

NOTES FROM THE BRANSCOMBE PROJECT

Over the last few years, Geoff Squire, the oldest son of Stan Squire, the village schoolmaster, has been writing about his memories of Branscombe in the 40s. Here's a shortened version of one called *Birds and the Rural Idyll*.



Is it better to grow up in the countryside or in the city? When my brother and I were growing up in wartime Branscombe our parents had no doubt about the answer. They believed that our remote village, in the folds of the East Devon landscape, was by far and away the safest and best place in the world for us, with the wonders of nature and the joys of spring just out there, waiting to be appreciated and explored!

My father, who had grown up in North Devon, decided that birds would be a good way of introducing us to the natural world. I remember one springtime when I was just about old enough to walk up School Lane to Hole House. A few yards along the path my father stopped, lifted me up and gently parted the hedgerow leaves. There, hidden away among the twigs, was a bird's nest with several bright blue eggs spotted with black. The sudden magic of that song thrush's nest was a very exciting surprise for a small boy.

I wanted to know more about birds and our patch around the schoolhouse, together with the hedges, woods, fields and orchard along School Lane, provided lots of opportunities. We began to recognise their calls, and learned to identify the habitats of different species - warblers, finches, tits, tree-creepers, woodpeckers, jays, buzzards, wrens, blackbirds, robins. Helped by a pair of wonky First World War binoculars, some school bird charts, and *The Observer's Book of British Birds*, we made progress.

Village life became subdued as it entered the Second World War, but there were still lots of chirruping house sparrows. Around the school and schoolhouse they were everywhere, fluttering, chattering and pirouetting on the gutters and squabbling away in little groups on the ground. Even they were involved in their own avian war. House martins were their opponents, arriving in force every April, flying in from Africa. Numerous old nests lined the eaves of the school and the schoolhouse, and on their return the martins soon set about the task of repairing the old nests or building new ones, using mud from the large wet area around the gateway, just a few wing beats over the school wall. But, year after year, the sparrows were intent on taking over the martins' nests. Their relentless attacks resulted in many noisy, vicious confrontations, some of them just above our bedroom window. We found this upsetting, especially when we found tiny unfledged martin chicks dead on the ground. We were on the side of the martins, we thought that they had flown all the way from Africa to be with us, only to be terrorised by the house sparrows. My father told us to stop worrying - he said that martins usually have two broods and events like these were part and parcel of the

natural world - a violent side of the rural idyll. And at the end of each breeding season, when the martins lined up on the wires near the school, there were lots of them, telling us by their lively twittering that they had done pretty well after all. They were waiting for the mysterious signals that set them off on their long flight to sunny Africa, leaving the sparrows behind to cope with the gales, rain and frosts of a Branscombe winter.

My father knew that every spring, a pair of dippers nested in a crevice behind the waterwheel at (Manor) Mill Farm. On a fine day up on the bank behind the Mill, we had a good view of the waterwheel with the millstream cascading down from the leaky old wooden trough above. For years this watery stage was chosen by the dippers for their delightful performances. They flew out through the curtains of water, perched on the wheel or the trough and bobbed up and down, showing off their white breasts and cocking their tails. Then they curtsied, had a quick look around and dashed back through the torrent to their nest. We asked a lot of questions: how did they avoid getting soaked? How did they keep their nest dry with so much water around them? How did they see when they were under water? Studies have shown how well they're adapted; indeed one writer has said 'The dipper is shaped by the rivers on which it depends'.

Are there still dippers in Branscombe? In March 2009, Ivor Dowell told me that he had recently seen one on the main stream, and according to Devon Bird News, sightings of Branscombe dippers have been reported from time to time. But overall, studies show that dippers and most of the other birds I've mentioned are in decline, and there's also been a great decline in insect populations. Things are not looking good.

By the age of thirteen or fourteen I found that the rural idyll, as I was experiencing it, was no longer enough. As I've described in other pieces, the idyll had its deprivations. Also, the demands of school work were increasing and I was beginning to set my sights on a place at university and the world beyond Branscombe. So on August 12th 1953, it was farewell to the dippers, martins, sparrows and all the other birds. Suddenly, the peaceful rural idyll of Branscombe was a long way away, but it left me with many fond memories and some life-long interests.