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Literary Somerset

Written by James Crowden

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LITERARY SOMERSET

J A M E S C R O W D E N



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THE COUNTY OF *SOMERSET*, commonly call'd *Somersetshire*, is a large and plentiful County. On the north the Severn-Sea bears upon it, on the west it bounds upon Devonshire, on the south upon Dorsetshire, upon the east upon Wiltshire and part of Gloucestershire. The soil is very rich, especially for grain and pasturage, tis very populous and tolerably well furnished with havens. Some think that this name was first given it because the air is gentle, and as it were a *Summer air* in those parts... in which sense the Britains at this day call it *Glad arhaf* translating the word out of our language.

But the truth is, as in summer time, it may really be called a *Summer-country*, so no less in the winter season be called a *winter-country*: so wet, moist and marshy it is for the most part; which creates a great deal of trouble to travellers. However I shall not scruple to believe that this name was certainly given it from *Somerton*, formerly the chief town of the County, since *Asser*, a very ancient author, calls it everywhere, the county of *Somertun*.

WILLIAM CAMDEN 1584



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St Dunstan died c.988: *Monk and poet; born near Glastonbury*
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Samuel Johnson 1709–1784: Essayist, poet and lexicographer; visited Bath in 1776

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Sir Arthur Pearson 1866–1921: Founder of The Daily Express; born in Wookey.

Lord Beaverbrook – Max Aitken 1879–1964 Newspaper tycoon; owned Cricket Court, Cricket Malherbie and other Somerset farms

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WH Davies 1871–1940: *Often visited Somerset*

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Siegfried Sassoon 1886–1967: *Buried in Mells*

Monsignor Ronald Knox 1888–1957: *Priest, crime writer and broadcaster; lived in Mells and buried in Mells*

Isaac Rosenberg 1890–1918: *Born in Bristol*

John Jarmain 1911–1944: *Taught at Millfield*

C.H. Sisson 1914–2003: *Translator, novelist and critic; Langport*

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Isabel Colegate 1931– : *Lived at Midford*

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Charlotte Bingham 1942– : *Novelist and script writer; lives near Brewham*

Polly Devlin 1944– : *Author and journalist; lives near Bruton*

Martin Booth 1944–2004 *Poet, novelist; lived in Drayton, near Langport*

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Robert Francis Kilvert 1840–79: *Diarist; educated in Bath*

John Bickersteth 1921– : *Diary editor; Bishop of Bath and Wells*

Sir Michael Holroyd 1935– : *Biographer; lives in Porlock and London*

Victoria Glendinning 1937– : *Biographer; lives in Bruton*

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Hartley Coleridge 1796–1849 Poet and biographer; born in Bristol, early years in Nether Stowey

Thomas Lovell Beddoes 1803–1849: Poet and playwright; born in Clifton, Bristol

Charles Kingsley 1819–1875: Author and historian; educated in Bristol

Robert Louis Stevenson 1850–1894: Poet, essayist and novelist; author of Treasure Island

John Addington Symonds 1840–1893: Poet and literary critic; born in Bristol, lived in Clifton 1868–80

E.H. Young 1880–1949: Novelist; lived in Clifton

Isaac Rosenberg 1890–1918: Poet and artist; born in Bristol

Barbara Pym 1913–1980: Novelist; lived in Clifton 1941–43

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James Owen Hannay – ‘George A Birmingham’ 1865-1950: Novelist and playwright; Rector of Mells; buried in Mells
Laurence Housman 1865-1959, Clemence Housman 1861-1955: Writers and artists; both lived in Street
Raymond Charles Robertson Glasgow 1901-1965: Cricket Writer; lived in Hinton Charterhouse
R.C. Hutchinson 1907-1975: Novelist; Monkton Combe
Humphrey Francis Ellis 1907-2000: Humorous writer; lived in Kingston St Mary

George Frederick Green 1911-1977: Novelist and short story writer; lived in Batcombe
Gertrude Hollis 1863-c.1940: Novelist and author; visited Wells often
Christopher Hollis 1902-1977: Author and politician; born in Wells, lived in Wells & Mells
Ruth Tongue 1898-1981: Folklorist; lived in Taunton and Crowcombe

Stanley Johnson 1940- : Author lives near Winsford
Jonathan Dimbleby 1944- : Lived near Bath
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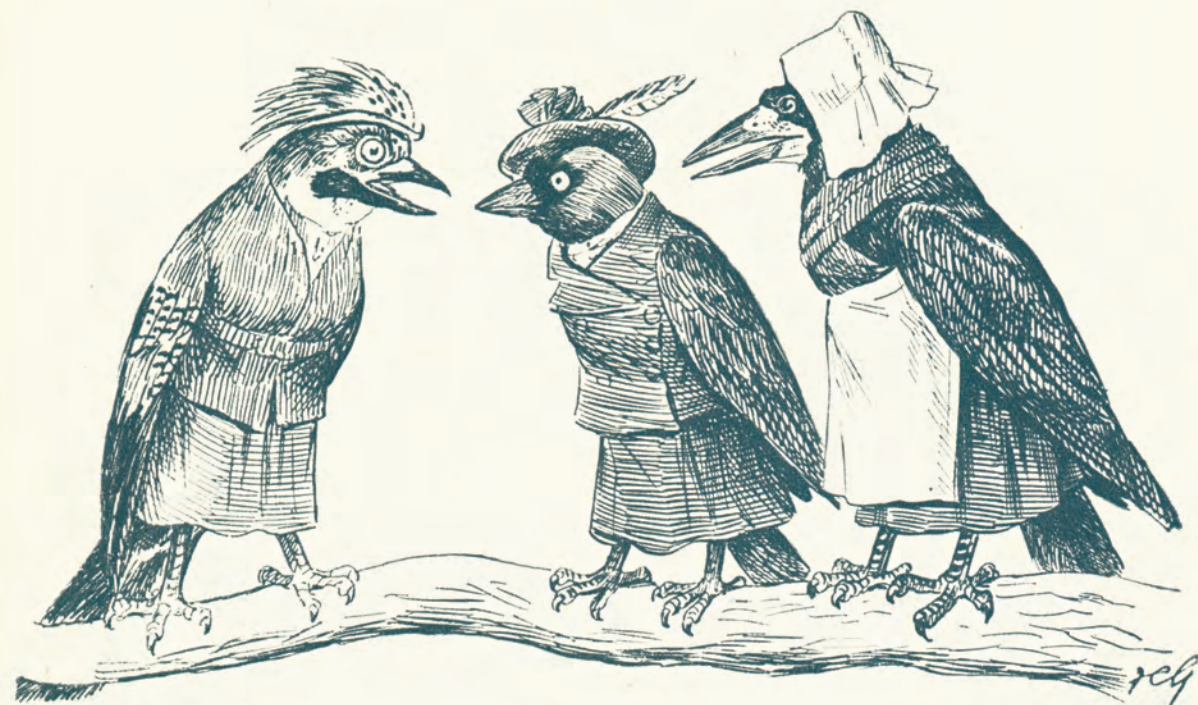
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Don McCullin 1935- : Lives near Bruton
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Liz Copas 1942- Lives near Crewkerne
Charles Dowding 1959- Lives near Bruton
Tom Jaine 1943- Born and brought up in Bath
Keith Floyd 1944-2009: Brought up in Wiveliscombe
Michael Raffael 1946- : Lives in Chard
Kit Chapman 1947- : Lives in Taunton
Gary Rhodes 1960- : Worked in Taunton Castle Hotel
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INTRODUCTION

Literary Somerset is a powerful evocation of many different writers and their relationship with the county as well as the rich harvest of poems, prose and novels that interlace the pages of this book. Somerset is worthy of exploration and in many ways the sheer diversity of writers presents a microcosm of English literature. There are many signposts, some of the roads are well trodden but others less so, and all the more interesting for it. I also have tried to juxtapose interesting and unusual authors, to keep the book quirky, eccentric and above all, alive.

It is striking that one of the earliest stories to be told in Somerset is that of Aeneas and Dido which is exquisitely preserved in a 4th century mosaic discovered at Low Ham in 1946. This mosaic from the bath house of a large Roman villa, connects Somerset in a very visual way to Virgil, the Aeneid and the ancient mediterranean world of Troy, Rome and Carthage (end page).

It is also striking that the earliest surviving written poem in Anglo-Saxon, *The Ruin*, should be about a city which has great baths and rings and columns bound with iron. Maybe it is no coincidence that King Alfred, one of the few scholar kings we have ever had, should not only found an abbey at Athelney surrounded by the very marshes which held him safe in his hour of need, but that he should also translate *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, from Latin into English.

Here also lie the roots of the Arthurian legend which Thomas Malory immortalised in *Morte d'Arthur*. A legend that in the 1950s brought across from America none other than John Steinbeck who lived for a year near Bruton. Then again T. S. Eliot named one of his *Four Quartets* after East Coker, his ancestors' village near Yeovil, where his ashes are buried. Old Possum comes

home at last. And what about William Dampier the 'pirate of exquisite mind' and his seafaring tales?

Literary Somerset is therefore more than just a reader's guide or an A-Z of writers, it is an intellectual jigsaw and should be approached as such. Each writer, each literary work and each place should be savoured, and sometimes they fit together in unusual ways. Ideas can often be very fluid and writers are always drawing on each other or on certain places for inspiration.

I have used the old county boundaries of Somerset which reach right up to the River Avon, to Bath and the very walls of Bristol itself. In the west there is Exmoor, the stags and the coast, in the middle the vagaries of the Somerset Levels and Moors, an impermanence which led to an itinerant and shifting way of life. Even the Anglo-Saxon name *Somersetæ* means the 'land of the summer settlers', which itself echoes the earlier Welsh term for Somerset: *Gwlad-yr-haf* or 'green land' referring to the rich summer pastures. To survive in Somerset you often have to be flexible. Then there is the limestone solidity of the Mendips, the subtle folds of the Poldens and the ancient ecclesiastical centres of Wells and Glastonbury.

The writers themselves are just as varied and colourful. Many of the early writers were pushing the boundaries and taking risks. This shows in their work. It is no coincidence that Somerset was also a hotbed of non-conformity and anti-establishment ideas. As a young man of 25, Daniel Defoe was at the Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685, the last true rebellion in England. Defoe was fighting for the Duke of Monmouth and was lucky to escape the Bloody Assizes. If he had been hung, drawn and quartered we would not now have the pleasure of reading *Robinson Crusoe* or *Moll Flanders*.

Where would Somerset and poetry be without the odd shot of opium taken in port or claret, as laudanum? Where would we be without *The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*? That heady year of 1797 when William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and Samuel Coleridge all walked those Quantock hills by night and set the local tongues a-wagging. Then there is Henry Fielding and his sister Sarah, the philosophers Roger Bacon and John Locke, the war poets, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg. Writers as diverse as Arthur C Clarke and John Cleese, Margaret Drabble and Michael Holroyd, Fay Weldon and Penelope Lively, Jane Austen, Christina Rossetti and Mary Shelley. Then there is John Cowper Powys and RD Blackmore. The list is almost endless and constantly growing.

It is as if living in Somerset is a rite of passage for writers and for a while their work pulses with the landscape. One writer was imprisoned for perjury, one executed during the Boer War, one exiled by Queen Mary. One imprisoned for experimenting with gunpowder, one lost his fingers to frostbite, one walked naked across Afghanistan, one spent a winter in the Himalayas, two at least survived the Somme, one was killed at Arras and another lost his life in the Calvados region.

Writing is often a lonely task. You need a roof over your head as well as peace and quiet. These you can find in abundance in deepest, darkest Somerset, as well as a rich landscape to walk in that will inspire you to greater things. Somerset has a history of welcoming outsiders and yet it is also close to the cities of Bath and Bristol, which were centres not only of trade and wealth, but more importantly the hub of new ideas and conversation. Bath had the watering hole and Bristol had its muddy docks. More importantly those docks had links to the outside world, to vast oceans and the adventures of the New World and the Pacific.

When I first came to Somerset, I worked in Bristol docks as a ferryman and then as a boatman on the Bristol Packet and every day I saw the city and its architecture shimmering in the water. The docks then were still richly laden with earthy tales and heady stories. Occasionally we would go down the Avon Gorge under the famous suspension bridge from which, every now and then, people would jump off. The sand dredger crews would usually spot the bodies and fish them out from the mud banks. They got a £1 if they were found on the Gloucester side or 30/- if they were found on the Somerset side. Of course they were always found on the Somerset side. Occasionally the crews would find return rail tickets in the coat pockets and marvel at the distances these people had come to commit suicide. A few years later, when I settled down in Somerset, I came as a casual agricultural labourer, involved with cider making, sheep shearing, night lambing and forestry. I saw the landscape through more rural eyes and began to write.

Literary Somerset is therefore a drawing together of many threads and ideas, chance acquaintances and friendships. It is not meant to be a definitive list of writers. It is a first trawl, as the fishermen say, a starting point for readers to explore and indeed conduct their own research into their own part of Somerset. More than anything else I hope that it will encourage people to visit the county and to re-read many old books as well as trying new authors. Writing *Literary Somerset* has been a fascinating journey.

Enjoy this rich feast of words and pictures.

James Crowden

Apple Day – 21st October 2009



PART ONE

FROM BATH TO
EAST COKER

Ruins of
Glastonbury Abbey
by William Stukeley
1724

A. S^t. Josephs chappel B. The Abby Church. C. S^t. Marys chappel D. Edgars chappel. E. The high Altar. F. The Cloysters. G. The Hall. H. The Abbots kitchen. I. The Abbots Lodging. Stukeley del.

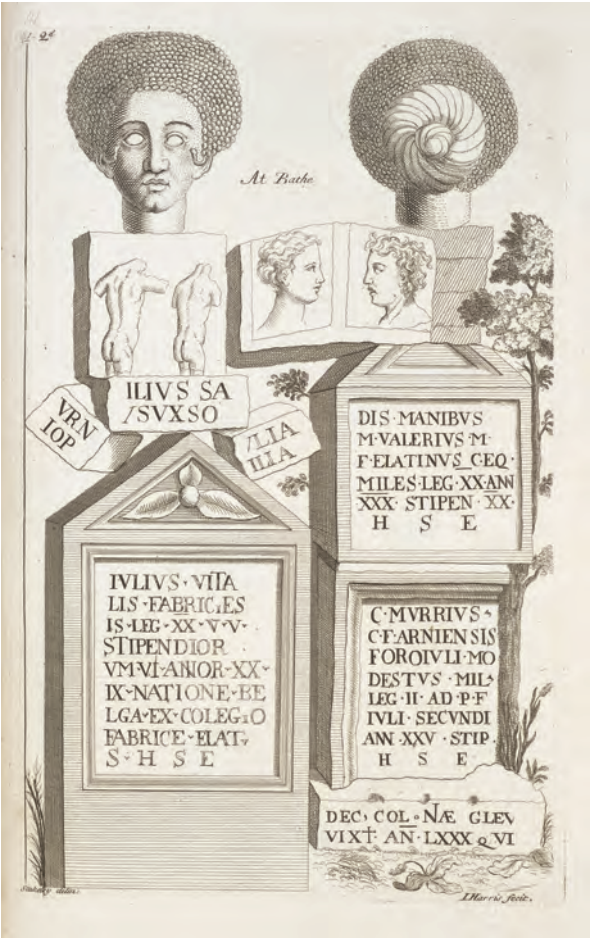
1 FROM THE RUIN TO THE WIFE OF BATH

GEOGRAPHICALLY Somerset was a key part of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex and it is no coincidence that some of the earliest literature in the English language should be associated with the county. With the Danes on the doorstep, it was a rough time when language and politics were being hammered out line by line. Poetry concentrated on tales of noble deeds and the fighting spirit, devotion and banishment, mystery, death and loneliness. The same language also kept historical chronicles and marked significant events. We still marvel at the strength and elegance of the Anglo-Saxon poetry and can only wonder at the literary gems that might have been lost.

Author of The Ruin – c.8th century AD

POET / Visited Bath with parchment in hand

The identity of this brilliant wordsmith, the anonymous wandering poet, still remains a mystery today. *The Ruin* is believed to be the earliest poem in the English language and describes the poet's feelings and impressions of wandering round the ruined city of Bath three centuries after the Romans left. The original copy survives in the Exeter Book on two leaves of badly scarred parchment charred around the edges. The fine-wrought description of the overgrown ruins can only be of *Aquae Sulis*, an important Roman city that we now know simply as Bath. The poem is incomplete. It is, however, a very powerful piece of writing and a fine example of the English language that was once spoken in Somerset, the land of the *Sumorsetae* or the summer settlers. The best translation from the Anglo-Saxon is by Michael Alexander of Stirling University who now lives in Wells.



The poem includes such wonderful composite words as *gravesgrasp*, *earthgrip*, *horngabled*, *mood-glad*, *goldbright* and *broad-dominion* words which inspired poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien who was himself an expert on Anglo-Saxon.

THE RUIN

Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it.
The stronghold burst....

Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
the work of Giants, the stonesmiths,
mouldereth.
Rime scoureth gate towers
Rime on mortar.

Shattered the showershields, roofs ruined
age under-ate them.
And the wielders and wrights?
Earthgrip holds them- gone, long gone,
fast in gravesgrasp while fifty fathers
and sons have passed.

Wall stood,
grey lichen, red stone, kings fell often,
stood under storms, high arch crashed-
stands yet the wallstone, hacked by weapons,
by files grim ground...
...shone the old skilled work
...sank to loam crust.

Mood quickened mind, and a man of wit,
cunning in rings, bound bravely the wall base
with iron, a wonder.

Bright were the buildings, halls where springs ran
high horn-gabled, much throng noise;
these many meadhalls men filled
with loud cheerfulness: Wierd changed that.

Came days of pestilence, on all sides men fell dead,
death fetched off the flower of people;
where they stood to fight, waste places
and on the acropolis, ruins.

Hosts who would build again
shrank to the earth. Therefore are these courts dreary
and that red arch twisteth tiles,
wryeth from roof ridge, reacheth groundwards...
Broken blocks...

There once many a man
mood-glad, goldbright, of gleams garnished
flushed with wine-pride, flashing war-gear,
gazed on wrought gemstones, on gold, on silver,
on wealth held and hoarded, on light-filled amber,
on this bright burg of broad dominion.

Stood stone house; wide streams welled
hot from source, and a wall all caught
in its bright bosom that the baths were
hot at hall's hearth; that was fitting...

Thence hot streams loosed ran over hoar stone
unto the ring tank...
...It is a kingly thing
...city...

Translated by MICHAEL ALEXANDER

Saint Aldhelm c.639–709

BISHOP, POET AND SCHOLAR / Died in Doultling



Aldhelm is said to have been the son of Kenten or Centwine, brother of King Ine. Aldhelm quickly rose to be Abbot of Malmesbury Abbey, a post he held for over 30 years. He was a great administrator and became the first Bishop of Sherborne. More importantly he was a learned scholar, well versed in Latin poetry and Anglo-Saxon literature. He attracted many pupils and in Somerset founded a place of learning at Frome. His many works include *De Laude Virginitatis* a Latin treatise on the virtues of virginity

and chastity addressed to the nuns of the double monastery at Barking, in Essex, founded in 666. Aldhelm later wrote a shorter poetic version of this treatise which was very popular. His letters are also well known: *Epistola ad Acircium* contains a treatise on the number seven and another one on metre and metrical feet for Latin poetry. He wrote many poems in Latin; one poem even describes a journey through the west of England. He also left over 100 riddles and is said to have written many poems in Anglo Saxon, but none survives though they were often turned into songs and recited in the time of King Alfred. St Aldhelm was a pioneer of Anglo Saxon literature: The Venerable Bede thought very highly of him.

On 25th May 709, whilst on a walking tour through his diocese, Aldhelm died in the church at Doultling. His body was carried to Malmesbury in Wiltshire where he

was buried. The 25th May is still celebrated as his feast day. King Ine dedicated the estate to Glastonbury Abbey. Doultling is a famous quarrying area and much of the freestone was used to build Wells Cathedral and additions to Glastonbury Abbey.

To see: At Doultling there is a holy well dedicated to St Aldhelm from which springs forth the River Sheppey, which eventually runs into the River Brue. Both the parish church and the primary school in Doultling are named after St Aldhelm. There is also a magnificent early chapel set on the Purbeck clifftops in Dorset, dedicated to St Aldhelm.

Alfred 849–899

SCHOLAR, KING AND TRANSLATOR / Spent a wet winter in Athelney · Founded Athelney Abbey

Born at Wantage, Oxfordshire, Alfred was an excellent scholar who wrote several books. He laid out his legal code in *The Book of Doms* or *Deemings*. He translated Pope



Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*, *The Universal History of Orosius* and *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by the Venerable Bede. Alfred also made an English translation from the Latin of *The Consolations of Philosophy* by Boethius. In 878 he was trapped in the Somerset marshes around Athelney and began his guerilla campaign against the Danes, as well as undertaking a local bread-making course. Ten years later, in 888 he founded Athelney Abbey. Today Alfred is widely commemorated – there is even a baker in Glastonbury called ‘Burns the Bread’.

To see: The Alfred jewel in Ashmolean Museum Oxford. The site of Athelney abbey, near East Lyng. Also a statue on Alfred’s Tower near Stourhead dated 1770.

Asser died c.909 AD

MONK, SCHOLAR, TRANSLATOR AND BIOGRAPHER / Lived in Somerset

Asser was a Welsh monk who came to the court of King Alfred as a scholar and translator. He read aloud to the King and together they translated several works including Pope Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care*. In return, Alfred gave Asser the monasteries of Congresbury and Banwell on Christmas Eve 886, along with a silk cloak and a quantity of incense “weighing as much as a stout man.” Not a bad Christmas present. Asser later became Bishop of Sherborne.

In 893 Asser wrote his famous biography called *The Life of King Alfred*. Even though it is only 20,000 words long it is one of the most important sources of information on King Alfred. It is contemporary but not complete, as Alfred lived another six years. Some say it was written for a Welsh audience. The earliest copy dating from around 1100 was once owned by Leland but

then became part of the Cotton Library in Westminster which was destroyed by fire in 1731. Luckily a printed version of *The Life of King Alfred* had been made in 1574 by Archbishop Parker. It is the only one to survive.

Official Speak 1: Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was originally compiled on the orders of King Alfred and subsequently maintained and added to by generations of anonymous scribes until the mid twelfth century. A slightly flawed but very important record of early England.

EARLY EXAMPLES RELATING TO SOMERSET:

AD 845: “This year Alderman Eanwulf, with the men of Somersetshire, and Bishop Ealstan, and Alderman Osric, with the men of Dorsetshire, fought at the mouth of the Parret with the Danish army; and there, after making a great slaughter, obtained the victory.”

AD 878: “In the Easter of this year King Alfred with his little force raised a work at Athelney; from which he assailed the army, assisted by that part of Somersetshire which was nighest to it. Then, in the seventh week after Easter, he rode to Brixton by the eastern side of Selwood; and there came out to meet him all the people of Somersetshire, and Wiltshire, and that part of Hampshire which is on this side of the sea; and they rejoiced to see him. Then within one night he went from this retreat to Hey; and within one night after he proceeded to Eddington; and there fought with all the army, and put them to flight, riding after them as far as the fortress, where he remained a fortnight. Then the army gave him hostages with many oaths, that they would go out of his kingdom. They told him also, that their king would receive baptism. And they acted accordingly; for in the course of three weeks after,

King Guthrum, attended by some thirty of the worthiest men that were in the army, came to him at Aller, which is near Athelney, and there the king Alfred became his sponsor in baptism; and his chrism-leasing was at Wedmor. He was there twelve nights with the king, who honoured him and his attendants with many presents.”

St Dunstan died 988

MONK AND POET / Born near Glastonbury

Dunstan was educated at Glastonbury Abbey and at a young age came to the attention of King Athelstan and became part of his court. In 940 he became Abbot of Glastonbury, a post he held till 956. During this time he not only expanded the Benedictine abbey, but built up a reputation for serious scholarship. Dunstan wrote many complex poems in Latin, one of which has survived and is called ‘*May you deign to look, O Christ, on Your unworthy abbot Dunstan.*’

A manuscript called *St Dunstan’s Classbook* exists in the Bodleian library in Oxford. It is divided into four parts. It has a drawing on the cover of Dunstan kneeling down praying to Christ, possibly drawn by himself. Throughout his life he was extremely prone to visions. Sadly very little survives of his own work, though many books have annotations and corrections thought to be by him in the margins. He was also a keen embroiderer and painter and played the lyre.



In 959 he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, a post he held till his death. He was a deep inspiration to the Benedictine movement and laid down certain stipulations regarding the behaviour of monks towards cloistered nuns. A Benedictine monastery for 10 monks was established on the site of Westminster Abbey by King Edgar and St Dunstan at the end of the 10th century. A local boy who made it to the very top.

Today the community school in Glastonbury is named after him.

To see: Glastonbury Abbey.

Official Speak 2: Domesday Book, 1086

A very different document to the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, the Domesday Book is an accurate description of who owns what in the newly acquired Norman kingdom. The authors and compilers of this unique national survey, which was compiled in Latin, were often trusted king’s men, barons and bishops, sheriffs, clergymen and clerks. The information was gathered swiftly in one year. Many of these compilers remain anonymous but one name exists of a commissioner on the South-West circuit, that of William, Bishop of Durham. Somerset was split down into about 628 manors with such wonderful names as Appley, Swang, Swell, Pillock’s Orchard, Perry, Horsey Pignes, Deadman’s Well, Barrow Gurney, Clewer, Bawdrip, Discove, Hamp and Shovel. Many still remain, though some have disappeared off the face of the map.

The entries give a good insight into the wealth of the county at the time. Five vineyards were documented in Somerset, at Glastonbury, Meare, Panborough, North Curry and Muchelney. The entry for Muchelney reads thus:

St Peter’s church, Muchelney, has 4 carucates of land which has never paid tax in these three islands *Michelenie*, *Midelenie* and *Torleia* (Thorney). In Lordship two ploughs, vineyard, 1 arpent, 4 slaves, 3 villagers, 18 smallholders with 2 ploughs, 2 fisheries, which pay 6000 eels, meadow 25 acres, woodland 12 acres, pasture 100 acres, 1 cob, 21 cattle, 6 pigs 30 goats. The value was and is £3.

NB An arpent is an old French measure of land based on the actus, a Roman unit of measurement. Equivalent to about 100 square perches, but was elastic between 5/6th of an acre to about 1¼ acres. It is still used in Quebec and Louisiana where the conversion ratio is 1 arpent = 0.84 acres.

Geoffrey Chaucer 1343–1400

TRANSLATOR, AUTHOR AND SATIRIST / Deputy Forester, North Petherton

Considered by many to be the “father” of modern English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* as well as many other works including *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Parliament of Fowles*. English, which had been the main language in Anglo-Saxon times from *The Ruin* onwards, was now back on the literary menu and slowly superseded Latin and Norman French.

Geoffrey Chaucer was probably the only son of John and Agnes Chaucer, who were wine merchants in London. At 14 Chaucer became a page in the household of the Countess of Ulster, whose husband Lionel was one of Edward III’s sons. In 1360 Chaucer was captured in Reims by the French and then ransomed back to Lionel. Chaucer returned to London and married in 1365. He had now become an esquire in the royal household. At this point he translated the popular French poem *Le Roman de*

la Rose (The Romance of the Rose), for which he became very well-known. He then wrote a Dream poem called *The Book of the Duchess* to mourn the death of the wife of John of Gaunt.

In 1374 Geoffrey Chaucer was made Controller of Customs for the port of London. In 1381 he wrote *Troilus and Criseyde* during the Peasants’ Revolt and in 1389 he was appointed Clerk of the King’s Works by Richard I, a job that made him responsible for the upkeep of royal buildings. Two years later in 1391 he retired from this lucrative London job, but was then appointed Deputy Forester of the Royal Forest of North Petherton. This was a less demanding post, part sinecure, which allowed him enough time to continue writing. In 1391

Chaucer produced *The Treatise of the Astrolabe* and between 1392–1395 most of *The Canterbury Tales* were written and published. In 1393 Chaucer was awarded 10 pounds by the King for services rendered. His depiction of ‘*The Wife of Bath*’ in Tale and Prologue makes her arguably one of Somerset’s most famous medieval residents, as agony aunt, purveyor of chick-lit, saucy and seductive, wise and witty, a woman who had learnt to wrap men round her little finger. She is supposed to have lived in Northgate Street, Bath. Chaucer’s son, Thomas Chaucer was later made Constable of Taunton Castle, so there remained a close connection with Somerset.



2 FROM GILDAS TO MORTE D'ARTHUR: INVENTION OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

SOME OF THE MOST ENDURING associations in Somerset are the Arthurian Legends centred upon Glastonbury. To some they are real historical events, to others they are luminous myths. The truth probably lies somewhere between the two. What is fascinating is to see how the myth was first developed from scant fact and then relocated and re-woven over the centuries into an enduring legend.

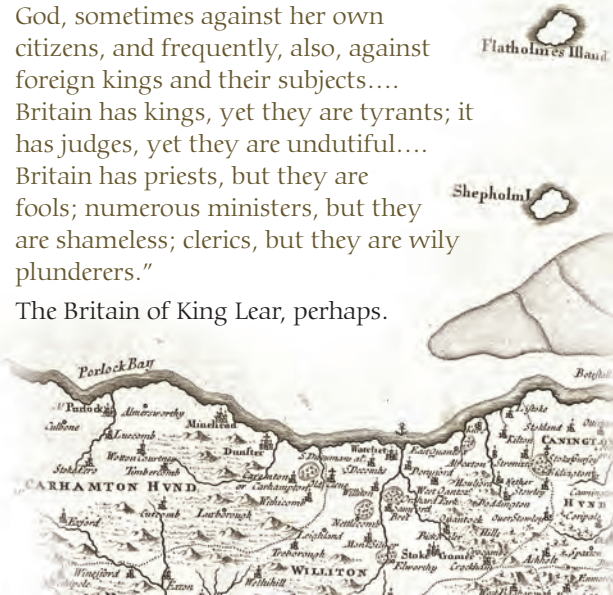
St Gildas the Wise 516–570

BRITISH CLERIC AND HISTORIAN / Lived on Steep Holm, died in Street

Gildas is thought to have been come from Wales. After his studies he is said to have travelled to Ireland, Rome, Ravenna and to Brittany where he is credited with founding the monastery of St Gildas de Rhuys. This information comes from *Vita Gildae auctore monacho Ruiensi*, written by an anonymous Breton monk in the 11th century. Another later version, *Vita Gildae auctore Caradoco Lancarbanensi*, was written by Caradoc of Llancarfan in Glamorgan, in the 12th century. This says that Gildas also studied in Gaul for seven years, preached in Wales and eventually came to Somerset, where he wrote his famous historical work *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* or *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*. This was later used by The Venerable Bede, who paid tribute to Gildas as the only surviving historian of that period. Gildas's history work, although not always accurate gives a rich flavour of the times. He has an endearing up-front writing style that would make him the envy of any newspaper editor today when referring to Britain:

"This island, stiff-necked and stubborn-minded, from the time of its being first inhabited, ungratefully rebels, sometimes against God, sometimes against her own citizens, and frequently, also, against foreign kings and their subjects.... Britain has kings, yet they are tyrants; it has judges, yet they are undutiful.... Britain has priests, but they are fools; numerous ministers, but they are shameless; clerics, but they are wily plunderers."

The Britain of King Lear, perhaps.



Gildas is said to have lived on the island of Steep Holm (or Shepholm) in the Bristol Channel for seven years where he survived on small fish and sea birds' eggs. He founded an oratory and for company had his friend St Cadoc, also in retreat on Flat Holm, the island next door; and from time to time they would visit each other. Ghosts of monks are still seen there...

After seven years of self imposed exile Gildas was harassed by pirates from the Orkneys who took his servants and his furniture. He then crossed over to Somerset and built a small church near present-day Street on the banks of the River Brue. He wore only a vest made of goat hair. When he died he was reputedly buried within Glastonbury Abbey which was remarkably convenient for pilgrimage.

Interestingly Gildas does not mention Arthur by name at all, but in the year AD800 another writer from Wales, called Nennius, wrote *Historia Britonum* and this included for the first time the twelve battles of Arthur. It was this work which gave the monks plenty to chew on even though Arthur appeared to be a Welsh hero. Some scholars dispute whether Nennius wrote *Historia Britonum* but they all agree it is an important work.

By the 12th century Caradoc says that Arthur killed Gildas's brother Hueil and later repented on bended knee. Later Caradoc mentions how Gildas intervened between King Arthur and a certain King Melwas of the 'Summer Country' who had abducted Guinevere and brought her to his stronghold at Glastonbury, where Arthur soon arrived to besiege him. It is from this *Life of Gildas*, not from Gildas himself, that the Arthurian legend derives Guinevere or *Gwenhwyfar*. Here you have the first basis of the well known plot involving Lancelot and Guinevere, as well as the Isle of Avalon and Glastonbury itself, which is called Glastonia or *Ynisgutrin*, the island of glass. In

Brittany, however, they firmly believe that Gildas died there and is buried in Rhuys. His feast day is 29th January. So it was these historical embellishments to the *Life of Gildas*, using the words of Nennius, which became the foundation stones of the Arthurian legend, not the words of Gildas himself.

No doubt the ingenious PR skills of the Somerset Monastic Tourism Department had its own agenda. Caradoc was a friend and contemporary of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Fiction, imagination and the powers of storytelling adroitly filled in the large gaps left by sparse historical fact. Certain elements of both stories may well be true. Scholars still debate the life and historical work of Gildas but in so doing put to one side the Arthurian legends which cannot be proved one way or another. Some think that if Arthur existed at all, it was as a composite mythical figure used to inspire rebellion against the invading Saxons and his name was used later to swell the abbey's coffers and encourage wealthy pilgrims.

Geoffrey of Monmouth 1100–1155

CLERK & HISTORIAN / Introduces Arthurian legend to Glastonbury

Geoffrey wrote *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), which mentions Arthur. He leans towards Arthur being of Welsh descent and living initially in Cornwall, possibly at Tintagel. This is based on the *Historia Britonum* a 9th century Welsh-Latin historical compilation attributed to Nennius. He also used Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* and Gildas's sixth-century polemic *De Excidio Britanniae*, expanded with material from Welsh legend, genealogical tracts, and Geoffrey's own imagination. Lastly, Geoffrey also wrote the *Vita Merlini* (*The Life of Merlin*) at a point between 1149 and 1151.

William of Malmesbury 1080/95–c.1143

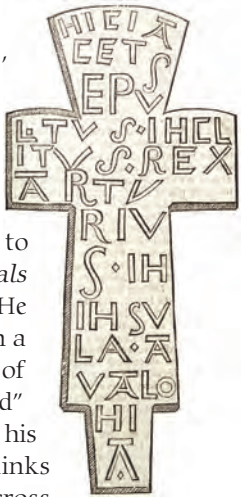
MONK AND HISTORIAN / Produces a history of Glastonbury

Inspired by The Venerable Bede’s history, William of Malmesbury was employed by Glastonbury Abbey to produce, around 1120, his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (*Deeds of the English Kings or Deeds of the Kings of the English people*) which spanned from 449–1120. He also wrote *De Antiquitate Glastoniensis*, Enquiry into the Antiquity of the Church of Glastonbury. In the early editions William does not mention the link between Arthur and Glastonbury but after the fire which destroyed the abbey in 1184 and the cessation of government subsidy, the links between Arthur and Glastonbury miraculously appear.

Gerald of Wales c.1146–c.1223

MONK AND HISTORIAN / Also writes about Arthur and Glastonbury

Also known as *Giraldus Cambrensis*, Gerald was archdeacon of Brecon, a medieval clergyman and chronicler. Born in Pembrokeshire, he was of mixed Norman and Welsh blood, his name being Gerald de Barri. He was called over to witness the excavations after the *Annals of Margam* had first told the story. He left a description of the inscription on a leaden cross which was found on top of Arthur’s tomb which was “discovered” in 1191 in Glastonbury and refers to his wife *Guinivere*. This inscription links Arthur to Glastonbury but the cross disappeared in the 18th century. The only remnant of it is the illustration in Camden’s *Britannia*.



Sir Thomas Malory c.1405–1471

KNIGHT / Author of Le Morte d’Arthur

Born in Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, Malory was the author of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, a romantic tale which relates the complex stories of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, the lady Guinevere, the wayward knight Sir Lancelot, as well as Camelot, Avalon, Tristan and Isolde and the Holy Grail, all wrapped in one. Malory was himself a very colourful character, elected to parliament twice but also managing to get the wrong side of the law on many occasions. During the 1450s he was charged with burglary, rape, sheep stealing, cattle rustling and deer poaching, as well as an attempt to ambush the Duke of Buckingham. Malory escaped from jail on two occasions, once by fighting his way out with a variety of weapons and once by swimming a moat. Bail and pardon was the preferred option. Many believe he actually started his writings within prison in the 1450s, with an ample supply of sharpened goose quills at the ready. Not the first or last to benefit from a little incarceration.

Le Morte d’Arthur was first published in 1485 by William Caxton, the original working title being *The hoole booke of kyng Arthur & of his noble knyghtes of the rounde table*. It is a compilation of the early writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth, with many strands from French medieval romantic literature woven into the story for good measure.

Le Morte d’Arthur has remained a classic for over 500 years. There were later editions by William Copland 1557, Thomas East 1585 and William Stansby 1634. There were two editions in 1816 and Davison’s 1817 edition was promoted by the poet Robert Southey. As recently as 1934 an original manuscript of the *Morte d’Arthur* was found by W.F. Oakshott in the library of Winchester College. This was one of the most important

medieval manuscripts discovered in the 20th century and it has kept scholars in business ever since.

Malory divided his work principally into eight tales:

1. “From the Marriage of King Uther unto King Arthur that Reigned After Him and Did Many Battles” Arthur’s birth and pedigree.
2. “The Noble Tale Between King Arthur and Lucius the Emperor of Rome” His battles against the Romans.
3. “The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lac”.
4. “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney” brother of Gawain.
5. “The First and the Second Book of Sir Tristrams de Lione” The tale of Tristram and Isolde .
6. “The Noble Tale of the Sangreal” The Quest for the Holy Grail.
7. “Sir Launcelot and Queen Gwenyvere” The goings on in Somerset between Lancelot and Guinevere...

8. “The Death of Arthur” The end of the tale. The breaking of the Knights of the Round Table and the death of Arthur.

Arthur, whilst mortally wounded, is carried on a barge with damsels to the *Isle of Avalon* to be healed no doubt with herbal remedies and local mulled cider. These Arthurian legends were very popular with the Victorians and were a worthy subject of the Pre-Raphaelite artists. Damsels in distress and knights in armour were just what the Victorian mind needed to counteract the rampant industrialisation and empire grabbing, always looking back to a perfect world and social order where gentlemen were gentlemen and ladies ready to be entertained. Malory as a young man is included by T.H. White in his book *The Once and Future King*.

In 1959 the Nobel prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck came to Somerset with his wife and started working on his modernised version of *Le Morte d’Arthur*.



He updated the Winchester version. Steinbeck lived at Redlynch near Bruton. The book was never quite finished; Steinbeck got as far as Sir Launcelot and the death of chivalry. It was only published in 1976 after Steinbeck's death. See: entry for Steinbeck, page 128. By all accounts Steinbeck, who discovered Arthur in his childhood, loved his time in Somerset. Scholars have even detected Arthurian themes in several of his books including *Cup of Gold*, *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, and many other writings.

The Arthurian legends, however tenuously connected to Glastonbury, are now deeply embedded in the Somerset landscape. *Le Morte d'Arthur* captured many people's minds and the myths that it wove are still very pertinent today, not least within the range of psychological archetypes. Many books about Arthur and Guinevere can also be found in the shops of Glastonbury, where they conveniently nestle alongside crystals, spirit catchers, South American weavings and dusty Tibetan Buddhas.



3 THREE WISE MEN

THESE THREE WISE MEN were incredibly influential in their day. They had a major impact on the philosophy of science and ultimately on philosophy itself. The search for empirical truth was always on their minds and laid the foundation stone for the scientific approach and ideas that today we take for granted. Locke's ideas on tolerance of religious practice are still quoted.

Adelard of Bath c.1080-1150

MATHEMATICIAN, SCIENTIST AND TRANSLATOR / Born in Bath and lived in Bath

Adelard's father Fastrad was an important tenant of Giso, Bishop of Wells. The next Bishop of Wells was John of Tours, the King's physician, who moved the episcopal seat from Wells to Bath. He may well have sent the young Adelard to Tours to complete his education. Adelard then travelled widely on the Continent and became an outstanding medieval mathematician who translated some fundamental texts from the Arabic. One of these was *The thirteen books of Euclid's Elements of Geometry*. Originally written in Alexandria around 300 BC, *The Elements* had been translated from Greek into Arabic in the eighth century AD. No Latin version from this time has survived, so the translation was a major contribution to western science and understanding. This was cutting edge and a fundamental step in the Renaissance of science. To make the translation Adelard, who was based at Tours, went to Cordoba and disguised himself as a Muslim student. Apart from Spain he also visited Italy, Sicily, Greece and Antioch.

Other important texts he translated were *The Astronomical Tables of Al-khwarizmi* as well as treatises on astrology, the abacus and astrolabe.

He also wrote several original works of his own in letter and dialogue form to his nephew. *Quaestiones Naturales* (*Natural Questions*), the *De Eodem et Diverso* (*On the Same and the Different*) and a short treatise *On Birds*.

Adelard had settled back in Bath by 1122 and is known to have lived at Bath Priory. Adelard was the first European scholar of his time to venture into the world of Arabic scholarship. This was crucial not just for philosophy but for science as well. His translations were used extensively by Roger Bacon a century later.

Roger Bacon 1214-1294

PHILOSOPHER AND SCIENTIST / Born in Ilchester

Roger Bacon belonged to a family that later lost all their possessions around Ilchester in the unsettled reign of Henry III. Bacon went to Oxford when he was 13 and developed a passion for mathematics and science. He lectured at both Oxford and Paris. Later he became a Franciscan friar and was well known as Doctor Mirabilis 'wonderful teacher'. He was attracted to the recently re-discovered works of Plato and Aristotle as well as to scientific ideas that filtered through from the Islamic world by way of Spain. Bacon then developed and advocated new theories of scientific knowledge. These theories, branching away from medieval alchemy,



astrology, superstition and dogma, placed much greater emphasis on taking down empirical evidence and using actual measurements. Bacon thus helped to lay the foundations of modern scientific method with hypotheses and objective observations.

His early works include *Opus Maius*, *Opus Minus* and *Opus Tertium*. In 1271 he wrote *Compendium Studii Philosophiae* which attacked clerical ignorance; this did not endear him to the authorities. He was constantly suspected of heresy and magic and was often placed under house arrest. He was even imprisoned by the Catholic Church in Paris for practising witchcraft and experimenting with gunpowder.

John Locke 1632-1704

PHILOSOPHER / Born Wrington, raised in Pensford

John Locke was born in his grandmother's cottage next to the north gate of Wrington church. His father was a Puritan attorney and clerk to the Justices of the Peace in Somerset. He came from Chew Magna and had served as a captain of cavalry in the Parliamentary forces during the Civil War. On his mother's side Locke's family were Puritan tanners. John Locke grew up in Pensford and his education at Westminster School and Christ Church College, Oxford, was sponsored by Alexander Popham, who had been his father's colonel. A clear headed and original thinker, John Locke produced many interesting

papers and propositions. In 1683 he fled to Holland after the Rye House Plot, using his time there very wisely. Upon his return he published some of his most famous works: an *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, which are still studied today. One of the foremost philosophers of his day, he helped to kick-start the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century. His writings influenced Voltaire and Rousseau as well as David Hume, Adam Smith and the slightly rebellious Founding Fathers of the United States. His writings

concerned the nature of government, money, the rise and fall of interest rates, supply and demand, and the links between property and labour, as well as the nature of self and education: ideas that certainly influenced Karl Marx. Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* devotes no less than 38 pages to Locke. A real tribute. John Locke was a close associate of the First Earl of Shaftesbury and like the Earl was very keen on experimenting with fruit growing. Locke died near Harlow in Essex.



To see: a statue in the porch of Wrington Church.

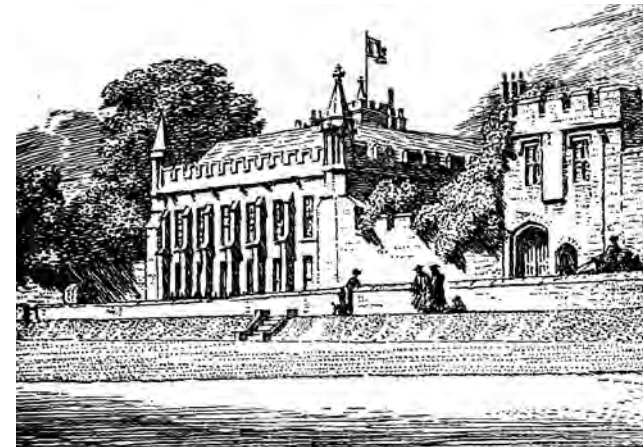
4 TWO HERBALISTS AND A LEG-STRETCHER

EXPLORING THE NATURAL WORLD through the properties of plants and herbs was a direct result of the Renaissance and the uncovering of classical medical texts. Many learned men, including William Turner and Henry Lyte, were keen to classify these plants and more importantly to understand their healing properties. Travellers and voyagers to foreign parts were of particular interest as they were often able to bring back new varieties to stimulate debate and research. The 'leg-stretcher' was Thomas Coryate, who walked all the way to India in 1615 but died in Surat and so never returned to Somerset.

Dr. William Turner 1508-1568

DOCTOR AND BOTANIST / Dean of Wells

William Turner is often referred to as "the Father of English botany." As a medical doctor he saw the value in taking scientific observations, applying no doubt the philosophy of Roger Bacon. He was twice Dean of Wells in 1551-1554 and again between 1560-1568 under

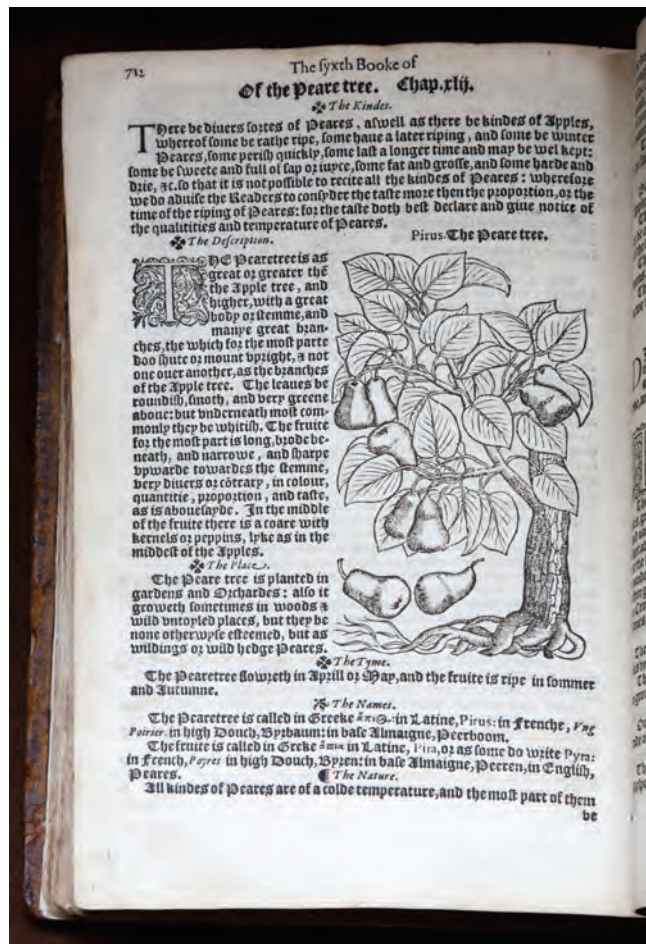


Edward VI and Elizabeth but was exiled under Mary. His *Herball* was written not in Latin but in English which was a great advance, and proved very useful to apothecaries. This predated Culpepper by about 60 years. *The Herball* gives names to many local plants which he grew in his garden at the Deanery in Wells. He advocated the therapeutic qualities of certain plants such as wormwood, feverfew and eye bright as well as the juice of the black poppy, ie opium. Turner also wrote a book on fishes and another on wine.

Henry Lyte 1529-1607

HERBALIST AND TRANSLATOR / Lived at Lytes Cary

Lytes Cary is in the parish of Charlton Mackrell, near Somerton. In 1577 Henry Lyte translated an important Dutch work, the *Cruydeboek* of Rembert Dodoens (Antwerp, 1564) into English via the French edition. Lyte's translation of this book in 1578 was called *A Nieuwe Herball, or historie of plantes: wherin is contayned the whole discourse and perfect description of all sortes of herbes and plantes: their divers [and] sundry kinde*. It contains many



Pear illustration from page 712 of *The Herball*

pertinent observations and may well have been used by Shakespeare in his use of plant-lore in his plays. A copy of this book can be seen at Lytes Cary, which is now in the hands of the National Trust.

In the 17th century the garden at Lytes Cary was well known for having all possible kinds of fruit including 44 varieties of pear among them:

“The Antick Peare, the round green peare, the hundred pound Pear, the Capon Pear, the Sugar Pear, the Ruddick Pear, the Russett Sweatter, the Orrenge Peare, the Warden Pear, Pear pimpe, the Chesil or pear Nought, the Bishop's censor, the Weeten Peare, the great Kentishe Pear, the Norwich Pear, the Winsor Pear, Pear Bell, Pear Laurence, Pear Marwood, the Red Gennett, the Catherin Pear, the Bartholomew Pear, the Cary bridge Pear, the Somerton Pear an excellent pear ripe before Kingsdon's feast.”

Of apples they had ‘three score severall sortes, Plummes 15 divers kynde, Grapes 3 severall sortes, Cherries 1, Walnuts 3, Peaches 1, The almond tree, the Figg tree, the quines tree, The Barbary tree, the Cornishe berrie, the Philbert tree, the black bullies and the Sloe.’

These varieties were written down in 1618 by Thomas Lyte, Henry Lyte's son.

To visit: Lytes Cary, National Trust.

Thomas Coryate 1577-1617

TRAVEL WRITER / Born in Odcombe

Thomas Coryate, known as the ‘Odcombe leg-stretcher’ was an intrepid traveller who travelled throughout Europe and Asia on foot. He is credited with introducing the table fork and umbrella to England. For many years his leather shoes hung in Odcombe church. Today there is a carved replica of his shoes. He was one of the first travel writers; he brought back the story of William Tell and published the first version in English. Coryate belonged to the Mermaid Club, in Bread Street, London. Its members provided him with a mock passport before he



departed on his Eastern travels. He walked from Jerusalem to Agra via Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan, a distance of about 3,300 miles arriving at the Moghul court in 1615. He then travelled very widely in India and died of dysentery at Surat, in Gujerat, near an East India Company factory.

To visit: Inside Odcombe church there is a replica of Coryate's shoes carved in hamstone by Eva Harvey, 2000.

