

PUBS

Growing up in Branscombe during the war I was aware that there were two pubs in the village, but what went on in them was a mystery to me - they were places for grown - ups. I have no memories of my parents visiting a pub, but they kept a bottle of sherry in the back of the sideboard. This bottle came out briefly for occasional special celebrations - VE Day, big birthdays and so on, but it was always quickly and quietly put back in its place. Perhaps this abstemious lifestyle was due to aspects of their early lives.

They were both brought up in religious families in a remote North Devon village in the early years of the 20th.Century. There was no pub in the village but my mother's father, who ran the village post office, had a licence to sell beer. Men brought their jugs to a small window in the post office wall and my grandfather dispensed the beer. My mother, who was born in 1901, made it clear to me that from an early age she was aware of the dangers of alcohol because she had seen the dire consequences with her own eyes. She would recount the difficulties my grandfather encountered when he was expected to serve customers (named) who had already consumed one over the eight - and more.

My father was also wary of alcohol and it's probable that during his years as Branscombe's village schoolmaster (1933 - 1962), he considered it inappropriate to visit a pub I think he preferred 'Eiffel Tower' to beer. This refreshing wartime treat, made by Foster Clarks of Maidstone, came in distinctive bottles full of crystals which were dissolved in water according to taste. The result was a drink with an intense lemon flavour and we all liked it - an exciting experience in wartime Britain. But today I expect there would be serious issues about its high sugar content.

Anyway, roaming around the enclosed world of wartime Branscombe on my bike, often high on Eiffel Tower, I became familiar with the locations of the Masons Arms down near the Square and the Fountain Head up at Street. Whenever I took our boots and shoes for repair to Charlie Taylor's (1869 - 1958) cottage at Street I could see the Fountain Head just up the road - the extreme western edge of my known wartime world. Everyone knew that the licensee of the Fountain Head was Archie Gill (1896-1982) and as time went on I gathered that the Fountain was regarded as less posh than the Masons a mile down the road, but picture postcards show a remarkable change in its appearance after the war.

It now seems that the Masons was always more of a cosmopolitan pub, especially in the summer months when visitors were about. This feature became more marked in the years after the war when the volume of local holiday trade increased with rising real incomes and increased car ownership. In a sequence of postcard photographs from the years between 1900 and 1950 we see that the Masons Arms was gradually enlarged, taking on a more sophisticated appearance.

For many years Charles Clarke (1879 - 1965) ran the Masons. I remember Mr Clarke and Lewin Perryman (1901 - 1977), the Masons resident shove ha'penny champion. who loved to take on locals and visitors - and beat them. I believe that shove ha'penny was introduced in the 1840s, so it's possible that Lewin was the most recent of a long line of Masons shove ha'penny champions. I remember watching him at work on his board on my occasional visits to the Masons in the 1950s - he always attracted a group of interested onlookers. Perhaps, in 1943 and 1944, some of those drinkers and onlookers were American soldiers who were often seen in Branscombe in the period leading up to D Day.

Sometime in the 1940s I became aware of the existence of a third pub, Ye Three Horseshoes - something quite new to me. I found out that this pub was a long way away up on the 'main' road, the A35 (now A3052). From my home in the schoolhouse I could look up the northern valley, past Woodhouse Farm and Baldash towards the Horseshoes, but the pub was out of sight, way beyond the northern boundary of my orbit. As time went on I had learned a little about what lay to the east and to the west of the village, but the north beyond Beckham was always distant and unknown. Of course, to the south was the sea - I was told NEVER to go anywhere near the cliffs - a rule I didn't always keep.

My father said that John Perry (1890-1950), the village postman, delivered mail to Ye Three Horseshoes on his bike. For all I knew he was going to a destination close to the North Pole, so I was surprised that he could get to such a remote place in all winds and weathers. Sometimes in the late 1940s I accompanied Mr Perry on his rounds but I never got anywhere near Ye Three Horseshoes. Picture postcards give a good impression of the Horseshoes during the 1930s and 40s, but the building was recently demolished. I now know that it was not in Branscombe at all, but in the neighbouring parish of Southleigh. So Branscombe had two pubs serving beer - In the schoolhouse we served Eiffel Tower.

A few years ago a part-time Methodist preacher told me about his Fountain Head experience. He was due to take a service in the Methodist Church just down the road from the pub. Before the service the resident minister advised him not to choose the hymn which begins with the words:

' We're feeding on the living bread. We're drinking at the fountain head '

As a result of this timely advice this hymn did not form part of the service, but there are versions of it on YouTube and one of them appears to have been recorded in the Fountain Head!

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