



Pooley, W. G., McLellan, J., Hanna, E., Dudley, M., Cole, T., Williamson, B., & Bickers, R. (2020). Creative Dislocation: an Experiment in Collaborative Historical Research. *History Workshop Journal*, 90, 273. Article dbaa030. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbaa030>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1093/hwj/dbaa030](https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbaa030)

[Link to publication record on the Bristol Research Portal](#)  
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Oxford University Press at <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbaa030> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol – Bristol Research Portal

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/brp-terms/>

## **Creative dislocation: an experiment in collaborative historical research**

This article introduces an experiment in collaborative historical practice. It describes how six historians visited the East Devon village of Branscombe in July 2016, with the aim of creatively engaging with the present and past of the village. This was a collaborative and collective act of what we term here ‘creative dislocation’. We were dislocated from our routines, our routine subjects, our routine places, methods, paces, and styles, and we adopted creative methods and constraints. In doing so, we aimed to shed light on the role of creativity in the historical research process. Despite a rich and long-established discussion of the fundamental role of creativity in historical practice, historians are often uncomfortable with the explicit language and methods of creativity (and even the word itself, preferring synonyms).<sup>1</sup> The aim of the historian, we are reminded, is surely to recover what happened in the past, and understand it, rather than embroider or add to it, let alone speculate.<sup>2</sup> This unease and anxiety can be seen in boundary-policing by historians, journalists, and cultural commentators around the borders of ‘popular’ and ‘academic’ history, creative non-fiction, and historical fiction. Yet there is not only a long tradition of historians producing self-consciously creative outputs, there is also creativity in any historical project. In most cases, it is simply not explicit. In this paper we argue instead for an understanding of creativity in historical practice that includes process as well as product. Although our experiment resulted in six short pieces of writing - three of which are presented at the end of this piece - they should not be understood first and foremost as standalone creative or academic outputs, but rather as records of the ways in which our processes made us think, at a particular time, in a particular place, having followed a certain set of methods, together.

Our move to creativity has not been made in isolation. In contemporary Britain, it is considered self-evident that creativity is a personal and public good. Creativity is variously presented as the path to better mental and physical health, self-realisation, higher productivity, economic growth, and personal efficiency. The broader resurgence of interest in creativity has multiple

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, R.G. Collingwood’s well-known discussion in his 1935 inaugural lecture at Oxford on ‘The Historical Imagination’, reprinted in: R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946);

<sup>2</sup> ‘Bickers is candid that his is mere speculation, but this is, simply put, not worth doing. Since it necessarily leaves open doors that cannot be closed, why bother?’, Philippa Levine, ‘Review of Robert Bickers, ‘Empire Made Me’, *American Historical Review* 110:4 (2005), pp. 1136–1137; See Simon Schama’s reflection on ‘the storm of righteous indignation’ which greeted his *Dead Certainties* in 1991: ‘Preface to the New Edition’, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (London: Granta Books, 2013). Schama’s book contained more than speculation of course: it was fiction.

threads: spiritual, therapeutic, and commercial.<sup>3</sup> But since at least the 1970s there has been a fundamental tension between creativity as, on the one hand, counter-cultural resistance and, on the other, as neo-liberal self-regulation and marketing.<sup>4</sup> Indeed these two traditions have often come together in the thicket of the creativity self-help industry.<sup>5</sup> These tensions between the conservatism and radicalism of creativity have been replicated in the emerging academic field of ‘creative histories’, and creative approaches to the past.

‘Creative histories’ has become an umbrella term for diverse traditions and genealogies of scholarship, such as the imaginative, the fictional, and the genre-challenging. The importance of imagination to historical work, for instance, could be traced back from the recent flowering of ‘speculative biography’ through Natalie Zemon Davis and other microhistorians, to Collingwood, then to the Romantics, and no doubt beyond.<sup>6</sup> These ideas have often grown from fascination mingled with distrust of historical novelists and other fictionalizers of historical fact.<sup>7</sup> But alternative genres of historical presentation are not limited to the novel. Although they have rarely come out of university history departments, genre-challenging histories such as poetry collections, theatre performances, visual art, and film have long co-existed alongside the academic monograph and article.<sup>8</sup> Much of the most important work of this kind in public history has been led by heritage organizations and community groups, communicating and researching histories in different forms.<sup>9</sup> The programme of the ‘Creative Histories’ conference in Bristol in July 2017 shows how varied the field is, with presentations on historical fiction for children and young adults, quilting as historical practice, graphic novels, auto-

---

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); ‘Creativity research: Its sociological and educational limitations’, *Studies in Art Education* 1983, p. 132; Arts & Humanities Research Council, *The Creative Economy* (Swindon: AHRC, 2014), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> For example: Centre for Planning and Development Research, *The Adventure Playground: Creative Play in an Urban Setting and a Potential Focus for Community Involvement* (Berkeley CA, 1970); Sam Wetherall, ‘Painting the Crisis: Community Arts and the Search for the ‘Ordinary’ in 1970s and ’80s London’, *History Workshop Journal* (2013) 76 (1): 235-249; Rod Purcell, ‘Images for change: community development, community arts and photography’, *Community Development Journal* (2009) 44 (1): 111-122.

<sup>5</sup> Miya Tokumitsu, ‘In The Name of Love’, *Jacobin* (29) (2014). <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/>

<sup>6</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History*; Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Donna Lee Brien, “‘The facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination’: History, fiction and speculative biography”, *TEXT*, 28 (2015).

<sup>7</sup> See Carlo Ginzburg’s reflection on *The Return of Martin Guerre* in his essay ‘Proofs and Possibilities’, reproduced in *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive* (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Poetry: Hannah Lowe, *Ormonde* (2014). Theatre: Martin Sherman, *Bent* (London: Amber Lane Press, 1979); Stephen Hornby, ‘The Burnley Buggers’ Ball: How a Forgotten Slice of Gay British History Inspired a New Play’, <https://attitude.co.uk/article/the-burnley-buggers-ball-how-a-forgotten-slice-of-gay-british-history-inspired-a-new-play/13487/>. Visual art: <https://lubainahimid.uk/about/>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example <https://outstoriesbristol.org.uk>, and <https://hiddenpresencewales.tumblr.com>.

ethnography, steampunk, video and board games, blogging, as well as art installations and performances.<sup>10</sup> Many of these different threads of ‘creative histories’ come from explicitly radical traditions of the kinds that have been at the heart of the History Workshop movement: feminist, socialist, queer, and subaltern.<sup>11</sup>

In this broad field of creative histories the focus is often on a creative end-product: a novel, film, poem, exhibition, weaving, play or performance. Many historians may automatically rule out creative histories on these grounds, feeling that they are themselves neither trained (which, in the main, they are not) nor talented (which is less cut-and-dried) in the creative arts. The time pressures of a modern academic career and the expectations around REF and career progression mean that most feel the need to prioritise traditional academic publications over ‘creative’ outputs. Yet this output-led understanding of creativity is unnecessarily and unhelpfully restrictive.

Our experiment in ‘creative dislocation’ suggests another way for historians to think about how they bring creativity into their practice.<sup>12</sup> This trip took us away from our accustomed haunts and habits in a number of ways. We were going to a place - Branscombe - that none of us had visited before. We were a group of historians, by chance five modernists and one medievalist, none of whom worked on the history of Devon, and all of whom were leaving our usual knowledge and historiography behind. We were also temporarily leaving behind our Bristol offices, with their associated marking, email and obligations. And we planned to explore it through a series of creative practices that took us away from our tried-and-tested practices of archival research and academic writing. We argue that these collaborative creative practices are a useful set of tools which can help historians to strengthen and invigorate our craft, even for those working in traditional forms.

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/events/2017/july/creative-histories.html>.

<sup>11</sup> For instance: Katherine E. Collins “‘A Man of Violent and Ungovernable Temperament’”: Can Fiction Fill Silences in the Archives?”, *Life Writing*, 2019, Saidiya Hartman ‘Venus in Two Acts’, *Small Axe*, 26:12 (2008), Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (2016).

<sup>12</sup> We draw here on the idea of ‘provocative dislocation’ described in an account of another place-based project: Adrian Howkins, Marianna Dudley, Peter Coates, Tamsin Badcoe, Sage Brice, Andy Flack, Daniel Haines, Paul Merchant, Laurence Publicover, Richard Stone & Alice Would, ‘An excursion in the environmental humanities: some thoughts on fieldwork, collaboration, and disciplinary identity following a day trip to the Island of Lundy’, *Green Letters*, 23:1 (2019), 39-53.

This article begins with an outline of what we did: how we got to Branscombe, how we began our writing process, and how our research processes evolved. We then turn to explore five key elements of creative dislocation we adopted during this experiment: place, serendipity, constraint, collaboration, and process. We argue that introducing creative methodologies to the research process can enhance our work, even when it takes conventional academic forms, and we provide some suggestions for how to introduce such techniques. Finally we present, unrevised, three variations on our Branscombe theme, which are published as they were written: collaborative and yet individual. They exist because of each other, and in relation to each other. Although this is only hinted at, they borrowed from each other. But we were also, at the same time, alone with our training, habits, reservoirs of reading and experience as we wrote them.

### **Experimenting in and with Branscombe**

Our experiment took place over two days in early July, in the Devon village of Branscombe. We had three criteria in choosing a place: it should be near the sea, it should be stony, and it should have a church. Some of the group were interested in environmental humanities, and, in particular, the sea and water, and stone, while others were interested in materiality.<sup>13</sup> The third criterion was suggested by the medievalist among us, for whom a church is a crucial architectural, social, and historical landmark. So we took out the Pevsner volumes for the coastal counties closest to Bristol: Dorset and Devon.<sup>14</sup> What better place than the Jurassic Coast? Not too far from Bristol, and stony and watery in just the right ways. By the serendipity of accommodation available to be booked, cross-referenced with those capriciously-chosen constraints, we found ourselves in Branscombe. We did not know the history of the place, and we did not seek it out before our visit.

We began by walking up onto the cliffs before clambering down to Branscombe's shingle beach. We planned to start our work by writing about found objects, so each of us brought back a natural and a man-made object we found on the beach. (Later, we would remember Branscombe's recent controversial beachcombing episode after the January 2007 wreck of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone. An Ecology of the Inhuman* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *Dorset* (Pevsner Architecture Guides: Buildings of England, Yale University Press, 1972); Nikolaus Pevsner, *Devon* (Pevsner Architecture Guides: Buildings of England, Yale University Press, 1989).

*MSC Napoli*.<sup>15</sup>) We returned to our accommodation with a small collection of pebbles, driftwood, plastic bottles and netting, bleached and eroded by the sea. We began with a simple timed exercise, writing for ten minutes without stopping on the prompt ‘a bracing dip’.<sup>16</sup> We then each picked one of the objects, and did an exercise where one of us read out a series of 14 questions, and we sought to answer them from the point of view of the object.

*What are you?  
How are you feeling now?  
Where would you rather be?  
What relationships do you have? (i.e. describe family, friends, how you get on with other bottles)  
What do you dream of doing?  
What worries you?  
What would you like others to think of you?  
What keeps you awake at night? (thoughts or external things)  
What is the best thing you ever did?  
What is the worst thing you ever did? (e.g. ‘I once ...’)  
What makes you feel guilty?  
What is your favourite time of day/night?  
What is the point of your life?  
How would you like to be remembered?’<sup>17</sup>*

We now had a series of 14-line poems, from the perspective of a stone, a piece of rusty metal, a washed-up suitcase handle and more. It was a way of working unfamiliar to the normal practices of the historian who, while used to ideas of the historical imagination, is not used to writing poetry from the perspective of an object.

For our next exercise, we moved to more familiar territory for the historian and looked for a site-specific archival text as a prompt. A keyword search of an online newspaper database for ‘Branscombe, church, history’ threw up, high in the list of results, a 26 November 1949 report in the *Western Morning News* headed ‘Vicar tells story of Branscombe through the centuries’.<sup>18</sup> The report offered us twelve anecdote-crammed paragraphs, and the evocative opening sentence ‘Branscombe is an ancient place—“half as old as time”’. We read the text

---

<sup>15</sup> Ian Cook and Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, ‘Material Geographies’, in Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 99-122.

<sup>16</sup> This methodology was inspired by Barbara Turner-Vessalago’s *Writing Without A Parachute: The Art of Freefall* (Jessica Kingsley, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> This exercise was taken from the excellent resource pack ‘Workshops That Work - Creative Writing Exercises’, which can be found here: <[http://www.expresseumpoetics.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/04\\_c\\_creative\\_writing\\_exercises.pdf](http://www.expresseumpoetics.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/04_c_creative_writing_exercises.pdf)>.

<sup>18</sup> *Western Morning News*, 26 November 1949, p. 4. This introduced *Branscombe: The Parish and the Church* (July 1949), by F. C. Butters (who probably penned the article).

together, and then each wrote for fifteen minutes in response. In this task, though we were working with a type of source more familiar to the historian, and not writing poetry, our openness to freer ways of writing, our willingness to experiment, and our conscious attention to chance combinations of ideas and words had been stimulated by the earlier creative writing exercise with which we had limbered up. We combined these into a single shared document, read each other's work and then did a further timed writing exercise where we borrowed and worked with each other's ideas and turns of phrase. This archival discovery drew us away from our initial focus on the pebble beach to explore the interior of the church and its churchyard.

The series of writing exercises that we experimented with dislocated us from our comfort zones in a number of ways: timed writing with and without the historian's 'sources' to hand, working in unfamiliar forms and with found objects, working with an expanded sense of imagination, sharing writing in progress, and working collaboratively with found texts. As a way of engaging with each other's writing, and piquing our interest in Branscombe it had worked well. At the end of our time together in Branscombe, we set ourselves the challenge of each developing a longer text (of no more than 2,000 words) building on what we had found. We took advantage of the summer months to do further archival research, and visit relevant sites, and we pooled the material we found using a shared drive. This resulted in an informal, collaborative archive that included newspaper articles, family documents from genealogy websites, histories of Branscombe and its church—including that authored by F.C. Butters, the 'Vicar of Branscombe' in 1948—manuscript and visual sources from the Devon Heritage Centre as well as the online resources of the productive and stimulating community history initiative, the Branscombe Project.<sup>19</sup> Once term started, another colleague with similar interests joined us, and, now seven, we met up once a month to report back on progress. By Christmas we had created six texts which offered a multi-vocal history of Branscombe and Butters. From two days together in one place, we had gone in six individual (personal, temperamental, scholarly, creative) directions. For reasons of space, we present three of them here, which give a flavour of the variety of our responses to the material. The project allowed us to develop a set of shared practices based around the idea of creative dislocation, which we

---

<sup>19</sup> Branscombe Project, url: <http://www.branscombeproject.org.uk/> We are quite ashamed to admit that it was only after our visit that we became aware of this impressive initiative.

outline below under the five headings: place, constraint, serendipity, collaboration and process.

## Place

We made a conscious creative choice to start with an unfamiliar place, rather than an archive, or a historiographical concern, or a specific artefact. Taking ourselves away from Bristol, immersing ourselves in an unfamiliar place and engaging not only in close reading, but also in a more multi-sensory experience of place and of materials was a way to kick start creative thinking and writing about present and pasts. We took ourselves to Branscombe, immersed our bodies in the cold sea, sunned them on the beach, played with smooth pebbles with our hands, trusted our feet to climb steep coast paths. We were interested in ourselves in this place, in addition to the place itself. Being alive to the sensory qualities of place also came to us from an existing academic interest in the methods and concerns of spatial history, historical geographies, and environmental history, which readily incorporate site visits and field work into research processes.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that we had set ourselves material aspects to the choice of place (it should be stony, and watery) rather than choosing a location purely based on distance from Bristol, afforded the consideration of materials as part of our collective experiences of place. These included both the playful, informal experiences of walking barefoot on the beach, and picking up shells, and also the more concerted efforts of thinking about and writing about materials that we found.<sup>21</sup> The materials that we touched became conduits for creative thinking. Beginning by writing about what we saw and touched was a way of paying close attention, and of the looking hard and thinking hard that is so critical to practices of close reading. The stone and the water appear scattered through our writing: from pebbles to pebbledash, from church walls to gravestones;

---

<sup>20</sup> The literature to choose from here is vast, but the following suggestions retain a focus on the local, within broader narratives, and have a connection to south west landscapes: John Wylie, 'A Single Day's Walking: Narrating Self and Landscape on the Southwest Coast Path', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30 (2), 234-247; in environmental history, the collection edited by Peter Coates, David Moon and Paul Warde, *Local Places, Global Processes: Histories of Environmental Change in Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2016), emerged from a series of 3 place-based workshops in Somerset, Cambridgeshire and Northumbria. Stanford Spatial History project <http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/index.php>; Holocaust Geographies collaborative <http://holocaustgeographies.geo.txstate.edu>; <http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/project.php?id=1015>

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Bodily Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).



water that brought in smuggling vessels, and beachgoing tourists, and carried away flint pebbles.

## **Constraint**

Artists have long valued the creative potential of constraints – whether temporal, material or thematic.<sup>22</sup> It is less common for historians to reflect on the ways that constraints foster creativity in their own analysis and writing.<sup>23</sup> Yet during this project we found that constraints—both intentional and unintentional—shaped what we did in productive ways. We had deliberately restricted ourselves to the history of Branscombe, a place we knew very little about. We had also chosen to work with a single source. As we followed the archival traces once we left Branscombe, we encountered the usual constraints of the archive. And as we wrote, like any project, we faced limitations of time and word-count. Yet these constraints were not frustrations, but rather invitations to work with and remake what we had.

The premise of creativity allowed us to do what we otherwise warn against—‘imagine’ the past, pretend to be somewhere, sometime, and in the company of historical characters, before any serious archival work had taken place. But our imaginative wanderings remained grounded in texts and objects, and Branscombe itself. The empiricism of history may seem to rule out creativity and invention, but perhaps the historical record is just another constraint, an aid to creativity and not a barrier. We might not have made things up, but we did embrace the power of the imagination in Branscombe, in ways we are perhaps reluctant to do in our regular academic work. Later on, as we researched and wrote, our archival wanderings—both virtually and physically—took us off in multiple directions, following stories of Butters and Branscombe across both time and space, owing much to the normal stuff of serendipitous encounter, the following up of intriguing references and those things that seem ‘interesting’ or ‘important’.

## **Serendipity**

---

<sup>22</sup> See for example the Boyle Family’s *World Series* (1968-): <http://www.boylefamily.co.uk/boyle/about/>.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Bickers, *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); Tim Cole, *Traces of the Holocaust: Journeying in and out of the Ghettos* (London: Continuum, 2011); Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-century France*, translated by Arthur Goldmann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

Our work in and on Branscombe purposefully foregrounded creativity and serendipity at each stage: our choice of village, the selection of Butters as a jumping-off point, and the use of creative writing techniques such as writing prompts and working with found words and objects. It also brought us together—with a diverse range of research skills and interests that framed the avenues of archival research that the next stage of the project took us on. We wanted playfulness to pervade the project from beginning to end—through walking, writing poetry, chopping up prose, swapping and re-making it. That chance discovery of a single newspaper account about the post-war publication of a new history of the parish by the vicar, F.C. Butters, reframed our exploration of this place and moved our attention from the coast that had initially occupied our attention, inland and up the steep valley to the medieval parish church. The role played by Butters, and our imagining of him, though we came upon him serendipitously, became surprisingly central.

At that early stage we had limited knowledge of the man, but were content to imagine his relationship with Branscombe and his parishioners, what he ‘felt’, how his house looked (and which direction his study windows faced). Lack of evidence or verifiable fact did not hold us back – yet. The time for facts would come later, as we moved to explore a range of archives and compose our textual responses. For now Butters offered us an imaginative grip on the place and its inhabitants. He joined the found objects as a source and a stimulus, imaginatively stimulating and transporting us to other times, places, activities. It was not certain where any of this would lead. There is something daring and playful in prolonging these uncertainties. Even once a place, an object, a document, or an individual was identified, the group continued to randomize, chopping and reworking each other’s words. This is hard play. It is hard to stick to ‘the rules’, and harder for some than others. But the game is the point. It is the process.

### **Collaboration**

Creative histories often take collaboration seriously as both a method and an aim, and so surrender professional caution about the form and direction of historical analysis, and about expertise. We travelled to Branscombe together—walking, talking, writing in an intentionally collaborative way from the outset. A couple of us have co-written articles and collaborated on projects before, and we all get on. But being around each other was important for this process, to work with one another, to operate as a collective, and to produce co-written materials. The kinds of creativity we found would perhaps have been possible individually, but would not

necessarily have produced such quick or such unexpected effects. Mutual appreciation of each other's skills also fed the creative exercise. Each member of the group brought different kinds of expertise, and different ways of working: one person's ability to read a medieval church; another's skills in researching and writing biography. But all of us took away more than we brought. Sharing writing early on was an invitation to see how others look, see, read and interpret, and so to borrow other's perspectives, to look, see, read, interpret and articulate differently. We found that this was—like a swim in the English Channel in early summer—bracing to begin with, but increasingly lovely as it went on. Later on, as we wrote, there was a more fluid sense of working alone and together with a blurring of the precise origins of ideas and turns of phrase.

The generosity of sharing expertise and writing that characterised our time together in Branscombe continued as we pursued individual archival exploration, sharing our findings with others to use/re-use as they wished. Much of what was provided by this experience was about moving beyond, and moving outside, our normal habits and our normal environment. Creating a 'third space'—no one's home, no one's workspace, no-one's territory of expertise—was crucial.<sup>24</sup> The obligations to respond to email, tackle that pile of paperwork, tidy that desk, to answer the phone, were removed as we left the usual responsibilities behind. Crucially this space was new to us all, none of us had ever even visited Branscombe before. Together, in this unfamiliar space, new energy and new enthusiasm emerged for curiosity-driven research. There are many different ways to write together, from producing individual pieces, such as the six pieces the group have made, to writing with one voice, as we do in the introduction to this article. We need models for working, teaching, writing together, but together in a way that embraces difference.<sup>25</sup>

## **Process**

---

<sup>24</sup> Ed Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master's House', Cherrie Morgana and GLoria Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), pp. 94-101.

Branscombe as an experiment in creative history was firstly about process, before it became also about product. We went to explore the processes of writing through exploration of place, and through the interplay of individual and collective writing/being. Locating creativity in process rather than simply as a quality of the end product moves us away from the idea of creativity as an (individual) visitation of muse or inspiration, something that you have or do not have. Rather, it is something that is central to (rather than opposed to) the craft of history.<sup>26</sup> But why make, if to produce nothing? We are historians, and process alone does not satisfy our desire (or training) to have something to show for our efforts. This rings true to Sennett's exploration of craftwork as a manual task. The pleasure and skill in crafting lies in the creation of something—in the case of historians often a text. In the valuation of craft as skilled labour, too, both process (hand-made) and product (artisanal; haute-couture) are recognised. And so our time in Branscombe started a creative process that included the research and writing we would later do. The pieces retain threads of the writing exercises, walks, conversations—glimpses of our processes—but are products that are more polished, more considered, and more formal, than the processes themselves. The emphasis on craft is self-conscious. Historians are makers not technicians, and each stage of making (and remaking) involves a set of creative acts. However that making and remaking is creatively coded. Creativity is something that can be developed, played with, and reflected upon. A recognition of writing and research processes as opportunities for creativity need not be self-evident in the form of the products themselves—and that is true of some of the short essays that we gather together at the end of this article; equally, they may lead to radically different formats—as in the case of one or two of the texts we produced. But the connection of process and product, of maker and making, can connect historians to a sense of craft and of skill, to enrich their practice, and to identify the writing of history as something worth practicing.

### **Creativity as Dislocation**

Our Branscombe work provides concrete examples of a point that is often made by historians who are interested in the 'creativity' of historical research and writing: 'creativity is an active part of the historical process at every stage'.<sup>27</sup> This creativity can happen at different points

---

<sup>26</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Laura Sangha, for instance, refers to this as a 'consensus' from the 'Creative Histories' conference in Bristol in 2017. Laura Sangha, 'Creative History Is....?' <https://storyingthepast.wordpress.com/2017/10/04/creative-history-is-by-laura-sangha/>

and in different ways. In fact, some of the pieces that follow might not in fact look ‘creative’ at all, and the value of explaining and dissecting how we worked is that it gives others the opportunity to think about techniques and processes that are often hidden, and remain undiscussed in academic literature. For different members of the group creativity variously meant the expedition itself, beach-combing as prompt, the writing exercises, the (effectively) random generation of a subject for research far from their field of expertise, venturing to unfamiliar archives, working with material found by colleagues, or - of course - the writing process itself. It is this last stage that we more commonly think of when we talk about creativity, with a tendency to focus on ‘creative outputs’. In the final writing - the results of which we include at the end of this article - most of us also did the ‘normal things’ we routinely do: we reached for this source, that type of sentence, inserted footnotes as we typed. Yet still, none of this would have happened if we had not ventured out and worked with this place, a varied set of creative methods and each other.

We suspect we are not alone in wondering how often our training and practice limits us. The muscle-memory of the university-trained historian lies within, guides our hands and our eyes as we look at landscape, or document, or catalogue, or image, and our thoughts easily tumble down familiar paths and emerge in familiar forms of sentence. Our professional careers are largely built on repeating ourselves in terms of process (and teaching this process to our students): we receive an early rite-of-doctoral-passage training in research and writing, and unlike most professions we do not usually revisit this thereafter. We are under no professional requirement as qualified researchers to reskill, renew, refresh, update. We keep ‘abreast’, but while of course we might develop, and our thoughts and methods evolve, we are not formally, professionally, required to. And we (mostly) do not stray far from where we began (in terms of subject, period, usually methods), although here there is more fluidity. When it comes to writing, professional gatekeepers limit us too: pushing us back to the appropriate modes and tone of writing, structure, length, type of topic, form of argument. This problem suggests its own solution: how will we produce more interesting and original work if we are not willing to consider our practices as ‘creative’?

In this article, we have argued for an understanding of creativity in historical research as process as well as product. In our experiment, creative work happened at each stage of the research process, in ways that were not always immediately visible in the final written pieces. Nevertheless, we are convinced that our methodologies and approach have had an impact in

multiple ways. Since the trip, the group has met regularly, not only to discuss the project itself, but also to plan future projects, and to experiment with writing. The project led to a creative writing group in the Department of History, which a range of students and researchers have joined. Many of them were not accustomed to talking about creativity in their work and research practices. Perhaps more of them now think about this. The impacts on the ways in which all of us work as historians can be hard to define precisely. We can think of the savour that playing outside of the normal rules brings to our work. Can anyone doubt that enjoyable work makes for more pleasurable reading? A process of ‘creative dislocation’ can keep us (intellectually, creatively) limber. It can also help us recognise and reflect on the place of creativity in our work. Even when working in the most traditional of formats, historians work creatively. When this creative work remains hidden, or outside of discussion, we sacrifice opportunities to learn from one another, both when we are successful, and when we are not. Explicitly addressing creativity as process is an invitation to borrow the tools developed by writers and artists, to refine them and turn them to historical ends. It is also to recognise historical work as innately creative, and to argue that this creativity does not necessarily lie in opposition to archival explorations and fact-driven narratives, but can also lie within them. Creativity informs the questions we ask, our ways of working with the archive and our approach to writing. Best of all, creativity is a skill that can be learned and practised, rather than a gift that one possesses or lacks. Below we offer a few starting points for stretching one’s creative muscles, individually or collectively, followed by three variations on the theme of Branscombe.

These three histories offer a record, and an example, of the kinds of collaborative-yet-individual writing that emerged during and after our time in Branscombe. We chose to include these three here because of they offered different approaches, different underlying methods, and different formats; we chose to include just three texts, and not to supply the names of their authors, to signal that they are extracts from, and examples of, the overall, collaborative products of our collective thinking and working. One piece elaborates upon the information we found in the newspaper account about F.C. Butters’ history of the parish. It works with the traditional archival and published sources, and supplements those with physical and material investigations of Butters’s places: his church and his home. However, this treatment of an apparently traditional subject, and these seemingly traditional sources, allows for the posing of some less traditional questions, and, crucially, permits those answered – sometimes answerable – speculations still to remain within the final piece. Both

‘I think’ and ‘I know’ are used in ways that highlight the value of wondering about our subjects, and that make explicit the part that creative thinking plays in writing history. Both forms can be – and are here – used speculatively. ‘I think’ here signals an act of creative imagination; in this context ‘I know’ suggests a stronger conviction based upon wider knowledge and experience, but without claiming certainty gleaned from actual ‘historical facts’ and from archival or textual evidence.

The second piece also uses published source material – wedding and funeral announcements from newspapers – that were archived by the local history group The Branscombe Project.<sup>28</sup> Following the inspiration of a poem by Denise Riley, which uses descriptions of mourning dresses from *Vogue* during the First World War,<sup>29</sup> the author here attempts something similar – two found poems using some of the text from the announcements. The integrity of the individual sources is preserved by not adding anything, and using full stops to separate one source from another. The result – in the first poem, ‘Weddings’ – provides a focus on the visual and material culture of weddings in the early twentieth century, on types of garment and luxurious fabrics the names of which are now unusual and exotic. The second poem, ‘Funerals’, highlights turns of phrase and cultural expectations that were once familiar, but which now belong to a different time. The use of poetic form reminds us that newspaper announcements, which perform a kind of neutrality, and which might purport to present us with ‘information’, are as crafted as any text.

The final piece uses another form again, reflecting within the piece upon the author’s own experiences and methods, to produce not just a discrete history of a place – of industry, environment, matter – but also to layer upon that history of Branscombe a new history of what was done that weekend, and what thoughts and prompts remained within the historian’s mind, to produce this particular history of Branscombe.

These variations offer both models for future work by others and put into words some of the diverse results of our collective thinking. These are just some of the ways it went, and could have gone.

---

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.branscombeproject.org.uk/WW2%20Family%20Announcements.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <http://poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/captions-to-illustrations-of-mourning-dress-in-vogue-1916/>

## Some useful resources

### Craft, creativity, and history

Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*

Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*

### Writing

Roy Clark, *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down The Bones: Freeing The Writer Within*

Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing*

Ann Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and Life*

Ursula K. Le Guin, *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*

Judy Reeves, *A Writer's Book of Days: A Spirited Companion and Lively Muse To the Writing Life*

Barbara Turner-Vessalago, *Writing Without A Parachute: The Art of Freefall*

### Some exercises to try:

These exercises are best done with a group. Spend a few minutes on the exercise, and then participants can choose to share what they have done, and discuss. With each exercise, you could discuss how the practice changes your process of thinking and writing, and produces a different kind of outcome from what you might normally do. Is it more evocative, direct, lyrical, or imaginative?

1. Travel. Go somewhere you would not normally go. It does not have to be far away, and you don't have to go for a long time. It could be a question of spending an hour in a park with some people you are working with.
2. Randomize. In his book *12 Rules for Creativity* one of the methods Michael Atavar recommends is cutting a piece of writing into pieces and reassembling them at random.
3. Imagine. Pick a selection of objects. Try using the 14 questions on [p.] to write from the point of view of the objects.
4. Constrain. In her book *Steering the Craft* Ursula K Le Guin suggests writing without using any adjectives or any adverbs. You could do this with an academic piece, or you can try writing a busy scene, which is the example she suggests.
5. Be brief. Try writing for 10 minutes, using words of one syllable.
6. Experiment. This is a longer exercise. In 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry', Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre suggest trying to write academic 'data' in different formats: a narrative account, a piece of theatre, and a poem.



## Three Histories of Branscombe

### Private and public histories of the Vicar of Branscombe



The Vicar of Branscombe, as we know him, Frederick Charles Butters, is shown here on Saturday 2 March 1940 on the steps of the building in Exeter where the Devon Bird Watching and Preservation Society was holding its annual meeting. Butters smiles cheerfully for the camera. I find his an attractive face, and coming across this photograph, after searching through and through archives and databases for traces of him, brought a sort of close to a process, and a smile to my own face. After this, having exhausted the limits of craft, I might now let imagination loose, to see what might be made of the life of the Vicar of Branscombe, or at least those marks and traces of it left on record.

I think Frederick Charles Butters will never have smiled as wide as did on the day in January 1949 when he was installed in the living of Branscombe. After all, his heart was plainly already there, for as early in his career as December 1926 Butters was presented with the gift of a 'charming water-colour' showing 'Blackberrying. Branscombe under cliff near Beer Head'. That winter Butters was leaving his position as Assistant Curate at Withycombe Raleigh in Exmouth for a church in Balham and the gift from his friends was 'the more appreciated' for the way it would remind him of the 'many happy hours' he had spent in that very same spot eighteen miles along the coast, in the four years he had been in Devon. But he hardly had time to hang it on a wall in south London and sigh before he was called back. On 2 January 1927 Butters became curate at St Michael's in Heavitree, in Exeter's eastern suburbs.

Devon was his adopted land. Frederick Charles Butters was a Norfolk boy, born in 1889 in the tiny parish of Hoe, near Dereham, north-west of Norwich. His father, Robert Dennis Butters, was then a groom or coachman, sometimes recorded as a gardener, sometimes unemployed. His mother, Anna Maria Kirk, was already step-mother to her husband's only child of his first marriage, Robert William, the mother having died in childbirth. Robert and Anna would have one further child, a daughter, Alice Mildred. As the young clergyman

moved from living to living in the 1920s and 1930s, rising slowly from curacies to take a benefice and then moving around to take more prosperous ones, circling back to Branscombe, his mother and sister moved with him, keeping house. So his own past, as well as his own love of the past, travelled with Butters always. Perhaps the relationship was more complex yet, for the Reverend Butters I think was so engrossed in the public past of his surroundings for the simple reason that it allowed him to leave behind in Norfolk obscurity an uncomfortable private history.

There was poverty there, in rural Hoe, and bastardy -- that old, old story, 'half as old as time'. Anna Maria Kirk's mother married another man two years after her daughter's birth (the father's name was entered in the baptismal register, and then crossed out). His paternal grandmother never married at all. Mary Ann Butters, charwoman, servant, had five children in all, and Robert Dennis was the fourth of them. These were unlikely social beginnings for the auctioneer (Robert), teacher (Alice) and clergyman who made their way out of Norfolk into the new century. The family had moved from Hoe by 1901 across Norfolk to Horning, and then by 1911 back west to Wisbech in Cambridgeshire. By then Frederick was a timber merchant's clerk, his sister a supplementary teacher, and Robert William an auctioneer's clerk in Bury St Edmunds. Robert Dennis moved from position to position, but it was education, above all, that helped his children move socially. But perhaps someone spotted the talents of the younger son, for in 1916 Frederick Charles graduated from Salisbury Theological College, and in early July 1917 he passed the examination for his Licence in Theology, studying for it at the Bishop's Hostel in Lincoln. In late December 1918, in Barking parish church, Frederick Charles Butters was ordained Deacon by Dr John Watts-Ditchfield, Bishop of Chelmsford, the first holder of that see.

Sunday 25 June 1922 marks the first occasion on which we can trace a performance by Butters as the scholar we first encountered in the pages of the *Western Morning News*. It hardly surprises that it was church history that seems first to have engaged him. A Historical Association meeting that day, held in Chelmsford's Institute of Agriculture, heard a talk from the young curate on 'Saxon Religious Houses of Essex'. The tone was one of lament for beauty lost to the twists and turns of history. But such erudite forays into the Saxon past were quite at odds with the evangelical direction set by his 'unconventional' Bishop for work amongst the 'difficult' parishes and large 'artisan' population of 'London-Over-the-Border'. Watts-Ditchfield's method was to speak the language of the East End, and set up clubs and

societies to 'bind' together in fellowship the men and women of his diocese. 'All this coddling the saints', the Bishop had said only the day before at a meeting in Chelmsford of the Church of England Men's Society, 'and not a single word about saving the sinners outside'. 'I want the Parson to be let loose', he continued, 'Let him go! He will preach ten thousand times better on Sunday if on Saturday night he calls at the public-houses instead of staying at home preparing his sermons'. Get out, he urged his pastors, and be seen in 'the slums, in the streets, and on the village green'. Perhaps Butters had seen enough poverty on village greens in Norfolk, and perhaps too he felt the pull of the country over the town. He cut loose from London and by August 1923 he had assumed the Assistant Curacy at Withycombe Raleigh in Devon.

It was a quarter of a century yet before Butters arrived in the Vicarage at Branscombe. By 1949 he was well-known locally for his energetic work in the county with the Devon Bird Watching and Preservation Society, and after leaving Heavitree had served in a tiny rural parish at Nymet Rowland from 1930-34, and then in the wealthier and much larger village of Stockland in the Blackdown Hills. Alice and his mother moved with him, their presence sometimes caught in newspaper reports of village event, or on 29 September 1939 National Registration Day, when the Butters family -- Anna Maria now 'incapacitated' -- lived in Stockland's spacious vicarage attended by at least one resident servant. This was a long way from life back in Norfolk. You can physically trace him in most of these places, for in the tiny Church of St Bartholomew at Nymet Rowland and the much larger St Michael's and All Angels at Stockland you can find his name on a wall, in lists of former vicars. And at Stockland, close by the gate from the large vicarage into the quiet churchyard, you can find his mother's grave. You can imagine other traces as you nose around the deserted churches. After all, these pulpit steps must have felt his feet, this bible (1853) or this *Book of Common Prayer* (1874) his fingers, these walls the echoes of his sermons and prayers. Here is the parish chest, and the church safe (in memory of a recent predecessor). Through this window Butters gazed. From the vicarage, here, he will have walked this way to the church, crossing the brook at the bottom of the vicarage garden. Here, just here perhaps, he will have stood as he buried his mother in January 1944.

I know he will have looked over everything, keen to know its date and its story, for the historian in Butters was coddled by the buildings in which he performed his role (those lists on the walls, the predecessors' names on church fittings and on graves in the churchyard).

But in addition, when he assumed the living at Branscombe he drew up a comprehensive 'Terrier and Inventory', detailing the fixed and movable property of the living and its land. As well as systematically surveying the contents of the church and vicarage, Butters corresponded with the Church Commissioners in London to reconstruct the still-recent history of the sale of parish land adjoining the vicarage. There seem to have been earlier versions of the terrier, though none appear to have survived, but Butters I think largely re-surveyed his living from scratch, scrutinising the church plate and copying its hallmarks, rifling through the church registers in the fire-proof Vestry Room safe, and itemising the ornaments and furniture, the 'Puritan period' font -- 'removed here from East Teignmouth Church' in 1911 -- one 'portable harmonium', one oak Bishop's Chair '(placed in Chancel for lack of room)', and three banners: 'Mothers' Union; British Legion (Men's Section); British Legion (Women's Section)'. There was an electric organ and there were six bells in the tower; 'When I Call Com Follow Me All' was written on one; 'Glory to God, honour the Queen' on the newest, installed to commemorate Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. And there was a 'fine, very old and large' Church key, 'still in use'.

It was a very small step from compiling the new Terrier to composing his new parish history, which was published just two months later. Butters drew on various out of print pamphlets and articles, and updated and enlarged the little illustrated pamphlet up to his death. He also found space in the text for that key. It was perhaps fitting that on his death, in February 1955, one obituary of the 'keen antiquarian' was headlined 'Death of the Vicar of Branscombe. Published booklet on his church and parish'. So he was remembered, the man who 'devoted much time' in the summer months 'to showing visitors around the church'. Butters was buried in the churchyard, but no gravestone was installed to mark the site. Superimposed on the Terrier he compiled are layers of later information inscribed by his successors, which record the steady whittling down of the Vicarage until its sale, and the despatch of many of the items recorded in 1949 to the Devon Record Office. This records too, the addition in 1964 of a new wall safe in the north wall of the Nave, a gift from 'Mrs Butters'.

There was then, late on, a Mrs Butters. 'Historic' St Winifred's at Branscombe had been crowded on the fine and sunny April Tuesday in 1953, when one hundred and fifty local parishioners and visitors came to watch the wedding of the sixty-four year old Vicar to Hylda Florence Herbert-Spottiswode, a widowed neighbour, eighteen years his junior, whose nine year old daughter served as her bridesmaid. Not since 1662, the *Exeter Express & Echo*

pointed out, had an incumbent vicar been married in the church. We can guess who it was who supplied that telling detail. Even in the midst of his own late flowering romance, the Vicar of Branscombe was attentive to publicising precedent and history. The chancel was ‘bright with pink almond blossom, and the altar was decorated with arum lilies and white irises.’ The ‘full church choir sang’, and then all made their way down the hill to a reception in the village hall as the church bells rang. Alice Butters was there, of course, and also a niece, Dorothy. There is a photograph in a local paper, difficult to make out clearly on the poor quality microfilm, but distinct enough to register a smiling couple, Frederick and Hylda, standing with the church in the background.

Less than two years later Frederick Charles Butters died in a nursing home at Poltimore, northeast of Exeter. He had been until only recently an indefatigable letter writer, with a note to *The Times* six months before his passing on points of local ecclesiastical history, noting by way of conclusion the ‘Saxon work’ to be seen in the fabric of St Winifred’s (the church, ever in the background). So, almost the last of his public utterances, like his very first, brought the Saxon world more clearly into the present. Perhaps, as he sat in his study in the parsonage at Branscombe, writing that note, looking up and out west towards his church along the valley, Butters reflected on the ways that a historian can conceal. Loudly, in print and talk, guiding his summer visitors around St Winifred’s, he gave shape to the rich past embedded in the Devon church. His own wedding, even, he cast as a new episode in the Branscombe pageant. But of himself, of Norfolk and that humble, awkward past, he had nothing to say. And so nothing was said. He blocked the view with history. So when Butters died he was the ‘keen antiquary’, the historian of his parish. And so we found him, the Vicar of Branscombe, by chance one summer day, as we sat close by his former home, looking out on the road he daily walked to the church.

\*\*\*

Alice Mildred Butters died in Honiton in 1982 and is buried in the churchyard at Branscombe.

Dorothy Butters died in 1997 in Poole.

Hylda Florence Butters died in 2000 in Morchard Bishop, not far from Nymet Rowland.

**Sources:**

Ancestry.co.uk and Findmypast.co.uk

David G. Jenks, *A History of Devonshire Ornithology*, pp. 208-209 (AGM)

*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 31 December 1926, p. 10 (gift)  
*Western Morning News*, 20 February 1934 p.3 (training)  
*Chelmsford Chronicle*, 30 June 1922, p. 2 (HA talk, CEMS meeting)  
*The Times*, 16 July 1923, p. 14 (Watts-Ditchfield)  
Devon Heritage Centre, 239A/add6/PB/12 Branscombe Terrier and Inventory.  
*Exeter Express & Echo*, 22 April 1953 (wedding)  
*The Times*, 21 June 1954, p. 7 (Saxon trace)  
*Exeter Express & Echo*, 22 February 1955 (death)  
*Western Times & Gazette*, 26 February 1955 (death)  
Devon Heritage Centre, Branscombe 239A/6/PB/19 (vicarage plan)

## Two poems

### Weddings

A white satin dress with veil and orange blossom  
A bouquet of dark red carnations.

The Misses Gloria Gush and Mary Hallett  
Friends of the groom  
Whose dresses were of lemon silk.  
All wore Juliet caps with gold brocade.

Powder blue taffeta.  
Dusty pink wool romaine.  
Pale clover moss crepe.  
Blue and heather silk.  
A dress with wreath and veil to match.  
A reseda curl cloth coat.

A saxe blue marocain dress with  
a navy blue halo hat and shoes to tone  
and a powder-blue edge-to-edge coat,  
the bridegroom's gift.  
The bride gave the bridegroom a travelling case.

The bridegroom's gift to the bride was a cheque  
and the bride gave the bridegroom a gold ring.

They were the recipients of many presents.  
Numerous presents.  
Over 50 presents. Over 60.  
Their presents were numerous and costly.

The bride was presented with silver horseshoes by two little girls.

Her shower bouquet was of pink carnations.  
Shaded carnations.  
Cream and pink rosebuds.  
Blue iris and yellow tulips.  
A posy of tulips and forget-me-nots

## **Funerals**

She had been in her usual health the previous day.  
He had been in failing health for some time.  
For the last three years she had been a helpless invalid.  
The end was hastened by a stroke 11 days before his death.  
A great sufferer of late years and this had prevented him from going far from home.  
He was killed at one of the Weser bridgeheads.

Horseman at Watercombe Farm.  
An excellent all-round farmer.  
A wheelwright by trade.  
An excellent craftsman of the old school.  
23 years old and had been serving for three years.

A devoted churchwoman with a quiet disposition.  
For many years organist and choir mistress.  
A member of the Church choir, the WI, the Red Cross Dance Committee, and the Folk Dancing Class.  
She was always ready to support any deserving cause.  
Her familiar figure at the bakery will be greatly missed, especially by the children.

Mrs Lunn had been an active member of the Women's Institute  
And keenly interested in the life of the village.

Gardening and poultry were successful hobbies.  
Being of an inventive and ingenious turn of mind



there was no job which once he had set his mind would baffle him.

One of his records was an unbroken church attendance record for a period of 21 years.

In a letter his C.O. spoke highly of Lance-Corpl. Fook's efficiency and example.

In spite of very bad weather many paid their last tribute of respect.

The coffin was of unpolished oak, with brass fittings.

The grave had been lined with roses and evergreens.

There were many lovely wreaths.

## Flash in the dark

Others, I think, are starting with Butters. Their talents will reveal his history, and his place in Branscombe's, better than mine. So I think back to the text and recall other things that made an impression. I think of the brief mention of the tea-rooms; the lime kilns on the cliffs (that we walked) and the trade route to South Wales (the village felt so insular tucked in the valley, but this asserted that it was as connected to other places as anywhere). The text now connects to experiences picked up in Branscombe on this trip like pebbles on the beach: the steep walk to Beer Head; painful barefoot steps on the shingle before a 'bracing dip' (also the name of one of the creative writing exercises); and crab sandwiches eaten in the sunshine. I go to Devon Archives, order anything under 'Branscombe' that catches my eye, and wait to see where it takes me.

First things first: Butters' *Branscombe: The Parish and its Church* (1953), which I document mainly for my colleagues. I move on to a photo collection of Branscombe scenes (Devon Archives 1587Z). The images are black and white, and were taken between 1912 and 1965. If the record didn't tell me when each photo was taken, it would be hard to guess. The 1912 shot of Beer Head sits alongside a 1956 image of beachgoers. The beach itself looks consistent – 'timeless'? But, of course, change is there to be seen. The council houses noted by Butters are documented – noticeably more linear than older, higgledy-piggledy cottages in the village. Beach huts look new. The Sea Shanty tea-rooms, also noted by Butters, sit squarely in the valley. The photos all have an aged quality. It appears, from documents included with them, that they were collected to make postcards with. So the 'timeless' quality of the village was a considered motif, to sell an image of the English coastline to its visitors? Or a visual retrofit, imposed by me on these old, similar images with their patina of age? Other documents will later flesh out perceptions, at differing times, of Branscombe as beautiful and 'unspoilt'. For now, I move on. I compile a list of names and types of Branscombe fishing boats – a pleasing litany of names ('Hope'; 'Sunbeam'; 'Dorothy') but something of a dead-end for thinking about, other than there were once more than the single boat ('The Branscombe Pearl') visible during our trip, who's orange paintwork cheered up my own photos of the beach.

I'd ordered documents of Branscombe's lime kiln industry. But they arrived in two big boxes, and I'm not ready to delve into them yet. Instead, I pick up another box, partly because I

can't place it – not the lime kilns, not the boat registers... its label confirms it to be 'Branscombe Beach Exploitation 1911-1957'. I open it.

In 1911, Edward Johnson established The British Flint Pebble Company at Branscombe. The flint pebbles that we so enjoyed picking and holding and throwing sea-ward were collected in large quantities, and exported to industries across the country, and around the world. They were shipped by boat from Branscombe round to Beer and Seaton where they were loaded onto trains for transportation further afield (there was much correspondence about transportation costs). Local men were employed to do the picking, packing and transporting. In 1912, the men refused to take the pebbles from the boats at low tide at Seaton any more, and Johnson agreed that they could hire a horse and cart to help; the work was clearly hard, and it was not always possible to use the tides to shorten the journey up the beach. Johnson also wrote to William Gush, his site manager, to 'please remember I want Branscombe men to have the first chance of getting this job when Reg and Harry are away. It is good money as they can earn two days pay in one and it is only right that our own work-people should have the chance of getting it'.<sup>30</sup> Companies that used Branscombe Pebbles included Gillingham Portland Cement (Kent); C.E. Ramsden & Co., manufacturers of potter's materials (Stoke-on-Trent); H. E. Heath & Son, 'Potters' and general merchants. Manufacturers of oxides and colours for pottery, glass and enamel iron' (Stoke-on-Trent). An early (1911) correspondence discusses 'the American order' which required special sized sacks (obtained from Liverpool).

What was the value of these pebbles, so plentiful on the shoreline? An extract from the *Journal of the Oil and Colour Chemists' Association* (March 1932) by S Wilmer Kendall explains:

In its simplest form a ball mill is a hollow cylinder mounted horizontally on bearings so that it may be rotated by power. The cylinder is partly filled with pebbles or iron or porcelain balls together with the paint pigments and liquid vehicle, and then rotated. The rolling and tumbling of the balls against themselves, and against the shell of the cylinder, rapidly grinds the pigment particles.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Letter, Edward Johnson (London) to William Gush (Branscombe), 14 October 1912. Devon Archives 1037M/B/2

<sup>31</sup> S. Wilmer Kendall, 'Modern Ball and Pebble Mill Technique', *Journal of the Oil and Colour Chemists' Association* (March 1932), Devon Archives 1037M/B/2

Not any pebbles would do. Flint pebbles were required, and Danish and French (from Picardy and Normandy) pebbles are identified as the best available. ‘Broken pebbles result in sharp edges which are further broken off with the formation of grit and chips that further contaminate the paint produced’. But with the inclusion of this document in the collection, alongside the well-documented business relationships with various potteries and paint manufacturers, show that Branscombe pebbles were smooth enough to offer a more local source to the European imports in paint production. Branscombe pebbles, then, had an invisible yet critical role to play in the arts and crafts of the early twentieth century.

In addition to the paint grinders of the Potteries, Branscombe pebbles were also used in the cement industry and particularly in the manufacture of Portland cement. This links to the earlier (19<sup>th</sup> century) lime kiln industry in the village, located on the cliffs above the beach. Lime powder, a primary ingredient of cement, is made by firing limestone in kilns to form clinker. The clinker is ground, and other materials added, to form the cement. Reading between the lines, I assume that the flint pebbles were used in the grinders, much as they were for paint, to achieve a fine powder. Portland cement, it transpires, is the most common type of cement in general use worldwide, and is a basic ingredient of concrete, mortar and stucco. The limestone cliffs, and the flint pebbles of Branscombe – so easily depicted as rural and idyllic – are (potentially) present in built urban environments the world over.<sup>32</sup>

Johnson sold the business in 1917 to John and Clement Ford, who kept it until the documentation ends in 1957 with the business being audited following a trading loss, and several bills left unpaid. Clement Ford also owned the Sea-Shanty tea rooms in Branscombe, a business which survived – and thrived – beyond the British Flint Pebble Company. While pebbles became less profitable, the tea-rooms were busy and the beach huts fully booked in summer. For some time, the two businesses overlapped; beach hut accounts show profits increasing from £72 and 7 shillings in 1929 to £112 and 18 shillings in 1931. The two businesses both relied on Branscombe’s beach, but in entirely different ways. While the first exploited its material components – sifting the shingle for the valuable flints – the second relied on broader notions of ‘the beach’ as a holiday destination. Rather than providing raw

---

<sup>32</sup> It would be a shame not to mention a correspondence between the Flint Pebble Co. and W. Jones, 9 July 1922. Jones was a dancer from Newport with a special request: he wanted a large, flat piece of flint ‘for dancing on with a pair of grooved [?] steel shoes so as to obtain a flash in the dark’ – an inspired use of stone. Devon Archives 1037M/B/3

materials for export, the beach instead attracted people to Branscombe – which increasingly became the more profitable (and less strenuous) route to extract a profit from the valley. By 1948 – almost contemporaneous to F.C. Butters’ text – the value of the beach to the village community was not lost on L.J. Dowell, a village resident, who wrote to Ford after hearing some gossip that the beachfront would be sold. ‘What brings thousands of people and hundreds of cars to Branscombe every year’, he asked rhetorically, but not exaggerating (Sea Shanty records show that 2183 cars used its carpark in 1948): ‘it’s your natural beauty of the seafront, I know there is nothing to worry about as long as it is in your hands... [but] it might get into some new hands who who (sic) would build a concrete esplanade and have the fun of the fair from one end to the other, if that should happen it would be a sad day for dear old Branscombe’.<sup>33</sup> Dowell recognised that, though tourism had potential to change the village greatly, the key attraction was the *unchanging* quality of the beach and valley. The tea-rooms stayed, and the fun-fair never materialized. Branscombe trades, to this day, on an unchanging vision of the English seaside which forgets its exploitative industrial past – but is echoed in the pebbles secreted in pockets and taken home as mementos of a trip to the beach. The stones matter in this history.

---

<sup>33</sup> Letter from L.J. Dowell to C. Ford, 14 January 1948, Devon Archives 1037M/B/3