

John Meade Falkner's *The Nebuly Coat*: an undiscovered Wessex

Peter Davey

John Meade Falkner's first two novels are, at least in part, clearly set in Dorset and the Isle of Wight. *The Lost Stradivarius* contains references to Worth, Encombe, Weymouth, Portland and Lyme Regis; in *Moonfleet*, Poole, Corfe, Swanage, Purbeck and Carisbrooke are mentioned as well as lesser-known locations. *The Nebuly Coat* is a different matter. Falkner develops his literary landscape, inventing names which seem to echo the Wessex of Thomas Hardy; but whereas Hardy made new names for real places (e.g. Casterbridge = Dorchester), Falkner's names represent composite creations. For this reason they are far more difficult to identify.

To begin with the story is set in the county of Southavonshire, an area we can associate with the River Avon which flows from Salisbury to Christchurch. In the novel it becomes the River Cull, flowing from the county town of Carisbury to the derelict port of Cullerne Minster. The author heightens their reality by giving them Roman names: Carauna for Carisbury, and Culurnam for Cullerne, linked by the Roman Way. But this suggestion of antiquity is not supported by fact. Christchurch began as a Saxon settlement in the 6th century.

It is tempting to think that Christchurch Priory is St. Sepulchre's in the novel. The Priory has a magnificent stone quire screen, installed in 1320, and Falkner makes several references to the stone screen, comparing it to Durham, Winchester and Gloucester, the only real places mentioned in the book. But the Priory never had a spire which collapsed, as does the spire of Cullerne Minster. There are several possible sources for this incident - Chichester (1861), Banbury (1790, mentioned in Falkner's own *Handbook to Oxfordshire*), even a fictional source in the novel *St. Antholin's* by Francis E. Paget, a favourite of Falkner's.

But what of the addition of the title, Cullerne Minster? Is there a connection with Wimborne Minster? In fact the Minster church at Wimborne, Dorset, used to have a spire on the central, or lantern, tower. This was added by John de Berwick early in the 14th century, and would for a time have contained the great bell of St Cuthberga before it was removed to the bell tower, completed in 1464. Much is made in the novel of the weight of the bells weaken-

ing the structure of the spire. The masonry of Wimborne's spire was repaired in 1544, and had to be strengthened by iron bars in 1565. This did not prevent its sudden collapse in the year 1600, a fact which would surely have been known to a student of churches like Falkner.

But there is more. In 1881 when Falkner was at Oxford, and the same year his father became curate at Buckland Rippers near Weymouth, the Minster at Wimborne suffered another catastrophe. In June of that year as the ringers were sending out a wedding peal, the St Cuthberga bell suddenly came loose, crashing to the bottom of the framework. It broke part-way through the floor where it became lodged. The panic-stricken ringers rushed down the tower staircase and into the churchyard. Beams and chains were immediately brought to prevent the bell falling further. Had it not been for the floor which hindered the fall, the bell would have continued into the porch entrance of the Minster resulting in some loss of life. News of such a calamity could not have failed to reach Falkner who was probably at home with his father at the time. And it is hard to believe that it did not in part inspire the climax of the novel.

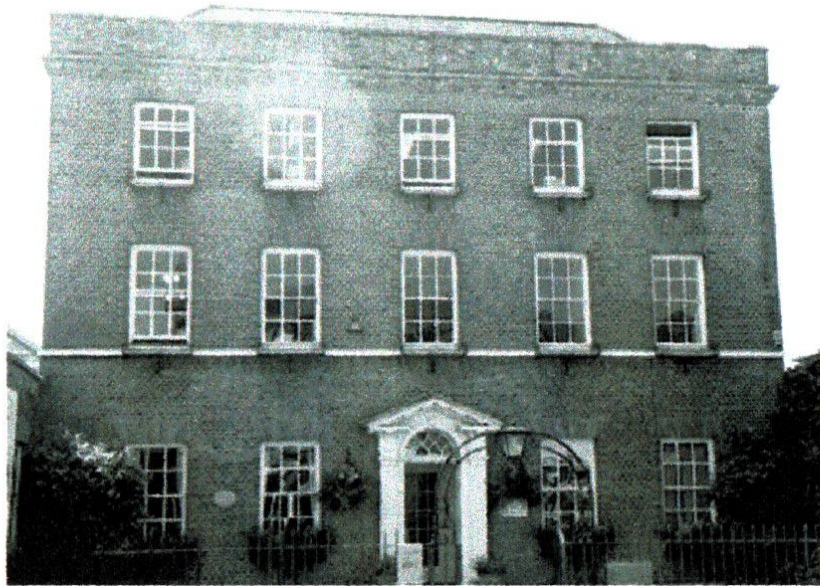
The name, Blandamer, features strongly in the story, Lord Blandamer being the mysterious character around whom the plot revolves. North of Wimborne lies Blandford, and six miles west of Blandford is Milton Abbas where we find a connection with the naming of the character. Joseph Damer, who in 1752 bought the Milton estate, was one of the most unpopular men in Dorset's history. He became Lord Milton and Earl of Dorchester, and the Damer name can be found today on roads and buildings in the County town. After buying the estate, he spared no expense in relocating the entire village so that it would be out of sight of his mansion and the abbey. Where wealth did not succeed, he used unscrupulous means such as flooding people's homes to make them move. His worst offence was the destruction of the graveyard and the dumping of bones elsewhere.

The fictional church, St. Sepulchre's, has a Blandamer Aisle, under which lie the family's burial vaults. Wimborne's Minster has part of a chapel reserved as a burial vault for the Bankes family of Kingston Lacy. Mr Sharnall, the organist, takes delight in the wonderful collection of music folios at Cullerne. This bears comparison with music held in the ancient chained library at Wimborne Minster where works by nine of the composers mentioned in the novel - among them Boyce, Gibbons and Byrd - can be seen.

The only thing which is slightly out of place is the Blandamer window which seems more reminiscent of the Turberville window at Bere Regis. It is also worth noting that Cullerne has a Grammar School and so did Wimborne, given an Elizabethan charter in 1562.

There is only one problem in all this: Wimborne is not a port. And although Christchurch has a harbour which is partially blocked by a sand-bar, it has always been too shallow to allow entry to the “many stately...tea clippers, and Indiamen” of old Cullerne which sent six ships to fight the Armada. However, a little further east we come first to the New Forest stream, Avon Water, reinforcing the idea of Southavonshire, and then Lymington. In the 18th and 19th centuries this coastal town certainly catered to larger vessels. A description of maritime Lymington states that “the dark narrow streets around the Quay, with their many alehouses, provided an ideal hunting ground for the Pressgangs”. We can imagine Mr Sharnall scurrying through such an area, now long deserted, with Mr Westray in tow at the beginning of the novel. On Lymington Quay itself was a building dating from 1700 which in 1850 became the Customs House. Could this have been the Bonding House which so attracts their attention?

Another feature of Lymington, unlike Christchurch town, is that it is clearly not flat, and neither is Cullerne. At the end of the novel the waggoner tries to get his team and cart up the street, away from the market place where the spire is about to fall. One could imagine this scene on Lymington’s steep high street. We are told that Bellevue Lodge “stood on the highest point in all the borough, and Mr Westray’s apartments were in the third storey. From the windows of his sitting room he could look out over the houses on to Cullerne Flat, the great tract of salt-meadows that separated the town from the sea. In the foreground was a broad expanse of red-tiled roofs; in the middle distance St. Sepulchre’s Church...; in the background was the blue sea”. It seems almost too great a coincidence, but at the highest point of Lymington High Street there stands a large, 3-storied dwelling, built in 1765, which was known as Bellevue House. From the rear one could have an unimpeded view of the salt flats at the entrance to Lymington Harbour. It is now the offices of the solicitors, Moore & Blatch. There is no possibility of its ever having been a coaching inn like the fictional Bellevue - at one time ‘The Hand of God’, a title worthy of Hardy. But there is a fascinating connection with Falkner’s youth. The family regularly took their summer holidays at Swanage, and they stayed in a house



Bellevue House, Lymington

called 'Belle Vue', a hundred yards from the sea which had once been an inn. It lived in the author's memory as he and his sister used to play with the pump handles which remained in the bar area.

Kenneth Warren in his biography of Falkner mentions that Victorian Christchurch "was on the direct railway line between Southampton and Bournemouth" which is true, but misleading, as this line was not built until 1888. There is only one detail in the novel which enables us to place the action in time and that is the date on Sophia Flannery's marriage certificate - 1800. From this it is possible to calculate that the story begins in 1865. If, as Kenneth Warren says, Cullerne is Christchurch, then Cullerne Road station must be at Ringwood. The Christchurch-Ringwood branch line was opened in 1862. But if Cullerne is not Christchurch, then we need to find another branch line which connects with the main line to London, and the most likely possibility is that from Lymington to Lymington Junction and Brockenhurst, opened in 1858.

Fording, the name of the home of the Lords Blandamer, might at first sight seem to be derived from Fordingbridge, situated on the River Avon. Another possibility is Fordington St. George, Dorchester, where Falkner first went to school. He mentions "Lytchett, the little wayside station which was sometimes used by people going to Fording. It was a seven-mile drive from the station to the house". We can rule out this station being either Lytchett Minster of Lytchett Matravers in Dorset as they are in the wrong direction - Fording is said to be east of Cullerne. If the Cullerne

Minster to Cullerne Road branch line is taken to be Lymington-Brockenhurst., then other things fall into place. Lytchett wayside station could well be Beaulieu Road station which, of course, would lead us to conclude that the inspiration for Fording was Beaulieu Palace House. There is, of course, no suggestion that the Blandamers are to be taken for the Montagus of Beaulieu any more than the Bankes of Kingston Lacy.

We may go a step further. In the novel it is said that the Carisbury Field Club made an expedition to Wydcombe Abbey where Miss Euphemia Joliffe used to worship when she lived at home on Wydcombe Farm. If we search for a model for this location, then perhaps Romsey Abbey is most likely. We should also remember that Mr Janaway, while still a young man, took horses seven miles from Wydcombe Farm to the fair at Beacon Hill. It so happens there is a place named Beacon Hill at Farley Mount, just six miles north-east of Romsey.

This is all pleasant speculation. Even Thomas Hardy denied the existence of a real 'Casterbridge', even a real 'Wessex, wanting the locations in his novels to be understood as creations of his imagination. Falkner would certainly have taken the same stance. However, even though we may never walk down the streets of the real Cullerne Minster, we can recognise elements of Wimborne, Lymington, and even Christchurch in his fictional world.

John Meade Falkner could have been quite familiar with Lymington as a result of many cycling expeditions into his beloved south Wessex. These continued even during his early holidays away from his work at the Nobles' in the north of England. It would be satisfying to link him positively with this area - and I think there is something which does. In his poem *A Seaside Garden*, written in 1891, he is visiting a house "beside the Hampshire sea" whose grey towers are three centuries old, situated by the mouth of a river. And as he sits on the terrace of the house, he can see below him the lights of the town being lit. From the entire Hampshire coastline, this description most closely fits Lymington. There is another startling coincidence here. Take the third stanza of the poem:

*And in the noon of summer days,
The summer of the South,
The purple shimmering August haze
Hangs on the river mouth.*

Compare this with the opening of Chapter 3 of *The Nebuly Coat*: "In summer the purple haze hangs over the mouth of the estuary". The

description which follows of “the silver windings of the Cull as it makes its way out to sea” through the salt-meadows fits Lymington exactly.

If this is so, the question is then, which house is it and what was the author doing there? The lines, “Towers dearer still to me/ Whose wandering footsteps find a home”, suggest to me that he was a fairly regular visitor. There are several large houses in this part of Hampshire, but they are not all old enough, nor do they all have towers. The most likely is Pylewell House, the only one dating from the early 1600’s.

The owner of Pylewell in 1891 - the date of the poem - was William Ingham Whitaker whose great-uncle, Benjamin Ingham, had been in the Marsala wine business. This may account for William’s great wealth. He had been brought up in Sicily, and had the title ‘Baron of the Kingdom of Italy’. His son, the second William Whitaker, had been born at Palermo and inherited the title. For a time in the Seaforth Highlanders, he later became President of the Lymington Literary Institute. There are points here which could link Falkner with this family. He frequently visited Italy, either in the company of the Nobles or on their behalf for the firm. His poem *New Year, 1892*, written in Rome, is evidence of that. He even received the Italian decoration, ‘Commendatore S.S. Maurizio e Lazaro’. They had many friends there.

All this is circumstantial. And other questions remain unanswered. For instance, who is the Lady he is addressing in *A Seaside Garden*? Is it the wife of the first William Whitaker, daughter of Admiral Sartorius? Or is it Lady Sartorius, the Admiral’s widow, who later lived at ‘East Grove’ in Lymington? And are the ladies addressed in other poems, as I think, different people?

A Seaside Garden was written three years before his first published work, *Oxfordshire*, four years before his first novel, *The Lost Stradivarius*. It was only four years since his father’s death - a time when he was still supporting his brothers and sisters, and no doubt coming south regularly. He was 33 years old - at his fittest for cycling from Weymouth to Lymington. And it was a time when he was already visiting Rome on behalf of the firm, clearly in a position of responsibility and mixing with influential people. If this was the milieu in which he was moving, then the Lady he was visiting in this autobiographical poem was known to the Nobles. The only other possibility is that there is a connection with his Oxford days, but that period, alas, is even more of a mystery.