

Scarborough Sea Wall Heritage Trail Project Lauren Bruce Founder and Head of the Anne Bronte Society

Interview and Transcription by Huw Roberts

Today, I'm talking to Lauren Bruce. Lauren is the founder and Head of the Anne Bronte Society and I'm hoping today to understand from her why this member of a famous literary family is buried here in Scarborough. But firstly, Lauren, tell us about the work of the Anne Bronte Society.

Thank you for having me today at the Society we are dedicated to preserving, but also promoting her books, legacy and memory, especially within the town. And what we're hoping to do is kind of change the narrative of her being the forgotten Bronte and actually realise she has a prominent presence within Scarborough especially.

What led to Anne's relationship with Scarborough whilst working as a governess?

So Anne spent time working as a governess for the Robinson family, who were based in Thorpe Green in York. However, for five or six weeks of the year between 1840 and 1845 and they actually came to Scarborough and they stayed in Woods Lodgings, which is now the site of the Grand Hotel. So she spent an awful lot of time in Scarborough. It's not just that she's buried here, she lived and also worked here and spent a lot of time throughout the town navigating her way through kind of this very unusual situation that she was in.

She would have, over that period, spent a lot of time here in Scarborough. Did that allow Anne to develop and pursue some interests of her own?

It did. So Anne was educated by her father Patrick, in addition to her sisters Charlotte and Emily and also her brother Branwell. But she was educated at that time, so when she became a governess she already had a lot of very unusual kind of talents or combined into one. They did the traditional sewing and she was also a keen musician as well. She loved playing the piano. But she was also a keen writer and she used to write these poems with her sister Emily and all these stories called Gondal, which unfortunately we only have shreds of evidence of this now. But it meant that she was very interested in in the arts but also in the sciences, and she took great advantage of that when she was in Scarborough. We know that her brother Branwell visited the Rotunda but it's very likely that she also visited the museum and had a particular interest in history. But she was also incredibly interested in geology as well and she spent a lot of time foraging different gemstones from the beaches, some of which are actually at the Bronte Parsonage Museum. But she got these from Scarborough and it's still a popular place to get fossils today, but she was really interested in natural sciences.

And her term working as governess for the Robinsons, why did that come to an end?

Well, there's a story. It's a very interesting notion of what happened next. There's various speculation and rumour, but as the saying goes, there's no smoke without fire, I suppose. and what happened was, we think, that when Branwell came to see and when he came to visit, he had an affair with Mrs Robinson. We don't know what this entailed, however, there was a clear disruption in the family and Anne left her position as a governess because of this. It was very embarrassing for her governess because of this. It was very embarrassing for her. She loved her time as a governess. She loved the children, especially. Lydia, one of the children was particularly interested in the theatre and she loved going to the theatre in Scarborough with Anne, and Lydia ended up actually joining the theatre in the end, but it was very upsetting and the children were heartbroken over it, so they actually gifted her a dog which was a spaniel called Flossy and Anne actually drew and painted Flossie, but she never actually finished and we think it's because she was such an adorable bouncy dog she could never sit still.

I gather after this position, she didn't seek any further work as a governess. What did she do next?

Well, she did quite a lot of things next, which is interesting. I think she didn't want to work as a governess again due to the fact of what had happened previously and actually before Thorpe Green she was actually a governess at Blake Hall for the Ingram family, and the children apparently were not very nice to her. They were very spoiled and I don't think she wanted to take her chances with another family. So she ended up going back to Haworth, which is now the Bronte Parsonage museum. But her sisters Charlotte and Emily were also there and what happened was they actually decided to write. That's what they wanted to do, they wanted to write. These were well educated women. They didn't come from a rich family, they were quite poor, but they had book smarts and they used their life experiences to conjure up these fantastic novels. But the first thing they ever published was actually a book of poems, and they were released under the pseudonyms of Courier, which were Charlotte Ellis, which was Emily, and Acton, which was Anne, all with the same surname of Bell. And whilst Charlotte was writing Jane Eyre and Emily was writing Wuthering Heights, Anne was busy writing Agnes Grey, which is a brilliant novel, but also a very angry one and it is very feminist.

However, her next novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is actually considered the first ever feminist novel, and what she wanted to do was draw her life experiences into creating these wonderful works of feminist literature. But *Agnes Grey* in particular is interesting because it is semi autobiographical and it is based in a seaside town and, although not mentioned specifically, we can pretty much say for certain it is based on Scarborough.

When she returned to Scarborough for the very last time, she was quite poorly. Was her journey to Scarborough then to try to improve her health, or because she wanted to spend her last days here?

It ended up being a little bit of both, actually, so she begged her sister Charlotte, as Emily had already passed away to bring her back to Scarborough. So what happened was desperately wanted to come to Scarborough, and Charlotte was worried that Anne was far too frail. However, Anne then wrote to the family friend and Charlotte's friend in particular, Ellen Nasi, asking if she could, she was begging, basically, that she wanted to come to Scarborough in particular. Yes, she'd had a lovely time here with the Robinson family, but at that time, Scarborough was also boasting a number of health benefits. Now the family had been struck by tuberculosis, and it's what Emily died of and Anne had now got it. We're not quite sure when she had it, because she was also an asthmatic, so we're not quite sure when she actually ended up contracting tuberculosis. However, she was very, very poorly, but they did manage to come to Scarborough, and she was hoping to use the bath houses as a way of actually helping her.

It wasn't uncommon for people to travel to the seaside in order to hope for a cure. However, they suggested that actually the months were slightly later in the year and they came in May. So perhaps the water wasn't at the right pH level. And also there's discrepancies about whether or not it could have actually helped. But in the end, she did, she did come, we know that she went to a bath house. We also know that she ended up walking on the beach. There is rumour that she also went on a donkey ride as well, but in the end what happened was she was incredibly weak and frail by the end of a couple of days after her visit, and she actually passed away in Scarborough. I don't think she could have made the trip back, but she was incredibly fond of Scarborough and especially the beach, and I just have a very, very short passage here from *Agnes Grey*, where she's talking about walking on the beach.

She says:

" My footsteps were the first to press the firm, unbroken sands. Nothing before had trampled them since last night's flowing tide had obliterated the deepest marks of yesterday."

I really loved that because it's incredibly poignant about this kind of ever growing natural cycle. And I think she really did love Scarborough in the end and she was content with passing away here. Even though she genuinely didn't want to die, she was desperate for a cure but when she knew she was going, I think Scarborough was the perfect place for her to pass away.

Unfortunately, of course, her last days here were quite short and she died not long after arriving. I gather that some believe that there was some rivalry between Anne and her sister Charlotte. What is your take on that theory?

I think Charlotte absolutely adored her sister Anne. We know for a fact that Anne growing up was closest to Emily, their aunt actually commented that Anne and Emily were more like twins. However, Charlotte was the eldest. Remember she went to work as a teacher for Roe Head and after Emily had returned there, Anne actually took Emily's place as one of the students and Charlotte doesn't really talk about Anne much there. So I don't think that they were close, but I wouldn't say they were rivals. However, I will admit that this narrative that is portrayed of Charlotte burning absolutely everything after Anne died could actually have been an act of love rather than defiance. Remember, at the time Charlotte was still grieving for Emily who had died, Branwell who had died, and now all of a sudden her only living sibling was dying in front of her eyes and she could not cope with that at all. She actually asked Ellen Nussey, her friend who was with them in Scarborough when Anne died, she asked her to handle all the administrative things that come with a bereavement and the paper published the wrong address. They published Ellen's address instead of Anne's address for the obituary. The grave, which has become kind of iconic for being incorrect as her age was actually 29 but on the grave, it was 28. The official death record which is held at the church is actually listed as 28 as well. So there were all these mistakes and I don't think it was out of being a rival at all. I think she was grieving and what was common at the time as well and I think it's where context is key here is that during this time, if you think about information spreading, what's the quickest way to get rid of something? Well, it would have been to burn it and just going back to why these women were using pseudonyms, it was a kind of a protective force and bearing in mind that Anne was writing about her experiences, and perhaps *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* will be able to shed more light on what she thought of her brother Branwell; I will implicitly imply that there. However, bearing in mind that she was outed as Anne Bronte and not as Acton Bell, this caused a bit of a problem for the family. Charlotte was left on her own and she didn't want anything to come and jeopardise what was happening. So she did stop the publication of *Tenant*, but Charlotte was the reason why they were outed in the first place when she took Anne to London with her to go to the publishers and say, look, we are not men, we're not one man, we are three women, we are three sisters. Emily refused to go but Anne was taken along, and I think Charlotte kind of felt some sort of guilt for that. So I don't think it was an act of hatred or rivalry. I do think in a moment of madness, and bereaved grief, perhaps she made some decisions which nowadays we would consider mean and hateful, but I don't think it was out of spite. I think it was out of love.

Lauren, thank you very much for that wonderful insight into Anne Bronte and thank you for giving us this interview today. The very best of luck with the work of the Anne Bronte Society.