



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

CORNWALL THEN AND NOW

by

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**Wilkie Collins Society
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In 1851, Wilkie Collins published *Rambles beyond Railways: or notes in Cornwall taken a-foot*, a description of his walking tour of Cornwall the previous year. The book included twelve lithographs by his travelling companion, the young artist Henry Brandling.

In the Introduction, Collins wrote “On considering where we should go, as pedestrians anxious to walk where fewest strangers had walked before, we found ourselves fairly limited to a choice between Cornwall and Kamchatka - we were patriotic, and selected the former.” The complete tour took a route along the south coast of Cornwall to Land’s End, returning along the northern coast with visits to some inland sites.

On recent visits to Cornwall, I have been attempting to reproduce photographically these twelve scenes as they now appear compared with the early 1850s. The images have been converted to black and white and toned to match the original lithographs although space permits only half of the illustrations to be included here.

St Germans

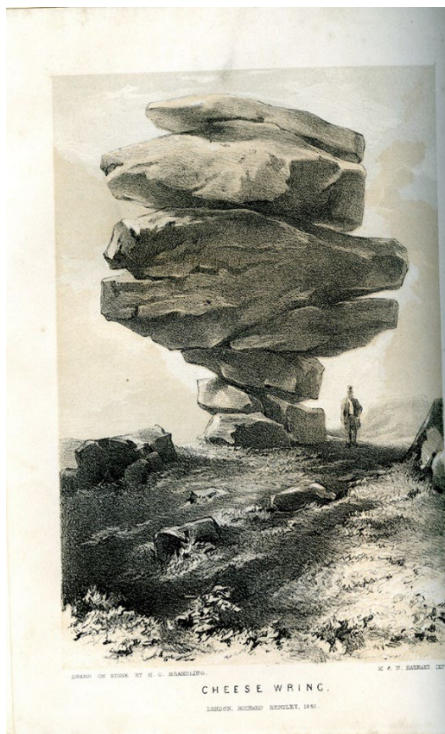
Collins and Brandling began their journey at Plymouth with a boat trip via Saltash to St Germans where Brandling produced his first illustration. The view now is remarkably similar to that of 1851. The 13th century Norman church is Grade 1 listed, still standing but no longer covered with foliage. The tree on the left is perhaps also the original. The viewpoint is now situated on the private Port Eliot estate - but alas there are no longer strolling families with bonnets and top-hats.





The Cheese-Wring

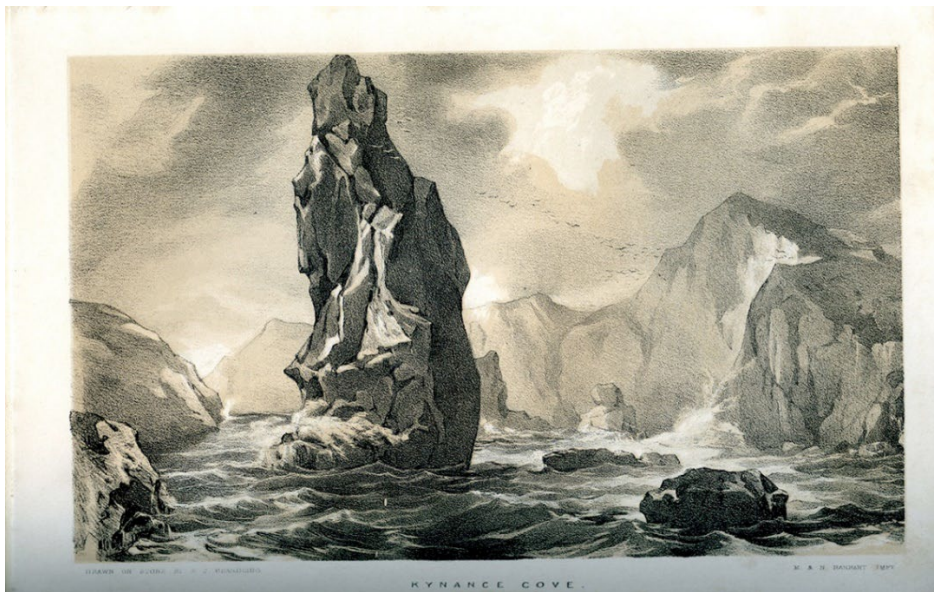
The travellers then visited Looe before turning inland to Bodmin Moor. Here they visited the Cheese-Wring, a precarious looking inverted triangle of stones, both then and now “visible a mile and a half away, on the summit of a steep hill.” Take your choice whether you believe it to be a Druid temple or a natural rock formation. Brandling’s picture makes it appear much more rugged in Collins’s day and at some more recent time it has been stabilised with the additional stones on the left-hand side. Fortuitously a modern tourist substitutes for the Victorian gentleman in the original.



Kynance Cove

Collins and Brandling left Bodmin for a hike much further west to the Lizard, England's most southerly point. They then took a two mile walk along the cliffs to reach Kynance Cove "the place at which the coast scenery of the Lizard district arrives at its climax of grandeur.....unrivalled in Cornwall; perhaps, unrivalled anywhere."

Brandling's lithograph shows Steeple Rock, slightly more attenuated than in real life, surrounded by waves – a good example of artistic licence. Kynance Cove is a photographer's delight to visit with dramatic rocks and caves to explore. The picture as seen, however, is impossible to replicate since it can be achieved only at low tide when this portion of the beach is no longer under water.



St Michael's Mount

Situated opposite the small town of Marazion, St Michael's Mount is now a National Trust property. Lord St Levan of the St Aubyn family retains a 999 year lease to live in the castle and show the historic rooms to the public. The Mount is approached either by boat or along the famous causeway at low tide.

Photographers are frequently accused of 'Photoshopping the truth' but artists take even greater liberties with reality. The lithograph of St Michael's Mount is another case where it proved impossible to replicate the view photographically. Compared with the 'correct' modern photograph, it looks as if the artist's version is almost a mirror image. We'll never know if the reversal was deliberate or accidental but it was still present in the second edition of *Rambles* in 1852.



Land's End

Furthest west, of course, is Land's End. "Granite, and granite alone, that you see.....presenting an appearance of adamantine solidity and strength.....The solitude on these heights is unbroken - no houses are to be seen - often, no pathway is to be found." Unlike Collins's time, Land's End is a commercial horror of modern attractions, a victim of its own success. They can't charge for what is public space so they exact an extortionate parking fee. Only go if you've never been: if you've been before, don't go back! In any event, here we have more artistic licence but in this case it is the photographer who has cheated by flipping the image horizontally to match the original.



Tintagel

Collins's return journey was along the north coast where most of the places visited such as Botallack mine are not specifically illustrated in *Rambles*. The exception is the last important point of interest represented by the final illustration - "Tintagel Castle, an ancient ruin magnificently situated on a precipice overhanging the sea." Once again Brandling uses artistic licence and exaggerates the ruins to look like significant remains of the legendary castle. Even in 1851 the remains "only consist of a few straggling walls, loosely piled up." Since the photograph was taken in April 2019, an unspoiled view of Tintagel is no longer possible because of the new bridge at high level between the two headlands.



The original 19 century editions of *Rambles Beyond Railways* have long been out of print. There were two 20th century editions, neither of which included Brandling's lithographs. Plans are now afoot to publish in the near future a new, unabridged edition. This will feature both sets of all twelve illustrations as well as a modern commentary.

Finally, I hope this article shows that the artist's perspective is very often impossible to reproduce photographically. If you doubt 'the camera never lies', then consider that artists can be even more 'economical with the truth'.

This edition of
'Cornwall then and Now'
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