

The Red Spider Walk

Well, it was actually a drive, in convoy, but some walking did happen. For me, from the start, this day was a delicious mixture of nostalgia and new information. Standing outside the church porch at Bratton Clovelly, listening to the very erudite Simon Timms of the Devonshire Association, I could not see only my father's grave but also my long-time friend George, pottering in the garden of Court Barton Cottage.

Baring-Gould frequently took services in Bratton, and as a very tiny child he lived in the grandest house in the village - now known as Eversfield. He is known to have paid visits to virtually all the homes in the parish at some point in his long life, and developed his own quirky impressions of many of them. One of the aspects of this complex man that I most relish is his intelligence and clear-sightedness. Where, most people, then and now, exist in a kind of unperceiving fog, SBG had a quality of attention and vision which resonates in his writings to this day. The short passages from Red Spider which Roger Bristow had arranged to be read out at points of the journey amply illustrated this.

At Chimsworthy I was transported with personal delight at the opportunity to revisit my one-time home. Rather too much so for the occasion, perhaps. The Baring-Gould connection, always slightly tenuous, was temporarily lost, I fear. However, there are many features in existence now which have changed hardly at all since Red Spider was written. The beams in the shippon end of the house date back to 1305 (how very accurate!), and are just as SBG describes them.

The perennially fruitless search for the Look-Out Stone from the book was re-enacted with much theorizing as to whether it had ever existed and if so where. Then to Wellon's Cairn, where the historical facts of the hanged murderer were reasonably well established. I had never been entirely clear as to where this cairn was, until now.

Finally to Langworthy Farm, which gave rise to some divisions of opinion as to its atmosphere. Essentially, to me, the back of the house is dour, Gormenghast-like, with unusual lead-coloured cladding over the roofs and upper walls, while the front has a run down Colonial air, with long grass and untended corners where brambles prevail. It was very easy to imagine Taverner Longford and Mrs Veale living there in unhealthy isolation.

The enjoyment of the day was greatly enhanced by the company. It is always a treat to be amongst interested informed people, and this was a five-star example. I was thrilled to meet Merriol at last, as well as Roger and other SBGAS members. It was also gratifying to sell so many Praxis titles over tea, after the 'walk'

I hope to be part of many future events and meetings of this kind. There is every sign that Baring-Gould and his writings are firmly on the map in Devon now, for which I think we might all congratulate ourselves.

Becky Smith.