

Chapter 1

George Crabbe's Aldeburgh

California: Crabbe recalled

*To talk about Crabbe is to talk about England.*¹

When Benjamin Britten read those words, he was homesick and far from England. It was the summer of 1941: war was raging in Europe and he and Peter Pears, the tenor with whom he was to form a lifelong relationship, were in California – both pacifists, they had followed in the footsteps of other English *émigrés* including W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. The arid hot landscape could not have been in starker contrast to the bleak, windswept Suffolk coast of Britten's childhood.

Britten was reading an article in *The Listener* magazine, 'George Crabbe: The Poet and the Man' – the text of a talk given by E.M. Forster on the BBC Overseas Service. It was about the life and work of an obscure eighteenth-century poet who had been born in Aldeburgh, Suffolk – the same part of England where Britten had grown up. It is not known how the composer came across the piece; perhaps it was sent by Auden, a fellow pacifist who was a friend of both Britten's and Forster's.²

But what seemed an incidental discovery of Crabbe in California was to be pivotal. Indirectly, it led to a new path in classical opera, putting Britten on the world stage. It also resurrected Aldeburgh's home-grown poet – bringing him to new-found public appreciation and awareness.

¹ Forster, 1941.

² *A Time There Was*, dir. Tony Palmer, 1979.

It was two years since the composer had set foot in England, and on reading the article he was overcome with longing for the landscape of his childhood. He wrote later, in 1945: 'I did not know any of the poems of Crabbe at that time but reading about him gave such a feeling of nostalgia for Suffolk, where I have always lived, that I searched for a copy of his works'.³

Pears found what they wanted in a second-hand bookshop. He wrote to a friend in July 1941 that he had found a 'marvellous Rare Book shop' in Los Angeles where he had bought *The Life and Poetical Works of the Revd. George Crabbe, Edited by his Son* (1851).⁴ The copy is now in The Red House, Aldeburgh, where Britten and Pears lived from 1957. Pears inscribed it twice, first in 1978, noting that he had bought it in Los Angeles in 1941 – but then, four years later, adding: '?San Diego?'⁵

Where precisely the book was bought is less important than the timing. Just weeks earlier, Britten had written to a friend, Enid Slater: 'I *am* homesick, & really only enjoy scenery that reminds me of England.'⁶ On 29 July, he wrote to the translator Elizabeth Mayer, with whom he and Pears had stayed on Long Island the previous year: 'We've just re-discovered the poetry of George Crabbe (all about Suffolk!) & are very excited – maybe an opera one day...!!'⁷

³ Britten, 1945, p. 7.

⁴ Peter Pears, letter to Elizabeth Mayer, 5 July 1941. See Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 156.

⁵ Dr Nicholas Clark, librarian at Britten Pears Arts, has stated: 'We have that lovely nineteenth-century copy in the collection and Pears inscribed it twice, once in the late 1970s and again in the early 1980s, with the intention of clarifying things. The "clarification" is slightly debatable. [...] it leaves us asking whether it was in Los Angeles or San Diego where the book was purchased. We can learn that the volume was purchased by Pears and his writing "we started work" acknowledges that the opera was a collaborative effort. Synopses in Pears' hand confirm his part in building the story at this early stage.' Email to the author, April 2020.

⁶ Britten, letter to Enid Slater, 17 June 1941. See Carpenter, 1992, p. 154.

⁷ Britten, letter to Elizabeth Mayer, 29 July 1941. See Carpenter, 1992, p. 154. See also Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (eds.), *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913–1976, Volume Two, 1939–45* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 961. According to W.H. Auden, the home of Dr William and Elizabeth Mayer in Amityville, Long Island, 'where Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears stayed in 1939–40, [was] a house which played an important role in the lives of all three of us. It was during this

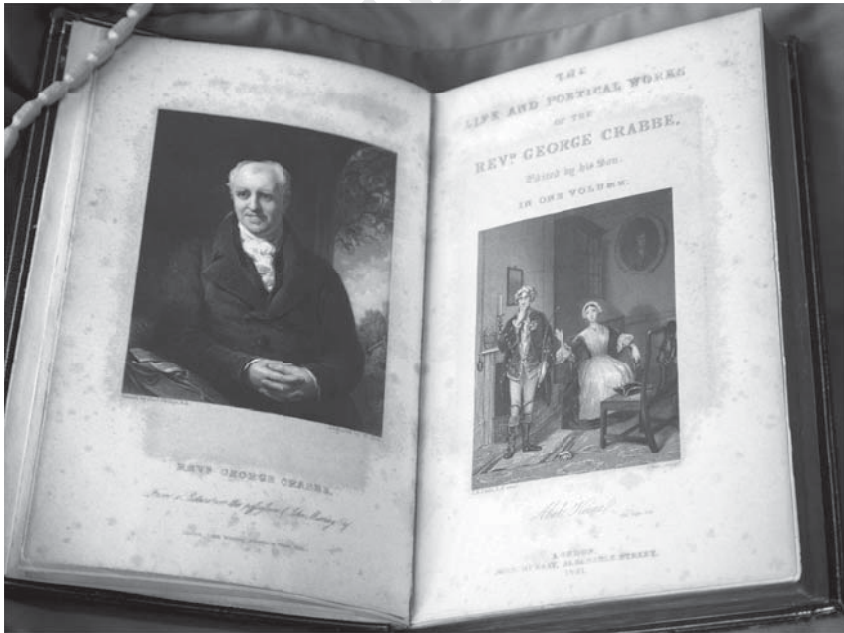
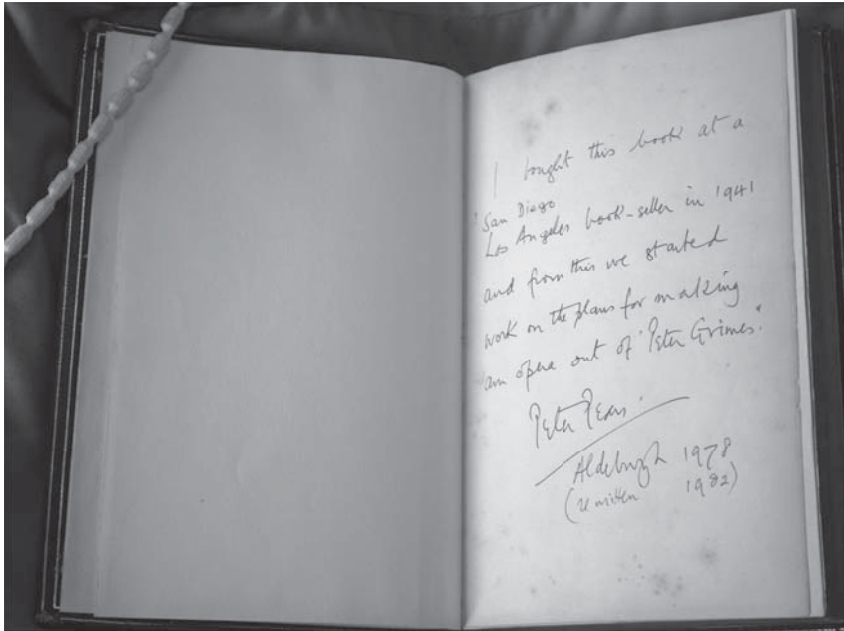


Figure 2. Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears's copy of *The Life and Poetical Works*

The *Listener* article, and with it the discovery of the poems of Crabbe, was to prompt the pair's return to England – and to inspire Britten's first internationally acclaimed opera, *Peter Grimes* (1945). In 1964, Britten would reflect on this defining moment: 'It was in California, in the unhappy summer of 1941, that, coming across a copy of the Poetical Works of George Crabbe in a Los Angeles bookshop, I first read his poem, "Peter Grimes"; and, at this same time, reading a most perceptive and revealing article about it by E.M. Forster, I suddenly realized where I belonged and what I lacked.'⁸

What in the piece had so stirred his nostalgia? Forster's article quotes Crabbe describing the Alde estuary with its marsh birds and melancholy mud flats – a watercourse that widens from a small river at the village of Snape over six miles to Aldeburgh, continuing several more miles along the east coast beyond Orford – finally meeting the North Sea.

The landscape is haunting: flat, with vast skies, and often soundless save for the rustling of the breeze in the reed beds and bird calls. Britten already knew Snape – he had bought and renovated the circular Mill House before leaving for the States; it can still be seen overlooking the expanses of reeds bordering the river. In the autumn of 1937, he had wanted a home of his own. Suffolk was the obvious choice – he was born in Lowestoft in 1913 and grew up in East Anglia. He also had some £3,000 after the deaths of his father and mother. The property cost him a few hundred pounds.⁹

Britten fell in love with Snape. When he came back from the States in 1942, he wrote to Elizabeth Mayer: 'Snape is just heaven. I couldn't believe that a place could be so lovely. The garden was looking so neat & intentional, & the house is so comfortable and so lovely to look at – & the view ... over the village to the river & marshes beyond.'¹⁰ And it was here, at the disused Maltings overlooking the Alde estuary, that in 1948 he founded the Aldeburgh Festival.

period that Britten wrote his first opera, and I my first libretto.' Auden, 'To Benjamin Britten on his Fiftieth Birthday', reprinted in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume V, 1963–1968*, edited by Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 66.

⁸ Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award: A Speech* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 21.

⁹ See Beth Britten, *My Brother Benjamin* (Bourne End: The Kensal Press, 1986), p. 105.

¹⁰ Britten, letter to Elizabeth Mayer, 17 May 1942. See Mitchell and Reed, 1991b, p. 1049.

But it was not just the evocation of landscape that stimulated Britten. He became fascinated with the psychological aspects of Crabbe's characters, how the poet not only looks at the scenery but, as Forster wrote, 'subtly [...] links the scene with the soul of the observer.'¹¹

Of Peter Grimes, the sadistic fisherman depicted in *The Borough* (1810), Forster remarked: 'The criminal Grimes is already suspected of murdering his apprentices, and no one will go fishing with him in his boat. He rows out alone into the estuary, and waits there – waits for what?' By way of an answer, Forster quoted from the poem:

*When tides were neap, and, in the sultry day,
Through the tall bounding mud-banks made their way ...
There anchoring, Peter chose from man to hide,
There hang his head, and view the lazy tide
In its hot slimy channel slowly glide;
Where the small eels that left the deeper way
For the warm shore, within the shallows play;
Where gaping mussels, left upon the mud,
Slope their slow passage to the fallen flood;*

'How quiet this writing is: you might say how dreary,' Forster drily concluded. 'Yet how sure is his touch; and how vivid that estuary near Aldeburgh.'

*Here dull and hopeless he'd lie down and trace
How sidelong crabs had scrawl'd their crooked race;
Or sadly listen to the tuneless cry
Of fishing gull or clanging golden-eye;
What time the sea birds to the marsh would come,
And the loud bittern, from the bull-rush home,
Gave from the salt-ditch side the bellowing boom:
He nursed the feelings these dull scenes produce,
And loved to stop beside the opening sluice.*

Forster's view of these lines was equivocal – sceptical as to their technical merit and yet arrested by their evocative force: 'Not great poetry, by any means, but it convinces me that Crabbe and Peter Grimes and myself

¹¹ Forster, 1941, p. 769.

do stop beside an opening sluice, and that we are looking at an actual English tideway, and not at some vague vast imaginary waterfall, which crashes from nowhere to nowhere.¹²

Crabbe's poem was, as Forster conceded, a powerful mix of psyche and setting: the outcast criminal Grimes is set against and defined through the bleak landscape with its variety of harsh and melancholic sounds. Forster's article would produce its own reverberations – a 'bellowing boom' that passed into Britten's consciousness, and then into his works. 'The reading of this article stirred Ben so deeply,' Pears later said, 'that he felt he couldn't stay in America any more.'¹³

Crabbe, through Forster, had recalled the pair to England and to Suffolk. The discovery of the poet was also a moment of artistic genesis. In a BBC radio programme in 1965, Britten recollected: 'In a flash I realised two things: that I must write an opera and where I belonged.'¹⁴

Aldeburgh: A wild amphibious race

*People speak with Raptures of fine Prospects, clear Skies, Lawns, Parks and the blended Beauties of Art and Nature, but give me a wild, wide Fen, in a foggy Day; with quaking Boggy Ground and trembling Hillocks in a putrid Soil: Shut in by the Closeness of the Atmosphere, all about is like a new Creation & every Botanist an Adam who explores and names the Creatures he meets with.*¹⁵

George Crabbe grew up in just this landscape. He was born on Christmas Eve in 1754 in Aldeburgh (then Aldborough), a small town of a few hundred inhabitants. Slaughden, some three quarters of a mile to the south, was its bustling port. Long since washed away

¹². Forster, 1941, pp. 769–70.

¹³. Peter Pears quoted in Carpenter, 1992, p. 155.

¹⁴. Britten in a discussion about E.M. Forster with Leonard Woolf and William Plomer (BBC Radio, 11 August 1965).

¹⁵. Crabbe, letter to Edmund Cartwright, Junior, 1 October 1792. See *Selected Letters and Journals of George Crabbe*, edited by Thomas C. Faulkner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 50.

by repeated floods, Slaughden survives today only as the site of two sailing clubs, whose moored yachts send out a clinking of halyards on breezy days.

The living in this tiny town on the edge of England, exposed to the North Sea, was hard – as were the natural elements to be contended with. The atmosphere was bleak and rough; smuggling and other crimes were rife.

Crabbe's son (also George) gives a comprehensive flavour of the place in which his father spent his childhood, worth quoting in full:

Aldborough [...] was in those days a poor and wretched place, with nothing of the elegance and gaiety which have since sprung up about it, in consequence of the resort of watering parties. The town lies between a low hill or cliff, on which only the old church and a few better houses were then situated, and the beach of the German Ocean. It consisted of two parallel and unpaved streets, running between mean and scrambling houses, the abodes of seafaring men, pilots and fishers. The range of houses nearest to the sea had suffered so much from repeated invasions of the waves, that only a few scattered tenements appeared erect among the desolation. I have often heard my father describe a tremendous spring-tide of, I think, the 1st of January 1779, when eleven houses were at once demolished; and he saw the breakers dash over the roofs, curl around the walls and crush all to ruin.

The beach consists of successive ridges – large rolled stones, then loose shingle, and, at the fall of the tide, a stripe of fine hard sand. Vessels of all sorts, from the large heavy trollboat to the yawl and prame, drawn up along the shore – fishermen preparing their tackle, or sorting their spoil – and nearer the gloomy old town-hall (the only indication of municipal dignity) a few groups of mariners, chiefly pilots, taking their quick short walk backwards and forwards, every eye watchful of a signal from the offing – such was the squalid scene that first opened on the author of 'The Village'.¹⁶

¹⁶ Crabbe, *Life*, 1947 (1834), pp. 7–8. *The Village* was one of Crabbe's earliest poems, published in 1783.

The contrast with present-day Aldeburgh is stark. These days the town is fashionable and upmarket – with more of the ‘elegance and gaiety’ that the younger Crabbe noted emerging in the early nineteenth century. Those ‘mean and scrambling houses’ have been replaced, in many cases, by imposing Victorian villas – often favoured by second-home owners. But Crabbe’s own words on holiday visitors could apply now:

*And Summer Lodgers were again come down;
These, idly-curious, with their glasses spied
The Ships in Bay as anchored for the Tide, –
The River’s Craft, – the Bustle of the Quay, –
And Sea-port Views, which Landmen love to see.*¹⁷

Aldeburgh today is sometimes labelled Islington-on-Sea; but that does not do justice to its singular character. Traces of the rawness that Crabbe’s son evoked, the imminence of nature, persist. And while it boasts a sailing fraternity, golfers, walkers and birdwatchers, Aldeburgh is not a typical holiday resort: no pier or bustling promenade, candyfloss sellers or slot machines. Its special appeal – the light, the landscape – continues to draw artists, writers and musicians. In their wake come music lovers – fans of Benjamin Britten, obviously, but more widely, devotees of the Aldeburgh Festival and Snape Proms.

The fishing trade has dwindled. A handful of boats still ply their trade and fresh fish is sold from several huts on the beach. The fish and chip shops – two owned by the same family – are famous. But most of the fishing boats lie idle – some carefully restored to preserve the memory of what in Crabbe’s time was the livelihood of many of the town’s inhabitants.

Beyond the layout of the two parallel main streets, the town would be almost unrecognisable to Crabbe. Landmarks, however, remain: the ‘gloomy old town hall’, as Crabbe’s son called it (now regarded as a charming Elizabethan building – the Moot Hall), and the church, enlarged since his day, on the brow of the hill above the town.

There are few signs to remind a visitor that Crabbe once lived in this place. A marble bust of the poet stands, somewhat hidden, close to the north window in the church of St Peter and St Paul. A street named after Crabbe runs close to the Moot Hall, possibly the street where his father once lived. The Aldeburgh Bookshop, just west of Crabbe Street,

¹⁷ ‘Peter Grimes’, *The Borough*, pp. 233–37. See Crabbe, 2015, p. 90.



Figure 3. Job Bulman, Moot Hall and Market, Aldeburgh, c. 1769



Figure 4. Graves of Mary and George Crabbe, Aldeburgh churchyard

speculates in its online history that its building is on the site where the Crabbe family house stood – and it might well be, although the present bookshop owner acknowledges that this is hearsay.

But if the town has transformed, the landscape of marshes and mud flats, and the often-turbulent sea, are as the younger Crabbe described. The town is still the victim of regular floods, and coastal erosion remains a real threat.¹⁸ Walk a little way out along the banks of the river Alde towards Snape, across the marshes, and there is no doubt the same atmosphere of timelessness.

From his early days, as E.M. Forster highlighted, Crabbe had something of a love-hate relationship with his home town. In a letter of 1780, he called it a ‘little venal borough’,¹⁹ and in his early poem *The Village* (1793), he characterised the town’s inhabitants as a ‘bold, artful, surly, savage race’:

*Here joyless roam a wild, amphibious race,
With sullen woe displayed in every face;
Who far from civil arts and social fly,
And scowl at strangers with suspicious eye.*²⁰

For all that he had earlier professed his love of the ‘wild, wide Fen’, Crabbe was here inclined to depict his habitat as inhospitable. In his contrasting portrayals, veering between beauty and barren ugliness, one can glimpse his ambivalence – his changing feelings about the place that shaped him.

*Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,
Reign o’er the land and rob the blighted rye:
There thistles spread their prickly arms afar,
And to the ragged infants threaten war;
There poppies nodding, mock the hope of toil,
There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil;
Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf,
The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf; ...*²¹

¹⁸. Cf. Blake Morrison, *Shingle Street* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2015).

¹⁹. Letter to Lord Shelburne, June 1780. See Crabbe, *Life*, 1947 (1834), p. 68.

²⁰. *The Village*, Book I, 112, 85–88. See Crabbe, 2015, p. 7.

²¹. *Ibid*, 67–84.

Crabbe left Suffolk in 1805, after fifty years of returning to live in this place. But in his life and work, Aldeburgh and Suffolk remained all-pervasive, whether to alienate or attract. As Forster put it: 'Into the work of Crabbe there steals again and again the sea, the flat coast, the local meannesses, and an odour of brine and dirt – tempered occasionally with the scent of flowers.'²²

Crabbes in East Anglia: Too obscure to possess a history

Sheltered against the eastern wall of the parish church of St Peter and St Paul in Aldeburgh is a tall double gravestone. The sandstone is deeply weathered, its inscriptions almost obliterated.

The graves are those of Mary Crabbe (1725–80) and her husband George (1733–86), parents of the poet. They lived in Aldeburgh nearly all their lives, where George for many years was a warehouse keeper and tax collector at Slaughden Quay.

The tombstone is the only physical link to the Crabbes' lives in the seaside town three centuries ago. But the church itself evokes their son. The writer Ronald Blythe was aware of walking in the footsteps of Crabbe, the poet, and of time stretching back, as he wandered in the graveyard: 'I would study the lichen on [the] Church tower and on the drowned sailors' tombs [...] It was the exterior of Aldeburgh Church which spoke to Crabbe of immortality – those furry mosses, those botanically cancelled names'²³

Inside the church is the sole monument to the poet himself. It is a white marble bust carved in 1847 by the English sculptor Thomas Thurlow (1813–99), who created various church memorials in the locality of his birthplace, Saxmundham.

This posthumous marble portrait imagines Crabbe in the incongruous guise of an elite Roman – his expression pensive, his thinning hair closely cropped in contrast to thick eyebrows, and a toga-like garment draped around his shoulders. The relief carving on the bust's plinth depicts a lyre, an emblem of his poetic calling – and of his still-reverberating voice. Yet, in keeping with Aldeburgh's reluctance to celebrate its famous sons too loudly, the bust is tucked away in an almost-hidden corner of

²² Forster, 1941, p. 769.

²³ Ronald Blythe, *The Time by the Sea: Aldeburgh, 1955–58* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), pp. 14–16.



Figure 5. Bust of George Crabbe by Thomas Thurlow, Church of St Peter and St Paul, Aldeburgh

the north chapel and is easily missed. Appropriately, the famous stained glass window by John Piper, a tribute to Benjamin Britten, is directly opposite.

Aldeburgh churchgoers were once in the habit of paying homage to Crabbe's statue on Christmas Eve, the poet's birthday, by placing a laurel wreath around his brow for the midnight service – in the style of the garlanded bust of Sir Henry Wood at the Proms.²⁴

As for Crabbe's actual grave, it is far away: he is buried in the town of Trowbridge, Wiltshire, where as vicar he spent the last years of his life.

There were generations of Crabbes in East Anglia. But as one biographer has put it: 'Crabbe [the poet] belonged to a family which was too obscure to possess a history.'²⁵ A number of branches of the name can be traced to Norfolk and, according to Crabbe's son, 'seafaring places on the coast of Suffolk'. It seems probable, he writes, that the first person who assumed the name was a fisherman. Possibly one of the Crabbes of earlier generations was known as Crab and added the 'be' to give the name more dignity. But at any rate, he continues, the Crabbes of Norfolk were for generations 'in the station of farmers or wealth yeoman; and I doubt whether any of the race had even risen much above this sphere of life.'²⁶

How did the Crabbes come to Aldeburgh? The link with the quay at Slaughden went back a generation to the poet's grandfather Robert, who was a burgess of Aldborough, with full rights and citizenship of that borough, and (from 1732) a collector of customs at £60 a year.²⁷ Apparently a man of many talents and business skills, Robert ultimately rose to the acclaimed position of bailiff, or mayor, but less than a year after being elected, he died – in September 1734. His wife Rachel and baby George (the poet's father) were left in poverty. From an early age, the teenage boy had to earn his own living – first as the keeper of a parochial school in nearby Orford. 'In the porch of Orford church, [...]

²⁴ Nigel Hartley, 'Introduction', in *Aldeburgh Parish Church, St Peter and St Paul: A Guide* (Leiston: Leiston Press, 2014), p. 5.

²⁵ René Huchon, *George Crabbe and His Times, 1754–1832*, trans. Frederick Clarke (London: John Murray, 1907), p. 4.

²⁶ Crabbe, *Life*, 1947 (1834), p. 3.

²⁷ In 1720, Robert married a widow, Elizabeth Miller, and moved to her home town of Aldeburgh to make his living. She died within six months of their marriage. In 1729 he married a local girl, Rachel Syer. See Neil Powell, *George Crabbe: An English Life, 1754–1832* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 2; Huchon, 1907, pp. 5–6.

he assembled the “ragged lads” of the parish, sons of fishermen and of “men who heave coals or clean causeways”, and tried to teach them the catechism and reading.²⁸ (Crabbe’s biographer René Huchon here paraphrases from the poet’s own imagining of an unruly school in *The Borough*.)

George soon left Orford to live near other members of the family, at that time in the parish of Seething a few miles north of Bungay, acting as a schoolmaster and parish clerk. But before long he had moved back to Aldeburgh, where he gained a position as a warehouseman on Slaughden Quay. In time, he would rise to be chief Saltmaster – a collector of duties on £10 a year and a customs official like his father, Robert, before him.²⁹

The poet’s father George was a very young man, not quite twenty years old, when he settled in Aldeburgh. In February 1754, soon after his return, he married Mary Lodwick, the widow of a publican, who was eight years older than him. They went on to have six children, of whom George Crabbe, the future poet – born on 24 December that year – was the eldest.

With Crabbe’s father working on the quay, it was probably in Slaughden that the family started life. Nothing now remains of the Slaughden dwellings, washed away by storms and tides over the course of centuries. Still, the modest setting of Crabbe’s birth and childhood was critical in determining the spirit of much of his poetry. In the words of his biographer Neil Powell: ‘No English writer is more firmly associated with a specific town than Crabbe [...] it is ironic that his birthplace and his childhood home should be impossible to locate, demolished long ago and almost certainly now beneath the North Sea.’³⁰

²⁸. Huchon, 1907, p. 6, paraphrasing from ‘Letter XXIV’, *The Borough*. See Crabbe, *The Poetical Works of George Crabbe*, edited by A.J. Carlyle and R.M. Carlyle (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 206.

²⁹. As Powell notes, ‘there is a clear sense of George following in his father’s footsteps without ever managing quite to fill them’. Powell, 2004, p. 3.

³⁰. Powell, 2004, p. 4. The writer G.K. Chesterton well understood the significance of the small – the local – inspiring the bigger picture: ‘The vast Greek philosophy could fit easier into the small city of Athens than into the immense Empire of Persia. In the narrow streets of Florence Dante felt that there was room for Purgatory and Heaven and Hell. He would have been stifled by the British Empire. Great Empires are necessarily prosaic; for it is beyond human power to act a great poem on so great a scale. You can only represent very big ideas in very small spaces.’ Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007), p. 122.