

Tennyson, Parry and crossing the bar

I doubt if anyone in our choir will fail to be moved by Hubert Parry's emotional interpretation of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Crossing the bar". Tennyson, writing a few years before his death in 1892, draws upon the sea and the landscape of the southern coast of England to express a poignant metaphor on the final journey from life into the infinite unknown of what lies beyond.

But the passage from one world to another is neither effortless nor easy. The sandbar across the mouth of the harbour which is so protective of life within becomes a formidable barrier to those who would pass over its shallows and currents and head into the open sea.

What was Tennyson's inspiration for the poem which he declared should end his anthologies? The Isle of Wight, and more particularly, his home of nearly forty years in Farringford House, just outside the village of Freshwater, is the obvious answer. From his home and its surrounding downland, Tennyson would gaze at Freshwater Bay, with its bar offshore. Indeed, Parry (born along the coast in Bournemouth) would call his composition 'Freshwater'.

And yet there is another story about the source of Tennyson's inspiration. This has the UK's longest serving poet laureate recovering from serious illness and in a sailing vessel forced to lay off Salcombe bar while waiting for the tide to turn. The bar remains notoriously dangerous and susceptible to fierce currents and high winds, accompanied by low, sustained moaning noises created by the turbulent water passing over the sandbank. Apparently, this was enough for Tennyson to ponder his own mortality and the transience of life.

Three decades later, in 1916, the bar across the mouth of Salcombe harbour was to claim a terrible price when during a severe gale the Salcombe lifeboat, returning from a rescue mission, attempted to cross the bar into safety. Instead, the open boat, powered only by oars, was flipped over into the foam, with only two of its fifteen crew surviving.

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