

LITERARY ASSOCIATIONS WITH MINSTERWORTH

By Terry Moore-Scott January 2020

You could be excused thinking that a small Severn-side village like Minsterworth had few, if any, prominent literary associations but such is not the case. History records quite a number of writers of various sorts associated in diverse ways with Minsterworth.

The medieval court chronicler **Walter Map** (c.1130-c.1209/10) is best known as the author of a written work entitled *De Nugis Curialum* (lit. 'Of Courtly Trifles'), a collection of tales, legends and gossip about affairs at the English royal court of Henry II. As well as being in royal service, he was also a man of the church possessing the livings of a number of churches around the country including that of Westbury-on-Severn, together with the its chapel at Minsterworth. In one chapter of *De Nugis* he tells of the treacherous mortal wounding of the Saxon king Edmund Ironside which, he claims took place in Minsterworth, '*the chapel of which I, thank God, today hold in right of its mother church of Westbury*'. According to Map, the king was conveyed from Minsterworth to Ross where he died.

[i] Doubt has been expressed as to the reliability of Map's writings as a source for historic research. As the vicar of Westbury-on-Severn however, he would have been familiar with local historical tradition from Edmund's time and, since nobody ever regarded Edmund Ironside as a saint, the parson and people of Minsterworth could have had no motive for inventing fiction about the event. Their accounts are therefore no less preferable than those of other chroniclers of the time.

Centuries later, **Sir John Gwillim** (1550-1620), a prominent court herald and 'rouge croix pur-suisant' to the Crown, achieved fame for his writing of *A Display of Heraldrie* which, at the time (1610) was regarded as the first authoritative exposition on English armorial symbols. His father, also John Gwillim, is recorded as holding manorial property in Minsterworth, and in 1552 John Gwillim senior witnessed the will of a William Kynde of Moorecote, a submanor of Minsterworth. We cannot be certain as to the extent the Gwillims regarded Minsterworth as their home but, upon his death in 1581, John senior was described as 'The Worshipful John Gwillim, lord of the manor of Hatheways in the parish of Minsterworth' and Sir John gave his father a full heraldic burial. Towards the end of the 16th century, the family were noted as leasing out and selling their properties in Minsterworth, suggesting that they were not by then fully resident in the parish. Sir John died in 1621 and is thought to have been buried in London.



Frontspiece of John Gwillim's 'A Display of Heraldrie' first published in 1610

The list continues with **Arthur Conan Doyle** (1859-1930), creator of the Sherlock Holmes novels. In 1884 Conan Doyle met and was attracted to a young lady, Louisa (Touie) Hawkins, daughter of a farmer and land holder Jeremiah Hawkins of Lower



Conan Doyle and Louisa try out a new tricycle outside their house in South Norwood.

Moorcroft Minsterworth. They married the following year and, although they never resided in Minsterworth, Conan Doyle would have been familiar with the village and in particular the Hawkins home at Lower Moorcroft Farm. The Conan Doyles had two children, a daughter Mary and a son Alleyne but in 1906 (the year in which Conan Doyle was knighted for his services to literature) Louisa died. Conan Doyle went on to marry a second time and by the time of his death in 1930, daughter Mary had become fully independent on the strength of her Hawkins inheritances, including numerous properties in and around Minsterworth.

The village also had a passing connection with **H G Wells** (1866-1946) who, as the author of *War of the Worlds*, is generally regarded as the founder of modern science fiction. Wells' father, Joseph Wells, had a brother Charles Wells who for much of the last half of the 19th century occupied Elm Farm in Minsterworth. As a young college student

Wells was evidently somewhat rebellious with no great enthusiasm for his studies and in the summer of 1886, to remove him from the distractions of student life in London, he was sent down to stay for a month with his uncle in Minsterworth. The episode is mentioned in his autobiographical notes along with the statement that it was in Minsterworth that he set to writing a paper on Socialism intended for presentation at the following autumn's session of the college debating society. Wells' first major novel *The Time Machine* was published two years later, followed by *War of the Worlds* in 1898.

But the writer with probably the strongest and most direct links with Minsterworth is the World War One poet and Gloucestershire Laureate **F W ('Will') Harvey** (1888-1957). 'Will' Harvey was born at Murrell's End in Hartpury but in 1891 the Harvey family moved to a new home at Redlands in Minsterworth. It was as a lad in Minsterworth that 'Will' grew to love the water meadows, orchards and the River Severn - a love he shared with his close friend the poet and song writer Ivor Gurney as together they would walk for miles talking and singing and enjoying the countryside round about. In 1912, 'Will' qualified to be a solicitor's assistant and it was about this time that he began to write poetry.



2nd Lieutenant Harvey

In 1915 he enlisted into the Gloucestershire Regiment and was soon deployed into northern France. While at the front, he contributed to one of the first trench newspapers, the Fifth Gloucester Gazette. Here his verse captured the longing for home, the camaraderie of his friends and humorous insights that made soldiering bearable. As a Lance Corporal, 'Will' was awarded the DCM for bravery in the field and was later commissioned to 2nd Lieutenant.

In 1916 however, he was captured and spent the final two years of the war in German prisoner-of-war camps. During his captivity he wrote some of his most enduring verse about his love for Gloucestershire and the Cotswold Hills and especially for his home village of Minsterworth. Many of the poems he wrote were published back home.

After the war, 'Will' resumed work as a solicitor, eventually in 1925 setting up a practice in Lydney. He did not earn very much as a solicitor though, choosing instead to help less fortunate clients and poorer Forest folk who had been treated shabbily in one way or another. His home was in the village of Yorkley in the Forest of Dean where he lived for the last thirty years of his life.

On 13th February 1957, after a number of years of failing health, 'Will' died at Yorkley but it was to Minsterworth that he returned to be buried with others of his family in Minsterworth churchyard close to the River Severn and the orchards he loved so much. A beautiful stained glass window in the parish church commemorates the life and work of F W Harvey and his spiritual bond with Minsterworth.

Footnote to text.

[i] There is uncertainty about how Edmund actually died. Some sources suggest the king died in Oxford, others in London or at Glastonbury abbey. Most authorities however agree that the king's death in 1016 was 'in suspicious circumstances'.

Sources.

In addition to information available in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the following sources were used in compiling the above notes:

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