

# THE Housman TRAIL

## A E HOUSMAN

ALFRED EDWARD HOUSMAN, poet and preeminent classicist of his time, was born in the *Valley House* (now *Housmans*), Fockbury, two miles from Bromsgrove centre on 26 March 1859. The Valley House was part of the Clock House estate which became the focus of the Housman family when AEH's grandfather, the Rev Thomas Housman, came to Bromsgrove in 1836 after he had married Ann Brettell whose father owned the estate. Thomas became the vicar of the newly built Catshill Church. *The Clock House* was a much modified sixteenth century manor house with several farms around it. AEH's father Edward was brought up there and eventually married Sarah Jane Williams of Woodchester. In 1859 they set up home in the *Valley House* a vacant farmhouse and AEH was their first child.

They moved the following year to *Perry Hall* which came into possession of the family when John Adams, a distant relative who built it, died. Edward Housman practised there as a solicitor and it was the family home. Sarah Jane had six more children, Robert, Clemence, Katharine, Basil, Laurence and George Herbert. They were all very happy until Sarah Jane died in 1871 on AEH's 12th birthday. All the family were devastated but particularly AEH. Edward, in financial difficulties, moved the family to *The Clock House* which was now vacant. He married again to his cousin, Lucy, and the family found renewed happiness in what was then the depths of the country.

AEH was lucky to get a scholarship to Bromsgrove School and he walked there, two miles every day, through fields and orchards. He obtained a very good grounding in classics and in 1877 earned a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford. From then on he only came back to visit his family in Bromsgrove.

At Oxford his scholastic career got off to a good start but soon he was pursuing his own classical studies rather than the curriculum and he developed a strong attachment to a room mate Moses Jackson. In his finals, Greats, he failed miserably. In 1881 he returned to Perry Hall where the family were now living, without a degree and full of remorse.

For a short time he taught at his old school. Meanwhile his father suffered a stroke and the financial difficulties were grave. AEH returned to Oxford for one term to read for a pass degree and at the same time studied for the Civil Service examinations. In 1882 he took up employment as a clerk in the Patent Office in London, where Moses Jackson already held a more senior position. He was determined to recover his scholastic career and over the next few years a number of his classical papers were accepted for publication. On the strength of these and testimonials by leading classicists he was appointed Professor of Latin at University College London, a remarkable change in his fortunes.

In 1896 *A Shropshire Lad* was published. Poems had welled up when he reflected on the troubles he had been through, among them the death of his mother, his failure at Oxford and rejection by Moses Jackson. Their rural setting is a distillation of the countryside he loved, and so missed in London, his native Worcestershire and Shropshire the county which stirred his imagination.

In 1911 AEH secured the coveted post of Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge. He was appointed as a Fellow at Trinity College where he lived for the rest of his life. His status as a classical scholar grew over the years but it was not until 1922 that a further small volume of poetry, *Last Poems*, was published. However they were not the last. After Housman died in 1936 his brother published two further small collections under the titles, *More Poems* and *Additional Poems*. His total output of poems was comparatively small but it includes some of the most perfect, best known and best loved poems in the English language.

# THE Housman TRAIL

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.*

*Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.*

*And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.*



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**A MOTOR TRAIL AND PEDESTRIAN ROUTE AROUND THE PROPERTIES ASSOCIATED WITH A E HOUSMAN**

A E Housman (1859 - 1936) is most remembered for his poetry. **'A Shropshire Lad'** was published in 1896 and has never lapsed in popularity.

He is also internationally recognised as one of the greatest **classical scholars** of all time.

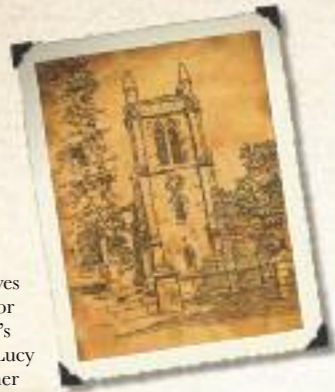
His childhood was spent in Bromsgrove and here he received his early education. His formative influences came from Worcestershire but he romanticised about the land on the horizon where the sun went down - Shropshire.

## MOTOR TRAIL

Start from Hanover Street/St John Street Car Park. Leave by exit opposite The Wishing Well pub turning right. You will find the route clearly marked with brown signs saying The Housman Trail and showing the above symbol. Continue along Market Street. At traffic lights turn left into Stourbridge Road, signed to Fairfield, B4091. Catshill Church is two miles on the right. 

### 1. CHRIST CHURCH, CATSHILL

Built in 1838, A E Housman's grandfather, Thomas, was the first vicar. He had married Ann Brettell of The Clock House and this was the family church. AEH was baptised here in 1859 and attended regularly in his teens. The church was the sad scene of several family funerals and there is a group of the family graves in the southern corner. There is a large stone for Thomas and Ann, and smaller stones for AEH's father Edward, together with his second wife, Lucy Agnes, and for AEH's mother, Sarah Jane. Other relative's buried there are Mary Brettell and Mary Theophania Housman. The churchyard also has chestnut trees planted by Edward Housman to commemorate his children and a cherry tree donated by the Japanese branch of the Housman Society.



Continue away from Bromsgrove, over the motorway and immediately turn left into Claypit Lane. At the next T-junction turn left into Fairfield Road and over the next crossroads into Valley Road. Here three hundred yards on the left is Housman's and three hundred yards further on behind a gate house is the site of the Clock House.



### 2. HOUSMAN'S

This private house was originally The Valley House, an early Georgian farmhouse, part of the Clock House estate. Here in 1859 AE Housman was born just before the family moved to Perry Hall.

*The night my father got me  
His mind was not on me;  
He did not plague his fancy  
To muse if I should be  
The son you see.*

#### GOD'S ACRE

*Morning up the eastern stair  
Marches, azuring the air,  
And the foot of twilight still  
Is stolen toward the western sill.  
Blithe the maids go milking, blithe  
Men in hayfields stone the scythe;  
All the land's alive around  
Except the churchyard's idle ground.  
There's empty acres west and east,  
But aye 'tis God's that bears the least,  
This hopeless garden that they sow  
With the seeds that never grow.*

### 3. THE CLOCK HOUSE

The Clock House once stood where there are several modern houses behind a long brick wall. Originally 17th century, it was at different times home to three generations of Housmans. A E Housman lived there in his teens and with his brothers and sisters enjoyed the large gardens (now private), country life and long walks.

### 4. WORMS ASH or HOUSMAN HILL

The high ground a few hundred yards from the Clock House was known to the Housman children as Mount Pisgah. It commands extensive views including Bredon Hill, the Malverns, the Abberley Hills and to the west the Shropshire Clees which were to Housman the 'blue remembered hills' behind which the sun set. He romanticised about the land beyond them and it became the setting for *A Shropshire Lad*. It also overlooks Bromsgrove and the spire of St John's is a marker for where Housman enjoyed his early years at Perry Hall and to where he walked daily to school.

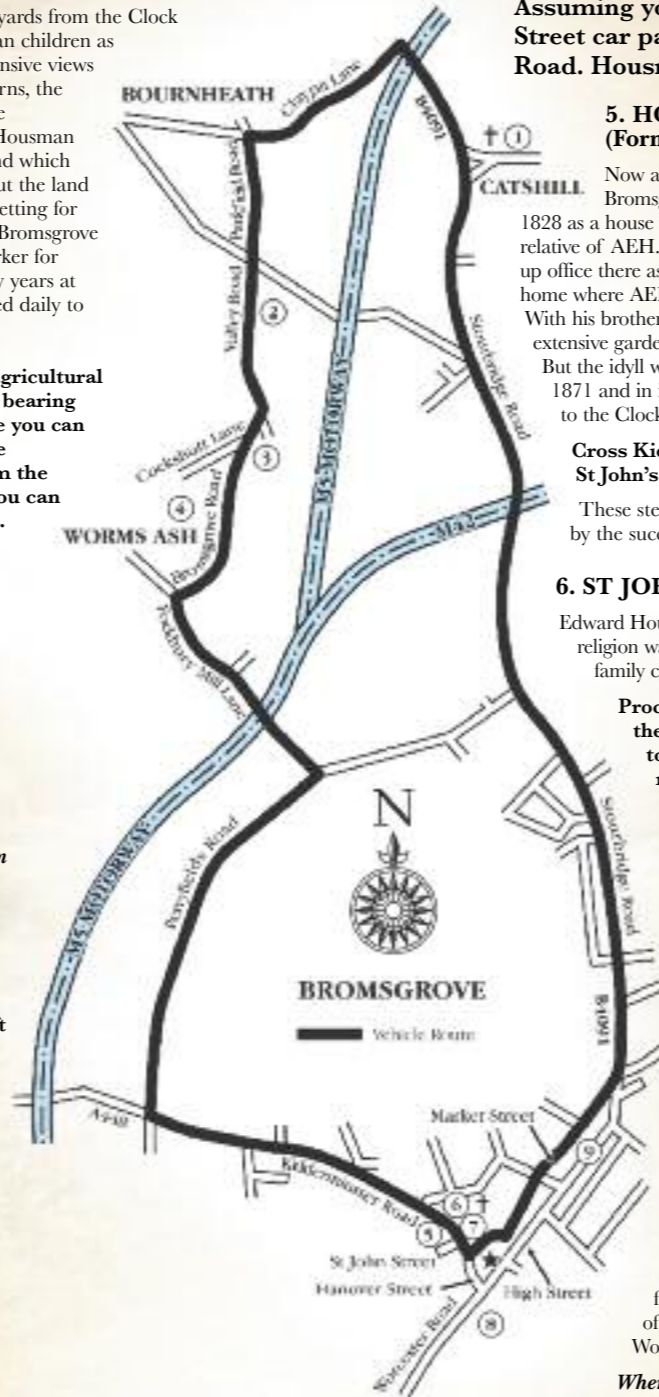
**The top of the hill is private agricultural land. If you leave the car, and bearing right, walk up Cockshutt Lane you can catch glimpses of Bromsgrove including St John's spire. From the first farm gate on the right you can see the Shropshire Clees Hills.**

*When summer's and is nighing  
And skies at evening cloud,  
I muse on change and fortune  
And all the feats I vowed  
When I was young and proud.*

*The weathercock at sunset  
Would lose the slanted ray  
And I would climb the beacon  
That looked to Wales away  
And saw the last of day*

*From hill and cloud and heaven  
The hues of evening died;  
Night welled through lane  
and hollow  
And hushed the countryside,  
But I had youth and pride.*

Leave Valley Road bearing left along Bromsgrove Road to Fockbury Mill Lane. Turn left and cross the motorway to Perryfields Road. Turn right and at the next crossroads turn left and return to the Hanover Street/St John's Street car park, from whence you can continue with the Pedestrian Route.



## PEDESTRIAN ROUTE

Assuming you start from Hanover Street/St John's Street car park, Bromsgrove, enter Kidderminster Road. Housman Hall is on the left.

### 5. HOUSMAN HALL (Formerly PERRY HALL)

Now a residential hall belonging to Bromsgrove School. It was built in 1828 as a house for John Adam's, a distant relative of AEH. The poet's father, Edward, set up office there as a solicitor and it was the family home where AEH lived until he was 13. With his brothers and sisters AEH enjoyed its extensive gardens and had a perfect childhood. But the idyll was shattered when his mother died on his birthday in 1871 and in increasing financial difficulties Edward moved his family to the Clock House. For most of the twentieth century it was a hotel.

**Cross Kidderminster Road and climb the steps to St John's Church.**

These steps were made for John Adams and were regularly used by the succeeding Housman family.

### 6. ST JOHN'S CHURCH

Edward Housman ran a household in which religion was strictly observed. This was the family church and a key focus for them.

**Proceed to the right of the church and down the steps to the market place. Turn right past the Wishing Well.**

This area of Bromsgrove was crammed with nailers' workshops, houses and pubs during the poet's childhood.

### 7. THE WISHING WELL (Formerly THE SHOULDER OF MUTTON)

This was patronised by Edward Housman, perhaps a little too well.

*And malt does more than Milton can  
To justify God's ways to man.  
Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink  
For fellows whom it hurts to think:  
Look into the pewter pot  
To see the world as it is not.*

**Skirt the car park and continue to Worcester Road.**

Passing Watt Close, which was the scene of agricultural fairs in nineteenth century. Fairs are a feature of a number of AEH's poems. Bromsgrove School is round the corner in Worcester Road, fifty yards on the left.

*When first my way to fair I took  
Few pence in purse had I,  
And long I used to stand and look  
At things I could not buy.*

### 8. BROMSGROVE SCHOOL

Bromsgrove School was a small grammar school in the nineteenth century. Cookes House, built in 1695 and added to in 1859, facing the road was then the main school building. AEH received his classical education there. He gained a strong grounding in classics and won prizes for poetry. It is now a large independent school with an international reputation.

**Turn back and proceed straight up Worcester Road to the High Street. Three hundred yards up the statue of AEH faces you.**

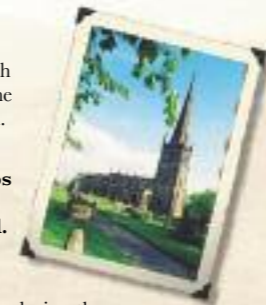
### 9. THE HIGH STREET and A E HOUSMAN STATUE

Bromsgrove was a small market and manufacturing town in Housman's day. It was built on the Roman road going north. The shop fronts were mainly Georgian often concealing the timbers of older buildings. The main industry was the forging of hand made nails.

The statue was erected in 1985. It shows the poet pausing on one of the long solitary walks on which poems welled up in his imagination.

*Into my heart an air that kills  
From yon far country blows:  
What are those blue remembered hills,  
What spires, what farms are those?*

*That is the land of lost content,  
I see it shining plain,  
The happy highways where I went  
And cannot come again.*



THE  
*Housman*  
TRAIL