



Poetry *in motion*

As Britain commemorates the bicentenary of the birth of one of its most celebrated poets, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, **Sarah Monaghan** gets on the trail of this literary great to discover the places that inspired his work



There is a scene in Steven Spielberg's gritty Second World War drama, *Saving Private Ryan*, in which Corporal Upham, a hapless US Army translator, is challenged on the logic of his squad's rescue mission behind enemy lines in Normandy, France. Seemingly unable to answer he simply shrugs: "Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die."

It is a classic line, borrowed from Alfred Tennyson's celebrated poem, *Charge of the Light Brigade*, which the author had penned 110 years earlier about another bloody battle that took place at Balaclava.

Today, this and other timeless Tennyson lines, such as "Nature, red in tooth and claw" and "It is better to have loved and lost" have become so widely used this enigmatic former Poet Laureate is now the second most frequently quoted writer after Shakespeare according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.

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 Sarah Monaghan is a freelance editor and member of the British Guild of Travel Writers



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lyric to poems shot through with bitterness and violence.

Born in Lincolnshire, in the village of Somersby, to Reverend George Clayton and Elizabeth Tennyson, he was known for wandering, book in hand, day and night. His life is immortalised here in brick, stone, running water and rolling

fields, and in the lyric poetry it inspired.

These wolds of Lincolnshire, where the poet spent his formative years, remain an isolated and little-known corner of rural England, unchanged from Tennyson's descriptions: "On either side of the river lie, Long fields of barley and of rye, That clothe the wold and meet the sky; And thro' the field the road runs by..." (*The Lady of Shalott*).

'Tennyson's county', as it is known, is proud of its most famous son and outside Lincoln Cathedral stands his commanding bronze statue, quoting his poem *Flowers in the Crannied Wall*. The Tennyson Research Centre in the city's Central Library holds the most significant collection on the poet, with family papers, manuscripts and even one of his renowned dramatic capes and a wide-brimmed hat.

Growing pains

Tennyson was just 16 when he brought out his first poetry book with his brother Charles. Their *Poems by Two Brothers* was published in 1827 and the boys hired a carriage with their £10 earnings, riding to the charming seaside town of Mablethorpe where they shouted their poetry joyously to the sea. →

Above: sweeping colours of the Lincolnshire Wolds. Centre: the prolific poet. Opposite: Lincoln Cathedral and Tennyson statue



Clockwise from top: Somersby Church in Lincolnshire; Epping Forest where Tennyson's family relocated; Trinity College's Wren Library

It was at Trinity College, Cambridge, where Tennyson made his deepest friendship yet, when he met the young man who was to inspire his signature work, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, which later was to bring such solace to Queen Victoria as she mourned Prince Albert's early death.

A.H.H. or Arthur Henry Hallam was a vivacious personality and the son of a famous historian. He persuaded Tennyson to enter the university poetry competition and Tennyson won the Chancellor's Gold Medal for his poem *Timbuctoo*. Hallam became a regular visitor to Somersby and soon became engaged to Tennyson's sister, Emily.

Family tragedy

Tennyson's idyllic university days were cut short by two life-changing events, however. The death of his father in 1831 forced him to return home to oversee family affairs. Then, in 1833, his dearest friend, Hallam, aged 22, died from a stroke. Tennyson was bereft and the force of his grief was to inspire some of his most moving work.

When the family was forced to move to Epping Forest in 1937, Tennyson documented of a profound sense of dislocation from Lincolnshire: "Dim

mystic sympathies with tree and hill reaching far back into childhood," he wrote. "A known landskip [sic] is to me an old friend that continually talks to me of my own youth."

His epic *Ulysses* was produced at this difficult time which was brightened however by a chance meeting with an old friend from Somersby, Emily Sellwood, who he ran into at his brother Charles' wedding. They fell in love that day, Tennyson wrote later: "I loved thee for the ear thou could'st not hide, And prest thy hand, and knew the press return'd." But Emily's father disapproved of the match – Tennyson he thought was "a Bohemian", and too fond of tobacco and port – and contact between the lovers was broken off for almost a decade.

Tennyson threw himself into his work. By now he had published *The Lady of Shalott* and *A Dream of Fair Women*. In 1842, Charles Dickens described him as "the man whose writings enlist my whole heart and nature in admiration of their truth and beauty". *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, published in 1850 to national acclaim, sold 60,000 copies in its first year. Emily wrote she thought it "grand and beautiful" and finally, Tennyson's success prompted a

change of heart on her father's part.

1850 turned out to be Tennyson's annus mirabilis, bringing marriage, professional success and his appointment as Poet Laureate, in succession to Wordsworth. The couple settled in Twickenham, but his new celebrity status brought its own challenges: plagued by autograph hunters, Tennyson craved isolation.

An island retreat

The solution came with a move to the Isle of Wight. The island was then so remote that a porter at Yarmouth would call out to departing travellers: "This way for England." "It was a rural backward place," says Tennyson scholar Brian Hinton. "But it was its very remoteness that had already made it a draw to an artistic community that included Dickens, Turner, Swinburne and Edward Lear."

During a visit to these literary friends at Bonchurch, a quiet fishing village nestled between Shanklin and Ventnor, Tennyson learned of a neglected Georgian house at Freshwater Bay on the western arm of the isle.

In 1853, he and his wife were rowed across from Lymington, according to Emily's diary, on "a still November



Above: the rolling Lincolnshire Wolds. Below: Farringford, Tennyson's former home and now a luxury hotel

evening. One dark heron flew over the Solent backed by a daffodil sky." Emily's maids "burst into tears saying that they could never live in such a lonely place", but Emily said: "I must have that view".

Tennyson was enraptured too. Farringford, now an elegant country house hotel, lay at the foot of High Down, from which chalk cliffs fall sheer to the churning sea below. These dramatic cliffs were to fuel his creative energy for the next 39 years. Pacing the Down daily, clad in cape and wide-brimmed hat, the poet found his inspiration, writing: "The air here is worth sixpence a pint."

Coast and country

Today, part of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Tennyson Heritage Coast is a walker's idyll, offering views of blue sea and white cliffs that stretch to Alum Bay. High Down has been renamed Tennyson Down and an immense Celtic cross, raised in 1897 in the poet's honour, stands at its crest.

On the other side of the island lies Osborne House, the country retreat of Victoria and Albert. Soon after the Tennysons' move to Farringford, the Prince arrived, promising "to bring the Queen to this very pretty place".

The Queen and Tennyson met often. In 1862, a year after Albert's death, she wrote: "I told him how much comfort I found in his *In Memoriam A.H.H.* He was full of unbounded appreciation of my beloved Albert. When he spoke of his own loss and of that to the Nation, his eyes quite filled with tears!"

Life in pictures

Farringford, Tennyson's refuge for nearly 40 years, was where his two sons, Hallam (named after his late friend) and Lionel, were born. Today, it remains recognisable from his words as his home: "Where, far from noise and smoke of town, I watch the twilight falling brown, all around a careless-ordered garden, close to the ridge of a noble down." Here, guests can even choose to sleep in the poet's former bedroom or his study.

Happily, his life was recorded in pictures thanks to his close friend, the pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who moved to Dimbola Lodge in Freshwater Bay. She photographed many famous Victorian luminaries that visited him: Charles Darwin, Ellen Terry, John Millais and Lewis Carroll. Today, Dimbola Lodge is a photographic museum, where →

The other side of Lord Alfred



10 things you didn't know about Tennyson

1 He was very short-sighted and often wore a monocle or spectacles. Several young ladies wrote of feeling "nervous" because he would sit so close and stare.

2 He was tall and strong. As a young man he would show off by picking up the family's Shetland pony.

3 He wrote plays as well as poetry. Sir Henry Irving was at the height of his career when he played Becket in Tennyson's play of the same name.

4 Tennyson was a heavy smoker, a habit that began at school in Louth. He tried to give up just once.

5 He loved apple pie and had a fresh one made every day.

6 He spoke with a Lincolnshire accent, which he kept all his life. He also wrote poetry in a Lincolnshire dialect.

7 During his college days he supported the reactionaries in Spain, travelling with a group in the Pyrenees. It was from this trip that he adopted his distinct style of dress.

8 He was interested in new inventions, travelling by train as soon as he could.

9 He was a very modern father and took great delight in playing and making noise with his two boys.

10 Facially, he looked very similar to the writer, Dickens, almost getting mobbed at Dickens' funeral.



Get on the Tennyson trail

If you fancy learning more about the life and times of Tennyson, here are the best places to start. . .

Tennyson Research Centre



For material relating to Alfred Tennyson, this Centre within Lincoln Central Library can't be beaten. Researchers can browse thousands of letters, diaries, proofs, manuscripts, critical and biographical works and a comprehensive collection of editions of Tennyson's works. In the same building, the *Tennyson Exhibition* houses a variety of treasures, including Tennyson's hat and cloak. www.lincolnshire.gov.uk

Somersby



At one time Tennyson's father was the rector of the 15th century church in Somersby, Lincolnshire (see picture on previous spread). Just down the road is the cream-coloured rectory where Alfred was born. This Georgian building with a pantiled roof is a private house. Rev. George Tennyson became rector of Somersby and Bag Enderby in 1808.

www.lincolnshirewolds.info/tennyson

Farringford



Tennyson's former home on the Isle of Wight, has rooms from £125.50 per person (based on two sharing), including breakfast and return car ferry crossings from Portsmouth or Lymington. An exhibition, *Tennyson at Farringford*, will run from 6-27 August, with the opening of the poet's restored library. Free guided tours of the house take place every Tuesday at 10am.

01 983 752 500; www.farringford.co.uk

Dimbola Lodge



The photographic gallery on the Isle of Wight with Julia Margaret Cameron's portraits of Tennyson and his circle is open year round, Tuesday to Sunday (Mondays on Bank Holidays and over the six-week school summer holidays). Open March to October 10am-5pm; November to February 10am-4pm. Admission is £4 for adults, £3.50 for students and free for children under 16.

01 983 756 814; www.dimbola.co.uk

Osborne House



Queen Victoria's royal residence on the Isle of Wight where she met Tennyson many times is open daily April to October, 10am-6pm (October until 4pm). November to March: open Wednesday-Sunday, 10am-4pm for pre-booked guided tours. Admission is £10.20 for adults, £5.10 for children and free for English Heritage members.

01 983 200 022; www.english-heritage.org.uk/osbornehouse



Clockwise from above: Osborne House; the Needles; Freshwater Bay; Tennyson Cross, all Isle of Wight; Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey

Cameron's archive work is displayed. By now so successful on the proceeds of his poetry as no other poet has been since Byron, the onslaught of 'cockneys' (as Tennyson called his fans who besieged Farringford) forced him to move for privacy each summer to a house he built at Haslemere, Surrey, named Aldworth.

But it was to Farringford he returned for the rest of each year. One of his final poems, *Crossing the Bar*, was written in 1889 as he crossed the sea to the Isle of Wight. "That is the crown of your life's work," his son Hallam told him. "It came in a moment," he said.

It was to be his death song. In 1892, he died with Hallam at his side at Aldworth. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Tracking Tennyson

To help you follow in the footsteps of Tennyson, two tourism trails have been put together. East Lindsey District Council has launched a trail which can

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no
moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea.


Crossing the Bar,
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

be driven in a day or walked in sections and highlights many hidden gems off the beaten track. The route is lined with information boards at key places of



Tennyson's life, such as his childhood home, his school and the charming rural villages of the southern Lincolnshire Wolds. It journeys along the county's award-winning coastline and winds through scenic countryside. Copies of this *Tennyson Trail* can be sought from Tennyson Research Centre at Lincoln Central Library.

Alternatively, you can find out more about Tennyson's life on the Isle of Wight with the *Wight History Trail*, a 33-stop tour of the island, available free from Wightlink by calling 0871 376 1000 or to download at www.wightlink.co.uk/historytrail.

A number of events commemorating the poet's birthday will also take place across Lincolnshire, including exhibitions and readings. For more information, visit the website at www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/tennyson 

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Sarah Monaghan travelled to the Isle of Wight with Wightlink. For details of their ferry crossings go to www.wightlink.co.uk

