

A SUSSEX GUIDE

SUSSEX
WRITERS
& ARTISTS



EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH



SNAKE RIVER PRESS



SNAKE RIVER PRESS

Book No 2

Books about Sussex for the enthusiast

Published in 2007 by
SNAKE RIVER PRESS
South Downs Way, Alfriston, Sussex BN26 5XW
www.snakeriverpress.co.uk

ISBN 978-1-906022-01-3

This book was conceived, designed and produced by
SNAKE RIVER PRESS

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ART DIRECTOR & PUBLISHER *Peter Bridgewater*
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PAGE MAKEUP *Richard Constable & Chris Morris*
ILLUSTRATOR *Ivan Hissey*
CONSULTANT *Lorraine Harrison*

This book is typeset in Perpetua & Gill Sans,
two fonts designed by Eric Gill

Printed and bound in China

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DAISY ASHFORD

1881 - 1972

LEWES



Daisy Ashford, without a doubt now one of the best-known Sussex authors, wrote her celebrated book *The Young Visitors* in 1890, when she was only nine years old and living in Lewes. The manuscript lay in a drawer for nearly 30 years, until it was finally published in 1919, with a preface by J.M. Barrie. Speaking of the photograph of the child-author that accompanied the text, Barrie wrote:

This is no portrait of a writer who had to burn the oil at midnight (indeed there is documentary evidence that she was hauled off to bed every evening at six): it has an air of careless power; there is a complacency about it that by the severe might perhaps be called smugness. It needed no effort for that face to knock off a masterpiece.

In fact the sheer confidence of the narrative – a child’s eye view of English upper-class society – and what seemed to be its sharp satirical edge caused many people to believe that the text had been written by James Barrie himself.

Though *The Young Visitors* is not – contrary to report – the only novel or novella that Daisy produced (there was another one called *The Hangman’s Daughter*, in addition to a number of short stories). She stopped writing when she was in her teens, though, according to her daughter, she continued to tell entertaining stories – invented lives for people she had observed in a teashop or elsewhere. But when her masterpiece was finally published, she couldn’t see what all the fuss was about, or why her book had become an instant classic. Since its publication, it has never been out of print.

Its immediate success was partly due to the cult of childhood that flourished in Britain in the years immediately after World War I, perhaps in reaction to the horrors of the war itself. A.A. Milne's Pooh stories and poems featuring his son Christopher Robin were beneficiaries of the same impulse – a need to try to reclaim a lost innocence. There was also the fact that *The Young Visitors*, with its naïve but telling vision of Victorian high society, recalled something that suddenly seemed incredibly exotic and remote.

One reason for the book's continued popularity, however, is that it is stuffed with quotable quotes. For example, who can forget Daisy's child's-eye vision of royalty? 'Here on a golden chair was seated the prince of Wales in a lovely ermine cloak and a small but costly crown.' And other gems are not difficult to find: 'Bernard always had a few prayers in the hall and some whiskey afterwards as he was rather pious.' Or, 'My own idear [sic] is that these things are as piffle before the wind.'

In her own way, Daisy was a phrase-maker on a par with Oscar Wilde.



Ashford's Top Works

- ① *The Young Visitors*, 1919
- ② *Love and Marriage (with Angela Ashford)*, 1965
- ③ *The Hangman's Daughter*, 1983

VANESSA BELL

1879-1961

CHARLESTON

Vanessa Bell was the eldest child of Sir Leslie Stephen, by his second marriage to Julia Duckworth. She studied at the Royal Academy Schools, then at the Slade. After the death of her somewhat overwhelming father in 1904, she moved, with her younger sister Virginia (*see p. 89*) and her brothers Thoby and Adrian, to Gordon Square in London. Thoby's friends from Cambridge began to frequent the house and the 'Bloomsbury Group' was formed.

In 1907 Vanessa married the art critic Clive Bell (she had previously refused him twice, but changed her mind after her brother Thoby died suddenly from typhoid fever) and had two sons by him, Julian (1908-37), killed when working as an ambulance driver for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, and Quentin (1910-1997). In 1910 she met the painter and critic Roger Fry, when he came to speak at the 'Friday Club', a regular gathering she had founded to bring progressive artists and writers together.

In 1910 the Bells went on holiday with Fry to Greece and Turkey. Vanessa had a miscarriage and was nursed by Fry – as a result they started an affair. This was succeeded by another, and much longer-lasting affair with the otherwise openly homosexual Duncan Grant (*see p. 44*), a painter who she had first met soon after her marriage, when he was studying in Paris, and who became an intimate part of the Bloomsbury circle when he returned to London.

Grant was a conscientious objector, and in 1916 he and Vanessa, together with Vanessa's sons and Grant's lover David Garnett, moved to Charleston, near Firlie in Sussex, so that he could escape conscription by doing agricultural labour. Charleston then became the country headquarters of the Bloomsbury Group, and Vanessa lived there from 1939 until her death. She had a daughter, Angelica, by Duncan Grant in

1918, but for many years they maintained the pretence that she was her husband's child, not that of her lover.

Vanessa had the reputation with outsiders of being somewhat difficult and antisocial, but her intimates never found her so. Leonard Woolf (see p.87), who married her sister Virginia, wrote:

To many people she appeared frightening and formidable... I myself never found her formidable, partly because she had the most beautiful speaking voice I have ever heard, partly because of her tranquility and quietude. (The tranquility was to some extent superficial; it did not extend deep down in her mind, for there in the depths there was also an extreme sensitivity, a nervous tension...)

Writing to Vanessa after their affair had come to an end, Roger Fry said:

Oh, why do I admire you so? ... I think you go straight for the things that are worthwhile – you have done such an extraordinary difficult thing without any fuss; cut thro' all the conventions, kept friends with a persnickety creature like Clive, got rid of me yet kept me your devoted friend, got all the things you needed for your own development and yet managed to be a splendid mother – no, you really can't wonder. You give one a sense of security, of something solid and real in a shifting world.

Her son Quentin remembered both her emotional depths and her sense of humour:

My elder brother, speaking with unconscious prescience, likened her to Demeter, a goddess who with terrible velocity could change from summer to winter. My earliest memories are of her summer laughter, specifically of an evening seated on a bench in Gordon Square when she told us how children were made and born, an account which she made so overwhelmingly droll that I rolled helpless with mirth off the bench.

In her lifetime, Vanessa's reputation as a painter was somewhat overshadowed by that of Grant. In hindsight, she now seems the stronger and more radical talent of the two, especially in her early paintings made just before and during World War I. Her work, like his, tended to become more conventional as she grew older.

SIR DIRK BOGARDE

1921 - 1999

ALFRISTON



Dirk Bogarde, born Derek van den Bogaerde in Hampstead of mixed Belgian and Scottish ancestry, is best remembered for his career as an actor. Starting out as a *matinée* idol in the 1950s (on his death Glenda Jackson described him as the Leonardo di Caprio of the period), when he made his name as the handsome young Simon Sparrow, hero of the ‘Doctor’ series, he went on to star in difficult, complex films by major directors, among them Joseph Losey’s *The Servant* (1963) and Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned* (1969) and *Death in Venice* (1971). During the latter years of his success as an actor, Bogarde lived mostly in Provence with his partner Tony Forwood, moving back to London in 1988 when Forwood fell ill with cancer. Forwood’s importance in Bogarde’s life was only fully acknowledged after his death. Neither of them seems to have thought of moving to Sussex. However, Bogarde claims a place in this book because his Sussex childhood played an important role in his books – he wrote both a series of memoirs and novels that are often obviously based on his own life.

Bogarde was brought up at Lullington, near Alfriston, in Sussex not by his parents (his father was the first art editor of *The Times*), but by his older sister Elizabeth and their adored nurse Lally. The county figures in his first volume of memoirs, *A Postillion Struck by Lightning*, published in 1977, and also, more intensely in the novel-memoir *Great Meadow* (1992), which recalls his intense response to nature as an 11-year-old boy, and again, more obliquely in his final novel, *Closing Ranks* (1997). One curious feature of this last book is that, while it tells the story of an upper-class family gathered round the death-bed of a beloved nanny, the dying woman curses them instead of blessing them.

In fact Bogarde seems to have felt a real ambivalence both about his family and about Sussex. It only emerged, some three years after his death, that he had a long-lost paternal grandfather who had lived in Brighton, reappearing there many years after deserting his wife and son. Aimé van den Bogaerde was an adventurer who, having lost all his money, sailed for Colombia in 1899, to try his luck as an orchid hunter. At first he sent optimistic reports of his progress but, soon after announcing his intention to return home with his fortunes restored, he ceased to communicate with his family. His wife died in 1917, believing he had been killed in South America.

When Aimé reappeared in 1931, his son Ulric, resenting his behaviour, refused to have anything to do with him, but Dirk, who had some contact with him, was apparently fascinated, although Aimé does not figure in any of his books of reminiscences. The returned prodigal, who died in 1938, was an alcoholic who forged paintings for a living, or else touted his own art round the pubs of Brighton in exchange for drink. He sounds very much like the kind of flawed character that Bogarde might have played in the later years of his film career.

Bogarde's Top Works

- ① *A Postillion Struck by Lightning*, 1977
- ② *Voices in the Garden*, 1981
- ③ *A Short Walk from Harrods*, 1993

Brangwyn's Top Works (see next page)

- ① *The Return of the Fishing Fleet*, 1888
- ② *A Cooper at Work*, 1905
- ③ *British Empire Panels*, 1924-33