

George Russell 'AE'
Lurgan Historic Walk Guide

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Introduction

George Russell is probably the most distinguished son of Lurgan in the town's entire 400 year history. He was known popularly as 'Æ'¹ and was a celebrated painter, poet, editor, land reformer, political thinker, visionary mystic and philosopher. He was a leader of Ireland's literary revival and a voice of reason and wisdom throughout Ireland's turbulent years in the period from 1890 to 1930.

Æ was born at 12 William Street Lurgan on 10th April 1867 into a lower middle-class Ulster Protestant family. A blue plaque marks the house. He was baptised in Shankill Parish Church and spent eleven formative years in Lurgan. His family later lived at the North Street gate lodge of the Brownlow estate and young George attended the Model school in Brownlow Terrace. Although his family moved to Dublin in 1878, Æ never lost his Northern connection. He frequently visited family and friends in Lurgan, Drumgor and Armagh city. He went on to become one of the most remarkable and inspirational personalities in Ireland and in the wider world.

When he died in England in 1935, the ship transporting his body back to Ireland was given a flying escort that dipped in salute as it reached the harbour. After lying in State at the headquarters of the Irish cooperative movement an estimated 500,000 people attended his funeral procession in Dublin.

¹ *Russell used to write under different pen-names, one of which was 'Æon'. A printer mistakenly shortened this to 'Æ' on one of his publications.*



STOP 1.

Brownlow House



Brownlow House

The Brownlow family created the town of Lurgan and maintained a castle there for over two hundred years. This building was constructed in 1833 and was the centre-piece of the 15,000 acre Brownlow Estate, which was the beating heart of the Lurgan economy. George Russell's family lived within the Brownlow estate in the

North Street gate lodge. Young George had the freedom of the estate in which to play with his sister and friends - a virtual wonderland for any young boy at that time.

While AE was a child the people of Lurgan were celebrating the success of Lord Lurgan's superb greyhound Master McGrath who won the Waterloo cup in 1868, 1871 and 1872 (the first to ever win it three times) and reached such celebrity status that Lord Lurgan was invited over to London to present him to Queen Victoria.

When AE was helping Australian novelist Pamela L. Travers to envision and create her Mary Poppins' stories he enthused over the famous chimneys and wonderful parkland became integral elements of the concepts and imagery in the Mary Poppins' books.



*Statue of Master McGrath
High Street, Lurgan*



STOP 2.

Lurgan Park and Lake



Lurgan Park Lake

Lurgan Park used to be part of the landscaped gardens within the Brownlow Estate. Young George discovered his love of nature here. In later life, he recounted some of the vivid visionary experiences he had while spending his childhood, running freely among the lawns, many-coloured flowers and lime trees around Lurgan Park and its lake. He described the intensity of the sights and sounds; the blue starry skies with the silhouetted chimney towers of Brownlow House; and the purple dragonflies that flashed brilliantly at the water's edge. The adult poet carried much of his childhood experiences into the rich imagery that adorns his poems, paintings and prose.

The 59 acre lake was created when bogland was dug out as a means of creating jobs for the local people. 'To have a face as long as a Lurgan spade' is a popular figure of speech which means to look miserable. The origin of this expression is that a 'Lurgan spade' was an under-paid workman wielding a distinctive narrow long shafted spade digging the swampy earth out of what is now the Lurgan Park lake.

The water in the lake comes from the confluence of nearby streams and was the outlet for the water course which used to power the Brownlow estate mill located on North Street.



STOP 3.

George Russell's House, North Street

This street containing the impressive Catholic St Peter's Church was originally called 'The Back Lane' as it was quite simply the rear entrance to the Brownlow estate. (The site for the Church was actually gifted by the Brownlow family to the Catholic community.)



*'Back Lane' Gate Lodge North Street
Lurgan – AE's home 1870 -1878*

AE's paternal grandparents Thomas and Elizabeth, and his Aunt Mary lived in the 'Back Lane' gate lodge. Elizabeth died in 1867 and Thomas moved to the Sheils almshouses in Armagh with Mary in 1870. AE's parents then moved to the gate lodge from William Street. His father Thomas Elias also moved his book-keeping business office to 16 North Street in 1874.

The gate lodge was a small, comfortable house just across from the busy Mill and easy walking distance from the Model School which AE attended. He had a settled childhood there inside the huge Brownlow estate with its access to the parklands where he came to love nature and its beauty.

Even in childhood, AE was aware of the inter-communal strife that beset Lurgan far too often. His abhorrence of such conflict made him a lifelong pacifist and a leader who put huge effort into seeking honourable accommodation wherever possible. He would no doubt have been horrified by the death of John Furphy a boy his own age who died amid rioting in Kilmaine Street a year after AE's family had moved to Dublin.

AE would have walked down Kilmaine Street to go to school at the Model. Before this time Kilmaine Street would have been longer, running all the way round the old Dougher graveyard and beyond. However it was cut off at Brownlow Terrace due to the arrival of the railway in Lurgan in 1841.



STOP 4.

The Lurgan Model School

The Irish School system from 1831 onwards was centred on the concept of a network of 'Model Schools'. The idea was that each of the 32 counties would have one 'model' which would serve not only as an exemplar to other National Schools in the area, but could also operate as a modern teacher training establishment.

AE's 'Model' school, situated on Brownlow Terrace, overlooking the railway line, opened in 1863. It was a fine 'state of the art' building for its time and did incorporate a teacher training facility.

AE became a pupil at the Model from 19th February 1872 (aged 4) until he left in June 1878 (aged 11). Although school records show that AE's gift for language was present from early childhood, it is unlikely that his teachers in Lurgan ever imagined him becoming one of Ireland's most accomplished writers and leader of a literary revival.

Nonetheless, it was at the Model where AE would have spent



*Lurgan Model School, Brownlow Terrace
around 1870.*

his most formative years and developed, among other personal and intellectual qualities, a voracious appetite for reading and creative output. It was not until his next school, Rathmines College in Dublin that he became affectionately known by the nickname 'the Genius'.

His school records at the Lurgan Model also confirm both his interest and his considerable ability in art and drawing. This would become very evident a few years later at Dublin's Metropolitan Art College – where he was later joined in the same class by William Butler Yeats.



STOP 5.

Industrial Lurgan and the Railway

Lurgan railway station was opened in 1841. It was from here that AE's family would have made their way to Dublin in 1878. The railway extension towards Portadown impacted greatly on AE's mother's family in that the new line ran through the middle of their farm at Balteagh (near Rushmere Shopping Centre today). The family eventually moved to nearby Drumgor (where Drumgor Park is situated), where AE's parents met. AE's grandfather George Armstrong lived there until 1894 when he passed away, aged 91. AE's grandmother Letitia had died in 'Black 47' and was buried in Shankill Graveyard. AE's grandfather had remarried in 1862 and so his second wife, Jane, was AE's granny. AE visited them often in his teens. Throughout the whole of AE's adult life the railway system simplified his trips home to Lurgan and Drumgor, and journeys further along the line to Armagh where he visited his aunt and his close friend Carrie Rea.



Lurgan railway c1870 with Model School and linen mill in the background



Lurgan Weaving Company

The textile industry remained a main employer in the town until the late twentieth century. The Lurgan Weaving Company built around 1880, is just one example of Lurgan's industrial success. The factory itself contained 472 looms and its products included cambric of the finest quality. The brick perimeter wall and characteristic saw-tooth roof of the weaving sheds are notable in their design, and are characteristic of the mills that existed in Lurgan at that time.

Lurgan George Russell Historic Walk



Russell Home



Lurgan Model School



Railway Station



Shankill Graveyard



*AE Birthplace
12 William Street*





Brownlow House



Lurgan Park & Lake



Shankill Parish Church



Mechanics Institute



Lurgan Town Hall



STOP 6.

George Russell Quarter

The William Street area has recently been designated as the 'George Russell quarter' and there is a sign near the car park which tells of his illustrious life.

At the foot of William Street opposite the railway station there is another sign erected dedicated to Russell. The sign highlights the following line.



“I saw the mystic flow and live in men and woods and streams, until I could no longer know, the dream of life from my own dreams.”

This line is from an AE poem which was first published in 1894 under its original title 'The Secret'. It shows how AE when rapt in deep thought could sometimes feel that his most vivid meditations were as realistic as actual normal life itself. It should be said however, that no other Irish mystical poet or literary figure was ever blessed with AE Russell's unique combination of starry-eyed spirituality and a real down to earth pragmatism and enormous practical ability to get things done.

This photograph shows the top of William Street around 1910, including a motorcar, shopfronts and even then, the Beehive public house. It provides a fair sense of how the street looked at that time. No.12 is on the left, just beyond the Beehive Bar, about level with the car in the picture.



William Street, Lurgan c.1910



STOP 7.

Birthplace of George Russell



What we know for certain is that George William Russell was born in a room upstairs at 12 William Street on 10th April 1867. The building is marked by an Ulster History Circle blue plaque and today is the house adjacent to the popular 'Beehive' bar.



12 William Street today

These premises were also where Æ's grandfather and father who were both book-keepers by profession maintained their office for some years up to 1874.



STOP 8.

Shankill Parish Church

The first Shankill Church in Lurgan was built at the site of what is now the old Shankill Graveyard. The name Shankill comes from the Gaelic 'sean coill' which means old church. When a larger church became necessary a new one known as the Church of Christ the Redeemer was built on the current site between 1720 and 1725.



A major rebuild took place between 1861 and 1863. The Russells, who were Church of Ireland had a strong connection with the church.



During this period AE's parents Thomas Elias Russell and Marianne Armstrong were married here in 1862. His brother Thomas Samuel (three years older than him) and his sister Mary (two years older) were baptised in the church, in 1863 and 1865 respectively, as was George on 22nd April 1867. The original certification of these events is still retained in the church vault. The baptismal font used for George Russell's baptism in Shankill church dates back to 1684 and is still very much in use today.

The signature image of Lurgan town today is of the long wide main street flowing down to the war memorial and Shankill Parish church.



STOP 9.

The Mechanics Institute and Windsor Avenue



Mechanics Institute c1870

The Mechanics Institute was first opened in 1858 at a construction cost of £1,400. It was an impressive building complete with tower and originally boasted a good library, reading rooms and other rooms for evening classes and social occasions.

Æ's father and mother would have been frequent visitors to the Mechanics Institute. They would have attended both religious meetings and various other social events.



Lurgan Mechanics Institute today

As for Æ himself - he would undoubtedly have been a very enthusiastic user of the Institute's library – the only library available in the town at that time. (The Carnegie Street public library did not open until 1906).

So the young Lurgan boy who later became a towering intellect in Irish public life, and in the Arts, began his intellectual journey in the Lurgan Mechanics Institute.

Today the Mechanics Institute is still a very prominent part of the Lurgan's central townscape. It no longer has a library but continues to operate as a popular cultural and social centre.



STOP 9. continued

When AE lived in Lurgan there was a grand main entrance to the Brownlow castle estate at the top of what is now Windsor Avenue. Beyond the gate were the magnificent gardens and lake where AE had his earliest visionary experiences.



Inside the Grand Gateway - with a view of the Mechanics Institute through the gates

As he wandered around or lay stretched out on the grass he was surrounded by flowers, scents and all the colours of nature. AE's carefree and dream-laden childhood gave him the sense of colour and vividness which was to inform and characterise both his poetry and painting. Young George and his sister Mary played in the park and sometimes stood inside the grand entrance gateway looking straight out at the Mechanics Institute across the road where his father often went to study and attend social events.

On the walk down Windsor Avenue, heading back towards Brownlow House, things look very different today. When AE was here, everything was open parkland - the freedom, the trees, the sky, the scents, the colours made this a special place for AE and it always remained in his memory.



STOP 10.

Lurgan Town Hall

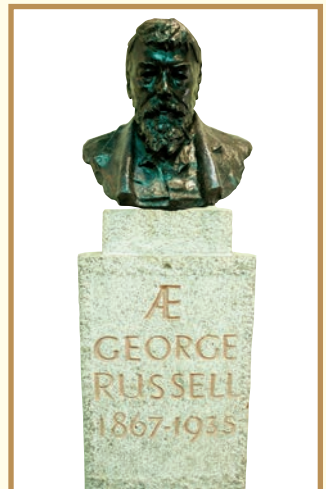
Just around the corner of Union Street adjacent to the Mechanics Institute is Lurgan Town Hall. The stone-fronted Town Hall was built in 1868 when George Russell was a toddler as Lurgan's main civic centre and the headquarters of the old Lurgan Town council.



Lurgan Town Hall today

The town hall has served for many years as both a centre for local government and as a social artistic and cultural centre. With its purpose-built performance arena it has hosted many local concerts and theatrical productions. For a time it was even used as Lurgan's police station. The Russells would have been frequent visitors. Today the Town Hall is still in local government hands, used as a public venue and host to Lurgan's tourist information centre.

The Town Hall is also host to a statue of AE Russell which was presented as a tribute to Lurgan by the Irish Cooperative movement in 1985 on the 50th anniversary of Russell's death. (two statues were cast - the other was erected at Merrion Square, Dublin). At the time, and at the height of the 'Troubles' the Council was unsure how to receive the tribute – unsure of AE's myriad political connections. However now, in better times, there is much wider appreciation of AE as a pacifist, committed always to the public good. Public representatives on all sides now recognise AE Russell's historic significance.





- AE was seen at home and abroad as one of Ireland's greatest artists.
- He established the United Arts Club, was a founder of the Metropolitan Art Gallery and exhibited the best of foreign art to inspire young Irish artists. He even inspired the design of the 'Starry Plough' workers flag and the new Irish stamps and coinage.
- AE was also renowned as one of Ireland's greatest poets and writers. He promoted new talent - James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, Frank O'Connor and P L Travers, the author of 'Mary Poppins'. AE and William Butler Yeats were collaborators and friends for 35 years.
- AE was the most influential figure in the Irish Literary and Cultural Revival from 1890s - 1930s. He founded the National Irish Theatre Society, later known as The Abbey Theatre.
- As secretary of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) AE transformed rural economics in Ireland and worked tirelessly to end poverty. His expertise on rural affairs and cooperation was admired by Gandhi and in Europe and the USA. It inspired Roosevelt's New Deal Programme.
- AE was renowned for his wisdom and rational approach - an economic and political thinker ahead of his time. He was one of Ireland's finest journalists. As editor of 'The Irish Homestead' and 'Irish Statesman' AE was Ireland's most influential social, political and literary commentator for 25 years.
- AE's rich charismatic personality resulted in his home and his office becoming the centre of the Irish Renaissance for thirty years. Everyone called for his advice - writers, suffragettes, politicians, artists, revolutionaries, poets, economists, journalists etc.
- AE was a key figure in the early Irish State. He believed that Ireland utilizing the talents of all could become an economic and social success, and a force for good in the world. He was a lifelong pacifist who inspired Gandhi's non-violent approach.
- AE was not privileged like many of his friends and admirers. He insisted on working for a living and turned down many lucrative financial offers and honours including a seat in the Irish Senate.