

Ruislip in Poetry — With a hint of Tragedy

by Melanie Winterbotham



**Frontispiece to *Tales, Songs and Sonnets*
by J.W. Dalby¹**

In the eighteen-thirties, the *Northampton Mercury* published several poems by the poet John William Dalby. Nine were written about or in Ruislip. Although we have few details of his connection with the area, Dalby clearly spent some time here, as well as in Harefield (four poems).

Dalby was born in Grays Inn Gardens, Holborn in 1800, and was placed with a bookseller in the West End at the age of 12. He later became editor of the *Literary Chronicle*, which in a review of his *Poems* (1822) describes him as labouring 'under all the disadvantages of privation, disease, and domestic calamity', but alas does not elaborate. He was a friend of Leigh Hunt, and contributed to several publications, publishing his last poem in *The Spectator* in 1884.²

Literary work rarely pays its way, and Dalby earned his living as an Excise Officer. By 1840 he was living in Amersham (referred to in twelve poems) where his daughter Gertrude was born. Did his role involve the inspection of the traders of Ruislip? Perhaps he dawdled as he rode beside the Pinn on fine days. He does however, appear to have lived in Ruislip from 1834 to 1836.

In 1851 Dalby was in Wootton, Northamptonshire, but is listed in 1854 as an Inland Revenue Officer in Buckingham.³ In 1857 the family moved to Thornbury in Gloucestershire, where his wife and daughter ran a small boarding school, and where unfortunately they became embroiled in an acrimonious dispute over the rights to a church pew. Dalby retired to Richmond in the late 1860s, where he died in 1885.⁴

Romantic though he was, it was not until 1869 that Dalby made 'an honest woman' of his wife Anne, and married her at St Pancras. She too had been born in Holborn, in 1805, the daughter of John Loathis, a coach harness manufacturer.

The three poems here imply a fondness for Ruislip, and a pleasurable stay, but the sonnets also looked back with pain at something lost, perhaps the death of friends or family, or a lover. He certainly paints a rustic scene. We may not think of Ruislip's hills and vales, but there were sheep grazing in the nineteenth century, and no doubt some bridges were simple wooden planks.

SPRING VERSES

TO-DAY the young year's violet
My own love brought to me;
Earth-stained the floweret was, and wet,
But full of fragrancy:
And then I thought the simple flower,
For my poor sake and hers,
Whispered – "The clouds which o'er ye lour
Will speedily disperse."

To-day my own love said to me,
"list to that gush of song; -
It is the blackbird's melody
That darts in light along."
What promise in that flying thrill!
Rough Winter-time is gone;
And sunny splendour clothes the hill,
To woo us wanderers on.

Ruislip. J. W. D. [printed 26 March 1836]

A VISIT TO RUISLIP

After receiving a View of that Village, painted by
Mrs Addison of Ickenham Rectory

I came to gather from the sealed up book
Of other days a fragment of the past;
To live again o'er moments unsurpassed
In quiet joy; by the dream-feeding brook,
The rustic bridge and many a fairy nook;
Through woodlands rich and rife with pastoral tales;
O'er hill that overlook delicious vales,-
Dear scenes that wear the old time-hallowed look.
Well did the season with that stroll agree –
I heard the requiem of the dying year; the lightest
breeze disrobing every tree,
The path bestrewn with faded leaves and sear –
All were in tune with the sad memory
Yet sweet, of pleasures that lie buried here.

And I returned to mark how Art had traced
Some of the choicest features of the spot,
And feel that though I could be with them not,
Their image might be evermore embraced:
Not only from the memory uneffaced,
But present to the eye; and bright and real,
And lovelier than Fancy's best ideal,
With taste, and skill, and sunny richness graced.
'Tis peace personified! the blue skies smile
In pure serenity; the couchant sheep
Seem types of it; its noiseless beauties steep
The herbage, the tree-shadowed cottages,
But most the holy venerable pile
That teaches peace and peaceful charities.

Ruislip, Oct. 15, 1840.

J. W. Dalby

A SONNET

On receiving the Painting of a Cottage
at Ruislip, Middlesex

It is a book of Memory and Emotion!-
And as I turn each precious leaf, I read
Of matters that might make the worn heart bleed
To think how many a shrine at which Devotion
The warm, full, fresh devotion of pure mind
Was paid, hath passed away, and left behind
But spectral thoughts, that on the spirit feed
Till it grows faint and weak with their corrosion
But quickly turn those saddened pages over –
Hide with impetuous hand those dark blurred pages,
And seek for some where Poet, Friend or Lover
Brightens the leaf, and Memory's pang assuages;
And dream as then in those green lanes a rover
Heart-linked with deathless Bards and truth-taught
Sages.

'Tis an Enchanter! And its welcome wand
Hath conjured up the scenes of other years;
And even though I look on them through tears,
They still are beautiful as Fairy-land,
And peopled with a lovely Fairy-band –
Children whose laughter rings in gladdened ears;
And ONE, soft-voiced, straw-hatted, now appears,
The green lane echoing with his joyous shout;
Or 'mid the orchard-grass you see him stand,
The rosy fruit o'erflowing tiny hand –
- Ah still that elfin boy shall rove about,
The Spirit of this well-beloved Retreat,
Child still, and still unchanged beyond a doubt,
As when the Painter saw him at his feet.

But hold the MAGIC MIRROR yet awhile;
Let it reflect those soft calm, moonlit nights –
Those lengthened strolls – those innocent delights
O'er whose sweet recollection Grief may smile.
The rustic one planked bridge – the sparkling stream –
The bowery nooks, so fit for Poet's dream –
The sweet companionship that made a stile
So dear a resting place –

Doth it not seem
That Time for ten long years hath stood stock still
That Death and startling Change are mockeries
Which for a night make prisoners of the will –
That hearts are close-linked yet, and tenderest ties
Unriven? –

Oh, then let us gaze our fill!
This PICTURED PAST spell-binds both heart and eyes.

Amersham, Bucks
[printed in 1842]

J. W. Dalby

¹ Frontispiece to *Tales, Songs and Sonnets* by J.W. Dalby, London,

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² <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/authorrecord.php?action=GET&recordid=33477>, accessed 04 Sept 2014

³ *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* 1854

⁴ <http://sms.thornburyroots.co.uk/John%20Watson%20Dalby.htm>, accessed 04 Sept 2014