
HORSHAM AND DISTRICT'S GREATEST POET

Percy Bysshe Shelley



HORSHAM DISTRICT
**YEAR OF
CULTURE**
2019



Help yourself to this free booklet that tells of his boyhood years in Warnham and gives a brief outline of some of the events in the rest of his short and eventful life. It may also be download from our website: horshamwriters.co.uk

On the **4th August 1792**: Percy Bysshe Shelley was born at his family's home, Field Place, a large country house near Warnham village. He was baptised at Warnham Church where his christening records may still be found.

His life was cut tragically and dramatically short - he drowned on **8th July 1822**, just a month before reaching the age of 30, in a boating accident off the west coast of Italy.

Without doubt Shelley is Horsham and District's most famous and important writer. His poetry ranks alongside that of some of the greatest poets of the English language. His influence has been enormous in the two hundred or so years since he started to write. He was also a radical whose views got him expelled from university, saw several of his publications made illegal for sedition and led to him spending his last six years of life in self-imposed exile.

So let's start with a couple of what-ifs.

1. What if he'd lived the sort of life society expected instead of the bohemian and rebellious one that he followed?

Shelley spent most of those last years in Italy. Life for him back in England would have become difficult - and because of his political and religious views, dangerous, perhaps. Also there was the problem of his first wife, Harriet, and the two children he had left there after he ran away with Mary Wollstonecroft Godwin (who later became Mary Shelley). Harriet went on to commit suicide. The English courts would not even allow Shelley to take custody of his two children by her because they thought his views and life style were not acceptable for the bringing up of children.

He had been disowned and disinherited by his father, Sir Timothy Shelley, for refusing to compromise on his views. In his early 20's he lived in virtual poverty and was constantly in debt. But then his enormously rich grandfather

Baron Bysshe Shelley died and the inheritance, although prudently held as a relatively modest fixed income (his grandfather knew well Shelley's impulsive and generous nature) provided him with enough to live on comfortably. So Shelley was able to move around, renting in various places in Europe, mainly in Italy, and to end up in the final year of his life, in an out-of-the way converted boathouse (The Casa Magni) on the Italian coast near Pisa, with his 'partner', Mary, their children and close friends. Lord Byron, then the world's most famous writer, lived only a few miles away.

It was during these years abroad that he wrote some of his most beautiful and exciting poems and where he had the ill-fated boat built for him to his (deadly) specifications.

A more conventional Percy Bysshe Shelley's life would have followed a more expected course. He would have gone from Eton to Oxford, perhaps taken qualifications in law, become an MP like his father, then moved on to the family baronetcy, spending his later years in his castle near Worthing. He might have observed, but contributed little to the political, economic and technological changes of the times. And he would have lived the extremely comfortable and privileged life of a true blue aristocrat.

But our boy from Horsham rarely did what was expected of him, as you'll find out from the amazing life story briefly outlined in this booklet.

2. What if the boat in which he was sailing hadn't been capsized in that storm?

Would he have gone on to produce more poetry? Shelley suggested around the time of his death that he wanted to write more about his ideas. He implied that poetry perhaps wasn't the best way to get them across. He'd already written and had published many pamphlets and booklets to present those ideas. Perhaps he thought that was the way forward if he wanted to change the world. But he was still writing poetry on the day he died - working on a long poem, *The Triumph of Life*.

We have much (perhaps most) of his writing from when he was a schoolboy up until his death - much of it lovingly collated by his widowed second wife, Mary Shelley (the author of *Frankenstein*). But his fame largely comes from her efforts. He was not very famous during his lifetime.

Although a key member of a circle of celebrated literary figures of the time - he was a friend of Byron and Keats, well acquainted with Wordsworth and Coleridge, Southey and Thomas Love Peacock, all of whom discussed and supported his writing - Shelley did not become well known with the public until later in the 19th Century. And that was largely through a selection of his more 'tasteful' poetry although an early, illegally-published long poem written at the age of 20 (*Queen Mab*) became the 'bible' of the Chartist movement of the 1830's and '40's and was certainly significant in the developing early socialist movements. Among many other things, it championed universal suffrage and social reform.

That late 19th Century popularity dipped, however, and remained quite low for much of the 20th Century. Shelley's writing was rather dismissed in university circles and academic commentary right up to the 1970's. T S Eliot, for example, claimed that he was 'unreadable' and '...the poet of adolescence.' F R Leavis, the Professor of English at Cambridge, and editor of the influential literary magazine *Scrutiny*, was a figure who dominated literary criticism for much of the 20th Century. Leavis suggested that Shelley 'had a weak grasp upon the actual', who 'switched off his intelligence when he wrote', and that his imagery was 'confused'.

But if Shelley had lived and continued to produce writing of the quality of his last half a dozen years, much of his youthful work would have been forgotten. What then for his reputation?

So what sort of family background did Shelley come from? And was it Horsham and District that shaped his unique creative talents?

Let's start with his family:

Percy Bysshe Shelley's grandfather was Sir Bysshe Shelley, First Baronet of Castle Goring (1731 - 1815). Born in America, where his part of the family had emigrated early in the 18th Century, he returned to England, to Field Place, Percy Shelley's birthplace, as mentioned above. Already quite well off, Sir Bysshe became enormously wealthy. He managed this, we are told, firstly by eloping with a wealthy heiress, and then, after she died, eloping with an even wealthier one. He became involved with politics - supporting the Duke of Norfolk (of Arundel Castle fame) a man who controlled a large bloc of Whigs (Liberals) in the House of Commons and did so by buying up election votes in 'rotten boroughs'. For his 'political services' Sir Bysshe was made a baronet in 1806.

Sir Bysshe Shelley seems to have been an extremely strong-minded, overbearing man and his grandson, according to comments in a couple of letters, rather despised him. The feeling may well have been mutual. He had a grand castle built (Castle Goring near Worthing) to be the family seat (although he seems to have spent much of his time in the considerably smaller, and less draughty, Arun House, which can be found at the far end of Denne Road in Horsham).

Shelley's father (Sir Timothy Shelley - 1753 - 1844) was said to be serious-minded and somewhat reserved. He became Horsham's MP in 1790 (although the results of this election were overturned - some say by some Tory procedural sculduggery - two years later). He had stood for (limited) political reform and the abolishment of slavery (which, incidentally, was a popular cause in Horsham at the time). Despite this hiccup he went on to become MP for Shoreham in 1806, again in 1807, again in 1812, and then continuously represented the seat until 1818 when he retired from politics.

This world of politics that surrounded the young Percy as he grew up, as well as the momentous events of the time, must have contributed greatly to the development of the young poet's ideas.

Shelley's mother, Elizabeth Pitfold, came from a Sussex landowning family. Her brother, John, who lived in Cuckfield, and who later tried to help young Percy with some of the problems he had with his father, actually captained a ship at the Battle of Trafalgar (1805).

And what do we know of his upbringing?

We know that the family's connection to the area and the town of Horsham was strong. Today the family vault containing Shelley's father, mother and grandfather may be seen in St Mary's Church at the foot of The Causeway, off the Carfax.

However, it was another place of worship, Warnham Church, a couple of miles away from Field Place, that was more important in Shelley's early life. From the age of about six, Shelley went there daily to be taught by its curate - the Reverend Evan 'Taffy' Edwards (who, incidentally, Shelley considered his only effective tutor, ever). He studied Greek and Latin with him. Shelley was receptive, quick-witted and enjoyed his studies, we are told. He showed a sharp and retentive brain. His mother, for example, is known to have been very proud at Shelley's phenomenal memory - he apparently memorised by heart the whole of the poem '*Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat Drowned in a Bowl of Gold Fishes*' by Thomas Gray (some 42 lines) having read it only once.

The young Shelley was a tall, somewhat gangly boy, with a fair and ruddy complexion, curly, unkempt brown hair, large and prominent blue eyes, and a rather squeaky voice.

We are told that he loved the outdoors and spent much of his time over at Warnham Mill Pond (now part of the Nature Reserve) where his father had a small boat. His love of the water, and of sailing, probably originated there.

Quite a bit is known about his childhood through writings by his cousin and childhood friend, Thomas Medwin (*Memoir of Shelley* - 1832, and a biography in 1845), as well as letters and other writing from his sister Helen, and his university friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg (*The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* - 1858). He seems to have had a happy time of it - and with his infectious enthusiasms and his humour it is said that he was loved by all, including the servants. Although perhaps, being surrounded by three sisters and a doting mother, he may also have been quite spoilt. His sister, Hellen, wrote about his sense of fun and adventure and of his story-telling. She told of how he would terrify his sisters with stories of 'The Great Tortoise that lived in Warnham Pond' who would come out at night and wander the surrounding area, and of a giant snake (rather than a dragon) that roamed St Leonard's Forest, as well as of a mysterious 'alchemist' who lived in a hidden room upstairs in their attic.

Gothic horror and mystery tales were all the rage in the early 19th Century and Shelley had actually written and published two such novels by the time he was 18.

His desire to learn was profound. There are accounts of how, at the age of 10, in 1802, soon after he started boarding school at Syon House College, Isleworth, he attended lectures on science. Returning home one holiday with a 'frictional machine' (a type of electrical generator) and full of excitement about the potential properties of this source of energy, this 'life force', he attempted to cure the chilblains on his sisters' toes by passing electric currents through them. We don't know if his treatment was successful! At Eton, a couple of years later, he was known to have attached wires from the machine to his door handle and literally shocked any unsuspecting visitors, both pupils and masters, to his room. Science became hugely important to him - and was to play a significant part in the development of his ideas and imagination. In his last term at Eton he is said to have blown up a large tree in front of the school with gunpowder.

Shelley was living at a time of massive and exciting scientific discovery, too, all of which he was most interested in. The names of many of the scientists of the time are still referred to today - in chemistry (Lavoisier, Dalton, Priestly), physics (Volta, Benjamin Franklin, Ohm) astronomy (Herschel) medicine (Jenner) natural history (Lamark - and many others - this was an extraordinarily fertile time for 'biology' as it came to be known a few years later) and, of course, engineering (the steam engine that heralding the industrial revolution, was now altering the landscape of the country and the occupations of most people).

Another very important part of Shelley's developing intellectual awareness came from the social and political upheavals of the time (he was actually born during the weeks of The Terror in France). Republicanism, even in England, was rife, and the war that followed the French Revolution, and then again, against Napoleon's France, continued right up to 1815. They were wars that changed the course of history. Despite the loss of the American colonies a few years earlier, it was a time of huge expansion of Britain's global influence and of the colonisation that would create the British Empire.

The world was changing. In his pamphlets and in his poems Shelley wrote about the horrors of war, the huge disparity between rich and poor, the importance of free speech, the rights of people. He went further than many at the time who held liberal ideas about these issues, too. He wrote about the inequality between the sexes (he intended, we are told, if ever he took on his inheritance, to share it with all of his sisters and younger brother), the massive constraints of the social order, the joylessness of contemporary marriage, the way society and, for Shelley, most importantly, religion, controls and limits thinking.

This was The Age of Reason one of those moments in history when all the old certainties were challenged, when there was a feeling in the air that the world could change for the better. It was like 1968 and the hippies with new art and music, with its sense of a new freedom, a new moral order, and new

inventions - rockets to the moon - but that sense of change in the early 19th Century, was on an even grander scale.

Shelley left Syon House and arrived in Eton in September 1804, where he immediately challenged tradition. He refused 'fagging' - the requirement of younger pupils to act as servants to older boys - and for this, as well as his other views, and his rather wild appearance and manner, he was seen as odd ('Mad Shelley'). He suffered being bullied, regularly and quite systematically in his early years there, according to some accounts. But his experiences at Eton seem to have been very significant for the development of his ideas. For he identified there, from the way he was treated and taught, and in the attitudes and values of many of the pupils, something of the injustice of British society, the wrongs of its politics and its social conventions, its huge disparities of wealth and opportunities, and its stifling religious conformity.

What about back home? Would Shelley become too grand for the small, provincial town of Horsham and its surrounding villages? In 1809, towards the end of his time at Eton, he commented about his home, referring, in a letter, to Field Place as a place to get away from it all, "*a temple of solitude*". But is that a kind of oxymoron? While it was a place to value for its calmness, was it also a place where he felt isolated and lonely there? Perhaps he wanted more action in his life. It seems he thought of Horsham as a bit of a backwater, too. He complained in the same letter that Horsham was not exactly a place of rock'n roll, or, as he put it - "*Dissipation and Pleasure are stagnant in Horsham and after a few balls ill-attended everything is now silent.*" (They might use different words, perhaps, but I'm sure you can think of a 16 or 17 year-old Horshammer who would share similar sentiments about the place today.)

Despite all this, he was, at Eton, an excellent scholar - translating, for example, from the Latin, half of Pliny's 'Natural History' - a massive work in many volumes that covered all that was known in classical times about botony, zoology, astronomy and geology.

A less studious aspect of his developing personality was displayed some time around 1808, when he was just 16. He fell madly in love with a cousin, Harriet Grove, even getting her to call him Percy (as he was later to do with those who were close with him - perhaps a signal that he wanted to break from his family and its name). Then, early in 1810, his impulsive and somewhat reckless self took hold. He sent her a copy of a long poem he'd written, '*The Wandering Jew*' (the story of a Jew who, rejecting Jesus, became destined to wander the world, an outcast). This outsider was clearly a character he identified with. Harriet's rather pious, anglican family didn't approve of its content, and, given Shelley's track record of ideas, this was the final straw (although Shelley wouldn't have mixed his metaphors like I just have!). They forced the relationship to an abrupt end.

So it was a heart-broken Percy Bysshe Shelley who went up to Oxford University on 10th April 1810. A short poem he wrote just after he started there began - 'Oh wretched mortal, hard thy fate!' And it ended - 'The lover is the vilest slave.'

Of course, being Shelley, he quickly moved on. In the college dining hall, some time during his first weeks, he met up with a young man named Thomas Jefferson Hogg - a figure who was going to be quite significant in his life.

Shelley was already making his name as a writer. Two novels of his were published at this time (the first, *Zastrozzi*, written while at Eton, the second, *St Irvyne or, the Rosicrucian*, written just prior to coming to Oxford). As well as these remarkable, precocious publications he had already co-authored a book of poetry with his sister, Elizabeth, - '*Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*' (which, incidentally, contained several exuberant love poems addressed to Harriet Grove).

His father, Sir Timothy, actively helped these literary ambitions. He proudly, but somewhat patronisingly, announced to the publisher in 1810:

“My son here has a literary turn, he is already an author, and do pray indulge him in his printing freaks.”

Sir Timothy was soon to regret it.

Was Percy Bysshe Shelley a good student at Oxford?

Well, he is said to have attended only one lecture while there and spent most of his time in his rooms. Just like a typical arts degree student of today, then? But being one who had no day-time tele to watch he had to do something else with his time. It seems Shelley had lots of interests. He certainly wrote a fair bit, as we'll soon find out. He read copiously. His mind seems always to have been darting from one thing to another. His room in the College is described here by his new-found friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, and the description suggests quite a lot about his Shelley's interests and habits :

“Books, boots, papers, shoes, philosophical instruments, clothes, pistols, linen, crockery, ammunition, and phials innumerable, with money, stockings, prints, crucibles, bags, and boxes were scattered on the floor and in every place. . . . The tables, and especially the carpet, were already stained with large spots of various hues, which frequently proclaimed the agency of fire. An electrical machine, an air pump, the galvanic trough, a solar microscope, and large glass jars and receivers, were conspicuous amidst the mass of matter.”

So he didn't tidy up much either!

During the Christmas vacation of 1810/1811 back with his family at Field Place it seems Shelley had some major arguments with his father about religion. Perhaps as a result of this he returned to Oxford having written a long pamphlet entitled '*The Necessity of Atheism*', which he then had published and distributed around the town. In it he argues that there can be no proof of the existence of a deity by physical evidence or reason, and that religious belief prevents both reasoned expression and rational thinking. Hence atheism is 'necessary'. He uses arguments from philosophers like John Locke and David Hume and William Godwin (who would later become his

father-in-law). The views expressed were not hugely controversial in the intellectual world of the time, but the bravado with which they were presented certainly ruffled feathers. The booklet ended with a QED, for example, provocatively suggesting that all the points made were obvious. He is said to have placed copies in the front windows of local bookshops himself as well as sending some to various heads of colleges, bishops and clergymen. University College's reputation was being attacked.

There were other publications, that he wrote and had published in those weeks, too, that caused the authorities consternation. One was '*Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*' - a collection of poems which Shelley mischievously claimed were penned by the poor woman herself (now in Bethlehem Asylum [Bedlam]). Margaret Nicholson was a woman who had attacked King George (although rather feebly and unthreateningly) with a knife. The poems both satirise and criticise the monarchy and the system of government for its corruption and anti-democratic activities. Another was a book, published anonymously, but announcing that it had been 'written by a gentleman of the University Of Oxford'. It was called, grandly - "*A Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things*". On its cover was written "*For Assisting to maintain in prison, Mr Peter Finnerty, imprisoned for libel*" - Finnerty was a journalist who had been imprisoned for supposedly libelling Castlereagh, the foreign secretary, for his conduct in the war against France. It was a 172 line poem, and it was vehemently anti-monarchist and opposed to the abuses of wealth. It was advertised in the *Oxford University and City Herald* for 9 March 1811 as '*Just Published, Price Two Shillings*'. Both of these items would be easily traceable to the pen of Shelley.

The University authorities felt they needed to do something. They told him to immediately retract his atheistic views or face expulsion.

He refused and was 'sent-down' in 25th March 1811.

After being expelled - along with his friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who shared responsibility for these publications - Shelley found lodgings in

London. Nor would he apologise for his actions to his father, who immediately took away his allowance. (Hogg did rather better with his own parents by promising, as punishment, to work in his father's office - conveyancing - for a year). Now, without money, Shelley went to see Leigh Hunt, perhaps the most influential journalist figure in the country at the time. Leigh Hunt was sympathetic, giving him advice and also giving him some like-minded contacts in London. He decided to seek help from his uncle (Captain John Pitfold) in Cuckfield back in West Sussex. With his uncle (and mother's) support he returned to Field Place - where he confronted his father who, while refusing to have him back home, grudgingly offered £200 per annum allowance (equivalent to about £18,000 today).

Shelley only received the first £50 quarterly payment. The promise of the rest of the allowance was revoked when, a couple of months later, his father heard of his son's next major indiscretion.

On 28th August 1811, and just 19 years of age, Shelley eloped with 16 year-old Harriet Westbrook. The couple got married in Edinburgh.

This was a different Harriet from the previous Miss Harriet Grove, though. This Harriet was a school friend of Shelley's sisters. She was the sixteen year-old daughter of a well-off coffee importer but, clearly, would have been considered as well below Shelley's social status by his family.

In September 1811, the couple moved to York.

In October 1811, Shelley returned to Cuckfield and Captain Pilfold who tried to help him get back in his father's favour. Without success.

This was to be the very last recorded time that Shelley came to the district.

Now, for those readers who have picked up this booklet to find out about Shelley and his time in Horsham and District, you should stop reading

here. The rest of the booklet is an attempt to provide a brief, 'though somewhat note-formy, account of some of the events that took place during the rest of Shelley's turbulent life.

November 1811: Shelley returned to Harriet in Keswick (where she had moved and joined by her much older, thirty-something, sister Eliza, who considerably disapproved of Percy) only to discover that his university friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, had been making strenuous advances on Harriet. Eliza had probably gone there to protect her younger sister from Hogg's amorous aspirations! The friendship between the two young men (temporarily) was damaged. However, in the Lake District Shelley found friendship with Robert Southey (a famous Romantic poet of the time, and who, in 1813, became Poet Laureate). Southey was very supportive - but Shelley soon found some his views old-fashioned and too conventional and moved on.

1812 - 1813

January 1812: Shelley started correspondence with William Godwin, a political philosopher and famous liberal radical (and the husband of the famous Mary Wollstonecraft - author of the (now celebrated) feminist treatise '*The Rights of Women*'). Mary had died in 1797, giving birth to a daughter - Mary Godwin - the couple's daughter who was to become Shelley's future partner and wife.

February - April 1812: Shelley went to Ireland where he distributed two pamphlets his: '*Address to the Irish People*' and '*Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists*'. He also made a number of speeches arguing for a repeal of the Act of Union with Ireland and for Catholic Emancipation.

April - May 1812: The couple found lodgings in Nantqwillt, in mid-Wales, then Cwm Elan north of Cardiff. Having little money, and being constantly forced into further debt, they found themselves having to move quite often during this period! There is a story that they were told to leave one of their lodgings after an explosion (Shelley had been trying out some scientific experiments).

June 1812: They moved to Lynmouth - where Shelley with his servant, Daniel Healey, distributed '*A Declaration of Rights*' - but Daniel was arrested for the

distribution of these (seditious) pamphlets and sent to prison for six months. Shelley was not prosecuted, as might have been expected (but was to be watched by the authorities).

October 1812: The couple moved to Tremedoc in North west Wales. From there Shelley went to meet William Godwin the political philosopher (mentioned above) for the first time.

December: 1812: Shelley spent some time with John Frank Newton - a well-known campaigner for various causes and writer of *'The Return to Nature, or a Defence of the Vegetable Regimen'* (1811) - and becomes a convinced vegetarian (then called a Pythagorean or 'follower of the natural diet'). Newton also practiced 'air-nudism' - though it's not known if Shelley took to this activity!

February 1813: it is reported that Shelley 'grappled with' a nocturnal assailant (a government agent? a local burglar? a disgruntled neighbour? perhaps a landlord wanting rent - Shelley had accumulated lots of debts - or a figment of Shelley's imagination?) shots were fired by both parties, it is said.

Shelley returned to Ireland for a couple of months. He completed his first major poetical work (*'Queen Mab'*). It was a very radical piece of writing. Recognising the danger of producing such a publication, he tried to ensure that it was kept as a private publication. Shelley wrote to his publisher: *'Let only 250 copies be printed. A small neat quarto on fine paper & so to catch the aristocrats: They will not read it but their sons and daughters may'*. It took up Godwin's ideas of 'necessity' i.e. that society and people must change for the better and people would realise that a better world could be achieved - but it stresses that violent revolution (as in France) would not achieve it.

The poem tells of how Queen Mab, ruler of the fairies, takes the spirit of Ianthe (the name of Shelley's first child) on a journey through time and space to reveal various human follies and errors. The poem is appended with 17 prose notes with essays on such topics as free love, atheism, republicanism and vegetarianism. By the 1830's *Queen Mab* had become known as the 'bible' for the Chartist movement - a working class movement that demanded universal suffrage, improved working conditions etc. It was a precursor of British socialism.

June 1813. First child born to Harriet and Shelley - Eliza Ianthe Shelley.

1814 - 1816

July 1814 - Shelley eloped with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. The couple ran away to France and on to Switzerland (Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, went along with them. One reason given is that she could speak French better than the others, but it is also suggested that she was in love with Shelley, too). The trip was a disaster - France was in ruins - Napoleon had been defeated and was in exile in Elba - this was a year before his return and the Battle of Waterloo. A bunch of English visitors would hardly have been welcomed warmly. The group could not afford decent transport or lodgings and they returned to England after several weeks.

November 1814 - a second child was born to Harriet - Charles Shelley.

January 1815 - Financial respite. Shelley had accumulated huge debts by now, and had responsibilities for Harriet and their children, as well as Mary (whose father, William Godwin, was enraged by the elopement and refused to help out). Shelley's grandfather, Sir Bysshe Shelley, died. Provisions in his will forced Sir Timothy to grant Percy an annual income (£1000 per year, paid quarterly) and a sum that enabled him to pay off most of his debts. However, perhaps recognising Shelley's spendthrift and often over-generous, impulsive nature, his grandfather demanded he was not paid all in one go (£1000 a year is the equivalent of about £80,000 today!)

There are different accounts of Shelley's treatment of Harriet and his children. A few suggest that he virtually abandoned them. Others suggest he provided an allowance - £100 or £200 per annum (which would have reduced his own income quite significantly) and - depending on whose account of the events you believe - that, combined with £200 per annum from Harriet's wealthy father, the totals would make her income the equivalent of either £24,000 or £32,000 today. While Shelley remained in England, it is thought that he met up with Harriet and the children occasionally, even trying to get them to join him and Mary.

Now with a steady income, Percy Bysshe Shelley could concentrate on his writing. In late 1815, while living in a cottage in Bishopsgate, Surrey, he wrote '*Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude*'. Critics consider it to be his first major work.

However, up popped Thomas Jefferson Hogg again, and, as with Harriet in 1812, he attempted to seduce Mary. Indeed, there may well have been reciprocation. At around the same time, there also might have been some intimacy between Shelley and Mary's sister, Claire. Thomas Jefferson Hogg is going to pop up again at the end of our story!

January 1816: a son, Shelley's son, William, is born to Mary.

Spring of 1816: Shelley and Mary travelled to Switzerland to meet the renowned poet, Lord George Gordon Byron. The story is that they had been urged, even pushed into it, by Claire Clairmont, Mary's half sister. Claire, with her ambitions to act and to write, had already had something of a romantic relationship with Byron and wished to be with him again. Later, she was to bear his child, Allegra - born in Bath in January 1817.

Very quickly, the two poets (Shelley and Byron) who lived in neighbouring houses on the shores of Lake Geneva, became close friends. The group - Mary, Shelley, Claire and Byron - began to spend a lot of time together, reading and talking. And sailing.

Influenced by Byron, Shelley also wrote a number of poems. Among them perhaps the most important was '*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*.' Critics consider it to be his first major work after '*Alastor*.' The beautiful and profound response to elemental nature '*Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni*', was also written during this period.

And it was here, in 1816, by the shores of Lake Geneva, in this intense, exciting, challenging time for these young idealistic writers who and so very much believed that they might improve the world, that Mary wrote the celebrated novel *Frankenstein*. Shelley helped edit it, and, of course, many believe he contributed to it, although there is no actual evidence that he did. Certainly one can see ideas about science, about the hope for humanity, about the intolerance of man and the ignorance of society, and even the benefits of a vegetarian diet (Frankenstein's sensitive and kind-hearted monster was a vegetarian!) but these are ideas that the Shelley and Mary both shared and developed together.

November 1816: Harriet committed suicide. She had taken lodgings near Hyde Park, went into the Park and drowned herself in the Serpentine. The report in the Times of 12th December 1816:

On Tuesday a respectable female, far advanced in pregnancy, was taken out of the Serpentine river and brought to her residence in Queen Street, Brompton, having been missed for nearly six weeks. She had a valuable ring on her finger. A want of honour in her own conduct is supposed to have led to this fatal catastrophe, her husband being abroad.

One story is that she had taken as a lover an army officer who, after being sent abroad, did not write to her. The story goes that a previous landlady (who no doubt was aware of her 'scandalous' behaviour with the officer while staying with her) had not passed on his letters to her and she felt abandoned. She was heavily pregnant (some say by the officer, some say by Shelley himself) and just 21 years of age. Her father never forgave Shelley for having abandoned her.

Shelley and Mary returned to England, taking up residence in Marlow, Buckinghamshire.

30 December 1816, only two weeks after Harriet's body had been removed from the Serpentine, Shelley and Mary were married in the Church of St. Mildred.

Now Mary's father, William Godwin, who had been estranged from her daughter since the elopement, accepted them both. But there was also the issue of Harriet and Shelley's two children. Was custody the main reason for their return and their hasty marriage? Were they attempting to make themselves 'respectable'? However, the adoption of the two children had been challenged in law by Harriet's parents - and the case was taken to court, both parties claiming custody. Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, ruled against both the Westbrooks and the Shelleys - Shelley's 'principles' he said, had lead to 'conduct ... that was ... immoral and vicious'. Shelley arranged for the children's adoption.

Some suggest he simply left them to their fate with their new adoptive parents. Most biographers say that Shelley contributed financially to their support. The events surrounding all of this certainly have stirred heated opinions since. A number of letters from those involved - many since proven to be forgeries - suggest indifferent, even cruel behaviour, on Shelley's part. So even today there are those who see him as cold-hearted and hypocritical.

In Marlow, however, Mary and Shelley began socialising again with Leigh Hunt (see 1811). The couple were introduced to many of the literary celebrities of the time - famous writers such as Thomas Love Peacock, John Keats, and William Hazlitt.

1817 - 1821

Shelley's best known work of this period was '*Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City*.' It was a long narrative poem, in which he attacked religion. It was first published in 1817, but was hastily withdrawn. Later in 1818, it was revised and republished as '*The Revolt of Islam*'.

Christmas 1817: Shelley wrote his now famous sonnet '*Ozymandias*'. He wrote the poem in competition with a friend of his, also in the Leigh Hunt circle, a banker and journalist, Horace Smith (1779-1849). Interest in ancient Egypt had swept across Europe since Napoleon's successful campaign there some years earlier and images and a statue of Rameses II was due to arrive in London. The two young men decided to have a friendly competition to write a poem - a sonnet - inspired by a particular image of the broken pedestal and remains of a statue in Egypt. Shelley won. The poem was printed in *The Examiner* on January 11, 1818. However, Smith's was also published on February 1st. Smith's title lets his entry down a bit, I think: *On A Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt!*

11th March 1818: Shelley left England for the last time. He and Mary stayed in a number of places in Italy and away from the scandals and climate of London (he had become quite unhealthy by now - some commentators putting this down to his vegetarianism. Despite his lack of meat protein, in Italy his writing flourished - his energy was restored - and his output was phenomenal. He started his time there by producing some inspired translations of Plato and Euripedes, as well as his own writing.

Late August 1818: Shelley and Mary met up with Byron in Venice. Here, some say, Shelley encouraged Byron to write *Don Juan* - Byron's most famous poem. However, all was not well. Relations had become strained between Shelley and Mary - and somehow made much worse by the death, in September, of their daughter Mary, who died, perhaps of heat stroke in her mother's arms while awaiting the doctor.

By the end of the year Shelley was writing his '*Stanzas Written in Dejection*'.

January 1819: Shelley visited Pompeii and was extremely moved by the experience.

March 1819: They went to live in Rome for a while - where Shelley met up with the terminally ill Keats (the house in which Keats actually died, in 1821, is now the Keats-Shelley House - a museum next to the Spanish Steps in Rome). But one significant, disturbing sight that will find expression in some of his later works, was witnessing, in St Peter's Square in the Vatican, one of the holiest places in the world, the awful mistreatment of man on man - "300 fettered criminals at work."

June 1819 their son William died - less than a year after their daughter. The couple moved away to Florence (where Shelley wrote the celebrated *Ode to the West Wind* and a lively, satirical attack on what Shelley now saw as the dull predictability of Wordsworth's recent poetry (*Peter Bell the Third*).

News of the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester in August was responded to by another great verse drama '*The Mask of Anarchy*'. It is from this poem that the famous verse that has been adapted into the Labour Party's current slogan 'For the many - not the few' comes:

*Rise, like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number!
Shake your chains to earth, like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you:
Ye are many — they are few!*

It was in these months that Shelley also wrote the sensational '*The Cenci*' - a drama that Shelley hoped would make it to the London stage - but with its accounts of incest and rape and parricide it was considered too hot a property. Mary Shelley said that Act V was the best thing that Shelley ever wrote. Although a reviewer for the *Literary Gazette* in 1820 wrote that the play was "noxious", "odious", and "abominable", Byron announced, "The Cenci is... *perhaps the best tragedy modern times have produced*." William Wordsworth is said to have called the play "the greatest tragedy of the age." After seeing a private performance of the play in 1886, George Bernard Shaw commented that "Shelley and Shakespeare are the only dramatists who have dealt in despair of this quality." It had to wait for its first public performance in England in 1922.

12th November 1819: Mary gave birth to a son - Percy Florence Shelley. Again there was a burst of literary activity and a number of now well known poems were written — *Ode to Liberty*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *The Cloud*, *To the Sky-Lark*.

August 1819: The Shelleys moved to near Pizza. where he wrote a satire on the British crown and government '*Oedipus Tyrranus or Swellfoot the Tyrant*'

October, 1819: Shelley became romantically involved (trying to help!) a beautiful young woman - Teresa Viviani - who was being kept in a convent awaiting the outcome of her marriage arrangements. Shelley wrote the beautiful poem *Epipsychidon* which suggests a romantic infatuation with her , but also appears to show a growing separation from Mary 'The cold chaste moon'.

1820: Shelley himself, perhaps, became aware that poetry (and very little of his work had yet been published) was not going to be the way forward.

January 1821. Some friends - Edward Ellerker Williams and his common law wife, Jane Williams, come to join them. Shelley wrote and dedicated a number of (apparent) love poems to Jane over the next few months. Edward is to drown in the boating incident that kills Shelley.

February 1821: The death of Keats in Rome lead to the writing of the wonderful elegy '*Adonais*'. Byron came to Pisa to live close by.

1822

April 1822: the Shelleys and the Williamses (perhaps to move away from Byron who seems to have had an inhibiting effect of Shelley's writing) moved to San Terenzo, near Lerici, in the Bay of Spezia where they shared a house - The Casa Magni - a converted boathouse. With Edward Williams they take delivery of a new boat - one that he had made for him. Shelley called it Ariel. When it arrived the words *Don Juan* had been painted on the sails (by Byron!). It was a three-quarter length version of a schooner (Byron's *Bolivar* was a proper schooner). But it was open-decked - more like a large sailing dinghy, and it had a very large area of sail - the specifications demanded by Shelley, who no doubt, wanted to race against Byron. It carried one and a half tons of pig-iron to act as ballast and compensate the sail area, as well as a false stern to help keep it balanced in the water.

16th June 1822: Mary had a miscarriage. It was followed by massive haemorrhaging. Shelley made her sit in a hip-bath full of ice to stem the bleeding and probably saved her life.

1st July 1822: Shelley and Williams (with an acquaintance, 19 year-old Charles Vivian, and a friend Daniel Roberts) sailed up the coast to Leghorn (Livorno) - to

meet with Leigh Hunt and Byron to discuss the setting up of a radical magazine, to be called *The Liberal*.

A great deal has been written of the events that were to follow. What is certain is that the boat capsized on its return journey.

Soon after leaving Livorno a storm was seen to be approaching. It is thought that Shelley saw it, or was warned about it. However, Shelley decided either that the storm was not going to be dangerous or that he could outrun it, so he didn't turn back into port as he should. Shelley's boat was vulnerable. It had more sail area than it should, had no protective deck and, because of the amount of ballast was low in the water. Was the boat undermanned as well? It certainly could have done with another crew member or two. On the outward journey there had been four - but Captain Daniel Roberts (of the Royal Navy, and a very experienced sailor) was not with them on the return.

Some theories suggest that the boat was actually rammed? When the boat was recovered, it seems it was severely damaged on one side. An Italian fisherman made a deathbed confession many years later. The pig-iron ballast was valuable - a reason for a fisherman to turn pirate, it might be thought. Or was it just that Shelley was too inexperienced as a sailor? It is true that most of his sailing had been done on rivers or lakes. Suicide? Shelley had been a bit depressed and was having nightmares, according to Mary of '*the sea rushing in*' and of him strangling her. Could it have been murder gone wrong? Had Edward Williams become jealous of Shelley's interest in his wife? Might it have even been a British undercover assassination - the British establishment fearful of Shelley's influence?

Whatever the cause, the three men were drowned. Shelley's and Williams's bodies were washed up some ten days later - Shelley's body was identifiable only by his clothes - but he is said to have had a copy of Keats' poems in one pocket, of Sophocles in another. The bodies were covered in quicklime, as was the Italian authority's requirement in such circumstances (to prevent spread of disease), before being taken to be cremated.

Byron and his adventurer friend, Edward John Tralawny, stepped in at this point (Tralawny wrote about the events that followed a number of times over the next few years, his accounts adding more detail each time). The two of them took responsibility for the corpse instead, and performed, on the beach, what they saw to be a more significant and symbolic funeral. They created a funeral pyre (some sort of metal contraption?) upon which the body was ceremoniously burned, with

libations of oil, etc. and no doubt appropriate poetry recited over it. The body apparently burst open and its heart was pulled from the corpse by Tralawny to be later passed on Mary who kept it for the rest of her life (in her desk drawer?). It was buried with her, in the graveyard of St Peter's Church, Bournemouth.

Epilogue:

Shelley's ashes were taken by Tralawney and placed in The Protestant Cemetery, Rome, near the graves of his son, William, and his friend John Keats.

Shelley's fame as a poet was to grow gradually from the 1830's onwards - due mainly to the efforts of his widow Mary who collated as much of his poetry as she could find (very little had been published in his lifetime). *Queen Mab*, illegally published, became popular amongst the working-class Chartists.

Oh, yes. I said that Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Shelley's Oxford University friend, would appear in our story again. He married Jane Williams (the woman to whom Shelley wrote those love poems in 1821, and the wife of the friend who drowned with him).

By the 1880's Shelley's reputation was at its peak - he was championed by writers such as Tennyson and Browning. It was his more conventional poetry that was favoured, however. A Shelley Society was formed in 1886. A large and extremely sentimental sculpture of his drowned body by Onslow Ford was placed in University College, Oxford 1886. A public speaking / debating society, also called The Shelley Society was created at Eton - the school he hated. It is still going. And the children of wealthy establishment parents celebrate his memory (an irony that I hope would amuse him, but would more probably make those famous blue eyes burn again in anger and that squeaky, high-pitched voice shriek again in rage!).

Upon her return to England with her son, Percy Florence (1819 - 1889) Mary, now very uncertain as to her future and, not least, her financial state, was greeted by the news that there were four stage versions of her novel 'Frankenstein' in production in London. She had become a celebrated author in her own right - and she went on to have a successful literary career.

Bryan Webster - Horsham Writers Circle

If you'd like to find out more about Shelley's life and writing, here's a list of some sources that I'd recommend:

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: Anyone with Library Membership may go on-line and have free access to this treasure-trove of very reliable information about Shelley and the major figures linked to him.

The Poetry Foundation: An on-line site that has biographical information, as well as a number of Shelley's poems.

The Red Shelley: (1981) by Paul Foot. This book, by the famous journalist, focuses on Shelley's left-wing credentials. It is both lively and has been quite influential in its focus on Shelley's political views.

Shelley's Ghost: On-line. This superb site, from the Bodlian Library in Oxford, is a really wonderful source with photographs of artefacts that featured in an exhibition at the University (from a numbers of years ago) about Shelley.

Shelley - Poetical Works: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (Oxford Standard Authors) - based on her original 1839 edition, and added to since then. This is the collection of poetry, started by Mary Shelley, and full of her (often quite remarkably objective) thoughts about her husband's writings.

Shelley: The Pursuit (1974) by Richard Holmes. This is a monumental work and perhaps the most recognised and influential recent biography of Shelley (Richard Holmes has also published a very interesting, quite personal, account of his time tracing places the Shelley's visited or stayed at in Europe - ***Footsteps: Memoirs of a Romantic Biographer*** (1985))

Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives by Daisy Hay. This focuses on the circle of talent brought together by Leigh Hunt. It is a really lively, well-written account of the writers and their times and provides some really interesting insights.