

## GEORGE GISSING IN EASTBOURNE

*I am just back from the Sussex coast, whither I was driven last Thursday by sheer breakdown. I went to Brighton but found the place impossible; a more hideous and vulgar seaside town the mind of man has not conceived. So on Friday morning I walked along eastward – through Rottingdean, Newhaven, Seaford, to Eastbourne. And here at length was rest. Surely there is no more beautiful watering-place. It is handsomely built, with broad, clean streets, almost all of them avenued with fine, thick chestnuts. I could not discover a dirty thoroughfare, and saw no single blackguard – yet there is a population of twenty-thousand or so. To the east is Pevensey Bay, a splendid sweep to Hastings; immediately west is Beachy Head, a grand chalk cliff, about 600 ft high, the sea up to the base. Behind, the magnificent stretch of the South Downs. The calm was wonderful. On the top of the Head I could light my pipe without sheltering the match. I could sit each night on the shore till ten o'clock, feeling perfectly warm and comfortable. It is clear that Eastbourne will in future be my health-resort.*

George Gissing's letter to his sister Margaret in September 1886 gives an indication of his routinely epic perambulations. We know that, during the same decade, the impecunious George Meek (like Gissing, later to be 'adopted' by the upwardly mobile H G Wells) was obliged to expend much of his youthful energies tramping around East Sussex in search of work. This was the lot of so many working men at the time. But did any other nineteenth-century recreational visitor from London casually undertake such strenuous walking explorations of this area? On a bitter, snow-filled February day in 1888, Gissing set out with a companion from his lodgings in Brightland Road and walked through East Dean, Jevington, Wilmington, Alfriston, and back again – presumably in darkness. And in March 1894, over the course of a few days, he ventured out from his guest house in Grove Road and walked to Wannock, Wilmington, Alfriston, Jevington, Beachy Head and Pevensey.

We cannot help speculating that these punishing days of exercise were perhaps providing Gissing with some form of relief from the continuing mayhem of his domestic life, a life (1857-1903) that could easily be the plot of an unusually lurid Victorian novel. But what is also clear is that throughout his life his wanderings were providing raw material for the novelist, and his visits to this part of Sussex were no exception. Chapter 7 of *Thyrza* begins:

*On the sheltered side of Eastbourne, just at the springing of the downs as you climb towards Beachy Head, is a spacious and heavy-looking stone house, with pillared porch, oriel windows on the ground floor of the front, and a square turret rising above the fine row of chestnuts which flanks the road. It was built some forty years ago, its only neighbours then being a few rustic cottages; recently there had sprung up a suburb of comely redbrick houses, linking it with the visitors' quarter of Eastbourne. The builder and first proprietor, a gentleman whose dignity derived from Mark Lane [in the City of London], called the house Odessa Lodge; at his death it passed by purchase into the hands of people to whom this name seemed something more than inappropriate, and the abode was henceforth known as The Chestnuts.*

Although the character of Gissing's heroine in this novel had been brewing in his mind for much of 1886, its final form may have been suggested by a chance encounter with Bella

Curtis, the young woman he found working in her uncle's tobacco shop in Church Street, just around the corner from Brightland Road. We now know that she was the reason for a subsequent trip he made to Eastbourne in 1888. (His diary records 'in absolute truth, I am now and then on the verge of madness. Thought of Miss Curtis, and longed, longed that she too might have thought of me'.) We know also that Eastbourne was where, in 1894, the Gissings brought their small son Walter to seek some relief for the lad's chronic bronchial problems. (The seaside air seems on this occasion to have done the trick, since the boy's condition improved and he survived a difficult childhood to become an architect. Walter's reprieve, however, was to last only until 1 July 1916, when he died on the Somme.)

In recent years, so much new material on Gissing's turbulent life has emerged that we must suppose these Eastbourne interludes would repay a more detailed study by one of our local historians. The author of *New Grub Street*, *The Odd Women* and *In the Year of Jubilee* looms larger now, as an observer of late Victorian attitudes, than he ever did in his lifetime. As a result, the shelf is groaning under the weight of the modern Gissing industry, or at least it would be if digital resources were not now taking up the strain. Twenty-odd years ago, Sydney Lott (1920-2002) began to draw together some of the threads in this Eastbourne chapter, and readers wishing to explore further might begin with *ELH* 92 (1994) pp.15-18, and *The Gissing Journal* XXX111 (1997) pp.28-33. The queries raised in *ELH* 93 (1994) p.7 are dealt with in *TGJ* XL11 (2006) pp.1-14 and *TGJ* XL111 (2007) pp.1-22. The most recent edition of *Thyrza* (Victorian Secrets, 2013) has an introduction by Pierre Coustillas, the *doyen* of Gissing Studies. There are several biographies.