

Kingston St. Michael

Hall of Fame

John Aubrey *(1626-1697)*



John Aubrey was an English antiquary, natural philosopher and miscellaneous writer. He was born at Eastern Piers or Percy near Kingston St. Michael, Wiltshire on March 12 1626 and was educated at Trinity College, Oxford. His grandfather Isaac Lyte lived at Lytes Cary Manor, Somerset, now owned by the National Trust. His father Richard Aubrey owned lands in Wiltshire and Herefordshire. For many years an only child he was educated at home with a private tutor. His father was not intellectual, preferring field sports to learning. John was educated at the Malmesbury grammar school under Robert Latimer. Latimer had numbered the philosopher Thomas Hobbs as one of his earlier pupils and John would later write Hobbs' biography at Latimer's house.

He then went on to study at the grammar school at Blandford Forum, Dorset. He entered Trinity College in 1642 but his studies were interrupted by the English Civil War. His earliest antiquarian work dates from this period in Oxford. In 1646 he became a student of the Middle Temple (The Honorable Society of the Middle Temple is one of the four Inns of Court exclusively entitled to call their members to the English Bar as

Barristers). He spent a pleasant time at Trinity making friends amongst his Oxford colleagues and collecting books.

He spent much of his time in the country and in 1649 he first discovered the megalithic remains at Avebury which he later mapped and discussed in his important antiquarian work *Monumenta Britannica*. Avebury is a Neolithic henge monument containing three stones around the village of Avebury in Wiltshire. He was to show Avebury to Charles II at the King's request in 1663. In 1652 his father Richard died leaving John large estates and some complicated debts.

John began working on compiling material for a natural historical and antiquarian study of Wiltshire in 1656. A self-appointed committee of Wiltshire gentry in 1659 determined that a country history should be produced on the model of William Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire*. It was agreed that John would deal with the northern division of the county. The work on the antiquities which he entitled *Hypomnemata Antiquaria* was closely modelled on Dugdale and was largely finished in 1671.

In 1663 John became a member of the Royal Society. He lost estate after estate due to lawsuits until 1670 when he parted with his last piece of property and ancestral home, Easton Piers. From this time he was dependent on the hospitality of his many friends. In 1667 he made the acquaintance of Anthony Wood at Oxford and when Wood began to collect materials for his *Athenae Oxonienses*, John offered to collect information for him.

John approached the work of the biographer much as his contemporary scientists had begun to approach the work of empirical research by the assembly of vast museums and small collection cabinets. As a hanger-on in great houses he had little time and little inclination for systematic work. He wrote the "Lives" in the early morning while his hosts were sleeping off the effects of the night before.

Aubrey himself valued the evidence of his own eyes above all and took great pains to ensure that where possible he noted not only the final resting place of people but also their portraits and papers. His work has frequently been accused of inaccuracy but this charge is somewhat misguided. In most cases he simply wrote what he had seen or heard.

John died of apoplexy while travelling on June 7 1697, and was buried in the churchyard of St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford.

In 1967 "Brief Lives" a one-man show was created by English director Patrick Garland and starring Roy Dotrice became the most successful one-man production ever seen.

In 2008 Aubrey's Brief Lives was a five part drama serial on Radio 4.