

Information on Readings

John Keats (1795-1821), 'To Autumn' (1819)

This great ode, one of Keats's finest poems, was written in Winchester during the course of a single autumn day, Sunday 9th September 1819. (He had by now already written the great Odes to a Nightingale, a Grecian Urn, Melancholy, Psyche and Indolence, earlier in the same year). The play of light and shadow here in the energies of nature and the heart may lead you to feel that Keats is gathering his strength to say goodbye to the summer of his life – he will actually have one more – and to prepare for its winter. The intensity of word and image, and the rise and fall of the poem's music, offer a listening experience on a par with that of hearing a short movement from a late quartet.



William Cobbett (1763-1835), from *Rural Rides* (serialised 1822-26, book 1830)

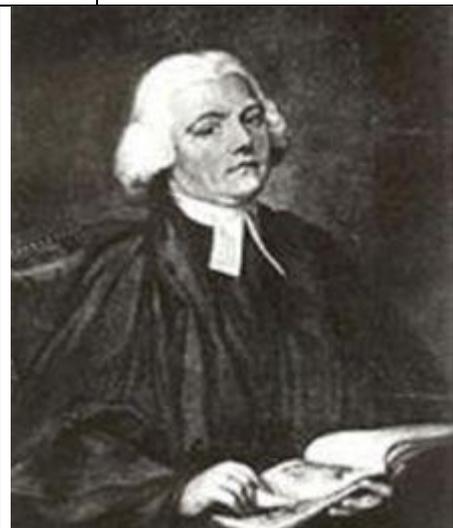
Two passages from an English classic written by an Englishman who loved his country and *the* country: the passion, candour and sheer detail of his style are as though Pepys and Defoe had been re-born to do for Surrey, Hampshire and Sussex what they had once done for London and journalism. Cobbett is Farnham's literary patron saint as Gilbert White is Selborne's, with the difference that Cobbett *got out* more. He is a crusader for English rural tradition. His eye is a connoisseur's, as clear and vigorous as Jonathan Swift's, his love of what he sees David Attenboroughesque. The first extract finds him reporting from Berghclere, which he locates as "near Newbury, Hampshire (as it was in those days), on October 30, 1821, the same day, as it happened, that Dostoyevsky was born in Moscow!



Gilbert White (1720-1793), from *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789)

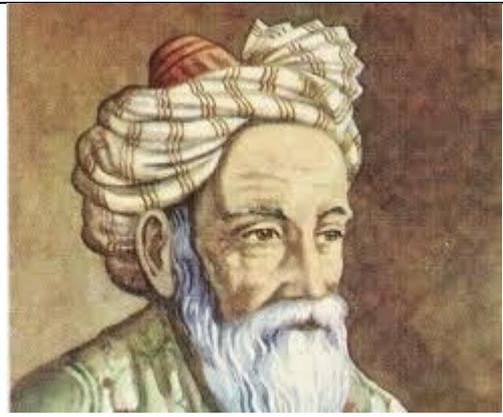
From two letters to Thomas Pennant Esquire: Letter 1 (Selborne Surroundings) and Letter 22 ('The Ring-Ousel and Goat-Sucker')

It was a good day for Selborne when Gilbert White's life came full circle back to the place where he was born, the vicarage of this village that then became his home again for more than forty years. White the bachelor curate's enduringly best-selling book has made Selborne's name ever since: a collection of letters he wrote from there to two kindred-spirit friends and filled with an early naturalist's genially precise observations and affectionate nature-loving thoughts. White was an early exponent of the art of watching birds rather than simply shooting them, and his writing conjures up what must have been a true picture of a peaceful rural idyll published in the same year as the outbreak of the French Revolution.



Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), from 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' (1120), translated by Edward Fitzgerald (1859)

We will hear the first 37 verses of this 75-verse poem, which became the most popular book after the Bible for Victorian households from the time when Fitzgerald's famous translation of it appeared in 1859. On 13 July 1895, England's Omar Khayyam Club held a literary dinner at the Burford Bridge Hotel near the foot of Box Hill. Among those Club members present was Thomas Hardy. 33 years later, in 1928 as he was dying, Hardy asked his wife Florence to read to him from the copy of the *Rubaiyat* which he had given her long before as an earnest of his love. They were the last words he ever heard.



Interval

Jane Austen (1775-1817), from *Emma*, chapters 42 and 43 (Dec 1815)

Picnicking under the sky was felt to as romantic as the out-door English poetry of the time, a getting-back-to-nature forerunner of the special new passion among artists in the mid-19th to *paint* in the fresh air. Eating and 'picture-painting' combine in Austen's clever dramatic cameo – one of her greatest moments - of the outing to Box Hill, as the characters we have come to know and love re-appear before us again in a flash as in newly discovered black-and-white footage: Emma Woodhouse, Mr Knightley, Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, Mr and Mrs Elton, Harriet Smith, and Frank Churchill, here in a fluster as Emma invites him to join what will prove to be a wonderfully complicated picnic.



Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), from 'The Passing of Arthur' (1869).

It is 150 years ago this year that Tennyson, on 5 June 1867, first visited the site on Blackdown near Haslemere for what would become his new home on the Downs, Aldworth. One of Tennyson's first acts at Aldworth was to re-write a poem dating from 1833, his 'Morte d'Arthur'. But that poem had ended without a shred of consolation and now the older man set to work to add some. The result was 'The Passing of Arthur', published with Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* in 1869. We join it tonight as King Arthur, mortally wounded after his last battle with Sir Mordred, orders the knight Sir Bedivere to throw his trusty sword Excalibur into the lake, on whose shore he is now lying, thus restoring it to the lady of the lake who had originally gifted it to him.



Edward Thomas (1878-1917), 'The Lofty Sky'
(10 January 1915), 'Haymaking' (6-8 July 1915),
'Aspens' (11 July 1915)

This year marks the centenary of the death of Edward Thomas on the battlefield at Arras in France on 9th April 1917. Thomas's best writing dates from the years when the village of Steep, near Petersfield, was his home, and it was here that he wrote all three of tonight's poems. Persuaded by the American poet Robert Frost during the summer of 1914 that he was actually a poet but had never believed it, Thomas finally started writing poems in December 1914, and in the two years and four months left of his life wrote 144 of them. When a plaque to Thomas and fifteen other poets of the First World War was dedicated in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner in 1985, the then Poet Laureate Ted Hughes paid tribute to him as 'the father of us all'. He meant us poets of nature.

