

## SABINE BARING-GOULD, ARCHAEOLOGIST

By any standard Sabine Baring-Gould was a remarkable man of enormous energy and enthusiasm, with wide ranging interests. He was parson, poet, novelist, theologian, historian, antiquarian and archaeologist. He was also that forgotten and despised character - the enthusiastic amateur - to him the word amateur was a term of praise (Betjeman 1954:)

Born in Exeter in 1834 he was the eldest son of a cavalry lieutenant in the East India Company's Service. His father was invalided out of the Service and consequently lived an unsettled life abroad with his family before settling into the ancestral estate at Lew Trenchard, just off Dartmoor. It was here that Baring-Gould's great affection for Dartmoor began, and was to remain for the rest of his life - it was simply "the region I love best in the world" (Dickinson 1970:157). His interest in its antiquities was sparked off by the gift of Rowe's *Perambulation*.

His education had been fairly disrupted; after Cambridge he taught at Lancing and Hurstpierpoint schools before becoming ordained at the age of 30. He served as a curate in two Yorkshire parishes where he wrote the hymn, *Onward Christian Soldiers* and where his writing began in earnest. His chief work was *The Origin and Development of Religious Life* which attracted the attention and praise of W.E. Gladstone. Gladstone subsequently offered him the Crown living of Vast Mersea in Essex. He eventually acquired the incumbency at Lew Trenchard in 1881.

Baring-Gould's writing was by now covering all manner of subjects from *Werewolves and their Natural History* to *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*. In a review of the latter, the Athenaeum observed:

`The author is sometimes fanciful and overbold in his conclusions, but he conducts us through marvellous ways - and if we do not acquiesce in his descriptions or arguments, we seldom differ from him without hesitation. (West of England Magazine 1888:47).

The past had always been of profound interest to him. At the age of 15 whilst living near Pau in France he discovered and subsequently excavated a succession of pavements preserved amidst the outlines of a Roman villa. The English community were vastly excited by the discovery and the French correspondingly annoyed; owing to the petty jealousy of the French authorities the whole site was eventually allowed to disintegrate completely. Baring-Gould planned the whole villa, copying the mosaic floors in water colour. One lying north of the atrium was particularly beautiful with a bust of Neptune whose arms were filled with mackerel, oysters, lobsters and octopi. These drawings were bound in a book and taken by Baring-Gould's brother to show to a London linoleum firm and subsequently lost. (Baring-Gould 1923:174).

At the age of 18 he wrote an article on the remains of an ancient camp near Bayonne which local antiquaries had attributed to the Romans or Saracens. Baring-Gould disagreed - he thought from its position in the centre of the Basque region that it belonged to those people driven by the Romans into their mountain region (Baring-Gould 1851). These 'ancient camps' were to remain an interest for him all his life.

His interest in antiquity was further fuelled by a visit in 1857 with his uncle, General Sabine, the then President of the Royal Society, to a meeting of the Society where there was an exhibition of the portable art discovered by Christy and Lartet on the Vezere in the Dordogne.

The whole science of early man was then in its infancy and the revelations of Lyell, Christy and Lartet startled the world, and made the believers in the textual infallibility of the Bible, of creation and of Adam and Eve, shake in their shoes. I resolved to visit the Vezere and see with mine own eyes whether these things were as stated. (Baring-Gould 1923:258).

This he did 35 years later, recording his visit in *The Deserts of Central France and Cliff Castles and Cave Dwellings*. His visit to the caves at Les Eyzies led him to write:

What a book of Chronicles the earth is! Beneath the soil is the record of Creation, written in indelible lines; the soil itself gives the history of man, to be read with pick and shovel (Baring-Gould 1925:255).

This reading of the history of man by pick and shovel was to occupy him fully on his return to Lew Trenchard to be squarson. Several distinguished archaeologists made Lew Trenchard their headquarters when visiting Devon (Dickinson 1970:168). The Rev. W. C. Lukis stayed with him whilst working on the prehistoric alignments on Dartmoor for the Society of Antiquaries. It is evident that Baring-Gould assisted in this work - in one of Burnard's map albums there is an ink-drawn survey carried out by Lukis and Baring-Gould in August 1880 of the stone row at Hingston Hill.

In 1892 he was invited by the squire of Trebartha Hall in Cornwall to carry out an excavation at Trewortha Marsh (Baring-Gould 1892). This was the first excavation carried out on a deserted medieval settlement and the dating of it caused him problems. The settlement is situated amongst prehistoric huts and field systems and his confusion is understandable. Two reports appeared in the *JRIC* with accompanying plates of drawings and plans, including one of the whole settlement. His plans and descriptions were described as

'a model for the time - though the interpretation was often odd, which is hardly surprising since he was a pioneer with little previous work upon which to base his conclusions' (Beresford 1971: 82).

Baring-Gould's conclusion was that the settlement postdated the Roman conquest but more exploration was needed to arrive at a more definite conclusion as to the date of these perplexing remains (Baring-Gould 1891).

Both he and Burnard played an active part in the updating of the OS maps for Dartmoor with reference to this appearing in Burnard's Albums. The OS surveyor involved was Edward Thomas.

Following Baring Gould's work at Trewortha, Thomas accompanied him there in November of 1891 to record the site. On their return journey the pair got completely lost in the dark which resulted in them being caught in a quaking bog at Red Mire Marsh. Baring-Gould commented:

I have ever entertained a repugnance to wobbly ground. I like to have firm soil under my feet, theologically, morally, socially and financially" (Baring-Gould 1925: 251).

Edward Thomas was to undergo a similar experience whilst mapping on Dartmoor with Baring-Gould and Burnard in 1892. He and Burnard became separated from the main party in the fog and spent 8 hours getting themselves off the moor. Baring-Gould recounted to the *Western Daily Mercury* of 26 June 1894:

how he and his companions wondered with interest, made somewhat languid by lunch and the fire at the Duchy Hotel in Princetown, what become of the "full of faith" photographer and his unfortunate companion, the surveyor with all his surveying implements?

He was to write at length on the shortcomings of the OS mapping. He thought the original maps drawn by surveyors, like Thomas, showed a much better plan than that eventually published. This was due to the original drawings being gone over by the revisers who struck out much detail as unimportant as they were indifferent to matters of archaeological interest. (Baring-Gould 1899c:3).

In 1893 Baring-Gould assisted Burnard in his work at Broadun and Broadun Rings and then carried out his own rather rapid excavation at Tavy Cleave. Here he excavated 4 huts, discovering a dais, hearth and cooking hole (Baring-Gould 1894a).

### **Their work in retrospect**

Burnard and Baring-Gould were to receive further acclaim for their contribution to British archaeology. In 1900 they were both elected Honorary Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Others elected that year included Charles W. Dymond who had visited Grimspound and Romilly Allen who had described their work so enthusiastically.

Baring-Gould was awarded the Henwood Gold Medal by the Royal Institute of Cornwall in 1902 for his work on *The Celtic Saints* and *The Saints of Cornwall*. He was to follow these with his book on *The Lives of the British Saints* in collaboration with the Rev. Canon

J. Fisher of the Cambrian Society.

"It needs no great discrimination to see that if the Devonian provided the speculative views it was the Welshman who supplied the facts" (Nash Williams 1946:20)

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Baring-Gould was held in high esteem by the Cambrian Society - all his work in Wales being at their express invitation. At Tre're Ceiri he was requested to "make some excavation in order to ascertain its date" with the Society contributing £15 towards the expenses (Baring-Gould 1904:1). On his copy of this report is added in his own hand that Prof. Boyd Dawkins and Harold Hughes resumed work at Tre'r Ceiri in 1906 when their findings confirmed conclusions he had already arrived at. Mortimer Wheeler was to describe Baring-Gould as one of the few successors to the sturdy pioneers of Welsh archaeology (Wheeler 1925:6). However, he then goes on to praise the work of Burnard and Baring-Gould - describing the latter as

"one of the most fertile and picturesque antiquaries in the realm; he had never known a man so versatile and who had done so much work which had been so excellent."

In a letter written to the WMN of 21 April 1920 after Burnard's death, Baring-Gould wrote

"All my college friends have passed beyond the veil, and of the friends I made in middle life none were more precious to me than Mr. Burnard ... He did during many years a notable work in establishing the period of the rude stone monuments on Dartmoor. A work that can never be forgotten in establishing the epoch and as such his name must never be forgotten."

In a letter sent to Baring-Gould on behalf of the Devonshire Association on his 89th birthday - Worth wrote:

"We may not claim that the advancement of science, literature and art is an object wide enough to include the whole scope of your work." (Worth 1924:13).

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