

# AGATHA CHRISTIE IN DEVON IN FACT AND FICTION

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It is possible to visit the birth places of William Shakespeare, Edward Elgar and the Brontë Sisters but not that of Agatha Christie.

On 10 October 1960, The Herald Express reported a planning application to build two blocks of flats on Barton Road, Torquay. Their construction involved the demolition of two large Victorian villas, Heathcourt (formerly Sorel) and Ashfield. Despite objections, the application succeeded and Ashfield, the birthplace of Agatha Christie, was lost for ever.

This was one of the worst planning decisions ever made, not only depriving the nation of the birthplace of 'The Queen of Crime', perhaps the greatest crime novelist of all time, but also the town of Torquay of potentially its greatest tourist attraction and a substantial income from visitors.

Ashfield was one of many large villas constructed for the privileged classes when Torquay was one of the most exclusive resorts in England. This map shows the villas of the Warberries and Lincombes, many of which survive divided into apartments, as care homes or guest houses and a few as single residences.

The Barton Road area was equally favoured with fine villas including Ashfield and the houses of other famous people nearby including Eltham, the home of author Eden Phillpotts and The Knoll where explorer Ernest Shackleton stayed with his brother before sailing for the Antarctic in 1907.

Today it is an area of cramped suburban housing, lacking the extensive views over open countryside to the north and Torbay to the south. It is, however, handy for the Mount Stuart Hospital. Opposite the hospital is the former rear entrance to Ashfield. If the curious wish to commune with Agatha then along the Barton Road boundary they will find a blue plaque. Take a camera and a very large slice of imagination combined with Poirot-like detection skills to find the few remaining sections of Ashfield's wall.

Agatha's mother Clarissa 'Clara' Boehmer, was born in Dublin in 1854 to British Army officer Frederick Boehmer and his wife Mary Ann Boehmer née West. Boehmer died in 1863, leaving his widow to raise Clara and her brothers on a meagre income. Two weeks after Boehmer's death, Mary's sister Margaret West married a widowed American merchant Nathaniel Miller. To assist Mary financially, they agreed to foster nine-year-old Clara. Margaret and Nathaniel had no children together, but Nathaniel had a 17-year-old son, Frederick 'Fred' Miller, from his previous marriage. Fred and Clara were married in London in 1878. Their first child, Margaret 'Madge' Frary was born in Torquay in 1879, their second, Louis 'Monty' Montant in 1880.

In 1881 when Fred was in America, he left Clara to find a temporary house to rent in Torquay, then a fashionable winter resort that appealed to Fred. But Clara was a bit more ambitious and using £2000 that Nathaniel left her in his will, she did not find a house to rent but bought Ashfield outright on a long lease. Fred was taken by surprise, expecting to return eventually to live in America. But being a man of independent means, Fred was quite happy with the

arrangement and settled into the life of a bon viveur amidst Torquay society spending much of his days conversing and playing whist at the Royal Torbay Yacht Club or in the season, walking to Torquay Cricket Club, then at Barton, of which he was President.

Agatha May Clarissa Miller was born at Ashfield on 15 September 1890 and was christened on 20 November at All Saints Church, Torre, a recently consecrated church that had been built with significant financial support from Fred Miller.

The young Agatha spent most of her time at Ashfield where she enjoyed a privileged and happy childhood. In her early years money was not an issue and the family was looked after by four or five servants. In her autobiography Agatha remarked on servants that:

*...it was not a case of only the rich having them; the only difference was that the rich had more.*

She often played alone as her siblings were 10 years older but also listened avidly to stories told by 'Nursie' and her mother and using her highly creative imagination conjured up playmates in the two-acre Ashfield garden, weaving complex adventures around them. At five she was given her own dog, a Yorkie her father named George Washington but she called Tony. She also had many toys and especially loved her two slightly sinister looking dolls called Phoebe and Rosalind. There was also a rather worn American Rocking Horse that lived in the greenhouse and a hoop which she drove round the garden for hours on imaginary railway lines calling at stations located at different flower beds. For indoor amusement Agatha played the piano and mandolin and there was a dolls' house which she furnished from her substantial pocket money and was constantly rearranging, a pastime she developed into adulthood with real houses.

Agatha received a home education and despite her mother insisting that she should not learn to read until she was eight. Through her own efforts she could do so by four and became a voracious reader, initially satisfying her penchant for fairies and then progressing to more serious works. She was certainly in a literary milieu with Eden Phillpotts living nearby and Henry James and Rudyard Kipling took tea at Ashfield. At ten she produced her first piece of writing, a poem called *The Cow Slip*.

*There was once a pretty cowslip  
And a pretty flower too.  
But yet she cried and fretted all  
For a robe of blue.  
Now, a merry little fairy,  
Who loved a trick to play,  
Just changed into a nightshade,  
That flower without delay.  
The silly little nightshade  
Thought her life a dream of bliss,  
Yet she wondered why the butterfly  
Came not to give his kiss.*

After Fred died in 1901 Agatha and her mother continued to live at Ashfield. Agatha went part-time to Miss Guyer's Girls' School in Torquay from 1902-05 but did not take to the formality and went to Paris to spend time at finishing schools. Though formal education did not attract her, she enjoyed many other pursuits including dancing, roller-skating and amateur theatricals. She often collected her pony from stables in Torre and rode to Cockington Court, owned by the wealthy Mallock family, in order to take part in dramatic

productions including an Arabian fantasy called *The Bluebeard of Unhappiness*. Agatha was an enthusiastic swimmer and a skilled surfer credited as the first woman to surf standing. She often visited Beacon Cove, Meadfoot Beach and Anstey's Cove. Beacon Cove, below the Assembly Rooms, was a female only bathing beach complete with bathing machines. Meadfoot is a little further east and Anstey's Cove near Babbacombe. It was at a midnight party at Anstey's Cove that Agatha met Amyas Boston, a dashing pilot who went on to become an Air Vice-Marshal. He was one of her many romantic partners and typical of the high-flying young men who attracted her.

Agatha and her mother visited Cairo in the winter of 1907-08 and had her 'coming-out'. It was a time when she began to overcome her natural shyness and took full advantage of the parties and dances that were organised by the ex-patriot community. After the excitement of Cairo she took a little while to settle back into life at Ashfield and her mother encouraged her to write some short stories, the first of which was *The House of Beauty*. Others followed and then a novel, *Snow Upon the Desert* drawing on her Cairo experiences. Sadly, all were rejected by publishers. At that point, neighbour Eden Phillpotts offered her advice and encouraged her to continue her efforts, in due course proposing a publisher who would accept her work.

In her late teens and early twenties Agatha lived a lively social life and had many romantic liaisons with eligible young men who were usually in the services. There was Bolton Fletcher, a major in the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers and Wilfred Pirie a naval sub-lieutenant. Both expressed ardent love for Agatha but it was not requited. Bolton received a blunt refusal to his proposal of marriage and Wilfred after disappearing on a treasure-hunting expedition to South America returned to find a letter from Agatha expressing the same sentiment. Then in 1910 came Reggie Lucy, the brother of Blanche, Marguerite and Muriel Lucy who lived in Hesketh Crescent and were great friends of Agatha, particularly enjoying roller-skating outings on the Princess Pier. Reggie tried to teach Agatha to play golf without much success, but one day on Torquay Golf Course proposed to her and she accepted. Despite his enthusiasm, Reggie was very easy-going about the idea of marriage and suggested that Agatha should take her time and that she might prefer to marry someone else and that they should wait until he returned from his imminent two-year posting to Hong-Kong. So they agreed to an informal engagement known then as 'an understanding'.

So Reggie departed and Agatha continued her social whirl, visiting country houses in South Devon for parties, dances, hunting and riding. On 12 October 1912 she went to a dance given by Lord and Lady Clifford at Ugbrooke House, north of Newton Abbot. It was held in what is now the dining room, and there she was introduced to a Royal Artillery Officer, Archibald 'Archie' Christie.

*Christie came my way quite soon in the dance. He was a tall, fair young man, with crisp curly hair, a rather interesting nose, turned up not down, and a great air of careless confidence about him. He was introduced to me, asked for a couple of dances, and said that his friend Griffiths had told him to look out for me. We got on very well; he danced splendidly and I danced several more times with him. I enjoyed the evening thoroughly.*

Archie visited Ashfield several times and they went to dances and concerts together including on 4 January 1913, a Wagner concert in the recently opened Torquay Pavilion. Afterwards Archie proposed to Agatha at Ashfield. He wanted to marry as soon as possible as he had been seconded to the Royal Flying Corps and was due to leave for training. But Agatha insisted on waiting, though she did write to Reggie calling off their engagement, which Reggie took very well. On the outbreak of World War One Archie was sent to France

as a pilot but managed to take some leave at the end of the year. He arrived in London, and with Agatha travelled to Bristol where they married on Christmas Eve, spending their honeymoon night in the Grand Hotel, Torquay which had been rebuilt in 1908. Two days after the wedding Archie was re-called to the front.

Agatha remained in Torquay and worked for the VAD, the Voluntary Aid Detachment, in the Town Hall Red Cross Hospital as an unpaid volunteer nurse and from 1916 in the dispensary at the Torquay Hospital in Union Street, subsequently qualifying as an Apothecary's Assistant, a post in which she acquired a comprehensive knowledge of poisons. Part of Agatha's training was with a local pharmacist she referred to as 'Mr P'. She drew on her time with this somewhat sinister gentleman when writing *The Pale Horse* (1961). Agatha's fascination with poisons stayed with her throughout her writing career and poisoning features in half her works, particularly with cyanide, arsenic and strychnine, the latter being her poison-of-choice for her first detective novel, and her first novel to be published, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1921).

In 1912 Agatha's sister Madge, herself a skilful, and published writer, bet Agatha that she would never write a detective story a challenge that she finally took up in 1916 during her quieter times at the dispensary. Unable to focus sufficiently on her writing, Agatha took two weeks off work and booked herself into the Moorlands Hotel near Haytor on Dartmoor, a hotel she described as large and dreary. Sadly, the Moorlands Hotel burnt to the ground in 1970 and although rebuilt, the room she wrote in was lost for ever. She wrote every morning and strode across the moor she loved in the afternoons. In the story she based the character of Cynthia Murdoch, who works in the dispensary of a local hospital, on herself. The novel was also the first to feature Hercule Poirot based on the many Belgian refugees she met in Torquay during the war. It is possible that the specific model was Jacques Joseph Hamoir, a refugee Belgian gendarme whom she met at a soirée in 1915. It was held at The Daison, the largest mansion in Torquay, built near St Marychurch by William Potts-Chatto in 1850, demolished in the 1920s and replaced by a housing estate.

In 1921 Agatha gave birth to her only child, Rosalind Margaret Clarissa Christie, later Pritchard and Hicks, at Ashfield. She continued writing but spent more time away from Devon as Archie was working in London, they moved to a house in Sunningdale which they called *Styles*. The early twenties were good years for Agatha with her writing reaching new heights of success with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926).

But Agatha's life was about to change. After her mother Clara died in April 1926 she fell into a deep depression and spent long periods at Ashfield sorting through her mother's possessions. Archie found Agatha very distant during those days and sought consolation in playing golf at Sunningdale Golf course sometimes with Nancy Neele whom he knew through Surrey social circles. In August Archie announced he was in love with Nancy and wanted to marry her. He asked for a divorce and after a quarrel in December, Agatha in deep sorrow, despair and heartbreak disappeared for 10 days, turning up at the Hydro Hotel Harrogate, but that is another story. The divorce was finalised in October 1928 with Agatha retaining custody of her daughter. She also retained the name Christie for her writing career.

In the same year Agatha took the Orient Express to Istanbul and travelled on to Baghdad where she met Sir Leonard Woolley, the celebrated archaeologist of Ur, who invited her to return in 1930. On this visit she was introduced to Max Mallowan, also an archaeologist, who was 13 years her junior. They married in September 1930 and Agatha spent many seasons supporting Max on his excavations in the Middle East. In 1938 Agatha and Max bought Greenway on the River Dart as a summer residence, and the same year sold

Ashfield. From then until her death in 1976, Agatha often spent time at Greenway with Max, who outlived her by two years. The house became a retreat for her away from the bustle of London and the Home Counties, a replacement for the lost world of Ashfield. A great consolation for her – and us - was that she brought a considerable amount of furniture from Ashfield and such pieces can still be seen in the drawing room facing the garden. In 1959 Agatha and Max had transferred the house and estate to her daughter Rosalind. In 2000 it was passed to the National Trust and in 2004 Rosalind's son, Matthew Pritchard gave the contents, including an extensive collection of Agatha's personal possessions, to the Trust.

Though many of her novels reflected her travels with Max in the Middle East, she set many in Devon. Agatha turned to Dartmoor for inspiration for *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) set near the town of Chagford and its inn *The Three Crowns*, though she gives the town the name Exhampton which also has features based on Okehampton. Sittaford Tor is south-west of Chagford but there is no village, though her descriptions could fit the nearby hamlet of Lettaford and Sittaford House resembles Gidleigh Park. It is certainly a feature of the locations in Agatha's stories that although they are often recognisable, they do not always fit together in real geography!

Despite Agatha's special connection with the Grand Hotel, it was the Imperial Hotel that was her favourite. Built by Sir Lawrence Palk, a member of one of the great landowning families of Torquay, it opened in 1866. Designed to rival any hotel in Europe for exclusive luxury, it soon attracted the rich and famous including royalty – and Hercule Poirot who stayed there with his companion Hastings in *Peril at End House* (1932). Agatha set the story in St Loo, mischievously locating it in Cornwall, and calls the featured hotel, the Majestic. But it was definitely Torquay and the Imperial. To confuse matters further, David Suchet's television version was filmed in Salcombe. The intended murder victim lived at End House, a large villa inspired by Rock End which stood on the clifftop to the east of the Imperial. The villa has gone but its wall and watchtower remain on the cliff edge.

Agatha's other famous sleuth, Miss Marple, visits the hotel, still the Majestic but now in Danemouth, in *The Body in the Library* (1942) to investigate the death of Ruby Keene, a young dance hostess. Marple was also gracing the Imperial's terraces in *Sleeping Murder* (1976) though this time Torquay is called Dillmouth.

Agatha loved to travel as a child, with Archie and especially with Max. Above all she loved trains, frequently using the GWR line from Paddington to Torquay and beyond, especially after she and Max acquired Greenway, to Churston. This is a journey taken by Hercule Poirot in *The ABC Murders* (1936) when Churston station plays itself, and *Dead Man's Folly* (1956) in which Churston becomes Nassecombe. *The ABC Murders* also features Elberry Cove west of Brixham where Sir Carmichael Clarke is bludgeoned to death whilst taking an evening walk. When resident at Greenway Agatha often used to swim in Elberry Cove. Agatha would have been familiar with taking glimpses into the compartments of slowly passing trains, a device she used in *The 4.50 from Paddington* (1957) when Mrs Elspeth McGillicuddy witnesses a murder in a train on a parallel line whilst travelling to meet Miss Marple.

*Dead Man's Folly* is set mainly at Greenway – called Nasse House – and its extensive grounds, as well as featuring the nearby May Pool Youth Hostel referred to as Hoodown Park Hostel. A little further up river stands the Boathouse where Poirot and Ariadne Oliver discover the body of Marlene Tucker who had volunteered to play the victim in a murder mystery devised for a fête being held at the house. Up river again is the Battery where the body of Amyas, named after Agatha's former beau, is found murdered in *Five Little Pigs*

(1942) Dittisham also appears in *Dead Man's Folly* as Gitcham where, Mordell, the ferryman meets his end in the water after three pints in The Three Dogs – The Ferry Boat Inn. In *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958) Arthur Calgary, the novel's protagonist, arrives from Redquay – Torquay - at Greenway Quay, takes the Dittisham ferry and, interpreting the precise descriptions, makes his way up Manor Street and along The Level and Riverside Road to Viper's Point. This is the location of his family house Sunny Point, formerly Viper's Point, a name that was probably inspired by Viper's Quay on the Dart. Viper's Point is of course Gurrów Point.

Dartmouth also appeared in *Dead Man's Folly* under the guise of Helmouth but played a bigger rôle in the short story *The Regatta Mystery* (1943) which has as its centrepiece a dinner held in the bay window of the first floor of the Royal Castle Hotel, represented as the Royal George.

Salcombe too made an appearance in one of Agatha's novels as Salt Creek in *Towards Zero* (1944) with Kingsbridge as Saltington and East Portlemouth as Easter Head, whilst the Balmoral Hotel is probably the Marine Hotel.

Perhaps the most famous location in Devon represented in Agatha's detective stories is Burgh Island near Bigbury, with its famous art deco hotel built in 1929 by Archibald Nettlefold, a film production company owner. It soon became a favourite of politicians and celebrities in the 1930s including Noel Coward, Prince Edward and Mrs Simpson, Winston Churchill, and of course, Agatha. As Soldier Island it was the setting for *And Then There Were None* (1939) originally burdened with a very non-politically correct title, which is the sixth most successful novel of all time selling 100 million copies, even without Poirot. The original plot has eight guests and two house servants isolated on the island. One by one they are murdered – until there are none! The other Burgh Island inspired novel is *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) and this time it is called Smugglers' Island and features Poirot. The island's hotel becomes The Jolly Roger Hotel. The coves and beaches are prominent as well as the famous Mermaid Pool from where Poirot helps Arlena Marshall launch her float to paddle away to her deadly fate.

Agatha's last novel, although not the last published, was *Postern of Fate* (1973), featuring a less well-known pair of Agatha's detectives, Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, now retired to their home The Laurels in Hollowquay, thin disguises for Ashfield and Torquay.

*O! ma chère maison; mon nid, mon gîte  
Le passé l'habite...O! ma chère maison*

*(Oh! my dear home; my nest, my cottage  
The past lives in it...Oh! my dear home)*

These are the first words of Agatha Christie's autobiography. They refer, of course, to Ashfield. In a sense she never left it. She was always the little girl secure as she played in its magical garden. She continued to find security with her first husband Archie until the deeply traumatic events of 1926. Security came again with her second husband Max as she wrapped herself in his companionship and the wonders of Greenway and its paradise garden.

Agatha knew of the impending demolition of Ashfield and tried to stop it, but without success. A year and a half later she visited the site and wrote:

*There was nothing that could even stir a memory. They were the meanest, shoddiest little houses I had ever seen. None of the great trees remained. The ash-trees in the wood had gone, the remains of the big beech-tree, the Wellingtonia, the pines, the elms that bordered the kitchen garden, the dark ilex - I could not even determine in my mind where the house had stood. And then I saw the only clue - the defiant remains of what had once been a monkey puzzle, struggling to exist in a cluttered back yard. There was no scrap of garden anywhere. All was asphalt. No blade of grass showed green.*

*I said 'Brave monkey puzzle' to it, and turned away.*

*But I minded less after I had seen what had happened. Ashfield had existed once but its day was over. And because whatever has existed still does exist in eternity, Ashfield is still Ashfield. To think of it causes me no more pain.*

*Perhaps some child sucking a plastic toy and banging on a dustbin lid, may one day stare at another child, with pale yellow sausage curls and a solemn face. The solemn child will be standing in a green grass fairy ring by a monkey puzzle holding a hoop. She will stare at the plastic space ship that the first child is sucking, and the first child will stare at the hoop. She doesn't know what a hoop is. And she won't know that she's seen a ghost...*

*Goodbye, dear Ashfield.*

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