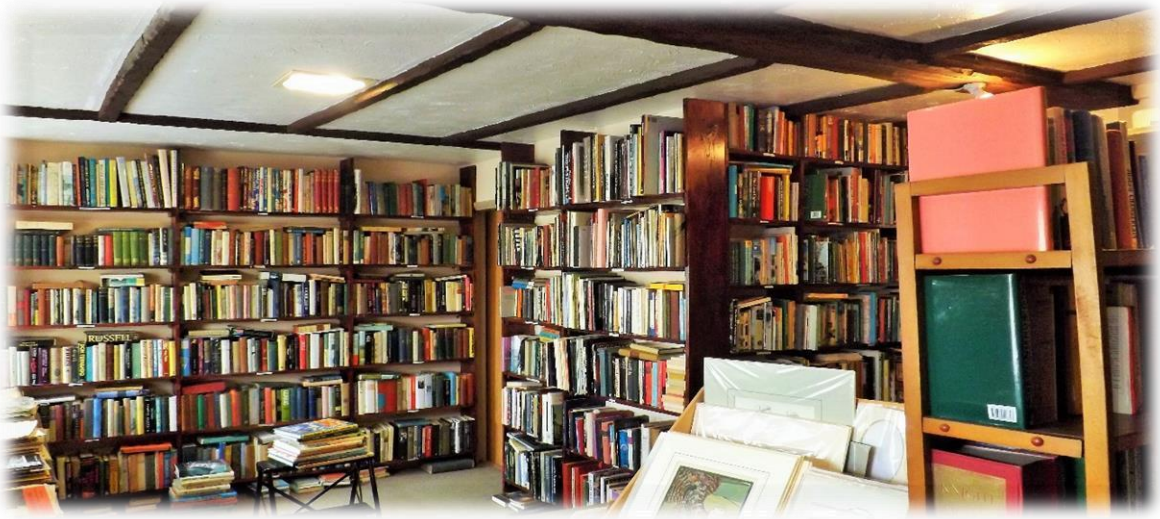
Chapter One.

'When you are old and grey and full of sleep, and nodding by the fire, take down this book, and slowly read, and dream of the soft look, your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep'. William Butler Yeats. "When you are old".

So far as I know 'Bimbling' doesn't appear to mean anything other than to walk or travel at a leisurely pace. It is for someone like me the preferred choice when out and about. It brings to the fore, all the senses and concentrates the mind in the moment, rather than focusing too much on the destination. It's less hurried pace suits those who by nature and inclination are apt to wander and are open to the random possibilities that may present themselves. The chance discovery of something engaging swiftly becomes incorporated into a revised plan. Talking to friends about Bimbling has revealed that I am apparently not the only person in the world to have stumbled on this approach to venturing outdoors. They too recount how some of their favourite memories arose quite by chance having taken a random turn and rewarded with the discovery of an unexpected gem or chance encounter. Often it has been both. It doesn't always work out like that of course and spontaneity can lead to dead ends and through places that seem less inspiring. However even the most rigid adherence to plans can face similar difficulties. Perhaps this relaxed attitude stems from my current favourable circumstances. Having reached the milestone of retirement and happily survived thus far there has been the welcome prospect of more free time to bimble. It helps that I have an abiding interest in exploring places, meeting people and learning about the history of the landscape.

Many of my travels have led me to explore in more depth and purpose my home county of Devon. In part, this has been born out of the privilege of living in such a lovely part of the world where the coast, countryside, moors and rivers are accessible from my doorstep within just a few minutes. Accompanying me on my travels has been a growing library of books and photographs connected to places visited and providing a rich layer of background, lived experiences and atmosphere. The habitat of these books is often discovered in the setting of local second-hand bookshops which hold an irresistible allure, stirring the hunter-gatherer instinct in me to seek out

potential treasures or bargains. If I call to mind many of these establishments, their enticements and attractions are much the same. Crossing the doorstep of any number of these bookshops has something of this experience. A bell momentarily rings out announcing the new arrival and disturbing the quiet stillness of the bookshop interior. The Grandfather clock in the corner of the room quickly reasserts its rhythmic sound. I rapidly adopt a hushed reverence and make a smile or greeting to the book-seller who is usually to be found appearing just above a fine old desk half buried in books, papers and ornaments. Nearby a fire is lit and warming a slumbering dog stretched across a worn rug. Sometimes I have a book or a subject in mind and make some enquiry. On these occasions I am pointed in the direction of the relevant shelf or room. Leaving my rucksack with the proprietor I make my way either by the most direct route or more typically by meandering, content just to wander. Along the way I enjoy the personal stamp each owner makes upon the character of their bookshop in their choice and location of pictures, ornaments and décor. If the intention is to create a nice inviting environment where books can be found and purchased, it also reflects the bookseller's pride and celebration of books. Literature in all its forms adds rather than subtracts to the value of life. It feeds the imagination, entertains and provokes thought, curiosity and learning. Presented with a vast array of books, maps and magazines on every conceivable subject, the hospitable provision of chairs or a sofa is evidence of a kind of literary fraternity. Sandwiched within rows of bookshelves, piled high in stacks or neatly displayed on table-tops are a cornucopia of books of every interest, age and preserve.



What, I find touching is that each book, map, leaflet or magazine has been found a place by a careful hand. When I open a book, I delight in finding some evidence of its previous readership marked with some dedication, event and date. You get some idea of the character and thoughts of these people by what they have added to the book. By way of editing, they make hand-written corrections emphasised with exclamation or question marks. Artistic contributions take the form of doodles or inscriptions. Perhaps, most touchingly they underline sentences or verses that held

some particular significance or sentiment. Throughout many books, there are the makeshift markers in the corners of pages turned when the reader's eyes presumably grew tired. It marks their progress through the book. Sometimes, the marker may have been a postcard or leaflet tucked away in its pages, or added to the book as having some connection to the subject. On used maps, I note the circles on locations, dates recorded and lines denoting the routes taken. I mention all this, because I always regard these additions as of bonus when choosing books on Devon. Take for example, a hardback book, bought for forty pence in a nearby charity shop: "Treasures of Devon" by Eric Leyland (1954). On the back of the front cover is a glued label stating that the book is the property of the Joint Committee of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and the British Red Cross Society Hospital Library Department. Quite a mouthful! I imagine that the book at one time sat on a trolley and did the rounds of hospital wards until it found its mysterious way to the Oxfam charity shop in Budleigh. I can think of no better place to return the book either as this seems in keeping with the opening of the story with two friends, Jack and Rex "Grumpy" travelling on a "small, fussy train puffing its laborious way down the Devonshire valley towards the sea...Far away, at the mouth of the valley, could be seen the blue sparkle of the sea".

Foraging through the local interest bookshelves has led to quite a haul of books that have become indispensable reading and liberally plundered for this humble offering on the Exe. It has also led to the discovery that earlier travellers along the banks of the Exe (and for that matter other Devon rivers) similarly adopted a 'Bimbling' style to their venture. One book in particular; "Rambles in Somerset" (1912), sets out as good a description of Bimbling as I have come across. "An Exmoor ramble should be an impromptu sort of entertainment, not a cut-and- dried affair planned on the direction of a guide-book. The spirit of the moor is the spirit of an almost irresponsible freedom which carries you at the whim of the moment anywhere across the heather (1). I feel sure The Exmoor Rescue Service might raise a slight eyebrow at this statement today, but Bimbling doesn't preclude common sense and care. At its best, it simply embraces the opportunities, great and small, to notice, learn and value what is all around us. In this respect, I have come to an enormous appreciation of two brothers, both of whom wrote about Exmoor; their styles and interests distinct from one-another, but united in the same respect and gift of writing. Of these, the introduction to:" The Heritage of Exmoor" (2) is for me, the most moving with the author, Roger Alan Burton reflecting back across a distance of thirty-five years to four days in May 1954, when he was invited by his brother to go on a rambling expedition on Exmoor. His brother, Samuel Holroyd "Tim" Burton, was a keen Ornithologists and at the time of the walk, Head of English at Blundell's School in Tiverton. Roger Burton writes that the brothers were dropped off by a baker's van near Challacombe and from there made their way up onto the high moors by way of the abandoned farm at

Radworthy. This took them towards Pinkery Pond; “a lonely spot in those days and we did not tarry long” and a route along Long Chains Coombe to Hoar Oak Tree, Cheriton Ridge and Farley Water. Tramping eastwardly, they arrived at the meeting of Hoccombe and Lancombe Water and spent their first night in a borrowed tent with a groundsheet, blanket, matches and a hatchet. They slept in their clothes which was just as well as they awoke early the next morning almost “paralysed” with cold in the frosty darkened morning.

Having managed to get a small fire started they were able to brew up a hot drink and revive themselves sufficiently for the next day’s hike. They were also rewarded with the sight of Red Deer grazing in the distance. They set off further east in the direction of the ruins of Tom’s Hill and Larkbarrow Farm, both “created out of the wilderness by the Knight family” and lain asunder as target practice by artillery during the Second World War. It was here that Roger Burton felt the “seeds were sown and the deep longing to know more about Exmoor’s past began”. Their second night was spent camped at Chetsford Water, near to Nutscale Reservoir where for a time the brothers were transfixed looking into the filter tanks filled with Stickleback fish. The following day they made a precipitous climb up to Lucott Moor, a reach made all the more testing with the heavy packs they were carrying, but rewarded with fine views and made camp at Chalk Water. The next day they headed to Landcombe overlooking Badgworthy Water and set up their camp early so that they could explore the valley and the ruins of the “Doones Cotts”. It is an area I know a little from a walk with my friend, Chris Porteus on a hot summer’s day and recall never being so glad to take a dip in the cold shaded Badgworthy Water after a long day’s hike. At least, it felt like a hike at the time, but seems a gentle stroll by comparison with the Burton Brothers on their last day. They set off in the westerly direction of Brendon Common, re-crossing Farley Water, Cheriton Ridge and Hoar Oak Water. The brothers returned to the Chains and “were not sorry when at last we reached Chapman Barrow and after a short rest...made their way down to Parracombe”. They were mercifully picked up by a passing motorist who gave them a lift up to Barnstaple. The sleeve cover of Samuel Burton’s book; Exmoor (3) sets out the hope that “if it succeeds in helping its readers to know and love more Exmoor’s than they knew and loved before, I shall be content; for I shall then have repaid a debt -a debt I owe to Exmoor, and to those who have walked there with me”.

This sense of debt to a place is something explored in ‘The Great Explosion’, by Brian Dillon (4). In his introduction, he wrote that his growing awareness and appreciation of his surroundings proved a turning point in his recovery from Depression. It marked an emergence from a hitherto "sullen indifference" to his adopted county of Kent and allowed him to find in the humblest of places some curiosity for the past shadows, stories and imprints of their history. He became interested in the small details and objects of everyday life alongside the broader sweep of history. This conscious awakening to the rich offerings found in his own neighbourhood, combined with a spirit of wandering appears to have served him well. Whilst walking through the Kent Marshes, he stumbled upon the ruined site of a long abandoned First World War munitions factory which had suffered from fire and a series of explosions and considerable loss of life. He was captivated by the story of this event, largely forgotten and half-hidden by the reclamation of Nature and the processes of decay. Having found a connection to a place, he found a renewed sense of creativity, enquiry and purpose. In his own words, he “decided that I owed something to this place, that although I was just an occasional visitor it had gone to work on me over the years and now embodied something of my attachment to his place”.

For myself, the release from full-time employment unleashed a similar spring of energy, enthusiasm and time for my own wanderings. In the course of my Bimbles amongst the Devonshire landscape, has been the discovery of so many places that have attached to me some special worth or evocation. One such haven is a place I call, somewhat unimaginatively, Reservoir Hill, because it holds just that; buried beneath its thin skin of grasses and wild flowers. Sunk deep into the soil and bedrock below and closed with steel lids, the reservoir serves as a marvellous platform upon which to survey the landscape. Looking at the map, the hill doesn't appear to have a

name that I can find, but it is there as much in my knowledge of the area, as in my mind's eye. As I write this, I can conjure up the images of the wooded rise and fall of the Crediton Hamlets in the distance. I can recall the criss-cross of ancient hedgerows across the valleys with farmsteads nestling on their slopes. In the far distance are the high undulating moors with a glimpse of their rocky outcrops on the horizon. The nearest identifiable landmark to Reservoir Hill, is the transmission mast, standing atop Waddlesdown. If the idea of a transmission mast puts you off, I recommend you go there and stand by the farm gate next to the old oak tree. From there, the

mast will be behind you, whilst before you will be an uninterrupted panorama of the Exe Estuary and the open sea of Lyme Bay beyond. It has few rivals in the viewing department, and for me, allows a gallery from which I can survey the stage upon which much of my life has been played out. However, Reservoir Hill offers a fond memory. It is where I recall the sight of birds of prey, one fine hot summer's afternoon, soaring effortlessly high and low above the landscape. They flew adrift and adroit on the thermal ebbs and falls. The manner in which they glided meant that they were able to observe more carefully and discern things of interest that might so easily be missed in a more hurried fashion.

Bimbling has some element of this, as I discovered some years ago. I was cycling slowly through the East Devon village of Lympstone enjoying the view and by good fortune, came across a poem displayed in a porch window along Sowden Lane. If people consider placing a choice poem on display, they could do no better than

'Days', that short exquisite contemplative poem by Philip Larkin (5). Opening with the question about the meaning of days, it alludes to the broader question on the nature of our very existence. It struck a chord with me, at the time and still does, about the measure, value and importance of each day. In our short “summer of a dormouse" existence, the choices we make about how best to use each day is a valuable lesson. It doesn’t have to be complicated either. As I cycled the rest of the way to Exmouth, I reflected on the poem and the choices I had made in how I might spend this day. Cycling to see my Parents seemed to have been the first of two good intuitive decisions that gave some shape and value to the day. No better time is spent than with those you love and whose time like your own is measured and precious. The second was the choice of the bike ride itself. A good deal of the enjoyment I derive from cycling owes to the slow pace my heavy-duty Pashley Roadster will only permit. It is made for cruising, not for speed. It is in effect, a Bimblers bike. On a hill, I can get off and push the bike without having to offer any justification. Only a masochist or a sadist would disapprove, whereas, in my experience, most people express some solidarity. On a couple of occasions, kindly motorists have actually stopped to ask if I needed a lift, proving there are good Samaritans out there. On the flat, or downhill, its high seat and handlebar position provide a fine cockpit view across the countryside. The springy seat allows the temporary assurance of some comfort on long journeys for older bones and muscles. Most of all, my beloved bike has a distinctive old-worldly character, that makes it as much a companion as a workhorse on country jaunts or commuting to work. As I lift the bicycle from its resting place in the conservatory at the back of the house and wheel it through to the front pavement, I am immediately reminded of its creaky sound. Or is that just me? Seating myself on the bike there is sound of understandable protest with springs compressing and my uncertain foot adjustment on the pedals. The first few seconds of gaining balance and traction are punctuated by a series of uneven creaks and stumbles. As momentum gathers apace the sound becomes more constant and almost rhythmic. My breathing, movement and control of balance meet with pitch and frequency of the three C’s; cranking, clanking and creaking.

I can’t help thinking Larkin might have considered this for one of his poems. For a large part of his life, he lived and worked as Head Librarian at Hull University, in Yorkshire and wrote letters and poems with reference to cycling. He described Hull to a friend as “very nice and flat for cycling” and beyond the city, he sauntered far and wide around East Riding in a landscape that inspired several of his poems. In another letter to a friend, he wrote about cycling “West in a long arc round the villages and wolds to Kirk Ella and Hessle”, only to find that the person he hoped to meet wasn’t in, so returned home having “done nearly 20 miles and felt tired” (6). If I had to write a letter about cycling, it would be as a debt of gratitude to a dear colleague and friend, Peter Freestone. It was his sage advice that led to me purchasing this bike and

at an opportune time, when I was coming up to semi-retirement. It has been entirely complementary. The slow leisurely pace I adopt on the bike has enabled me to cycle far and wide, on any number of pleasant day trips. At times, I feel compelled to slow the pace down further, or dismount and walk. On occasions, when home-coming has been rewarded with the spectacle of sunsets over the Haldon Hills, I have often wished for the clock to stop and reminded of the words of Kenneth Grahame: “Then everything gradually seems to join in, the sun and the wind, the road and the dusty hedges, the spirit of the seasons, whatever that maybe, the friendly old Earth…till you walk in the midst of blessed company immersed in a dream. “The man who walks alone” (1913).

The same wistfulness is repeated each year, in the calm ambience and dappled shade of Glebe Wood, which is situated close to Waddlesdown. In spring, the woodland floor bursts into life with its perennial bluebell harvest of scent and colour. If ''days are to be happy in'' as Larkin wrote, then I can think of no better time and place to linger. These intense experiences have provided me with a rich treasure trove of vivid memories. I hold them in good store as an antidote to the times when days are more frenetic and challenging. In the same vein, this brings to mind, that particular day in June 2015, when I pulled into the lay-by at Exe Head Bridge, high on the Exmoor upland, aware that no day could be finer and no time more precious. I had arrived in the spirit of pilgrimage to the source of The River Exe. The day was young and the day was mine. Gathering my things eagerly from the boot of the car, I decided that it was tee-shirt weather and dispensed with the thought of carrying my coat and fleece.

In my rucksack was packed a small picnic, water bottle, thermos, camera, a crumpled book, swim shorts and towel. I was intent upon walking up to Exe Head and from there, planned to go for a swim at nearby Pinkery Pond. The crumpled book lurking at the bottom of my ruck-sack was ‘The Exe’ by Rod Lawrence (7). I confess, that it was a book to which, I had paid little attention in the past, and having bought it as a passing whimsy when noticing the title. I'm sure I looked through it briefly on the day of its purchase, before putting it onto one of my bookshelves and there it had lain for several years, largely undisturbed. Luckily, it was the chance rediscovery of this book that helped inspire me to make the expedition to Exe Head. Sitting down in my armchair, I opened the book up and began to read the introduction, noticing that his odyssey had taken place thirty years previously in June 1985. I warmed to his description of a childhood affinity with the river and the estuary, sensing in this, a kindred spirit and connection. Lawrence’s childhood memories included a description of wading out into the estuarine mudflats near Starcross and getting stuck in the oily mud and having to walk back to his grandparents, minus his wellies. This reminded me of many such battles with the mudflats on the other side of the Exe Estuary. For a time, the creek behind the back of Camperdown Terrace in Exmouth was one of our favoured family playgrounds. From here, my father would launch the rowing boat from the slipway into the lapping high tide water and we would row around the little bay. I recall Grandfather Norman and his older brother, Arthur taking turns to row the boat with us as passengers or swimming alongside.

Reading on, I have not by comparison, experienced the effects of the flooding on my small terraced house in St Thomas, Exeter which lies close to the River Exe as befell Lawrence's aunt and uncle who lived nearby. In 1960, whilst he was staying with them, he witnessed the full impact of the rising floodwaters in the area. Whilst I have felt alarmed at the ferocity and surge of the river in times of flood flowing sometimes too high for my comfort in the proximity of my house, I have had good cause to acknowledge the Flood Prevention Scheme which came in the wake of the two separate floods of 1960. Luckily the river in flood is mercifully but one of its many moods and more often than not it appears benign and placid. On fine days a walk or cycle along the riverside provides a pleasant excursion. On occasions I have cycled to Topsham and sat on one of the benches along Goats Walk and enjoyed the spectacle of The Exe Estuary. There is something very uplifting about the sight of the glimmering surface of the water stretching all the way down to the mouth of the estuary. Beyond its narrow mouth lies the open sea of Lyme Bay which Lawrence described as: "that ever-changing silver ribbon of water ". These words are apt particularly at low tide when the channels in the mudflats positively glisten in the mid-day sun. It is a childhood image to which he returned in adulthood and set about reacquainting himself with the river and the estuary and led him to decide that it was "high time that I did a little exploring of the higher reach of the river". Recalling my parents mentioning that they had visited the source of the Exe in the past, I wondered if this was the time for me to go in search of this place. Reading through the rest of the book, brought to mind the realisation, that many of the places he described were pretty much 'Terra Incognito'. I felt the impulse to remedy this situation. If I could start from Exe Head, the cradle of the river, I could in time follow

its course down to the sea and enable me to piece together these unknown stretches with the parts of the river with which I was more familiar. Perhaps it was time for me to go.

From its rise on the high ground of Exmoor in Somerset to its meeting with the sea at Lyme Bay in Devon, the Exe straddles two counties, taking possession of springs, streams and rivers that meet with its sixty-mile course. Indeed, Exmoor is named after the river, which in turn derives its name from the Celtic word of Isca, meaning a river abounding in salmon. This seems to have been adopted by the occupying Romans, who incorporated it into the fledgling settlement of Isca Dumnoniorum and the Saxons later called Exanceaster. The city and various settlements along the river have incorporated its name over the centuries; examples being Exford, Exebridge and Exton. For the most part, my earliest connection with the river was where it entered into the Exe Estuary and made its farewell bow to the sea. Here the mudflats and sandbanks of the estuary bordering Exmouth, revealed or hid themselves with the rise and fall of the tides. As the water receded, the exposed rippled sandbanks, shallow pools and channels became our newly exposed playground. This had to be surrendered as the incoming tide inexorably reclaimed its underwater kingdom and we children, were gradually forced to retreat to the high-water shoreline of Shelley Beach. In the golden embrace of many a fine Summer's evening, with a sunset settling down over the Haldon Hills, I can still recall the sheer pleasure of being alive in the thrall of the moment. The desperate attempts to stop the sandcastles from being engulfed by the rising tide water and the sweet surrender met with laughter and a final swim. It was here, in home-made woollen pants that I learnt as a young boy to swim. It was on

these sandy beaches, that I discovered the great pleasure of beach-combing, a past-time that has never left me.

My memory of den-making is instantly rekindled by the dank-smelling sand that lay beneath upturned boats and formed our temporary shelters. From the edge of the seashore, we would help each-other to clamber onto the boats of family friends, taking us to communal barbecues and play amongst the dunes on the nearby Dawlish Warren. In later years, I would canoe with my friends, Miles, Andrew, Ralph and Nigel to Dawlish Warren and camp nearby to the spot where in the 1920's and 1930's, my Maternal Great Grandparents had had a beach chalet, now long ago swept away. Shelley Beach was where, for a short period in the late 1960's, our Parents brought us to stay in one of the chalets that made up a makeshift colony. Its informal layout was criss-crossed with little paths and courtyards, running between the chalets and leading down to a succession of small beaches. At the centre of this colony was the large dock filled with ships and industry. Large grain silos stood on one side of the docks and nearby were the Dixon boatyard and Putts timber mills. There was a much-frequented general store, where ice-creams, sweets, comics and other childhood essentials could be carefully purchased with an advance of holiday money. Across the road was the Fishmongers, which was one of the last of the old businesses to go in the subsequent redevelopment.

Some things, however, remain constant. The end of the piers continues to be a place to inspect the wriggling fish caught by local fisherman and witness passengers make their way down the boarding ramp to the Starcross ferry. I used to frequently come back to the area long after we moved in the late 1960's to a large Edwardian house in Gussiford Lane, further up in the town. However, this extended my childhood playground towards the magnificent Madeira Walk Plantations, the Maer, and the sea front all the way down to Orcombe Point. As I grew more independent, the cliffs overlooking Lyme Bay and the East Devon countryside around the town also became my roaming country with friends on walks or cycle trips. Perhaps, here was the cradle of my bimbling nature. From Woodbury Castle, a regular haunt, I could as now survey the estuary and its westerly settlements of Cockwood, Starcross and Dawlish, nestling on the lower slopes of Haldon Hills. Much has changed in the landscape of the Exmouth of my youth, including the development of the docks into a marina and upmarket residential area. There remain the familiar sounds of the trains running, the chimes of the Holy Trinity church clock ringing the time and the sea.

In later life with Fatherhood and work, I moved to Exminster, a village just outside of Exeter. I spent time walking along the tandem water courses of the Exeter Canal and the river as it met with the Exe Estuary. In summertime, I would take my children down to the marshes and make our way across the ferryman's crossing to Topsham. At other times, with family and friends, we would cycle or walk down to the Turf Locks Hotel at the mouth of the canal. In later years, I have moved to St Thomas in Exeter and learned to rein in my natural impulse to swim in the river constrained by a convention, that 'it's just not the done thing'. On hot summer's evenings I have imagined myself immersed in the river but confined myself to simply admiring its splendour as I walk alongside it. One consolation has always been a stretch of the river at Bramford Speke, a few miles upriver from Exeter. Here, swimming is almost part of the DNA of the village community and where on many occasions, I took a dip with the kids long before I became aware that it gets a mention in the Bible for all Wild Swimmers; namely that of Roger Deakin's, 'Waterlog' (8). Beyond, this I was very

familiar with a delightful place called Cove just a few miles upriver from Tiverton and it was here, with one of my oldest friends, Giles Cox, that we used to take our children swimming and messing about in the water and it is to all of these places I shall return in the book.

The day, I arrived at Exe Head Bridge I came with sense of purpose heightened by a range of interests developed over the years. Chief amongst them: Photography, Devonshire History and the noble pursuit of Wild Swimming. I thought it would be nice to include in a reflective illustrative journal, something that might be taken down from the bookshelf and read by the fire. In these pages and photographs, I might recall "the soft look" and "their shadows deep". So much for these fanciful thoughts. In the event, the subsequent walks took considerably less time to complete, than it has taken to put the final full stop on the last chapter to this book. In the process of writing, my interest in local history has come to the fore and in amateurishly attempting to write about it, had cause to reflect on how my book has stood up to the advice given by H.P.R. Finberg on; "How not to write Local History" (9) He begins with the following suggestion that "anyone who wishes to avoid writing local history will find it perfectly easy to do so: he has only to switch on the radio or television; or he can just go to sleep". I suppose, I could have followed this advice, but having started a journal (a retirement gift by my good friend, Seb Rotheray) the pages

started to fill up and took on a momentum of their own. Alongside the reflections of each walk came the start of researching the places visited; which often felt the wrong way around, but arose out of a haphazard itinery. I found the exercise of writing quite absorbing. I began to tell family and friends that I was doing this. Gradually, I amassed a considerable body of work and came to think that no matter what the final result of a book was judged to be, it was more important to have achieved completion than abandoned the project altogether. In the process of researching this book, I came across any number of fading out-of-date publications; many of them self-published, providing a rich seam of insight into the lives of ordinary people in communities and landscapes spread along the Exe. Such publications were found in village shops, post offices, second-hand bookshops, recycling centres and of course charity shops. I found something quite touching about the personal accounts of people who have long since passed away, writing about their lives and experiences. They were oblivious to Finsberg's wagging finger that the way not to write a book is "to assume an equal enthusiasm in the reader". This inducement it seemed to me, rather overlooked the authors enjoyment in finding expression for their thoughts and lived experiences. They would have received encouragement, interest and support from family and friends as I have. I suspect, they hoped that their record might live on in print beyond the lived memory. Some trace of themselves found in the pages, photographs and pictures, each account bearing the authors stamp in the selective memory, description and style. The book marked a personal triumph and legacy. There is much richness in this diversity and a broad stroke of the great and the small that speaks to the lives of ordinary people throughout the centuries. There is a lament and celebration in each of these books and at times, I suspect a summing up before the advent of senility and a record of their brief mortal sojourn for posterity. No doubt you've guessed, these emotions have played out in my motivations for writing this book. It is also true, that this interest has been spurred on by several years compiling my own family history, much of which has strong roots in Devon and connection to the places along the Exe. Knitted together, these disparate strands resonate with the sentiment in Alison Light's book; "Common People" (2014) where she explored her reasons for delving into her family history. In a more fragmented age, it seems we turn to the past to find;" lost ancestral places to which we can never return. Can there be family history in a floating world?"

There is one lighter suggestion on how not to write local history, I particularly liked: "Never use one word where you can possibly use four". Hopefully, several re-readings and the contribution of my mother, Pamela has helped stem this instinct and I thank her, as in all things, for this help. I also have my partner Kathy Gore to thank for her enduring love and companionship along the distance of this book and the encouragement in distilling thoughts and banishing doubts. The words, sentiments and mistakes are mine. This book is a celebration in days no better spent than on the

banks of the Exe and blessed in company of others. Out of it has forged a cherished friendship with my river walking companion, Charles Dixon, without whom this enterprise would have been infinitely the poorer and correspondingly, the richer for his shared endeavour. I am immensely grateful to him. The book is above all things, my witness and gratitude to the countless gifts the walk provided and my encounters with the many delightful people met along the way.