

A Study of Agatha Christie's South West England (I)

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Agatha Christie wrote many stories featuring Devon where she was born and grew up. It is easy to follow her footsteps and locate the places in her stories. Her interest in the railway is so great that the description is very realistic and precise. It is even possible to locate the places in her stories by those clues. This study wanders around Christie's beloved Devon in her footsteps and investigates the connection between the settings of the stories and the actual places.

Key Words : area study, Agatha Christie, Devon, Torquay

I Introduction

Agatha Christie was born in Torquay, Devon, in 1890. She spent her childhood, youth and honeymoon days there. She occasionally lived in or around London, but she always had her house to go back in Devon.

Devoted to her home country, Christie used Devon as the background in many of her works. Sometimes using those places as themselves, sometimes giving them fictitious names, she mentions many of her favourite places in her beloved Devon. It is very interesting to hunt those place names and backgrounds just like hunting down the criminals in her detective stories.

Accordingly, this study aims to walk in the footsteps of Agatha Christie in the West Country and to investigate many places in her works and see how they are "disguised" (or not). Naturally we start from her birthplace Torquay.

II Torquay

As is often the case with the English people, Christie moved from one house to another in and around London. But she lived in only two places in Devon all her life. "Ashfield", where she was born and brought up, and "Greenway House" on the River Dart, which she bought just before World War II. It seems that she was so pleased with those places that she didn't dream of living in any other place. Especially,

Ashfield remained her most beloved house all her life. Even long after Ashfield was sold and pulled down to become a new estate, she remembered her dear house. “Almost best of all, sitting in the sun—gently drowsy.... And there you are again—remembering. ‘I remember, I remember, the house where I was born....’ ” (Christie^[3] 549) She even went to see if there was anything that could stir a memory. But unfortunately, all there was left was “the meanest, shoddiest little houses” (Christie^[3] 550) she had ever seen.

Ashfield was in the older part of Torquay, near the outskirts of the town. It seems to have been an ordinary enough villa, “ordinary” in the sense that it was meant for the Upper Middle Class family of an intellectual profession. Barton road, where Ashfield stood, led into rich Devon country, with lanes and fields everywhere. The house and the garden seemed enormous: so Agatha had remembered long after she grew up. In fact, Ashfield was enormous. The garden that Agatha liked very much consisted of three parts; the kitchen garden, the garden proper and the wood.

There was a large greenhouse near the house, and another small one on the other side of the house, which was curiously named “K.K.” It is mentioned in her *Autobiography* as well as in *Postern of Fate*:

On wet days there was Mathilde. Mathilde was a large American Rocking Horse which had been given to my sister and my brother when they were children in America.... The small greenhouse, called, I don’t know why, K.K. (or possibly Kai Kai?) was bereft of plants and housed instead croquet mallets, hoops, balls, broken garden chairs, old painted iron tables, a decayed tennis net and Mathilde....

As companion to Mathilde in Kai Kai was Truelove—also of transatlantic origin. Truelove was a small painted horse and cart with pedals.... Like all gardens in Devon, our garden was on a slope. My method was to pull Truelove to the top of a long grassy slope, settle myself carefully, utter an encouraging sound, and off we went; slowly at first, gathering momentum whilst I braked with my feet, so that we came to rest under the monkey puzzle at the bottom of the garden. Then I would pull Truelove back up to the top and start down once more. (Christie^[3] 58–59)

In *Postern of Fate*, “The Laurels”, which Tommy and Tuppence have bought in the beginning of the story, is very much in accord with Ashfield. This can be seen easily in the conversation of Tuppence and Isaac the gardener:

“And a greenhouse you can call it, too. But this here, KK old Mrs. Lottie Jones used to call it. I dunno why.”....

“That’s a rather wonderful-looking horse,” said Tuppence.

“That’s Mackild, that is,” said Isaac.

“Mack-ild?” said Tuppence rather doubtfully....

"Who was Miss Jenny?"

"Why, she was the eldest one, you know. She was the one that had the grandfather as sent her this. Sent Truelove, too," he added. . . .

"That's what they call it, you know. That little horse and cart what's there in the corner. Used to ride it down the hill, Miss Pamera did. . . ." (Christie^[11] 68-71)

Miss Pamera mentioned here undoubtedly is Agatha herself.

Torquay "developed first as a fishing village and then further developed as an English Riviera" (Christie^[11] 92) for its mild climate in the 19th century. Agatha's parents had often visited there, was fascinated, and her mother, on an impulse, had bought Ashfield. And so it became her home.

So it is only natural that Torquay appears most frequently in her works. But it usually appears in "disguise": "Loommouth" in *Murder in Three Acts*, "Danemouth" in *The Body in the Library*, "Cullenquay" in *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*, "Redquay" in *Ordeal by Innocence*, "Dillmouth" in *Sleeping Murder* and as "Hollowquay" in *Postern of Fate*.

In a short story "The Unbreakable Alibi" in *Partners in Crime*, Torquay appears in its real name. In the story a girl claims to have been in London and Torquay at the same time. One of the reason it is not in disguise seems to be that this is not a murder case.

The girl claims that she left London Paddington at noon and arrived Torquay at 3 : 35 in the afternoon. This is a popular train, also mentioned in *Dead Man's Folly*, named "Torbay Express." It was a very convenient train to go down to Torbay area from London. So much so that the train survives even until now with little change of times. The returning trains mentioned in the story also exist. The morning train leaves Torquay 9 : 00 arriving Paddington at 13 : 30, which is named the "Plymouth and Torbay Express." The afternoon one leaves Torquay at 16 : 24, arrives Paddington at 21 : 00 : (Thomas^[19])

"Paddington twelve o'clock. Torquay three thirty-five. . . ."

". . . .Then she takes a train back to town arriving in time to get to the Savoy.

"There is one at four-forty gets up to Paddington at nine-ten." (Christie^[10] 141)

The Castle Hotel which the girl claimed to have stayed must be the Imperial Hotel, which remains one of the most grand hotels in Torquay. And the Pavilion theatre which she was recommended still remains, and what is more, there now stands a bust of Agatha Christie in front of the Tourist Information near it.

Agatha's love of Torquay can be seen in many stories, perhaps the most clear is the following. Needless to say, Dillmouth is meant for Torquay :

It [Dillmouth] was a charming and old-fashioned little seaside town. At the far “modern”, end, there was a couple of new-looking hotels and some raw-looking bungalows, but the geographical formation of the coast with the hills behind had saved Dillmouth from undue expansion. (Christie^[12] 8)

There is a passage in her *Autobiography* to the same effect. These show Christie’s strong feeling towards the geographical setting that has long saved Torquay from disorderly development or expansion.

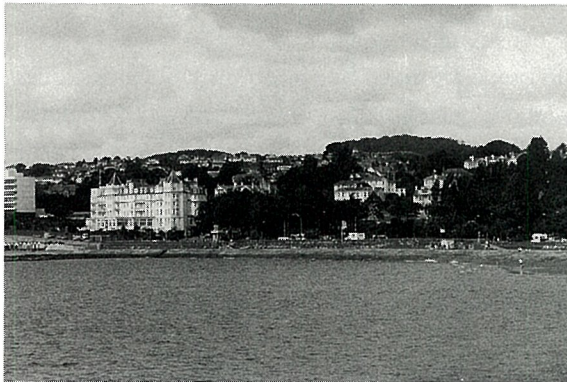


Fig. 1 Torquay

III Greenway House

Nasse House in which the murder case described in *Dead Man’s Folly* takes place is actually Greenway House in the south of Torquay, Agatha’s House. Her second home Greenway House is described very much in accordance with the truth, not only the house and the garden, but also the place around it.

One summer day in 1938 Christie learnt that Greenway House was on sale. She remembered her mother saying that it was the most perfect of the various properties on the Dart. (Christie^[3] 496) She hadn’t seen it since she went there with her mother when she was a child. She revisited Greenway and was utterly fascinated by the beautiful garden, 30 acres forest of the ground and the river beside it, to say nothing of the house itself :

So we went over to Greenway, and very beautiful the house and grounds were. A white Georgian house of about 1780 or 90, with woods sweeping down to the Dart below, and a lot of fine shrubs and trees—the ideal house, a dream house. (Christie^[3] 497)

The price was six thousand pounds, which seemed incredibly cheap for her. Indeed it was not the price she couldn’t afford at all, and her husband Max Mallowan liked

it also and suggested to buy the house.

It happened that Christie had given away Ashfield, her so much beloved home a little while ago. The reason was, as mentioned earlier, the disorderly development of Torquay, which she had always feared. Torquay was expanding itself. The large houses of the neighbours had become old and turned into nursing homes or schools. (Christie^[3] 496)

Once it had been all countryside out of Torquay : three villas up the hill and then the road petered out into country. The lush green fields where I used to go to look at the lambs in spring had given way to a mass of small houses. No one we knew lived in our road any longer. It was as though Ashfield had become a parody of itself. (Christie^[3] 496-497)

So she bought Greenway House in October 1938.

Today, the vast grounds of Greenway House with tennis courts, lanes, nursery and “a picturesque thatched roof boathouse built out over the river, with a little wharf and a storage place for boats underneath” (Christie ^[5] 17, 67) (in which the body of a young girl was found) ; the scene is just as it is described in *Dead Man's Folly*.

Sadly, Greenway House is not open to the public now except for the garden just twice a year. But the nursery is open all year, and we can legitimately go there through the front gate. It has a sign “Greenway House”, but nothing is there to tell us that here Agatha Christie once lived. Beside the iron gate can be seen a gatehouse or a lodge which is also mentioned in *Dead Man's Folly* :

They were standing now by the front gate. The lodge, small white one-storied building, lay a little back from the drive with a small railed garden round it. (Christie^[5] 43)



Fig. 2 The front gate of Greenway House

In *Dead Man's Folly*, Hercule Poirot is summoned by Mrs. Oliver at a moment's notice. His journey from London to Nasse House in Nassecombe might as well be said a journey to Greenway House :

The train, having done one hundred and eighty-odd miles of its two hundred and twelve miles journey at top speed, puffed gently and apologetically through the last thirty and drew into Nassecombe station. . . . (Christie^[5] 8)

Mrs. Oliver who summons Poirot to Nasse House informs him that there is a twelve o'clock train from Paddington to Nassecombe. (Christie^[5] 6) According to the June 1946 Bradshaw Timetable, this is the "Torbay Express" (mentioned earlier) which only stops at Exeter, Torquay, Paignton and Churston before arriving at Kingswear. Arriving just in time for tea (Churston at 16 : 18), this train must be the most convenient one for Torbay. No wonder Christie used this train several times. Probably she took it herself on her way home.

There does exist a little incongruity in the details, however. The distance from London to Churston (the nearest station for Greenway) is $204\frac{3}{4}$ miles, not 212 miles as in *Dead Man's Folly*. The Torbay Express runs the $199\frac{3}{4}$ miles from Paddington to Torquay in 3 hours and 55 minutes, the average speed of which is about 50 miles per hour. However, after it leaves the main line (strictly speaking, it has already left the main line at Newton Abbot, $5\frac{3}{4}$ miles before Torquay), it clearly slows down, taking 30 minutes from Torquay to Kingswear, which is only nine miles. The average speed is barely 18 miles per hour. Despite these minor discrepancies, Christie's description of the journey fits surprisingly to reality. As she admits it herself, Christie really liked railway (travel).

After Poirot is met by a chauffeur from Nasse House, they drive away from the over the railway bridge, which really exists, and turn down a country lane which winds between high hedges on either side. Presently on the right there opens a very beautiful river view with hills of a misty blue in the distance. This is River Helm (which is, of course, River Dart in reality) with Dartmoor in the distance. (Christie^[5] 8) It is around here that the lane overpasses the railway line to Kingswear again, which passes under the grounds of Greenway House by a tunnel.

They pass two girls with heavy rucksacks on their way. The chauffeur explains to Poirot that the girls are going to the Youth Hostel next door to Nasse House. At the chauffeur's suggestion Poirot gives them a lift with pleasure until the fork of the road.

At this point the chauffeur slowed down where the road forked. The girls got out, uttered thanks in two languages and proceeded up the left-hand road. . . .

He restarted the car and drove down the right-hand road which shortly afterwards passed into thick woods. . . .

They went on, down a steep hill through woods, then through big iron gates, and along a drive, winding up finally in front of a big white Georgian house looking out over the river. (Christie^[5] 10)

On arrival at Nasse House, Poirot finds Mrs. Oliver and hears about a Murder Hunt which is planned by her as an attraction for a big fête that is to take place at Nasse House the following day. And he is told that she has an uneasy feeling that something is wrong, and is asked to be on the spot when the Murder Hunt takes place.

In reality, in spite of numerous requests to open Greenway to the public (whether it was for a fête or not), Christie always turned them down. But she was happy to plan a Treasure Hunt for the children of her diplomat and archaeologist friends.

After being forced to consent, “in a mood of exploration Poirot went through the front gates and down the steeply twisting road that presently emerged on a small quay. A large bell with a chain had a notice upon it: “Ring for the Ferry.” There were various boats moored by the side of the quay. (Christie^[5] 44)

This ferry appears also at the beginning of *Ordeal by Innocence*, in which Doctor Calgary arrives in a car from Redquay (that is, Torquay) in order to cross the river on his way to the Argyle's house, Sunny Point :

The car he had hired was waiting. He said good-bye and left to drive the seven miles along the crowded coast road and then inland down the wooded lane that ended at the little stone quay on the river.

There was a large bell there which his driver rang vigorously to summon the ferry from the far side. . . .

He heard the soft splash of the oars as the ferry boat drew into the side of the little quay. Arthur Calgary walked down the sloping ramp and got into the boat as the ferryman steadied it with a boathook. (Christie^[9] 1)

I visited the place one early morning in 1995, following the route which was exactly as was described in *Dead Man's Folly*. The stillness of the ferry and the mist covering half of the other side of the River Dart reminded me, just as Christie wrote, of the Scottish Lochs. “And yet, only a few miles away, were the hotels, the shops, the cocktail bars and the crowds of Redquay.” (Christie^[9] 1)

The village across the river is called Dittisham (which is named Gitcham in *Dead Man's Folly*). In the story, Inspector Bland spends the afternoon taking a trip in a well-known pleasure steamer, The Devon Belle. It is a popular name for a steamer or a train. There actually is an observation car named “Devon Belle” at Paignton & Dartmouth Steam Railway. Leaving Brixwell (which is Brixham in reality) at about three o'clock, it rounded the headland, proceeded around the coast, entered the mouth of the Helm and went up the river. (Christie^[5] 140)



Fig. 3 Dittisham in the mist

There still are steamers today (one of them is named “Devonair Belle”) sailing from Dartmouth to Totnes upstream of the River Dart. It is interesting that owing to the influence of the tide in River Dart, the time of the sailings varies accordingly each day. It is a popular tourist attraction comprising a circular journey from Paignton to Kingswear by Steam Train, Ferry to Dartmouth, River Cruise to Totnes and return by Bus to Paignton. It is possible to start and break journey at any of these places.

IV Churston and Dartmouth

The railway line from Paignton to Kingswear is now called Paignton & Dartmouth Railway which runs steam-hauled trains in summer, but it formerly belonged to British Rail branch line from Newton Abbot to Kingswear, and many through trains from London were operated. This line appears in many of Christie’s works, one of which is *The ABC Murders*.

Few minutes after departing Paignton, Torbay shows itself on the left, with white sands, dark green and red sand promontories, and sapphire blue sea. After a while the train turns inland and crosses a viaduct, from which the village of Breadsands beautifully extends itself. Breadsands leads to the beautiful coast of Elbury Cove, also mentioned in *The ABC Murders*.

In *The ABC Murders*, Hercules Poirot and Captain Hastings, on receiving an announcement from the murderer that the next murder is to take place in Churston, jump into a midnight train. Hastings consults an ABC Timetable :

“Churston, Devon,” I read, “from Paddington 204 $\frac{3}{4}$ miles. Population 656. It sounds a fairly small place. . . .”

“There’s a midnight train—sleeping-car to Newton Abbot—gets there 6.8 am, and to Churston at 7.15.” (Christie^[13] 77–78)

According to July 1922 Timetable, this train actually exists as the 000 from Paddington to Plymouth with sleeping cars, which arrives Newton Abbot at 6 : 01 in the morning.

By changing there (departs Newton Abbot 6:55), one arrives Churston at 7:34. (Thomas^[18])

Churston lies in between two popular resorts, Paignton (Torquay) and Brixham. It is a small village with “a post office and cottages at Churston Ferrers.” (Christie^[13] 83) But it is by no means a secluded village in summer :

“I suppose a stranger hanging round the place would be fairly easily noticed?”

“On the contrary. In August all this part of the world is a seething mass of strangers. They come over every day from Brixham and Torquay and Paignton in cars and buses and on foot. Broadsands, which is down there (he pointed) is a very popular beach and so is Elbury Cove—it’s a well known beauty spot and people come there and picnic....” (Christie^[13] 83)

After Churston, River Dart shows itself on the right (as in *Dead Man’s Folly*), and soon after that the train goes through Greenway tunnel. When it comes out and crosses another viaduct, Maypool Youth Hostel (which also appears in *Dead Man’s Folly*) comes into sight. It is a grand house with red bricks, more like a manor house than a Youth Hostel, although Mrs. Folliat in *Dead Man’s Folly* says “fortunately Hoodown [=Maypool] is late-Victorian, and of no great architectural merit....” (Christie^[5] 43)



Fig. 4 Maypool Youth Hostel

Dartmouth lies across Kingswear, the terminal of Paignton & Dartmouth Railway. Two ferries, passenger and vehicle, link the two towns. Dartmouth’s streets are still lined by house of medieval time, some half timbered. In the Butterwalk, the terrace of shops is supported on the granite pillars, leaving room underneath for the shoppers, which can also be seen in Totnes.



Fig. 5 Dartmouth

Dartmouth was a favourite place for Christie. The Royal Castle Hotel near the quay appears as the “Royal George hotel” in “The Regatta Mystery”. The location of the film *Ordeal by Innocence* also took place in this hotel. Dartmouth also appears as “Drymouth” in *Ordeal by Innocence*, and “Helmmouth” in *Dead Man’s Folly* :

At that time, Jack Argyle said, he was hitch-hiking into Drymouth, having been picked up by a car on the main road from Redmyn to Drymouth about a mile from here just before seven. (Christie^[9] 11)

It is very interesting that the abstract in the endpaper of the Pocket Book edition of *Ordeal by Innocence* says “he was hitch-hiking into Dartmouth” (the emphasis is mine). This, of course, has nothing to do with Christie herself, but isn’t it self-explanatory that Drymouth is Dartmouth?

V Burgh Island

Off the coast about twenty miles south west of Torquay lies Burgh Island, the setting of *Evil Under the Sun*. It is named “Smuggler’s Island” and is linked by a causeway from the mainland, but it is clear from the map at the endpaper of the book that it is Burgh Island.

Actually, it is possible to walk across the sands at low tide from Bigbury-on-Sea to Burgh Island. It was here that the millionaire Archibald Nettleford built the luxury Burgh Island Hotel. Created in Art Deco style with a natural rock sea-bathing pool, this was the retreat of famous figures other than Christie, such as the Duke of Windsor and Noel Coward.^[15] Also in the island is Pilchard Inn, which is reputed to be haunted by the ghost of a smuggler. Hence it is rightly named “Smugglers’ Island” in *Evil Under the Sun* :

But Captain Roger Angmering had only one great love, the sea. So he built his house—a sturdy house too, as it needed to be, on the little wind-

swept gull-haunted promontory—cut off from land at each high tide.

In 1922 when the great cult of the Seaside for Holidays was finally established and the coast of Devon and Cornwall was no longer thought too hot in the summer. . . . The sturdy house was added to and embellished. A concrete causeway was laid down from the mainland to the island. “Walks” and “Nooks” were cut and devised all round the island. . . . The Jolly Roger Hotel, Smugglers’ Island, Leathercombe Bay came triumphantly into being. . . . (Christie^[6] 7–8)



Fig. 6 Burgh Island at low tide

Another story that takes place in these parts is *And Then There Were None*. In the story, ten people are invited to “Nigger Island[sic], Sticklehaven, Devon.” Where is this island? Some of them are instructed to take the 12.40 from Paddington. Another guest, Mr. Blore, arrives at “Oakbridge” station in a slow train from Plymouth. “Outside Oakbridge station a little group of people stood in momentary uncertainty. (Christie^[6] 14,17) A taxi driver approaches them :

“There are two taxis here, sir. One of them must wait till the slow train from Exeter comes in—a matter of five minutes—there’s one gentleman coming by that. . . .” (Christie^[6] 17)

That means “Oakbridge” is between Exeter and Plymouth. Looking at the June 1946 timetable, there is a station called “Ivybridge”. So this must be it. Also according to June 1946 Timetable, there is 12:05 train on Saturday which is a through train to Ivybridge arriving at 17:27. The slow train from Plymouth, which Mr. Blore took, leaves at 16:30 and arrives Ivybridge at 16:55. Unfortunately there is no slow train from Exeter after 17:27, but the London train becomes the slow train from Exeter, so the guests were probably on those two trains. Incidentally, Ivybridge station was closed at the beginning of the 1960s, but was reopened in 1994.

The guests ride in two taxis and proceed to Sticklehaven. This must be Bigbury-on-Sea. The main Plymouth Road mentioned in the text is now a local B3213 road, and

after that it is about ten miles through the undulating hills and narrow lanes to Bigbury-on-Sea.

They drove through the sleepy streets of little Oakbridge and continued about a mile on the main Plymouth road. Then they plunged into a maze of cross-country lanes, steep, green and narrow. . . .

They came over a steep hill and down a zigzag track to Sticklehaven—a mere cluster of cottages with a fishing boat or two drawn on the beach. (Christie^[6] 20–21)

Then they all get in a motor boat and make a short trip to the island. One of the guests remark that it “is a very small boat,” to which the boat’s owner replies: “She’s a fine boat that, Ma’am. You could get to Plymouth in her as easy as winking.” (Christie^[6] 22) It is less than twenty miles from Bigbury-on-Sea to Plymouth, so this also confirms the inference that the island in question is Burgh Island.

VI Concluding Remarks

As we have seen so far, Agatha Christie used her beloved Devon in many of the settings in her books. Her description of the geography and the transportation system, especially the railway, of the area is very accurate. Indeed, she admits her love toward the railway (travel) in her *Autobiography*. There are some stories in which the railway play an important role.

Christie wrote not only about Torbay area in Devon but also about Dartmoor and also about Cornwall further south west. But we will have to stop here now and adjourn the investigation for the time being.

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アガサ・クリスティの南西イングランド (I)

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アガサ・クリスティの作品には、彼女の生まれ育ったデヴォン州が舞台としてよく用いられている。とりわけトーキイ及びその近郊のグリーンウェイがたびたび登場する。それらの描写は非常に正確であり、また交通機関、特に鉄道事情に関する記述は、驚くほど事実在即しており、鉄道に関する記述から、物語の舞台となった場所を推定することもできるくらいである。本論文は、クリスティの物語の舞台とその記述の関係を、実証的に論じたものである。