

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

Volume 15 (2015)



Contents:

Nebo The Nailer: Setting the scene by Roger Bristow

Nebo The Nailer: The the novel by Becky Smith

Grime, graft, humour and song: The Spirit of the Black Country by Roy Palmer

A letter to Sabine Baring-Gould by Becky Smith

Baring-Gould and me: A journey towards obsession by Martin Graebe

Book Review: S. Baring-Gould, *Ecclesiastica Celtica* by Norman Wallwork

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The Transactions
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Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society

The original talks from which the articles in this journal are drawn were presented at the annual gathering of the Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society held at the Avoncroft Museum, Bromsgrove 3 - 5 October, 2014.

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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

If you wish to offer an article for publication, please submit a brief description by e-mail to the Editor at the address above. Articles should be submitted as electronic documents that can be read in Microsoft Word. Please do not format the articles beyond the use of bold for headings and italics for quotations. Illustrations should be sent as separate files. See previous issues for a guide to layout or request a style guide from the Editor. It is the responsibility of authors to ensure that copyright permission has been obtained (in writing) for the use of any text or illustrations used in the article, other than short extracts quoted within the scope of 'fair use' provisions.

Introduction

Five of the articles that appear in this volume of the *Transactions of the Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society* were presented at the Society's annual gathering, held in Bromsgrove, 3-5 October, 2014. The meeting was centred on Baring-Gould's novel, *Nebo the Nailer* (1901), which is set in the Black Country.

Roger Bristow expended considerable effort in the months before the meeting in establishing the locations that Baring-Gould took as models for his fictional landscape, using his knowledge of the geology of the area to tie together the clues found in the novel. He shared his findings with us in an excellent presentation in which he also found the real people who bore the unusual name of the eponymous 'hero' of the story.

Becky Smith gave us an excellent overview of the book itself, and looked at some of the characters Baring-Gould has created and at the construction of the plot (without giving away too much for newcomers to the novel). The book did not sell well at first and early reviews were unfavourable, and she talked about some of the reasons for this.

We invited the leading folklorist and writer **Roy Palmer** to talk to us about the social background to the novel and the character of the people of the Black Country. He did so in a lively and entertaining manner, helped by his wife, Pat, and his talk was greatly enjoyed by all those present. Sadly, this was his last public speaking engagement, as his illness increasingly restricted his movements. He died on 26 February 2015.

There were two further talks by SBGAS members in the series 'Baring-Gould and me'. When we asked **Becky Smith** to give one of them we said, in a careless moment, that she should share some of the details of her love affair with him with us. She took us literally, and read us a witty and sometimes poignant letter, written posthumously to her lover.

Martin Graebe told of his journey towards obsession with Baring-Gould – a journey that he insists is not complete, though many of his friends will disagree.

For the first time we have included a detailed book review in the SBGAS *Transactions*, in which **Norman Wallwork** looks at *Ecclesiastica Celtica*. This is a new edition of extracts taken from Baring-Gould's *Lives of the Saints* with some additional analysis and background.

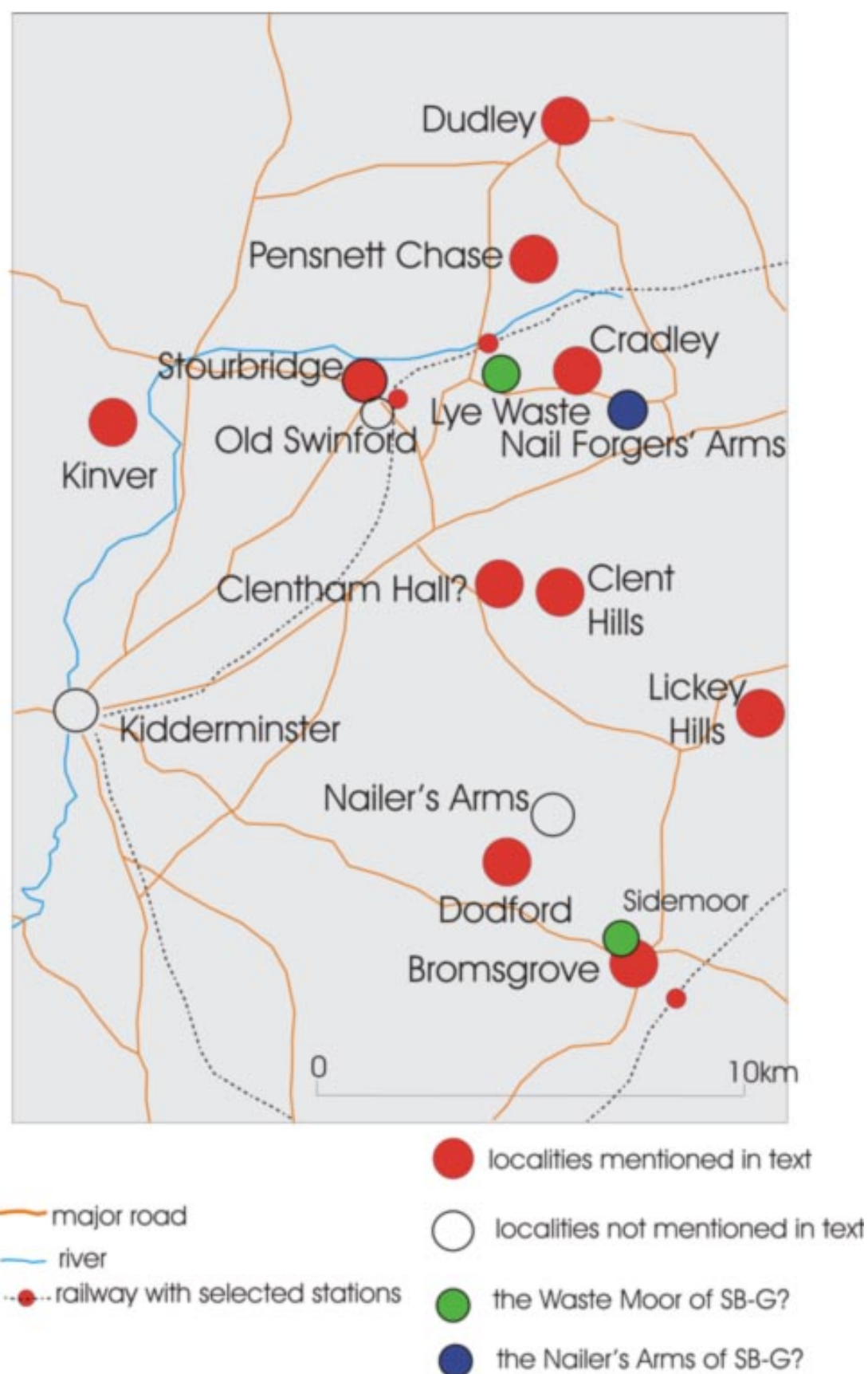
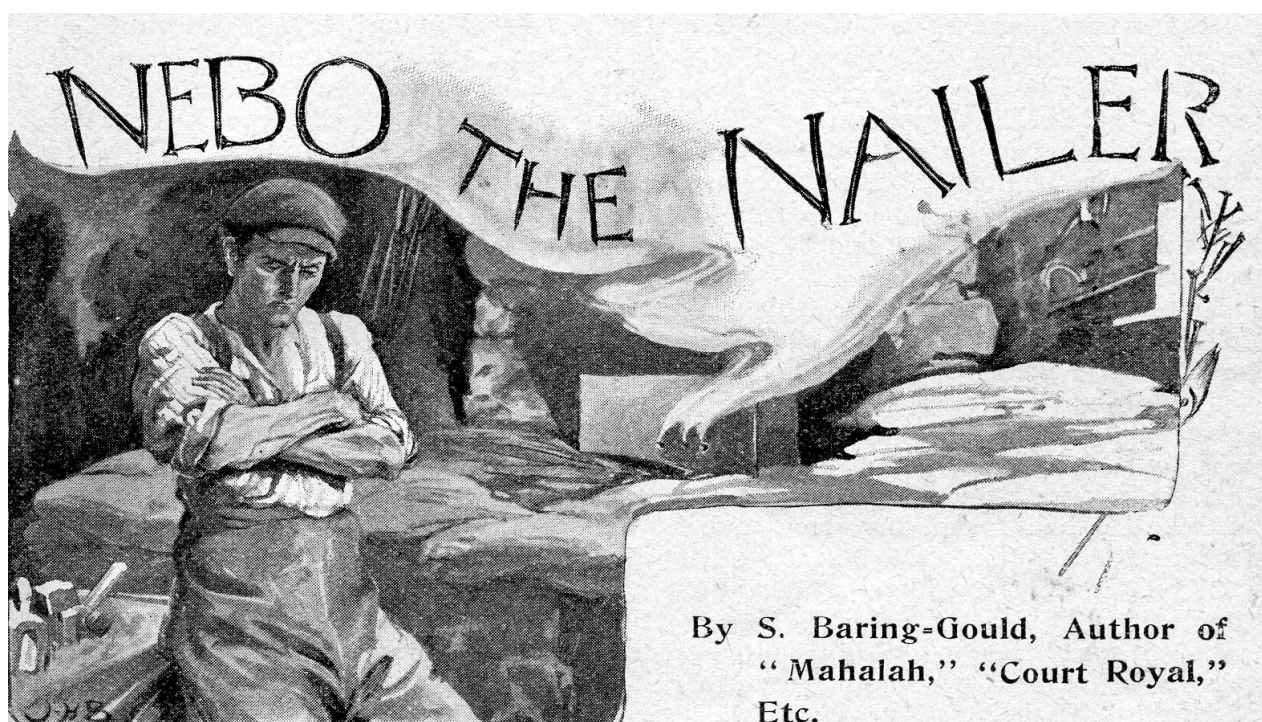


Figure 1. Localities mentioned in the text of Nebo the Nailer



By S. Baring-Gould, Author of
"Mahalah," "Court Royal,"
Etc.

Chapter heading from *The Quiver* (1901)

Nebo The Nailer: Setting the scene

Roger Bristow

In the late 1890s/early twentieth Century, Sabine Baring-Gould wrote a trilogy of books based in the West Midlands: *Bladys of the Stewponey* (1897), *The Frobishers* (1901) and *Nebo the Nailer* (1901-1902). These three books may have been researched at the same time, but we know little about when, or where, this took place. We know that SB-G visited Kinver some time prior to 1896 when he stayed in the vicarage (since demolished) of his friend the Rev. Cooper-Slipper (whose diaries are held in the Staffordshire Record Centre), but for the other two books we have no information – there is no mention of these in his diary or autobiography.

The name Nebo

As with so many of Sabine's books, the lead character commonly has an unusual name – in this case Nebo HOMER. A search by Colin White of the free BMD website reveals 96 Nebos (some of course refer to the same person), the majority of whom were in the Black Country, with some 50% of the Nebos in the registration district of Stourbridge:

34 births between 1839 and 1904
24 marriages between 1839 and 1945
38 deaths between 1844 and 1964.

Having established that Nebo was a real name, I will now move on to the setting of the story and come back to the name later.

The setting of the story

The Waste Moor, where the nail-making industry of this story is located, is referred to throughout the novel. Although the location of the Waste Moor, which was '*on the confines of a small town*', is not specifically identified by Sabine, there are a number of clues.

First, a description of Waste Moor.

The Waste Moor on which stood the habitation of Saach [Nebo's stepfather] was, in fact, a limited tract of clay land intruded upon the red sandstone. The clay was so stubborn that it had for centuries grown nothing but coarse moss; so it had been allowed to remain unenclosed and profitless, till, at some period unknown, settlers had squatted on it, had formed paddocks and constructed houses out of the tenacious material [...] Every ten years further encroachments had been made till the entire common had been appropriated and had become the seat of a colony of nail-forgers, each nailer having his own house and as much garden and paddock as he had cared to enclose. Nebo's house was described as entirely composed of clay and timber. [...] The roof was of thatch, doorways and windows were of timber; only the chimney was of brick, made on the spot.

This description of the Waste Moor could fit any number of localities. Originally, we thought that the novel was set near Bromsgrove where there was a very important nail-making industry in an area known as Sidemoor north-west of the town. However, it soon became clear that Bromsgrove could not be the location.

In Chapter IV, Sylvia Folly and her brother Fred, dined with Sir Michael Oswestry at Swinwood [Swinford?] Park. In Chapter V, in a typical digression from the Oswestry's dinner party, Baring-Gould talks about the rise of Richard Foley (of Old Swinford) through his perfection of a rod splitter (he erected a slitting mill at Kinver), and then goes on to say that '*the Oswestry family had not been made of coal and iron, but it had prospered on both*'.

In Chapter VII, returning home from Swinwood Park, the Follys met Nebo and his sister who had left the Waste Moor and were on the way to Bromsgrove [actually Dodford north-west of Bromsgrove], which was *a long way off*, and they could not possibly reach it that night.

Clue 1: They were going to, and not from, Bromsgrove.

The Follys took Nebo and his sister to their home at Clentham Hall which was fairly close to where they all met. I think that Clent Hall, about 6km SE of Stourbridge, is the model for Clentham Hall.

All the other localities mentioned in the text (Kinver, Pensnett Chase, Dudley, Clent & Lickey Hills) lie north of Bromsgrove which suggest that it is somewhere in the northern area of Figure 1 where the novel is set. Then, in Chapter XXII we get another important clue: Mr Pershore, who is trying to buy Nebo's property and land through his stepfather Saach, says '*I have just been for a walk through Cradley*'. This implies that the Waste Moor is close to Cradley.

The geology of the Waste Moor

The geology of the area is fairly simple (*Figure 2*). The oldest strata are of Carboniferous age and occupy a fairly extensive area to the north-east (South Staffordshire Coalfield) and north-west (Worcestershire Coalfield) of the present district. These strata are overlain unconformably (a big break in geological time) by the red-coloured Sherwood Sandstone of Triassic age (the same unit that the cave houses at Kinver are carved in (*Bladys of the Stewponey*) (*Figure 3*), and it also features in *The Frobishers*. The highest strata in the area are the red mudstones of the Mercia Mudstone.

The Waste Moor is described (Chapter I) as:

'an islet of intractable clay of a pale and dingy yellow or of a dirty white in the midst of a warm sea of ruddy sandstone and warm red gravels. So unferruginous was it, that the clay turned up on it and burnt did not become red when fired.'

From Figure 3, it is clear that Sidemoor, at Bromsgrove, is eliminated as the Waste Moor of the novel. It sits on Sherwood Sandstone. Nevertheless, there is clay, the Mercia Mudstone, to the west and south. However, it is the 'wrong sort of clay', being red in colour. In Chapter XXII, Mr Pershore says that the soil (of the Waste Moor) '*is clay, which will serve for fire-bricks, linings for stoves and furnaces, and for bath's*'. This statement is re-inforced in Chapter XXXI: '*the Waste Moor is composed of a clay that makes excellent fire-resisting brick and tile*' – i.e. a

‘Fireclay’. The Mercia Mudstone is not a source of fireclay, but the Coal Measure strata are.

Thus it is only the Carboniferous strata with which we are concerned. As its name implies, the Carboniferous rocks include coal seams, as well as thin beds of ironstone, fireclay, mudstones and sandstones. It is the coal, ironstone and fireclay which are of economic importance, but they only occur as relatively thin beds which are not always laterally persistent – i.e. discontinuous (Figure 4 - geological vertical sections). It is the close association of coal, ironstone and fireclay which was a factor of considerable economic importance in the 18th and 19th centuries during the Industrial Revolution.

Ironstones in the Coal Measures were historically a very important source of iron. Continuous beds of ironstone were best developed in the North Staffordshire Coalfield, but elsewhere nodules and lenticular bands, as opposed to continuous beds, were more the norm. Although worked on their own, they were commonly a by-product of coal mining. The decline in their importance in the early part of the 20th century was due to their thinness and lateral impersistence.

The South Staffordshire and Worcestershire Coalfields were an important source of iron ore with about 23 million tonnes being produced between 1858 and 1938. Typically, iron contents were 25 to 41% Fe with an average in South Staffordshire of about 35% Fe. They had the advantage of a low phosphorus content. The bands of ironstone were never more than about 60 cm thick.

Fireclays are seatearths (seatearths) and were the fossil soils on which the vegetation which became coal grew. They are found in coal-bearing strata commonly, but not always, underlying coal seams. Because of their relatively high alumina and low alkalis content they were relatively refractory compared with other common clays and thus used for making refractory bricks for lining furnaces. The South Staffordshire Coalfield was an important source of fireclay and the present area ‘*includes the finest fireclays of South Staffordshire*’ (Whitehead & Pocock, 1947¹). The Stourbridge firebrick industry was quite famous, but for bricks for coke ovens and gas retorts.

Clue 2: The geology also points to this north-eastern area as the setting for the novel

¹ Whitehead, T.H. and Pocock, R.W. 1947. Dudley and Bridgnorth (one-inch Geological Sheet 167, New Series). *Memoirs of the Geological Survey of Great Britain*. HMSO.

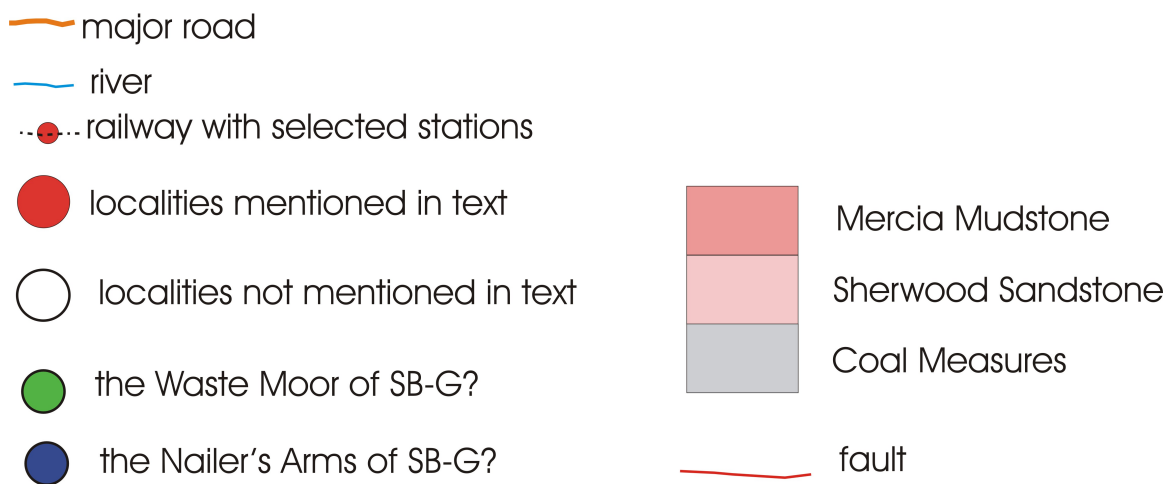
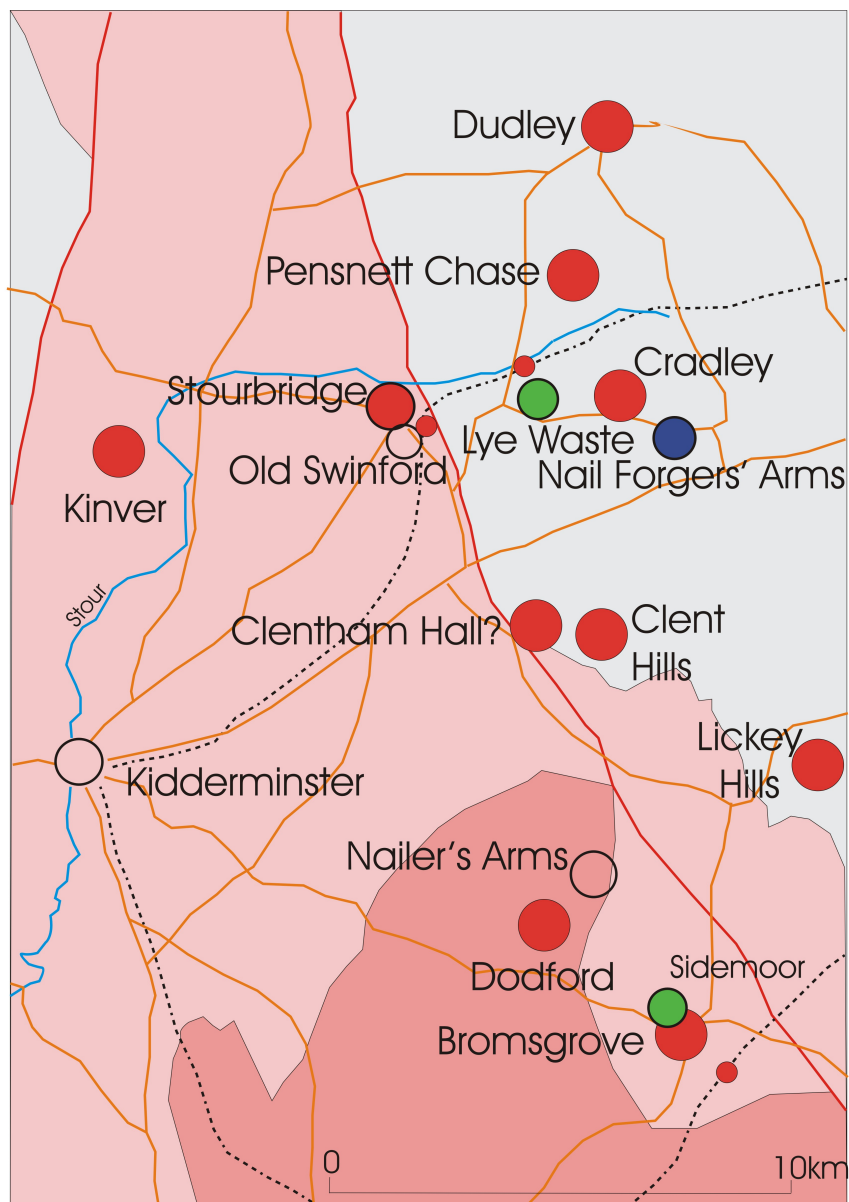
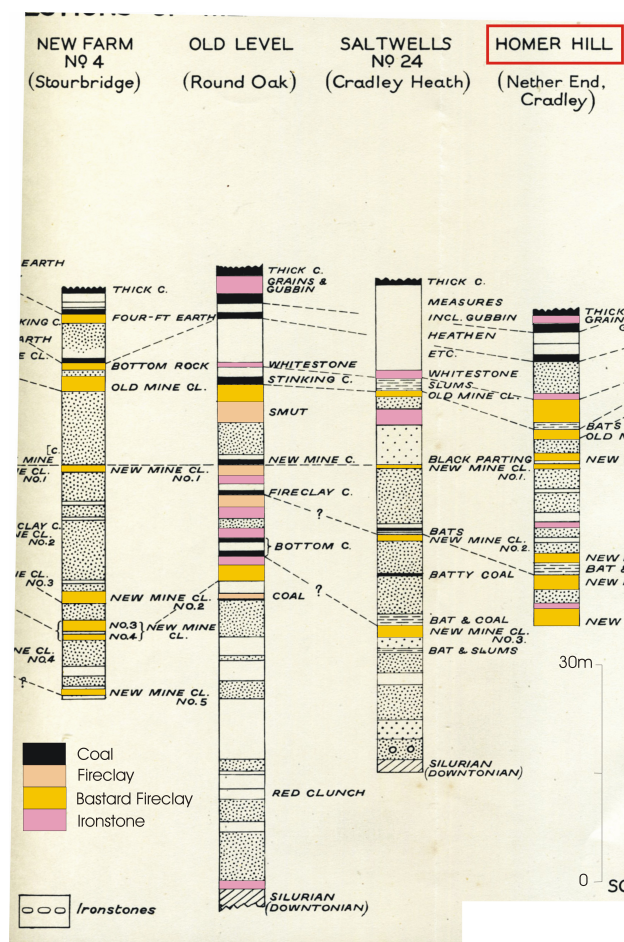


Figure 2. Simplified geological map of the area covered by Nebo the Nailer



Figure 3 – Cave houses at Kinver



Borehole sections through Coal Measures in the South Staffordshire Coalfield

Figure 4 – Geological Vertical Sections

The name Nebo Homer

Of the 46 Nebos in the Stourbridge registration district, four have the surname HOMER (two entries are the birth and death of the same person), the same as Nebo the Nailer:

- 1) Nebo [b. 1803] – 1879
- 2) Nebo b. 1873-1889
- 3) Nebo b. 1877

For **Nebo 1**, we have quite a lot of information (see below). He would have been dead at the time Sabine was researching his book, but I think that he is the one whose name Sabine took for the main character of his book. Possibly Sabine took the name from a tombstone² in one of the nearby graveyards.

For **Nebo 2** we just have his birth and death dates and he is not considered further in this account. **Nebo 3** is the grandson of Nebo 1. Unfortunately, I can find no further information after his appearance, ‘aged 4’ in the 1881 Census. If he survived to adulthood, he would have been around at the time Sabine was researching his book (believed to be in the late 1890s) and it could be his name that Sabine in his book.

Nebo 1. In the 1841 Census there is Nebo (supposedly born c.1813, but actually in 1803 at Cradley) listed as a nailer at Waste Bank, Oldswinford, near Stourbridge, married to a Sarah and with 3 children (Louisa, 1; Ann, 4, and Phoebe 9).

In the 1851 Census, Nebo (born at Cradley), Sarah and children are living at Lye (in the parish of Oldswinford). Nebo (his age is correctly given as 48) and Sarah have four children living at home (Phoebe is not listed (she would be 19) so presumably has left home): Ann 15, Louisa 11, Eliza 8 and John 5. In 1851, Nebo’s main profession is indecipherable, but added in clearer writing is the word ‘Victualler’ [at the Dudley Arms, Lye].

In 1861, living at Lye Waste, Nebo and Sarah have a new child, Benjamin, 5. Interestingly, whilst Nebo’s sole profession is now that of a Victualler, his son John is a Nailer. The family do not appear in the 1871 census, but in 1881 (Nebo now deceased), John (1845-1923), a Victualler [Lord Dudley Arms, High St., Lye in 1888], his wife Sarah [Ann HARRIS](also described as a licensed victualler), his six children (including **Nebo 3** b. 1877) and his mother were still living at Lye Waste.

² The speaker, Pat Tansell, who followed my talk, independently came to the same conclusion and showed a photograph of a gravestone from the Cradley area with the names of Benjamin Homer (Nebo’s father) and Nebo Homer (Nebo 1).

Clue 3: This census information strongly suggests that Lye Waste is the location of the novel

The localities listed above include Cradley, Lye, Waste Bank, Lye Waste. Waste Bank and Lye Waste all of which I think are the same place in Lye, which adjoins Cradley to the east.

The Waste at Lye was a place of tumble down mud and brick houses, full of ragged people who were mostly dirt-poor nailers, and a place where the forces of law and order rarely trod. In 1781, the Enclosure Act tuned the nailers' little plots on Lye Waste into Freeholds, and within a short space of time, there were over 2000 inhabitants. Not the sort who paid taxes and obeyed the law, but, as described by some, *a dirty, squalid, immoral, lecherous, drunken, thieving bunch of heathens*.

Summary

The narrative of *Nebo the Nailer* clearly establishes that it is set to the north of Bromsgrove, near Cradley.

The geology similarly establishes that the Waste Moor is set on the Carboniferous strata north of Bromsgrove.

Nebo Homer 1, a nailer born at Cradley and subsequently living with his family at Waste Bank, Lye, I regard as the source for the name Nebo in the story. Thus the Waste Moor of the story would have been Lye Waste. The only drawback to this hypothesis is that amongst the 56 public houses recorded at Lye, there is no Nailer's Arms, but there is/was the Nail Forgers' Arms south-east of Cradley.

Localities mentioned in text (see Figure 1)

Pagination is taken from what is thought to be the first published one volume edition by Cassell & Co. in 1902 (it was originally serialised)

Bromsgrove [SO 960 700]. Nebo and his sister were heading towards Bromsgrove when they met Sylvia and Fred Folly (p.47).

Burslem Road. Nebo walked for 3 miles on the Burslem road away from Clentham Hall (p. 116)

Bwlch, Wales. The town that Bessie was taken to by her step-father.

Clent Hill [SO 940 795 and 932 802]. Two prominent hills rising to 304m OD about 5km SE of Stourbridge.

Clentham Hall. Home of the Sylvia and Fred Folly. I suspect that this may have been based on Clent Hall [SO 929 741].

Cradley [SO 942 845]. Famous for its former chain-making industry [the chains for the Titanic came from here]. Appears to lie close to the Waste Moor of the novel (p.144).

Dodford [SO 930 730]. A commune founded by Feargus O'Connor [1796-1855] of the Chartist Movement in 1849. (p.49).

Dudley [SO 940 900]. The birth place of the ironmaster Richard Foley [b. c. 1580] (p.27).

Hunley, Staffordshire (p. 30). Locality not known, but probably meant to be Hanley. Lord Dudley had furnaces here.

Hyde, Kinver [SO 846 900]. Richard Foley established a slitting mill here (p.27).

Lickey Hill [SO988 760]. A prominent hill rising to 291m about 6km NNE of Bromsgrove

Longlands. A fictitious? farm near the Royd. (p.197).

Pensnett Chase [SO 912 890]. Area of land owned by the lords of Dudley Castle. Lord Dudley had ironworks here (p.29).

Royd. A fictitious (?) farm close to the Waste Moor given by Sylvia Folly to Nebo to found his own co-operative commune (first mentioned on p. 27).

Stourbridge [SO 90 84]. The Nailers' strike extended from Stourbridge to Bromsgrove (p. 223). There were several strikes during the 19th century—the last major one was in 1878.

Swinwood Park. Possibly Old Swinford [SO 908 8832] was the setting for Swinwood Park, the residence of Sir Michael Oswestry of the novel. Richard Foley (see Dudley and Hyde) lived at Old Swinford.

Waste Moor. The home of Nebo and an important seat of nailmaking. This is believed to be Lye Waste [SO 925 844].

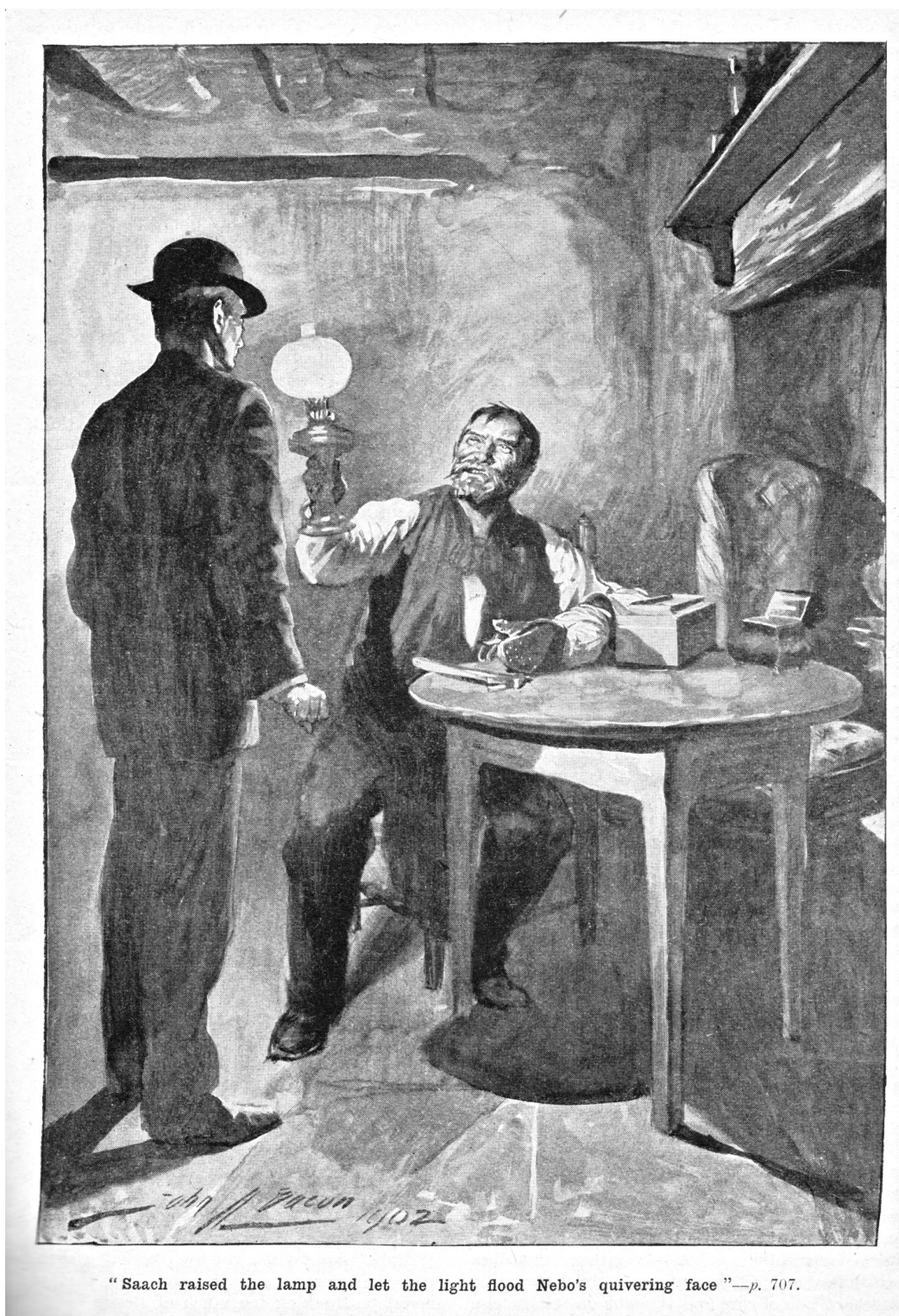


Illustration from the serialised version of *Nebo the Nailer* in *The Quiver* (1901)

Nebo visits Saach, in search of his sister

Nebo the Nailer: The novel

Becky Smith

The book examined as a piece of literature, and example of SBG's performance as a writer of fiction.

The Spectator magazine, in its issue of 27 September 1902, carried a review which said:

‘Mr Baring-Gould, seeking, after his habit, fresh woods and pastures new, finds his way into the land of nail-making. He is too fond of settling economical questions by his *obiter dicta*, and he is not free from the fault here. On the other hand, he does good service to the cause of common sense by his exhibiting in a practical shape the difficulties of Socialism. Nebo is a quite admirable person, with his enthusiasms and aspirations, and he and his doings are described with a sympathy, which does not, however, blunt the keenness of the author's observation. The *fainéant* gentleman, Fred Folly, is a good study; moral conversations have seldom a convincing look in fiction, but his case is an exception. The story, as a whole, is distinctly good; still, we cannot but think that it would have been improved if there had been some little attempt at shading in the study of Adonijah Saach. Surely even Fred Folly should not have been allowed to ask *cui bono*? when he meant to ask what was the use of a proposed plan.’³

I think the reviewer is unfair. This is the quotation:

‘What about that brother?’ (Asks Fred)

‘I intend to have a talk with him. He strikes me as a strange, cantankerous creature.’

‘He is a most objectionable cub,’ said young Mr Folly.

‘He has his head full of queer notions. I shall find an occasion to let him air them.’

‘Cui bono?’

³ *Obiter dicta* - An incidental remark, something said in passing, not directly pertinent to the case under discussion.

Fainéant - idle, lazy.

Cui bono – to whose benefit? As a benefit to whom? For whom is it an advantage?)

Sylvia shrugged her shoulders. 'It is always well to find out what are the theories, prejudices, and ambitions of other people.'

'The game is not worth the candle.'

'In that I disagree with you. However crude and undigested the schemes and fantasies of men such as this Nebo Homer - '

'Is that his name?'

'Yes, I have learned it from his sister. I was about to say that, whatever the fantasies of such men as he may be, they deserve attention – they are the sparks, the heat produced by friction, somewhere.'

I imagine Sabine might have been irritated by the reviewer's interpretation, because as far as I can see, it's quite wrong.

The book did not sell well as an expensive (6 shillings) hardback, and did not earn out the advance of £250. But a cheaper edition did better, and eventually it showed a small profit.

To put *Nebo* into context - Sabine only wrote two real novels after this one: *Miss Quillet* and *In Dewisland*. He was in his late sixties, and was concentrating more on short articles and stories, his primary interest, at this time, being Dartmoor archaeology. But there is a strong Midlands element in his work of this time. Two years earlier, he wrote *The Frobishers*, set in the Staffordshire potteries. *Bladys of the Stewponey* (published 1897) is set in Kinver, also in the Midlands. In the mid 1890s, Baring-Gould was working with a publisher, R.C. & E.C. Jack, with an office in Birmingham, as well as writing for a Birmingham magazine entitled *The Quest*. These, then, were the 'Midlands years' for Sabine, and we can assume he paid repeated visits to the area at this time.

But, as the review shows, this novel was taken seriously. Over the past decade or so, Sabine had moved into the contemporary world, from his former preference for historical fiction, often at the urging of publishers. The accusation that he deals with 'economical questions' only obliquely strikes me another rather unfair remark. That's what novelists do – they concentrate on their individual characters, and show the reader the effects and implications of larger matters through the lives of these individuals. The research into nail-making is impressive, with the background painted with confidence. We can never forget what these people in the story do for a living, or how difficult their lives have become, but their small personal preoccupations are not forgotten – although the Saach baby repeatedly fades from sight.

Despite the book's title, it is arguable that Fred Folly is in fact the story's central character. Fred matures and blossoms more obviously than does Nebo. He is more

realistic about romantic matters, and is a much better listener. He is witty, handsome, impressionable and brave. He does everything with a foppish languor which we find again, twenty years later, in Lord Peter Wimsey and Bertie Wooster. (Both first saw the light of day in 1923, by the way). Fred starts off as selfish and brainless, thanks to his social position, but develops into a committed member of society – thanks largely to Nebo's straight talking.

The Spectator also points up another character – Adonijah Saach. Sabine works hard to stop us from feeling sorry for this caricature of a man who is beyond redemption. And yet there are moments when we almost like him. He has a talent for self-expression that makes us smile. He is extremely focused, and never gives up. The world is implacably against him, and this has made him bitter. He sees only one way out of his ghetto, which is to acquire as much money as he can. But he is far from stupid. He understands Nebo very well. He is irrepressible. When confronted about kidnapping Bessie, he faces Nebo squarely.

'She is gone from the Royd,' said Nebo, 'and I require you to inform me where she is.'

'I will tell you,' replied Saach. 'You must 'ave 'eerd as 'ow the sodgers 'ave been through the town. She 'as run after the redcoats.'

'A lie!' exclaimed Nebo. 'You know it is a lie and Bessie is as incapable of doing that as you are incapable of doing a worthy act.'

'I know what wenches are – wenches as runs away from 'ome and their mothers. They mostly goes after the sodgers.'

'You have taken her away,' burst forth Nebo furiously. 'You have hidden her somewhere. Where is she?'

'If I 'ad took 'er away,' said Saach, as he laid down the hammer and looked full at Nebo, with manifest enjoyment of his distress, 'if I 'ad took 'er away, do you suppose I wud tell you what I 'ad done with 'er?'

'I will force the truth from you. I have put the matter in the hands of the police.'

Saach laughed boisterously. 'Look 'ere, Nebo,' said he, 'for argiment's sake, let us assume I 'ave a-took the wench away. For why? Becos I'm a respeckable man, an' I don't choose as my wife's child should be made a talk about, wi' a fine band-box young gen'leman dancin' about 'er, and doin' what 'ee can to bring 'er into the dirt.'

'Saach!' gasped Nebo, livid with rage.

'But there! It's just for argiment's sake I allowed it. If I 'ad a-done it, and the perlice found it out, and axed why I did it, and I told 'em, wot'd they say but "Right thou art, old man, and your fillin's, us respects 'em. You 'ave done the

proper thing.” But theere, I don’t say I done it. Wot I sez is, say I, ’er ’ave run after the redcoats. They be on their way to Chester.’

Nebo stood trembling with wrath and unable to frame a sentence. He had come in unprepared and at this moment he felt his incapacity to cope with this brutal man....

Nebo tried to speak, but only spluttered incoherent words. Adonijah coolly resumed his work.

Later in the story, Saach gives a genuine-sounding account of himself, as he sees it.

‘Come ’ere, now,’ pursued Saach. ‘Wot’s the good of us bein’ unfriendly? It’s not me as keares to ’ave ill blood between us. Everyone knows I’m a good fellow an’ amiable when not crossed. You’ve took a dirty advantage of me. But I bear no malice, not I. An’ the reason why I be walkin’ beside you now is that I’ve a proposal to make.’

‘It strikes me, Nebo, as you’re in a queer box altogether. ’Ow do you get on wi’ your grand acquaintance? Do they tek you up as their ekal? Do they tek you into confidence as if you was one of them? Don’t you feel when one of them grand ones is torkin’ to you as if ’ee or she was a-comin’ down by a parachute out of a balloon to ’ave a word wi’ you, and then was goin’ up again beyond your reach? I reckon you’re mighty comfortable in their society. You feel as if you was born to be in it, and are easy in your mind, and don’t for a moment suppose you’ve made no mistakes, and they ain’t a-larfin’ at you up their sleeves, and when your back is turned they won’t be mekin’ fun of you one to another.’

Nebo’s colour flushed into his cheeks and then left them sallow. Saach looked out of the corners of his eyes and saw the effect of his words.

‘I’ll tell you the truth,’ he said, ‘tho it mayn’t be pleasant to ’ear. Wot do you think that your own people, the nailers, sez of you? Do they trust you? Do they consider you one of themselves, feelin’ like themselves? Not a bit. They seez you dress like a gen’leman, and yet are not one, no more than a turnip cut and flourished about to look like a rose, and they larf at you, and despise you, and wot they sez is – you’re a stuck-up, bumptious chap as don’t know your place. So you’re out of water every way.’

Nebo retorted with a growl.

Saach is made a mouthpiece for the central dilemma of the story. Nebo, the character who gives the book its title, is painfully suspended between two worlds, and his discomfort and confusion increase as the story proceeds. In a way, this echoes the two worlds so well described in *Court Royal*.

The women in the story are insubstantial and barely credible. Sylvia shows spirit now and then, but Bessie never does. She apparently forgets all about her baby

half-sibling, and is limp and two-dimensional until very near the end, when she does come alive for a moment. Susanna Saach, mother to Nebo and Bessie, is little more than a faceless cipher. Where everyone in the lower classes is powerless in this story, the women are even more so. Susanna does manage to leave her money to her son, as her final act, and Selena Gadd, Saach's girlfriend, has a modicum of autonomy, but it is a pale shadow of the freedom the men have.

So – the story...which I will try not to spoil completely for those who haven't yet read the book.

Nebo and Bessie are brother and sister, something like 19 and 17 or younger. Bessie has been hit on the back with a red hot rod, by her stepfather Saach. This is the final straw for Nebo, who finally confronts the man after years of frustration, and as a result they are both forced to leave the house. They live on a barren stretch of land called the Waste Moor, where the only way to make a living is by manufacturing nails by hand. Baring-Gould gives us a detailed explanation of how this work is conducted. We will learn more of this through the weekend.

This topography reminds us – among others - of *Mehalah*, *The Queen of Love*, *The Broom-Squire* and *Guavas the Tinner*, in various ways. This little-known Midlands moor is a powerful and ever-present setting, crucial to the story.

Nebo and Bessie's dead father was ambitious and sent his children to school, where they learned how to speak nicely and gleaned, it seems, a smattering of useless information. They can read and write, anyway. There is a baby, offspring of Adonijah and Susanna, who is badly neglected throughout the story. I worry about the baby a lot.

Nearby live a couple, Abraham Allfours and his wife. They have deformed backs and can only move on all fours. Strong echoes of the Dartmoor-dwelling Cobbledicks in *John Herring*, and a familiar motif in BG novels. Also, of course, echoes of Dickens and *Bleak House*.

The Allfours perform a fairly slight role in the plot, but they are memorably enjoyable. They illustrate the dictum that every single character in a novel or a play should have a value. One way of putting this is to ask whether there is a single role that no actor would ever be pleased to be given in a performance. I think *Nebo the Nailer* passes this test, despite the flimsy nature of the women. There is a prolonged comic scene in which the Allfours give evidence to the Coroner after Susanna dies.

The other brother and sister couple are Sylvia and Fred Folly. Sylvia has money, but Fred does not. When she marries, her brother will be forced to fend for himself. Their ages are not given, but it feels as if they are slightly older than the Homers.

When the foursome first meet, the social differences are highlighted forcefully. Sylvia is instantly interested and sympathetic towards the homeless pair. After another meeting, she offers immediate practical help whereby Nebo can establish a farm which promises to provide occupation and hope to the people of the Waste Moor. This is sketchily described, and the time frame is vague and contradictory. But there is a whole chapter devoted to a discussion between Sylvia and Nebo, which reads like an essay on politics and social conditions in some ways, but never abandons the requirements of fiction. It is very well done.

Mrs Saach dies, and there is little doubt that Adonijah has killed her by throwing her downstairs. Athaliah Allfours finds the body. There is an extended comic passage in which the Coroner questions the Allfours. Nebo inherits a substantial sum of money from his mother, which almost instantly changes his self-image and complicates his political views. Adonijah, having met the Follys and formed a passionate dislike of them, kidnaps Bessie and has her sent to live in Wales. She goes willingly, having been persuaded that her love for Fred Folly is hopeless and can only harm him.

Sylvia remains faithful to local aristocrat, Reggie Oswestry, never feeling remotely attracted to Nebo as a lover. He does not understand or accept this until the very end. His self-knowledge remains shaky and defective. Fred, by contrast, rapidly sees himself quite clearly. Fred has, by sheer carelessness, disrupted the romance between Sylvia and Reggie. The reader is partially aware of this throughout the story, and the suspense of waiting to discover the details and the outcome is an important subtext to the narrative.

I won't reveal the very end. It is dramatic and deftly handled. Nebo acquires a degree of self-knowledge, and Fred is destined to end up having to work for his living, whilst still maintaining an upper class influence and patronage.

There is plenty of humour in the book, with the characters of the Allfours, the dialect, the sharp observations. This reaches a climax in the chapter set in Bwlch. Fred's journey there by train is a lengthy riff on the state of the railways in Wales that makes us laugh out loud.

Intriguing little themes run through the story. One is tobacco. Reggie, Sylvia's aristocratic suitor, goes off to grow tobacco, thanks to a misunderstanding which arises from Fred's excessive smoking. Another is architecture, and here Sabine's personal interest and passion for the subject shines through. In Chapter Nineteen,

he permits himself a brief diversion when describing the property which Sylvia freely hands over to Nebo for his social experiment.

The old English farmhouse was unpretentious and eminently picturesque. Rest and comfort and home were written on its face. But the modern land-owner delivers up his farm buildings, house and all, to a local contractor or to an estate agent to rebuild, and he inscribes his ignorance and vulgarity on the structure, to be a horror in this and all succeeding ages. It costs no more to build a pretty than it does an ugly house; yet the whole of England is being spotted over with architectural monstrosities, as disfiguring to its beauty as are pimples on the face of a lovely woman.

The subject occurs again when Fred goes to find Bessie in Wales. We can be in no doubt that Sabine saw the place for himself at some point.

The village itself was entirely modern. Not a house in it was over thirty years of age. It consisted of two rows of dwellings drawn up face to face, like partners for Sir Roger de Coverley.

They were separated from each by the entire width of the road, each precisely fifteen feet from the centre and therefore thirty feet apart. Each house consisted of an upper and a lower storey, all were white-plastered and looked anaemic; all were roofed over with plum-coloured slate, and none had any garden in front. All were equally decent, equally respectable and altogether hideous.

There is the casual racism of the time, extending to the Irish, who are described as ugly blackguards.

The section of maximum humour deserves to be read in full.

'Meanwhile Fred had been much distracted from his meditations by the attention of a small child with a heavy cold in its head, which was travelling under the supervision of an indulgent mother. This child, that could walk, and had recently acquired the faculty of speech, traced in Fred a certain resemblance to an acquaintance of the name of Barker, and after eyeing the young gentleman with great attention it wriggled from its mother's knee, impatiently rejecting her offer to employ a pocket-handkerchief on its face, and toddling up to Fred, with an insidious grin put its hands on his knees and said, 'Well, Mr Barker!'

The infantile pronunciation at once convinced Fred that the child was of pure English extraction.

Fred, ever disposed to be courteous and kindly, took some notice of the advances of the infant. The mother, smiling, said, 'You must excuse him, sir, there is a gentleman in the haberdashery line calls at our 'ouse and, as you are like him, my little one has mistaken you for that gentleman.'

Fred expressed himself flattered by the mistake, and at the next station dropped two pennies into the slot and provided himself with two packets of butterscotch for the delectation of the infant.

Unhappily for him, this served to seal the interest taken in him by the child. It refused to remain in the constraint of its mother's arms. With hands and face smeared with dilute toffee, it persisted in staggering across the carriage. Placing its palms on Fred's knees – clothed in a light grey that took every stain – it repeated its salutation of, 'Well, Mr Barker!' At length the train drew up at Bwlch Road Station and Fred left with a sense of vast relief.'

Overall, as a piece of fiction, *Nebo the Nailer* has nothing to be ashamed of. The character development is handled with intelligence. The plot is neatly resolved, with not too many loose ends. Selena Gadd might adopt the Saach baby – although she might equally well not. There is no overt moralising. The contemporary readers are assumed to understand the rise of Socialism and its effects and implications. We are never given dates, since it was simply a novel set in the present day. Nobody reading it could guess that the author was a clergyman. There is scarcely a mention of church morality. Sylvia is forgiving, generous, gentle and in possession of a powerful conscience. As a representation of Christian charity, she is adequate, but not particularly powerful. Fred becomes a modern man, lowering his expectations as far as lifestyle goes. Bessie and Sylvia are both rewarded with the traditional prize of a happy marriage. At least, we are told in a subtle way that all eventually turns out well for Sylvia and Reggie.

The background research provides a structure and a vehicle for the romantic story, serving the purpose of entertaining and instructing the readers of the day. *The Quiver* magazine was aimed firmly at a female readership, but it contained many articles about contemporary society, world politics, history and quite a lot of religion. It seems designed to 'improve' the girls of the new century and broaden their horizons. There's a lot about nursing.

Grime, graft, humour and song: The spirit of the Black Country

Roy Palmer

'Dante's Inferno', 'a Gehenna', 'a barren wilderness of slag and shale', 'a black, tormented Sahara', 'the plain of the Cyclops': such descriptions of the Black Country are at variance with the fierce sense of belonging felt by the people who live there. They may explain the kind of hostility towards outsiders illustrated in the *Punch* cartoon of the late nineteenth century which showed one Blackcountryman saying to another: 'Ay, Bill, 'ere's a stranger. Let's 'eave 'alf a brick at 'im'. Paradoxically, the Black Country has never officially been an entity. It contained parts of Shropshire and Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire, and now belongs largely to the four metropolitan boroughs of Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley and Sandwell. It owes its name, of course, to the industrial activity based on the deposits of iron and coal which underlaid the area. Local identity was strengthened by dialect, involving vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. For example, a foreign doctor found this statement completely unintelligible: 'Ah cor gutter slape cuz me too ay arf gin me some ommer'. Some of those here today might also have found this tricky. Even Black Country people can be at a loss because no single accent covers the entire area. At the beginning of the twenty-first century a young man from Wolverhampton in all seriousness told a researcher:

If you go to Broierly 'ill [Brierley Hill] you can't understand a bloody word, can't understand what they're sayin' 'alf the toim, because they're even broader than we are. Many a time I bin over there, asked for directions, an' gone, 'OK, mate, cheers', an' gone on to the next person to ask 'im.

One of my favourite examples, which may be apocryphal, concerns the chain store at Oldbury, Toys R Us, which is locally known as Toys Am We. As well as this sort of thing, which is essentially variant grammar, there was an extensive vocabulary, some of it shared with other areas:

Adjectives: *clammed* (starving hungry), *lungeous* (violent in play).
Nouns: *glede* (cinder – giving the expression 'She's got a voice like a glede under a door'), *gullet* (passage between two houses), *hontle* (handful).
Verbs: *dout* (put out), *bezzle* (drink greedily), *siden* (tidy).

I could go on at some length because I find this fascinating. Let me just mention that it's been calculated that although much of the vernacular vocabulary is now gone or obsolescent, some two-thirds is still known to older people. The young writer, Liz Berry, found it necessary in her volume of poems, *Black Country*

(2014), to gloss such words and expressions as *bostin fittle* (good food), *donkey bite* (small patch of grazing), *wammel* (mongrel dog), and many more. Thick dialect is used in particular newspaper columns, and also in sessions of songs, jokes and stories known as 'Black Country Nights Out', some of which tour further afield. Dialect still plays a part in humorous sayings and anecdotes.

First woman: Ah wish Ah knew here Ah was a-goo'in' to die.

Second woman: What good'd that do yer?

First woman: Well, Ah sh'd nivver goo theer.

That kind of surreal logic characterises the exchanges between two mythical figures, Enoch and Eli (normally pronounced Aynoch and Ayli), which are still in common currency throughout the Black Country. Many of these stories have been widely published, but they also circulate orally. Here is an example told to me casually as 'Have you heard this one?'

Aynoch bought a motorbike. 'E was tryin' it out one day when 'e saw Ayli and 'e says, 'Ayli, what d'yer think on 'er?' Ayli says, 'Er looks a good un'. Aynoch says 'Gerr on the back, an' I'll give yer a ride'. So off they went. After a while, Aynoch asks, 'All right, Ayli?' 'No', 'e says, 'the cold wind ay 'alf gerrin down me chest'. Aynoch stops and says, 'Gerr off, and put yer overcoat on back to front, and I'll fasten it up at the back. That'll protect yer chest a bit. So off they went again. After a mile or so Aynoch shouts, 'Ow is it now, Ayli?' But Ayli wor there. 'E'd fallen off. So Aynoch about turns and goes back. Presently 'e comes to a crowd o' people, and there was poor Ayli a-lyin' on the floor. Aynoch asks, 'Is 'e 'urt much?' A chap answers, 'Ah doh know, but 'e ay spoke since we turned 'is yed round the right road'.

The jocular tales of the Black Country do not confine themselves to the doings of Aynoch and Ayli, though they share a similar sense of humour. They often seem set in yesteryear, a sort of verbal equivalent of an archive film:

Two women go to the seaside for the day. When they get there they want a bathe, but have no costumes. One says to the other, 'We sh'll be all right if we keep us bloomers on and keep us arms across us chests'. They set off down the beach like that. A little lad who is passing remarks, 'Ay, missus, if yo're gooin' ter drown them puppies can I 'ave the one wi' the pink nose?'

Let me hand you over now to the late Tom Langley, who died in 1980 at the age of 73. He was firmly rooted in the Black Country – his grandfather was born there in 1836 – and deeply versed in its history and lore. He had stories of everything from grave robbers to prize fighters, wife selling to poaching and murder, pigeon flying to local cuisine. Local industry, inevitably, was also a prime topic. Here he is talking about mining:

When I was a lad I knew an old chap named Gammy Whitehouse. He was called Gammy because he'd got one leg shorter than the other and he used to go up and down. His pal also had one leg shorter than the other and it was very funny because when they went out one would be going up when the other went down. Gammy was a bitter wit. He used to say, 'We'm seen some ups and down in our time, ay we?' But anyway, the story about Gammy Whitehouse is very true; it goes back to the 1840s. They were buried in the Fly Pit at Chasetown. Most of the pit ponies were called Nobby, and the Nobby of the day was with them. They were there three days in pitch darkness, and there is always one man that rises and takes command, and that man that rose was Gammy Whitehouse. After three days the food had gone. There was a drop of water, by the way, a little seepage, though relatively fresh water. But how they survived was this. They killed Nobby and ate part of his stomach which was the tenderest part. They survived, and they were buried fourteen days altogether.

That was Gammy. Another story about the mines is the man who was buried with his two pals. Again, one always rises to the top, and this was the man. He said a prayer for all three of them, and this was his prayer. He says. 'Lord, if thou'll only get we out of this lot we won't bother you again for a bloody long time'

Tom Langley also knew the classic story of the foggers, middlemen from whom nailers collected the bundles of rods which they turned into nails in individual workshops. The foggers had three sets of weights: one heavy, when giving out materials; another light, when weighing the finished articles; and (after the 1870s) a third accurate, to be produced when an inspector came to check. Nail making in the Black Country, according to one writer, goes back to Elizabethan times. It was certainly well established by the early seventeenth century as a home industry involving whole families, including children. The work was done in backyard sheds equipped with a hearth and basic tools, a pivoted, weighted hammer on a known as an 'Oliver'. Like other hand industries nailing was increasingly affected by competition from machine-made manufacture. No wonder that nailers sang:

Ommer, ommer, ommer, clink, clink, clink
Work all day without any drink.
Pudding on a Sunday without any fat,
We poor nailers can't find that.

Some young women sought sweethearts in other trades:

Colliers they get gold and silver
Nailers they get nought but brass
Who d'ye think would have a nailer
When there's plenty of collier lads

Some took the contrary view. Liz Berry writes in her poem, 'Nailmakers':

*Marry a nailing feller and yo'll be a pit oss
fer life, er sisters had told er,
but er'd gone to him anyw in er last white frock
and found a new black ommer
under a tablecloth veil.*

Nailers sang as they worked to lighten the weary hours. They also sought to defend their livelihood by forming unions and going on strike, but this was essentially a protracted rearguard action. By the 1890s nailers were earning as little as 9 shillings a week for 70, 80, or even 90 hours work, and even that was less expenses for firing. By then, most younger men had left for other jobs, leaving women to keep an ever-decreasing trade going until the 1920s.

Conditions in Bromsgrove (just outside the Black Country) were studied in a chapter of an indignant book of 1897, *The White Slaves of England*, by Robert Sherrard. An interesting figure, by the way, university educated, cosmopolitan, friend of Oscar Wilde, translator of French literature, novelist, biographer, and journalist who investigated conditions among the workers in the sweated trades. This is what he found on his first day in Bromsgrove:

The first shed that I visited was in a not unpicturesque courtyard, not far from the beautiful church. ... There were three men at work in this shed ... The persistent laboriousness of these men was my first impression. Not for one second did they interrupt their mechanical movements, undisturbed by our advent, indifferent to all but the maximum to be effected. They answered my questions, they even made comments, but their weary eyes never deflected from their work, their hands and feet busy in one monotonous jig. Now it was working the bellows, now stoking the fire, now turning the irons, and now fashioning them on the bench – a series of brusque, jerky, harassed movements, not for one second suspended; perpetual motion, under the whip of hunger, as long as nerves would direct and muscles fulfil.

As it happens, another of the trades which Sherrard investigated, was that of the Black Country chainmakers. He described the workers' conditions at Cradley Heath as 'even worse' than those of the Bromsgrove nailers. As it happens, there is an eye-witness of the same period, George Dunn, who was born in 1887 at Quarry Bank, not far from Cradley Heath. He confirms the hard times but describes how people made the most of them:

Houses hadn't used to be two bob a week. They couldn't let their houses unless they'd got a shop at the back for the women. Some shop's had got two hearths. The women and children worked the bellows themselves. I've seen scores of

babbies on the hearth in a clothes basket; be very nice and warm. They were chain mostly, there was only one or two isolated nailmakers. I started work in 1900. There were very few nailmakers at Quarry Bank at that time because they'd changed over to chainmakers. The chain hearths were exactly the same. Quite a lot of the men worked in their own shops together with their wives and children.

As with the nailers, chainmakers would go to a fogger for a bundle of rods, from which they were required to produce a set quantity of items, depending, of course, on the size. Others worked in what were small factories, sometimes with a group of men working together: a leader (known as the chainmaker), strikers, and a boy to blow the bellows. 'The heat of the furnaces is terrible', wrote Sherrard, 'and the work is exhausting. Men have to wring their clothes when they go home. A boy is attached to each factory, whose exclusive service is to run out and fetch pints for the men. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that they should drink such quantities'. The beer was gone by the 1970s, when George Dunn took me to see Noah Bloomer's, the chainshop where he had previously worked. (Incidentally, it closed a few years later). The men wore just trousers and a singlet; each had a large towel handy and a big bottle of water. They could not possibly have combined such strenuous and exhausting work with any singing. It was different for women who worked on a smaller scale, on dog chain, for example, and they gradually came to predominate as mechanisation displaced men working on big chain.

Years gone by they [the women and girls] 'd all be singing in the shops. They'd be 26 in one, I think. They'd all be singing. I was only 13 then. They'd send you for a nine-inch foot-rule. Yo'd run off, silly like; before yo got there they penny'd drop and yo'd run back. They'd go, 'Go and fetch that left-handed spanner for me'. Yo'd fly, but of course it'd dawn on you and you'd run back. They'd play some tricks on yer.. They'd sometimes put mud on your rock [handle of bellows], and when you'd blow you'd get your hand full of mud. They'd hide yer hammers and tongs and everything. They'd get the tongs hot at the wrong end, enough to make you jump. Looking back, them days were a lot happier than they are today.

That was Lucy Woodall, who worked a chainmaker for fifty years before retiring in 1972. She died seven years later at the age of 83. Fortunately, she was filmed as she worked. In the piece you heard she said that she couldn't recall other songs learned at work, but later she remembered several, including a version of the classic 'Rosemary Lane'. The banter, the humour, the practical jokes she mentioned were all part of a workplace culture which helped to humanise the experience. The spirit and tenacity for which women chainmakers were renowned were amply demonstrated when they went on strike at Cradley Heath in 1910 – remember, this is only thirteen years after Sherrard's visit - in order to compel employers to pay new rates agreed by the chainmaking trade board. They were successful, thanks to

national sympathy and widespread support. They had a number of campaign songs such as this, to the tune of 'Men of Harlech':

Rouse, ye women, long enduring,
Beat no iron, blow no bellows
Till ye won the fight, ensuring
Pay that is your due.

At length the light is breaking
The sweater's throne is shaking
Oh do your part with all your heart
A sweeter world is making.
Stand together, strong and splendid,
In your union till you've ended
Tyranny, and with toil blended
Beauty, art and joy.

I find it impressive that they were not only looking for their due, but for a world where work was combined with 'beauty, art and joy'. The women's successful struggle left a lasting mark on local memory for decades. A portmanteau song current until at least the 1970s incorporated a verse on the strike:

I said to my sweetheart the other day
What does thee want for thy birthday?
She answered diamonds and straight there and then
I gid her the queen and the ace, jack and ten
Olly oh, oll oh, to me whack fol the doodle da day.

The lady chainmakers they'm all gone on strike
The bosses they think they can pay what they like
They work 'em so hard both by night and by day
And for it they all get such terrible pay

New I dreamed that I died and to heaven did go
Where do you come from? They wanted to know
When I said from Bromsgrove, well how they did stare
They said Come right in, chap, yo're the fost man from there.

Clearly, there was a lively working-class culture in the Black Country. George Dunn, whom I mentioned earlier, spent the whole of his life in Quarry Bank. In his younger years he was not averse to a bit of poaching in the neighbouring countryside. He enjoyed pigeon flying. He was a long standing fan of Aston Villa. He cherished memories of hop picking – 'the best o' me days', he called it. He was a keen reader, with Francis Brett Young and Charles Dickens predominant on his

shelves. He knew stories and riddles, relishing sayings and speech itself. He was had a considerable repertoire of both traditional and music hall songs, and was a fine singer.

The Oyster Girl

As I was a-walking down fair London street
A charming little oyster girl I chanced for to meet
And so into her basket so nimbly I did peep
For to see if she had any oysters

Oh oysters, oh oysters, oh oysters said she
Three a tanner I'm selling them but four I'll give to thee
Three a tanner I'm selling them but four I'll give to thee
If you'll bargain for my basket of oysters

Oh landlord oh landlord oh landlord said he
Have you a little private room for the oyster girl and me
That we can sit down and so merrily merrily be
Whilst I bargain for he basket of oysters

Oh yes says the landlord oh yes says he
I have a little private room for the oyster girl and thee
That you may sit down and so merrily merrily be
Whilst you bargain for he basket of oysters

We had not been inside the room for half an hour you see
Before she picked my pocket of all my money
Then around the room she tripped and she gave me the slip
And she left me with her basket of oysters

Oh landlord oh landlord oh landlord said he
Have you seen the little oyster girl that came along with me?
Yes and she's paid me your reck'ning sir so you may go free
So it's 'look it with your basket of oysters

I'm not wishing to suggest that, as a singer, George Dunn was a typical Blackcountryman: after all, the existence of a champion runner in an area does not mean that everyone else there can equal him or her. The Black Country, like many industrial and urban areas, did not attract song collectors as did the green acres and pleasant villages of Somerset and Devon or Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Ironically, in the case of the last two counties, Black Country people, including George, would have been heard singing there during the annual stints of hop picking. George learned many songs from his parents, who in turn had acquired them from others. They were not the only people who sang. Lucy Woodall learned songs from workmates, and as it happens one of these, which she called 'Rosemary Lane', was also sung by George Dunn. His title was 'Young Sailor Bold':

I once had a colour as red as a rose
But now 'tis as pale as the lily that grows
All through the young sailor who came courting me
But a false-hearted lover he turned out to be

He told me such stories I believed what he said
And to prove that I loved him I took him to bed

But early one morning the sailor arose
And threw into my apron two handfuls of gold
Take this love take that love for the deed I have done
I have left you a daughter or else a fine son

And if it's a daughter she shall wait upon thee
And if it's a son he shall sail the blue sea
He shall wear the blue jacket a hat lined with gold
And prove by his daring a true sailor bold

Now all you young lasses take warning from me
And never trust a young man one inch o'er your knee
They'll kiss you they'll court you they'll swear they'll be true
And the very next moment they'll bid you adieu

Taken from Roy Palmer, *Classic folk songs from the heart of the Black Country*.

Sources:

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A letter to Sabine Baring-Gould

Becky Smith

Dear Sabine

It is hard for me to say just when this one-sided love affair began. Perhaps it was right back in 1959 when I experienced the thrill of living in a house that was described in one of your stories. But I think not. I think it was much, much later than that – because, you see, you were firmly my mother's property for a long time. Only when I began to eavesdrop on your letters and notebooks in the Devon Record Office, stumbling onto your innocent secrets and feeling the touch of your pen, did love really blossom.

Or perhaps it began earlier than that, when my family paid regular visits to your house, in a time when children could run free, upstairs and down, indoors and out, and I had glimpses of how life might have been for you and Grace and all those children. After all, not so very many decades had elapsed between your death and my childhood visits. I like to think your spirit lingered there yet, in certain atmospheric corners.

I read all your novels, in the span of a few years, and loved your sharpness. Like many intelligent people, you betrayed an impatience, sometimes even anger, with those less endowed. You deplored many of the usual sins – greed, dishonesty, and so forth. But you hated even more the absence of a true aesthetic amongst those entrusted with the public landscape. You raged against sentimentality and lazy thinking. You snapped and snarled at your publishers, who were forced to swallow your unreasonable accusations. I really loved you when I read those angry little letters in the archive boxes, so like emails, and so like those I have sent myself at times.

I love the characters you have created – the bad ones, especially. Elijah Rebow, Mrs Veale, Mr Lazarus – the list could be a lot longer. Like Dickens and Shakespeare, you reveal a fascination with those who transgress, or choose a darker path.

But I am a poor lover, and am ashamed at how I have let you down. At some point early in the last decade, I recklessly embarked on a telling of your life story, which would cover all your writings, your family, your travels and your religious beliefs. It went well for five years or more, as I ferreted amongst all those papers and learned details that I had never expected, and never encountered elsewhere. And

then my modest career as a writer of fiction became more demanding and, perhaps, more suited to my temperament. And yet, I came to love you all the more, as I followed you into lonely old age, where you were misunderstood and abandoned. I revelled in your sweet dalliance with Miss Healey, despite suspecting that her motives were not entirely pure. I think she made you happy.

I have always felt I knew you. You had, after all, walked in the unchanged farmyard of Chimsworthy, where I lived, and more significantly, roamed Broadworthy where I often rambled alone on a Sunday afternoon. The pages of *Red Spider* formed a slender bridge for me between reality and fiction – and who knows what lasting influence they had?

I love your poetic exaggerations – the fireflies in the pony's harness on Dartmoor, for example. I love your sincere friendships with unlikely women – Miss Angell, Frau von Hillern, and Evelyn Healey. I imagine these arose from a solid self-confidence on your part, a willingness to get close to these ladies and share yourself with them in all innocence. Just as your father went walking in the Alps with someone else's governess, you were free to pursue such friendships without embarrassment.

I love your sense of the absurd, especially where church matters are concerned. All those ludicrous saints and their utterly pointless miracles! The bishops you attack in *The Church Revival* are quite deliciously despised by you, and therefore many of your readers. That book especially reveals many aspects of your character that I find delightful.

I like to think you understood what you did to Grace; how you created her as your creature, and yet recognised and appreciated those qualities she always possessed. You elevated her to a higher social plane, and thereby made her strange and lonely in her new life, especially once you returned to Devon. All those children were, I'm sure, a gift you gave her, as well as a result of selfish male appetites. I think you both rejoiced in the babies and took great pride in all those handsome girls.

Baring-Gould and Me: A journey towards obsession

Martin Graebe

I have called this talk ‘Baring-Gould and Me: a journey towards obsession’. I will not, yet, admit that I have reached that goal, though some of my friends and, occasionally, my wife, might think I have been there for some time. Over the next fifteen minutes I would like to tell you about that journey, and you can make your own minds up.

Though I cannot remember exactly when I came across the name of Sabine Baring-Gould for the first time, I’m sure that it was attached to a sheet of music for one of his hymns or carols. I would like to believe that it was on the sheet music of ‘Gabriel’s Message’, his reworking of the lovely Basque carol, which has been one of my favourites since I first sang it in the school choir. It may, though, have been one of his hymns; ‘Now the day is over’, ‘Onward, Christian Soldier’, or ‘Daily, daily sing the praises’, all of which we used to sing in the school chapel.

It was not hard, then, to imagine what he looked like, even without seeing one of his sternly posed photographs. There was, of course, no question that it was a ‘him’, even with the rather strange fore-name. In the 1960s the prefix of ‘Rev.’ made gender a certainty. When we did see photographs of the hymn-writers they were all black and white (and would have been even if you had been using colour film). They were forbidding and undeserving of our interest when test pilots, racing drivers, footballers and pop stars, though also in black and white, demanded our attention.

It was not long, though, before the name came back to my notice. My school had a bright idea to deal with the problem of what to do with the older students who had finished their ‘O’ or ‘A’ level exams. We were sent off on ‘Initiative Week.’ With a couple of pounds in our pockets and a rucksack on our backs, we went out in pairs to complete a project of our choice somewhere in England.

I had recently discovered Dartmoor while staying with my cousin at Princetown where her husband was then working at the Prison. I persuaded my friend that a project on Dartmoor would be a really good idea and so we hitch-hiked to Ivybridge, on the southern edge of the moor, and then walked, first to Princetown and then over to Buckfastleigh, stopping to look at old mine workings and prehistoric remains along the way. From there we headed into Plymouth and to the Central Library to do the research that would justify our trip. Baring-Gould came to our rescue and we shamelessly copied passages from his books on Devon and

Dartmoor so that we could nonchalantly talk of our studies of stone rows, kistvaens and hut circles. I am not sure whether a school would be allowed, nowadays, so blatantly to expose its children to danger in order to save on teaching resources and catering costs. But the damage was done. I had been infected with Dartmooritis and this dangerous disease, which also affected Baring-Gould, was to determine the course of my career and my life.

A few years later, as I was completing my studies at the National College of Food Technology, I was faced with the reality that I needed a job. In the end it was a choice between doing quality control on cakes for Mr Kipling near Southampton or research and development for Ambrosia rice pudding based in Exeter. The prospect of being on Dartmoor's doorstep decided it and I thought I could afford a couple of pleasant years in Devon before getting a proper job. After all, how much research could there be to do on rice pudding? I stayed there twenty years. When the laboratory was relocated to the factory site at Lifton, in West Devon, I moved to Okehampton, on Dartmoor's northern edge, with a commute that took me twice a day past the majestic row of tors that stretches from Okehampton to Tavistock.

Lifton is only a short distance from Lewtrenchard, and I was passing though Lew Down every day. These were the days when it was customary for visiting sales representatives to take people out to lunch at a local pub or hotel. One day I found myself being driven through the gates of the Lewtrenchard Manor Hotel. The gardener looked up as we drove past and made our way into the hotel where we were met by Mrs Briggs (one of Baring-Gould's great-granddaughters) and invited to sit in the bar, where we were served by the gardener's twin - dressed now in immaculate tie and tails. Both of these people were, of course, the famous Jim. Lew House became a favourite watering hole, and I got to know Image and the family and even met Merriol Almond and her Uncle Teddy there on one visit.

That visit had been in connection with a folk concert that I have been asked by Image to organise at the house, with the local branch of EFDSS. I had been introduced to folk songs at school and developed that interest further while at college, so that, when I arrived in Devon, I started to visit the folk song clubs. It was not long before the name of Baring-Gould cropped up again, this time as the premier collector of songs in Devon and Cornwall. His name was not universally blessed, since the orthodox view was that he had changed the songs too much, leaving out the naughty bits. That didn't, though, seem to stop people singing them. As part of my induction into Devonshire life I bought a number of Baring-Gould's books about the county and invested in the first of my copies of his *Songs of the West*. Within a few years I had acquired a reputation for knowing something about Baring-Gould and was asked to do some workshops and talks about his song collection. And so it began.

The moment at which my interest was transformed to near-obsession can be determined to within a few hours. In 1989 I was asked by Paul Wilson and Marilyn Tucker of Wren Music to join them in a show to mark the Centenary of the first publication of *Songs of the West* which was put on as part of the Okehampton Summer Festival. Apart from singing, my role was to construct a narrative, based on Baring-Gould's writing, to link the show together and to impersonate him by reading some of the quotations. The show worked well and we performed it around Devon with such success that we decided to make a recording of it. We chose to do this as a live recording in the library at Killerton House, near Exeter, where the greater part of Baring-Gould's collection of books was then housed. We did two shows so that we could extract the best of each for the final recording.

During the break between the two shows we were entertained to a meal by Denise Melhuish who manages the house for the National Trust and, before we started the second show, she showed us some of the books, which it was not normally possible for visitors to handle. My heart started beating faster when she took out one of three large handwritten volumes of songs, which I recognised to be similar to the manuscript books of songs that Baring-Gould had given to Plymouth Library. Being quite familiar by then with the Plymouth manuscripts, I also realised that this was a much bigger collection. That was the moment, at about 6:30 on the evening of 22nd March 1992 when the course of my life changed, and I started down the path to obsession.

It took a while to get permission to work with the manuscripts from the National Trust and from Merriol Almond. I don't know why, at that time, the prospect of dealing with this American stranger seemed so daunting. I had, briefly, met her before and she had seemed perfectly pleasant. But she was very positive then, and has been totally supportive of what I have done ever since. Having got the necessary permissions, I started to make regular visits to Killerton to work with the manuscripts. At the time, that meant I could only work in the library when the house was closed or during the winter – not always the most comfortable way of working. I began to examine the manuscripts and to catalogue them – always keeping my eye open for good songs that I could sing. When I needed a stretch I explored the library, slowly becoming familiar with the 5,000 books from Baring-Gould's collection that were housed there. These included classic folk song texts, many signed and inscribed, as gifts to Baring-Gould from their editors. There were bound volumes containing chap-books and broadside ballads, just a part of the huge collection of street literature that he had once owned, the rest of which had been given to the British Museum Library. And there were the books that he had used for reference in his studies of folklore and folk song. All of these offered the promise of a better understanding of his folk song collecting.

After I had visited Killerton a few times, Denise surprised me again when she said: 'Did I tell you about the boxes in the basement?' These turned out to be 32 large boxes that contained, among some general detritus from Baring-Gould's collection, a number of notebooks (including more folk songs), albums, letters, printers' proofs and other papers. After some initial examination I reported the discovery to Merriol Almond and it was agreed that the boxes would be transferred to the Devon Record Office (now the Devon Heritage Centre) in Exeter. Here, they have been consulted by me and by many other scholars of Baring-Gould and his work in the years since, and have helped considerably in increasing our understanding of him in a number of different ways.

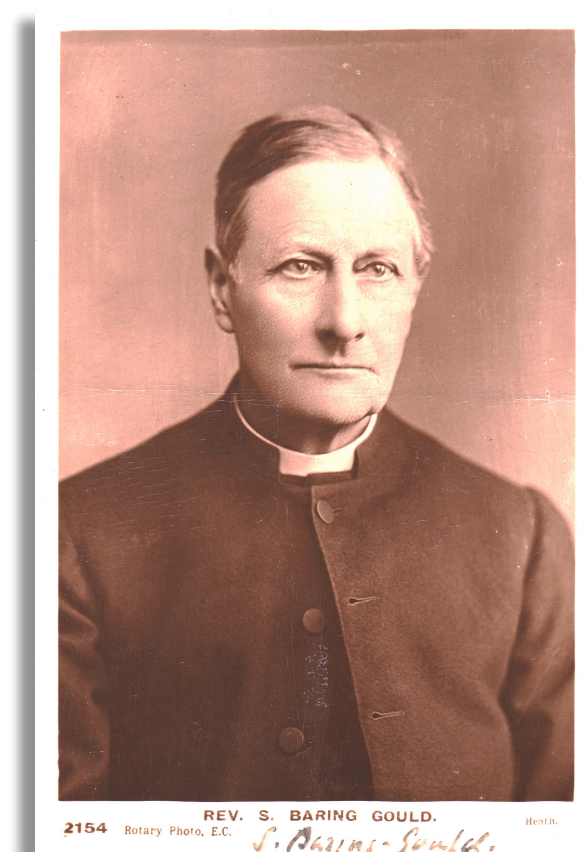
I joined SBGAS in 1995; another experience that seemed a bit scary at the time. There were all these people who knew so much about Baring-Gould and who had even read his novels. It was another couple of years until the meeting at Bratton Clovelly gave me a chance to examine this strange breed at close quarters. I began to contribute articles to the SBGAS newsletter and was slowly drawn into the web. I had already read a lot of what Baring-Gould had written, but began to read more. I even began to read some of the novels. This enabled me to fill in more of the background to his life as I gave talks about his folk song collection to various organisations at home and abroad. These talks have been intended to raise awareness of his work as a folk song collector.

Perhaps the most important work that I have done to date is that of helping to make his collection available to the general public. This was started in 1998 with the publication by Wren Music of the microfiche edition of the collection, which was made available in libraries in Devon and elsewhere as a result of the Baring-Gould Heritage Project. In 2011 the 'Devon Traditions' project, also involving Wren Music, rephotographed the manuscript collection as digital images which enabled the whole of Baring-Gould's manuscript collection of folk songs to be put online, so making them available, free of charge, to anyone who wants to see them, anywhere in the world, on the EFDSS's 'Full English' website.

My research has taken me to many different places where Baring-Gould's original manuscripts are to be found – mostly in England but also in the USA. I have read hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles written by him and about him. I have scoured the newspapers, trying to unpick the publication history of some of his books. And I have visited many of the locations important to his story – including three journeys to Iceland. All this needs to be written up: sometimes for short articles in the newsletter, sometimes in magazines and, sometimes, in impressive academic journals. I have also contributed chapters to some books – my bibliography is starting to look quite impressive. But my intention has always been to write a book about Baring-Gould, his folk song collection, and the people that

worked with him to achieve it. That is now well advanced and, with a bit of luck, will be on your bookshelf in the next couple of years.

I have grown to like Sabine Baring-Gould – most of the time. His inconsistencies are very annoying – but then so are mine. There is so much that I would still like to know and which I know that we will never know. And there is still a lot of work to understand and interpret his folk song collection. Even when my book has been published there will still be more work to do than I can reasonably expect to complete in my lifetime. That is why it is important to get other people interested and sharing in the study of this fascinating man and his amazing collection of folk songs.

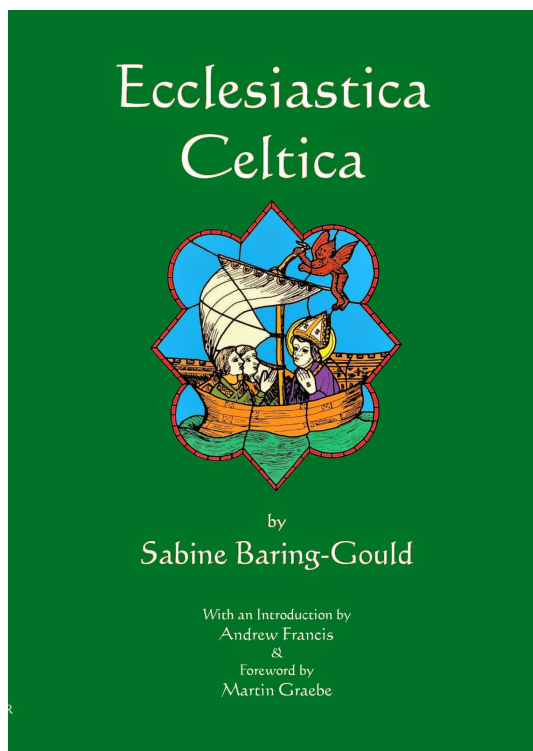


Signed postcard from Martin Graebe's collection.

The reverse reads 'Not a recent photograph, but taken some 30 years ago' (in Baring-Gould's hand).

Book Review

Sabine Baring-Gould, *Ecclesiastica Celtica*, with An Introduction by Andrew Francis, Bristol: Imagier Publishing, UK 2014 pp. xxiii + 229. Paperback £10 ISBN 978-09573715-1-4. www.imagier.com.



It seems very odd reviewing a book by Baring-Gould - the title of which never existed! *Ecclesiastica Celtica* is a title which the modern publishers have given to a re-printing of extracts drawn from Baring-Gould's essays in the 1898 Appendix Volume of *Lives of the Saints* – Volume Sixteen and material taken from his four volume *Lives of the British Saints* published in 1913.

The present paperback begins with *A Biographical Note* by Martin Graebe which paints a warm and vivid picture of Baring-Gould's many gifts and pursuits for those who light upon *Ecclesiastica Celtica* without knowing anything about the author. There is a minor slip on page xviii. Baring-Gould went up to Clare, Cambridge in 1853 (not 1872).

On the same page there the oft-repeated notion that Baring-Gould was overwhelmingly swayed by 'the Oxford Movement and the ritual of Anglo-Catholicism'. This always needs to be paralleled by reference to the Cambridge Movement, the Cambridge Camden Society and the Society of the Holy Cross all of which moulded and shaped Baring-Gould's churchmanship.

Andrew Francis' 22-page *Introduction* contains a curious mixture of surmise and conjecture about Baring-Gould's motives in penning his material on the Celtic Church. To this has been added an enthusiastic and zealous account of both the survival and the perceived revival of Celtic spirituality – both of which are regarded by current church historians as contentious and unresolved areas of debate. Here we are presented with the thesis that Baring-Gould deliberately 'buried' the Celtic Church material at the end of Volume Sixteen of *Lives of the Saints*. Further that he deliberately chose his latter years to separate out the more 'mystical' elements of Christianity, and that furthermore Baring-Gould purposely published the Celtic material quietly, cautious of the threatening shadows of Bishops Benson and Temple. Much more likely and much truer to his work-load is

a contrary theory that Baring-Gould, who feared neither publishers nor bishops, did not get round to Volume Sixteen and its supplementary material until he had the time!

The assertion that there might have been something of the absentee parson about Baring-Gould is of course manifestly not the case! And his need to write to earn money seems to have gone unnoticed.

The essay forming the *Introduction* groups together the opinions of modern authors who take radically different views about what we can and cannot know or claim for the myths and facts of Celtic spirituality. Ian Bradley and Donald Meeks are cited as bed-fellows whereas Donald Meeks is radically opposed to the romanticism of Ian Bradley and presented his major thesis *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* to expose the many-sided belief that there was or is a coherent Celtic spirituality. Unnoticed in the *Introduction* is also Meeks exposure of the validity of much so-called Celtic prayer and poetry – not least the notion that there was any significant evenness in the much over-rated *Carmina Gadelica* of Alexander Carmichael.

Proof-reading of the *Introduction* has left intact ‘Kilvert’ sDiary’ (sic) (p.6); ‘libairies’ and ‘it’s’ for ‘its’ (p.7); ‘became’ for ‘become’ (p.9); ‘it’ for ‘its’ (p.19) among others.

Baring-Gould’s own texts, which make up the main pages of *Ecclesiastica Celtica* are, like all his writings, a delight to read. He writes in his inimitable style. He never allows unverifiable facts to get in the way of a good tale! His narrative, reflections and summaries all need to be tested against the latest critical theories about the Celtic church, but that is not why anybody would now choose to read Baring-Gould thinking him a safe church historian. He remains, after all, the epitome of the assertion that all history is fact plus interpretation. The second part of the Baring-Gould material in *Ecclesiastica Celtica* on *Brittany, Its Princes and Saints* is again very interesting but without doubt must be read for its atmosphere and large-scale interpretation rather than for its quality as good history. The third section of the Baring-Gould material, *A Glossary of Celtic Saints*, provides an indispensable set of references but again we must enjoy the fact that Baring-Gould did not readily distinguish ‘was’ from ‘may have been’ or fact from pious legend. But in writing about ‘Celtic’ saints, particularly those of Cornwall, fact and pious fiction have always blended into an enjoyable and inseparable mixture!

Norman Wallwork

Notes on the Contributors

Roger Bristow is a geologist by profession and an entomologist by inclination. It was whilst working in the Essex marshes that he came across the name Sabine Baring-Gould, a vicar on Mersea Island who had written a book with a funny title - *Mehalah*. Having bought a copy for 2/6 (half-a-crown) and read it avidly, he was hooked. He has compiled an 80-page bibliography of SB-G's works which includes over 1150 titles, many published in such obtuse newspapers as the *Kalgoorlie Western Argus* and the *Ossett Observer*. For many years he was the Society's Secretary, and is now the Newsletter Editor.

Martin Graebe has been interested in Sabine Baring-Gould and his folk song collection for over forty years, as described in the article in this volume of the *Transactions*. He has written extensively on the subject as well as giving public presentations. Martin and Shan Graebe sing together to audiences around the world, taking Baring-Gould's songs with them. He is the Chairman of SBGAS.

Becky Smith is a professional author, whose detective novels delight readers the world over. She grew up in Devon and the development of her interest in Baring-Gould's life and work is also described in this volume. Her informal style has made her a familiar and popular presenter at the annual meetings of SBGAS. She now lives in rural Herefordshire, from where she emerges from time to time to research her novels and to attend crime writing events around the world. Her imprint, Praxis Books, has republished a number of Baring-Gould's books, including *Nebo the Nailer*.

Roy Palmer, who died on 26 February 2015 aged 83, was a prolific writer with more than 30 books and numerous articles to his credit. Though, perhaps, best known for his studies of folklore and folk song he was actively involved in a wide range of literary and other interests, including the work of John Masefield and the Dymock poets. He discovered folk song at university in Manchester and soon became involved in the movement. As a teacher and, later, a headmaster in Birmingham he started to write about songs and folklore, and the social history that underlies them, in a series of books for both children and for adults. He shared his knowledge freely with those who sought his advice, though part of the deal was that you used it well. Our thoughts go out to his wife, Pat, who also joined us in Bromsgrove, and to his three sons and their families.

Norman Wallwork is a Methodist minister living in retirement in Exeter. In addition to appointments in London and the provinces he has taught liturgy and Worship at Wesley College Bristol. He was a member of the panel that produced the current Methodist hymnbook *Singing the Faith* for which one of his own hymns and a number of his revisions were commissioned. Norman is a Prebendary of Wells Cathedral and is about to become one of the two lead Chaplains to the retail community in Exeter city centre. At the Society's Cambridge gathering in 2001, Norman gave a paper on 'The Churchmanship of Baring-Gould'.



Roy Palmer (1932 – 2015)



SBGAS members visit the reconstructed nailshop at the
Avoncroft Museum, Bromsgrove



‘Rosedene’, cottage in the Dodford Chartist Settlement, owned
and restored by the National Trust
(The settlement is mentioned in the novel, *Nebo the Nailer*)