

A Literary Landscape

With a new film of Jane Eyre opening in cinemas in September, and manuscripts of the Brontës' childhood stories set in the imaginary worlds of Gondal and Angria currently on show as part of the Out Of This World exhibition at the British Library, the novels written more than 150 years ago by three sisters living in a parsonage in a small Yorkshire village are still very much in demand. Emma Newrick headed to Haworth in search of its most famous family.



'The Bells are of a hardy race...The air they breathe is not that of the hot-house, or of perfumed apartments; but it whistles through the rugged thorns that shoot out their prickly arms on barren moors, or it ruffles the moss on the the mountain tops.'

A review of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Acton Bell (Anne Brontë), 1848

There is a quotation stuck to a filing cabinet in the Library at the Brontë Parsonage Museum that is incongruous and yet curiously apt. 'In Austen, sex is just a kiss on the hand. In the Brontës, everything happens.' It goes some way towards explaining why, more than a century after the deaths of the Brontë sisters, their books are still devoured by readers worldwide, and every year thousands of visitors make a pilgrimage to the Parsonage and the quaint village of Haworth.

The walls of the Library are lined with books on everything Brontë related, and on top of the filing cabinet is a pot holding brushes intriguingly labelled with phrases such as 'Mr B's Bedroom.' Ann Dinsdale, Collections Manager, explains that this is for conservation purposes – each of the rooms has its own brush, which is used to dust the ornate mouldings. However, this isn't what I've come to see. The Library holds the largest collection of items relating to the Brontë family in the world. Perhaps ten percent of the museum collection, which was founded by a small group of enthusiasts in 1893, is on display in the Parsonage itself; the rest is carefully stored in this hallowed sanctuary, which is not usually accessible to visitors.

However, I have been given special permission to have a peep at some of the Library's treasures. Ann unwraps a miniature painting by Charlotte; a drawing by their brother Branwell which proves to have Charlotte's doodles on the reverse; a rare diary page of Emily's that contains a witty reference to Anne's habit of sitting with her feet on the fender; one of the famous 'little books' – the juvenile stories of the Brontës – and perhaps most poignantly, the last letter Anne wrote before she died. Then Ann unwraps a treasured sheet of

paper, carefully mounted on board, from its tissue paper shroud. In 1846, Poems, a volume by the Brontë sisters writing as Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell was published. It sold just two copies, one of which was bought by a Mr Enoch of Warwick, clearly a discerning reader as he wrote to the Bells, requesting their autographs. 'Whenever I look at this I imagine her practising it on a sheet of blotting paper until she'd got it just right.' Ann says. 'Charlotte was always the driving force, determined to succeed, although she also gave away her inexperience as she used to post her manuscripts out to publishers wrapped in paper on which the address of the previous publisher, who'd rejected her work, was crossed out!' In the Parsonage's Library, as Ann holds the paper bearing those autographs in white-gloved fingers, the sisters are brought vividly to life again. Emily and Anne's signatures are modest, neat, almost unassuming, while Charlotte's is extravagant, oversized and triumphant.

The magic of the Brontë Parsonage is in its ability to make the sisters' lives as vivid and immediate as their work. Far from a museum, the Parsonage still has the feel of a home, and at times it seems as if it is waiting for the family who once lived here to return. Vases of fresh flowers are placed on windowsills and mantelpieces – not hothouse blooms but gathered from the garden and simply arranged as though one of the sisters had picked them that morning. By the grandfather clock, halfway up the stairs, a note reveals that Patrick Brontë would lock the door every evening at 9pm, pause at the dining room to remind his daughters not to stay up too late, then wind the clock on his way to bed. The dining room is the most moving of all. It is here that Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall were penned; here that the three women would walk around the table talking about their work; and here that Charlotte paced alone after her sisters' deaths, unable to sleep without their nightly ritual. In one corner is the chair where Anne would sit, her feet on the fender, and opposite, the sofa on which Emily died. It is as though the sisters had just left the room, perhaps to walk the moors above Haworth, leaving pens and parchment still scattered, awaiting their return.

Visitors can see Patrick's study, the kitchen and Charlotte's husband Arthur Bell Nicholls' study, and upstairs, the bedrooms where Branwell and Charlotte died. Charlotte's room displays a collection of her belongings. Her clothes reveal a fine-boned woman – literary giant she may be, but in the flesh Charlotte Brontë was tiny. The wall of another bedroom is covered in scribbled figures, they are thought to be characters inspired by a set of toy soldiers given to Branwell, which the young Brontës created stories about, set in their imaginary worlds of Angria and Gondal.

A large gallery contains other treasures, from Branwell's paintings, to Emily and Charlotte's writing desks and even the original apostles cupboard, which belonged to the Eyre family, and is thought to have been the inspiration for the cupboard mentioned in Jane Eyre. Emily's writing desk contains five reviews of Wuthering Heights and a letter from her publisher suggesting she was working on another novel when she died. The baize covering of the writing slope is heavily scored with the force of her pen – many have pored over the markings, desperate to piece together some of the words, but to no avail.

Downstairs, an exhibition brings the real Patrick Brontë to life. Elizabeth Gaskell's biography casts Patrick in a rather poor light, but when she knew him, he was an ailing man in his 70s, and had suffered the loss of all but one of his family. 'I do think Charlotte inherited her father's ambition,' Ann says. Originally Patrick Brunty, he left his humble origins in Ireland far behind, winning a place at Cambridge. By the time he arrived at Haworth, he was a published author of poetry and fiction, so his children grew up accustomed to seeing their name on books on the Parsonage shelves. Patrick's lively ideas and encouragement undoubtedly influenced his children as they grew up. 'Remember that it was Patrick's decision to take the living at Haworth,' Ann says. 'Would we still have had Wuthering Heights without Emily's background in Haworth? I

don't think so. Haworth in those days was a rather bleak place, set against the wild moors. If Emily had lived in a more genteel atmosphere, she would have lacked that. The book could have teetered over into a gothic extravaganza without the grounding of real life – Emily's real life – and it is the domestic detail she knew from her life in Haworth, blended with her fantasy world, that is so essential to Wuthering Heights.'

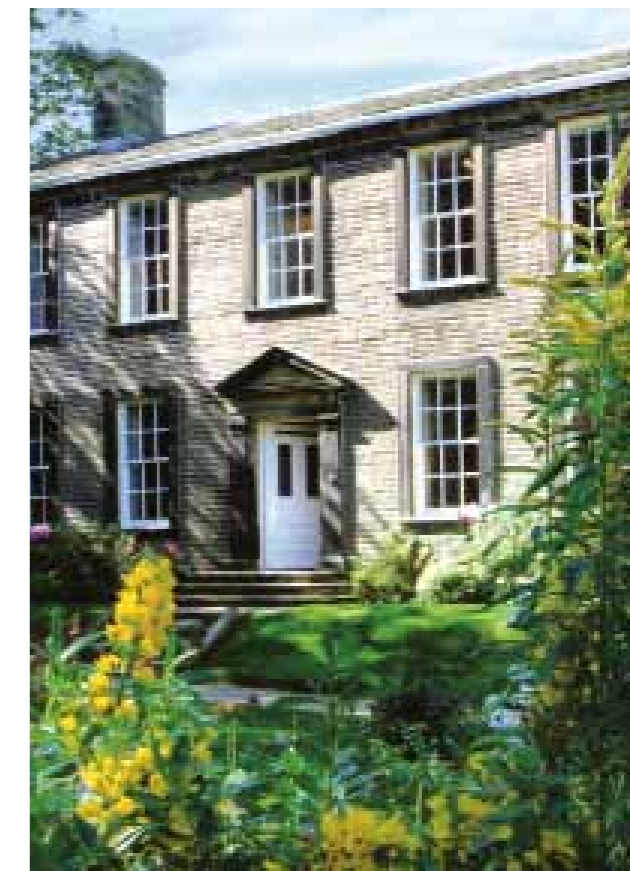
Present-day Haworth is inextricably linked with its most famous family, reflected in shop and street names, and caters for its many tourists with Brontëana of all kinds. In the antiquarian bookshops such as Venables & Bainbridge, volumes on the lives of the Brontës jostle for space with rare first editions and witty Brontë mugs. The post office where Charlotte, full of hope, posted her manuscripts, is now a gift shop, and opposite is the apothecary's shop where Betty Hardacre supplied Branwell with opium. You can't buy opium at Rose & Co Apothecary today, but the stock is just as addictive – a glorious old-fashioned range of lotions and potions sits alongside tempting gifts and traditional sweets, all housed in a shop whose vintage fixtures and fittings make you feel as though you've stepped back in time. Old-world remedies and household products that have long since disappeared from our homes (carbolic soap, anyone?) are still available here, with many of them manufactured to original formulations on the premises.

The influence of a bygone age is very much in evidence in Haworth. There is a plethora of vintage clothing shops, from the Aladdin's cave of The Souk to Poison Ivy, Notorious Vintage and Ooh La La – the organiser of the Haworth 1940s weekend – should you wish to dress in keeping with the village's history. The Brontë Weaving Shed boasts an original Victorian loom, while Haworth Heritage Portraits can cast you as Cathy and Heathcliff, complete with period costume, for an unusual souvenir. Should you prefer something a little more modern, however, Haworth isn't stuck in the past. Children will appreciate Cobbles and Clay, an art café where you can enjoy coffee and cake, and then decorate something from their range of ceramics. In the window hangs a cast of a baby's footprints, wittily inscribed with 'Charlotte Brontë, 21st April 1816.' Florist Daisy Days offer beautiful blooms as well as a range of treats, from socks and scarves by Avoca Handweavers, to quirky mugs based on the Monday's child is fair of face... rhyme, alongside handcrafted brooches and much, much more. Rosie Bobbin offers new, if retro-inspired, gifts and homeware, while Catkins of Haworth boasts a range of home and gardenware that includes frames, heart bunting and a fantastic selection of witty greetings cards. They also sell tempting and beautifully decorated cupcakes made by a local baker.

Haworth boasts plenty to please gourmets, whether you're looking for picnic supplies, a hearty meal or an edible souvenir. Gascoigne's fulfils several of these needs in one: from Parson's Pride cheddar smoked in the Victorian Brontë Kiln, to fresh produce from the deli and some of the best mushroom soup I've ever tasted. If the Parson's Pride has whetted your appetite, The Cheese Place boasts everything from biscuits and chutneys to eat with cheese, to a huge range of the all-important cheeses themselves. Next door, The Chocolate Box offers a Willy Wonka style selection of traditional sweets and chocolates.

For something more substantial, Number 10 The Coffee House offers one of the best selections of homemade cakes in Yorkshire. Wharenuī – the Maori for meetinghouse – offers a New Zealand inspired twist with offerings such as the Kiwi burger. At night it's a buzzing wine bar and bistro. Close to the Parsonage, the multi award-winning Weaver's Restaurant and Bar With Rooms offers renowned regional British cooking.

Should you fancy a pint after a day spent exploring Haworth and the surrounding countryside, the Fleece Inn, halfway up the iconic cobbled hill, won't disappoint. Every evening the stone-flagged bar plays host to a gregarious crowd of locals and tourists partaking of the locally brewed Timothy Taylor ale, and it's not hard to imagine Branwell sitting among them,



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enjoying a drink. Nick, the landlord of The Fleece, tells us that Branwell could often be found staggering around the bar room of The Fleece, and he tells us of a story that claims the black sheep of the Brontës once fell out of a window at The Black Bull, further up the hill. Branwell drowned his sorrows in many of Haworth's pubs, and apparently The Fleece was one of his favourite haunts. Perhaps it still is! It was also a favourite of the cast of The Railway Children film in 1970. The bedrooms, which today provide a comfortable haven from the hustle and bustle and an excellent base for a few days in Brontë country, once offered a place for the cast to enjoy a cup of tea during a break from filming on the nearby Keighley and Worth Valley Railway. The walls of the dining room boast pictures of the film's stars alongside portraits of old Haworth and local characters such as Timothy Feather, the last hand loom weaver in the village, who is buried in the churchyard. Next door, the Haworth Brass Band have their practice room – it couldn't be more quintessentially Yorkshire, or more charming.

The whole Brontë family, with the exception of Anne, who is buried in Scarborough where she died, lies in the vault of St Michael and All Angels Church. A paved path runs up the side of the churchyard, leading to the moors, where a walk of just under three miles will bring you to the Brontë Waterfall. A rainstorm of epic proportions had just passed, and high above the village, the sun was beating down on the moors from an azure sky. Raindrops sparkled in the bracken and the bilberries, and the curlews dipped and wheeled, their lilting calls the only sound. Other visitors had fled to the pubs at the first sign of rain, and the moors were ours alone. The sisters walked here many times, and though we didn't climb to Top Withens, the house rumoured to have provided inspiration for Wuthering Heights, the ghosts of passionate lovers Heathcliff and Cathy, and the Brontës themselves seemed to walk the path beside us. At the waterfall we rested on the 'Brontë chair' – a stone boulder in the rough shape of a seat – before retracing our steps across the moors, past a ruined cottage and artist Martin Heron's stone book sculptures, entitled Literary Landscape, half buried in the heath.

After the deaths of her sisters, Charlotte wrote, 'when I go out there alone everything reminds me of the times when others were with me, and then the moors seem a wilderness...My sister Emily had a particular love for them, and there is not a knoll of heather, not a branch of fern, not a young bilberry leaf, not a fluttering lark or linnet, but reminds me of her. The distant prospects were Anne's delight, and when I look round she is in the blue tints, the pale mists, the waves and shadows of the horizon. In the hill-country silence their poetry comes by lines and stanzas into my mind: once I loved it; now I dare not read it.'

'The Brontës' story is tragic, but not uncommon,' Ann Dinsdale says. 'In the churchyard there lie a couple who had 17 children. All died. Patrick Brontë lost his wife and all of his children so young, including the oldest children Maria and Elizabeth, who died before they reached their teens; it is tragic, but he was by no means the only one to suffer such a loss.'

It is astonishing to think that a single family produced not one but three writers of such genius, and that the three sisters penned such enduring works before their untimely deaths. In Anne's last letter, written a few weeks before she died aged 29, she wrote 'I wish it would please God to spare me...I have many schemes in my head for future practise – humble and limited indeed – but still I should not like them all to come to nothing and myself to have lived to so little purpose.' None of the sisters could possibly have imagined that more than 150 years after their deaths, visitors from all over the world would flock to a tiny Yorkshire village to pay tribute to them and their work. It is said that no one ever truly dies while their names are still spoken, and if that is true, then Charlotte, Emily and Anne will live forever in the hearts and minds of their readers.



Address Book

The Brontë Parsonage Museum 01535 642323 www.bronte.info
The Museum is open every day except 24th-27th December and 4th-31st January: 10.00am - 5.30pm April to September, 11.00am - 5.00pm October to March

SHOP

Brontë Weaving Shed 01535 646217
Catkins of Haworth 01535 646706
Daisy Days 01535 644 653 www.daisy-days.co.uk
Haworth Heritage Portraits 01535 646606
www.haworthheritageportraits.co.uk
Oh La La 01535 640640 www.ohlalavintage.co.uk
Poison Ivy Vintage 07542950590 www.poisonivyvintage.co.uk
Rosie Bobbin 01535 649217
ROSE & Co 01535 646830 www.rose-apothecary.co.uk
The Souk 117 Main Street Haworth 01535 646538
Venables & Bainbridge 01535 640300

EAT

The Cheese Place 01535 647959
The Chocolate Box 01535646706
Cobbles & Clay The Art Café 01535 644 218
www.cobblesandclay.co.uk
Gascoigne's of Haworth 01535 646059 www.brontekiln.co.uk
Number 10 The Coffee House 01535 644694
www.10thecoffeehouse.co.uk
Weavers (Restaurant and Bar with Rooms) 01535 643822
www.weaversmallhotel.co.uk
Wharenu 01535 644511 www.wharenu.co.uk

STAY

Ashmount Country House 01535 645 726
www.ashmounthaworth.co.uk
The Black Bull 01535 642 249
The Fleece 01535 642172 www.fleece-inn.co.uk
Old Registry 01535 646 503 www.theoldregistryhaworth.co.uk

There are plenty of carparks around Haworth. Avoid the clampers at the Changegate carpark and head instead for the carpark by the Parsonage itself. For more information visit www.yorkshire.com