

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

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Agatha Christie wrote many stories featuring the West Country 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 very thorough so that its description is very realistic. Indeed, there are several stories in which the railway plays an important role. This study wanders around Christie's beloved South West England and investigates the connection between the scenes of the stories and the actual places.

Key Words: area study, Agatha Christie, Devon, railway.

I. Introduction

This is a sequel to Ieki⁽¹⁾ which was concerned with the works of Agatha Christie and her beloved Devon. In this study we will follow her footsteps in the West Country again and consider how these places are described in her works. Our main concern will be Devon and Cornwall, but we will refer to some other places of interest as well. We start from Dartmoor in Devon.

II. Dartmoor

To the north-west of Torquay lies Dartmoor, occupying the main part of Devon. It is the greatest expanse of wilderness in the West Country, with raw granite, barren bogland and heather-grown moor. Christie completed her first story *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* at the Moorland Hotel in Haytor, Dartmoor. The circumstances are explained in detail in her *Autobiography*.

During the First World War, Agatha was working as a volunteer nurse in the Red Cross Hospital in Torquay. When the hospital decided to open a pharmacy department, she was asked to work there. As it happened, her sister Madge had challenged Agatha to write a detective story. Since there was much time to spare in the pharmacy now, Agatha accepted the challenge and began writing her story. She was halfway through it when she stuck, and then her mother gave her a good advice. She encouraged Agatha to take a holiday and go somewhere

to finish the story. She even suggested Dartmoor as her destination.

So to Dartmoor I went. I booked myself a room in the Moorland Hotel at Hay Tor. It was a large dreary hotel with plenty of rooms...I used to write laboriously all morning till my hand ached. Then I would lunch, reading a book. Afterwards I would go out for a good walk on the moor, perhaps for a couple of hours. I think I learnt to love the moor in those days. I loved the tors and heather and all the wild part of it away from the roads. Everybody who went there would be clustering round Hay Tor itself, but I left Hay Tor severely alone and struck out on my own across country. (Christie^[4] 265)

The Moorland Hotel still exists today, but the actual building that Agatha stayed is no longer there as it was burnt down in 1970. But it was reconstructed and has "Agatha Christie Bar" in which there is a portrait of Agatha to commemorate her.(Miyazaki^[16] 139)

Dartmoor is above all famous for Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but Christie also used it in several stories. In *The Big Four* Moretonhampstead appears in its real name.

John Ingles did not delay us more than a couple of minutes, and soon we were in the train moving out of Paddington bound for the West Country. Hoppaton was a small village clustering in a hollow right on the fringe of the moorland. It was reached by a nine-mile drive from Moretonhampstead. (Christie^[10] 23)

"Hoppaton" must be somewhere near Haytor, which is about seven miles from Moretonhampstead.

In *The Sittaford Mystery* the nearest town to the scene of the crime is Exhampton, which is undoubtedly Oakhampton.

Sittaford House had been built ten years ago by Captain Joseph Trevelyan, R.N., on the occasion of his retirement from the Navy. He was a man of substance, and he had always had a great hankering to live on Dartmoor. He had placed his choice on the tiny hamlet of Sittaford. It was not in a valley like most of the villages and farms, but perched right on the shoulder of the moor under the shadow of Sittaford Beacon....The nearest town was Exhampton, six miles away, a steady descent which necessitated the sign, 'Motorists engage your lowest gear,' so familiar on the Dartmoor roads. (Christie^[12] 8)

Incidentally, the sign is now "Drive Moor Carefully" (Tsuno^[20] 181).

In *Evil under the Sun*, Hercules Poirot and the guests go on a picnic from "Smugglers' Island," which is in fact Burgh Island in Devon, to "Sheepstor," which is a real place in the west of Dartmoor. It is actually about 30 miles from Burgh Island to Sheepstor, so here is another, if indirect, evidence that Smugglers' Island in *Evil under the Sun* is in fact Burgh Island.

The three cars drove off. They first went to the real Pixy's Cave on Sheepstor and had a good deal of fun looking for the entrance and at last finding it, aided by a picture postcard. (Christie⁶¹ 151)

III. Other Scenes in Devon and Cornwall

Devon also features in a short story called "Double Sin" in *Poirot's Early Cases*. Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings are on holiday in "Ebermouth" in Devon. They get involved in a crime during their trip to "Charlock Bay" in north Devon, summoned by a client.

"Ebermouth" may be either Dartmouth or Exmouth. On the other hand, the model of "Charlock Bay" is not known, although it is stated that it can be reached in three hours by railway and two hours and ten minutes back from Ebermouth via Exeter. Dartmouth is much farther to Exeter than from Exmouth, so it should be reasonable to assume "Ebermouth" is Exmouth.

However, on inquiry, I found that the journey could be accomplished by only one change at Exeter and that the trains were good.(Christie⁶¹ 155)

The train, as you may remember telling me, left here at eleven and got to Charlock Bay at two o'clock. Then the return train is even quicker—the one we came by. It leaves Charlock at four-five and gets here at six-fifteen.(*Ibid.* 166)

Hastings, after inquiring about the trains, learns on his way back that there will be an excursion coach tour from Ebermouth to Charlock Bay the next day. And on the spur of the moment, books two seats for himself and Poirot, much to Poirot's annoyance. The tour starts at 8:30 from Ebermouth, travels through Dartmoor, lunch break at Monkhampton (which is undoubtedly Oakhampton), arrives Charlock Bay at four o'clock. The return journey takes 5 hours.

Now, a place in north Devon which can be reached by train at that time (the story was published in 1961) should be Ilfracombe. There is a village called "Porlock" which is nearer in pronunciation, but it is rejected for it does not have a railway and it is impossible to make a day trip from Ebermouth. (The railway to Ilfracombe was abolished in the 1970's and it is now only possible to reach Barnstaple by train, about ten miles short of Ilfracombe.)

According to the 1960 timetable, it is possible to go to Ilfracombe from Exmouth by changing only once at Exeter (just as the text shows). By departing Exmouth 10:45, and changing at Exeter (depart 11:43) one can arrive Ilfracombe at 14:00. The return trip is either 15:05 or 16:45 from Ilfracombe, again changing at Exeter and arriving Exmouth at 18:13 and 20:12 respectively. So as far as the (real) timetable is concerned, Exmouth could be considered as the likely candidate for "Ebermouth. "

In *Towards Zero* Devon appears as the setting for murder again. "Saltcreek" is not explicitly specified, but the map at the beginning of the book shows clearly that it is Agatha's well-known country. River Tern must be River Dart, the ferry connecting Saltcreek and Easterhead Bay seems to be Dittisham ferry. (It can be the Kingswear-Dartmouth ferry, though.) Saltington, the town with the railway station, must be Totnes up the River Dart.

Mary looked out of the open window. Lady Tressilian's house was situated on a steep cliff over-looking the River Tern. On the other side of the river was the newly created summer resort of Easterhead Bay, consisting of a big sandy bathing beach, a cluster of modern bungalows and a large Hotel on the headland looking out to sea. Saltcreek itself was a straggling picturesque fishing village set on the side of a hill. It was old-fashioned, conservative and deeply contemptuous of Easterhead Bay and its summer visitors. (Christie^[3] 39)

Cornwall, which lies to the west of Devon, appears in some stories. The first to be mentioned is "The Cornish Mystery."

The best train of the day was the one-fifty from Paddington which reached Polgarwith just after seven o'clock. The journey was uneventful, and I had to rouse myself from a pleasant nap to alight upon the platform of the bleak little station. (Christie^[9] 36-7)

Where is Polgarwith? It took a little more than 5 hours from London, but according to the timetable, if you left Paddington at this hour, you could only reach Plymouth around 7 o'clock, which can at best be said the gateway to Cornwall. If it was Torquay, it just fits. So it must be that Christie just picked up Cornwall for her setting, but really had Torquay in mind.

The same thing applies to *Peril at End House*. The setting is in "St. Loo" in the Cornish Coast. It is true that there exists a town called Looe, and there are many places with the name beginning with "St." The name is very much Cornish. In spite of this, when one considers the description of the town, one cannot help being reminded of Torquay. For example, the Majestic Hotel in the following citation is apparently the Imperial Hotel in Torquay.

No seaside town in the south of England is, I think, as attractive as St. Loo. It is well named the Queen of Watering Places and reminds one forcibly of the Riviera. The Cornish coast is to my mind every bit as fascinating as that of the south of France.(Christie^[6] 7)

We were sitting on one of the terraces of the Majestic Hotel. It is the biggest hotel in St Loo and stands in its own grounds on a headland overlooking the sea. (*Ibid.* 8)

Next we shall consider two short stories in *The Thirteen Problems*. Two Cornish villages in the stories are mentioned, which, at a glance, can be recognized as parodies of real place names.

My village is called Polperran. It is situated on the west coast of Cornwall; a very wild and rocky spot. (Christie^[11] 32)

The name of the village was Rathole. It is a queer little Cornish fishing village, very picturesque—too picturesque, perhaps.(*Ibid.* 44)

It is clear that the former is intended to be Polperro, the latter Mousehole, though Polperro is in the south coast of Cornwall, not in the west.

It is easily detected that Christie uses place names based on real places existing, which is not at all a rare phenomenon in itself. However, it must be noted that the places names are just chosen for the sake of the stories and are not the real description of the existing places. Therefore, it is different from the stories based on real descriptions of the real places: for example, *Dead Man's Folly*. We will return to this point shortly.

IV. Christie and the Railway

We have already seen Christie's love of the railway (Ieki^[15]), but we will take up here a short story named "The Plymouth Express", which shows her knowledge of the railway pretty well.

A woman's body is found in the express train from London to Plymouth. The victim was on her way to a house party near Bristol. However, she didn't get off at Bristol, according to her maid, and is found dead under the seat in the carriage near Newton Abbot.

In the story "the Plymouth Express" runs the following course.

She left London by the twelve-fourteen from Paddington, arriving at Bristol (where she had to change) at two-fifty. The principal Plymouth expresses, of course, run via Westbury, and do not go near Bristol at

all. The twelve-fourteen does a non-stop run to Bristol, afterwards stopping at Weston, Taunton, Exeter and Newton Abbot. (Christie⁹¹ 102)

As shown above, the main line to Plymouth from London does not call Bristol, but there are some through trains running via Bristol for the connection of London, Bristol and Plymouth, respectively. So it was in Christie's time and so it still is now.

This short story was published in 1951. According to the September 1950 timetable, there is an 11:15 from Paddington, which runs via Bristol to Taunton. But this train stops at Bath, Bristol, Weston, High Bridge West and Bridgwater, and does not do a "non-stop run" to Bristol. The next train will be 13:15 to Weston. On Sundays there is an additional 12:30 to Weston, but every train stops at Bath. It is the same case in June 1946 timetable. If we go back to July 1922 timetable, we find that both 11:15 and 13:00 trains do not stop at Bath. But there is a "slip carriage" service to Bath, which is an ingenious device to cut off the carriage (for Bath, for example) while the train is still running, and the cut off carriage will gradually come to a stop (by controlling the brakes in the carriage) at the station. Looking at the timetables of the period, especially of the Great Western Railway, which was eager to speed up the main line and cut short the journey time to principal stations, it is easy to find trains or rather, stations served by this slip carriage.

So there did exist trains running non-stop from London to Bristol in Christie's time. Probably Christie knew this and put it into the story.

There are some problems here, however. In the 1922 timetable, neither the 11:15 from Paddington nor the 13:00 goes through to Taunton and Plymouth, although there is a connection at Bristol for Plymouth and Torquay. The train connecting from the 13:00 from London departs Bristol 15:55 and leaves Newton Abbot 18:40, which coincides with the story pretty well.

A moment later a cry rang out into the night, and the great train came to an unwilling halt in obedience to the imperative jerking of the communication cord. (Christie⁹¹ 100)

The plot of the story, actually, is that the victim was murdered before Bristol and it was the criminal who impersonated as the victim to impress the witnesses as if she were still alive beyond Bristol. Since it is almost certainly impossible to change trains with a dead body, changing trains at Bristol is simply nonsensical. It just has to be the through train. So it might seem that the "Plymouth Express" itself is just a result of Christie's creation. But as mentioned above, there do exist Plymouth (and beyond) trains running via Bristol. There is the 16:15 from London Paddington in the 1922 timetable, for example, named "Bristol, Exeter, Plymouth Express" which stops at Chippenham,

Bath, Bristol, (Bridgwater – by slip carriage), Taunton, Exeter, Dawlish, Teignmouth, Newton Abbot, Totnes and Plymouth. The night train to Penzance also runs via Bristol.

Even now is no exception. According to the 1997 timetable, several trains still run via Bristol to Plymouth or Torquay and Paignton.

So the conclusion will be as follows. The Plymouth Express described in the story is not real in itself: meaning that there is no such train running to that time. But it is not altogether Christie's invention. There do exist trains running that route and Christie knew them very well to include it as a key factor to her story. Which, once again, shows her awareness of the railway system.

V. *4:50 from Paddington* and St Mary Mead

The setting of *4:50 from Paddington* is not exactly situated in the West Country, but we will refer to it as reflecting Christie's interests to the railway.

In this story too, the railway plays an important role, at least in the beginning. Two trains are running in the same direction, and a murder is witnessed in one of them from the other train. This unique setting is very much appealing. (Of course, there is a situation like this in other writer's story. In Andrew Garve's *The Cuckoo Line Affair* (1953), a signalman witnesses a woman being strangled from his signal box along the tracks.)

Mrs McGillicuddy, who is to witness murder, rides a train from London Paddington.

"The train standing at Platform 3," the voice told her, "is the 4:50 for Brackhampton, Milchester, Waverton, Carvil Junction, Roxeter and stations to Chadmouth. Passengers for Brackhampton and Milchester travel at the rear of the train. Passengers for Vanequay change at Roxeter." (Christie⁶⁰ 5)

After a tired day in London, she dozes off shortly after the departure of the train. Waking up later, she finds her train slowing up and there's another train running in the same direction as hers.

At that moment another train, also on the down line, swerved inward toward them, for a moment with almost alarming effect. For a time the two trains ran parallel, now one gaining a little, now the other. (*Ibid.* 7)

And in the other train Mrs McGillicuddy sees a young woman being strangled by a man whose face she could not see (because he is turning his back to her).

Aghast, she informs the train conductor, but is taken down as to have been dreaming. So she sends a note to the stationmaster in Brackhampton, the next stop.

“The train now arriving at Platform 1 is the 5:38 for Milchester, Waverton, Roxeter, and stations to Chadmouth. Passengers for Market Basing take the train now waiting at No.3 platform. No.1 Bay for stopping train to Carbury.” (*Ibid.* 10)

Miss Marple, having heard the story from Mrs McGillicuddy and, unlike the train conductor, believes her story and sets to action. Getting help from a great-nephew, who is in British Railways, Miss Marple concludes that the train in question (the one in which the murder was committed) had to be 4:33 for Market Basing.

There are only two trains that can possibly apply—the 4:33 and the 5 o'clock. The former is a slow train and stops at Haling Broadway, Barwell Heath, Brackhampton and then stations to Market Basing. The 5 o'clock is the Welsh Express for Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. The former might be overtaken somewhere by the 4:50, although it is due in Brackhampton five minutes earlier and the latter passes the 4:50 just before Brackhampton . . .” (*Ibid.* 25-26)

Mrs. McGillicuddy had said definitely that the carriage had not been a corridor one. Therefore—not the Swansea express. The 4:33 was indicated. (*Ibid.* 26)

The section in question must be Paddington—Reading. There are four tracks between these two stations, two for each direction, enabling the fast trains to pass slow ones. Since this four track section ends at Reading, it is impossible for two trains to run in the same direction after Reading. The tracks from Reading to Didcot for Oxford and Bristol do remain four tracks, but since Reading is the first major stop after Paddington, and Miss Marple's village St Mary Mead is described “20 miles from the coast” (*The Body in the Library*), (Didcot is in the opposite direction from the sea) the section where the murder occurred must be Paddington—Reading. So Brackhampton has to be Reading.

It goes without saying that the stations described in the story are fictional, but they are somehow realistic. For example, the first stop of 4:33 train is “Haling Broadway” which is no doubt Ealing Broadway, and “Barwell Heath” seems to be Hanwell.

Now we will look at the timetable. According to the 1950 timetable, there is a slow train 16:30 from Paddington, which arrives Reading at 17:42. On the

other hand, 16:40 for Oxford passes the 16:30 on the way, arriving at Reading at 17:24. If the latter train was running a little late, it is indeed possible that the two trains run parallel somewhere. Indeed, it seems that this was an accidental case, since it is indicated in the story that when Miss Marple rides the same train with Mrs McGillicuddy a few days after the incident, no other train draws level with their train.(Christie^[6] 21)

It must be noted, regretfully, that the distribution of the tracks is rather different now, so that the (two) fast lines and (two) slow lines are paired and laid. Which means that no two trains going the same direction runs immediately adjacent, but with another track in between them. So the situation described in the story is hard to occur, if not impossible.

Of course this does not invalidate Christie's story, all the more so that the distribution of the tracks might have been different in Christie's times. It can even be the case that the direction of the trains were being altered by some reason (which often happens in Britain) at that time.

We will return to the train itself. This plot is based on Christie's draft for her novel *The Burden*, in which she was interested in the two trains passing or going in the same direction.

Long ago she had made the note, 'Man sees girl being strangled in train' and now she developed it as a new problem for Miss Marple. 'Train. Coming from London, Reading? passes local?—no corridors?... Now?—what really happened? Man strangles woman. Her body thrown out of carriage on to the embankment or field. Or tunnel? If tunnel, how far from London? Embankment or field his own. . . ' So Agatha launched into the story, introducing Mrs McGillicuddy and Lucy Eyelesbarrow, 'leg man' for Miss Marple who, like Agatha, found it increasingly difficult to scramble about. (Morgan^[7] 305-6)

There does not, however, exist "the 4:50 from Paddington", but for a very good reason. (Or we should say 4:50 train was chosen for the purpose.) It is stated that Christie went out of her way to consult a friend of hers (not her great-nephew!) and made certain that there was no 4:50 train from Paddington.

This is because a Mr. Nicoletis who happened to have the same name as the character in *Hickory Dickory Dock* objected that Christie had libelled his mother by using her name in the novel. So (at least in the time) Christie seemed reluctant to use real names, even if they were train times. Agatha's painstaking effort is described in detail in Morgan^[7].

The title of Agatha's new mystery had a number of changes. First it was 'The 4.15 from Paddington', then 'The 4.30', next 'The 4.50' and, when Agatha sent her draft to Cork in March 1956, 'The 4.54'. At

Nimrod she consulted Peter Hulin, an epigraphist with a passion for railway trains and timetables, and on his advice fixed upon 4.54, since he assured her that no train left Paddington at that time. Otherwise, she informed Cork: 'I thought people might write and say "but the 4.40(or whatever it was)goes to Weston-super-Mare."' Collins found this too clumsy, while Dodd, Mead suggested that American readers might not recognise the station. Exasperated, Agatha offered Cork '4.54 from London' adding that, if they feared another Mr Nicoletis, 'possibly refer to the Terminus as Padderloo?—in case someone lives in a large house surrounded by railway. . . .' They settled on *The 4.50 from Paddington*. (*Ibid.* 306)

The title was thus decided, but the American title became *What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw!*, which shows (as Christie feared) that the American readers were not familiar with Paddington. And in the Pocket Book edition the train even departs Paddington at 4:54!

Incidentally, there does exist the 4:50 from Paddington (which runs to Marlow and High Wycombe) in the 1922 timetable. But neither the 4:50 nor the 4:54 existed in the 1950's.

A few words on the whereabouts of St Mary Mead. It is certain that it is in the south west of London and Reading. It might be somewhere in the district surrounded by Reading—Westbury—Salisbury—Basingstoke—Reading. The reason for this is as follows. i) It can be reached from London Paddington. ii) Market Basing, which also appears in some other stories, seems to be Basingstoke. (It is stated in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* that Market Basing can be reached from London Waterloo, which is just the case with Basingstoke.) iii) There are several dismantled railways in the district. (There is a railway station in St Mary Mead, although Mrs. McGillicuddy didn't use it.) iv) It is about thirty to forty miles from the coast. (It is farther than stated in *The Body in the Library*, but it cannot be nearer than that in order to reach St Mary Mead from Paddington, since the south coast is served by trains from London Waterloo.)

Of course, as will be seen below, St Mary Mead has no particular model, so the trial to locate St Mary Mead itself seems to be futile, but even Christie herself admits that it is somewhere in Hampshire. Incidentally, the BBC film of Miss Marple series was on location in Nether Wallop, which lies just off the district mentioned above. So it is not so farfetched as it might seem, that St Mary Mead might be somewhere in this area.

It goes without saying that St Mary Mead does not exist nor has certain models.(Though in Japan it is wrongly assumed that the model of St Mary Mead is Widecombe-in-the-Moor, Devon.) But it just fits any old English village. It is, as Barnard^[1] describes, a "Mayhem Parva." We will return to it

shortly.

VI. Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, Agatha Christie wrote many stories in which the scenes are set in Devon where she was born and bred. It is easy to follow the "places of origin", or the models of the places. Her description of the railway and its system is also quite accurate. It is true, however, that after the Nicoletis incident, she was more careful in using proper names. But finding the models of the places on which the stories are based upon is very interesting, sometimes more interesting than solving the mysteries themselves.

The description of the places that she knew very well, such as Nasse House in *Dead Man's Folly* (alias Greenway House) is naturally very precise. On the other hand, although many places are used in Devon and Cornwall, either in disguise or in their actual names, few of them are closely described or there are some which appears just as place names. i.e. they do not have to be in Devon or Cornwall: they just can be anywhere. So there are two kinds of places. The places which she knew and are actually described, and the places which she only borrowed their names.

St Mary Mead, which is an important base for Miss Marple stories, is quite a different problem. St Mary Mead and some other villages described in Christie's stories seem just like typical English villages. And yet they are not based on any specific villages. It is true that there are so many villages like them so it is practically impossible to identify them. These village settings are called "Mayhem Parva". "Mayhem" stands for disorder, disaster or death, while "Parva" means village (Takahashi^[9] 62). It is a world shut off from the political and social preoccupations of the day.

In *Murder is Easy* Christie describes one such village "Wychwood-under-Ashe" as follows. It might be very well said to be a description of St Mary Mead.

Wychwood... consists mainly of its one principal street. There were shops, small Georgian houses, prim and aristocratic, with whitened steps and polished knockers, there were picturesque cottages with flower gardens. There was an inn, the Bells and Motley, standing a little back from the street. There was a village green and a duck pond, and presiding over them a dignified Georgian house... (Christie^[7] 23)

All in all, we can conclude that there are no actual models in St Mary Mead and other "villages", but they are described according to "Mayhem Parva" convention. So it might seem futile to search for the model of St Mary Mead.

Even so, there are places in her stories, which apparently seem to be based on real places in Devon, which give us pleasure to search for and try to locate the

places and compare them with the description in the stories. It must be emphasized that Christie's description is such that it invokes the readers the scenes of the crimes, as well as the atmosphere of the "old English villages" and makes them want to visit the scenes.

There is much to say about "Mayhem Parva." Many authors have written mysteries according to "Mayhem Parva" convention, including Christie herself. One of them is Martha Grimes, who is an American writer but her mysteries capture the atmosphere of the English villages fairly well. And there is also much to say about St Mary Mead itself. But that will have to wait for another occasion.

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アガサ・クリスティの南西イングランド(Ⅱ)

い き やす ひろ
家 木 康 宏

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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登場する。本稿は家木[1997]の続編であり、デヴォン州、コンウォール州など、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。彼女の物語に現れる地名は、彼女がよく知っていた場所を描いたものと、名前だけを借りたものとの2種類がある。また、特に特定のモデルを持たず、いわゆる「メイヘム・パーヴァ」の概念に基づいて描写されている場所も多い。それと同時に、物語の中で重要な役割を演じることがある鉄道についてのクリスティの知識についても引き続き論じたい。