

The Landmark Trust

PEPPERCOMBE Castle Bungalow



History Album

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Re-presented in 2017

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BASIC DETAILS:

Part of Pine-Coffin estate since Middle Ages

Bridge Cottage built c. 1830

**Castle Bungalow erected as boat-house
at Portledge pre-1914**

Moved to Peppercombe 1926

Valley acquired by National Trust 1988

Cottages acquired by Landmark 1990

Architects: Caroe & Partners

Builders: C. Robinson (thatcher); C.J. Cox

Repairs completed 1990

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Bridge Cottage



Castle Bungalow

Peppercombe Valley – Summary

Peppercombe, part of an estate belonging to the Coffin (latterly Pine-Coffin) family of Portledge since c.1087, has changed little since the time of the Conquest. Here, a deep wooded combe, divided by a clear stream emerges on the seafront to flow down some of the most dramatic cliffs in Devon.

Court Rolls, and the Tithe Map of c.1840, show that Peppercombe once boasted quite a considerable population. Early maps show the main hamlet sited on its western edge, where there is still a Peppercombe Farm, but in the valley itself, smallholders' cottages were joined from the 18th-century at least by lime kilns and the huts of stonebreakers, who dragged pebbles from the beach for road mending. Soon after 1810 these were joined in turn by a castellated seaside villa, named Peppercombe Castle after the Iron Age camp on the headland above. This was built by William Tardrew, a lime and coal merchant from Bideford, who had established his business on the beach below in 1807.

By the end of the 19th century, the kilns had been pushed out of business by competitors at Bideford and Barnstaple. New farming methods made both marginal cliff and valley plots uneconomic and many carefully-tended fields gave way to scrub or woodland. Some buildings vanished altogether, their cob walls quickly melting once maintenance stopped. In the 20th century, only one smallholder carried on in the valley.

Meanwhile, the Tardrew family were replaced by about 1870 by other tenants, and later, a Pine-Coffin son chose to make it his home, but not for long. In 1909, subsidence of the cliff caused Peppercombe Castle to crack, and removal of the roof ensured swift decay. The lawns reverted to hay meadow and the gardens and stables became part of a smallholding.

The fate of Peppercombe Castle is mirrored, albeit less dramatically, by the decline of the Pine-Coffin estates as a whole. A tradition of military service had ensured a succession of inadvertently absentee landlords, and when the present owners, Colonel Trenchard John, and his wife Susan, inherited in the 1970s, they were faced with over fifty cottages in urgent need of repair. In 1988 it was decided that Peppercombe, together with five miles of coastline, from Abbotsham to Buck's Mills, could be best preserved by sale to the National Trust. To help raise the necessary funds, the Landmark Trust took on the leases of two of the buildings in the valley – Bridge Cottage and Castle Bungalow.

Bridge Cottage, situated in the woods at the top of the combe, was built around 1830 and is typical of the kind of vernacular building which must have always existed in Peppercombe. They were smallholders' and labourers' cottages built from rubble stone, cob (mud mixed with straw) and thatch. The central front door opens into the kitchen, beyond which is a smaller inner room which was heated, indicating this to have been a house of good quality. The large wash-house or laundry is further evidence that this was more than the most basic labourer's cottage.

The 1840 tithe map shows Bridge Cottage with a garden, a plot and a field. The Pine-Coffin estate leased it and by the turn of the 20th century it was the home of the Hockin family, who had nine children. One of their daughters, Mrs Packington later returned with her husband and they were the last full time inhabitants. They had no children but their nieces and nephews remembered how beautifully they kept the cottage and garden. Mrs Packington moved out of Bridge Cottage in the 1970s to live with her niece until her death aged 98.

Castle Bungalow was bought as a prefabricated building around 1900 by the Pine-Coffins for use as a boat-house at their main seat at Portledge in the next valley to the east. In 1926, they decided to move the boat-house up the coast road for £150 to the site of original Peppercombe Castle. There, they could enjoy the view and use the cottage as a summer pavilion. This is the present Castle Bungalow, which straddles the drive to the former house, looking out over the ruins and the memory of formal gardens and tennis courts

Restoration

Work started in 1989 to make Bridge Cottage weather-tight after it had lain empty since the 1970s. The roof frame was mostly rotten but as it also supported the bedroom's ceilings, it was decided to construct a new frame over the existing and then suspend the old, weakened timbers from it to carry the ceiling. A local roofing firm, C. Robinson re-thatched using water-reed.

In 1990, after undertaking minor structural repairs, the inside was made habitable again. Windows and doors were repaired, apart from where they were missing entirely – these were replaced. The stairs, partitions and upper floors were made good where necessary. Water-proof insulating membranes were laid beneath the kitchen floor and a new slate floor replaced the cement one in the parlour. A new bathroom was inserted in the lean-to.

Outside, the chimneys were repaired and the render was patched before the whole cottage was limewashed. Derelict outbuildings were made good, undergrowth cleared and a French drain was dug around the building to address the problem of severe damp.

The most substantial job at Castle Bungalow was the renewal of the painted iron roof. Galvanised corrugated iron was the only suitable replacement, now painted with bituminous paint to darken its colour. A lean-to housing a bathroom was demolished and a new bathroom installed where there had been a bedroom. Internal doors were stripped and re-grained, in the Victorian and Edwardian fashion. Outside, a new verandah was built encircling the bungalow. The exterior was repainted in cream and dark brown, similar to the original colours and which suit the surroundings. Visitors can now enjoy the scenery described in Henry Newbolt's *Ode to Devon*:

Deep wooded combes, clear mounded hills of morn,
Red sunset tides against a red sea wall,
High lonely barrows where the curlews call.

Bridge Cottage

Bridge Cottage, although itself dating only from the 1820s or '30s, is typical of the kind of building which must always have existed in Peppercombe:

smallholders' and labourers' cottages, built of the most locally available materials, developing over the centuries from humble single-storeyed dwellings into decent two-storeyed cottages such as we have here. The materials most readily to hand were rubble stone, cob (mud mixed with straw) and thatch, and it is of these that Bridge Cottage is built, with brick for the chimneys, made as tall as possible to provide a draft in this sheltered place.

Inside, the floorboards of the upper floor form the ceiling of the lower, left visible from below in a building tradition surviving from the Middle Ages. There is evidence in the wall heads that at some stage these had been heightened to provide better headroom upstairs, but otherwise the cottage is little altered. The ground floor is arranged in the universal manner, found in cottages throughout the country, with regional variations.

The central front door opens into the kitchen, which is the larger of two downstairs rooms. The end wall is occupied by the large fireplace, on which, before a range was fitted, most of the cooking would have been done over the open fire, in a series of specially-designed pots, either self-supporting, with legs, or able to stand on a trivet; to the left is the bread oven, and on the other side is the corner recess in which the fuel, usually brushwood or furze, would once have been piled.

The inner room is also heated, and there is no sign that the chimney is an addition. It must always have been a parlour, therefore, showing this to have been a house of good quality. Often the inner room of a cottage was a storeroom, or a bedroom, unheated like the rooms upstairs. On the other hand, the parlour here was not the precious, seldom-visited sanctum that is described



Bridge Cottage in 1989

by some writers on rural life in the last century. The stairs lead out of it, and off it were the back-kitchen, or larder, and the wash-house, which would more normally open out of the kitchen itself.

Further evidence that this was more than the simplest labourer's cottage is shown by the large wash-house or laundry, with capacity to absorb more than a single family's clothing. One 19th-century wife must have taken in washing to add to the family income.

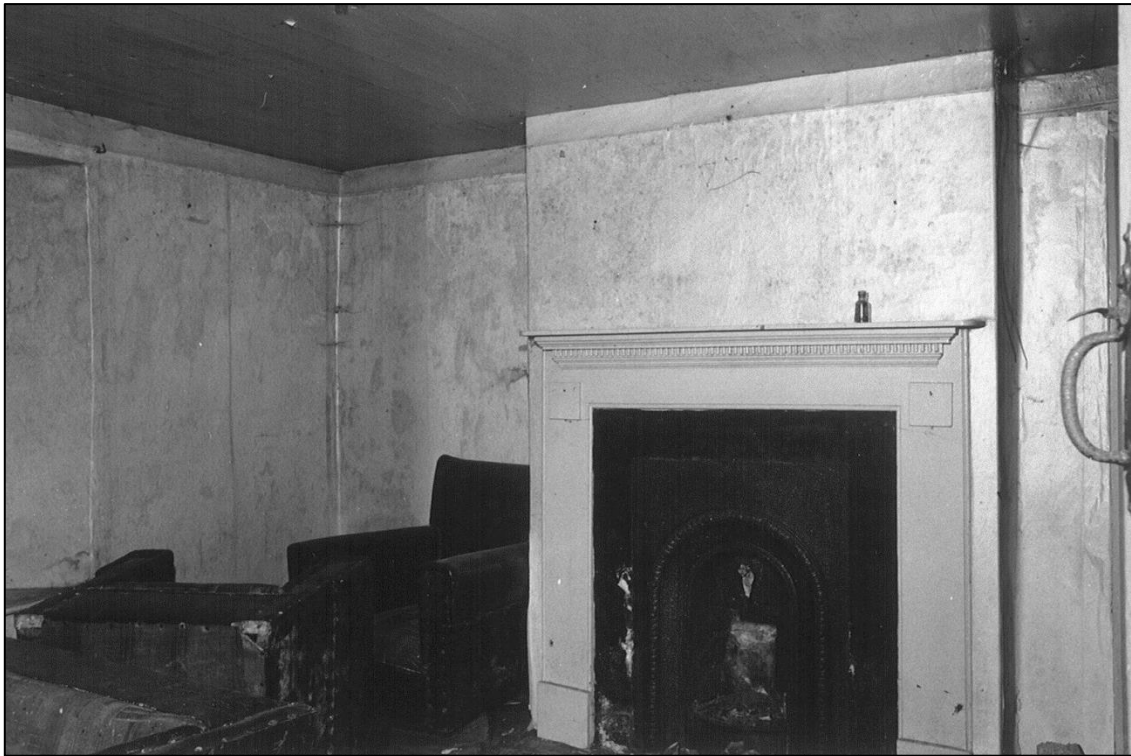
The house shows on the tithe map of 1840 with a garden, a plot, and a field. It stands on the edge of land belonging to Gilscott, the farm to the east of the valley, but was leased separately by the Pine-Coffin estate to Mary Glover. Probably, like many West Country properties, the lease was dependant on three named lives, of which Mary Glover was perhaps the second after her husband, or her father or father-in-law. The lease could have been for the land only, in which case the tenant was responsible for building and then maintaining their own house. As a result, this and the many cottages like it are vernacular buildings, belonging to a local building culture, rather than conforming to an improving landlord's or agent's idea of an estate cottage.

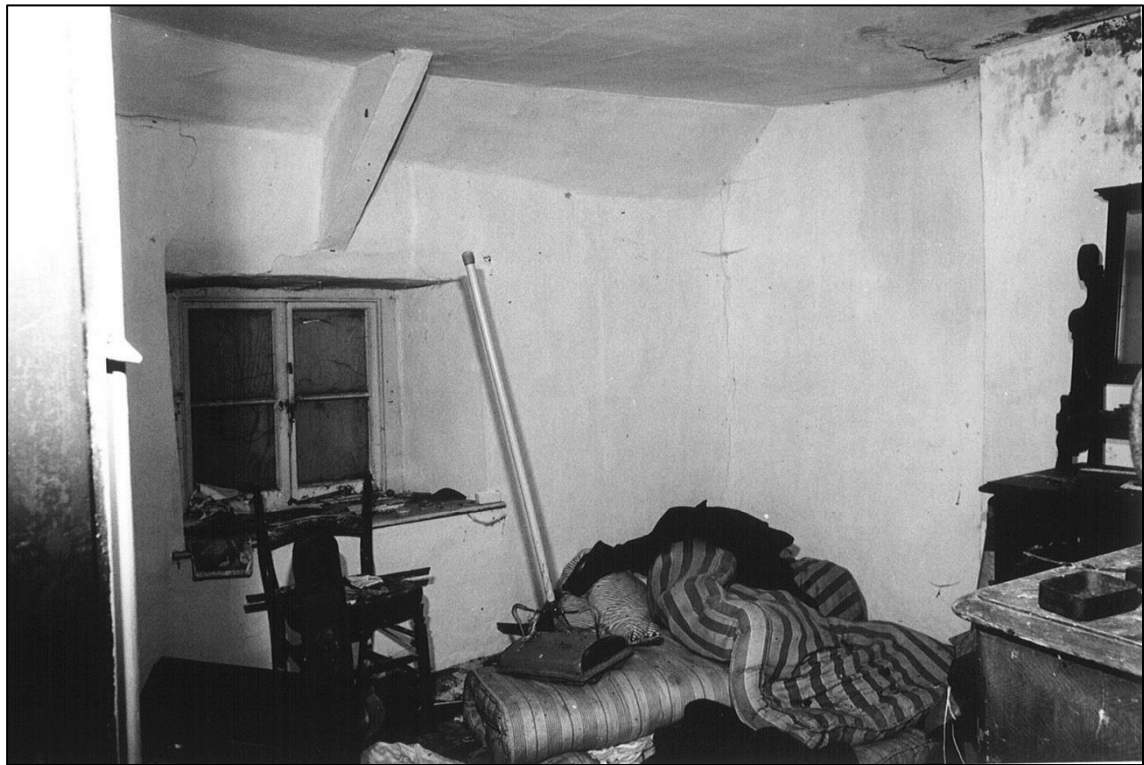
At the turn of the century, Bridge Cottage was the home of the Hockin family, who had nine children. One of their daughters married Mr Smales, who lived on the other side of the valley, and farmed the site of the Castle for about fifty years, from 1918. Another daughter, Mrs Packington, later came back with her husband to live in Bridge Cottage for many years, the last person to do so. Stephen Smales, who owns the garage in Horns Cross, and his sister, Mrs Eileen Tucker, remember frequent visits to their aunt and uncle, who had no children of their own and therefore made much of their Smales nephews and nieces. The cottage and its garden were beautifully kept, although of course there was no electricity and minimal plumbing. Mrs Packington finally moved out of the cottage in the 1970s, to live with her niece until her death in her 99th year.



Bridge Cottage before restoration

Bridge Cottage before restoration





Repair of Bridge Cottage

The thatch of Bridge Cottage had not been renewed for several decades, for the last two of which it had been covered with a tarpaulin. After the house fell empty in the 1970s, decay had quickly followed, with the windows broken and the weather getting in.

When the Landmark Trust agreed to take on the building, the first priority was to make it weather proof, and at the same time vandal proof. This work was put underway early in 1989. The roof was stripped of its old thatch. The frame underneath was found to be largely rotten, and to support the new thatch would have to be renewed. However, the old frame also supported the bedroom ceilings, and these we wished to preserve. The architect's solution was to construct a new frame over the existing one, and then suspend the old, weakened timbers from it, to carry the ceilings.

The wall heads had, of course, to be repaired at the same time. This was done in a mixture of rubble stone set in lime mortar, built up on the existing cob, or mud, walls. The new thatch is water-reed, and the roof is finished with a plain ridge, as is the Devon tradition. The work was done by a local roofing and thatching firm, C. Robinson.

To finish off this part of the work, the house was securely boarded up. Other commitments did not allow the next phase to begin until the following year. This was undertaken by another local, but slightly larger, general building firm, C.J. Cox. In addition to minor structural repairs, the work consisted in giving the cottage a general overhaul, to make it habitable again.



Renewing the thatch

The windows and doors, the external render and the internal plaster, were all in poor condition. One alternative, and probably the cheaper one, would have been to strip out all the existing finishes and completely renew them, copying the original work. The danger of this approach is that not only do you lose the texture and feel of old materials, but that in addition, however carefully and sensitively the new work is carried out, nothing can stop it being the work of late 20th-century craftsmen, rather than early-19th; and nothing, therefore, can stop the building from becoming a 20th-century creation in the eyes of future generations, even if not of our own.

The other alternative is to keep as much as possible of the original work, and to carefully repair it. The repairs will be obvious, but the reason for them will also be obvious, and will be part of a continuous process in the life of that building, rather than an interruption. This was the approach that Landmark adopted. All the doors and windows were repaired, apart from one upstairs window on the north side, which was entirely missing; and the outside door in the lean-to, which was beyond repair. Inside, the stairs, partitions and upper floors were similarly made good where necessary. The slate floor in the kitchen was lifted to put an insulating membrane beneath it, and in the parlour, a cement floor was replaced with a similar membrane and a new slate floor. The plaster on the walls was patched, and then limewashed.

The kitchen range was retained, and reblacked, and entirely new kitchen fittings provided. A new bathroom was inserted in the lean-to. The previous facilities for washing consisted of one tap and a bowl in a small porch on the front of the cottage, which we removed. Providing an adequate new water supply was a major undertaking, requiring the sinking of a new well.

On the outside of the building, the taller chimney had to be rebuilt entirely, as did the top of the shorter one. The chimneys pots were not replaced. The render was

patched with new lime render, before the whole cottage was limewashed, in a colour to match that found on the old render.

The outbuildings were also derelict. The lean-to on the end of the cottage was coming away from the gable and had to be stitched back to it. The rag-slated roof was stripped and repaired and the slates refixed, with second-hand ones to make up the gaps. In this type of roofing, which is common in Cornwall and West Devon, larger slates are nailed directly onto the rafters, rather than onto battens laid across them - presumably in an attempt to economise on timber. The wash-house, on the other hand, has an ordinary slate roof, of Cornish slate (Countesses, in traditional slate size-names), which also needed repair. After renewing the structure, as many as possible of the old slates were relaid, with second-hand ones to make up. On the ridge, there were some special ventilating tiles, and two of these were retained. The chimney was rebuilt, the walls repointed and the window repaired.

When the undergrowth around the building was being cleared, the privy was discovered underneath a large pile of brambles. This was given a new slate roof, but it was decided that the door was adequate for its purpose. The kennel beside it was made to house the pump for the new sewage treatment plant.

One of the reasons for the cottage being left empty had been the severe damp. To help cure this, the ground was dug away from the upper end and a new retaining wall built of beach pebbles. Then a French drain was dug right round the building. When the earth was scraped away, the stone path was found beneath it, so this was lifted and then laid back over the drain, and then extended to reach round to the wash-house.

With its orchard and small garden, Bridge Cottage provides an area of cleared space and domesticity in the now thickly wooded coombe, a reminder of ordinary life lived in remote places over many centuries.

Castle Bungalow and Peppercombe Castle

Castle Bungalow reflects a more recent strand in Peppercombe's history. Since the early 19th century, there has been a growing appreciation of it as a place to be valued for the beauty of its scenery. To begin with, this went hand in hand with more obviously productive uses, but as these died out for one reason or another, it became the predominant one, and remains so today.

The first example of this new attitude occurred around 1810-20, when William Tardrew, whose business operations were carried on in the lime kilns on the beach below, chose also to make Peppercombe his home. He took advantage of the open ground at the valley mouth to build what seems to have been a substantial house, enjoying a fine view of Bideford Bay. It does not appear on the first one-inch Ordnance Survey Map of 1809, but is clearly shown, as Dwelling House and Court, with gardens and lawns, on the Tithe Map of 1840.

A surviving photograph shows this to have been a sprawling stuccoed 'castle', complete with seafront verandah and flagpole. Its ruin confirms the impression of a Picturesque residence vaguely in the style of Nash, perhaps more at home on the South coast of Devon than the North.

The Tardrew family's lease was renewed for the last time in the 1860s. There is no record in the estate papers of the Pine-Coffins taking over the Castle and re-letting it, but according to the Smales there were other tenants. For the last part of its short history, it was the home of Major John Edward Pine-Coffin. He is given as the occupant in Land Tax returns in 1909, but it is not certain for how many years he had been living there before that.

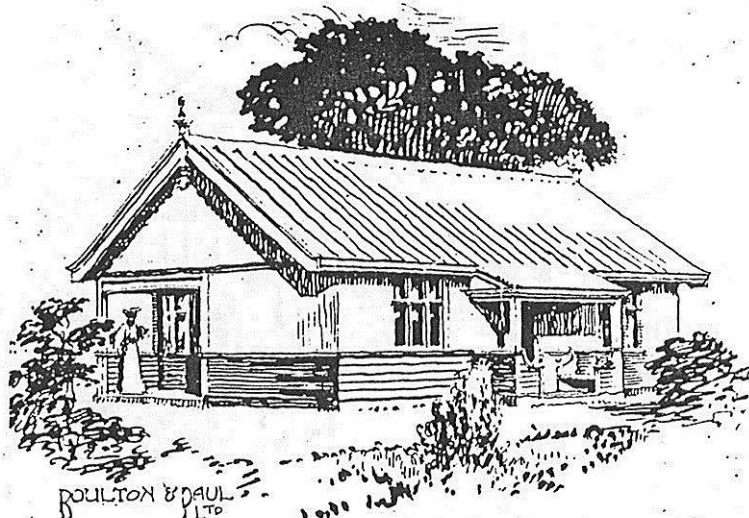


The nineteenth century Castle at Peppercombe

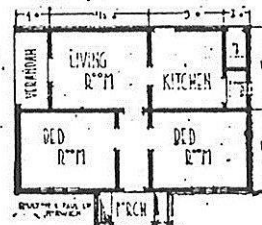
As a serving army officer, Major Pine-Coffin would not have been much at home, for which reason the estate had been left outright to his mother, Matilda Pine-Coffin, on his father's early death in 1890. He was married in 1894 and presumably at some point thereafter retired from the army and came home. However, Portledge itself was let, and his mother lived at the dower house of Kenwith Castle, so Peppercombe would have seemed a handy solution to the problem of where he was to set up his own household.

A few local people remembered the house in its heyday; Sunday school teas were held in the large kitchen, and children played games on the lawn afterwards. The Smales' grandfather was coachman at Peppercombe, and they remembered from their own childhood the remains of formal gardens, and the tennis courts with their changing hut halfway down the cliff path. These, together with the trout pond and rabbit warren, and remains of the house itself, have now disappeared beneath the undergrowth, following the Castle's abandonment.

Unfortunately the site was not a safe one, as was revealed when part of the cliff subsided in 1909. The Pine-Coffins had already threatened the local council with court action in 1895 for undermining the cliffs at Portledge when removing gravel from the beach below. Peppercombe, too, was a popular source of road gravel, and this may have contributed to the landslip which rendered Peppercombe Castle uninhabitable. The house developed dangerous cracks, and soon afterwards the Pine-Coffins decided to cut their losses by salvaging what they could of the wood and ironwork. Traces of the Castle can thus be found in many houses on the estate: windows were reused in the workshop at Fairy Cross, and part of the porch can be seen on one of the cottages in Peppercombe.



Bungalow No. B48.

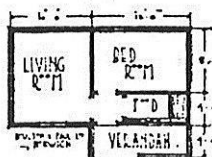
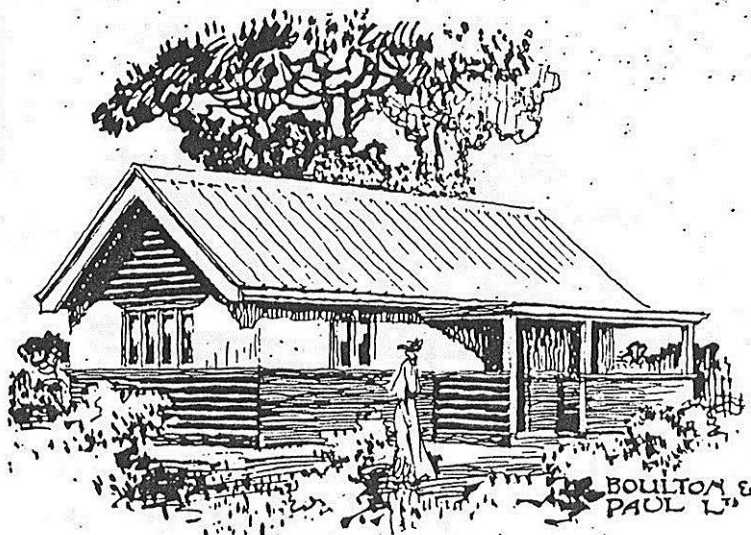


CASH PRICES (Approximate)

Erected by our men, customer providing brick foundations and chimneys	£490
Erected by our men on and including brick foundations and chimneys	570
Independent Range and Open Fire Stove	extra 21

We shall be pleased to give Special Estimates for Lighting, Plumbing, Drainage, Water Supply, Fencing, Gates, and Garden Furniture, etc., complete.

Bungalow No. B49.



CASH PRICES (Approximate)

Erected by our men, customer providing brick foundations and chimneys	£230
Erected by our men on and including brick foundations and chimneys	280
Independent Range	extra 11

CARRIAGE PAID to nearest Goods Station and erected by our men.

Boulton & Paul Ltd.
NORWICH

In 1926, however, the Pine-Coffins decided that the view from Peppercombe, and the plentiful prawns to be caught on the beach, should not be wasted. They engaged John Walters, who lived at Horns Cross, together with his father and two other estate workmen to move the existing prefabricated boat-house from the lake at Portledge to the Peppercombe drive, for £150. As Mr Walters remembered, this was no easy task. The coast road was in bad repair, and a cart track had to be specially levelled between Portledge and Peppercombe. Then, with the help of a horse, the boat-house was dragged in sections along the coast to the new site, where, perhaps with irony, it was re-christened Castle Bungalow. Luckily re-assembly was easy.

Prefabricated housing

The boat-house had come in the first place from Boulton and Paul of Norwich, when the Pine-Coffins ordered it from their catalogue around 1900. The company began in 1797 making agricultural equipment and then all manner of 'portable structures' of timber and galvanised corrugated iron. Then in 1869, the company was reborn as Boulton & Paul under the management of W.S. Boulton and John Dawson Paul (who had joined as an apprentice 16 years earlier). They were one of the first manufacturers of prefabricated 'Residences, Bungalows and Cottages', which they sent not only to the seaside coasts of Britain, but to destinations all over the British Empire ('carriage paid to the nearest Goods Station') and even to South America. Their 1888 catalogue ('No. 43, Revised Edition, All Previous Catalogues Withdrawn') included everything from cattle sheds, poultry houses and kennels, to a school room, billiard room, parochial hall, suburban residence, even a hospital.

A five-roomed cottage could be bought for £180, 'Carriage paid to the nearest Railway Station. Erected by our men on purchaser's light brickwork foundation, he providing assistant labour.' Interiors were lined with lined matchboarding,

outside woodwork had three coats of paint.¹ The 1888 catalogue described prefabricated bungalows as 'Cool in Summer, Warm in Winter. No Possibility of Damp. Can be inhabited the moment they are finished.'²

Castle Bungalow is not in the surviving catalogue but the Pine-Coffins had chosen something similar in scale and materials to B48, one of the more modest designs on offer. For £570 the customer got a weather-boarded and timber-lined two bedroom bungalow, with brick foundations and chimneys included. The Peppercombe version has a few slightly grander touches, which make it closer in appearance to the more luxurious B34, Seaside Bungalow, with 'wood walls and Italian pattern iron roof.'

The company still has a copy of its 1920 catalogue, containing a choice of twenty-two designs. Several varieties of bungalow are illustrated, ranging from the Modern Residential, through the Week-End and the Seaside to the plain and ordinary (with verandah).

The Bungalow was used by the family for picnics, and Colonel Pine-Coffin's father kept his prawn nets there. More recently, it was altered lightly and let as a holiday cottage. It passed to Landmark after the National Trust's acquisition of Peppercombe in 1988.

Boulton & Paul supplied the huts for Scott's ill-fated Antarctic expedition in 1910. When the First World War broke out, they were asked to add military aviation to their production line and were soon producing 28 Sopwith Camels a week. The company produced the R101 airship for assembly in the huge Cardington hangars in Bedfordshire in the 1920s, until the disaster of its maiden voyage in 1930 put an end to airship production (Boulton & Paul were formally cleared of any blame for the accident). When the Second World War came, their less than glamorous

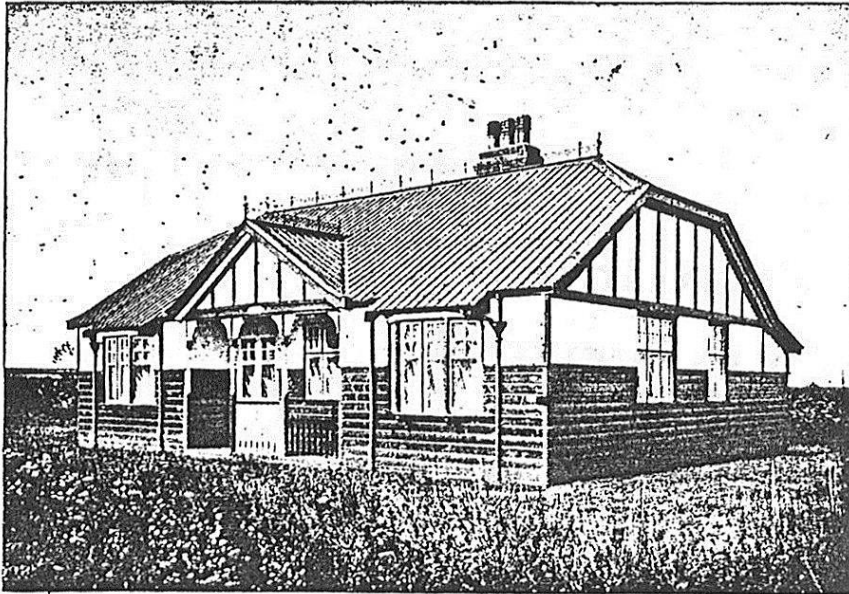
¹ <https://archive.org/details/BoultonPaulManufacturersRoseLaneWorksNorwichcatalogueNo.43> p. 167.

² <https://archive.org/details/BoultonPaulManufacturersRoseLaneWorksNorwichcatalogueNo.43> p. 169.

job of supplying Nissan huts and other prefabs to the armed forces, made Norwich a target for German bombing raids.

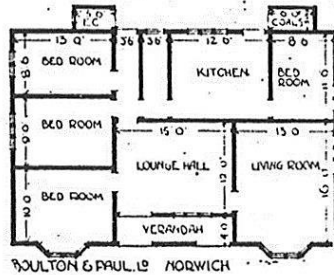
The demand for Boulton & Paul's prefabs continued after the war when inexpensive housing stock was needed to replace bomb damaged homes destroyed during the Blitz. However, by the late 1960s, tastes had changed with improved living standards and the company began its decline.

Sadly, Boulton & Paul went out of business around the time Landmark became involved at Peppercombe. At their peak, they had 3,000 employees in Norwich.



No. B34: Seaside Bungalow

BRICKWORK foundation and chimney, wood walls, and Italian pattern iron roof.



CASH PRICES (Approximate)

Erected by our men, customer providing brick foundations and chimneys	£950
Erected by our men on and including brick foundations and chimneys	1150

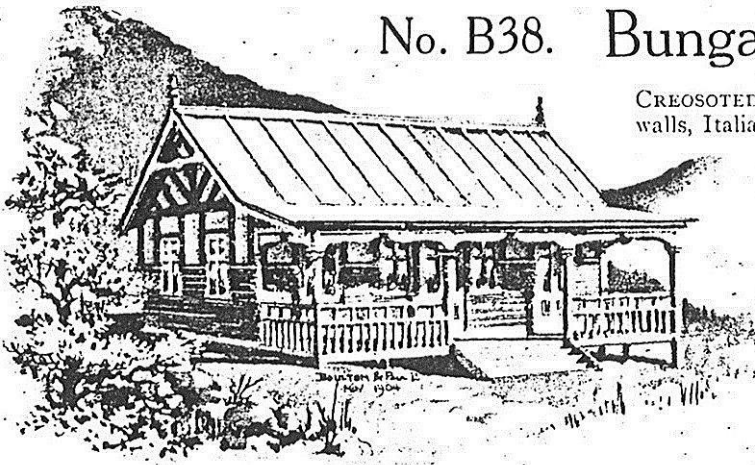
FULL SPECIFICATION ON APPLICATION.

CARRIAGE PAID to nearest Goods Station and erected by our men.

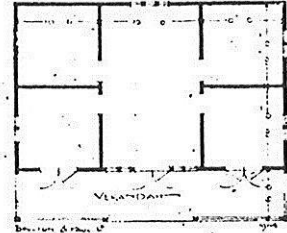
We shall be pleased to give Special Estimates for Lighting, Plumbing, Drainage, Water Supply, Fencing, Gates, and Garden Furniture, etc., complete.

Boulton & Paul Ltd
NORWICH

No. B38. Bungalow



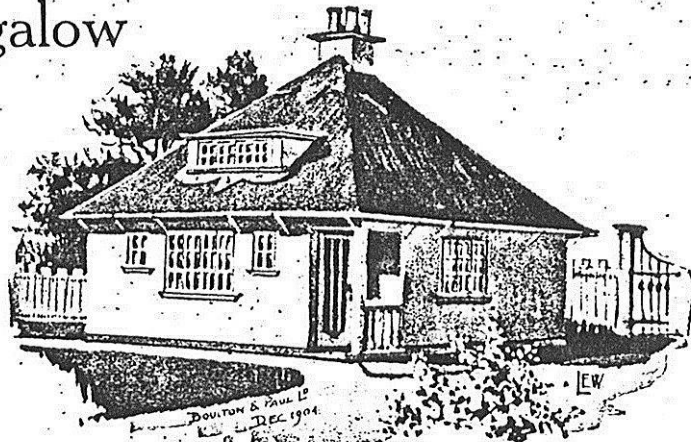
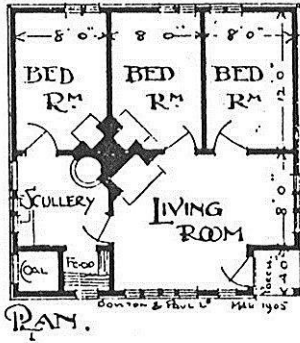
CREOSOTED sleeper foundation, wood walls, Italian pattern iron roof.



CASH PRICES (Approximate)

Erected by our men, customer providing brick foundations and chimneys - £650
 Erected by our men on and including brick foundations and chimneys - 730

No. B39. Bungalow



BRICK foundation and chimneys, iron walls, and asbestos cement slate roof.

CASH PRICES (Approximate)

Erected by our men, customer providing brick foundations and chimneys - £475
 Erected by our men on and including brick foundations and chimneys - 575

CARRIAGE PAID to nearest Goods Station, and erected by our men.

We shall be pleased to give Special Estimates for Lighting, Plumbing, Drainage, Water Supply, Fencing, Gates, and Garden Furniture, etc., complete.

Boulton & Paul Ltd.
 NORWICH



Castle Bungalow in 1989, before restoration



Repair of Castle Bungalow

The work at Castle Bungalow, as with Bridge Cottage, consisted mainly of repair and redecoration of a straightforward kind. The most substantial job was the renewal of the painted iron roof, which was too full of holes to save. We had hoped to find the same variety of ridged iron to replace it, but this does not exist any more, so ordinary galvanised corrugated iron had to be used instead, with bituminous paint to darken its colour.

Some years ago, a bathroom and loo had been added in a lean-to at the back of the bungalow. We wanted to fit all the accommodation inside the original walls again, even though this would mean the loss of one bedroom to provide a new kitchen. When the lean-to had gone, the frame and cladding had to be replaced where it had been cut out, and the paving made up. Frame and cladding also needed renewing on the dormer over the sitting room doors, as did the leaded lights of the windows on this side which, because they face west, had suffered more than the others from the weather.

Inside, a new doorway had been made between the larger bedroom and the sitting room. This was blocked up again, and a new stove installed on an existing stone let into the floor, presumably for the original stove. The doors themselves were stripped down and then re-grained, as they had been in the beginning, in the universal Victorian and Edwardian fashion. The cracks in the floorboards were caulked like the deck of a ship, to keep out some drafts.

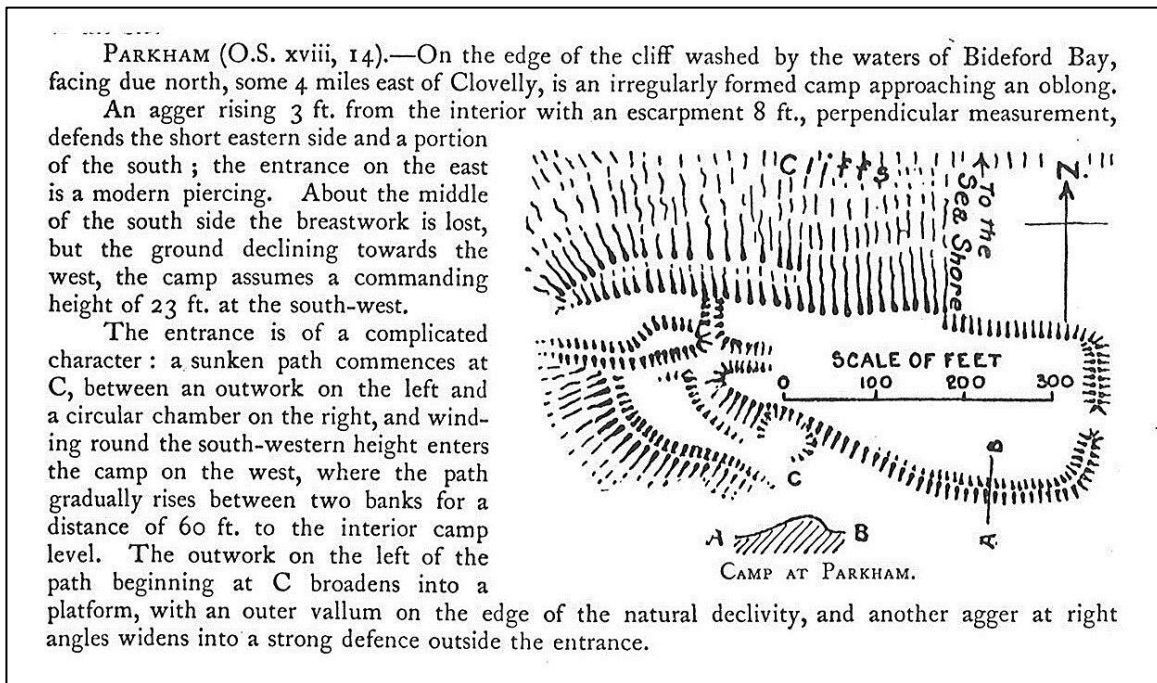
To separate the bungalow from the surrounding field, and at the same time dispense with the wire fence that had encircled it, a new verandah was built - and now looks as though it was always there. The line of the drive was altered slightly, to bring it to the back of the building rather than the front, and keep cars out of sight.



Before restoration



Finally, the whole bungalow was repainted in a more sober variant of the former colours, which seemed better suited to its surroundings. Besides, the architect and the Landmark's Architectural Adviser, both serious students of railway design, had spotted that the existing white and rust belonged properly to the carriages of the old Midland Railway. In cream and dark brown, Castle Bungalow is now safely restored to membership of the Great Western.



Description of the Iron Age Peppercombe Castle from the Victoria County History's Inventory of Ancient Earthworks

Living and Working in the Valley

The Valley of the Pippa

Peppercombe's stream, the Pippa, runs like many Devon streams through what J.I.W. Page described in 1895 as 'a dell sloping to the shingle with a cluster of thatched cottages sheltering beneath the western hill.' The wooded valley however gives way at the shore to dramatic red cliffs, rising in great curves from the grey beach.

These rocks, according to S. Burton writing in 1953, 'make the secluded little valley one of the sights of the coast - red, chocolate brown and a rich yellow.' Peppercombe is one of the few places where coloured carboniferous rock survives as an 'outlier', creating a vivid contrast to the harder wearing Triassic rocks of surrounding cliffs.

Iron Age man obviously found the site exciting too; the jutting promontory above the present Castle Bungalow is a complicated hill fort, described in detail in the Victoria County History.

The Peppercombe cliffs have an interesting local history as Giffard's Jump. Polwhele's *History of Devon* (1773-1806) gives an early version of the story:

The cliffs adjoining the sea are remarkable, high craggy and romantic. The highest bears the marks of, and is supposed to have been, an ancient fortress. It still retains the name of Peppercombe Castle, and is noted for a remarkable accident which happened there about half a century ago, which is this: Some of the ancient family of Giffard and others on a party of pleasure, having seated themselves on the top of this cliff, which commands an extensive view of the sea, one of the Giffards (a young man) sitting carelessly near the brink, & turning himself about hastily, fell backward over the precipice, upwards of 130 feet perpendicular, and the floor at the bottom covered with craggy rocks and large stones, yet received no manner of hurt. Since which this place has born the name of Giffard's Jump.

Maps show Giffard's Jump as the headland just to the east of the valley, rather than Peppercombe Castle, but the story survives today, at least three different versions being told in Horns Cross and Peppercombe alone. One has it that the unfortunate Giffard fell over three times, breaking his watch, his leg, and finally his neck. Interestingly a Coffin daughter married a Giffard (whose manor house, Halsbury Barton, survives in Parkham) in the mid-1600s. Perhaps the tale was connected with a wedding feast?

Working on the Land

Peppercombe falls within the two parishes of Alwington and Parkham, with the stream as their boundary. It has always been a predominantly agricultural community. George Jacobs, who grew up in Parkham at the end of the last century, paints a vivid picture of local life in a short pamphlet. Apart from the carpenter, blacksmith, baker and butcher, almost everyone in the parish worked on the land or in domestic service, either on a farm or for one of the five main landowners in the area: the Pine-Coffins, the Rolles (of Stevenstone), the Elweses, the Kekewicks or the Rogers of Orleigh Court.

Most of these estates broke up in the years following the First World War, the land passing to individual farmers or outside investors. Smaller tenants had to take their chance. The Portledge estate, in fact, has been an unusual survival, allowing the Pine-Coffin tenants in Peppercombe to enjoy an unbroken continuity of landlord until the 1980s.

Leases surviving from the 16th century onwards show that smallholdings at Peppercombe were largely granted for the space of three named lives, a form common to the West Country. The tenant paid an annual rent and had a duty to keep his fences and buildings in a decent state of repair. In addition, he was only allowed a fixed number of animals on his land. In 1648, for example, three tenants recorded at Peppercombe were allowed to have one horse, two young bullocks, 18 sheep 'and not more for each tenement.'

Farmers or labourers who broke the terms of their agreement came up before the manorial court, and rolls dating back to 1531 record the dirty deeds of many local families. In the early 17th century a spate of hedge breaking and diverting of neighbour's watering places produced a new division of land;

It is ordered and agreed that all the tenants of Pipcombe that whosoever shall break the street between them newly agreed concerning the occupation of Pipcombe cliff shall forfeit for every time that he shall break the same, 3s 4d to the use of him or their inhabitants there that shall sustain any damage or loss thereby.

By this century, changes in farming practice meant that self-supporting smallholders were almost a thing of the past in Peppercombe. Only the Smales family continued, keeping a few red Devons, taking a crop of hay each year off the meadows at the mouth of the valley, and growing vegetables and flowers in the former Castle garden.

Life wasn't all work however; George Jacobs remembers the weekly trips to Bideford Market, the Parkham Club nights, and the excellent prawning to be had on Peppercombe Beach. More exciting was the annual Band of Hope Outing, when villagers piled into coaches and went down the coast to new resorts like Westward Ho!.

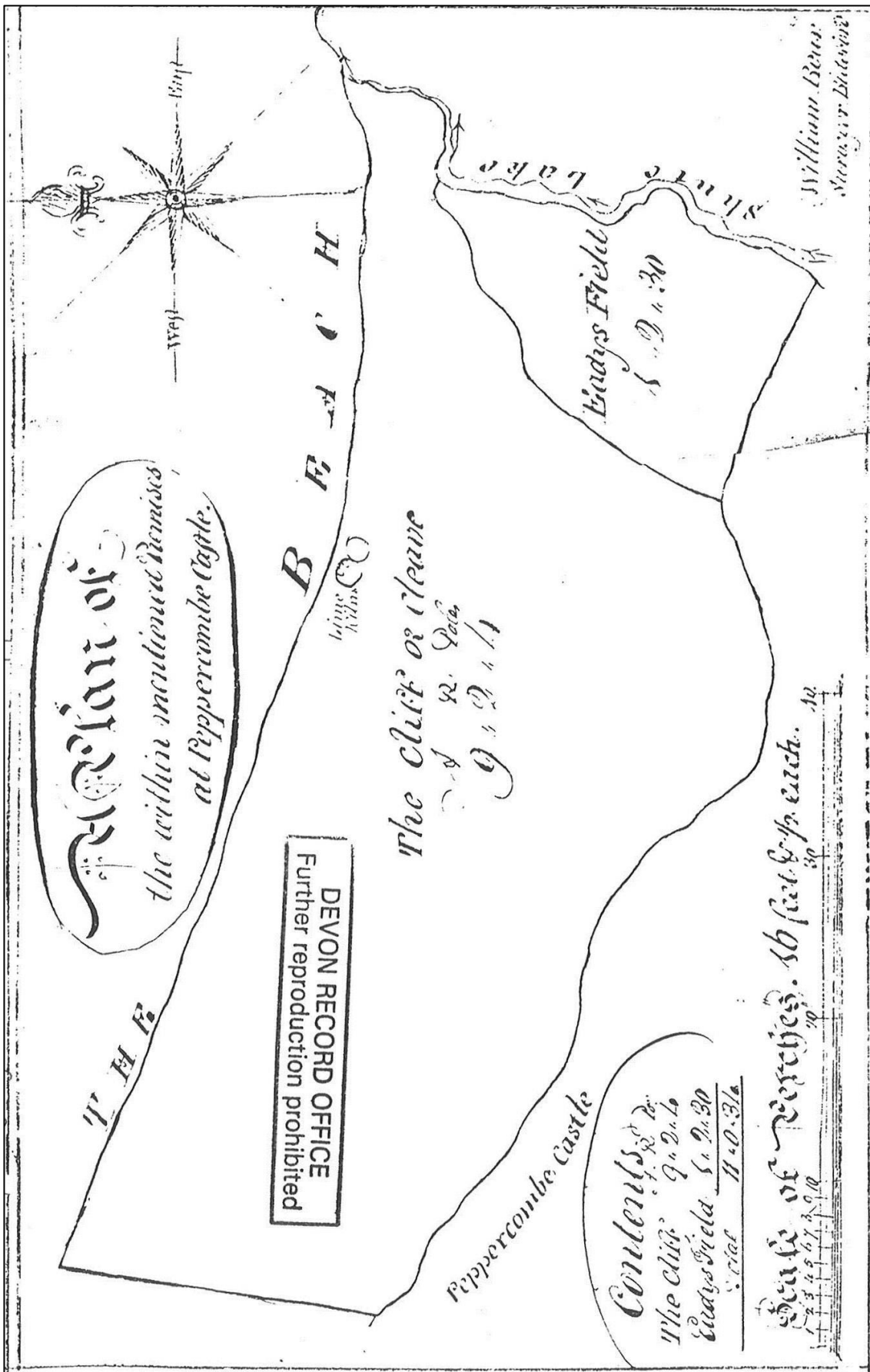
Working on the Coast

The sea has always played an important part in the life of the valley. Several tenants kept boats at Peppercombe, and George Jacobs and others remember the Coast Guard station which used to be at the foot of the cliffs. Wreckage also provided a handy windfall for scavengers over the centuries; at Portledge you can see woodcarving claimed to have been washed up from the Armada. Most booty was more prosaic however. In 1562, for example, 361 ells of iron were found at Peppercombe, and the value divided between the finder and the Pine-Coffin of the day.

Polwhele's *History of Devon* in the late 18th century, records two other industries which made their home at Peppercombe until this century: lime burning and stone breaking:

the principal manure used in this parish is WELSH LIME (the lime being brought over and burnt at Bideford) and SEA SAND, which is taken up at ebb tide by persons who earn their living by it, and laid up in large heaps at the foot of the cliff, where the farmers take it away with their teams, paying so much per 100 horse loads, for the labour of landing, as it is called.

The trade in sea sand, later used of course for roads, has left no trace, but ruins of the old lime kilns can still be seen on the Peppercombe cliffs. Until the invention of artificial fertilisers early this century, lime was used by almost every farmer to reduce the acidity of the soil. The Bideford area was a popular one for kilns, with nine between Bideford and Appledore alone. Those at Buck's Mills, just to the west of Peppercombe, have been restored. Limestone was brought across the Bristol Channel from South Wales, with the coal to burn it, in boats that could be beached for unloading. Having been burnt, the powdered lime would then be taken inland in carts.



Plan accompanying the lease of land at Peppercombe in 1807 to William Tardrew

The Pine-Coffins must have realised the advantages of having lime kilns on their doorstep, because in 1807 they leased Peppercombe beach and land at the top of the cliff to William Tardrew, a Bideford merchant. In return for the first choice of lime and an annual rent, Tardrew was allowed to build kilns and warehouses, a new cliff path, and landing and unloading facilities for the boats.

The original lease stipulates the premises as:

Wasteground _ between headland called Peppercombe Castle and stream called Shute Lake, with liberty and access to erect lime kilns etc, and use of beach beneath the waste ground for importing and exporting materials.
Eady's Field, a foot, horse and cart way to be made and maintained by Tardrew between the premises and the turnpike from Hartland to Bideford.

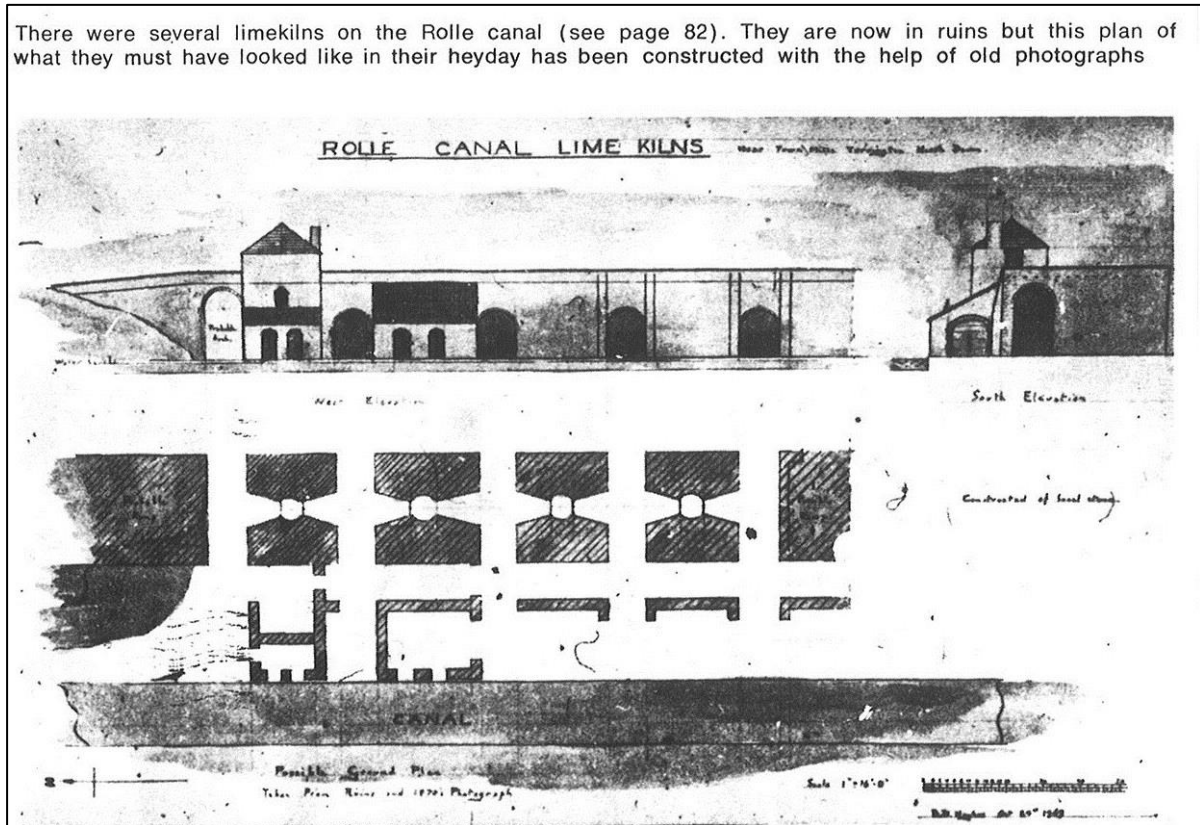
It is uncertain when the kilns finally stopped working, but they were still going in the hands of Tardrew's heirs until at least 1866.

Lime Kilns



The Yeo Vale limekiln on the river Torridge south-west of Bideford, with its castellated top and gothic arches is a particularly fine example.

There were several limekilns on the Rolle canal (see page 82). They are now in ruins but this plan of what they must have looked like in their heyday has been constructed with the help of old photographs



Peppercombe and the Pine-Coffin family

No history of Peppercombe could be complete without a description of the family who owned the valley for nearly 800 years. Their drawing-room-comedy name was the product of an 18th-century marriage between Dorothy Coffyn and Edward Pyne of East Down, whose grandson became heir to the Coffin estates and adopted both names in 1797. Although the Pines had been at East Down since the reign of Edward III, their house and land were small compared to the ancient Coffin holdings. According to family tradition, the first Coffin came to England with the Conqueror in 1066; 'Coffeyn' meant 'guardian of the boundary' in Norman French, and members of the family were placed at strategic points around the West Country.

Portledge, in the parish of Alwington, became the centre of an estate which reached from Abbotsham in the East to Buck's Mills in the West. Deeds recording a boundary dispute with the Abbot of Tavistock confirm a certain Richard Coffin as Lord of the Manors of Alwington and Cochementon as early as 1087. Succeeding generations of Coffins and Pine-Coffins expanded their lands by marriages with local landowning families, and buried their dead in Alwington church. Centuries of careful husbandry and a record of service to Devon in Parliament and the courts help explain why Pine-Coffins can still be found today at Portledge. While other landowners sold up and moved away as agriculture declined, the Pine-Coffins pruned their estates and prudently let out their houses.

Their tenacity, (and fecundity!) is well attested by the enormous monument to Richard Coffin and his fifteen children in Alwington church :

All here pourtrayed shewes one joynd Coffin sent
through Heaven's canopy & to earth here lent
perfum'd with vertues & bedew'd with Grace
t'adorne them with a progeny for a Space
One man took life from dead Elisha's bones,
Eight mortal sons lived from this Coffin's loynes,
with daughters seven that from this vine did sprout
like Olive plants their tables round about.
Thrice happy fruitfull Coffin may thy Buds spread,
and to Eternity Hallejuahs sing.



A Coffin and his Coffin

Few Pine-Coffins reached national prominence, although they have always figured in Devon life. One early exception was Sir William Coffin, Gentleman of the Privy Chamber to Henry VIII. As a younger brother, Sir William was free to join the royal service, and soon attracted the King's favour. Master of the Horse at Anne Boleyn's coronation, he was also one of Henry's eighteen assistants at the Tournament of Guienne - the famous Field of the Cloth of Gold. In the 1530s, however, he had a curious encounter with a coffin, which led him to campaign for fairer mortuary fees for the poor.

The story goes that Sir William was riding past a church when he heard the priest refusing to bury a poor man unless his relations handed over his horse - their only inheritance. Sir William was incensed, and is variously described as pushing the priest into the grave, jumping in himself, or offering his own horse as payment. Whatever happened, the priest complained to his Bishop, and the matter was brought up in Parliament. Luckily William had the King on his side, and mortuary fees were thereafter regulated by statute. When he died he left Henry his favourite hawk and horses, and his best cart.

Two rebellious Coffins

Most Coffins however were of more local interest, hampered partly by remaining Catholic for some generations after the Reformation and therefore being debarred from public office. John Coffin, indeed, probably one of Sir William's nephews, was involved in the Prayerbook Rebellions against the Reformed Church in 1549. John became Second in Command to Lord Arundel, leader of the Cornish uprising, and marched on Exeter under the flag of the Five Wounds of Christ. The rebels were routed by royal troops at Sampford Courtenay, but John was one of the survivors who escaped to make a last stand at King's Weston. Surprisingly, he does not appear on the final list of the executed, and so was either pardoned or died of wounds.

Nearly 150 years later another Coffin became involved in a rebellion, but this time on the government side. Richard Coffin was Sheriff of Devon during the ill-fated Monmouth rebellion. One of his more gruesome responsibilities was to oversee the distribution of the pickled quarters and heads of executed rebels to the main towns in Devon. Coffin's deputy, Thomas Mortimer, objected to their display in Bideford:

The quarters are already boiled and tarred; warrants are to be sent to the Mayor to set them up, to the disgrace of humanity and the great inconvenience of the inhabitants.

Coffins for Tea

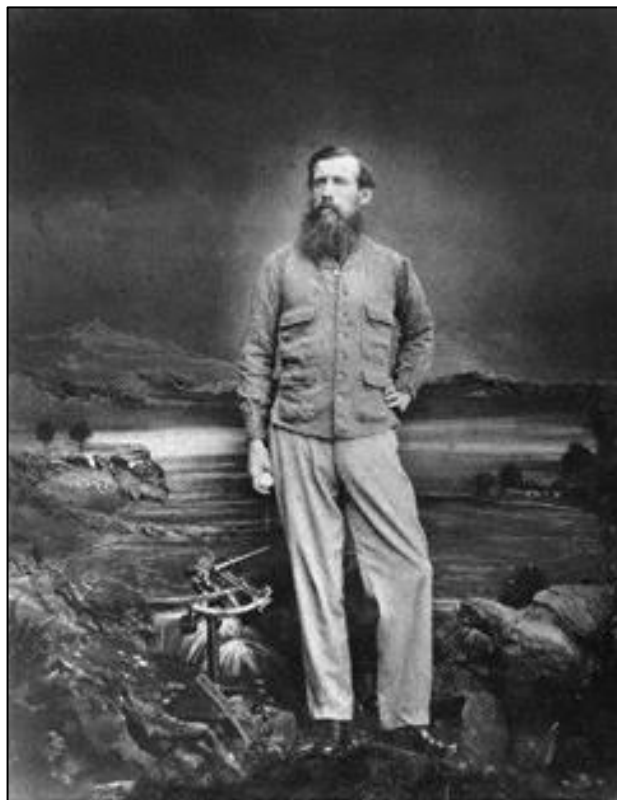
On the other hand, some Coffins have reached almost international fame. One branch of the family, for example, emigrated to America in the 1640s. A descendant, Nathaniel Coffin, was the unfortunate Boston customs official who enforced the Stamp Duty which caused the Boston Tea Party. Ironically, the American Coffins' loyalty to the Crown was to have side effects in Devon: prior to the Revolution Bideford had been one of the leading Tobacco ports, but trade never picked up again after the 1780s.

Pines and Coffins

After marriage to the Pines in the mid-18th century, Pine-Coffins seem to have divided their sons equally between the church and the army. Of the children of the Rev. John (the first to hold the joint name) one became vicar of the family living, one emigrated to Jamaica, and two became prominent soldiers: Major-General John Pine-Coffin held Napoleon in custody as Lieutenant-Governor of St Helena under Sir Hudson Lowe, while his younger brother Sir Edward ended as Commissary-General. These two, with their distant cousin, Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin, son of the Boston customs official, are the only members of the family to feature in the Dictionary of National Biography.

Speke and the Nile

Later in the 19th century, another Pine-Coffin married Matilda, the sister of the famous explorer, John Hanning Speke. While travelling with Sir Richard Burton, Speke became the first European to see Lake Victoria, and was later the first European to cross equatorial Africa. Speke's monument in Kensington Gardens cites him as 'discoverer of the Nile', and indeed he was the first to prove that Lake Victoria was the source reservoir for Africa's greatest river. When not abroad Speke lived at Orleigh Court, Buckland Brewer, and was a frequent visitor to Portledge.



John Hanning Speke, 1863, National
Portrait Gallery

Worthy Matilda

Speke's sister, Matilda, is worthy of independent mention. On her husband's early death in 1890, Matilda succeeded to the estate, a wise precaution perhaps, in view of their inevitably military eldest son's long absences abroad on duty, and her own obvious capability. It was she who held the Portledge estate together during the difficult early years of this century, forced at one stage to let Portledge itself and move into the dower house of Kenwith Castle. Two of her sons were killed in the First World War, one in action and the eldest son, Major John Edward, of wounds in 1919, leaving his young son, Edward Claude, as her heir. Matilda continued to run things for her grandson until her death at the age of 82 in 1928. Local affection can be gauged from her obituary in the Records of the Devon Association:

Mrs Matilda Pine-Coffin, who was a Vice-President of our Association at the Bideford meeting in 1926, died at her residence at Portledge on June 4th, 1928, at the age of eighty-two. She was the widow of John Richard Pine-Coffin, JP, DL, who died in 1890, and to whose memory his bust was erected at the eastern end of Bideford Bridge. Mrs Pine-Coffin was the youngest daughter of William Speke of Jordans, Somerset, and sister of John Hanning Speke, the discoverer of the source of the Nile, who was born at Orleigh Court in Buckland Brewer on May 3rd, 1827. She married Mr. Pine-Coffin in 1865, and had by him a family of six sons and six daughters. Her eldest son, Major Edward Pine Coffin, never recovered from an illness contracted during the Great War. Her youngest son, Captain Tristram, also made the great sacrifice and was one of the last of the British officers to be killed in action. Her grandson, Captain Claude, who is serving in the army in India, becomes her heir to the Portledge estate, which has been in the Coffin family since the reign of Henry II. The house contains a very valuable collection of ancient deeds and manuscripts which have been reported on by the Historical Manuscripts Commission; some of these have recently been published in book form with the title *Portledge Papers*. Mrs Pine-Coffin herself had literary tastes, and at the time of her death was engaged on writing a life of her famous brother. 'A lady of remarkable gifts, endurance, and will power, devoted to the country in which she spent all her married life, she has passed away at a great age, active in mind and body almost to the last, deeply loved by her children, grandchildren, and a large circle of friends and neighbours.

Some Pine-Coffin Houses

As was inevitable with a family and an estate of such long standing, by the 19th century they owned more than one manor house. Peppercombe Castle was a late arrival. Other subsidiary houses, for one reason or another, also became on occasion the main family residence, if only for a short time. All are still standing today, although the oldest and most senior house, Portledge, remains in Pine-Coffin hands.

East Down was the home of the Pines from the 13th Century, when Oliver Pyne of Cornwall married the heiress, Elinor Le Downe. The surviving manor house is mostly 18th-century, perhaps the work of the Rev John Pine-Coffin, who preferred to live on there rather than move to Portledge. It has Doric pilasters and a pedimented porch. Pine memorials can be found in the church, but the house was sold in 1866.

Kenwith Castle is where Matilda Pine-Coffin lived while Portledge was let to tenants. It is one of several small manors in Abbotsham, distinguished by a Regency Gothic front.

At Portledge itself, little remains today of the original 11th-century stronghold of the first Coffins. The medieval core has been engulfed by the additions of succeeding generations. About 1800 the house was effectively reversed: the former kitchen court was roofed over to create a new hall, and a large Gothic/Jacobean porch added to make an impressive entrance. Round the other side of the house you can still see the medieval gatehouse leading into what is now the back court, and the old hall has been floored in to make a kitchen.

Portledge is only just down the road from Peppercombe, at the hamlet of Fairy Cross.

Update: The estate itself was sold in 1998, after nine centuries in the Coffin family's hands



Portledge House, about 1907

Former Inhabitant of Peppercombe



John Prance (1789–1871)³

John Prance is thought to have been born in Parkham, North Devon and certainly married Mary Braund in Parkham in 1810. He was of humble status and all efforts so far to establish his parentage have proved unsuccessful however his descendants are well documented and include many of interest. According to his bible, he fathered ten children. As his abode at Peppercombe was on the cliff's edge it is not surprising that he is pictured holding a lobster in his lap.... the sea being a major source of food for those living beside it. His children and grandchildren moved from Peppercombe, mostly into Bideford, when fierce storms at the end of the century made life impossible in such an exposed position.

³ Adapted from www.prancefamily.co.uk

Very little is known about the life of John Prance. What we do know is that he married Mary Braund at Parkham in 1810. We know the exact date of his death from the death certificate which says he was 82. We know the manner of his death because it was written up in the local newspaper. We know where he and his family were living while he was in old age and he was described as a fisherman. All his ten children are documented in his own hand in a handsome leather bound bible. The hints that can be gleaned from his family suggest that he was an upright man of the working classes, but with some status, and whose children all did quite well for themselves.

John's birth is not recorded. However his ten children are almost the same, name for name, as those of William Prance (1765-1808) and Joanna (Lee) except in a slightly different order. Both include the name Athalia and it is suggested that this William Prance is John's father. It does seem that the two families are intimately linked and probably by direct line. His marriage to Mary Braund is recorded though and took place on 4th February 1810 at Parkham. He lived in Peppercombe, a steep sided valley leading down to the North Devon shore, in what his daughter-in law termed in a poem 'a rude built cottage by the sea.' In 1873 it is known that his son William and his wife Harriet with the young family of six children were still occupying this cottage. The cottage was 'below the Castle.'

PARKHAM. *Bideford Gazette* September 1871

FATAL ACCIDENT. On Tuesday fortnight 19th ultimo, an accident occurred to a respectable old man, living at Peppercombe, near this place, called John Prance, aged 82, which had a fatal termination ten days afterwards. The cottage in which the deceased lived is the nearest to the cliff; and on the evening of the 19th he went up from his home towards the Castle and in his way gathered a few nuts for his grandchildren. Returning towards home, he took upon his shoulder a small branch of a tree which was lying in the road, and in passing a part of the road which overhangs the cliff that branch caught in the hedge and threw him off his balance, and he fell over the edge of the cliff. It is wonderful that he was not at once dashed to pieces but he appears not to have fallen precipitously, but rather to have rolled from point to point of the cliff until he came to the bottom, perhaps a hundred feet or more. He did not lose his senses, but was able to get on his legs, when he found that his right leg was disabled, and that he had sustained some internal injuries. As he did not come home, his grandson went up the road with a lantern to look after him and the poor old man called to him from the beach to come to his help. The boy instantly fetched his father, with whose assistance he walked home. He complained chiefly of his leg, and the doctor, (Dr. Thompson of Bideford) was at once sent for, who, on examination, found that deceased had sustained a severe scalp wound, besides the fracture of one or two of his ribs, which had penetrated his right lung. He was able to give a full account of the accident, and continued sensible, and apparently recovering from his injuries until Friday last, when, active inflammation of his lungs having set in, the poor man died. He was a very hale old man, of above six feet high, and but for this accident, bade fair to add to his already advanced years. The place from which he fell is not a public walk, but only a private path belonging to the Lord of the Manor. The deceased had always lived in the parish, and few men in his walk of life have attained as much respect or enjoyed so high a reputation among gentle and simple. His funeral, on Monday, was attended by most of the respectful parishioners, who expressed their sincere regret at his death, and their sympathy with the bereaved family.