

South Devon Days from *The Innocent Moon*

Mick Loates

Since first reading *Tarka the Otter* as a youth, dissatisfied with a life in suburbia and commuting daily into London to a job in advertising that I was equally dissatisfied with, I have been deeply captivated by Henry's precise ability in taking his reader to scenes and sounds far away. *Tarka*, my initiation to Williamson, was indeed read at the age of 18, mostly in crowded, smoke-filled compartments of Southern Region's rolling stock. What I recall now, some 25 years on, was my longing for the landscapes I was reading about. The emptiness and quietude of the estuaries; the wooded river valleys; the call of the curlew; they all evoked the clearest of visions that literally took me out and away from the crowded and noisy carriage to places then unknown to me. Arriving home, I would seek out pictures of North Devon and follow place names on maps, as I have continued to do when reading subsequent volumes by Henry. I recall too, that in my numerous re-readings of *Salar* both prior to and whilst illustrating that book, I would follow the Salmon's journey on an Ordnance Survey map, finding the weirs, bends and bridges. All this gave me an indication as to just how thorough Henry had been in his research and observations.

The skill of the pastoral writer runs parallel to that of the pastoral painter in as much as one must experience the landscape on foot to capture its spirit. No good working from photographs or imagination. Henry trod the landscapes, heard the birdsong, the river's music, the tide's ebb and flow, and from it he drew his poetry. Having been born in a South London suburb only a few miles into (as it was then) Kent, from where Henry spent his own childhood, I was amazed to find that my childhood had followed such similar steps to those of Henry. One such place was Keston (Reynard's) Common and the Greyhound pub in the old village with its ponds and windmill, which crops up with regularity in both the *Chronicle* and the nature writings and is mentioned in Ch. 18, 'Wandervogel', of *The Innocent Moon*. Many aspiring young naturalists and fishermen must have been spawned in this little oasis of South London. I read with a fervid appetite, as many Williamson titles as I could lay my hands on, capturing the essence of place 50 years before my time.

Then I moved to South Devon. Here, living in Kingsbridge, on this delightful peninsular of South Devon, I read with a more than keen interest Henry's descriptions of the area from *The Innocent Moon*. I can assure the reader that, as is usually expected of the writer, his locations were well described and in one or two instances remain little changed to this day. Whilst South Devon doesn't feature in Henry's writing to any great degree it is however the main location for Phillip's courtship and short time with Barley. It also remains today an area of outstanding beauty and spirit. In my notes that follow I have tried to make some semblance of place and hopefully, will generate an interest with a view to a meeting in the area at some time in the future.

Chapter 2: *Flowers in the Sun*

By now he had passed through Exeter, and was following the road to the coast, seeing the blue tors of Dartmoor on his right – At long last he came to a town built down a hill, with a narrow High Street leading to what he thought was the sea, but arriving at a quay, saw it was mud-flats.

Henry's journey would have taken him either down the old A38 road by Ashburton and Buckfastleigh and onto a narrow backway (now the B3196 via California Cross and Loddiswell to Kingsbridge). Or he may have taken the A380 by Chudleigh, Newton

Abbot and Totnes. This road gives some outstanding views across the Southeastern moor whereas the A38 route skirts the southern moor with intimate panoramas up to such grand knolls as Beara Common on the eastern side of the Avon Valley, immediately North of South Brent village. Whichever route, the grandeur of either landscape is sufficient to fire the weariest of travellers. After a conversation with a sailor on Kingsbridge Quay he went on up another hill (the A381 via West Alvington where we find the Ring O' Bells public house) and

... through more twisty lanes until suddenly before him and below lay a wide valley of pasture land. He stopped, arrested by the sudden strange appearance and change in the countryside. The grey road descended before him, to rise, after a curve at the bottom, up the reverse slope.

This scene remains on the same A381 road to Salcombe via Marlborough (Clayborough Ch. 7) and is located about 1½ miles on from West Alvington. On the descent prior to the curve at the bottom is a right turn leading to Hope Cove (Esperance) via Galmpton. A delightful road indeed with its visions across Kingsbridge estuary to the east and glimpses of the sea at Bigbury Bay beyond South Huish to the west.

But what had startled him was the sight of the dark mass of a church on the horizon – it was as prominent a landmark as the church on the Passchendaele Ridge before the bombardments of Third Ypres.

Marlborough Church remains the same today, a landmark set high just inland from the massive mica schists of the grand coast of Bolt Head to Bolt Tail. Here also is Henry's Valhalla.

I note, with a certain sadness today, that Henry heard a partridge and a corncrake. Probably the former would have been a grey partridge now alarmingly reduced in numbers by those whose farming methods would have been in opposition to Henry's. The corncrake too is only an extremely rare passage migrant, although one was sighted in this area last summer.

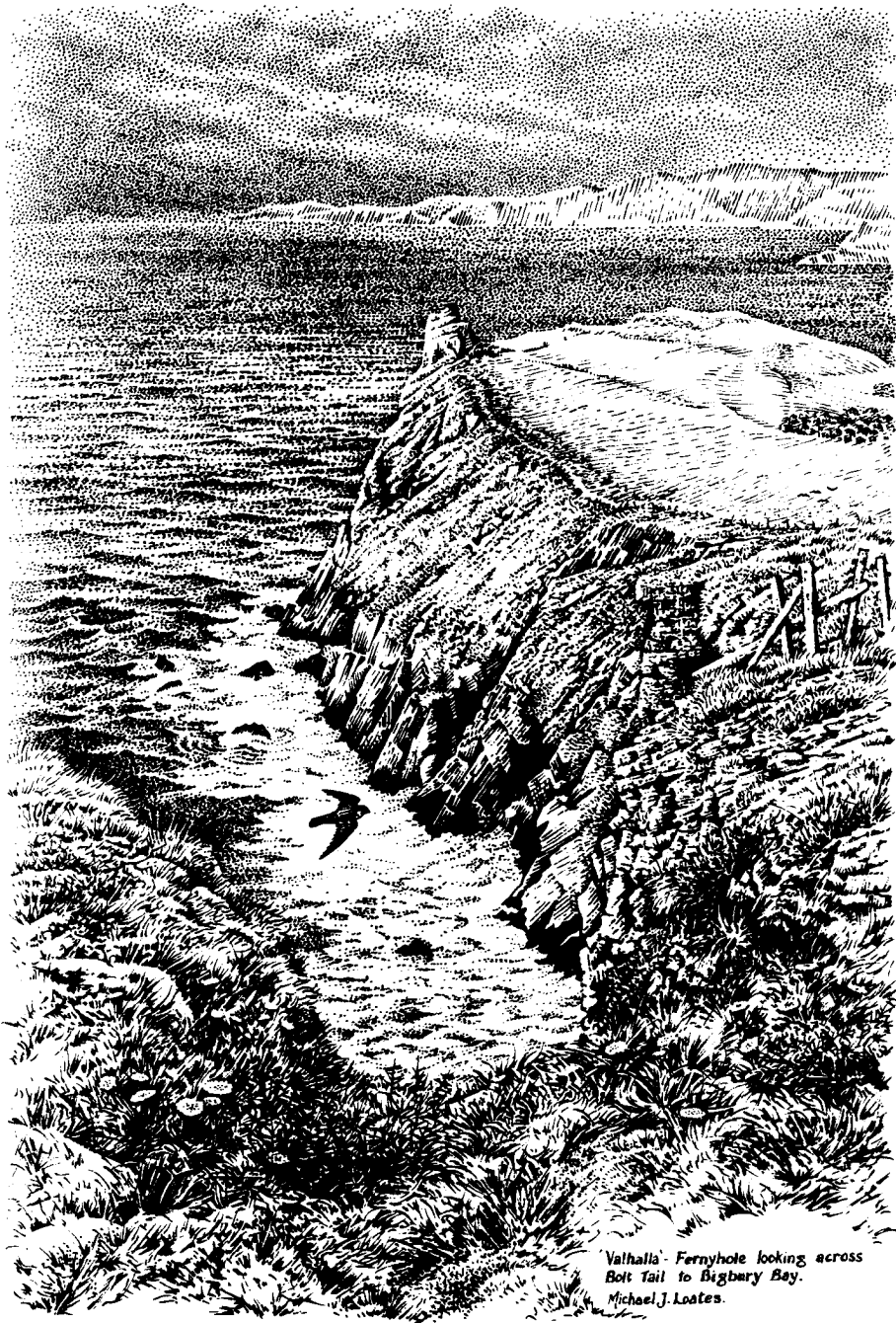
Valerian Cottage could be any number of dwellings around South Huish although those with sharper eyes than mine may detect an old water pump somewhere along a lane giving a closer clue as to the exact cottage.

Valhalla is probably the great headland towering over Fernyhole, haunt of grey seal, raven and hunting peregrine, where on a clear day one can see the Lizard Point far down the coast of Cornwall and the hills of South West Dartmoor to the north. Here indeed one can cast one's soul to the wind and travel afar in the mind with visions as grand as one will see anywhere in England.

Valkyries Rock to the West is probably Great Ledge lying between Hope Cove and South Milton beach where South Milton Ley enters the Sea.

Philip made the best of it as they sauntered beside a reedy lake dammed by sand hills . . . he wanted to see the burnet roses, mulleins, and plants of viper's bugloss which grew on level sandy ground behind the outfall of the lake, where it cuts it way through the sands to the sea.

South Milton Ley is now a nature reserve and vast reedbed extending a mile from where it enters the sea, as Henry accurately describes, towards South Milton village at the head of the valley. I find no record today of Burnet Roses on the reserve's plant list although it does grow in the area. Mulleins and viper's bugloss are however still present.



Valhalla - Fernyhote looking across
Bot Tail to Bigbury Bay.
Michael J. Loates.

Chapter 7, To The West Country

Henry describes a journey to Devon after spending a night at the bizarre Warbeck home. If the journey had been traumatic and grossly uncomfortable these hardships seemed compensated for by the lines:

... he was a free man, he could sleep in a dry bed that night: for the war was over. He was his own master; his book was accepted; he was going to his own home; henceforward he would live according to nature.

I still think of these lines today and reflect to the time when I finally left London and the advertising world to pursue a career in wildlife art. I remember the train in Charing Cross Station pulling slowly out over the Thames at Hungerford Bridge. Henry's words had sustained me for nearly a decade, I had drawn hope from them and finally I was to begin a new chapter in my own life.

He felt his way down the lane and coming to the Ring of Bells in the open valley, heard a louder wave-roll from the distant channel.

The Ring of Bells lies about 3 miles inland from Thurlestone Beach and with the wind blowing from the S.W. it is possible to hear the sea. The walk from Malborough to the Ring of Bells is nearly 3 miles and the pub does overlook an open valley to the south.

Chapter 8, Enter Porky

Turnstone Sands – Thurlestone Sands is perhaps the last beach set between Warren Point and Loam Castle before the cliffs rise up and over prior to descending to the beautiful Avon estuary below Bantham. On the western shore lies Bigbury and (accessible by foot at low water) Burgh Island. Strangely, I find no reference to this rather delightful part of the coast in the book. Malandine beach is probably South Milton Sands just east of Thurlestone Sands.

Phillip walked faster up the rising shoulder of land which above them on the cliffs he called the Rock of Valkyries. The rock was about 300 feet above sea-level, then for four miles or so there was a path along the cliffs ending at the formidable headland where 400 feet above the waves stood the ruins of Valhalla.

It appears that Phillip and Julian Warbeck retrace their steps briefly away from Thurlestone Sands, passing South Milton beach and on up to Great Ledge (Rock of Valkyries). I am a little confused over the precise site of Valhalla. Every detail points to it being Fernyhole – already described, as spectacular a place as one will find on this coast – yet I find no trace or record of any significant ruin unless such has slipped into the sea in the past 70 years.

Julian's presence would ruin the vast petrified music of the cliffs.

I can vouch for the fact that these geological massifs are best walked over alone to capture the full spirit of place. And so the passage reads on indicating a turn of direction,

Continuing west along the shore, he saw his first dead guillemot, its feathers clotted with the brown smear of oil-fuel – waste from some ship passing up the channel.

Unfortunately, not an infrequent find these days. Guillemots, razorbills, cormorants and shags; I've found them all, oiled, dead and alive; a sign of the times. (It may be of interest here that a friend brought me a dead little auk from this very beach last winter although it was not oiled.) Henry talks of ringed plovers at this juncture and rightly so for the area is rich today in birdlife. Common shore birds include ringed plover, dunlin, knot, oyster catcher, sanderling, curlew, red and greenshank, common sandpiper and, of course, turnstones. Again Henry's brief words brought a clear vision to me: 'Phillip watched the birds as they sped away over the breaking waves.' I pictured a small flock of waders flying downtide and as they turned, backs to the sky, their undersides shining vivid white.

March 27. This south coast of Devon is glorious even when it rains. It is so big and generous. Today I wander beside the reedy lake behind the sandhills, while lapwings cried through drifting mists. It is full of romance. I realized I was still as in boyhood, joying greatly in all wild places Today I watched through my Zeiss glass the peregrines flying swiftly above the fire-formed ruins of Valhalla. . . . I saw a pair of swallows, a solitary pair. They are at least a fortnight early. Wheatears have come; pipits are fetching down song from heaven. Cormorants on the rocks below hold their umbrella segment wings outstretched. . . .'

The reedy lake will again be South Milton Ley, although lapwings are infrequent here. The text that follows this passage may well have been written today, aptly describing the sounds and sights across the cliffs either side of Bolt Tail.

Porky's remarkable hospitality in the pubs stopped abruptly . . . Phillip went down to Porky's cottage in Esperance Cove (Hope Cove). There were rumours of scenes in the Anchor Inn. (The 'Hope and Anchor' – very much alive and well today, a local's pub during winter months but a lively centre during the summertime. The mainstay of this small village!) Phillip was beginning to experience a dark feeling in the village. Similar to that described by John Crowe the cornish novelist/lecturer at the Parnassus Club, as 'ingrowing toe-nails of the soul'. He wondered again who could have cut the tyres of the Norton left in the lane outside? As for Julian, he was known in the district as 'the German' by certain young farmers. . . .

Interesting to note that parallel attitudes are commonplace today in this locality. Newcomers are viewed with caution and prejudice – gossip remains rife!

Chapter 9, A Home of One's Own

One reads on to the return of Julian Warbeck from the pub and the ensuing verbal abuse, fight and gunshot that followed with the neighbour Walter Crang listening with his wife. Such behaviour would, even today, fuel village tongues with an interest that would go down as local history.

Chapter 10, The Singing Sands

Sometimes while swimming he saw salmon and sea-trout leaping just beyond the foam-drag of toppling green waves.

This is a scene I have experienced myself on a number of occasions whilst swimming at various places in Bigbury Bay. Most fish in the locality will be making their homeward journey up the River Avon to the spawning beds which exist upriver from Aveton Gifford to South Brent at the foot of the moor. (Cautionary note – beware the sewers at

Thurlestone beaches.)

The stream running down from Malandine cutting through the sands to the sea would again indicate South Milton beach where Phillip meets Barley and Irene Lushington, but the rock Britannia (so-called by Phillip because its outline resembled the lady) is doubtless long gone with decades of erosive, wild seas.

Chapter 11, No One Wins

Phillip takes Barley to Farmer Crew's hayloft at Barton Hole, down the lane to the sea . . . 'Barton Hole lay in a Coombe leading off the main valley, a cluster of thatched buildings around a cattle yard.' Despite a plethora of 'Bartons' in the locality I would guess this one to be Hope Barton lying just off the road running down from Bolberry to Inner Hope. This cluster of 'developed farmhouses' is best viewed from the sheep grazing between Bolberry Down and Bolt Tail where again one feels the grandeur and inspiration of place.

Chapter 14, The Solitary Summer

On Phillip's return to South Devon I read the paragraph,

The stream was singing its night song, running past stone and shard and under culvert on its way to the sea. Stars shone in the little pools. The stream was flowing to the sea even as his life was flowing to that strange sea beyond time in which were gone, for ever and for ever, the unknown men and women who had lain, even as he was lying, in that dim, quiet, hollow room. The thought of their hopes and dreams lost in the silence of dust, beyond memory and the unthinkable mystery of night was piercing in its sadness, and his tears streamed silently to the pillow.

One of my personal favourites which typifies Henry at his best, all emotion unleashed which gives an insight into the lonely condition a poet sometimes suffers. It was such passages that instantly drew me not to just another writer but into the whirlwind, peace, fire: the existence of Henry the poet.

Chapter 18, Wandervogel

Fernbridge is doubtless Ivybridge although the branch line (now closed) to Kingsbridge ran from South Brent some 5 or 6 miles to the east. The course of the old railway is mostly walkable today and covers some of the finest country through the wooded Avon valley to the sea at Bantham.

Whilst my notes are brief, I hope they will, for those afoot in this corner of South Devon, hold just a little spirit of location such as we glean from the Northern coast of Henry's county. Perhaps it will have aroused your curiosity to seek out this little remarked upon but nevertheless important area. It would be well worth exploring for yourselves; and would make an interesting location for a Society meeting?