

## BRANSCOMBE PROJECT: *HISTORY SNIPS*

### GEOFF SQUIRE - Branscombe 1934-1950: the people and places of my early years (Part Two)

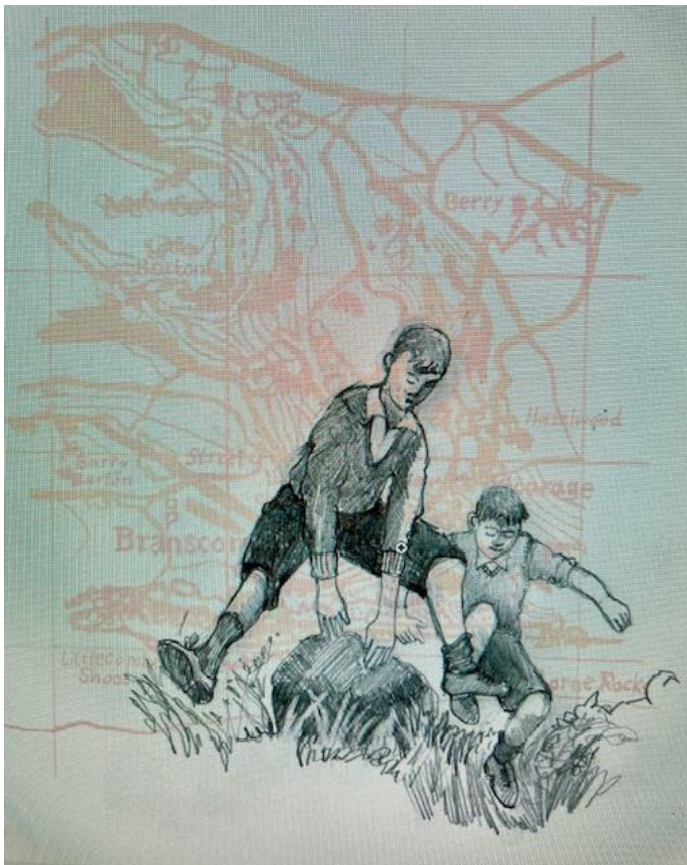
**Barbara:** Part one of this piece was published before the Summer; this is the second and last part. When Geoff sent it to us, he said it was going to be the last in his series on Branscombe. And so, in a way, it is. But, in another way, it isn't. Talking with Geoff and with Patrick Dillon who used to work with Geoff when they were both lecturers at Reading University, and talking with the Branscombe Project Committee, it seemed a lovely idea to bring all these pieces together, edit and illustrate them, ask Patrick to write an introduction, and produce another of our little booklets.

It's going to be called:

#### AN IDYLIC CHILDHOOD IN TROUBLED TIMES

Branscombe 1934-53. A Memoir

Geoff Squire



The first part will be called 'A Rural Idyll'. It's about nature, and landscape, running wild, getting lost, beginning to learn ... We have asked Maisie Rowe (who some of you will remember helped to create 'The Smallest Museum in the Southwest') to draw some pictures. .... Here's an example.

The second part is called *'The Village Community'* and this will be accompanied by old photographs of all the people and places that Geoff mentions. We won't say more because we hope you'll buy the book.

But meanwhile let's tidy away the last part of the last piece that Geoff wrote for the Parish Newsletter.



### ***The Old Village Hall***

Another memorable feature of the old wartime village hall was its atmosphere. When crowded, the hall had a warm smoky fug with little fresh air, a distinctive deodorant-free smell and blacked out windows. Cigarettes were not rationed. Craven A, a widely available brand was accompanied by the slogan *"will not affect your throat"* and it was said that smoking relieved the stresses of war....

Dad smoked Kensitas and he often sent me up the road on my bike to Miss Parrett's house for a packet of 20. We were assured that Kensitas cigarettes were made of *"The finest leaf"* and they were *"As good as really good cigarettes can be"*.

The Miss Parretts' were three chatty, cheerful and funny sisters, Netta, Elsie and Daisy - you could hear them all down the road! Born in 1888, 1890 and 1893 in Branscombe, they lived together in a house on Church Row and surprisingly they sold tobacco and cigarette. Dad also smoked Players and Woodbines and at one stage he took to rolling his own fags in Rizla cigarette papers using tobacco from Church Row. I'm sure that smoking seriously damaged his health.



Popular events evenings in the village hall had a buzz of Devon accents, especially when people came in, chattering away as they greeted each other before settling down for some enjoyable entertainment - a mixture of singing, acting, comedy and story-telling. Sometimes this included a lively performance by a Branscombe girl of the old music hall song:



*I'm Burlington Bertie ...  
I rise at ten thirty, and saunter along like a toff,  
I walk down the Strand with my gloves on my  
hand,  
Then I walk back again with them off*

My father was keen on the amusing Devon dialect stories of Jan Stewer by AJ Coles (1876-1965). At entertainment evenings Dad would get up on the stage read a Jan Stewer story in a proper old Devon accent. I remember 'Jan's adventures in London'. This went down well with the village audience and there was plenty to chat about when we all got home! John Betjeman considered that AJ Coles should be regarded as one of Britain's greatest humorists. Born in Woolwich, AJ Coles had a varied life - schoolteacher, soldier, journalist and newspaper editor but he was best known for his Jan Stewer stories in Devon dialect.

Dad told me that soon after he came to Branscombe School in April 1933, he took some boys down to the flat area behind the village hall to play football. Seeing an altercation between two boys he went over and heard one boy say to another *"why vor thee be kickin I?"* Dad knew he had a big task ahead of him!

The village hall's wartime story ended on a positive note in August 1945. After the end of the war in Europe there was a feeling that Branscombe wanted to honour Branscombe people who had been serving in the forces. Meetings were held in the hall to arrange welcome home celebrations for them. A Welcome Home Committee decided that an old-fashioned grand fete in the grounds of Barnells (Trafalgar House), would be a popular way of raising money. It was all planned for August 1st. Entrance cost a shilling (10p) and a chair half that. There were various games, stalls, dancing by Miss Howden's pupils from Sidmouth and tea on the lawn, which, we are told, was organised by seven lady members of the Committee. Then an evening dance in the village hall, music by courtesy of Mr Peck's radiogram and no doubt, there was the usual 'very successful' raffle!

Wednesday August 1st. 1945 turned out to be a fine and sunny day and the fete attracted a lot of people. The money raised was added to that from a house-to-house collection and £112 was distributed to the 56 Branscombe members of the forces. At the final meeting of the committee in late August 1945, the organisers were thanked and there was a discussion about the future and the need for a new village hall and a playing field - developments which came to Branscombe about 30 years later!

For me, life has come full circle. From our house above Ansteys Cove in Torquay on a clear day I can look out across Lyme Bay to see Branscombe cliffs, Branscombe Mouth and the seaward end of the valley where it all happened, so many years ago.