

Historama

a story
of
people
&
place

prepared by Sara Bowler &
the Looe Street Detectives
2018

We've been on this site for centuries. I imagine we arrived in some corn seed sent for milling when **Sir John Hawkins** and his father **William** owned the mill and a house next to the **Pope's Head Inn**. Best hotel in Plymouth back in its day, during the reign of Good Queen Bess. We've been quietly growing here ever since. Some call us Mouse Ear but likely you'll know us as Forget-me-not, tiny blue flowers tumbling through the garden with bright yellow middles. But people are good at forgetting, especially things they don't wish to remember. For instance, **John Hawkins** took Britain into the **slave trade** in 1562. What a terrible thing to do. I heard Elizabeth was furious at first, said it was "a detestable undertaking & would bring down vengeance from heaven". But in the end she backed him. The 'Men of Devon' had a big impact on the world. **Hawkins** in **slaving**, **Drake** in circumnavigating the globe and fending off the Spanish Armada and **Raleigh** having a royal patent to explore **Virginia** in the New World, resulting in it eventually being colonised. And of course, he brought tobacco to these islands. Apparently these three and **Hawkins'** son, **Admiral Sir Richard Hawkins**, were the inspiration for the C.19th novel written by Charles Kingsley, 'Westward Ho!'. Still, the **Pope's Head Inn** was the place to be and everyone who was anyone stayed here. So close to Sutton Pool you see, next door to the Guildhall and just a short stroll from St. Andrew's Church.

The C.17th was a difficult time for everyone, plague, civil war, seige; but by the end of it, Celia Fiennes, a travel writer, described Plymouth thus, "The streets are good and clean. There are a great many though some are but narrow. They are mostly inhabited by seamen and those which have affairs of the sea". Things were improving. By then, the old corn mill had gone and we were happily spreading across the garden of **Dr. Charles Vinson**. It was a lovely place, with vines and jessamine trailing over the walls and tall trees overhanging **Pomeroy's Conduit Street**, what you call **Batter Street**. Then things changed again and in 1704 we found ourselves sharing the garden with a new building, **Batter Street Congregational Church** complete with its own burial ground and, in 1708 a Manse for the minister. Seems they were **Nonconformists** and had been struggling for decades to be free to worship as they saw fit. **Nicholas Sherwill** and **George Hughes** even went to prison on **Drake's Island** for this right. Evetually it was granted in 1689 and plans were made to build the **Church**. The early congregation was large, upwards of five hundred, with men arriving for services in fine clothes and powdered wigs and their ladies carried in sedan chairs. Though the more humble women had to clatter in on pattens, high wooden clogs to lift their skirts out of the filth in the streets. But we were pleased to see them and often sweethearts would exchange us.

Back on **Peacock Lane**, which used to be known as **Bull's Lane**, I noticed that business was booming at the **Pope's Head**. Seems everyone still wanted to be there. There was that **Mudge** fellow, **Dr. John**, who set up the **Otter Club**, a group of twelve young men who met every morning to bathe at the **Hoe** and every fortnight to discuss literary and scientific ideas. Oh, and to eat cake and take tea and drink everything on offer: punch, brandy, port, sherry, porter & cider! They were interested in maintaining good health but suspect they rather missed the mark on that. I do know the painter from Plympton, **Joshua Reynolds** and his friend, **Dr. Johnson** visited in 1762. Who would have thought **Sir Reynolds** would be the first to preside over the **Royal Academy of Arts**. And then there was **Thomas Dunckerley**, a naval captain and **Freemason** who attended meetings of Lodge No.203 at the **Inn** when he was in Plymouth and who became a Provincial Grand Master and set up a national body for Templar Masonry. When he was thirty-six, his mother made a death bed confession. He learnt he was probably the illegitimate son of the Prince of Wales, later George II. So he received an annuity from George III until he died. Impressive for a young lad who ran away to sea at ten years of age. And of course, **Joseph Whidbey** who stayed at the **Inn** in 1811 when he worked with John Rennie Snr. while building **Plymouth Breakwater**.

We regularly saw distinguished people. Being so small and discrete, we noticed and heard much. And passed what we knew down through our generations so what I tell you today is the same as my forebears knew. I remember the voice of **Charles Benjamin Incedon**, a Cornish tenor who once sang at a naval dinner at the **Pope's Head**. Sadly, he was rather drunk after a week of wining and dining. His voice was beautiful, but he didn't manage much of a repertoire that night. I think **Richard Curgenven** was the publican then. And the visit by **Prince William Henry**, who came here for dinner after being at the Plymouth Assembly, as did the **Duke of Saxe Gotha** and **Count Bruhl** on another night. Literary groups met here too, as well as the **Otter Club** who held a Jubilee dinner in 1790. They certainly sang and drank the night away that evening, wearing their silver medals and carousing in the yard. Rather more serious were the meetings of the **Plymouth Medical Society**, who met to discuss the latest scientific advances in medicine. They amassed over two thousand volumes, which many doctors studied. And the **Bunch of Grapes Literary Society**, which began life here before moving to Kinterbury Street. And of course, in 1807 we learnt that Britain had abolished **slavery**. We felt such relief, having never agreed with **Hawkins** from the start. But it was 1833 before the **Abolition of Slavery Act** was finally implemented.

Batter Street Church saw many pastors come and go but the **Rev. Christopher Mends** and his son, **Herbert**, were a force to reckon with. The elder **Mends**, "a man of eminent piety" increased the congregation by three hundred while the younger **Mends** worked tirelessly for the poor. In 1785, he set up the **Batter Street Benevolent Institution**, a charity school for girls; had a second Church built at Stonehouse; published sermons "On the Injustice & Cruelty of the **Slave Trade**" and "On the Education of the **Children of the Poor**" and established the Association of Independent Ministers & Churches in the West of England, for whom he held a dinner at the **Pope's Head** in 1801. A pupil of his, Mary Taylor, secretly lent books borrowed from him to the young **John Kitto** who lost his hearing falling from a ladder while helping his stone mason father work on a roof in **Batter Street**. Despite this, and general poor health, he went on to become famous for his study of the bible and travelled in Europe and the Arab world, publishing twenty three illustrated books. When **Herbert Mends** passed away in 1819, the new pastor, **Rev. Thomas Mitchell** took over. A nervous man, he was attended by **Dr. Joseph Collier Cookworthy**, great nephew of William Cookworthy, the inventor of English Porcelain. **Dr. Joseph** was **Plymouth Public Dispensary's** second physician and did much to improve poor people's health.

Of course, other things were happening, especially in **Looe Street** which was once called **Pike Street**. In 1814, **John Wilmot** moved from No.2 to No.38. The house included several buildings once belonging to the **Pope's Head**. He was a Pawnbroker. I used to love gazing at the golden orbs outside his shop. Seems the symbol came from the Medicis in Italy centuries ago. Business was clearly good. He lived there with his wife, Grace and their five children and two servants. We'd often be picked and pressed back then. When he retired, his son **Charles** took over, Sadly his wife died but he remarried later in life. There were other trades here too. **William Deare**, the brushmaker; **John Paramore** who made boots & shoes; and the baker **Mary Hillson**; and **William Hodge**, a mason and his wife, **Susan**, who kept a shop. It was a busy place with folk coming and going. About this time, we noticed a change at the **Pope's Head**. It no longer attracted the well to do. Instead it seemed to be frequented by rougher types. As the years wore on, things became increasingly difficult for all living things. The people seemed stretched, there was never enough to eat or clothes to wear, they looked pinched and cold and hungry, even in the summer. I heard things changed because the Royal Hotel opened in Union Street in 1818, along with the Theatre and Assembly Rooms. This was the new part of town and the wealthy felt safer there, preferring the wide elegant street to our narrow lanes and alleys.

But a brighter part of this time lies with the **Bond** family, **William Cranch**, and his son **George Phillips** who took the first photograph of a star in 1850 through a telescope at the **Harvard College Observatory** in Massachusetts in America. They were amongst the first astrophotographers, being widely reported in the newspapers. **William's** parents, **William Bond** and **Hannah Cranch** were **Nonconformists** who had several of his sblings christened at **Batter Street Church** before emigrating to America. The star they photographed was **Vega**, or **Alpha Lyrae**, the brightest in its constellation. The ray of light that made the image left the star more than twenty years earlier, long before **Daguerre** had invented the Daguerreotype in 1839, his method of fixing light to a glass plate. Seems **Vega** was known to the Greeks and Romans as well as in China and Polynesia thousands of years ago. We'd see her some nights when we snuggled down to keep warm and looked like clusters of stars ourselves when the moon turns everything silver. During these years, my fellow Forget-me-nots and I were squeezed for places to take hold but we endured in nooks and crannies in the increasingly crumbling stone and brick. And we continued to smile at passers-by, and mostly, they smiled back. In 1845, **Rev. Thomas Collins Hine** thought the area run down and tried to move the **Church** to Saltash Street, but many in the congregation opposed him and would not go.

At the **Church**, burials continued. There were so many we wondered how they managed, it was such a small space, yet one hundred and seventy two adults and one hundred and sixty four children were laid to rest before the early C.19th with more to follow until it was finally deemed full. The dead were then taken to the new public cemetery at **Efford**, a lovely place, looking out towards Dartmoor. Cholera claimed many lives as did the general poverty that now hung over our area. The houses on **Looe** and **Batter Streets** were packed to bursting. Every ten years, strangers came, asking questions. This reckoning, the Census they called it, counted the people, not only in the houses but sheds and stores behind. In 1841, there were **one hundred and thirty seven**; by 1851 it stood at **one hundred and eighty**; in 1861 it amounted to **one hundred and ten**; yet by 1891 it had fallen to just **fifty six**, with many houses empty and decrepit as even the poor couldn't live here anymore. **Inspector Rawlinson** said Plymouth was amongst the most insanitary towns in Europe, next to Warsaw. There was only a handful of water closets for all of these people. You can imagine the filth. And we seriously doubted we would survive. We thought everything might be swept away. Indeed, the other side of **Looe Street** was demolished and new, wholesome houses built for corporation workers following a terrible fire there when thirteen people died, eight of whom were children. It was even discussed in **Parliament**.

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Batter Street Chapel, as it was now called, continued its work. **Rev. John Burfitt** would preach to Presbyterian troops before their own chapel was built at **Eldad**. It was a sight to see, burly soldiers in full uniform alongside the poor, yet neatly dressed girls from the school. Many of these men didn't return, falling during the Crimean War. Then came another formidable pastor, the **Rev. William Whittley**. Seeing the poverty all around he made improvements. New pews, two vestries built and a house for the caretaker, all through donations of one thousand one hundred and forty pounds. In 1882 he had the schoolrooms enlarged at a cost of one hundred and six thousand pounds. **Queen Victoria** even donated twenty pounds, a telegram arriving from **Windsor Castle** at 2.00pm during the opening ceremony to announce it, news which greatly enhanced the Public Tea. To commemorate the occasion, a sealed bottle was buried in the grounds containing the names of all previous pastors, all the donors, local newspapers and copies of the hymns sung. To my knowledge, it's still there. The **Chapel** stayed open for another three decades but services and Sunday School attendance dwindled to a handful. **Mr. Charles Farmer**, a former policeman, saw numbers rise but despite his and **Rev. Oliver James Searchfield's** efforts **Batter Street Chapel**, the first **Nonconformist** church in Plymouth closed in 1920 and was sold to **Lord Astor** in 1924.

As with the **Chapel**, so with the **Pope's Head Inn**. It had dwindled from a large hotel with a yard and stables, workshops, stores and a garden that attracted the wealthy and well to do, to being a simple tavern. Stories abounded about improper behaviour. **Mrs. Evans** had **Sampson Jasper**, the landlord, charged with allowing unlawful games to take place on the premises. She found her sixteen year old son drinking and gaming there with other young lads and was met with "violent and disgraceful language" when she challenged **Jasper**, who said he had already ejected them but they had slipped back in. Needless to say he was fined 40 shillings and costs. Yet some glory remained, albeit tainted by tragedy. We discovered the grandfather and uncles of **Robert Falcon Scott** owned breweries and taverns in Plymouth, including the **Pope's Head**. We heard about **Scott** and his team from the conversation of drinkers, that they had walked to the **South Pole**, only to find Roald Amundsen had already been there. He and his fellows died on the way back. So sad. We hung our heads in sorrow at this news for we remembered seeing him occasionally. And we wept for **Mr. Brendon** who took his own life in the office of his bacon curing business at **No.38**. His wife had taken to planting us in pots and we had grown. Indeed, for many years we seemed to be perpetually in sorrow for news of the lost and dead in the Great War. We were often gathered then, to ease broken hearts.

When **Lord and Lady Astor** bought **Batter Street Chapel**, they acquired **37,38 & 39 Looe Street** and parts of the **Pope's Head Inn** as well. It was a time of great change that once again filled the place with life and energy. Our garden had all but vanished, built on and over, yet the ground beneath still held the dead. Before work could begin, the bodies had to be moved. There was much upheaval, it was a grisly business and permission was needed from higher authority, but eventually, grave stones were lifted and the remains made one final journey to the Dell at **Efford Cemetery**. Some of us went with them and started new colonies, while those of us who stayed briefly revelled in the freshly turned soil, before the workmen started. The buildings were joined together and new rooms made. A library and music room were added with classrooms for cookery and languages. They even had a dance hall in the old **Chapel**. The **Virginia House Settlement** was one of several set up around the country by the wealthy to help working people make good use of their free time and improve their education. It took its name from **Virginia** in America, where **Nancy** was born. She wanted to help local people, just as the pastors at the **Chapel** had done. Before it closed, she set up a clinic for Mothers and Babies here. It was lovely when they came into the courtyard, the little ones were fascinated by us and eagerly reached out to touch our faces. And we beamed back at them.

Although we had no garden, there was still the courtyard behind the old **Inn** and people had begun to plant us in pots and window boxes with other flowers. We didn't need to grow in cracks anymore and everywhere was trim and tidy. There were wardens who organised everything. I remember **Miss Lippert** and **Steven and Mary Dalston**. And **James Joseph Judge**, a lovely man who had been a newspaper editor. He lived here too and did much to improve life for working people. He was a close friend of the **Astors** and often stayed with them at Clivedon, their family home. **Virginia House** seemed to offer something for everyone. There were clubs for football, boxing and judo, a gymnasium and billiard room. And regular meetings of the Mothers' Club, the Youth Club and the Men's Club. **Lord Astor** would lead discussions on international affairs and people could learn to sew and sing. It was a delight to hear the gramophone play and we loved it when dances were held and people arrived in their finery. Life was hard after the Great War, **Virginia House** helped us look to the future. We heard things were difficult everywhere, including in Germany and that **Freemasons** there wore Forget-me-not badges on their lapels to show support for the poor and destitute. It was strange that our little flowers were busy there as well as here. And sad to think of all those lost in both countries because of the war. And it reminded me of **Dunckerley** and his visits to the **Pope's Head**.

Dark times came again. Bombs fell from the sky and broke buildings and people. When it began, we trembled and feared the worst. Parts of our plot were struck, the dance hall and **No.39**, but none were hurt. Indeed, people came from nearby streets to **Virginia House** for shelter and comfort in those dreadful times. One lady even took her baby onto the roof to watch the flames all around. But we hunkered down and finally it ended. When men came to repair the hall, they found three burial chambers under the floor that had once been part of the **Batter Street Chapel**. They had been missed when the other bodies were taken to **Efford**. Of course, they were carefully lifted and reburied in the Dell. Once again, everything was in short supply, clothes, food, homes. People needed **Virginia House** more than ever, even though they had to continue to make do and mend. But the war was over and they were free and hopeful for the future. The new welfare system started and for the first time people could see a doctor for free. Places like the **Settlement** had led the way in showing that social care was important. In the summers, children who had never had a holiday, would head off to Maker in Cornwall, or up to Dartmoor, where they could breath clear fresh air and run and play away from the damaged streets. Life was changing very quickly for everyone now. Bombed buildings were cleared and a new city began to emerge. But here, apart from the gap left by **No.39**, we stayed as we were.

And now another group of people began to come here regularly. **Nancy Astor** offered **38 Looe Street** to the **United Services Centre**, set up to help soldiers stationed here from abroad, learn about British culture. **Mr. J. Wood Palmer**, from the Army Educational Corp., put on painting and drawing classes and exhibitions, held gramophone and piano forte recitals and produced plays. Social evenings and lectures helped people get to know one another. The **Virginia House** Film Society reformed to show continental classics supplied by the British Council. **Mr. Auberry Pryor** gave a talk on the Tudor composers, Byrdd, Bull and Purcell and we listened with glee when he played the piano. We knew this music from when we first flourished here. Even the Lord Mayor of Plymouth came. **Mr. Isaac Foot** spoke about **Drake** and how he had once lived in the street. We felt the world had come to us, with new languages and customs shared. After a while, the soldiers went back to their own countries but they left a new way of doing things. **No.38** was to be converted and made ready for civilian use, it was going to become **Plymouth Arts Centre**, a place for people to experience new ideas in the arts. It was 1947 and everything was going to be different. The newly formed **Arts Council of Great Britain**, the city council, the **American War Relief Trust** and the **United Services Centre** contributed to the experiment and the **Arts Centre** was born.

The opening took place in May 1947. Everything inside and out was spick and span and we were joined by other, more exotic flowers for the day. We felt a little overshadowed by them but we had roots, they only had stems. **Sir Kenneth Clark**, Director of the **National Gallery**, did the honours and of course, **Lady Astor** came too. Within a year the **Arts Centre** had almost one thousand members paying five shillings to join, with many more coming to see exhibitions and films, hear recitals, attend readings and meet friends for drinks. There were groups in art, music, literature, drama and film, which had the largest membership and used the hall in **Virginia House** to accommodate everyone. The secretary then, **Mr. David Thompson**, provided rooms for singers and groups, such as the Intimate Opera Company to rehearse during the day, while **Malcolm LeGrice's** jazz band were resident in the basement in the evenings. "Not high or low brow", it attracted people from all parts of the city and all walks of life, eager for new experiences. I remember a very funny lady visiting once, the comedienne and actress, **Joyce Grenfell**, **Nancy Astor's** niece. She was charming and took tea with **James Judge** and the staff. Another time, **Nancy** spoke of her experience riding pillion on a motorbike driven around the city by T.E. Lawrence when he was an airman at Mount Batten. And others gave talks and recitals, hung exhibitions and put on plays. The place was alive.

In the following decades, the **Virginia House Settlement** continued to provide rooms for groups to meet but increasingly focused on welfare needs. In 1999, **Princess Anne** opened the Carer's Centre which supports the Friends & Families of Special Children group. That was another big occasion, with many dignitaries and photographers. In 2005 they sold their buildings, only keeping an office here while the rest of it was made into the flats of **Astor Court**. Many people have happy memories of time spent at **Virginia House**, pursuing their hobbies and interests. Today, **Plymouth Arts Centre** continues the tradition of innovation. They opened the city's first vegetarian restaurant in 1978 and have helped many new ideas take off. Take A Part at **Efford**, where our cousins live and Plymouth Art Weekender. They're often the first to present an artist's work as they did for the painter **Beryl Cook** in 1975. Her paintings made me smile. As have many other artists. **Douglas Gordon**, **Tacita Dean** and **Vong Phaophanit** showed here early in their careers and more well known folk, **Andy Goldsworthy**, **Paula Rego**, **Zarina Bhimji** and **Richard Deacon**. Plus the myriads of emerging artists excited to be seen. And thousands of films. Some even shown on big screens in the city during summer. We've seen many things happen over the centuries, new ideas emerging, people making change. We are proud to know this place.