

*This talk was illustrated with a great many pictures by John White and other local painters. Unfortunately we have been unable to source many of them and have therefore not been able to get permission to use them. We have therefore decided to use them more sparingly, and if anyone does have copyright we apologise and, if notified, will take the picture off the website.*

Tonight the Branscombe Project has teamed up with the Branscombe Players, and some noble volunteers to give you the words of various visitors to Branscombe, some literary and some less so. We shall also show you a few paintings by some of the artists who visited Branscombe.

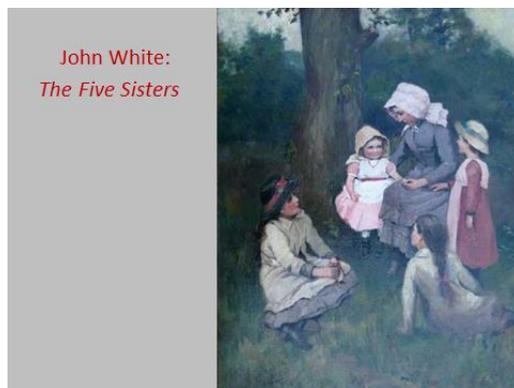
I'll start by telling you about the painters. The best known, of course, is **JOHN WHITE**, who arrived as a *visitor*, but then settled here.

He was a Scotsman, born in 1851. When he was a child, his family emigrated to Australia, but he returned and studied art at the Royal Scottish Academy. Then he came south, first to London, and then, around 1878, to Branscombe.

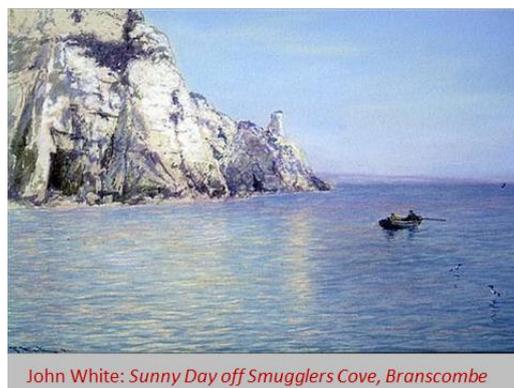
He lived in Marine Villa (now Still Point) with his wife, Emma and four children.



Emma died in childbirth in 1888 and a year later he married a local girl, Rosetta Perry and six or seven more children were born at fairly regular intervals.

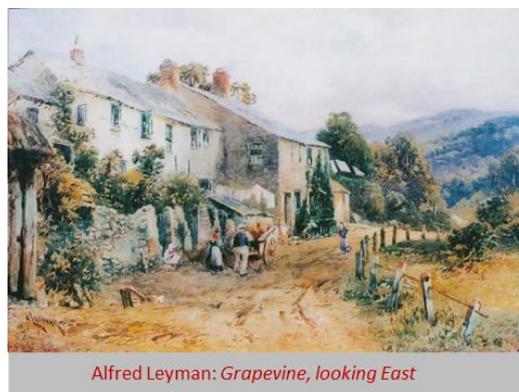


Around 1906 the family move to Exeter, but eventually they moved to Beer (4 Belmont Terrace) where John White died in 1933. In Census Returns he's often described as 'Artist Painter' - he sold to local people, and no doubt to tourists.



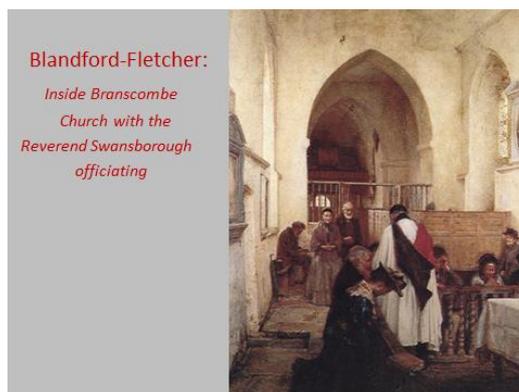
Although he exhibited frequently at the Royal Academy and at the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolour, one suspects that he led a scrambling sort of existence and that in order to feed his large family he had to keep on churning out the paintings!

Then there's **ALFRED LEYMAN**. Born 1856, died 1933. He was born in Exeter, and seems to have settled in Honiton around 1888 where he taught art at Allhallows School. By all accounts, he was a 'shy retiring man of small stature' who much preferred being left alone to get on with his paintings rather than teaching unruly boys!



Alfred Leyman: *Grapevine, looking East*

There's a one-off picture by **BLANFORD FLETCHER** of the Newlyn School of painters. A rather marvellous painting of the interior of the Church with the Rev. Swansborough giving communion.



Blandford-Fletcher:  
*Inside Branscombe  
Church with the  
Reverend Swansborough  
officiating*

And finally, there's **ARTHUR WILLIAM PERRY**, born 1860. He lived in Seaton all his life, painted some beautiful landscapes, and some fairly awful pot-boilers.



Arthur Perry: Hooken Cliff, c 1900

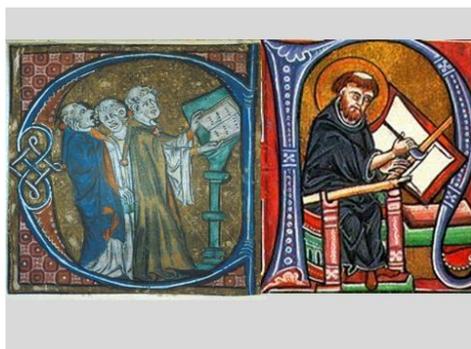


Arthur Perry: Beer Head, c.1910

His art shop in Seaton sold all kinds of art materials as well as his paintings. He doesn't seem to have tried to exhibit his work. He died in 1948 and is buried in St Gregory's churchyard.

### ***So – now we begin our literary pilgrimage***

Branscombe once belonged to King Alfred, the one who burnt the cakes, and the first mention of it by name is in King Alfred's will, in the year 880. But the first **visitors** who have left any account of the village were the official Visitors – who came from time to time during the Middle Ages to inspect the manor.



The manor of Branscombe belonged to the Dean and Chapter of Exeter cathedral, and two of the senior clerics would come on a Visitation and report back.

Their reports were in Latin, but here's a taste from a shortened version of a report from 1307, transcribed in 1890 by F.C. Hingeston-Randolph:

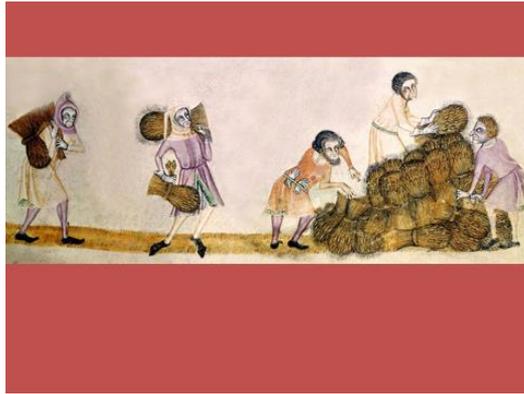
**FIRST SPEAKER: *Master Ralph Germeyn and sub-dean Upavene arrived in the village ... They were dismayed at the state of the chasubles and stoles in the Church but noted the gift of 'a pair of organs' and a roll of organ music, the gift of the incumbent vicar. The villagers declared that they loved their vicar and that, in his general conduct, nothing could be better - he preached from the heart and visited the sick. They were also very happy with the clerk.***

***However, they were not at all fond of the late steward, Master Henry: he'd favoured one tenant over the others, so that the others had to shoulder an unfair burden when they had to make contributions to the Church.***

***They had to provide labour in the harvest-field but, whereas before, they'd been fed, he'd stopped doing this.***



***They had to provide labour in cutting, loading, carrying and stacking hay and had, before, been given three good sheep from the lord's fold and three good cheeses and three second-hand cheeses [for a feast] and all this had stopped.***



***And they hadn't got their usual twenty shilling for threshing the lord's corn.***



***What's more a number of buildings were utterly dilapidated – repairs to the bailiff's chamber would cost not less than ten shillings; two of the store-barns, forty shillings and eightpence; the granary, four pounds; the bake-house, forty shillings; the fences of Coweparke and sundry other fences, twenty shillings; the mill 'de la Pole' [perhaps Hole Mill], a hundred shillings;***

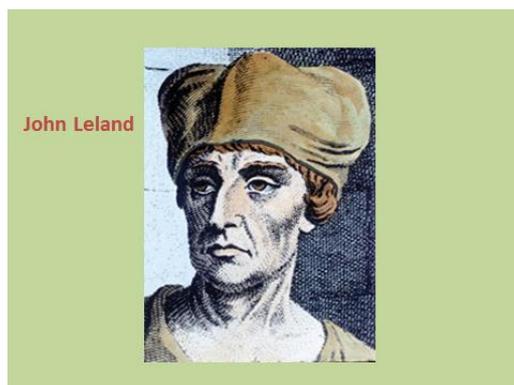


***and the chamber looking towards the Church at Manor House [Church Living], sixty shillings.***

***The grumbles rumbled on: after Master Henry's death, his executers had warned off eighteen cowherds from the Manorial pastures fifteen days before the proper time ...***

Hingeston-Randolph, writing in 1890, says wryly that these grumbles between tenant farmer and landlord sounded quite familiar.

So much for the Middle Ages. Things started to change in the sixteenth century. As the New World opened up, explorers and cartographers produced maps and surveys that could be used both on sea and land. And as 'new' families, enriched by mercantile capital, competed with and married into the older aristocracy, and landowners hastened to enclose open field and common land, the mapping of estates and tracing genealogies of local families became highly desirable. A new breed of antiquarians, often beholden to rich patrons, began to flourish. Henry VIII employed one of these early antiquarians, John Leland, to ride around the country, mapping, collating and *spying*.



But it's very frustrating! In 1542 **JOHN LELAND** got as far as Seaton, and even to Beer (which he called Berewood) where, he says:

***SECOND SPEAKER: There was a fair pier for succour of shiplets at this Berewood, but there came such a tempest a 3 years since [thus 1539] as never in mind of men had before was seen in in that shore, and tore the pier in pieces.***

Leland seems to have made it to Sidmouth, but then set off from Axmouth to Axminster. But he missed out Branscombe.

Nearly 200 years later, in 1724, **WILLIAM STUKELEY**, the leading antiquarian and archaeologist of his day, also came this way:



William Stukeley

**THIRD SPEAKER: *The Roman road seems to have crossed the Otter at Harpford. At Woodbury is a camp. I passed by Sidmouth, and came to Seaton, a little village upon the mouth of the Ax ...***



Arthur Perry: Axmouth from Seaton c.1885

Here Stukeley gets really excited for he's sure Seaton is the site of the Roman town of *Moridunum*. He explores the estuary, he even gets as far as the Roman site at Honey Ditches (just below Seaton Garage!), and then moves on to ... Colyford.



Arthur Perry: View towards Seaton c.1900

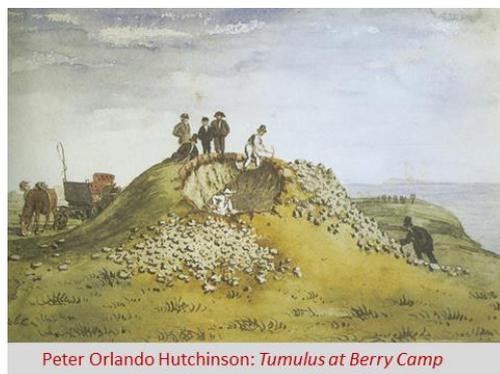
He, like the others, never quite made it down the coombes to the little out-of-the-way settlement at Branscombe.

At last, our first glimpse. 1750, **DEAN MILLES** of Exeter is making notes for a history of Devon (which was never published) and had this to say about Branscombe: –

**FOURTH SPEAKER:** *Branscomb is a [village] situated on ye sea Coast, being bounded by Salcomb on ye West, by South Leigh on ye North, by Bere on ye East, & by ye sea on ye South. It consists chiefly of hills and valleys, which branching out different ways gives name to ye parish – Branchescomb, ye Branching vale.*

There's a long description of the church, an inaccurate description of the medieval house at Church Living, and then, more interestingly –

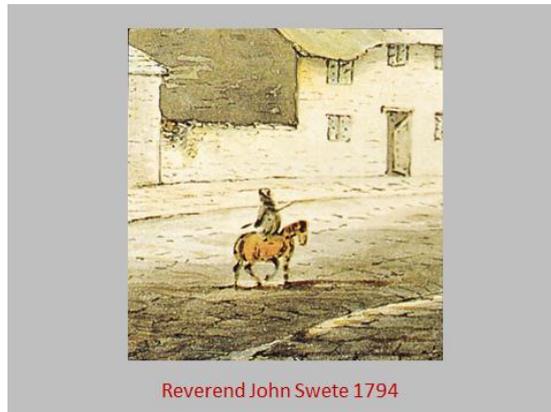
**FOURTH SPEAKER continues:** *A little to the South of ye church on ye sea coast is a tenement called Berry, [which] I suppose takes its name from a small encampment on ye cliff of [which] there are some small remains, but ye mounds are very slight –*



*near this is Mr Kerlakes quarry of Limestone, which lyes so near the Cliff, [that] when they take off ye head of flints & clay, which is very thick here, they drive it in wheelbarrows, & turn it over ye Cliff into ye sea. In this chalky Limestone are found layers of black flints & some round coated flints, which are esteemed very good to be cut for guns ... There are several Kilns here for burning ye Lime.*

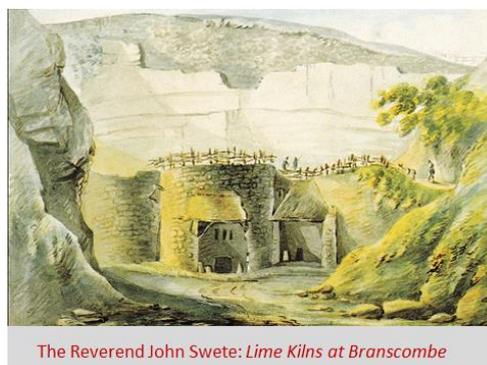
Then, at the end of the eighteenth century, a splendid figure bustles on to the scene. He's an antiquarian and water colourist, much influenced by the

‘Picturesque’ mode – i.e. an admirer of all that is rustic and charming. He is the **REVEREND JOHN SWETE**.



In his diary, he comes bumping along in his carriage with his wife and daughter. He’s a man with time on his hands and private means, which he inherited from his aunt Esther Swete by changing his name (no doubt gladly, because he was previously called John Tripe). A man of insatiable curiosity with a passion for painting lime kilns, we meet him coming up Quarry lane from Beer -

**FIFTH SPEAKER:** *We continued to ascend up the hill, by a narrow and stoney road – a short way, after having surmounted the hill, we inadvertently past beyond the turning that was to reconduct us the turnpike road and in the course of reconnoitring the Country before me to procure information – I came by a beaten backway over a field or two to a commanding eminence from whence I had a most delightfull view of Branscombes Hills and deep vallies. ... Seeing a Quarry and Kiln somewhat further on I was anxious to know how far we had erred and to gain directions for our future way.*



***On my approach to this kiln by a hollow way, as that at Beer, I was again struck by the similarity and its appearance, if possible more romantic.***

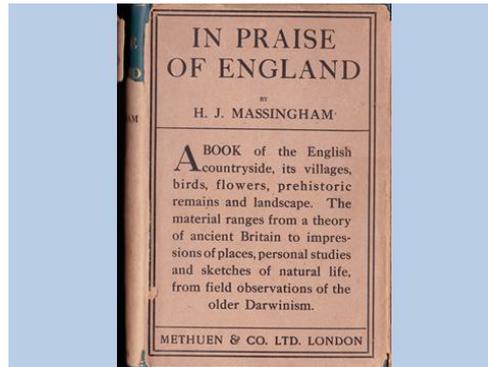


• The Reverend John Swete: *Lime Kilns at Branscombe*

***The ground on the sides sloped more abrupt – the Lime kilns then occupied the whole of the hollow beyond – having two openings, and projecting from the Quarry in a rounded form, having weather-sheds of thatch over their mouths, and wattled wicker fences on the upper verge – on the right, the road by which culm was brought to the pits, and stone convey'd from the Quarry, had a very picturesque effect ... [PROBABLY CUT and beyond appear'd the stratum of freestone, which in some parts seem'd nearly exhausted – I saw the end of it, and observ'd that, all above and behind consisted of a strata of the same black flints which I had just noticed in the quarry at Beer ...] I was uncommonly pleased with this Scene ... Indeed the whole of this country seems to deserve particular attention. The Parishes of Beer and Branscombe, are abundant in the Romantic, and among the Vallies, that wind between the Moutainous hills to the Sea, I have no doubt, but there may be found lanschapes of the wildest and most magnificent Nature.***

He'd obviously failed to take the turning to Woodhead towards the turnpike road to Sidmouth (now the A3052), and had started down the road towards the Branscombe. At the top of Vicarage Hill, instead of going down into the village he took a track across the fields to the quarry above what was later the garden of Hazelwood.

Now, just for a moment, we want to fast forward one hundred and thirty years. **H. J. MASSINGHAM**, the most over-the-top writer of romantic purple passages, walked over to the self-same quarry in 1924.



The lime kilns had long been abandoned, and the quarry floor was overgrown.

**SIXTH SPEAKER: *Over the crater lips, scooped out by an explosive human energy ... Nature, the toiling seedsman, had crept back to profit by Man the fortuitous delver. First she had sown her tares like a thief in the night, but then, growing bolder ... had emptied her barrel-loads, until what had been man's utility became her undisputed tenure and own wild garden.***



***In the steeper hollows, the ash trees grew forty and fifty feet high, and had a squirrel trod the skeleton thatch of their roofs, I, standing on the barrens above, had but to stretch a hand out for him to take a desperate leap and scramble over the edge to my feet.***

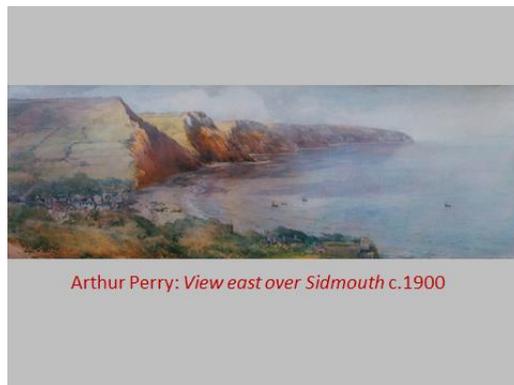
***These little wildernesses, these forms where driven nature hid her wild heart like a trembling hare, were man-made. It was man who had scarred the hills and so caused them to be clothed in beauty.***

It's interesting to have these two contrasting moments in time. But to return to the eighteenth century. Swete came in from the Beer in 1795. Some twenty

years earlier, a quite unexpected other person came from Sidmouth. He's an historical oddity whose visit was recorded in -

**SEVENTH SPEAKER [with American accent]: *The Journal and letters of the late SAMUEL CURWEN, Judge of Admiralty &c.; an American Refugee in England, from 1775 to 1784.***

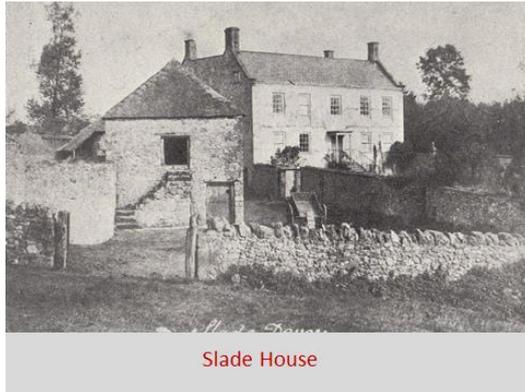
Samuel Curwen was a Loyalist. He was on the losing side in the War of Independence. So he took refuge in England, and came to Sidmouth, which he described as –



**SEVENTH SPEAKER continues: ... *a watering hole, some of the company resorting hither for the benefit of sea bathing and drinking the waters. ... Sidmouth consists of about one hundred houses ... the inhabitants chiefly hired out to the Newfoundland traders, and for the most part in low circumstances***

Curwen rode out to view the landscape and to pass time with various local big-wigs, particularly those of dissenting persuasion.

**SEVENTH SPEAKER continues: *October 17 1776 'Rode to Slade [now the Donkey Sanctuary] to visit Mr Lee, ... took a stroll to the cliffs on the seaside, yielding a delightful prospect.'***



On November 11 he's coming from Coliford and decides to dine with Mr Lee again. His description of riding through Branscombe is terse –

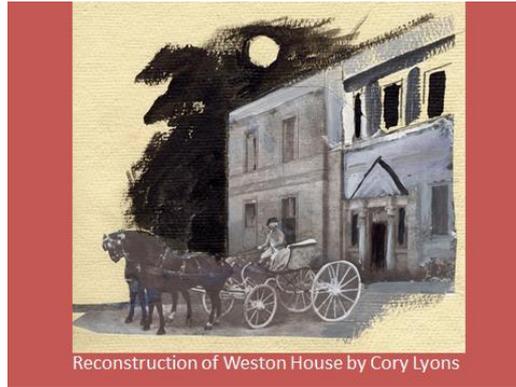
**SEVENTH SPEAKER continues: *Passed forward to Branscombe consisting of five clusters of small huts, of mud walls and thatched roofs.***

By mud he must have meant cob, and the five clusters are probably *Square, Bridge, Church, Street* and perhaps *Weston*. Clearly, Curwen didn't find Branscombe up to American standards, and not even picturesque!



We arrive at the beginning of the nineteenth century and there's one short account that sheds light on an important event. First, a digression is necessary.

Some of you will recognize the name of **JOHN STUCKEY**, builder of the great house at Weston, avaricious land-owner, a magistrate who was hard on smugglers but had a secret cellar in one of his out-houses.



Reconstruction of Weston House by Cory Lyons

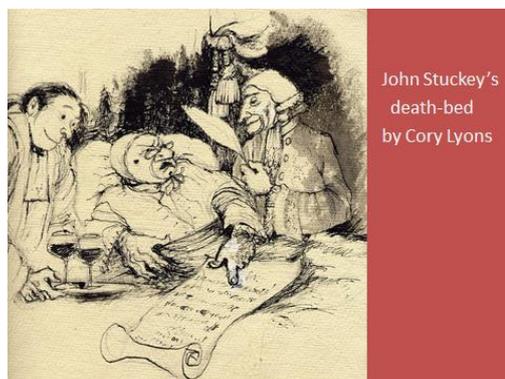
Born in 1718, he never married (he was engaged to a Miss Carslake but she turned him down, allegedly 'because he had wronged a girl') and he was the sworn enemy of William Leigh, Curwen's friend at Slade, who was his neighbour and cousin. He also loathed the vicar, the Reverend Puddicombe —

**EIGHTH SPEAKER:** *Puddicombe has become the most intolerable scoundrel that ever a parish was cursed with; his whole bent is to make the utmost penny of the parish ...*

A bit rich – Stuckey, the greediest grabber of property in the Parish, accusing Puddicombe of avarice! Mind you, Puddicombe got the last word. When Stuckey died he wrote in the Burial Register:

**NINTH SPEAKER:** *1810 Stuckey, John, aged 91. He was for many years ... a Magistrate; and was the oldest Magistrate in the County for several years before he died. He died possess'd of vast worldly property; which, after he had long possess'd, without enjoying and without using; he was, at last, constrained to leave to others ...*

In 1810, while Stuckey lay on his death bed, a deplorable relative, Barnaby Bartlett, appeared on the scene and managed to cajole him into changing his Will.



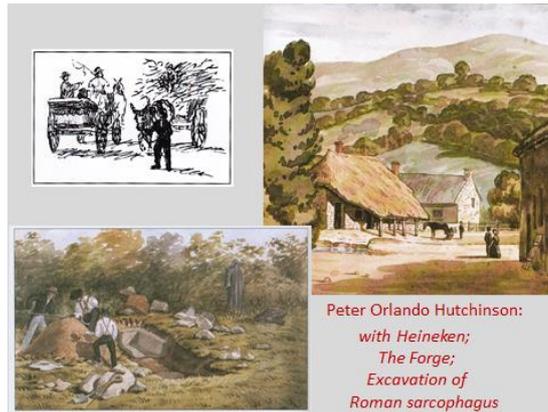
John Stuckey's death-bed by Cory Lyons

However, things didn't go entirely Barnaby Barlett's way. The story, according to Elijah Chick, eminent local historian writing almost a hundred years later, and one still heard today, was that –

**TENTH SPEAKER:** [The] *large house at Weston ... was burnt about A.D. 1810 (ie the year Stuckey died). It was said to have been destroyed by a natural son of the Stuckey just then dead, in his rage on discovering that he could not inherit the property.*



Ah, but wait, here comes a *visitor!* Who can this be, on the very day of the burning, walking over the hill from Sidmouth with his school-mates? Well, what a surprise - it's young **PETER ORLANDO HUTCHINSON!** Here he is, and here's *his* story –



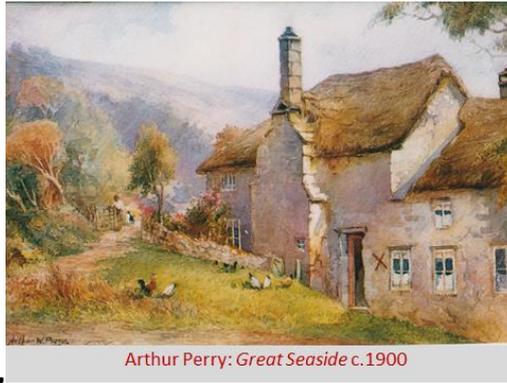
**ELEVENTH SPEAKER:** *It is necessary for a carriage to go round the head of the valley by Slade, in order to reach Weston House the ruins of which are seen at a distance. This mansion, when the property of Stuckey Bartlett, Esq., was consumed by fire, and has never been rebuilt. The author went over with some school-fellows the next day, and burnt the soles of his shoes among the still smouldering ruins. He brought back a mass of lead, which had run off the roof in a molten state, and had formed itself into a heap on the ground, where the drops had cooled as they fell. The marble mantel pieces, burnt into lime, could be easily broken with the hands, like a biscuit.*

Orlando was born in 1810, the year Stuckey died. In the margin of this account someone has written July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1829. Another suggested date for the fire is 1825. If Orlando was born in 1810 and went up to see the burnt house with his school friends, a date in the middle to late '20s would be right. So Orlando's visit tells us that the illegitimate son, if indeed he did set the fire, had been brooding on his revenge for a long time!

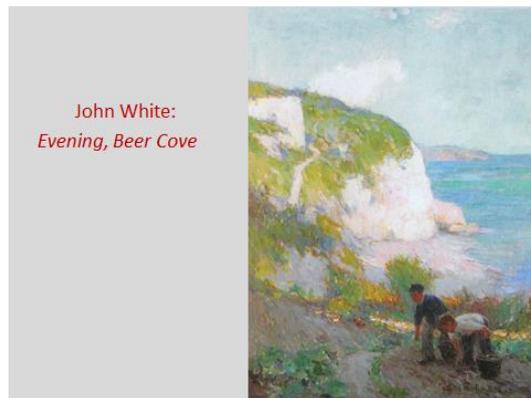
In later years Orlando Hutchinson came regularly to Branscombe with his faithful companion, Mr Heineken in his little carriage. Mostly, they came on antiquarian excursions, surveying or excavating – but also to paint.

Here he is on a slightly different expedition, accompanying the ladies:

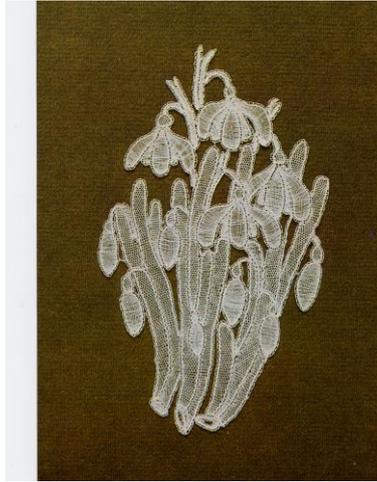
**ELEVENTH SPEAKER:** *Wed. May 8. 1867. Drove with some ladies to Branscombe, which place some of them had not seen. We passed past all through the long village to Sea-side Farm,*



***where we alighted. We ate our sandwiches near the cliff. We then proceeded to the undercliff. One of them and myself went all along to the great towers of chalk towards Beer Head. Since I first rambled through this romantic place, more than thirty years ago, numerous parts of ledges and slopes have been cleaned and brought into cultivation, either for potatoes or corn. And how forward the potatoes are at this early season of the year! The place is so sheltered and so warm. Today it was boiling hot.***



Starting in the 1840s and 50s, Branscombe began to emerge from the shadows. The by-roads in and out of Branscombe and Beer had gradually improved and in neighbouring towns shops were beginning to cater for the expanding middle classes. In the villages, after a catastrophic decline in the lace trade following the invention of cheap machine-made lace, things had taken a turn for the better. Queen Victoria had ordered her wedding dress from Beer, and it became the 'thing' for affluent ladies to set themselves apart from more ordinary people by ordering expensive hand-made lace. There was also a knock-on effect from the Great Exhibition in London.



So there was a little more spending money and carts laden with goods begin to trundle down the lanes between town and village. To facilitate trade and commerce, the first **DIRECTORIES** began to be compiled in the eighteen thirties. The heavyweights - White's, Kelly's, Murray's - come on line from 1850. They list notable residents, farmers, shopkeepers and other trades. There's also a short description of each place, and it seems likely that in some cases someone was sent out to check the scene. In 1851 Murray produced a travellers' 'Handbook for Devon and Cornwall' Here's their account:

**TWELFTH SPEAKER:** *Branscombe is a straggling village, beautifully situated in a wide, but irregular basin, at the junction of three valleys, and as many streams, which flow to the sea at Branscombe Mouth. The sides of these valleys form a perfect jumble of picturesque hills, one of which, on the S., gives a character to the scene. It rises abruptly, with a load of old trees, to the height of 600ft., and there meets with the precipice which forms the other side of the hill, and descends at once to the shore.*

*From Branscombe, the pedestrian will pursue his walk along the cliffs as far as Weston Mouth. The coast is extremely beautiful, rising from the sea in slopes or precipices and occasionally varied by an undercliff of small extent, a rude kind of terrace which here and there affords space for a little orchard or corn-field. The rocks are festooned with Ivy and other creeping plants, and the cliffs crowned with old lime-kilns ...*

From the same date comes another account, by the traveller **WALTER WHITE**. He too, describes the cliffs and village, but has a more homely take:

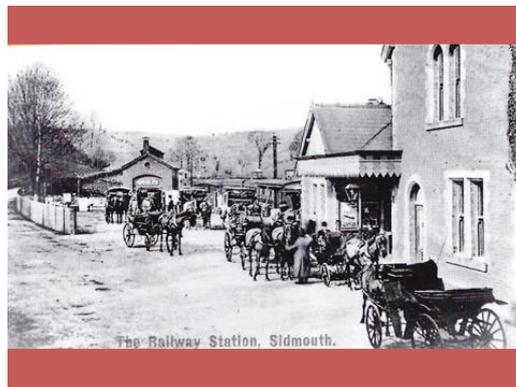
**THIRTEENTH SPEAKER:** ... *The village ... comprises a few scattered groups of houses ... and is encircled ... by a strange assemblage of hills.*

*At the Masons' Arms, a public-house in the largest of these townlets, I found quarters for the night, comfortable enough, although the hostess thought fit to apologise for the rustic nature of the accommodation: people came there for refreshment during the day, but rarely stopped all night. The mutton-chops, however, and the bread and butter were excellent, the tea was refreshing, the bed scrupulously clean, and what more can a wayfarer want? Then, you may talk with the host over a glass of cider, and hear all about the gossip of the neighbourhood, and if you will, something about the redoubtable Jack Rattenbury, who was once chief of the smugglers at Beer.*



John White: *The Masons Arms* 1915

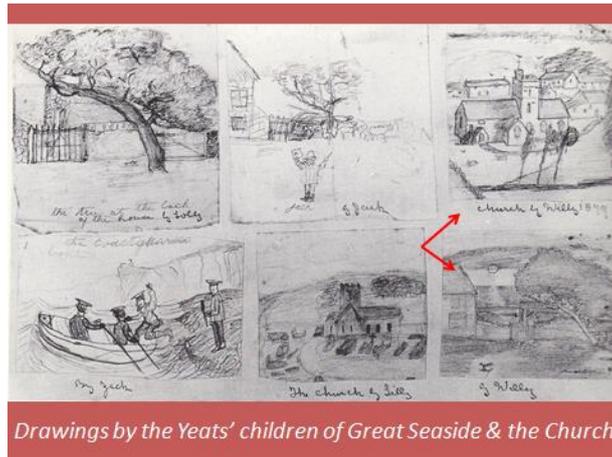
Then came the railway. In 1860 the main line from London to Exeter was completed, followed by branch-lines to Seaton in 1868 and Sidmouth in 1874.



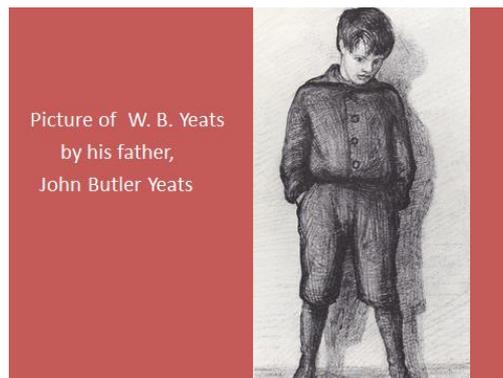
The Railway Station, Sidmouth.

Now tourists began to tumble into the village, sometimes putting up in farm-houses.

These charming pictures were drawn in 1879. Willy is **W.B.YEATS**, aged fourteen - who would become the greatest Irish poet. **JACK** became a great artist. The others are by their sisters, Lilly and Lolly.



Their improvident father had rented Great Seaside and this rare holiday was warmly remembered by members of the family.



**FOURTEENTH SPEAKER: *They read aloud from David Copperfield, Old Mortality and The Antiquary, and from Scott and Macaulay ... particularly The Lays of ancient Rome and The Lay of the Last Minstrel. They were taught chess moves in the dust of the road; ... made big stones into dolls, with faces painted by Jack. Willy and the Ford boys had a smugglers' cave ...***

It has been suggested that the Branscombe mackerel reappeared in Yeats' famous poem *Sailing to Byzantium* as the 'mackerel-crowded sea'.

Other tourists stayed in cottages. There's a lovely account by George Chaloner, a London printer, who had been ill and came to recuperate in Branscombe in the 1860s. He was an ardent Methodist, and he seems to have lodged with John Perryman, the man later killed at Branscombe Old Pits. He wrote an

ecstatic account in Lethaby's Sidmouth Journal.

**FIFTEENTH SPEAKER:** *If any reader, exhausted by mental toil, desires perfect rest for a space, let him go to Branscombe. There is no one there to talk to except the natives; nothing to excite, nothing even to look at but the hills, the valleys, and the sea. He may gather watercresses in the brook; catch butterflies in the fields; pick blackberries on the sides of the cliff; may even lie on the beach for hours in perfect solitude.*



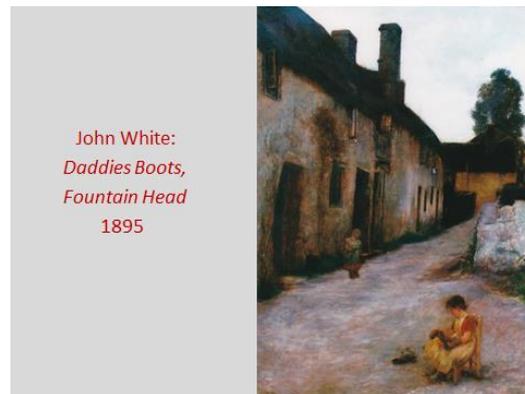
John White: *Three Children Playing* c.1880

*There are no visitors, and there is no society. Dress as you please, do as you like, none can say you nay. Dull as it is, I shall always like Branscombe, for there when very weak I laid in a store of health during a fortnight's pleasant rest ... Here ... I indulged in many vagaries unintelligible to the natives, whose fears were excited when I rashly seized a dragonfly with unprotected fingers; and still more when I secured a bat, that had the temerity to fly into our kitchen driving an old lady into a corner, and two damsels into a capacious cupboard ... Here I saw the beautiful Orange-tip butterfly in vast numbers and variety, haunting the yellow flowers of seaside Crucifera; and I secured, crawling slowly among the pebbles on the beach, the beetle called "bloody-nosed," on account of its apparent bleeding when wetted.*

Chaloner may have arrived out of season, for there seem to have been no other tourists. Or perhaps, since the railway had only just come through, they were still very few. The famous nature writer **W.H. HUDSON**, writing in 1898, describes a different scene.

**SIXTEENTH SPEAKER:** *It was surprising to find that there were many visitors, and one wondered where they could all stow themselves. The explanation*

***was that those who visited Branscombe knew it, and preferred its hovels to the palaces of the fashionable seaside towns. No cottage was too mean to have its guest. I saw a lady push open the cracked and warped door of an old barn and go in ... it was her bed-sitting-room. I watched a party of pretty, merry girls marching single-file, down a narrow path past a pigstye, then climb up a ladder to the window of a loft at the back of a stone cottage, and disappear within. It was their bedroom.***



***The relations between the villagers and their visitors were more intimate and kind than usual. They lived more together, and were more free and easy. The men were mostly farm labourers,***



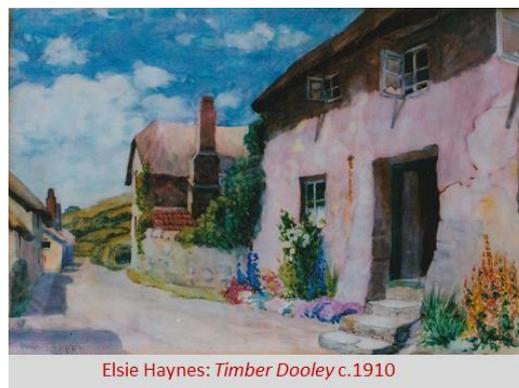
***and after their day's work they would sit out of doors on the ground to smoke their pipes; and where the narrow, crooked little street was narrowest – at my end of the village [Street] – when two men would sit opposite each other, each at his own door, with legs stretched out before them, their boots would***

***very nearly touch in the middle of the road. ...No sooner was it dark than all were in bed and asleep; not one square patch of yellow light was visible.***



A few years later, **C. G. HARPER** adds a little more to this picture.

**SEVENTEENTH SPEAKER:** *Away up the valley road are little groups of the quaintest cottages, with tiny strips of gardens scarce more than two feet wide, forming, as it were, a fringe or hem to the walls, and merging directly, without fence, into the roadway. But no gardens anywhere can show greater fertility or a more pleasing variety of flowers. Among them are to be seen spoils of the neighbouring cliffs, in the shape of petrified vegetation from the coast between Branscombe and Weston Mouth.*



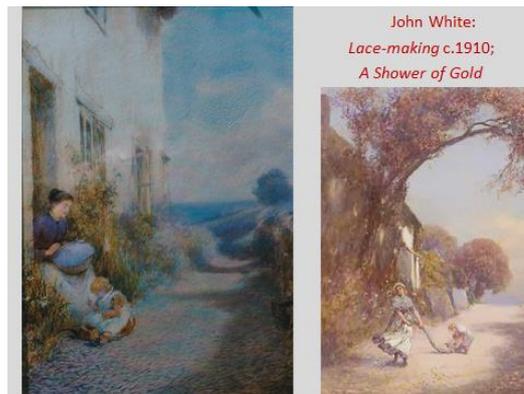
But we want to return to Hudson, who is a marvellous raconteur. He's walking through East Devon, and he's still some distance from Branscombe. It's a hot day, he's thirsty, and he comes to a small group of cottages. He stops and asks if he can have something to quench his thirst – cider, milk? ... The young woman could only offer him water, but let him rest for an hour –

**RETURN TO SIXTEENTH SPEAKER:** *Despite the burning climate, [she] was as white as any pale town lady, and although she was the mother of several*

*children ... the face was ... almost girlish in its delicacy and innocent expression when she looked up at me with her blue eyes shaded by her white sun-bonnet. ... I mentioned I was on my way to Branscombe ...*

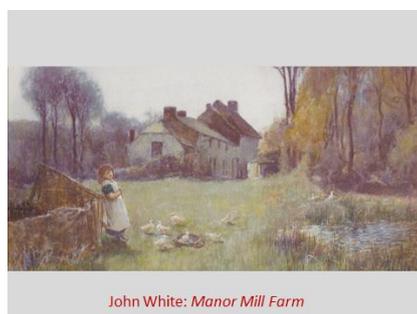
*'Branscombe – are you going there? Oh, I wonder what you will think of Branscombe!' She exclaimed, her white cheeks flushing, her innocent eyes sparkling with excitement.*

*What was Branscombe to her, I returned with indifference ..*



*'But it is my home!' She answered, looking hurt at my careless words. 'I was born there, and married there, and have always lived at Branscombe with my people until my husband got work in this place; then we had to leave home .'*

*She went on to tell me that Branscombe was, oh, such a dear, queer, funny old place! ... People who went there sometimes laughed at it at first because it was such a funny, tumbledown old place; but they always said afterwards that there was no such sweet spot.*



Hudson gets quite carried away –

**SIXTEENTH SPEAKER continues: *Her enthusiasm was very delightful; and when baby cried, in the excitement of talk she opened her breast and fed it before me. A pretty sight. But for the pure white, blue-veined skin she might have been taken for a woman of Spain – the most natural, perhaps the most lovable, of the daughters of the earth. But all at once she remembered that I was a stranger, and with a blush turned aside and covered her fair skin. ...***

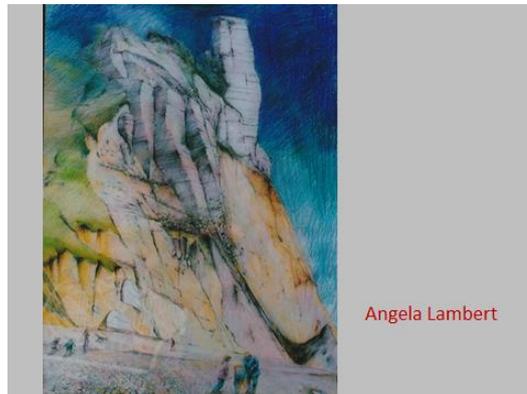
Here's Hudson's marvellously vivid description of the little cliff plats on the undercliff to the east of Branscombe mouth –

**SIXTEENTH SPEAKER continues: *The cliff is not nearly so high as many another, but it has features of peculiar interest. Here ... there has been a landslip, a large portion of the cliff ... falling below and forming a sloping mass of chalky soil mingled with huge fragments of rock .... On this rough slope, under the shelter of the cliff, with the sea at its feet , the villagers have farmed their cultivated patches. The patches, wildly irregular in form, some on such steeply sloping grounds as to suggest ... they must have been cultivated on all fours, are divided from each other by ridges and by masses of rock, deep fissures in the earth, strips of bramble and thorn and furze bushes .... The effect was very singular ... the ruin wrought by Nature ... and the plots ... of cultivated smoothness – potato rows like parallel lines ruled on a grey ground, and big blue-green cabbage-globes – each plot with its fringe of spike-like onion leaves, crinkled parsley, and other garden herbs.***



Sitting amongst the cliff plats, Hudson described a huge number of herring gulls nesting on the cliff, and twenty years later, in 1924, **MASSINGHAM,**

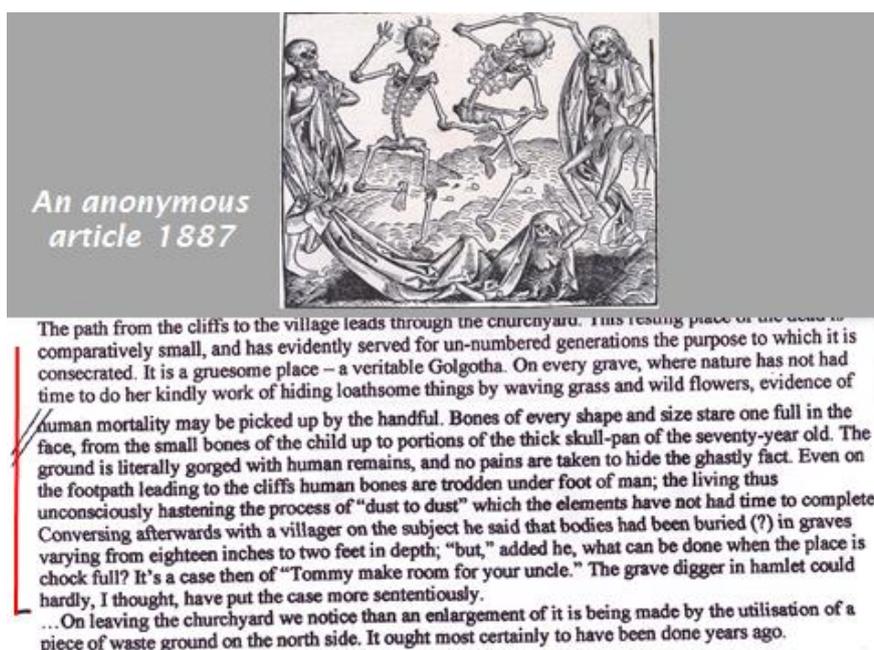
sitting on the self-same undercliff watched the peregrine falcons on Hooken Stacks –

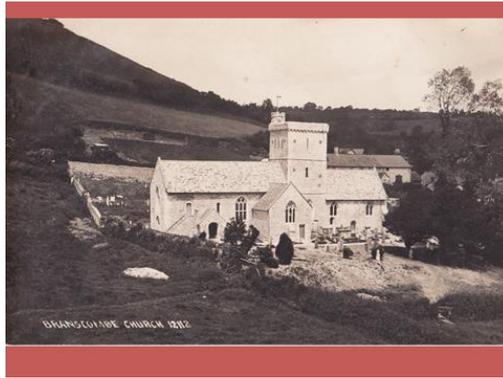


**RETURN TO SIXTH SPEAKER: *There were six of these natural “menhirs”, ... each of a different shape. The pinnacle, the most commanding of them all ... was the regular lookout of a peregrine falcon . . .***

The stack was also home to a pair of ravens, who, according to Massingham, led an incredibly domestic and loving life.

While Hudson and later Massingham were extolling the beauties of village, cliff and birds, and **JOHN WHITE** was out painting day after day, others were turning a critical eye to the state of the church and churchyard. Here’s an indignant account from the late 1880s.

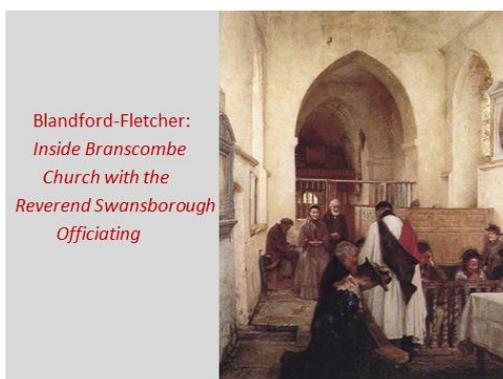




**EIGHTEENTH SPEAKER:** *The path from the cliffs to the village leads through the churchyard. This resting place of the dead is comparatively small, and has evidently served for un-numbered generations ... . It is a gruesome place – a veritable Golgotha. On every grave, where nature has not had time to do her kindly work of hiding loathsome things by waving grass and wild flowers, evidence of human mortality may be picked up by the handful. Bones of every shape and size stare one full in the face, from the small bones of the child up to portions of the thick skull-pan of the seventy-year old. The ground is literally gorged with human remains, and no pains are taken to hide the ghastly fact ... Conversing afterwards with a villager on the subject he said that bodies had been buried in graves varying from eighteen inches to two feet in depth, “but,” added he, what can be done when the place is chock full?” It’s a case then of “Tommy make room for your uncle.”*

And here’s **J. L. W. PAGE**, 1895, waxing indignant about the church –

**NINETEENTH SPEAKER:** *Descending the wooded side of Littlecombe Hill we reach the church, a very ancient building and in a state of repair that can only be called shocking.*



Blandford-Fletcher:  
Inside Branscombe  
Church with the  
Reverend Swansborough  
Officiating

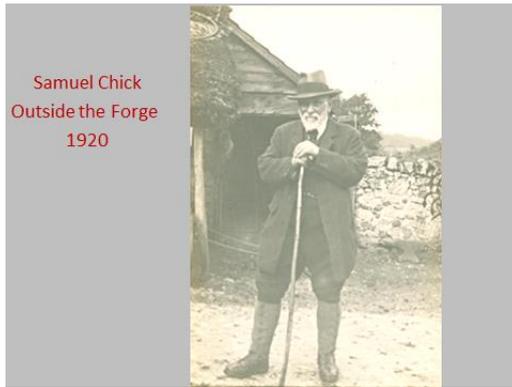
*The floor is broken and uneven ....and the monuments in the chancel are positively running with green slime. The verger, a cobbler, who has a little wayside cottage hard by, shakes his head dolefully. "The architect says it will ake £2600 to put 'un to rights, sir." Maybe, but it would not take 2600 pence, or even farthings, to make one or two eyesores disappear, and it reflects little credit on the people of Branscombe that they are content to leave their church in such a state.*

Of course, there'll always be someone who disagrees. Here's **C.G HARPER** again, writing in 1907 (only **four** years before the church was restored):

**RETURN TO SEVENTEENTH SPEAKER:** *There have been those scribbling tourists who, passing by and looking up the time-worn building, have acted the part of agent provocateur to "restoring" zealots by dwelling upon the dampness of it, and the "meanness" of the box-like deal pews of the interior; but not yet have their instigations to crime against the picturesque been acted upon, and the ferns and mosses still sprout from the time-worn tower and the interior is still, in its whitewash, its pews, and its wooden pulpit, an example of the simple sway of the churchwarden and the village carpenter of a simpler age.*



We reach the beginning of the twentieth century and at least one family has bought themselves a second home. Does a second-homer count as a visitor? Yes? No? Well, we can't resist this particular family ...



Samuel Chick  
Outside the Forge  
1920

**SAM CHICK III** was the grandson of Abigail Chick, the first lace entrepreneur, whose husband Sam Chick I farmed at Berry Barton. Their son, Sam Chick II, ran a lace business in Sidmouth. Sam III was sent to London in 1863 to set up a lace outlet. He was an astute man and, realising that lace was on the way out, moved successfully into property development. By 1901, married and with ten children, he wanted to spend more time in Devon. Branscombe was a familiar place – his aunt Harriet Chick had married John Tucker, who ran the lace factory at Barnells; their daughter, Mary, had married Henry Ford of Lower House.

So, when, in 1901, **HAZELWOOD**, built by Henry Ford for his mother, fell vacant, he took it on – first renting and, much later, buying it.



**EDITH CHICK**, his eldest daughter, describes the house in her letters to Arthur Tansley whom she later married –

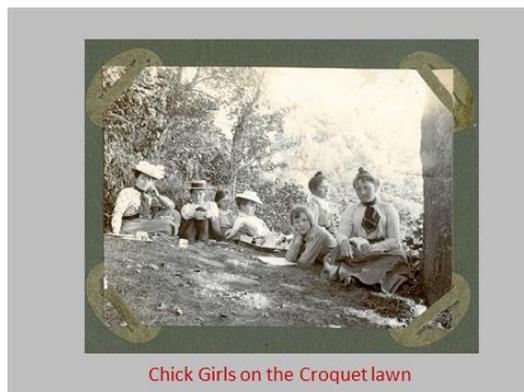
**TWENTIETH SPEAKER: Feb 1901 – We are in the midst of furnishing Hazelwood ... Papa is awfully funny he buys ornaments & pictures when we haven't half enough chests of drawers, and then solemnly confides in me with a statement that is half a suggestion "that Mother doesn't know". In this way**

***we have acquired a complete set of Punch, a picture about the size of an ordinary room door -***



***& have only escaped the terrible bronzes because he wasn't quite sure that he liked the subjects ... My imagination cannot rise to picture the excitement in the village when a Maple's Pantehnicon van meanders slowly through it next week ...***

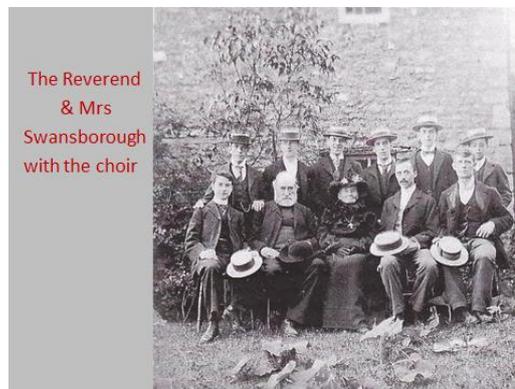
***March 1901 – the garden is both exciting and disappointing. There is very little flower garden or lawn but any amount of woodland, & a fascinating winding grass walk up to a croquet ground on a level with the Beer cliffs a hundred feet above the house. This is our one feature.***



***We boast a minion called (by his sister) "Horlbert". ... "Horlbert" is distinguished in looks ... but has the slight drawback of being absolutely unintelligible. Papa says he can understand him "in the open air", which seems a little weird. Most times his sister has to act as interpreter, her accent***

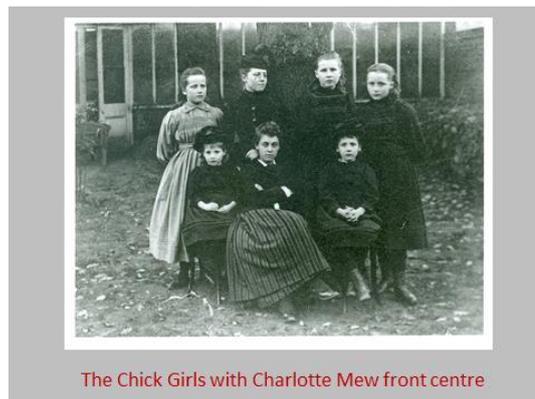
*being a little less pronounced. There is a sublime height towards which they both urge us, viz – the keeping of a pig. The attraction is a little difficult to understand, the entire justification being that “the potato peelings would not then be wasted”.*

*Our clergyman [the Reverend Swansborough] has formally welcomed us to his parish & won my father’s heart with raspberry canes. The same old gentleman is the dearest soul, with but one amiable weakness, an affection for dreary hymns – last Summer on the occasion of a christening his choice was “Brief life is here our portion” & “Thy will be done”. He is as old-fashioned as his Church & is 77.*



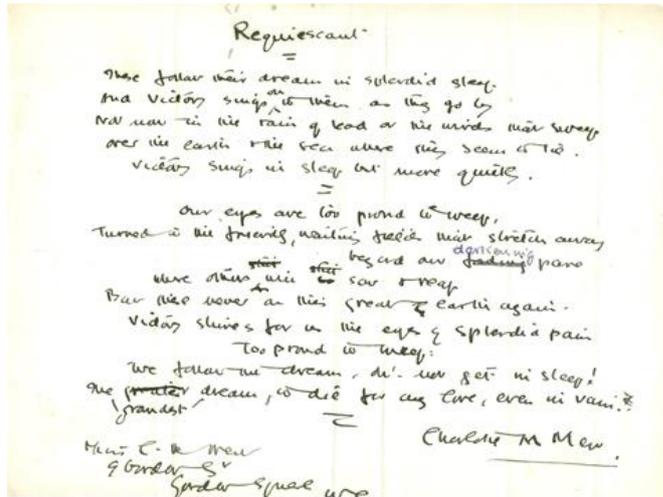
The Reverend  
& Mrs  
Swansborough  
with the choir

The Chick girls were very sociable and a great many people came to visit at Hazelwood. One of them was the poet **CHARLOTTE MEW**.



The Chick Girls with Charlotte Mew front centre

She’d gone to school in London with Edith and gave her handwritten copies of some of her poems. She was a diminutive, reclusive person, with a family history of mental instability. Eventually she committed suicide. This is part of a poem that she wrote which seems to address the village – and perhaps also someone who knew Branscombe and has died.



**TWENTY-FIRST SPEAKER:**

**REQUIESCAT**

***Your birds that call from tree to tree***

***Just overhead, and whirl and dart,***

***Your breeze fresh-blowing from the sea,***

***And your sea is singing on Sweetheart.***

***Your salt scent on the thin sharp air***

***Of this grey dawn's first drowsy hours,***

***While the grass shines everywhere***

***The yellow starlight of your flower.***

***As if your spirit, swaying yet***

***To the old passions, were not free***

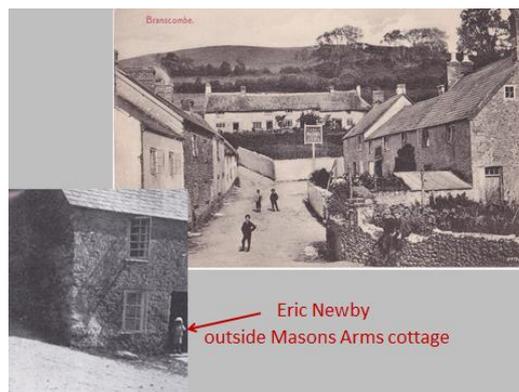
***Of spring's wild magic, and the fret***

***Of the wilder wooing of the sea!***

We move on to something *quite* different. 1925, and a smart chauffeur-driven Napier came down Vicarage Hill and draws up outside the Mason's Arms.



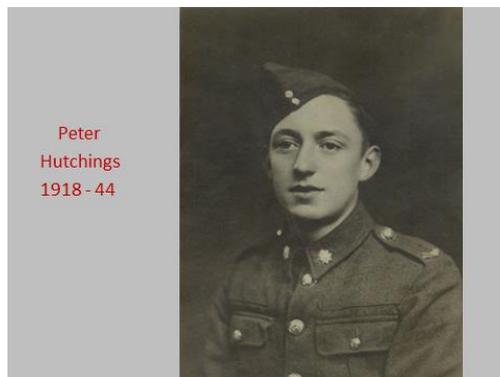
**ERIC NEWBY** – later to become a famous travel writer, but now aged seven - has arrived with his father and mother and Kathy who was supposed to look after him. They have rented the cottage alongside the pub.



**TWENTY-SECOND SPEAKER:** *Behind the Mason's Arms ... there was a yard surrounded by various dilapidated outbuildings and a piece of ground overgrown with grass and nettles which concealed various interesting pieces of rusted, outmoded machinery the most important of which was an old motor car smelling of decaying rubber and dirty engine oil. The stuffing of what was left of its buttoned leather upholstery was a home for a large family of mice. This yard was to be the scene of some of the more memorable games I played with my best friend in the village, Peter Hutchings, whose mother kept a grocery, confectionery and hardware shop on the corner opposite Mr Hayman, the butcher's.*



***It was from Peter Hutchings, who was killed while serving as a soldier in the Second World War ...***



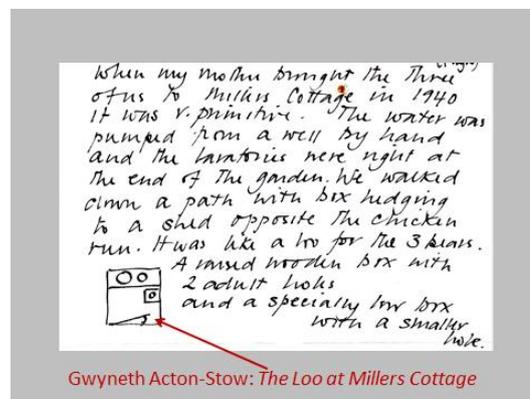
***that I learned the broad local dialect which was so broad that by the end of that first summer ... no one except a local inhabitant could understand what I was saying. 'Sweatin' like a bull 'er be,' was how Peter Hutchings described to me one day the state of his sister, Betty, confined to bed with a temperature, and it was in this form that I passed on this important piece of news to my parents.***

***There in the inn yard, in the long summer evenings, we used to sit in the old motor car, either myself or Peter at the wheel, taking it in turn, the driver making BRRR-ing noises, the one sitting next to him in the front making honking noises ... as we roared round imaginary corners, narrowly missing imaginary vehicles coming in the opposite direction ... In the back we used to put Betty Hutchings, if she was available, who wore a white beret, was placid, said nothing apart from an occasional BRR, and was in fact an ideal back-seat passenger. Sometimes, if we felt like doing something 'rude' we used to stop the car and pee on the seats in the back, and Betty would pee too.***

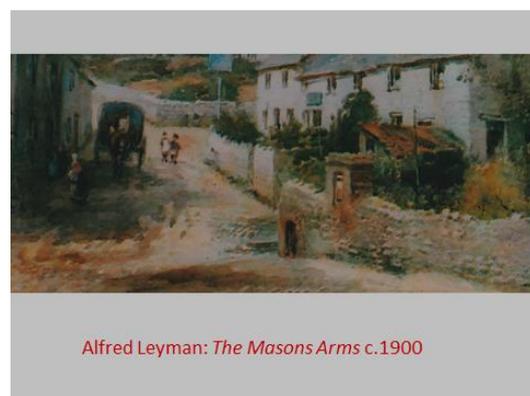
***When we got tired of driving our car we ourselves used to become motor cars, tearing up and down the street making BRRR-ing noise of varying intensity as we changed gear ... It was these hideous ... noises that no doubt prompted old Mrs Bamford, whose cottage also faced the main street, to utter the words, 'She didn't ought to 'ave 'ad 'im.'***

Moving on ... Second World War, and the evacuees are arriving. Here's **GWYNETH ACTON-STOW** remembering staying with her great grand-mother Mrs Perry, at Hillside cottage in 1940.

**TWENTY-THIRD SPEAKER: *At Miller's Cottage (where the children first stayed with their mother) the lavatories were right at the end of the garden ... It was like a loo for the 3 bears. A raised wooden box with 2 adult holes and a specially low box with a smaller hole.***



***When we stayed with my Great Grandma at Hillside cottage, all the water was carried up from the village square. The water spout was next to the post box. This was used by others too and was a meeting place for the women.***



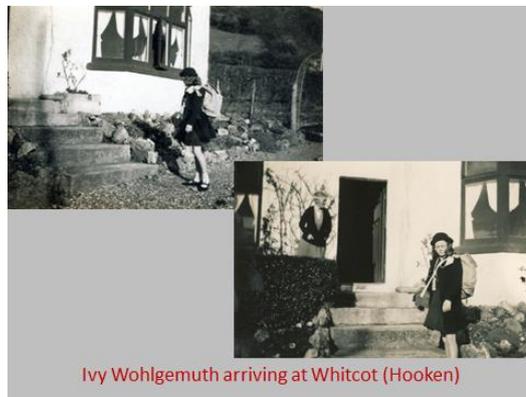
***Water ran around the back of Hillside Cottage and there must have been a spring too because the flagged floor was sometimes flooded and the furniture and carpets removed to the garden.***

***The lavatory was surprisingly near the house ... I certainly remember huge rats playing in the garden ...***

And here is **IVY WOHLGEMUTH'S** account. She was evacuated with 29 other children, two mothers and a teacher from the east end of London in 1938. She was eleven years old.

**TWENTY-FOURTH SPEAKER:** ... ***We went into the village hall... a lady was on the steps ... she looked at my 'label' which hung round my neck to ask me what my name was, and asked me to pronounce it ... Little did I know that she chose to have me and Joyce Frappell ... to live with her and her mother – 'Mrs Birks and Eleanor' whom we called Miss Birks ...***

***Joyce and I got in a car (Austin 12 1937, CTA 884), with Mrs Birks and Barney – a black cocker spaniel ... .***



***Having arrived at 'Whitcot' [now Hooken] and shown the room we were to share, we washed our hands. We heard a hand bell rung, which meant that supper was ready. We were taken into the dining room and Netta the maid brought in a dish of smoked haddock. My eyes almost fell out and I knew that I had to keep my feet under this table. Mrs Birks was rather Victorian ... but we soon got used to ... her ways, her likes and dislikes ...***

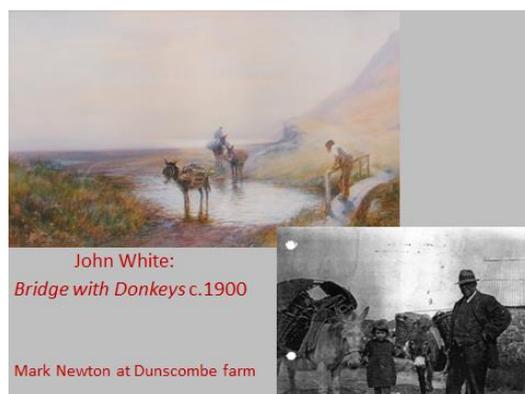
***Netta's hours were 8.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m., and she had a mile to walk home. Wednesday afternoons she had off (after she had washed up at about 2 p.m.) and Sunday afternoons off, all for one pound a week.***

***It was nice living in a house that had plenty of room and a very large garden plus a huge kitchen garden with a full time gardener – Mr Stevens, a man getting on in years, but very kind with us children. He cut us a large patch in the field so that we had our own garden ... Having the field gave us plenty of room to run and play games until "Dig for Victory" came about and the field had to be ploughed up to plant potatoes.***



***Joyce and I were very happy with our billet, but most, if not all, of the other children had to be re-billetted to houses where they were happier. ... In one of the very big houses, Barnells, lived Captain and Mrs Lloyd ... We had twins, Joyce and Doris Watton who went to live with them. It was a large house and they had a number of staff plus 3 gardeners. The twins didn't settle there and were moved to a small house in the village where they were very happy.***

Cliff-plats. Before the war, they were still being cultivated, both on the Beer and the Littlecombe side of the village. But after the war, the younger generation no longer wanted to put in the back-breaking work, and instead worked the allotments that were scattered through the village. Here's a visitor's account of one of the last of the cliff-plat farmers, most probably Mark Newton, working the Dunscombe plats. It's written in the late 1940s by **D. ST. LEGER-GORDON** –



***TWENTY-FIFTH SPEAKER: We met him, or rather his donkey, at a turn of the path ... Round a big rock he stepped out of the past, grey, sturdy, sun-tanned, and, but for one or two minor details of dress, differing little ... from the man who originally cleared the little patch ... two or three hundred years ago.***

... Throughout his life, the old man had worked on the cliffs, planting the same little potato-plot that his father and grandfather had tilled before him. ... In his grandfather's time and within his own memory, many of the less precipitous slopes, now abandoned to birch scrub and guilder rose, grew tons of early potatoes which found their way to Exeter market by means of ... a light waggon upon which 15 cwt would be loaded, and twice weekly during the early harvest this load was drawn into the city by four donkeys ... the slow but sure equipage eventually arriving after paying at the four turnpike gates which existed between Exeter and Branscombe. ...

Leaning on his long stick ... the old man told tales ... They were fishermen too, those cliff husbandmen, and as they wielded mattock or scythe keen eyes frequently wandered seawards, ever on the watch for the wheeling clouds of gulls which indicated an approaching mackerel shoal ... At the first intimation of a shoal off-shore a shout went up, echoed from ledge to ledge along the cliff-face. Tools were downed, and a general scramble ensued to launch the boats moored ... below ... . Now the fish, together with the busy cultivation and the old methods, have vanished ... the shoals dispersed by "night-drifting," the primitive agriculture superseded.

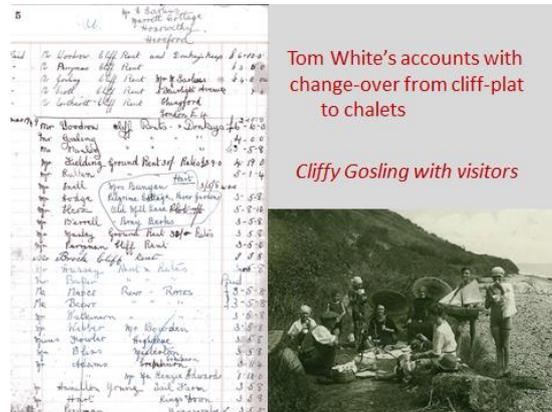
After the war, the cliff plats started to go out of use. And now new 'visitors' came, renting the old lincays on the plats at Littlecombe from Tom White at Berry farm, and turned them into 'little bits of Paradise'. That's a whole other story.



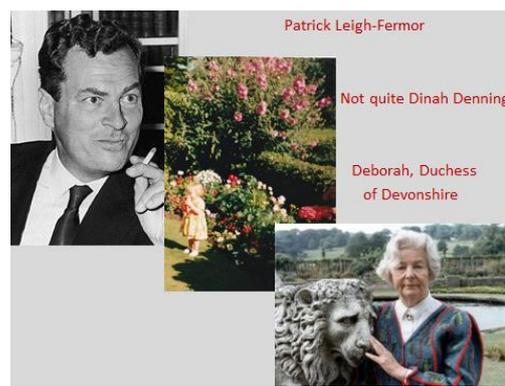
Tom White's wartime planting on the plats

But here's a glimpse seen through **TOM WHITE'S** Account Books: 1943 – wartime and Tom is planting out his plats. 1949 Tom's Rent Book – there are

still at least seven cliff plat farmers, but there are also people beginning to rent the disused plats. ....



We're nearing the end, but here's one surprise visit. **PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR**, another famous traveller, spent some time in the village in 1964, and scrawled a letter to his friend Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire.



**TWENTY-SIXTH SPEAKER: 9 May 1964, c/o Mrs Denning, Church Farm, Branscombe, South Devon**

*Darling Debo, I'm scribbling like mad in this farmhouse. Green hills all round, now crowned in tea cosies of mist, rain falling, gulls everywhere, also rooky woods; well-owled at night.*

*This letter is a bit disjointed before the farmer's three-year-old daughter, Dinah, v. pretty and comic, is booming up and down the flagged passage outside. A new apron has gone clean to her head and I don't wonder. It's pink with a pattern of small blue bears carrying parasols and I would have pined for it were I the right age and gender. ...*

*No more now, darling Debo, except tons of love from Paddy*

Leigh-Fermor actually got his story a bit muddled – Dinah and Ron Denning were, of course, his hosts at Church Living, and the little girl in the pinny was their daughter Rachel.

And so we come to our last visitor ... a HUGE visitor. 2007 and the arrival of the **NAPOLI** , followed by hordes of visitors from ‘away’.



**TWENTY-SEVENTH SPEAKER: *Daily Mirror January 24<sup>th</sup> 2007: BEACH BUMS! Fury as greedy looters wreck heritage site. Scavengers turn an idyllic World Heritage Beach into a litter-strewn tip yesterday in their sickening greed for loot.***

***In a shameful scene condemned worldwide, the vultures arrived from up to 280 miles away to snatch goods washed ashore from the stricken container vessel MSC Napoli. Looters forage like vermin on rubbish-strewn Branscombe beach. ... Some came with crowbars. Kids were dumped as parents plundered.***

***Branscombe beach ... was left looking like a landfill site with rubbish as far as the eye could see. The culprits should be named and shamed, exposed as common thieves rather than swashbuckling treasure hunters ....***

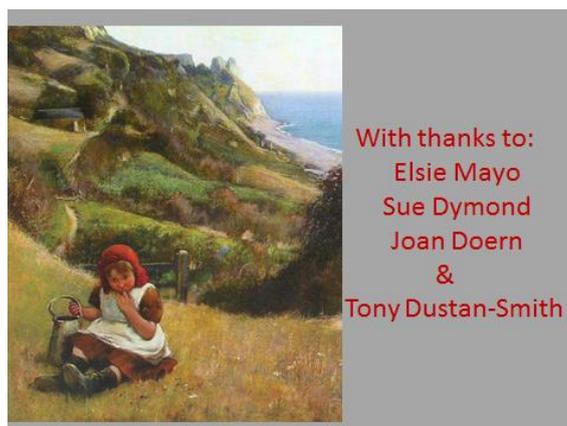


**TWENTY-EIGHTH SPEAKER: *The Guardian January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007: 'If you go down to the beach today ... you're bound to find something to steal'. ... Looters swoop amid battle to avoid ecological disaster ...***

***Branscombe Beach is heaving with ... hundreds of - depending on your point of view – looters, salvagers or beachcombers. Motor-bikes ... steering wheels, carpets, beauty creams, shoes, golf clubs, oil paintings, camcorders ... A bloke just said to me 'If you want trainers they're on the left, and videos are on the right' ... At sea ... two hundred tonnes of oil seeped from the ship and oil-coated seabirds continued to be washed up along a 40-mile stretch of the Jurassic coast ...***

Some of the locals, of course, had a slightly different take on what happened ...

***The talk ended with two songs composed by local people, Mike Green and Sue King, to celebrate 'The Napoli'***



*Cast:*

*Members of the Branscombe Players:*

Neil Clayton

Nigel & Annette Freathy

Paul Haynes

Sally Herniman

Joan Lister

Audrey Maskrey

Fiona Strange

*and guests:*

Rowland Molony

Tony Lambert

Pete Wilson

*Narrator:* John Torrance