

# George Eliot Country

A self-guided tour



George Eliot Country  
Main Picture: Autumn at Astley  
Insert: Spring at Woodlands, near Bedworth

## Forthcoming events 2007

In 2007 we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of George Eliot's first novel 'Scenes of Clerical Life'. An exciting programme of events is planned. For details contact (024) 7637 6490.

## Contacts

Tourism Officer, NBBC (024) 7637 6490 or [tourism@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk](mailto:tourism@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk)  
Museum & Art Gallery, Nuneaton (024) 7635 0720 or [museum@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk](mailto:museum@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk)  
Nuneaton Library and Tourist Information Centre (024) 7638 4027 or [nuneatonlibrary@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:nuneatonlibrary@warwickshire.gov.uk)  
The Herbert (Arts, Media and Museum) (024) 7683 2386 or [info@theherbert.org](mailto:info@theherbert.org)

The George Eliot Fellowship exists to honour George Eliot and to encourage interest in her life and works. It has 500 members worldwide and was founded in 1930. Details from The Secretary, 71 Stepping Stones Road, Coventry CV5 8JT or via [www.george-eliot-fellowship.com](http://www.george-eliot-fellowship.com)

**Nuneaton  
&  
Bedworth**  
United to Achieve



Designed by Graphic Design Team,  
Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council.  
Photography and text by John Burton.  
Thanks to The George Eliot Fellowship  
for information in this publication.  
All information correct at time of printing - March 2006.

**CV ONE**  
DESTINATION MANAGEMENT  
& PROMOTION

## George Eliot Country - A self-guided tour

This leaflet provides basic information for local residents, as well as visitors to the area, about George Eliot, who was born Mary Ann Evans in November 1819 at South Farm on the Arbury Estate.

In early 1820 the family moved to nearby Griff House, where Robert Evans continued to farm and act as respected agent to the Newdigate family at Arbury. Mary Ann lived at Griff until, on her father's retirement in 1841, they moved to Coventry. When Robert died in 1849 Mary Ann, whose intellect had sparked and expanded in Coventry, moved into the fringes of London's literary world. Ten years later, and by now living with George Henry Lewes, she was to conquer London's literary world with outstandingly successful novels written under the name of George Eliot.

Three generations of the Evans family made contributions to this part of Warwickshire. The leaflet briefly shows these contributions whilst concentrating largely on the links between Mary Ann's vivid imaginative interpretation of heard or remembered events and her fiction.

Local references feature most in her early works, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and to a lesser extent *Adam Bede*, while developments in Coventry are reflected in *Middlemarch*.

Overleaf shows the George Eliot locations in the centre of Nuneaton. Open the leaflet fully to show George Eliot locations further afield - in Arbury, Astley, Aitleborough, Bedworth, Bulkington, Chilvers Coton, Coventry and Griff.

The picture on this page shows Newdigate Square, in the centre of Nuneaton. The statue of George Eliot was made by John Letts, then of Astley, in 1986 to a commission by The George Eliot Fellowship, with support from Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council.

In 2007 we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of George Eliot's first novel '*Scenes of Clerical Life*'. An exciting programme of events is planned. For details contact (024) 7637 6490.

### The novels

1857	<i>Scenes of Clerical Life</i>
1859	<i>Adam Bede</i>
1860	<i>The Mill on the Floss</i>
1861	<i>Silas Marner</i>
1862-3	<i>Romola</i>
1866	<i>Felix Holt, the Radical</i>
1871-2	<i>Middlemarch</i>
1876	<i>Daniel Deronda</i>

All are available as hard or paperback



### 1 Market Place

The Patty Townsend watercolour of Milby market day shows Nuneaton as it would have appeared in the 1830s. Beyond it was Abbey Street with its densely populated and unhealthy courts where families tried to make a living from ribbon weaving. The building shown on the right is where the town clock now stands, shown in the photograph from the west side of the Market Place.



### 2 Museum & Art Gallery

Houses an internationally important collection of George Eliot material, some of which is displayed in a reconstructed London drawing room. It includes her grand piano, which is sometimes played for the public. The museum holds Eliot's writing desk, a dress and other clothes, as well as many pictures, photographs, documents and artefacts.

Opening times:

Tuesday - Saturday 10.30 - 4.30;  
 (plus Bank Holiday Mondays 10.30 - 4.30)  
 Sunday 2.00 - 4.30

There is a tea room attached to the museum, adjacent to the river. Monday - Saturday 10.30 - 4.30; Sunday 2.00 - 4.30.

Further information: Tel. (024) 7635 0720

*George Eliot*



George Eliot Statue

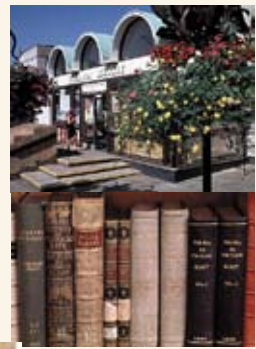
### 4 Bridge Street

The street was much narrower in George Eliot's time, but the pub on the right, an old coaching house, was then called The Bull Hotel. In Janet's Repentance it is The Red Lion. Lawyer Dempster and his cronies gather there to plot their opposition to Rev. Tryan. The pub was re-named The George Eliot some twenty years ago.



### 5 Nuneaton Library and Tourist Information Centre

The Library's local studies section has the largest collection of George Eliot material available to the public anywhere in the country. Built up over many years it includes early editions of the novels and essays and a comprehensive collection of critical and academic works. The George Eliot Fellowship regularly donates relevant material. Opening times: Monday 8.30 - 7.00; Tuesday 10.00 - 6.00; Wednesday - Friday 8.30 - 6.00; Saturday 9.00 - 4.00; Sunday 10.00 - 2.00. For further information (024) 7638 4027.



### 6 Church Street

Stand outside the church and look towards the library. The road system has altered many features but the present Church Street was Orchard Street in Milby and many of the well-to-do families lived there, including Lawyer Dempster and his wife Janet, and Mrs Pettifer. The line of houses shown in the picture were opposite the present library. They were all bombed during the war, and their back gardens formed what is now the George Eliot Memorial Garden.



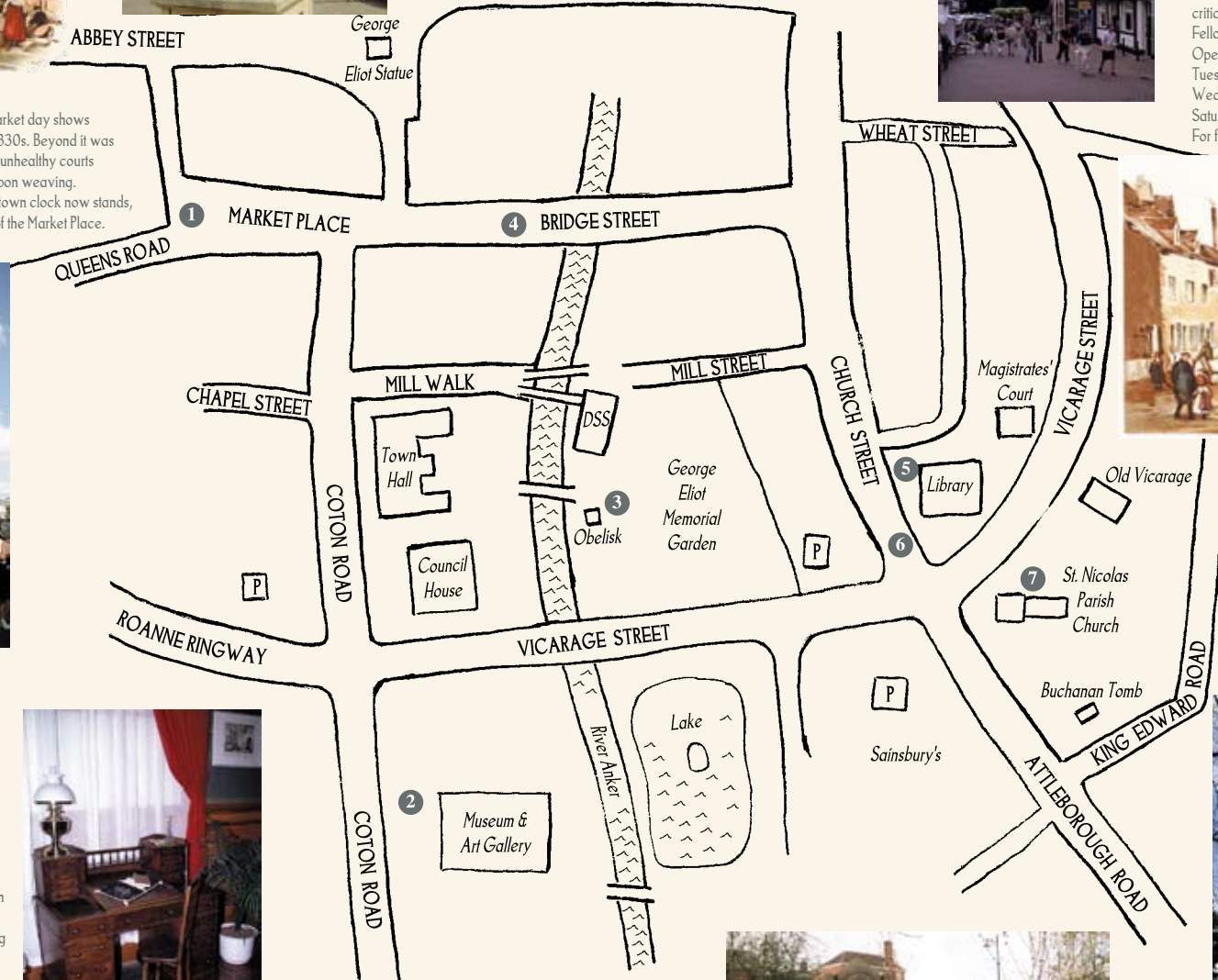
Turn half right and look down Vicarage Street. On the immediate right is the old grammar school. Beyond it is the vicarage, the scene in Milby of discussion and plotting over Rev. Edgar Tryan's evening lectures in the church. On the far side of the road, beyond the parish rooms was The Elms, the school which Mary Ann attended when she was eight. The building was demolished after the war and magistrates' courts built on the site. Picture of Orchard Street by Patty Townsend, from 'George Eliot - Her Early Home', 1893.

### 7 Parish Church of St Nicolas

In Janet's Repentance, one of the three stories in Scenes of Clerical Life Nuneaton is called Milby. The story details church and parish life in the early 19th century, with its rivalries, petty differences and religious disputes. The Rev. Hugh Hughes was curate for 52 years and headmaster of the grammar school for 40 years. Eliot calls him Mr Crewe. His wife was helped by Lawyer Dempster's wife, Janet. Dempster is based on the Nuneaton lawyer James Buchanan, whose family tomb is shown in the photograph, alongside King Edward Road.



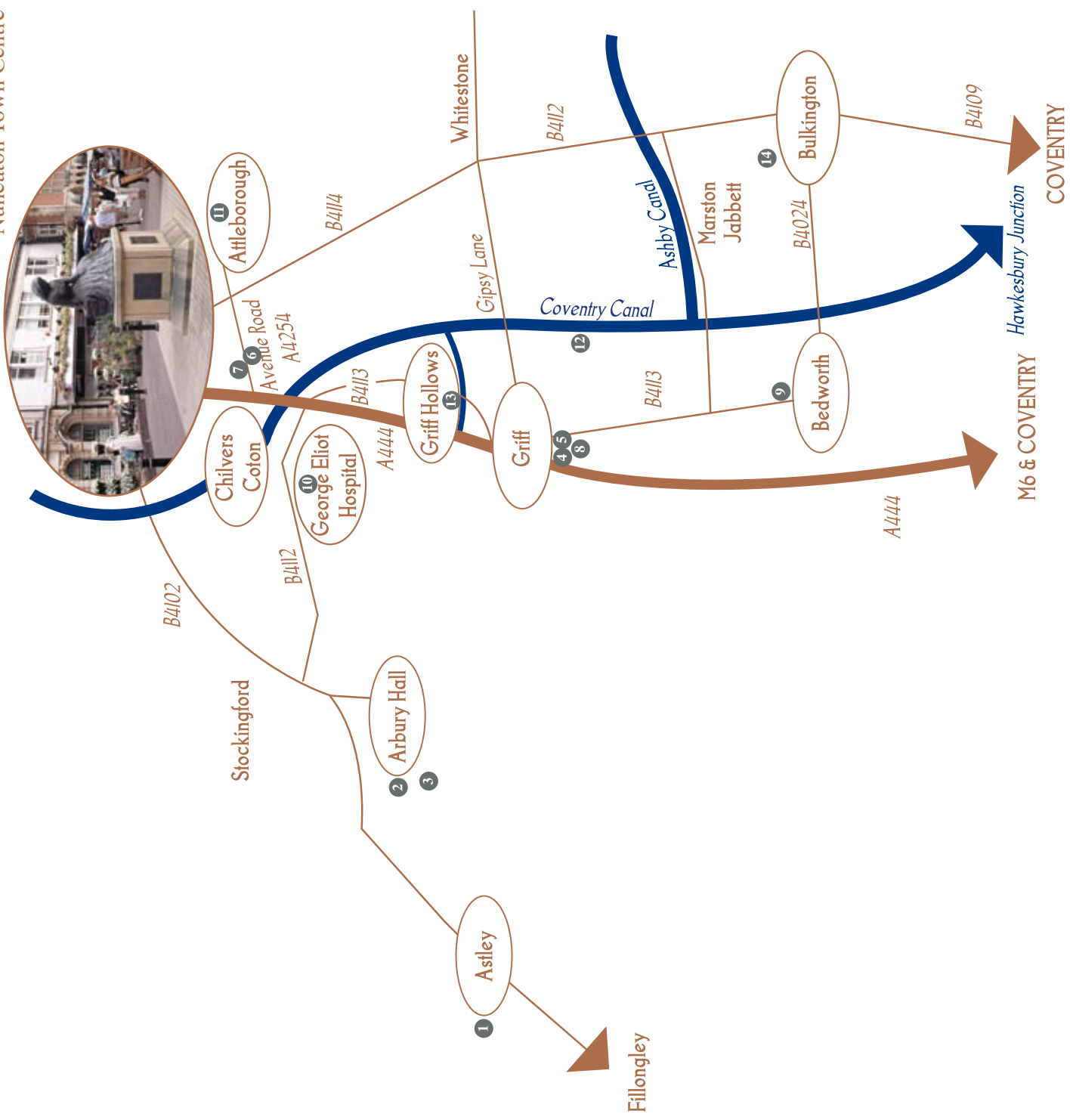
There are many other references in and around the church.



### 3 George Eliot Memorial Garden and Obelisk

The obelisk was originally in Arbury Park. It was moved here in 1952 when the George Eliot Memorial Garden was opened. Members of the Institute of Landscape Architects competed to design the garden, most of whose features have disappeared in the intervening years. In 2002 a new footbridge across the River Anker was opened to commemorate the Queen's Golden Jubilee and the obelisk again has a prominent position. The George Eliot Fellowship holds a wreath-laying ceremony here every June when groups with a George Eliot connection commemorate the life of the author.





## 1 Astley



The delightful hamlet of Astley carries many references to George Eliot, particularly Mr Gilfil's Love Story. The castle is her Knebley Abbey and was the home of the Oldinport (Newdigate) family. George Eliot's father was agent for Francis Parker Newdigate of Arbury.

Her parents were married at Astley Church in February, 1813. It was a second marriage for Robert. His wife was Christiana Pearson, daughter of an Astley farmer. Two other daughters were married there - Mrs Everard of Aitleborough Quarry and Mrs Johnson of Marston Hall, Bulkington. These two appear as Aunts Glegg and Pullet in *The Mill on the Floss*. Robert's first wife Harriet was buried at Astley. The castle, childhood home of Lady Jane Grey, is in a derelict state and is best seen from the church graveyard.



Originally the present church was the chancel of a much larger collegiate church. The spire collapsed in 1600 but the interior, which is visited on the George Eliot Country Tours is recognisable from Eliot's description:

'Mr Gilfil had a large heap of short sermons, rather yellow and worn at the edges, from which he took two every Sunday, securing perfect impartiality in the selection by taking them as they came, without reference to topics; and having preached one of these sermons at Shepperton (Chilvers Coton) in the morning, he mounted his horse and rode hastily with the other in his pocket to Knebley, where he

officiated in a wonderful little church, with a checkered pavement which had once rung to the iron tread of military monks, with coats of arms in clusters on the lofty roof, marble warriors and their wives without noses occupying a large proportion of the area, and the twelve apostles, with their heads very much on one side, holding didactic ribbons, painted in fresco on the walls'.

## 2 Arbury Hall

George Eliot used the history of Arbury and many of its features to create 'Cheverel Manor' in Mr Gilfil's Love Story, one of the three stories in 'Scenes of Clerical Life'.

Her Sir Christopher Cheverel is based on Sir Roger Newdigate who transformed the old Elizabethan house into the gothic mansion, the 'castellated house of grey-tinted stone' we know as Arbury today. George Eliot would have known of Sir Roger, and her father's work gave her access to Arbury where she witnessed as a girl the splendid interiors which appear thirty years later in the story of Mr Gilfil, itself based on that of Rev Bernard Ebdell, the vicar of Chilvers Coton who died when Mary Ann was nine. There are references to Sir Christopher Cheverel as 'a splendid old gentleman, as anyone may see who enters the saloon...where his full-length portrait, taken when he was fifty, hangs side by side with that of his wife', and to the lovely saloon which was 'in the same style of florid pointed gothic as the dining room, but more elaborate in its tracery, which was like petrified lacework'.

Outside we can see, largely unchanged, 'the great pool...where the open waterlilies lie...the large bow-window of the saloon, opening on to the gravel-sweep, and looking towards a long vista of undulating turf, bordered by tall trees'.

The saloon window can be seen in the photograph. The lake is to the left of the picture. Behind is the bridge, a successor to 'the pretty arched wooden bridge which formed the only entrance to the Mosslands for any but webbed feet'.

The George Eliot Country Tours include a full tour of Arbury. The Hall and Gardens are open to the public on Bank Holiday weekends only (Sundays and Mondays) from Easter to August Bank Holiday. Hall 2pm - 5pm. Gardens 1.30pm-6pm.

Further details from (024) 7638 2804.



## 3 South Farm



Robert Evans, farmer, surveyor and land agent to the Newdigate family at Arbury recorded in his diary that his daughter 'Mary Ann Evans was born at Arbury Farm, at five o'clock this morning', which was 22nd November, 1819.

Arbury Farm is now known as South Farm. It lies across the lake from Arbury Hall, secluded amongst the trees.

It is only possible to see South Farm on the George Eliot Country Tours which are organised twice a year by the Borough Council and The George Eliot Fellowship.

Details from the Tourism Officer on (024) 7637 6490 or on the NBBC website [www.nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk/visiting/eliotguidedtours.asp](http://www.nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk/visiting/eliotguidedtours.asp)

## 4 Robert Evans

Robert Evans accompanied Francis Parker as land agent when he moved from Kirk Hallam in Derbyshire to take over Arbury.

He was a strong man of firm principles, highly respected in the professional circles his skills gave him access to. He advised other estate holders and led a busy, active and interesting life.

He insisted that Mary Ann had a good education and he had a deep influence on her. Adam Bede's character is largely based on Robert Evans. (Portrait reproduced by kind permission of Nuneaton Museum & Art Gallery). He is buried at Chilvers Coton.



## 5 Isaac Evans



Mary Ann idolised her elder brother. *The Mill on the Floss* and *Brother and Sister Sonnets* describe their childhood beautifully. Isaac took over his father's duties in 1841 and remained at Griff until he died in 1890. Mary Ann was hurt by Isaac's 20 year refusal to communicate when she lived (unmarried) with George Henry Lewes. He acknowledged her wedding with John Cross in 1880 and there was a brief reconciliation before she died at the end of the year. Isaac Evans is buried at Chilvers Coton.

## 6 Chilvers Coton



The parish church in Avenue Road was largely destroyed in the war. The 'substantial stone tower' remains and 'its intelligent eye, the clock', though damaged was repaired to look as it did in 1813. Mary Ann and her family attended services here. Two baby brothers, her elder brother Isaac, and her parents are all buried at Chilvers Coton.

In *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton* she refers to Shepperton and there are numerous links between Coton and the novel. Under a yew tree close to the tower is the tomb of Emma Gwyther, the fictional Milly Barton. The novel relates how Milly's children 'made a circle round the grave while the coffin was being lowered'. Two of them, Fred and Sophy, 'had not learned to decipher that terrible handwriting of human destiny, illness and death'.

A few yards away is the Evans family tomb (far left) where Robert and Christiana Evans are buried with two tiny twins. Further to the south of the graveyard is the memorial to

Eliot's brother Isaac and his wife (left).



## 7 Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre

Across Avenue Road from the church is one of Nuneaton's oldest buildings, originally the free school, built in 1745 by Lady Newdigate, and now the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre, which opens on Tuesday mornings 10am till 12 noon or by prior arrangement phone (024) 7632 5822 for details.

Isaac Evans attended the school briefly and it is mentioned in *Amos Barton* when 'The schoolmistress opposite witnessed this departure (of the Countess) and lost no time telling it to the schoolmaster, who

again communicated the news to the landlord of The Jolly Colliers at the close of the morning school-hours'.

The same school mistress also gave help to Milly Barton just before she died.

For visitors to Coton Parish Church and the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre there is car parking behind the Heritage Centre.

On the same site is Chilvers Coton Craft Centre, which opens Tuesday to Saturday 10am - 4pm.

## 8 Griff House

Now a restaurant and pub, Griff is very accessible for the interested visitor. The Patty Townsend watercolour (from 'George Eliot: her early home', 1893) shows a largely unchanged view despite the considerable extensions.

The childhood of Maggie and Tom Tulliver of *Dorlcote Mill in The Mill on the Floss* is largely an autobiographical account of incidents in the early lives of Mary Ann and Isaac Evans, and was partly set in the 'trimly-kept, comfortable dwelling house as old as the elms and chestnuts that shelter it'...with its 'great attic that ran under the old high-pitched roof' of Griff House. The attic was 'Maggie's

favourite retreat on a wet day, when the weather was not too cold; here she fretted out all her ill-humours, and talked aloud to the worm-eaten floors and the worm-eaten shelves, and the dark rafters festooned with cobwebs'.

The round pond, between the car park and the A444, was the original Round Pool of The Mill on the Floss where Maggie and Tom used to fish. 'No one knew how deep it was; and it was mysterious, too, that it should be almost a perfect round'.



The phrase 'George Eliot Country' assumes a rural setting. But Griff, though surrounded by farms and countryside, also had thriving industries on its doorstep. Across the fields at Collycroft was a worsted mill employing several hundred workers. On the fields where the Bermuda Industrial Estate has been built were numerous old and new mines, and the nearby canal carried boats full of coal and stone. In many ways the area was in at the birth of the Industrial Revolution. To the excitement of Mary Ann and Isaac two stage coaches passed Griff House daily, on the route from Birmingham to Stamford, possibly recalled by George Eliot in her description in *Felix Holt, the Radical* of 'the unfailing yet otherwise meteoric apparition of the pea-green Tally-ho or the yellow Independent'.

## 9 Bedworth

Robert and Isaac had close business links with Bedworth, advising the Chamberlaine Charity, collecting rents and inspecting property. Eliot uses two clergymen, Revs Dix and Bellairs as models for characters. Isaac's son Frederic was rector from 1876 - 1927 and was a key figure in running the Almshouses (right), the schools and the rebuilding of the church in 1890.



## 10 George Eliot Hospital

Now occupies a huge site, but its origins were in College Street and grew out of the workhouse or College for the Poor which stood there, and is referred to in *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton*. There are close links between the George Eliot Fellowship and the hospital. Most wards are named after characters in the novels, and a replica of the John Letts statue is visible to all visitors. The picture shows Serena Evans, a direct descendant of George Eliot's brother Isaac performing the opening ceremony of the Millennium Garden in the summer of 2000.

Serena and her father Tenniel Evans are both actors.

## 11 Attleborough

The picture shows part of Attleborough Square, which remains small scale with many buildings which Mary Ann Evans would have recognised. Somewhere here on Attleborough Green was the little boarding school run by Miss Lathom, which Mary Ann attended, aged five, with her older sister Chrissey.

An additional interest in Attleborough arises from research by local historians Alan Cook and Peter Lee into the life of a reclusive hoarder known as Teddy Kem, who, they suggest, might have been a model for Silas Marner. George Eliot wrote that Marner was 'suggested by my recollection of having once, in early childhood seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back'. Other arguments have been made for Bulkington as the base for the book, but the research opens up interesting avenues in an area where most links were established a century ago.



## 12 The Canal

The Coventry Canal runs only a few hundred yards from Griff. One of the original bridges is shown here, close to the canal arm which served the mines on the Arbury estate, known as Griff Hollows.

Eliot wrote some autobiographical sonnets, Brother and Sister, where she describes the brown canal and talks of:

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,  
Where but my growing self, are part of me,  
My present Past, my root of piety.

## 13 Griff Hollows

George Eliot described this section of the canal arm between the Nuneaton to Griff road (B4113) and the Coventry Canal as Red Deeps in *The Mill*

on the Floss. The Patty Townsend watercolour (reproduced by kind permission of Nuneaton Museum & Art Gallery) is somewhat romanticised, and shows the area where Maggie Tulliver used to meet Philip Wakem in secret. For many years Griff Hollows was a local beauty spot but is now overgrown.

As a little girl Maggie 'needed all her confidence in Tom's bravery to reconcile her to an excursion thither - visions of robbers and fierce animals haunting every hollow'.

The canal arm has gone but a stream remains and it is possible to walk to the Coventry Canal and then turn right along the towpath to Gipsy Lane and past the quarry to Griff House.



## 14 Bulkington

Marston Hall, at Marston Jabbett, has long since disappeared, but Mary Ann would have known it from visits to her mother's sister Elizabeth, who had married a gentleman farmer, Richard Johnson, who lived there. Mrs Johnson is Aunt Pullet in *The Mill on the Floss*. Just outside the south door to the church is the gravestone of Eliot's aunt and uncle from Marston Hall.

Close to Bulkington Church is Church Street and some of the houses are several hundred years old.



## Further reading

For the general reader wanting to know more, the recent (2002) Pitkin Guide to George Eliot is an excellent 22 page colour guide by Kathleen Adams, illustrated by John Burton. It is widely available in the area.

There are scores of more academic works. The standard biography is still Gordon Haight's 'George Eliot' (1968). More recent and eminently readable are Rosemary Ashton's 'George Eliot - A Life' (1996), and 'George Eliot - The Last Victorian' (1998) by Kathryn Hughes.

For those wanting more on the influence of her childhood on Eliot's later fiction, Graham Handley's 'George Eliot's Midlands: Passion in Exile' (1991) is unsurpassed.

## Coventry

If Griff gave Mary Ann the roots which were to sustain her, Coventry gave her the intellectual confidence to launch herself into the literary world. Her Coventry life with her father from 1841 until his death in 1849 was crucial to her development, and there are still places associated with her for visitors to see.

Bird Grove was one of a pair of large semi-detached houses outside Coventry in leafy Foleshill in 1841 when Robert Evans and his daughter moved there. Through their neighbours Mary Ann was introduced to the Brays and their radical friends.

Part of Bird Grove was demolished but the house lived in by Mary Ann remains, as the photograph shows. It is now used as an evangelical church and is not usually accessible, but can be seen from George Eliot Road, off Foleshill Road.

On Greyfriars Green an estate agent now occupies the building at 29 Warwick Row, originally known as Nant Glyn. It was a school for girls run by the Miss Franklins which attracted bright girls from all over the Midlands. She was there from 1832 until her mother was ill in 1835 and Mary Ann had to return to Griff to help run the house and the farm. Also on Greyfriars Green is the recently moved and restored horse trough dedicated to Cara Bray, who founded the Coventry Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, as well as being a life long friend of George Eliot.

St Mary's Guildhall is an ancient building of great interest. For Eliot lovers its interest is that it is the setting for Hetty Sorrel's trial in *Adam Bede*.

The Herbert (Arts, Media and Museum) has some excellent Eliot material, including one of the four copies of the Durade painting of George Eliot (reproduced here by their kind permission). It is particularly appropriate since it was painted only a short time after Mary Ann left Coventry, and has been used on the front cover of at least three recent books about her.

For further information contact Coventry Tourist Information Centre, 4 Priory Row on (024) 7622 7264.



Nant Glyn - school from 1832-1835.



St. Mary's Guildhall.



Bird Grove.