

expansion of higher education in the 1960s benefited the middle classes and women in particular, but not the working classes as a whole. Her solution was that no one should enter the workforce until they are eighteen. An allowance should be paid to those over sixteen, and all education over that age was to take place in tertiary colleges rather than in sixth forms. Working-class students find it easier to be in colleges of further education than in schools, where they don't feel comfortable. Such colleges should provide much improved vocational education where students could sample a variety of trades from painting and decorating through plumbing and car maintenance, as well as majoring in one. The much derided YTS scheme would be a dead duck overnight. The tertiary colleges would also provide A-level studies, but with much wider courses and with all students taking both arts and sciences. Those that went on to higher education, whether immediately or later, full or part time, whether in polytechnics or universities, would be offered mixed arts/science degrees. All through the system teachers should be highly valued, highly paid and given frequent retraining. We mulled over vocational education for a while: the numbers concerned are vast, and we have failed and failed and failed since the middle of the last century to get the recipe for training right. There are 2 million people unemployed, and yet the building industry is short of craftsmen and may well be driven to recruit in Europe. Industry has a very poor training record: it doesn't seem able to plan its manpower needs. One day it decides it needs skilled men, and hasn't allowed time to train them. The Thatcher government has put considerable effort into improving this area, and has succeeded in going round in a circle. In the early seventies the Tories, realizing that employers failed to give adequate training - apprenticeships had been abandoned rather than modernized - introduced state intervention in the form of the Manpower Services Commission. That was hardly a resounding success. First attempts to revamp the scheme ran aground when the TUC played up and important sections of the membership decided to boycott the whole thing. The government had to think again and turned once more to the employer: two thirds of the members of the Training and Enterprise Councils (Tecs) will be employers from the private sector because 'it is they who are best placed to judge the skill needs'. Maybe employers have changed; maybe, frightened by the prospects of a shortage of school-leavers, they have seen the error of their ways. Maybe.

## Chapter 14

### The City of Bristol and the Duchy of Cornwall

I left Norwich by train and decided that, for once, I would ricochet with all speed from coast to coast. In London I paused to fill my suitcase with warmer clothes and accepted a lift to Bristol. I sat in the back and pretended I was J. B. Priestley; at the end of his time in Norwich, Priestley's mind turned to the law, and he nagged about the way in which our libel laws prevented journalists from uncovering corruption, whereas in America the law of libel was much less strict and corruption was forever being uncovered. Our libel laws are still strict, but going to court is so expensive that few can afford to fight and very few bother. There's no legal aid for libel, so the courts have become the province of the rich and famous, and beyond libel they have become the province of the rich or the last resort of the poor on legal aid. That means they are no-go areas for the majority, and much needs to be done about it. But no one is much bothered by the plight of the press: no one seems to think their hands are tied and should be freed. It's just the opposite in fact: there's concern about the way in which sections of the press abuse their rights - the way in which they invade people's privacy in order to print details of sexual peccadilloes; the way in which they print inaccurate reports without giving the subject the right to reply. The cry now is to curb the press, not free it, and they have only themselves to blame. Unfortunately, the honourable scribe will suffer; curbs on the hunter of salacious titbits are bound to inhibit the best kind of investigative journalism.

For the moment my thoughts were less concerned with the state of modern journalism and rather more concerned with the state of the legal profession. The very words evoke the world of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*; a world of ossified tradition, a world of Masonic secrecy, which the consumer enters at his peril. At worst the law stands for all that is wince-making in England: arrogance, complacency, conformity

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and conservatism. And snobbery: solicitors are seen as players and barristers as gentlemen. Gentlemen become judges, although a few solicitors are allowed to join the club. Judges fascinate me; they have such power, real power, to play God, deciding who and what is good and bad. How are judges picked? How do they know whom to believe, when all too often the truth seems secondary to a legal jousting tournament? Do they fear making wrong decisions, or do cases evaporate with the end of each day? Why do sentences vary so much? Since most judges come from professional backgrounds, how do they understand the plight of the guy caught brawling outside a pub? And how does a person view the world when day after day he sees nothing but those accused of lawbreaking?

I have a friend of twenty years who is both a QC and a recorder – a part-time judge – and I suggested to him that it would be fun to visit Bristol when he was sitting as a recorder. I could watch and listen to him at work by day and then in the evening we could gossip by the fireside. I could discover what makes a good judge and rake over the arguments in favour of a two-pronged profession of barristers and solicitors and discover why both wings have doubled in the last twenty years: in 1971 there were 2,500 barristers and 25,000 solicitors, and now there were 5,000 and 45,000 respectively. What fun, was his first reaction; his second was more cautious. And then it became clear that it couldn't be fun at all. My request had to go before the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice personally for endorsement. Yes, a recorder – a part-time judge for a mere four weeks a year, presiding over the least serious of Crown Court cases – had to seek permission from the highest authorities before he could talk to me. Six months later came the reply: the Lord Chancellor said in writing that as it was his duty to preserve the integrity and independence of the judiciary, he could not allow the recorder to talk to me about the cases he was involved with; nor could he talk to me about sentencing policy, nor could he talk to me about particular points of law on which he might have to decide in future. I dare say that still left a few things to talk about besides claret, but none the less I dropped the idea of focusing on judges. I suppose, knowing a little about the workings of the Lord Chancellor's department, I ought to have been flattered that he didn't just say *no* to any conversation: there exists some kind of code that states that only the most senior members of the law are allowed to talk to the 'media'. The Lord Chancellor then was Lord Hailsham, and undoubtedly he had been made nervous by Judge James Pickles speaking out so fearlessly and claiming that judges were 'scared to death of the Lord Chancellor and his minions'. Pickles felt it was time

judges left 'the monastery in which they lived and meet the populace from time to time and tell them what they think about the monastery'. It looked for a while as though Pickles was going to be the first judge to be sacked for anything other than for criminal behaviour.

We have a new Lord Chancellor now. Lord Mackay of Clashfern is thought by some to be one of Mrs Thatcher's most brilliant appointments. Apart from anything else, it showed, they said, that she wasn't all that anti-Scottish if she could invite a breath of Scottish fresh air to ruffle torpid English feathers. And Lord Mackay is certainly doing that. He's brushing aside some of that complacency, conformity and conservatism. He's busily promoting ways in which the law can be made cheaper, more accessible and more efficient. Others have talked of doing such things before, they talked and talked and did little. Lord Mackay has chosen to assault several areas: he favours the introduction of a 'no win, no fee' system, similar to that already operating in Scotland, where lawyers agree to charge their normal fee only if they win. While some argue that this is immoral and will encourage lawyers to be dishonest in search of victory, most people dismiss this as an insult to the profession, believing instead that lawyers will become more diligent knowing that if they lose a case they will be out of pocket; and clients will feel more inclined to seek justice rather than nurse grievances, knowing that they cannot end up out of pocket. It is an excellent notion. There are drawbacks in that lawyers will obviously be eager to capture the obvious 'winners' and anxious to be rid of the borderline, but against that one must place the thought that lawyers now are known to take borderline cases because *they* have nothing to lose. Lord Mackay also favours ending the barristers' monopoly of higher court work by allowing some solicitors to become qualified to plead in those courts. He also favours widening the net from which judges are chosen to include all advocates, and putting an end to the system whereby a barrister can only be briefed by a solicitor and not by a client. In return for all these gains, solicitors will have to accept further competition for the lucrative business of conveyancing. A few years ago their monopoly on this work was removed by the creation of a new profession of licensed conveyancers. This innovation made the buying and selling of houses cheaper for property owners, and now building societies and other institutions are to be allowed into this field.

These proposals are not as radical as they seem at first glance. Some favour a system whereby all lawyers have the same training, and all practise as solicitors for a number of years, after which those who wish to become barristers would be selected by examination. In other

words, they fancy a fusion of the two wings into one. The present proposals are certainly a step in that direction and the bar has made it clear that it is not happy. The howls of protest are hard to ignore. Barristers launched a campaign to raise a million-pound fighting fund to guard their patch, and hired a flashy advertising agency to argue their case before the Green Paper – a discussion document – turns White and becomes law. Does the most cosseted of professions see its privileges of centuries being whittled away and like it not? Or are barristers genuinely worried that the proposals will not achieve their stated aims; will not make the law cheaper and more efficient? It is a mixture of the two. There are genuine worries, particularly about how the independence of the bar could be harmed: there's a suggestion that an advisory council dominated by lay-people would be given a greater role in regulating the profession. But there's also a strong whiff of self-interest emanating from an elitist breed of men inclined to pomposity who also know that their influence in both Houses of Parliament is significant. Most judges seem against the new proposals, but I can't help thinking that it is Mrs Thatcher they are against. A House of Lords select committee examining life sentences discovered that in 60 per cent of the cases the judge's recommendations (and they are only *recommendations*) for the minimum length of sentence to be served had been increased by the Home Office. In other words, the government thought the sentences too soft.

The prime minister said on 18 January 1984 that she would like the governments which she had led to be seen as governments that tackled the vested interests which had been immune for years – the trades unions, the nationalized industries, local government *and* the monopolies in the professions. One by one she has done just that; perhaps barristers thought they would be immune.

Bristol has a reputation for being radical, of promoting change in legal proceedings to make life easier for the client. It claims a number of firsts, including the introduction of a duty solicitors' scheme and a conciliation scheme, to take the sting out of matrimonial proceedings. The idea that divorce courts should abandon traditional adversarial procedures in matrimonial and family matters has been talked about for more than a decade. So has the suggestion of family courts, where the welfare of those involved is seen as of greater importance than merely pronouncing on who is 'right' and who is 'wrong'. Nothing has happened in England, except in areas like Bristol where solicitors *encourage* couples to cooperate in sorting out their problems instead of racing them to court in search of a fat fee and a spot of *Kramer v. Kramer*. I went along and eavesdropped for a morning on one such

session; it is sad enough listening to the to-ings and fro-ings of 'sensible' divorcees. 'He says he wants to take the child away on holiday at Christmas. What do you say to that?' 'I say No. He can keep the child for a bit longer, but the child goes to school. *He* takes her to school and that's it.' It's the stuff of documentaries rather than the cinema.

The duty solicitors' scheme was introduced when it was discovered that too many people were going through the courts without legal representation and that such people got a rougher deal than those who were represented. Now if someone appears in court and is not represented, the magistrates can adjourn the case and refer to the duty solicitor. There is a rota, and solicitors *eagerly* join; it is after all both a service and a means of getting work. I went to court to witness the scheme in practice and also to get some idea of the kind of cases magistrates had to face; it was some time since as a young reporter I spent days in court covering a stream of minor offences, and I wondered how the pattern had changed. My guide was Dudley Thomas. The doorman said: 'You want Mr Thomas, do you? One of the best, he is, one of the best.' He was young and stocky and wore heavy brogue shoes. He has a splendid sense of humour and regaled me with numerous legal anecdotes which well illustrated the fallibility of even the best solicitors. Above all he made it clear that solicitors were no longer staid and slow and given to sitting in mahogany-lined offices charging whatever fees they liked. Competition had cleared the cobwebs; solicitors jostle for legal-aid work; paying clients demanded fixed quotations in advance and businesses invited firms to tender. After the riots in St Paul's district two young solicitors had moved in and cornered all the black business. A very smart move, said Dudley. The numbers of solicitors had increased because legal-aid enabled more people to be represented. The duty solicitors' scheme ensured that people knew their rights. The number had also risen because people had become more assertive; they no longer swallowed what fate dished out – if they thought they had been sacked unfairly they went to tribunals in search of compensation. Here as everywhere people's expectations had risen and here as elsewhere the professions no longer commanded automatic deference.

The magistrates' court was new, pine-panelled, bright and light, and designed so you could hear with ease. The lady magistrate wore a tweed suit and a cameo brooch, which is just what you expect a magistrate to wear. The first cases were straightforward theft: a girl was accused of having stolen a sweater from Marks and Spencer, and several cartons of cream and a hair-dryer from John Lewis. In the

second case a couple were accused of stealing a Honda motorcycle and riding it without insurance. Then there was the committal of a well-dressed and good-looking young man charged with living off immoral earnings. I was beginning to think that the nature of crime had changed little when along came a young man caught in possession of a chocolate bar containing cannabis. He explained that he used cannabis for medical purposes. He was an asthmatic and cannabis helped his breathing difficulties. Another youth was charged with stealing an Access card, and yet another was charged with destroying a pane of glass worth £13 belonging to Bristol city council. He was drunk at the time. And I didn't have to wait long to see the duty solicitors' scheme at work: a middle-aged man of no fixed abode was accused of breaking windows, car headlights and so forth. As the charge was read out he looked contemptuously around the court and then said: 'I've already been in prison for that!' There was confusion; no one seemed to know what was going on and the magistrate adjourned the case until the duty solicitor could sort it out.

Bristol's reputation as an innovator intrigued me. I was given a number of reasons for it: size – the place was big enough to be interesting and small enough to be cohesive; it had a very active law society and, above all, the city is dominated by solicitors and not barristers. London, they argued, is dominated by barristers. Until recently all the big cases went to London. Now there is a local bar, but it is small and there are only four QCs. The message was clear: solicitors deal with the public at first hand, therefore they are better able to see where changes are needed; they are practical and less conservative and enjoy exploring changes. It seemed only fair that I should hear the other side.

Nicholas O'Brien is a barrister. He argued that at local level solicitors and barristers get on well; there was no need for antagonism between the two. A royal commission had decided that it was in the public interest to have a split profession, and as far as he was concerned that was correct. It was relatively easy for a solicitor to become a barrister if he wished to do so, and in any event solicitors over the years had eased into areas previously reserved for barristers, without any serious problems. Solicitors could plead in magistrates' courts, in county courts, in some crown court cases and, in certain remote areas like Barnstaple and Truro, they could even appear in a jury trial, but they tended not to use this right to the full. More often than not they used a barrister for a difficult case, or where it seemed more cost effective. It was indeed true, he admitted, that barristers are cut off from clients, that they tend to deal with them at arm's length, but the proposals for clients to have

direct access to barristers, while it would end this detachment, would not achieve its aim of making the law cheaper and more efficient. At the moment Nicholas O'Brien's overheads are about 30 per cent of his costs. They are low because his needs are few; a shared typist and someone to take case bookings. If direct access were to come into being, his overheads would increase and his fees rise. 'I understand why people ask the question, should you use two people, a solicitor and a barrister, when surely one would do. But solicitors do a lot of preparatory work, finding witnesses and taking statements, and if I have to start doing that it is going to mean that I can handle perhaps one case a week. That is not going to be cheaper for the client. And I don't think it will be good for the client. It will mean that I am using my court skills less, once a week instead of every day, and any skill has to be used as much as possible to keep it up to the mark.'

O'Brien also feels that it is not in the best interests of the client to encourage (as the proposals do) firms of solicitors to take on in-house barristers. As the system stands he sees a barrister as something of a 'second opinion'. 'A solicitor brings a case to me and I look at it afresh and spot things that have been missed and pick out cases where the solicitor has made a mistake, and I can say that the case is not worth proceeding with. If a barrister within a solicitor's firm were to take on this role, he'd be more inclined to cover up the solicitor's mistakes and proceed with the case regardless.' But surely not if there were a system of contingency fees: no win, no fee?

'I don't think such a system is the answer to making the law cheaper and more accessible. In the end, someone has to pay. I agree that going to law is expensive. I couldn't afford it myself! But I really don't know what the answer is. Perhaps a better answer would be for people to take out insurance to cover litigation. They could pay £50 a year, or whatever.'

Nicholas O'Brien was about to handle a most unusual case; the sort of case that doesn't often get to court; the sort of case that is hushed up. I followed him to court to sit and listen.

As the magistrates' court is modern, so the crown court is old. Court One had high-backed red-leather chairs; everyone was dressed in black and white, many with gowns and wigs. My jade-green scarf was the only splash of colour. The atmosphere was sombre. I sat back and admired the stained-glass windows with their mixture of shields and emblems and spotted one for John Cabot, navigator, who sailed from Bristol in 1497 and planted the flag of England on the northern coast of North America five years after Columbus discovered the continent. And another to Edward Colston, 1636–1721, whose chief

pleasure was spending his great wealth for the benefit of his native city and whom that city has subsequently greatly honoured with statues and plaques. While I admired the windows, I eavesdropped on fragments of conversation: a female voice near me was explaining how her ninety-two-year-old aunt had known Gandhi. O'Brien was prosecuting. The accused had been charged with the attempted rape of a twelve-year-old. The defence lawyer was arguing that the accused was on drugs and didn't know what he was doing. The young girl was the accused's daughter.

The man in the dock wore a suit, a shirt with a button-down collar and a blue tie. He was thirty-five; he'd been a bus conductor and then a carpenter and had been unemployed for long periods of time. He'd been given suspended sentences in the past for possessing drugs.

Nicholas O'Brien stood up. His robe slipped and slithered. 'The child's mother was at work at the supermarket at the time of the first offence, and the girl's younger brother was watching TV. The girl's father called her upstairs. He was in bed. He said, come and give me a cuddle. The child did and he touched her breasts. Some weeks later he asked her again to get into bed and told her to take her skirt off. He pushed her legs apart and attempted to push his penis into her. She resisted and the attempt failed. The girl did not tell her mother because she was frightened. The second rape attempt relates to an incident some time later when the girl went with her father to a recording studio in the docks area. He showed her two wooden rings, large curtain rings, and said they'd make nice bracelets. He told her to lie on the floor. He tied one wrist to the leg of a desk and the other to a chair and one leg to another chair. He tried . . . It was painful and she screamed and he apologized. She discussed the matter with a girlfriend who told her to tell her mother, but she did not. Then one day when she told her father she didn't feel like going to school he slapped her face and told her to go to bed. She ran out of the house and found her mother at her place of work.'

The accused's lawyer said his client was in urgent need of hospital treatment. The woman whose aunt knew Gandhi was a doctor. She told the judge that when she interviewed the defendant she found him confused; she thought he was affected by drugs; she thought he needed psychiatric treatment.

The man in the dock stared at her. His blink rate was very high.

The judge: 'You say he took drugs to stay awake?'

The doctor: 'Yes, he had just bought his house from the council and he needed to do a lot of work on it, so he took pills to stay awake.'

There was much talk about something called a 'fugue' state, and amphetamine psychosis, which all seemed to add to the fact that the

man - or so his defence would have us believe - did not know what he was doing. The judge remanded the man in custody for three weeks for psychiatric reports. He said: 'I think at the end of the day I might have to send your client to prison.'

The *Bristol Evening Post* reported the case on page one. 'Girl, 12, tied to chair in sex ordeal.' They named the man but then in order to protect the child they could not say it was his daughter. The option, which I would have chosen, would have been not to name the man but make it quite clear it was his daughter. The report as published represents a hidden statistic. This was the third time on my journey that abuse of daughters by their fathers had filled pages of my notebooks. On the first occasion it was in Liverpool, in Toxteth; a black girl told me that the story of her appalling life began when her father sexually abused her. My face must have showed disbelief. She said, 'It's not that uncommon, you know. I do counselling work with child-abuse victims now, and I know it's not uncommon.' The second time was in south Wales. I was at a dinner-party where the subject of incest was discussed as though it were nothing more or less than drug abuse. I said as much. 'Oh, we don't know anything about drug abuse here, but we know about incest.'

The Cleveland affair means that many people who knew nothing about child abuse know about it now. In Cleveland in the spring and summer of 1987, 121 cases of suspected sexual abuse of children were diagnosed by two paediatricians, Dr Marietta Higgs and Dr Geoffrey Wyatt, using a technique known as anal dilation; a diagnosis which was approved while it belonged to forensic pathology, but contested once it was applied to paediatrics. After bitter legal battles, twenty-six of those children from twelve families were said by the judges to have been wrongly diagnosed. (In the other cases the children's alleged abusers either left their homes, or the parents agreed to 'protective plans' with social services, or the children were removed from their homes.) The furor surrounding the Cleveland affair resulted in a judicial inquiry which acknowledged that sexual abuse of children was a serious social problem, gave cautious approval to the diagnostic techniques used and criticized in some way almost everyone involved with the Cleveland crisis. The press had a field day. As Beatrix Campbell says in her book *Unofficial Secrets*, somehow the press managed to give the impression that most of the abuse cases were cleared by the courts, which was not so, and the two doctors suffered a witch-hunt. Campbell points out that even the *Guardian* had a headline saying 'Cleveland: The doctors were wrong', on a 'leak' of the judicial inquiry. I certainly had formed the opinion, after careful reading of

several newspapers, that the doctors were over-zealous and I needed to read Beatrix Campbell's book before realizing that it wasn't that clear cut. The press reporting had not been accurate. An attempt by the colleagues of Dr Marietta Higgs to make this point and to get her reinstated ensured that Cleveland had two years in the public eye. And after all the noise, where are we? The *response* to sexual abuse has been debated at length – in future, those who detect abuse will know they must act cautiously – but are we any the wiser about why children are abused? Only in that we know it has nothing to do with poverty; it crosses all income groups and all classes and races.

There was a time in our history when incest was widely practised. Giraldus, writing of the Welsh in the twelfth century, states, very simply, 'The Welsh are much given to incest.' Are we today unearthing the remnants of cultural practices we thought were long dead? Or are we unearthing a pristine problem, a problem thrown up by the failings of contemporary family life? Is it as some feminists suggest, that if we involve fathers more fully in fathering they will not abuse their children? Or is it merely telling us something unpalatable about male sexuality? Could it be that the British attitude to children is all wrong? One consultant paediatrician, Dr John Partridge, wrote these words: 'The attitude towards children in Britain is too often rejecting. Children seem of little value, rather a nuisance, to be treated irritably.' Children are low status objects, to be used and abused, who in turn use and abuse their own children and dismiss and discard their, by now elderly, abusers. A report from Brunel University, unconnected with child abuse and designed to discover how a man's job affected his attitude to his wife and children, stated unequivocally that those in boring, regimented jobs with no responsibility had impoverished relationships compared to those in flexible jobs demanding initiative and responsibility. The research cut across class lines and dealt with blue collar, white collar, any jobs where men felt bored or undervalued – the researchers called them 'slave jobs', jobs you had to put up with in order to pay the mortgage. 'The fathers in slave jobs did not help in the home, never cooked or washed up, were less involved with their children and less fond of them.' Could there be a link between dehumanizing jobs and bad man-management and child abuse? There are only questions; there are no answers.

Bristol is an interesting city. It is a pity that when I think of it, I think first of one particular court case that reveals the darker side of life. It was in Bristol that Coleridge wrote 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and that Defoe met Alexander Selkirk and learned the story of his

adventures, upon which the writer based *Robinson Crusoe*. Bristol was a merchant city; it acquired prominence and wealth on the profits of the slave trade and on sugar and tobacco, as well as wool and soap and leather and fish and wine. It has always been seen as an energetic city: history records that it was particularly badly battered by the Black Death, but that resourceful men fought back and built anew. It was badly battered during the Second World War, and once again men fought back and built anew. For the most part, post-war redevelopment was not a success; but Bristolians were sensitive to the mess and have since put much effort into retrieving their city by planning with care and with beauty in mind. The development of the sides of the river which runs right into the centre of the city is splendid. Once, such was the planners' low opinion of the value of the waterfront, a hotel was built with its back to the view. That lost opportunity has now been corrected: the hotel and the city have both realized that a watery outlook is an asset. Tackling the environmental mistakes of the past is only one of Bristol's problems. It has, like other cities, its share of bad housing and of homeless families; of racial prejudice, and the ghetto of St Paul's, which erupted along with other cities in the early 1980s. And it faces the same challenge as the rest of the country: finding new employment to take the place of dying industries. To this end it has been busily chasing the future by attracting its share of insurance, banking and other service sectors.

Bristol is also a gateway to the West Country and one misty morning I passed through that gateway on a bus, via Exeter to look at Cornwall. I was heading for a conference in Perranporth, south of Newquay, but such a distance is not possible in one day, so I broke the journey, first at Bude, to admire the coastline. In many ways, the coast *is* Cornwall. The county may stretch inland for twenty miles or so, but nothing inland – at least not in November – not even the barren and beautiful moors, rivals the coast. In the summer Cornwall's climate allows it to boast of many beautiful gardens attached to historic houses and castles, but the winter traveller can be forgiven for hugging the coast. By the time the bus reached Bude there were only three passengers on board. Two Americans, mother and daughter, had been told by their US travel agent that Bude would make a nice little overnight trip from London. It was either that or Edinburgh, they said, and they'd accepted Bude. In the evening light the two fretted about the narrowness of the country lanes – they'd never seen such tiny roads – and worried about what would happen if another bus came around the corner from the opposite direction. We arrived in darkness at 7 p.m., and they told me they would be leaving the next morning at 9.15 to return to London.

They'd shrunk England into little more than a day-trip, which offered me a valuable perspective on size. But what puzzled me most was why an American travel agent should even know of Bude's existence: most British people have never heard of the place.

I asked the driver of the bus for advice on a small hotel. 'I know just the one,' he said. 'I'll drop the other passengers and then drive you round.' He did that, only to discover that his chosen hotel was closed for the winter. I took pot-luck on the Burn Court Hotel. Within seconds I found myself faced with more riddles. The hotel reception was full of men wearing cowboy boots, checked shirts and jeans, with accents to match, broad accents of the southern states of America, of Texas and Tennessee. Ten minutes after checking in I returned to the hotel foyer in search of a telephone and realized that there was a queue. The phone was the only one for miles around that accepted one-pound coins, and the men from the southern states were making their weekly phone calls home. The hotel owner let me use his portable phone for a quick local call. 'You'll be waiting for hours otherwise. They each stay on the phone for twenty minutes. I reckon I get £500 a week through that box.'

I tried asking one of the men what they were doing in Bude.

'Satellites, communications, that kinda thing.'

'Is there an American base here?' I persisted.

'No, British.'

It wasn't the fullest of answers. In the bar after dinner it was clear that the Americans had been given the run of the place. They fixed their own drinks and one man showed two girls pictures of his sons of eighteen and twenty-three. The girls begged him to bring them over. 'We'll pay the fares,' they giggled.

The next morning was Remembrance Sunday, and wrapped up against the wind and the rain I walked for an hour by the sea watching the huge waves topple over one another to form a white sheet at the water's edge. I could see that it would make a surfing beach in summer. Just before 11 a.m. I went in search of the war memorial, wondering if there was to be a service. I found the memorial; at its base lay one bunch of chrysanthemums, white paper wrapped around the stems. A message had been written on the paper, but the rain had blurred the words and all I could see was, 'died 1943'. Eleven o'clock passed. The shop said that the guides and scouts would be having a march that afternoon. But I'd already decided to wander off down the coast to St Colomb Major, because I liked the name and because I'd heard about the rectory, a building dating back to the fifteenth century and drenched in tales of ghosts and smugglers. It was now a hotel with log fires, and the rain made me feel in the mood for a log fire.

The taxi driver was most forthcoming. I learned that the Americans were working at the Composite Signals Organization Station at Morwenstow. 'Up there they can listen to any telephone conversation anywhere in the world. They listened to Jane Fonda's telephone conversations when she got into the peace movement. I'm only giving you gossip, mind, but that's all we have to go on. No one talks about the place, especially not those who work there. The place was chosen because it's high up and provides a granite base. We tell ourselves that it's OK. It provides jobs, which is good for the locals, jobs from cleaners upwards, and it is especially important in providing a middle-class professional base. There's nothing else around here except tourism in the summer.'

He'd been an industrial chemist and had quit Cornwall for Birmingham in pursuit of his career, but he returned to take over his father's taxi firm. Cornwall was a better place to bring up children. His wife, who was born in Surrey, had taken eighteen months to settle down, but on the whole they were pleased with their decision. The schools were good and the only things they missed were the shops, and they put that right by spending a few days in Croydon once in awhile.

The coastal drive was glorious, the cliffs were covered in gorse and bracken and the lashing rain seemed appropriate and in keeping with the wildness. My first sight in St Columb was of a large RAF coach blocking the road, but the driver did at least direct us without hesitation to the Old Rectory, whose owners the minute I arrived began to apologize for the lack of *en suite* bathrooms and telephones. My attempts to reassure them that it was the absence of these things that had made me seek out the place were to no avail. 'We'll be putting in showers soon. It's the Americans, you see, they won't stay here unless we provide these things. We get lots of Americans coming here for dinner and for big parties. Their base is down the road, at St Mawgan, but they need these extra things if they are going to stay.' On the mantel shelf, over the fire, were two flags, one American, one British.

Up to this point I had accepted the way in which Americans had edged into my life on the bus and at Bude. Now I became truly curious. They seemed everywhere. I hadn't connected Americans with Cornwall. I knew that there were more than a hundred bases in this country, but I had not associated them with Cornwall. I knew that the US Air Force was the second biggest industry in East Anglia; that some 25,000 service men were dotted around the country; that the US ambassador had argued that these men, and their families and the USAF in general, added \$1 billion to our economy and created, directly, 255,000 additional jobs. But I hadn't associated any of this

with Cornwall. I decided to try and visit the base and, with the help of the hotel owners, I phoned the executive office of the US Navy. A polite voice told me that the US Navy were only 'guests', and that I should call the RAF. Several phone calls later I was told that the base needed six months' notice of a visit unless I could get special permission from 'on high', which meant the Ministry of Defence in London. I turned instead to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: its local members would be able to enlighten me. I took a bus ride to Falmouth and met Betty Levene. I learned that the station outside Bude has been in operation since the early seventies and is part US National Security Agency and part GCHQ, the Government communications Headquarters, Cheltenham. Before 1979, nerve gas had been manufactured at Portreath. And at St Mawgan since 1965 thousands of acres of Cornish soil has been used to store US Navy nuclear weapons - B57 nuclear depth charges - and that they were guarded by a special contingent of US Marines. The local paper might say that St Mawgan is 'alleged' to be a nuclear weapons store, but CND has no need to be so careful. They know that American nuclear bombs are housed there. Betty has Snowballed for several years. The Snowball campaign started in 1984 at the Sculthorpe base in Norfolk, where three people cut a single strand of fence in non-violent protest. St Mawgan is now annually snipped; Dora Russell took part in the 1986 Snowball. The fines are modest, but Betty used part of her annual holiday one year to spend eight days in prison for refusing to pay the fine. It was good publicity for the cause.

When Bruce Kent gave up the secretary-generalship of CND in 1985, he said that though membership figures were high, he felt tempted to say that CND could boast of no tangible gain. No weapons have been sent back, no bases closed, nothing had been agreed. In September 1988 Cruise missiles began to leave Britain. Earlier in that year, in February, the Russians had pulled their missiles out of East Germany. The long years of arms negotiations, first to limit the weapons and then to reduce them, were beginning to bear fruit. The American ambassador said: 'We are witnessing the removal of Cruise missiles because we, the Nato allies, have been strong and united.'

Nato came into being forty years ago, after the Berlin blockade in 1949, when Europe became suspicious of Russian intentions and fearful of Russian military might. It was thought that given half the chance Russia would invade West Germany, then Italy, France, Norway and Sweden, and then come to Britain. The only thing that seemed capable of calming such fears was for Europe to get together under the American nuclear umbrella. Nato came into being. Since then Britain

has spent a large proportion of its national income on arms - funding an independent nuclear deterrent as well as contributions to Nato. Since then, thousands of American troops have been stationed on British soil; since then, American and British foreign policies have been closely linked, and it was because of this link that Mrs Thatcher allowed American bases in Britain to launch an attack on Libya. Some people, most notably the left of the Labour party, have never accepted the American-umbrella line of thinking. They say it is based on a false premise: Russia has no intention of wandering into western Europe; the Russians lost 20 million people in the last war, and they have no intention of repeating the experience. In any event, they continue, the Russians realize without constant and visible reminders that any war in Europe would involve America, just as it did last time. These differing theories about Russian intentions have kept parties, politicians and people arguing for years. Then along came Mikhail Gorbachev, a Russian the West could begin to like and trust, and suddenly years of arms talks took on real meaning. It became possible to believe that Russia did want to negotiate an end to nuclear weapons and a levelling off of conventional weapons. Gorbachev, with the help of Ronald Reagan, began breaking down the old cold war divisions: people began talking of a future without a Berlin Wall and the dissolution of Nato. It is easy enough to dream of a brand new start to the twenty-first century. But many voices are raised in warning; what exactly is Gorbachev up to? Is it a desire for peace that motivates him or is it that faced with an arms race of Star Wars proportions he began to shiver? He knew the Soviet economy could not cope, and plumped instead for the opposite tactic: ridding himself of nuclear weapons altogether, in order to have more roubles to spend improving the state of the economy. Perhaps, the cynics suggest, he wants to cripple Nato, and, even if his desire for peace is sincere, what would Russia's stance be if he were no longer leader? Ronald Reagan has gone and his successor, George Bush, is less inclined to flirt with Russia. And anyway, even if the superpowers were able to agree on denuclearization, what about other possessors of the bomb? What about India, Israel and South Africa, who already own the thing and Iran, Iraq, Brazil and Argentina, who may soon join them? There are too many unknowns and therefore it is not surprising that Mrs Thatcher still favours prudence and a strong Nato, with bases in place to ensure another forty years of peace.

In St Columb Major the pavements are very narrow: it is not possible for two people to pass each other. I stepped off the pavement many times to let an American voice pass - since there are no married quarters at St Mawgan, many find homes in this tiny town. If the



servicemen were to go, the impact on this town would be noticeable, but it would matter little to Cornwall as a whole. At the weekend conference on Cornwall, at Perranporth, no one mentioned the bases. America was mentioned only once, when a delegate suggested that he would rather see an American in charge of Cornwall than an Englishman, because the latter's record in recent years as entrepreneurs and adventurers has been poor.

And because Cornwall resents English domination. It is Celtic and a nation, not an English county latched on to Devon. The Celts were bothered by other invaders, the Romans and the Normans, but it is the Anglo-Saxons for whom they reserve most of their ire. They put up a good fight under a strong leader who may or may not have been King Arthur, but in the end the English colonized them and made good use of their mineral wealth, particularly tin. They reckon the English are still making good use of them: Cornwall is their playground, and a provider of second homes.

The conference was attended by fifty or so people who care about Cornwall and about being Cornish. It was not a conference of Cornish nationalists, Mebyonn Kernow, although some were present; it was a gathering of those with the laudable aim of keeping their culture alive in a world that is becoming increasingly homogenized. Their agenda was wide-ranging. It covered the railways and the health service and the need for a Cornish resource centre and a Cornish development agency, and there were reports from working parties on education, devolution and tourism. Throughout their discussions ran one message: Cornwall does not wish to be ignored and does not wish to be hyphenated to Devon, as though 'Devon and Cornwall' were like Gilbert and Sullivan, nothing without each other, devoid of a separate identity. Cornwall is fed up with border blurring, with having more and more decisions that affect daily life decided on the other side of the Tamar. In the name of economies of scale, many of Cornwall's services are run by Englishmen in Devonshire. The final insult is the postal service. The postmark for north Cornwall is Exeter and for south Cornwall, Plymouth. The conference's attenders refused to use such codes: they marked their envelopes 'Kernow'.

The problems of a smothered identity could not be resolved without a firmer economy, and their solution is to emulate Scotland and Wales by having a Cornish development agency that would attract industry and investment. Their unemployment rate, around 20 per cent, is one of the highest. The Methodist church's community programme was the third biggest employer. (John Wesley was as popular and successful in Cornwall as he was in Wales.) The Cornish are no longer content to

see china clay being dug out of the ground and taken to the Midlands: why couldn't pots be made in Cornwall? They were no longer happy to see potatoes dug out of the ground and taken to England to be put in plastic bags and sold back to them via Tesco. Why couldn't the value be added in Cornwall? Tourism has been a big earner, but tourism is seasonal and provides only low-paid work. And tourism is no longer a certainty, with numbers dropping as more and more people go abroad for holidays and with more and more competition from other areas of Britain. They told the story of how Cornwall's stall at British Travel Week had been surrounded by Hull, Bradford and Greater Manchester. They would like to find a way of attracting the kind of tourist that is interested in Celtic Cornwall; the kind of tourist that comes to appreciate Cornish culture, who is interested in historic buildings and who walks on the moors and admires the wildlife. The lovers of sea and the surf are no longer enough.

Ideas were plentiful and so was the realization of the magnitude of the task. They were all too aware that their biggest difficulty was apathy, engendered by too many decisions being taken miles away by faceless officials; by years of feeling that there was nothing anyone could do - except talk. And that was another difficulty: the well-known Celtic ability to argue and disagree, to talk and get nothing done. They appreciate that both Wales and Scotland are harder-nosed commercially. All in all the Cornish path to self-determination would not be easy. None the less, it would get easier as more and more people came to resent the fact that the best jobs still went to the English, and as more and more resented the fact that 'outsiders from up-country', having made their money, retired early to Cornwall, buying up houses and in the process putting property prices beyond the reach of local people. In fifteen years they'd seen a change; for a start the conference on Cornwall had become an established twice yearly event, and schools had become more interested in introducing Cornish studies. But this was a long way from the moment when Cornwallians would be confident enough to believe that they could become, despite their small population, a viable unit and turn their backs on London in the same way that the Bretons had turned their backs on Paris. After all, the Bretons, they said, were once weak, lily-livered and pusillanimous, but no longer. One day they could hope to have their own Cornish assembly; one day they could dream of being completely self-governing and part of a Celtic federation looking to Europe and not to London.

When I arrived at the conference someone suggested that I was yet another English journalist come to have fun at the expense of a principality of 400,000 people who wanted to be big when they were

## CHOPPING DOWN THE CHERRY TREES

small and who bore grudges for events that had happened centuries ago. But how could anyone who had travelled through the United Kingdom, through the Highlands and Islands, through Scotland and Wales and through Ireland, feel anything other than a sense of embarrassment towards the overbearing English and their insensitivity towards Celtic feelings? The Cornish themes were familiar to me; their resentment well understood. I had come to be thankful to the Celtic fringe for being part of the United Kingdom. England without the Highlands and islands, without Scotland and Wales, would be a dull place. We should recognize that we are a partnership of nations, not just one nation comprising different people, with those in Brighton thinking that those in Birmingham and Blackpool are 'different', and never giving a thought to non-English regions. Regional diversity and community identity and Celtic culture should be encouraged just as it is with Asians and Afro-Caribbeans. Devolution should be encouraged; the dead hand of assimilation and the dead hand of Westminster should loosen its grip. No one can say that dependence has brought riches to Cornwall; she might just as well be poor and make a few of her own decisions as be poor and told what to do. Diversity and choice are supposed to be Thatcher themes. Well, let them reach Cornwall. Technology makes for easier communications; the fashion is for smaller firms, smaller schools; people working from home can work from Cornwall as well as Croydon. The fashion is for people to take more responsibility for themselves and for the community in which they live; for that to happen one must first give them back their identity.