

## Light on *The Pathway*

Tony Evans

The main setting for Henry Williamson's book *The Pathway*, the fourth and final volume of *The Flax of Dream*, published in 1928, is the Braunton Burrows and Marshes and they form a fascinating backdrop for the places and people that Henry Williamson has created to inhabit this area.

My own fascination and interest in this diverse area of burrow and marsh goes back more than fifty years to the days when as a child my father would tell my sisters and I of this far off-place, (as indeed it was to children living in Barnstaple, during the second world war, when much of the area was restricted to the public, due to allied military occupation). He would tell us of the hospital ship that was once moored at Broadsands, the lighthouse, the burrows, the marshes and Crow Island. My father had served in the RFA in the first world war, was wounded and came home to Barnstaple in 1919. Before he was able to obtain work, he would often walk from Barnstaple to the Burrows and marshes and enjoy the peace and solitude of the area.

After the second world war was over my sisters and I were able to visit this area ourselves; I remember that first visit of fifty years ago clearly. Armed with sandwiches and bottles of lemonade packed into the baskets on the front of my sisters' bikes; the opening and closing of the gates on the toll road; the sea-wall; the White House, the dykes and the sand dunes. The hospital ship had gone, sold and broken up by Hinks of Appledore. The lighthouse was still there and in use; the wooden barges loading up with sand and gravel on Crow Point. It was all as fascinating and wonderful as we had anticipated. Today, I consider myself very fortunate in living only ten minutes drive away and able to visit the area whenever I want.

It is because of my long association and interest in this area of North Devon that *The Pathway* is to me a very special book. Henry Williamson's intimate knowledge and love of the area comes through on every page. But it was not until I had read Peter Lewis' interesting article 'Shedding Light on Crow Point' (HWSJ Sept 1991), that I was prompted to try and unravel some of the mysteries that still surround the locations of certain properties and places that feature in the narrative of *The Pathway*, and if, as with most of Henry Williamson's writings, they were based on fact; I found they were.

In some instances, in the preparation of this article, I have had to mention some of the subjects already dealt with by Peter Lewis. This has been necessary to allow me to include additional information that I have gathered over the years, including much from local people a generation older than I am, people who lived and worked in this area at the time that *The Pathway* was written. When Peter 'concluded, without conviction', that Speering Folliot was sited near Velator, he actually concluded correctly.

### SPEERING FOLLIOT VILLAGE

There are a number of references in Chapter 5 and the last chapter of *The Pathway* that indicate where Henry Williamson located the fictional village of Speering Folliot. For instance, 'Like its sister church of St Brannock whose grey broach spire leant among trees to the northwards, the Church of St Sabinas was old in its associations with human endeavour', Chapter 5. Also in Chapter 5, Willie and Mary climb the stairway to the top of the church tower and observe the view, the breakers on the bar, the sandhills, the sea, and concludes with, 'The Great Field, a flat hedgeless area of tith, lay beyond the village street, divided by landsheds, or narrow grass strips, into scores of elongated and curved fields.' Mary can see the governess cart coming; 'Along the road below the sea wall, beyond the marshman's cottage (the toll house) Mrs Ogilvie was driving Miss Chychester, while Mr Chychester with Benjamin and two other children were walking behind. "They will be here in ten minutes. The ringers have just gone in". They lingered in the sunshine, listening to the larks to the remote pealing of bells borne down the valley of the Taw from Pilton.'

In the last chapter Mary is concerned as to the whereabouts of Willie; she searches around Aery Point. 'She crossed the sand hills and came to the Great Field, walking between the long strip called Pillands and the splats' (small sections of land) 'called Gallowell and the three Thorns - Lower, Middle, and Higher -, and the two Cutabarrows and coming to Scur Cottage beside the church and the stream.' The names of these sections of the Great Field are shown on large scale OS maps, as can be seen over.



OS map showing the field names.

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*Wrafton village as Henry Williamson would have known it.*

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These combined references give an accurate position for Speering Folliot. It is located south of St Brannocks church, about ten minutes walk from the marshman's cottage and situated on the edge of the Great Field and close to the two Cutabarroes, Higher and Lower, and the stream, the river Caen.

Add these clues together and it will be seen that Velator on the southern outskirts of Braunton is where Henry Williamson has placed Speering Folliot; and a final clue, the sea wall ends at Velator as it does at Speering Folliot. But the village of Speering Folliot itself is based on Georgeham and Wrafton, the village that stands below the Church of St Augustine, the church of Heanton Parish; the tower of this church can be seen from the Burrows and is the tower that Mary can see when, 'She walked slowly backward when the tower of Speering church came into view', Chapter 9.

Willie and Jean leave the post office and walk down the village street. 'They passed the Parish Club-room, gift of the elderly Miss Virginia Goff, and turning down a narrow lane came to the Braunton Great Field, a white expanse of three hundred and sixty five acres, over which flocks of plovers were wheeling and forming. A flock settled on Lower Cutabarrow, rising again before the dogs'.

Since Henry Williamson wrote this, Wrafton has changed quite dramatically. The village street is now bisected by the Barnstaple to Ilfracombe road, constructed in the mid-nineteen thirties. Thatched farm-houses and cottages have been pulled down to make way for new development. Hart Barton, a house at one time owned by the Chichester family, and the old rectory that stood close to the post office have been demolished for the same purpose. The old Cross Tree was cut down 20 years ago.

The post office is still there but is no longer thatched; the Parish club-room was in fact a gift of Sir William Williams, to act as a memorial to the men of Wrafton and Heanton Parish, who fought and died in the Great War. This building has now become the meeting place of the Royal British Legion; the 'narrow lane' that leads to Velator and the Great Field has been widened to accommodate today's ever increasing motor traffic.

Wrafton village has also one public house, *The Williams Arms*, (after Sir William Williams). In Henry Williamson's day it was *The Exeter Inn*; this may well be *The Plough* of Speering Folliot village.

#### THE CHURCH OF SPEERING FOLLIOT

Henry Williamson has combined parts of several churches in the area to create the Church of Speering Folliot. Its name, St Sabinas is that of the church at Woolacombe. Other details are drawn from St Georges Church, Georgeham; from the top of the tower Willie and Mary look down at the empty cottage under the church wall and 'the Vicarage lying under the northern wall of the tower'. St Brannocks Church, Braunton also forms part of St Sabinas Church. For instance, the bench ends 'were carved with the scenes of the crucifixion; pincers and nails; hammer and ladder' etc. 'He examined the oak bench seats, the timber of which, he remembered, was said to have been grown on the Burrows and drawn to the church by deer.' This is the legend of St Brannock, and it is claimed that the timber was drawn from the Burrows to build the church. The 'old stocks beside the porch' are now placed inside the porch to form a bench; the 'avenue of limes', are also situated here.

The Church of St Mary Pilton is also in part, incorporated into Speering Folliot church. Over the porch doorway of St Mary's inscribed on a slate plaque are the following words; 'The tower of this parish being by force of arms pulled down in ye late unhappy Civil wars, Anno Dom 1646, was rebuilt 1696.'

The interior of this church contains a number of monuments which Henry Williamson attributes to his fictional St Sabinas Church. In the chancel chapel are two large monuments, memorials to the Chichester family; one shows, 'effigies of men and women kneeling at prayer with the Chychester coat armour - the crest a cormorant sable' (a heron in fact), 'with wings extended, in its beak an eel argent - between them'; also 'There was a more recent monument among them, of Sir Orlando Bassett, who died in 1727 with his two wives and his two crests and his shield of thirty two quarterings.' Henry Williamson attributes this second monument to the Bassett family, but it is in fact another Chichester memorial, 'the shield of thirty two quarterings', being the coat of arms of the Chichester family.

'In the south wall was a huge affair, containing perhaps more than a ton of material, looking as though some monstrous sea worm had cast it there. The central tablet was like a vast black shining beetle, set with dark indiscernible letters, with four smaller beetles around it' - 'conceived in the spirit of dreadful darkness expressing the soul of the departed Sir Incledon Chychester, who so disliking his two daughters, had told his executors to pull down his mansion after his death and let the brambles grow over the ruin. During his life he had feared darkness (never realising it was within him), and at night every window of the house had been lit up'.





*St Mary's Church, Pilton.*

*'In the south wall was a huge affair. . . . The central tablet was like a vast black shining beetle . . . with four smaller shining beetles around it.'*

This monument is a memorial to a Christopher Lethbridge and family; Henry Williamson has attributed this to a Chychester, perhaps to enable him to incorporate the incident of the mansion that was pulled down, a story no doubt based on fact. Whether it was a Chichester house that was pulled down for 'so disliking his daughters' is uncertain. Many great houses of the landed families have disappeared from the Devon landscape, some without trace; for example, the Chichester home at Eggesford, (not Eggesford House, Eggesford, from where HW purchased oak boards, to form the floor of the Writing Hut), the Coppelstone mansion at Colebrook, the original Bassett home at Umberleigh, Raleigh Court close to Pilton once owned by the Chichester family and later the Bassetts and many others.

The tower of St Sabinas has a flagpole with wire stays attached, presumably to stabilise it; it also had a 'gilt cock' for a weathervane. The church tower at Pilton has both a flagpole with wire stays attached and a gilt cock. As so much of Pilton church has been used in the creation of St Sabinas church, then it can be safely assumed that part of the tower, at least, is that of St Mary's Pilton.



*St Brannocks Church, Braunton.*

*'The bench ends were carved with the scenes of the crucifixion; pincers and nails . . .'*

## BURROW FARM

A significant property in the book is Farmer Bissett's Burrow Farm. This property exists and is known locally as South Burrow Farm or 'Zow-burra'. It is shown on the Ordnance Survey map, sheet SS 43/53 as South Burrow Cottage. This property can be seen out on the marsh, about a quarter of a mile from the toll road. Built in 1849, on an area of marsh known as South Burrow Marsh, after the sea wall was built and the marshes drained, it was one of three properties built for the Marsh Inspectors. The other two being the White House and what is now the toll house.

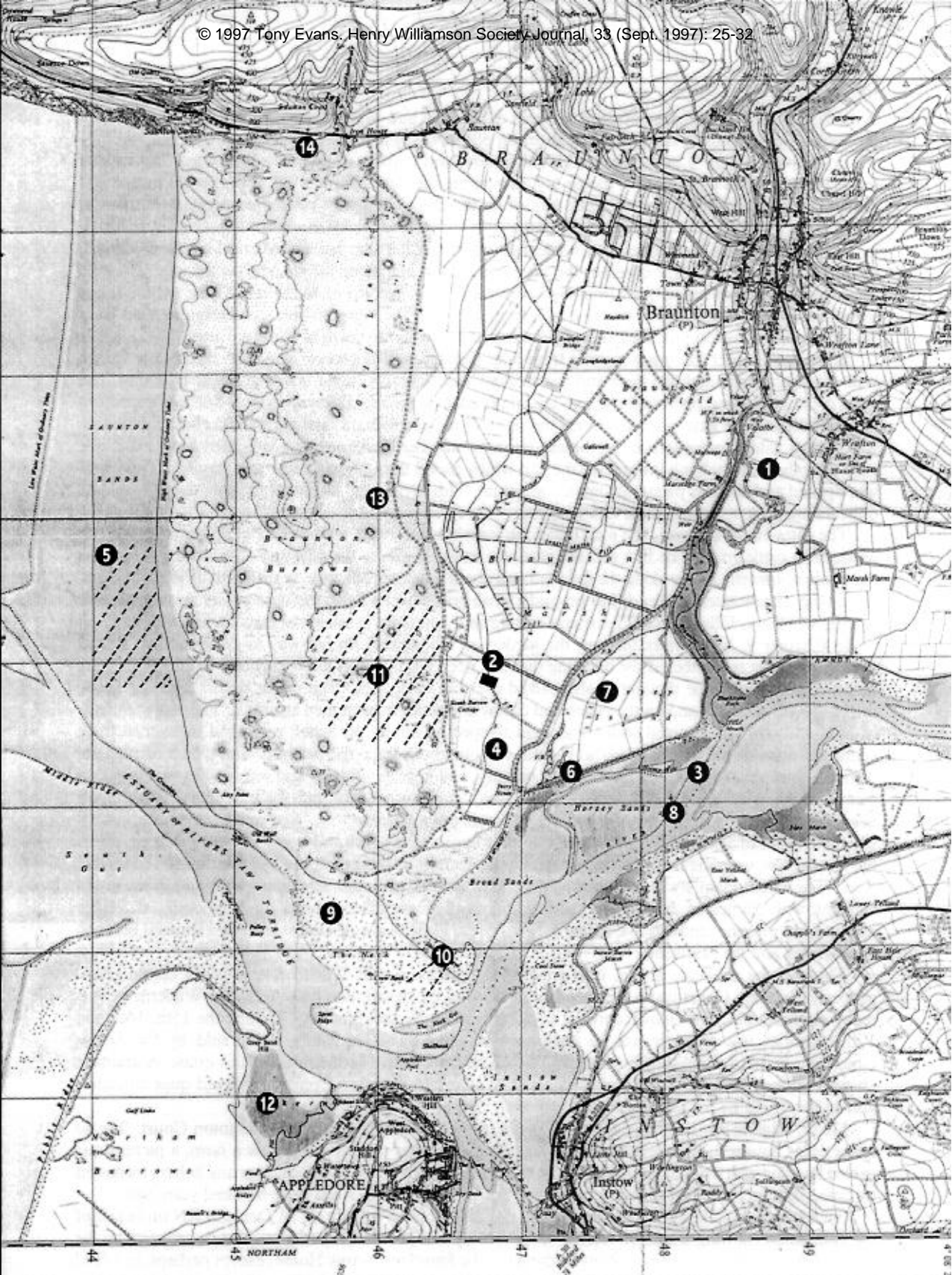
Dick Acland lived at South Burrow Farm during the nineteen twenties. He, like Farmer Bissett made his living by trapping rabbits on the Burrows. In Chapter 2 Michael Ogilvie is credited with the shooting of a Greenland Falcon. A Greenland Falcon was in fact caught in a trap set by Dick Acland in 1925. (See Eliston Wright's, *Braunton a few Nature Notes* 1931). On occasions birds of prey would feed on the rabbits caught in his snares and gin traps, so he set traps to catch these 'awks'. The Greenland Falcon, a rare visitor to the southern part of the UK, met its fate in this way. It also appears briefly in *Tarka the Otter*. The falcon was prepared and mounted by Mr Rowe, a well known taxidermist, who also sold fishing tackle. His shop was in the Barnstaple High Street and I remember him well, quite a character, a person whose company Henry Williamson no doubt enjoyed. Mr Rowe is mentioned in *The Pathway* (Chapter 10) where Sufford Chychester records in his journal, 'Left my rudder at Rowe's' (this being an otters rudder). The Greenland Falcon still exists and is now owned by a relative of the late Dick Acland.



*The Greenland Falcon that featured in Tarka.*

## KEY TO MAP OF BRAUNTON BURROWS AND MARSHES OPPOSITE

1. Site of 'Speering Folliot'.
2. 'Wildernessee'.
3. Luke's Hut.
4. Farmer Bissett's Burrow Farm.
5. Area where Dutchman's Wreck located.
6. The Footbridge that Willie and Mary crossed on their way to Luke's Hut.
7. The original course of the river Caen before Horsey Island was reclaimed.
8. Horsey Weir where Sid Crick caught 'some girt conger een there'.
9. Braunton Lighthouse.
10. Where the sea broke through and formed Crow Island again.
11. 'The Great Plain'.
12. The Skern, where the *Revenge* 'lay like the body of a giant cockchafer'.
13. The linhay with the dressed sandstone and the approximate position of Burrow (or Barrow) House.
14. Saunton Court.



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## WILDERNESSE

With the position and identity of Burrow Farm established and using clues from *The Pathway*, it is not too difficult to work out where Henry Williamson placed the fictional Wildernesse.

In Chapter 9 Mary is in the kitchen of Wildernesse and is about to prepare a pot of tea, 'but looking in the larder, behold a disaster – a mouse lay drowned in the milk'. She sets off to Burrow Farm for new milk. 'This building, the more wretched half of its thatch covered with rusting corrugated iron sheets, stood about a quarter of a mile away.'

In Chapter 7 Mrs Ogilvie receives a telegram informing her that her son Michael has been killed, a victim of the Great War. She observes the telegraph boy cycling along the road below the inner sea wall, 'those moments of watching him turn into the drive instead of keeping on to the farm.' The telegraph boy would have cycled from the post office at Speering Folliot, the village is in a northerly direction from Wildernesse; this would put Wildernesse a quarter of a mile to the north of Burrow Farm.

In the last chapter Mary is returning from Scur Cottage to Wildernesse along the road below the sea wall. 'She passed through the third and fourth gates which, swung high for a swift decisive closing. The gates could not be tied open as the marsh grazing fields belonged to different owners. She was approaching the fifth and last gate when she heard the noise of the gate behind clashing to, and climbing the sea-wall, with a wild hopeful leap in her breast, she saw only her mother getting into Miss Goff's car. She waited by the gate, holding it open for the car, which glided through and came to a standstill. The door was opened and she was pleasantly invited to get in'. This invitation 'to get in' suggests that it would be quite a long walk to the house, as indeed it was.

The gates on the toll road, 'the road under the inner sea wall', were removed about fifteen years ago and replaced by cattle grids. 'The fifth and last gate', the entrance gate to the driveway of Wildernesse is still in place, approximately a mile along the toll road and about a quarter of a mile to the north of Burrow Farm. It is a long straight track, and ends just beyond a small bridge over a dyke; this dyke passes through the rear gardens of Henry Williamson's Wildernesse and forms a boundary between the marshes and the Burrows.

In Chapter 9, Mary walks through the garden of Wildernesse on her way to the Burrows. 'By the cypress trees she remembered the duckling that had been taken by rats a few evenings before. "They are all poor little things" she thought as she walked over the stone footbridge of the dyke'. 'The sun shone full on the tall cob wall, and on the peach and cherry and plum trees trained against it. The wall was made of mud and cow dung mixed with stones and slapped on straw, yet it had withstood more than three centuries' rains driven by the south-west gales without check from the Atlantic. The thatch of reed cut from the duckponds had topped it for half a century, and kept its core dry and sound. The wall was four feet thick' . . . 'Mary unbolted the door', (in the wall) 'and squeezed through the least space. She took off her shoes; she was on the Burrows at last, the wide and open Burrows.' . . . 'She walked slowly backwards when the tower of Speering Church came into view beyond the house and trees.' . . . 'And walking across the Great Plain, wending her way through dark green clumps of spiky rush and low thick bushes of privet.' Also, 'The Great Plain lay before them, a level tract of turf and moss stretching wide and green in the sunlight, with clumps of darker green rushes and small mossy hillocks breaking its smoothness. Half a mile in front rose the sandhills' – Chapter 8. The 'Great Plain' is a wide almost level area situated between the marshes and the sandhills.

Through the evidence above, it is possible to conjecture that Wildernesse is based on an actual property. Saunton Court just a short distance away fits the description quite well; like Wildernesse it is many centuries old. *Domesday* records it as being held by Tedbold in 1086. During the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries this property was in possession of the Chichester family, being sold by Sir Arthur Chichester in 1614. Braunton Burrows and South Burrow Marsh formed part of this estate. A drainage channel on the marshes, Sir Arthur's Pill is named after him. Saunton Court was altered quite considerably in the 1930s by Sir Edwin Lutyens.

J.L.W. Page in his book *The Coasts of Devon*, published in 1895, describes Saunton Court; 'like so many other houses in this western land, it was once of greater dignity – it is now a farm, a picturesque gabled building with a round massive archway to the porch, with thatched outbuildings and lincays mellowed by time. And the old walled garden is hardly as prim and neat now as it was three hundred years ago.'

On a map dated 1832, documenting a survey carried out by a Lieut. H M Denham RN on behalf of the Admiralty, showing Braunton Burrows, the estuary and part of Braunton marshes, a property by the name of Burrow House is shown. Now nothing is to be found of Burrow House, except perhaps, in a field close to where this house stood are the remains of a stone built lincay; in the walls that are left standing