

THE PLAY AND THE PUB

If we look at the chapter in R.C. Sherriff's autobiography, *No Leading Lady*, that relates to the writing of his play, *Journey's End*, it becomes indisputably clear that he was not at the Ringmore pub, The Journey's End, nor anywhere in Devon, when he wrote and completed the play.

In the autobiography he relates that the play took about one year to write. At the time he was living in his mother's house in the Richmond area and working for Sun Insurance as a travelling agent in the Thames valley area. He says he wrote the play in the evenings, somewhat spasmodically. He would get stuck at various points and would have to put the manuscript away for weeks on end or until he had worked out what to do next. He describes how he used to shut himself in his sitting room in the evenings and struggle to find the way ahead with the writing. Then he gives quite a detailed description of how the last act, and then the title of the play, came into being:

'Finally, it came out of the drawer for the last time, and the three scenes of the final act wrote themselves.....It had taken a year... I had done it because I couldn't have written the play in any other way. It had been a labour of love... It had carried me through a long winter of discontent... All that remained was to find a name for it. I never had a flair for titles. I thought of calling it Suspense, but this didn't ring true... Waiting was a possibility, but it had the flavour of a restaurant or a railway station. The play didn't readily lend itself to an interesting title. One night I was reading a book in bed. I got to a chapter that closed with the words: "It was late in the evening when we came at last to our Journey's End". The last two words sprang out as the ones I was looking for. Next night I typed them on a front page for the play, and the thing was done.' (*No Leading Lady*, pp.38, 39.)

Although it is clear from Sherriff's account that no part of the play was written at the Ringmore pub, this does not mean that the pub's change of name from The New Inn to The Journey's End was not in some way connected with the play's title. For one thing, it does look as though the pub was renamed in the heyday of the play's popularity, and it certainly is not difficult to dream up several likely scenarios in which saloon bar chit-chat or the arrival of a new landlord with knowledge of the play and an imaginative appreciation of the pub's position might have generated the idea of a change of name. The splendid items of memorabilia still on the walls of The Journey's End give credence to such an account and remind us of the grip that Sherriff's play exerted on the national sensibility.

There is one event recorded in *No Leading Lady* that indicates a link that the play has to South Devon. It could not have had anything to do with the title of the play, for Sherriff has unequivocally told us how that was conceived. But the event is worth mentioning simply because it was the catalyst to the play's success.

In his endeavour to secure a West End run for *Journey's End*, Sherriff sent it to many producers, publishers and actors. He had more or less given up hope of its acceptance when it was suggested he showed the script to Maurice Browne, a somewhat eccentric, often impecunious actor, poet, and promoter of the dramatic arts. Browne received the script on the morning he was about to leave London to spend Christmas with his influential friends, the Elmhursts of Dartington, and he began reading it on the train from Waterloo to Devon. He was so enraptured by it that he briefly left the train at Salisbury in order to send Sherriff a telegram:

'Journey's End' magnificent. Will gladly produce it. Returning to London Monday afternoon. Shall look forward to meeting you without delay. My profound congratulations upon a splendid play. Maurice Browne.' (*No Leading Lady*, p.70)

In his autobiography Sherriff gave no dates, not even a year, concerning his writing and completion of the play. The exact connection between the change of the pub's name from The New Inn to The Journey's End and the heyday of the play remains to be discovered. What is surely undeniable, given the quantity of fine memorabilia in the pub, is that there is such a connection and that it is one that adds significantly to the character and charm of Ringmore's historic inn.

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* OE was first performed on 9 December 1928.