

T. S. Eliot

Poet and dramatist



Thomas Stearns Eliot lived at 31 West Street, Marlow, briefly in 1918-19, although he was working for Lloyds Bank Foreign Department in London at the time. Several well-known people visited him there, including the novelist, Aldous Huxley and the philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who had made the house in Marlow available to Eliot and his wife, Vivien. This was not a happy time for Eliot for it was in Marlow that he first discovered that his wife had been having an affair with Bertrand Russell since the summer of 1917. The discovery devastated Eliot and caused him to experience a state of dispossession that he would later describe in *'The Family Reunion'* as 'that sense of separation, that isolation irredeemable'. He forbade his wife to ever to see Russell again and terminated his own friendship with Russell. This event and the unremitting slaughter of the Great War is said to have given him a hatred of life in general and women in particular at that time, although this is probably overstated. His poem *'Gerontion'*, published in 1919, was one of several written at Marlow and is said to symbolize civilization gone mad. It shows a depressing disillusionment with the world:

"I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh,
 heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought."

It is an obscure chorus of dissonances and is certainly not easy for the average reader to comprehend or appreciate. It was followed by his most famous poem *'The Wasteland'* in 1922, which might also have been begun in Marlow. It has been unkindly suggested that the later poem reflects Eliot's earlier experience in attempting to teach English to boys at The Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe for one term in 1915. It has been described as 'a journey of the human soul searching for redemption'.

Eliot was already regarded by some as a leading poet of the avant garde even before he lived in Marlow, having already published *'Prufrok and other Observations'* in 1917. Eliot was then still an American citizen, having been born in Missouri on 26 September 1888, the youngest of a family of seven. He lived in St Louis for 18 years, before taking an MA in English at Harvard and studying at the Sorbonne in Paris. He settled in

England in 1914, married the Englishwoman, Vivien Hague-Wood in 1915 and became a British citizen in 1927. He separated from Vivien in 1933 and married again to Valerie Fletcher at the age of 68 in 1956.

As well as poems, T S Eliot was author of much inspirational work in prose and several very successful plays, of which the best known are probably *'Murder in the Cathedral'* and *'The Cocktail Party'*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 and died in London in 1965.

The house at 31 West Street, Marlow, is better known to Marlow people as 'the old Post Office', as it was one of several buildings in Marlow that have performed this function through the years. The exact age of the building is not known, but its frontage is similar to several other buildings in the area that were re-fronted in the eighteenth century. It is a three-storey terraced building, fronted in dark burnt headers, with a lighter red brick around the arched windows and framed by decorative vertical columns in red brick, to give the building an element of the classical style that was so fashionable in the eighteenth century. A circular plaque, recording T.S Eliot's occupation of the building, has been placed on the front.

Another dubious claim to fame enjoyed by this building is that it was reputed to accommodate the "ladies-in-waiting" when the Prince of Wales (Frederic, son of George II) was visiting Marlow Place. Messages are said to have been passed between the two buildings by waving flags on the roof.

A modern memorial to T S Eliot in the churchyard of All Saints, Marlow reads:

"Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present"



Text by Tony Reeve. Published in 2010 by the Local History Group of the Marlow Society.