

# A Souvenir

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Whilst in Norfolk recently I found an interesting item in a junk shop . . . *A Souvenir and Guide of Braunton and District*, published by the local Publicity Committee some time around 1950. It's not dated but mentions soap coupons (when did soap come off ration?).

The most important parts of the contents are two contributions by Henry: (1) 'The Burrows, 1938' (described as a sketch by Henry Williamson), and (2) 'Baggy Hole, Revisited in May 1945'. The first seems familiar but I can't remember ever seeing the second piece collected anywhere. I strikes a strange note for a holiday guide.

The first few paragraphs of this forgotten essay are in a traditional style for holiday guides and in line with what the public would expect Henry to write. Another essay by Henry in the same guide, 'The Burrows, 1938', is a straight nature piece with no surprises.

However, much of 'Baggy Hole' is a confession that the author is a broken man. Henry casts his mind back, once again, to those idyllic periods before and after World War I when he was so inspired by the Devon landscape and its characters. 'Where is the ghost of myself, my lost youth? . . . I am less unsteadfast because now I know what then was uncertain,' he reflects.

When Henry wrote this piece, he had spent nearly a decade trying to save Old Hall Farm at Stiffkey. He had suffered from local suspicion during the war and had been arrested. He had tried to implement new ideas but was met by resistance and scepticism from his workers. In the end, the land beat him, life pressed him down and his relationship with Loetitia could not be sustained.

Six months after writing this piece, Henry sold his farm and publicly announced it in the *Daily Express*, as if to ensure he could not change his mind. In that piece, 'I Have Sold my Norfolk Farm', Henry wrote, 'This Michaelmas, I am going to do what I want to do more than anything else on earth — to write books and plays out of my physical existences.'

I'm sure that as he sat at Baggy Point in May 1945, the War in Europe over, he knew that the Norfolk years had not expunged the memories of World War I as he hoped they would have. Whatever revitalisation he achieved with the farm still left him unfulfilled. He knew in May 1945 that it must end and wrote, 'I know that the simple, the fundamental truths of life are not altered by experience, if a man keep faith with his inner belief, or soul. But I have learnt this: that the truth of life is not to be sought when a man is tired, or overborne.'

Fortunately for us, Henry did return to Devon and start *The Chronicle*. The irony of finding a lost essay in this holiday guide is the fact that Henry ever agreed to contribute to it. For is it not so that one of the reasons why he left Devon for Norfolk was because of the encroachments of tourists and the pink bungalows they erected.

'I am an ordinary man,' Henry concludes, 'composed of normal flesh, of ordinary hopes and fears,' and contradictions, perhaps.

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## 1. THE BURROWS, 1938: A Sketch by Henry Williamson

Sometimes as the traveller crosses the sandhills of the Braunton Burrows quivering in the summer heat, he fancies that a strange aerial music is rising and falling just beyond the verge of hearing.

There is a particular valley or plain within the sandy undulations where, as you enter

after toiling up and down the dunes with their stabbing points of marram grass, all sounds are shut off — the far and gentle roaring of the sea, the larks' songs, and the wailing cries of plover which accompanied you all the way from the mainland yonder. Your bare toes sink into the loose sands, which burn the soles of your feet with a glassy heat; and each forward step makes a purring sound in the ribbed slopes where whitely glare the bones and skulls of rabbits; for the Burrows are a vast warren. The world of distant green hills drops away; you are in the radiant desert. All sounds, except your footfalls purring in the hot sand, have dissolved with the horizon of the workaday world.

It is then that strange music comes upon you. Others beside myself have heard it in this place. It is like bells chiming far away, yet near: or the chimmer of rods of air set in vibration by striking wafts of colder eddies from the sea. It is a musical friction of land images, or moisture arising invisibly and refracting the colours of the spectrum which seem to the mind's eye-ear to be the harmony of God revealed this moment to a mortal. For within the sound as of fragile chiming bells are voices which seem to rise and fall in the height of the pale blue sky. A strange happiness, a rare ecstasy of loneliness, comes upon the pilgrim; a feeling of the sky's everlasting harmony, of the centuries and this moment being one; thousands of years of ancient sunlight, before the Romans came, long before moose and elk roamed in the oak forests now gone under the sands — it is the same moment, the same sunshine, the same spirit of life; and you are one with truth and that truth is from everlasting to everlasting.

This is not mere fine or precious writing. It is not literary emotion. It is a description of actual feeling experienced among sandhills of a North Devon estuary. The sandhills, or dunes, rise raggedly beyond the tide-marks of the shallow coasts where wooden wrecks of ships lie buried. On the calmest summer day Atlantic breakers crinkle white on the sand-bars. Along the brilliant westering pathway of the sun lies Labrador. Ring-plover flicker in zig-zag flight along the wet ribands of the lapsing tide. A sea-breeze stirs the grey-green marram grasses. Gulls float chalk-white in the depths of the blue air. You are an immortal.

Moving with deep lunging steps down the steep slope of the dune, one side of which you have just climbed, the sea and the wind are shut out, and again the radiant desert beats upon your body. Once more the burning loose sand purrs under your naked feet. Strange, those aerial voices rising and falling: what are they? Are they solar voices? The cries in elemental life of the sun in the sands, elemental voices of the very rocks freed by wave and wind and light?

Legend says that once there was a chapel here, built long ago by monks. Its foundations lie under the sand, which is strewn everywhere with bleached bones and skulls of rabbits, and bead-like shells worn thin by the sand-blast.

On what intuition was the chapel made here, in this valley of harmony? Did the olden builders discover that in this sunlit place the small inner voice of a man grew and blended with natural voices, which were of the everlasting virtue of the earth?

Did the builders know that here prayer was a natural thing?

## 2. BAGGY HOLE, REVISITED IN MAY, 1945

Before and far below your quavering self is Baggy Hole, in which hundreds of gulls are soaring, diving, side-slipping, and rising in the air-currents on motionless out-held wings. The Hole is enclosed by sheer cliffs on two of its sides. The third side is broken along the north-west, and in the open fourth side heavy Atlantic waves are pounding the rocks, three hundred and ten feet below your eyes.

The buffeting winds of the south-west pouring over water and rock below, the violent

sea-winds have whipped away and scoured the very sub-soil on the exposed places of the headland; but following down the path, to the hummocks of sea-thrift and turf, there is shelter, where a man may lie and watch the face of the precipice.

The air in the Hole is never still. When the south-west blows, a hundred currents meet and clash, spin and eddy and rebuffer against the stony facets and ledges of the precipice. The Hole is then filled with invisible rocks of air tumbling, cascading, and heaving in that great and fretted cathedral of the winds; whereupon the ravens and jackdaws play and disport themselves, falling and diving, side-slipping, shooting up vertically, twirling and half-rolling, and muttering joyous croaks while the gulls utter their salt complaints and wails of the sea.

It is as I knew it in boyhood, in early youth before the sky had turned to brass above the Somme battlefields, in the blessedness of peace and during the uneasy and semi-social years of the 'thirties — the decade before the second war, the decade in which the mental war preceded the physical war, as there is always the obscurity of smoke before a fire.

*It won't be the same ever again* — how many times during the war have I not heard, and echoed, that remark? Did this not mean, rather, that I felt I would never be the same again? I blamed, of course, the change on the cares, anxieties, and frustrations in the so-called civilised world, which, I said, had caused the ageing of my body, and therefore of my mind. I forgot that man has a soul, and that it lies within his choice whether the soul or the body rules his mind.

If the body rule the mind, then the machine will rule the body. That is what has happened to us to-day. Mankind is mastered by the machine; even in this wild and lonely place the slaves of the machine have been ordered to do what no man truly wanted to do. Here they practised what they were doing this day last year, in this south-westerly gale, along the sandy beaches and the foreshore rocks of Normandy. But in a few seasons pink-sea-thrift and grasses will fill the craters of the shells which have exploded here; the dove's-foot crane's-bill and wild thyme will heal the bullet rips in the turf; nettles will spring from the slit trenches, and the salt spray gnaw the iron stakes and the barbed wire.

Within a few seasons the machine-iron will infiltrate as ferrous oxide and ferric chloride into its native rock again. Jute of sandbag will fret and decay and nourish the thrift. Man makes mistakes; the earth and the elements lose not, but forgive. Air, sun, and water; the seals below as during all the centuries, the gulls sitting on their nests on the ledges, gulls looking no larger than white dew-drops across the vast cathedral booming with the organ of the gale.

Over the Atlantic the clouds are galleons sailing in from the Azores. How then is life essentially changed? And where is the ghost of myself, of my lost youth? Am I not the same person as the boy who came here all those years ago, but with this difference: I am less unsteadfast because now I know what then was uncertain.

For, sitting among the flowers of the sea-thrift, buoyed in ambient sunshine and the salt air of ocean, I know that the simple, the fundamental truths of life are not altered by experience, if a man keep faith with his inner belief, or soul. But I have also learnt this: that the truth of life is not to be sought when a man is tired, or overborne.

For however sophisticated or disillusioned a man may think himself to be, he is, and always will be, an elemental creature: made out of the elements, maintained and restored by the elements. At least, that is true for me and I am an ordinary man, composed of normal flesh, of ordinary hopes and fears.

HENRY WILLIAMSON