

MERSEA'S UNCHARITABLE CHRISTIAN SOLDIER.

Your article on the Rev. S. Baring-Gould reminds me it must be at least 25 years since I first read 'Further Reminiscences.' At that time I knew little or nothing of East Mersea and the reverend had been dead just a few years. Long association with the island since almost compels anyone to comment on a book which to say the least is unkind to Mersea people, and is almost on a par with the celebrated treatise of Charles Dickens concerning the Great White Horse hotel at Ipswich.

Baring-Gould was at East Mersea from 1871 to 1881. He deals with about 12 months of this period, and dismisses the whole episode in about a dozen pages. It would appear he came to Essex on sufferance; having become cramped at Dalton, "it was a veritable relief to my perplexity," he says on being appointed here. Then comes the remark quoted by Mr. Waterhouse, followed by "I cannot say I liked the place or became attached to the people." This is not to be wondered at. It was up to him to get to know them better; it was difficult for them to approach him, for he was dashing all over the Continent, presumably on full pay.

"At a former period," he says, "wild fowl shooting was largely carried on by the islanders - they lay for hours in grey shallow boats and contracted ague and rheumatism." This apparently had been going on for generations and had lowered the mental and physical development of the islanders. It is important to remember here, he is talking about Mersea and not Tristan Da Cunha. It also proves the theory that children on the island who fail the eleven-plus, and suffer from rheumatism, at one time had ancestors who went duck-shooting.

Individuals Belittled

But that's not all. Onward goes the Christian Soldier to castigate and belittle individuals as well as the whole population. He mentions that at the eastern end of the island "were the remains of a Parliamentary camp" reputed to be haunted. A Mrs. Baker used to see this ghost, says the parson, "but only in her cups on her way back from the Dog and Pheasant." Having commented on the islanders' lack of education he now proceeds to use Mrs. Baker as the character in a novel, at the same time borrowing a Mersea name in the process. A case of having your cake and eating it.

His opposite number at West Mersea he just about tolerates. "Our nearest neighbour was Mr. Musselwhite, vicar of West Mersea, a kindly man, but not possessed of many interests or of much information." Mr. Cant, the strong Dissenter, must have been a match for him, but everybody else was dull and spent all their time eating and drinking.

Dialect "Vulgar"

There is more of the same sort. He finds fault with the gentry, the church organist, and the Essex dialect, which he says is "markedly vulgar." He even has a moan about the elements.

The ever-present wind that blew across the estuary was something that had to be endured. It was always there, piping away like a tin flute (it still does) and when visitors came, and the fire was lighted "I was wont to prepare my guests for it by telling them not to be uneasy if the souls of drowned sailors who had found a watery grave in the northern waters were to be heard sobbing all night long because they couldn't get to the fire to warm themselves." The guests used to thank him for the information but were very emphatic in asking him not to elaborate on it too much. It would seem he had begun to come under the influence of Mrs. Baker.

The people living in Mersea nowadays are the descendants of those Baring-Gould couldn't get along with - and as far as I'm concerned they're all right. They in their turn have done a very practical thing in perpetuating the name of their parson. Opposite the rectory gates stands a row of council houses, "The Baring-Gould Cottages." It is possible these might still be standing long after "Onward Christian Soldiers" is forgotten - though I doubt it.

R. Hemstedt, 8 St. Albans Road, Colchester.

(Source and date unknown - does anyone have a copy of the article referred to in line 1 ? - Ed.)

SBGAS Newsletter 1996/97, No. 23, p. 7