

Catherine Laker

Article :Finding Derek's Minack

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Writer and journalist Derek Tangye and his wife, Jeannie, gave up their glamorous London lifestyle in the forties to live in a cottage in remote West Cornwall and run a flower farm. Some years ago I read his book 'Jeannie' and became a confirmed fan. I have since read many of Derek's other stories about their idyllic country life and the struggles that he and Jeannie endured while establishing their farm, but 'Jeannie' remains my favourite of the Tangye novels. I have read it several times over. While living abroad, it lessened the pangs of homesickness; at the end of a failed relationship it was a reminder that true love really does exist; and since returning to London, it has transported me from a cramped corner of the Tube to Cornwall's wild cliffs.

The book is essentially a love story and a tribute to Jeannie, who died in 1986. But Derek and Jeannie also shared their home with a variety of animals, most famously their cats and donkeys, and the book is also a loving and humorous tribute to them. I vowed to one day visit Minack, the tiny cottage where they lived, and the other magical places about which Derek wrote. On learning of Derek's death in 1996, I realised that my visit was already long overdue. My mother, also a staunch fan of the Tangye books, headed off with me one bright sunny September morning in search of Minack.

Our first stop was the Donkey Sanctuary at Sidmouth which, after Derek's death, became home to Merlin and Susie, the Minack donkeys. We spent several hours meandering around the various stables and paddocks, stroking the donkeys and learning about the Sanctuary's work. Eventually, we found the celebrated pair in one of the top paddocks, grazing peacefully and completely oblivious to their fame! Merlin sadly died in 2005 but Susie is still living happily with the other donkeys. It would be very easy to spend an entire day at the Sanctuary. The surrounding countryside is beautiful, and we found a scenic walk leading from the Sanctuary grounds through forest land to the cliff tops, and a fantastic view of the Devon coastline.

From Sidmouth, we continued our journey to Mousehole, the picturesque fishing village in Cornwall where we had booked a cottage for the week. I knew finding Minack would take a bit of investigative work, as Derek had written that it was very hard to find (this was long before the advent of the internet). I remembered reading in 'The Gull on the Roof' that St Buryan was the nearest village, so that was our starting point. We were soon to discover that Minack is the best-kept secret in West Cornwall! Everyone was eager to help, but we got so many conflicting directions that we left St Buryan none the wiser.

We headed to Lamorna Cove, as we were reliably informed that Derek was a frequent visitor to The Lamorna Wink, a local pub. We passed the pub, which had not yet opened, and drove down to the cove itself. I guessed that Minack couldn't

be too far away and that it was accessible from the cliffs, but one peek around the first rock and my mother decided it was definitely not suitable terrain for a pensioner, especially one with no sense of balance! So off I went alone, leaving Mum on the beach to soak up the last of the afternoon sunshine. Weaving my way around the cliff path and scrambling over rocks, I stopped every now and then to admire the breathtaking scenery. Just when I thought the trail would never end, I came across a little clearing and white gate marked "Private Property". I peered over the top and there, nestling in a little valley, was Dorminack cottage. Its rooftop was barely visible but, as I turned around, the familiar view, so often captured in the Minack Chronicles, was all the confirmation I needed. A bolder visitor than I would have ventured through the gate, but I knew there was a more accessible route and decided to save it for another day. In any case, the light was fading and I imagined my mother contacting the coastguard, having convinced herself that I had taken a nose-dive into the sea!

So I returned to the cove and a much-needed drink at The Lamorna Wink, an unpretentious pub with a distinctly nautical feel about it. The barman gave us directions by road, so we decided to check out the route for the following day. We thought it would be easy, especially as we now had a good idea of our bearings, but every road seemed to lead to a dead-end. We did, however, discover a footpath to the Merry Maidens, another landmark Derek wrote about in his books, to which we returned the following morning, anxious to see where it would lead us. The path was very overgrown and we wondered if anyone else had ventured along it in the last decade. "This can't be the right path", observed my ever-practical mother. "I mean, how on earth could they have got their furniture down here?" Troupers that we are, we decided to take it anyway. We fought through nettles and brambles, and managed to attract the interest of an inquisitive cow, before finally emerging on a wide, dusty track, which looked suspiciously like the road we should have taken in the first place.

Before long, we reached the familiar sign: The Derek and Jeannie Tangye Minack Chronicles Nature Reserve - A Place for Solitude. We heaved sighs of joy and relief at having finally discovered the way to Minack, and followed the winding path across Monty's Leap to the cottage itself.

A couple of friendly dogs came running out to greet us, but otherwise there appeared to be no sign of life. As a result of our local enquiries, we knew that Minack now had a new tenant, Jane Bird. Jane had been a friend of the Tangyes since turning up on their doorstep and asking for work when she was a teenager in the fifties. Derek wrote about Jane in his book, 'A Drake at the Door'. Eventually, Jane appeared. She warmly welcomed us and told us of the plans she and her partner had for Minack. We finally said our goodbyes and, wishing them luck, followed the path that led us to all those places I had long dreamt of visiting - Oliver Land, the Ambrose Rock and the Honeysuckle Meadow.

We spent hours there, perched on the Ambrose Rock, watching the sun glistening on the sea and savouring that rare feeling of solitude - as Derek and Jeannie Tangye must have done so many times.

N.B. The Minack Chronicles Trust asks visitors to respect the privacy of the tenants of the cottage, although everyone is welcome onto Oliver Land.