Branscombe Project 2000), is a remarkably detailed record of memories, experiences and opinions of people who lived and worked in the village 60 and more years ago. So oral history recalls village life, adding vivid personal accounts to the picture postcard images of the place. The accounts are accompanied by a series of helpful maps which locate the buildings and neighbourhoods featured on the postcards.

The Shooting at Branscombe Old Pits by Barbara Farquharson and John Torrance (The Branscombe Project 2009), includes a detailed account of life and conditions in Branscombe in the 1880s – not long before the appearance of the first picture postcard of the village. Other postcard themes such as the story of the local geology, the growth of tourism and the history of Branscombe Church offer similar incentives for further reading.

Conclusion

As a genre these postcards form a visual inventory of Branscombe during the first half of the 20th century. Taking us back to an earlier landscape, they provide information, stimulate curiosity and promote further enquiry. In these respects they make a distinctive contribution to the Branscombe Project.

WALKING THE POSTCARDS

PART ONE

The trail begins with the area around the forge. From there it moves up Deepway Lane and the Northern Valley, past the school and Hole House towards Edge Barton. Then we go back to the main road through the village, up past the Church, Grapevine and Blue Ball to Street.

PART TWO

Now the trail starts with the cliffs at Littlecombe Shoot which show us Branscombe's geology, then moves along the top of the cliffs to Branscombe Mouth. We then turn back towards the village hall via the Square and Bank with a short detour up Sellars Wood.

PART ONE – FROM THE FORGE TO STREET, INCLUDING NORTHERN VALLEY

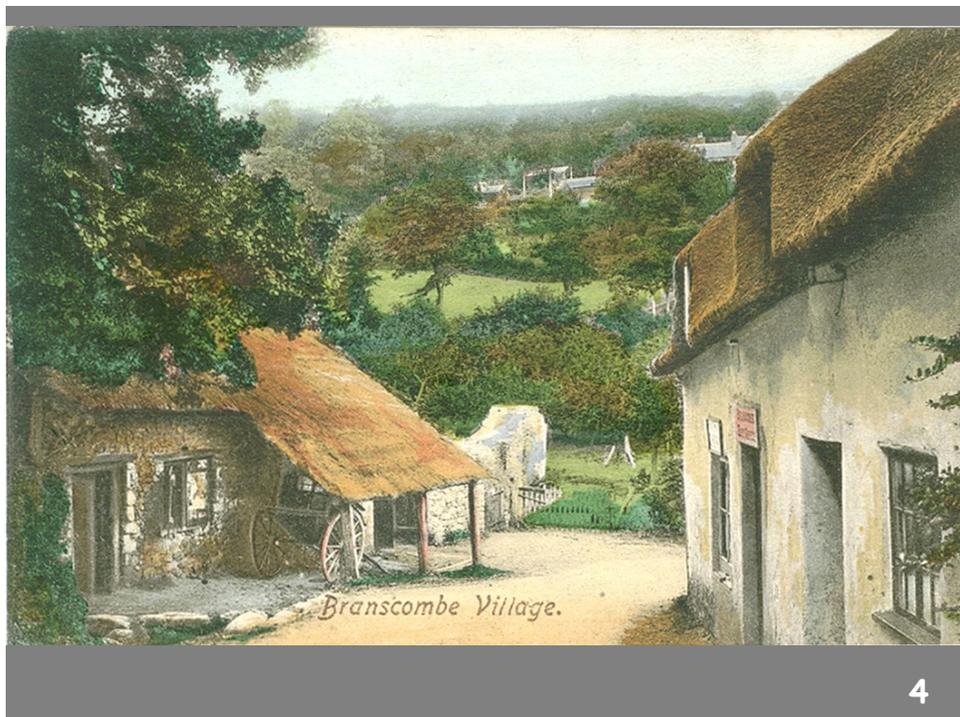
The area around the Forge



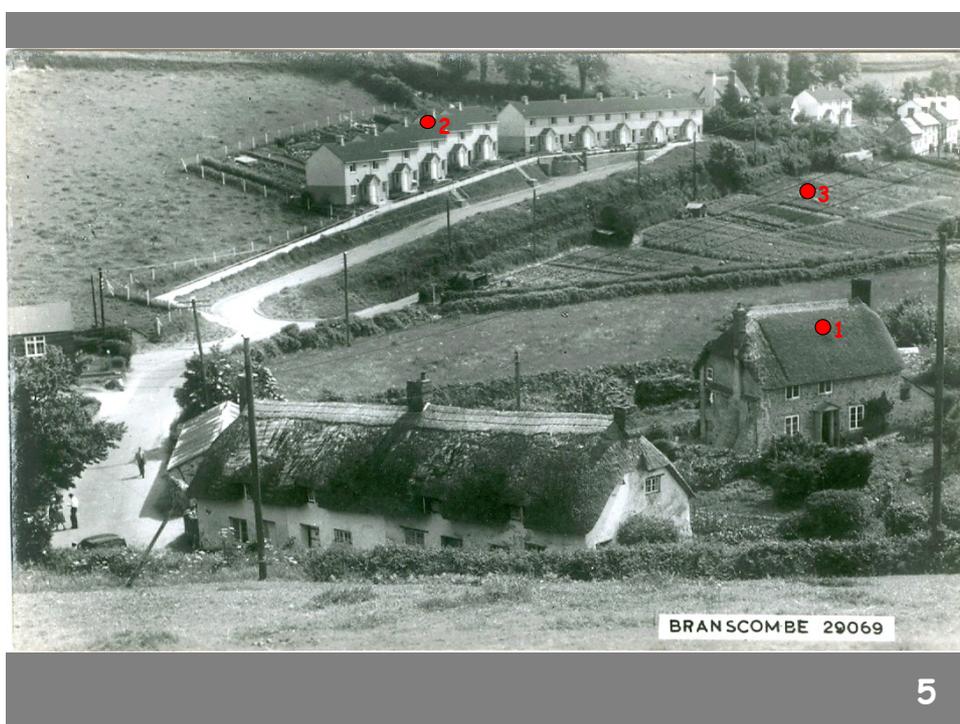
It's midday, midsummer in Branscombe. A Chapman photographer captured this tranquil scene in the late 1940s. Hay dries in the sun, oblong ricks, neatly thatched, sit in the corner of the field, wood is stacked high for the baker's oven and a car stands outside the forge. Branscombe's church (1), school (2), bakery (3), forge (4) and its original village hall (5) are all here – a good starting point for a walk around the village.



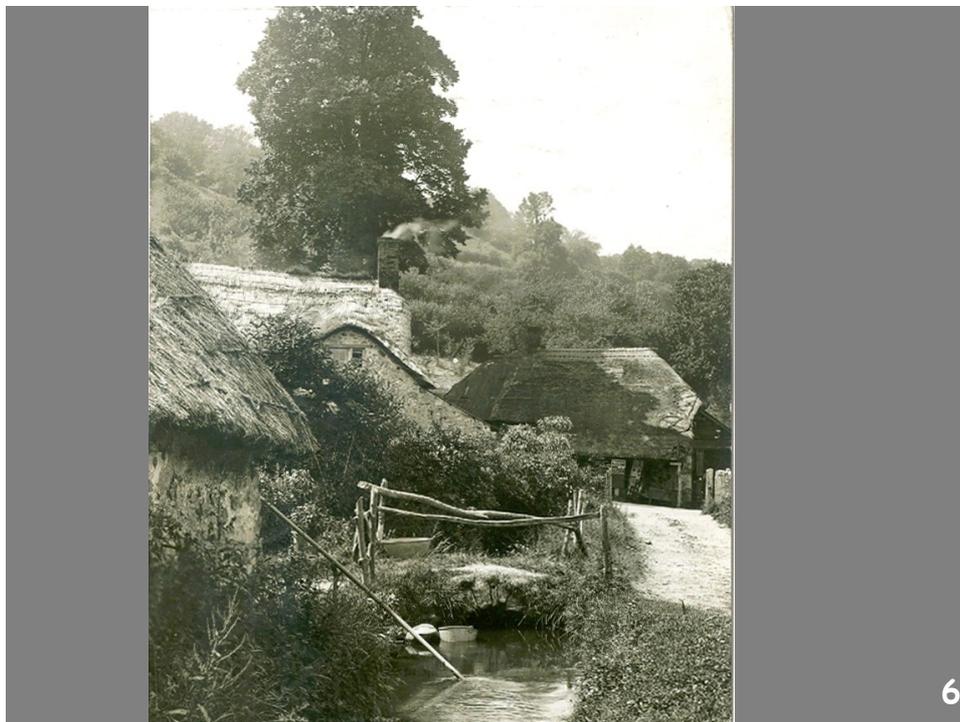
The forgemaster at work. Harry Layzell is shoeing a horse in the 1920s – an activity carried on here for hundreds of years.



An early view of the forge. At this time the Post Office was in Forge Cottage (sign over the door). Mr Butter ran this Post Office and a little shop (with a sign over the window). This photograph was taken soon after 1900 – before the Layzells took over the forge.



A much more recent card – the forge is out of sight lower left. [The bakery is lower right (1). The council houses in Parkfield Terrace were built in 1964-5 (2). Today housing covers what was the allotments area (3).



A favourite view of the photographers – the forge is in the background.

The Northern Valley



The wide sweep of the Northern Valley from the south about 1910. On the left is Deepway Lane running up past the school (1) and Rising Sun Cottage (2). Lower right the area around the forge.



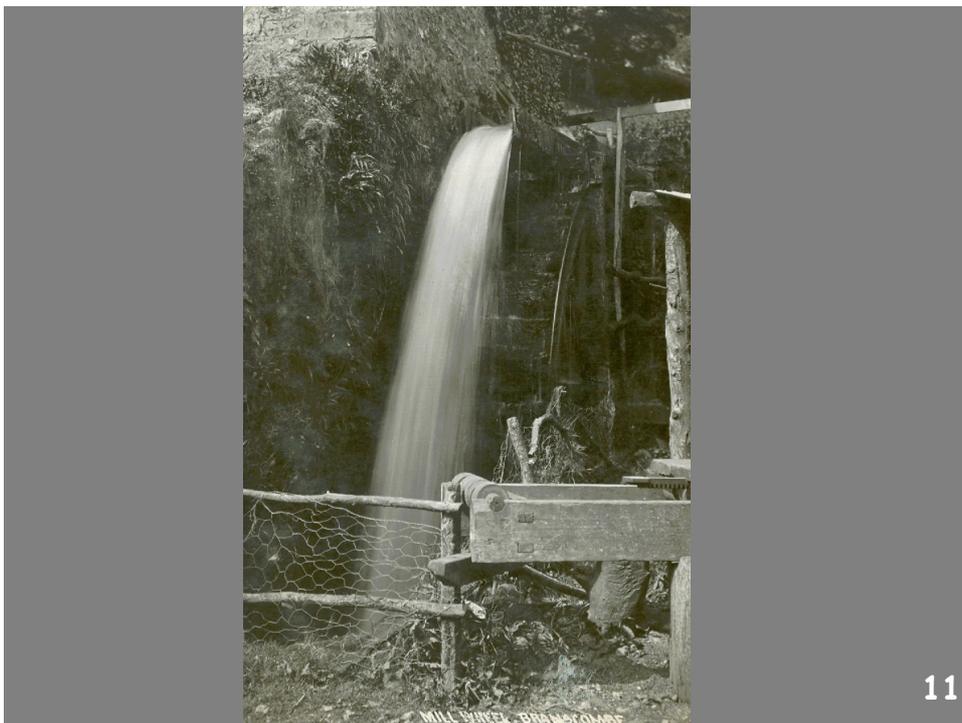
Rising Sun Cottage on a summer's day before the cottage was extended. The large acacia tree was a feature at that time.



Looking towards Culverwell across the valley from a point above Woodhouse Hill. A Chapman card from an unusual angle.



10

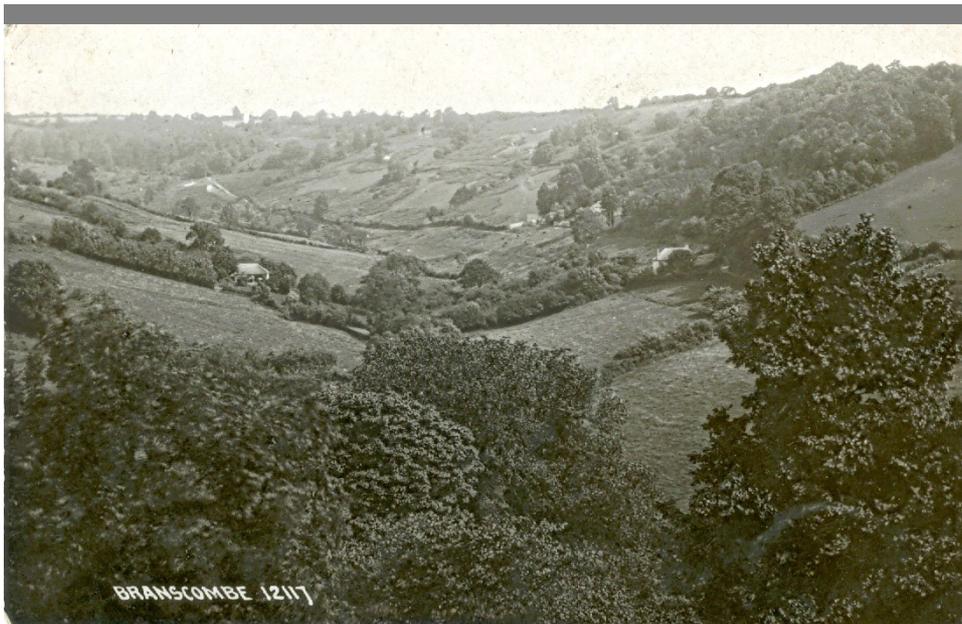


11

10: view of Hole House (top) and Hole Mill (lower left).



12



13

The upper parts of the Northern Valley. Edge Barton in the distance (12). These views give a good impression of these quiet remote areas in the early 1900s.

From Branscombe Church to Street

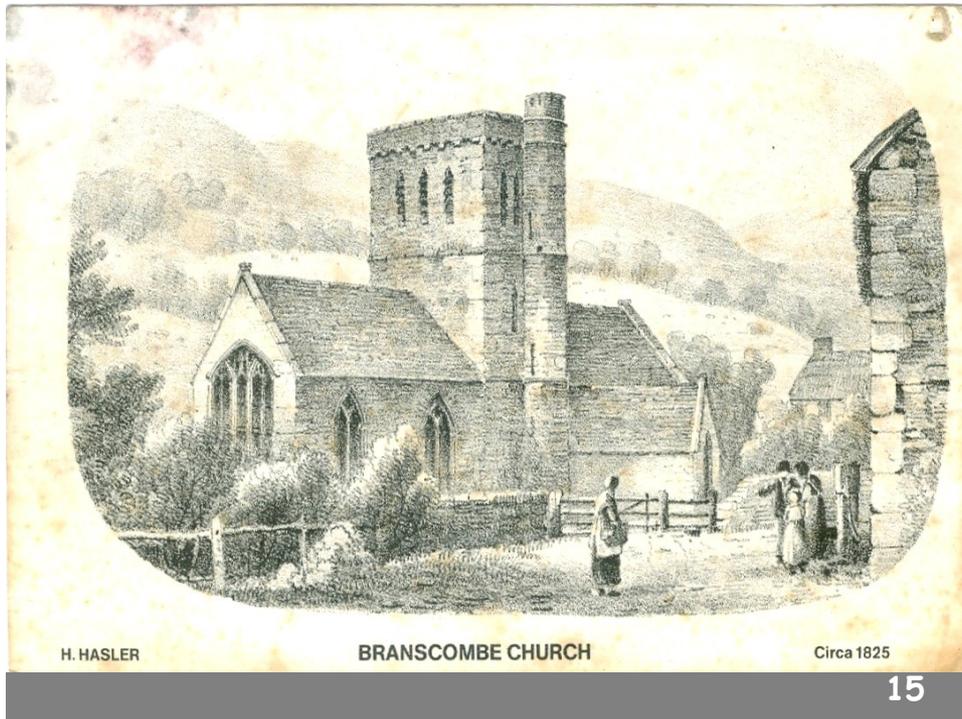


13a



14

13a & 14: Two pre-1911 views show the state of the road at that time. Bottom left (by the bucket) there is a spring water shute – drinking water for this part of the village. 14a, an even earlier postcard - the building on the left has a thatched roof later replaced by slate. This building was demolished c1930s.



1825 print. On the right is the sexton's house pulled down in the 1880s and now the site of the War Memorial.

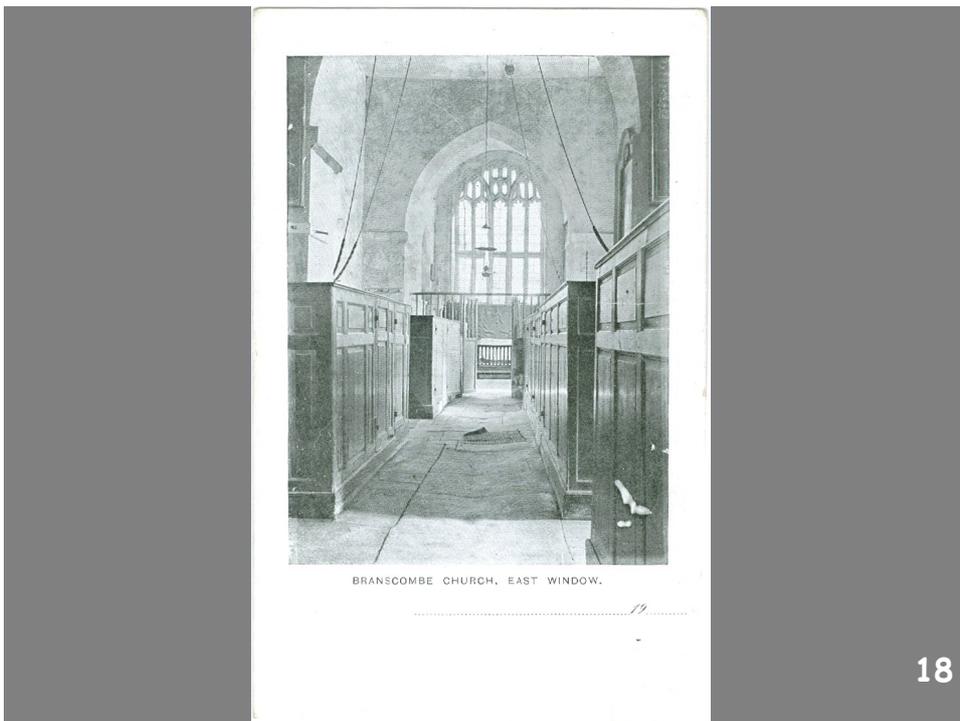


The church before the 1911 restoration. 21 – 22 show some of the changes made at the time – a door into the south transept and a new boiler house in the bottom corner of the churchyard. The cliff plats farmer is on his way to the cliff plats with his donkey (see comment on 38 and 39 in Part 2).



Branscombe Church.

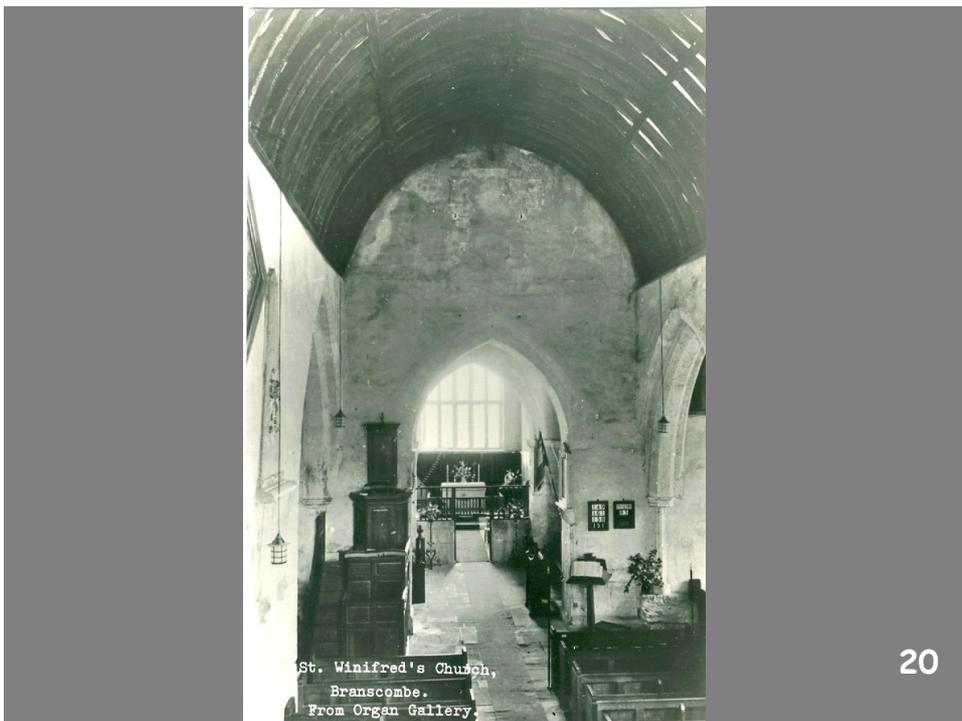
17



BRANSCOMBE CHURCH, EAST WINDOW.

18

The interior of the church prior to restoration. The horsebox pews were put in during the time of Thomas Puddicombe (vicar 1794 – 1827). The 3 tier pulpit was on the south side of the nave. Some horsebox pews were left in the north transept after the 1911 restoration.



The post restoration position of the pulpit. The church was lit by oil lamps until 1937 when Rev W H Raymer (vicar 1924 – 49) switched on the new electric lights.



21



22

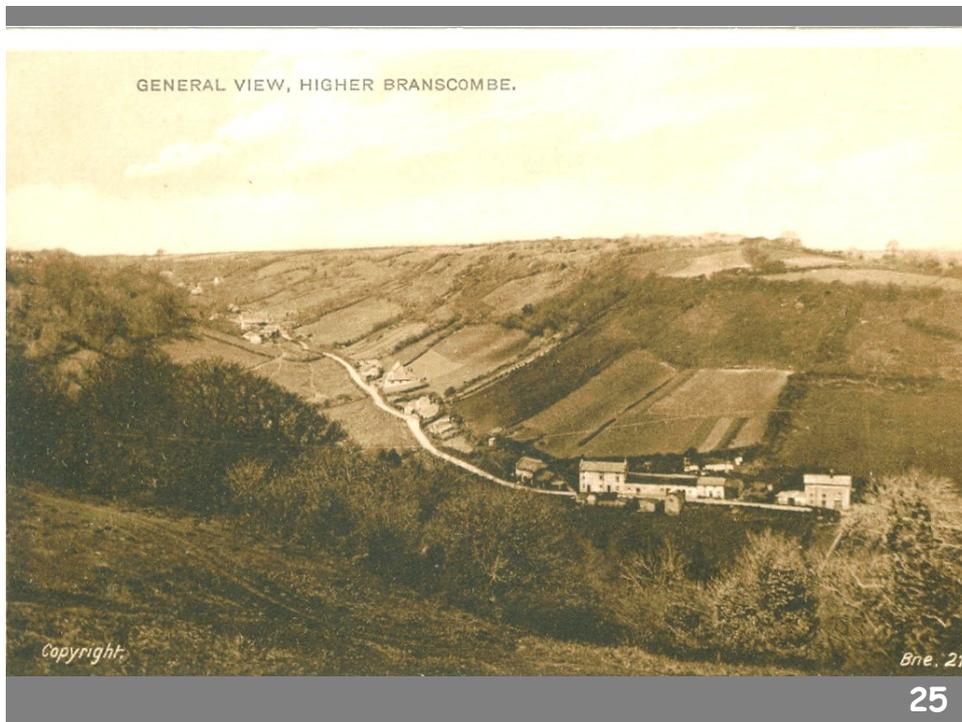
Exterior views of the church just after the restoration of 1910-11.



An early 20th century view of one of the cottages above the church.



An Edwardian panoramic view from Ball Hill. In this one tree cover is less extensive than in later versions of the scene.



The road to Street (in the distance) shows extensive allotments on the south side of Culverwell Hill – the scene of a murder in 1883 (see *The Shooting at Branscombe Old Pits* by Barbara Farquharson and John Torrance. The Branscombe Project 2009).



Blue Ball cottages and the new Methodist chapel (1900). There was a shop at Blue Ball from 1875 until 1927.

Street