

Sir John Betjeman

1906 - 1984

Sir John Betjeman

Sir John Betjeman was a poet, broadcaster and journalist.

He was knighted in 1969 and the UK's Poet Laureate from 1972 until his death in 1984.

He was amongst the leading poets of the 20th century, enthusing people about the value of Britain's cities, landscapes and architecture, as well as producing many volumes of poetry, which sold in their thousands. Betjeman wanted to make his themes and subjects accessible; he always wrote with clarity. Amongst his best known poems are *A Subaltern's Love Song*, *Slough* and *How to Get on in Society*.

Born in North London in 1906, he studied at Magdalen College Oxford during the 1920s and was a contemporary of WH Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, Kenneth Clark and Harold Acton.

He was also an architectural conservationist. His role in saving St Pancras Station from destruction in 1968 is marked by a lifesize statue on the concourse, from which the bust outside this museum is cast.

Betjeman was a prolific broadcaster from the 1930s and as a consequence he was probably one of the most recognizable men in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s.

He suffered from Parkinson's Disease during his later years. When he died in 1984 a memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey. He is buried at St. Enodoc in Cornwall.

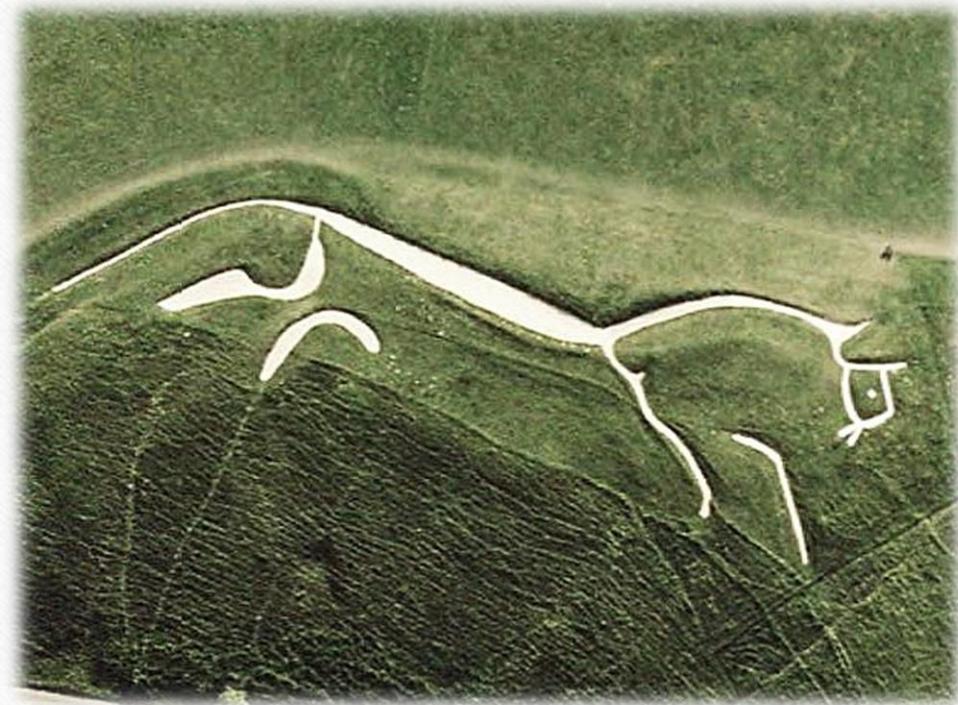


John Betjeman in his library at The Mead, Wantage

Garrards Farmhouse

In 1934 John and Penelope moved from London to Garrards Farmhouse in Uffington.

The visitors' book for 1934-6 contained many famous names including Evelyn Waugh, Cyril Connolly, Peter Quennell and Marcelle Rothe.



The Mead, Wantage



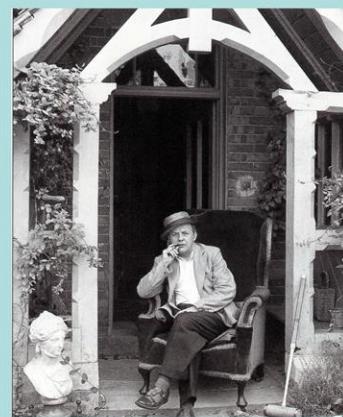
In 1951 the Betjemans moved from Farnborough to the The Mead, a Victorian house beside Letcombe Brook in Wantage. It remained the family home until 1972 and several of John's poems and his children's book 'Archie and the Strict Baptists' were inspired by the town.

The Mead was surrounded by several acres of land. Penelope kept horses in the paddocks and established the 'Mead Waterfowl Farm' breeding ducks and geese. Although John also had a flat in London he did his best to get involved in town life. He was governor of St. Mary's School and became churchwarden of the Church of St Peter and St Paul. He actively supported the Wantage Church Restoration Appeal and wrote the promotional pamphlet to encourage donations. When Rev. John Schaufelberger joined the church in 1960, they became good friends and often shared a sherry together on a Saturday morning.

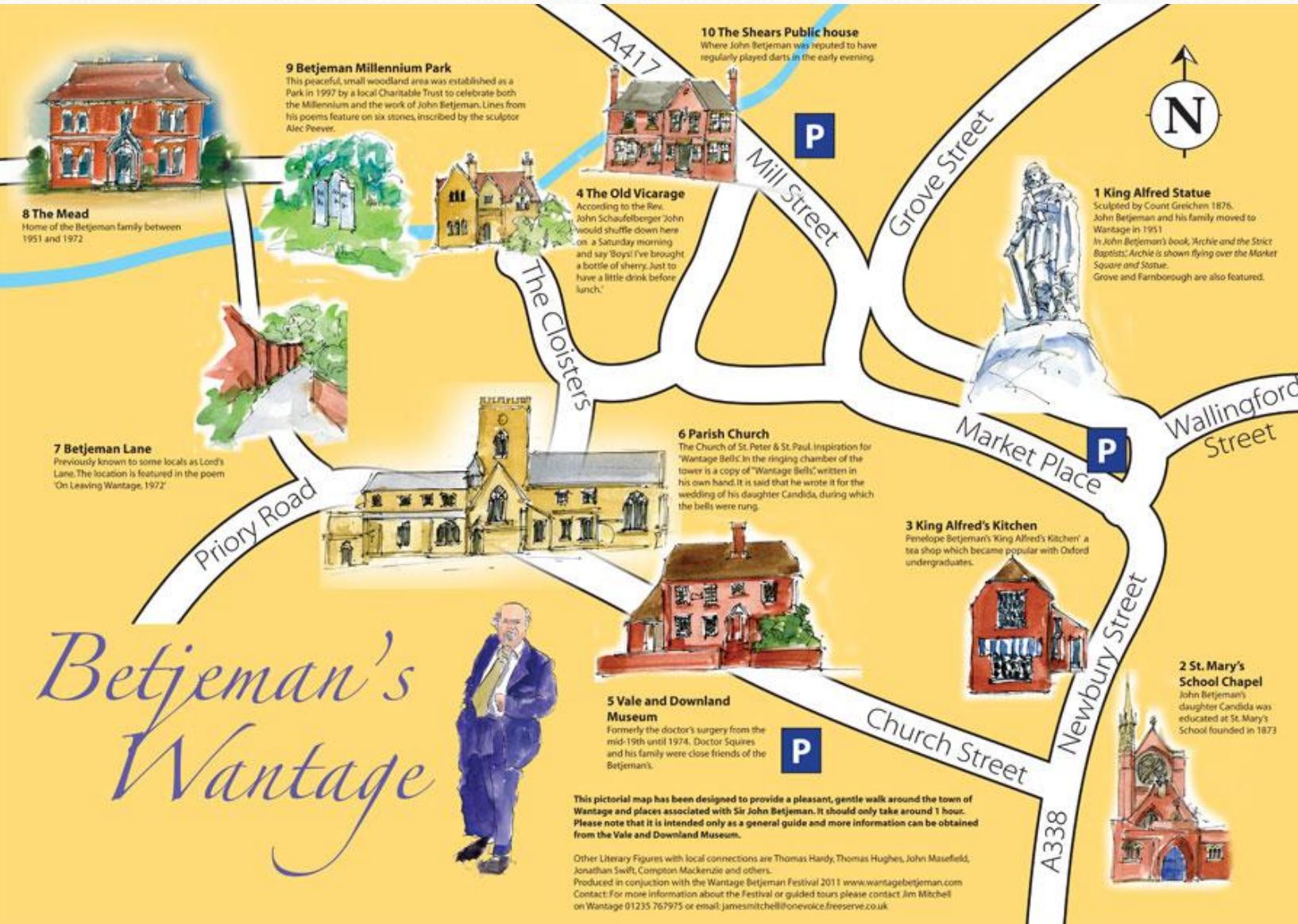
John wrote most of his best selling work while he lived at The Mead including his autobiography in verse 'Summoned by Bells' and his 'Collected Poems' which is the best selling poetry book of all time.

The move to Wantage brought them closer to old friends such as Mollie and Desmond Baring of Ardington House and Dr Vaughan Squires and his wife Ottolie who lived just the other side of the brook.

For more detailed recollections of John and Penelope's time in Wantage, please refer to Bevis Hillier's three volume biography of John Betjeman, published by John Murray.



John at The Mead (Copyright Sunday Times)





King Alfred's Kitchen

From the mid 1950s until 1962 Penelope ran a teashop in Wantage known as King Alfred's Kitchen. It had the slogan 'Burnt cakes a speciality!' and customers could order a 'King Alfred's Special' - ice cream, nuts and burnt sugar with chocolate sauce. It became a very popular meeting place for Wantage locals and Oxford Undergraduates with motorcars.

The "caff" had been John's idea initially, when he stepped in to help Peter and Dorothy Martin with their failing lending library. He suggested they start a cafe alongside lending books. After a year the business was failing so Penelope took control and concentrated on producing home made cakes and good food. Local girls were employed as part time waitresses, including Veronica Sharley, a family friend of the Betjeman's who still lives in Wantage today.



King Alfred's Kitchen is now Peking Dynasty

Eventually the day to day running of the cafe was made easier when they employed Miss Iris Langley as a manager. Although only formally employed by the Betjeman's for two years, Iris' friendship and contact with them extended well beyond that time. Her acquaintance with them meant a lot to her and she kept an archive of letters, postcards, photographs and inscribed books from both of them.

Sir John Betjeman's name is now immortalised in Wantage with not only a lane being named after him, but also the Betjeman Millennium Park, the bust outside this museum and the Wantage (not just) Betjeman Literary Festival which is held annually in October in tribute to Sir John and to celebrate all things connected to 'the word' www.wantagebetjeman.com



Why not find out more about the Betjeman's life in Wantage, by exploring the life of Penelope Chetwode (Sir John's wife) and their friend Dick Squires. Alternatively maps of Betjeman's Wantage can be purchased from the front the desk, to explore Sir John's favourite spots, along with books on his life and poetry.