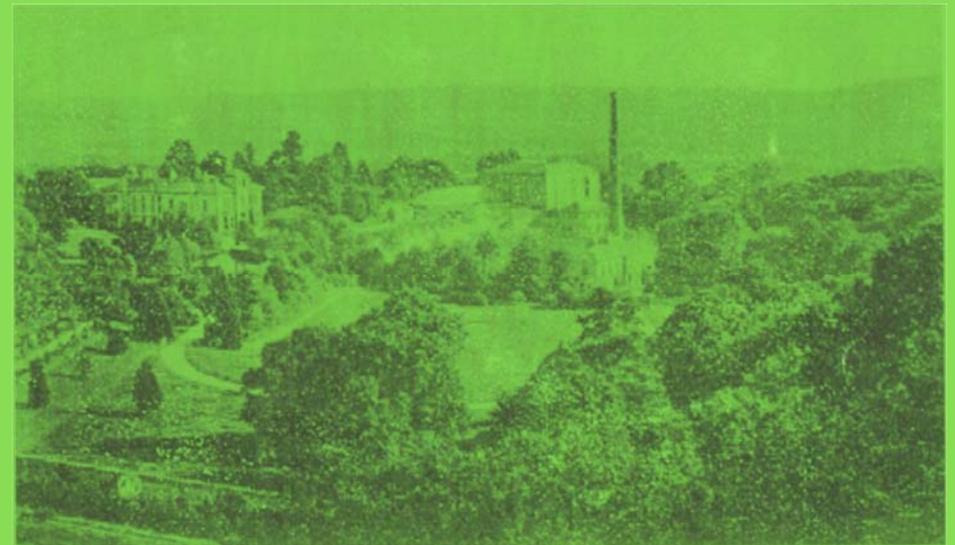


The Devon town of Ivybridge, between the lower slopes of Dartmoor and the fertile South Hams, is surrounded by beautiful walking country, but the place itself is often dismissed as dull and boring! In this short but wide-ranging little book, South Devon writer Bob Mann takes a personal look at Ivybridge, past and present, and finds that it contains a wealth of stories and interesting corners. Find out how the town grew up along an ancient highway and learn about ghostly animals, a visit by a famous musician, a forgotten prisoner of the feminist novel and much more.

# *IVYBRIDGE*



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**BOB MANN**



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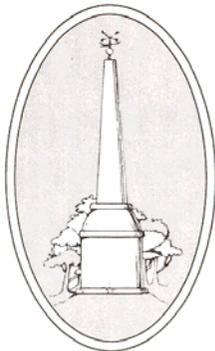
This book is dedicated, with gratitude, to Ellen Mann.

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A series of four 'Self-Guided Walks' around Ivybridge has been published by South Hams District Council, which can be obtained at local information centres, and the town's tourist brochure includes a historical walk around the main landmarks. The Ordnance Survey map for Ivybridge is the two and a half inch 1357 'Pathfinder'.

All quotations in the text not attributed to anyone else are from the works of M. P.Willcocks.



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## Introduction

The small but rapidly expanding South Devon town of Ivybridge sits at the southernmost tip of Dartmoor, where the rocky little River Erme leaves the moor for the rich pastures of the South Hams. It is on an ancient road which originally crossed the Erme by a bridge — the eponymous 'Ivy Bridge' itself - at a point where four parishes met: Ermington, Cornwood, Harford and Ugborough. Ivybridge has always been a place along the road, a place where the traveller stopped, perhaps, for refreshment, but then passed on.

Motorists today, on the A38 dual carriageway heading towards Plymouth, only about ten miles from here, probably register it merely as a small urban mass over on the right behind the barrier and the roadside foliage. From the car window you see a not very exciting collection of houses, roofscapes and new buildings, a big secondary school, a factory chimney against some trees, a small church spire; then it is gone, and you are passing a large garden centre on the left, and soon reach the massive industrial estate of Lee Mill on the right. Coming from Plymouth, just as you feel you have finally left the city and its hinterland behind, here is Ivybridge, like an extra suburb thrown out into the country. In either case, it seems just a little too close to Plymouth to stop for, and if you look the place up in a guide book you will not be encouraged to think you have missed anything.

*Ivybridge before it started to grow outwards*



Travelling by bus you go through, rather than past the town, but your initial reaction will probably be much the same. You will notice, though, that its natural setting is very pleasant, with the woods, fields and river, and the attention-grabbing hill of Western Beacon, almost Dartmoor's most southerly point, rising up behind it, like a mystical green mountain. But the best way to appreciate this setting is to pass through it by train. The main line from Paddington to Penzance skirts Ivybridge, crossing the Erme valley on an impressive viaduct and giving wonderful views of the surrounding landscapes. In 1994, in response to the town's growth, a bright new station was opened to replace the one closed in the early 1960s, which the train passes a little farther on, all overgrown and poignant as only disused railway stations can be.

The impression, then, is of a fairly ordinary town, not long since a mere village, but placed in countryside which is undeniably beautiful and romantic. This countryside is a potent meeting of moor and cultivated lowland: hanging woods, deep combes and rounded hills, dotted with centuries-old Devon farmhouses and manors reached by sunken lanes; a landscape soaked in the steady continuity of rural life and its traditional culture and, like so many border areas, full of folklore and legend. A quiet, secretive country, once you get away from the main

road, in which, even in the high summer, you can find undiscovered corners that seem not to have changed much for generations, 'where the wind blows sometimes from the sea and sometimes from the moor; where the inn signs creak in the breeze, and the minute drops fall from the thatch of overarching eaves as they did in country villages five hundred years ago.'

*Western Beacon rising high above Bittaford*



If you do decide to stop in Ivybridge for a while to explore the place, and stand in the middle of the town in Fore Street, looking east, you see Western Beacon dominating the scene from above, while if you turn around and look in the other direction the town is backed by the deep green of fields and woods long since tamed. Ivybridge combines something of the raw, granite hardness of the moorland settlements with the softer, slate-hung communities of the South Hams.

I wrote my book about another Dartmoor border town, Buckfastleigh, partly because I felt that it had been unfairly treated by topographical authors, and Ivybridge has suffered in the same way. Volume after volume on Devon or Dartmoor dismisses it in a few lines as being of no interest. The Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould stated in *A Book of Dartmoor* (1900): 'In Ivybridge itself there is absolutely nothing worth seeing.' Seventy-five years later Ann Jellicoe, in the *Shell Guide to Devon*, wrote that it 'seems like a bit of the Midlands: dull and sooty.' As we near the end of the twentieth century, some writers are beginning to appreciate the visual qualities of its Victorian streets and solid, suburban houses, so perhaps in another hundred years authors will be finding the estates of the 1970s and 1980s full of charm and atmosphere. Anne Born, in her excellent 1983 book *South Devon: Combe, Tor and Seascape*, is refreshingly polite about the town and its people, seeing a vibrant young community which, she says, presents 'a heartwarming contrast to decay and inner-city problems.' The view of most writers, however, is that the nicest thing about Ivybridge is its name.

Having celebrated Buckfastleigh and, I hope, demonstrated that it is more interesting than previous authors have allowed, I therefore thought it would be good to write a similar book on Ivybridge, a personal look at its landscapes, history, folklore and creative associations. It will, I hope, counteract the familiar dismissive comments.

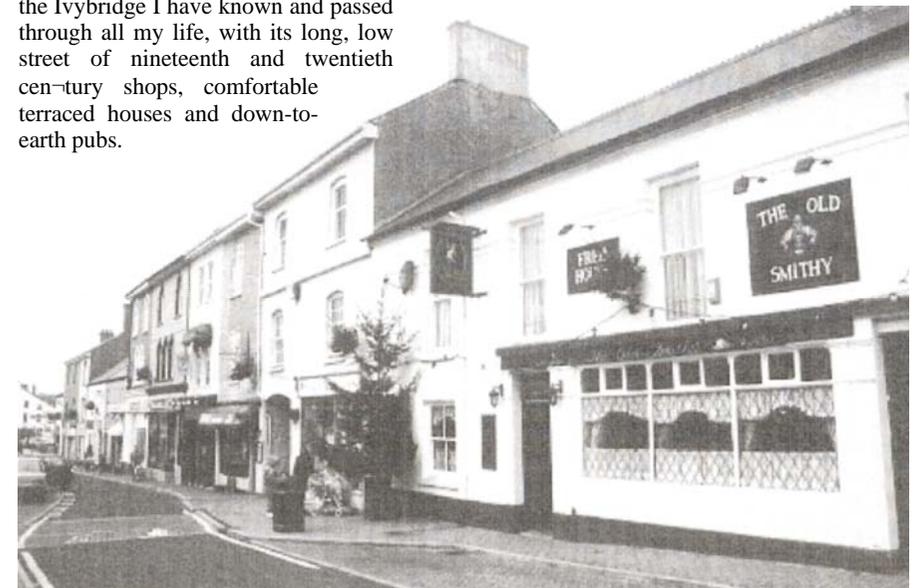
Every place has more of interest than it seems to at first sight, and I dislike the snobbishness which leads authors to put down the 'ordinary' communities where the majority of us live and work. Not many towns, after all, are breathtakingly beautiful, but each place is special to the people who know it and are rooted in it, who watch the seasons change from these particular houses and bungalows; this is their home, the background to the large and small events of their lives. Surrounding the new estates and industrial buildings of Ivybridge, beyond the link-roads and roundabouts, are the ancient fields, lanes and copses, still there, telling us that the past is real and always present, around us and beneath us, however unconscious of it we may be. Within minutes of the main thoroughfare you can be in quiet streets, lanes and footpaths still rich in the flowers, ferns and mosses that grew there before the houses were built.

In Ivybridge, like anywhere else, every view, every well-loved stretch of road or parcel of landscape, modest and unexciting as it may look to the casual visitor, contains its own 'bundle of tales', distinctive qualities and memories which, with a little care, can be discovered and enjoyed. An increasingly popular way of exploring these memories collectively is by the creation of Parish Maps, a concept originated by the environmental arts charity Common Ground, and promoted by many local councils. This book might be seen, then, as the embodiment of my personal 'map' of Ivybridge and its surroundings. Maybe it will inspire others to explore their own relationship to the place, and express their vision of it in some form.

Although I have never lived in the town itself, it has always been one of the places in my life, and some of its stories and memories have become my own. My mother was born at Cadleigh, just outside the town towards Lee Mill, while my father's family still live not far away in the direction of Ermington, where I visited and stayed with them throughout my childhood. I therefore feel, quite naturally, a deep connection with the area; its landscapes are part of my identity as a Devonian. At a time when Ivybridge is changing and growing so quickly—apparently it is the fastest-growing town in the west of England (some say the fastest-growing in Western Europe) - it is important for it to have confidence in itself as a community. If I can, in these pages, give a sense of the town's particular qualities to residents and visitors alike, and remind the people in the new houses, along the new roads, of a few memories, some of the 'hidden archaeology', contained in the land around them, I shall be more than satisfied.

## **Around the Town**

It was on a warm day in August that I first visited Ivybridge specifically for the purpose of researching this book. Somehow I had not been to the place for a few years, and just before the bridge over the Erme I found what appeared to be a whole new town coming into existence down on the left, where Leonards Road takes the traffic away from Fore Street. There is an industrial estate, a new town hall, large car parks, an attractive tourist information office and the much-lauded South Dartmoor Leisure Centre. A footbridge took me across the river to a pleasant new shopping arcade where I sat watching the people and listening to the fast-running water in its boulder-strewn bed. There was a flower shop selling second hand books, an enticing smell of freshly-baked pasties and the scene was busy and lively, with lots of attractive and confident young people around. Then I found my way out into the familiar old Fore Street, the Ivybridge I have known and passed through all my life, with its long, low street of nineteenth and twentieth century shops, comfortable terraced houses and down-to-earth pubs.



I walked up and down the street, noticing the different kinds of shop: traditional bakers and greengrocers, gun and saddle shops, as you might expect in a small country town, but also Chinese and Indian takeaways. The pubs looked like real 'locals', with shirtless young men lounging outside with their pints, watching the world go by. Western Beacon ahead of me, its granite outcrops showing clearly in the summer sunshine, gave an expansiveness to the scene, and something about the way it loomed there above the squat buildings reminded me, too, of places other than Devon - the northern villages around Saddleworth Moor, on the border between Lancashire and Yorkshire, or one of the grey Cornish clay villages. Bugle, for instance, where the hill would be a dull white, and where I have enjoyed many times the famous brass band contest they hold there. But lying as it does in such soft, rich countryside, you cannot for long imagine Ivybridge to be anywhere except Devon.

Arriving at the road bridge across the Erme I stopped at the war memorial and examined the names on it, then walked along by the river and turned left to look at the parish church, a modest but spacious Victorian building. I wandered amongst the graves while pigeons brooded in the trees, then went back towards the river and the original medieval bridge which gave the town both its reason for existing and its name. Beyond, on the other side, I saw what used to be the London Hotel, now converted into flats, and not far away the Stowford Paper Mill. I was half



expecting this to be flats as well, or a visitor centre with guides dressed as nineteenth century mill workers offering 'The Stowford Mill Experience', but it is still a paper mill. Pevsner in the 1950s described it as 'in the masculine, dignified fashion of early nineteenth century factories,' and it certainly looked splendid with its tall chimney against the wooded hills.

Then I walked into the woods and ate my lunch beneath that magnificent viaduct, with the river rushing down through its narrow gorge below me and the sunlight dappling through the trees onto the ferns and mosses. As I sat facing the town I knew that, behind me, unseen, there was the freedom and mystery of Dartmoor, in front the deep beauty and gentleness of the South Hams countryside, with its pattern of fields and woods stretching away, its promise of quiet villages, historic towns, green lanes, winding estuaries and dramatic coastline. It felt a good place to be and from which to contemplate the world, but also a place to set out from, into the rich country below, or on epic journeys across the moor, maybe even the Two Moors Way, crossing Dartmoor, Exmoor and the seemingly endless mid-Devon plain between them, which starts just beyond the mill.

## The River Erme

Ivybridge exists because of the River Erme, which some have described as the loveliest river in Devon (and therefore in England). As a native of the Dart I am not sure about that, but certainly it is beautiful, and it passes, in its fourteen and a half mile journey to the sea, through some of the most characteristic South Devon country.

No one knows what the name of the Erme means. Place-name experts suggest that it is a rare case of a 'back formation' from the name of one of the villages standing beside it, Ermington. This is Anglo-Saxon and means 'the principal or great (Iermen) farm (ton)'. The theory is that the river was named after the village, rather than the other way round. Even if this is true (and the field of place-names is one in which the inexpert should tread very cautiously indeed), the river must have been called something by the pre-Saxon, Celtic inhabitants of the area. Most of the river names of Devon are Celtic, or rather, they are what the incoming Saxons ('invasion' is too strong a word for the Saxon penetration of Devon, which took nearly a century) made of the Celtic originals.

This is probably so with the Erme's two neighbours. The one to the west, the Yealm (pronounced 'Yam') is said to mean 'kind', presumably a quality noticed in it by those far-off people, while the Avon to the east is one of many rivers simply called 'river.' The Devon writer Brian Carter has imagined how this came about: the Saxon asks the local Celt what the river is called, and the Celt, with disbelief, tells him 'Avon'. The Saxon confuses the general for the specific, and goes off happily thinking he has learnt the river's name, when all he has got is the Celtic word for a river... very silly, but probably just the way it happened. The river's real name may well have been taboo anyway, known to everyone but never used because it was too powerful, and certainly not given to a stranger. There is evidence, according to the late Devon folklorist Theo Brown, that the Dart had a secret 'real' name, so maybe other rivers did as well. Perhaps this is why the Erme's earlier name has not come down to us. Interestingly, Erme, Yealm and Avon can all sound pretty similar, especially if pronounced lazily in a local accent: could it be possible that they are all derived from the same word?

Whatever its name means, the Erme has a strong riparian personality of its own, powerful and sometimes austere, speaking, as it rushes off the moor, of ancient energies. Unlike the Dart, and other famous rivers such as the Tamar, the Erme has not often been celebrated, and avoiding as it does any major settlements, except Ivybridge, and without a famous port at its mouth, it can be easily overlooked. Those who have discovered its secretive beauties, however, feel a strong affection for it. In Ivybridge itself you can walk beside it in the woods, as well as in the area between the two bridges —to be a true local you have to have fallen into it along here —and around the new shopping arcade, where you can watch mallards and muscovy ducks, and picnic on the grass outside the leisure centre.

The Erme rises in the hills not far from the famous Fox Tor Mire, high on the moor, a place 'windswept, cloud-chased, the gathering place of rains between the two seas.' In its upper



reaches it is surrounded by some of the most interesting of Dartmoor's antiquities, including cairns, hut circles, enclosures and what is said to be the world's longest stone row, at Stall

*The Erme in spate*



Moor, extending for two miles. Passing through the small, rather mysterious village of Harford and leaving the moor, it winds on through Ivybridge and past Ermington and Holbeton. Here it arrives at its wooded estuarine stage, flowing into the English Channel at Mothecombe at the western end of Bigbury Bay. It is a quiet ending to the river's life, in a minor key; there is no triumphant, symphonic conclusion like you get with the Dart, entering the sea between castles and wooded heights. But even here there is a sense of the unusual, of something from the distant past. Baring-Gould states that some ancient fortifications existed here, although more recent authors do not mention these, and more specifically, there is a boat from the distant past. A few years ago the wreck of a Bronze Age vessel, one of the oldest ever found around British shores, was discovered near the river mouth.

### **Western Beacon**

If the river is the dominant geographical factor in the development of the settlement at Ivybridge, in purely visual terms the major feature is of course Western Beacon, which calls out to be climbed. I did so, for the first time in over twenty years, early one spring morning, approaching by the lane leading up from Davey's Cross east of the town. If I lived in Ivy bridge I would probably walk here regularly, but my companion and I passed only a solitary girl, her dark hair spreading behind her in the wind, who smiled at us as she strode down towards the moorgate.

It is strange how quickly the sense of being in another world, which Dartmoor induces, takes hold. Even here, so close to the cultivated fields and hedges, the atmosphere of wildness and mystery is very apparent, and as we climbed towards the beacon top with its cairns and granite boulders, the sight of a dead lamb and the remains of a mountain hare reminded us of the real harshness of this environment, and the potential dangers of unprepared moor walking.

It had been my hope to look down upon Ivybridge from its beacon and achieve a clear insight into the layout of the town and its relationship to its surroundings. But although the views in every direction were magnificent, I found no such clarity. The sight of the town from the hills opposite, in the direction of Hunsdon and Cleeve, where I walked later in the day, was actually

much more enlightening in this respect, but that may be because it was already familiar, tied in with childhood memories, though of course there are more houses now, and fewer fields. Still, it was good to be on the moor for a while, even if only the very edge of it. We walked down in a westward direction and into Ivybridge through the rocky lane to Stowford. This is the beginning and end of the Two Moors Way, and I imagined the feelings of someone coming down to the town who had just completed this most challenging journey. We came along the road past the large comprehensive school and community college, lined with low dry stoned walls of rounded moorstone, rich in lichen and navalwort.

### **An Ancient Highway**

Soon we were down at the old bridge, and it is to the original bridge that you must go if you wish to make sense of the town and its history. Ivybridge grew up at the place where an old road crossed a river, and for a long time that is about all it was.

It is difficult these days to see much romance in roads, especially highways, but this road, for those with a sensitivity to the past, is one for the imagination to play with. It is the old road leading from Plymouth and the South Hams, following the edge of Dartmoor through South Brent, Ashburton and Chudleigh, to Exeter and beyond, to the great world outside the large, self-contained county of Devon. This is the high road taken, century after century, by many of those numerous Devonians who have set out from their farms or villages for London or Oxford, seeking, and very often finding, wealth and distinction in the church or the law, or as men of letters, soldiers, statesmen or - especially in the case of Plymothians - artists. It is the way the great Elizabethan seadogs passed between Plymouth and London during the exciting years of exploration and the defeat of the Armada in the 1580s. One of the earliest regular postal services in England was established from London to Plymouth along this road at that time, and later on it was a major stagecoach route. You don't get much sense of all this now, of course, at least not when you are actually on the road, but it is all still there, like the ancient fields that are still beneath the concrete.

We must begin by imagining the road as a narrow, muddy track, possibly established, if it wasn't there before, by the monks of Plympton Priory in the twelfth century, to enable them to visit their lands at Wrangaton, near South Brent, and at Dean Prior, a little farther on towards Buckfastleigh. The name 'Ivybridge' first occurs in a document of the thirteenth century. In 1280 John Peverel of Ermington granted to his daughter, Iseult, 'all the land in Harford from the furthest bounds of the waste of Harford and of the river which is above the waters of the Erme under Ivy Bridge.' The new port of Plymouth was beginning to expand at this time, and bridges across the Plym, first recorded in 1238, and the Yealm, mentioned in 1249, show the developing importance of a road to it from the east. Possibly the Peverel family, lords of the manor of Ermington from the time of Henry I (1100-35), and always in favour with the reigning monarch, built the bridge here to facilitate the use of the road. They seem to have formed a new manor, embracing lands they owned on both sides of the river, and using for it the name of the 'Ivy Bridge', some time in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries. It is not known, though, where the manor house was.

### **Ivy Bridge**

I regret that I never had the opportunity to talk to Mr Tom Maddock, an authority on all aspects of Ivybridge's history, who died as I was starting to work on this book. He gave much thought to the origins of the bridge and the town, and as a tribute to his memory, I quote from a manuscript of his, written in 1993 and given to me by my publisher, Chips Barber (I have slightly edited the original):

Why was the first packhorse bridge built across the river Erme just where it is? That is a question I have often asked myself, and I have pondered over this for a long time. I like to find out things for myself - that is the pleasure of being an amateur historian. Commonsense thinking will often solve the problem for you if you have the time and interest.

Let us begin by taking a look in the Erme for the answer. Take a look at the foundations of



our bridge. There you will notice an outcrop of very hard blue elven rock on both sides of the river, on which the bridge foundations stand. The rock on the east side bulges out beyond the built up wall, and on the west side rises up almost to the level of the road. From this we can conclude that in the thirteenth century when the Ivy-bridge was first mentioned, the track or pathway across the river already existed at that point, and the rock structure was used for passage (other than when the river was in full flood, when no man or animal would dare cross the Erme).

In 1992 and 1993 Mr Maddock organised ceremonies to beat the local bounds and to celebrate the bridge, the place where the community began all those centuries ago. It is not in so many towns that you can stand in the actual place where it started, as you can here, so stop for a few minutes and let your mind wander back through time, imagining the traffic which has passed this way.

The bridge marked, as stated earlier, the meeting place of four parishes: Cornwood on the north west, Harford on the north east, Ugborough on the south east and Ermington on the south west. Most of Ivybridge as it grew up in later centuries, along the road, was in the parish of Ermington, but its church, when it got one, was in Cornwood, and the first beginnings of a village here must perhaps be sought in Harford.

## Stowford

The Domesday Book in 1086 refers to the manor of Stowford, just across the river in Harford parish, which was held by earl Hugh of Chester. Hugh also had three other holdings in the same area and possibly they met at, and controlled, the crossing place. 'Stowford' means either 'a ford beneath a steep bank' or 'a ford marked by stakes', both of which could apply here.

The present Stowford House is mainly nineteenth century, with some remains from a mansion of the sixteenth century. It has been the birthplace of a Speaker of the House of Commons, Thomas Williams (d. 1566) and a Bishop of Worcester, John Prideaux (1578-1650), but what is important for us is not the history of the house and estate, which has been told by Louise Ryan in her book *An Obscure Place* (1973), but the fact that a small village grew up on high ground on the east bank of the Erme in the early Middle Ages. Its residents worked the manorial lands and mined the moor for tin. By 1400 there were enough people grouped about the area of the bridge to merit a chapel being licensed for their use at Stowford. This was

dedicated to St Nicholas, patron saint of seafarers, which suggests that mariners were passing to and fro along the road in significant numbers. After the Reformation this chapel became an ale and cider-house, which by 1638 was merely a cottage. The London Inn later stood on the site.

What we have to imagine, then, for many centuries, is an increasingly busy main road passing through the area that is now the town and over the Erme, with, gradually, a community developing, loosely focused around the bridge, made up of peasant farmers and craftsmen. There would probably have been corn, and, perhaps, woollen mills, using the powerful energy of the Erme, from an early date.

The emerging community would be mainly of people owing their allegiance to the manor of Ivybridge - which, like Stowford, passed through various hands over the centuries - and belonging, ecclesiastically, to four different parishes. It is important when studying the origins of places to remember that the 'manor' (the feudal estate owned by the squire), and the 'parish' (the unit of church administration), were rarely synonymous, and that the physical village, as it took shape in accordance with local topography, may not have corresponded neatly to either. This is certainly the case here. (The whole area was in the Hundred of Ermington - an ancient legal division which made little geographical sense, and probably meant nothing to the people living in it.) It is possible that this long history of diffuse loyalty has a consequence today in the lack of coherence that many people feel in Ivybridge! C. F. Hankin, in his short history of the town, goes into all the convolutions in detail, so there is no need to do so again, except to say that by the seventeenth century a distinctive settlement called Ivybridge was forming along the roadside.



The road was now a 'great thoroughfare', according to the Devon topographical writer Tristram Risdon, and beside it there were woollen mills and places of refreshment. The first inn we know the name of was the Three Tunns, kept in the 1670s by Alexander Pearse. This was later known as the Royal Oak.

In the eighteenth century the great age of road improvements in Devon began, with the establishment of the Turnpike Trusts. The roads of the county had always been notoriously bad, and wheeled traffic was hardly known here, everything being transported by packhorse or pulled on sledges. It was a while before the effects of the new system were felt in Ivybridge, but when they were, they were quite considerable.

## Notable Buildings

By the 1780s there was a smart new inn, the London, later the London Hotel, on the Stowford side of the bridge, and the first paper mill stood nearby. The lord of Ivybridge manor, Sir Frederick Leman Rogers, Baronet, wished to make the place desirable to the growing middle classes, so he began building spacious houses along the north side of Fore Street and by the river. Meanwhile, artists and travellers in search of the picturesque, journeying along the highway, discovered the romantic Erme and the quaint old bridge, which was widened to

enable the new stagecoaches to use it In 1796 the Reverend John Swete, that indefatigable diarist and watercolourist, whose work is a valuable source of information on late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Devon, passed this way and wrote of the river: 'all was foam and uproar. The torrent dashed over the huge rounded masses of granite which lay in its channel and whilst a spray arose in thick volumes, the listening ear was rent with its thundering sounds.' All this traffic brought prosperity, and wealthy residents of the expanding towns of Plymouth and Dock - later Devonport - found it a conveniently close weekend retreat.

Highlands, a large white house in extensive grounds on the hill behind Fore Street, was built in 1790 on land owned by the Rogers family. In 1839 it became the home of William Cotton (1794-1863), a collector of artifacts and antiquities, who was an enthusiast for the work of the Plympton-born painter Sir Joshua Reynolds. His substantial collection of books, pictures, furniture and bronzes is now in Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery. Cotton also wrote the first book on the history of Totnes, published in 1850: *A Graphic and Historical Sketch of the Antiquities of Totnes*. The Devon historian W. G. Hoskins dismisses the work as 'a trifle', but I have found it useful for articles.

Another prominent house above the town, Tremarron Court, was once the home of the Dame Hannah Rogers School, originally founded in 1787 for pauper children from all over Devon and Cornwall. The name continues, though now the school is for children with special physical needs, and is housed in a modern building west of the town built in 1959.

### Places of Worship

The growing village clearly needed its own place of worship, and in 1789 an Anglican chapel, on the Cornwood side of the bridge and under the vicar of that parish, was opened, although it was not consecrated until 1835. Three years later it was renamed St John's Church, Ivybridge. This building was replaced by the present church, built on land to the west of the old one, in 1882, and at last Ivybridge became an ecclesiastical parish in its own right. The Methodists and Congregationalists also had substantial places of worship by the end of the nineteenth century, both of which are still used.



In 1817 the village had a population of nearly five hundred, and new houses and streets were continuing to be built. Old prints, while no doubt seeking to emphasise the picturesqueness of the river and the mountainous beacon, make it look respectable and attractive. A new bridge from Fore Street built in 1823 took the traffic away from the original one.

### Famous Visitors

Along the road came increasing numbers of people. Amongst them, inevitably, were some who were famous. One was the Duke of Wellington, on his way to Plymouth, who is described as the most celebrated person never to stop at the London Hotel. The story is that he had intended to change horses there, but his new mount was not ready, so he crossly chose to walk on, accompanied by a farmer and two navvies, until it caught up with him.

Another talc concerns a famous pianist and composer, and is actually one of my favourite musical anecdotes. Franz Liszt (1811 -86) was the archetypal romantic artist, and his tours of Europe were like those of twentieth century pop stars. His flamboyance, his mastery of the expressive possibilities of his instrument, his mane of hair and flashing eyes made every performance he gave an orgy of hero-worship. Some of the most beautiful and sophisticated women of the time threw themselves at his feet, and into his bed. This happened everywhere he went, until he came to Plymouth in August 1840, where he was to give two recitals.

Unfortunately Plymouth wasn't ready for him, and only seven people bought tickets for the second concert, so he moved on to Exeter on the 28th, stopping in Ivybridge for a mid-morning Devonshire cream tea. What he thought of the local speciality, and whether or not it compensated for his reception in Plymouth, his biographers fail to say.

### The Coming of the Railway

According to White's Devon Directory of 1850, Ivybridge had 'many neat houses... a post office, several neat villas, and many good lodging houses; three large and commodious inns, two paper mills, a large corn mill, several good shops, an extensive joint-stock tannery and leather manufactory.'

But two years before that a great event in the history of Ivybridge had occurred: the arrival of Brunei's South Devon Railway, later part of the Great Western.

The railway line between Totnes and Plymouth, and on into Cornwall, features many dramatic and beautiful viaducts, spanning the deep, tree-filled valleys. From the train you can gaze into these with fascination, or draw back from them in vertiginous horror. One of the viaducts crosses the Erme just behind the town, and



is a remarkable piece of engineering, a monument to the supreme confidence of the railway age. Walking beneath it in the woods you get an unforgettable impression of the effort and vision involved in the creation of the system. It is actually the second viaduct to be built here, replacing the original in 1893. The granite pillars of the old one stand just behind it. The first superstructure on top of the piers was of wood, and Murray's Handbook for Devon and Cornwall in 1859 enthused about it like this: 'a spider-like fabric of such slender proportions that one wonders it has not been blown away into the moor... a black wooden roadway, which is carried in a curve over ten pairs of white granite pillars, each pair being sixty feet apart, and the most elevated a hundred and fifteen feet above the valley.' The new viaduct is a mere hundred and ten feet high.

### A Great Benefactor

According to Louise Ryan, it was the arrival of the railway which finally caused what remained of the old 'village' of Stowford, higher up on the hill, to be absorbed into the new one. The Stowford Paper Mill came into the possession of John Allen in 1849, and he is largely responsible for the form in which we now see it, although it was badly damaged by fire in 1914 and had to be rebuilt. Allen was a great benefactor to the village, and built the characteristic Victorian cottages in Fore Street for his workers. (Perhaps it is from them that Ann Jellicoe got the impression that Ivybridge is 'sooty'.) He and the Rogers family, who still owned the ancient manor, were very much in the patriarchal tradition who saw it as their duty to improve the village and its people as much as possible, giving land for schools, churches and developments to roads and services.

## Twentieth Century Changes

Ivybridge finally achieved independence from the four original parishes in 1894, when it became a separate entity of local government, with its own Urban District Council (it had been a Sanitary District since 1878). This, however, only lasted until 1935, when it was taken into the Urban District of Plympton. It continued with just a parish council until after the great reorganisation of 1974.

Although for forty years it enjoyed the status of a small town, and had a decidedly urban feel to it, for much of the twentieth century Ivybridge has been, and has thought of itself as, a 'village', if quite a large one for Devon. It was very much a working village, and its people, as in most places, made their own entertainments, though between the wars a cinema was started in the old corn-mill building, now the Glanville's shopping arcade. Unfortunately, I am told that the projector frequently broke down, and rain came in through the roof, so it was common to see umbrellas dotted around the house.

If there was little in Ivybridge of obvious appeal to the visitor, it was a convenient gateway to the southern moor for the walker, and communications by road and rail were good. The publishers of guide books, assuming their readers were well-heeled and of genteel taste, recommended the golf at Wrangaton, trout fishing in the Erme and hunting with the Dartmoor foxhounds.

The 'old ivy bridge' remained a natural focus for the community as well as being a symbol of its past. Lovers met on it, the old men looked down from it into the river and their memories, visitors sketched it, children played on it. Tom Maddock, in his manuscript, recalls, early in this century, the local boys sitting astride the parapet singing raucously until the landlord of the London Hotel came out and clouted them away with his beer cloth. A few years later, in 1914, the same landlord, now at the Bridge Inn, was waving them off as they marched to the railway station to embark for Flanders, many of them never to return...

Others remember a different, if equally poignant, procession in the early 1930s, when hundreds of unemployed coalminers walked from South Wales to Cornwall in the hope of finding work in the tin mines. Local people brought food and clothing and arranged to accommodate the men in the primary school and the drill hall, while a bonfire was lit on some wasteground nearby. Children, expecting a carnival, were completely unprepared for the sight of the 'weary, tired and hungry men, straggling up the road... gaunt, grey faces... they utterly collapsed on the ground while tea and bread were brought to them as they sat in dull silence.' Later, my informant says, the Welshmen sang their thanks to the people around the bonfire, and the next morning, when they walked on, a local pub landlord gave each of them a packet of Woodbines. Such are the stories to be found in this little place along the old road.

## Ever-Growing Ivybridge

Since the Second World War, Ivybridge has grown rapidly as a dormitory town for Plymouth, and its population has virtually doubled every ten years, now standing at about 10,000. In 1977 the village again became officially a town, its council having the right to give its chairperson the title of mayor. There is an active civic society which concerns itself with both the history and the present quality of the built environment, and members have begun collecting material relics of the town's past, which they take around to local schools. 'Ivybridge Museum' is a collection without, yet, a building, but this is probably a good, and certainly a challenging, way to start!

## On the Outskirts

After this brief overview of the town's history, we have time to take a short and equally personal 'mental tour'—which you may like to do physically as well—of some of the attractive walking country and interesting corners around Ivybridge, which we shall do in a vaguely clockwise direction from the old bridge.

Directly to the north, at 'midday', is the lovely nature reserve of Longtimber and Pithill Woods, owned and managed by the town council, in which you can walk by the Erme and

enjoy looking out for a vast range of trees, ferns, mosses, flowers, birds and mammals. Walking up Station Road with the river on your right, you enter the woods beneath the viaduct and follow a well defined footpath.

The powerful quality of the Erme can really be appreciated here, and you can understand why it is the setting for the legend of Tom Treneman, who was said to be a lord of the manor at Stowford some time in the fifteenth century. After his funeral his ghost reappeared in the kitchen of the house, terrifying the staff, one of whom died of shock. Eventually a group of parsons was called together and the ghost was taken, with a halter around his neck, to a pool of the Erme, where he was given the impossible task of making a beam of sand. When the river is in spate, the grinding of the boulders is said to be the ghost crying for more rope. Elias Tozer, a nineteenth century Exeter journalist who wrote books about Dartmoor under the name of 'Tickler', believed that, whilst walking by the Erme in his boyhood, he saw Tom Treneman at his hopeless labours, wearing a red cap. Stowford is also supposed to be haunted by a white bull, which appears whenever a death is about to occur in the family. Although ghosts that foretell deaths are common, a white bull sounds like a very ancient folk-memory indeed, taking us right back to the dark druidical sacrifices which early antiquarians imagined taking place on the moor.

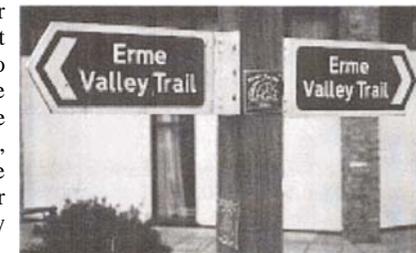
Deep in the woods you come upon what was once a huge open-air swimming pool. The South Hams District Council's walks leaflet states that it was created during World War Two by American soldiers, but I know people who swam in it in the 1930s, and it is mentioned in a guide book of 1929 (it seems to be becoming part of local folklore that any large piece of concrete in an unusual place in South Devon must be a relic of the American forces being here, and while it is often true, it is not in this case!). Many locals were put off using the pool, apparently, after an unhappy woman drowned herself in it, and a ghostly figure in black was subsequently seen in its vicinity.

## Along the Erme

Returning to the town, on the left is the lane to Stowford and the beginning of the Two Moors Way, which has already been mentioned, but we shall go south for a little way, into the beautiful South Hams country, laid out invitingly below. From Fore Street turn left into Keaton Road. Before the building of the A38 I remember walking out along here towards Ermington to visit my father's family, past terraced cottages and into the country. Now you find your way beneath the roaring traffic, and onto something called the Erme Valley Trail. This soon peters out, however, and you have to walk on the road, but it is possible to leave this for a path by the river a little farther on towards Caton where, in the last century, they mined lead from a shaft twenty five feet deep. Keaton and Caton (they sound much the same in a Devon accent) may derive from a Celtic word meaning an enclosed field, but 'ton' of course is Saxon, meaning a farm or settlement. This path is traditionally called 'the runs', which gave me much innocent pleasure as a child.

Above, on the right, in the wooded hills beyond the playing field, is a farm called Cleeve, which should be known to all who care about Devon's literary inheritance.

One of my special interests is the way in which writers relate to their native landscapes, or to the particular places that inspire their work. In Britain there is hardly anywhere that has not been imaginatively written about, and whenever I discover a place which appeals to me, I assume that there is a writer, known or unknown, whose work will illuminate it for me. Over the years I have come across several interesting but long-forgotten authors whose work has touched me for some reason, and who have turned out to have been connected with places of personal significance. I have already written about two of them: R. J. King in *Buckfast and Buckfastleigh*, and Francis George Heath in *Walks in the Totnes Countryside*.



## Devon's Forgotten Feminist

The most interesting I have found so far, a writer with whom I feel a strange affinity, is the one who belongs to this country between Ivybridge and Ermington: M. P. Willcocks. Even the most literary of readers can be forgiven for never having heard of M. P. Willcocks or her work, because she is totally unknown today, and her own story has never, I think, been written, which says much for the arbitrary nature of fame. I shall tell it now, because she is worth spending some time with.

Mary Patricia Willcocks was born at Cleeve in 1869, although the house has been rebuilt since then. Her family had been yeomen farmers in this part of Devon for generations, and her deep knowledge of farming life, and the traditional speech and culture of Devon's people, are apparent in much of her work. She later said that her literary career began at the age of six months, when a gypsy predicted that she would one day write a book. She was taught to read by a miller's daughter, using biscuits shaped into letters. After going to Plymouth High School for Girls and a Young Ladies' College, she qualified as a schoolmistress and worked in Edinburgh and Leamington.

She was over thirty when she wrote her first novel, *Widdicombe* (1905). The setting is not, as you might think, Widecombe on Dartmoor, but the South Hams village of Yealmpton. *The Wingless Victory* (1907) features Brixham, Totnes, Dittisham, Dartmoor and Cornwall. Others of her books, many of them about the struggles of strong women against weak or selfish men, and a society which denies them basic rights, are set in Dartmouth, Topsham, North Devon and Sidmouth. The unnamed little town in *Worlds Apart* (1924) might be Ivybridge. While in *Wings of Desire* (1912) two characters walk beneath a viaduct in a wood on the edge of the moor. After the success of her second novel she gave up teaching and lived for the rest of her life in the Pennsylvania area of Exeter, though she traveled widely in Europe, and her imagination was as at home in Paris or London as in Devon. As well as novels she wrote biographies, essays and translations. She died in 1952.

Her style was romantic and intense, and her views advanced. She was a feminist, socialist and pacifist, with a deep interest in mysticism and what we now call 'human potential'. Her vision was a wise, broad and generous one; she was a thinker and artist who surveyed 'the long sweep of history' and knew that our evolution must involve inner growth as much as outer change. She sensed that 'through the vast texture of life there runs a common consciousness', and that life is an 'ocean of being on which we are all carried, star-systems, birds, beasts and men, the living and those who are to them but names on a tombstone.'

I am told that she became rather embittered as she aged, but there is no sign of this in her last book, written in her eighties, *The Laughing Philosopher* (1950). This, a study of the French author Rabelais, expresses a joyous acceptance of life in all its absurdity, and a serene delight in descriptions of the countryside. She never forgot her childhood in the gentle South Hams, amidst the 'fields and hills of a wide landscape'.

You will search the reference libraries in vain for any mention of M. P. Willcocks, and her books are extremely difficult to come by. I had never so much as seen one, until I found a shelf of them, all signed, in a second-hand bookshop in Plymouth. Over a period of about three years I went down at irregular intervals and bought them all, but, to judge by the dust, no one else ever disturbed them between my infrequent visits.

An author of such integrity and vision should not be completely forgotten. I have met only two other people who have heard of her, and talking to them is like being a member of an obscure and exclusive club! It is strange that the specialist women's publishers have not rediscovered her, but they might, and we shall see her works as bright new paperbacks with scholarly introductions (if this happens, remember who told you about her). 'Minor' writers often tell us more about their times than their greater contemporaries, and she deserves a place in the history of twentieth century feminist literature. She ought certainly to be included in the 'canon' of Devon writers: she has at least as much to say to us today as Sabine Baring-Gould, Eden Phillpotts, Beatrice Chase or John Trevena, and, I think, a lot more.

## On the Road to Ermington

It pleases me that the farm next to her birthplace, a little farther along the road to Ermington, is the farm that was one of my earliest haunts, the place which epitomises for me the archetypal Devon farmstead. The Ivybridge area is especially rich in examples of these, both on the moors and in the lowlands, and if you explore the country around the town you will be rewarded by the discovery of many beautiful old houses. This one sits at the end of a narrow lane leading gradually upwards between dense, fern-covered hedges. It is built snugly into the side of a hill facing south, thick-walled and stone floored, full of interesting passages and corners, large fireplaces and old beams. Warm in winter and cool in summer, it seems to grow naturally out of its surroundings, and has become the standard against which I judge all old houses, perhaps even all homes. As it was never actually my home and never will be, its perfections are uncontaminated by too close a familiarity. It thus remains an ideal, to be visited occasionally, dreamed about and meditated upon with unpossessive pleasure: 'the smoke of burning peat, mingled with the scent of new bread; the quiet falling of the ash from the quiet fire: peaceful security... and the dead and gone generations.'

The isolated farmhouse, or the small hamlet consisting perhaps of two or three such farms, is very characteristic of the Devon countryside. In some parts of the county it is the most common form of settlement. A few of the farms were in existence before the Romans arrived, and have been continuously occupied ever since. Many others were created out of woodland, moor, heath or marsh by the Saxon farmers from the seventh century onwards. There must have been more than one in this area for the name 'Ermington' to mean the largest. Almost all the rest were founded no later than the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, by free peasants with a charter from the local lord, a few basic tools and a lot of determination. Slowly, over many lifetimes, these Devon people created the landscape we know today, with its high hedge-banks and narrow lanes. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries most of the farmhouses were rebuilt, as was this one, indicating that there was plenty of wealth generally available, and enough time to think about a few luxuries on top of the basic making of a living. The wealthier Jacobean farmer had the time to read his Bible in the evenings, or play the viol, or just sit with his family and workers sharing the latest news and stories. Earlier generations would have had little leisure even for this. Oliver Cromwell, later in the seventeenth century, stated that the agriculture of Devon was the best in England. Subsequent ages have been more up and down, but the houses remain to commemorate those days of the county's greatest prosperity, along with some of the town houses of Exeter, Totnes and Dartmouth.

It is from such homes, in town or country, that many of the famous men and women in Devon's history have come, the offspring of free, independent yeomen or tradesmen, and the buildings themselves are as interesting as any grander house or castle. To me they mean much more. These houses breathe the life of past ages. To contemplate them gives a vivid realisation of the continuity of past, present and future, a sense of growth through the centuries, keeping what works, replacing what doesn't, extending when necessary. In the process they have become multi-layered and ever more individual and rich in associations. They are sensitive records of real and down-to-earth historical changes. It is this, and the knowledge of the people who have lived and died in them, that gives them such a healing and satisfying quality.

## Endsleigh Garden Centre

Returning to the main road, it is always pleasant to visit the extensive garden centre of Endsleigh, where the staff, in my experience, are especially helpful, and where you can spend many enjoyable hours among the plants and other wonderful things they sell here. But we must somehow cross the road to look briefly at a rather special, secretive bit of country between the town and the Lee Mill industrial estate (this is easy to do in a book; in reality it is not a wise idea to try walking across the A38).

## Cadleigh

Taking the lane that goes up past the Hunting Lodge, a comfortable pub which I can just

remember being called the Julian Arms, when the road at its front door was the main highway, you are soon going towards Cadleigh. Here, sheltered by mature trees and shrubs, is the local Roman Catholic Church, dating from the early years of the twentieth century when a small community of French nuns was established. My mother, who went to their tiny school, remembers that it became a seminary run by some Spanish priests after the Spanish Civil War, and it is odd to read their names in the quiet little cemetery, deep in this damp, shady corner of Devon.



The surrounding landscape, as she learnt about it in the 1920s, was mysterious and haunted, the influence of the nearby moorland already being felt in the walls of rounded stone; every field and lane had a strange story or a ghost attached to it, traditions going back many centuries, to the Reformation and beyond. Tales of a ghostly monk walking between here and Ivybridge, black dogs, a black horse galloping silently along Langham Levels beside the railway line, a field where nothing could be grown because of the blood shed on it, a secret tunnel linking two ancient manor houses, somewhere along which there 'lies more gold than the devil can haul'. Little of this lore seems ever to have been recorded; I wonder how much of it is known to the people living here today?

### **Fardel and Strashleigh**

The two 'manors' are Fardel, a short distance along the Cornwood road and off to the left, and Strashleigh, a substantial farm with the remains of an earlier mansion, that can be seen on the other side of the dual carriageway. Fardel is a small medieval house once owned by the Raleigh family; Sir Walter's father left here for Hayes Barton in East Devon, where the great man was born. The Reverend Swete in 1796 described it in his diary as 'an old mansion, of respectable appearance, surrounded by large branching oaks, sons of other times.' The garden is sometimes opened to the public.

An 'Ogam' stone, with inscriptions in an ancient Celtic script dating from the sixth century, and commemorating people of Irish descent, was found here in 1860. It was the first to be discovered in England, and is now in the British Museum. This stone has itself become the focus of legend: a tradition recorded in 1923 was that if it ever left the field in which it was dug up, or if that field was ever ploughed, tragedy would follow. But I have a book published about thirty years ago which states that the stone was not found in a field at all: it was originally part of a gatepost in the courtyard. A later book confidently asserts that it was built into an old bridge! One story puts the buried treasure in the same field, and has it guarded by a lady in dark, rustling silk who glides along the road, yet another tells of how it was hidden by Sir Walter Raleigh on his last journey from Plymouth to London, during which he was arrested outside Ashburton.

The folklore my mother learnt insisted that both Fardel and Strashleigh had been pre-Reformation monastic houses, and the gold buried between them was church plate hidden from the despoilers at the time of the Dissolution. Traditionally, the occupiers of ex-monasteries were dogged by ill-fortune for several generations, and the stories she heard about Fardel were of this nature. One owner plunged to his death from a bridge, and another was thrown by his horse while hunting on the moor, a headless white horse haunting the area of this tragedy.

The blood spilt in the uncultivable field was of monks, fleeing from the troops and cut down in their hundreds, and because it was so blighted by evil, the field could never be ploughed. Plough shares would break, horses would go lame, and if, by a miracle, someone managed to cut a few furrows, by the next morning they would have disappeared, and the field would be as it was.

Needless to say, there is no historical evidence for any of this. Neither Fardel nor Strashleigh was ever a religious house, or even owned by one. The Dissolution of the Monasteries, although a great psychological shock to the people, and involving the destruction of irreplaceable libraries and artifacts, was a relatively bloodless affair; most ex-monks were given pensions for life or jobs in the reformed church. Clearly, Fardel is one of those places which for some reason attracts constellations of old tales, so just take the one that most appeals to you and embellish it! The fact that these stories concerned places which the listeners would have to pass and re-pass daily must have given winter storytelling, in the days before radio and television, an impact which it is difficult to revive, although it is good to see that the art of live storytelling is becoming increasingly popular.



From Fardel go right towards Ivybridge, with the railway line immediately on your left. This is the road which the ghostly black horse gallops along. A large, angry looking animal, he is so real in appearance that people stand back to let him pass, only realising afterwards that they heard no sound of hoofbeats. I know that he was definitely seen in the 1940s; does he still run here?

At Langham levels, where you meet the new houses of the town, turn sharp left over a railway bridge onto a footpath for Henlake Down. This soon becomes a rocky, muddy Devon lane going steeply upwards. At the top you go through a gate and you find yourself on Dartmoor. The Welsh poet R. S. Thomas once described walking onto a moor as like entering a church, and it is very strange how the atmosphere changes so immediately. On the bright, cold autumn day when I came here the stillness was tangible. As I looked back at the South Hams landscape spread out beneath me, the green of the fields glowed, becoming blue in the distance, while barely a sound came up from below—even the A38 was invisible.

### **Henlake Down**

If you keep going on up the path, further into the experience, you reach Henlake Down, which has prehistoric remains and where the Rogers family, in the eighteenth century, created a racecourse. From here you can easily descend to Pithill Woods and back to the town, but I returned by the same path to Langham levels and into Ivybridge along Blachford Road. Passing a large house called Nirvana, built for a retired governor of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), I walked along in the autumn sunshine enjoying the colours of the leaves, and I was soon down at St John's church and the old bridge. My senses were filled with the beauty of this country where the moor meets the South Hams, and as I stood on the ancient bridge, with its great, weathered stones, I reflected that, whatever the other books say, Ivybridge is a good place to be, to become rooted in and to watch the changing seasons from.



### And Finally ...

I shall give the last word to Tom Maddock, lover of the town and oracle on every aspect of its past:

Perhaps when we stand and watch the beautiful waters of the Erme flow underneath, we will remember that the old bridge contains a lot of history. Then we will appreciate its value, and the wisdom of those who chose the site for it eight hundred years ago. So please fondle the coping stone as you walk away, and give a thought for those living now, who are preserving the structure for modern Ivybridge. It pays sometimes to stop the car and look around, to see what valuable assets we have inherited.

#### Other Titles by Bob Mann:

##### **Boat Trip Down The Dart**

**£1.95**

A boat trip down the Dart from Totnes to Dartmouth, or upriver from Dartmouth to Totnes, is one of the most enjoyable journeys in Devon. Away from the sight and sound of traffic, this 2 mile, one-and-a-quarter hour voyage is a wonderful way to savour the delights of the beautiful River Dart. In this easy-to-read little book, Bob Mann tells the stories of the people and places which are passed on the way. You may use it as a guide book whilst exploring the area, or keep it as a lasting souvenir—as a reminder of a great day spent travelling through some of Devon's most beautiful scenery.

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