



"Trees, walled garden and stabled yard complete a traditional picture."

## Weekend and a Quarter!

TWO 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ -LITRE M.G.s MAKE  
AN EXMOOR VOYAGE

by Michael Brown



IT had been obvious for a long time that my host had similar tastes to my own. We had both been to sea in the past—and liked it; we both had a great affection for the English countryside; we both owned 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ -litre M.G.s (and liked them, too), and we both attempted to convey to others in writing something of the pleasures we experienced behind the wheel. The name "Longships" in this connection may be familiar to older readers, and it is sufficient to say that it was to "Longships" Devon home that the 1 $\frac{1}{4}$  took us for the purpose of exploring the by-ways of Devon and Somerset, from the Culme Valley northwards to Exmoor and the Bristol Channel.

Our host, owing to his long years of service as a doctor in the Navy, was for the occasion promoted to commodore of the convoy; his present shore-going practice having, also, enabled him to acquire a certain knowledge of the navigation of some of the lesser-known Devon lanes which it was thought might prove useful during our weekends. His tastes resulted in a route that no motorist could fail to enjoy. Certainly we were bound to enjoy it, conditioned, as we were, by the gracious hospitality of an English country home, and not even one day of almost continuous rain was able to mar that enjoyment, for the route had been cunningly planned to give a kick to the driving, and that kick is fortunately independent of weather. The convoy set out on time, two green cars strong, completely in the hands of the commodore, the navigators having a day off.

This route, then, must be taken for what it is—one of really narrow but quite easy lanes, provided you are not afraid of reversing, and of stiff gradients occasionally necessitating first gear. As a measure of their character, none on the route is as difficult as Porlock Hill, which was included in the tour. Show such a route to a 1 $\frac{1}{4}$  M.G. and you can almost hear it rub its hands together; show it to two of them and they want to elbow each other out of first place. But even with their narrow overall width (4ft 11in) they must stay put in the lanes; the commodore heads the column perforce.

The starting point (Willand) has a special interest, for near

to it is a spot named Verbeer on the map. Verbeer is obviously no English name, although the splendid old country house that it describes is as English as it can be. It is set some way back from the road near the old village, and possesses Jacobean panelling and a Georgian front, while trees, walled garden and stabled yard complete the traditional picture.

But the name. Right back—13th century or so—the Dutch are supposed to have landed in the neighbourhood of Plymouth and made their way towards London. One or two sensible fellows dropped out on the way, deciding that Devon was good enough for them, and established such farmsteads as Verbeer. It claims to be one of the original buildings of the village of Willand, along with the church. The third was burned down some years ago.

We were away to Tiverton, which, on casual acquaintance, might be dismissed as a pleasant country town, with a chuckle over the enormous knife-and-fork sign on a shop in the main street. That would be a pity, for Tiverton has some surprising corners. Peep through an arch in an ordinary façade and a 14th-century alley may reward you. Peep through a certain arch and the reward will be Old Blundells, the original buildings of the famous school, warmly grey beyond the green lawns that Devon rain makes easy of growth. Tread softly up the churchyard path, also, and scan the south wall, richly carved with emblems of trade and industry, nautical motifs being predominant. These are the highlights of a workaday picture.

To the north-west the land rises towards Exmoor, and from the main road we struck off into the lanes, making for Molland. I could appreciate why the commodore had fitted Windtone horns in place of the rather undignified cheep that is standard on the M.G., for most of the corners are blind. As "next in line" we enjoyed a field day of observation, having only to keep the tail of the leading M.G. in sight. As a consequence the rosebay, the honeysuckle, the ferns, mosses and lush grasses of the Devon hedgerows could be admired (the honeysuckle could be smelt, drifting in the windows on the warm, wet, western air). The rain hissed



softly down, punctuated by the snick-snick of the gear lever, continually in use. Up, down and round, and suddenly there was Molland, cream walls and thatch, nasturtiums and Dorothy Perkins ramblers, aglow against the grey of the day.

Molland has claims to fame, for West Molland manor was formerly the seat of the famous Devon family of Courtenay. In the church there is a double heart-stone which forms the receptacle for the hearts of one of the Courtenays and his wife, the family's arms being carried on the stone. As if this were not sufficient county influence, Molland stands on the River Yeo, a Devon name if ever there was one. North of the village rises Anstey Common, and up the steep hill past Cussacombe Gate\* the commodore's car swept up to the moor.

### The Moors

Above about 1,000ft in Devon the character of the scene changes abruptly. Bracken fights the heather for pride of place in the sun, and grey stone crops out of the purple and green. The gentle summits are a great sweep of colour, contrasting with the small-squared chequerboard pattern of the farmed land lower down. On a fine day you can see into Cornwall from up on Anstey Moor, and you might acknowledge your debt to a certain Froude Hancock, who did much to make this moor accessible. He is commemorated in a singularly tasteful way, by a great natural boulder out in the heather on which his name and dates of birth and death have been carved.

From Cussacombe Gate (1,207ft), the road follows the hog-back of the moor towards Dulverton, plunging down after reaching Five Cross Ways into a steep coombe, through which flows Danes Brook, the border of Devon and Somerset. At a crossing point—Glade Bridge—we lunched, contemplating a steep ascent on the other side, and, after a short warming-up the M.G.s leaped up on to the Exmoor plateau. This was one of the climbs on which first gear was needed. Momentarily—and relatively—the car drops down again at Withypool, and again at Exford, but the heights are dominant until you have crossed Codsand Moors and are skirting Dunkery Hill on the right.

Here the characteristic Exmoor coombe scenery intrudes as the road zig-zags down through the trees towards Cloutsham. The bracken proves less suppressive of the short turf than might be expected, the stream splashes along from boulder to boulder in the valley. You must ford this stream at Cloutsham, and during a period of heavy rain a

\* The word "gate" is derived from the English word *yate* or *yeate*, by which was meant an opening or entrance. There is an old cross in Cornwall, situated at the junction of three ancient tracks which opened out at that point, and the cross was anciently known as "Wydeyeate Cross" in consequence. The adjoining meadow is still so called.



"The road zig-zags down through the trees"—and also through the farmyard shown in this picture.



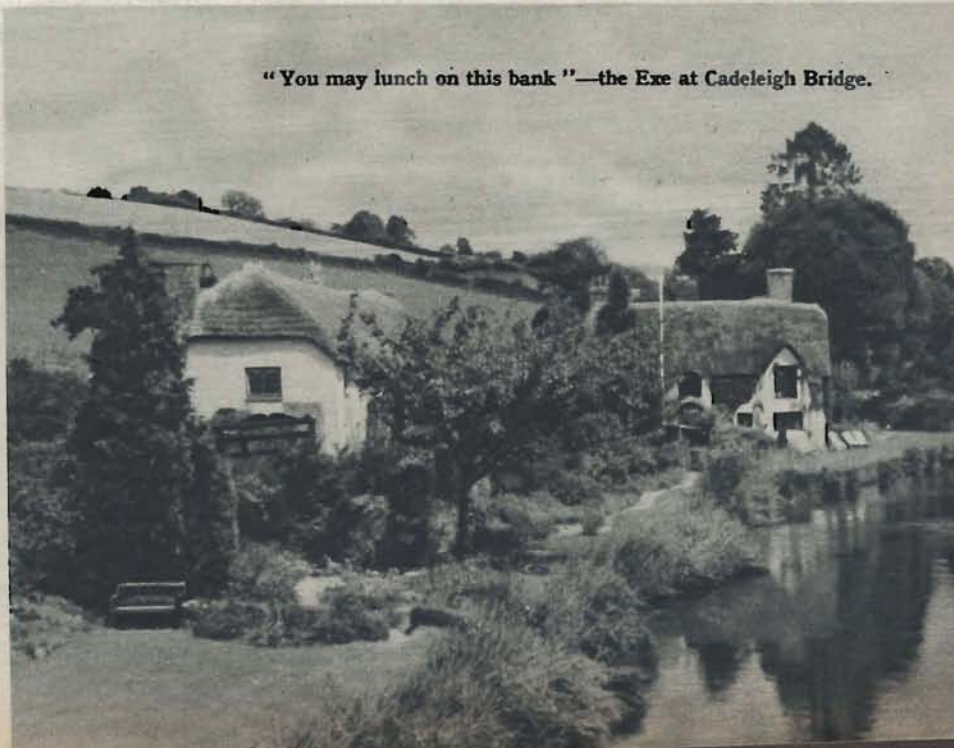
"Here the characteristic Exmoor coombe scenery intrudes."

reconnaissance is advisable; later the packhorse bridge over Horner Water, to the left of the road, should not be missed. And then, suddenly, you are out on holiday route A39, and within a mile of Porlock village. "Shall we climb Porlock?" asked the commodore. "My car has not yet done it, and I want a comparison with my previous one."

"Neither has mine, and it would be a pity to come to the West Country and not to climb Porlock." We trickled through the village, thronged with cars and wet holiday-



"Commemorated in a singularly tasteful way"—the boulder on Anstey Moor which serves as a memorial to Froude Hancock (1865-1933).



"You may lunch on this bank"—the Exe at Cadeleigh Bridge.



## WEEKEND AND A QUARTER!

continued

makers, now drying off a little in the pale sunshine that had at last peeped through the low cloud.

Too many of us, I think, tend to assume that everyone knows Porlock and climbs it successfully, but the local garage proprietor can put us right on that, as also could the scene that afternoon. Two cars were stopped in trouble on the hill, and it was, as usual during holidays, watched by spectators at the two hairpins low down. I would not minimize the climb, which is decidedly stiff, and is bound to call for first gear on the less powerful cars, as well as a sharp haul round on the first hairpin. If in doubt, take the toll road (as hundreds do). If in doubt as to a skilful change down into bottom gear, take proper notice of the sign that reads "Bottom gear now" but make sure that your speed has dropped sufficiently for successful engagement. If blithely confident, speed into the first hairpin in second gear, at high revs, and make a smart change into bottom gear as soon as the revs have fallen on the hairpin, which they will quickly do. Never mind the disappointment on the faces of the spectators as the lever goes in. The pleasure's yours! So we climbed Porlock, and for the record an M.G. that



"You must ford this stream at Cloutsham."

could probably do with decarbonization needed first gear over three sections. It is a long climb—deceptively long—but the toll road, with its easier gradient, is longer. It is also much more scenic, for Porlock Bay, a gentle curve outlined in the white of Bristol Channel wavelets, comes into view several times from varying heights. This road swings to and fro under trees, passes through the tollgate, and fetches up in the village again, from which we took the route of no return (at least by another road) to Porlock Weir, a quiet shingle haven down on the beach where a few yachts nuzzle each other and there can be no through traffic.

Worthy lies just beyond the Weir, and here we had the exquisite experience of being shown Worthy Manor by its present occupier, who had kindly invited us to take tea with him. It would be unfair to dilate on the Manor's charms, because it is strictly private, but it is a period gem the history of which goes back to the 12th century, and it has been most carefully preserved by Lady Lovelace. There is much original timber, a priest's hole and a glorious garden down to the sea where camellias, rhododendrons and ericas grow that the frost would cut down farther east; its present occupant makes the old house live with his enthusiasm for it.

With the evening came the soft Devon rain again—the rain to which the Devon greenery is owed, and as such better able to be borne with equanimity. We cut from A39 over the hill through Wootton Courtney to Timberscombe on A396, and along that winding main road, clinging to the valley of the River Exe, with all that that implies in scenery, we went fast home.

But we had not finished with homes of beauty. The Sunday morning broke with brilliant sunshine and fleecy clouds, and the hours before it was necessary to head Londonwards again could be well spent. After turning right in Cullompton's main street, which is also A38, we climbed into the lanes again towards Butterleigh and up the hill on which stands Hillersdon House. From this high vantage-point one can look north-east towards Taunton and be rewarded by field and farmstead, copse and hillcrest, spread in a pattern that is not quite Devon, not quite Somerset; which is as it should be near the border.

Our host and hostess now adopted that conspiratorial air that says, "Ah, but wait." We were quite content to do so, for the lanes under the sun poured their gold and green into the atmosphere. A mile or two beyond Butterleigh, following the road through the valley past Great Dorweeke Farm, we suddenly came out on to A396 near Bickleigh, crossed the ancient stone bridge over the Exe (Cadeleigh Bridge), parked and strolled back to admire the view.

## English Fare

It is as English as afternoon tea. The river runs quietly and smoothly between banks of blossom and green grass. On the left bank (the right as you observe it from the bridge) flowers and grass are wild—gold of ragwort and St. John's Wort, green of water-meadow; on the opposite side is the gaiety of late summer—gladioli, pelargoniums and phlox, offset by close-mown turf. You may lunch on this bank, at a thatched cottage by the riverside, along the village street, and in the goldfish pond you might recognize Doris and Rufus—but that is another story.

However, this is not the *pièce de résistance* of this part of Devon. Over the bridge is a sharp left-hand turn, the road running along on the bank of the river, under the trees, to what the map calls Bickleigh Court; with less than justice, for it is Bickleigh Castle. Not much appears to have been published about Bickleigh Castle, but it is an ancient castle, painstakingly restored to a beauty that is rarely surpassed.

How far one should go and peer at such residences is a moot point, but Bickleigh Castle is quite irresistible, and the owner can but feel flattered at your tribute. The English are, when they choose to be, great craftsmen in stone and real artists in a garden, and here is proof of it. Drive softly, park gently, and pay tribute. Then cross the road.

For the restoration did not stop at the castle. Opposite it stood a cattle byre up to 1929, when the true purpose of the ancient stone building was once more fulfilled, for it was really a Saxon chapel. Here, a similar restoration has been carried out, but here it has been imbued with something spiritual and the result is, in some peculiar way, very moving. The simple and tiny chapel grips the imagination. "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." In this ancient place of worship, the words from St. Matthew are very apt.

Outside, a similar care has been lavished on the chapel's setting, for the south door gives on to a garden walled in stone. The centre is a lawn, while a two-foot border, massed in flowers, shelters under the wall. The top of the wall has been thatched with an increasingly rare skill.

This, then, is the gem hiding in this part of Devon. It should be allowed its sanctity, attracting only those who really wish to seek it out and are ready to pay due regard to the proper feelings of its owner.

The tramp of sightseers on the Saxon flags would be sacrilegious; the soft steps of the two or three, the moment of meditation, and the willing acknowledgment of the power of Christianity, remain right and proper.



AUGUST 31, 1951



1035



### A Chapel by the Exe

At Bickleigh, in Devon, the restored Saxon chapel and castle described in the article on the previous pages reveal a labour of love of which the photographs are proof. Above is the simple and tiny interior, on the right the thatched exterior. The road between castle and chapel has been beautified by flower-beds (top right), and the chapel itself stands in a walled garden of singular peace and charm (below).

Over the thatched top of the wall the sun slants across the castle façade. The tower on the left is restored, but with a year or two of weathering will be almost indistinguishable from its original twin.

