

# My Special Place

There are a few candidates for my special place, even if we confine ourselves to the literal and geographical. The Braighe in winter when the long tailed ducks bob about in the Minch and take flight at sunset – a few spots in the Castle Grounds which I expect will have other champions.



Then there is England, Rusland Beeches in South Lakeland for one. And a little footbridge, buried in woodland that crosses the tiny River Ash in Hertfordshire and always feels to me as if you have stepped out of South East England to somewhere wilder.



But to the surprise of nobody who comes to the writers group regularly, I am going to plump for Highgate, in North London. The reason is no mystery. Absence notoriously makes the heart grow fonder and I lived for two decades in unlovely Archway, right at the foot of Highgate Hill. I worked there in three separate jobs. I got married there (in a magical hidden walled garden in a magical hidden smallholding). I have found roosting tawny owls and nesting sparrowhawks in the depths of Highgate Cemetery, a few miles from Kings Cross. I drank in Highgate Pubs which were, without exception, much better than the pubs of Archway (and not much more expensive).

All of these would be reason to pick it but there is a better one for a writers group piece. As I learned more about the history of Highgate I became aware that it was not just popular with poets – the place is a poetical phenomenon. However, Highgate is too big an area to qualify as my special place so I am going to narrow it down to the terrace of Lauderdale House, two thirds of the way up Highgate Hill.

The first poet (that I know of) to be associated with Highgate was Sir Francis Bacon, who died there in 1626, having caught a chill after experimenting with freezing chicken in the snow down Archway way (look, look it up if you don't believe me). To be fair, Bacon was better known for other things, amongst them more or less inventing the scientific method, but he was a poet too, and he must have passed Lauderdale House on his last, ill fated journey up the hill. There are rumours of a ghostly chicken haunting Highgate. I don't know about that. What I do know, and swear is true, is that when I worked in Highgate Cemetery and was conducting a bird survey a chicken walked down Swains Lane on the other side of Waterlow Park to the house, and clucked about around the cemetery entrance before heading down towards Parliament Hill.



Andrew Marvell is, however, mostly remembered as a poet. He had a cottage, since demolished on Highgate Hill. The garden of the cottage is still accessible as part of Waterlow Park, now a grove of white barked trees.

'Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,  
And Innocence, thy sister dear!  
Mistaken long, I sought you then  
In busy companies of men;  
Your sacred plants, if here below,  
Only among the plants will grow.  
Society is all but rude,  
To this delicious solitude.'



The cottage was next to Lauderdale House, which is still there and much older and more interesting than a casual glance might suggest. It is rumoured to have belonged, briefly, to Nell Gwyn, King Charles II's mistress. "Pretty, witty Nell" was a great friend of Aphra Benn, playwright spy and novelist and the first woman known to have made a living from writing in English. I read somewhere that their riotous parties annoyed their neighbour, Andrew. Disturbing his fair quiet and delicious solitude, no doubt. I can't swear that is true but I do hope so.



At the back there is a tiny café, more a kiosk really, with tables and seats on a terrace. This is part of Waterlow Park which is a small but very fine park and the benches on the terrace have views over the lower park, its ornamental lakes, and Highgate Cemetery which looks like forest from this vantage. Sir Sydney Waterlow was a Lord Mayor of London who gifted the park to the public to be a "garden for the gardenless," and I lived for many years in a flat without a garden, ten minutes walk away. More times than I can remember I nipped up the hill to have a cappuccino in the sunshine and watch the world stroll by. It was a great solace in bad times and a relaxed place to meet up with a friend in better ones. I even got to organise a 99th birthday celebration on the adjacent terrace, for Eve, a lady who did not even have a garden at her sheltered housing.



So I say thank you to Sir Sydney for gifting this garden to gardenless to me, to Eve, and who knows how many others? And thanks to Andrew too for celebrating it in words, long before his own cottage and garden became part of my own special place.



# The Garden

Andrew Marvell (1681)

How vainly men themselves amaze  
To win the palm, the oak, or bays,  
And their uncessant labours see  
Crown'd from some single herb or tree,  
Whose short and narrow verged shade  
Does prudently their toils upbraid;  
While all flow'rs and all trees do close  
To weave the garlands of repose.

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,  
And Innocence, thy sister dear!  
Mistaken long, I sought you then  
In busy companies of men;  
Your sacred plants, if here below,  
Only among the plants will grow.  
Society is all but rude,  
To this delicious solitude.

No white nor red was ever seen  
So am'rous as this lovely green.  
Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,  
Cut in these trees their mistress' name;  
Little, alas, they know or heed  
How far these beauties hers exceed!  
Fair trees! wheres'e'er your barks I wound,  
No name shall but your own be found.

When we have run our passion's heat,  
Love hither makes his best retreat.  
The gods, that mortal beauty chase,  
Still in a tree did end their race:  
Apollo hunted Daphne so,  
Only that she might laurel grow;  
And Pan did after Syrinx speed,  
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.

What wond'rous life in this I lead!  
Ripe apples drop about my head;  
The luscious clusters of the vine  
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;

The nectarine and curious peach  
Into my hands themselves do reach;  
Stumbling on melons as I pass,  
Ensnar'd with flow'rs, I fall on grass.

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,  
Withdraws into its happiness;  
The mind, that ocean where each kind  
Does straight its own resemblance find,  
Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other worlds, and other seas;  
Annihilating all that's made  
To a green thought in a green shade.

Here at the fountain's sliding foot,  
Or at some fruit tree's mossy root,  
Casting the body's vest aside,  
My soul into the boughs does glide;  
There like a bird it sits and sings,  
Then whets, and combs its silver wings;  
And, till prepar'd for longer flight,  
Waves in its plumes the various light.

Such was that happy garden-state,  
While man there walk'd without a mate;  
After a place so pure and sweet,  
What other help could yet be meet!  
But 'twas beyond a mortal's share  
To wander solitary there:  
Two paradises 'twere in one  
To live in paradise alone.

How well the skillful gard'ner drew  
Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new,  
Where from above the milder sun  
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;  
And as it works, th' industrious bee  
Computes its time as well as we.  
How could such sweet and wholesome hours  
Be reckon'd but with herbs and flow'rs!

