

Saturday Ramble: A Summer idyll — Minack

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Getting away from the misery of 2009 and the last-gasp, quasi-administration of Gordon Brown isn't easy. There aren't many escape routes.

Here's one I tried earlier.

The myth of Minack in Cornwall has not affected everyone. Few now remember the long series of books by Derek and Jeannie Tangye (pictured) that ended in the mid 1990s. I had a small walk-on part in the drama, so recall it more than most. Turn away if the call of wild nature is not to your taste.

Over the years, the many adherents to the Minack story have been among the most loyal readers anywhere. But what is the truth: was it an English

Shangri-la, or just another hyped publishing opportunity?

If the American dream is to join the high rollers of a largely fluid society and take one's place at the top of the tree, the British version is much more muted.

Of old it was an aspiration to the squirearchy: an elegant manor house, a few tenanted farms and three days a week in the City. Nowadays, it tends to be a rugged farmhouse in the country, a smallholding, and shelling peas by an open fire.

But Derek and Jeannie Tangye got there first. Way back in the austere 1950s, they abandoned their London lives — she as the famed publicity queen with the Savoy Hotel on the Strand, he as a social gadfly, spy, and sometime journalist with the *Daily Express* — and moved to a minuscule cottage on the coast near Lamorna in West Cornwall. Through Derek's writings about the place, Minack became a promised land to millions of people around the world.

So was it quite as idyllic as the dream would have us believe. Like everything else, the answer is a complex one.

In their favour, the pair stuck it out until their deaths, Jeannie's in 1986 and Derek's in 1996, so we can assume that life was at least tolerable. But their early years were undoubtedly harsh.

Converting the cliffs on their new domain into those peculiar Cornish potato meadows, that have to be tilled by hand, was never going to be easy for urban people. Daffodils, and other early-season blooms, dominated the remainder of the rough landscape.

The weather was fickle — as it always is. Prices fluctuated — as they always do. Both Derek and Jeannie turned to writing to make ends meet — as the middle classes usually do. Each was successful in their own way, and that helped.

Soon, though, dark clouds of change swept over their demi-paradise. New cultivation methods elsewhere devastated the Cornish daffodil and new-potato industries.

Tourists started to flood in from around the world, responding to the Minack legend created by Derek in his books. Suburbia came to Minack and never thereafter left them entirely alone.

In a book written after Jeannie's death, Derek told of the strain of those years and how their lack of children diminished their relationship by slow attrition. It was no idyll by this account.

I went to Minack in 1997, just after Derek's death, to investigate the agricultural lease to the main property. The house and 21 acres (the rest, so-called Oliver Land is now a nature reserve) was available to the right person. The owner, Viscount Falmouth, was determined to maintain the legend by all accounts.

It seemed to me like a wonderful opportunity to make a new start after seven years living in Spain. But it soon became clear that this was Derek and Jeannie's dream, not mine. Their imprint and their legend was all over the place. Any newcomer would inevitably feel out of place and out of time.

I took the scenic route along the cliffs from Lamorna — not as easy as it sounds in the Chronicles — and found myself walking beside a lengthy metal fence which skirted the cliff path. Totally lost, I eventually took a gamble and climbed over an old gate into what seemed a deserted farmyard. It was Minack.

There was the much-described cottage — so small. How could they have lived in it all those years? The famous "bridge" (a vantage point) was bijou in the extreme; and "Monty's Leap", that giants' causeway of the imagination, was a little trickling stream across the lane.

From such small and simple features came a whole world that resonated in the minds of jaded urbanites in every corner of the planet.

Gilbert White did it for Selborne, and Derek Tangye made a mighty edifice out of his beloved molehill at Minack.

Small really is beautiful when there's no one else around.

John Evans