

# OUR RIVER TORRIDGE

*Hither from my moorland home Nymph of  
Torrige proud I come.*

(Charles Kingsley)

A river fascinates most of us and we in Weare Giffard are very aware of the ever-present force and energy, which the Torrige radiates as it flows to the sea along the western boundary of our parish.

A journalist once wrote:

*"The village of Weare Giffard nestles in the wooded valley of the tidal Torrige and is a 'Sylvan Paradise', boasting no inland beauty spot of more delight, typical of the joys of rural life, with surpassing beauty presented at every turn of the winding stream. The situation is ideal, with tonic properties of the bracing North Devon air but sheltered by the hills from the quarters whence all cold winds blow".*

(Bideford Weekly Gazette dated 1905).

This is as true today as when it was written nearly one hundred years ago; and the chosen course of the Torrige is responsible for the location of our village. Ancient Mesolithic people travelled inland along the banks of the Torrige over 4000 years ago and established a working flint site near Weare Giffard Cross. The river has been used as a communication network long before highways and byways became commonplace. After King Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings, his sons sailed up the Torrige estuary in 1069, in an attempt to eject the Norman Sheriff of Devon, Baldwin de Bionne, but their endeavours failed. The site of the church and the manor was carefully selected as a defensive position, with the added advantage that the river was tidal above this point. A weir close to the manor was used to catch salmon and other river fish. The

cannons intended for use in defending Weare Giffard Hall at the time of the Civil War, were probably brought upstream by boat. Sand, naturally calcareous, was extracted around the river in the 17th century and was transported inland to sweeten the acid soil.

A man-made leat was created from the weir at Beam, on the Torrige, to supply water to drive the wheels of the Tucking Mill and Corn Mill. In later years, our river became home to a small shipbuilding complex at Sea Lock below Annery Kiln. Limestone and culm were brought upstream to the many limekilns along the valley, and so the river was a very well used highway.

The river has many moods and is usually benign and peaceful but this can change suddenly when swollen by heavy rain. It can become a raging torrent, and when these conditions coincide with a high tide and low air pressure, the banks disappear beneath a widening lake of rushing water. Unfortunately, the Torrige has taken its toll of human life and over the years, several people have been drowned.

Mrs. Lucas recalls that when parish meetings were adjourned, parishioners could assess, by the sound of the river, whether they would need to 'pickup tonight'. Most of the cottages had stone floors and easily movable furniture so a community spirit rallied to help those flooded. On another occasion when the water 'was out', the Reverend Lucas happened upon a worried postman unable to reach the post-box which he

The rector rolled up his trousers, waded to the post-box and collected two buttons and a snail! Farmer John Moore from Riversdale had to milk his cows in the road as his shippen was under water, and when Mr. Braunton was moving two pigs to safety, one escaped, swam across the river to Loxdown and disappeared into a culvert. Howard Curtis was dispatched to effect a rescue. Howard and the pig were pulled from the other end of the culvert!

Pollution from chemicals in the 1970's caused a dreadful decline in salmon and sea trout in the Torridge. This also affected the whole wildlife cycle from small insects to otters and other mammals. Fortunately the Environment Agency and Water Companies are now fully aware of pollution dangers, and with the help of strict controls to prevent contamination, there is some recovery of wildlife.

All-time local folk are well-used to our river - its ways, its varying tune, its vagaries, and 'in-comers' to the village soon become equally fascinated by the constant changes. So, without our river, perhaps no village with villagers and

this book

**WEATHER RECORDS  
PINEWOOD  
WEARE GIFFARD 1981-2001**

Highest Rainfall in a day - 91mm (3.6")  
12th June 1993.

Highest Pressure - 1045mb (30.87")  
26th January 1992.

Lowest Pressure - 954mb (28.18")  
25th Febraury 1989.

Highest Temperature - 32°C (89.6°F)  
3rd August 1990.

Lowest Temperature - -10°C (13.6°F)  
10th February 1991.

Driest month - Febraury 1986.

Wettest month - 268mm (10.5")  
December 1999.

Wettest year - 1585mm (62.4")  
2000.

Earliest frost - 29th October 1997.

Latest frost - 26th April 1989.

Altitude 30ft above sea level



*The river at Weare Giffard Quay*

## “The Riddle of the River” by J. Weare-Giffard

This is a tale of romance and smuggling written in 1923 by an author, Jeffery Farnol using the pseudonym ‘J. Weare-Giffard’. The story is set in our village.

A synopsis of the narrative is presented here by Peter and Joan David.

### THE TORRIDGE - AN INSPIRATION

*“A widower and his daughter come to live in Weare Giffard, in a cottage by the quay. The father works for a widow who owns a warehousing business in Bideford, whilst the daughter is employed as a school mistress in Weare Giffard.*

*One afternoon, the Squire and a coastguard officer, while out otter hunting, find a local man beaten and unconscious on an island in the river. They carry him to the schoolhouse where the schoolmistress cares for him until the doctor arrives. Later he says that he has been attacked by a gang but refuses to divulge their names.*

*On enquiry, the coastguard finds that there is a great deal of smuggling taking place around Bideford and he narrows it down to the widow’s warehouse. However, he has fallen in love with the schoolmistress and thus is in an awkward situation.*

*Nevertheless, he raids the warehouse and finds a large quantity of brandy. He arrests*

*the father and the widow but the rest of the gang escape. Unfortunately, the widow falls down unconscious and is therefore unable to clear the girl’s father and the girl is very angry with the coastguard.*

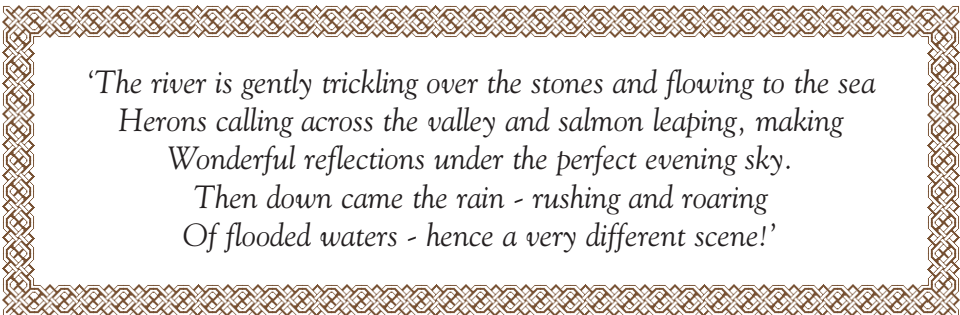
*In an attempt to set matters right, he tries to catch the rest of the gang. He finds them at Crow Point where there is a fight and he is wounded in the leg.*

*However, his men overtake the gang on the estuary and arrest them. The coastguard then persuades them to clear the father who is acquitted and released.*

*They return to Weare Giffard where the daughter, on hearing of the efforts of the coastguard to clear her father, forgives him and agrees to marry”.*

There are several books by J. Weare

There are several books by J. Weare Giffard and all are written about the smuggling of contraband around the Taw-Torrige estuary.



*‘The river is gently trickling over the stones and flowing to the sea  
Herons calling across the valley and salmon leaping, making  
Wonderful reflections under the perfect evening sky.  
Then down came the rain - rushing and roaring  
Of flooded waters - hence a very different scene!’*

**Weare Giffard on the Torridge.**

*The River Torridge port a tidal stream  
Reaching upward as to Beam  
Where trout and salmon at a weir delay,  
Ardent anglers oft' their fly do play.*

*The River at Bideford it does retard  
After graceful flowing though Weare Giffard  
Where, from Ha'Penny Bridge a lovely view  
This Devon vale beholds to you.*

*Midst vale, stands a very old church in view,  
Beyond that structure the home here where Fortesque  
Anciently, lived all deeds recall,  
They in the famed Manor House, 'Weare Giffard Hall'.*

*Here, farmland fertile for growth each season  
Apt build on it, folk find reason,  
Pray it be kept alone for forage  
Along this meandering flow of the 'River Torridge'.*

*Via the high road or low road a reversible trip while out  
'twix Bideford and Torrington, Weare Giffard you'll come about.  
All viewing along the Torridge banks here which lure,  
You'll find worth the while when on a Devon Tour.*

*Harry Harris*

**HARRY AND SUE HARRIS**

Harry came to this country from the USA as a GI during the Second World War. He was in the United States Air Force and worked as an engineer. He met and married Sue, a French lady, who was teaching English soldiers French, prior to their embarkation.

After the War they went to the USA but unable to settle they came back to this country, first living at Beaford, and then Quay Cottage, Weare Giffard. After another spell in the USA, they returned to Weare Giffard where they lived at 8 Church View. Harry thought Weare Giffard was "Heaven's Place".