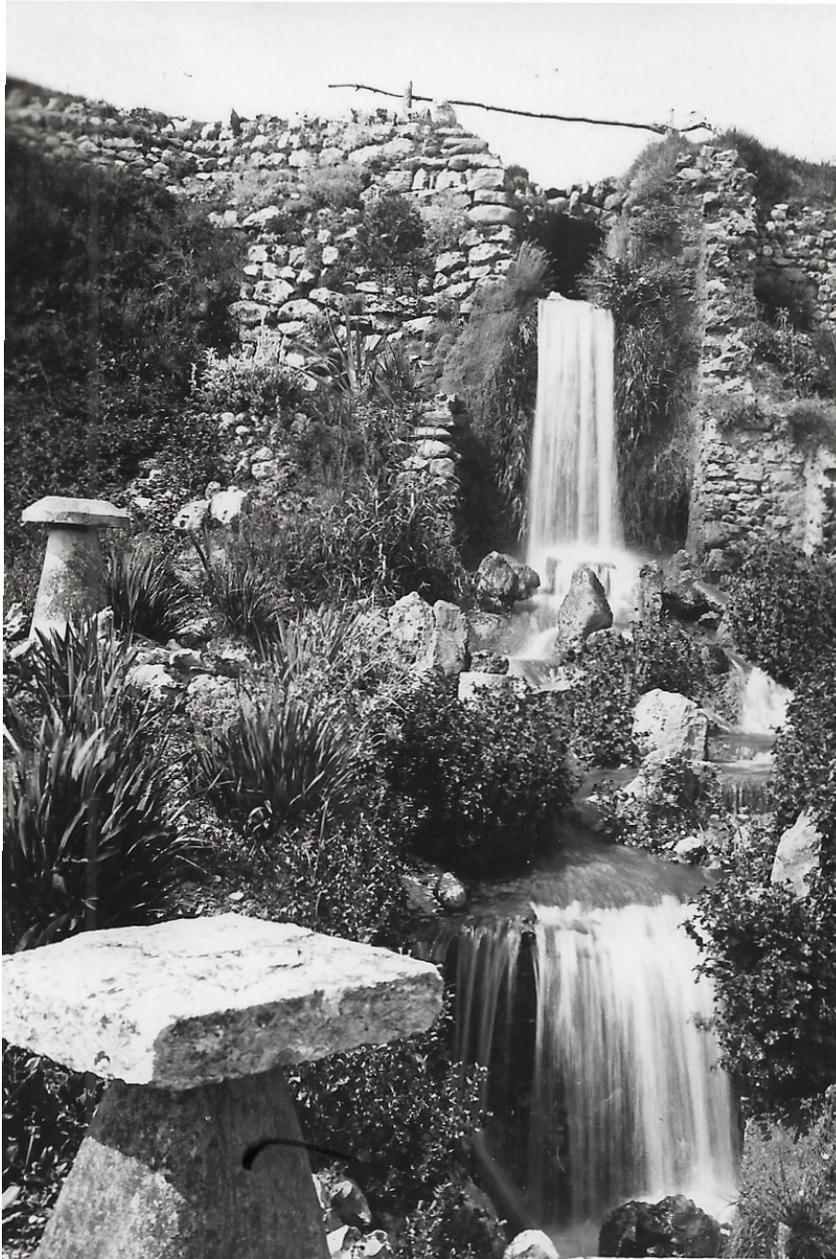


## Branscombe Voices from the 1940s

### 11. The Waterfall - An appreciation.



It wasn't the grandest of waterfalls, but from the first time I saw it on a sunny summer afternoon before the war, the sight and sound of this little gem held a fascination for me. The waterfall was inaccessible during the war years because the beach was sealed off due to the threat of invasion. Later in the 1940s local people and tourists rediscovered its eye-catching attractions, hidden just around the corner from the Sea Shanty by the path to the chalets. With the war over there we were on the path looking up at this waterfall and finishing our ice creams purchased at the ice cream window of the Sea Shanty, served by Mrs Ford wearing a big wide-brimmed hat.

We saw a gleaming column of water cascading from the top of the cliff. Then it descended in steps towards the path, splashing and dashing through a little watery world of rocks, flowers, ferns and quaint stone ornaments. Forming another smaller cascade the water gushed down a deep stone-walled cavity and disappeared into a tunnel under the path. Moving across to the seaward side of the path you could look down and see the water emerging from the tunnel into a pond on the pebbles, where it seeped away towards the sea.

With a fall of only a few metres the waterfall was small in scale, but visits provided close encounters with an elemental force of nature, the effect of gravity on water - roaring down in a torrent with spray after heavy winter rain, but quiet and subdued during summer droughts. There was nothing else like it in Branscombe, but on a school visit to Interlaken, Switzerland in August 1948, I saw the spectacular waterfalls in the Lauterbrunnen valley, where, in contrast to the size of our waterfall, the Staubbach Fall drops almost 300 metres in a cloud of spray.

In the 1940s I didn't know about the origins of the Branscombe waterfall. Now it's clear that Mr Clem Ford (1877-1961), the landowner, set it up as a tourist attraction in the late 1920s/early 30s. At that time the Fords developed the Sea Shanty as a tea room on the site of an old stone-walled coal yard.

Nearby, the waterfall was constructed using a leat excavated in the 1850s to carry water to a waterwheel which powered a gypsum mill. Gypsum, found in the cliffs, was the raw material for a plaster of Paris business which failed after a few years, but the leat and the site of the Victorian waterwheel provided the Fords with the opportunity to turn the remnants into a captivating 20th century waterfall.

There is an account of what happened to the gypsum business in Ch 5 of 'Cliffs and beach at Branscombe' by Barbara Farquharson and Sue Dymond published by the Branscombe Project 2014. On p173 there is a picture of the gypsum mill and a 1904 view of the 1850s tunnel and its fine stone arch, which carried the water under the path to the beach.

Today, nothing is left of the waterfall. Its plants and ornaments have all gone. The leat and the deep stone-walled cavity have been filled in and on the seaward side of the path, shingle covers the tunnel and its arch. However, for a few decades the Branscombe waterfall was a popular and memorable landscape feature down by the sea, appreciated by young and old alike.