

# A Literary Pilgrimage of Durham

by Ruth Robson

## 1. Market Place

Welcome to *A Literary Pilgrimage of Durham*, part of Durham Book Festival, produced by New Writing North, the regional writing development agency for the North of England. Durham Book Festival was established in the 1980s and is one of the country's first literary festivals.

The County and City of Durham have been much written about, being the birthplace, residence, and inspiration for many writers of both fact, fiction, and poetry. Before we delve into stories of scribes, poets, academia, prize-winning authors, political discourse, and folklore passed down through generations, we need to know why the city is here.

Durham is a place steeped in history, with evidence of a pre-Roman settlement on the edge of the city at Maiden Castle. Its origins as we know it today start with the arrival of the community of St Cuthbert in the year 995 and the building of the white church at the top of the hill in the centre of the city. This Anglo-Saxon structure was a precursor to today's cathedral, built by the Normans after the 1066 invasion. It houses both the shrine of St Cuthbert and the tomb of the Venerable Bede, and forms the Durham UNESCO World Heritage Site along with Durham Castle and other buildings, and their setting.

The early civic history of Durham is tied to the role of its Bishops, known as the Prince Bishops. The Bishopric of Durham held unique powers in England, as this quote from the steward of Anthony Bek, Bishop of Durham from 1284-1311, illustrates:

'There are two kings in England, namely the Lord King of England, wearing a crown in sign of his regality and the Lord Bishop of Durham wearing a mitre in place of a crown, in sign of his regality in the diocese of Durham.'

The area from the River Tees south of Durham to the River Tweed, which for the most part forms the border between England and Scotland, was semi-independent of England for centuries, ruled in part by the Bishop of Durham and in part by the Earl of Northumberland. It acted as a buffer between England and Scotland, and was tolerated as a means of defence against the Scots.

The Bishop of Durham had the right to raise an army, mint coins and levy taxes. He could govern as an autonomous ruler but must remain loyal to the King of England, and fulfilled the role of protecting England's northern frontier.

The Domesday Book, a survey of the value of the land across England, carried out on the orders of William the Conqueror in 1086, excludes land governed by the Bishop of Durham and swathes of the north. A later survey known as the Boldon Book – commissioned by Bishop of Durham, Hugh de Piuisset, almost a century later

in 1183 – documents the value of the land of the Prince Bishops and provides important historical detail akin to its more famous counterpart.

In 1541 Henry VIII took some powers away from the Prince Bishops, as he asserted control through the English reformation. All remaining secular powers were removed from the Prince Bishops through the Durham (County Palatine) Act 1836.

Durham Town Hall, in the north-west corner of the Market Place, was first built as a wooden structure in 1356 as a Guildhall. It has evolved over time. Its current façade was built in 1851 and incorporates the city's indoor market.

Durham is a University City, with its roots linked to the church. The university was founded in 1832 by Bishop Van Mildert, the last Prince Bishop. It is a leading university, with many of its academics and associates contributing to the literary wealth of the city, as we will discover.

The industrial heritage of County Durham has helped form the literary landscape of the county, sometimes presented as nostalgia for times gone by and sometimes as the topic of political discourse.

The other well-known institution within Durham City that has influenced writers is Durham Prison. It has been written about, some inmates have picked up the pen, and some have found themselves as central characters in biographical telling of their tale.

## **2. Framwellgate Bridge**

The view to the south east of Framwellgate Bridge is dominated by Durham Castle and Durham Cathedral as they tower over the River Wear and the rest of the city.

When the community of Cuthbert arrived in 995, the place they came to was called Dun Holm, which combined the Old English word for hill 'Dun' with the Norse for island, 'Holm'. The community had fled their home on the island of Lindisfarne some time earlier, following Viking invasions that started in 793. They left their monastery carrying with them the body of St Cuthbert, relics [that were] buried with him, and their substantial archive of manuscripts.

This raid is documented in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – a collection of Old English records written at the court of Alfred of Wessex. It says of the 793 Viking invasion:

'In this year fierce, foreboding omens came over the land of the Northumbrians, and the wretched people shook; there were excessive whirlwinds, lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the sky. These signs were followed by great famine, and a little after those, that same year on 6th ides of January, the ravaging of wretched heathen men destroyed God's church at Lindisfarne.'

The life of St Cuthbert is documented by Bede: the story of an Anglo-Saxon bishop and saint told by a venerated Anglo-Saxon monk and scholar. We will hear more of Cuthbert and Bede.

Durham Castle was built by the Normans in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century to defend the troublesome border with Scotland and control local English rebellions. Both were real threats in the years immediately following the Norman Conquest. Robert de Comines, the first Earl of Northumberland appointed by William the Conqueror, was brutally murdered in Durham along with his entourage as he travelled north to take up his seat. This led directly to what is known as the Harrying of the North – a series of campaigns waged by William during the winter of 1069-70 to subjugate northern England. The Harrying of the North was documented at the time by the Anglo-Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis. His account is harrowing, though subsequent historians have questioned its accuracy. It begins:

‘Nowhere else had William shown such cruelty. Shamefully he succumbed to this vice, for he made no effort to restrain his fury and punished the innocent and the guilty. In his anger he commanded that all crops and herds, chattels and food of every kind should be bought together and burned to ashes with consuming fire, so that the whole region north of the Humber might be stripped of all means of sustenance.’

Today Durham Castle houses University College, Durham. The college was formed in 1832 as the first college of Durham University, moving into the castle in 1837. William Wordsworth was given an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law from Durham University in 1838, and dined at the castle.

Whilst in Durham, Wordsworth visited his friend, the antiquarian and Librarian of Durham Cathedral James Raine, who lived at Crook Hall on the north side of city. They walked to the ruins of Finchale Priory, three miles away. We know of this excursion because Raine’s daughter, the writer Margaret Raine Hunt, made a record of it. James Raine had written a history of Durham Cathedral of which Wordsworth had a copy, and Raine had recently written a history of Finchale Priory, a Benedictine Priory dissolved in 1538 by Henry VIII. Raine was therefore suitably qualified to act as a guide to Wordsworth, who had a long-standing interest in monastic life. Wordsworth had used Raine’s history of Durham Cathedral, and *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by Bede, as material for research into church history as he prepared his sonnet series *Ecclesiastical Sketches* which was published in 1822. Wordsworth was deeply interested in Bede’s life and work, and celebrated Bede in the sonnet ‘Reproof’ published in 1869:

‘But what if One, thro’ grove or flowery mead,  
Indulging thus at will the creeping feet  
Of a voluptuous indolence, should meet  
The hovering Shade of venerable Bede;’

### 3. Redhills

One November evening in 1869 a group of men met in the Market Tavern in Durham, looking to improve the lot of the working class after decades of hardship and struggle against Victorian coal owners. That meeting led to the creation of

Redhills, known as the 'Pitman's Parliament': home of the Durham Miners' Association, which formed in 1869.

Redhills opened in 1915, replacing an earlier Miners' Hall, and was regarded as the finest purpose-built trade union building in Britain. The union organised and educated, concerning itself with the welfare of its workers and communities. It provided homes for the old, education for the young, medical care, sick pay, and unemployment benefit. Its reading rooms and welfare halls were at the heart of vibrant communities.

During the Great Depression in the 1930s, to the south of Durham, the Spennymoor Settlement was created, funded through a philanthropic gift. It was built by out-of-work miners and its objectives were 'to encourage tolerant neighbourliness and voluntary social service, and give its members opportunities for increasing their knowledge, widening their interests, and cultivating their creative power in a friendly atmosphere.'

It soon became known as the 'Pitman's Academy'. Activities ranged from teaching practical skills to drama groups performing works by Ibsen.

A son of a coalminer, Sid Chaplin started work in the pit at Ferryhill, close to Spennymoor, in 1931. He attended Workers' Educational Association classes run by Durham University at the Settlement, going on to Fircroft Working Men's College, Birmingham. He started to write, with his first book *The Leaping Lad* published in 1946. It is a collection of short stories and won an Atlantic Award for Literature. The stories were based on his childhood and included memories of the general strike of 1926.

After the Second World War he returned to work in the Durham Coalfield. In 1948 became a writer for the National Coal Board's publication *Coal*, and in 1957 he became their first ever Public Relations Officer. Chaplin continued to write, turning to novels, with two in particular, *The Day of the Sardine* and *The Watchers and the Watched*, achieving critical acclaim. He was given a column in the *Guardian* newspaper writing on subjects such as the demise of the cloth cap, to the discovery of the diary belonging to his great-grandfather, who was killed at Shildon Colliery in 1888. In the 1970s he contributed to the BBC drama *When the Boat Comes In* and other television programmes.

Chaplin's writing was indebted to the storytelling tradition fostered by the communities who lived on and worked the Durham Coalfields. He talks about this in his first book, *The Leaping Lad*:

'So in the beginning I told stories like everyone else before ever I wrote them down. All my stories have been told and retold to myself until natural selection has shaped them to my satisfaction: until all the parts fall together (and sometimes this takes years): then only do I write them down.'

Another writer who used mining to inform his writing is the poet W H Auden, who incidentally met Sid Chaplin in Newcastle in 1972. Chaplin was there as Chair of the Northern Arts Literature Panel, part of what was to become the Newcastle Office of

Arts Council England. Russian translator and Auden scholar Alan Myers and the author Michael Standen were also present. The day is documented through a contribution to the Auden Society *Newsletter* and can be found online.

Auden's mining references are mainly concerned with lead mining. His family owned a holiday cottage in the Lake District. When he was 12, he discovered Rookhope on a day trip from Cumbria into County Durham. It was a formative experience and the North Pennines, with its dramatic landscapes and legacy of lead mining, features again and again in his work. In 'New Year Letter' he states:

'The derelict lead-smelting mill,  
Flued to its chimney up the hill,  
That smokes no answer any more  
But points, a landmark, on *Bolt's Law*  
The finger of all questions. There  
In Rookhope I was first aware  
Of Self and Not-Self, Death and Dread.'

#### **4. Colpitts Hotel**

The Colpitts Hotel was established around 1836 by John Colpitts. John died in 1891 and in 1892 it was bought by the Smith family of Tadcaster, Yorkshire, and continues as a Sam Smith pub.

In 1975 its back room became the venue for a series of live poetry readings known as Colpitts Poetry. It was founded by two poet-librarians, David Burnett and Richard Caddel, and Diana Collecott, a Durham University lecturer. Its back room has hosted an enormous range of speakers, some well known and some not so well known. Regular attendee David James wrote an account in a private notebook, since published by his son:

'The small back room was lit by one or two bulbs hung from the ceiling and heated by a gas fire; its trademarks are the wallpaper and the dart board. It was frequently noisy from bar-chatter in the corridor outside, but had a good rectangular pattern of seats, and was seldom either over-crowded or embarrassingly empty. I would arrive early and take a seat at the far end, to command a view of both reader and audience; thereafter it was pot-luck whether I retained an open view, but I seldom moved, taking obstructions, along with the available light, as conditions of the occasion.'

The pub was refurbished recently so the trademark wallpaper is certainly no longer there. Colpitts maintains a reputation as a place for good company and conversation.

By the end of the 1970s Colpitts Poetry had outgrown size of the back room, with the last reading at the pub in 1979. Then, in the words of poet Jackie Litherland, it 'wandered around the city' until it alighted at Alington House, a community association on the Bailey in the centre of the city, which continues as its home today, with its longstanding name Colpitts Poetry. It ventures out of the city at times. For example, in 2019 it held an evening at the Bearpark Community Centre.

The poet Gillian Allnutt lives in County Durham and has read at Colpitts Poetry. In 2017 she was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Fellow poet, and columnist for the *Guardian*, Carol Rumens has described Allnutt as writing 'from a strongly personal sense of history. Sometimes described as a "spiritual" poet, she belongs to the contemplative tradition, and she is scholarly and deft in handling religious subject-matter. But her poems love the world, too. They have a lapidary quality, and are brightly dotted with the names, places, small scenes and treasured objects of everyday life.'

Allnutt's volume of poetry *Nantucket and the Angel* was shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize. She draws from collective history and her personal history, with the collection featuring several elderly characters including her imagined 90-year-old self. 'The Garden in Esh Winning', the name of a County Durham village, speaks of her grandmother:

'Go then into the unfabricated dark  
With your four bare crooked tines, fork,  
And get my grandmother out of that muddle of dock and dandelion root  
And put an end to neglect  
While the wind says only *Esh Esh*  
In the late apple blossom, in the ash  
And all the hills rush down to Durham...'

## 5. Margery Lane Allotments

Margery Lane Allotments occupy a space quarried to build Durham Castle and Durham Cathedral and, afterwards, the site of medieval fishponds. The cathedral and, on winter days with no leaves on the trees, the castle can be seen dominating the city skyline. Durham is a Cathedral and a University City. One of the founders of the university in 1832 was Bishop William Van Mildert, the last Prince Bishop of Durham. He gave up his Bishop's Palace of Durham Castle so it could be the first college of the fledging university. Auckland Castle, 15 miles south west of the city, became Van Mildert's Bishop's Palace, elevated from its status as a hunting lodge.

Van Mildert was both a man of God and a scholar. Perhaps the most famous man of God and a scholar associated with Durham is the Venerable Bede, whose tomb is in the Galilee Chapel at the west end of the cathedral.

Bede, born in the early 670s, dying in 735, was a prolific writer. He wrote over 40 books, his most famous being *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Bede is often referred to as 'the father of English History' and he wrote on many subjects, including historical and astronomical chronology. In his work *On the Reckoning of Time* he offers explanations of how the spherical earth influenced the changing length of daylight, how the twice-daily timing of tides is related to the position of the moon, how water movements cause low tide at one place and high tide at another, and gave instructions for calculating the date of Easter from the date of the paschal full moon.

During Bede's lifetime there were a variety of ways of referring to dates. One was the use of indictions – 15-year cycles. Another was to use regnal years – calculating the year by the number of years a ruler had been in power, which caused much confusion when kingdoms with different rulers were in diplomatic discussion. Bede adopted the *anno domini* method in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which was invented by the 6<sup>th</sup> Century monk Dionysius Exiguus. Bede's use of this method of referring to dates led to its widespread adoption.

Of all his writing, perhaps his most influential literary legacy is the Parable of the Sparrow, used since by countless authors and poets. It encapsulates a desire for salvation which is neither guaranteed nor understood, and remains a definitive account of the human condition. Bede's account is drawn from a description by an unnamed thane – a servant – at the court of the Anglo-Saxon King Edwin of Northumbria:

'The present life of man upon earth, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the house wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your ealdormen and thegns, while the fire blazes in the midst, and the hall is warmed, but the wintry storms of rain or snow are raging abroad. The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at the other, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all.'

The Venerable Bede sets the tone for the scholarly life of the city. Durham University teaches the History of the Book, Creative Writing and English Literature. The university's Department of Education offers a module on Harry Potter, playing on the city's association with the films of the books, scenes for which were filmed at Durham Cathedral. A project called Durham Priory Library Recreated is digitising all books known to have been in the pre-Reformation library of Durham Cathedral, uniting them online. For a variety of reasons, a major one being Henry VIII and the ransacking of religious orders, elements of the Priory Library were dispersed. The majority are still held in Durham, either at the cathedral, the university, or Ushaw – a former Catholic seminary close to Durham City – with a few further afield.

Durham Cathedral boasts the largest in situ medieval monastic library remaining in the country, with its collections dating back to the library of the community of St Cuthbert, transported from Lindisfarne over 1,000 years ago. It is extensive and is a constant source of interest. Recently an academic from the University of Edinburgh carrying out research on the 17<sup>th</sup> Century writer Alice Thornton was able to trace a manuscript held in the cathedral archive previously attributed to Alice Comber, the wife of a Dean of Durham, as the work of Alice Thornton. Alice Comber was Thornton's daughter. The missing manuscript now completes a set of four documenting 17<sup>th</sup> Century life, including during the Civil War.

## **6. Prebends' Bridge 1010**

Prebends' Bridge, a much-loved landmark, was built in 1778. It replaced an earlier bridge washed away by the great flood of 1771, which caused much damage along the coast and inland water ways. The bridge famously has a quote from Sir Walter Scott's epic poem 'Harold the Dauntless' (written in 1817) inscribed on a plaque on the north-west balustrade of the bridge.

Sir Walter Scott was a regular visitor to Durham, visiting his good friend, the historian Robert Surtees. It's possible it was Surtees who introduced Scott to the story of St Cuthbert. The poet immortalises the travails of the saint's body, as it wends its way to Durham on its convoluted journey from Lindisfarne, in Canto XIV of *Marmion*, written in 1808. This extract concludes perfectly describing what is seen from Prebends' Bridge:

'And, after many wanderings past,  
He chose his lordly seat at last,  
Where his cathedral, huge and vast,  
Looks down upon the Wear.'

Like his contemporary Wordsworth, Scott also dined at Durham Castle. The occasion was a celebratory dinner on 3 October 1827, with the Duke of Wellington as a guest of Bishop Van Mildert. Sir Walter Scott's diary entry for that date says, 'The bright moon streaming in through the old Gothic windows contrasted strangely with the artificial lights within; spears, banners, and armour were intermixed with the pictures of old bishops, and the whole had a singular mixture of baronial pomp with the grave and more chastened dignity of prelacy.'

Scott's diary goes on to describe something of an afterparty at the nearby Assembly Rooms. He records the next day that he 'slept till nigh ten – fatigued by the toils of yesterday, and the unwonted late hours'.

It is also Surtees who is likely to have introduced Sir Walter Scott to Sir John Morritt, owner of Rokeby Hall near Barnard Castle in County Durham on the River Tees. Scott became a regular visitor, Teesdale providing the setting for his romantic poem 'Rokeby,' set in the aftermath of the Civil War.

The College immediately to the south of the cathedral is the Close where the cathedral clergy live. The abolitionist Granville Sharp was born and grew up there, his father being the Archdeacon of Northumberland and a Prebend of Durham Cathedral. Sharp was one of eight children, though there were more, with some not surviving childhood.

Granville and his siblings are celebrated in a biography, written by Hester Grant, called *The Good Sharps – The Brothers and Sisters Who Remade Their World*. Stories include that of his older brother John, who became a clergyman and set up a mini welfare state in the village of Bamburgh in Northumberland, and another who became a surgeon to George III. The book documents Granville's achievements as an abolitionist, with an account of his role in the formation of what was to become Freetown in Sierra Leone, enabling freed slaves to go back to West Africa. David Olusoga, the historian and television presenter who grew up in North East England, described the book in a review for the *Sunday Times*, as a

'luminous and detailed account of the lives of this unique family and the turbulent times they navigated'.

A contemporary writer who sometimes uses Durham and North East England as a backdrop is Booker Prize-winning novelist Pat Barker. Originally from Thornaby, Teesside, south of Durham, she has lived in Durham City since the early 1980s. Barker is best known for her trilogy of novels about the First World War, which begin with *Regeneration*, partly inspired by her grandfather's experiences fighting in the trenches in France. *The Eye in the Door*, the second novel, won the *Guardian* Fiction Prize, and the third, *The Ghost Road*, won the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1995.

Barker's most recent novel, *The Silence of the Girls*, was published in 2018 with much critical acclaim, making it into the *Guardian's* Top 100 novels of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The novel is set against the Trojan War and Homer's epic poem 'The Iliad'. The narrative is somewhat altered, telling the story from the perspective of the enslaved Trojan women.

In 2019 Barker once again looked to the classics for inspiration, this time for a short story. 'Medusa' was published in the *New Yorker* magazine, with an audio link to Barker reading the story available on the magazine's website. It is, at times, a contemporary telling of the story of Medusa, told in the first person, of the rape of a painter who is also an art teacher, living in Durham City. At the beginning, the central character leaves Durham Cathedral, where she had been hanging her first ever solo exhibition, passes through the Market Place and is followed, with the perpetrator getting into her home. The emphasis of the story is on the character's recovery, creatively and psychologically, as she hardens as a means of self-preservation – like Medusa turning herself and others into stone. A scene near the beginning could be many a city and town on a Friday evening:

'In the marketplace, the Friday-night bonanza was well under way, girls in tight dresses and vertiginous heels, teetering along in noisy groups, watched by boys who pretended indifference and turned back to their mates, laughing.'

## 7. Dun Cow Lane

Folklore and legends are prevalent in writing in and about Durham. One such legend is that of the Dun Cow, part recorded by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century monk Symeon of Durham, and further recorded in *The Rites of Durham* in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century. A synopsis is as follows:

The Community of St Cuthbert wandered around the north of England.

Near to what is now Durham, a wheel of the cart carrying the coffin of St Cuthbert stuck and wouldn't move.

The monks decided to rest and offer prayers to St Cuthbert, who appeared in a vision instructing that the coffin be taken to Dun Holm. After this revelation, the

monks discovered that the cart would move, but they did not know where Dun Holm was.

A milkmaid was close by who said she was looking for a lost cow which she had last seen at Dun Holm. Again, the monks saw this as a sign. They followed her as she searched for the missing cow, arriving at Dun Holm and settled. The year was 995.

Dun Cow Lane is a homage to the legend, and when you reach the end of this walk, and stand in front of Durham Cathedral, look for a Victorian carving depicting the story.

Incidentally, *The Rites of Durham* is an anonymous account of what life was like in the pre-reformation monastic community of Durham. It is most likely written by a member of the new Church of England community who was not happy with the outcome of Henry VIII's interventions.

Another tale common to County Durham is that of worms terrorising communities and being slain by heroic figures. There various versions in Durham folklore, with the 'Lambton Worm' and the 'Sockburn Worm' both linked to Lewis Carroll, and the latter linked with the Bishopric of Durham:

'My Lord Bishop, I hereby present you with the falchion wherewith the champion Conyers slew the worm, dragon or fiery serpent which destroyed man, woman and child; in memory of which the king then reigning gave him the manor of Sockburn, to hold by this tenure, that upon first entrance of every bishop into the county the falchion should be presented.'

These words are spoken in an ancient ceremony which continues to this day. When a new Bishop of Durham is appointed, they enter the Diocese of Durham, which is roughly the same area as the historic County of Durham, crossing the bridge at Croft-on-Tees from Yorkshire. The current Bishop, Paul Butler, is the last Bishop who will have held the original medieval sword. It is now on display in the cathedral's museum Open Treasure, with a battle-ready, full-size replica prepared for use by the next Bishop.

But what is the connection to Lewis Carroll? Carroll spent a significant part of his childhood growing up in Croft-on-Tees, where his father was Rector of the local church. Carroll will have been familiar with the story of the Conyers Falchion and the slaying of the worm, and it is known he wrote the first verse of the nonsense poem that would become 'Jabberwocky' whilst in Croft. Carroll's family had connections to Whitburn, just north of Sunderland, and he will also have been familiar with the story of the Lambton Worm. There are many accounts of the Lambton Worm, including one by Robert Surtees, but the most famous of all is the pantomime song written in 1867 by the Sunderland-born tenor C M 'Jack' Leumane. The chorus goes:

Whisht! lads, haad yor gobs  
An' aa'll tell ye aall an aaful story  
Whisht! lads, haad yor gobs  
An' aa'll tel ye 'boot the worm

Lewis Carroll wrote his remaining 'Jabberwocky' verses during a stay at Whitburn. It is likely the Jabberwock creature was inspired by the Sockburn and Lambton Worms, with the falchion being the inspiration of the Vorpall blade used to kill the beast:

'One two! One two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.'

## 8. Durham Prison / East End of Old Elvet

Tony Harrison, poet and playwright, was born in Leeds and lives in Newcastle. His poem 'Durham', written in 1970, starts playfully:

'Durham  
St Cuthbert's Shrine, founded 999'

Imagining the date when Cuthbert was placed in his shrine as the emergency service telephone number immediately sets the tone of protest against what the poet views as totalitarian authority, in which the city is reduced to a conflation of institutions. The poem concludes:

'...As we pull  
out of the station through the dusk and fog,  
there, lighting up, is Durham, dog  
chasing its own cropped tail,  
University, Cathedral, Gaol.'

Norfolk-born crime writer Alan Hunter set his 'Detective Inspector George Gently' novels in East Anglia. North East-born writer Peter Flannery adapted them for television, choosing to place *George Gently* in Durham. Many an episode features the view from the front of Durham Prison, east to west across the city skyline.

Infamous inmates of the Prison include Mary Ann Cotton. Her life, as told by David Wilson in *Mary Ann Cotton: Britain's First Female Serial Killer*, was the basis for the television drama *Dark Angel*, with Cotton played by Joanne Froggatt of *Downton Abbey* fame.

Cotton was born and lived in and around County Durham in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, killing her victims with arsenic tea. In 1873 she was convicted, hanged and buried within the walls of Durham Prison. Eerily, during renovations in the 1990s, her bones were found. They were then cremated. Beamish Museum in County Durham has her teapot and, inevitably, there is a nursery rhyme.

'Sing, sing, oh what should I sing?  
Mary Ann Cotton, she's tied up with string.  
Where, where? Up in the air.  
Selling black puddings, a penny a pair.'

A more recent crime that took place in Durham was the theft of a rare First Folio of William Shakespeare, published in 1623. In December 1998, several books and manuscripts were stolen from Durham University. Among them was a first edition volume of the old English poem 'Beowulf', a fragment of a poem by Geoffrey Chaucer, and the First Folio. The Folio turned up ten years later in Washington DC being presented to the Folger Shakespeare Library by a man who said he had come across it in Cuba. It turned out the man was from County Durham and he was found guilty of handling stolen goods, though not of the theft itself.

Old Elvet, an elegant street that starts near the Prison, links Durham to the pre-Raphaelite movement and women's suffrage.

No. 29 is the birthplace of Violet Hunt, granddaughter of James Raine, and daughter of Margaret Raine Hunt who married the artist Alfred William Hunt in 1861. The Hunts lived in Durham for a while, after which they settled in London, initially renting a house from their friend William Holman Hunt, a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in 1848. The movement rebelled against contemporary establishment ideals, taking inspiration from medieval and renaissance imagery combined with naturalism.

Political activism was part of Violet's family ecology. She inherited her mother's commitment to women's suffrage and, later, founded and supported the Women Writers' Suffrage League. In 1921 she co-founded PEN with Catherine Amy Dawson-Scott, which grew into an international organisation championing freedom of expression through the written word.

Violet's novels explore routes of resistance to the constraints placed on women by late 19th and early 20th Century society. She was published in the literary reviews of the day and widely admired by her contemporaries, including Henry James, Rebecca West, and D H Lawrence who said of her, 'I rather like her – she's a real assassin'. A young Oscar Wilde called her 'the sweetest Violet in England'.

Hunt never married, though had several relationships, which included Somerset Maugham and Ford Madox Ford, at the time Ford Hermann Hueffer. Hueffer and Hunt underwent a marriage ceremony abroad, which caused a scandal at the time and was not recognised as Hueffer's wife refused to divorce him. By 1918 Violet Hunt and Hueffer were estranged. Hueffer based his feisty character Sylvia Tietjens in *Parade's End* on Violet.

Hunt died in 1942. Her obituary in the *Times* noted that, artistically, 'certain types – especially of disagreeable worldly women – she drew with extreme skill', and concluded that, personally, 'kindness of heart and feeling for the troubles of others lay behind her often acid speeches'.

In her autobiography Hunt said of herself, 'I have to live always in the boiling middle of things or, to mix metaphors, in a world of thin ice and broken eggs that will never make an omelette. It seems to be my fate to be always up against people who prefer solvency to sentiment and pawkiness to passion.'

## 9. County Hotel / view of Elvet Bridge

'To me the Gala is the most joyous and emotional day it's possible to have. I was taken to my first Gala when I was eight years old and I marched behind the band and the banner of Fishburn Colliery with my mother and Great-Uncle Wilf and Aunt Lizzie. It was always a wonderful day out, with three great emotional moments in it. First, there was the pride you felt at marching behind the lodge banner towards the racecourse, then there was the moment when we stopped outside the County Hotel and the band played their serenade to the big shots on the balcony, and finally there was the parade to the cathedral for the miners' service.'

This description of the Miners' Gala, which always takes place on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday in July, is by Booker Prize-winning author DBC Pierre, whose mother is from Durham. He lived in Durham as a child in the 1960s.

The Durham Big Meeting, as the Gala is also known, is a large annual gathering and labour festival celebrating the mining heritage and communities of County Durham. It first took place in 1871.

Communities around the County gather early in the morning in their villages and towns, ahead of a ride into Durham for the Gala itself. Community banners are paraded through the city, each accompanied by a brass band. Ironically, those aloft on the balcony referenced by Pierre are usually figures who fight for the underdog, such as film director Ken Loach, labour politicians, and trade unionists.

The poet William Martin was born in a pit village near Sunderland, historically part of the Durham coalfield. After military service during World War Two, he became a gas fitter, later working at the Royal Infirmary Hospital, Sunderland as head of its audiology department, all the time writing poetry. In his words: 'I was brought up on hymns and preaching, and lodge banners and the solidarity they proclaimed.'

The Durham coalfield has had its share of mining disasters. Martin's poem 'Durham Beatitude', subtitled 'The Easington Colliery disaster in 1951, Remembered at the Durham Miners' Gala', recalls at that year's Gala, the Easington Lodge Banner was processed around the city draped in black:

'Saul's Dead March  
Common grave and grief  
Beatitude their banner  
Weeping and drum beat'

Tommy Armstrong was born in Shotley Bridge, County Durham in 1848, starting work in the mines aged nine. He eventually escaped, fostering a career in the musical hall as a songwriter and performer. He earned the title of 'Pitman's Poet' by ardently espousing the miners' cause in his lyrics.

In 1892 the whole of the Durham Coalfield halted work because miners already living in poverty would not accept a 10% cut in their wages. Armstrong's lyrics 'The Durham Lock-Out' dates from this period:

'With tyranny and capital, they never seem content  
Unless they are endeavouring to take from us percent.  
If it was due, what they request, we willingly would grant.  
We know it's not, therefore we cannot give them what they want.'  
The coalfield welcomed Bevin Boys during World War Two: those conscripted to keep the nation stocked with coal, rather than conscription to military service. One Bevin Boy was George 'Jock' Purdon, who came to Durham from Scotland. He remained in the North East working at the Harraton pit, known as the 'Cotia pit, an abbreviation of Nova Scotia – New Scotland, because so many Scots worked there. As a folk musician he wrote many songs and poems. The 'Cotia closed in 1965. Purdon recalled, 'I remember when we found out that 'Cotia was finished, I wrote "Farewell to 'Cotia" and stuck it up on the notice board at the pit. It's probably there yet, lying under the rubble.'

The last deep pit mine in the Durham Coalfield closed in 1994, with the only remaining surface mine closing in 2020. The warm water that floods redundant mines is being developed as a thermal heat source.

## 10. Magdalene Steps

The Magdalene Steps, named after a medieval hospice, lead onto Saddler Street which in turn is the route up to the centre of the Durham World Heritage Site. Elvet Bridge, to the east, is home to several independent shops and two branches of Oxfam, one specialising in vintage clothes and the other in second-hand books. For those interested in new books, the Durham branch of Waterstones is over the road, at the top of the steps on Saddler Street.

Slightly lower down Saddler Street is No. 74, a building with a gold teapot above it. The teapot was put there in 1970 though it dates to 1832, having been moved around the city on a number of occasions.

From 1909, No. 74 Saddler Street was the House of Andrews Bookshop, established in Durham from as early as 1808, though originally at No. 64, further up the hill and now a pizza restaurant. In 1816 the House of Andrews published the famous and highly regarded four-volume *History of Durham* by Robert Surtees, and it is known that Bishop William van Mildert was a regular customer. In 1832, when Durham University was formed, House of Andrews became the official university bookshop. These days Waterstones has a branch further up the hill performing that role.

Ownership of the House of Andrews was passed down through the family, with the engraver John Henry Le Keux (1812-1896) marrying into the family to find himself running the business. Le Keux was a friend of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century art critic, commentator and writer John Ruskin, and worked on the illustrations for Ruskin's books *The Stones of Venice* and *Modern Painters*. A few months before Le Keux' death, the business was sold to his manager of the store, Warneford Smart, who was a close acquaintance of Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes.

The business continued to thrive and was described in the *Publishers' Circular* of January 1909, reporting on the firm's recent centenary dinner, that the business had grown considerably, 'necessitating the removal to larger and more convenient premises, and even still further extensions until at the present day it may truly be considered one of the finest businesses in the North of England'. Smart retired in 1961, age 98, selling the House of Andrews. It passed through several hands, finally being taken over by John Menzies who operated it as a bookshop until the 1990s before selling.

There are other publishing associations with No. 74 Saddler Street, through the 18<sup>th</sup> Century caricaturist and satirical painter Isaac Cruikshank, whose cartoons were popular and much published in his day. His cartoon, 'Durham mustard too powerful for Italian capers, or the opera in an uproar' features the Bishop of Durham striding on to a stage to protest at the antics of the opera chorus girls. The cartoon is a reference to the origins of English mustard, when, in the 1720s, a Mrs Clements discovered that grinding mustard seeds like flour produced a stronger flavour. This took place in buildings behind No.74 in the vennels, the name for the small alleys that run between and behind buildings in Durham. Mrs Clements' recipe was introduced to King George I, who patented the product. Production of English mustard is now in the hands of Colemans of Norwich, but Mrs Clements' branded mustard can be bought from the East India Company.

## 11. Palace Green

The Durham UNESCO World Heritage Site has literature and learning at its heart. The poem 'Durham', regarded as the last poem in Old English, is a celebration of the city. The author and its date are unknown. One theory is it was written to mark the placement of Cuthbert in his new shrine in 1104, in the newly built cathedral. In translation the poem reads:

'The city is celebrated through the kingdom of the Britons  
placed on a steep eminence, surrounded with cliffs  
wonderfully large. The Wear surrounds it,  
a river strong in its current and therein reside  
various kinds of fish in the midst of the floods.  
And there grows a great fortress of woods;  
In the recess of which dwell many wild animals,  
In the deep dales there is a countless number of beasts.  
There is also the town illustrious among men  
the honourable blessed Cuthbert  
and the head of a pure king,  
Oswald, lion of the English and bishop Aidan,  
Eadberch and Eadfrith, illustrious associates.  
Therein, along with them, Aethelwald, the bishop  
and the illustrious author Bede and Boisil, the abbot  
who taught the pure Cuthbert  
willingly in his youth and well did he receive his instruction.  
There abide with that blessed one with that minster  
Countless relics

Where many honour them wonderfully as writers report,  
Whilst they await the just sentence of the Lord.'

There are several translations of the poem from the Old English. The translation just heard is by Joseph Stevenson, who studied theology at Durham University and was librarian at the cathedral in the 1840s. The poem remains evocative of the city, its landscape and Durham's provenance as centre for learning and pilgrimage.

Many of the buildings around Palace Green, the name of the grassed area between the cathedral and the castle, house collections of books as part of Durham University. Palace Green Library is home to the university's special collections and an exhibition space. Another is Bishop Cosin's Library, created as the first public lending library in Durham by Bishop Cosin just after the restoration of the monarchy in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

A dark side of Durham's history is use of the cathedral and the castle to house prisoners taken at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650 by Oliver Cromwell, a year after the execution of the English monarch, Charles I. The period that followed, known as the Commonwealth, saw England governed as a republic, whilst Scotland recognised Charles' son, as Charles II as King of Britain. Battle was inevitable and the two sides met at Dunbar. The English won, with Cromwell's army marching around 4,000 prisoners, taken captive in the aftermath, south. Many died on the way. The remainder were imprisoned in the castle and the cathedral, which was empty and abandoned. Cromwell had evicted the Dean and Chapter, as he suppressed the Church across England.

In November 2013, building work was taking place at the back of Palace Green Library. A grim discovery was made. Multiple skeletons were exposed. Work stopped immediately and it was suspected the skeletons were those of the Scottish prisoners who had died and were buried in Durham. A team of Durham University archaeologists investigated and found evidence they were. A fascinating book called *Lost Lives, New Voices*, written by the team of archaeologists involved, provides insights into the story. Not all the prisoners died; some were taken as indentured servants to North America. Durham, Dunbar, and the story of the Scottish prisoners has featured in the American version of the television programme *Who Do You Think You Are?*, with actor Jon Cryer being a descendant of a Scottish prisoner.

The south side of Durham Cathedral has the most complete set of monastic buildings remaining in the UK and is home to the cathedral's library. Durham Cathedral's collections include three issues of the Magna Carta – the 1216, 1225 and 1300 issues; a first edition King James Bible published in 1611; and an 8<sup>th</sup> Century commentary on the psalms – the Durham Cassiodorus.

Durham University attracts writers to Durham as academics, or sometimes as their spouses or partners. The multi-award-winning author AS Byatt lived in Durham in the 1960s and early 1970s, having moved to the city with her husband, who had taken a post as an Economics Professor. Her novel *Still Life* takes one of its central episodes – the shocking, untimely death of Stephanie – from a near-death experience Byatt endured in the kitchen of her Durham home.

A sparrow had got into the house and, in the confusion of trying to chase it out, she upset a fridge and was nearly electrocuted. Byatt has described the incident on several occasions. She remembers lying on the floor, looking out of the window at Durham Cathedral and thinking of the Venerable Bede, who wrote that life is like a sparrow. She uses Bede's words from his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* as an epigram to the book. Byatt survived her incident with the sparrow; in the novel, the character Stephanie does not.

A contemporary author's use of the words of an Anglo-Saxon scholar and monk is a fitting conclusion to this literary walk around Durham City. The written word associated with Durham spans more than a millennium and presents Durham as a place of contradiction with a strong literary sense of place.

We hope you have enjoyed this literary pilgrimage, part of the Durham 2020 Book Festival.