

A CURE FOR CONSUMPTION IN SPAXTON?

Older residents will remember that Quantock Lodge in Over Stowey was for forty years a TB hospital, closing its doors in 1965 and later becoming a boarding school. But 20 years earlier, Spaxton had its own sanatorium for treating TB. In 1900, Timbercombe, that grand house beyond the Pines Cafe, once spoken of as the future home of Johnny Depp, was a much favoured hospital for the treatment of incipient phthisis (or consumption, or tuberculosis of the lung.) In a directory of sanatoria for consumptives, it is described thus:

Timbercombe is a private house under the care of two ladies, one of whom was for some time a patient at Nordrach in Germany. It is intended for patients for whom daily medical supervision is not necessary, but who would benefit greatly from “Nordrach treatment”. The number of patients is limited to ten. Visits from relatives and friends are only exceptionally permitted. The visiting physician, Dr Brown of Taunton, examines patients once a month. Terms: three guineas, including all except personal laundry”.

Nordrach treatment consisted of three elements:

- Abundance of fresh air at all times and in all weather;
- Abundance of nourishing food – “some might call it superabundance”
- Rest and exercise graduated according to the state of the body temperature.

The first antibiotics for TB became available in the 1950’s. There is now widespread resistance to many of the drugs, and it may be that in years to come we may once again be resorting to “pine tree therapy” rather like the Nordrach treatment.

I learned all this as a result of a chance meeting with Dr Jessica Milner Davis, whose Australian satnav, set for Timbercombe, abandoned her in Charlynch Lane. Read on for the rest of the story.

Richard Lee

ARTHUR HENRY WALKER B.A., 1871-1907

I came to Spaxton in July this year, looking for a large old country house called Tempercombe or Timbercombe. Being a colonial from Sydney, I got hopelessly lost in the beautiful country lanes. I did find the house, although its seclusion (and security gates) made any view impossible from the street – but it was there, just where it ought to have been.

Why Timbercombe? At the turn of the 19th century, it was a very advanced and progressive sanatorium for the treatment of private patients with phthisis. I knew this because I had in my possession a letter dated from the Sanatorium on 10 July 1902 written by my Great-Uncle Arthur, thanking his former students at the United Services College in Westward Ho! for their kind fund-raising that was enabling him to take a course of treatment at Timbercombe. Sadly he was not cured, and early in 1903, he left England for good for South Africa, hoping that the climate would assist. He seemed to thrive for a while and was a highly valued member of staff at the Victoria College Boys High School, Stellenbosch. He died (of tuberculosis) in Stellenbosch in 1907; but he died happily married to a local girl.

Before Arthur became ill, he was a fine cricketer, a singer and a poet, and by 1902 had published a short text book, *A Primer of Greek Constitutional History* (Oxford: Blackwell). Arthur’s mother turned her back on him, refusing to recognize his wife and tearing her letters into shreds. His name was only added to the family grave in Arnos Vale Cemetery, Bristol, after his mother’s death.

Whatever the cause of his mother’s displeasure, Arthur’s life was permanently blighted by his father’s suicide on 3 September 1902: He shot himself in the head in a railway carriage somewhere between his local suburban stations of Montpelier and Redland. Maybe Arthur’s decision to go abroad was the last straw for his father. But evidently Arthur was a sensitive and clever man, and it’s nice to know that the beautiful country of the Quantocks gave him the rest and strength he needed to make difficult decisions and to embark on a new life in South Africa with, it seems, the girl he loved.

Jessica Milner Davis. Sydney, October 2015