



# Heritage

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No. 29

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*Journal of the Ottery St. Mary Heritage Society*

## FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The Heritage Journal has a new editor! A hearty welcome to Chris Wakefield who takes over the publication with this issue, and brings with it a 'new look' which I hope you will find refreshing. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Chris Saunders who lays down the editorial pen after more than seven years in the hot seat – thank you Chris for all your hard work.

As this issue goes to press, I am delighted to tell you that our long and often turbulent search for a museum premises could be a step nearer fruition. We are launching a fund-raising initiative to purchase a building in the centre of town – you will discover more as the campaign gathers momentum. Very exciting news!

You will see from our 'Forthcoming Events' feature that we have now completed our list of Speakers to November, the last meeting of 2009.

Those who regularly attend our Members' Meetings will have noticed a marked improvement in visual presentations, thanks to the use of computer graphics and the Power-point programme. We are indebted to Sue Dymond and Chris Wakefield for their technical expertise in making this possible, and to our dear colleague Betty Williams who has kindly funded the purchase of a new projector for our meetings – many, many thanks!

## Blue Plaques Scheme growing steadily



The fifth and latest blue plaque to be organised by the Society was 'tried' at the Priory in Paternoster Row in early February. The official unveiling of the plaque will take place with appropriate ceremony in the spring, but the Chairman (left) was due to talk to residents of the Priory and the opportunity arose for this preview. The roll call of plaques is currently as follows:

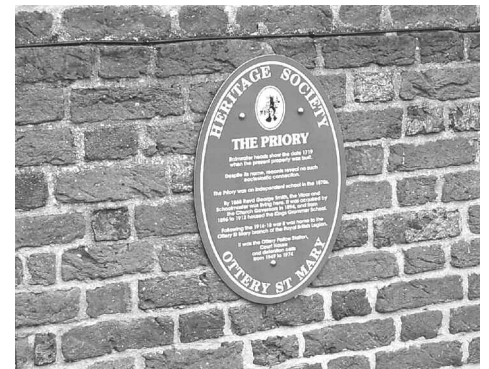
Coleridge's birthplace, The College.  
Congregational Church, Jesu Street.  
Raleigh House, Mill Street.  
The Old Town Hall, Flexton.

There are also plaques in waiting for the Old Mill and Factory, when the future of these buildings is finalised.

On behalf of the Trustees I am delighted to welcome member Oliver Wilson who has been co-opted onto the Committee.

Plans for our Summer Exhibition "Ottery – a Parish at War" are beginning to come together, so please start looking out all those photos and keepsakes and contact Sue Dymond (813500) or any member of the committee.

*Robert Neal*



Letters, articles or any other submissions to the Journal can be emailed to [otteryheritage@googlemail.com](mailto:otteryheritage@googlemail.com)



## “Send three-and-fourpence, we are going to a dance”.

This year is a big one for the Society. We are ten years old, and we continue to offer members a range of entertainment and information in lectures, summer exhibitions and the occasional coach trip or archaeological excavation. Our next exhibition, in August this year, recalls “Ottery - A Parish at War”. And just as the chaps above are clearly doing their bit, so you, the membership, need to be aware of the war-weariness of the existing trustees, some of them with all ten years at the front. I accept that the comparison is not really a worthy one - the real Great War was played out of a far bigger stage than our small concerns for the Heritage of Ottery, but nevertheless the parallels are instructive. We too have suffered the loss of valued colleagues who we cannot replace, and continuous service at the sharp end will (maybe already has) lead to fatigue and reluctance to engage.

If you find the work the Society does interesting and valuable, then please think hard about serving on the committee - even for a short while. There is a desperate need for new recruits, and you really do not need experience of committee work - come to think of it, it's probably better if you have none! The main condition is that you are prepared to spend some of your TIME working with other trustees to sustain the work the Society does.

If we fail to refresh our trustees, then instead of engaging with the local community to promote a broader understanding of our history, we shall ourselves become an untold part of a neglected history. Surely to prevent that must be worth a small effort on your part? So let's get the message straight - “Send reinforcements, we are going to advance”! Contact the Hon. Sec. to sign up for active service without delay - 01404 812962.

*Chris Wakefield*

## Forthcoming Events

Unless otherwise noted, all the Society's meetings are held in the Institute, Yonder Street, Ottery St. Mary.

• **March 17th (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**The history of the Ottery Feoffees**

The founding and history of the feoffees and their continuing work in Ottery. Speaker: Mrs Diane Passey.

• **April 21st (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**The History of Medical Practice in Ottery**

A retired GP outlines the beginnings and subsequent history of medical practice up to the highly polished organisation of the present day. Speaker: Dr Jeremy Bradshaw-Smith.

• **May 19th (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**History of Ottery Church**

An illustrated talk. Speaker: Richard Coley.

• **June 16th (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**Annual General Meeting**

The meeting will be followed by a showing of a video produced by Mary Godwin (late of RAMM) which illustrates some typical activities of members of the East Devon Museums Group.

• **July 21st (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**Growing Up in Wartime**

Recollections from her childhood of the privations and joys of wartime life, seen through the eyes of a young girl. Speaker: Miss Peggy Cooke.

• **August 27th - 31st**

**Summer exhibition - Ottery: A Parish at War**

Ottery's memories and historical remains from the Civil War to the Second World War.

• **September 15th (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**The beaching of the Napoli**

A description of the effects of the beaching of the MSS Napoli on the village of Branscombe. Speaker: Barbara Farquarson.

• **October 20th (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**The World Heritage Site South West**

An illustrated talk. Speaker: Dr. Robert Symes OBE.

• **November 17th (Tuesday) 7.30pm**

**How did Ottery Begin?**

An illustrated talk on what history and the landscape can tell us about the very early development of Ottery. Speaker: Chris Wakefield.

### Heritage Society Trustees

Hon Chairman	Robert Neal	813686
Hon Secretary	Chris Saunders	812962
Hon Treasurer	Jim Woolley	812176
	Hazel Abley	
	John Pilsworth	812737
	Chris Wakefield	815262
Membership Sec.	Judy Mullinger	813019

### Co-opted members

Sue Dymond, Oliver Wilson

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# SUMMER EXHIBITION

## “Ottery – A Parish at War”

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War 2, and our Summer Exhibition at the Institute will focus on the Home Front here in Ottery - reflecting people's memories of those austere days, the way Ottregians pulled together, fundraising for Spitfires, and supporting our fighting troops overseas.

We would like to hear from you if you have any keepsakes or memorabilia - ration-books, gasmasks, petrol coupons, letters home - anything from the wartime periods would be interesting.

Do you remember evacuees? Maybe you were one yourself. Remember soldiers billeted at the factory, the Land Army, part-time schooling, air-raid drill, 'Digging for Victory' and food shortages? The Home Guard, sandbags, blackouts and sticky tape on windows?

Photos and keepsakes loaned for the exhibition will be treated with the utmost care. Photos or paper / card items can be copied and originals returned to you within a few hours - that's a promise!

Our exhibition will feature other wars that have affected Ottery in the past - the Civil War, Napoleonic Wars, and WWI all left their mark on the town so there will be plenty to see.

Provisional dates for the Exhibition are Thursday August 27 to Monday August 31. Please contact Sue Dymond 813500, Robert Neal 813686 or Chris Wakefield 815262.

ROBERT NEAL

# RANDOM THOUGHTS A WINDOW ON THE PAST

I recently came across a small group of objects which provide a glimpse of an almost forgotten world, one in which I grew up and which will be familiar to many of you reading these words. A world which I fear is no longer with us.

The objects in question were several Bibles and Testaments which had belonged to various members of an old Ottregian family. Inside the Bibles were the names of their previous owners, one containing a succession of names of members of the family who had used it, together with their address. The writing was unsophisticated, child-like. My thoughts instantly went back to my schooldays, when every pupil had his own Bible, either in their desk or in their satchel, and where religion was a part of everyday life. Many of those Bibles also had the names of elder brothers or sisters in them, showing how they too had been passed down to younger siblings.

My first real contact with religion was through the local Congregational Church. We were not what one could call a religious family, although my maternal Grandfather had been a Congregational Lay Minister and my mother sometimes played the organ in the chapel. I attended the afternoon Sunday School sessions presided over by Miss Rowe, a kindly spinster lady of indeterminate years, who read bible stories to us and played the piano for hymn singing. All very "low key" and friendly. My attendance ceased when I felt I didn't want to go anymore, when I was about eleven years old.

The first school I attended was the local "Church of England School", just one of the many built around the turn of the century, readily identifiable by the uniformity of the buildings, the neat playgrounds and segregated toilet block. Every day began with Assembly and prayers, and the local Vicar came in once a week to give Religious Instruction to older pupils. At Easter and Christmas, we were formed up into the obligatory "crocodile" and the whole school march to the local church for divine worship.

When I went to Grammar School, the routine was similar, although one of the senior masters now took Religious Instruction as a formal subject. The whole school still marched to the local church for Easter and Christmas worship but now Founder's Day was celebrated in a similar fashion.

During my formative years, I never felt at any time that Religion was being forced upon me, but without doubt the moral framework it provided has shaped my values and influenced my behaviour throughout the rest of my life. Looking at the state of much of our Society today, with its vandalism and anti-social behaviour, the prevalent "me-me" culture, the breakdown of the family unit, the general lack of tolerance and consideration for others, one could be forgiven for thinking that we have lost that moral framework. But I don't suppose many school children today have a Bible in their desk or in their satchel .....

Funny how a chance find of a few books at the local Reclaim can set one thinking !

*A Trustee*

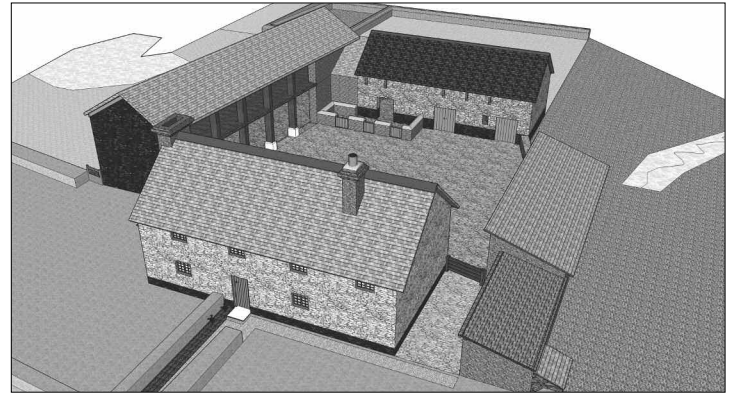
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# Living together in Ottery - 1800-2001.

The recent decision to build an entirely new town in East Devon reveals the extent to which our demand for housing has spiralled since the last war. In simple terms, we need more houses because we want more space for ourselves - and a few figures from Ottery's population history are instructive here.

In 1811 Ottery parish had 554 houses accommodating 2880 people - an average of 5.19 persons per household. The next 50 years saw something of a housing boom with a near doubling of the housing stock, and a slight fall in occupancy rates. So in 1861 we find 4340 folks in 925 houses - 4.69 persons per household. Then there is a remarkable period of calm in population and housing dynamics which lasts for almost a century. The population of Ottery, in line with most other East Devon market towns, altered very little between the 1850s and the 1930s, and the housing stock had expanded by less than 10%. Occupancy levels had dropped a little further (3.6 per household in 1931) but in essence, population density in Ottery was much as it had been for a century past\*.

After the war, the pace of development picked up significantly - by 2001 housing stock in the parish had reached 3353 (three times the 1931 level) to accommodate 8556 people, so occupancy levels were now down to 2.5 per household - half what they were in 1811. In Ottery town itself the occupancy rate is even lower - 2.1 per household (2001) - illustrating the odd situation that, occupation-wise, the town has been traditionally less crowded than the countryside. Farms in particular, were among the larger domestic units - in



**Goveton Farm - subject of the Society's 2008 archaeology project. The Tolman family, who farmed here in the 1880s, numbered nine in all, including John Tolman, his wife, six children and his 80 year old father, who was blind. (1881 census)**

1851, Pitt Farm had a household numbering 15, Knightstone had 13, Four Elms - 12, Straitgate - 11, Holcombe 10 (see fig 1), and so on with many more having 8, 9 or 10 living on the farm, either in the house itself or, in the case of many labourers, in a convenient barn or outhouse.

In conclusion - the fact is we used to live much closer together than we do now. Lodging was common, and many houses, not just those of the local grandees, had live-in servants. Lower down the scale, families had children and sundry relatives living with them. All in all - we certainly had the knack of living together more closely in times past - even though it was probably a case of needs must.

*Chris Wakefield*

*\*The 1866 fire seems to have had little effect on housing stocks. Those that were burned down were simply replaced one for one.*

**Fig. 1: Large households were not uncommon 150 years ago. The list below is from the 1851 Census - showing the occupants of Holcombe Barton Farm. Maria Broom was a considerable landowner at the time. Her husband, John, had died in the late 1840s and she had taken over the responsibility of running the farm. She headed a household of 10 (and 3 visitors, one from Jamaica) and a workforce of 18, six of these as live-in servants.**

Name	Position	status	age	gender	employment	birthplace
Maria BROOM	Head	W	66	F	Farmer of 300 Acres	Collumpton-DEV
John BROOM	Son	U	29	M		Ottery-DEV
Margaret BROOM	Daur	U	27	F		Ottery-DEV
Sarah BENTLY	Vist	W	46	F		Collumpton-DEV
John MITCHELL	GChd	-	9	M	Scholar	Talaton-DEV
Francis HALL	Vist	U	17	M		Talaton-JAM
Jessie SALTER	Vist	-	7	F	Scholar	Collumpton-DEV
Maria THORN	Serv	U	20	F	House Maid Servant	Awliscombe-DEV
Thomas CARTER	Serv	U	21	M	Farm Servant	Ottery-DEV
Wm. DARKE	Serv	U	18	M	Farm Servant	Ottery-DEV
Wm. PEARCE	Serv	-	15	M	Farm Servant	Ottery-DEV
Charles CHURCHILL	Serv	-	13	M	Farm Servant	Ottery-DEV
Wm. THORN	Serv	-	13	M	Farm Servant	Ottery-DEV

# A Notable West Hill Residence

“Elsdon”, just west of Elsdon Lane, is the largest house at West Hill and was built in 1905 by John Billiatt the Australian explorer. Billiatt was the youngest member of John McDouall Stuart’s expedition of 1861–62, the first to cross Australia from Adelaide on the south coast to Van Diemen’s Gulf on the north coast. He is buried in St Michael’s churchyard.

Billiatt returned to England in the mid 1890s and decided to settle at West Hill. He called his new house “Wurlie”, the aboriginal word for an octagonal dwelling, a shape that is repeated in the house’s water tower and in the hall at “Blackmores”, a cottage that was once part of the Wurlie estate. Sadly, John’s wife died soon after the house was finished and he remarried and moved to Exeter. A subsequent owner from the village of Elsdon in Northumberland later changed the name of the house.

Before the late 1950’s fresh water was piped from the reservoir near West Hill Court and pumped up into the water tower to supply the house as here was no mains water or drainage until then.

Michael Potter’s aunt was in service in the house from the mid 1920s to 1930s when the house was owned



**Elsdon House, formerly Wurlie - John Billiat’s house in West Hill**

by a Major Tyler. She recalled that there were 6 female staff working indoors and outdoors there were 4 gardeners and 2 chauffeurs, one living alongside and one over the garage. The head gardener lived at “Blackmores” and the housekeeper also lived off the estate.

The chauffeurs job frequently involved driving the family to Sidmouth Junction (now Feniton Station) to catch the London train, shopping trips to Sidmouth or Exeter or social calls. The local tradesmen from Ottery called daily

at the house to deliver bread, groceries, meat etc. Milk was supplied by the West Hill farms.

The house had tennis courts and a croquet lawn in the grounds and was famous for big tennis and croquet parties. The wealthy householders had a glamorous lifestyle with houseguest from afar arriving by chauffeur driven car. There was accommodation for the visiting chauffeur and staff. How times have changed!

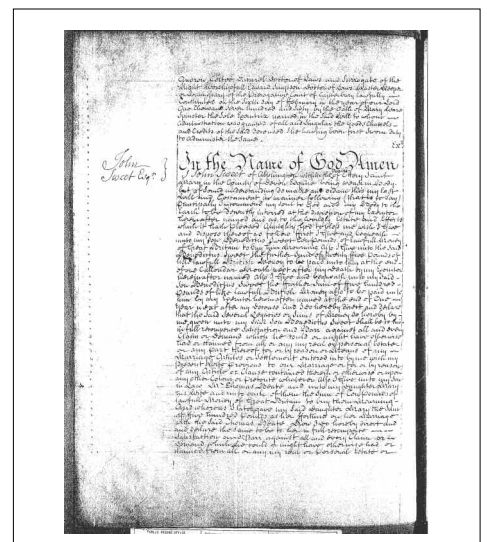
*John Pilsworth*

## Records Transcription Group?

Following the success of the Tithe Map transcription, I would like to propose some further transcription work from paper to digital media. This is something you can do at home, but it does rely on you having a computer and internet access. In particular I would like to transcribe a series of Ottery wills dating from the 16th to the 19th century. You will need to learn a few basic paleographic skills - lessons are available online and skills come quite easily with a little practice. This work can be quite fascinating. Our efforts, if they bear fruit,

will form the basis of some long overdue publishing of local records by the Society. The picture here shows the Will of John Sweet who lived in Alffington and died in 1760. The will mentions his immediate family, and also some building work he is undertaking locally at a farm called Mudpool or Eveleigh’s Tenement (where are these?). The wills are a great resource for family history and can settle long running arguments (see back page). If you are interested, please email [otteryheritage@googlemail.com](mailto:otteryheritage@googlemail.com) for more information on how to get started.

*cw*



# Reading between the Lines

## A look at Ottery's past from Pulman's Weekly News

During the mid-1800s Ottery was eagerly anticipating the arrival of three things – the railway, gas and pavements. Using information from articles in Pulman's Weekly newspaper from that period the progress and set-backs of these schemes can be followed.

### The Railway

*"We hope soon to have a better and more speedy mode of transit than we now enjoy. 'The Diligence,' to and from the station to this town, would do very well fifty years ago, but not in the present days of rapid transport."*

(Extract from Pulman's Weekly 12th February 1863)

Many local people refer to Feniton station as Sidmouth Junction which was its name in the past when you changed trains there to travel on to Sidmouth on the branch line. Long before this the station was known as Ottery Road.

The first stage in bringing the railway to Ottery and Sidmouth was actually getting the directors of the South Western Railway to agree to create a station between Honiton and Broadclyst. They decided against this in December 1858. However, by September 1862 an Act had been passed in Parliament for the construction of the line from Ottery Road Station to Sidmouth. It seems that Ottery Road Station was by now established and "*the works will be commenced forthwith*" on the line. Engineers were surveying by November of the same year with the hope of earthworks starting in early spring of 1863. In February of 1863 there is mention of the "*Budleigh Salterton Branch Railway, which will diverge from the trunk line at Tipton St. John*". In April 1863 comment is made that the express train to and from London has been stopping at Ottery Road Station during the past month. Perhaps the station was constructed some time before trains began stopping there. We know coaches met the trains and took passengers on to Sidmouth (and points in between) "*there being a very good driving road from the station via Ottery to that place.*"

By late May 1864 at least 50 navvies are working at Ash Farm on cutting no.1 and embankment no. 2. They have got as far as the River Otter. There are 5 bridges and culverts so far, as well as "*a bridge of considerable magnitude over the River Otter near Gosford. The surveyor is still here, engaged in the valuation and purchase of lands and property for the further extension of the line*".



Ottery Station in the 1960s

(photo John L. Smith)

By December 1864 however things had taken a turn for the worse. It seems that work had stopped some weeks previously and the workers discharged. The reason given was the lack of necessary plans and information to enable the work to progress. The shareholders were unhappy at this and blamed lack of business-like management. Commenting that it had taken two and a half years since the Act was passed to construct this railway they regretted the slow progress. They also wanted to apply to Parliament for another Act to enable them to increase the capital and decrease the number of directors and issue preference shares. The shareholders are going to oppose this application and a solicitor has been instructed "*to file a bill in Chancery against the directors.*"

In January 1865 the Globe Inn in Exmouth was the venue for a public meeting to consider the railway coming on to Exmouth through Budleigh Salterton. Most present seemed to be against the idea.

January 1865 in Ottery still sees no work on the railway and contractor's plant has been removed. The board of directors seem to be split on what to do. The money used so far on the works is seen as lost and the town has lost confidence in the scheme. A solicitor has lodged an injunction to stop the contractor removing plant.

The New Year of 1866 starts on an optimistic note for resumption of the work on the railway by Mr Shrimpton, the contractor, who is sorting out the company's affairs. It is seen as quite a job for him after several years neglect but evidently the local shareholders are behind him.

In March 1871 it is announced that the railway from Ottery Road Station to Sidmouth via Ottery St Mary

will soon be commenced. Should that perhaps be re-commenced? The Ottery station is going to be near St Saviour's Bridge.

The source of newspaper cuttings now dries up but we know that the railway arrived in Ottery in 1874. So from the Act of Parliament by 1862 to the arrival in Ottery took 12 years or 16 years if you count the campaign as starting with the intention of a halt on the main line between Honiton and Broadclyst.

## The Gas Works

In February 1864 it is announced that the town is "to be lighted with gas". Mr Vickery of Exeter is to carry out the work. By the end of May the foundations of the buildings have been laid.

In April 1865 "the gas buildings are at a standstill". Towards the end of May work seems to be coming on apace with men employed laying pipes through the streets. November 1865 sees the streets and most of shops lit by gas produced at the "handsomely built" Gas Works by St. Saviours Bridge.

Storm and floods in January 1866 damaged the gas works and it would be expensive to repair. Vigilant staff meant that the town was only in darkness for two nights.

In December 1869 the gas works proprietor agreed to lower the price of gas during the winter.

The river must have damaged the gas works again in October 1870 as the town was without gas for almost a week. Many men were taken on to repair the damage. Hoping for a quick renewal of service so that "what is dark in us will soon be illuminated"!

## Pavements

"The improvements in question, together with the contemplated gas works, railway &c., will tend, we hope, to brighten up the old town, and place it in appearance equal to others in the county."

Pulmans Weekly 21st. July 1864

In July 1864 a public meeting was held in the Town Hall (present day library) to listen to a report from a committee on the laying of "flagging through the foot walks of the principal streets". It was agreed to start the works at once and there would be a special rate, on house property in the town only, to raise the £700 necessary.

Early January 1865 saw a meeting of the Paving and Improvement Committee which indicated that the paving and flagging would soon be commenced. In September the tenders of Mr. J Digby, builder of the

town, were accepted for carrying out the work at a cost of over £600. The work would include kerbing and paving of over 7000ft. Also included would be reforming of the town seat and arching it over.

By April 1865 indications are given that the streets are to be entirely relaid and small pebbles and flagging will be used for footwalks and streets.

November 1865 sees the covering over of "the unsightly town leat" with the space gained added to the street. This in preparation, it seems, for the paving and kerbing work.

Mid-February 1866 sees "the first instalment of the new pavement and kerb stone" at Mill Street from the factory to the Post Office.

August 1867 saw a resumption of work and Paternoster Row and Cornhill were laid with curb and pebble paving. Apparently this gave a "very pretty effect".

Sue Dymond

OTTERY ST. MARY.  
EXETER AND YEOVIL RAILWAY.—  
It is stated that the inhabitants of Ottery St. Mary feel greatly aggrieved and disappointed at the determination of the directors of the South-Western Railway not to erect a station between Honiton and Broadclyst.

**Ottery St. Mary**  
It was stated a few weeks ago that the contractor of the Ottery and Sidmouth Railway had been compelled to stop the works and to discharge the men, in consequence of his not being able to procure the necessary plans and other information essential to progress. Since then several meetings of the shareholders have expressed surprise and regret at the tardy progress of the works and the conviction that if diligence and business-like management had been exerted a very different result would have been achieved during the two years and a quarter which have elapsed since the Act was obtained. A Board meeting has been held to consider the matter particularly with regard to the notice of application to Parliament for another Act to enable the directors to increase the amount of capital of the company, and decrease the number of directors, issue preference shares, etc. It is said that the shareholders will strenuously oppose the application, and that a solicitor has been instructed to file a bill in Chancery against the directors.

Pulmans Weekly News has recorded life in and around Ottery since 1857 (and continues up to the present day). Those older editions may not all be extant any longer but "What We Were Doing 100 Years Ago" items from the 1950's and 1960s are highly revealing of local detail. These clips relate to the editions of the late 1850s and early 1860, when the railway was eagerly anticipated. The reported delays and the administrative and technical difficulties have a curiously modern feel to them.

# The William Browne Affair

**It has long been held that William Browne, an influential 17th century poet, lived his last years in Ottery St Mary – dying here in 1645. But where did this story originate, and is it accurate?**

For many people the name William Browne conjures up a scruffy schoolboy – the protagonist of Richmal Crompton’s delightful children’s books. There is another William Browne though, a 17th century poet, author of the *Britannia Pastorals*, quite well known in his time, and judged to be an influence on later more famous poets. He is of interest to us simply because it has long been suggested that he spent his last years in Ottery St Mary. John Whetham<sup>(1)</sup> goes as far as suggesting that the tributes to the Sherman family on tablets in the church were penned by him, and argues that the entry in the parish records for the burial of a William Browne in Ottery in 1645, is a record of the death of the poet.

The claim has a much longer provenance than Whetham's 1984 book, and we can see it stretching back to one of Browne's early biographers, Anthony Wood, who in 1690, wrote “*In my searches I find that one Will. Browne of Ottery S. Mary in Devon. died in the Winter of 1645. whether the same with the Poet, I am hitherto ignorant*”<sup>(2)</sup>. This suggestion was repeated by subsequent biographers, sometimes with and sometimes without the original caveat<sup>(3)</sup>. Robert Southey (Coleridge's long time friend), is among the worst offenders, remarking that “*there is reason to think the latter part of his (William Browne's) life was past at Ottery St. Mary's, in his native county*”.<sup>(4)</sup>

in 1893 A H Bullen appears to have made a more substantial effort to

discover the truth of the matter. His conclusion runs: “*William Browne died in or before 1645. Administration of his estate was granted (in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury) to his widow, Timothy Browne, on 6th November, 1645. In the Act he is described as 'late of Dorking, in the county of Surrey, Esquire.'* There is no trace of his death or burial in the Dorking register, and the Horsham register has been searched in vain. It is possible that he was buried at Tavistock. The Tavistock register, under date 27th March, 1643, has an entry — ‘William Browne was buried.’”<sup>(5)</sup>

Let's look again at the facts of the case.

William Browne was one of three children (two sons – William and John and a daughter, Elizabeth) of a wealthy Tavistock family. He was educated first at Tavistock then at Oxford, becoming a barrister in 1611. In 1628 He married Tymothy Eversham (his second wife – the first appears to have died in 1614), and they had two children, both of whom died in infancy. Browne moved in an exalted social circle, which included some of the leading poetic and literary lights of the day. His work was judged to have influenced Milton, Keats and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning.

The evidence from the will of William Browne of Ottery Saint Mary does not match well with the life and circumstances of Browne the poet. The will, dated 6th November 1645, is indeed that of a William Browne who seems to have no surviving children. There the

similarity ends though. There is no mention of a wife, and this William Browne had three sisters, called Margaret, Mary Jane and Sibyl. There is no sister Elizabeth; no brother John. If there was a brother (the relationship is not specified in the will) he was called Henry Browne and he lived in Gittisham. Neither do William Browne’s social connections match what we would expect of the poet, who was a protege of the Earl of Pembroke, rubbed shoulders with the aristocracy and had an estate of his own. Ottery William’s bequests add up to a modest £170 (£22,000 in modern money) and no property is mentioned. The network of friends and relations that appear in the will also seem to be of no great note, certainly not from the great and the good of Ottery at the time.

Nothing in this will supports the argument that this is William Browne the poet. Perhaps it’s time to relinquish our claim on him.

*cw*

- 1). John Whetham “Ottery St Mary” 1986
- 2). Anthony Wood “Athenae Oxonienses” 1690
- 3). Principally Thomas Davies in 1772, Alexander Chalmers in 1812 and Robert Southey in 1831.
- 4). Robert Southey in “British Poets, Chaucer to Johnson” (1831).
- 5). A. H. Bullen “Browne, Poetical Works” ed. Goodwin 1893.

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