

Introduction

A Local Habitation and a Name

Stand on the edge of the wide, windswept expanse of Aldeburgh marshes and look down the miles of estuary towards the sea; linger in the shadowed quiet of the nave of St Peter and St Paul with its irregular stone tiles; or pause by the Tudor Moot Hall – especially when surrounded by market stalls at carnival time – and you are in the Aldeburgh of George Crabbe.

Two and a half centuries on, the town is no longer the rough fishing borough that Crabbe knew. But elements remain – the landscape and the sea, a few of the buildings, and above all the spirit of the place.

George Crabbe (1754–1832), poet, clergyman and surgeon-apothecary, spent most of his life in Suffolk. If, as E.M. Forster said, to talk about Crabbe is to talk about England, it is particularly to talk about Suffolk and the coastal resort of Aldeburgh.¹ Crabbe was born and grew up there – the son of a collector of salt duties on what was Slaughden Quay, before that assortment of dwellings on the southern edge of the town was lost to successive tides.

Even when, later in life, he left his native county and moved inland – ultimately to the softer climes of Wiltshire (where he is buried at Trowbridge) – Aldeburgh and Suffolk remained as an unbroken thread through his writings, the flavour and piquancy that gave his poetry its hard, realistic edge.

¹ E.M. Forster, 'George Crabbe: The Poet and the Man', *The Listener*, Vol. 25, No. 646 (29 May 1941): p. 769.

Crabbe had a chequered start. On leaving school, he trained as an apothecary's assistant and surgeon, but the family had no funds to support his ambitions. He ended up rolling butter tubs for his father on Slaughden Quay. One day, at a gloomy spot in Aldeburgh then known as the Leech Pond, he decided to head for London and try his luck as a poet. There, by good fortune, he persuaded the statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–97) to be his patron. It was Burke, too, who encouraged the young Crabbe into the church. A succession of curacies in villages of Leicestershire and Suffolk followed.

But the east coast always stayed with him. As Forster put it: 'there is one other thing about him that we must bear in our minds: his feeling for the scenes of his childhood, for the coast of Suffolk, for the wind-bitten town of Aldborough. He is one of the poets who are never able to escape from their own particular corner of England, however far they travel and however much they read.'²

Crabbe's works were consistently gritty – their depictions of destitution and madness often visceral, in contrast to much of the work of the Romantic poets who were his contemporaries. One critic of the day even described his verse as 'disgusting'.³ Yet it was Crabbe's writing, in particular his poem about the brutal fisherman Peter Grimes who murdered his boy apprentices, that inspired Benjamin Britten's 1945 opera of that name – placing Britten on the world stage, and by association George Crabbe.

Britten is by far the bigger name, the louder voice, of the two men. But both, outsiders in their own ways, were rooted in the Suffolk coastal landscape. Britten had acquired the Old Mill 'in a quaint old village called Snape' in 1937.⁴ When he first discovered Crabbe in the summer of 1941, the composer was in California. Four years later, he wrote: '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.'⁵

² E.M. Forster, 'Introduction', in George Crabbe, *The Life of George Crabbe by his Son* (London: Oxford University Press, World Classics, 1932), p. xviii.

³ Francis Jeffrey, 'The Borough: A Poem, in Twenty-four Letters', *The Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 16, No. 31 (April 1810): p. 36.

⁴ Benjamin Britten, letter to Nell Burra, 14 July 1937. See Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (eds.), *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976, Volume One, 1923–39* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 495.

⁵ Benjamin Britten, Introduction to Sadler's Wells Opera Guide, *Peter Grimes* (London: John Lane; The Bodley Head, 1945), p. 7.



Figure 1. E.M. Forster on Aldeburgh Beach with Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten, 1949

Crabbe, Britten and other writers and artists – from Thomas Hardy to Ronald Blythe, M.R. James to Susan Hill, and W.G. Sebald to Maggi Hambling with her striking steel sculpture, *Scallop*, on Aldeburgh beach – have been inspired by the place. It has reverberated. And it was just this affinity for Aldeburgh and its environs – first Crabbe’s and then Britten’s – that fascinated Forster.⁶ The landscape, he proposed in a lecture at the first Aldeburgh Festival in 1948, offers a way of looking backwards in time, into both historical and fictional pasts:

It is with this estuary of the Alde that we are mainly concerned today. It is here, and not on the open sea or the sea-front, that the action of the poem of ‘Peter Grimes’ takes place. There used to be a little port on the estuary, Slaughden Quay. It was important in Crabbe’s day, and was well defined even in my own earlier visits to the district. It is now battered and derelict, and the sea may wash across into it at the next great storm. Here Crabbe worked as a boy, rolling casks of butter about, and much he hated it. Hence Peter Grimes set out to fish. The

⁶. See Judith Herz, *The Short Narratives of E.M. Forster* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 138.

prospect from Slaughden, despite desolation and menace, is romantic. At low tide the great mud flats stretch. At high tide the whole area is a swirl of many-coloured waters. At all times there are birds and low woodlands on the further bank, and, to the north, Aldeburgh sheltering among a few trees, and still just managing to dominate her fate.

I wanted to evoke these sombre and touching scenes as best I could, in order to give a local habitation and a name to what follows. Crabbe without Aldeburgh, Peter Grimes without the estuary of the Alde, would lose their savour and tang.⁷

In other words, Aldeburgh is one of those places that Iain Finlayson, the author and journalist, writing of Tangier, calls ‘more a place of the mind than a place in the world; it is an atmosphere rather than a location’.⁸ On the cusp of the Mediterranean, poised between Africa and Europe, Tangier has provided both muse and mooring for a wide range of writers (including Samuel Pepys, Alexandre Dumas, Mark Twain, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams). Aldeburgh – perched on one of the easternmost edges of England – has, in its own understated way, inspired writers, artists and musicians. Its singular atmosphere permeates their works – and their works, in turn, define the town as ‘a place of the mind’.

Aldeburgh made Crabbe, but his relationship with the town was always ambivalent. In his introduction to the 1932 edition of *The Life of George Crabbe by His Son*, Forster put it more strongly:

He hated Aldborough, ‘where guilt and famine reign’, where his queer rough father had made him roll casks on the quay, where, later on, he had practised as an unqualified surgeon

⁷ E.M. Forster, ‘George Crabbe and Peter Grimes’, a lecture given at the Aldeburgh Festival, 7 June 1948. See E.M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1972), p. 167. Forster alludes to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1:

*And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.*

⁸ Iain Finlayson, ‘A City of the Dream’, *IB Tauris Blog*, 5 December 2014: <https://theibtaurisblog.com/2014/12/05/tangier-last-resort-of-the-living-dead/>.

and an unwelcomed curate. He compares himself to a swallow, who migrates from the cruel east coast to a happier land. Yet Aldborough dominates his work; it is not only *The Village* and *The Borough* and the parish of *The Parish Register*, but it inserts itself into later poems, and reappears among the quiet inland parsonages and ducal seats of Leicestershire.⁹

Suffolk's influence on Crabbe was not confined to Aldeburgh, however. He spent years in nearby Parham, Glemham and Rendham – some of the happiest of his life. Wandering in the 'green lanes' of these inland villages, he could indulge his passion for botany and insects and absorb the natural habitat. Landscape, for him, was not just a backdrop; it became integral to his characters, often reflecting their states of mind.

Here, for instance, is an autumnal scene that greets a doomed lover looking out from his window:

*Before him swallows, gathering for the sea,
Took their short flights, and twittered on the lea;
And near the bean-sheaf stood, the harvest done,
And slowly blackened in the sickly sun;
All these were sad in nature, or they took
Sadness from him, the likeness of his look,
And of his mind – he pondered for a while,
Then met his Fanny with a borrowed smile.¹⁰*

'Surely the most telling impression of the time and the place in our verse', wrote the poet and critic Edmund Blunden in 1947 of this passage, 'perhaps the most ably displayed scene in the poetry of landscape. Yet before the poem's end Crabbe has turned away from that outward scene and acknowledged that his thought had been as much upon the state of mind of his unfortunate hero – the psychological landscape.'¹¹

⁹ Forster, 1932, pp. xviii-xix. Variant spelling has been retained here and in other quotations.

¹⁰ 'Delay has Danger', Book XIII, *Tales of the Hall*, 717–24. See George Crabbe, *Selected Poems*, edited by Gavin Edwards (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), p. 433.

¹¹ Edmund Blunden, 'Father and Son', in George Crabbe, *The Life of George Crabbe by his Son* (London: Cresset Press, 1947, originally published 1834), p. xviii.

This book is not just about the facts of Crabbe's life – fascinating though these are. Nor is it intended as a comprehensive biography – they already exist, notably the moving account by the poet's son, also George, published in 1834, that by René Huchon in 1907, and more recently the authoritative life by Neil Powell in 2004. While delving into Crabbe's writings, the book does not attempt an extensive analysis, nor an assessment of Crabbe's place in the canon of English literature.

Rather, it traces the literal and psychological landscapes (to borrow Blunden's phrase) of Crabbe's life – above all, the formative landscape of his earliest years. But the book also looks to events and places away from Suffolk. While Crabbe returned continually to the county of his birth, the map of his life was diverse: Georgian London, rural Leicestershire, later-life dalliances in the west country and pulpit preaching in various settings are all part of that bigger picture. Crabbe's fluctuating fortunes and experiences – the times of his life – offer a foil for the place that was a point of return.

The biography of his son, George, sets the framework for much of what follows. His is the first in a sequence of retellings of Crabbe and his world, whether Forster's lecture or more recent events in Aldeburgh such as the 2013 staging of Britten's *Peter Grimes* on the beach. This book combines the insights of previous biographers with Crabbe's own verses and letters to form a kind of anthology – spanning creative struggle, religious faith, romantic love and opium addiction.

As Crabbe did, the book ventures far beyond the confines of Suffolk – but it comes back, like the poet, to the place that shaped him. It seeks to capture the 'then' of Crabbe's life through the 'now' of Aldeburgh and its surroundings today – through the buildings surviving from Crabbe's lifetime, the monuments that stand to him, and most of all, the landscapes and seascapes he would have recognised. It sets the poet – even at his most cosmopolitan – in the context of the 'local habitation' that gave his poems their 'savour and tang'. And it traces the resonance of the place through the works of writers and artists who have been drawn to this once 'little venal borough' and its landscape beyond.¹²

Aldeburgh 2021

¹² George Crabbe, letter to Lord Shelburne, June 1780. See Crabbe, *Life*, 1947 (1834), p. 68.