

Milborne Port's Literary Connections

For a village nestled in the south Somerset, we can boast some rather extraordinary literary connections! And the connections within the connections – however tenuous – are also rather interesting! So, in chronological order (sort of!), here they are!



Elizabeth Rowe¹ (née Singer, 1674–1737) was an English poet, essayist and fiction writer called ‘the ornament of her sex and age’ and the ‘Heavenly Singer’. She was among 18th-century England's most widely read authors, writing mainly religious poetry, but her best-known work, *Friendship in Death* (1728), is a miscellany of imaginary letters from the dead to the living. Despite a posthumous reputation as a pious, bereaved recluse, Rowe corresponded widely and was involved in local concerns at Frome in her native Somerset. She remained popular into the 19th century on both sides of the Atlantic and in translation. Though little read today, scholars have called her stylistically and thematically radical for her time.

Prolific author and scholar who lived all her life in the village, Emma Raymond Pitman, tells us in her *Memorials of the Congregational Church Or 'old Independent Meeting House', Milborne Port* (1883) that Elizabeth Singer Rowe is said to have lived in Church Street in Milborne Port in the late 1690s/early 1700s, probably in the house that Reverend William Hopkins had occupied during his non-conformist activities after he had been ejected from the Church for being a dissenter. Our current theory is that Elizabeth might have come to Milborne Port with her father, Walter Singer, in the late 1690s/early 1700s; he had been a dissenting minister in Frome and was possibly still involved in non-conformist and dissenting preaching. William Hopkins died in 1700s so could it be that Walter came to support his flock before John Sprint - orthodox Calvinist dissenter - started his work in the village?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Singer_Rowe

‘Pouncing’ Peter Walter bought much of the property of the Medlycotts (lords of part of the manor and of Ven House) at the time of James Medlycott’s bankruptcy in 1731; he features in the protracted legal case brought against Thomas Medlycott and various other members of the family by his mother, Ann, who believed that her son had cheated her of the dowry that she believed should have been returned to her when James died. It’s complicated, to say the least.



Peter Walter was written about unfavourably by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745):

*That rogue of genuine ministerial kind
Can half the peerage by his arts bewitch
Starve twenty lords to make one scoundrel rich;*

And in a similar vein by poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744):

*If Peter deigns to help you to your own:
What thanks, what praise, if Peter but supplies!
And what a solemn face if he denies!*

...

*And lies to every Lord in everything
Like a King’s favourite—or like a King.*

A caricature of Peter Walter appeared in Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* (1742) in the form of Peter Pounce, Lady Booby’s steward - a stingy, uncharitable man who on one occasion saves Fanny from rape but plans to abuse her himself.

James Medlycott’s daughter, Sophia, married Richard Willoughby (a Wiltshire Justice of the Peace), who was known to Henry Fielding, who

made him a very minor but worthy character in *Tom Jones* (1749) – Justice Willoughby of West Noyle. Jane Austen, who was a great fan of Fielding and of *Tom Jones* in particular, might have taken the name Willoughby from the novel for her own Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, although there is no similarity in character at all between the two!

In *Sense and Sensibility*, there is a description of a manor house in Devon that apart from the canal, could be a description of the manor house in West Knoyle, Wiltshire, belonging to the Willoughby family.

Delaford is a nice place, I can tell you ; exactly what I call a nice old-fashioned place, full of comforts and conveniences ; quite shut in with great garden walls that are covered with the best fruit-trees in the country ; and such a mulberry tree in one corner ! Lord ! how Charlotte and I did stuff the only time we were there ! Then, there is a dovecote, some delightful stewponds, and a very pretty canal ; and everything, in short, that one could wish for : and, moreover, it is close to the church, and only a quarter of a mile from the turnpike-road, so 'tis never dull, for if you only go and sit up in an old yew arbour behind the house, you may see all the carriages that pass along. Oh ! 'tis a nice place ! A butcher hard by in the village, and the parsonage-house within a stone's throw. To my fancy,

Richard Willoughby worked for many years as the steward and agent of Henry Hoare of Stourhead; another agent of Hoare was Joshua Cox who, when in London, lived at Bartlett Buildings in Holborn. Jane Austen's Steele sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* stayed at Bartlett Buildings when they were in London to visit their cousin.

Richard Willoughby quoted Alexander Pope in a letter to Joshua Cox on 29th November 1740. It has been suggested that the precedent for the Alderman William Beckford's tunnel at Fonthill is that at Alexander Pope's house at Twickenham, first created in 1720 to 1725 and extended nearly 20 years later. His famous grotto there had its parallel in Fonthill's Hermitage. Richard Willoughby worked as William Beckford's steward, probably in the 1750s and early 1760s.

A granddaughter of John Sprint and also very much involved in the life of the non-conformists in the village was Mary Scott Taylor² (1751-1793); she was a poet originating from Milborne Port. Notable for her literary contributions, Scott authored *The Female Advocate* in 1774, a work advocating for women's participation in writing and literature.



Mary Scott, Mrs John Taylor 1751-1793
Mother of Mary Anne & John Edward Taylor
(from a miniature, F.B. p 206)

The Member of Parliament for Milborne Port from 1796 to 1804 was Lord Henry Paget (1768-1854). When Charles, fifth Duke of



Richmond, was engaged to Lady Caroline Paget, daughter of Lord Paget (aka Marquis of Anglesey), in a private letter to her niece, Jane Austen wrote, *If I were the Duchess of Richmond, I should be very miserable about my son's choice. What can be expected from a Paget, born and brought up in the centre of conjugal infidelity and divorces? I will not be interested about Lady Caroline. I abhor all the race of Pagets.*

Thomas Medlycott and Jeffrey French were both MPs for Milborne Port. Jeffrey French's nephew – Arthur Murphy – was a journalist and playwright, one of the Streatham Worthies painted by Joshua Reynolds, mixing with the likes of Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Johnson and actor David Garrick. David Garrick knew Thomas Hutchings Medlycott well enough to make a gift to him of this George III metal mounted ornament made from a section of branch surmounted by a gentleman aiming his



² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Scott_\(poet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Scott_(poet))

musket; the silver mounts around the top and the base are inscribed 'From Shakespear's Mulberry Tree given by Mr Garrick, 1778 to Thomas Hutchings Medlycott'. 14.5cm high. Garrick had once been the lover of actress Peg Woffington, later probably also the mistress of sexual predator Thomas Hutchings Medlycott.



Thomas Hutchings Medlycott married Jane Coles of Salisbury, the great-granddaughter of Peter Walter.

Thomas Hardy wrote about *that trump of mortgagees* Peter Walter of Stalbridge Park – naming him Timothy Petrick of Stapleford Park – at the start of a short story called *Squire Petrick's Lady*, which appeared in the anthology *A Group of Noble Dames*. In this story, Marlott is Marnhull, Sherton Abbas is Sherborne and Millpool is Milborne Port. In another short story – *For Conscience's Sake* - from the anthology *Life's Little Ironies*, there is a character called Mr Millborne. Below is a picture of a Thomas Hardy lookalike (on the left) outside the Old Post Office in Milborne Port! But who knows, maybe it really *is* him!³

³ Read more about the Walters at Stalbridge Park here:
<http://www.dorsetlife.co.uk/2012/03/the-old-stone-wall-at-stalbridge/>

Stephen Fox (later Fox-Strangeways), Baron Ilchester (1704-1776), is probably the Fox from whom Thomas Medlycott was expecting venison (the reference is a letter to his steward Edward Hallett from 11th December 1739) and who had a manor at Redlynch between Wincanton and Bruton. They were probably well known to each other as neighbours, if not as friends; Fox was the MP for Shaftesbury from 1726-1741, after which he was elevated to the House of Lords. Stephen Fox appears in the story as Stephen Reynard (i.e. Fox), later Lord Ivell (in other letters Medlycott also refers to him as Lord Ivelchester) and Earl of Wessex, in the short story *The First Countess of Wessex* by Thomas Hardy, collected in *A Group of Noble Dames*.

A contemporary of Thomas Hardy was Emma Raymond Pitman, born in Milborne Port in 1841 and with much in common with Elizabeth Singer Rowe and Mary Scott; she died in the village in 1899. She was a prolific author and a scholar, dedicating her career to illuminating the lives of early reformers and lady missionaries, with a particular focus on women's roles in social justice. She was very much involved in the life of the Congregational Church in Milborne Port and it is thanks for her *Memorials of the Congregational Church Or 'old Independent Meeting House', Milborne Port* (1883) that we know that Elizabeth Singer Rowe is said to have lived in Church Street in the late 1690s/early 1700s.



The East View houses in Paddock Walk, Milborne Port were built by William John Cory, an adventurer who was often away in different parts of the world making his fortune. A carpenter by trade, he also made the coffin for Mary Kingsley, daughter of Charles Kingsley (the writer, poet, university professor, social reformer and historian) who was, at her request, buried at sea after dying from typhoid in on June 3rd 1900; she had been treating Boer prisoners in Simonstown, South Africa. A touch of comedy - which would

have amused Kingsley herself - was added when the coffin refused to sink and had to be hauled back on board then thrown over again weighed down this time with an anchor.

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