GREAT BRITONS

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GREAT BRITONS

Top 50 Greatest Brits Who Ever Lived

By
Anglotopia

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five women. Twenty-five men. The greatest Britons who ever lived. A few years ago we started a regular column on Anglotopia called 'Great Britons' which was intended to be an ongoing survey of great British historical figures. Almost 100 articles later, it's been one of my favorite columns to publish. We've learned so much over the years, and learned about so many historical figures you don't simply learn about in a typical American education.

We have sought to create the first guide to great British historical figures, evenly split down the middle between women and men. There are so many important women in British history, that have been brushed out of it. But we're rediscovering more every day. You may not have heard of a lot of the women we've chosen to include, and that's a good thing! As a corollary to that, whittling down to just 25 men was a challenge as well. I've leaned on my own interests in historical figures and who are widely considered the 'most' important. So, Tolkien is in while someone like William Morris is out (though he was fascinating!).

Growing up in America and going through an American centered education, I encountered a major problem as an Anglophile watching hours and house of British TV: I was actually very unfamiliar with a lot of the major figures in British history. I simply didn't know who they were or why they were important. I knew all about the Founding Fathers, our great

and terrible presidents, and other American historical figures. But very little about who Nelson was or why he was 'great.' This book is for those like me, who simply didn't know who a lot of these people are.

First, I need to define by what we mean by 'great.' It does not mean they were amazing people, it means they had a massive or important impact on British history. Their greatness derives from their importance. So, you will find less then savory characters in here - like Cecil Rhodes or Margaret Thatcher or Cromwell (and their terribleness is up for lots of debate which is not what this book is). When we initially published these articles on our website, the internet commentariat had a lot of problems with this definition of 'great.' Hopefully it makes more sense in book form.

Who is a 'Briton' exactly? Technically, anyone born on the Island of Great Britain. But this is too narrow of a definition because several great figures in British history were born in Ireland or in Britain's empire. So, we define a 'Briton' as anyone who played a role in overall British history - locally and globally. An example is someone like Mary Seacole, a Jamaican who was a very important person in British nursing history. Someone like Nancy Astor is an American, but she became part of the British aristocracy and was the first woman to take her seat in the British Parliament - a major achievement.

With the exception of a few Roman era queens, we've deliberately left monarchs out of this selection. They'll get their own book like this in time. There are a few important aristocrats, however, and we've included Princess Diana for the effect she had on Britain when she lived and when she died.

Undoubtedly some will think that we've left someone important out. And they would be right. It's not possible to include all of them in a reasonably sized book. But it is possible to give a good overview of the most important ones so you know what they're talking about when watching British TV documentaries or British films. If you want an encyclopedia of all the most important Brits who have ever lived, I highly recommend browsing the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (heavily consulted in the writing of these articles I might add!).

We have made every effort to ensure that each article is accurate and true. Each article was fact-checked before they were initially published and now before publication in this book. Inevitably some mistakes will slip through. We're not trained historians, we're enthusiastic amateurs with a passion for British history, doing our best to break down these great figures for a non-British audience. We have done our best.

Each entry is meant to be a survey of the person's life and impact. They're not exhaustive biographies but rather springboards for your own

further research - which is why each one has a list of books, dramas, documentaries etc where you can learn a lot more.

Finally, Sir Winston Churchill is included as a 'bonus' chapter, considered by most historians to be the 'Greatest Briton' who ever lived, he deserves the last spot in the book along with an extended essay that covers his whole complicated and fascinating life.

What you will find in this book are people who have shaped Britain into what it is today, whether you think that is a good thing or not. We've tried to stick to the facts, and keep our opinions to a minimum. We hope you enjoy this guide to the Greatest Britons.

HORATIO NELSON

The Victor of the Battle of Trafalgar

Key Facts

- Born 29 September 1758. Died 21 October 1805
- Established British naval power around the world
- Defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Trafalgar, where he died

In the 18th century the European powers were caught up in a global power struggle for control of the various foreign territories they had seized during the earlier era of exploration. Shipping, territorial claims, the control of the various trade routes and trading agreements were vital national interests for each country. The main method of settling the inevitable disputes that arose was by engaging in naval battles, seizing each other's ships and fighting for the control of coastal trading ports. Although bloody, these battles in distant seas had an heroic quality that had not yet been diminished by the mass slaughter characteristic of the wars of the 19th century and which culminated in the two world wars of the 20th.

Horatio Nelson was born into this environment on 29 September 1758, in Norfolk, England. He was one of 11 children of a clergyman. In an age before adolescence had been invented, by the age of 12 he had entered naval service on a boat commanded by his mother's brother – Captain Maurice Suckling. He was quickly made a midshipman and began to be trained as an officer. He also quickly discovered that he suffered from seasickness, which persisted throughout his career but never seemed to hamper his success.

When he heard of a naval expedition to the Arctic he persuaded his

uncle to transfer him to it and the expedition came close enough to the North Pole for Nelson to try without success to kill a polar bear to give the skin to his father.

Shortly after turning fifteen Nelson went on the HMS Seahorse to the East Indies (today's India and south-east Asia) to assist the East India Company enforce its trading monopoly with India and keep out the French. His ship spent most of its time protecting trading vessels, but he also experienced his first battle in February 1775. A short time later he contracted malaria and was sent back to England.

Following his recovery his now highly-placed uncle found him a position as an acting lieutenant on a ship sailing to the British colony of Gibraltar. After he became a full lieutenant – his uncle made up one-third of the examination board – in 1777 he sailed to the Caribbean. France had by this time allied with the American Revolutionaries, so most of Nelson's time was spent catching and looting French trading and naval vessels, a practice referred to as 'taking prizes'.

After a peace was made Nelson returned to England and indeed spent some time in France, where he attempted to learn the language.

Britain had a number of restrictive laws on trading – the Navigation Acts – designed to give her an advantage which the new independent Americans did not like. So by 1784 Nelson was back in the Caribbean. After seizing several American ships under dubious circumstances he was for a time in danger of being imprisoned for illegal seizure, but the courts ruled in his favor.

At this time too he met Frances "Fanny" Nisbet, a young widow from the British island of Nevis. They quickly married and when Nelson returned to England Fanny followed him.

Nelson spent the next five years on half-pay without a commission, which frustrated him very much. However in 1793 Britain was again at war with Revolutionary France on the side of the remaining royalists and moderates. His fleet sailed to Toulon, on the French Mediterranean to protect the royalists who still held the city. After several encounters the British fleet captured the French island of Corsica with the intention of using it as a naval base.

However during the final battle for the town of Calvi Nelson had an eye damaged when a shell hit a sand-bag and exploded sand and gravel in his face. It is widely believed that Nelson wore an eye-patch to cover the wound, but in fact this is not true – he had no need for a patch as the eye appeared normal – only the vision had gone.

In 1795 the French attempted to re-capture Corsica, but following an extend battle near the Italian city of Genoa, the French lost several ships

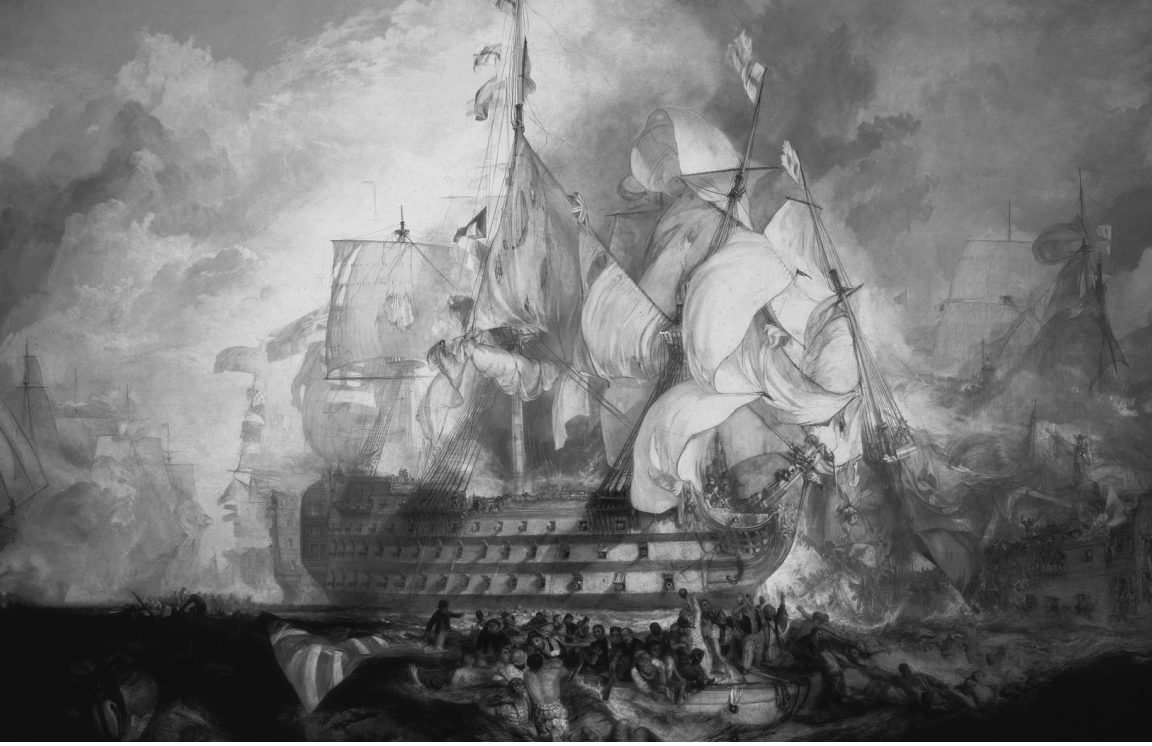
Emma Hamilton

and were forced to retreat. But by the end of 1796 a new alliance between Genoa and France made the British activities in the Mediterranean impossible so Nelson and his fleet set off for England. However they had not even left the Mediterranean when they began fighting with Spanish ships, capturing several.

This war with Spain continued for several years during which Nelson developed a reputation not only for bravery bordering on bravado, but for disobeying orders that he did not agree with. Nelson became a successful leader because he treated those under him with respect and concern, compared with the standard way of leading sailors at that time, which was mostly floggings and executions. As his career developed he gained more and more loyalty and even love from his officers and crews.

In 1797 at the battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Nelson was shot and his right arm was amputated. While being helped to board his ship he refused, saying "Let me alone, I have got my legs left and one arm!"

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte, on his way to becoming Emperor of France, took an army to Egypt and seized the country in the name of France. This outraged the British and Nelson was sent to Egypt to confront Napoleon's fleet. At the Battle of the Nile he destroyed or seized a good part on Napoleon's fleet and stranded his army, who were forced



The Battle of Trafalgar by JMW Turner

to battle their way north. France's ambitions were severely set back. However Napoleon was seen by the people as a hero and this enabled him to seize power in France.

Nelson went to recover from the campaign at the home of an old friend, Sir William Hamilton the British consul in Naples. Hamilton was married to woman half his age, the model Emma Hart, now Emma Hamilton. Emma was an artist's model and had been mistress to several powerful Englishmen. She had briefly met Nelson some years earlier but this time he and her, both very famous for very different reasons, began a passionate affair. Sir William did not seem to object. This quite public affair became notorious but Nelson's fame was so great it did not damage his military reputation. Nelson needed constant praise and Emma seems to have provided that.

Over the next few years Nelson and the British fleets continued to fight the French as Napoleon rose to greater power as Emperor. In 1805 Nelson took an opportunity presented him to attack the French fleet in the Mediterranean and the Battle of Trafalgar began. This decisive battle destroyed the French fleet and Napoleon's power, but in the battle Nelson was shot and died on the 21st of October, 1805.

He received a hero's funeral back in England – Emma was not allowed to attend.

His Legacy

Nelson was a complex person. A brilliant leader and battle strategist, he was independent and often defiant of authority. He was also brave to the point of bravado and desperate for approval – which he certainly received. Some of his military actions, including the execution of prisoners, might today be seen as war-crimes, yet he was considerate, kind and interested in those under him.

His affair with Emma Thompson and the abandonment of his wife was considered a scandal, but the public and many powerful people adored him.

Today he is remembered as a British hero, who defeated Napoleon and established Britain as the supreme naval power.

Sites to Visit

- There are numerous statues of Nelson, the most famous being Nelson's Column, in Trafalgar Square, London. Others can be seen in Portsmouth, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Birmingham, Glasgow, Montreal (Canada) and Bridgetown (Barbados).
- Museums to visit are: Royal Navy Museum, Portsmouth; National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; Lloyd's Building, Lime Street, London.

Further Research

- A TV mini-series called "I Remember Nelson" (1982)
- A film "Emma Hamilton"(Le calde notti di Lady Hamilton) (1968)
- A documentary "Leaders in Battle: Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson"(2007)
- Of the numerous biographies the best are "Nelson: a Dream of Glory" and "Nelson: The Sword of Albion", both by John Sugden

ADA LOVELACE

Mathematician

Key Facts

- Born 1815, died 1852
- Mathematician and early developer, with Charles Babbage, of proto-computers
- Rare female scientist of the 19th century
- Daughter of the poet Lord Byron

Ada Lovelace was a daughter of the poet Lord Bryon and a member of the British aristocracy. She was part of the group of British amateur scientists that made significant discoveries in the 19th century and laid the foundations for modern science. She worked with Charles Babbage on the development of his Difference Engine and Analytical Engine, precursors of the computer. She was the first person to appreciate and describe the advantages of a machine capable of accurately and quickly carrying out any manner of calculation, no matter how complex.

The poet Lord Byron had a reputation for amorality and agnosticism. So, it is not surprising that although he had numerous children with several partners, he only had one legitimate child, which to his disappointment was a girl. Bryon had married her mother, Anne Isabella Milbanke, the previous year, following a protracted pursuit of this strict and moral woman by the dissolute Byron. Ada was born on the 10th of December 1815.

The marriage was brief, and early in 1816, Anne left their home in London with Ada, largely to avoid the erratic and unpredictable behavior of her husband. Under the law at that time, Byron could have taken full custody of the baby, but he made no attempt to do so. A few days after signing the official separation he left England for good. He died in 1824

fighting in the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire.

If Byron had little interest in Ada, her mother had hardly any more. Although she strove to keep custody, Ada was brought up by her maternal grandmother, Judith, Lady Milbanke. Around the time of her father's death, Ada suffered from a bout of severe headaches that caused temporary blindness, followed by a case of measles for which she was treated with a year in bed. Not surprisingly, she needed crutches when she was finally allowed up.

To avoid the contamination of poetry, Ada's mother had her daughter taught mathematics and music. The mathematics came in handy when Ada was 12, and she decided she wanted to fly. She set about the project in a thorough fashion. She researched the structure of birds to determine the appropriate wingspan, researched various choices for materials and wrote a book – Flyology – with her own plates and summaries of her findings. It doesn't seem that she used her research in any actual flight attempts.

Scientific pursuits, such as botany and geology, were acceptable pastimes for men of wealth in the elite circles that Ada moved in. It was in those circles that she met Charles Babbage, Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, when she was 17. They entered into a long and voluminous correspondence on mathematics, logic and all things scientific. She also was acquainted with other natural philosophers, including Michael Faraday and Charles Wheatstone, as well as lesser-known 'gentleman scientists' such as Andrew Crosse and Sir David Brewster. At that time, science as a profession was not known. Indeed the term 'scientist' was not coined until 1836.

Following her separation, Ada's mother had devoted herself to exposing Byron's amoral behaviors and she also had friends watching Ada during her teenage years for signs of morally deviant behavior. The first signs did indeed seem to emerge, when Ada, just 18, had an affair with one of her tutors and then tried to elope with him. She was returned to her mother by the tutor's relatives.

Two years later Ada was married to William King, a noble ten years older than her, which was not uncommon in those times. King inherited his family title in 1838, and the couple became the Earl and Countess of Lovelace. The marriage did not, however, free Ada from the grip of her mother, who continued to control and direct the family, meeting little resistance from King. They lived at Ockham Park, in Surrey, where Ada had three children, two boys, and a girl, between 1836 and 1839. Her oldest son was called Byron.

Keen to prevent the moral decay of the children, Ada's mother appointed William Benjamin Carpenter as a tutor for them. Carpenter

was a doctor and zoologist who is remembered mostly for devising the concept of the unconscious, but with Ada, he fell in love and tried to begin an affair with her, an offer she rejected. Generally, her relationships with men were not within the appropriate framework for her class and time, and there were numerous rumors of affairs. A notable one was with John Crosse, the son of the amateur scientist in electricity, Andrew Crosse. The exact nature and extent of their relationship is unknown since John destroyed all their correspondence after Ada died.

Throughout her life, she continued to study mathematics. This was a period in the history of science when many things that are considered unscientific were blended with real research. A hundred years earlier, Newton had been an alchemist as well as a mathematician and Ada was also a believer in metaphysics, which treated speculation as a valid tool for making scientific discoveries. Fashionable beliefs with no factual basis were widespread, and Ada believed in phrenology – reading character from the bumps on the head – and animal magnetism, the precursor of hypnosis, which was believed to offer cures for a variety of diseases. She was interested in developing mathematical models for the workings of the brain and in the then mysterious properties of electricity and magnetism.

Her most famous work was with Charles Babbage. He had designed a Difference Engine, which was effectively an early mechanical computer to produce error-free tables for astronomy, navigation, and mathematics. Although funded by the British government, the engine was never completed, but Babbage put forward plans for a new machine, the Analytical Engine. This was based on work by an Italian mathematician, Luigi Federico Menebrea. Since his work was in French, Babbage recruited Ada Lovelace to translate it, and between 1842 and 1843 she did so, adding a set of Notes of her own analysis. In these Notes, she was the first person to realize the potential for a general-purpose calculating device that could work with any function, regardless of how general and complex – a pretty good definition of a computer. She also dismissed the idea that a calculator could ever constitute an artificial intelligence.

Like other early mathematicians, she also turned her skills to the problems of probability and gambling. In 1851 she formed a secret syndicate with a group of men-friends, but her calculations failed, and she ended up owing the syndicate thousands of pounds, which she had to reveal to her husband in order to settle the debts.

In 1852, she died of a combination of uterine cancer and the bloodletting, which was standard medical practice at the time. During her last months, she was entirely controlled by her mother, who excluded all her friends and worked on her moral salvation. She succeeded in having

Ada repent her sins and also became the executor of her estate.

After a mysterious confession to her husband, he abandoned her, and she died without him or her friends on the 27th of November, 1852. She was the same age as her father had been when he died – just 36.

Her Legacy

Despite the exclusion of women from the roots of science in the 19th century, Ada Lovelace showed that there was no inherent inferiority in the mathematical abilities of women. With skills equal to the greatest men of the time she was the first to see the potential for the development of computers from the primitive beginnings she witnessed. The place of women in science is today assured, but that would have been a more difficult achievement without Ada Lovelace demonstrating their abilities and capacity to make an equal contribution.

Sites to Visit

- Ada Lovelace is buried in the Byron family vault, alongside most of the Byron family, in the churchyard of the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Hucknall, Nottinghamshire.
- Ockham Park, in Ockham, near Guilford, Surrey, is today a listed building, partly converted into flats. It has been extensively re-modeled since Ada lived there.
- Worthy Manor, known in her time as Ashley Combe, was another Lovelace property in Porlock Weir, Somerset. Although the house was destroyed during World War II, ruins and the grounds can still be visited. Babbage and Lovelace would walk on the Philosopher's Terrace, discussing mathematics.
- Babbage never completed his Difference Engine, but in the 1980's one was built using his original plans and technology that would have been available to him at the time. It worked perfectly. A second model can be seen at the Computer History Museum, Mountain View, California.

Further Research

There are several biographies available, including:

- Ada's Algorithm: How Lord Byron's Daughter Ada Lovelace Launched the Digital Age, by James Essinger (2012)
- The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage: The (Mostly) True Story of the First Computer, by Sydney Padua (2015)
- Ada Lovelace: The Computer Wizard of Victorian England, by Lucy Lethbridge (2001)
- Ada, the Enchantress of Numbers: Poetical Science, by Dr. Betty Alexandra Toole (2010)
- The Bride of Science: Romance, Reason, and Byron's Daughter, by Benjamin Woolley (2015)

THOMAS HARDY

Writer and Romantic

Key Facts

- Born 1840, died 1928
- Lived around Dorchester his whole life
- Wrote some of the greatest novels of the 19th century
- Acclaimed during his life as a literary giant

Thomas Hardy was a 19th-century novelist who led a relatively uneventful life and produced 14 novels, 40 short stories, 900 poems and two plays. He lived almost his whole life in a small area around the Dorset town of Dorchester and set all his novels in that area. His works caused some outrage for their outspoken depiction of ordinary lives.

"Kiss me, Hardy!" legend tells us, were the dying words of Horatio Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Sir Thomas Masterman Hardy was Nelson's aide and close friend, who died himself in 1839. A year later his cousin, Thomas Hardy, was born on the 2nd of June, 1840, in the small village of Bockhampton, a little west of Dorchester, the county capital of Dorset.

The Hardy family had noble roots on the Isle of Jersey, going back to the 15th century, but by the time young Thomas was born the family fortunes had fallen. His father, another Thomas, was a respectable local builder and stone-mason and although his mother came from a poor family and had been a maid and cook, she was self-educated, loved to read and taught Thomas to read and write before he was four. In this close-knit rural community, she knew many local stories and histories which she taught her son. When not working his father was a keen violinist and

chorister, so between his two parents, Thomas had a strong literary and artistic upbringing for such humble beginnings.

He at first attended the local school run by the Church of England, but when he was ten, his mother transferred him to the rival system of the time, the so-called 'British' not attached to the Church of England. Hardy remained there until he was 16. He was a 'bookish' child who preferred solitude and his books, and he became very proficient in Greek, Latin, and French. He read mostly romances, such as the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Alexander Dumas.

Since his family was poor, further education at a University was out of the question for Hardy, so like many other children of those times, he was apprenticed to learn a trade. In 1856 he went to work in Dorchester for a local architect who specialized in church restoration, John Hicks. He spent four years with Hicks, during which time he traveled extensively in the surrounding area, learning more of the local towns and unconsciously collecting material that would later re-appear in his works. He also met a local schoolteacher and poet called William Barnes, who is believed to have been the inspiration for Hardy to become a writer.

Like many a boy with his head in a book, Hardy was unsuccessful at courtship, and after rejection by what seems to have been at least his

third frustrated attempt at romance, he set out for London to perhaps make a fresh start. He became assistant architect to Arthur Blomfield, another church restorer and had a successful if brief career. He won prizes from both the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Architectural Association and worked on several projects with Blomfield.

London was a revelation for Hardy. He attended a lecture by Charles Dickens as well as plays and operas at London's famous theaters. He visited museums and art galleries. He was influenced by important writers of the time, from John Stuart Mills to Charles Darwin and John Ruskin and he abandoned the established Church. He also developed an interest in poetry, reading Swinburne and Browning but his own efforts were rejected for publication. His first published work seems to have been a short humorous piece called How I Built Myself a House, which was published in 1865 and won Hardy a prize.

Although he earnestly studied literary technique, he seems to have remained an outsider in London society and after five years there and no literary career in sight he returned to Dorchester in 1867 and resumed working for John Hicks. Back home his love-life took a turn for the better and although himself by now 28; he developed a passionate relationship with a sixteen-year-old cousin, Tryphena Sparks. Relationships with cousins have always been perfectly acceptable in English society, and the age difference was by no means unusual for the period. Hardy also began a novel, strongly influenced by the psychological style of George Meredith, who was exploring the emotions of his characters and using his own life for inspiration. Hardy's first novel was called The Poor Man and the Lady, a reflection of Hardy's own struggles with social class and his sense of loss in the decline of his family fortunes.

He submitted the novel to the publishing company Macmillan, who rejected it but urged him to continue writing. He did, and eventually had several of his early novels published in serial form, rather in the manner of Dickens' works. His fourth novel, Far from the Madding Crowd, published in 1874, finally brought him recognition and some financial success and was followed in 1878 by The Return of the Native, another success.

His career now more assured and his fortunes looking up, in 1874 Hardy married Emma Lavinia Gifford, the daughter-in-law of the rector of a church in Cornwall Hardy had been restoring and who had become an important encouragement of his writing. In 1885, now successful in every way, Hardy designed and had built a villa house he called Max Gate outside Dorchester, where Hardy would spend the rest of his life.

Following the publication of his last two (and greatest) novels, Tess of the d'Urbervilles in 1891 and Jude the Obscure in 1895, there was a

public outcry about their 'immoral' plots, a view apparently also shared by his wife. Shocked and hurt Hardy announced his withdrawal from novel writing and returned to his first love, poetry. His career as a poet proved as successful as his career as a novelist and his Napoleonic epic The Dynasts proved a great success. He received honorary degrees from Cambridge and the University of Aberdeen, the Order of Merit from King George V and a gold medal from the Royal Society of Literature.

In 1912 Emma suddenly died and although the marriage had long before become unhappy, Hardy was struck with grief. However, his grief seems to have been short-lived, for in 1914 he married his niece, Florence Dugdale, almost 40 years his junior. One of the causes of his estrangement from Emma had been his interest in young literary women and Florence was also of that type. However, his introverted habits and solitude in his study seem to have quickly soured things for Florence. She did, however, help him with his autobiography, which was completed shortly before his death. She also gave away or sold most of his manuscripts and destroyed many of his papers.

Max Gate became a place of pilgrimage for younger writers and Hardy continued to have an active involvement in literary society although rarely leaving his home. He even managed one last infatuation with a young actress when he was eighty. Becoming more reclusive and now staying entirely at Max Gate, Hardy died on the 11th of January, 1928, at the age of eighty-seven.

His Legacy

The middle of the 19th century was a time of great social upheaval in England, with the traditional rural society being displaced by industrialization and with many rural people migrating to the cities to work in factories. Hardy felt a great love of the old ways which was always reflected in his writing, so when it comes to depictions of life in 19th century England, few if any writers can rival Thomas Hardy in capturing the real sense of what it was like to live at those times.

He writes about the lives of ordinary people and his detailed descriptions, realistic characters and moving plots still speak to us today of the human condition and the courage of existence. Unlike some other writers, Hardy led a relatively quiet, introverted life but he had a rich internal one that produced some of the greatest novels in the English language.

Sites to Visit

- Hardy was buried twice. His body was cremated and his ashes interred at Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, in an official funeral. At the same time, his heart was buried next to Emma, in the churchyard of Stinsford Parish Church, Dorchester, where his father and grandfather had both sung in the choir.
- There is a statue of Hardy in Dorchester, Dorset.
- His childhood home in the cottage where he also wrote his first novels is a National Trust property, in the village of Higher Bockhampton, outside Dorchester.
- His home, Max Gate, Dorchester, is also a National Trust property. Unfortunately, the house contains very few artifacts directly related to Hardy as his possessions were dispersed before and immediately after his death. However, his dog, Wessex*, has a headstone in the Pet's Cemetery on the grounds of the house.
- Wessex was the Anglo-Saxon name for the part of England that Dorchester is in and was the fictional name for the area that he used in all his novels.

Further Research

Almost all Hardy's works are still in print, and they can also be accessed online.

Biographies of Hardy include:

- Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man, by Claire Tomalin (2007)
- Thomas Hardy, by Robert Gittings (2001)
- Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited, Michael Millgate (2004)
- Thomas Hardy: His Life and Work, by F.E. Halliday (2001)
- Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy, edited by Norman Page (2001)

NELL GWYN

The Actress Who Charmed a King

Key Facts

- Born 1650 – died 1687
- Rose from the slums to become a famous actress
- Mistress to King Charles II for 17 years
- Established a line of peers, through her son by the king

Most famous as an actress and the mistress of Charles II, who she had two sons with, Nell Gwyn, or Gwynne, had an unlikely start in life serving drinks in her mother's brothel while still a child. When the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 re-legalized theatre and allowed women to act on stage for the first time, she became famous for her portrayals of flirtatious girls. She caught the eye of the new monarch, Charles II, already known for his multiple mistresses, and became his most famous one, continuing until his death in 1685. She persuaded him to make a Lord of their eldest son, establishing a lineage that continues to this day. She died young, perhaps only 37, probably from complications of venereal disease. She has frequently been portrayed as the essence of the bawdiness and excess of the Restoration period, which followed the strict puritanism of the Cromwell years.

It is a measure of how obscure the origins of one of the best-known women in English history were when it is not at all clear exactly who her mother or father were. We don't even know for certain if she was born in the Covent Garden district of London, but that is the most likely possibility. Even her birth date is uncertain since the one usually given – the 2nd of February, 1650 – is derived from a horoscope done later in her life. 1642 has been suggested as a perhaps more plausible year. It does

seem she grew up in Covent Garden, probably on Coal Yard Alley, a slum area near Drury Lane. It seems that her father was not part of her life, perhaps having died in Oxford when she was very young. We do know that the young Nell, whose baptismal name was Eleanor, worked in Old Ma Gwyn's 'bawdy house,' that is to say a brothel, from an early age. It is pure conjecture whether she worked solely as a serving girl, bringing drinks to the guests, or whether she was a child prostitute, but in either case, she would have been very worldly from an early age. When she was twelve, she was supported for about two years by a lover called Duncan, who housed her in a tavern, and it was while with him that she became an actress.

After the English Civil War, the Puritans had banned theatre, but when Charles II was restored to the throne he not only re-opened the theaters, but he legalized acting by women and created two companies of actors. One, the King's Company, opened The Theatre in Bridges Street, which later became the Theatre Royal, on Drury Lane, still open today. Nell and her sister Rose were hired by an ex-prostitute called Mary Meggs, or "Orange Moll," to help sell oranges in the theatre, not dissimilar to the cigarette girls who used to be found in movie theatres not so many decades ago. For tips the girls would also carry messages from men in the audience to the actresses backstage, arranging liaisons. Since the King and his court regularly attended the theatre, in this way Nell became known

to a higher level of society.

Within a year Nell had joined the King's Company as an actress, being perhaps 14 at the time. Thomas Killigrew, the head of the Company, had created a school for young actors, and Nell entered it, quickly beginning an affair with Charles Hart, the drama teacher and one of the major actors of the time. There was a temporary delay in her career during the Great Plague of London, which began in the summer of 1665. The Royal Court, and many other people, including Nell and her mother, retreated to Oxford. Perhaps 100,000 people died, about a quarter of the population, and just as the plague was retreating the Great Fire of London occurred, delaying the return of the Court until late in 1666.

Upon her return Nell had her first opportunity to tread the boards in March 1667 (or 1665?), appearing in The Indian Emperour, a drama by John Dryden loosely based on the Spanish conquest of the New World. Nell played Cydaria, the Inca Emperor Montezuma's daughter, who Cortez falls in love with. Since Cortez was played by Charles Hart, perhaps not too much acting was involved. Samuel Pepys attended a performance, and although a later admirer of Nell, found her performance poor.

Drama was clearly not her thing, and she had much more success a little later in a comedy called All Mistaken, or the Mad Couple, by the Royalist playwright James Howard, again playing opposite Charles Hart. Between them, they established a new theatrical trope, the 'Gay Couple,' which was widely used by them and others in numerous Restoration Comedies. At that time productions ran for only a short period, since the audience was limited, so Nell had the opportunity to appear with Hart in a number of plays, culminating in their greatest performance in Secret Love, or The Maiden Queen. Pepys saw the play three times and was effusive in his praise for Nell.

It was difficult for theatrical companies to keep good actresses since they were swept off the stage to become the mistresses of nobles. This was the fate of Nell too, when she became the mistress of the poet, courtier, and rake Charles Sackville, Earl of Dorset. She also caught the eye of Charles II, although he passed her by on the first occasion when through the intermediary of the Duke of Buckingham she asked for too much money. He relented in 1668 when he found himself in an adjacent box at a theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The story is that she ended up paying for the supper he invited her to when he discovered he had no money with him. She returned to the King's Company, where her notoriety as Charles' mistress ensured packed houses. However, as she became a more permanent feature in the King's life, her appearances reduced considerably.

In 1670 she gave birth to her first son, and the King's seventh, by five different mistresses. The King's wife, the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza, had failed to provide him with an heir, so she had to accept the semi-official status of his string of mistresses. In 1671 Nell was installed in a fine house at 79 Pall Mall, but only as a leaseholder. Always one thinking of her own best interests, she pressured for the property to be given to her outright, which was eventually done.

At the end of 1671, she gave birth to a second son, James, who was sent to Paris to be brought up. However, he died there six years later, perhaps of blood poisoning. Her first son, who she named Charles, remained with her, and she pressured the King to legitimize him. One version is that she called him 'you little bastard' in front of the King, saying she had nothing else to call him, at which point the King relented. Another is that she held the baby out of a window and threatened to drop him, but in either case, the King made little Charles Beauclerc Earl of Burford and Baron of Heddington and granted him a house outside Windsor. He also gave Nell Bagnigge House, a country house with healthy spring water at 61-63 Kings Cross Road.

In 1685 the king died, leaving instructions to his heir, James II, to "not let poor Nelly starve." James did not, giving her a pension of £1,500 a year, roughly equivalent to at least a quarter million pounds today. She did not have long to enjoy her retirement from whoredom, however, as she suffered a series of strokes and seizures, probably the consequences of syphilis, and died on the 14th of November, 1687, less than three years after the death of the king.

Her Legacy

Although Nell openly and regularly referred to herself as a whore, it would seem from her pleading with the king to legitimize their son, that she did not truly enjoy her situation. Her image as the archetypal woman who sells her body to improve her situation underestimates the privations of life for the poor of the time, and how eagerly almost anyone would grasp at a chance to survive. She was undoubtedly a lot smarter than she might appear, given her ability to stay in the King's favor for 17 years, acquire several properties and establish her son as a man of privilege. There is today still an Earl of Burford, Charles Francis Topham de Vere Beauclerk, a member of the House of Lords and famous for defending the rights of hereditary peers. He has some of his ancestor's genes, having married a pop star.

Sites to Visit

- Nell Gwyn's grave is St Martin-in-the-Fields Churchyard, Westminster.
- There are blue plaques at 79 Pall Mall, the house Charles II gave Nell to live in, and at the site of Bagnigge House, 61-63 Kings Cross Road. In the 18th century, the house became a popular spa, before giving way to development.

Further Research

Plays:

- In Good King Charles's Golden Days, by Bernard Shaw (1939)
- Our Nell, a musical, by Harold Fraser-Simson and Ivor Novello (1924)
- Nell Gwynn, by Jessica Swale (2015)

Films:

- Mistress Nell, starring Mary Pickford (1915)
- Love, Life and Laughter, starring Gracie Fields (1934)
- Stage Beauty, starring Zoe Tapper (2004)

Novels:

- The King's Favorite, by Susan Holloway Scott (2008)
- Exit the Actress, by Priya Parmar (2011) (uses contemporary documents to show the larger political and social context)
- The Darling Strumpet: A Novel of Nell Gwynn, Who Captured the Heart of England and King Charles, by Gillian Bagwell (2011)

Biographies of Nell Gwyn include:

- Nell Gwynn, by Jessica Swale
- Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King, by Charles Beauclerk
- Nell Gwynn (Life of a Harlot), by Jenny Stone
- House of Nell Gwynn: Fortunes of the Beauclerk Family, 1670-1974, by Peter Beauclerk Dewar and Donald Adamson