

Trace: 100: The Day our World Changed

By Elizabeth Bennett

Abstract

On August 3rd 2014, I attended a performance of WildWorks' *100: The Day our World Changed*, a continuous theatrical event from dawn till dusk, travelling from the harbour of Cornish town Mevagissey to the nearby Lost Gardens of Heligan. The Treymayne family have owned the Heligan Estate for over 400 years, providing employment in various forms to the surrounding three parishes of Mevagissey, St Ewe and Gorran. Due to storm damage and decades of inattention, the gardens were discovered in a derelict state in 1990, when John Nelson and Tim Smit led a groundbreaking restoration project. The Lost Gardens of Heligan now welcomes 200,000 visitors a year. Nelson and Smit made a vital discovery within days of their initial explorations – the old gardeners' toilet (Thunderbox Room) – where the pencilled names of past staff on the wall caught their imagination and respect. In August 1914, twenty-three outdoor staff were recorded in the labour books; by 1917 there were just eight. This performance grew from a desire by the Heligan Estate to: “honour and commemorate not just the Lost Gardeners from the Heligan Estate but all the people and the families locally whose world was changed in August 1914” (WildWorks, *Programme*).

Using field notes, snatched impressions, visceral responses from embodied memory, and subsequent access to the performance script to clarify my scribbled sentences, this paper aims to trace what has remained with me. This piece of creative remembering is influenced by, and inflected with, my thesis research into landscape processes of biography, affect,

presence and absence. My tracing is presented as a first person narrative, in order to chart the different registers of landscape that this piece created within me. In doing so, this work navigates the tricky waters that Nicola Shaughnessey identifies as “the difficulties of writing about a medium as elusive as performance and of negotiating the absence and presence of events which have happened but which remain as memory and cannot be recovered” (xiv)

Trace: *verb*,

Find or discover by investigation

Take (a particular path or route)

Give an outline

[...]

Trace: *noun*

A mark, object, or other indication of the existence or passing of something

[...] (Oxford English Dictionary)

“They say we all die twice. The first time when our body dies and the second time when people stop saying our names and stop telling the stories of the things we did in our lives”. (Bill Mitchell [WildWorks, *100: The Day Our World Changed*])

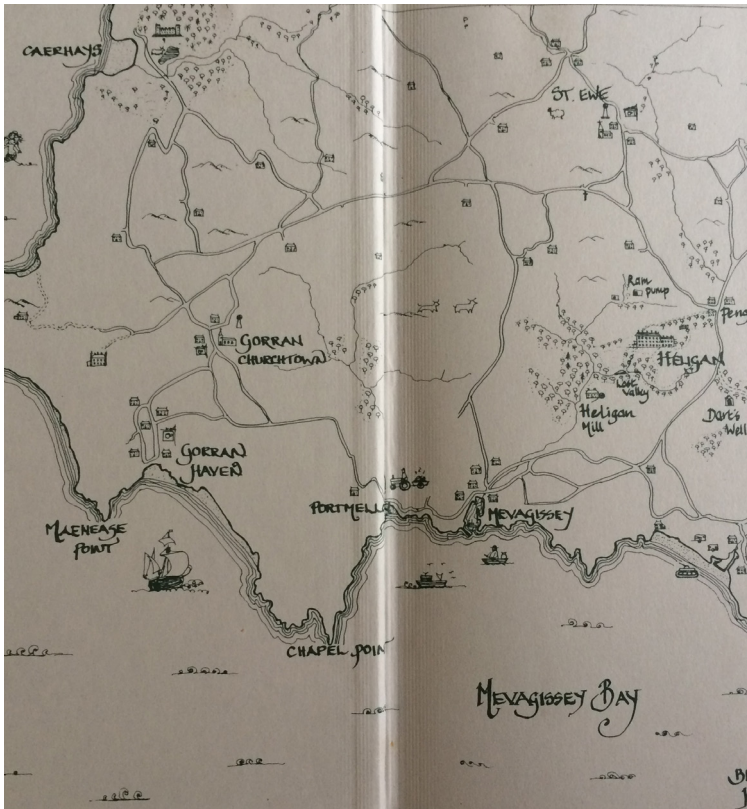


Figure 1: *End Paper Map: The Lost Gardens of Heligan Map.*
From S. Pring (London, 1997).

I remember this.

Sunday, 3 August, 7am Mevagissey War Memorial. I'm here to hear the fallen called. The intoned names reverberate around the still early morning, echoing the departed already woken in the parishes of St Ewe and Gorran.

The Lost Men of Mevagissey:

Reginald Vernon BARBER, 24. He loved to sail on bright mornings with stiff breezes.

John George BARRON, 21. He was a fisherman. Born within days of Michael Burns, a farm boy from Gorran. They took their final journey together at the Somme.

Roy Oliver BARRON, 21. He had nimble fingers and worked making nets when he was just 14.

Alfred Dunn BEHENNAH, 20. He was an only son. His father had hopes they would one day be fishermen together.

Arthur BURT, 28. He loved to dig the earth and keep it well tended. He died with his friend Samson Hunkin, from Mevagissey.

John CARNE, 29. He was small, and wiry, and knew how to cut stone, and build houses.

Arthur Lindsay Maury CHURCHILL, 52. He was a doctor. A healer.

Walter CLOKE, 22. He knew his way on the water and how to sail close to the wind.

Thomas Henry DONNITHORNE, 20. He was a carefree young boy, looking for adventure. Adored by his mother and sisters. The women of his family visit his grave to this day.

William DUNN, 25. He was born by the water and could handline from the harbour wall before the age of five.

Charles DYER, 35. He was lost, then he was found.

William Coombe FOARD, 38. The thing he missed the most was going out to sea on a bright spring's morning.

Raymond FRAZIER, 27. He was four the year electricity came to Mevagissey. He became an electrician.

Charles HOCKING, 36. His mother, Maria, had already lost a husband. (Kemp 4-6)

During the early morning pause, I sit next to a man on a bench at the harbour wall. Already the sun has a delirious heat to it, the coast provides a welcome wind and bouncing up from the waves comes a reflection of the cloudless sky, dressed in the costume of the past: "Sunday 2nd August 1915 ... the call up of the Naval Reservists in Mevagissey, a blisteringly hot morning with many out early, yachting" (WildWorks, Programme). We talk about the weather. We talk about the First

war. We talk about his service in the Second. We talk about the harbour. He explains that when he enlisted he was asked about where he would prefer to be deployed; he chose the water. He produces a photograph from his wallet, the only one in there. He hands it to me; I study the black and white image of boats approaching land. They are landing at Malay. I hold it up to the light; the Cornish sea of the present provides a frame for a far away sea, long ago. A life seen in water. “Apart from that break, I’ve looked at this harbour for 90 years, and I’ve never got tired of it.”

A few hours later, walking back from the church, I am caught up in the marching band of The Lost Boys parading the streets. Mevagissey has taken on the air of a carnival. I ruthlessly ditch the congregation and I duck and dive to try to get up onto a doorstep for a vantage point to see the approaching band. My impressions of this town are formed in part by summers spent further down the Roseland Coast as a child, reading Susan Cooper’s *Over Sea Under Stone* (1973) and *Greenwitch* (1974), both set in the a fictional town Trewissick, based upon Mevagissey. I have the former book in my bag and am reminded of a passage I read last night in my tent:

Satisfied, Barney went off to see the carnival. He followed the last of the crowd still drifting up the road, Even down in the sheltered harbour the wind was blowing in from the sea, but now and again it dropped for a moment, and Barney heard a tantalising snatch of music wafting over the roofs from somewhere in the village [...] He made one or two false turns losing the sound. Then gradually the band grew louder, and with it he began to hear the hum of voices, and the rasping shuffle of feet [...] and then suddenly the noise burst in

on him, and he was out of the muffling narrow street and among the crowds, out in the sunshine filling a broad road where the procession danced by. (135)



Figure 2: The Lost Boys Band. WildWorks, 100: The Day our World Changed. Mevagissey, Cornwall. R. Philpot (2014).

We follow them along the streets to the harbour. A total transformation, the quay is lined with people, materialising what I had heard narrated in church about how the villagers had

turned out in full to wish the men farewell after the news of war was announced and they were called upon to fulfil the duty of their enlistment. Here, in the harbour, our storytellers are Mary, a young laundress at Heligan House and Percy, an apprentice gardener at the Heligan estate. They have arrived to watch the action, both shadowing their younger selves, voices from the past.



Figure. 3: Percy and Mary. WildWorks, 100: *The Day our World Changed*. Mevagissey, Cornwall. R. Philpot (2014).

Mary: It's that day again.

Percy: You looked some pretty, Mary King.

Mary: And look at my Jack. He was some handsome...

Percy: Yes, it's that day again. (Kemp 11)

A motorcyclist arrives with news from the continent, six thousand people raise their arms in unison to shield their eyes from the sun and watch his progress down the hill. Elbows swooping down together in a piece of spontaneous crowd choreography.

Squire Tremayne: We have faith it will be a short campaign.

Mayor: It will all be over by Christmas.

Men of Mevagissey go to your homes and say your good byes. Meet back here in an hour with your bags packed and we will all give you a proper Mevagissey farewell! (Kemp 9-11)

From a boat, the ghost of Mary watches her younger self. With a look, a sweeping narrative is fixed in a fleeting moment somewhere between 1914 and 2014. Somewhere between Mevagissey's waters and the pools in Mary's eyes. Solicitations swim through to me in the crowd: "Are you fit and under thirty?" "Women recruit at least one man", in addition to other forms of recollection: "This is the spot where I had the worst seagull shit on me of my entire life". Enlistment haircuts. Medicals. Boatmen arrive back and catch the news. Some depart swiftly, some move to settle affairs before they take their leave.



Figure. 5: The Men Depart. WildWorks, 100: *The Day our World Changed*. Mevagissey, Cornwall. R. Philpot (2014).

We process to The Lost Gardens of Heligan, walking the paths of all those who have peregrinated here, carrying out an act of remembrance with our soles. On entering the Lost Gardens the funnelled flow has dispersed. Lacking the direction of a pilgrimage, the bodies relax into a recreational mode and the audience meander around on their chosen path of interest, creating spontaneous curves that people the design of Sue Hill's map. I head first to give my greetings to the Mud Maid in her

gloaming slumber, a spot that still breathes an air of suspension, a garden waiting to be woken from an enchanted sleep and resting from injuries. Here, there is still a vestige of the “unearthly silence” and “deep, brooding melancholy” that struck its rescuers (Smit 21) From there I head off to send another missive in the hut containing postcards to add to the field of the lost; an installation of white flags created by WildWorks as a space of collective remembering. I pass my postcard up to the wire where others have placed their absence. It hovers just in front of a window where the scope of vision soars down to the installation. My message is framed against the blank waves of the missing.

5pm. We gather in Flora’ Green by the Edwardian bandstand. It is the local chapel, the girls are singing, the news has spread

through the village and the men have been called up, they have come to say goodbye. I have spent the last hour pottering

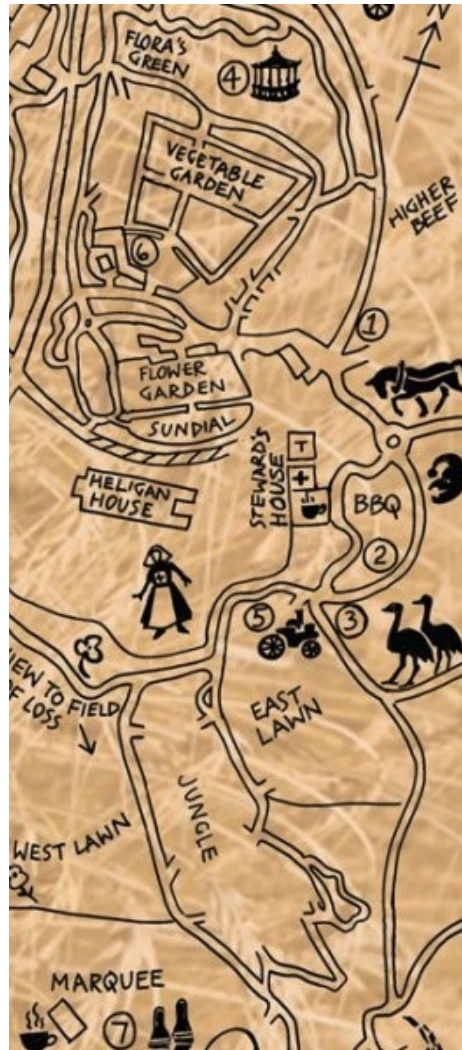


Figure 5: 100 Map (WildWorks, 2014)

through the greenhouses, enormous cabbages remembered from my youth, and transient scents of tomatoes and eucalyptus, punctuated by memorials filled with research sparked by the love affair of *les petits riens* found by the restorers: “My eye was drawn to something hanging on the wall: a small pair of rusty scissors, how long had they been there? Who did they belong to? What was their story? What had happened here?” (Smit 26)

A Dedication written on a slate in a greenhouse:

Charles Ball. Born in Gorran Haven, 1876. Died in France, April 1918.

Remembered on the Gorran war memorial. Charles was known as a gentle giant, with a lovely singing voice. He wrote to his wife shortly before he died that he would like to sing one more time with her in the Chapel on a Sunday morning. (Heligan Estate)

In Flora’s Green, the Choir are singing:

Brightly beams our Father’s mercy
From his lighthouse ever more
But to us he gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.

Let the lower lights be burning
Send a gleam across the wave
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

Dark the night of sin has settled
Loud the angry billows roar

Eager eyes are watching, longing, ,,,
For the lights along the shore.

Trim your feeble lamp, my brother
Some poor sailor, tempest tossed
Trying now to make the harbour
In the darkness may be lost. (Philip P. Bliss, "Let The
Lower Lights Be Burning" [WildWorks, Songs 3])

Mary: Percy, would you take me to see what
happened next? (Kemp 25)

The men marching to war infiltrate the crowd. We proceed behind them through the gardens. The progress is slow; six thousand people don't move anywhere fast. I think about the monotony of marching, the dead, wasted thoughts, that take place as you troop.

We are led to a field where the women and the children of the village quietly work the land. Their movements are repetitive and physically demanding. A horse and plough move along the field behind them.

Dispatches to the Front:

"I wish I could put the song of the larks into this
letter, as I hear them now, and the heat of the sun".
(Kemp 27-28)

I turn as the soldiers pass through us once more, this time they are walking into combat. We are not at the front, these are not ghosts; we are in the minds of the women in front of us, anxious for news and fearing the worst. We are in their

imaginations, but we also know the story.

Dispatches from the Front:

“The shells fell like rain”

“It is futile to tell you how much I love you”

“You are my star on these trench nights” (Kemp 29-30)

Explosions in the bushes at the bottom of the slope, the men advance towards them and disappear.

Silence.



Fig. 6. *The Men Advance* (2014) WildWorks, *100: The Day our World Changed*. Mevagissey, Cornwall. R. Philpot (2014).

The smoke coasts away, dissolving. Traces of memory, the feelings and thoughts of the men, blowing here to these fields to rest.

“Today I have a strong sense that I shall never see

Cornwall again.” (Kemp 30)

White stretchers appear from the other side of the bushes, shouldered up the field by nurses. The white flags of remembrance, in the field of loss, shiver. Some of the men are laid down to be treated; many are borne away to their graves. The village women dig the earth with their hands to sow, as the men are returned to it.



Figure 7: The Men are Borne Away. WildWorks, 100: The Day our World Changed. Mevagissey, Cornwall. R. Philpot (2014).

The women and children set down their tools, gather up their baskets and walk towards the poppies. We accompany them, but many continue to look back over our shoulders at the white stretchers in the distance. No-one speaks, no camera phones, no notes, no audience, just a sudden painful awareness of the erasure of lives 100 years ago and the wounds that run deep into the pasture before us.

Village children fold sheets in the poppy fields as we gather around the edges, they have been around the gardens all day, playing games with the sheets, washing them in laundry bowls, stopping occasionally to flick water at each other. The endless folding speaks to the tedium of life left for the women. I picture again the girls wringing out the sheets and the words of the vicar that morning: “They did not leave perfect lives, they left loved ones yes, but not just through duty, they left for the hope of a better future, for the income of infantry, for the prospect of adventure away from a life of service and labour”. (*Remembrance Service*).

6pm, 3 August 2014. The names of the fallen are called. Re-sounding.

Frederick HUNKIN, 29. He died with his friend George Moore from Mevagissey.

Samson HUNKIN, 24. He died with his friend Arthur Burt, from Mevagissey.

William Samuel HUNKIN, 22. He was the first to die. He was a long way from home, in far away Africa.

James KELLY, 41. He was older, an experienced man of the sea. He was the last to die.

George MARSHALL, 25. A brave seaman. Went down with his ship together with his friend William Patten from Gorran.

Alfred Horace MARTINDALE, 28. He just wanted to see the world.

Frank MATTA, 27. He loved his young wife. He wanted to keep

her safe.

George MOORE, 21. His young wife found love again, but never forgot him.

Frank PEARCE, 20. His father would always remember him as a young boy running like the wind down Cliff Hill to greet him after work.

William Henry ROBINS, 58. All the boys on ship looked upon him as a father. They all went down together in the Aegean sea.

James Leonard THOMAS, 26. A fishhawker. He loved shouting the catch of the day to all the ladies.

Albert TOWNER, Age unknown. With his friend Frederick Doddridge from St Ewe he joined the thousands of lost sailors in the Hellespont.

Thomas VERCOE, 40. He loved to walk from Portmellon to Mevagissey on a Sunday morning.

Samuel WARREN, 20. He was one of seven siblings. A hard working boy who helped his family.

Alfred WILLIAMS, 48. Remembered as a 'late gardener'.

Perhaps this means he did it out of love. (Kemp 4 -6)

As their names are called the men arise from the poppy field and walk peacefully away into the distance. Unaware that the men had been lying in undergrowth, I watch them grow like poppies from the fields where they had worked, from the fields where they had lived, from the fields where they had loved. Men whose labour seeded the land and whose stories seeded this show. The notes of the last post go with them towards the sea.

Fractions of the audience gather at the bar post-show, I grab myself a drink and a hay bale and try to eavesdrop on nearby conversations. My eye is caught by motion in the periphery.

I can still see the men walking into the horizon.



Figures. 8, 9, 10. The Poppy Field, The Poppy Field and Field of Loss, The Poppy Field and The Sea. *WildWorks, 100: The Day our World Changed*. Mevagissey, Cornwall. R. Philpot (2014).

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