

# PEOPLE HEADINGLEY



**Alfred Austin** 1835 – 1913

Poet Laureate

The blackened sandstone gateposts of 48 Headingly Lane are carved with the name 'Ashwood'. But in Alfred Austin's two-tome autobiography, the one photograph of the house is labelled 'Headingly', and Austin speaks of a Bishop who was 'a frequent guest at Headingly', suggesting that this is the name of the house. But the lack of detail in his one chapter on his childhood is disappointing. Apart from one, he doesn't even name his own siblings, though census entries show that his parents, Roman Catholics named Mary and Joseph (a wool stapler and magistrate who declined the office of mayor more than once) had five children.



Ashwood was among the first villas built on Headingly Hill. Alfred Austin says that the house 'Headingly', was 'thoroughly in the country, no other house intervening between it and the farther side of Woodhouse Moor' with 'adjoining meadows' to play in. Little Austin could watch the cavalry executing what he calls their 'somewhat elementary manoeuvres' on

Woodhouse Moor from the lawn. He was given a pony at the age of six, and rode down to watch the cavalry at close quarters, fell off and was picked up by Prince George, Queen Victoria's cousin, who let him ride beside him for the rest of the morning.

Alfred Austin lived at Ashwood until he was 20. In 1896, having given up law for literature after inheriting a fortune from his uncle, he became Poet Laureate for 17 years, chiefly because William Morris turned down the role and Swinburne was deemed unsuitable because, Gladstone said, of 'the turbulency of his political opinions.' Though Austin did have his supporters and fans, the poet Robert Browning called Austin a 'Banjo Byron that twangs the strum-strum there'.

Austin was physically very small and short. An article states that one Dewsbury resident, seeing his Conservative candidate for the first time, said 'Eh, but you're a very little'un,' to which Austin replied 'You wait till you see my wife.' His wife Hester was presumably even shorter than he was, but unlike him did not sport a huge handlebar moustache. Frequently lampooned in political journals and cartoons (*Punch* shows him straining upwards to reach his lyre), Austin was apparently known for being pompous, and there are references to him as 'the preening Yorkshireman' and 'the popinjay poet'. He was caricatured in the 1906 children's novel *John Dough and the Cherub*, by L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*. In it he is called "Sir Austed Alfrin" and writes not very good limericks to order. He was misquoted by mockers and it is indeed sad that any poet should be remembered only by some lines that may never have been his.

Alfred Austin died in 1913. When I enquired into having a blue plaque placed on Ashwood, I received a polite and formal reply stating that blue plaques were only placed when people had made a significant contribution to the city or town where they had resided. Sorry, Alfred.

### **Jane Bower**

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The author at Ashwood