

## 5 CORNWALL AND OTHER PLACES

By the early thirties my parents had abandoned the Workers' Travel Association, purchased two white ridge tents, and become pioneer car-borne campers. For a number of years our regular summer run was to Pendower Beach on the south Cornish coast, via Honiton, Exeter, Dartmoor and Truro, sometimes with detours via Exmoor or to see the Torquay illuminations - little roadside grottos lit with coloured lights.

Pendower Beach was at the time backed by a single large sand dune covered in soft springy turf. It had been thrown up by a severe storm a number of years earlier, demolishing a road which formerly crossed the valley behind the beach. In the thirties this dune was in the early stages of marine erosion, a sandy scar taking infrequent backwards bites. It was an exhilarating sport for two small boys to jump repeatedly from the turf at the top of the scar and roll in the soft warm upper-beach sand at its base.

Behind the dune was a slightly neglected grassy meadow with a small wooded stream running down the western side to issue in erratic loops on the beach. Upstream were dark dampish woods and on the flanks of the valley hot bracken covered slopes with quite frequent adders. We set up camp in the meadow close to the stream, having first checked with the farmer.

It was a wonderful location and in the early years we were pretty well alone, although by the mid-thirties we were beginning to be joined in our meadow by two or three other tents and caravans. There was swimming on the sandy beach, an inexhaustible supply of prawns in the rock pools and eels under stones in the stream, walks along the foreshore and cliffs, trips with fishermen out of Portloe, helping the farmer with the grain harvest, and visits to Portloe, Veryan, Portscatho and farther afield in Cornwall.

Later we became expert at catching adders by seizing them round the neck with a cleft stick, and there were bluebell bulbs to be collected as they fell from the sandy scar of the dune (the descendants of these bulbs followed us from garden to garden and in 1980 some returned to the south-west with us in Devon).

At times the local people put out a land seine, usually in the evenings. A rope started from the beach, the net was bundled out in a wide semi-circle from a small rowing boat, and the other rope end returned farther along the beach. Pulling in the net was a lengthy process, in which all and sundry joined vigorously, the two groups of several dozen pullers gradually closing as the net approached. There followed a session of splashing, grunting, shouting and flashing lights, after which a mass of struggling fish lay on a tarpaulin.

The fish were divided into as many near-equal piles as there were in the combine which owned the net, one man turned his back whilst another pointed to each pile in turn saying, 'Whose be this?' Names of the official participants were shouted out until all the catch had been disposed of. There followed little bargaining sessions at the edge of the crowd, and we usually returned to our tents with a few mackerel for breakfast. Sometimes, though, the net contained little except a few squid and spider crabs.

The unfortunate spider crabs had a very raw deal from Cornish fishermen, as we saw when we occasionally went out in their creel fishing boats. Lobsters and edible crabs were collected in buckets, but everything else was tipped back, the spider crabs first having their shells cracked open on the boat's gunwale as a gratuitous parting gesture.

The Cornish fishermen had a very different approach to that which I later saw adopted by their French counterparts, who lovingly collected not only spider crabs but even little shore and swimming crabs. No doubt it is no more disagreeable to have one's shell cracked open without discernable reason than to be boiled alive without discernable reason.

One of our creel fishing friends of Portloe was a quiet, large, well-built man called Malachi Trudgeon, much admired by my mother; I can see him, clad in waders, carrying her bodily from the little beach at Portloe into his boat. I later heard he was killed in the war.

The grain harvests with which we helped were mostly of oats. Helping consisted of gathering the sheaves, deposited singly by the binder, into stooks of about a dozen sheaves stacked upright and leaning against each other. As the cutter-binder clattered round the field it left a smaller and smaller patch in the middle, into which numerous rabbits became concentrated. Periodically one would burst out in a hectic and erratic dash for the surrounding hedges.

The earlier a rabbit panicked the better its chances of getting away. As the patch of shelter became smaller the rabbits had to face flailing sticks as they attempted their escape, and sometimes also they were severely mauled by the binder. I took a dim view of this element of the proceedings and finally one day I attacked my father as he wielded his stick - adequately to overbalance him in mid-aim. He was fairly disgruntled, but my attack was not instantly returned as I had half expected; rather, I was thereafter not invited to help.

An important figure at harvest time was the daughter of the farmer, Peter she was called. She was square jawed, bronzed and athletic, with a short haircut and usually dressed in riding breeches, often driving a tractor. She was always much involved in organisation of the farm, and when her father died she continued to run it, with her mother operating the kitchen.

She had a practical approach to life, which appealed to my parents, with whom she was on terms of personal friendship. From time to time little groups of youthful females appeared at the farm, laughing and chattering, wearing flowery cotton dresses, their hair well groomed. These were Peter's girl friends from London.

Before the war the sun always shone in Cornwall. Year after year the hard gravel roads were bordered by the dry brown seed heads of foxgloves. Every year I thought how beautiful it must have been earlier in the season when the foxgloves must have been in flower; but every year they remained unchangedly dry and brown in August.

After many visits to Cornwall my parents decided that Pendower Beach was getting too crowded in August, and moreover they wished to break new ground. In 1933 we travelled to the Western Highlands of Scotland to christen our new car, YY1573, and set

up camp under the mass of Ben Cruachen on the Inverary to Lochawe road. The address was c/o McIntyre, Tullich, Elenary, Inverary. The wish of my parents for solitude was certainly fulfilled; solitude, that is, apart from the midges.

My 13th birthday happened during this holiday, and was duly recorded in my log, the first I seem to have kept. From it I learn that we stopped twice en route to Scotland, once with a Mrs Bedford at North Catterick, and once sleeping in a loft at Blackhill Farm, 4.5 miles south of Ayr.

It seemed to me that it rained or drizzled without cease for the couple of weeks we were in the Highlands, so it was fortunate both Richard and I had arrived at the reading age of our youth. We also went out in our school raincoats and the drizzle to catch quite a lot of small brown trout, using worms as bait I fear. Despite the rain we got around quite a lot, taking in Glencoe, some Highland games, climbing of Malloch, helping with sheep dipping, Oban, haymaking, Tarbert.

I recollect the whitewashed stone mass of Inverary by the water, and the car labouring up the old road at Rest and Be Thankful Pass, now replaced by a highway of lesser gradient. The trout were good, and so was it to be plunged in a book in the intimate security of the damp tents; on the whole, though, the West Highland experiment remains in my memories as having been bordering on a disaster.

On the way back we travelled via the Erskine ferry, which cost us 1/-. I recorded that we travelled a total of 1453 miles and used 47 gallons of petrol. This first diary of mine was mainly a record of mileages and petrol consumption, although I did include a drawing showing the layout of a sheep dip; what is clear, though, is that the all consuming interest in the natural world which dominates my later pre-war diaries had not dawned in 1933.

By the summer of probably 1936 my career was in question, and as I had by now firmly decided that it was to be something to do with the open air I was sent for two weeks to live with a farmer in the Fen District, the farmer being a friend of a friend of my father. This visit also was a disaster, not because of the farming but because I had a difference of opinion with the farmer's son, an unmarried lad of around 30 still living at home. The difference of opinion concerned some point of natural history, the son's view being based on his practical experience and mine on the not inconsiderable reading I had done on the topic. The discussion became heated, the son chose to step beyond the mainstream disagreement to denigrate people who had merely learnt out of books, the farmer himself remained aloof and moustached, the mother thought a young person should not disagree with an older one; and that was that.

I made the mistake of detailing the not very satisfactory nature of my relationship with the family in a letter to my parents, leaving it unsealed for a while in the chest of drawers allocated to me in my bedroom. It did not cross my mind that any remotely civilised person could possibly under any circumstances pry into another person's private belongings, but I discovered then, and it has later been confirmed, that this is not the case. The result was that my last few days at the farm were somewhat strained.

As a trainee I was not paid for my work, which consisted of assisting with the wheat harvest. Much of the crop had been beaten flat by earlier bad weather, so that for the

blade of the binder to get at the stalks it was necessary to walk in front lifting the flattened areas up by means of long poles. This was far from easy, and was also very hard work over a long day. At the end of two weeks I was exceedingly fit, and whatever my other feelings may have been I knew I had more than earned my keep. I was therefore not too chuffed when, in reply to a query from my mother and father as to whether I had been of any help, the farmer replied casually that yes, I had helped 'a little'.

My parents and Richard picked me up en route to a camping holiday in the Yorkshire Wolds. This was quite pleasant, including assisting our host farmer and his brother - a gentle unassuming couple - with collection of their peat harvest, which was transported on a large wooden dray pulled by one of their three cart horses. There was a chance, too, for Richard and me to ride another much slimmer white horse belonging to them.

This was the year (?1936) when we took our first colour photographs. Colour was then possible only as transparencies which one viewed awkwardly by holding them up to the light, but it is nice to have a few good colour shots of the camping in its pre-war heyday, and of the pre-war garden at 17 The Valley Green.

In 1937 we returned to Cornwall, which we had been missing. We camped not on Pender Beach, which by now was becoming noticeably overcrowded in the school holiday season, but in a small overgrown quarry on the cliffs between Portloe and Nare Head. It lay within the bounds of Caragloose Farm, and to get to the quarry we took our car across a grassy field alongside and below the farm. At the time it seemed reasonable enough to do so, but when Lucette and I and young family revisited the place years later the slope looked hazardous and the ground distinctly squelchy, to the extent that I chickened out.

This site did not have the benefit of a sandy beach, but we were able to scramble down the cliff to a rocky foreshore, where there was plenty to occupy a confirmed naturalist

My main memory of this last pre-war visit was that the farmer and his wife had three daughters. I must have been growing up. Sylvia was only twelve, but vivacious and competent - a real go-getter. I forget the name of the fourteen year old, who was mostly away 'in service'; the eldest was Beryl, about seventeen. Apart from the curable misfortune of one front tooth being replaced by a black hole, it slowly dawned on me that Beryl had distinct possibilities. But time was far too short and I was far too shy. Had it not been for the war there would have been following years, and I might conceivably have become a Cornish farmer; Beryl was after all the oldest of the three girls. Was my real forté, though, in Cornish farming?

In 1938 we thought we were about to have a war, and in 1939 we did have one, so in neither of these years were our minds on holidays, rather on pointless digging of trenches in the garden and helping the equally useless issue of gas masks.

When we made our years-later visit to Caragloose all three girls were married and away, but the Caragloose farmer and his wife were still preoccupied with their cows and milk churns.