

## SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF A BARNSTAPLE BOYHOOD

Peter Gillard

This article started its existence as a letter to George and Mary Heath and they, very kindly, passed it on to Anne Williamson, who, in turn, asked me if I would care to expand the original into the present format - all rather tortuous. Nonetheless I felt pleased that my notes were worthy of inclusion in the 'Journal'. Firstly, perhaps I should explain that I was born and brought up on the outskirts of Barnstaple and can just remember the town in pre-1939 days, when a hansom cab, driven and owned by Mr. Webber of Newport, still plied commercially and not as a curiosity, taking folk to the Junction Station to catch the 'London train'. The 'flavour' of the area must have changed little by the late thirties since Henry Williamson first settled in Georgeham in the previous decade. I hope that the following details will not only corroborate the amazing accuracy and authenticity of Henry's writing, but will add, if only very modestly, to the reader's sense of period.

My first example is connected with the 'P.C. Bullcornworthy' story. I knew the dentist who features in this story very well. He was about contemporary with my grandparents and a great friend of our family. He told me on more than one occasion that Mr. Henry Williamson was one of his patients and that he had featured in the story referred to above. At the end of the tale, there is a reference to 'Dr. Shaplande's Nervekicke Pillules'. This is an illusion by Henry to the dentist, whose name was Hubert Shapland and who practised in a fine old town house towards the northern end of Boutport Street. I can only assume that Henry felt that Mr. Shapland's name should be included in the story as a kind of recognition, but that respect for professional ethics dictated that Henry mention the name indirectly. Hubert Shapland had a brother, who was an excellent swimmer, and who used to exercise in one of the drowned quarries at Venn, which feature in *Tarka*. There were three such pits, but only two were permanently flooded. The largest was very deep and a local resident told me - about thirty-thirty-five years ago - that he could remember when the quarry was still worked. Apparently men and machines looked very small at the bottom of the excavation. One night, at close of work, an underground river was struck and the men had to climb up the inclined plane, which lay on the Landkey side, and was used to draw out the quarried stone, as quickly as they could, leaving their tools behind. The next day, the quarry was half-full of water and it filled up to the level of the path on the south side, which lay between the quarry and the stream that runs from Swimbridge to the Taw at Bishopstawton.

From the mid or late fifties, the quarry was filled with waste from the modern workings. One day, according to another local resident I talked to in the early nineteen-sixties, a lorry ran away and disappeared into the depths of the remaining water. Divers were sent down and at 180 ft. no sign of lorry or bottom could be seen! This rather bears out what I had already been told about the great depth of the pit - an observation that my late father had also made to me. The water had a remarkable turquoise colour, when viewed in direct sunlight, but was very dark and non-reflective on cloudy days.

Across the stream was the smaller pit described in *Tarka*, where, as a boy, I used to fish for perch. There were certainly large carp in the pool - as is suggested in *Tarka*, for I can recall seeing them lolling around and sometimes rolling on the surface on hot summer days. The 'ivy-covered tower' referred to in the same book was still there thirty years ago or less, and was originally part of a complex aerial ropeway, powered by water-wheels driven by a 'leat' drawn off the stream below. Plenty of material here for the industrial archaeologist.

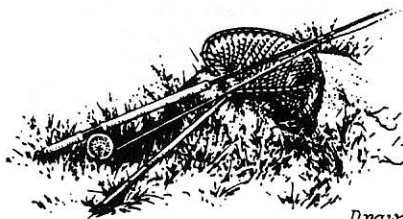
Further points of interest come to mind, when re-reading *Tarka*. Below Newbridge on the Taw there stands, in the middle of the river, the central pier of the original bridge, built in mediaeval times by Bishop Stapledon. This used to be a favourite sprainting point for otters and, when a lad, I used occasionally to see otters in the river thereabouts. Fishing would go very quiet and I would look out for one or two otter heads peering across the pool from the 'shilletts' downstream. It was not unusual as I pedalled back long the main road to hear otters whistling in the valley late on a summer evening.

One of Henry's most exact descriptions is that centred about Barnstaple Fair now much attenuated and far from its old site, as Henry describes it, like a crescent moon, with one horn at the end of Castle Street and the other almost round to the Braunton Road junction. The Castle Street point of entry to the fair was just about opposite my father's shop - still in the family, at No. 25 Castle Street - and here one would see cheapjacks in operation exactly as described by Henry. There were usually a few sandwich men carrying texts such as 'Beware of the Wrath to Come!' or 'Prepare to Meet Thy God!', but no-one took too much notice, though I used to fancy as a boy, that 'Chapel folk' could be spotted by the manner in which they would slink past these warning notices.

Henry's description is so very true to the original, including as it does its hint of mystery at what went on behind the stands and side-shows; the huge steam-engines and whirring dynamos, the cables snaking through the mud and the sense of a 'no-go area' privy to the Fair personnel only.

Perhaps I may conclude by supporting Henry's description of the salmon netmen in *Salar*. As a boy I used to help the netmen haul in their nets and feel the thump as a salmon or big sea trout or 'peal' rushed the net to break through. The netmen were very superstitious and once the skipper of a boat threw a thole pin at me for touching a dead salmon recently netted. His son explained to me that his father felt that as a landsman I would bring bad luck.

I hope these notes prove interesting. I knew the area so well as a boy and young man and perhaps that is one of the reasons that my recall is clear. The other reason is that *Tarka* - the Tunncliffe illustrated Putnam edition - was the first book I consciously remember reading and its total accuracies about well-known and well-loved places of my youth early burned themselves into my mind.



Drawing by Mick Loates