

Shedding Light on Crow Point

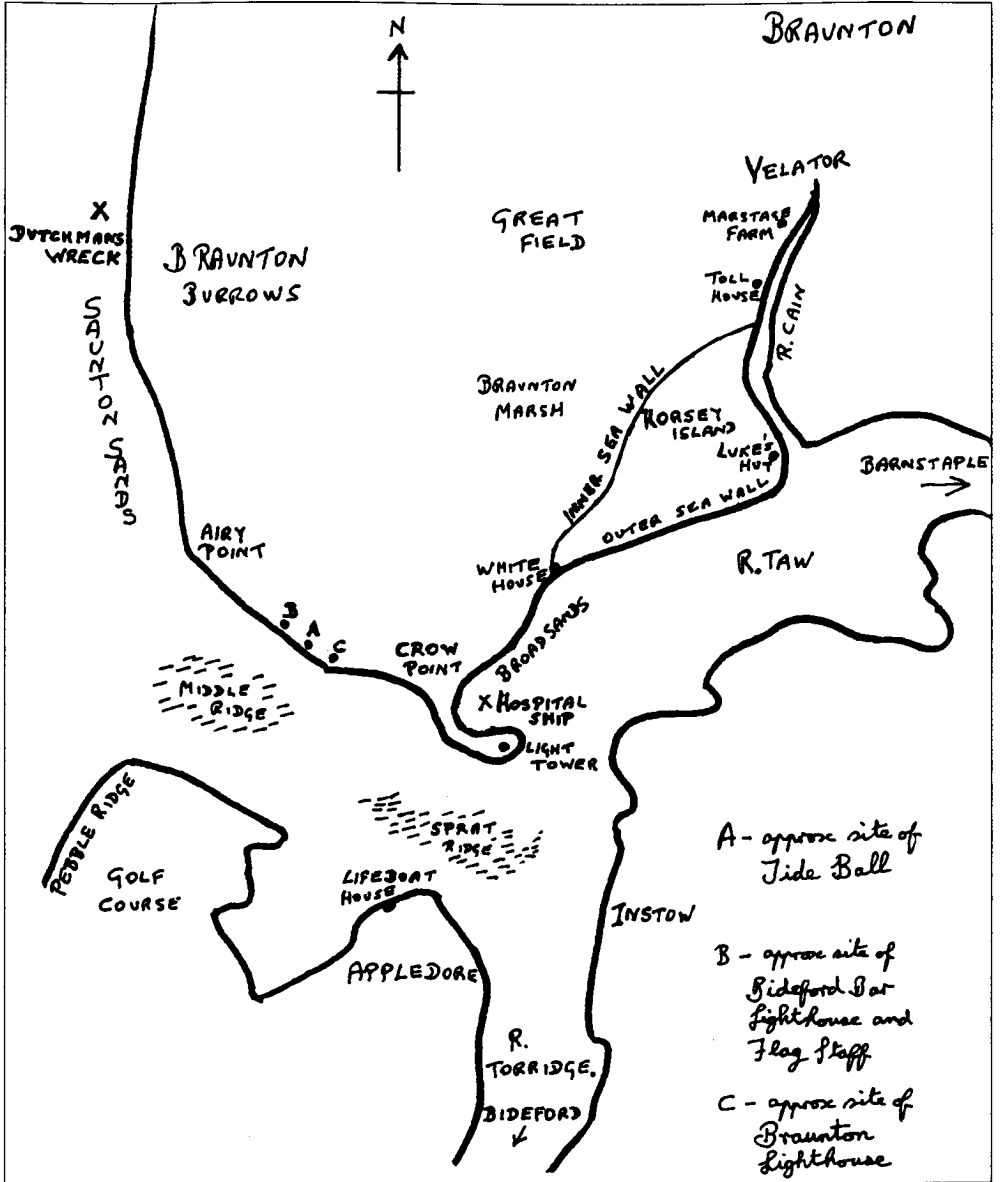
Peter Lewis

Strictly speaking, Crow Point is the name for the southern extremity of the Braunton Burrows where the shore-line turns north-eastwards along the River Taw towards Barnstaple. In comparatively recent times, at this place, a sandy peninsula, or appendage, has formed, or re-formed, ending in a large sand dune called by local people, and often referred to as such by Henry himself, Crow Island. The 'island' (and indeed it has been an island from time to time) consists of a slowly shifting mass of sand and shingle, moulded by tide and wind, and was apparently not there at all in the early nineteenth century. It was firmly established, however, by 1845, at least, for it is clearly shown on a Trinity House map of that year. Today it forms a valuable breakwater and protection against the fierce tides; huge rocks have been placed there, and marram grass planted over many years, to stabilise it. When I realised that Crow Point did not necessarily mean Crow 'Island', it became easier for me to 'place' the various lights or lighthouses, lifeboat houses, flag-staffs, tide 'balls' and wooden and concrete groynes or breakwaters that have over the years been sited along the southern shore of the Burrows.

No trace of any of these artefacts now survives, however, except perhaps for some ancient timbers and iron bars leaning out of the sand here and there, and a large rusty iron tank which may have been the one used at the lighthouse to collect rain water. The industrious researcher must now depend upon old photographs, maps and drawings, and the vague memories of even older local residents to help him. There are, though, a number of booklets and pamphlets available today which, although they indulge, it seems to me, in not a little harmless plagiarism, and seldom reveal their sources of information, are quite useful, and make very interesting reading. I would recommend the more serious student to pay a visit to the splendid new North Devon Library and Records Office at Barnstaple (not, by the way, the old Atheneum, which is now the North Devon Museum) where the Staff were most helpful when I called there recently, and of course it houses the microfilm of many years of the local North Devon Journal Herald, a mine of information for those with plenty of time and patience to spare.

When compiling my map, I thought I would like to locate and site both the imaginary village of Speering Folliot (although undoubtedly this village where Willie Maddison rented the humble Scur Cottage below the churchyard wall was based upon Georgeham) and the equally imaginary manor house of Wildernesse. Henry provides many clues in *The Pathway*, which, however, when pursued, come to nought, but I have examined some of them (there are no doubt many more) and perhaps a good detective can draw some valid conclusions.

The village had a medieval church, St Sabinus, a Post Office and at least one inn, The Plough. I have tried to equate Speering Folliot with the Braunton suburb of Velator, without success. The ancient church and the village, at least, must have had a road leading to them, but the roads of the Braunton marshes and the Great Field were no more than rough paths and tracks until the sea-walls were built in the 19th century – there just doesn't seem to be a suitable place where a village could have been. It is said that the Saxons threw up the hedge (still called the Saxon Hedge) along the southern boundary of the Great Field to keep out the invading sea floods – perhaps Speering Folliot was sited near the Braunton/Saunton road north of the Great Field, or at least west of it where now lie the Burrows. Strangely enough, the Burrows are said to have been forested at one time, and local tradition has it that there was once a fishing village or settlement there, near Airy Point, it is thought, called St Hannah's (together with its



Sketch map of the Crow Point Area

own chapel dedicated to St Anne), which has long since disappeared. This 'village' is actually shown on very old maps, but in the wrong place, it seems. When in Ch. 3 Willie and Jean Ogilvie enjoyed their long walk together they were given cocoa and cake at the tollgate house and 'walked along the [sea]wall until they came to the village'. It seems to me that on their walk from Wildernesse to Speering Folliot they had been walking from west to east – from this I have concluded, without conviction, that Speering Folliot, after all, may well have been sited near Velator. When Willie and Mary are on St Sabinus church tower in Ch. 5 they see the Ogilvie family approaching from Wildernesse along the road below the sea wall beyond the marshman's cottage (the Toll House) and Willie comments, "They will be here in ten minutes."

Siting Wildernesse is just as difficult for although there are more 'clues' many of them are confusing and even contradictory. The large thatched grey limestone manor, surrounded by an extensive garden wall also thatched, was said to have been founded during the reign of Alfred the Great. This description does not fit any of the houses on the marshes – again, there does not seem to be a suitable site for this large house unless perhaps it was at the hamlet of Saunton, which is very unlikely. Marstage Farm at Velator, at the eastern end of the sea wall, has been suggested as a likely site, but there are indications that this could not be so. In Ch. 12 we are told that Wildernesse was little more than a mile from Appledore as the crow flew – this would place it at Broadsands, south of the White House, at least, and this easily eliminates Marstage Farm as a candidate. Mary Ogilvie, born at Wildernesse of course, says in Ch. 5, "I am so glad I was born on the Burrows," and this suggests that Wildernesse was far west of Marstage Farm, at least. In Ch. 3 Benjamin Chychester sets off on his bicycle from Wildernesse on the two-mile ride to his school – this school was probably in Braunton, which is not far from Marstage Farm. An interesting pointer is that in Ch. 16 Diana Shelley, looking out of Mary's bedroom window at Wildernesse, spotted Willie Maddison in Luke's tiny hut and hurried along the sea wall to see him. This implies of course that Wildernesse was very near the sea wall and near enough to Luke's hut for Diana to see Willie in it (Mary was out on the Burrows with the family hawking party at the time, I think – why, we wonder, was Diana in Mary's bedroom?). We are not certain where Luke's hut was, but we know that it was immediately below the sea wall and lapped by water and may therefore, surprisingly, have actually been on the seaward side of the sea wall. At the end of their talk in the hut Willie escorted Diana along the sea wall, not back to Wildernesse, but past the tollgate house and then through the Great Field to the Saunton road – why, we do not know. Willie then hurried back (to Wildernesse) to see Mary for the last time, but was no more successful in this last mission than I have been in siting Wildernesse. I wonder whether Henry, who even in his old age loved to wander along the marsh roads and around the Burrows, himself knew where Speering Folliot and Wildernesse were sited. If he did, he kept his secret well.

It was not always possible to walk easily around the Braunton marshes to the north east of Crow Point for it was not until 1811 that work was begun to build the Great Sea Bank which now protects the area, some 1000 acres, from the waters of the tidal River Taw. The sea wall was built from where the White House now stands to Velator over a number of years, at a cost of some £20,000. It was hoped to raise this huge sum by the sale of their plots to the tenant farmers of the marshes, but it is highly unlikely that the poor salt-tainted grazing land would be worth anything like the £20 per acre needed, and the initial cost, and the heavy subsequent expenses incurred, seem to have been borne by a small number of local squires and landowners. The Great Sea Bank was some 30 yards wide, and was an enormous achievement in those days before the advent of mechanical diggers and earth-movers. Many miles of drainage ditches were dug and sluice gates incorporated, under the supervision of Dutch experts, to allow the marshes

to drain out and to prevent the tidal waters from flooding in. Roads were built, their expense met in part by tolls. Marsh Inspectors were appointed and at least three houses built for them along the sea wall – they include the White House, the Tollgate House (once named the Inspectors House) and the South Barrow, unidentified by me.

The Great Sea Bank, and a second (inner) sea wall was built and the course of the little River Caen was altered – this extra work, completed by 1857, cost a further £40,000. Repairs to the walls after disastrous 'tidal surge' damage in 1910 cost another £10,000, the cost again apparently borne by the local landowners, one or two of whom 'went to the wall' in more ways than one! It is interesting to note that one of the squires was a Bassett, of the Gorges manor; we are told in Ch. 11 of *The Pathway* that Mary Ogilvie's great-grandfather had built the sea wall, and in Ch. 3 we read that Old Farmer Bissett, Jack's father, claimed really to be a Bassett, like Mary's paternal grandmother, and so entitled to own the Burrows. In Ch. 5 we read that a John Bassett, esquire, of Wildernesse, had died in 1888. Old Mr Chychester, Mrs Ogilvie's uncle, we are told, had been the squire of Heanton Court, another of the local manors directly involved in the draining and reclamation of the marshes; his fortunes, too, had declined, for a number of reasons – Heanton Court had to be sold, and Uncle Suff and his sister Edith moved in with their niece at Wildernesse. This is another story, however, and richly deserves a little research on its own account.

The Braunton Lighthouses

Although a 16th century map shows a 'Signal Light House' near Crow Point, it is not at all clear what it was or what its purpose. The first lighthouse on Braunton Burrows, it is thought, was built in 1820, but very little is known about this light, either. It was completely rebuilt in 1832 by Joseph Nelson, a Yorkshireman, whose octagonal white wooden tower was modelled upon the North Country windmills of the time. It was 87 ft high and was propped up by sturdy 'queen' timbers running up from the massive square lighthouse below which housed the three keepers and their families. Its design was absolutely unique; the tower was thought to have been made of wood in order to reduce the weight bearing down upon an unstable foundation, and the house built around its base was made as big in area as was practicable to spread its weight; Mr Nelson built better than he knew, for the lighthouse stood in the sand for 125 years. Some of the wooden slates (shingles) which completely covered it, together with its Trinity House plaque, are preserved in Braunton Museum.

A Trinity House map of 1845 which I have seen shows *two* lighthouses or Towers at 'Crow', and an earlier (1832) Notice, still extant, refers to 'the Leading Light Houses at Braunton Burrows'. It was while trying to establish the sites of the various 'lights' in the area that I realised that Crow Point did not necessarily mean Crow 'Island', and I saw that the lighthouses had not actually been on Crow Island but had been further along the coast towards Airy Point (called Aery Point by Henry), somewhere near point 'C' on my map, I think. It was unlikely, in any case, that such heavy structures would have been erected on the shifting sands of Crow Island especially at a time when, it is thought, the Island was only then (1820) itself emerging from the sea.

What also confused me to begin with was that I failed to realise that there were two lighthouses there at the same time, both variously known as the Bideford Lighthouse or Bideford Bar Lighthouse, the Braunton Lighthouse and even the Saunton Lighthouse. My appeal for help to Trinity House, the venerable establishment for lighthouses, was kindly responded to, but apologies were made for the fact that the little information now 'available' about the lights is buried in some thirty tons of archive material going back nearly two hundred years and unlikely, now, ever to be classified or indexed. Most of the books about lighthouses, I was told, which might shed some light (sorry!) on the

Braunton houses, are now out of print. I could find no trace of the foundations of either of the old lights, or of their many outbuildings, when I searched the area in September 1990, but perhaps I was looking in the wrong place. Old photographs show that massive wooden groynes, or breakwaters, ran out from the shore near the main lighthouse. Traces of these groynes still exist – there are none at Crow Island.

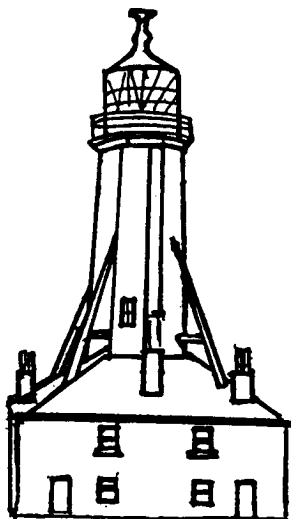
Erected at the same time, apparently, as the main light, also on the shore, and some 300 yards west of it, was a much smaller 'Low Light' or "lower Light' house, described as a small wooden light-room on piles, unmanned, known locally as 'Blinking Billy', so called because, unlike the main 'High' light, it blinked, or flashed. (One expert, however, states that it was a 'fixed' light, visible over eleven miles.) Low Lights and High Lights (now known as Front Lights and Rear Lights, as at Instow, for instance) were so constructed that the ancient mariners out in Bideford Bay who wished to enter the estuary could line up their ships with the lights so that the High light appeared to be directly above and behind the Low light and so obtain a guideline and a safe channel over the Bar. The main (High) light was a 'fixed' white light, visible for fourteen miles ('fixed', as opposed to revolving, or flashing or occulting). Blinking Billy, or, more correctly, the Bideford Bar Lighthouse, maintained and operated by the keepers of the main light, was a 'sector red-to-green light', and was 'moveable' on an ingenious rail system, the details and purpose of which I have been unable to discover. Probably, at least, red meant that the channel was not safe to use, and green, that it was [or possibly it relates to Port and Starboard rather than Stop and Go: i.e. Red – Port – left, Green – Starboard – right].

Alongside Blinking Billy, and clearly shown in an old painting in the North Devon Museum (the old Barnstaple Atheneum) was a Tide Ball (point At on my map). This hollow iron ball, referred to briefly in Ch. 4 of *The Pathway*, was fixed on top of a tall mast and was raised up and down by the keepers from the main lighthouse to indicate to shipping the state of the tide. Presumably, if sailors could see the Tide Ball then the tide was high enough for vessels to negotiate the Bar. Also shown is a large Flag Staff, the purpose of which is not now known – possibly the flag indicated wind speed or direction or may just have sported the Union Jack. All these things, coupled with their duties as part-time coastguards and lifeboat station assistants, must have kept the keepers on their toes. One wonders whether one or two of the old boys might not have hankered for a quiet wife-free spell on the Eddystone!

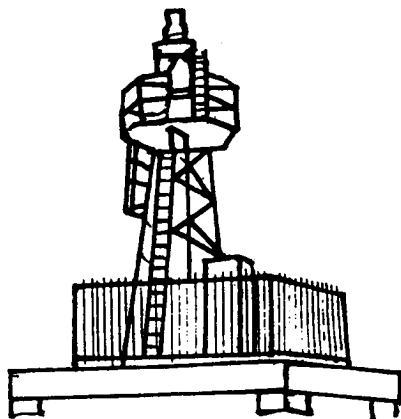
As a matter of interest, the first 'lights' seen by shipping other than simple beacons or cliff-top fires were emitted by groups of candles on the top of light towers, succeeded by wicks soaked in whale oil at first, then paraffin, followed by coal-gas generated somehow on the premises, the naked flames later enclosed by mantles, then eventually by single giant electric light bulbs, the light magnified by elaborate glass lenses, the electricity also generated on site.

The main Braunton light ceased to operate in 1957 and was replaced by an unmanned steel tower erected immediately alongside it. The old lighthouse was slowly demolished over a number of years, up to 1960, I understand. The new steel tower itself fell into disuse shortly afterwards (date not known to me) – the small Bideford Bar Light (Blinking Billy) which it used to operate in conjunction with was still in use, according to Trinity House, in the late 1960s, although this is disputed by some local people.

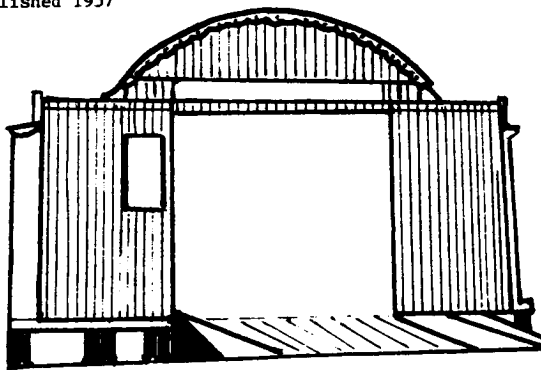
The present light tower on Crow Island was established in 1954. It had nothing to do with the old system, apparently, and was merely an electronic navigational aid to local shipping which serviced the new (but now demolished) power station at Yelland on the opposite bank of the River Taw. Only about 20 ft high, it can actually be looked down upon from an adjacent sand dune, and can hardly be of any use to shipping out in Bideford Bay even if it can be seen at all from out there, which is doubtful. A Trinity



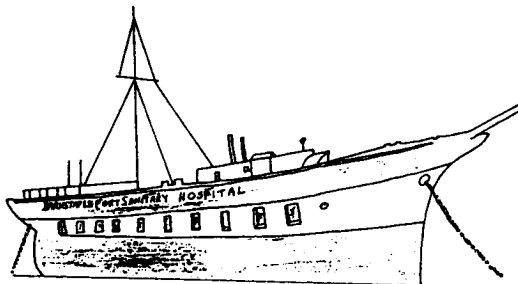
Braunton Lighthouse,
demolished 1957



Crow 'Island' Light



Braunton Lifeboat House, demolished 1919



Hospital Ship 'Nymphen'
scrapped 1927

House Notice attached to it, however, declares grandly that it is a lighthouse, and threatens to prosecute anyone who damages it, or perhaps even picks it up and carries it away! An article in the *North Devon Journal Herald* in 1979 reported that Trinity House had gone to a great deal of trouble to stabilise this little light, sinking 34-ft long sheet-iron piling around the 14-ft concrete pillars of its foundations. This seems to have been effective, for the light is still there, its purpose unknown (to me) except that it marks the 'Island' in the dark for boats wishing to use the Taw; a prudent mariner would surely leave until daylight the difficult and dangerous task of navigating the shifting sand banks of the estuary on his way to or from Velator quay or Barnstaple.

Across the Taw from Crow now are two small unmanned flashing light towers, one up on the hillside above Instow and plainly visible, and the other down nearer the shore line, it seems. These Front and Rear Lights have now taken over the main functions of the old light system on the Burrows.

If we take the site of the old Braunton lighthouse to be at point C on my map it is easy to follow the distraught Mary Ogilvie in her search for Willie the day after he was drowned (*The Pathway* Ch. 18). Her route from her home at Wildernesse, thought by some to be sited near Marstage Farm, Velator, took her around Crow Point and Airy Point and back to the imaginary village of Speering Folliot. She 'walked along the inner wall of the marsh, and so to the White House. She crossed the low sandy plateau above the shore . . . She passed a rusty anchor fluke jutting out of the sandy ground opposite the black hospital ship . . . Crossing the single spit of the Crow, she saw . . . the houses and trees of Appledore . . . She walked on, coming under the white tower of the lighthouse with its groynes clogged with roots and brushwood . . .' She then found some pages of Willie's manuscript of *The Star-Born*, and 'hurrying back along her footsteps, she gathered seventeen sheets . . . She walked round the Crow, searching the tide-line; then she crossed the sandhills (again) to the lighthouse, arriving breathlessly at the groynes. She continued her search round Aery Point, and along the flat wide sands (Saunton Sands) to the Dutchman's Wreck, and at the wreck she left the shore . . . She crossed the sandhills (the Burrows) . . . came to the Great Field' . . . (and walked right across it) ' . . . to Scur Cottage'.

The old lighthouse gets a final mention in the last chapter of *The Pathway*. Mary tells Phillip Maddison that if she had known that Willie was on the Sharshook she would have gone at once to the lighthouse, and asked them to telephone across to Appledore for a boat to pick him up. But it was not to be.

The-Hospital Ship

There are two old photographs of this ship on the walls of the Mariners' Arms at Braunton, and another, much larger, in the tiny Museum at Braunton (open May to September). This last photograph is the one on which my amateur tracing is based, hurriedly executed by kind permission of the Museum's caretaker. (Preserved in the Museum are the ship's kedge anchor and its surprisingly small figurehead, the usual maiden-bare.)

The old snaps in the Mariners were the first intimation I had that the hospital ship featured in *The Pathway* was based on fact, and inspired me to find out more about this unusual craft. First of all, where exactly had it been moored? A caption said vaguely 'at Broadsands' – well, where was that? No one seemed to know. I recognised a challenge.

I found that Broadsands, now called Crow Beach, lay between the White House (now called, incidentally, Crow Beach House – it had once been named Ferry House and the road leading to it was Ferry Road) and Crow 'Island'. Part of this beach of mud and sand is sheltered by the shingle spit of Crow Island which sticks out into the Taw estuary, and I suppose that this would have been a good place to site the ship. T.A

Falcon, RBA, MA, placed the ship there on the unpublished end-papers intended for *Tarka the Otter* – see the Tarka Diamond Jubilee Issue of the Society Journal pp. 19-20. Falcon lived in Braunton during the era of the hospital ship and must have known exactly where it was.

The ship was a large wooden sailing vessel, probably copper-sheathed, age and tonnage not known. Dismasted, it was moored pointing inland, held by at least one anchor and several chains to the sandy cliffs of the dunes. It sat squarely on the mud, heavily ballasted with gravel (at 3s. 9d., or 19p a ton), barely lapped by the tides, for some thirty years, from 1896 until 1927. By 1925 the ship had so deteriorated that a second hospital ship, the *Charlotte*, was purchased (I have no other details) and in 1927 both ships were sold to a ship-breaker for scrap, for £32, and were not replaced.

In 1892 the Barnstaple Port Health Authority had bought an old French ship called *Nymphen* for £275 and equipped it as an isolation hospital for sailors who brought back infectious diseases such as cholera and smallpox from overseas. It was equipped with five wards (one of them for women), a bathroom, lavatory and kitchen, and it also boasted a primitive, manually-operated air-conditioning system. Provision was made for medical staff to be quartered there if required, and a caretaker-and-wife team was appointed. On its black flanks was painted 'Barnstaple Port Sanitary Hospital'. The ship opened for business in 1896 – in 1903 it received its first and only patient!

The first caretakers were Charles and Hester Petherick (or Perterick or Pedric, opinions differ – it was probably Petherick, pronounced Pedrick or Petrick). Readers of *The Pathway* will recall that the caretaker of the hospital ship in the novel was an extraordinary character called Luke who lived alone on the ship for thirty years. Mary told Willie that 'he was frozen on an ice-floe when whaling, losing his ears and an arm, and becoming deaf and dumb'. Long straight hair fell over his narrow forehead and yellow cheeks to hide his ear-holes. He had a leather arm ending in a bright steel hook. He was probably the brother of the real owner of the White House whose name was Joe Petherick, one of whose duties as a marsh-keeper was to operate a sailing-boat ferry from the White House to Instow or Appledore when called upon. (Uncle Suff chatted briefly with Mr Pedric in Ch. 10.) Luke helped him out, and also owned a little hut at the point where the River Caen ran into the Taw – see map. The ramshackle wooden hut with a corrugated-iron roof was merely a place to stow his fishing gear – no more than a rough shelter. I think it unlikely that such a chap as Luke would have been entrusted with the care of the hospital ship. In 'The Crake', one of the yarns in *Tales of Moorland and Estuary*, 1953, we meet the ill-fated Whistling Paddy, a salmon boat owner of Appledore, who had much in common with Luke. This story, incidentally, truly reveals Henry's love for the estuary and the people who lived there.

I have assumed the 'events' of *The Pathway* to have taken place mostly in 1923. Very early in Ch. 1 we meet the lad Benjamin, and are told that he is fourteen years of age. In Ch. 12 we are told that he was born in 1909. In the novel we meet again with Phillip Maddison in the year before he married his first wife, as far as I can make out, and I think we can work out, reading between the lines of *The Innocent Moon*, that Willie died in September 1923. We know that after leaving the Army in 1919 he spent some three years in London and with the War Graves Commission in France, and so I think that 1923 is a good bet. It is interesting, therefore, knowing that Henry was still writing or revising *The Pathway* in 1927, and would have known about the sale of the hospital ship in 1927 for £32, to read in Ch. 14 of Willie and Mary discussing the possibility of purchasing *Nymphen* and living in it:

They 'walked on, with the black mass of the beached hospital ship looming bigger and blacker as they approached it. The hull was shored upright with props, and held by chains stretched over their heads and secured to rusty anchors half-buried in the low

sandy cliff. The moon shone on the gilt knightheads, and illumined the dewy letters of NYMPHEN on its bows'.

(Willie and Mary saw the name *Nymphen*, but Henry didn't – it had been painted out. The knightheads were the timbers supporting the bowsprit.)

They heard coughing inside the hulk, for Luke was the caretaker of the cholera ship, which had not received a case for more than thirty years.

'They say it is going to be sold soon,' said Mary.

'I know. Let's buy it! and live in it! The magpies have their nests in trees, the fox has his earth, and we'll have the old ship! They say in Speering that the chap who bought the Revenge is the only man likely to buy it, and he won't give more than thirty pounds. I'll finish 'Star-born', and get an advance in royalties, perhaps. I'll start tomorrow morning, and finish it in a week!'

Mary smiled at his enthusiasm . . .

When, in Ch. 17, Mary passed that way again, alone, not knowing, but guessing that Willie was dead, she saw 'the black hospital ship, which for an hour of a summer night had been her home in imagination. How things changed; and nothing ever seemed to make up for their going. The hospital ship had been there ever since she could remember, and now it had been sold, and was to be broken up for firewood. Well, she was glad of that, for now no one else would live in it . . .'

The Braunton Lifeboats

The first lifeboat at the estuary was the *Volunteer*, stationed at Appledore in 1825. In 1831 it was joined by another boat, the *Assistance*. Because of the difficulties of getting the boats over the 'Bar' and out into the bay it was decided to keep the *Assistance* across the water at Airy Point or somewhere near it, and later (two years later!) a boathouse, believed to be little more than a corrugated-iron shed, was erected by the North Devon Humane Society to house it. The boathouse was later twice rebuilt, probably also at Airy Point.

The boathouse was at first in the charge of the owner of the White House. When needed, the *Assistance* was summoned by the firing of guns or rockets at Appledore and also at the White House (then called the Ferry House); the lifeboat crew would then row over from Appledore in their own little boats, while farmers from the Braunton marshes would hasten with their horses to launch the lifeboat by dragging it on its wheeled cradle down the gently sloping sand into the sea – ten carthorses were normally required.

Of Braunton's many lifeboats over the years, we know of the *Assistance*, the *George & Catherine* (from 1866 to 1881), and there others, all called *Robert & Catherine*, from 1881 to 1919 – three of them were donated by a Miss Leicester from London, it seems. In 1919 Appledore acquired a motor lifeboat, and the Braunton lifeboat and boathouse became redundant. A total of 85 lives had been saved by these boats and their valiant crews.

The lifeboat, housed at the southern end of Saunton Sands and nearer in fact to Saunton than to Braunton, was sometimes referred to as the Saunton Lifeboat, leading me to believe early in my research that there were two lifeboats at the northern shore of the estuary. Recently I called at the Appledore Lifeboat Station and asked the chap who seemed to be in charge there if he knew where the Braunton boathouse had been sited, i.e. which side of Airy Point it had been. Not directly answering the question, he pointed at the opposite shore and said, "There were *two* lifeboats, there and there. Both were in the charge of the Appledore Station, so we had three boats in all." "How long ago was that?" I asked, and received the cryptic reply, "Ah, many years ago now,

midear." With that, the splendid old seadog, cocooned in yellow plastic, dived back under the tractor he was repairing, and the interview was over. I did not know then that the Braunton lifeboat had ceased to operate in 1919, or I may have dared to question him further. For my part, I dived into the nearby Royal George, where nobody knew anything; the mystery remains. (I would just mention here that on the same day I asked a friendly native if he could remember the railway at Appledore. He assured me that he could, and said that he remembered that trains used to run from Appledore to Bideford in the 1930s. He then went out of his way to show me where the railway station had been. It turned out that he was quite wrong on both counts, and the last train from Appledore had run in 1917!)

One finds it most difficult to equate the incredible bravery of the lifeboat crews who, unpaid, risked and sometimes lost their own lives, launching their puny boats in appalling conditions to save life, with the mindless greed of their fellow villagers on the North Devon coast whose evil reputation as wreckers, looters and smugglers lives on today – heedless of human life they built fires to confuse mariners who depended on lighthouses to find their bearings in storm, fog and darkness. Cargoes of wrecked ships were stolen wholesale, and surviving ships' crews who defended them were sometimes killed or chucked overboard – even masts, sails and rigging, and private property were carted away. As recently as 1982 some 200 men, in broad daylight, and before the very eyes and cameras of the national press, totally stripped and vandalised the 1000-ton *Johanna* which had run aground near Hartland Point lighthouse.

Henry arrived in North Devon in 1921, after the lifeboat and boathouse had gone. I'm sure that if he had known them he would have 'put them in his books'.

The Whales

At Christmas 1911 a fifty-foot whale, species not recorded, as far as I know, was cast ashore on Saunton Sands, opposite, it is said, the lifeboat house at Saunton (I wish I knew where that was). I understand that whales find themselves stuck in shallow water as a result of navigational error – once 'beached', they very quickly suffocate because their chest muscles are not strong enough to inflate their enormous lungs when not supported by water. Such animals were known as 'Royal Fish' – local customs officials kept people away from them, but in most cases, because of the awful smell, soon begged them to take them away!

In Ch. 7 of *The Pathway* we read that it was the eight-year-old Mary Ogilvie who first discovered 'the great sperm whale on the sands near the Dutchman's Wreck. She ran most of the way home to gasp out the news, looking, her father had said, as though she had been swallowed, and cast forth again'. Mary had thereafter been known to her school chum Howard de Wychehalse as 'Jo', for Jonah. Incidentally, this chance clue tells us that Mary would have been aged twenty and still a minor at the time of Willie's death, if of course the dead whale in the novel is the one which was cast ashore at Saunton in 1911. But we are told in Ch. 5 that Mary's father died in 1908, and as he was still alive when the eight-year-old Mary found the whale, Mary must have been born in 1900 or earlier and so was at least twenty-three. It seems to me that Henry sometimes went out of his way to foil attempts to pin down dates and places!

Four years later, in 1915, another whale, said to be a large bull, was beached on Croyde Sands. Some of the bones of this creature were 'appropriated' by the Hyde family, who lived on the flanks of Baggy Point – their house is now the Baggy Point Hotel. Miss Hyde, of course, was the model for Miss Virginia Goff in *The Pathway* – she featured, too, in the 'village' books and was also there portrayed as Lady Maude Seeke (Hyde and Seeke!). The formidable Miss Goff was instrumental in turning her friend Mrs Ogilvie against Willie, and had even wanted to have him prosecuted for

blasphemy! Back to real life – the Hydes placed some of the massive whale bones alongside the path to Baggy near their home, seventy-five years ago. Some of them are still there, protected now by the National Trust, whose Notice begs visitors not to take them away!

I well remember my grandparents telling me of a whale that was once beached in Carmarthen Bay, across the Severn Sea from North Devon – my grandfather explained that it was not a real whale, but a grampus. This amused me because I called my grandfather Grampa or Gramps and used to think of the beached whale as 'Grampa's whale'. The word grampus is not generally in use now, and the creatures are known as killer whales, because they hunt seals and fish, and indeed sometimes other whales, in packs, and, like dolphins and porpoises, have teeth to grip and chew their prey. The intelligent black and white grampus is at thirty feet half the length of the sperm whale and at up to eight tons about one-sixth of its weight, and is considered to be a dolphin, not a whale (but don't quote me or my grandfather on that!).

It was the grampus, of course, that was the villain of the story 'The Crake' in *Tales of Moorland and Estuary*. From the book's preface we gather that the story may have been written in the 1920s. The 'crake' was the dreadful scream uttered by seals as they were gripped by the grampus – if that is not enough to give us the creeps we are regaled by the horrible demise of Whistling Paddy, his figure silhouetted by the sweeping beams of the lighthouse, as he is dragged into the water, tangled in his own fishing net, by the monster of the deep.

Henry called the grampus 'orca Gladiator' in a flourish of inventiveness. Linnaeus dubbed it 'delphinus orca' (literally 'demon dolphin', says my library book) but its Latin name now is 'orcinus orca'. According to a Latin dictionary I consulted 'orca' is a pot-bellied jar, and 'orcina' means 'relating to the realm of the dead', so perhaps its new name can be very loosely interpreted as 'the pot-bellied one from the realm of the dead', a translation that Henry might have approved as being more fitting for this fearsome creature than his Gladiator. I cannot here resist from mentioning that if the reader thinks that my Latin is rotten, then he may well be right, but he may think that Henry's was worse – in Ch. 5 he would have us believe that the Ogilvie family motto 'Quae moderate, firma' means 'Who dies, if England lives?'

Sharshook Ridge

My map shows Sprat ridge in the estuary squarely between Crow Point and Appledore. The eastern hook-shaped extremity of this ridge, which is visible only at low tide, is or was called Shellhook, according to a blown-up photograph of part of an undated Admiralty chart on display in Appledore Maritime Museum. (That part of the Instow shore opposite 'Shellhook' is or was called The Shellies, according to the same chart.) The whole area is littered with shells of all descriptions, and mussels are still found in profusion there. Willie Maddison told Mary in Ch. 14 that a Captain Charles Hook had been drowned off the ridge, hence the name 'Sharshook', but this of course is pure invention and has no foundation in fact.

When Mrs Ogilvie and her daughters Mary and Jean, with seventyfive-year-old Uncle Suff and Willie went to the Cheriton Otter Hunt Ball, which was expected to end at 2 a.m., they walked to the White House and were then ferried to Appledore in Luke's boat. Willie and Mary left together a few minutes before the dance ended, while the others walked behind. The second party were then presumably ferried back to the White House, and walked on to Wilderness.

Meanwhile (Ch. 14) we find Willie and Mary on the Sharshook ridge in mid channel. How they got there we do not know. The water between Appledore and the 'Sharshook', although it looks to me to be only some sixty yards wide at low tide, is

three fathoms (eighteen feet) deep, according to the chart, and cannot be crossed on foot, a fact that was later of course to cost Willie his life. Perhaps Willie and Mary too had been ferried across from Appledore to Crow Point by one of the salmon boats which were still working there through the night, apparently, and then decided to walk back to the Sharshook ridge in the intermittent moonlight. There they walked up and down, avoiding the pools of sea water in the dark (five lights shone in the village, Appledore, a quarter of a mile away), Mary in her ball gown and Willie in his best togs. A proposal of marriage was made and accepted. When the incoming tide was becoming dangerous (Willie had drunk several glasses of whisky and did not seem to be unduly concerned) they were still half a mile away from the shingle spit of the Crow, and were extremely fortunate to hail Jimmy Chugg's boat, operating in complete darkness, otherwise there would almost certainly have been a double tragedy. We held our breath for the happy couple until they were safely ashore at Crow Point, from where they walked home to Wildernesse to find Mrs Ogilvie waiting up for them, none too pleased.

Willie, penniless, homeless, unemployed, and, more important to him, unable to overcome Mrs Ogilvie's growing hostility, finally decided to quit Wildernesse for good. Eventually, again in the dark, leaving behind him his dog and his walking staff, he ventured out on to the Sharshook ridge, allegedly to get to Appledore to commence his lonely walk to London. After his recent experience of the ridge and the tides, it seems incredibly foolish of him to do so, for he had no reason to set off on his journey (over two hundred miles) in the dark (his lease on Scur Cottage still had five days to run), and he had no reason to go to Appledore at all; from Wildernesse, although its exact location is not known to us, it would have been far easier for him to walk to Braunton and then to London via Barnstaple. It seems incredible, too, that Willie, sober this time and in any case a very good swimmer, did not turn back to Crow Point in time to beat the tide when he realised that he was not going to get a boat to take him over to Appledore. Did he set fire to the unfinished manuscript of *The Star-born* to attract attention to his plight, or did he just want to destroy the work in which he had no real confidence and which he had told his cousin Phillip was 'nothing'? Many readers, better able to read between the lines of *The Pathway* than myself, have concluded, albeit somewhat reluctantly, that the despairing Willie may well have decided to end his work, and his life, at the same time.

I last visited Crow Point on a cold October day. The last visitors had gone, and I had the vast expanse of shell-crusting sand to myself, save for the frail oystercatchers and redshanks which strutted and squabbled on the tide-line. On the wet uncovered rocks of the ridge a cormorant stood, wings outspread, watching me anxiously. Over the 'Bar' the pale watery sky merged with the sea, the ceaseless booming of Atlantic rollers sounding across the empty estuary water interrupted by the haunting plaintive cries of wandering gulls. On that timeless beach I have observed lone holiday-makers standing on the 'Sharshook', gazing slowly around them. Are they overwhelmed by the wild silent beauty of the estuary, I ask myself, smiling sadly, or are they perhaps *Flax of Dream* readers wondering, as I have done, "Is this the place? Is this where poor Willie drowned?"