The Transactions
of the
Sabine Baring-Gould
Appreciation Society
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The Transactions
of the
Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society

The original talks from which the main articles in this journal are drawn were presented at the annual gathering of the Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society held at South Zeal in Devon over the weekend of 26th/28th September 2008.

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Articles for publication
Articles for publication are welcomed. The main categories of material published in this journal are:

- Papers presented at the SBGAS Annual Meeting
- Original essays on aspects of the life and work of Sabine Baring-Gould
- Reprints or transcripts of hard-to-find published material and manuscripts written by or about Sabine Baring-Gould

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Introduction

This issue of the Transactions of the Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society is focused on his novel, *John Herring*, the study of which was the subject of the annual gathering of the Society in September 2008. Three of the papers given at that meeting are presented here. In addition the article written by the journalist James Greenwood, which described the ‘North Devon Savages,’ and which was read by Noel Parry, has been included. I have also appended a selection from the reviews of John Herring which appeared in newspapers shortly after publication.

**Becky Smith** is a crime writer with a growing reputation based on the sixteen crime novels she has had published. She also operates her own publishing company, Praxis Books, which has re-issued a number of Sabine Baring-Gould’s books as modern, affordable paperbacks, bringing them to the attention of a wider public. In her talk, ‘John Herring – the Novel’ she analyses the book and leads us through the plot and characterisation with the eye of a novelist.

**Roger Bristow** is the compiler of the bibliography of Sabine Baring-Gould’s work – a task that he has pursued with immense determination and with great success. The 2008 meeting was one of several he has arranged for SBGAS in Devon and was, once again, organised with the precision that the military aspire to. The paper published here is based on the itinerary that he developed for the meeting with additional notes.

**Noel Parry** lives in Lapford, North Devon and is an authority on the history of the area, including that of Nymet Rowland, the village where the Cheriton family, known as the ‘North Devon Savages’ lived.

Martin Graebe
April 2009
**John Herring: The Novel**

Rebecca Smith

*John Herring* is only BG’s fourth novel, after *Through Flood and Flame* (1868), *In Exitu Israel* (1870) and *Melahah* (1880). Only *Melahah* had made any real impact – and that a tremendous one. But he still felt constrained to explain and justify his novels – something he more or less ceased to do after *Court Royal* in 1885. Oddly, the rationale for *John Herring* is contained in the Introduction to *Court Royal* – suggesting that he harboured defensive feelings for some time after reading reactions to JH.

Written during the winter of 1882-3, it is 170,000 words in length, twice the length of the average novel these days. In his personal life, things were busy. There were eight children in the family at this point – five girls and three boys. Sabine was in his late forties and Grace in her early thirties. They had left Mersea only a year and a half earlier, and Sabine was deeply engaged in researching family history, taking up the reins of the parish and remodelling Lew House.

Although written quickly, it is not so slapdash and superficial as some of Sabine’s novels. He has obviously thought about it, and the characters are convincing. There was a single-volume version produced some years later, reduced in size by at least a third, which cut out all the best parts. Several minor characters disappeared, as did any extended diversions such as the Hokee-Pokee-Wankee-Fum chapter, which might have seemed slightly politically incorrect, even in the late 19th century!

The book demonstrates a detailed knowledge of western Dartmoor, Launceston and Boscastle. North Cornwall attracted a lot of his attention from the mid 1870s onwards, starting with his biography of Hawker in 1876. *The Gaverocks* and *In the Roar of the Sea* – both popular in their time – are also set in this area.

It is always fascinating, but often fruitless to enquire into links between details in a novel and the same details in the author’s life. For example, Sabine’s younger brother Edward Drake might well have informed the references to Brazil and the diamond trade there. The satirised Evangelical minister, the Reverend Israel Flamank, may or may not have had a real-life model. He is a variation on a well worn theme in Sabine’s writings. His diary contains a number of actual stories concerning bad behaviour on the part of clergymen. The almost lyrical descriptions of Dartmoor clearly reveal his love of the moor – again the setting for a number of subsequent novels. There were actual mining swindles much as described in the book, too.

*John Herring*, like *Melahah*, is set in earlier times – a necessity when describing actual farmsteads, taverns and villages, as he does in these and many subsequent novels. It is possible to date the book quite precisely as 1812, from references to the War and the phrase ‘seventy years ago’ – but there is little historical detail to cement this. The plight of farmers, for example, reads much more like the experiences of the
1880s than seventy years earlier. But it is right that there were diamonds mined in Brazil at that time, and the references to the Consul there are accurate. The extended riff on African missionary work does feel slightly anachronistic, but since there have been missionaries in Africa since 1450, we can hardly criticise. The first London Missionary Station was set up in 1799 in South Africa, and introduced Protestantism to a practice that had been almost entirely Catholic until then. Sabine’s knowledge of African missionary work came from his time at Hurstpierpoint, when reports were sent back for publication in the magazine. Quite where his antipathy to the whole business arose is an interesting question – my guess is that he was sceptical from very early in life, thanks to the taint of Evangelism around it. The most glaring anachronism is in the ‘Nymet savages’ which Sabine says are related to Grizzly Cobbledick. In fact this Nymet family lived from the 1860s to the 1880s, and were unheard of in 1812.

At some point towards the end of the 1890s, an appraisal of Baring-Gould as novelist appeared in a compendium entitled Novels and Novel Writers, written by Joseph Hocking, himself a well-known novelist of the day. Referring to Mehalah and John Herring, he says ‘Both of these are so widely read, that it would be a waste of time for me to subject either to anything like a detailed study. Mehalah is an Essex story, and is probably among the finest things of the kind ever written.’

Of John Herring, he says ‘The book should, I think, have been called Joyce, for Joyce is the name of the heroine, and is certainly the most fascinating, the greatest and the most pathetic character in the book. She is a wild, savage Dartmoor lass. Reared among the caves and rocks of Dartmoor, without education, without children to play with, without companionship save that of a mad savage old man, she immediately fires the imagination of the reader, and at the same time forms a fine central character...Her devotion to John Herring is beautiful in the extreme, and while the author never causes the tear to start in the eye, her figure is always pathetic.’

The theme that Sabine claims for the book is that of a young man determined to aim for an ideal, regardless of the consequences for himself and others. He characterises this as a ‘moral’ issue – ‘a noble character can only be formed when it has before it an idea...’ In the Preface to Court Royal, Sabine gives a heartfelt summary of his reasons for writing John Herring: The object ‘was to show that man’s character is only moulded by mistakes’. His reviewers objected that his hero was characterless: that was his purpose – to show an amiable, well-intentioned man, shaped by his misfortunes. There was another, and deeper, purpose in the story, which was to show how a noble character can only be formed which has before it an ideal, and that the ideal which elevates character is ever, and ever must be unattainable. The man without an ideal sinks; the man with one rises; but in so rising passes through agonies. This life is his purgatory. Only the man without an ideal is happy – brutally happy.’

The inflexible adhesion to this message creates a peculiar story where the eponymous hero blunders along doing considerable harm, and acquiring little that looks to us like nobility. When forced to confront some of the consequences, he tries to shoot himself
– hardly a noble act. Failing in that, he staggers through to the end of the story, bitter and blind to his folly, while the lives of all the other characters fall into a similar slough of despair.

It has the feeling of a writer arguing with himself – or perhaps continuing an argument he had with someone else. The ending is crucially important, but might be interpreted in at least two different ways. It is, of course, the sign of a good novel that we can debate alternatives, based on the characters we have come to know and understand through the story.

John sticks to his position throughout, even when the entirely reasonable Cicely shows him how misguided he has been and continues to be. We might respect him for his steadfastness and consistency – but I myself believe that Sabine intended us to take Cicely’s side. John has wreaked such havoc, made so many mistakes and ended up miserable, all for an ideal that even the staunchest Victorian clergyman could hardly recommend, given the collateral damage that is caused. John has missed numerous opportunities to make a good life for himself, on the grounds that mere happiness is less than human. The only person not to end up frustrated or miserable (or dead) at the end of the story is Joyce, who has everything she wants in the shape of John himself.

It is, of course, a meditation on the work of John Stuart Mill in his discussion of Jeremy Bentham – Mill adds the notion of self-respect to the stark utilitarianism to Bentham, and goes on to say: ‘Nor is it only the moral part of man’s nature, in the strict sense of the term – the desire of perfection or the feeling of an approving or of an accusing conscience – that he [Bentham] overlooks; he but faintly recognises, as a fact in human nature, the pursuit of any other ideal for its own sake.’ And, most famously, ‘it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.’ Sabine is using very similar language to that of Mill – continuing a well-worn debate that never goes away.

The problem is that Mirelle, the bewildered, unemotional tormented girl, who is neither really Spanish nor French nor English, whose only home has been a convent in France, is a poor object for John to choose as his ideal. She is not worthy of his adoration. By placing her on a pedestal he destroys her – although her chance of salvation would be little better with Trecarrel, the selfish cad who cannot face up to any of life’s challenges.

In the first exchanges between John and Mirelle, in the aftermath of the accident to the coach, which has killed her father, she is rude and dismissive towards him. He is keen to spare her feelings (as he assumes them to be), ignoring her clear statements as to what she is really experiencing. He doesn’t listen to her at all throughout their relationship, until she finally makes him hear that she does not love him, that there was never any suggestion that she might love him. Her powerlessness (in 1812, this would have been considerably more profound than in 1882) is a factor that John seems to ignore. He never for a moment looks at the situation from her point of view.
Mirelle’s cool acceptance of her father’s death mirrors Joyce’s savage hope that her own father had died in the rolling barrel. In their very different ways, neither girl has reason to feel much filial respect or love.

John meets Cicely and Mirelle for the first time that day. Mirelle is pale, elegant, foreign and incomprehensible. Cicely is colourful ‘somewhat stoutly built’, kind, understanding ‘There was buoyant good nature in every line of her face.’ Sabine deliberately dwells on their differences:

The contrast between the two was striking. The newcomer was absolutely colourless. Her hair was dark, almost if not wholly black. She was very slenderly built, her hands were long, and the fingers fine and tapering. The hands indicate culture and purity of race; those at which Cicely now looked were hands belonging to a lady of high nervous sensibility and perfect breeding. Her features were regular and singularly delicately and beautifully cut. The eyes, when raised, sent a tremor to the heart of him on whom they rested; they were deep, full and mysterious. A soul lay in those unfathomed pools, but of what sort none might guess. There was nothing in the expression of the face to assist in the inquiry. And yet the face was not a blank page and therefore uninviting. The expression that sat on it was one of reserve, and therefore as provoking as those wonderful eyes.

Cicely was frank and impulsive; her heart was visible to all the world, she had no reserve whatever, what she thought, she said; and her heart spoke through her eyes, a genial, affectionate heart, fresh and simple.

Mirelle mocks John, thinking him a peasant. She makes fun of his fishy name. Sabine apparently becomes aware that readers might judge Mirelle rather harshly, so he gives a 7-page account of her background and history, with her proud capricious mother, and wearily detached father, as an explanation and excuse for her character. He does perhaps succeed in eliciting our sympathy, which intensifies as the story proceeds, but she remains a thoroughly unsuitable mate for John Herring.

John Herring, with its Shakespearean choreography, leads us from one frustrated lover to another, in a chain of unrequited passion that entertains unflaggingly from start to finish.

A roughly contemporary novel is Far From the Madding Crowd by Thomas Hardy (nearly 10 years earlier), and it is salutary to make a brief comparison between the two. Both set in rural areas, with a man at the centre steadfastly devoted to an unsuitable girl. Hardy was rightly regarded as a much more serious writer, from the 1880s onwards, while Sabine’s reputation for literary excellence sank lower with each passing decade, despite sustained sales, and a considerable reputation as a man of numerous talents. Hardy was as uneven in his output as was BG, but his best novels are far superior to Sabine’s. He shows people at work, getting their hands dirty, balancing their thoughts with their actions with a skill that Sabine never achieved. Thomas Hardy can make his readers cry. Sabine’s characters are put in context geographically and economically, but we seldom see for ourselves what they
do all day. An exception is perhaps *Court Royal*, where both groups of people are seen through a closer lens than usual.

*John Herring* rises above the ordinary thanks mainly to its cast of characters. Joyce, Orange, Cicely and Mirelle are created deliberately to be as different as four women can be. Joyce is a comic figure, with the most genuine emotions in the story. She is incapable of deception – although her father has much less difficulty in cheating and lying when required to do so. Joyce adores John, with a slavish doglike devotion and it seems that readers from the outset half hoped that he would abandon his suit for Mirelle and settle for Joyce. Cicely also wants him, and would be a thoroughly suitable wife in every respect.

The opening pages – most of which were cut out in the one-volume edition which came about 20 years later – give a long exposition of the ‘half-naked savages’ that were the Cobbledicks. They were a branch of the Nymet people – considerably more savage than the Cobbledicks. These wild uncivilised people were semi-mythological by the end of the 19th century. In the 17th century a prototype family, the Gubbinses, lived in caves near Lydford. At the beginning of the 20th century the dictionary defined ‘Gubbins’ as “a half-savage race in Devonshire”. By the late 20th century, the old slang for scraps of fish, or trash, or anything of little value had taken precedence over the other – “a contemptuous name formerly given to the inhabitants of a district near Brent Tor on the edge of Dartmoor, who are said to have been absolute savages.” [*Oxford Dictionary*]

We are given a full account of the epiphany that struck Old Grizzly, Joyce’s father, one night, whereby he carried off one of the Nymet women and set up home on Cosdon, having suddenly acquired the concept of personal property. The dolmen became his private home, and he lived there ever since, with his dead wife buried beneath the hearth. The couple taught themselves how to grow their own food, and catch rabbits with the help of ferrets.

The burial, incidentally, is taken from known primitive practice. *Spears of Twilight*, a work of anthropology written in the 1990s by Philippe Descola, describes an almost identical burial, under the floor of a house, by the Jivaro people in Amazonian Ecuador.

This half-comical, half-affectionate account chimes with much of Sabine’s other writing. The story of the Cobbledicks is a microcosm for the development of early civilisation, presented with a wry self-awareness on the part of the author. ‘Thus we see how the sense of property quickens invention’. The savage couple had the sense to respect the property of their near neighbours, but not that of anyone beyond the moor.

One child was born to them, and then the wife died. She haunts Old Grizzly, ‘he felt her heave the earth under him where he lay, and roll him over, so that he could not sleep.’ So he shifts his quarters to a large cider cask for the night time. The child slept in there with him until she grew too big.
While the Nymet savages were naked, the Cobledicks wore tattered clothes, provided for them by the Battishills.

Joyce is required to ‘log’ or rock the cask with her father inside, at sundown, to lull him to sleep. She is doing this when the story opens, but the cord attached to it breaks, and the cask rolls away down the slope of Cosdon into the path of the coach carrying John Herring, Mirelle and her father.

We are not shown Joyce in any detail until the last page of this first chapter. ‘Joyce was eighteen...a tall, well-built girl, with bright colour, a low forehead and dark eyes. Her hair was as uncombed and uncared for as the mane of a moorland pony. It was dark brown. Her jaws were heavy and her cheekbones high...There was some beauty about her – the beauty of a fine animal; she was perfectly supple in every limb, admirably proportioned, easy and even graceful in her movements, unrestrained by shoes and cumbersome clothing. Her face was even fine, but there was nothing like intelligence illumining her dark eyes.’

For a Victorian novel, this is noticeably unsentimental. Hollywood directors would have difficulty finding someone to play the part of Joyce as she appears in the book. On the other hand, the delightful cameo of the police constable in Chapter 28 would offer a most desirable bit part for any aspiring actor.

Grizzly is very violent towards his daughter, to the point of breaking both her arms. There is no hint of sympathy for him as a person – he tyrannises her, cares only for himself and his few possessions, and although a figure of fun when he tries on John’s clothes, his dramatic death carries with it not the slightest hint of regret or pity.

The only truly peaceful, relaxed moments that John experiences are with Joyce.

“He sat down by the girl under the lee of the great stones. It was warm there and pleasant, leaning against the grey blocks of hoar antiquity and unknown use, stained orange and silvery white with lichen, and with white frosty moss like antlers of elfin deer filling the nooks in the stones. The ants were crawling over the moss in the sun; they were migrating, and wore their wings for that one day. Turf was heaped up at the side of the cromlech, forming a rude bench. On this the two sat. As he took his place the thought came into Herring’s head that far away in the dim prehistoric age, some such a savage as that which sat beside him had assisted when it was reared.

‘It be lew [sheltered] here,’ said Joyce; ‘vaither hev took to sitting here mostly on a Sunday when he ain’t wanted to the mine.’”

She saves his life once, and soothes his broken spirit after his failed attempt at suicide.

There is a serious lack of Christian feeling amongst many of the characters in this novel. The postboy driving the overturned carriage is far more concerned for his horses than for his passengers. The Trampleasures care for nobody but themselves, similarly Captain Trecarrel. Even John Herring himself has no concern for other people’s feelings. There is no ‘do as you would be done by’. No ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’. Almost everybody except for Joyce and Cicely behaves selfishly. And
Cicely, by marrying a drippy clergyman by the name of Harmless-Simpleton, makes herself foolish and irrelevant.

The gold mine swindle which John Herring exposes is a clever vehicle for Sabine to have chosen. His own grandfather was the victim of some shady dealings regarding mine working, and his naivety is reflected in that of Reverend Flamank. Flamank, like Mr Battishill, is defeated by the devious dealings of the Trampleasures, and by their own lack of energy and insight. There is a hopelessness to Mr Battishill, which Sabine depicts with real skill. He has gout – he devotes all his attention to the study of family history and the reading of Shakespeare. He has invested in a tin mine which yielded nothing, and is in considerable debt to Tramplara. By Chapter 8 he has been further rendered useless by a stroke.

The description of West Wyke and the sort of people who lived in this sort of house is recycled very similarly in ‘An Old Country House’, written 15 years later – a book full of material from earlier publications. The ‘yeomanry’ are listed with names and properties, and West Wyke is given an exhaustive historical account. No wonder SBGAS had a member by the name of Battishill – this novel provides a marvellous piece of family history from the 17th century.

A dubious piece of moralising occurs in this long chapter, regarding the inertia of Mr Battishill over arranging the burial of Mirelle’s father.

‘We take infinite pains to do what is just and kind, and find afterwards that everything would have been better had we put our hands in our pockets. We give in charity and pauperise; we effect reforms which bring in a state of affairs worse than existed before. There is more mischief wrought by doing good than by doing nothing.’

A reader of the copy that I used for my reissue had written ‘Rubbish’ in the margin against these lines. A very 1880s piece of Victorian self-doubt, at a point where some of the towering confidence of the mid-19th century was faltering under the hardships suffered by farmers. In a period which we can recognise all too clearly now, there were five awful wet summers in a row, the sheep died of liver-rot in their millions, and there was a desperately serious outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 1883. Britain became dependent on food imports from America. The failures of British agriculture affected trade in all areas, and brought about a public mood of depression and anxiety. This is expressly stated by Mr Battishill, whose sheep have fallen sick, and rain spoiled the crops.

From Chapter 9, the action moves to Launceston – and Dolbeare, home of the Trampleasures. The uncouthness of this family is one of the gems of the book. The old man is wonderfully rude to Mirelle, and although we have some pity for her in this alien environment, we can see her clearly through Sampson’s eyes, and enjoy his plain speaking. Every time he appears, the narrative lifts a notch, and we find ourselves liking the old man quite a lot. He is perfect for the period – a character straight out of Surtees, and emphatically pre-Victorian.

Orange comes to the rescue. ‘Father, said Miss Orange Trampleasure reproachfully, ‘you are too boisterous with the young lady...your noise frightens her.’
‘Frightens me!’ repeated Mirelle with perfect composure. ‘Non il ne me fait pas peur – il me revolte.’

By which she loses much of our sympathy, as well as that of Orange.

In Dolbeare there is a portrait of ‘a gentleman in a red coat, with powdered hair.’ It is known as ‘the red man’. This is probably a reference to a portrait at Lew House, which somehow became damaged in the late 1850s or early 1860s. Sabine refers to it in two letters to his mother, clearly very concerned at the damage, and reproachful of Sophy. In the manner of fiction writers, such details emerge onto the page at random times. Also at Dolbeare is a collection of strange walking sticks – which was apparently taken from real life. Any attempts to trace this sort of material can sometimes be exciting and productive, but are just as likely to run into the sand after a considerable waste of time. Small mysteries like this bring the man and his times alive, if solved – but the great majority remain stubbornly mysterious forever. Sabine teases us by giving the red man and the walking sticks supernatural powers – they foreshadow disaster to anyone living in Dolbeare by making strange music.

Mirelle and Captain Trecarrel are both Catholic. In a short diversion, John returns to West Wyke and finds Joyce with both arms broken. But attention remains with the Trampleasures and the obvious swindle of the gold mine at Ophir. Ophir is a briefly-mentioned land from which gold is fetched for King Solomon. I Kings 9, v28. ‘And they came to Ophir and fetched from thence gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to King Solomon.’ A gold field in Australia was named Ophir by a migrant well up on his Bible. By a convoluted piece of wordplay, Old Tramplara persuades the Reverend Flamank that Upaver on Dartmoor is the original Ophir, source of much gold.

The Cassiterides which Flamank associates with Ophir is not a Biblical reference, but from Herodotus, Strabo and other ancient writers. They were ‘Tin Islands’ somewhere vaguely to the north-west of Spain, though it was suggested quite early that they might actually be the South-West corner of England.

‘And when it comes to religious folly, my private conviction is that it goes down through the world and out the other side. It is like the well of Zem-Zem, that has no bottom.’

Sampson spells out his manipulations of the gullible Flamank, with relish. The reader is encouraged to see Sampson as the likable rogue, the clergyman as a dangerous fool. Tramplara has such energy and good humour, he laughs and shouts and has great momentum. The opposite of Battishill. We expect Sampson to triumph, to fleece Flamank and his congregation of their money – and have little sympathy for them. They are greedy and ignorant, easily deceived. Without John Herring’s unfaltering desire to do the right thing, the whole scam would have succeeded.

Sabine tells us:

‘He was held captive at West Wyke, held in captivity by Joyce’s broken hands. The reason why he was impatient to go forward was that he had been summoned to Exeter to rejoin his regiment...he had applied for an extension of leave, but no
answer had come to his application. He knew that he ought to be with his regiment. He would get into trouble for his absence and yet – he allowed himself to be detained. The call of humanity was one he was unable to resist,. He was good-natured, that is – weak. The strong men are the selfish men.’

The marriage between John and Mirelle is never consummated, but there is some actual sex in this story, but not between married people. Young Sampson runs off with the Launceston barmaid, Polly Skittles, thus justifying his sudden demise later on. He is beyond redemption.

Almost carelessly, too, we are told that the Reverend Flamank is in the habit of becoming far too intimate with young girls in his congregation, much to the annoyance of Mrs Flamank. This, says Sabine, is common amongst Evangelical clergymen.

Mirelle is not, on the face of it, a very nice person. She is intelligent and quite well educated and finds the people of Devon and Cornwall ignorant and rough. She says of Dolbeare ‘This is not my home. It is simply a menagerie in which I am allowed a cage among bears.’

She is dutiful, a good Catholic girl, with pride and courage. She seldom acknowledges fear or loneliness. She speaks coldly and heartlessly to John, and he has no idea of her real feelings. His so-called love for her is based on her white skin and elegant manners. They can do absolutely no good to each other. Orange does at least understand Mirelle to some extent. Trecarrel, who she trusts because he is also Catholic, deceives her with callous deliberation.

Trecarrel is probably the greatest villain of the story. Well-born, selfish, heartless, all he wants is money to save his family estate. Any woman who can bring him some cash is the one he wants to marry. This is spelt out by Sabine, pointing up, incidentally, how he falls short of writers such as Thomas Hardy. He doesn’t trust the reader to work it out, but lays it on with a trowel.

‘Captain Trecarrel was playing his cards very carefully. He did not intend to be off altogether with the old love till he was quite sure that it was to his pecuniary advantage to be on with the new. He was curious to know in what Mirelle’s money had been invested. This was not easy for him to find out. He could not inquire of old Tramplara.

After turning the matter over in his head, the Captain resolved on trying to ascertain what he desired to know through Mirelle herself, who was too simple to suspect his purpose.’

Mirelle isn’t actually ‘simple’ anyway. She can’t hope to work out who to trust, from the scanty information she has to go on.

Trecarrel is also a figure of fun, however, with his habit of pretending to be ill when life gets difficult. Not until close to the end, when he exerts his authority as a male, over-rides both Mirelle and Orange and thereby orchestrates the final tragedy. It is worthy of Shakespeare that a shallow and greedy man can affect so many lives, bringing so much misery.
Sabine often claimed to have little head for arithmetic, but the facts belie this claim, repeatedly. His correspondence with publishers indicates that he kept close account of payments and promised advances. In this novel and others – especially Court Royal – he plunges into the details of mortgages, debts, trust funds with perfect clarity of understanding. The financial sections of the story are written with sufficient skill to engage the reader’s attention and comprehension. We are in no doubt as to just how and why John Herring’s financial dealings ensure that Mirelle has no choice but to marry him. The finances of the Dartmoor mines are crystal clear, too.

The reverend Flamank is one of a number of Evangelical clergy that Sabine mercilessly satirises. He is easily fooled by Tramplara, his ignorance used against him:

‘Mr Battishill must have heard of the Phoenicians,’ said Mr Flamank, now on his particular ground and able to trot. ‘From them we derive clotted cream. It is a singular and significant fact that clotted cream is made nowhere in the world except in Devon, Cornwall and Phoenicia. That is a well-established fact, and it speaks volumes in favour of an early intercourse between the Cassiterides and the natives of Tyre and Sidon. The Cassiterides have been for some time identified in the minds of antiquaries with Devon and Cornwall. The only difficulty in the way is this. The Cassiterides are described by the ancient geographers as islands. But the difficulty vanishes when closely considered. The Phoenicians ascended Brown Willy and Cosdon, and from these heights saw the sea on both sides, and not supposing they were in an isthmus, they hastily and incorrectly concluded they were in an island. But the fact of clotted cream being found only in Phoenicia and the West of England is, to my mind, absolutely conclusive. A point not considered by antiquaries has arrested my attention. The point is, that the Jews came with the Phoenicians, and that they actually formed permanent settlements in our West Country.’

Mrs Trampleasure feels like one character too many for Sabine, and he pretty well gives up on her before he starts:

‘Mrs Trampleasure was a harmless old woman, who sniffed about the house, being troubled with a perpetual cold in the head and a perpetual forgetfulness of the handkerchief in her pocket. Mrs Trampleasure had got very few topics of conversation, for her limits of interest were few – little local tittle-tattle, and the delinquencies of Bella, that maid-of-all-work.’

But she doesn’t fade away entirely. When her house has to be sold, she is given a small obsession for comic effect, which feels as if Sabine could not resist a piece of sheer exuberant storytelling.

‘Mrs Trampleasure was all day in tears. She was thinking of mats and cushions, worked with her own hands, which would go to the hammer. The cruets-stand also; O woe! Woe! There was, moreover, a set of Blair’s ‘Sermons’ she had been wont to read on rainy Sundays – sermons devoid of ideas, and therefore adapted to a mind incapable of receiving ideas. She lamented likewise, and Rollin’s ‘Ancient History’, which she had attempted ineffectually to read for the last thirty years. Though she had not read Rollin, the sight of his back on her shelf, in many volumes, gave her a sensation of solidity and well-grounding. But the
thought that especially troubled her was that she had left behind in Dolbeare two pillow pincushions fastened to the back of the best bed. In her hurry and distress at leaving she had forgotten these treasures, and they would be sold with the furniture. The pincushions were of white satin, ornamented with figures and flowers in coloured beads. They were heart-shaped – of the size of a bullock’s heart, heavily stuffed. They depended, by white satin ribands, from mother-of-pearl buttons. Those pincushions had been given to Mrs Trampleasure on her marriage by a great-aunt. They would hold, on a moderate computation, a thousand pins apiece. What anyone in bed could want two thousand pins for did not enter into the consideration of the artist who constructed them. For some years these pincushions had adorned the head of the bed occupied by Mr and Mrs Trampleasure. But they exhibited a tendency to fall down on the sleepers in an unprovoked and startling manner. Mrs Trampleasure had sewn them up repeatedly, passing the stitches through the mother-of-pearl buttons; but whether spiders ate the threads, or the damask bed back was unable to suppose the burden, down one or other would come, till at length Mr Trampleasure, upon whose nose one had pounded whilst enjoying a refreshing slumber, woke with an oath and flung both the guilty and the innocent pincushion across the room, vowing not to suffer their re-erection above his head any more. After this they were banished to the spare bedroom, and although not under Mrs Trampleasure’s daily observation, they did not cease to be dear to her soul. These precious pincushions, through inadvertence, were doomed to fall into strange, perhaps unappreciative, hands. The thought made her weep and sniff.

Or is it just padding?

Genefer and Hender Benoke are almost as ignorant and uncivilised as Joyce, in their way. Superstitious, powerless, with even narrower lives than Joyce’s. She at least can walk anywhere she likes. Genefer is a memorable character, but we can see little sign of her ‘parental’ hand on John. A better novelist would have thought this through more carefully, even in pre-Freudian times. Charles Dickens was brilliant at showing how the child is father to the man. In this book it is impossible to imagine a credible young John Herring, growing up in the house as it is described.

The social world is described less than in some of Sabine’s novels, but we have the dance at Dolbeare, and the sightseers flocking to the ‘gold mine’ at Ophir.

At the end, it seems apparent that Mirelle has been murdered, although this is never mentioned, nor is there any police investigation. Orange has smothered her with a pillow. Earlier in the story, Chapter 35, we have a pointer, which is easy to miss in the pace of the narrative:

‘Orange drew the pillow from the bed and held it up, that the pillow might shadow the white face. The heart of Orange beat furiously. She hated Mirelle. She had but to put that pillow over her mouth, throw herself upon it, and with her strong arms hold down the tossing figure – that figure so frail and feeble, and then she could laugh at the schemes of Captain Trecarrel.

But no. Orange put the pillow back with a curl of the lip. She could not do that, easy as it was to do. But as she stood over Mirelle she vowed never to permit Captain Trecarrel to take that pale girl to the hearth from which he had cast
Orange Tramplara...Orange put her hands over her heart. It was bounding noisily, the moonlight throbbed in her eyes, the thoughts beat in her brain. That horrible idea of the pillow, and Mirelle under it, came over her again. She saw the feet beating in the bed in rhythm with the pulsation of her heart, and her hands clenched as though gripping the delicate wrists. As one at the edge of a precipice turns giddy and feels impelled to throw himself where he fears to fall, so was it now with Orange. A dread – a dread was on her lest this horrible thought might in a moment become a fact. She turned away. She paced the room; she could not rest in a bed. She was like a wild beast in a cage. 'Many readers have forgotten this scene by the time Mirelle dies at the end, but we have Orange with a pillow again, to remind us, and her faltering nerviness at the very end betray what she has done.

The book is a deep rich read, to be taken slowly and enjoyed on its own terms.
**John Herring – a topographical guide**

Roger Bristow

This guide lists the places mentioned in the novel and adds some notes on each location, as appropriate. It should be read in association with the map that appears in the centre section of the Transactions. (A printable copy of this map has also been placed on the SBGAS website www.sbgas.org for your convenience). For more accurate location, Ordnance Survey grid references are given [in square brackets]. Page numbers quoted are for the ‘New Edition’ of John Herring, published in 1888 and may be different in other editions.

**Belstone Tor**, p. 126 [SX 614 921]

**Blackapit**, p. 283 [SX 095 914]. John Herring had his office on the cliff above the slate quarry at Blackapit on Willapark Headland.

**Boscastle**, p. 283

**Bridestowe**, p. 203 [SX 514 894]. It was here that Sampson Trampleasure changed horses at one of the inns [not identified] on his way from South Zeal to Launceston.

**Brown Willy**, p. 298 [SX 160 800]

**Camelford**, p. 282 the final representative of the Tink family sold the Welltown (q.v.) estate and moved to Camelford where he started a drapery shop.

**Chagford**, p. 139 [SX 701 875]

**Combebow**, p. 217 [SX 485 880] (see also Lew Water)

**Cosdon Beacon**, p. 1 [SX 636 915]. SB-G erroneously describes Cosdon Beacon (550 m OD) as the second highest point on Dartmoor (after Yes Tor (619 m)), and the second highest mountain in the south of England. In fact, it comes quite a long way down in a list of the ‘highest’ Dartmoor tors.

**Cranmere Pool**, p. 5 [SX602 858] ‘Hardly more than a puddle’ (*A Book of Dartmoor*, 1900, p. 151) - see also *A Book of Devon*, 1899, pp. 213-24

**Crediton**, p. 85 [SS 83 00]

**Davidstow churchyard**, p.299 [SX 151 873]. Reputedly, there are tombstones in the churchyard inscribed ‘D. o D.- D. A’ which translates as ‘Died of drink – Drunkards All’ (q.v.).

**Dolbeare**, Launceston, p. 62 = Dockacre, where the Trampleasure family live. In the novel, the house is described as follows:

The main street of the hill, clinging to its side, was the quaintest conceivable house – a long narrow range of gables, roof and walls encased in small, slate-like mail armour.
In front of the house is a narrow terrace, with, at one end, a sort of summer house, furnished with fireplace and chimney. Below this terrace the rock falls abruptly to the valley. The foundations of the houses in the street above are higher than the tops of the chimneys of ‘Dolbeare’, as this picturesque house was called.

However, the above description does not fit the illustration Dockacre that appears in *Old Country Life*, 1890, p. 349.

The following entry appears in SB-G’s Diary for the 3 July 1882:

In Launceston. Called on Mrs. Smith at Dockacre, the widow of the surgeon on Lew Down, when I was a boy. Dockacre is a very curious house that belonged to the Bedford’s. It is one room thick, built of timber and plaster, with a succession of gables in front. The house is let with a bundle of old walking sticks which Mrs. Smith showed me. They are entered in the lease. One of the walking sticks is the backbone of some creature, I suppose a serpent. Another has a handsome copper gilt head, a third is prettily inlaid, and a fourth has a musical instrument in the handle like a child’s pan pipe with metal tongues. (?) Also two quite ordinary sticks. The saying is the house is unbearable without the sticks in it. Those who rented the house before Mrs. Smith were there two years and left it unable to endure the discomfort any longer. The noises, the pacing and knocking in the house gave them no rest. They left the bundle of sticks at the lawyers. Mrs. Smith took them to the house, but then, - she slated over all the rat holes, and that probably accounts for the cessation of noises.

The above was written into the novel under the chapter heading: ‘*A Musical Walking Stick*’.

See illustrations in centre pages

**Drake Island**, Plymouth, p. 411 [SX 470 528]

**Drunkards All**, p. 299 = All Drunkards, Hallworthy, later a temperance hotel known as All Worthy – now a private house [SX180 878]. ‘A wretched little tavern on the heath’ where John Herring stopped with Mirelle on their way to Welltown

**Egloskerry**, p. 299 [SX 272 866] a village ‘buried in the valley where trees grow and the sun sleeps on smooth greenswards, ’ below the Launceston-Boscastle road. But this was not to be for John Herring and his new bride as they drove to Boscastle:

> ‘that road, on such a day as this, was unendurable. There was no shelter whatever, not a hedge, not a tree; not a village was passed through’.

**Exeter**, p. 139
Giant’s Table, p. 2. described by SB-G as
‘composed of four great slabs of granite set on edge, two parallel to the others, with a fifth stone closing one end. The whole five supported an enormous quoit or block, plain on the nether surface, but unshaped above’. This was the home of Grizzly Cobbledick, one of the Nymet savages.

Hamoaze, Plymouth, p. 420 [SX 440 560] ‘crowded with ships’.

Hartland, p. 374. Captain Trecarrel claimed [to Orange] to be making a ‘sketching tour’ from Hartland to Boscastle.

Kings Arms, Launceston, p.64 - a possible hostelry for John Herring whilst in Launceston.

Launceston, p.62

Leawood, Bridestowe, p. 204 [SX 516 887]. A neighbouring estate to Lewtrenchard. It was here that John Herring borrowed a horse from Squire Hamlyn for his onward journey to Launceston when he was pursuing Sampson Trampleasure. Little did Sabine know when he was writing this story that his daughter Grace (1891-1948) was to marry Major Charles Calmady Hamlyn of Leawood.

Lew Water, Combebow, p. 206 [SX485 879]. Where Sampson Trampleasure laid the gate across the road to stop John Herring in his race to Launceston.

Llaneast =Laneast, p. 299 [SX 227 840] – see Egloskerry

Meachard Island, p.353 [SX 090 916], close to Welltown – ‘The waves besieged the Meachard on all sides they appeared to explode on touching the rock into volumes of white steam, that rushed up whirling and swept the crown’.

Meshaw, p. 85 [SS 759 196]

Minster Church, p. 366 [SX 111 904] ‘down in a valley embowered in trees, with the ruins of the old monastery crumbling about it’.

Moreton Hampstead, p. 139 = Moretonhampstead [SX 752 861]

Mount Batten Hoe, Plymouth, p. 411 [SX 485 532]

Mount Edgecumbe woods, p. 420 [c. 455 525]
**Nine Maidens**, p. 126 [c. SX 614 928] reputedly, the stones were ‘damsels so fond of dancing that they would not desist on the Sunday, and in consequence were turned to stone. And it is said that even now on Sunday at noon the stones come to life and dance thrice round in a circle’.

**North Tawton**, p. 139 [SX 653 945]

**North Wyke**, p. 33 [SX 660 984] – the former house of the Weeke family – now the home to the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research.

**Nymet [Rowland]**, p.2. Where the parent stock of Grizzly Cobbledick lived. His house is described as ‘an old tumble-down cottage, sans windows, sans doors, sans chimney, sans floors, sans everything save the ‘cob’ – that is, mud walls – and the ragged roof of thatch’.

![The Savages Cottage](image)

**Okehampton Castle**, p. 59 [SX583 942]. This has very little to do with the story. John Herring relates to Mirelle that the castle formerly belonged to the Courtneys. Lady Howard lived there and had one daughter by the son of the Earl of Northumberland. When she married for the second time, she refused to see her daughter. However, her daughter came to Okehampton under an assumed name to meet her mother, but her mother did not recognise her. Lady Howard tried to escape, but her daughter clung to her and her arm was broken in the door as the mother was escaping. Now ‘Every night she [the mother] drives along this road from Okehampton Castle in her great coach drawn by four headless horses, with a skeleton driver on the box, and her favourite bloodhound runs besides the coach’.

**Okehampton churchyard**, p.60 [SX582 951]. Not really part of the story, but SB-G mentions that prisoners [at least 4] from the Napoleonic wars are buried in the churchyard.
Okement – one of the two rivers of that name (West and East) that flow through Okehampton

Oxenham Arms, South Zeal, p. 165. Former seat of the Burgoyne family, but now ‘The manor-house has descended to become the village inn’. SB-G gives an account of staying at the Oxenham Arms in about 1857 when he was collecting folk songs (see Amongst the Western Song-men, Illustrated English Magazine, Vol. 9, pp. 468-477), although he mistakenly calls the village ‘Zeale Monachorum’. He describes the scene as follows ‘The room in which they caroused was the old hall of the mansion. The great fireplace had logs and peat burning in it, not that a fire was needed in summer, but, because this room also served as a kitchen. The rafters and old timber of roof and walls were black with smoke’……one man sang ballads…….’I learned that he was given free entertainment at the inn, on condition that he sang as long as the tavern was open, for the amusement of the guests’.

Pentargon Cove [SX 105 920], p. 366. ‘that glorious cove, with precipitous walls of rock black as night, over which a stream bounds in a long fall to meet the sea’.

Plymouth, p. 408. Mirelle, believing that she is a widow, goes to Plymouth with the intention of returning to France.

Plymouth Bay, p. 420

Port Isaac, p. 360 [SW 999 810]. The port which Sampson Trampleasure was making for on board ‘The Susannah’ when it sank off Welltown.

Rayborough Pool, p. 110 [SX 640 900]

River Lyd, p. 118

River Tamar, p. 118

River Taw, p. 202

Continues on page 25
Cover and title page of the 1883 edition of *John Herring*

Localities mentioned in John Herring places in bold italics (West Wyke, Trecarrel and Welltown) are some of the principal localities that we will be visiting
Dolbeare, the home of the Trampleasure family in *John Herring*, is based on Dockacre in Launceston, shown above in an illustration from Baring-Gould’s *Old Country Life* and in a photograph taken recently by Roger Bristow
Welltown – the top photo shows it in a state of dilapidation
River Walkham, bridge over = Bedford Bridge, p. 422 [SX 504 703]. As Mirelle and Captain Trecarrel return from Plymouth to Launceston, they come to a long hill and Trecarrel gets out to walk to relieve the horses.

Row [Rough] Tor, p. 298 [SX 145 808]

Sheepstor, p. 85. described by SB-G as 'a mountain due east of Launceston' - it is actually 16 miles south-east of Launceston [SX 565 682].

Ship Inn, Boscastle, p. 373 Captain Trecarrel stayed at the Ship, ‘where was a cosy little parlour and a clean bedroom’.

Sourton Down, p. 202 [c. SX 545916]. It was at the Sourton turnpike that Sampson Trampleasure bribed the keeper to delay John Herring in his race to Launceston.

South Tawton p. 5 [SX 653 944] Also referred to as South Towton [Sic] on p. 85.


“…after it was ‘bypassed’ in the early 1800s as ‘ceasing to have any importance, and went to sleep, and remained till recently a most singular specimen of a village of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the centre stood, and I am glad to say, still stands the old village cross, of granite, in perfect preservation. Near it was the old chapel, turned into a school, but now through the munificence of Sir Roper Lethbridge, whose family derive from Zeale, restored for divine service. The village inn is still the same, with deep porch, granite mullioned windows, anciently the mansion, and cradle of the Burgoyne family, now the Oxenham Arms’…..The old village street possessed other quaint old houses, with parvise chambers supported on granite pillars and with richly sculptured oak and granite doors. Alas most of these have now disappeared.”

See illustrations in centre pages

Sticklepath p. 202 [SX 643 942]

St Kneighton’s [also known as Nectan’s] Kieve [SX 080 885], p. 366 – where ‘the maiden-hair fern, dancing in the draught of the falling water grows’. Around 500AD, St Nectan (Knighton) built his sanctuary above the waterfall there. Before the Celtic saint died, and realising that his simple faith was being ravaged by the marauding Romans, he was carried to the edge of the Kieve (basin) where he launched his bell into the turbulent waters, declaring that his bell would never ring for unbelievers. Legend has it that at times the bell tolls to warn of misfortune to come. The Crusaders made special pilgrimages to bathe in its waters before leaving for the Holy Lands in the Middle-Ages.

Tavistock, p. 139

Tintagel, p. 377 [SX 058 883], site of King Arthur’s Castle [SX 859 090] where Captain Trecarrel took Mirelle and Orange ‘exploring’.
Trecarrel, p. 86 [SX 316 782]. Trecarrel is the home of the impoverished Captain Trecarrel who hopes to marry either Mirelle or Orange for their money. SB-G visited Trecarrel on Feb. 20th 1882. In his Diary, he describes it as:

Walked with Mr. John Northmore of Clive (?) to Trecarrel, interesting ruins, the hall very fine, the little chapel threatening a fall, all built out of cut granite blocks. The old oak panelled screen in the hall remains but the wall panelling has disappeared, the screen is Jacobean and not good. Indeed the architecture of Trecarrel is bad, coarse and clumsy. But it is nevertheless a most interesting place. The great gate of entrance has been thrown down and lies scattered about in the orchard, bits in the farmyard and some built into the garden wall. In the novel, Trecarrel [Manor] is described as lying like most old manor houses in a hollow. A small stream dribbling through the hollow constituted the only attraction that could lead a gentleman to build his stately mansion in such a spot. A stately mansion Trecarrel must have been in its prime. The great banqueting hall was hewn out of granite, with granite windows and doorway and chimney-piece. A little chapel stood south of the hall also of cut granite. The mansion house itself is, at the present date, reduced to a fragment of the great house that once occupied three sides of a quadrangle. At the time of which we are writing [he began in Nov. 1882] it was more than dilapidated, it was falling into utter ruin. There was no glass in many of the windows, and the roofs were breaking down. Next to the hall the glory of Trecarrel was the gatehouse of granite, with a richly sculptured doorway of the same intractable material, with strawberry leaves carved into the hollows of the mouldings. The Trecarrel who gambled pulled down the gatehouse because coaches could not pass beneath the arch; but when he had pulled it down he had not the power or the means to remove the huge blocks, and so he left them encumbering the ground where they had fallen, and there at the present day they lie, rankly overgrown with nettles.

Treneglos, p. 299 [SX 208 880] see Egloskerry

Tresmarrow, nr Launceston, p. 69 [SX 316 837]. The anecdote quoted below has nothing to do with the story, but was 'mined' from SB-G’s Diary of July 3rd 1882:

A more curious tenancy is that of Tresmarrow near Launceston, where the house goes with a skull. The farmer now there buried the skull, but the noises, - voices – knocks and tramplings heard at night were intolerable, so they dug the skull up again and restored it to the place in the apple chamber, where it now is, - then the sounds ceased.

Tresmeer, p. 299 [SX 232 875] see Egloskerry

Trevalga, p. 287 [SX 081 900]. Baldwin Tink’s marriage is recorded here.

Upaver (Mine) not located, p. 51. In *A Book of Devon* (1899, pp. 222-223), SB-G relates:

A mine had been worked formerly above South 'Zeal. It had been under a "captain," of practical experience but no scientific knowledge. It yielded a small but steady profit. Then the directors and shareholders became impatient. They discharged the old captain, and sent down a fellow who had passed through the mining college, had scientific geology and mineralogy at his fingers' ends. He scouted the machinery that had been hitherto in use, sneered at the old-fashioned methods that had been pursued, boasted of what he was going to do, revolutionised the mine, reorganised the plant, had all the old machinery cast aside, or sold for old iron; had down new and costly
apparatus — then came heavy calls on the shareholders—renewed calls —and there was an end of profits, and as finis a general collapse.

Some years ago a great fraud was committed in the neighbourhood. It was rumoured that gold was to be, found in the gozen — the refuse from the mines. All who had old mines on their land sent up specimens to London, and received reports that there was a specified amount of gold in what was forwarded. Some, to be sure that there was no deception, went up with their specimens and saw them ground, washed, and analysed, and the gold extracted. So large orders were sent up for gozen-crushing machines. These came down, were set to work, and no gold was then found. The makers of the machines had introduced gold-dust into the water that was used in the washing of the crushed stone. I made use of this incident in my novel *John Herring*.

**Walkham Bridge** [=Bedford Bridge], p. 422 – see River Walkham.

**Welltown** [Manor] [SX 088 904], p.281. Sabine describes Welltown as:

‘... A bleak spot. It stood against a hill, only a little way in from the head of the cliffs. The hill had been quarried for the stone of which the house was built, and then the end of the house had been thrust into the hole thus scooped. The hill rose rapidly, and its drip fell over the eaves of the old quarry about the walls of the house. If the hill had been to seaward it would have afforded some shelter, but it was on the inland side, and the house was therefore exposed to the raging blasts, salt with Atlantic spray, that roared over the bare surface of the land. Not a tree could stand against it, not a shrub, except privet and the so-called teaplant. Larches shot up a few feet and lost their leaders; even the ash died away at the head, and bore leaves only near the ground. A few beech-trees were like broken-backed beggars bent double’.

The current owner, Dr John Fanshawe, says that SB-G captures many aspects of the house wonderfully, not least the Labradorian exposure, and notes that “when we were children, the house was ringed with a perimeter of large elms, all windswept inland, but robust and really substantial. Sadly the Dutch Elm disease did for them all, and returned the house to a more exposed state.”

Day and night the roar of the ocean filled the air, the roar of an ocean that rolled in unbroken swell from Labrador, and dashed itself against the ironbound coast in surprise and fury at being arrested; beneath its stormy blows the very mainland quivered.

Welltown was an old house, built at the end of the sixteenth century by a certain Baldwin Tink, who cut his initials on the dripstone terminations of the main entrance. The Tinks had owned the place for several generations, yeomen, aspiring to become gentlemen, without arms, but hoping to acquire a grant. Baldwin had built one wing and a porch, and proposed in time to erect another wing, but his ability to build was exhausted, and none of his successors were able to complete the house; so it remained a queer lopsided erection, the earnest of a handsome mansion unfulfilled. Baldwin Tink was an ambitious man; he expected to be able to form a quadrangle, and pierced his porch with gateways opposite each other, so that the visitor might pass through into the courtyard, and there dismount in shelter. But as he was unable to add a second wing to the front, so was he also unable to complete his quadrangle; and the porch served as a gathering place for the winds, whence they rushed upstairs and through chambers, piping at keyholes, whizzing under doors, extinguishing candles, fluttering arras. The windows were mullioned and cut in granite, the mullions heavy and the lights narrow. The porch was handsomely proportioned and deeply moulded, but as want of funds had prevented Baldwin Tink from completing his exterior, so had it
prevented him from properly furnishing the house inside. The staircase was mean, provisional, rudely erected out of wreck timber, and the unpanelled walls were plastered white.

Dr Fanshawe comments “Most of what he writes accords with the house, but I am surprised by the ‘mean staircase, provisional rudely erected out of wreck timber’ given the robust semi-spiral that exists today.

As the rain drove against the house, fierce, pointed as lances, it smote between the joints of the stones, and, though the walls were thick, penetrated to the interior and blotched the white inward face with green and black stains. There was no keeping it out. When the house was built, nothing was known of brick linings, and the only way in which the builders of those days treated defects was to conceal them behind oak panelling. Poverty forbade this at Welltown, and so the walls remained with their infirmities undisguised. Our readers may have seen a grey ass on a moor in a storm of hail. The poor brute is unable to face the gale, and therefore presents his hinder quarters to it, and if there be a rock or a tree near, the ass sets his nose against it, and stands motionless with drooping ears, patiently allowing his rear to bear the brunt. Welltown presented much this appearance — a dead wall was towards the sea, and the head of the house was against the hill. The furiousness of the gales from the south and west prevented Baldwin Tink facing his house so as to catch the sun in his windows, and the only casement in the entire house through which a golden streak fell was that of the back kitchen. What the house would have been when completed can only be conjectured; as it was, it was picturesque, but dreary to the last degree.

According to his Diary, SB-G visited Welltown in 1882 and included within it is what Dr Ron Wawman believes to be a contemporary plan and sketch of the house. However, Dr John Fanshawe, is fairly confident that the addition to the building (to the right), missing from SB-G’s drawing, and the doorway (which he has as a window on the left), were both present in 1882. His drawing appears like the house might (did) look when it was first built. He wonders if he knew this, and it was his interest in the original Tink story that led to the drawing.

In the Diary, SB-G states that:

‘… the exterior of the house is eminently picturesque. In the room over the porch [now a bathroom] a madman was detained for some years till the magistrates interfered, when he was removed to Exeter, where he speedily recovered’.
See further illustrations in the centre pages

**Werrington Woods** nr Launceston, p.154 [SX 326 824] ‘the dark woods of Werrington’.

**West Wyke** [SX 657 926]. Sabine records (p.33) that:

> “West Wyke is a perfect specimen of a small country gentleman’s house of the sixteenth century … West Wyke is now a farmhouse …”
>
> “… look closely at West Wyke — it deserves a visit and a description.”
>
> “The house stands on the moor, in the midst of a little patch of reclaimed land. The situation is too lofty and exposed to allow of trees to flourish. A few ash stems attempt to live there, and they are twisted from the south-west. A few feet below the surface the roots reach the rock, and when the taproot touches stone the doom of the tree is sealed.”

> “West Wyke House was built in 1583—the date is on it—by William Battishill. It is a house which a substantial farmer nowadays would scorn to inhabit. It consists, on the basement, of one hall, a ladies' bower, a kitchen, and a large dairy—that is all. And that is the basement plan of many hundreds of similar mansions in the West … “

> “In 1656 Roger Battishill, the reigning lord of the manor, walled in a garden in front of the house, and at the side built an embattled gateway, only twelve feet high to the crown of the battlements; a gateway of shaped granite blocks and carved granite mouldings; and over the centre, proudly also sculptured in granite, the arms of Battishill, the cross crosslet in saltire between four great owls. He planted the garden with lilies, white and orange, with honesty, golden-rod, and white rocket. These flourished here, sheltered from the winds by the inclosing walls; and a monthly rose ran up the side of the house, about the hall window, and bloomed up to New Year's day.”

> “… Now Roger Battishill had been a Royalist, but his twin brother Richard had been a Roundhead. There were two other brothers, Robert and Ralph. Now, when the commissioner came to Okehampton to levy decimation, he summoned Squire Battishill before him; whereupon the four brothers, all habited in grey, with very erect hair, protruding ears, and staring eyes, and a general puzzle-headed expression in their faces, appeared before him, and so bewildered the commissioner with their Roger and Richard, and Robert and Ralph, and their extraordinary likeness to each other, and their profound puzzle-headedness, which made it impossible for Roger to speak without involving Richard and Robert and Ralph, and so through the rest — that he dismissed them undecimated, fully impressed that the Royalist was Ralph, who, being only just of age, could not have been in the past a dangerous recusant. Thereupon the four brothers rode home to West Wyke, hooting with joy, and in commemoration of this achievement set up the embattled gateway, to shut themselves in and the world and politics out for ever. Over the gateway they carved the four owls, their arms, said Roger and Richard, and Robert and Ralph—their own portraits said the malicious world of South Tawton.

Some account of the hall has been already given.”

[p.18 – included here for completeness]

> “The porch opened immediately into the hall or parlour. This was a small low room, irregularly built, with a bay in which there was a window. It was so small that with twenty people within it would be crowded inconveniently; it was so low that a tall man could touch the ceiling.

The hall was panelled throughout, very unpretentiously, with plain black oak; there was no carving except over the great fireplace, where was a coat of arms, once heraldically emblazoned, but now obscured by smoke. The coat was curious. Azure, a cross crosslet in saltire, between four owls argent, beaked and legged or.
The ceiling was crossed by moulded oak beams of great size, black with age and smoke. In our day the oak panelling has disappeared as fuel for the great hearth, but in the granite mullioned window is still preserved in stained glass the cognizance of the Battishills, the four owls impaled with, azure, three towers argent, on which are squatted three white birds.

A gentleman of the present day, if not exacting, might possibly accommodate himself in the lower part of the house, but would hardly acquiesce in the upstairs arrangements, for there all the bedrooms were en suite. In the centre slept the squire and his lady, when he had one; on the right were rooms for the men; in the furthest slept the apprentices, in the nearest the sons and brothers of the family. On the left were three rooms all in communication. The first was the state guest room, the next that allotted to the young ladies; beyond that, over the cow-shed, the room for the servant maids.

In a Book of Dartmoor (1900, p. 151), SB-G describes West Wyke as follows:

Above South Zeal, on West Wyke Moor, is the house that belonged to the Battishill family, with a ruined cross near it. The house has been much spoiled of late; the stone mullions have been removed from the hall window, but the ancient gateway, surmounted by the Battishill arms, and with the date 1656, remains untouched. It is curious, because one would hardly have expected a country gentleman to have erected an embattled gateway during the Commonwealth, and in the style of the early Tudor kings. In the hall window are the arms of Battishill, impaled with a coat that cannot be determined as belonging to any known family.

Whidden Down, p. 163. John Herring got off the coach from Exeter here ‘determined to have another look at Ophir’.

White Hart, Launceston, p.64 - a possible hostelry for John Herring whilst in Launceston.

Willapark Headland, p. 273 [SX 090 913] ‘started out of the mainland into the ocean, and was gnawed into it on both sides by the waves threatening to convert it into an island’.

Zeal – see South Zeal
The Nymet Savages
Noel Parry

Nymet Rowland lies about 2km west of Lapford where I live. Much of this talk is based on Peter Christie’s *The True Story of the North Devon Savages* (1992).

The savages date back to John Cheriton who rented the 32-acre Upcott Farm from Thomas Bird in 1798. Ten years later, he bought the farm. On his death, it passed to his son Richard and then to his grandson Christopher. Upcott Farm was surrounded by larger, richer, farms – the Partridges and Lord Portsmouth’s Eggesford estate.

In 1851, Christopher was living with Mary Bragg – no proof of a marriage has ever been found. At that time, they had three daughters and two sons. In 1861, there were three children at home: William (aged 17), Eliza (14) and Matilda (12) and two grandchildren (children of Charlotte who was not recorded in the census). The children and parents interbred with many retarded offspring, including five grandchildren. Ultimately, there were thirteen illegitimate children and grandchildren.

They were regarded as the ‘neighbours from hell’ – their behaviour was dreadful and they were regarded as a ‘terror and abomination’, with women working in the fields semi-naked. Baring-Gould (1898) writes about them driving home with sheep’s entrails hanging around horses, necks. More and more troubles began to be reported in the north Devon papers. There were 67 court appearances between 1854 and 1878. Offences included many minor misdemeanours, poaching, theft and assault. William was charged with nine severe assaults (including assaulting a policeman looking for stolen wheat in 1867; fined for poaching and subsequently imprisoned for 3 months for assault and poaching in 1869) and Christopher five. Their activities started to appear in the local papers, especially the *Western Morning News*. In 1870, an article in ‘Devonshire Sketches’ by ‘Tickler’ (George Pulman) included the comment ‘*Tis all very butival ‘ere, an would be vine if twadden vur they dang savages*. The savages’ activities made the national press in the same year – the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Times* (in the latter, an article on *Heathenism in Devon*). The Home Secretary was involved at one stage in gathering information about them.

The lurid headlines in the newspapers attracted visitors from all over, including London. Visitors would arrive at Lapford Station on the London & South-Western line and walk just over a mile to Nymet to ‘gawk’ at them. The savages played up to the visitors by hurling abuse, obscene songs and remarks at them. In 1871, the *Daily Telegraph* described the savages as ‘bestial, filthy, vicious and hideously dirty’.

In 1871, Mary Bragg was in prison for stealing potatoes. The home conditions were described as ‘a filthy, old thatched-broken down cottage, where they slept on the floor on piles of straw’. They were surrounded by rich, respectable farmers who wanted this ‘dreadful nuisance’ removed. They were stoned by neighbours in February 1878, and in October 1879, their hayrick burnt down. However, it was not all one-sided. The local Congregational minister, Rev. T.J. Leslie, wrote to the papers in support and partly blamed the local farmers. Leslie said that they attended services
at both chapel and church, and in cottages at Nymet and Chenson – they were roughly, but respectably dressed.

In March 1880, Mary died; in the 1881 census, no Cheritons are listed. Christopher went to live in Sandford with Matilda. He died in October 1881 aged 80 and is buried in Crediton Parish churchyard. His estate, worth £174, passed to his brother Herman who lived in Crediton. William died on February 28th 1918 aged 78.

The fictional Old Grizzly Cobbledick in the novel John Herring is based on the legend of Christopher’s brother, Elias, supposedly living in a barrel on top of Whitestone Hill on the way to Dunsford.

Noel then read the account of the North Devon Savages given by James Greenwood in his book *In Strange Company*, published in 1873.

References


Greenwood, S, *In Strange Company; being the experiences of a Roving Correspondent*, London: [?] (1873)

STRANGEST of all strange company was that which, in my journalistic peregrinations, it was my lot to fall in with in North Devon. At first the vague rumours of a veritable savage tribe existing at a remote place called Nymet Rowland was received by the British public with incredulity. At the nick of time, however, I received from the good minister of the parish such information as decided me to make the journey, and if possible glean, as an eye-witness, some particulars of the manners, habits, and customs of these modern barbarians who were scandalizing the land. Without daring to breathe a word of my intention to anxious friends or family, I made the first step towards invading the barbarian stronghold by taking a North Devon ticket at Waterloo Railway Station.

Nymet Rowland, approaching it across country, is about a mile from Lapford station, on the North Devon line. The village is not numerously inhabited, but it contains several substantial farm-holdings, a sprinkling of the handsome residences of gentlemen farmers, and a venerable and goodly-sized church. Almost within the shadow of its ivy-clad square tower is to be found the kraal of the savage tribe of Cheriton. Hut, hovel, stye, or whatever else it should be termed, it is in every respect inferior to anything in the way of house architecture that can be met with in the most barbarous regions on the earth.

A Mandan of the Indian prairies would laugh to scorn such an effort at hut-building; a man-eating Fijian would regard as a wanton insult the suggestion that the hideous structure at Nymet Rowland might serve as a pattern useful to be followed in his construction of a dwelling-place. Carved and painted warrior as he is, he has at least some notions of decency in his domestic life, and of home comfort for those dependent on him. He will take care that his house is shut in from the inquisitive gaze of neighbours by a wattle wall or latticed fence; and, with no other material at his command than rough-hewn timber, grass, and reeds, he constructs a clean and
commodious habitation, not uncommonly with some attempt at ornamentation in its exterior.

Within the hut of the Fijian will be found a fire-place, even though it be nothing more than a slab of stone edged about with a curbing of iron-wood; he recognises the utility of doors and windows, and weaves mats for the floor. Even the benighted Esquimaux, who has nothing besides snow to serve in the place of bricks and mortar and timber, somehow contrives a house of which he has no reason to be ashamed. He provides a window of thin fresh-water ice in the wall of his snow-hut; and he has raised seats for his family and guests, covered first with a layer of whalebone, then with sealskins or deer pelts; and all within is made as snug as possible.

But the barbarian tribe of Nymet Rowland, squatting amid the model dairy farms and mellow apple orchards of Devonshire, are less fastidious in their domestic economy. They care no more for the house they inhabit than the pig does. The pig, indeed! I can imagine with what disgust and scorn a daily-scrubbed, milk-and-bran-fed, white prize Windsor pig would curl his dainty snout were he condemned to pass a single night in the crazy, breezy hovel in which the individuals who have earned for themselves such unenviable notoriety are born, are bred, and pass their lives. To be sure, the premises in question give shelter to pigs as well as people; but they are pigs of a bad sort - unhappy animals which have had constantly before their eyes the villainous example their owners and fellow-lodgers have set; and therefore it cannot be expected that they should be so delicate in their tastes as pigs more fortunately circumstanced.

The savages of North Devon are by no means shy. The threshold of their abode, although not exactly on the highway path, is not so far removed therefrom that it would not be quite easy for the passer-by to pitch a penny piece into any one of the yawning holes in the wall or roof partly mended with wisps of filthy straw. The building is not large, and it is difficult to decide whether it was originally a farmhouse, a granary, or merely a cow-house. It is perhaps forty feet long by twenty-five feet wide; its walls are apparently a mixture of lime, mud, and pebbles, and very thick; and the thatched roof is surmounted by a wide-mouthed chimney-opening, partly blown down. The front of the hovel may be made out with tolerable distinctness from the road. There are several apertures, designed and accidental; but the main opening, which I suppose is designated the window, is a jagged hole about seven feet high and five wide, into which, by way of window-blind, ragged bundles of straw are piled.

This was the inviting domicile for which I was bound; and the closer I approached, the more vividly rose to my mind the current stories of its redoubtable inhabitants - of the eldest son, the lawless villain with a gun, who, on the smallest provocation, or none at all, would let fly at a peaceful neighbour, of the shock-headed amazons, who, from concealed parts of the premises, hurled bricks and other unpleasant missiles at strangers. I thought, too, of the inoffensive farmer, who, guilty of no crime more grave than that of looking over the fence behind which these savages dwelt, was set on and so terribly cut and mauled, that, in the words of the local guide-book, "he bears the marks of his barbarous treatment to this day."
There was a gate - a five-barred gate - with its posts rotten and sunk all aslant in the ground; and between it and the "house" such a quagmire of black mud, that it looked more like a pitfall for the inquisitive and incautious than a path to be trodden by visitors. Besides this, it was a gate with a curious crook for a fastening; and, one way and another, I deemed it advisable to make my presence known before I proceeded any farther. I shook the gate, and rattled on it with my stick; and from amid the bundles of straw I have mentioned as piled in the great jagged hole at the front of the premises was protruded what, in consequence of the hair growing over the eyes, could be recognised as a human head only by the open mouth and remarkably white teeth. The eyes in the head having, from behind its covert of thick hair, contemplated me for some little time, the head was withdrawn, and one of a larger size filled its place - a female head this time, with a face tolerably clean, and a pair of cheeks rosy as any Devonshire milkmaid's: a "devil" of a face, all the same, with high cheek-bones and a retreating forehead, and eyes deeply set in their orbits.

Like the first inquisitor, this one had, as I believe most savages have, a splendid set of teeth, but, oh! the voice that proceeded from between them. "Well, what is it?" It was the voice of a full-chested "navvy," grown hoarse through long toil in tunnels and deep railway cuttings.

"Well, what is it?

"Have you got a drink of water to give to a thirsty man?"

She did not say she had not, nor did she say that she had. She appeared undecided on the matter; and I thought it a good opportunity for unhitching the gate-fastening, and walking in - slush, plash - through twenty yards of mud that covered my boot-tops. Then I had a fair view of the savage interior through the opening before-mentioned.

A mud floor, walls black as soot, and full of chinks as a child's dissecting puzzle with the bits wrongly placed together; and overhead the roof through which protruded faggot-sticks and smoke-dried blades of straw that had dropped through holes in the rotten ceiling above. The depth of the place might have equalled that of an ordinary dwelling-house; and through a great gap at the farther end, partly curtained with a piece of frowzy red baise, came a breeze that bore on its wings a strong odour of pigs and their favourite food. The porkers, however, were not yet in sight The visible living creatures within the shanty, besides half-a-dozen cocks and hens and a duck or two, were seven human beings - an old woman, three young women, a girl of about twelve, a boy of about fourteen, and a baby.

There was not a single article of what could be called furniture to be seen - neither chair, nor stool, nor table. Ranged against the wall to the right was a long rough-hewn bench, and above it was slung a shelf on which were stacked a few odd bits of crockery, five or six yellow quart basins, and an old earthenware foot-bath patched and tied round with string, which, since a ladle reposed in it, and the idea of feet-washing among such a community was simply ridiculous, I presume was the family soup tureen. On the bench were a pile of onions, a monstrous loaf or two of hearth-baked bread, a battered tin pail three-parts filled with milk, a ragged old saddle, and some jars and bottles containing apparently medicine for cattle.
There was no fire-place; but a ruddy glow smouldered from a hole in the floor of the earth, and over it, by an iron chain, a cooking-pot was suspended. Round about the fiery pit-hole, squatted on their hams, were two of the young women and the younger girl; while the fourteen-year-old lad was prone on his belly among the ashes, with his hideously dirty face resting on his infinitely dirtier hands, and his keen eyes twinkling through his matted hair. They all wore clothes of a sort, and the young women had shining eardrops hanging from their ears. I renewed my application for a drink of water, and, emboldened by the fact that no savage of man kind appeared, accompanied the request with a second - "Might I get a light for my pipe at the fire?"

A general stare, and a rumble of masculine laughter on the part of the damsels by the fire-hole, were the only immediate response; so, seeing no other way in, I stepped round to the back of the hovel, and putting aside the red baise curtain, walked in. The pigs were a slight obstruction. An enormous black sow, with monstrous flapping ears and an iron ring through her snout, was sprawling in what, from its recognised relation to the rest of the building, might be designated the back parlour; while nine or ten little piglings, as fierce-looking as herself were eagerly besetting her for natural nutriment. This impediment overcome, there was nothing to bar my way to the fire. Bad as they may be, these North Devon barbarians - bestial, filthy, and inexpressibly vicious - they at least exhibited towards me, a chance visitor and complete stranger, an amount of hospitality that smote my conscience hard when I reflected how little I deserved it. A damsel of the tribe, aged apparently about twenty, with thick clouted boots on her feet like those of a maltster, and a white rag bound about her muscular jaws, caught up an antique pot or piggin of red clay, capable of holding, I should say, a couple of gallons. This she took out, and brought it back full. Then she got a little jug and half filled it with water, out of another vessel filled it up with milk, and presented it to me with the polite observation that "she wished as how it was cider, but they were quite out of it."

"You're a stranger?" said she, interrogatively.

I nodded.

"Don't know the passen (parson), or any of them in these parts?"

"No; shouldn't know them if I saw them."

"There, I told thee so," said she, turning to the others; whereon, as though it was the constant recreation of their lives, and my entry had interrupted it, there arose a family chorus of the foulest abuse and cursing, directed against "passen" and all his friends, that might have made my blood run cold, only that I was stooping over the red-hot chumps and sticks to get a light for my pipe.

"Parson a bad sort?" I ventured to inquire.

"A regler old -," spoke the young gentleman in the ashes, deftly picking up a stick with his toes, and thrusting it into the fire; "that's what I'd like to do wi' passen," a sentiment which was highly applauded by the rest, one of the girls adding, in far more
idiomatic language than I dare use, that she would like to perform upon the
gentleman in question the operation of disembowelling.

"He don't come here very often, I'll wager," I remarked, wickedly joining in the
hideous laughter. This crowned the joke. Come there! "Passen come here!" The little
villain in the ashes was so tickled that he almost stood on his head, his mahogany-
coloured legs writhing convulsively in the air; while a comely squaw of thirty, who as
she sat in the dirt was engaged in patching an old pair of corduroy trousers with some
twine and a carpet needle, flung aside her work to grasp her sides, they ached so with
laughter.

"You're a droll 'un," exclaimed the old woman, grinning till she showed her toothless
gums. "Passen come here! ho! ho! Gi' he some more milk, Lisa"

"I suppose the old fellow is too wide awake to chance it," was my next irreverent
remark, for which I humbly beseech the clergyman's forgiveness.

"He ain't old, — him; he's young enough to take a young wife," returned the female
savage named Lisa. "He got married a bit ago, and come up with his — (it was a
mercy that the villainous epithet she applied to the bride did not sear her heathen
throat) - and we all of us went to the gate to gi' em a warmin'. Ha! ha! ho! ho! She
won't forget us more'n passen will. It'll make him hotter agin us than ever, — his
carcase!"

I wanted to prolong my stay a little, so looked about for an excuse; and at that very
moment the baby which the old woman was nursing thrust its little face forward, and
presented a convenient, though at the same time an appalling, pretext for talk. It was
a ghastly, contrast, that between the nurse and the child. The former was a creature
wrinkled, gray, and hideously dirty, but still with some tigerish light in her deep-set
eyes, which, combined with her flat, backward-slanting forehead, and her hard-set
thin lips, betokened the constitutional inclination to vice that had tempted her to the
dreadful path she had entered forty years ago, and which still sustained her in that
path unashamed and dauntless. This was the female founder of the savage tribe by
which she was now surrounded, and her arms held the last fruit of the inhuman stock
- a five months old, as I was informed; but there were more than as many years of
suffering in its poor little yellow, pinched face, its weak watery eyes that blinked
shyly at the light, its frothed lips, and the sickening sores that disfigured it.

"Does the doctor come and see it?" I asked.

"He don't come here, he'd be afear'd; nobody comes here;" the old hag replied, with
an ugly grin. "I takes it to the doctor, but he don't do it no good; and I ain't goin' to
stand his humbuggin any longer. It's been like it is ever since it was born the biles
come up on it, and they break and leave sores. Look here." As she spoke, she turned
the helpless infant savage over, and showed me its neck and shoulders; and glad
indeed was I to escape from the sight on pretence that my pipe had gone out again,
giving me an excuse for turning towards the fire. There was another baby somewhere
-I had learned that previously - and some allusion was made to it by a member of the
family; but I could not see it anywhere, and I did not care to appear too curious. I did
not like even to ask to which of the three strapping wenches present the poor little horror belonged.

And here I have to touch on the most repulsive and scandalous feature that distinguishes the North Devon haunt of savagery and its occupants. The facts are simply these: Here is a man - Cheriton by name - who takes a woman as his mate; and the pair agree to defy decency and goodness in any shape for the remainder of their lives, and "to do as they like." The den they inhabit at the present time is that in which more than forty years ago they first took residence. They can afford to keep aloof from their neighbours, their homestead being surrounded by about forty acres of good land, their own freehold. In the natural course of events, they have children; their daughters grow up and have children, and the latter in turn grow up and become mothers; but no one ever yet heard of a marriage in that awful family, or knew any male stranger to be on visiting terms with it. The only adults of the masculine sex ever heard of in relationship with the Cheritons are the old man, Christopher; his eldest son Willie, aged thirty-five or so; and the fourteen-year-old youth I have already mentioned.

They decline communication with the world outside the boundary hedges of their estate. Accidental encounters with civilized beings are invariably accompanied by conflict, physical or verbal. No one knows when a child is about to be born in this mysterious settlement, for they dispense with the services of a doctor and nurse each other. No one knows to whom a child belongs when it is born, nor are the neighbours usually aware of the fact until by chance some one gets a glimpse of the infant two or three months afterwards. Supposing the members of this awful tribe to be so inclined, they might dispose of their infant dead and nobody would be the wiser. The horrible suspicion is that they herd together like brutes of the field, and breed like them.

Thus saith rumour; and my personal observation enabled me to gather what may be regarded as corroborative evidence in support of much of it. The ground floor of the hovel is at once the living-place, the cooking-place, the pig-stye, and the sleeping-place. As I have mentioned, not a single article of furniture is contained within it; there is not even a bedstead. The family bed, on which repose savage old Christopher, Willie his middle-aged son, the old woman, the three strapping daughters, the big boy and the big girl, and the smaller fry, including the horrifying baby or babies, consists of an accumulation of foul straw, enclosed within rough-hewn posts driven into the earth.

It has been said that the tribe sleep in a pit; but if so, the pit has become filled in with fresh layers till now it is raised nearly two feet above the level of the ground. The bed space is about that of the floor of a country waggon, and in or about it not a vestige of sheet, or rug, or blanket was visible, thus there seems no choice but to suppose that they burrow in the straw like rats or ferrets, and so keep themselves warm.

That they are more decent in their behaviour than they used to be, is allowed by every good authority in Nymet Rowland. I was informed by a gentleman whose extensive estate joins that of the savages, that not more than two years since, it was quite common to see dreadful old Christopher sunning himself at noon, with nothing but a
wisp of dirty rag slung round his waist, his body being otherwise perfectly naked, except for the dirt that begrimed it; while the daughters, grown women and mothers, thought nothing of attending to their daily farm duties, clad airily in a single garment of calico.

The most incomprehensible part of the business is that the Devon authorities, who have effected a partial reform, are not strong enough entirely to wipe the disgrace from their county. If the horrors proved, and the dreadful suspicions whispered, came to civilised ears concerning some benighted tribe at the Gaboon or Tierra del Fuego, every community of Christians, with missionary power at its disposal, would be roused to immediate action, and the whole religious world thrown into a state of commotion, until the happy day when it was announced that the barbarians had been brought to acknowledge the iniquity of their ways, and had given substantial security against longer continuance in them. But Nymet Rowland is not in a savage land. It is in the heart of fruitful Devon. You may take a railway ticket at Waterloo Station at noon, and arrive at Nymet Rowland in time to see grandmamma savage slinging the iron pot over the fire-hole to brew tea for the evening meal.

Whoever sets about the task of converting the savages of North Devon should, however, be thoroughly apprised of the attending difficulties. He should be a man accustomed to barbarians in grain, to their manners and customs - a Moffat, a Livingston, or a Williams. Savagery is in the blood of the Cheritons. It is a fact that a brother of the present old Christopher Cheriton, Elias by name, was even more strongly tainted than the latter with the family malady; but by some merciful dispensation of Providence, he lived and died a bachelor. Elias Cheriton resided at Whits[t]one, which is not very many miles from Nymet Rowland. Like Christopher, Elias was a freeholder of land to some extent; but unlike him, he had not a house or a hut to live in. He lived in a cask, with a few rags and some straw, just like a make-shift mastiff-kennel. The cask was placed under a hedge that skirted one of his own broad meadows; and it was his serious declaration that there was nothing on earth so handy as a tub to live in, because one could shift it about according to the quarter from which the wind blew.

Elias, however, though he neglected his land, was famous for rearing poultry - making caves and breeding-places for them in the earth all round about the spot where his gipsy kettle was slung, and where he sometimes cooked the meat he ate; and when he died, which is no more than two years back he was able to leave to his dear brother Christopher between three and four hundred pounds. Of the five-and-thirty or forty acres owned by the Cheriton savages, not a fifth part is under cultivation; it being their practice to grow no more than suffices for their personal consumption, and that only in the way of potatoes and cabbages, and a little wheat which they dry and grind for themselves. They breed a few sheep - a mere dozen or so. They hire no labourers, the whole family engaging in the necessary field-work; the females helping at the plough, assisted by one old horse and a bull.

The animal I have just mentioned was out of work when I saw him, and taking his ease in a field; but, as though determined that all their belongings should be in
keeping with their savage selves - the horned brute has the reputation of being the most vicious and dangerous bull in the county. The only way of getting him to work yoked with the old horse is to envelop his head and shoulders in a sack; and even then he needs to be pretty sharply watched, lest in his blind malice he should wickedly prod his equine comrade through his sackcloth hood. They are proud of their bull, those wild Devonians. He has never slept under cover summer or winter since his calfhood, one of the damsels informed me; and she showed me out in the open the tree to which the creature was tethered at nights, all withered and barren in consequence of the bull's fierce assaults on its bark, which was gored and torn all away. "They'll be home with him presently," said old grandmother savage, who sat rocking the awful baby, that was squeaking like a snared rabbit. "Who will be home with him?" I asked. "My old man and Willie," she replied.

Willie was the young fellow who had nearly smashed the unoffending farmer; so, inwardly thanking her for the timely hint, I bade the interesting family good morning, made for the five-barred gate that grew out of the black mud, and sought the sweet highway.
Some contemporary newspaper reviews of John Herring

A selection of reviews from newspapers printed at the time that the novel was published.

JOHN HERRING

Few readers of “Mehalah,” except experienced and rather pessimist critics, will refuse to allow a certain disappointment with “John Herring.” No critic of any experience, whether he be a pessimist or not, will have much difficulty in accounting for the inferiority of “John Herring” to “Mehalah.” The Earlier Book was short, it concentrated its passion and its strangeness on a few characters and, although the author was obviously acquainted with the unfamiliar scenery and manners he described, his familiarity with them did not lead him to overload the book with local colour. In all these respects “John Herring” departs from the wise restrictions of its predecessor. It submits itself to the orthodox and lamentable three volumes, it distributes its interest over a large number of characters, and the West Country dialect, manners, folklore, and the like, which season it, are sprinkled with a too lavish hand. It has the additional disadvantage that the heroine entirely lacks the attractiveness of Mehalah. Mirelle Strange, or, as she prefers to call herself, the Countess Garcia de Cantalejo, pupil of the nuns of the Sacré Cour [Sic], aristocrat, and devoted lover of France, is little more than a thing of shreds and patches, so un lifelike that one is almost inclined to think she must have been drawn from the life. Nor is her lover, husband, and widower, John Herring, much more satisfactory. Two strong and satisfactory portraits of girls, Orange Trampleasure and Cicely Battishill, hardly make up for the unsatisfactory character of the prima donna, especially as the reader feels that Orange ought to have been made much more of. The Cobbledick family, a half-savage father and daughter, who are spiritual, and in a way lineal, descendants of the Gubbings, known to all men from “Westward Ho!” are also good, though it may be we have too much of them. The polished villain Captain Trecarrel, and the unpolished villain Sampson Trampleasure, partake of the character of exaggeration which mars the book in more ways than one. It is in reality less tragical than “Mehalah;” but it is much more melodramatic. It will be readily apprehended by intelligent readers that this censure is merely comparative. Among most novels of the day “John Herring” is a very considerable work indeed, and both deserves and will receive proportionate attention.

The Pall Mall Gazette, November 17, 1883

None who read “Mehalah” are likely to forget that strangely powerful tragedy, resembling a transfer of the scene of “Wuthering Heights” from the Yorkshire Moors to the Essex Salt Marshes. “John Herring” (3 vols: Smith, Elder & Co.) by the same author, is at least equally fascinating, equally powerful, and far more agreeable to read. Since the author chooses to conceal his name, it is not for us to attempt openly
to speculate upon the identity of one who, by these two singular works, has established a claim to be regarded as among the strongest and most original of living writers of fiction. At the same time, it is not particularly difficult, even from internal evidence, to form an opinion based on striking peculiarities of style and thought, minute local knowledge, a tendency to the illustration of the wilder kinds of folk-lore, and an intimate acquaintance with the darker and more grotesque phenomena of human nature. The scene of “John Herring” is laid in the still uniquely fascinating region of Devon and Cornwall lying between Dartmoor and Boscastle; and those who know the district as it is today, will have little difficulty in realising “John Herring’s” period, though apparently, seventy years ago. Any attempt to select the most striking characters from the dramatis personae would result in an exhaustive catalogue. Those, however, which are most likely to impress the reader by their absolute novelty are old “Grizzly,” and his daughter Joyce, two members of a clan of degraded savages such as Devonshire has known even in our own day, but distinguished from other accounts of such startling survivals by the minute detail of their individual portraiture. How far fact is answerable for the barbarous manners, customs, and superstitions of old Grizzly is not pleasant to consider. He is the savage who is yet more hopelessly degraded by his first contact with civilisation; his daughter Joyce, the savage taught by instinct that life is not mere existence, so that she evolves for herself a pathetically grotesque system of faith and duty. The scenes in which this amazing creation appears almost demand quotation, for the sake both of her ideas and her phraseology; but then the same demand is made of many of the author’s own passages of description and reflection, and this to such an extent that, though without free quotation to give an idea of the book is impossible, the temptation, for space’s sake, must be resisted firmly. The story is sombre in its general tone, though very far from approaching the unbroken gloom of “Mehalah.” Indeed, it is amply relieved by passages of comedy which is not always acid or bitter, and by the strength of its leading motive – a noble view of life rendered the more impressive by its thin disguise of cynicism. It would be interesting to examine at length the character of the heroine (if such she can be called), Mirelle, who seemingly as colourless and passionless as a snowflake, and refined to the last extreme of delicacy, is really as much a savage in her own aristocratic fashion as Joyce, or as Orange Trampleasure – a vulgar and passionate bourgeoise [Sic] beauty – in hers. Except that of Joyce, every life associated with the story of “John Herring” becomes more or less a failure; but we are shown strongly enough that failure to achieve happiness is by no means the greatest of misfortunes. The subordinate characters are also excellent, not forgetting Genefer Benoke, the fanatical but nevertheless great-minded devotee of the half religious, half witch-like function known in Cornwall as “devil hunting,” and the minister who, in all honest simplicity, distorted the Scriptures with a monstrous puff of a bogus gold mine. The story itself is romantic and interesting to the highest degree, apart from its purpose and its extraordinary wealth in novel and original portraiture. From all the ordinary fiction of the day it stands out with absolute grandeur; and no sort of justice can be done to it in a short review.

The Graphic, December 15, 1883
From the author of “Mehalah” one is justified in expecting an intensely vivid representation of phases of life little known to the readers of novels, and rarely met with by the ordinary frequenters of cities. “Mehalah, with its wild landscape, its drama of fierce and sullen passions, its portraiture of half-savage beauty, lingers in the memory like a blood-red sunset on the salt marshes. It would be as vain as it would be undesirable for the author to attempt to repeat it. The difficulty lies in seeing how he can possibly equal or excel it in a way altogether new and unexpected. In “John Herring” we find the problem solved with the happy facility peculiar to genius. In the bleak and forbidding solitude of Dartmoor we have a landscape as grim and effective, and in the house of the Cobbleicks – a cider barrel tethered to the blocks of a granite dolmen – the author finds a couple of characters which he delineates with all the subtle skill and nervous power of his former work. The Cobbleicks are the descendants of a clan of half-naked savages who have lived on the moor from time immemorial. It is only a little before the period at which the story opens that Grizzly Cobbleick conceives the civilised notion of the existence of possessive adjectives. The conception of property is crude and rude, but its is an advance on the antique savagery of the clan. He seizes one of the women as his own, and takes possession of a cider cask and a dolmen on the moor, where in course of time his daughter Joyce is born and grows up into the wild beauty of a primeval girlhood. Throughout the story, which may be briefly described as the love and marriage of John Herring, these figures move eventfully, and nothing in the way of psychological subtlety can surpass the manner in which the elevation of the girl and the degeneration of the old man are wrought out. With happy touches of ironical humour, the author suggests them as illustrations of the scientific theory of human development from the age of stone onward. The contact of civilisation accelerates the process; the old man under the influence of drink and tobacco rapidly falls into a depth of degradation far below his original savagery; the girl under the influence of love rises to religion and the sweet nobility of womanhood. The situation is full of pathos and pity, which the author is too wise to suggest, much less to emphasise, for of course John Herring, absorbed in his passion for the Countess Mirelle, is altogether unconscious of the wild devotion of poor Joyce. While we refrain from spoiling the freshness of the story by giving an outline of the plot, it is not to be supposed that the novel is merely a skilful but tedious analysis of character. On the contrary, it is quick with incident and rapid interest. It is the reader rather than the author who analyses. The dramatis personae themselves are in constant action, and leave little room among the plots of the great mine-swindle of Tramplara and his son for padding of any sort. Where the author does speak in his own person, however, his observations are characterised by a caustic wit, a shrewdness of observation, and occasionally a degree of cynicism which are startlingly at variance from what one might expect from “a son of the manse.” Of John Herring himself, the Countess Mirelle, The Tramplaras, Cicely Battishill and her father we have said nothing. They are all admirably
portrayed, but they all belong to the class of people we have all read of and some of us met. The author has, to borrow a phrase, used in a larger canvas than “Melahah,” and has filled it with a greater number of figures. The picture may fall short in point of fierce passion and terrible power, but it is more attractive in detail, equally novel in arrangement, and contains a promise of magnificent possibilities.

*Glasgow Herald*, January 25, 1884

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NEW NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF “MEHALAH.”

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