

## PAUL VERLAINE

PAUL VERLAINE was born on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1844. He wrote poetry while still a schoolboy and most of his young adulthood was spent in the cafes and salons of Paris, imbibing absinthe and conversing with fellow versifiers. He married in 1870 but dreams of domestic bliss soon faded. In 1871 he began his fateful association with the teenage poet Arthur Rimbaud. He travelled abroad with Rimbaud, quarrelled with him and finally shot at and wounded him. He was subsequently imprisoned.

After his release, in January 1875, Verlaine sought solace in Roman Catholicism and toyed with the idea of becoming a Trappist monk before opting for the marginally less demanding existence of a schoolmaster in England. He registered with an employment agency in London towards the end of March and was soon on his way by train from King's Cross to **Sibsey** and thence by pony-chaise to **Stickney**.

On arrival Verlaine took up a pre-arranged appointment as teacher in charge of French, Latin and drawing at William Lovell's School (which the 1872 edition of Carteret-Bisson, an educational guide-book, had described rather grandly as 'The Grammar School 'Lovell's School had suffered much neglect but a commodious, Gothic-style building had been opened in 1858 and the recently appointed Master, William Andrews, who had studied at London University, was striving to bring the establishment more into line with the high intentions of its eponymous seventeenth-century founder.

Foreigners were regarded with suspicion in rural Lincolnshire in the 1870s and Verlaine, with his slanting eyes, bristling eyebrows and faltering English, was anything but inconspicuous. The Frenchman appears, however,

to have shed this bohemianism when he set out for Stickney. A photograph taken at the time showed him in nicely cut tweeds with his hair smoothed down and his beard neatly trimmed. He was determined, it seems, to succeed as a teacher and to fit without friction into his new surroundings. He even accompanied his pupils to Anglican services at the parish church, St Luke's: a big concession for a Catholic neophyte!

Mr Andrews warned the children when Verlaine first appeared at morning assembly that the new teacher was not to be ragged. Monsieur Verlaine, he told them untruthfully, knew English as well as any Englishman but had trouble sometimes with pronunciation. If anyone tried to take advantage of this weakness he, Mr. Andrews, would 'lose no time in correcting the error'. The older pupils, however, could not refrain from teasing 'Monsieur Mossou', as Verlaine came to be known. The most common approach was for them to ask him the French word for water. When he answered 'l'eau', they would all repeat this word, prefixing it with water thus recalling (for him) a famous British victory over the French. Verlaine took all their leg-pulling uncomplainingly. He even allowed these lively Lincolnshire lads to teach him the rudiments of football - a rash decision, this: he ended up flat on his back!

Some of the senior boys at Lovell's became his friends, joining him on long walks through the surrounding fen-country. One of these youngsters, John Holmes (who later qualified as a doctor) was still to recall with pleasure in his old age, a walk he and some of his classmates had taken with Verlaine to the site of Revesby Abbey.

Verlaine's pupils made no mention of his French classes in later years. Nor did they allude to his Latin lessons. One wonders, indeed, if he taught much Latin, at any rate to the children. He certainly acted as Latin tutor to Mr. Andrews, who hoped by acquiring a classical language to secure a more

enumerative appointment and who assisted Verlaine with his reading of English, quid pro quo.

It was the Frenchman's art lessons his classes - not surprisingly: he had a God-given talent for drawing. One of his students, sixty years later, still spoke admiringly of the skill with which Verlaine had conjured up a portrait of himself leaping over a stile. Other scholars cherished the recollection of their art master's caricature of himself sandwiched between two buxom countrywomen on the Boston-bound market-wagon. His blackboard sketches of local notables delighted his pupils and won the outspoken approval of George Coltman, Rector of Stickney, who was nominal Head Master of Lovell's, and chairman of the trustees.' These Frenchmen!' the old gentleman exclaimed. 'All artists!'

The Rector, who was an admirer of Tennyson, inquired of Verlaine in all innocence whether he was fond of poetry, to which the young poet replied, with a straight face: 'Un peu! 'The Frenchman soon established a rapport with his pupils. According to Colonel Grantham's daughters, whom he taught privately, the boys and girls of the village all liked him. Some of the girls picked violets for him. Perhaps they were sorry for him. He looked so sad! His youthful charges would have been astounded if he had told them that he had recently spent eighteen months behind bars for wounding his boy friend! Verlaine's life at Lovell's was uneventful. There were no distractions in Stickney, and at first, as he himself recorded, he 'didn't look for any'. He needed, he said, to 'recover from his past idiocies'. Every day after lessons he would pace up and down writing out verses. He found an unexpected source of inspiration in the 1875 edition of Hymns Ancient Modern. Some of his poems reflect, not only the general impact of the hymnal but its actual turns of phrase.

But boredom set in and linguistic isolation took its toll. Verlaine looked forward with growing eagerness to his weekend visits to Boston, ostensibly to worship at St Mary's Roman Catholic chapel in Horncastle Road. Boston was

livelier than Stickney and his activities there were less restricted. He and his acquaintances could patronise public houses there: this would have been impossible in Stickney. Mrs. Andrews noticed that their Gallic guest was sometimes 'merrier' than usual when he returned from his outings! Verlaine finally left Stickney at the beginning of June 1876, with both sides almost in tears. The Frenchman's conduct, Mrs. Andrews later averred, had been exemplary. He had further short spells as a schoolmaster after leaving Lincolnshire, in one of which he ended up carousing with the pupils. After that he went rapidly downhill, drinking heavily and consorting with undesirables. Much of his time in the 1880s was spent in Parisian charity-shelters and hospitals. Yet during that decade he established himself as major force in French poetry. He gave talks on poetry to adoring audiences in England and the Netherlands, dropping his notes occasionally and lapsing between lectures into spells of debauchery. There must have been moments before he died in 1896 when he looked back with longing on his time as a schoolteacher in the Lincolnshire Countryside.