

Notable People

Button Gwinnett

Politician

One of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Born in 1735 in the Parish of Down Hatherley. It is believed he attended the College School (now Kings School) of Gloucester Cathedral, he married, became a shopkeeper, and fathered three children.

The young family moved to the United States and eventually settled in Savannah, Georgia. On credit Button bought a large number of slaves and became a Planter, a venture that failed. His interest in politics was far more successful and he was elected to the Provincial Assembly. He became a strong advocate of colonial rights when St John's, the Parish which encompassed his lands threatened to cede from Georgia.

Gwinnett was elected to represent Georgia at the Continental Congress where he voted in favour of the Declaration of Independence. The Continental Congress being the governing body by which the American colonial governments coordinated their resistance to British rule during the first two years of the American War of Independence.

He went on to serve in the Georgia State Legislature and in 1777 wrote the original draft of Georgia's first State Constitution. He became Speaker of the Assembly and held that position until the death of its Governor where upon he took over the position.

Gwinnett's approval from the General Assembly to attack British Florida and the subsequent failure of that manoeuvre fuelled tension between Button Gwinnett and an old adversary Lachlan McIntosh. Gwinnett had previously lost out to McIntosh over the position of Brigadier General to lead the 1st Regiment in the Continental Army.

McIntosh had branded Gwinnett a liar and scoundrel. Infuriated Gwinnett challenged McIntosh to a duel, pistol shots were exchanged at twelve paces, both men were wounded with Gwinnett later dying of his wounds.

Button Gwinnett's signature is highly sought after by collectors, given that he was fairly unknown outside of Georgia prior to signing the Declaration of Independence, and his death shortly afterwards meant there are only fifty-one known signings.

Gwinnett County in Georgia is named for him

Dinah Craik

Writer

Dinah Craik had no connection to the town that became the setting for her most famous work. *John Halifax – Gentleman*. She came to visit Tewkesbury with her friend Clarence Dobell from Charlton Kings and Tewkesbury became the inspiration for *Norton Bury*. In Tewkesbury she keenly observed the alleyways, the Avon Mill, also known as *Fletcher's Mill* after Abel Fletcher, a Quaker who was the inspiration for the Miller in her book. *John Halifax* is a name she had seen on a tombstone in the abbey churchyard.

John Halifax – Gentleman was published in 1856 it is the story of a poor boy who makes good through hard work integrity and initiative. It illustrates the Mid- Victorian era ideals of middle-class life.

Craik published around twenty novels, in addition to her essays and poetry. There is a memorial to her in the south transept of Tewkesbury Abbey

William Shakespeare

Playwright

Shakespeare made a reference to Tewkesbury mustard (a blend of mustard and horseradish) in Henry IV part II, Falstaff described his friend Ned Poins as having a “a wit as thick as Tewkesbury mustard”

Shakespeare had 7 brothers and sisters; his younger sister Joan was the only one of the siblings whose lineage carries on to this day. She married a hatter named William Hart. Members of the Shakespeare-Hart family are buried in the Old Baptist Chapel graveyard

J.M.W Turner

Painter

A British painter water colourist and printmaker born in 1775

He and his father owned a burgage, (a medieval term for a town rental property usually consisting of a long narrow house with outbuildings) situated in what is now known as Turners Court off Church Street. Until recently there were five houses in Turners Court, the end one next to the wall along St. Mary's Lane was thought to be the home of the painter. His name had been seen on voting lists although there is little documented evidence to show he had lived there; his sketch books were his diaries and the record of his travels. He produced many pictures of Herefordshire Worcestershire and the West Midlands. He died in London and is buried in St Pauls Cathedral.

Charles Dickens

Author

Born in Portsmouth in 1812 and London based throughout his life, his first major work The Pickwick Papers features a Tewkesbury pub, the Royal Hop Pole is the setting for Mr Pickwick and a group of friends travelling across England, during their travels they repeatedly encounter Mr Jingle an engaging rascal who's life somewhat mirrors Mr Pickwicks own life

It may be that Dickens friend the painter JMW Turner encouraged him to visit Tewkesbury, a strange coincidence that a house on the corner of St Mary's Lane had been called The Old Curiosity Shop and on the opposite corner one of the oldest medieval buildings in town had a vaulted cellar resembling that of Dickens Old Curiosity shop.

Henry Disston

Industrialist

The American Industrialist Henry Disston, was born in Tewkesbury in May 1819, aged fourteen he and his sister moved with their father to the USA. He was to demonstrate a machine he'd invented to produce fine lace. Three days after arriving in Philadelphia the father died. Orphaned Henry was taken in as a saw making apprentice and in 1840 founded his own company, the Keystone Saw Works. Within ten years his saws were considered superior and by 1859 he employed 150 men. During the civil war (1861-64) he switched production to war supplies such as bayonets and guns, became a supplier of steel for shipbuilding it was at this time he amassed his fortune supplying steel products to the Union army.

In 1871 production was moved to a neighbourhood called Tacony which sat close to the railroad and the Delaware river. After the Civil war and renamed Henry Disston and Sons his factory became the largest saw manufacturing facility in the world. The company were a

benevolent employer and constructed a school, library and music hall along with more than 600 homes rented or sold to workers.

During the Second World War the company produced armour plate for steel tanks.

The company was sold in 1955 and Henry Disston became an early settler in Atlantic City building a summer cottage and businesses such as a bakery and brick yard.

He died in 1878

Thomas Walker

Fairground Ride Manufacturer

Born in Tewkesbury in 1846, after completing an engineering apprenticeship in 1868 he set up a business for the repair of agricultural machinery and steam engines in a small back yard at the Back of Avon in Tewkesbury, a decade later moving to bigger premises at what was the old candle factory at the junction of Walls Court and Oldbury Road, where the business began to include the repair of showmans equipment. Further expansion saw the company move into the design and manufacture of agricultural and commercial machinery and create a range of fairground rides. He was awarded the first British patent for a galloping motion fairground roundabout, further patents followed, and fairground rides became the principle activity of his company, producing swingboats, racing cars, merry-go-rounds, galloping horses, coasters and later the helter skelter, cake-walk tobogaroo and over-the falls. Although Thomas died in 1912 the company continued for a further thirteen years under the leadership of Thomas's wife and sons.

Kathleen Hawkins

Poet

Born 1883 and grew up in Tewkesbury where the River Avon flowed through the bottom of her garden. She married George Hawkins a tea and rubber plantation manager based in Ceylon who wrote to her after reading one of her poems. They were married two years later and remained in Ceylon for twenty years, a period she notes as a happy and colourful time. For Health reasons in 1938 the couple retired to Tauranga, New Zealand, her husband George died in 1953. Kathleen became known as The Pioneer Poet, she had particular interest in the New Zealand land wars which took place 1860-74 and the first missionaries that came to Tauranga. Kathleen never used her poetry for personal gain but to support charities such as the NZ Crippled Children's Fund and the airplane fund (during world war II) she remained in New Zealand for the rest of her life and died in 1981 aged 97

Robert Harold Compton

Botanist

Born in Tewkesbury in August 1886, he was a university scholar at Cambridge, served his country during World War One and arrived in South Africa in 1919 to become director of the National Botanic Gardens at Kirstenbosch at the eastern foot of Table Mountain and Professor of Botany at the University of Capetown, posts he held for 34 years. The Compton Herbarium at the gardens is named in his honour.

On retirement he settled in Swaziland and embarked upon a botanical survey of the country on behalf of it's government. He died back in Capetown in July 1979

Raymond Priestley

Explorer

Born in 1886 and educated at Tewkesbury Grammar School, where his father was Headmaster. The family were Methodists and worshipped at Tewkesbury Wesleyan Chapel. He spent a year as a pupil teacher at Tewkesbury Grammar School before

attending the University of Bristol as a geology student. In his second year he applied to join Ernest Shackleton's Nimrod expedition to the South Pole. A year later he was recruited by Capt. Robert Falcon Scott to take part in the 1910-13 expedition to the South Pole. The party split up, Scott and four of the group failed to reach the South Pole and died. Priestly and five others survived a long cold arctic winter in a snow house with only tents, summer clothing and four weeks of rations to keep them going after their expedition ship became cut off by ice. During World One Raymond Priestly served as an Officer in the Royal Engineers and won the Military Cross in 1918. He died in Cheltenham in 1974 aged 87. His expedition sledge is displayed at Tewkesbury School

John Moore

Writer and Conservationist

The writer philanthropist and conservationist John Moore was born in Tewkesbury in 1907. He wrote about rural life, his first work Dixon's Cubs being published in 1930. During the second world war he had been a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm. Moore published his best selling trilogy Portrait of Elmbury, Brensham Village and The Blue Field just after the second world war, he had loosely based Elmbury on Tewkesbury and Brensham on the village of Bredon. John Moore was an early countryside conservation campaigner particularly concerned with highlighting the threat to wildlife and dangers of the indiscriminate use of pesticides on the land. For eighteen years he was also the weekly columnist on rural matters to the Birmingham Evening Mail and became a driving force to conserve Tewkesbury's architectural heritage

He was a founding member of the Cheltenham Literary Festival in 1949 and it's Chairman for many years

He lived the latter part of his life in Kemerton and died in Bristol in the summer of 1967.

Henry Green

Writer

The son of a wealthy industrialist, Eton and Oxford educated novelist Henry Green, was born Henry Vincent Yorke in 1905 just outside of Tewkesbury. He left without a degree and joined his family's firm H Pontifex and Sons who manufactured glass beer bottles in Birmingham where he started working on the factory floor and became managing director. The factory was the inspiration for his novel "Living" Along with Virginia Woolf their works are considered some of the most important of English modernist literature. In 1945 he published "Loving", set in an Irish country house and considered to be his finest work. He passed away in 1973

Barbara Cartland

Author

As a schoolgirl Barbara became a frequent visitor to Walton House Estate in Ashchurch owned by her maternal Grandfather Lt. Col Scobel. Her family lived in genteel poverty after the bankruptcy and suicide of her paternal Grandfather. Her own father was a Major in the 1st Battalion Worcestershire Regiment who fell in action at Berry-Au-Bac in 1918. A memorial to him, The Cartland Calvary stands outside Tewkesbury Abbey, after world war two the names of Barbara's two brothers both of whom lost their lives one day apart in 1940 were added, and later the name of her mother.

Walton House had remained in Cartland ownership until 1937 then had various uses including that of an orphanage. In the 1987 the house was sold for development into flats. Dame Barbara expressed her disapproval that “little people” would live in such a fine house, she finally made her peace with Tewkesbury seven years later giving a talk to raise funds for Tewkesbury Abbey.

Eric Morecambe

Comedian

After his performance and six curtain calls at a charity performance at the Roses Theatre in May 1984, he collapsed in the wings suffering his third heart attack, he died hours later in Cheltenham General Hospital. A conference room is named after him. His infamous partnership with Ernie Wise had endured since 1941

Anna Ford

Broadcaster

Born in Tewkesbury October 2nd 1943 to parents that were both West End actors. Her father became an ordained priest and the family moved to the Lake District. After gaining a BA in Economics from Manchester University where in 1988 she was to receive a post graduate diploma in adult education and an honorary Doctorate of Law.

Anna began her career as a teacher, including a spell teaching at HM Prison Maze in Ulster and later became a social studies tutor at the Open University in Northern Ireland

In 1974 Anna joined Granada television as a researcher and went on to become a reporter and newsreader. Her career with the BBC began in 1976 working on Man Alive and Tomorrows World before joining ITN in 1978. In 1981 she was one of “The Famous Five” along with Angela Rippon David Frost Michael Parkinson and Robert Key that launched TV-AM, the breakfast franchise of ITV.

Anna returned to the BBC in 1986 where she presented lunchtime and early evening news and became the first newscaster to present News at Ten.

After leaving the BBC she became a non-executive director of Sainsbury’s, Chancellor of the Victoria University of Manchester and Co Chancellor of the University of Manchester following Victoria’s merger with UMIST

Mel Nicholls

Paralympian

Born in Worcester in 1977 and has made her home in Tewkesbury

From watching the Beijing Olympics from her hospital bed in 2008 four years on she became a Paralympic wheelchair racing finalist at London 2012 just fifteen months after taking up the sport, she reached the finals again in Rio 2016. At the end of 2016 Mel turned from the track to endurance and road racing and handcycling. She competed in the London Marathon in 2019 and in 2021 completed a 4,800 mile hand cycle journey around the coast of Great Britain

Mel is an honorary patron for the Roses Theatre Tewkesbury and supporter of the Roses “Take Part” community projects, she is also Sports Ambassador for Hartpury College and an operational member of Severn Area Rescue Association (SARA)