

Discover the Dartmoor Story

Tales from the Rails Audio Trail (Transcript)

1. THE POTTER

You'll gather by my accent that I'm not from round these parts. No, I was born and brought up in Burslem, in Staffordshire, where me father put me to an apprenticeship in the potteries.

But in answer to an advert, I got a job, I gained employment at Bovey Tracey Pottery Company in 1851 and made a move for which me and the missus will be eternally grateful.

You see in 1842, Mr Thomas Buller and his brother-in-law Mr John Divett – two clever, well-educated men – bought Folly Pottery which, by all accounts, had been struggling for years. They started modernising the production and brought in skilled workers, like me-self, from Staffordshire, Liverpool and even Scotland.

As a thrower I got two quid a week, although out of that, I had to pay the turner – a woman as drives the wheel fast or slow, according to my instructions – but me missus also worked at the pottery, in the warehouse, so her wage made up for what I lost.

Mr Divett also played a large part in bringing the railway to Bovey. In fact, he was one of its Directors. He could spot an opportunity and he made sure there were sidings at the pottery to send off the finished bricks.

Sad to say, Mr Divett passed away last year. Such an outpouring of grief I never saw, and it was a privilege to walk, along with around 150 of my fellow workers, at the head of the procession. I remember the silence of the procession, suddenly broken by a soft toot from a locomotive and I thought briefly of how Mr Divett had brought the railway to Bovey and made a new life for me and so many others.

2. THE HOUSEKEEPER

I'm the housekeeper here at Parke, keeping the house in order for the fourth Mr William Hole.

I wish you could see it; it's the most imposing mansion house in the whole Wray Valley with all its windows and classical lines. There's been a fine house here for hundreds of years, but it was completely rebuilt in 1826 by the master's father, the third Mr William Hole. They were not very imaginative with the names, were they? If you have time you should go and have a look at Parke: if anyone says anything, tell them I sent you!

There has been gossip in the town about my Mr William, but I don't care what they say; he is a fine gentleman and should be greatly admired for his generosity. He has always favoured progress and not been afraid to speak his mind. There was some

unpleasantness between him and the vicar about the way he was changing some of the Church traditions, but I understand they have shaken hands, and all is now amicably resolved. Mr William is trying to make things better for those who live here and to improve the water supply, even selling the rights over his land for the pipes. And, with his influential friend Mr Divett from the pottery, he is one of the Directors of this railway.

So I do hope that future generations will recognise what they owe to Mr William Hole and his family at Parke.

3. THE NURSE

Good day to you. Most visitors who alight here at Hawkmoor Halt, are off to visit someone at the Hawkmoor County Sanatorium so if you've not arranged for a horse drawn carriage then you'd best get walking. It's 2 miles down country lanes along the far side of the valley, but I dare say the fresh air will do you good.

I was one of the first nurses at the Sanatorium, which was opened in 1913. It was built in the Valley to provide, care, fresh air and isolation for those suffering from tuberculosis. This had reached epidemic proportions during the 19th century and was responsible for one in seven deaths. Even today with medical advances and, in spite of our best efforts, less than half our patients survive more than five years.

I did my nursing training at the Royal Cornwall Infirmary in Truro, where I learnt the latest treatment for tuberculosis, or consumption as it used to be called. It is a terrible disease, yet during the 19th century, in some creative circles, it was considered fashionable. The Romantic poet Lord Byron announced that "I should like to die of consumption...because the ladies would remark 'Witness poor Byron, how interesting he looks in dying!' Tuberculosis also became known as White Plague, since even the ladies chose to look thin and pale.

Such folly; they should have experienced the pain of some of the people I've had to care for.

4. THE MINER

I worked in Kelly Mine, along with some other of ol' beys from the village: us was after a mineral called micaceous haematite, us calls it 'Shiny ore', 'cos it twinkles and its shines, in beautiful colours that 'll stay on your skin and your clothes for ages no matter how much you wash so it looks like you've been sprinkled with pixie dust.

Most of the shiny ore mines in the Wray Valley they are owned by farmers and they earn extra benefit off their land by leasing the site and getting paid royalties based on the output – around 6 pence a ton, I believe. Farmer often lends us his horse and cart to move the refined ore to Lustleigh railway station. He don't make a charge for that but he knows us'll help him dreckly usually with the harvest in the autumn. Us do get paid mind you, not in coin but in cider!

Years ago the only value this ore had was to dry ink on documents then somebody discovered they could make black lead for cleaning fire grates but the real money was made when it was added to paint, making it rust proof.

It was in great demand by the Navy for painting ships. I reckon that's where the term "battleship grey" comes from. I've been told the paint made from this ore has been used to paint monuments all over the world, Eiffel Tower, Sydney Harbour Bridge ooh and the Brunel Bridge over the Tamar. I'm very proud to say I played a part in linking Lustleigh to the rest of the world

5. THE RAILWAYMAN

I wish you could have taken the rail journey up the valley with me; I never tired of it. I was a fireman, with the responsibility of keeping the fire going in the firebox and making sure the engine always had enough water in the boiler to provide steam when the driver needed it. Some stretches are quite uphill, so I'd have to work extra hard shovelling in the coal – very hot work on a summer's day! And occasionally, the engine would find it too much and break down.

What a journey that was, up from Bovey, through Mr Hole's estate at Parke, the tiny stop at Hawkmoor then on into Lustleigh. This was always my favourite part. It's such a picturesque village with its station like a smaller replica of Bovey. When the Station master wasn't looking after the passengers, he was tending the prize-winning station garden. Oh yes, and there was a cat called Jumbo that must have had many more than nine lives, for his amusement was to jump in and out of the railway lines.

As we left Lustleigh we'd enter Casely Cutting, I still marvel at the strength and skill of the navvies who carved through the solid rock – 70 feet high. Then on through Higher Coombe Wood, Sanduck Wood and on for a few more miles of this beautiful valley to journey's end – Moreton. I remember it in its heyday. There was a long, covered engine shed and just before the run-round loop to make our return were the cattle pens, sometimes full of beasts waiting to be loaded onto our train.

What change and progress we and our railway brought to the area.

6. THE QUARRYMAN

I used to be a tin miner, like me father before me, but I've been working in East Wrey Quarry for the last six years where I have learnt new skills.

It takes two of us to split a lump of granite. One makes a hole with what we call a jumper; that's a heavy iron bar about four feet long, and he keeps jumping it up and down on the same spot in the rock until there's a hole about 3 inches deep. He goes on doing this along the grain, making holes about six inches apart. Then t'other one gets to work with the feather and tare. The tare is a sort of chisel and either side of that is a slightly curved steel piece, which is the feather. You keep hammering these into the hole until the block splits.

Sometimes, gunpowder is used but I vow that can be dangerous and there have been accidents; some of the lads learnt their rock blowing from working on building the railway.

One of the reasons the railway came about is that a number of gentlemen thought it would make transporting the stone that much easier, but that hasn't really happened. We could haul it from the quarry by horse and cart to Lustleigh Station, but since they never thought to put in any lifting gear, we still must go the extra three miles or so to Bovey.

What the railway has done is make a steady demand for stone to build platforms, bridges and viaducts and they're also starting to build big houses in the Valley for the folks wanting to move in to enjoy our pleasant country air.

7. THE WOODSMAN

You might have noticed how quiet it is in these ancient woodlands; it's like the trees are resting, as well they might for some of them are hundreds of years old. Mind you, they're full of life – nuthatches, tree-creepers, yaffles ... that's what we call green woodpeckers. Occasionally, they'll break the silence with their loud, laughing call and frantic knocking on the tree-trunks. And if you're lucky, you might catch sight of a deer, though if they see you first likely they'll be off and all you'll get is a glimpse of their white backside.

I've worked in these woods since I was a lad and seen some big changes. All the heavy work used to be done by horses; pulling out the great trees from where they were felled and then drawing the carts that took them to the sawmills. Then the railway arrived in the valley and whilst the horses still help us in the woods the timber train takes the strain, carries far greater loads and speeds up transport, sometimes to the nearest harbour at Teignmouth, where the wood is loaded onto ships bound for who knows where.

I think one of the most memorable jobs I had was splitting alder and rough shaping it for clog soles that were needed for the industrial labour force in Lancashire. A good lot of us woodsmen were employed for many months on end. Thousands – 84,000 pairs I'm told – were left out in the open to dry, before being taken by railway all the way to Manchester. And 'tis amazing to think that there might still be folks wearing clogs made from the very pieces I cut.

8. THE TRAVELLER

Having enjoyed a most pleasant railway journey from London Paddington to Newton Abbot, in the near unbelievable time of five and a half hours, my companion and I boarded the train for Bovey Tracey. On arrival, we were conveyed by horse-drawn carriage from the station to the Dolphin Hotel, where we were greeted by our host, Mr Joll – a most apposite name for he is, indeed, a jolly man. After a splendid dinner, a restful sleep and a hearty breakfast, we rose to continue the charming train journey up the valley to Moretonhampstead.

It is not necessary to take the European tour for grandeur when such countryside exists in our own fair island. We had heard much of far-famed Lustleigh Cleave but, in truth, the guidebooks scarcely do it justice. We alighted at Lustleigh, a picturesque village in the extreme, and within the Cleave are delightful hidden gems. Becky Falls is such a sight, the water tumbling some sixty feet over huge boulders. The locals will try to tell you they were thrown there by giants!

Below the slopes of the Cleave is the Mill of Foxworthy and, close by, the River Bovey forces its way over a bed of huge, detached rocks before disappearing into a subterranean passage. Seated on the riverbank, we partook of a wonderful picnic.

By evening we had arrived at our hostelry in Moretonhampstead, full of the day's experiences and looking forward eagerly to the next when we were to take a leisurely perambulation of this delightful market town. I confess that I have quite fallen for the charms of Dartmoor and will, without question be returning, it being so accessible by train and invigorating to one whose existence is lived in the dusty capital.