

ABBOTSKERSWELL PAST AND PRESENT

MY THESIS

By Fred Brimecombe

Fred's family have lived in Abbotskerswell for generations and he was born in the village in 1918 and lived here his whole life. He was a regular contributor to the 'Abbpast' page in AbbTalk with his recollections of life and wrote what he called his Thesis to help John Somers-Cocks with these pages. It should be noted that these are mainly Fred's recollections rather than extensively researched records.

ABBOTSKERSWELL

In a Saxon Charter of 956 'Abbotskerswell' was written 'Caerswylle'. This literally means 'cress spring'. Its name has changed over the centuries. In the Domesday Book it is recorded as 'Carsvelle', and later on as 'Karswill Abbatis' and Abbotescharswell'. The word 'Abbot' being used to separate from the manor owned by the King. That being 'Kingskerswell'. The Abbots were those of Horton, which were taken over by Sherbourne in the 12th century.

WHICH PARISH?

It is difficult to say which parish Abbotskerswell belongs to because in fact it is part of two. The Church Parish, the ecclesiastical parish, is made up of Abbotskerswell village and Aller. However, the civil parish, that being the parish defined by the County Council is of Abbotskerswell and Kingskerswell. Occasionally these two villages are referred to as one, in this case they are termed 'Kerswell'.

Many people who have read the following poem:

'In coffinswell and Kingskerswell,
And so in Abbotskerswell too,
For here we merry craftsmen dwell,
And wonderous is the work we do'-

believe that Coffinswell is also linked in the same way, but this is not the case and is entirely separate.

THE OLDEST HOUSES

Centuries ago the Lord of the Manor would only grant the freehold for houses to be built if the builder was certain that he could have smoke coming out of the chimney of the house at the end of the day in which the building was begun. This law obviously meant a lot of hard work. Undoubtedly the oldest houses in the village would have been built under these regulations.

The two oldest cottages in the village are Rock Cottage and The Thatches. Rock Cottage is of added interest as it was here that silk slippers for Queen Mary's court jesters were made.

THE SCHOOL AND SCHOOL LIFE

The village school is 110 years, being built in 1876 and at that time cost £600 to erect. It was large enough to educate 75 children. There were only two classrooms and two cloakrooms. The ages of the children ranged from 3 to 14 years old.

The toilets were in the same places as they are now but they were very unhygienic. There was an open gulley, which ran through the toilet area and when the toilet was flushed the contents would run right down along the open gulley.

The wooden huts are obviously a fairly recent extension but before they were built the area which they occupy were garden plots for the pupils of classes 6 and 7. The children used to take a great deal of care and pride on their gardens and every year there was a cup awarded to the best kept plot.

When reverend Gordon Campbell became the vicar of the parish every first Monday in the month he would go along to the school to take the registrar. When the pupils names were called out they had to stand up and the vicar would ask each child how they were and how their families were. This exercise obviously took a long time but it was very effective as the vicar knew everybody in the village so as he could help anybody if they needed it.

The staff of the school composed of a head master and two mistresses.

When the girls left school most of them went into dressmaking or domestic service. The boys would do various work on the land, such as farming, or they would go and work in the clay pits. The boys could do almost anything they wished. Abbotskerswell was full of different industries which they could join to earn a living.

EMPLOYMENT

Unemployment was never at the scale it is these days. It was very easy to get a job. If you didn't like your work there was no risk taken when handing in your notice without already having a job to go to.

One of the present residents of the village told me that he can remember a very strange interview when applying for a job. Fred had been told that there was a job as a coach driver vacant in Exeter at Greenslade Coaches. He was rather interested in this job and so made a trip over to the city to see if he would be suitable for the post. Fred walked into the offices of the coach company. Looking around he thought that it was most strange because the walls of the room were covered in shelves and all the shelves were filled with religious books. Fred saw a girl at a desk and went over to her to tell her that he had come to apply for the job as a coach driver. "Oh yes" she said, "The boss isn't in at the moment so if you would like to wait it shan't be long until he returns". Fred agreed and sat down. To pass the time he picked up one of the many books on the shelves and began to read it. Not long passed before the office door opened and a man walked in. The girl looked up and said, "My father will see you now".

Fred entered the office expecting the usual interview procedure about qualifications and previous experience. The boss turned to him and asked, "Do you know what you were just reading?" Fred was a bit taken aback and replied, "Well yes". The boss then said, "Did you understand what you were reading?" "Yes, I was reading the Bible."

The boss looked up and simply said, "Good, you've got the job"!

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Everybody who went to school had to go to Sunday School. It wasn't held in the Church House, as it is now but in the village school. There were two sessions a day. The first from 10am to 11am, followed by a service in the church. Sunday School being held again at 3pm. The vicarage was always that of Glebe House, which is along Vicarage Lane. The vicar's wife always took the senior Sunday School class. Occasionally she may not have been able to go

down to the School in which case the class had to crocodile march all the way over to the vicarage, where she would hold the lesson at home.

THE CHURCH

The Church is no doubt the most prominent building in the village. For it is obvious that the village has been built around the Church. The center of the village more than likely being just outside the gates of the Church as many of the oldest houses such as Town Farm and the Church House are built very nearby.

The Church is dedicated to Mary the Virgin. In 1884, after a mass of plaster had been removed from near the alter a figure of a woman standing 6ft 8in tall was discovered. There were many theories as to who the statue was. Many people believed that it was the figure of Ethelhilda, at one time being the Lady of the Manor. In 926 she married Hugh Capet, and so founded the French royal House. It was even suggested that it may be Queen Mary or even her sister, Queen Anne.

None of these suggestions were very likely as no-one but the patron saint would be in the standing position. People began to believe that it may be that of Mary the Virgin, as the constitutions of Winchester say that the patron saints were always placed on the right side of the alter.

The figure is made of beer-stone. From the pose of the Lady it is almost certain that at one time the Baby Jesus was being carried on the right arm.

The figure was more than likely first damaged by emissaries who would have been sent by the Duke of Somerset to ruin the churches in the reign of Edward VI. It was probably built into the wall to save it from these men. It was damaged by the restorers of 1884 before they realized that it was there.

The Church is thought to have been first built in the 13th century, as this is when the oldest work in the chancel has been dated. There was once a Rood Loft above the Screen. The doorway can be seen to the right of the screen and has been walled up. It is believed that the Monks of Sherbourne once painted the panels of the screen but there is no sign of this at all. The colour of the carved vine winding along the top of the screen was not always there. It is thought that a church-warden, whilst doing some repairs, thought that he would improve the beautiful carvings by colouring them in! The vicar wanted these colours to be removed but after finding out that it would cost £100 to remove the paint and that he would have to send the whole screen all the way to London, decided against it and left it in the hopes that in time the colours would fade and disappear.

In 1884 the walls, the pillars of Dartmoor granite and the roof were restored. Sadly the windows were restored with bathstone instead of granite so today they appear to be somewhat of a mixture. A very fine Jacobean alter-rail was also taken away. A new pulpit was also added. The stocks were taken from the tower and put into the porch. [Later they were loaned to Newton Abbot Museum. Ed.]

All the restoration cost £1,609 and was paid for by Mrs. Marcus Hare in memory of her husband, Captain Marcus Augustus Stanley. He was the commander of H.M.S. Eurydice, which sank off the Isle of Wight in 1878. By the flag there is a brass memorial plate.

Mrs. Marcus Hare also bought the Church the clock in the tower at the cost of £120 and was dedicated to the Church on December 31st 1908.

Mrs. Hare is also remembered in the Church as in 1925 three more bells were added to the six already there, by her daughter Miss Hilda Hare.

THE CHURCH YARD

The oldest tomb in the Church Yard is no doubt the solid stone slab about 6ft by 3ft high. It is found on the left, just beyond the Lych Gate. It was thought to be the oldest grave of a

Free Mason in England. A Major Gatwicke, the former editor and past proprietor of the Devon and Exeter Gazette, had it copied and published the inscription, his intention being to raise money at a Freemason's banquet in London to pay for a tablet in the Church with a copy of the long inscription, and also to have the raised tomb protected by iron spiked railings, but he soon died and nothing has been done by the Freemasons. This may be due to the fact it is questionable that it is that of a Freemason, or even a Stonemason. This is thought as the inscription is a play on the word 'mason'.

The inscription:

William some of Arthur Mason
Of Cornwood a hopefull Minister
Of the word in his journey
From Cron was here with
Much love and grieffe intered May 25
An Domi 1639 then aged 23.

A further inscription reads:

"Mason how ist that thou so soone art goone
Home from thy works what was the fault i th stone
or did thy hammer fayle or didst expect
Thy masters wages would thy work neglet.
christ was thy CORNER STONE CHRISTIANS the rest
HAMMER was WORD GOOD LIFEthY Live all blest
And yet art GONE twas honour not thy crimE
with STONE HARTS to worke much; in little time
thy master sawt a;nd tooke thee off from them
To the bright STONE of NEW JERUSALEM
Thy worke and days men may esteem a baston
He auen* counts it blest there rest a blest FREE MASON"
*alone

The grave yard was extended in October 1905. It was consecrated by the Bishop of Crediton. The plot was bought and enclosed by a wall, all this was paid for by none other than Mrs. Marcus Hare at the cost of over £100.

The great Benefactress to the Church is buried in the South East corner of the Church yard. She died at Court grange on March 15th 1918.

THE LYCH GATE

Abbotskerswell has the oldest dated lych gate in England. On the cross beam is inscribed the year 1603 with the words "Fear God and Honour the king" positioned between the initials 'TR' and 'SR'. These are more than likely the initials of the churchwardens of that time. However, if you look closely at the inscription you will notice that in fact the letter 'i' has been omitted from the word 'King'. There is no other explanation for this other than that there wasn't enough space to fit it in.

"FEARE.GOD.T.R.1603.S.R./HONOV.R.YE.KNG.S.Y."

The gate is assumed to have been erected to commemorate the accession of James 1. It was restored in 1899 when the wicket gate at the side was blocked up. The restoration was in memory of the Rev. Vesey Hine.

At the beginning of this century there was also a white iron kissing gate at the bottom of the church path.

FUNERALS

There was always a village superstition condemning the use of biers at funerals. The villagers had a hatred toward them. As there were no cars, and before the horse and cart became widely used, the people who died in the village were carried in their coffins all the way through the village to the church. The mourners would walk in twos in a crocodile line behind the coffin. Mr. Brimecombe can remember when a very old man died at Whiddon Farm. The farm was quite a long way out of the village so consequently the coffin had to be carried a long way. Not surprisingly the people carrying the coffin became very tired, this they overcame by having a short rest every so often.

They would lay down the coffin in the middle of the road and all the mourners stood around and sung a hymn. When the coroners were ready the coffin was picked up and the procession carried on its way to the church.

SAINT AUGUSTINE'S PRIORY

The Priory building was originally a large country house called Abbotsleigh owned by a man called Mr. Baine. In 1860 it was bought by the Canonesses of St. Augustine and this has been the home of this order of nuns since 1861. The Canonesses of St. Augustine were a community formed in 1609 and moved from France to Abbotskerswell in 1860. They were led by Mother Margaret Clement, whose mother was Margaret Gibbs, the adopted daughter of Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII.

Public tolerance of religion had increased enough for the English community to return home and this they did in 1860. However, it was still dangerous and for extra safety a special train was hired to move the members of the community and their belongings. The nuns also traveled in disguise by changing their clothing of habits into normal clothes which were borrowed from friends and relations.

When the Order bought the house from Mr. Baine, accommodation for 50 nuns was required. There were more buildings built, which included the Church. The Church was partly designed by Mr. Hansom of the well-known local 'Hansom Cabs'. The high altar and sanctuary, were designed by Benjamin Bucknell who was also responsible for its unique tabernacle at a cost of £1,212!

There are still reminders of Sir Thomas More within the Priory one of which is his original hair shirt, smuggled out of the country by Margaret Gibbs. She left it with the nuns of Abbotskerswell for safe-keeping.

There are stories of secret passages running from the Priory but although the passages are there, their purpose can only be guessed. They could have been dug out as a hideaway for the nuns when they first returned in 1860 in case the problems concerning the anti-nuns belief rose again. Or it may have been added much more recently such as in either of the wars as a shelter in the event of bombing. The former idea seems to make more sense as the passage is said to run the length of Priory Road, whereas a bomb shelter would have only been a confined space. It is said that there is also another underground passage, but this again is only idle gossip and probably part of the same one. The entrance to the passage was found in the North, or Service Wing but is now inaccessible as it has been blocked off after about 15 meters.

Until recently the Priory was a closed order. The nuns however, started to use part of the property for people who were seeking a retreat for spiritual and bodily health. Although the nuns weren't allowed in the outside world they were always very friendly to visitors. When somebody went up to see them, they would open the door and behind the door would be an iron grating through which they would speak to the visitor. Outside the door were two iron chairs and this is where the local tramps would seat themselves for dinner. At one o'clock a

bell would ring from the tower and a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread were left out on the chairs.

The Priory was put up for sale in 1982 after the number of nuns had slowly dwindled from 50 to 2. Clennon developments bought the property and planned to develop it into 49 retirement apartments and cottages. There will be facilities such as a bowling-green, putting green, an orchard and woodland. It is also planned that the octagon will now house an indoor swimming pool. The whole development scheme is planned to be completed in the Spring of 1987.

THE CHURCH HOUSE

It was in 1524, November 24th the Abbot of Sherbourne gave to “our parish church of Kerswell Abbot a parcel of land 100 feet in length and 60 feet in breadth on which certain feoffees were to build one house.” It was built to provide shelter for parishioners from places far away from the church between the morning service and vespers. The men and women were kept separate. The men being down-stairs and the ladies upstairs. They had separate entrances. The running costs of the Church Houses were paid by the selling of Church Ale, due to this many Church Houses turned into Inns. This probably explains the quote stated by Baring-Gould, a frequent visitor to the village as a young lad. “At Abbotskerswell, South Devon, is a perfect old Church Inn, that has remained untouched from, probably, the reign of Richard 11. It consists of two rooms - one above stairs and one below. The men sat in the lower, the women in the upper room. Each was furnished with an enormous fire in winter, and here the congregation took their dinner before attending vespers”.

The Church House was saved from changing into an Inn thanks to Mrs. Marcus Hare, whose portrait still hangs on the walls of the house. Mrs. Marcus Hare, along with her husband who was a captain, owned Court Grange. She bought the Church House in 1914 from the feoffees and promptly spent hundreds of pounds restoring it. After Mrs. Hare died her daughters were advised by the vicar to make the Church House over to the diocesan trust. From then it has been used as a village hall.

The cottage at the end of the Church House was first occupied in the war. It was never the home of gravediggers, as some people believe, but only that of the Church caretakers. The Church House has since been used for dances, the entrance fee being 6d per evening, billiards and also as a young men’s club as well as a Sunday School. The large rooms used to be small separate rooms and the bazaars which were held had only one stall in each room.

DIFFERENT RELIGIONS

Although the only Church in the village at present is that of the Protestant religion, over the years Abbotskerswell has been a home of many different religions and beliefs.

BAPTIST CHAPEL: the Baptist Chapel was originally a cottage, to which it has been reverted. It was the site of Court Cottage, now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Rooth.

WESLEYAN CHAPEL: the Chapel of this puritan religion was in vicarage road. It is now a car repair shop owned by Mr. Michael Norrish.

THE QUAKERS: at one time the Quakers played an active part in the life of Abbotskerswell. There is still a burial ground in the village which can be recognized and found in Wilton Way, next to a new development of houses. The plot was part of the Court Grange and Ruby Farm Estate, which was owned by the Tuckett family. All the ground has been built upon except a very small section which has been left. There are approximately 16 graves in this area which is surrounded by a wall. The Quakers, who were also called ‘The Society Of Friends’, was a very puritan religion founded in 1650 by a man called George Fox. The

people of this religion were devoted to peace principles and the plainness of dress. They usually wore grey or black. They believed in the simplicity of speech. When a religious meeting was held it was without a priest and there was no speech involved at all. The Quaker religion was very much frowned upon.

When the estate was sold in the 1700's a covenant was made on the deeds, which stated that one Quaker meeting had to be allowed in the upper room every year. The room is still there ready for anybody who wished to hold this meeting but it hasn't been used for this purpose for many years.

INDUSTRIES

Due to the confusion over the different parishes it is awkward to say exactly which industries were sited in the village itself. When listed they are separated into the different parishes, consequently involving Aller and Kingskerswell. However, it is a well known fact that Abbotskerswell was always a very self-sufficient village. It catered for the needs of its residents without relying on many 'imported goods'. The only items which were brought to the village were the fuels such as coal and paraffin as well as pots and pans.

THE CIDER PRESS: the most prominent and well-known industry was that of the Cider Press. The cider factory was founded by Henley in 1791. The site of the press now being that of Watermota where they currently convert Ford vehicle engines for marine use. However, we cannot be sure that it was always at this site for a map dated 1839 depicts the press near the Mallands. The press was the result of so many orchards in the village. Everywhere you went there were apple trees. To give you some idea of how many there were, visitors to the village said that they could 'smell' the apple blossom which as a rule has a very weak subtle smell. The 'Cyder', (as it was always spelt,) was advertised by the words:

"For the good of your health, the delight of your palate, and for the love of England".

The cider press was sold to Whiteways and was eventually closed down in 1965 being taken over by Watermota in 1966.

PAPER MILL: Aller was very much a manufacturing area for it was here in 1830 that a paper manufactory was being run by Rev. George Baker. By 1850 it was being run by Daltons. Soon this paper manufactory specialized in hand-made writing paper.

CORN MILL: in 1830 there was also a Corn Mill as part of the village. It was situated in what is now known as 'Mill Door Meadow', at the top of Vicarage Road, now the site of the sewage works. It was no doubt in this place because this is where all the surplus water of the village runs toward. This would have been ideal to drive the mill.

BOOT FACTORY: in the early 1800's the building in Newton Abbot which is now Marks and Spencer was a pub called 'The Newfoundland'. Sailors who wished to crew the ships to the Americas used to go here to sign on. Having signed on they would walk to Abbotskerswell to buy seaman's boots which were made at Town Farm. The newly shod sailors would then walk back into Newton Abbot and join the ships at the quay in the town.

TOFFEE FACTORY: during the war Crystalwood, the home of Mr. John Sommers-Cocks, which is situated along Stoneman's Hill, was then not a house but no less than a Toffee Factory. When Mr. Somers-Cocks moved into the house, about 25 years ago he thought that it was most strange the vast amount of sheds which were in the grounds of the house. When he also discovered that his water was metered he made it his business to find out why. This was when he discovered it to be an old Toffee Factory, in production during the Second World War. It is still a mystery as to where all the sugar came from which was essential, especially as it was so tightly rationed during war-time.

MINING: Another industry which has taken place in the village, again near the Wolborough reservoir, is the extraction of iron ore. It was decided that the haematite iron ore should be

mined from the slopes by four men over a drink in the Newton 'Jolly Sailor Inn' in 1871 after Augustus Smith had discovered Firestone Hill while on holiday, and having persuaded his partners to come and have a look at it. They were given a 21 year lease by the Earl of Devon on the condition that a royalty payment of 1/- a ton (*one shilling a ton*), on all ore sold or extracted from the site was paid. The four men were Andrew Barclay, an engineer and George Hoey, an accountant, both from Glasgow. And Ian Fortescue Harrison and Augustus Anthony Smith, engineers and speculators from London. The four controlled the North of England Iron Co. Rail line trucks and other equipment were brought from H. Bearn and Sons' works at Liverton and a mine captain, William Henry Hosking was appointed. He was paid by so many fathoms of excavation. He started eight men who set to work opening a shaft. Store-houses, tramways and a road was built in a very short time and a stone engine-house was built on the crest of the hill beside the shaft.

For more than a year the ore flowed out of the mine, was loaded onto horse-drawn carts and hauled along Coach Road and down to the quay from there being shipped to the smelters in Wales. Mr. Hoskings reported that the load had run out and he had little hope of finding a new one of any value. Very little evidence of the mine can be found today even though it was closed only 100 years ago. Many of the records were destroyed during the blitz on Exeter in the last war. It is almost impossible to find any remnants of the running operations because of the terms made by the Earl of Devon. One of the conditions being that the land must be returned to its original arable conditions; therefore all the buildings were dismantled and the spoil heaps, except one which can be seen from the Totnes Road in a large field next to the Polish Cemetery, were leveled. It is said that 1,200 tons of ore were mined for which the Earl of Devon was paid £42/10/0 on Lady Day, April 4th 1873.

This mine was rather an oddity in that it was well off the general line of iron bearing country and appeared to be an isolated deposit.

POTTERY: the Pottery works were at Aller but there must have definitely been men of the village who worked there. Any young people who wished to specialize in pottery could work in the factory when they left school or do other work such as farming when there was sufficient work to do and work in the pottery in their slack times. The people of the pottery had great artistic sense and original ideas, and the skills of these people caused the pottery at Aller to be soon exported to different parts of the world. Sadly the site of the pottery is now only a warehouse.

LEATHER FACTORY AND SADDLERY: this factory was situated in Aller. Here they used to kill the animals and treat their skins. This was a prosperous industry, which finally closed down in 1911.

FARMING: At one time there were nine farms in the village.

COURT FARM: this was the Manor farm. Manor Farm of today is only so called because it is so near the Manor House. This is now a large pub. **MANOR FARM (ALLER):** so called, as it was the Manor farm of Aller rather than Abbotskerswell. **TOWN FARM** and **WHIDDON FARM**. **LABURNHAM FARM:** this was otherwise known as Wilton Farm. **WESTBURY, ABBOTSFORD** and **FAIRFIELD**. **RUBY FARM:** the site of this farm is what we now know as Monks Thatch. The Ruby Farm of today is about 20 years old.

Many people believe that the farm of Saint Augustines Priory should be included in the list but this is not the case as officially this is listed under the parish of Wolborough.

ABBOTSKERSWELL PEOPLE AND THEIR JOBS IN 1850

(Taken from 'White's directory.)

<u>NAME</u>	<u>JOB/POSITION</u>
BRADFORD, Wm	Merchant, Moor Park
BURRIDGE, Wm	Smith and Beerhouse

CODNER, Thos	Shoemaker
COSSERAT, Rev. Geo PG	MA Vicarage
CREED, John	Gent, Whiddon House
CREED, Wm	Gent.
DALTON & Co.	Paper Makers, Aller
DALTON, Daniel	Shopkeeper
EMMETT, John	Mason
EMMETT, Edward	Mason
HENLEY, Wm Codner	Cider Merchant
HENLEY, Mrs Wm	
LANGLER, Christopher	Rat catcher
LEAKER, Thomas	Shoemaker
LEE, John	Shoemaker
LUSCOMBE, Mr.	
RENDELL, John	Law agent, Aller
RUBY, Gerige	Baker
TAYLOR, Wm	Mason
VANNING, Wm	Parish Clerk
WOOD, Wm	Tailor

FARMERS

AMERY, Joseph
 ELLIOTT, John
 ELLIOTT, Thomas
 ELLIOTT, William
 HEYWARD, William
 LEAKER, John
 MADDICOTT, Thos
 PERROTT, Allen
 RUBY, John
 SKINNER, Robert

Mrs. Hare was mentioned as a land-owner, but apparently not then a resident.

SHOPS AND PUBS

The original village stores, next to the Post Office was opened in the early 1900's. Mr. Sutton ran this very small shop. To earn himself an extra bob or two he used to run a 'bus' service for the farmers and their goods going to market in Newton Abbot. It wasn't really a bus but only an old lorry. Every Wednesday morning he could be seen putting chairs in the back of the lorry, thus turning it into a bus. Mr. Sutton charged 2d for the fare but it saved a long trek into the town and the farmers were very grateful for it.

When Mr. Sutton ended his running of the stores Mrs. Fey and her sister took over the position. Later, on January 1st 1936 the two sisters took over Abbotskerswell Post Office. The Post Office was originally opened in the late 1830's. At this time it was more of a general store than a Post Office as it also sold sweets, fruit and groceries. Mrs. Fey has now been at the Post Office for 50 years and in 1982 her hard work and dedication was rewarded when she was awarded the B.E.M. The Post Office now looks over the new village stores which was built by the Co-operative Society and opened in 1928. It was built on the site of part of Mr. Chudleigh's orchard. Mr. Eales 'Model Stores' was opened later in 1953.

Over the years there have been three pubs in the village. **THE TRADESMANS ARMS:** this pub was sited in South View. **COURT FARM INN:** this was at one time the Manor Farm. **BUTCHERS ARMS:** this pub used to be a combined Blacksmith and pub. It was owned by Mr. William Prowse, and his father before him. It was under the same family management for many years. The women of the family would work and serve behind the bar, whilst the men manned the Blacksmiths.

CHARACTERS

JOHN LEE, “THE MAN THEY COULDN’T HANG”: on January 8th, 101 years ago, William Gasking died. He was a man of the village of Babbacombe being the landlord of the Cary Arms and perhaps his death would not be remembered except for two things. At 84, he was the oldest inhabitant of Babbacombe, and at the time there was no-one older in Saint Marychurch either, (evidently people were not then so long-lived in these two villages as they were in Brixham), and, he played a part in the most dramatic episode in the history of the area – the terrible murder of Miss Keyse at ‘The Glen’, and a witness in the trial of John Lee, “The man they couldn’t hang”.

The Glen was a fairly large, two-storied thatched roof house, set down in the Combe near the old Cary Arms. There is now a little public park to mark the grounds of the house. There were two or three fisherman’s cottages belonging to a Mrs. Whitehead, right on the shore below the house. In the 1880’s this house was the home of Miss Emma Ann Whitehead Keyse, and there came a time when she advertised for a boy to look after her mother’s Donkey, which had been ‘pensioned off’ from its transport duties and needed care.

John Lee was born in Abbotskerswell. His father was a day worker who farmed a little land, so that the family was in reasonably good circumstances. On the day that John was 15 his father showed him Miss Keyse’s advertisement. His mother took John to Babbacombe for an interview and Miss Keyse was favourably impressed – more, she took a liking to the boy and employed him to start right away at a wage of 3 shillings a week ‘all found’. Lee enjoyed the work, although he had little to do, but after 18 months decided that he wanted to join the Navy. His father objected, but Lee persuaded his mother to sign the papers, and left for Plymouth. At 18, while still under training, he contracted pneumonia and was invalided out. He wrote of his discharge: ‘My heart was broken’. At 19 he started work at ‘Boots’ at the Yacht Club Hotel at Kingswear, but ‘did not care for the work’ so he became a porter at Torre Station. Miss Keyse had felt a sense of responsibility to the young man and had kept in touch with him, and she now wrote to say that she had obtained a post for him as a footman to a Colonel Brownlow. John Lee was overjoyed, and started the work, but after three weeks the family went abroad, leaving the servants in Torquay.

In Lee’s own words: “At this time one of my friends was a young fellow who was going to Australia. He wanted a few pounds as well, I was led astray. In my desire to help him I pawned some of the family plate. By means of the crest the theft was traced to me”. He evidently felt hard done by when he was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment. “In the eyes of the world I was thief,” he said. In Exeter Prison he first met the chaplain, Rev. John Pitkin, whom he was to know so well later on in life, and, it seemed, in death. Miss Keyse still stood by him and on his release, after some serious discussion, took him back into her employment.

The other members of the household at the time were Eliza and Jane Neck who had been servants at the Glen for 40 or 50 years, and Lee’s step- sister Elizabeth Harris who was cook. Lee did odd jobs and waited at tables. Writing at this time, Lee said that he was walking out with a girl called Kathie Farmer, and that he was very ambitious and anxious to get something better to do, and that he was very unsettled. On the night of November 14th 1884, according to Lee’s own story, he was awakened before daybreak, (he slept on a

truckle bed in the pantry of 'The Glen'), by shouts of "Fire!" He "jumped out of bed and put on my shirt, socks and trousers". The house was full of smoke and the three women were shouting: "Where is Miss Keyse?" "Eliza was the first to go into the dining-room. Jane and I waited outside". Then, because the smoke was so thick, he rushed into the dining-room and tried to open the French windows by pushing his arm through the glass to let in air. He cut his arm and blood ran onto his shirt.

They found Miss Keyse lying on the carpet near the charred remains of a sofa, with blood on her neck. Her clothes were almost burned off. Lee wrote, "I just took one glance at the body and went out. Jane and I at once called a man called Stiggins who was living in one of Miss Keyse's cottages on the beach". That was when William Gasking became involved. He was fetched too, and helped Lee to carry out the body. John Lee finished his story of the crime by commenting, "As I left the house for Torquay Police Station, (he had been taken on suspicion by a police constable), I heard William Gasking say that something foul had been done".

But this is Lee's version. At the trial several less favorable points were made; Lee had used threats against Miss Keyse a few days before; when he helped Jane Neck down stairs immediately the alarm was raised his arm left blood stains on her nightdress; asked by a fireman for an axe, he produced one almost at once, although it was kept in an outhouse; there was blood on the axe; an oil-can which should have been almost full and which was kept in the cupboard right beside Lee's bed, was found to be empty and had a trickle of blood down the side; there was a small pool of blood in the hall only a few feet from the pantry door; and there were spots of blood on Lee's trousers, partly washed off; and most damning, on Lee's socks there were hairs proved to be those of Miss Keyse, although in carrying out the body, according to Lee's statement, Mr Gasking had taken the head, and Lee had taken the feet.

Lee's defense cost £60, and a petition was circulated and many people subscribed towards the cost. The jury took only half an hour to decide that Lee was guilty. The judge put on the black cap...Rev. Vesey Germain Hine, vicar of Abbotskerswell, visited Lee in prison at Exeter but it was the prison chaplain, Mr. Pitkin, who on Monday February 23rd 1885 attended the hanging and read the burial service – rather prematurely.

On the night before, Lee had dreamed that he had three times heard the drawing of the bolt which should have released the floor below the scaffold, but three times the mechanism failed – and this is what in fact happened. Each time, the floor only dropped two inches. There is some irony in Lee's comment that "such an ordeal would be enough to kill most men I suppose, but I remained perfectly quiet". He reported that the hang-man, Mr. Berry, was "most upset" and the chaplain was near to collapse. Each time Lee was led aside, and the boards and the mechanism were tested, but the trap refused to work even when layers of the wood were planed away. He was told later that if the bolt had moved another one-sixteenth of an inch, the trap would have opened.

Reprieved, John Lee asked for ham and eggs for breakfast, and a beefsteak and half a pint of port for dinner. He recorded that he was only given one glass of port. Later he learned that his sentence had been reduced to 20 years penal service. In fact, because of "threats" that he had made from time to time (which he himself explained away) he had to serve not only the full 20 years, but an additional two years also. He himself put this down to his opinion that the Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, had been a friend of Miss Keyse, and that Sir William had been to dinner with Colnel Brownlow when Lee was in service with him. Although frequently mentioning that he had been reported for 'threats', Lee stated in another place that his character was so good that noone in authority would believe such statements.

Throughout his story, Lee showed that he felt that he was 'someone special'. On one occasion he said to the Doctor, "He seems to think that I am just an ordinary prisoner". At last, in August 1907 he was called before the Governor of Portland Prison, (he was most anxious that everyone should know that he had not been in Parkhurst), and was told that there was some hope of release before the end of the year; but it was not until December 17th that he was discharged. Characteristically he reported that, "convicts as a rule are supplied with suits of blue cloth...mine was brown". One of the warders of Portland was coming with his wife to spend Christmas at Torquay and they all traveled together. At Newton they left the train and took a carriage to Abbotskerswell. Lee wrote: "My village seems to be very much as when I first left it. There, only the people have changed.....there are people in the village who do not remember me at all."

He thought that the new trains, compared with those of his youth looked like St. Pauls Cathedral compared to the church of Abbotskerswell. "Speed, Speed, Speed – there seems to be nothing but speed these days" – he wrote. "At Paddington Station my eye was caught by something I had never seen before. It was a thing that made a noise like a sewing machine. It had big, bulky wheels. Two huge dazzling lamps gave it the appearance of a fiery monster. It pulsed like a live thing. In short, I was looking at the first motor car I had ever seen."

SABINE BARING GOULD 1834 – 1924

When Sabine Baring Gould was a small boy he used to stay with his aunt who lived at Abbotsford house in Abbotskerswell. It was here he used to spend many of his Summer holidays. He was very fond of the village and many of his works are found to incorporate references to it in their texts. In his later years Baring Gould became a well known Squireson, writer and folklorist. One of his works, which I am sure most people will know well is the hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. He was also the author of a great deal of well-known books which include 'Curious Myths of the Middle Ages' and 'Early Reminiscences'.

JACK THE WATER-CRESS MAN: another well-known character was Jack the Water-Cress Man. He didn't have a house, but lived rough. He made his living by going down to Aller Brook. Once there he would pick watercress, having done this he would walk into town and sell it. He often exchanged his cress with farmers who would repay him by letting him spend the night in one of the barns. The farmers always made sure that they took away his matches first.

MR LANGLER: 7 Rose Cottages was the home of Mr. Langler, The Rat Catcher. He used to go around the farms catching the rats. His charge was 2d a tail. This was quite a lot of money but he never caught them by using poison, which could harm the farm animals, he was one of the very few who used a proper rat trap.

There were less famous people, but equally well known and loved by the villagers were the villagers themselves.

JAMES JOHN PROWSE: The war had an effect on everybody in the world, including Abbotskerswell. There was a very old man by the name of James John Prowse who was well known to every Abbotskerswellian after the war. He was a victim of shell shock and was rather an eccentric character. He lived at South View in Berry Meadow and liked to take an active part in village life, this included the Annual Village Flower Show, which at the time was held in the Church House. All that he grew was broad beans but every year when it was time for the show his beans were always limp and black. This happened every year without fail and so for fun the committee used to buy him a booby prize. It was nothing special often something from Woolworths. James John Prowse was always so pleased with his prize that once it had been put on display next to his black beans, alongside all the other winning entries with their cups, he would stay sat by his prize all day long and would not move until they started to put everything away. Another of his strange, but well-known

antics was his checking of the time of his wrist watch against that shown on the church clock. He was one of those people who didn't really walk but would shuffle along very slowly. He would shuffle along to the center of the village and would stand looking up at the tower and then down to his watch. This procedure would be carried out many times until he was satisfied as to what time it was. As he went back to his house he would be continually looking up to the clock and down to his wrist- watch, muttering the time to himself. After the war the Convent used to give soup to wayfarers who passed by. Now, James John Prowse liked his soup so he would go up to the Priory to 'pass by'. He would make this trip every single day without fail. In the late 1950's the Priory stopped the serving of soup. This did not please Mr. Prowse in the slightest. He became very angry so in the end it was decided that they would stop the soup for the wayfarers and continue only for Mr. Prowse. With this sorted out he was contented. The nuns used to cook his meal, James John Prowse would go up to collect it and take it home to eat. He died in the 1960's and his grave can be found in the village churchyard.

THE SUPERNATURAL

GHOSTS OF ABBOTSKERSWELL, (Taken from 'Ghosts of Devon' by Peter Underwood): a few years ago there was considerable publicity in the village following the frightening experience of a young married couple. John and Carol Durston. It was only a few weeks after they were married and had moved into the ground floor flat of a 200 year old Aller house. For 10 days they were happy and had just settled in when they first saw the ghost. First they heard footsteps at night and a curious shuffling noise. They had been asleep for an hour or so when they found themselves wide awake and listening to the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside their flat. They heard a lot of shuffling too and movement that sounded like someone walking up and down the corridor and then eventually the footsteps faded as they sounded on the stairs. The young couple decided that someone must have come in late and they turned over and resumed their sleep. The next evening they were just thinking about going to bed when they heard the noises again: distinct and heavy footsteps and the sound of shuffling. John went out to see what was going on. Once he was in the corridor outside their flat he could still hear the footsteps and they seemed to be all around him and quite close but he saw nothing. The following evening, a chilly one for September, the young couple built a big fire, settled down and enjoyed an evening of television. As they switched off the set the room suddenly went stone cold although a good fire was still burning. They were both shivering as they went to bed but they spent the rest of the night undisturbed. The next night the real terror began. They were in bed when they heard the footsteps again and then the single 'clink' from the direction of the mantel piece in the room they were occupying. John switched on the light and Carol noticed immediately that a tiny ornamental donkey had been moved to the end of the mantelpiece from its usual position in the center. She jumped out of bed and replaced it in the middle of the mantelpiece beside a large sea shell, and returned to bed and tried to go back to sleep. As the light was switched off there was another 'clinking' sound. They jumped up, switched on the light and found that the donkey had moved again! After that the movement of the donkey and the shell became a nightly routine, and always, just before any noise or movement they noticed that the room became icy cold although they were careful to ensure that a good fire blazed in the hearth.

A few days later Carol was preparing a meal in the kitchen and John was reading in the next room. John described the first sighting of the ghost: "I noticed that the room suddenly felt icy cold and then I heard a noise from the direction of the window and when I looked I saw a whitish cloud of mist, shaped like a fat man. I found that I was paralyzed and couldn't say a word. As I watched the mist evaporated and the room became warm again". Just then Carol

came into the room and the smile on her face froze as she looked at her husband. "John", she called. "What is it – you look as though you have seen a ghost." John didn't look up as he huskily replied, "I have....." Carol said that at this stage she still didn't believe in ghosts but from that moment on she felt uneasy and somehow insecure in the flat in the daytime whenever John was out. Then one night she saw the same figure. "It was horrifying...but we didn't tell anyone, we thought that they would only laugh at us." Meanwhile the ghostly happenings became more noisy and more violent. Once they were sitting on the settee, one at either end, when the room suddenly became cold and they both saw the misty form of a fat man sitting between them.

Another evening, after the room had suddenly become freezing cold, the lampshade began to spin round and round, faster and faster, until the wire circling up forced it to stop and spin the other way. John took hold of it and began to unwind the wire but before he had time to complete the second round it suddenly stopped for an instant and then spun back again. This 'game' continued for about ten minutes. "I was determined not to give in," said John. "But the ghost had more patience and he won." Eventually, left to itself the lamp stopped winding and the room gradually resumed its normal temperature. That night the noises of footsteps and shuffling became louder and as the terrified couple clung to each other wondering what was going to happen next, the mist appeared in the room and 'walked' up and down. From then onwards it was seen in the room at night. Sometimes it opened doors, at other times it seemed to appear and disappear through some paneling. Once it shook a heavy bedroom cupboard as though it was a baby's rattle. When this was happening John switched on the light and they both saw the cupboard moving. Then the ghost started to roll up the edge of the carpet.

By this time John and Carol had had enough. Although it was two o'clock in the morning, they got up and dressed as fast as they could and walked two miles to the home of John's mother where they spent the rest of the night. They tried to move back into the flat several times but things were so bad that they couldn't bear it for more than a few hours although, because of the difficulty they had in obtaining the flat in the first place and the problem of finding another, they didn't want to leave altogether.

In desperation they went to see the Reverend Gordon Langford, vicar of Abbotskerswell. "I didn't laugh at what they told me," the vicar said at the time. "Instead I listened sympathetically and then went to the flat with them. I neither saw nor felt anything extraordinary, but then I am not in the least sensitive to that sort of manifestation. John seems to be a healthy, sensible sort of fellow and Carol seems perfectly normal and down-to-earth, not at all a neurotic type, so I decided to do a little investigation for myself." He discovered that there was once a factory behind the house and that the young couple's flat was once used as an office for the factory in 1925. At the time when the firm's books were being audited, a man named Victor Judd had committed suicide. After the factory was pulled down in 1939 the tenants of the house were frequently troubled by mysterious noises. One tenant, an elderly lady, said that she had noticed nothing unusual while she was there but her two dogs certainly had. Eventually she was forced to move because they kept howling in terror night after night.

Some years later, the house was put up for sale and a professional man, his wife and his father, a business man, all very practical and realistic people, went to view the house. They spent about five minutes in the place and left because they felt instinctively that the house was haunted. They told the estate agent that they had all felt a presence there.

The vicar also discovered that local people remembered an incident years earlier when a man had hanged himself beside a window in the flat where John and Carol had lived and he remembered that after the young couple left their flat, other tenants in the building reported that they had continually heard the sound of heavy footsteps, apparently coming

from the couple's empty room. These witnesses included Mr. Leonard Culley, who lived in the other ground-floor flat with his family, and he and his wife had often been woken up at night by the noises coming from the empty Durston flat.

The Reverend Gordon Langford reported the matter to the Bishop of Exeter, Dr. Robert Mortimer, and he sent one of his chaplains, the reverend Sir Patrick Ferguson-Davie to investigate. At the flat, sitting near the fireplace, Sir Patrick said, "I know there is a ghost here. I am stone cold from toe to waist." Following this preliminary visit the Bishop visited the House; sprinkling Holy water and conducting a thirty-five minute service of exorcism. Carol and John were present and Carol said afterwards, "during the service the ghost stood right behind us. It made a lot of noise as if it was fighting against the exorcism, but halfway through it gave in and disappeared. We have had no trouble since."

However, a month later Mr. and Mrs. Culley believed that the ghost had moved into their flat across the passage and it seemed that the bishops exorcism had had little effect on the ghost. The Culleys arranged for four mediums to visit the house after claiming to see the ghost in the kitchen of their flat. Mrs. Culley said a kind of mist appeared in front of an airing-cupboard and then she saw a shadowy figure. About a month after the Culley's experience Carol Durston told Reverend Alan Rowe that "our friend has come back to the flat!". She told him that she and her husband went into the room one evening and found it icy cold and then they saw the misty figure sitting in the armchair. It rose and moved past them and out of the room. After this incident the couple decided to definitely leave Aller House.

THE PHANTOM MONK, (Taken from 'Ghosts of Devon' by Peter Underwood): the Augustinian Priory has long had the reputation of being haunted by a phantom monk, a daylight ghost that is usually seen standing by one of the Priory walls, although on one occasion the ghost reportedly moved close to the Priory but kept pace with a horse and trap in which the witnesses were riding. Thirty years after this sighting a ghostly nun appeared during Mass in the chapel of the Priory and was witnessed by all the worshipers present, some of whom thought it was a vision of the Virgin Mary herself. However, from time to time reports filter out of a ghost nun being seen in this chapel so it would appear that the place is haunted by a nun and a monk.

OVER THE YEARS

The Square used to be known as 'Cross Tree'. This is because there used to be an oak tree in the middle of the road junction. When the oak tree blew down a chestnut was planted to replace it, and to commemorate the Coronation of Edward VII in June 1902. This tree became knocked down in a car smash. In 1911 a lamp standard replaced it and also commemorated the Coronation of George V.