



Algernon Charles Swinburne was an English poet and critic and was famous in Victorian England for the innovation and versification of his poetry and infamous for his violent attacks on Victorian morality. He spent his early years on the Island and is buried in St. Boniface churchyard, Bonchurch.

Swinburne was born at 7 Chester Street, Grosvenor Place, London on 5th April 1837 and was the eldest of six children born to Captain Charles Henry Swinburne and Lady Jane Henrietta, daughter of the 3rd Earl of Ashburnham, a wealthy Northumberland family. His parents and grandparents both owned property on the Isle of Wight, including East Dene in Bonchurch, which is where Algernon spent much of his childhood, and almost certainly sparked his love of the sea. He also made frequent visits to his grandfather's estate in Northumberland where he was fascinated by the medieval border ballads that the servants sang to him.

He was educated at Eton from 1848 to 1853 where he became an avid reader and won prizes in French and Italian. The corporal punishment that was traditionally meted out at Eton may have developed the abnormal pleasure in the experience of pain that characterised his adult behaviour.

When he left school he enrolled at Balliol College, Oxford and studied there – intermittently - for four years. Though he continued to read widely, he rebelled at academic discipline and neglected his studies. Bizarrely, he became known for his violent attacks on Christianity and on conventional morality as well as his late hours and heavy drinking. Swinburne replaced the religious faith of his youth with political fervour.

By 1860 his Balliol College colleagues considered him 'dangerous' but his decision to leave university without a degree was his own. His father was most displeased but, nevertheless, provided him with a permanent allowance and he moved to London and devoted his life to writing. He took up residence with Dante Gabriel Rossetti (whom he had met at Oxford) at Tudor House, 16 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea.

Swinburne possessed a curious combination of frail health and strength. He was only just over five feet tall and slightly built but was an excellent swimmer and was said to be the first person to climb Culver Cliff - between Sandown and Bembridge. He had an extremely excitable disposition and seemed to be unable to maintain moderation in things that he did. He suffered from fits but he made his condition much worse by drinking past excess to unconsciousness. On many occasions he was delivered to Rosetti's door in the early

hours completely intoxicated. Throughout the 1860s & 1870s he rode an alcoholic cycle of dissolution, collapse and drying out, only to start all over again!



Although his works were beginning to appear in periodicals, in 1865, *Atalanta in Calydon* was the first poem to come out in his name. Swinburne continued with his extremely unsavoury and disturbing life-style and, inevitably, in 1879 he nearly died from alcoholism and dissolution. His legal advisor, Theodore Watts-Dunton, took him in to his home in Putney and was successful in getting him to adopt a healthier style of life, where he was able to live out the rest of his days. He died of influenza on April 10th 1909 at the age of 72 at The Pines, 11 Putney Hill, London.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Colin Beavis (photo of Swinburne's grave taken January 2021)



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre. The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.
www.ventnorheritage.org.uk / telephone 855407

