

TEN YEARS ON THE MUD

"Ian Yearsley follows in the footsteps of a clergyman novelist and one of his young heroines."

'We begin life as believers, and end it as sceptics. We begin with trustfulness, and go on through every stage of delusion into absolute mistrust. As children, we look up to everyone; as old men we look down on all.'

Thus wrote Sabine Baring-Gould, one-time rector of East Mersea, in his 1888 novel *Richard Cable*.

A prolific writer, Baring-Gould is best remembered now for his hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers', but his 'Ten Years On The Mud' - as he referred to his time at East Mersea from 1871-1881 - saw him produce a number of classic literary works which have still not yet been given the full recognition they deserve. Incisive observations such as the one quoted above characterised his works and sermons.

His 1880 novel, *Mehalah*, provides one of the most graphic descriptions of the North Essex coastal region ever to have been recorded: 'In summer, the thrift mantles the marshes with shot satin, passing through all gradations of tint from maiden's blush to lily white. Thereafter a purple glow steals over the waste, as the sea lavender bursts into flower, and simultaneously every creek and pool is royally fringed with sea aster. A little later the glasswort, that shot up green and transparent as emerald glass in the early Spring, turns to every tinge of carmine.'

The characters, too, are so alive that one can almost envisage the true life personalities on whom they were so accurately based. *Mehalah* herself was a young girl on the island; her suitor, Elijah Rebow, was the local bully; and her fiance's mother was a houseboat dweller who, just as the novel records, was indeed involved in an incident when a pail of water was thrown over a latecomer to her vessel.

Baring-Gould seems to have a particular animosity towards women, judging by some of his acidic comments about the fairer sex: 'As long as the world lasts, women must sting, and men must weep; and the sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep.'

This is strange, as he was apparently happily married for almost 50 years!

In addition to its characters, *Mehalah* also provides the 20th century reader with a romantic picture of the days of smuggling, when every inn had a false cellar and coloured lights at night were an almost obligatory sight.

A classic portrayal of both Essex and 19th century life the novel was described at the time by Swinburne as being as good as *Wuthering Heights*. Fortunately for us, the area which Baring-Gould knew, and in which his characters spent their fascinating lives, has so far successfully evaded the destruction which the 20th century has wrought on other parts of Essex.

The Ray, where Mehalah lived, is now National Trust property as the Strood over which she went looking for employment at the nearby Peldon Rose Inn, is now a metalled road, but still subject to flooding.

The rickety structure of Virley church, in which she was married, has now all but crumbled away, but the atmosphere and the memories are still there.

Apart from Mehalah, Baring-Gould also wrote the hymn 'Now The Day Is Over' while he lived at East Mersea, a hymn written, it is said, to be chimed on the bells of the church of St Edmund King and Martyr at East Mersea, where Baring-Gould was rector.

It was here also that he compiled what he considered to be his best work - the 17-volume *The Lives Of The Saints* written between 1872 and 1879.

In all, Baring-Gould produced over 150 widely different works, ranging from novels and hymns to horror stories, religious doctrines and collections of folk songs and sayings. He lived to the ripe old age of 89, dying weeks short of his 90th birthday in 1924.

Today Mehalah. Richard Cable and most of his other novels are out of print and must be rooted out in secondhand book shops or borrowed specially from the British Library. They are well worth the effort as it cannot be much longer before the talents of Sabine BaringGould are finally recognised after going unnoticed for so long.

He worked hard to raise a family of 14 children while pursuing his other interests and it would be wonderful now for all his efforts to be finally recognised.

As he wrote himself: 'Success is the sanction of conduct, however tortuous.'