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Church

In Eliot's stories clergymen shape their local communities and are the subject of local gossip and power wrangles. Church is where people come together – but also the cause of division in provincial towns rocked by sectarianism. St Paul's Church, Stockingford is just up from the gates to Arbury Park. This former industrial area is a sudden contrast after the country estate, one of the quick transitions Eliot writes about at the opening to Felix Holt. Eliot's controversial story 'Janet's Repentance' was so close to the life of Rev. John Edward Jones of Stockingford that his brother wrote and complained when the story came out. All Saints, Chilvers Coton is the setting for 'Amos Barton' and is where George Eliot was baptised and Robert Evans buried. Astley church is described in detail in 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story'. There is a memorial to Harriet Poynton, Robert Evans's first wife, a 'faithful servant' to the Parker Newdigates, in the church; Eliot's parent married here in 1813.

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Castle

Astley Castle – rebuilt and managed by The Landmark Trust – can be reached by walking down Astley road, or by a short drive from Griff. Eliot's mother was from Astley and relatives farmed near the Castle. Astley Book Farm nearby is a booklover's heaven with excellent cake. Our walk also passes the site of Sudeley Castle at Griff. By Eliot's time only the moat remained, remembered in her Brother and Sister sonnets and noted by early pilgrims to her birthplace. Now scraped away by open-cast mining and construction, imagine the moat lying beneath the roundabout at Griff, running under MacDonalds and the Middlemarch Carvery. Eliot argued that in England – a small country always being remade by industry and transport infrastructure – we needed an 'effort of memory and reflection' to feel connected to our past. Remembering Sudeley Castle whilst sitting in McDonalds seems a fitting tribute to Eliot.

George Eliot Country

Eliot started writing fiction in the 1850s, when the census revealed for the first time that more people were living in towns than the countryside. Her depiction of a landscape of 'tree-studded hedgerows', brown canals, 'high banks where the ash trees grew', red earth, and farmsteads appealed to a new, urban readership. Many of the characteristics she writes about are now identified in the official 'Warwickshire Landscape Guidelines' used in heritage and planning processes in the county. But Eliot's books remind readers that this is only one aspect of a rapidly changing landscape, cut up for coal, canals, and rail in her lifetime as it is for giant distribution parks, bypasses, new housing in our own. Our walk tries to reconnect with those marks human labour has made on this landscape over the last 200 years or more. We are crossing unofficial countryside, scruffy but well-used public places on the edge of town that tell a history of industry and hard-earned leisure, as well as the protected rural landscape of Arbury Hall.

Learn More:

Our blog:

georgeeliotprovincialism.home.blog

The George Eliot Fellowship:

www.georgeeliot.org

Visit Nuneaton Museum in Riversley Park for displays about Eliot

Discover Astley Castle with The Landmark Trust

www.landmarktrust.org.uk

See Maria Newdegate's Diaries at Warwick County Record Office

Warwickshire Landscape Guidelines: <https://apps.warwickshire.gov.uk/api/documents/WCCC-688-141>

For Sudeley Castle:

www.weddingtoncastle.co.uk/sudeley-castle.html



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The Unofficial George Eliot Countryside

