

RED SPIDER COUNTRY - 25 YEARS AGO

Sybil Tope

To read through some of the books of Sabine Baring-Gould is to get a detailed picture of a variety of localities in Devon and in other parts of the country.

In "In the Roar of the Sea" he takes us to the Wadebridge and North Cornish coast; "Mehalah" to the Essex mudflats, "The Pennycomequicks" to Yorkshire, and "Margery of Quether" to the Brentor district.

A detailed picture of Bratton Clovelly and an insight into the daily life of the villagers around 1840-45 is given in "The Red Spider".

The title has a double meaning, being the nickname of the heroine who wore red stockings, and the popular superstition of the little money-spider, which had the power of putting money in the pocket of he who secured it.

This book was first published in 1887, and into it are woven early memories of Baring-Gould, for he spent some years in Bratton Clovelly as a boy.

The people of the village do not consider themselves to be Dartmoor folk, as indeed they are not, for the Moor is some miles away, and the ever-present view of it delights all who live there.

It is an interesting fact that all the flowers mentioned in "Red Spider" are those which are now listed as belonging to Dartmoor ... "The countless springs issue from emerald patches of bog, where bloom the purple butterwort, the white grass of Parnassus, the yellow asphodel, and the blood-tipped sundew."

In the first chapter of "Dartmoor" by Harvey and Gordon, we read: "Asphodel and cotton grass brighten the bogs, and to the seeking eye, the paler delicacies of sundew, butterwort and bog pimpernel display their exquisiteness." According to that similarity, the area had characteristics which we now attribute only to the Moor.

STILL STANDING

The farms of Langworthy, Swaddledown and Chimsworthy figure prominently in "Red Spider", as does the cottage where Honor Luxmoor, the heroine, lives. These houses are all still standing four-square as they did then. There have been changes in acreage, and the modernising of some on quite a large scale, but by some of the descriptions parts are much the same, though modern methods of farming have vastly improved the land.

It is Chimsworthy, where the hero, Hillary Nanspian, lives, which has the most detailed description. It is interesting to compare it as it is now.

"An avenue of contorted, stunted limes led to the entrance gates of granite, topped with stone balls; and the gates gave admission to a yard deep in dung." The limes today, far from being stunted, are tall and lofty, meeting overhead to form in spring a long, leafy arch buzzing with bees.

Two of the trees have been removed, uprooted unceremoniously by a bulldozer, and dumped on the other side of the avenue to make way for a silage pit. One of the stone balls has come off one of the gateposts and lies on a low wall beside, awaiting replacement.

The yard is not, as a rule, deep in dung, but in wet weather it gets its share of the mud carried in on the wheels of modern vehicles and on the feet of the pedigree Jersey herd of cows now kept there. The gate-posts had been supporters of a prehistoric dolmen or cromlech. "At the back of the house rose the lofty bank of Broadbury, the highest ridge between Dartmoor and the Atlantic. The rain that fell on the down above oozed through the shale about Chimsworthy, so that the lane and yards were perpetually wet and compelled all who lived there to walk in wading boots".

FARM UNCHANGED

Basically, that is all true. It is still death to decent shoes to venture far from the house and rubber boots are the order of the day.

The situation of the farm has not changed, of course. "In shape Broadbury was a crescent, with the horns east and west, and the lap of the half moon lies to the south. In this lap, the nursery of countless streams, lies Chimsworthy." ... and again: "Chimsworthy had no prospect from its windows; but it stood at the source of an affluent of the Tamar, and beyond its granite gates across the lane that led to Broadbury was a stile and beyond the stile a slope with view down the valley to the setting sun and the purple range of Cornish tors above Caradon, Boarrah, Kilmar, and Trevartha."

Whether it is owing to the felling of trees, or whether more bedroom windows have been added to the east side, from the upstairs windows on that side there is a good view of Dartmoor. From a window on the west side one can get a glimpse through the trees to St. Michael's, Brentor, perched up on the hill.

Although the stile has now gone to make way for a wider gateway to allow tractors and combines to pass, there is still the wonderful view to the Cornish Tors and the television mast on Caradon Hill. Chimsworthy boasted good apple orchards in the last century: "Hillary had an orchard of the best sorts of apples grown in the West, and he had a nursery of apples, of grafts and of seedlings. When he ate an apple he collected the pips for sowing, put them in a paper cornet, and wrote thereon, 'This here apple was a-eated of I on ... (such and such a day) and cruel good it was, too.'"

There are two orchards now, head-high with nettles in the summer, and overrun with brambles. In one is a good deep litter house and a pig ark, and in the other a small hen-house. Probably these orchards are the only things which have taken a backward step during the intervening years.

The oak woods for which the farm was well known are still there, but much wood has been taken for sheds, for gateposts and for general repairs and construction around the farm.

"Adjoining the house was a good oak wood covering the slope to the brook that flowed in the bottom. Fine sticks of timber had been cut thence, time out of mind.

The rafters of the old house, the beams of the cattle sheds, the posts of the gates, the very rails, the flooring, all were of oak, hard as iron; and all came out of Chimsworthy Wood."

Up in the roof of the house, in the loft and granary, the huge oak beams can still be seen and outside one can detect a line along the cob wall where the roof has been raised at some time.

"The house was low, part of it cob, part of it stone laid in clay, not in lime. In the cob walls plastered white, were oak windows, in the stone walls were granite windows.

THATCHED ROOF

"The house was shaped like a letter 'T', of which the top stroke represents the stone portion, containing parlour and the best bedroom over it, and the stairs. The roof was thatched. There was more roof than wall to Chimsworthy which covered almost into the ground."

The roof is now covered with lichen-covered slates, which probably replaced the thatch when the roof was raised. The impression is not now of such a low house.

In the story there is much rivalry between Hillary Nanspian and his brother-in-law, Taverner Langford, who nags him about the way Chimsworthy is farmed. Langford never wastes an opportunity to gibe about the thistles, docks and rushes which apparently abounded at that time, and about derelict buildings and choked drains.

Today, the ditcher has been and done its work, and the water all runs merrily away to the stream in the bottom, causing no flooding. The old buildings have been repaired and modernised with drinking water and electricity, and a new milking parlour erected on the site of a derelict shed.

There is rivalry too, because Hillary is a Cornishman and Taverner a Devonian. "Here we live on the rose of a watering-can, pillowed among bogs," says Hillary to Taverner, who replies: "It is wet in Devon, it is wetter in Cornwall". "Wetter! That is not possible", shouts Hillary. Bratton Clovelly is a village about which one seldom hears much. Some persist in mixing it up with Clovelly. In "Red Spider" it emerges as rather a dull place, and very wet.

Returning from the Army, Oliver Luxmoor, Honor's brother, says: "I had no wish to be buried alive in Bratton Clovelly", when asked why he had stayed away so long.

ROUGH ROADS

The roads were certainly bad. "The road was very rough, he could not descend fast because of loose stones. In rainy weather the way was a water course, and the water broke up the shale rock that formed the floor and scattered it in angular fragments over the road." And again we are told... "puddles are common on the roads of Bratton Clovelly." In the recent wet weather,

that would be something of an understatement, for not far down the road from Chimsworthy gate was a flood deep enough to stop the traffic.

"The rivulets become rills and swell to brooks which have scooped themselves coombs in the hill slope, and the coombs as they descend deepen into valleys, whose sides are rich with oak coppice, and the bottoms are rank with cotton grass, fleecy and flickering as the white clouds that drift overhead."

A hundred and twentyfive years ago there was dancing in the barn after harvesting at Chimsworthy. "The barn ... decorated with green boughs. There were no windows, only the great barn door, consequently the sides were dark; but here four lanterns had been hung diffusing a dull yellow light. The threshing floor was in the middle, planked; on either side the barn was slated so that dancing was to be in the middle. Forms were placed on the slate flooring for those who rested or looked on."

Nowadays the barn has a window and two doors besides the original great door, but the floor is still partly planked and partly slated. In one corner stands the grinder, near it a hole in the cob wall for the belt to reach a tractor outside.

The automatic time switch for pumping the water from the bore-hole and the electric fusebox adorn the wall, things almost unheard of in the days of Nanspian.

Rabbits are no longer seen there, but long ago they were a menace at Langford's farm and he swore they came from Chimsworthy plantation.

THROUGH THE FLAMES

In spring now we see the fires up on the Moor caused by swaling, but over 100 years ago on Broadbury, "when the gorse is swaled, the cattle are driven through the flames. They plunge and resist, but a ring of men and dogs enclose them, armed with sharp stakes, and goad them forward, and at last, with desperation, lowing, kicking, leaping, angry and terrified, they plunge through the flames." Why were they made to do this?

In 1779 a murderer was hung in chains on Broadbury Down. As was the custom, candles were thrown to him on which, it was supposed, he fed.

The church of St. Mary, Bratton Clovelly, is said by Dr. Hoskins in "Devon", to be one of the noblest in the county, but when BaringGould remembered it, "The air was chill and damp and smelt of decay. The dry rot was in the pews. The slates were speckled, showing the church roof was the haunt of bats who flew in flights when darkness set in."

A modern electrical heating system has cured the chill and damp, and it certainly no longer smells of decay, and it is bright with flowers throughout the year.

The detail in all Baring-Gould's books makes fascinating reading, particularly to residents of the locality concerned.

There is a marked contrast between them and James Bond, the television, the Beatles, the traffic problem and the rat race to who knows where? Some things have changed for the better, some for the worse, but at least we can be sure that the weather was just as bad!

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