Chapter Two.

“Treeless, it maybe, empty and barren it is not, for those who care to seek it, there is a wealth of plants and animal life just waiting to be discovered “. The Exe: A river for wildlife. Rod Lawrence. 1991.

Exe Head.

Stepping through the gate at Blackpitts, I looked up at the signpost pointing in the direction of Exe Head and followed onto the rough worn track. To the side of me was Exe Head Bridge and here the river was clearly evident, but as I followed the path higher up Exe Plain and Dure Down, it quickly became hidden amidst the moorland’s canopy. The track eventually merged with the more established Two Moors Way and led to an area shown on the map as the site of Exe Head. In this high and exposed position, the landscape protected only by a thin carpet of low-lying ground cover, seemed at the mercy of the open sky and the radiating heat of the sunshine. Little wonder that in periods of prolonged drought, the ground becomes hardened, blackened and baked. The grasses and heathers dry to kindling and easy fodder to fires that can take hold and sweep across large sections of the moors. However, even in the driest of spells, the moorland it is not without miry pockets, hidden just a few inches from where the unsuspecting walker’s foot might land. In part, this is a consequence of the high rainfall and periodic melted ice and snow that fall across the moorland. This bountiful supply of water is then held within a solid impervious bedrock and a huge layering mass of peat soil consisting of slowly rotting vegetation, “its own dead and scanty “(10) and formed over thousands of years. This giant sponge acts as a natural reservoir slowly releasing deep reserves of water through countless springs onto "a land of bubbling streams", as Alfred Tennyson put it and rising out of this force is the cradle of the Exe.

On the map, a ford was shown at the site of Exe head, but in the recent spell of dry weather the ground around me, appeared almost devoid of any hint of moisture. The first clue that I had reached my watery destination was a small signpost stating 'Exe Head'. Close by, was a bank of earth which forms part of the South Chains wall. It was bounded on each side by a line of fencing and covered in thick vegetation. Where the wall came to an abrupt halt and fell away, there was an exposed earthen and stony face. I noticed a small trickle of water appear from somewhere beneath the grasses at the top of the bank and wind its way down into a small pool at its base. The water in the pool was clear, almost film-like, its thin shimmering surface rippled in the gentle breeze and stirred by the constant replenishment from the spring. The bright coloured stones strewn around the floor of the pool glistened like gold nuggets in the strong sunlight. I chose one of the stones in the pool of water as a keepsake and putting this down to one side, cupped my hands to draw the water to my face. It was a baptism of sorts. It marked the start of a habit I have adopted at the source of each river subsequently explored.

Feeling lifted by this sense of anointment and my skins direct contact with the water, I switched my attention to its sounds. The trickle of water below made faint, tinkling chimes. Closing my eyes, I concentrated more intently on the hearing. I became aware of the reverberations created by the force of water hitting or pouring over nearby rocks that lay in its path. The most notable sounds produced were a mixture of high-pitched sparkling notes along with occasional gurgling sounds, as if some plug had been pulled. There was no obvious rhythm or order at play here, more a harmonious anarchy in which, no matter how hard I tried, it was impossible to find any musical shape or order. The constant flow of the running stream offered little chance to keep abreast with its fleeting nature. However, the act of trying to really listen to the stream was rather rewarding. It felt like another kind of bathing, only this time, drawn from an invisible, soporific soundscape which drew in the occasional birdsong and rustle of breeze.

Opening my eyes, I looked at the juvenile ribbon of water steadily making its way from the pool and across a small channel bordered on either side by a mass of dry baked ground. Eventually, the stream passed under a wire fence and into the mass of vegetation covering Exe Plain. In the distance, the moorland was shouldered by a large blue sky and drifting islands of white billowy clouds. The horizon unbroken by

any tree or distinctive object. In such an open- wide setting, the moorland presented a large canvas upon which each passing cloud cast enormous shadows rather like a dark spell. The land became bleak, brooding and overcast. The effect might linger for a while but just as easily, instantaneously lift with the return of full sunlight and joyful countenance. The overall effect was to create a stage upon which the constant change of moods of the day could play their parts to the full.

I set off up the side of Dure Down to get a view from a little further above Exe Head. From certain vantage points, I could just make out the coastline of Porthcawl and the Glamorgan coast, appearing like some desert mirage in the shimmering heat. It was a visible reminder that the river rises just a few miles from the Bristol Channel and a considerable distance from the East Devon coast where it meets with the sea. Standing on a bank and readying myself to take a photo of the Exe Head, I remember thinking how inauspicious it all seemed. I suppose, I had imagined there might have been more to see at the source of the Exe. On the map, marked “ford”, there had been no stepping stones or walk-way. Instead, there was the hard-compacted earth trampled and worn by countless hooves and walkers’ boots. Where I had expected to find water welling up from an open spring, the source was hidden. There was no commemorative stone, or plaque, just the wooden footpath sign denoting this was the site of Exe Head. Looking back, I now realise this was without the knowledge and experience, I have acquired from several subsequent river walks. This has taught me that the cradles of rivers are not always easily identifiable and often a bit of a hit and miss affair. They often have a humble simplicity and are barely indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape. However, at whatever, point you chose as the start of a river, be it, in the miry moorland coombe, beneath a canopy of dense undergrowth or choice from several streamlets, there is the recognition of a

beginning. From here, the journey starts, both for yourself, your companions and in the company of the river. However, it is worth savouring the moment, not least for the discovery of the source (something that has fascinated explorers of many far grander river enterprises) but also the occasion.

Whatever, ignorance or petulance, I showed in high-sight at my first meeting with the source of the Exe, I still felt a privileged by-stander amidst the stark beauty of this lonely moorland destination. There was a welcome sense of isolation which offered no distractions to engaging fully with what was around me. It seemed to me, a world away from the “filthy, barren ground” described by the author of “Robinson Crusoe", Daniel Defoe in 1724, during his tour of England and Wales (11). The day was warm, the air was fresh and I was exactly where, I had set out to be and far, from barren ground, I had borne witness to an ancient natural force in motion. As the continuous flow of water gathered apace downstream, the more, I had sensed its growing force fed by new tribulates; fastening its stride, audibly increasing, reach widening and exerting a constant furious pushing against any impediment. I remember thinking that if I could have shrunk in size, I would have eagerly grasped the opportunity to enter the water at the pool and allow its current to draw me downstream.

Sitting down on the bank, I closed my eyes once more and lifting my head towards the sun, enjoyed the sensation of warm sunshine on my face. I listened to the sound of the breeze rustling through the cotton grasses and the occasional lonesome bird song. Having seen no-one for a couple of hours, I found myself rather savouring the experience. Perhaps in celebration, I drew my thermos from my rucksack and poured a cup of milky coffee, raising it in the direction of Exe Head and toasting the occasion. After a while, I opened my copy of Rod Lawrence's book and read about his approach to the source of the Exe. Unlike me, he had followed the river upstream from the bridge to the place where the tiny ribbon of water seemed to dissipate. Having reached this spot, he wrote that standing at the source gave him a great sense of achievement. Sitting on my little bank of grass I felt much the same way, but aware too, that this was only the start of something, rather than an end itself.

I was aware too, of a vague memory that had taken place some forty-three years ago and re-kindled in this place. Towards the end of my time with the choristers, I was given an impromptu guide around the interior of Exeter Cathedral, by a venerable and rather eccentric Prebendary. I forget his name, but would guess, that he had spent many years, looking at the memorials lined around the cathedral walls. He kindly pointed out some of the memorials where the stonemasons had made some mistakes. I still look for them to this day, but can only recall two. One such flawed memorial depicts a kneeling figure with two left feet, whilst the other figure has two left hands clasped tightly in prayer. The Prebendary also showed me the memorial to Richard Dodderidge Blackmore on the interior of the West facing wall. Blackmore is best known as the author of the classic romantic book, ‘Lorna Doone’ and what stuck

in my mind, was the Prebendary's lively account of the bog at Exe Head. It was here, that John Ridd rescued a girl who had become trapped in the mire whilst out collecting whortleberries. Her dog had managed to alert Ridd as he walked past, “the old Oare oak” and having freed her, carried the girl back to his mother’s house. There, the girl was given clean clothes and a set of shoes and later, Ridd and his mother, took the girl “where she ordered us”. However, she revealed nothing of her name nor whom she was. Ridd then seems to have been forgotten about the incident, until many years later, when he sought counsel from Mother Meldrum, the Witch of Exmoor. She lived during the summer months in a cave set amongst the Valley of the Rocks, near Lynmouth. She surprised Ridd by knowing in advance his identity and reminding him of the time in his youth when; "the child who would have died there, but for thy strength and courage, and most of all thy kindness. That was my granddaughter, John; and all I have on earth to love" (12).

I am only able to relay the story more clearly now, with the aid of a subsequent retirement gift of the book from my friend, Chris Porteus with a card inserted advising me to “Use my time well”. Towards this end, I attempted to achieve something, my ten-year-old self had failed to do. Having eagerly searched out a worn copy of the book tucked away in one of the dusty bookshelves found in the School Common Room. I had tried to read it, but struggled with its dense wordiness and eventually given up. However, with my recent gift to hand, I began trawling the

pages until I reached Chapter Eighteen and the account of the rescue. I then made a strenuous effort to read the book from start to finish; all seventy -five chapters in all, making this book appear as a short story! Nonetheless, the effort was worthwhile, as it inspired me to find out more about the author and the landscapes woven into his bibliography and biography. It seemed to me, that the close proximity to the Exe, of many of the places mentioned in his book might offer a good foundation for the start of the odyssey.

I made several excursions to North Devon and Exmoor, including one fine October day, when Chris and I explored the area known in recent years, as Doone Country; a nod to the importance of the literary tourism in the local economy. Our walk began at Malmsmead, whose ancient arching bridge and Lorna Doone Farm overlook Badgworthy Water. From there, the river flows steadily to its meeting with Oare Water and East Lyn and onto Lynmouth and the sea. It was at The Rising Sun Inn at Lynmouth in 1865, that the author, R.D Blackmore (1825-1900), lodged and worked on his classic novel. In fact, several pubs in the area make similar claims and it likely that he made numerous such stops to write up his notes as he toured the area. The inspiration for the book evolved out of a long association with the Exmoor in his youth. His Grandfather, John Blackmore, had been the Rector of St Mary's at Oare and Combe Martin, between 1809 and 1842, both places the author visited during youthful holidays. He was also familiar with the well- established stories of “The Doones”, a legendary gang of robbers and fugitives. He described these stories as, "nurse's tales" (13), recalling their serialised adventures in the magazine, “Leisure Hour”, which appeared in popular print in 1860 (14). The Doone Clan supposedly inhabited an enclave on the moors and terrorised the local inhabitants and travellers.

During his wanderings over Exmoor, Blackmore appears to have been richly rewarded with the seeds of ideas, characters and landscape for “Lorna Doone”. I was interested in discovering the features that found their way onto the pages of his book. Our path along the slopes of Hoccombe Coombe took us to the site of the former medieval village, a place Blackmore imagined as the ruins of the Doones

settlement. Atop the open moorland of Brendon Common, the sun bore down on us and I was glad, when we turned towards the descent into Lank Combe and the shadier regions of the oak woodlands. A series of smooth rock known as ‘the Slithers’, over which a stream flows down the valley into Badgworthy Water, is reputed to have been the inspiration for the waterfall. At the end of all this walk, Chris and I came to a pool heavily shaded by a thick canopy of oak trees. Here we took a dip in the bitter cold black water, something, I note, not mentioned in Blackmore’s book. Relieved to have cooled ourselves from the fierce heat of the day, we dried in the sunshine whilst tucking into our late lunch. Walking back to Lorna Doone Farm, we passed a solid granite memorial to Blackmore at the foot of Malmsmead Hill. Standing for a moment by the memorial, I read the inscription acknowledging the literary legacy Blackmore has left on the area.

I was mindful too, of the memorial in Exeter Cathedral and his strong ties with the neighbouring county of Devon. This was forged from family farming roots in North Devon, schooling at South Molton and later, Blundell’s School in Tiverton and his father holding curacies at Kings Nympton, Ashford and Culmstock. Amongst his less well-known books, Devon features prominently as the stage upon which his adventures take place. The Teign village of Christow is the setting for ‘Christowell. A Dartmoor Tale “(1882). The story is woven around a solitary fictional character known to the villagers as Captain Larks. He lives in a cottage standing beneath a jagged tor some "five leagues off from the dark square towers of Exeter Cathedral”. The loss of life at St Pancras, Widecombe-in-the Moor in October 1643 is also referred to in the book recording the time when a bolt of lightning caused; "the greatest crash of tempest ever known in England. The tower was cleft, the church was rent, the people cast, like blasted straws. The roof flew wide, the pillars snapped, the timber fell like cobwebs, and walls were riven as a bladder burst, and stifling vapour, shrouded all who were consumed”. The book also takes a glance towards Mortenhampstead on the eastern fringe of the moors with its former large elm standing by the village cross and known as the Dancing Tree. This was focus for the May Day Celebrations and held a platform raised in its tall bower for the young "lasses" to sit and young lads had to get up by means of a greasy short length of rope. Whilst on the subject of Christow, it is recorded that during the Napoleonic

Wars (1799-1815) several wealthy families took refuge in the village rather than remain in their homes in Exeter, where the danger was felt to be greater met (15).

I mention this, because Blackmore may well have had knowledge of the actual French invasion on the south Devon coastal town of Teignmouth, in July 1690. This might have sown the seeds for a subsequent book entitled 'Springhaven', which is commemorated on the cathedral memorial alongside Lorna Doone. Springhaven is a fictionalised little fishing village in a tranquil Sussex valley and the setting for a drama based on a "place of all places in England for the French to land". His memory of the "spring bright "years spent in childhood at the foot of the Blackdown Hills and the Culm Valley also provided the inspiration for one of his last publications; Perlycross, 'A Tale of Western Hills' (1894). It was at Culmstock that his Father, John had served as curate-in-charge and from the vicarage, that the author had made many a wandering along the Culm Valley, within the lie of the three villages of Uffculme, Culmstock and Hemyock. He describes with great lyricism the landscape he recalled. An example is the desolate area he called Blackmarsh, near Dunkeswell: "A long way back down among the Blackdown Hills, and in nobody knows what parish, the land breaks off into a barren stretch, uncouth, dark, and desolate. Being neither hill nor valley, slope nor plain, morass nor woodland, it has no lesson for the wanderer, except that the sooner he gets out of it the better. For it is a lonesome and gruesome place, where weather makes no difference; where Nature has not put her hand, on this part or that, to leave a mark or show of preference, but slurred the whole with one black frown of desolate monotony".

Charles.

"A legend persisted in family circles that the parsonage of Charles was ever afterwards haunted by the repented spirit of the father bewailing his unjust selection". The last Victorian. Kenneth Budd (16).

Alas, even the best lingering moments have their allotted time and stirring myself out of a trance like stupor, I decided it was time to be leaving Exe Head. For a moment or two, I hesitated by the gate at Exe Head, knowing this took me onto the track leading to Hoar Oak Tree, which has an interesting history. The original Hoar Oak Tree is thought to have been part of a line of trees marking the boundary of the old Exmoor Royal Forest. By 1658, the tree had become rotten and toppled over in a storm. A new oak was planted and this lasted until Boxing Day, 1916, when a replacement was felt necessary and several saplings were planted in the vicinity and one survives in good order to this day. However, I postponed this walk for another time. For now, I decided to pay my respects to South Molton, but by chance and impulse turned up at the hamlet of Charles, a place familiar to Blackmore. It required some coaxing of my old Citroen to manoeuvre up the steep winding lane to the side of the Parish Church of St John the Baptist.

Stepping out of my car, I found the centre of the hamlet seemingly deserted. For company there was a slight breeze whistling through the churchyard and birdsong filled the warm afternoon sunshine. It was here that Blackmore's Grandfather, the Reverend John Blackmore whilst Curate at nearby High Bray, had bought the advowson of St John's in the hope of taking on the role of Rector. However, fifty years would pass before the post became vacant and, in the meantime, he took on the Rectorship of Oare and Combe Martin. When the vacancy became available, John Blackmore passed the Rectorship of St John the Baptist to his youngest son, Richard in preference to his elder son, John who was the Father to the Author, R.D. Blackmore. It was said that he regretted the decision although I am not sure why. It certainly didn't stop Blackmore visiting the old Rectory and adjoining Parsonage Farm at Charles. He came to stay with his uncle and Grandfather and wrote about it; "as a boy amidst the scenes and silences of a place as remote from the highways of men as any in the whole of England at the time "(16).

Taking my bearings, I was just about to set off for a walk up the church path when my attention was drawn to a wall across the road daubed with the painted message; "Freemasonry equals Fraud". I was pondering this and rather enjoying the spell of being alone in the middle of this delightful hamlet, when I sighted a woman stepping out of her garden gate by the side of the churchyard. I asked her about the protest and she told me that this was something to do with a local dispute over

development. There followed a brief introduction followed by Ros, kindly offering to be my guide on a brief tour of the church and the churchyard. As we walked up the path, Ros pointed out the gravestone of William Buckingham who had been "in the constant employ" of the Reverend J.P Blackmore, the author's Paternal Grandfather. The unfortunate deceased met an untimely and instantaneous death following a fall from a horse and cart accident. He was aged just thirty-four years at the time of his unfortunate accident in October 1829. His Wife, Susan was subsequently commemorated on the same gravestone.

Inside the church, I was shown the memorial to the Reverend Walter William Joyce (1867-1945) who took on the incumbency in 1916 and served the parish until his death in September 1945. It appears that Reverend Joyce had a passion for the moors. His first book; 'Echoes of Exmoor' was published in 1925, the same year a centenary stained-glass memorial to R.D. Blackmore had been placed in the east window. Joyce had been a supporter of this memorial. He went onto write another book; 'Moorside tales' and used to give talks on the subject of Exmoor around the neighbouring villages and towns. Ros told me that he is remembered by some of the older residents "as cutting a striking High Church appearance, wearing a sweeping black coat and clerical hat and zipping about in a powerful open top motorcar". At the time of his death, the Reverend Joyce and his Wife, Mary had lived for twenty-nine years at St. Petroc's Rectory, situated down the narrow and high banked Huddley Mill Lane that drops down to Charles Bottom. The Rectory retained the name of the chantry that had once stood on its location. The missionary saint, St Petroc, came over from South Wales in the sixth century and having established a church in Combe Martin went on to found churches on the edges of Exmoor, Devon and finally in Bodmin, in Cornwall where upon his death, his relics were placed in a silver or ivory casket (2).

The former chantry at Charles stands on the side of the lane that was once served by the aptly titled, 'hedge priest' and chaplain for nearby Walland Manor. However, by 1426, the chantry had fallen into ruin and a cottage built (17). In 1824, the site was cleared and a new Rectory built and where Blackmore recalled, "where the lawn is a russet sponge of moss and a stream trickle under the dining room floor "(16). However, it has since become a private residence and at the time, was on the market, Ros informing me that "the bit about 'Lord Haw- Haw' is kept quiet". It seems as if Walter Joyce was a relative of William Joyce, the infamous Nazi broadcaster, otherwise known as "Lord Haw-Haw". When I stopped near to the former rectory, which still bears the name, a tall gate screened the drive to the house making it difficult to see very much more than the castle-topped appearance of the building.

It was further down to Hundley Mill, the site of the disused Methodist Chapel and the old granite bridge, that I now made for. Having managed to park by the side of a gate, I walked over the bridge and had a look at the former mill. In no time, I fell into conversation with Jenny Wilkinson who owns the mill-house and the mill. I explained that part of my interest in exploring this area had been inspired by the photographic

work of James Ravilious. One of the subjects that had interested Ravilious in his archive work on North Devon had been the late Seymour Husbands and his ploughing horses at Sandy Park, close to the mill. I had spotted Seymour's gravestone as I toured the churchyard and Jenny recalled Ravilious visiting the mill during the mid-1970's on his way to photograph Seymour and the horses at work. Jenny very kindly showed me that the leat and waterwheel were still in good order, thanks to the efforts of her late Husband. As Jenny opened the sluice gate, the water began to pour into the leat. The water-wheel had stood until now inert and silent but with the gathering force of water entering the leat, gradually started to turn. The gentle sounds of the water travelling through the leat and the turn of the wheel did not produce an abrupt jarring noise. Instead, the sounds appeared to blend with the stillness of the valley. Looking into the channel of water that fed the leat, the idea occurred to me, that if I lived here this would be a place I would swim. The water looked very inviting and I asked Jenny if anyone ever swam in there. "Perish the thought", she said somewhat disbelievingly, which put paid to my next question! Having enjoyed this encounter and the delight at seeing the water-wheel in action, I bid my goodbye and for a time, settled on the bridge a little further down from the mill. The bridge overlooked a brook that hurriedly made its way down to the meeting with The River Bray. I imagined that young Blackmore may well have sat on the same smooth stones and surveyed the passage of the brook. He must have come down to the valley from the Rectory as he recorded sitting on a large fallen menhir found in the nearby woodlands. The menhir may well be a relic of the hamlet's Celtic settlement past. I sat for a time on the bridge. I was nearing the end of what had been an almost perfect Bimbling day. I had one last stop before I made for home.

South Molton.

"With a huge pannier market doubling up as a car park on non-trading days and an impressive market drawing heavily on Exmoor and North Devon in general for stock, the town has tremendous atmosphere- and several buildings of interest". Devon. Off the beaten track. Tricia Gerrish (2002)

South Molton is always a pleasure to wander around. My Father was the Deputy Head Teacher at the Primary School in the early 1980's and it is where my parents with my youngest Sister, Lizzie, rented a house nearby. It's not so much a home-coming as a return to the fleeting memories I have of the fish and chip shop in South Street and a few walks into the town centre from my parents' house on the edge of the town. Like anyone in their early twenties, I was too caught up in my own life to

have much appreciation for the charms of a North Devon town that seemed dull and uninspiring at the time. Whereas now, with a wholly different perspective, I can only regret that I did not see the opportunities to record the earlier character of the town. I have come to a belated appreciation of this through Lizzie. She clearly had an eye to the idiosyncratic rural nature of the town, such as a time when a bull escaped from one of the cattle compounds behind The Pannier Market and ran amok. She retains keen childhood memories of the characters she encountered both here and later at Crockernwell, some thirty miles away on the eastern fringe of Dartmoor. It was to here, that she and our Parents moved when our father secured his Headship at Cheriton Bishop Primary School. My parents bought an end of terrace cottage and Lizzie recalls a largely bed-bound neighbour using a bucket tied to a piece of rope to pull the shopping up to the bedroom window. In later life, Lizzie worked for South West Water and spent considerable time driving around much of rural Devon to

investigate customer's complaints. In the process, she came across many more interesting characters and places that have fused with my interest in the Beaford Archive and the photographic work of James Ravilious.

So, in this semi-nostalgic frame of mind, I stood by the arching frontage of the Guildhall observing the passing of people scurrying along Broad Street. The town had the appearance of winding up for the day. I tried not to take it too personally. Alas, the little museum tucked away at the entrance to the town hall was closed. However, the Pannier Market was still open, although by now half empty with traders beginning to pack up their stalls for the day. This didn't stop me from enjoying the spectacle of the cavernous nature of the hall. In fact, the slow running down of the day's commercial business, lent more attention to the study of the hall itself. Its sheer size and shelter would have been a major improvement to the commercial life of the town, providing a covered area to cope with the vagaries of the North Devon weather. The continuity of the market to this day provides a bridge to the trading traditions in the commercial life of this old market town. It remains in the centre of the town and in its essentials, largely unchanged, retaining its character and sense of occasion. To give some emphasis to this, hanging down from the high ceiling were colourful banners displaying the communal life and diversity of the town. On the surrounding walls were stern worded regulation signs, but mixed in with this, were murals bearing witness to vibrant history of the town.

My interest was constantly drawn to the floor of the hall where the business of selling and shopping takes place. On busy days, the stalls are tantalizingly bedecked with all manner of goods and where the eyes of shoppers are drawn. There is a well-established hierarchy of stalls. Regular stall-holders have their established or favoured pitches, whereas, the novice or infrequent trader often finds a pitch on the less desirable spots. Each stall has its own character, shaped as much by the personality of the seller, as the wares or produce on display. In days gone by, sellers brought and displayed their items for sale in a large assortment of baskets giving rise to the name of the market, whereas now they are boxed up and put into vans parked at the rear of the hall. What I most value, is the human element. As a keen People-Watcher, (or someone who is apt to stare, as Kathy more perceptively reminds me) there is nothing to compete with the spectacle of the market. When an interesting haggling exchange is taking place, I shamelessly attempt to overhear proceedings. At the heart of it is an innate sense that it seems somehow rude to haggle, although I admire those who appear brazen enough to strike a better deal. Most often, it appears fairly straight-forward, beginning with the question; “What’s your best price on that?” and after a few moments of deliberation on the seller’s part; the reply is, “I could do that for £5”. If I think back to the thousands of transactions, I must have made in life I can’t help thinking how much I may have saved if only I had the confidence to ask this simple, reasonable and perfectly polite question.

Speaking of politeness (or not) I observe with some amusement the etiquette of shoppers manoeuvring around each-other. The market becomes a microcosm of how personalities and behaviours play out in daily life. On the one hand, there are shoppers who display courtesy or meekness in stepping aside or actively sharing a space or wait patiently for the browser to finish looking at whatever is of interest. In the middle of the spectrum, are those who will try and find some glance over, through or under the person in front. They will be tactically marking their position to seize the earliest opportunity to muscle in on any vacant space. The third group somehow weave or push their way to the front of the stall and remain there for as long as they want undaunted by anyone behind them waiting to be served. Overall, there is a palpable sense of noisy, restless energy in the company of others. The hall makes for a lively, invigorating and theatrical experience and I hope survives the increasing use of the Internet in our more detached shopping behaviour. The advent of the railway did much to bring about a steep decline in the Woollen and Coaching trade that were major features of the town right up until the mid 19c. The population declined and the economy of the town suffered, but the market has survived and from the range of stalls still on show, it appears there is still much life in the old hall yet.

Stepping out of the market and crossing The Square, I made my way into Church Street and up the cobbled path. On the wall above one of the terraced cottages I was surprised to see a black cat appearing to climb up the wall, but soon realised it was just an ornament. Nice touch though, it had me going for a moment. It wasn't until later, as I walked around the churchyard of St Mary Magdalene that I spied a real-life black cat keeping a watchful eye on me. The paths leading up to the entrance of the church allow an eye level view towards the raised banks that hold the gravestones. In spring and summer, it must be nice to see the flowers at closer proximity, softening the character of this stony kingdom. As always, I ponder on the names commemorated on some of the stones. The sense of connection between the living and the dead of this parish was probably the stronger for this churchyard. It provided a point of remembrance not only in the burial places and memorials scattered around the church but also in the heart of the town. I am reminded of the Stanley Spencer's painting, The Resurrection (1924-7). In the front churchyard of Holy Trinity Church, the deceased villagers of Cookham are depicted emerging from their graves. It might appear as a disturbing sight but this is to misunderstand its meaning. Stanley Spencer had a deep attachment to the Thames -side village of his birth, ("a village in heaven ") where he lived for much of his life and was buried in the churchyard. It literally was the place of his cradle to the grave. The painting reflects his religious convictions and his knowledge of some of the deceased, either through their family names or through his own acquaintanceship. In much the same way, there would have been a similar familiarity with the South Molton townsfolk of old with the names of the deceased carved onto the gravestones. In the late afternoon, the weakening sunlight held an ever-decreasing sway over the gravestones and the

spaces in between. Shadows began to loom larger and the stones appeared more dark, cold and indecipherable from afar. I walked to the shadier rear of the church. Here, tombstones are laid flat against the ground, creating a phalanx effect with the names of the devoted and their testimony borne towards the skies. This felt more like the land of stone. There was a mood of other-worldliness, reinforced in my imagination when I realised, I was being closely watched by a black cat peeping from discreet corners of the churchyard. Had the cat on the wall been some kind of feline warning?

I retreated to the inner sanctum of the church, I sat for a short time and took in the view. It is a fine sturdy looking building, both inside and out, but how, I should judge its supposed rival church, St Hieritha, in Chittlehampton, I do not know. On a previous occasion I had visited St Hieritha and liked it very much. I had arrived during a choir practice and been invited to join them. I also heard the story of the two

brothers who competed to design and build the most beautiful church. One was responsible for St. Mary Magdalene in South Molton and the other, St Hieritha at Chittlehampton. Part of the condition was that each would not inspect the other's work and progress until both churches were complete. When the day of judging the two churches arrived, both brothers met to consider each-other's work. They agreed that Chittlehampton, "Cathedral of North Devon", St Hieritha was the best, but the story has the sad ending with the suicide of the brother who lost. Leaving the church, I made my way down to Broad Street by way of the small avenue of lime trees and past Mr Brown's Vault. I once more scanned the centre of the town and some of the noticeable buildings that stood out in my memory of first coming here in the early 1980's. The ornate iron railings of the Medical Hall and on the opposite side of the square, the solid-looking General Post Office. In the middle stood the lime trees bedecked in bunting and patters of guerrilla knitting festooned around the tree trunks to adorn the forthcoming South Molton Carnival. The bust of Hugh Squier set into the Guildhall looked down almost approvingly. By now, the day was drawing in and I was keen to seek out one last memory found on the outside of the Baptist Church in New Road. On one of the occasions, I had wandered around the town, I had noticed an epitaph on a memorial its sorrowful lament for "Sarah, Wife of James Badcock. Who died of a seizure, June 15th 1853, aged 52 years Farewell my Husband and children, whom I love most dear. It is a sudden change! I had no time to wish you well. Before Christ fold me in his arms ".

"On a dull day, there is a weird atmosphere about the place and certainly it is not one of Exmoor's brighter spots". "Exmoor Wanderings". Eric Delderfield.

The following year, I went to Pinkery Pond or Pinkworthy, as it has otherwise been called. It lies on the western edge of Challacombe Common. Passing Simonsbath, I followed the Challacombe road towards Goat Hill Bridge, which is

where I planned to park and make the trek up to the Pond. As the windscreen wipers were fully occupied in a downpour, I did wonder if the swim at the pond was going to be viable. However, as if on cue, having reached the lay-by close to the bridge, the

rain made itself scarce. So, gathering my rucksack over my shoulders and my trusty and much abused camera strapped around my neck, I began the walk up to the pond. I followed the track leading up to The Pinkery Farm Exploration Centre, originally one of the tenant farms commissioned by the Knights. In the sunshine, the situation looked very inviting with lush grassy fields bordered by beech hedges, the River Barle flowing through the valley below and moorland in the distance. However, this pastural transformation came at a price for many of the tenant farmers who tried to make their living on the land. On the neighbouring Goat's Head Farm was a George Groves. He was described as "hardly the most suitable type of man to take such a farm as he was quite an invalid with about one foot in the grave, and after occupying the farm for about twelve months and getting deeper into debt, he took his gun and blew his brains out". The inquest into this unfortunate man's suicide noted that he "had been dejected of late, eating nothing but a little dry toast and drinking only water" (2).

Tragic as the life of George Groves had been, it is not uncommon to read of other farmers and their families experiencing similar hardship and loss of life on the moors.

Pinkery Farm survived right up until 1969, when Somerset County Council bought two thousand acres near Simonsbath, including the farm and adapted it into an educational resource which it remains to this day (17). Somewhere in the vicinity of the centre lived Ursula Fry in a small cottage until her death at the age of ninety in 1856. No evidence of the cottage survives to this day, but I wondered whether she may have witnessed the construction of the pond and the start of a canal in 1830, by the two hundred Irish navvies brought over from County Mayo in Ireland by John Knight. Whilst I am pretty certain John Knight didn't have wild swimming in mind when he commissioned the work, it appears to have gathered swimmers over the years and I was on my way to join their ranks. The original purpose seems to have been to harness the watershed to create a reservoir. Having bought the former royal estate, John Knight set about the formidable task of transforming the land towards agricultural and mining purposes. Limestone was needed in large quantities to sweeten and fertilise the moorland in order to make it suitable for cultivation. In order to convey this more efficiently from the coastal town of Porlock, John Knight drew up a scheme to develop the port facilities and link this with a railway line to Simonsbath. The water stored at Pinkery Pond and released into the canal would have powered the trucks making their way up the inclines on the approach to Simonsbath. The proposed railway would also be vital for the potential mining of the area, however, the scheme did not come to fruition in his nor in his son's lifetime, although the pond and to a lesser extent the canal is a visible reminder of the scheme (2). The author S.H. Burton doubts this was the purpose, stating that the lake would have been inadequate to have floated more than a toy boat down to Simonsbath (3).

As I passed the Exploration Centre, I picked up the pitted footpath towards the pond. The first hint that I was reaching my destination came with the view of the man-made ridge that effectively forms the dam. As I began to walk up the ridge, the sound of rushing water became more audible and soon I could see the rapid flow of water emanating from a spillway to the side of the dam. The spillway maintains a steady flow of water into the fledgling River Barle as it starts on its journey towards the Exe. At the top of the ridge, I reached a wooden gate and my first view of the pond. I am not sure if someone was having some fun when they called it "a pond", because it covers an area of seven acres and drops down to thirty feet. To my untutored eyes this seems to qualify it, as more of a small lake, but in the setting of large open moorland, it does rather shrink and resemble a large puddle. The banks surrounding the pond were given over to low grasses and marginal plants and my initial impression was that it looked rather unremarkable, featureless and plain. That is, until, I gazed upon the large open glassy surface of the pond acting as a mirror to the colours and mood of the sky above and weather conditions. I have gone onto notice this on the two subsequent occasions, I have been to the pond. By comparison and in the company of first, Chris and then, Charles, I have stood on the same promontory and witnessed the pond battered by wild and cold stormy conditions.

The colour of the water has been grey and dark, the surface swept by strong winds creating swathes of dark ripples streaking across the pond. We could find no place of shelter around the thin margins devoid of any tree cover. Whatever respite I could find lay in the deep pockets of my waterproofs, gloves, fleece and walking boots. These attempted to act as a shield against these elements, whereas, the pond simply absorbed them all. There was nothing in the way to stop the biting cold winds, the greyness of the sky above nor the hard rain falling like nails upon the water and producing thousands upon thousands of tiny indents. The mood was forbidding, inhospitable and dangerous, but wrapped well against this onslaught, I found a pleasure in withstanding the weather and witnessing the pond and its surrounds in complete contrast to the first occasion I visited.

On this day, the sun had put up a fine show with the departure of the earlier rain. The wind had dropped to a gentle breeze. There was now a sharp clarity with brilliant sunlight emerging periodically from behind the clouds. The light seemed to infiltrate every crease and crevice in the folds of the moorland and cast some invisible warmth on the surface of the water. The water reflected the blue skies above and seemed quite alluring making the prospects for swimming altogether more inviting. This leads me on to a process of weighing up the necessary conditions for a swim. I will let you have the method for free. You just have to think NUTS and use each letter to decide if the conditions are favourable or not. Rule Number One. Starting with the letter **'N'** you assess the **Natural** conditions you face. This includes; how the weather and water are behaving, the entry and exit routes and how cold it is in and out of the water. On this front, everything seemed satisfactory. It was dry, reasonably warm. There was a thin stretch of open space by the side of the pond, offering a convenient place to change and ease of access. Rule Number

Two. The letter 'U' stands for Uninviting. Whatever, the romance of Wild Swimming (admittedly this is my description, a view not widely shared) there are times, when a potential swimming opportunity doesn't seem that inviting. It could be for good sound reasons, such as pollution, strong unpredictable currents or too shallow. No such complaint, however, could be made to the welcome sight before me. The open water surrounded by beautiful moorland and lit beneath bright sunshine seemed eminently inviting. Number Three Rule. The 'T' is for Towel or something similar. This can make or break a spontaneous swim, because whilst getting in can prove simple enough, getting dry (and getting warm in very cold conditions) is tricky with a pair of socks. So, it helps if you are forearmed with a nice big wrap around towel. Rule Number Five. This leaves the letter 'S' which stands for Spirit. Your frame of mind when you are deciding whether to take the plunge or not. Sometimes, this extends to the company of others, who are willing or not to take to the waters. On this memorable day, the spirit of Wild Swimming was firmly assured. Having quickly weighed things up, I knew I was definitely confident of being NUTS.

Having changed into my bathing shorts, I began to wade slowly into the cool peaty waters and knelt down to absorb the temperature, before gently launching myself into the water. Just at that moment, the sunlight was impeded by passing clouds and the water appeared grey, colder and slightly hostile. A sudden breeze blew ripples across the water and the effect was to create an imaginary malign swarm, spreading across the surface of the pond. For a few seconds, I experienced a slight feeling of anxiousness as I crept out towards the middle of the pond. The words of the author, Henry Williamson, came to mind. Reflecting on his experience of bathing in the pond he wrote; "monsters are lurking down there. You can't enjoy a solitary swim" (11). It wasn't the fear of imaginary monsters lurking below that unsettled me, but rather the uncomfortable sensation of an unseen deepness below. Not long into my swim the floor of the pond had given way to a sudden drop. It had taken me by surprise and sharply reminded me that I was relying on myself completely to swim or sink. In freshwater, there is less buoyancy than in the sea but at least I could see the banks and the pockets of vegetation. These reed banks lapped by water, "deep and brown and still, reflecting rushes and reeds at its sides, the sedges on the hills and the sky over them", were the refuge for Tarka the Otter and it was towards these that I now headed. I made strong strokes towards the Western side of the pond. On reaching the bank, my feet were able to find a soft muddy shelf upon which I could stand. I looked back across the stretch of water I had swum. It was not a great distance, but in the challenge of the open water the crossing had seemed longer. In this solitary space, with my worldly goods contained in my rucksack and towel, on the other side of the pond, I felt both liberated and exposed. There was a pleasant sense of freedom and feeling unencumbered; moving freely and fully engaged in the physical environment. However, the sudden nature in which the pool had become deep had also unnerved me. I was alone and although I didn't feel tired, I was aware, that the water was cooling my body temperature and I needed to make a decision whether to

swim back or get out and walk along the bank. It was the welcome return of sunlight that revived my spirits. The immediate casting of a delightful shimmering effect upon the surface of the water had an almost miraculous reviving effect. I felt drawn and mesmerised by this natural light show as I once again launched myself back across the water. As I neared the last few strokes of the swim, I submerged myself into the

murky water. I wanted to feel fully immersed in this watery domain of the moors. The floor of the pond suddenly came into view through the half light of the peaty water and I was able to touch the soft spongy mud below. As I resurfaced, I found my footing and made my way over to my towel and clothes. I was still alone and realised that I had seen no-one for several hours now. Having dried and dressed, I collected my things together and walked up to the grassy bank that forms the dam and found a nice place to sit overlooking the pond. Having poured myself a cup of milky coffee, I surveyed the pond with a slightly proprietorial air.

At one time, the pond provided a well-stocked lake for trout to serve for wealthy fishermen who leased the pond. In March 1889, one such gentleman was F.G. Richmond, whose permission was needed when it became necessary to drain the pond during an attempt to find the body of Richard Gammon. He was a local Parracombe Farmer, well respected in the area and left a widower with ten children in his care. Gammon had become infatuated with a young woman from the village, but

she declined his advances. The last time he had been seen alive was at the Fox and Goose Inn at Parracombe, where he told customers that he intended to drown himself in the waters of Pinkery Pond. Having left the inn, he made his way to the pond and a few hours later, a local shepherd found his pony and clothes on the side of the pond. In one of the jacket pockets, was found a letter from a young woman turning down his declarations of love for her. A search of the area quickly drew many volunteers and spectators, but to no avail. A decision was made to search the pond and over the next fifteen days, drew many spectators and reports from the North Devon Journal.

The search of the pond began with a small rowing boat loaned by the Lynmouth Lifeboat Service and carefully transported overland to the pond. The boat was used to dredge the bottom of the pond, but when this yielded nothing, a diver was brought into search for the body. Spectators observed the passage of the diver, a Mr Binding from Cardiff, from the bubbles that rose to the surface as he maneuvered through the murky depths below. When this proved unsuccessful, canisters containing dynamite were exploded under water in the hope of dislodging the body to the surface. When all this had failed, it was decided to drain the pond. Mr Binding was then sent down once again into the depths of the pond to locate the two twelve-inch pipes that had been placed in the dam wall during its construction. The pipes had plugs at their end which in theory required the simple pulling of the chains attached to them to release the water from the dam. However, the pressure from the volume of water stored in the pond proved too strong for the chains which broke as they were pulled. One of the plugs still had a ring attached and another attempt was made to tie a chain to this and pull it out but the ring broke.

Hopes turned to Bob Jones, a local builder (of Lynton cliff railway prestige) to come up with a plan. He soon realised that the plugs could not be pulled but would need forcing out. This required access to the original drainage tunnel which had been cut through solid rock and measured one-hundred and seventy feet in length, four feet six inches in height and two feet four inches in width. At its far end, underneath the dam, stood a brick-lined culvert of much reduced proportions. The first task was to clear away the sediment and investigate the state of the escape pipes. The challenge was the confined environment, but undaunted, Bob Jones was able to apply specially adapted shortened iron pipes through the original escape pipes to the plugs at their end. Then, by means of a ten-ton hydraulic jack fixed into the sides of the tunnel and operated by lines of chains and wire ropes from the mouth of the tunnel, sufficient pressure was exerted on the plugs to force them out. Thousands of gallons of water poured into a muddy stream flowing out of the tunnel.

By the following morning of March 28th, 1889 at 06:15am, the body of Mr Gammon was found on the ledge of rock close to where he had left his clothes on the western side of the pond and estimated to have been some six feet under the water. It took three days before the pond was nearly empty. It revealed “a black dismal gorge” as a

reporter for the North Devon Journal described the scene, with herons coming from miles around to pick off the stranded trout (2). Long after, Bob Jones had removed the machinery from the tunnel, resealed the plugs and the pond allowed to fill up again, the local villagers were left with a strong sense of foreboding about the pond. It came to be known as "the Devil's Water", as a warning to local youths not to attempt to swim in the pond and years later, there were reports of sighting of a spectral Richard Gammon in the vicinity of the pond (18). I can't help thinking about the mood that must have settled over the village of Parracombe with the orphaned children, locals of The Goose and Fox, who overheard Gammon's drunken threat and the young woman who did not reciprocate his feelings.

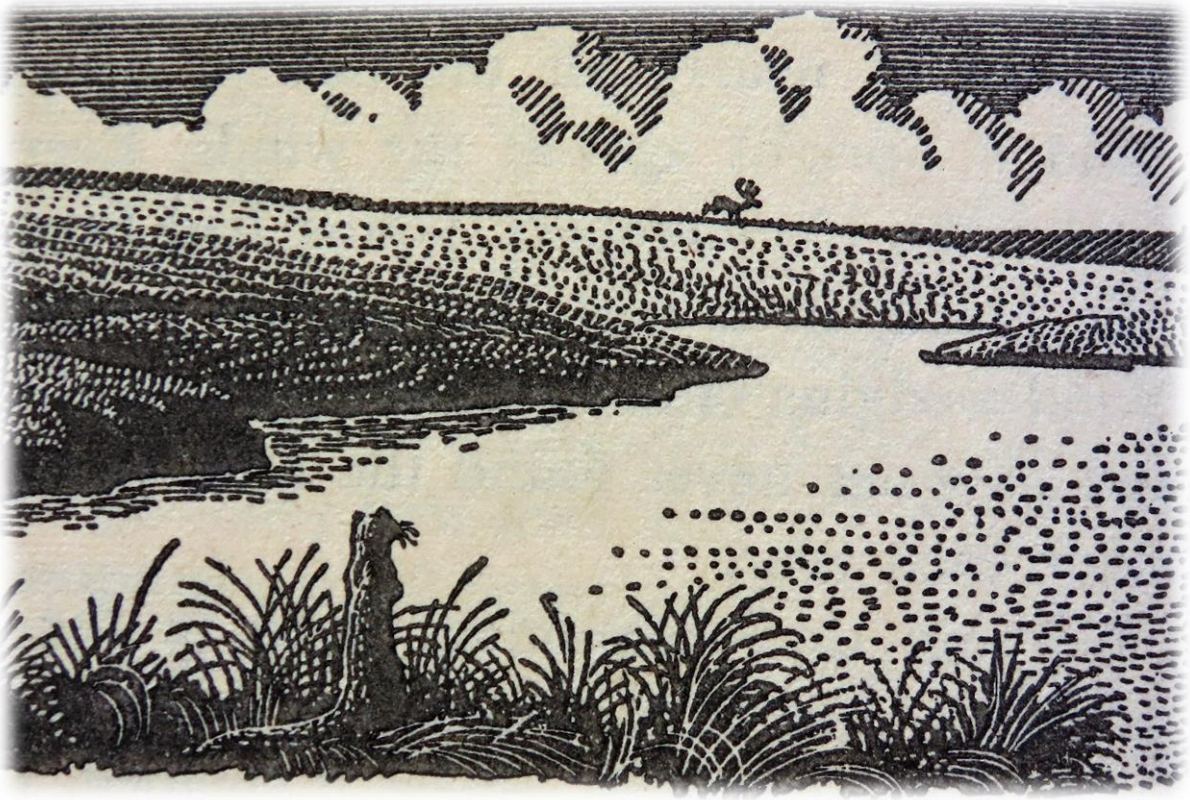
In much the same way, I wonder at the strain on the family of Mr William Stenner. His disappearance led to the second draining of the pond in January 1913. This followed a six-month search for Stenner who went missing from his home on the night of August 9th, 1912. Stenner, a married man with six children, was employed at Riscombe Farm, near Exford. He was reported to be industrious and trustworthy and at the time of his disappearance had been left in charge of the farm by its owner, Mr F.G. Heal who had gone on holiday to California. Stenner had been seen on a number of occasions by a doctor, with complaints of disturbed sleep and low mood. On the night he went missing, he had gone to bed early asking his wife to make him a hot drink. When she came up to the bedroom, she found him gone and it appeared that he had jumped from the bedroom window out into the garden. Dressed in just his night attire he had run off into a wild rain-lashed night. His wife quickly called for a help and a search was soon underway, but no sign of Stenner was found.

For the next six months, further searches were made, including the draining of the nearby former limestone quarry at Newlands, but nothing found. By now the search

party wondered if Pinkery Pond might be worth investigating as they had received a report that Stenner had been seen in the area at the time of his disappearance. The lead was taken by a Mr J Kingdom of Driver Farm, whose father had taken part in the first draining of the pond and perhaps this added to enthusiasm for the second attempt. If so, he may have been disappointed. Whereas, the first draining had taken less than a week to complete, the second took a whole month. The challenge came with the plugs repeatedly repositioning themselves over the mouth of the pipes when they had temporarily been forced out. In the end, Kingdom and his crew used the hydraulic method successfully tried during the first attempt, but took the risky step of remaining in the tunnel during the operation. One of the men assisting Kingdom was Alfred Vowles of Minehead. His job was to hold the lamp and ensure that Kingdom and the other assistant; Tudball could see what they were doing. He described his job as "keeping still, getting wet, and looking on like a frightened cat".

With the hydraulic jack in place against the bar of a raised platform in the tunnel additional pressure was able to dislodge the plugs. There followed a tremendous rush of water causing the platform to collapse and the men were lucky to escape without injury. However, their chief concern was that after an initial escape of water, the plug had resealed and all the work had to start again. Eventually, the draining was completed but there was no sign of Stenner's body (19). For a fortnight, spectators witnessed the exposed base of the pond bed and the herons once again feasting on the trout. The plugs were replaced and the water once again began to refill the pond, but was not re-stocked with fish. As to Stenner, the absence of his body in the pond came as little surprise. There were rumours circulating that he was alive and living in Canada and a reward for information of his whereabouts was posted by his local parish. However, in late February, his body was found just four-hundred yards from his cottage wedged in a flooded passage to an abandoned mine. Ironically, this had been one of the first areas searched, but it was his former workmate, Reginald Hookway who noticed that cattle had been refusing to drink the water near to a stone drain close to the opening of the mine. The body of Stenner was pulled out and taken to the Crown Hotel in Exford and a Coroner's inquest held a couple of days later ruling that Stenner had committed suicide whilst of unsound mind (2).

From my vantage point, I called to mind a much earlier impression of the pond from my copy of Henry Williamson's book; Tarka the Otter. Mine is a later edition, but the first edition books were published in 1927 and contained wood etchings by Hester



Sainsbury. The success of the book led to a number of reprints and in 1933, featured the work of Charles Frederick Tunnicliffe (1901-1979) and it is to his illustration of Pinkery Pond that I was drawn. With encouragement from his wife, Tunnicliffe contacted Williamson's publishers, Putnam's and Sons, sending them samples of his work in the hope of securing a commission. A letter from the publishers to Williamson forwarded the “out of the blue “samples for his consideration. It also made the suggestion that Williamson might take photographs of the area in early spring, fall of snow or heavy frost. The letter ended with a suggestion: “I suppose you would not care to consider pencil sketches by Lionel Edwards. I learn he may be available “.

In the event, Williamson very much liked Tunnicliffe's work and invited him to come and stay with him at his home, “Shallowford “in the North Devon village of Georgeham. The month of May 1932, must have been a good month. Over the course of a few days, the pair travelled around the moors and North Devon covering the fictitious trail taken by Tarka. This provided Tunnicliffe with the imagery he needed to begin his commission (20). His illustration of Tarka standing alert on the bank of the dam, surrounded by sedge, shows him looking across Pinkery Pond, its surface water tensed with ripples to the side and in the middle, an undisturbed calm reflecting the sky above. I sat with just this same view and imagined Tarka down below, staring in the same direction towards the horizon with billowy clouds. In the picture, silhouetted against the brow of the moorland and the big sky is a stag racing across the open moorland; “where sedge grasses grow on the slopes to the sky “(10).

Out of view, is the hunt that is chasing the stag and the same hunting party from which Tarka earlier escaped at Junction Pool, a little further south of South Molton at the meeting of the rivers, Mole and Taw.

Whilst recuperating around the pond, Tarka would emerge from his “rillet's bed, scarcely wider than himself and looked through green harts-tongue ferns at the coombe up which he had travelled ”. It was a landscape; Henry Williamson knew only too well from his solitary rambles over the south west part of the moors and expressed poetically in his writing. The success of Tarka the Otter led to the award of the Hawthornden Prize in 1928, with the princely sum of £100. Williamson put this money to good use. At the top of Ox Cross, overlooking the village of Georgeham, he had a wooden writing shed built of oak and elm. Around the shed, he planted a boundary of Monterey pine. From this lofty perch, he continued to write prodigiously, often spending up to fifteen -hours a day in isolation, surrounded by his simple table and chair, gramophone player and records and nearby his brick fireplace. Tunnicliffe continued with his illustrations, collaborating in the late 1950's and early 1960's with the Ladybird editions of the English Countryside through the seasons. Both Tunnicliffe and Williamson left some testimony to the pond. Williamson in word and Tunnicliffe in picture. What a wonderful legacy.

As I got up, there was the satisfaction of having swum in the pond and adding it to a growing list of memorable outdoor bathing spots. It was time for me to go, just as Tarka eventually had to leave this little sanctuary. My route was southwards, whereas, Tarka “journeyed over the chains to water that hastened in a bright thread out of the bog ”. Upon reaching Hoar Oak, “a sapling caged from the teeth and horns of deer, a little tree by the grave of his father ”, he picked up the scent of the trail of the otters. Nothing so poetic for me, alas, but just as I was making ready to return to the car, I noticed a couple make their way down to the pond. Within no time at all, the woman was swimming towards the centre of the pool, whilst her companion, made his way up the bank and settled down to watch her. I felt a kindred spirit with this woman, as she swam gracefully through the rippling surface of the water. I wondered if she had spontaneously decided on making the swim or had come with the intention of doing so. As I made my own way back along the ridge in the direction of the gate, I acknowledged the man below. He looked up at me and aware that his partner was swimming in the water said rather meekly that he hadn't felt brave enough to go in himself. On reflection, I think she was a hearty exponent of my NUTS Analysis, whereas he was using the more common tool with the acronym; NFWAIGIT, or; "No way am I going in there". I forget what the 'F' stands for?