

A REMARKABLE FELLOW

(Part of an article by Trevor Beer in The Western Morning News)

Many readers will know the hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*, a battle hymn almost and one which echoed out of the schools I went to as a boy. It was written by the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, a remarkable fellow who wrote scores of books as well as collecting the folk songs of Devon and Cornwall and much else besides. Not only was he a prolific writer but the range and diversity of his work was incredible. From scholarly articles to romantic novels, his output touched people in every walk of life, as indeed it still does.

Born in Devonshire in 1834, he was almost 40 when he inherited the family estate at Lew Trenchard, moving there from East Mersea in 1881 and being installed as the incumbent of the local church. Once settled, the magic of the Westcountry washed over him and he began exploring the archaeology of the area, plus all aspects of folklore. A church minister, he was also a wise man learning from his personal experiences while travelling in Europe. He was fascinated by the myths and legends of the countryside and became a collector of strange and popular lore throughout his life, thus a preserver of our heritage. He looked beyond the everyday and the mundane with perceptive insight into the realms of possibility, a man with an open mind. We could do with a few more of those today.

Via his writings we can explore the interesting world of '*Cornish Characters and Strange Events*', and their Devonshire counterparts. Baring-Gould deliberately chose the somewhat lesser-known characters, not the Raleighs and Drakes we can read about elsewhere, so providing us with fascinating glimpses of Westcountry life we may otherwise have missed altogether. I found a copy of his book on Dartmoor in a second-hand bookshop. It is excellent, and typical Baring-Gould, covering many aspects of the moor from topography to fox hunting and luminous mosses and from convicts to inscribed stones. I like that.

Baring-Gould's books are like walking along an old country lane, each step enjoyable and you never know what is around the corner. He is certainly one of our more interesting Westcountry writers.