

APHRA BEHN.....APHRA WHO?

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Aphra Behn (1640-1689), a bold, salacious, and pioneering individualⁱ

St Michael's church Harbledownⁱⁱ

The St Michael's Parish Register contains a baptism entry, dated December 14th 1640: "Eafry, d. of Bartholemew Johnson and Elizabeth, Harballdowne".

Three and a half centuries on, this same Eafry is now recognised as the first English novelist and the first English woman to earn her living as a writer. Aphra. Behn, as she became known, was for a long while thought to have been the daughter of John Johnson, a barber, and to have been baptized at Wye, a mistake enshrined in the Encyclopedia Britannica. Moreover, Vita Sackville-West placed her as Ayfara, daughter of John and Arry-'Amis of Wye, born 10th July 1640.

Thanks to diligent historical detective work by Maureen Duffy (1977)ⁱⁱⁱ and Angeline Goreau (1980)^{iv} we now know our Eafry Johnson was indeed Aphra Behn. Her father, Bartholemew, described as "a yeoman" came from Bishopsbourne.

At the time of her birth Harbledown's population was no more than 180. It was a small hamlet of farms and cottages, clustered downhill from St Michael's Church, and spread out along the London-Canterbury-Dover road. These were troubled times, with Parliament and King Charles I increasingly at loggerheads. The outbreak of the Civil War was only eighteen months away. Already, allegiances were being consolidated, intolerances between factions hardening. Was this the reason Royalist sympathiser Bartholemew Johnson and his wife moved from Bishopsbourne to Harbledown? We can only guess.

What we do know is that, whilst still a child, Eafry was taken by her parents to Surinam, then an English colony on the edge of the South American mainland. Here she stayed until 1658 when the colony was handed to the Dutch.

She was then eighteen years old. During her childhood and adolescence in such exotic surroundings, Eafry is said to have "learned the history and acquired personal knowledge of the African prince Oroonoko and his beloved Imoinda". This story was to form the 'oasis for her novel "Oroonoko" , *the* first English novel. But that was later.

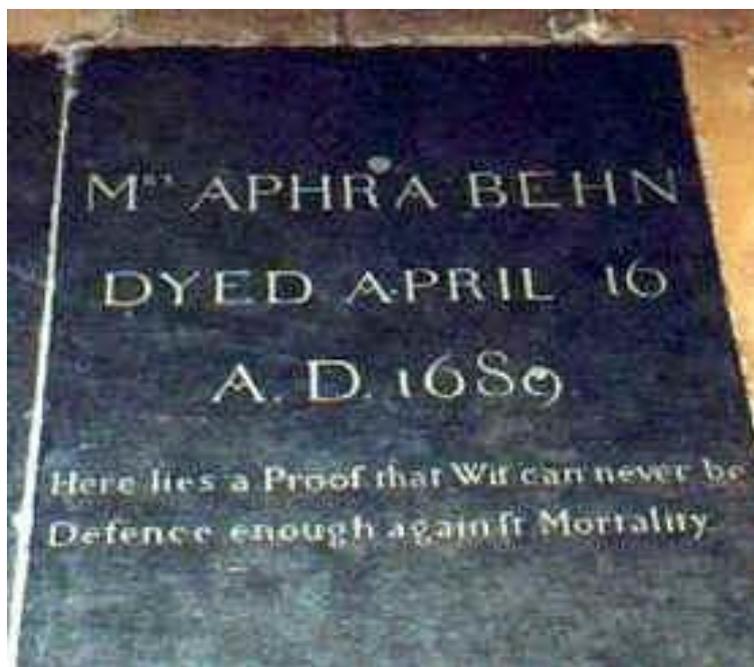
It was perhaps during her upbringing in Surinam that Eafry also gained the self-confidence, the survival instincts, the linguistic flair and the skill in writing which enabled her to make the impact she did.

Soon after returning to England Eafry became Aphra Behn, marrying a London merchant of Dutch extraction. He died when she was 26 years old in 1666, the year of the Great Fire of London. By now Charles II was on the throne, the Restoration was well underway, but the Dutch War had started. Because of her command of Dutch and connections by marriage, Aphra was employed by Charles II on secret service in the Netherlands. She was a spy. At Antwerp she unearthed the Dutch plan to sail up the Thames and burn the English ships in their harbours. This she duly reported to the English Court but was superciliously disregarded, receiving no reward for her efforts. Soon after, in June 1667, the Dutch fleet came up the Thames and the Medway, landing and taking the uncompleted fort at Sheerness, burning and capturing ships at Chatham, putting ashore raiding parties and for two weeks controlling the Medway and Thames estuaries, But being proved right was no help to Aphra. As an unsupported widow she now lived in utmost poverty and was for a short while imprisoned for debt. She took up writing to support herself. In 1670, at the age of thirty, her first play "*The Forc'd Marriage*" was produced, followed by a series of nineteen others. These included "*The Rover*" (1677), "*Sir Patient Fancy*" (1678), "*Feigned Courtesans*" (1679) and "*The Roundheads*" (1682), an attack on the Puritans.

She was a versatile, witty, vivacious writer of comedies with an immense output, not only plays and her novel "Oroonoko", but translations, adaptations and poems. "Some of her plays antedate modern feminism; *The Rover* concerns an adventurous woman very like Charles II's mistress Nell Gwynn. *The Forc'd Marriage* was an attack on a common social evil".

Her fame and popularity grew, as did her notoriety. She became the centre of much gossip and scandal but enjoyed London high-life to the full. She was her own woman. She died in 1689, just 48 years old, and for the next two centuries slipped from memory. The Victorians thought her "coarse and unwomanly". But. her impact on English literature, not, least on the English novel, continued and continues today. She was indeed "the great-grandmother of the English novel" and the most successful of English women playwrights. She is now both respected and recognised as a woman of great talent, courage and determination.

And she started her life here, in Harbledown.



Westminster Abbey Poets' Corner^v

Note 1: The local history library at the Beaney has several biographies of Aphra Behn

Note 2: See also an article 'Some literary connections' by Ian Shackcloth which appeared in *Harbledown Heritage* ed Peter Osborne (Harbledown Conservation Association, 2000). This includes material on Aphra (pp. 114-116)

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ⁱ <http://writersinspire.org/writers/aphra-behn>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.harbledownpc.kentparishes.gov.uk/default.cfm?pid=1091>

ⁱⁱⁱ Duffy, Maureen (1977) *The Passionate Shepherdess, Aphra Behn, 1640-89*, Jonathan Cape

^{iv} Goreau, Angeline (1980) *Reconstructing Aphra: a social biography of Aphra Behn*, Dial Press

^v <http://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/behn.htm>