EAST COKER

A pilgrimage to the village on the Somerset/Dorset border which inspired T.S. Eliot's poem.

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East Coker's significance for T.S. Eliot lay in the fact that Andrew Elyot, the founding father of his American family, had set out from here for the New World in the mid-seventeenth century. When Eliot came to write *Four Quartets*, his great sequence of philosophical poems, East Coker provided the inspiration for the second of them; and it was here, in the village church, that his ashes were buried on Easter Sunday 1965.

East Coker is not the only Coker: there is also a North and a West, and to recreate Eliot's journey you need to start at West, a mile and a half away. Eliot was staying here, at the house of his friend Sir Matthew Nathan, when he set out on an August afternoon with his camera in his hand. (Half a dozen blurry black-and-white photographs still survive.) It was 1937, and when he drew on the experience for his poem two years later, the scene must have represented for him an idyll of English country life that was in danger of imminent destruction.

The lanes between the Cokers are cut into steep hills, and it is this which gives them their depth – and a sense of mystery. The overhanging branches and tall hedgerows help to create a shadowy, enclosed world in which anything – roe deer or dead poet – might be lying in wait for you. At one point, the way to East Coker passes through a dark gorge of yellow stone that would be equally at home in Coleridge's Xanadu.

Reaching the village itself, you come to a lychgate leading to a small, grey-stone chapel with a sparsely tenanted graveyard. Preparing to do reverence to the poet's ashes, you turn the door handle, step inside, and find yourself staring at a lawnmower.

This is not the only odd thing. There is no pulpit, no organ, and indeed no cross. The white nylon altar cloth – protected by a plastic sheet – is weighted with small figurines of the Holy Family, a dust-spotted prayer book open at *Proverbs*, and a curling, cloth-covered edition of *The Burial of the Dead*. Is this really the final resting place of one of the twentieth century's greatest poets?

The answer turns out to be no: it is simply a chapel built to serve the new cemetery in Victorian times. And although Eliot would probably have loved the rackety symbolism of it all, he himself lies in far superior lodgings, in a fifteenth-century church on the other side of the hill.

East Coker is not an unspoilt village – it has a housing estate and a couple of small factories on the outskirts – but the heart of it is so picturesque that you want to stick a stamp on it and send it to your friends. In summer the thatched cottages which line it are awash with roses, while the grey garden walls practise crowd control on a riot of pink and purple flowers. Overseeing it all, shoulder to shoulder, are the handsome, red-tiled St Michael's Church and an equally fine Tudor manor, Coker Court.

The lords of this manor were – for 300 years – the Helyar family, who gave their name to the local pub and to a row of beautiful almshouses (for eleven women and one lucky man) leading up to the church. The Helyars also helped to finance the voyages of William Dampier, one of the greatest seamen of the seventeenth century. Born in East Coker, and described on a plaque in the church as 'Buccaneer Explorer Hydrographer', Dampier circumnavigated the globe three times, and was one of the first Englishmen to set foot on Australian soil.

Dampier also made a significant contribution to English literature. His *Voyage Round the World* was a bestseller in 1697, and partly inspired *Gulliver's Travels*; and it was he who brought Alexander Selkirk home

from his desert island, giving Daniel Defoe the idea for *Robinson Crusoe*. It may seem odd that a landlocked village should produce great seafarers, but there is a maritime connection: thanks to its flax – a major local crop in William Dampier and Andrew Elyot's day – East Coker was a centre of sailcloth manufacturing.

St Michael's Church, with its Perpendicular arches and splendid wagon ceiling, could not be a more different experience from the forlorn cemetery chapel. Above the splendid, 700-year-old north door is a royal coat of arms painted in William and Mary's reign; 'Feare thou the Lord, and the King,' reads the inscription, and the villagers clearly took this to heart. From the British Legion standard hanging by the war memorial, to the brass-eagle lectern acquired to mark Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, the aisles brim with declarations of loyalty to Church and State. No wonder Eliot took East Coker as the model of a traditional, ordered society.

But it isn't quite as simple as that, because closer examination of St Michael's reveals a number of things that do not quite fit. The arches on the north side are not altogether straight; the stained-glass window behind the altar is just off centre; the tower, contrary to usual practice, is built at the east end of the church. Even at its best, it seems, humanity – as Eliot suggests in his poem – is an imperfect part of God's greater pattern.

Eliot's ashes are buried in the north-west corner of the church beneath a simple stone plaque, moving in its humility. 'Of your charity,' it reads, 'pray for the repose of Thomas Stearns Eliot, poet.' There is no mention of his Nobel Prize; just the dates of his birth and death, and the opening and closing sentences of *East Coker*:

In my beginning is my end…

In my end is my beginning.

It is when you stand outside the church door and look back towards the village that you most clearly understand why Eliot loved this place. The grass around the lichen-covered tombs and leaning tombstones is thick with buttercups and daisies; butterflies flit between them, and the ground slopes away to offer an Arcadian view of trees and meadows and distant blue hills. 'In my beginning is my end' was Eliot's acknowledgement of the historical symmetry that brought him back to the home of his ancestors; and in creating one of poetry's finest evocations of an English summer, he more than earned his right to lie among them.