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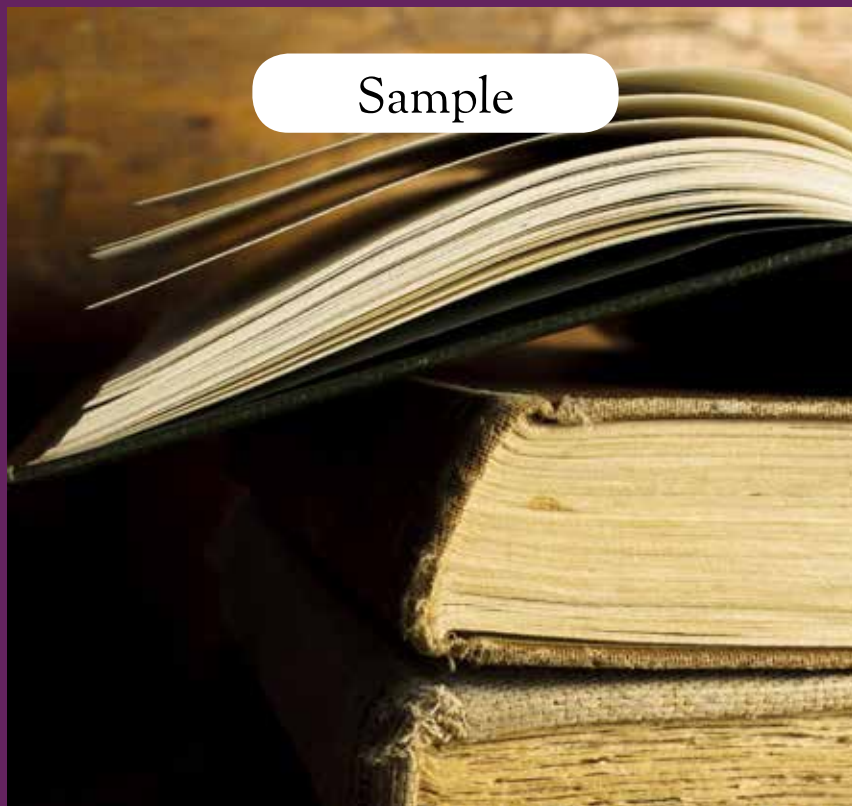
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'the stones of Lancaster do sometimes whisper'

Sample



Literary Lancaster

City of Stories

Penny Bradshaw

LITERARY LANCASTER

A Tour of Lancaster's Literary Heritage,
Inspired by the City's Ancient History.

This PDF is a sample.

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University of
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Chapter (*& Location*)

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Williamson Park

Introduction

Literary Lancaster - A Tour

The 'Literary Lancaster' tour takes you on a literary journey via eight key locations and gives you the opportunity to dip into a range of texts which have been inspired by this ancient city. Writers featured include many well known and canonical names such as William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, and Carol Ann Duffy.

As you will see, there is a dark and Gothic thread running through Lancaster's literary heritage, inspired by the city's ancient history as a place of execution and as a slave port. Along the way you will encounter tales of witches, hangings, and ghostly hauntings...

*

The Tour begins in Williamson Park on Wyresdale Road. The park was created by the Victorian philanthropist, Lord Ashton, and is now the venue for various outdoor theatre performances in the summer months. Enter the park and follow signs to the cafe and shop. Once outside the cafe turn to see the impressive view over Lancaster sands.



Thomas Gray (1716-1771)

View over Lancaster Sands

i. Williamson Park

Before the coming of the railway in the nineteenth-century the most direct route from Lancaster to the Lake District was via a crossing of Lancaster Sands, across Morecambe Bay. The route was and is treacherous because of the quicksands and tidal bores within the bay, and travellers must be accompanied by a guide.

The experience of the sands, the strangeness of a landscape which is temporarily reclaimed from the sea, and the dangers inherent in travelling across its shifting terrain have proved inspirational to a number of writers.

The poet, Thomas Gray (1716-1771), crossed the sands in October 1769 after having spent several days visiting the Lakes and his account of the experience reminds us of the tragic stories associated with the crossing:

Oct: 11. W^d S:W: clouds & sun. warm & a fine dappled sky. cross'd the river & walk'd over a peninsula 3 miles to the village of Pooton w^{ch} stands on the beach. an old Fisherman mending his nets (while I enquired about the danger of passing those sands) told me in his dialect a moving story, how a brother of the trade, a Cockler (as he styled him) driving a little cart with two daughters (women grown) in it, & his Wife on horseback following, set out one day to pass the 7 mile sands, as they had frequently been used to do, for nobody in the village knew them better than the old Man did. when they were about half way over, a thick fog rose, & as they advanced, they found the water much deeper than they expected. the old man was puzzled, he stop'd, & said he would go a little way to find some mark he was acquainted with. they staid a little while for him, but in vain. they call'd aloud, but no reply. at last the young women press'd their mother to think, where they were, & go on. she would not leave the place, she wander'd about forlorn & amazed, she would not quit her horse, & get into the cart with them. they determined after much time wasted to turn

back, & give themselves up to the guidance of their horses. the old Woman was soon wash'd off and perish'd. the poor Girls clung close to their cart, & the horse sometimes wading & sometimes swimming brought them back to land alive, but senseless with terror & distress & unable for many days to give any account of themselves. the bodies of their parents were found soon after; that of the Father a very few paces distant from the spot, where he had left them.

The Gothic novelist, Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), made the same crossing with her husband in 1794 and responded strongly to the mysterious beauty of the landscape of the sands. The later Cumbrian poet, Norman Nicholson, would describe her account of their passage as 'beautifully written' and reminiscent of an 'eighteenth-century chalk drawing':

We took the early part of the tide, and entered these vast and desolate plains before the sea had entirely left them, or the morning mists were sufficiently dissipated to allow a view of distant objects; but the grand sweep of the coast could be faintly traced, on the left, and a vast waste of sand stretching far below it, with mingled streaks of gray water, that heightened its dreary aspect. The tide was ebbing fast from our wheels, and its low murmur was interrupted, first, only by the shrill small cry of sea-gulls, unseen, whose hovering flight could be traced by the sound, near an island that began to dawn through the mist; and then, by the hoarser croaking of sea-geese, which took a wider range, for their shifting voices were heard from various quarters of the surrounding coast. The body of the sea, on the right, was still involved, and the distant mountains on our left, that crown the bay, were also viewless; but it was sublimely interesting to watch the heavy vapours beginning to move, then rolling in lengthening volumes over the scene, and, as they gradually dissipated, discovering through their veil the various objects they had concealed—fishermen with carts and nets stealing along the margin of the tide, little boats putting off from the shore, and, the view still enlarging as the vapours expanded, the main sea itself softening into the horizon, with here and there a dim sail moving in the hazy distance. The wide desolation of the sands, on the left,



William Wordsworth (1770-1850)



Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865)

was animated only by some horsemen riding remotely in groups towards Lancaster, along the winding edge of the water, and by a mussel-fisher in his cart trying to ford the channel we were approaching.

The Romantic Poet, William Wordsworth (1770-1850), also describes the experience of crossing the sands in his *Guide to the Lakes* (1810) commenting that:

The Stranger, from the moment he sets foot on those Sands, seems to leave the turmoil and traffic of the world behind him; and, crossing the majestic plain whence the sea has retired, he beholds, rising apparently from its base, the cluster of mountains among which he is going to wander, and towards whose recesses....he is gradually and peacefully led.

The Manchester-based Victorian novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell, spent a great deal of time at Silverdale in Lancashire and wrote a short story about a drowning on the sands entitled '*The Sexton's Hero*' (1847).

The sands also feature in more recent literature and provide the setting for the evocative opening chapter of Melvyn Bragg's *The Maid of Buttermere* (1987), in which the villainous bigamist, Colonel Hope, is watched by a local woman as she sets out with her shrimping nets:

Again he struck out due west. She watched his predatory, slightly uneven gait and once more puzzled over whether he was foolish or bold. The Sands were known to be perilous but the man went without a guide and in a direction certain to tempt danger. This time she would follow him, if only to warn him; and he had intrigued her long enough. The woman slung the shrimping net over her shoulder and stepped out from her hut onto the ripple-ribbed sands. Though they glistened from the recent sea, they were here as hard as stucco....

A white ghost sun showed through the thinning scuds of dull cloud, lending the watery vastness a pewter slate reflection; forbidding. The ebb tide was sucking the sea out from the greedy mouth of the bay for a few hours – when travellers could be piloted over the expanse, when urgent fishermen could race onto the Sands with their horses and carts to trawl the seabed's, when the poor, like the woman, could pick along the shifting margins; but the prodigious stridings of ocean floor would soon be violently reclaimed. And every day, the channels, the bracks, the mosses, the mudflats, the quicksands were altered by the awesome and unpredictable force of the sea.

He walked for about a couple of miles and then stopped. From the pocket of his high-collared dun brown jacket he took out some papers and looked on them intently. But before he began what he had come to do, he looked around to make sure of his isolation.

Although by now he had been out on Lancaster Sands in the Bay of Morecambe several times, he was still unused to the perspectives. He saw a hill across a hop and a jump of sand and thought it a mile or so away when in truth the distance was nearer fifteen. He could just make out groups of women, bent double as if grazing, searching, as he had learned, for cockle-beds – two, four, six miles off? A couple of carriages and several chaises and gigs were beginning their caravan from near his own point of departure – the distance gave them glamour and for a moment he imagined the deserts of the East which he loved to talk about, the

ancient harmonies of timeless travel, the old silk route through Samarkand to Cathay. Down the Bay, as if they were driving into the sea on some imperative from the Old Testament, he thought he could spot the fishermen straddled across their amphibious carts. Nearer – but not too close – and anyway absorbed in the back-bowed raking and culling of the sands for the day's harvest – there were a few solitaires, but as comfortably spaced out from each other as he from them. He felt alone on what had a few hours before been the ocean floor; and safe.

*



The 9th Tercet, Williamson Park

Outside the Williamson Park cafe also note the white cast-iron way marker featuring the 9th tercet from a poem by the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, written to mark the 400th anniversary of the execution of a group of men and women who became known as the Pendle Witches.

Another way marker, featuring the 10th and final tercet, is found outside Lancaster Castle. Those charged with witchcraft were hung on the moors next to where Williamson Park stands today on a spot known as 'Gallow's Hill'. More details about the literature inspired by their story is given at Location 7.

*

Walk back through the Park and as you leave its gates turn right onto Wyresdale Road. Follow the road, crossing over the crossroads and walking down Moor Gate and into Moor Lane. Near the end of Moor Lane you will see The Dukes (Lancaster's second theatre and cinema) ahead and on the right. Turn right at Brewery Lane before you reach The Dukes and then turn left onto Lodge Street to reach The Grand Theatre.