

Who was George Eliot?

George Eliot was one of the richest women in Britain during the nineteenth century thanks to her fame as a novelist. But by that time she knew she could never go home to the setting for many of her books: North Warwickshire and Nuneaton. Eliot challenges everything we think we know about Victorian women. She lived a passionate life outside conventional marriage and was shunned by her family and community. Her ambition and intelligence opened a world to her: from school, to the library of Arbury Hall, to the radical freethinkers of Coventry, to editing one of the leading periodicals of her day. Born Mary Ann Evans at South Farm, Arbury in November 1819, she took the pen name George Eliot for her first fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, in 1857. *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda* gained Eliot a huge following and reshaped what people thought novels could and should do. They show us a picture of provincial English life that was disappearing even as Eliot wrote about it. Her writing helps readers understand what it is to live through change and makes us sympathize with those forced out of their communities as a result. Eliot's fiction gives a sense of place in a world that is always in motion.

1



Griff (Beefeater / Premier Inn)

The Evans family moved to Griff House in 1820 when Mary Ann was a few months old. The house was the base for Robert Evans's business managing land around Warwickshire. Eliot took over managing the household at 18 until she moved with her father to Coventry in 1841. Eliot's brother Isaac was still living at Griff when visitors started to make the pilgrimage there after Eliot's death in 1880. 'Dear old Griff', Eliot wrote in 1874, remembering a place to which she felt she could never return. The George Eliot Fellowship is raising funds to convert derelict outbuildings at Griff into a Visitor Centre.

2



Quarry & Pit

George Eliot country is always in a state of upheaval. Wherever you look there are quarries, pits, deeps: sources of riches for the Newdigates of Arbury Hall; sites of hard labour that reshaped men's bodies so that they 'walked queerly with knees bent outward from squatting in the mine'; places of darkness to swallow up your secrets like the deserted stone-pit in *Silas Marner*. Griff Quarry continues that tradition. Robert Evans redeveloped Gipsy Lane for better road transport from Griff colliery to Leicester. The giant sheds of Bermuda industrial estate sit on top of the scars of those mines; the Arbury Estate is proposing a new distribution park at the Faultlands next to the canal. All thanks to Nuneaton's place at the centre of road and rail networks: middle England. Everything changes; everything stays the same.

3



Canal

Before the railways, before reliable road transport, there were canals. Up at Arbury, Sir Richard and Sir Roger Newdigate were early enthusiasts, carving channels

for coal transport throughout the 1700s. In Middlemarch, Timothy Cooper remembers the promises made about canals to dismiss the new railway: 'it's been all aloike to the poor mon. What's the canells been t' him? They'n brought him neyther me-at nor be-acon, nor wage to lay by ... An' so it'll be wi' railroads. They'll on'y leave the poor mon furdur behind.' The Griff arm of the Coventry Canal opened in 1787. It ran to the colliery and remained open until 1961. Our walk takes us along its route as it branches off towards Arbury, through Griff Hollows. Listen to Eliot in the concrete shell of these Red Deeps:

*The wide-arched bridge, the scented elder-flowers,
The wondrous watery rings that died too soon,
The echoes of the quarry, the still hours
With white robe sweeping-on the shadeless noon,
Were but my growing self, are part of me,
My present Past, my root of piety.
(Brother and Sister Sonnets)*

4



Arbury Estate

The Arbury Estate brought the Evans family to Warwickshire. Remodelled in the fashionable gothic style by Sir Roger in the 1700s, Arbury Hall passed through a tangled line after he died in 1806. Francis Parker Newdigate of Kirk Hallam in Derbyshire inherited a life interest in Arbury and brought his agent, Robert Evans, down with him. Evans fell out with Francis Parker but continued to work for his son at Astley Castle, as well as other estates. When Arbury passed to the young Sir Charles Newdigate Newdegate in 1835, his mother Lady Maria interviewed Evans soon after they arrived and her diary records reinstating him. Lady Maria, aunt of feminist Jessie Boucherett, encouraged Eliot to use the library at Arbury. Arbury is in the private ownership of Viscount Daventry, descendent of the Newdigate family. It is open to visitors four weekends a year. Our route is the only public right of way through the estate. Don't be like Eliot's Felix Holt and face the penalties of going off-road.