

The Disappearing Houses of Lyme Regis

Gillian Candler

Mary Anning's house has gone. The museum stands there now. The other house I look for is gone too. 5 Millgreen. I check the numbers twice, walk up and down the road. I ask a builder and his mates outside number seven. They welcome the break from ladders and tools. Each sentence, each word they speak sounds like my father. Just as each word I utter reveals that I live in a foreign land. Between us, we agree that number five must have stood where the car park is now, next to the Angel Inn. There's a photo of my father in his navy uniform, standing below the Angel Inn sign. 5 Millgreen was the last house he lived in at Lyme Regis. It's the only one on the list that's gone, but not the only house that I can't find.

I had no trouble finding 16 Coombe Street where he was born. But it's windows are blanked by curtains, there's no sign of life there now. The house gives nothing away about its past. Up Church Street among a terraced row crowned with a rooftop jumble of chimney pots, aerials and dormer windows, I find number 49. A narrow blue house, quashed in between faded candy-stripes of yellow, pink, ochre, more blue and pink again. Such a small house, only two windows, one up, one down. Was it one of the family tragedies that forced them here? Had them squash into this tiny house until they found something more permanent at Millgreen? But how can I judge what's liveable, how can I judge how many children can fit into a house? I've done a virtual tour online of the tiny cottage in Sherborne Lane where my great-grandparents lived with their ten children. It's now a holiday-let that sleeps only four.

The house I can't find is 57 Colway Mead. No one can help me find it. I ask around. I search hopelessly. Is it a house name? There's a Colway Lane. Ivy curls around the street sign at the bottom of a steep lane, a green tunnel of a lane. I have a photo of the house, and it's none of these on Colway Lane. No one, not even at the information centre or at the museum shop can help me. But my distant cousin Ken knows. Colway Mead was an estate, the houses still stand but the streets have been renamed, the houses renumbered. As with any estate the houses look pretty much the same, so the photo isn't enough of a clue, except to confirm the area. Ken remembers where my great uncle Fred lived, one on the corner, but not the one in which my grandmother lived, where my dad did most of his growing up. I'll never find which one was 57 now.

I felt better about this when I got home and read that on his last visit to Lyme Regis with his sister that they'd been puzzled by the renumbering of Colway

Mead and couldn't remember which house they'd lived in. Perhaps after more than sixty years it's not surprising. Some houses just disappear.