

STORIES FROM THE EARLY YEARS OF COMBE MARTIN MUSEUM.

Stories remembered, by Hilary Beaumont. July 2020

I think some of the most interesting and common stories I heard whilst working in the museum in the early years were those relating to holiday visitors in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I imagine the idea of a holiday to those living here at that time was quite unreal and almost certainly not experienced by them.

But, in the early 20th century things changed for some of the working classes and a holiday became a real possibility, Here in North Devon the train was a fast and relatively inexpensive means of reaching Ilfracombe, Westward Ho! (although this meant a bus or horse and cart trip from Ilfracombe station for those destined for Combe Martin.)

When there is a real chance of earning money the village folk used initiative and rooms became vacant at short notice.

Families gave up their own rooms and slept in outside sheds, stables or even the scullery.

Bathrooms were almost unheard of so I leave it to the reader's imagination where ablutions took place (or did at all) The WC or more likely earth closet, was at the bottom of the garden, avoiding stinging nettles as one went! Chamber pots were placed discreetly beneath beds and emptied by the hosts the next morning (in the veg garden or street whichever was closest.)

Food was of great importance. For the guests who were always hungry and for the hosts who sought to make appetising but cheap meals which satisfied all. I had assumed the 'deals' were 'bed and breakfast' but this was not so. Substantial breakfast over off traipsed the guests to the beach. At dinner time (in those days dinner was at lunch time) back trouped the guests for a hearty and sustaining meal to keep everyone going until High Tea around 5 o'clock.

This pattern continued for the whole week interspersed with a rare charabanc trip to Hunters Inn or Lynton and Lynmouth, perhaps?

But the beaches at Combe Martin were the real magnets with swimming, rock pools to explore and occasional boat trips. And the guests were content and revelling in the freedom to enjoy the sun, fresh air and the clean beauty of the place.

Meanwhile back at the guest house each host would be flat out dealing with chores, washing, cleaning, emptying the dreaded chamber pots and then preparing meals. All home baked, of course.

One such host was Mrs P. who being of slight Cornish extraction was a dab hand at Cornish pasties....in fact she was renowned for them.

Mrs P's cottage was in a side lane but a fairly busy thoroughfare.

On hot days she could be seen through her open door rolling out vast quantities of pastry ready to assemble her famous pasties.

Chickens roamed her garden and the lane and frequently popped into her kitchen in search of droppings from the pastry. By now Mrs P was sweating profusely and used a floury arm to wipe her brow and then to swipe at two chickens who had jumped on to the pastry covered table. Undeterred Mrs P continued her work; the pasties were cooked to perfection and eaten with appreciation.

I love this true tale but can imagine the reaction from Food Standard gurus!