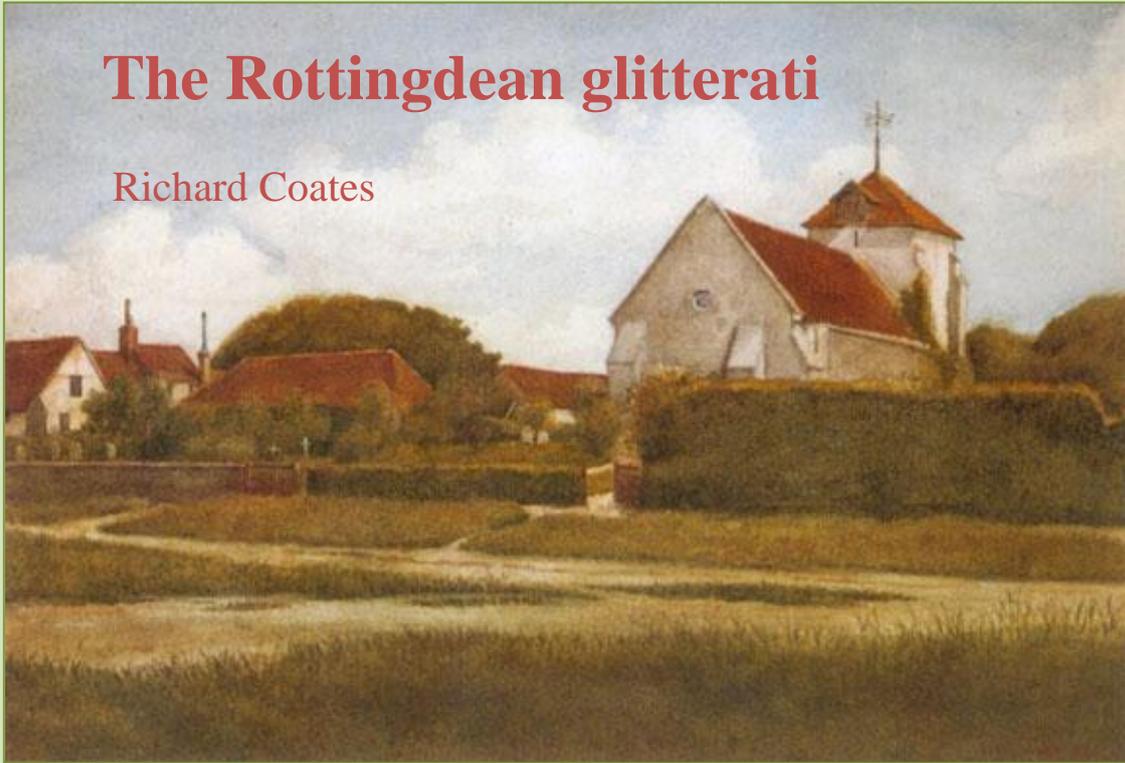


The Rottingdean glitterati

Richard Coates



*Sir Philip Burne-Jones, "The village church, Rottingdean" (watercolour, 1891).
Image courtesy of Peter Nahum At The Leicester Galleries, London,
www.leicestergalleries.com*

*It's a wet and windy village full of rheumatism and beauty
with a history of great men. – Enid Bagnold*

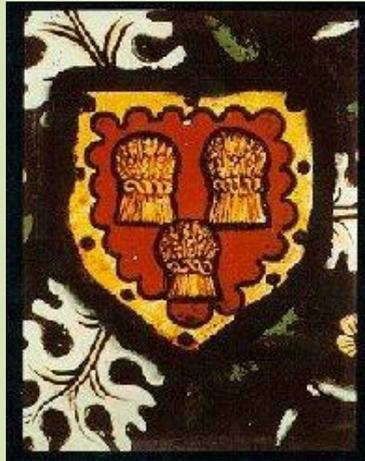
Writers of local guide books and journalists often dwell on the distinguished artistic heritage of Rottingdean. When they do, they always mention the Victorian painter and stained-glass artist Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) and the never-knighted writer Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), both of whom lived in houses on the Green. Burne-Jones was there for eighteen years until his death (1880-1898), they say, and his wife Georgiana for forty (1880-1920); Kipling resided for just over a mere four (1897-1902). Although it may make Rottingdeaners feel good to flirt with these masters of high culture, it is only a partial truth about both men to make them out to be locals. On the other hand, some other modestly well-known artistic people have lived in the village and in nearby

Ovingdean, and it would be good to get them all in perspective. The dates when some of them lived in the villages appear differently in different sources. In some cases they rented before moving in permanently, and in other cases they owned but were often absent. So their true dates of residence are not always easy to ascertain. And despite Enid Bagnold's assessment, the talent has not been exclusively male.

Rottingdean was a smallish village devoted mainly to farming till Brighton was transformed into a fashionable resort for the rich and richer in the late eighteenth century. Some leisured folk who enjoyed the seaside but were repelled by the raffish resort took genteel lodgings in surrounding villages, and Rottingdean was the main one to benefit in this way. There were lodging-houses there from around 1790.¹ The reasonably well-to-do temporary company were so numerous that a team of visitors could take the field against the historic village cricket club in 1807.²

The first artistic "foreigner" in the village with a modest claim to fame may be the painter in oils and book illustrator Mary Elizabeth Dear. She was professionally active from about 1848-67, was good enough to exhibit at the Royal Academy in 1857, and produced illustrations for Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The scarlet letter* in 1859. She is known to have lived in Ivy Cottage (87 High Street) in Rottingdean around 1867-71. But she is unlikely to find a warm place in local hearts; she was the Mrs Chantrell who was "twice convicted of starving dogs and cats on her premises at Rottingdean."³ A little earlier, in 1855, Jane Welsh Carlyle (1801-66), the put-upon wife of the philosophical and historical writer Thomas Carlyle and herself a diarist of some distinction, inspected one of the Hill Houses on the western cliff with a view to taking a let. With characteristic diplomacy, Thomas dismissed the house as a "hut" and never even came to look at it.⁴ Who can say what Rottingdean missed out on?

A little mystery attaches to the local credentials of W. Harrison Ainsworth (1805-82; not "William Ainsworth", as ignorantly inscribed on the front of one of the local buses). He was best known as the author of the novel *Ovingdean Grange*, serialized in 1859-60, in which he invented the myth that Charles II stayed at the Grange during his escape to France after the battle of Worcester (1651), with foetal consequences. We know that Ainsworth lived in Arundel Terrace, Kemp Town, from 1853-67, but he was great friends with the rector of Ovingdean, Alfred Stead, and attended his church, St Wulfran's, on Sundays.⁵ He also stayed with one Mary Beard in 1857-8 during the gestation of his most famous novel. The Beards were significant landowners in Rottingdean at the time, but where exactly this Mary lived is unclear. She was probably the Mary Beard, "annuitant", "fund holder", born in 1793/4, recorded in the 1851 and 1861 censuses in Rottingdean.⁶



The trade-mark of the Kempe stained glass studio, taken from the family coat of arms (photo Philip Collins, image © The Kempe Society, 1988)

Ovingdean produced its own native talent in the form of Charles Eamer Kempe (1837-1907), the prolific Tractarian stained-glass artist and church furnisher, who was born at Ovingdean Hall and is buried in the churchyard of St Wulfran's, which displays some of his work.⁷ He and his company would certainly be more widely famous, and he would be locally celebrated, if Victorian church art were more fashionable.

William Black (1841-98) was a very well-known writer of the Victorian period whose reputation, like Ainsworth's, is now eclipsed. He wrote novels such as *A daughter of Heth*, *Macleod of Dare* and *Yolande* often with a Scottish setting. He lived at 1 Paston Place, Kemp Town, from 1879, but enjoyed striding out over the cliffs to Rottingdean so much that, according to some writers of guidebooks, he decided to become a permanent resident. This is true, but only with effect from the date of his funeral; he is buried in St Margaret's churchyard.⁸

Now we actually come to Burne-Jones, the star of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. He lived at North End House on Rottingdean Green, named after his house in Fulham. He was not a permanent resident, though; he lived by the sea seasonally (and had many well-known artistic guests such as William Morris and Sir Edward Poynter), but had enough sense of belonging in the village to expand his household into the next building and install there a large slot (still visible) through which his huge canvases could be delivered. Some of his stained glass depicting angels and saints can be seen in the parish church. His often exquisitely coloured pictures with bland-faced women characters dropped out of favour for many decades, but his work now seems to be going through a reassessment.⁹ His wife Georgiana was Kipling's aunt, and that fact was a reason for Kipling's interest in the place. Kipling nominally lived at The Elms from 1897-1902, but during this period was often away on his imperial and personal pursuits, in America and South Africa, on naval reviews and much else.¹⁰ His fame magnified to a considerable extent in his absences; the locals not unreasonably exploited his rare presences by arranging sightseeing tours for



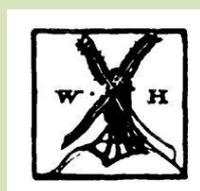
*Edward Burne-Jones, "Georgiana Burne-Jones" (oil on canvas, 1883),
public domain*

people who might just catch a glimpse of him over his wall.¹¹ Not a natural "celeb", he disliked the attention and left for Burwash in 1902 (not 1903, as it says on the blue plaque), having written *Kim, Stalky & Co.*, the first *Just so stories*, the controversial

poem *The white man's burden*, and the anthology-filling *Recessional* and *If* whilst enjoying his Rottingdean address. The melancholic Sir Philip Burne-Jones (1861-1926), son of Edward and Georgiana, was a not inconsiderable artist himself, and he executed a portrait of Kipling as well as the fine watercolour of St Margaret's church which appears at both ends of this article.¹²

The Burne-Joneses were also the grandparents of Angela Thirkell (1890-1961; who was therefore Kipling's second cousin), author of the many *Barsetshire chronicles*. She was not strictly a resident (but then, how strictly was her grandfather?) She often stayed at North End House in her younger years, and wrote tenderly about it in *Three houses* (1931). Her ashes are buried, like those of the Burne-Joneses, in St Margaret's churchyard.

After the death of Lady Burne-Jones, North End House, eventually extended yet again to occupy three original dwellings, became the home (1923-71) of the independent-minded writer Enid Bagnold (1889-1981) and her husband, Roderick Jones, head of Reuter's news agency. Bagnold was a novelist most famous for *National Velvet*, a novel about a horsey young woman (Velvet) with aspirations to win the Grand National. She also wrote plays including *The chalk garden*, a sensitive reading of which can reveal many echoes of Rottingdean, where she too is buried in the churchyard. During the same long period, a house in Steyning Road was until 1940 the home of Maurice Baring (1874-1945), essayist, poet, biographer, Russian literature scholar and commentator on Russian affairs, who wrote the novels *C* (1924) and *Daphne Adeane* (1926), the latter seeming to refer to the village-name. A little before (around the 1910s), the literary scholar and poet Alfred Noyes (1880-1956) had lived in the same street. Like Baring, he was a Roman Catholic convert. His poem *The bee in church* is often said to have been inspired by an incident in St Wulfran's, Ovingdean.¹³ The society portrait painter, illustrator, woodcut artist and theatrical designer Sir William Nicholson (1872-1949) lived at the former vicarage, by then called (by him, it seems, pretentiously) The Grange, from 1909 to 1914, with his first wife the artist Mabel Pryde (1871-1918) who rarely gets a deserved mention, before decamping to the Wiltshire countryside for the same reason as Kipling. The famous windmill emblem Nicholson designed for William Heinemann, the publisher, is often said to have been based on Rottingdean mill; a glance at the real thing shows some sort of passing resemblance – they both have sails – but not enough to be arresting.¹⁴





Wooden grave-marker of Angela Thirkell and her daughter Mary, at St Margaret's, Rottingdean, made early 1960s (public domain image)

Enid Bagnold, photographer and date unknown (? about 1910-20)



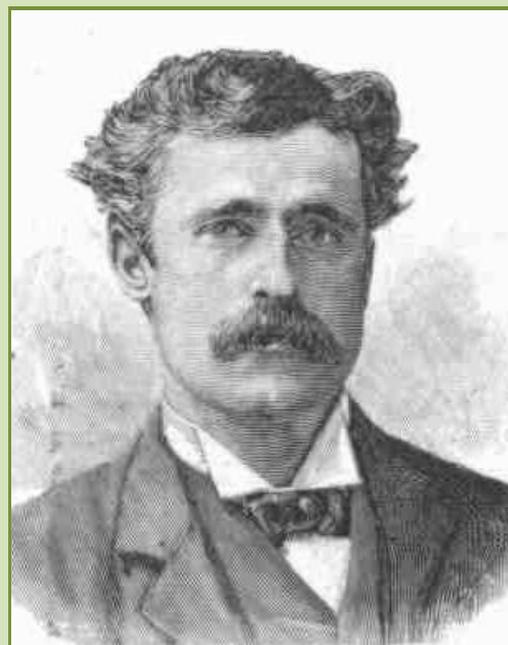
Dr Alfred Noyes, photographer and date unknown (? about 1920)



E. H. New's pen-and-ink frontispiece for William Watson's collected poems, 1898 (believed to be out of copyright)

Rottingdean might have you believe that its true cultural glory lasted from about 1880 to 1902, but you could argue that the place was more strongly illuminated by a larger crowd of such slightly lesser lights as these from about 1910-1940. One had threatened for a while to be the biggest light of all. Sir William Watson (1858-1935) had been a serious contender for the title of Poet Laureate, which eventually became vacant in 1913. But his work had fallen from favour by Edwardian times, in part because of his unwelcomely outspoken views on foreign affairs, and from about 1909-19 he lived in a small house, 17 West Street (which in the 1980s bore the label "Poet's House"), apparently on the charity of his friends, before poverty forced him out to the social wilderness of the newly-developing Gladys Avenue, Peacehaven.¹⁵

Sir William Watson, engraving, artist and date unknown



Space should be found to register the short stay of Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) in 1910. In April she rented a room in the High Street over Tickner's the grocer's, and then took an unidentified cottage, for her recovery from a clutch of much speculated-over medical problems, using her painful leisure to write several poems, including *Sea*, *The sea child* and *The opal dream cave*. In a sense Rottingdean made her who she was, because she had been Kathleen Bowden on her arrival.

We might just accept into this collection of cultural icons in the Deans Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1853-1917), who resided at Hillside from about 1893, probably renting. Best known as an actor and theatre manager, he also lectured and wrote on a range of subjects.¹⁶ Duff Cooper (1890-1954), politician, diplomat, historian and biographer – these grandees could afford so many bows to have strings to – stayed there in 1913 at the time when he was pursuing his future wife Lady Diana Manners, best known for her autobiography, who was then a guest of Sir William Nicholson's at The Grange.¹⁷ But we should not spend too much time on relatively minor figures, however glamorous, who were just passing through.

George Robey, "The Prime Minister of Mirth", promotional photograph, photographer and date unknown



Separated by a considerable gulf of cultural pretension from these names, leading figures in the popular arts came to the area between the wars. The Brighton-born comedian Max Miller (T. H. Sargent; 1894-1963) briefly owned Woodingdean Farm (which he renamed Woodland Grange),¹⁸ and Saltdean became the home of the entertainers Sir George Robey (1869-1954), Will Fyffe (1885-1947), and G. H. Elliott (1882-1962) "The Chocolate Coloured Coon", who named his house Silvery Moon after his most famous song, and who is buried in the same earth of St Margaret's as so many of the intellectual aristocrats. Before them, the songwriter Felix Powell, best known for the marching tune of the wartime favourite *Pack up your troubles in your*

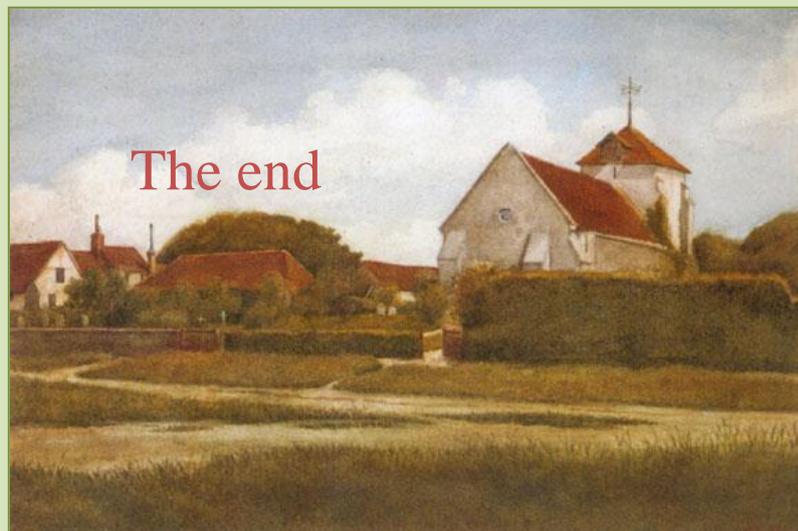
old kitbag, had settled a short distance away in Peacehaven, where he shot himself in 1942.¹⁹ In a different category of distinction altogether was Bob Copper (1915-2004), born into working-class Rottingdean, the only true Rottingdeaner among these immigrant glitterati and birds of passage, the descendant and progenitor of a long line of singers specializing in unaccompanied English folk-songs, and a prizewinning autobiographical writer, whose mother was born to domestic service within shouting distance of Burne-Jones's grand house in Fulham.²⁰



*G. H. Elliott,
"The Chocolate Coloured Coon",
promotional postcard
by Protheroe of Bristol, about 1910*

Finally, there must be a word for Godfrey Winn (1908-1971), who lived at Mill House, Falmer, four miles inland from Rottingdean, from about 1960 till his death. He was a prolific novelist, biographer and *Daily Mirror* journalist, some of whose works embodied his wartime experiences in the Royal Navy, and whose talents made him, allegedly, the highest-earning writer in Britain in the 1950s.²¹ Winn was also the voice of the BBC Home Service's *Housewives' choice*. This was a delicious irony – widely known in press circles as Winifred God, he was convivially gay.

These are only the dead. Talented authors and artists still live in Brighton's eastern villages. Perhaps a future writer will reward them with a sequel to these pages.



Notes

¹ The Prince Regent's first visit to Brighton had been in 1783; the Duke of Gloucester had been the first royal visitor in 1765. For the mention of lodging-houses, see Thurston Ford, letter in *The Gentleman's Magazine* 71 (1801), pp. 1082-3 [on p. 1082].

² Heater, Derek (1993) *The remarkable history of Rottingdean*. Brighton: Dyke Publications, p. 33.

³ *Pall Mall Gazette* 3176, Friday 23 April, 1875. There seems to have been an attempted defence that the skeletons were her artist's models.

⁴ This correspondence is not widely known in Rottingdean or quoted in the many books about the place, so here is the full exchange:

"I took such an amount of air and exercise yesterday as would have DONE FOR most nine-teenth century *females!* Started at eight, by the boat, with a good tide and was at the station a quarter before nine. Was quite well situated in my open carriage and reached Brighton without the least fatigue. *Bathed* the first thing; and then walked along the shore to a little Inn I had been told of by Neuberg and Ballantyne; as a charming quiet place "for *even Mr Carlyle*" to stop at; found it, of course, noisy dirty not to be even *dined* at by *Mrs Carlyle*—and walked on, still further along the cliffs, to a village I had SEEN ON THE MAP, and was sure must be very retired. The name of it is Rottingdean. It is 4 miles *at least* from the Brighton Station. I *walked* there and back again!! and in the last two miles along the cliffs I met just ONE man! in a white smock! Thus you perceive the traveller expences to one of the quietest sea villages in England is just per boat & third class train 3/10d!. a convenient locality for one's cottage at all rates. The place itself is an *old sleepy* looking little village close on the sea, with simple poor inhabitants. not a trace of a Lady or gentleman bathe[r] to be seen!— In fact except at the Inn there were no lodgings visible. I asked the maid at the Inn, "was it always as quiet as this?"— "*always,*" she said, in a half whisper, with a half sigh,— "a-most *too* quiet!"— Near the Inn, and so near the sea you could throw a stone into it, are three houses in a row—the center one old—quaint, and empty—small rooms but enough of them—and capable of being made very livable in at small cost—and there are *two* "decent women" I *saw*, who might either of them be trusted to keep it— But I should fill sheets with details without giving you a right impression—you must just go and *look*. I returned to Brighton again—after having dined at the Rottingdean Inn on two fresh eggs a plateful of homebaked bread and

butter, and a pint bottle of *Guinness* (chaarge 1/6d)—I walked miles up and down Brighton to find the Agent, for that cottage—did finally get him by miracle—name

and street being both different from what I set out to seek—and almost committed myself to take the cottage for a year at 12£ (no taxes or rates whatever) or to take it for 3 months at six pounds— However I took fright about *your* not liking it,—and the expences of furnishing &c &c—on the road up—and wrote him a note from Alsops shop that he might not refuse any other offer and hold me engaged till you had seen and approved of it. If Tait shared *this* cottage and went halves in the furnishings it would cost very little indeed—My only objection to it this morning, is that one might not be able to get it *another year* and then that would be done with the furniture? But oh what a beautiful sea! blue as the Firth of Forth it was last night!—I lay on the cliffs in the stillness, and looked at the “beautiful Nature” for an hour and more, which was such a *doing* of the picturesque as I have not been up to for years. The most curious thing is the sudden solitude beggining *without gradation* just where Kemptown ends— It is as if the Brighton people were all *enchanted* not to pass beyond their peir—” (Jane Welsh Carlyle to Thomas Carlyle, 14 August 1855).

►► “He knows Rottingdean, he says; a village correctly defined by you as clean and “sleepy”: I know not what to think of the Cottage; but mean, with due obedience, to go at least and look at it; you and the judicious Tait having all the arrangements estimated and prefigured ready for a Yes or No.—” (Thomas Carlyle to Jane Welsh Carlyle, 15 August 1855).

►► “A poor old vacant hut at Rottingdean, which was to be furnished, to be sure! Dear soul, what trouble she took, what hopes she had, about that! *Sunt lachrymae rerum* [There are things for tears].” (Thomas Carlyle, in *Letters and memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*; the questionable translation of the controversial Latin is Carlyle’s). All three quotations from **The Carlyle letters online**, vol. 30, available at carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/content/vol30/issue1/.

⁵ In the dedication of *Ovingdean Grange*, Ainsworth described himself as “One of [Stead’s] Flock” – he attended Ovingdean church from his residence in Arundel Terrace, Brighton. See also S. M. Ellis (1911) *William Harrison Ainsworth and his friends*. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, vol. 2, p. 231. The reference to Ainsworth’s stay with Miss Beard is in L. F. Salzman, ed. (1940) *Victoria history of the county of Sussex*, vol. 7, “Rottingdean”, citing “Mrs Stanley Baldwin” in *Sussex Notes and Queries* 5, p. 72, meaning Lucy Baldwin and Arthur Ridsdale (1934) *Annals of old Rottingdean. Sussex Notes and Queries* 5.3, pp. 71-74.

⁶ The census data can be accessed online at www.ukcensusonline.com/. The wealthy Beards had accumulated wide-spreading interests beyond the immediate Rottingdean area; for example, “[i]n 1829 Mary Ann Beard of Preston Place, his [John Beard’s] widow, released her right of dower and widows bench to Stenning Beard of Rottingdean, gent” (East Sussex Record Office, MS. BRD/1/12/6).

⁷ See “Charles Eamer Kempe web page” (1999), online at homepage.ntlworld.com/peter.fairweather/docs/Kempe_mainpage.htm.

⁸ Reid, [Sir Thomas] Wemyss (1902), *William Black, novelist: a biography*. London: Harper and Brothers, p. 347.

⁹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York put on a centennial retrospective exhibition in 1998 and published a catalogue of considerable size. The *New York Observer*'s critic Hilton Kramer was not impressed: “What remains to be explained . . . is why we should now be treated to such an exhaustive survey of such a negligible and often ludicrous career” (28 June 1998). I await Hilton Kramer's centennial retrospective with interest.

¹⁰ Smith, Michael (1989) *Rudyard Kipling: the Rottingdean years*. Brighton: Brownleaf; Smith, Michael (2003) *Kipling's Sussex*, chapter 2, online at www.kipling.org.uk/rg_sussex2.htm; and facts given in many other places.

¹¹ Heater, *Remarkable history*, p. 68, quoting C. Lewis Hind; Smith, *Kipling's Sussex*, chapter 2, online at www.kipling.org.uk/rg_sussex2.htm; and facts given in many other places.

¹² On the character of Philip Burne-Jones, see S. M. Moens, assisted by Henry Blyth (1953) *Rottingdean: the story of a village*. Privately published, revised, “Coronation”, edition, pp. 96-97.

¹³ See the final stanza: “Ah, sweet Franciscan of the May,/ Dear chaplain of the fairy queen,/ You sent a singing heart away/ That day, from Ovingdean.” On Noyes, see Moens, *Rottingdean*, p. 130.

¹⁴ This claim was attributed to Enid Bagnold by Michael Smith (1994) *The Grange: a brief history of a house and its residents*. Rottingdean: Rottingdean Preservation Society, p. 6. It was comprehensively demolished by John G. Davies in unpublished work (1989) available at Sussex Archaeological Society headquarters, Barbican House, Lewes: “A historical gazetteer of Ovingdean parish”, Ovingdean History Occasional Paper 11.

¹⁵ Heater, *Remarkable history*, pp. 76-78; Beckett, Arthur (1935) The oldest English poet. *Sussex County Magazine* 9, p. 530.

¹⁶ Mainly about the theatre and the creative imagination; for example “The imaginative faculty”, a lecture delivered at the Royal Institution, 26 May 1893.

¹⁷ Bagnold, Enid (1969) *Autobiography (from 1889)*. London: Heinemann.
Paperback edition London: Century (1985), p. 163.

¹⁸ For this and other assertions about local house-names, see Richard Coates (2010) *A place-name history of Rottingdean and Ovingdean in Sussex*, [etc.]. Nottingham: English Place-Name Society.

¹⁹ Wilson, Snoo (2006) Text in programme of *Pack up your troubles*, National Theatre, formerly available online at www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=18283.

²⁰ Copper, Bob (1976) *Early to rise: a Sussex boyhood*. London: Heinemann, p. 84.

²¹ Those talents are described as “hideously sentimental” in George Melly’s autobiography *Slowing down* (London: Viking, 2005), chapter 11.

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Contact the author: richardc.yb@gmail.com.

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One of Burne-Jones’s lesser-known works: *Scene for Tannhauser – at Beyreuth*, sketch on writing-paper embossed with “Rottingdean, Sussex”, sometimes referred to as *The Rottingdean Venus*, sold at Bonham’s in 2008.