

This memory seemed to embarrass the others, but Mr Cox was happy and even seemed to be savouring it.

'I think it's a detestable thing, picking on someone,' he said. 'I tried to bottle it up, but it made me bad-tempered. Then I shouted at him. It was the only time in my life. It just came out.'

After the villages of Devon, Plymouth looked vast. It was scattered over several valleys, and farther in it was on the hills as well. It was only the larger towns and cities of England that covered hills like this. The Plymouth outskirts looked ugly and dull.

'Busy, built-up place,' Mr Gussage said. 'I remember my mother and father came to my wedding. They were country people, and this was Brighton. They said, "Look at all them slate roofs."'

Mr Gifford was staring at Plymouth. He said, 'Yes. Look at all them slate roofs.'

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The Cornish Explorer

A special train ticket I bought in Plymouth called 'The Cornish Explorer' allowed me to go anywhere in Cornwall, on any train. I travelled into the low shaggy hills, which were full of tumbling walls and rough stone houses, and yellow explosions of gorse bushes. I had lunch for eight pounds, which was twice as much as my ticket. The dining car was set for eighteen people, but I was the only diner. Elsewhere on the train, the English sat eating their sandwiches out of bags, munching apples and salting hard-boiled eggs. Times were hard. I realized that my lunch was over-priced, yet in a very short time there would be no more four-course lunch on these trains, no more rattling silverware, and no waiter ladling soup. But it was also ridiculous for me to be the only person eating: soup, salad, roast chicken and bread sauce, apple crumble, cheese and biscuits, coffee. There were two waiters in the dining car, and a cook and his assistant in the kitchen. The meal that most long-distance railway passengers had once taken for granted had now become a luxury, and Major Uprichard would soon be telling his grandchildren, 'I can remember when there were waiters on trains - yes, *waiters!*'

There were rolling hills until Redruth, and then the land was bleak and bumpy. There was only one working tin mine left in Cornwall (near St Just) but the landscape was scattered with abandoned mineworks, which looked like ruined churches in ghost villages. Cornwall was peculiarly uneven, with trees growing sideways out of stony ground, and many solitary cottages. On a wet day, its granite was lit by a granite-coloured sky and the red roads gleamed in a lurid way; it looked to be the most haunted place in England, and then its reputation for goblins seemed justified. It was also one of those English places which

HAARDU WEEK 2

(SOUTH
-WEST) TRAVELLING
BRITAIN.

PAUL THEROUX,

constantly reminded the alien, with visual shocks like vast battered cliffs and china clay waste dumps and the evidence of desertion and ruin, that he was far from home. It looked in many places as if the wind had creamed it of all its trees.

'I love the red earth,' Mrs Mumby said, staring out of the train window at the drizzle, and reminiscing. 'During the war I lived at Ross-on-Wye, in an antiquated old cottage. These Cornish cottages remind me of that. I don't like the architecture of today. Concrete jungle, I call it.'

Appearing to reply to this, Vivian Greenup said sharply, 'I've looked everywhere for my husband's walking stick. My daughter brought it to the hospital, in case he might need it. After he died, I looked everywhere and couldn't find it.'

Mrs Mumby stared at Mrs Greenup and her expression seemed to say: *Why is Vivian running on like this about her dead husband's walking stick?*

'It's quite a weapon,' Mrs Greenup said. 'You could use it as a weapon.'

'We came to Penzance ('somewhat ambitiously styled the "Cornish Riviera" ... John Davison, the Scottish poet, drowned himself here'). I changed trains and went back up the line about seven miles to St Erth, and there I waited in the rain for the next train to St Ives.

There were few pleasures in England that could beat the small three-coach branch-line train, like this one from St Erth to St Ives. And there was never any question that I was on a branch-line train, for it was only on these trains that the windows were brushed by the branches of the trees that grew close to the tracks. Branch-line trains usually went through the woods. It was possible to tell from the sounds at the windows – the branches pushed at the glass like mops and brooms – what kind of a train it was. You knew a branch line with your eyes shut.

We went along the river Hayle and paused at the station called Leland Saltings, which faced green-speckled mud flats. Hayle was across the water, with a mist lying over it. There were two more stops – it was a short line – and then the semi-circle of St Ives. It was Cornish, unadorned, a grey huddled storm-lit town on several hills and a headland, with a beach in its sheltered harbour. Today, in the rain, it was quiet, except for the five

species of gulls that were as numerous now as when W. H. Hudson was here and wrote about them.

All the great coastal towns of England were a mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. Here was the sublime climate and the pearly light favoured by watercolourists, the sublime bay of St Ives and the sublime lighthouse that inspired Virginia Woolf to write one of her greatest novels, and the sublime charm of the twisty streets and stone cottages. And there was the ridiculous; the postcards with kittens in the foreground of harbour scenes, the candy shops with authentic local fudge, the bumper stickers, the sweatshirts with slogans printed on them, the souvenir pens and bookmarks and dish towels, and the shops full of bogus handicrafts, carved crosses and pendants. These carvings at St Ives advertised 'Our Celtic Heritage – The Celts were famous for their courage and fighting qualities; which carried them before the birth of Christ from their homeland north of the Alps, across the known world ...' Cornish pride was extraordinary, and it was more than pride. It had fuelled a nationalist movement, and though the last Cornish-speaking person died in 1777 (it was Dolly Pentreath of Mousehole), and Cornish culture today was little more than ghost stories and meat pies, there was a fairly vigorous campaign being fought for Cornwall to secede from England altogether. It was not for a vague alien like myself to say this was ridiculous, but it did seem to me very strange.

Across St Ives Bay were sandy cliffs and dunes, and I thought of walking along that shore to the village of Portreath – it was about twelve miles: I could do it before nightfall. But the rain was coming darkly down like a shower of smut, and I still had my Cornish Explorer ticket. So I walked to St Ives Head, where the Atlantic was riotous, then I returned to the station to wait for the little train to take me back to St Erth.

The graffiti at St Ives Station said, *Wogs ought to be hit about the head with the utmost severity*, and under this, *Niggers run amok in London – St Ives next!* and in a different hand: *Racism is a social disease – you should see a doctor.*

I went back to St Erth and changed for the main-line train to Liskeard, going back the way I had come, past the mining chimneys and the clay deposits and the great hard sweeps of stony

land and the green glades that each contained a large house – one comfortable family – but no more.

The branch-line train to Looe was waiting at Liskeard. It ran on a single track through a narrow ravine under the main-line viaduct and made a big loop through the countryside, past ivy-covered walls and steep hills to Coombe Junction, where a man in a rubber raincoat yanked levers to change the points, nudging the train down the branch line to Looe and the coast. There were about twenty-five people on the three coaches of this train, and the train went so slowly it did not even startle the horses cropping grass by the side of the track.

The woods on this rainy day were deep green. The branches bumped and brushed the windows. We came to St Keyne. There was a famous well here. 'The reported virtue of the water is this, that, whether husband or wife come first to drink thereof, they get the mastery thereby.' There is a ballad by Southey in which a man describes how, just after his wedding, he went to the 'gifted Well' and had a drink, so that he would be 'master for life', but his wife was quicker-witted.

I hastened, as soon as the wedding was done,
And left my Wife in the porch;
But i' faith she had been wiser than me,
For she took a bottle to church.

Even so slight a poem as this seemed to give the acre of woods at St Keyne a curious importance. This was true all over England, which was why England was so hard to describe: much of it had been written about by great men, and the very mention of a place in a literary work tended to distort the place, for literature had the capacity to turn the plainest corner of England into a shrine.

We came to Sandplace, and then Causeland. The Looe river was hardly a river here. You could jump across it at Causeland, but then it widened from a creek into something more substantial, a waterway containing tussocky islands. On one of them there was a swan sleeping in a nest, looking like the fragments of a failed wedding cake, and the rocks of the shore looked nastily like dead ferrets. At the confluence of the West Looe river we passed the steep narrow harbour of Looe, another apparently magnetized

village and a sign saying, 'Headquarters of the Shark Angling Club of Great Britain'.

It was still light and I was stiff from my shuttling back and forth with my Cornish Explorer ticket. And the rain had finally stopped. So I oiled my hiking shoes and as night fell I walked along the coastal cliffs, past Hendersick and through the buttercups at the Warren above Talland Bay to Polperro. Just below Crumplehorn – I was muttering the names to myself as I went – I found a pleasant-looking pub and got a room for the night. Everything seemed very simple and there was always enough daylight to do anything I pleased.

Polperro was a village of whitewashed cottages tumbled together in a rocky ravine on the sea. The streets were as narrow as alleys and few of them could take motor vehicles. I saw a full-sized bus try to make it down one street – hopeless. At best, one small car could inch down a street knocking the petals off geraniums in the window boxes at either side. When two cars met head-on there was usually an argument over who was to reverse to let the other pass.

The loathing for tourists and outsiders in Cornwall was undisguised. I had a feeling that it was the tourists who had made the Cornish nationalistic, for no one adopted a funny native costume quicker or talked more intimidatingly of local tradition than the local person under siege by tourists. Polperro was a pretty funnel but with the narrowest neck, so there was nowhere to go but the tiny harbour. It was true that the Cornish derived most of their income from tourists; but there was no contradiction in the way they both welcomed and disliked us at the same time. Natives always had very sound reasons for disliking outsiders; the Cornish fishermen had nothing whatsoever to do with tourists, but the other Cornish were farming people and treated tourists like livestock – feeding them, fencing them in, and getting them to move to new pastures. We were cumbersome burdens, a great headache most of the time, but at the end of the day there was some profit in us.

Mr Tregeagle, the hotel-keeper I met in Polperro, had been a farmer for thirty years. He had had dairy cattle, between sixty and seventy head, and he had also grown vegetables. The month before I arrived in the village he had chucked his farm in Bodmin.

He had bought this little hotel in the hope of making a living, but he laughed when he admitted that he had never run a hotel before and knew practically nothing about it.

'I was losing thousands on my milk,' Mr Tregeagle said. 'I owed money to the bank. The price of feed increased and the price of milk dropped. Last year it was terrible. I was in debt and I was working eighteen hours a day. I said to myself, "What's the point?" I began selling my cows. I hated doing it, but I had no choice.'

'What about your vegetables?' I said. 'You could feed yourself, couldn't you?'

'The vegetables were useless. I had a garden full of lovely lettuces. One morning I brought three crates – about a hundred lettuces – down to the local greengrocer. He offered me a penny a piece for them. A bloody quid for three crates!'

'Did you sell them?'

'I took them home and buried them, and I ploughed the rest of them under. And then I said, "That's it – I'm selling." The Tregeagles have been farming here for generations, but we'll never go back to the land again.'

There was a South African couple at the hotel, Tony and Norah Swart. He was a fat and rather silent red-faced man in his mid-forties, and she was harder and younger, talkative and unsmiling, a girl with a grudge. Tony's silence was a kind of apology, for Norah was usually complaining, and she had that hypersensitivity that some South Africans have, the bristling suspicion that any moment she is going to be accused of being a bumpkin, and the justified fear that she is a bumpkin. She was proud of, and at the same time hated, her snarling accent and bad manners.

It had been a horrible trip from Capetown. They had wanted to stop in Nigeria and Zaire, but those African countries would not let them enter. Norah Swart said, 'It's bleddy unfair.'

I said this was probably because Africans were discriminated against in South Africa. They treated Africans like dogs, so African countries were disinclined to put out the red carpet for South Africans.

'The real trouble,' Mrs Swart said, 'is that we were too nice to them. When the Australians were shooting their Abos and you were killing your Indians, we were looking after our blacks.'

'Of course,' I said. 'You're famous for looking after your blacks.'

'Kristy, my Australian friend, said to me, "If you'd shot yours like we did ours you wouldn't have these problems today."'

I said, 'What a pity you didn't exterminate them.'

'That's what I say,' Mrs Swart said. The thought of mass murder softened her features and for the first time she looked almost pretty.

But her husband saw I was being sarcastic. He kept his gaze on me and went very quiet.

They especially hated the Africans in Namibia. They called it 'Southwest', they said it belonged to them, they wanted to raise caraculs there, and Norah Swart made a noise at me when I asked her what a caracul was. They said they would never willingly turn it over to African rule, but when I said that African rule was inevitable in Namibia ('stop calling it Namibia,' she said) the Swarts said they would fight for it. It was an empty land, Tony Swart said – only 400,000 people in it. He swore this figure was correct, but later I checked and found the population to be almost two million, of whom 75,000 were white.

I asked them where they had travelled in England.

'Lyme Regis,' Mrs Swart said. 'Where they made that movie.'

'We're just motoring down the coast.'

'What was the name of that movie, Tone?'

Tony shook his head. He did not know.

Mrs Swart said, 'People around here keep telling us to read Daphne du Maurier. Have you read it?'

She thought Daphne du Maurier was the name of a novel. Instead of setting her straight I said that it was a very good novel indeed and that the author, Rebecca something, had written many others. I urged her to ask for *Daphne* at the local bookshop.

Polperro was in such a deep ravine the sun did not strike it in the morning. I walked through the damp dark village – straight overhead the sky was blue – and climbed out of the little harbour on to the cliffs, just as a bright mist descended. It hung lightly over the rocky shore and the purple sea, and created luminous effects of live creatures appearing and disappearing near the tumbledown cliffs, and dripped morning light on the waves. It whitened the surf and the foam sliding patchily back from the

rocks. Bright and indistinct with shadowy light, and softened by mist, the whole coast that morning was like a Turner water-colour, or more than one, because it kept dripping and changing, the greens and blues becoming sharper as the morning wore on.

I was setting out to have lunch at Fowey, and I planned to walk on to Par, where there was a railway junction. The grass on this path was wet with mist and dew and before I had gone half a mile my shoes were soaked, in spite of the oil I had put on them in Looe.

This was the softer side of Cornwall, damper and greener than the north coast that was pounded by the Atlantic. The whole cliff was green, from the top to the sea, full of ivy and meadow grass and brambles. The cliffs of Cornwall were depicted always as rocky, like ruined castles and castle walls. 'I like Cornwall very much. It is not England,' D. H. Lawrence wrote. 'It is bare and dark and elemental . . . bare and sad under a level sky.' He meant the other coast, the Cornish stereotype of black headlands on a choppy sea, and charming desolation. But here on the path to Fowey the cliffs were like steep meadows. The bramble bushes and the gorse made a mild reflection in the water; the trailing ivy gave a delicacy to the sea, and the foliage muffled the wind. The air was sweetened by all this greenery, and the fragrance of the rain was partly its soft stutter on the grass. There was nothing elemental here, thank God.

Two battered old ladies appeared on the path, tramping towards me out of the gorse – Miss Brace and Miss Badcock. They were half-naked, leathery and terrifying in halters and faded shorts, and though it was cool on these cliffs they were perspiring. Old ladies in skimpy clothes could look defenceless. These two looked formidable – rather plump and plain and dauntless, with lined faces, and varicose veins standing out on their calves like thongs. They were very brown. They carried walking sticks with spiked tips. One had a bright patch on her shorts saying 'Bad Gastein'. They were ramblers, they said, and then as if to prove it said they had walked here from Land's End.

'And we 'aven't touched pooblic transport,' Miss Brace said.

Northerners. Her rucksack must have weighed a hundred pounds. She had the tent, Miss Badcock had the cooking gear – you could hear the clink of the skillet.

Miss Badcock said, 'ow mooch does your knapsack weigh?'

I said not much. They plumped it with their hands, and weighed it, and laughed, taking me for a twinkie.

'We've got spare shoes,' Miss Badcock said.

'Let's go, Vera,' Miss Brace said. And she explained to me, 'We're in a hoora to find accommodation in Polperro.'

I said, 'Polperro is full of hotels.'

'We want a youth hostel,' Miss Brace said.

A youth hostel? They were each well over sixty – Miss Badcock looked closer to seventy. I could see Miss Badcock's navel.

They had walked a hundred and fifteen miles since last Thursday. Had they seen anything interesting?

Miss Brace said, 'We 'ad soom nice coves and bays. We 'ad soom nice villages. We joost walk by.'

Miss Badcock said, 'We don't stop mooch.'

They asked me where I was going. I said, to Fowey and then to Par today.

Miss Brace said, 'It's a canny little step.'

A canny little step was similar to *a fair old trot*. Why didn't the English ever use the word 'far'?

We went our separate ways, and now it began to rain. Miss Brace had said that was the reason they were so scantily dressed – because of the rain: fewer clothes to get wet, and they dried more quickly. I had been ashamed to say that I had a hooded plastic raincoat. I now put it on and walked around Lantivet Bay and on to Lantic Bay, where the water was wonderfully marbled with sea foam, the white veiny effect heightened by the luminous blue-green water that was flat and gleaming.

Towards lunch time I walked around Blackbottle Rock and into the village of Polruan. This village was so tiny, and its roads so narrow, a sign to the entrance of the village said: 'Vehicular Access to Village Prohibited for Day Visitors 10 a.m.–6 p.m.'

It was strange the way some of these villages were protected. Polruan was sealed off: no traffic. But people still lived there, taking refuge in their small houses and the distant past. And visitors parked up the road and wandered around, peering through cottage windows and remarking on the cobblestones.

There was a ferry from Polruan to Fowey, across Fowey Harbour. The ferry sign said:

Adults	25p
Children	25p
Dogs	12p
Pram	12p
Cycle	25p

All these villages looked better from the water, face-on like Fowey from its ferry, with all their watching windows and all the peeling paint and storm damage. Fowey was perpendicular, built around the rock shelves of the steep harbour, and the houses were faded and stately. At the head of the harbour was a green wedge of woods and the emptying Fowey river, and at the harbour mouth high battlements in ruins. Fowey had been a harbour from ancient times. It looked an excellent place to start a long voyage, because it was a beautiful settled place, like a serene lakeside village.

I had my lunch – a sandwich – on the cliff at the west side of the harbour and, startling the wrens in the hedges, set off again. I walked at the margins of pastures, on the cliff edges above the sea, and around coves to a headland called the Gribbin, where there was a candy-striped beacon – a marker for sailors. From this height I could see St Austell, and Par sprinkled at the head of St Austell Bay, and twenty miles of coast – mountainous heaps of china clay refuse, and Black Head, and the whole of dark blue Mevagissey Bay as far as Dodman Point. The distant rocks in the sea were called the Gwinges.

One of the pleasures of travelling this fractured coast was such a vista. The irregularity of the English coast offered unusually long views, and these heights helped. A vantage point like the Gribbin made this part of Cornwall look like a topographical map with raised features in bright colours – the best views were always like dazzling maps. And in contrast to the sea, there were the reassuring pastures: on one side the cows and bees and sheep, and slate walls and the smell of manure, and on the other side the gulls and cormorants and whiff of salt spray; and these mingled. The gulls crossed into the pastures, the crows strutted on the sand, and the smells of muck and salt mingled, too.

I walked on. Under the trees above Polkerris, which was a small harbour and beach, there was a cool shade and a rich aroma, a whole acre of wild garlic.

Par was small and ugly, a china clay factory wrapped around half its bay, and the other half a clutter of caravans and broken-down shallys. Rising behind this miserable beach were long terraces of hollow-eyed houses. Factory effluent had stained the water. I had been heading for Par all day, but instead of stopping I walked through the town to the station and caught the train that crossed the narrow part of Cornwall.

This branch-line train from Par to Newquay was a delight. We were heading west, and the bright sun was propped just above the horizon. I took the seat behind the driver, in the first carriage, and slipped my wet shoes off. There was nothing in the world more restful; the train seemed like the highest stage of civilization. Nothing was disturbed by it, or spoiled; it did not alter the landscape; it was the machine in the garden, but it was a gentle machine. It was fast and economical and as safe as a vehicle could possibly be.

Mr Kemp, the conductor, said, 'When I took over this train they said they were going to close the line. That was eighteen years ago! They're still saying it, but they haven't done it yet.'

But of course they would eventually, because they had closed down a hundred others just like it, all over the country. I suggested this to Mr Kemp.

He said, 'I'll be retired by then. But it'll be a shame if they close it. It's a beautiful line!'

We went through a green corridor of sunlit trees and sparkling leaves to Luxulyan. And then the landscape became stony, and rather bruised-looking, as the interior of Cornwall often appeared. The hills of rubbish from the china clay factories looked like pyramids – thick, broad-bottomed and sprawling across treeless plateaus – so that the effect was that of a lost city, as empty and geometric as any Aztec ruin. This was not far from the tiny village of Bugle.

The scars and eruptions – I supposed they were mines – showed clearly on the long low hills falling away from Roche. I heard someone referring to 'barrows', but didn't know whether he meant the china clay pyramids or the ancient burial mounds in the distance. The train passed under a number of small stone bridges. They were old and solid and symmetrical and looked both Chinese and ecclesiastical to me, but as I was thinking this

a man behind me named R. T. Justice began explaining to his friend Maurice that this was Victorian railway architecture. It still looked Chinese and ecclesiastical.

Most of the people on this train – about sixty of them – were on what they called a ‘whist holiday’, having travelled most of the day from Wolverhampton. I asked what a whist holiday was. It was three days of whist in a hotel at Newquay – just cards, in the lounge, while the Atlantic smashed against the coast. It was quite nice, really, they said. It made a change. They did it every year, taking advantage of the low-season prices. They were old and rather sweet and softly talkative.

Then there came a loud, deaf lady’s voice. It was one of the widows, Mrs Buttress. ‘You see, they’re Indian extracts!’ she said. ‘Yes, *extracts!* From Africa! But they’re very refined! And as far as their English is concerned they could be dark-coloured English people. They come from a very well-to-do family. And they’re so polite! They are very kind to me, always bringing me things – the loveliest shawl! Sometimes it’s food. Well, the food is interesting but you wouldn’t want to make a whole meal of it, would you? I never comment on the food, but their fabrics are really quite fine. Now their child is car-mad! Their first names are impossible, but their surname is easy. It’s Baden. An Indian name. But it’s easy to remember, because it’s like Baden-Powell!’

The train swung around the back of Newquay, which was so thickly piled against the coast it had displaced the cliffs with three miles of hotels and boarding-houses.

About a half-hour after arriving in Newquay I was sitting in a front room, a dog chewing my shoe, and having a cup of tea with Florence Puttock (‘I said leave that shoe alone!’), who was telling me about the operation on her knee. It was my mention of walking that brought up the subject of feet, legs, knees and her operation. And the television was on – there was a kind of disrespect these days in not turning it on for Falklands news. And Queenie, the other Peke, had a tummy upset. And Mrs Puttock’s cousin Bill hadn’t rung all day; he usually rang just after lunch. And Donald Puttock, who lisped and was sixty-one – he had taken early retirement because of his back – Donald was watching the moving arrows on the Falklands map, and

listening to Florence talking about ligaments, and he said, ‘I spent me ‘ole life in ‘ornchurch.’

Somehow, I was home.

But it was not my home. I had burrowed easily into this cosy privacy, and I could leave any time I wished. I had made the choice, for the alternatives in most seaside towns were either an hotel, or a guest house, or a bed-and-breakfast place. The latter alternative always tempted me, but I had to feel strong to do it right. A bed-and-breakfast place was a bungalow, usually on a suburban street some distance from the front and the promenade and the hotels. It was impossible to enter such a house and not feel you were interrupting a domestic routine – something about Florence’s sewing and Donald’s absurd slippers. The house always smelled of cooking and disinfectant, but most of all it smelled of in-laws.

It was like every other bungalow on the street, except for one thing. This one had a sign in the window, saying *Vacancies*. I had the impression that this was the only expense in starting such an establishment. You went over to Maynards and bought a *Vacancies* sign, and then it was simply a matter of airing out the spare bedroom. Soon, odd men would show up – knapsack, leather jacket, oily hiker’s shoes – and spend an evening listening to the householders’ stories of the cost of living, or the greatness of Bing Crosby, or a particularly painful operation. The English, the most obsessively secretive people in their day-to-day living, would admit you to the privacy of their homes, and sometimes even unburden themselves, for just five pounds. ‘I’ve got an awful lot on my plate at the moment,’ Mrs Spackle would say. ‘There’s Bert’s teeth, the Hoover’s packed up, and my Enid thinks she’s in the family way ...’ When it was late, and everyone else in bed, the woman you knew as Mrs Garlick would pour you a schooner of cream sherry, say ‘Call me Ida’, and begin to tell you about her amazing birthmark.

Bed and breakfast was always vaguely amateur, the woman of the house saying she did it because she liked to cook, and could use a little extra cash (‘money for jam’), and she liked company, and their children were all grown up and the house was rather empty and echoey. The whole enterprise of bed and breakfast was carried on by the woman, but done with a will, because she

was actually getting paid for doing her normal household chores. No special arrangements were required. At its best it was like a perfect marriage, at its worst it was like a night with terrible in-laws. Usually I was treated with a mixture of shyness and suspicion; but that was traditional English hospitality – wary curiosity and frugal kindness.

The English required guests to be uncomplaining, and most of the people who ran bed-and-breakfast places were intolerant of a guest's moaning, and they thought – with some justification – that they had in their lives suffered more than that guest. 'During the war,' they always began, and I knew I was about to lose the argument in the face of some evidence of terrible hardship. During the war, Donald Puttock was buzz-bombed by the Germans as he crouched under his small staircase in Hornchurch and, as he often said, he was lucky to be alive.

I told him I was travelling around the coast.

'Just what we did!' Mr Puttock said. He and Florence had driven from Kent to Cornwall in search of a good place to live. They had stopped in all the likely places. Newquay was the best. They would stay here until they died. If they moved at all (Florence wanted fewer bedrooms) it would be down the road.

'Course, the local people 'ere 'ate us,' Mr Puttock said, cheerfully.

'Donald got his nose bitten off the other day by a Cornishman,' Mrs Puttock said. 'Still hasn't got over it.'

'I don't give a monkey's,' Mr Puttock said.

Later, Mrs Puttock said that she had always wanted to do bed and breakfast. She wasn't like some of them, she said, who made their guests leave the house after breakfast and stay away all day – some of these people you saw in the bus shelter, they weren't waiting for the number fifteen, they were bed-and-breakfast people, killing time. It was bed and breakfast etiquette to stay quietly out of the house all day, even if it was raining.

Mrs Puttock gave me a card she had had printed. It listed the attractions of her house.

- TV Lounge
- Access to rooms at all times
- Interior-sprung mattresses
- Free parking space on premises

- Free shower available

- Separate tables

The lounge was the Puttocks' front room, the parking space was their drive, the shower was a shower, and the tables tables. This described their house, which was identical to every other bungalow in Newquay.

I was grateful for the bed-and-breakfast places. At ten-thirty, after the Falklands news (and now every night there was 'Falklands Special'), while we were all a bit dazed by the violence and the speculation and Mr Puttock was saying, 'The Falklands look like bloody Bodmin Moor, but I suppose we have to do something,' Mrs Puttock would say to me, 'Care for a hot drink?' When she was in the kitchen making Ovaltine, Mr Puttock and I were talking baloney about the state of the world. I was grateful, because to me this was virgin territory – a whole house open to my prying eyes: books, pictures, postcard messages, souvenirs and opinions. I especially relished looking at family photographs. 'That's us at the Fancy Dress Ball in Romford just after the war ... That's our cat, Monty ... That's me in a bathing costume ...' My intentions were honourable but my instincts were nose-y, and I went sniffing from bungalow to bungalow to discover how those people lived.

It was either that – the Puttocks in their bungalow – or the opposite – vast bare cliffs of windswept stone that were blasted by the Atlantic. I used to leave the bungalow and laugh out loud at the difference. The town of Newquay in its charmless way was bleaker than the cliffs. It was dreary buildings and no trees. But the visitors were decent folks, mainly old people who were rather overdressed for such an ordinary place. The men wore hats and ties and jackets and the women dresses and pearls. It looked like church-going garb, but they were off to buy the *Express* or the *Telegraph*, or to walk to the bandstand and back. They seldom strayed out of the town and were never on the cliffs.

In a month or so, Mr Puttock said, it would all be roaring with yobbos, fat youths with moustaches and oafish girls, drinking themselves silly and doing damage, or at least leaving a trail of vomit along the promenade. Mr Puttock intimated that

a population composed of the very old and the very young did not exactly make Newquay sparkle.

Dorothy, a half-Indian, half-English girl I met, said this was true. Newquay was slow, she said. Dorothy had spent the past two years sewing buttons on cardigans in a sweatshop in Leicester, so she certainly knew what slow meant. Otherwise, she was full of surprising answers.

Did she like her job at the Indian restaurant?

She said, 'I like the hours - six to midnight.'

What was her ambition in life?

'I'd like to own a factory.'

How had she prepared herself for factory-owning?

'I've got an O-Level in Needlework.'

What did she do for fun?

'Martial arts, you know? Tae-Kwon-Do. And I like making joompers.'

Most people agreed that Newquay was a hard place in which to make a living. The fish-and-chip shops would not open until June, and then it was a short season - two months or less. 'And the real problem with chip shops,' Mr Ramsay told me, 'is that you can't tell them apart. I can't tell the difference, and I run one! If they use fresh fish and fresh potatoes that's another story, but not many of them do.' Ramsay was on the dole. 'I'll re-open my shop in about a month.'

I was beginning to find the Puttocks a little trying. I had told them I was in publishing and they pestered me with dull questions about books. They regarded books as clumsy, pointless things, and Donald Puttock smiled in pity whenever he mentioned them. What was the use? he seemed to say. He had no objection to them, but what was the good of them? He was entirely ignorant; he had a few harmless opinions. Mrs Puttock had her dogs and her jigsaw puzzles. There was nothing more. Sometimes I imagined that they were terribly frightened.

One night after the news - an invasion of the Falklands was predicted - I asked Mr Puttock what he thought about the war.

He said, 'I don't know anything about it,' and left the room.

I wondered what his politics were, but when I asked him who his Member of Parliament was he said he did not know.

'We've been so busy for the past couple of years,' Mrs Puttock explained.

If they had secrets I never learned them, but in a superficial way they had made it possible for me to invade their privacy for a few days.

And then I was overcome with the in-law feeling of wanting to go - of stepping outside and never coming back. That morning I studied the weather forecast, because I would need fairly good weather for my walk along the cliffs to Padstow. The *Telegraph* said, 'Scattered clouds . . . occasional showers.' But there was a large weather item on the front page:

CLOUDS BEGIN TO THIN OUT

Clouds from Wednesday's intense cold front began to thin out over the Falklands yesterday. Overcast low and broken high clouds still covered the islands and adjacent waters, but the heaviest weather was in the east and north.

The deepening low pressure area was centred at the southern tip of South America.

Fairly good weather meant there would be an invasion of the Falklands by British troops. On the other hand, I had no definite idea of what the weather would be like for me on the coastal path to Padstow.

I slipped away from the Puttocks' bungalow, feeling as if I had been sprung from prison, and I hurried to the path. It was cloudy and slightly rainy, but the visibility was good and the path was firm. I could see the black headlands in the distance, Berry's Point, after the sweep of Watergate Bay, and Park Head, and in the smoky distance, the giant shadow of Trevoise Head.

I walked on. There was no greenery here. It had been torn away. There was only a thin meadow on top of the rock cliffs. The coast was high, hard and grey, and the rocks split and wrinkled, some of them cleft open. The coves were great jagged hollows of slooshing surf and waves - what noises came out of the caverns under those cliffs! But it was familiar thunder, for this coast was like the coast of Maine.

The paths were steep and narrow, and by the time I walked the five miles to Mawgan Porth I was ready to stop for a coffee.

There was a detachment of US Marines guarding – what? – probably an atomic bomb on the cliffs here at Mawgan, but I did not meet them. I met the Wheelers, Marian and Bob, who had just rolled out of bed and were having tea, ‘and I wouldn’t mind a bowl of flakes,’ Marian said. Her sparse hair was coppery with henna and she sucked smoke out of the cigarette she had pinched in her fingers.

‘I’m tired,’ Mr Wheeler said carefully, ‘because I ’ave just woke up. Heh.’

He looked at me and grinned to signal that he had intended a joke.

I asked them whether they had heard the news on the radio – that an attack on the Falklands was expected.

‘I never listen to the news,’ Mr Wheeler said. ‘Know why?’

No, I said, I didn’t know why.

‘Because there’s nothing you can do about it. Right, my dear?’

Mrs Wheeler agreed, and then she narrowed her eyes at me and said, ‘Course, you people ’ave been criticizing us.’

I said I had been under the impression that the United States had given material support to the British and, because of it, had alienated the whole of South America. I wanted to tell him about the Monroe Doctrine, but he was at me again.

‘We’re in this all alone,’ he said. ‘And the French are worse than the Americans.’

Mrs Wheeler said, ‘My father always said, “I’d rather have the Germans over here than the French.”’

I said, ‘Do you mean the German army?’

‘The German anything,’ Mrs Wheeler said. ‘It’s them French I ’ate.’

A car drew up to the hotel and a family tumbled out, yelling.

‘Too many tourists ’ere, that’s the trouble,’ Mr Wheeler said. ‘That’s why the Cornish are so unfriendly, like. They can’t stick the tourists.’

‘Course, that’s where all their money comes from,’ Mrs Wheeler said. ‘Kick out the tourists and they wouldn’t ’ave a penny.’

‘You’re walking, then?’ Mr Wheeler said, his teacup shaking at his mouth.

I said yes, along the cliffs.

‘How many miles you reckon on walking, then?’ he asked.

I said I averaged between fifteen and twenty a day.

‘We never walk,’ Mr Wheeler said, and made it sound like self-abuse.

‘We *have* walked,’ Mrs Wheeler said.

I said, ‘It’s not much fun in this weather.’

‘It’s been trying to rain all morning,’ Mrs Wheeler said.

I smiled. That was one of my favourite expressions.

‘We never minded the weather,’ Mr Wheeler said. ‘We walked fifteen or twenty miles – *in an evening*. In rain, snow, wind, anything – anything except fog. Never in fog. We couldn’t stick fog.’

‘And another thing about the Cornish,’ Mrs Wheeler said, suddenly bored by her husband, who was almost certainly lying about all the walking. ‘The Cornish mispronounce their words.’

This was wonderful. She mispronounced the word ‘mispronounce’!

I remembered the Wheelers again later that day, because they were the only people I had met on the path, and when I arrived in Padstow I heard the news that the Falklands had been invaded; a British frigate, the *Ardent*, had been sunk and twenty-two men drowned, and a bridgehead established at San Carlos, and hundreds of Argentines killed. I especially remembered the Wheelers’ bored silly faces and how little they cared.

The River Camel was black that afternoon. Instead of crossing it I went to Wadebridge. I decided to return to the main line and Exeter, and take the branch line to the North Devon coast. I set out the next day thinking: To be anonymous and travelling in an interesting place is an intoxication.