

COVENTRY'S

Literary TRAIL

A guide to a walk around
the city centre taking in
writers who have lived
in, passed through and
written about Coventry.

Eleanor Nesbitt

FESTIVAL
**POSITIVE
IMAGES**
CELEBRATING COVENTRY'S DIVERSITY

 **heritage
lottery fund**
LOTTERY FUNDED

Coventry's Literary Trail

1	Railway Station	2
2	Park Road and Manor Road	4
3	Warwick Road railway bridge and King Henry VIII School	5
4	Drinking Trough, Greyfriars Green	7
5	29, Warwick Row	8
6	Sir Thomas White's Statue	8
7	1, The Quadrant	9
8	54-57 Hertford Street	10
9	The Council House, Earl Street	11
10	The Herbert, Bayley Lane	11
11	The Cathedral	13
12	St Mary's Guildhall, Bayley Lane	15
13	The Golden Cross, Hay Lane/Pepper Lane	16
14	Holy Trinity Church	17
15	Statue of Lady Godiva, Broadgate	18



© Crown Copyright and database right 2014. Ordnance Survey 100026294

COVENTRY'S

Literary TRAIL

Coventry abounds in literary connections: over the past nine hundred years writers have lived in Coventry, passed through the city and written about it. Gosford Green is the site of the third scene of William Shakespeare's play *King Richard II*; Mary Ann Evans, better known as the novelist George Eliot, was at boarding school in Warwick Row in the 1830s and then lived in Foleshill with her father from 1841 to 1849; Charles Dickens visited, and in 1970 the novelist E. M. Forster died in Styvechale, aged 91, at the home of his friends Bob and May Buckingham. The eleventh-century Godgifu (better known by her Latinised name of Godiva), the compassionate wife of Leofric Earl of Mercia, features in literature from the chronicle of Roger of Wendover (who died in 1236) up to the present. Two of Coventry's cycle of about ten Mystery Plays survive and they continue to be enacted in the city: their first recorded performance was in 1392–1393.

An excellent way of connecting with Coventry's wealth of literary association is to walk the itinerary mapped out in this publication, with its fifteen stops en route, starting from Coventry railway station and finishing in Broadgate – or start at any point along the trail. This way you can pause to look at sites that feature in famous writers' lives, or in what they wrote, and also retrace the steps of novelist George Eliot and poet Philip Larkin in their schooldays and imagine the youthful William Shakespeare (very possibly) watching the Coventry Mystery Plays or, years later, (almost certainly) acting in St Mary's Guildhall.

1

Railway Station

Station Square,
Eaton Road, CV1 2GT



Coventry railway station is more than merely a convenient place to begin walking the city centre's literary trail. The railway and the station itself have their own claims to literary fame. The original station was opened in 1838, but only after considerable controversy about the impact of this new, disruptive invention, the railway. As a local, **Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot)** (1819–1880) would have heard heated discussions, and we can listen in, thanks to chapter 56 of her novel, *Middlemarch*, which owes so much to Coventry.

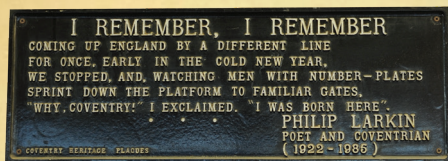
...those who held the most decided views on the subject were women and landholders. Women both old and young regarded travelling by steam as presumptuous and dangerous, and argued against it by saying that nothing would induce them to get into a railway carriage; while proprietors, differing from each other in their arguments... were yet unanimous in the opinion that ... these pernicious agencies must be made to pay a very high price to landowners for permission to injure mankind. (1994: 597)

In July 1848, Mary Ann left here on a day trip to Stratford upon Avon with **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803–1882) and the Brays (see no. 4).

In the 1850s both Charles Dickens (1812–1870) and **Harriet Beecher Stow** (1811–1896), author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, used Coventry station.



Probably uniquely among the UK's railway stations, Coventry's was the starting point for poems by two celebrated poets, Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) (see no. 3 below) and **Philip Larkin** (1922–1985) respectively. A plaque, beside the door of the customer



services office on platform one, quotes from Philip Larkin's poem 'I remember, I remember', published in 1955.



Coming up England by a different line
For once, early in the cold new year,
We stopped, and watching men with number-plates
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

(Here a word of explanation is in order: Coventry was a major centre of car manufacture. Before the use of car transporters, vehicles – with the company's temporary red number plates – would be driven to retailers by drivers. Bringing back the vehicles' 'trade plates', these drivers would return to Coventry by train to collect another car for delivery.)

Each summer, Philip, his sister Kitty and their parents used to set out from the station for Folkestone and other seaside resorts.



Usually they holidayed in England but in 1936 and 1937 Sydney Larkin took his son Philip to Germany. One can also picture the novelist, **E. M. Forster** (1879–1970), arriving and departing on his visits from King's College, Cambridge, to his friends, Bob and May Buckingham in Styvechale, Coventry.





2

The corner of Park Road and Manor Road

Park Road runs eastward from the station and intersects Manor Road. From 1927 until 1940 the Larkin family lived in 'Penvern', 1 Manor Road, a genteel brick and pebbledash three-storey house, demolished in the 1960s when the ring road was built. From the age of five to eight Philip walked, in his sailor suit, from 'Penvern' to Cheshunt Preparatory School (also demolished) on the corner with Park Road. Philip was a short-sighted lad with a tendency to stammer, and he was a keen collector of the cigarette cards in the gutters.¹



On the other side of the ring road, which severed it from Manor Road, is St Patrick's Road. Here Philip's friends Tom Wilson and Peter Snape lived – both were killed in the Second World War.

The Larkin household was dominated by Philip's father, Sydney. On the mantel piece in 'Penvern' was a small statue of Hitler: Sydney Larkin, Coventry's City Treasurer, was a Nazi sympathiser. On the subject of his parents' marriage Philip subsequently wrote that it 'left me with two convictions: that human beings should not live together, and that children should be taken from their parents at an early age.'² Of his Coventry childhood he wrote damningly, in his poem 'I remember, I remember' that 'Nothing, like something, can happen anywhere' (1955).

¹ Lee 2009 and Motion 1993 provide the details of Larkin's childhood.

² BJL Notebook 5 (quoted in Motion 1993: 15) i.e. Philip Larkin archive in Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull.





3

Warwick Road railway bridge and King Henry VIII School

Warwick Road railway bridge is wider than the bridge that Alfred Lord Tennyson immortalised in 1840, when he was returning from Coventry to London. His poem 'Godiva' begins:



I waited for the train at Coventry;
I hung with grooms and porters on the bridge,
To watch the three tall spires; and there I shaped
The city's ancient legend into this:³

Twentieth-century buildings now obscure the view from the bridge of the three spires: St Michael's (the 'old cathedral'), Holy Trinity church and Christchurch (originally Greyfriars).

Across Warwick Road from the railway bridge is King Henry VIII School which numbers Philip Larkin among its more famous alumni. From Cheshunt Preparatory School he transferred to the junior school when he was eight and then entered the senior school in 1933. The Philip Larkin Room there commemorates him. His first prose publication was in the school magazine, *The Coventrian*, in 1933 and his first poem to be published appeared in it in 1938, the year in which he gained an A in English Language and a C in English Literature in the School Certificate. According to the school song 'We are the school at the top of the hill',⁴ but this had only been the case since 1885 when the Grammar School moved from its earlier site.

³ See <http://www.bartleby.com/270/1/102.html>

⁴ Larkin 2005a: 3.



Soon after being founded by **John Hales** (c.1516–1572) in Whitefriars church in 1545, the Grammar School moved to the former St John's

Hospital at the corner of Bishop Street and Hales Street.

Hales himself wrote *Highway to Nobility* (c.1543) as well as introductions to grammar for his school and *Precepts for the Preservation of Health*, a translation from Plutarch. One of the Grammar School's early headmasters was **Philemon Holland**

(1552–1637), the Translator General,

who produced the first English renderings of Latin works including Livy's *History of Rome*, Pliny the Elder's *History of the World*, Plutarch's *Moralia* and Suetonius's *History of Twelve Caesars* and, from classical Greek, *The Education of Cyrus* by Xenophon. He dedicated his works to, among others, Queen Elizabeth

I, Robert Cecil and the mayor and aldermen

of Coventry. An early pupil was **William Dugdale**

(1605–1686), the antiquarian noted for an account of monasteries and abbeys and publications including his *Antiquities of Warwickshire*. Dugdale rose to the position of Garter Principal King of Arms.⁵

Literary alumni of the school on the Warwick Road site include **Eric Malpass** (1910–1996), a novelist whose work was particularly popular in Germany, and **Peter Ho Davies** (born 1966) whose work includes his award-winning short story collection *The Ugliest House in the World* and a novel *The Welsh Girl*.

⁵ See Broadway 2011: 8–9.



4

Drinking trough, Greyfriars Green

In 2002 a stone drinking trough was relocated to its present (2014) position, to the left of the pathway from the station through Greyfriars Green to Warwick Row. The trough connects us with not just one author but with a network of celebrated nineteenth-century

writers. It was first installed in memory of Mary Ann Evans's close friend **Cara (Caroline) Bray** (1814–1905), who in 1878 founded the Coventry Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Cara wrote *Little Mop and Other Animals*, *Our Duty to Animals* and *Elements of Morality: Lessons for Home and School*. Her husband, **Charles Bray** (1811–1884), was a ribbon manufacturer, a newspaper owner and a radical freethinker who was a major influence on Mary Ann (George Eliot) as a young adult. Some of her earliest publications were articles in his newspaper the *Coventry Herald*.⁶



Charles Bray's works include *Philosophy of Necessity* (1841) and *The Industrial Employment of Women* (1857). In 'Rosehill', their Radford home, Cara and Charles hosted such literary celebrities as **William Makepeace Thackeray** (1811–1863)

and (on a visit from America) **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, whom Miss Evans surprised by her enthusiasm for Rousseau's *Confessions*, as well as the 'first female sociologist', **Harriet Martineau** (1802–1876).

⁶ Adams 2002: 9.





5

29, Warwick Row

CV1 1DY



Beyond the trough, on Warwick Row, are the premises of Loveitts, the estate agency. As 'Nant Glyn', this building housed the school run by Miss Mary Franklin and Miss Rebecca Franklin, the daughters of local Baptist minister, the Reverend Francis Franklin. Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) was a boarder from 1832 (when she was 13) to 1835 (when she had to return home to nurse her ailing mother). She later based the Reverend Rufus Lyon in *Felix Holt, The Radical* on the Revd. Franklin. At 'Nant Glyn', aged fourteen and a half, she wrote 'Edward Neville'.⁷ A fragment of this historical fiction is now in Yale in the USA. Mary Ann imitated Rebecca Franklin's diction, abandoning her former Warwickshire accent, and shared the two mistresses' Christian devotion.⁸ Meanwhile, her weekly hamper of fresh farm produce, sent by her father, was the envy of boarders from further afield.

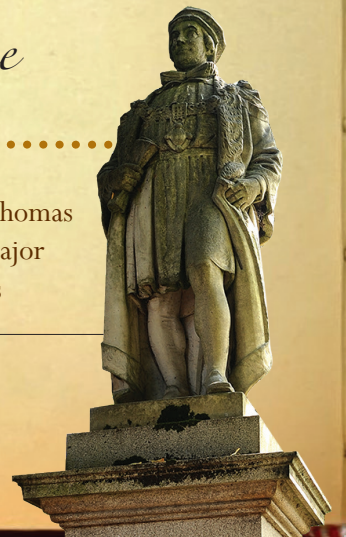
Greyfriars Green used to be considerably more extensive. Each Sunday she walked across it from her school, and past Christchurch (of which only the spire survives from the bombing of 1940) to the Reverend Franklin's chapel (now no longer extant) in the former Cow Lane.⁹

6

Thomas White's statue

Warwick Row

Also in Greyfriars Green stands the statue of Sir Thomas White (1492–1567), a Lord Mayor of London and major benefactor to Coventry. In 1555 he founded St John's



⁷ Rignall 2011.

⁸ Adams 2002: 7.

⁹ Lynes 1970: 11





College, Oxford, whose alumni include the poets A. E. Housman and Philip Larkin. The fact that Philip Larkin won a scholarship to St John's was no coincidence: schools with scholarships founded by White included King Henry VIII, and one of its four houses is named after him.

7 1, The Quadrant

CV1 2DZ

The Quadrant (across New Union Street from Christchurch spire) was not built till about 1860. In 1911 **Angela Brazil** (she pronounced her name 'Brazzle') (1868–1947) moved into number 1 with her brother and mother, and her sister later joined them. Brazil was a pioneer of schoolgirl fiction,¹⁰ her first school story being *The Fortunes of Philippa*, based on her mother's childhood. Brazil was also a locally noted hostess, who threw parties (complete with children's food and games) for adults.



In the 1930s the young Philip Larkin often saw her and, at Oxford in the 1940s, under the *nom de plume* of Brunette Coleman, Larkin himself drafted what were ostensibly schoolgirl stories, *Trouble at Willow Gables* and *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's*. These were, however more risqué than Brazil's novels, and were published only posthumously in 2002 after being brought to the public's notice by Larkin's biographer, Andrew Motion.

On the other side of New Union Street is the Methodist Central Hall. Here, in 1994, the Birmingham poet, **Benjamin Zephaniah** (born 1958), performed for Coventry's first Positive Images Festival.



¹⁰ Freeman 1976 provides detail and discussion.





8

54-57 Hertford Street

CV1 1LB



To the left of Methodist Central Hall, leading into Broadgate, is Hertford Street, where Ristorante Etna used to stand. In Philip Larkin's youth the premises were Hanson's Music and Records. Larkin went on to make a name not only as a poet but also as a jazz critic, and it was here that he would come to browse and buy gramophone records. With Jim Sutton, a school-friend, he discovered jazz, and his father took out a subscription to *Down Beat* for him and bought him a drum kit.¹¹ Larkin's passion was for pre-1940s jazz. His short-lived pen name, Brunette Coleman, was inspired by his admiration for the jazz singer, Blanche Coleman (1910–2008).

This is an appropriate point to recall lines that Larkin wrote in 1954 'For Sidney Bechet'

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,
Building for some a legendary Quarter
Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,
Everyone making love and going shares –
Oh, play that thing!

(Larkin 1964)

The passageway, on the right, is designed to reveal the façade of Ford's Hospital, described by travel writer, **H.V. Morton** (1892–1979), in his (1927) *In Search of England*. Through its garden Mary Ann Evans probably walked to the Revd Francis Franklin's chapel each Sunday from 'Nant Glyn'.

For Christmas 1857, at 8 Hertford Street, the former Corn Exchange, **Charles Dickens** read from his novella, *A Christmas Carol*.

¹¹ Motion 1993: 21.





9

The Council House

Earl Street, CV1 5RR



The Council House, Earl Street, in 1920 replaced St Mary's Guildhall as Coventry's civic centre. From 1922 to 1944 Sydney Larkin, Philip's father worked as City Treasurer in his first-floor office. From the window, father and son watched Lady Godiva ride past in the Godiva procession. In 1939 Sydney was persuaded to remove from his office the Nazi regalia that he had brought back from Germany. However, in 1940, the year that Coventry's cathedral was bombed, he did praise the efficiency of German administration.¹²

10

The Herbert

Bayley Lane, CV1 5QP



Beyond the gift shop inside The Herbert stands George Eliot's piano, a present from her partner George Henry Lewes on her fiftieth birthday. By now she was spelling her name 'Marian'. The music company Broadwood's records show how the piano moved with her in London from one house to another. In 1937 it was gifted to Coventry Council, together with her writing desk, via the Lewes family. While imagining Marian's fingers on the keys and her feet on the pedals, one recalls an exchange of views in *Middlemarch* between Mr Brooke and his daughter, Dorothea:

Mr Brooke: A woman should be able to sit down and play you or sing you a good old English tune...

Dorothea: Mr Casubon is not fond of the piano, and I am very glad he is not....

¹² Motion 1993: 12.





[her] slight regard for domestic music and feminine fine art must be forgiven her, considering the small tinkling and smearing in which they chiefly consisted at this period. (1994: 89)

The History Gallery contains more of George Eliot's possessions: among them a writing bureau, a sewing box and a small statue of Florence Nightingale. Other items on display evoke the Victorian period in which she lived.

Also in The Herbert's collection is King Henry VIII school's punishment book in which Philip Larkin's name appears for minor misdemeanours.

One of Philip Larkins' friends, from his time as librarian at the Queen's University Belfast, was **John Harold Hewitt** (1907–1987), a renowned poet as well as art historian and collector. From 1930 to 1957 Hewitt worked for Belfast Museum and Art Gallery but realised that further promotion was unlikely as his socialist views were unpopular with the political establishment. As a result, in 1957, he gladly accepted the post of Art Director at the Herbert, a post he held till 1972. During these years he started his unpublished autobiography, *A North Light*. Of his relocation to Coventry he wrote in his poem 'The Search':



We left the western island to live among strangers
in a city older by centuries
than the market town which we had come from
where the slow river spills out between green hills
and gulls perch on the bannered poles.

It is a hard responsibility to be a stranger;
to hear your speech sounding at odds with your neighbours';
holding your tongue from quick comparisons;
remembering that you are a guest in the house.
(2007: 83)





Another poem, 'An Irishman in Coventry 1958', affirms Coventry as his progressive new home:

A full year since, I took this eager city,
the tolerance that laced its blatant roar,
its famous steeples and its web of girders,
as image of the state hope argued for...
(2007: 53)

11 *The Cathedral*

Priory Street, CV1 5FB

On leaving The Herbert by the revolving door of the glass-roofed gallery, from the pavement one can see the East end of St Michael's church. (St Michael's church became a cathedral in 1918 when the modern diocese of Coventry was created.)



In 1838, during her very religious period, Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) came to St Michael's church for a performance of Handel's oratorio, *Jephtha*, and reputedly went away, denouncing oratorios and saying she would never attend another.

The organist of St Michael's, Edward Simms, gave Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) music lessons. Angela Brazil worked as a volunteer both for the cathedral and for the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

In 1922 Philip Larkin was christened here, and given the name Philip after the Elizabethan soldier and poet, Philip Sidney. Despite his atheist stance, Philip's father, Sydney Larkin, 'suspended his disbelief in Christianity for the day'.¹³

¹³ Motion 1993: 8.





Later, in an early poem 'Founder's Day, 1939', Philip wrote:

All day the clouds hung over the cathedral
Like soggy paper bags bursting with water
And spilt their water onto the spire
And along its narrow streets. (2005a: 12)

In November 1940 the cathedral was destroyed by German incendiary bombs. The ruins have provided a setting for performances of the mystery plays.

The new cathedral was consecrated in 1962. That year author **Alan Garner** (born 1934) saw Jacob Epstein's statue of St Michael's victory over the Devil. In 2011, receiving an honorary degree from the University of Warwick, Garner recalled that St Michael's face 'totally bent on destruction' had inspired his malevolent character King Malebron of Elidor.¹⁴



The poet **John Betjeman** (1906-1984) was friends with John Piper, designer of the baptistery windows.



In 1972, the cathedral organist, David Lepine, died of a coronary. His devastated fiancée was the novelist **Susan Hill** (born 1948). Hill's father worked in Coventry's car and aircraft factories and she attended Barrs Hill school.

In 1973 Philip Larkin came to the new cathedral to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Warwick and had an 'extraordinary weekend' in Coventry.

¹⁴ 'Author Talks of Coventry Cathedral Inspiration', Coventry Evening Telegraph, 25 January 2011.





12

St Mary's Guildhall

Bayley Lane, CV1 5RN



Also on Bayley Lane stands St Mary's Guildhall, built between 1340 and 1460. Its rich history (for example, Mary Queen of Scots was held in captivity here) includes literary connections with **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616), the American writer **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (1804–1864), George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, **A. E. W. Mason** (1865–1948) and Philip Larkin.

It is possible that William Shakespeare visited the guildhall as a boy when his father was mayor of Stratford. At the far end of the upstairs hall from the gallery, he may well have watched plays being performed on the platform below the tapestry, and he quite probably acted here himself: companies that performed here include Worcester's men (22 November 1580, when he was 16), the Admiral's men (from 1586), the Chamberlain's men (from 1594) and the King's men (from 1603). Plays would first be performed in the presence of the mayor so that he could check for anything politically inappropriate.

Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) was nearly persuaded to sign the pledge here at the first meeting of the temperance movement – she was dissuaded by Charles Bray. In 1854 she came with the Brays to hear Thackeray lecture. Nathaniel Hawthorne (while living in Leamington Spa in the 1850s) also visited the guildhall and wrote a vivid description.

Some readers claim that the hall is the setting for the market at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*. Certainly George Eliot's description of the court room for the trial of Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* leaves no doubt that she was picturing the guildhall:

The place fitted up that day as a court of justice was a grand old hall... The mid-day light that fell on the close pavement of human heads, was shed through a line of high-pointed windows,





variegated with the mellow tints of old painted glass. Grim dusty armour hung in high relief in front of the dark oaken gallery at the farther end; and under the broad arch of the great mullioned window opposite was spread a curtain of old tapestry, covered with dim melancholy figures, like a dozing indistinct dream of the past. It was a place that through the rest of the year was haunted with the shadowy memories of old kings and queens, unhappy, discrowned, imprisoned... (1859: 476–7)



The novelist A. E. W. Mason came to the guildhall several times, once with the Coventry-born actress **Ellen Terry** (1847–1928). The most famous of Mason's many novels is *The Four Feathers*. Less well-known is the fact that Mason was Liberal MP for Coventry from 1906 to 1910.

As City Treasurer, Sydney Larkin would come to the guildhall on business. Decades later, in 1978, Philip Larkin received a civic honour (the Award of Merit) for his works *The Less Deceived*; *Whitsun Weddings*; and *High Windows*. This was his last recorded visit to his hometown.

13 *Golden Cross*

Hay Lane/Pepper Lane, CV1 5RF

Since it was built in 1583 (when William Shakespeare was 19) the Golden Cross – or at least its exterior – would have been familiar to nearly all the writers mentioned in this booklet. Certainly, as a sixth-former, Philip Larkin used to come here with his friends. At that time he fancied himself in a green jacket, red tie and yellow gloves. He would also sit here reading books that he borrowed from the John Gulson Library, Coventry's central library, which stood nearby.¹⁵



¹⁵ Larkin, 'Books for the People', *New Statesman*, May 1997, cited in Motion 1993: 28.



14 *Holy Trinity Church*

Priory Row, CV1 5EX

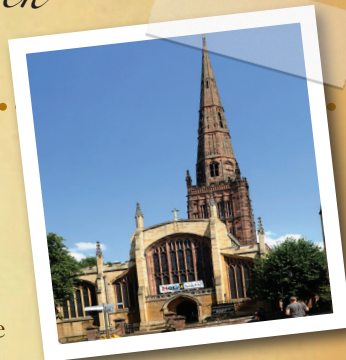
*H*oly Trinity, one of the city's oldest churches, is rich in literary

connections. Philemon Holland

(see no. 3 above) is buried

here. The epitaph which he composed for himself is on

the wall near the far corner of the chapel to the left of the nave as one enters the building. The words 'totus terra fui, terraque totus ero' are his pun on his name (Holland/ all or whole land) 'I was all land/earth and I will be all earth'.



Sarah Siddons (1755–1831), the famous actress, first appeared as Ariel in *The Tempest* with her father's company in 1766. In 1767 a new actor, William Siddons, joined the company and, in 1773, despite her parents' opposition, the couple married in Holy Trinity church. (Her father had wanted Sarah to accept a squire's offer of matrimony rather than this 'insipid' actor's.)

An inscribed plaque commemorates the fact that Robert Evans, the father of Mary Ann (George Eliot), was a sidesman and that she worshipped here. It was during this period that she came to doubt the truth of the Bible in which she had so fervently believed as a schoolgirl.¹⁶ Influenced by Charles Bray, the radical freethinker, she came to regard scripture as 'histories consisting of mixed truth and fiction'. In 1842, she wrote a letter to her father explaining that her feelings would interfere less than if she tried to speak to him in person. She wrote 'I could not without vile hypocrisy... profess to join in worship which I wholly disapprove... I will not do even for your sake.' However, to spare him further distress, she did agree to go back to church with him. Robert died in 1849.

¹⁶ Adams 2002: 8.



15

Statue of Lady Godiva

Broadgate, CV1 1NF

In Broadgate, and at other points in the city, from 1392 to 1579, the Mystery Plays would have been performed on large horse-drawn wagons. Helen Cooper, Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English in the University of Cambridge, has said:

I'm convinced Shakespeare would have seen the Coventry cycle of mystery plays, which was probably a New Testament cycle, and which was last acted in 1579, when he was 15... There are a number of points in his plays where he seems to be recollecting a version of biblical history that comes from the plays rather than from the Bible, although of course they were very closely linked.¹⁷

Broadgate's focal point is the statue of Lady Godiva, mounted on her horse. Lines from Tennyson's poem 'Godiva' are inscribed on the pedestal. Although she had probably died in 1067, Godiva is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, as a major landowner whose estates included Coventry. She and Leofric endowed the priory of St Mary's which stood (until its dissolution by King Henry VIII) on the northern side of Holy Trinity church. One of her generous benefactions was a golden necklace for the priory's statue of Mary.



¹⁷ Wilson 2013: 27.



Godiva is better known for her courage in carrying out her threat to ride naked through the streets of Coventry if her husband, Leofric, did not lighten the people's burden of tax. In respect for their champion's modesty the townspeople stayed indoors. As related by Tennyson:

Then she rode forth, clothed on with chastity...
And one low churl, compact of thankless earth,
The fatal byword of all years to come,
Boring a little auger-hole in fear,
Peeped – but his eyes, before they had their will,
Were shrivel'd into darkness in his head,
And dropt before him.¹⁸

In the centuries since the first mention of Godiva's ride, in a twelfth-century work by **Roger of Wendover** (died 1236), her feat has been commemorated in popular ballads and by well-known writers.



The Elizabethan poet, **Michael Drayton** (1563–1631), was born in Hartshill, Warwickshire. His *Poly-Olbion* (1612–1622) provides *A Choreographical Description of Great Britain*. 'Hymne to his Ladies Birthplace' proclaims:

Coventry that dost adorne
The Countrey wherein I was borne...
That princesse, to whom thou do'st owe
Thy Freedome, whose cleere blushing snow,
The envious sunne saw, when as she
Naked rode to make Thee free...¹⁹



The essayist **Walter Savage Landor** (1775–1864) was born in Warwick. Many of his celebrated 'Conversations' are exchanges that he imagined between ancient Greek and Roman characters, but one is between Leofric and Godiva.

¹⁸ See <http://www.bartleby.com/270/1/102.html>

¹⁹ See www.poetryatlas.com/poetry/poem/1167/hymne-to-his-ladies-birthplace.html.





The mechanical figures of the Broadgate clock re-enact the scene once every hour. Godiva's 'clockwork horse' is mentioned by John Hewitt in 'An Irishman in Coventry'.



Coventry's city centre, depicted evocatively by Nathaniel Hawthorne in the 1850s, is the subject of two very different twentieth-century literary descriptions a few years apart. **J. B. Priestley** (1894–1984) devoted a chapter of his *English Journey* (1934) to Coventry. He records that 'It is genuinely picturesque' and describes the 'half timbered and gabled houses'. These have almost

all disappeared, but not so the two much more recent dominating buildings 'new and enormous bank offices, very massive and Corinthian and designed to suggest that there is nothing wrong with our financial system'.²⁰

Philip Larkin's novel *Jill* describes returning to a once-familiar but now almost obliterated town:

...as he came nearer the centre of town, where disused tramlines were still in the streets and there were warehouses and shops, ruins all at once appeared on every side. Many streets that harboured delayed-action bombs were barred off, and in those streets the tiles and broken glass remained unswept, littering the road, not in tidy heaps in the gutters...
(2005b: 195)

²⁰ Priestley 1934: 57.



References

- Adams, Kathleen** (2002) George Eliot, Norwich: Jarrold Publishing.
- Broadway, Jan** (2011) *William Dugdale: A Life of the Warwickshire Historian and Herald*, UK: Xmera.
- Eliot, George** (1859 rep. 1906) *Adam Bede*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eliot, George** (1994, first published 1871–2) *Middlemarch*, London: Penguin.
- Freeman, Gillian** (1976) *The Schoolgirl Ethic: The Life and Work of Angela Brazil*, London: Allen Lane.
- Hewitt, John** (2007) (ed. Michael Longley and Frank Ormsby) *Selected Poems*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press.
- Larkin, Philip** (1955) *The Less Deceived*, Hessle, East Yorkshire: The Marvel Press.
- Larkin, Philip** (1964) *The Whitsun Weddings*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Larkin, Philip** (2005a) (ed. A. T. Tolley) *Early Poems and Juvenilia*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Larkin, Philip** (2005b, first pub. 1946) *Jill*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Lee, Don** (2009) 'Philip Larkin's Coventry' (leaflet), Coventry: Philip Larkin Society.
- Lynes, Alice** (1970) *George Eliot's Coventry*, Coventry: Coventry Corporation.
- Motion, Andrew** (1993) *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Priestley, J. B.** (1984, first pub. 1934) *English Journey*, London: Heinemann.
- Rignall, John** (2001) *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, Stephen** (2013) 'A Medieval Renaissance', *CAM*, 69, 24–27.

Acknowledgements

Permission for the use of quotations or photographs used in this book have been sought from copyright holders where appropriate and the rights of such copyright holders is gratefully acknowledged.

George Eliot by Frederick William Burton, 1864

Harriet Beecher Stowe c1852 by Gurney & Sons - Bodian College Museum of Art

E. M. Forster, BBC Hulton Picture Gallery

John Hales © National Portrait Gallery

Philemon Holland engraving by J. Thompson

Peter Ho Davies, Glenn Bering Photography

William Makepeace Thackeray by Jesse Harrison Whitehurst

Angela Brazil © National Portrait Gallery

Susan Hill, John Lawrence/Rex

Ellen Terry at age 16, Julia Margaret Cameron

Michael Drayton 1628, Cartwright Collection, Dulwich Gallery

Walter Savage Landor, Illustrated London News. Oct 15 1864

Thanks to David McGrory for his valuable suggestions and corrections.

Designed by Cascade Ltd, Coventry.



First published by Positive Images Festival 2014

ISBN 978-0-9562779-1-6

Text copyright © Eleanor Nesbitt 2014

The rights of Eleanor Nesbitt to be identified as the author of this work have been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

