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## Anna Sewell, Black Beauty and Old Catton



Throughout her life, Anna Sewell lived in many parts of England. But despite the fact that much of her life was not spent here, Norfolk was the county of her birth, death and family heritage.

Old Catton was her last home and it was from here that she wrote the book *Black Beauty* which was first published on November 24th 1877. Since then it has become a world-wide best seller with over 400 editions and over 30 million copies of the book published.

To this day, it remains one of the most widely read English novels.



Anna was born in Great Yarmouth in Norfolk on 30th March 1820. The daughter of Quakers Mary Sewell (née Wright) and Isaac Sewell, she very quickly entered a life of moving around whilst her father sought employment to support the family. Financial hardship meant that Anna was largely educated at home by her mother and it was mainly based on the bible and moral teaching.



**A portrait of Anna Sewell as a young lady.**

Anna's early life and that of her family was hard. They had to endure the grime and squalor of London and Anna's mother took every opportunity to send her and her brother Philip back to Anna's maternal grandparents' house in Buxton near Norwich. It was around Buxton that Anna experienced some of her happiest times with a great amount of freedom and countryside.

Anna did not enjoy good health. As a young teenager at the family home in Stoke Newington, Anna fell and twisted her ankle badly. It never completely healed and Anna was lame for the rest of her life. As she grew older, Anna's health problems grew worse with various pains and ailments. She was also prone to bouts of great fatigue and depression. These illnesses became more and more debilitating for Anna as she grew older.

Anna never married. Apart from short spells away, she spent much of her life with her parents. Her return to Norfolk would seem to be in part due to her parent's retirement and in no small measure due to bad fortune befalling her brother Philip.

In December 1866, Anna's sister-in-law, her brother's wife, died. The strain of this and having to look after his seven children resulted in Philip's health failing. Anna and her parents decided to move back to Norfolk to help him and the children.



In September 1867, when Anna was 47 years old, she and her parents moved into the White House on Spixworth Road in Old Catton. The location was probably chosen as it lay on the road between Philip's house on the outskirts of Norwich and Buxton.

Known today as Anna Sewell House, the house had out-buildings that are now known as 2 and 4 Church Street. The old stables now provide garaging and a mews flat. The small front garden between the house and the road was "Anna's garden".



Anna's mother Mary wrote in one of her letters that the garden was "designed and kept up for the pleasure of the toiling artisans of Norwich, whose Sunday afternoon walks led them in large numbers to Old Catton".

Across the road was Samuel Gurney Buxton's Deer Park where horses grazed. From the rear of the house were views of the garden, fields and trees to the village church, St Margaret's.

At the time of Anna's residence, Old Catton was a small well-kept village of some 650 people. It was home to many Norwich merchants and to the Buxton family at Catton Hall, to whom the Sewell family became well known.

Some of the residents of Old Catton believe that Anna drew inspiration for *Black Beauty* from a horse grazing opposite her house in the Deer Park. In fact this is unlikely. Anna's love of horses began at a very young age. She became very dependant on them for mobility as her disabilities grew worse. Anna's travels around the country exposed her to much ill treatment of horses. The late 1800's saw Britain becoming an industrial power-house and horses were vital for almost every form of transport. Often, these horses were victims of great cruelty and neglect and they frequently died in harness due to over work and lack of care.

In reality, Anna's inspiration for *Black Beauty* probably came from her brother Philip's black horse called Bessie.



Philip and his family lived in an elegant three-storied home on St. Clement's Hill on the outskirts of Norwich. The nineteen or so acres were wedged between St Clement's Hill and Constitution Hill. Sadly, the house no longer exists as it was given to the City of Norwich upon Philip's death. Over time, the house was taken down and the land split up. The Blyth Jex School, a small public park and the Sewell Barn theatre now occupy the site of Philip's home.

Today, at the southern end of this land, there is a triangular horse trough with the inscription "1917. This fountain was placed here by Ada Sewell in memory of her Aunt Anna Sewell authoress of Black Beauty and of her sister Edith Sewell - Two Lovers of Animals."



**This barn was home to Bessie, Philip's black horse that probably inspired Black Beauty. Today it is home to the Sewell Barn Theatre.**



**The memorial to Anna Sewell at the bottom end of the field where Bessie probably once roamed.**

In 1854 Maria Louisa Charlesworth published her Victorian best-selling book "Ministering Children". This was an uplifting moral work that featured a beloved horse called "Black Beauty" as a character. This childhood reading, a combination of many years observing, drawing, riding and travelling with horses together with the inspiration of Bessie probably planted a seed. Anna started writing the Black Beauty book at her home in Old Catton in 1871. It was to be her increasingly failing health and her inability to leave the house in Old Catton that probably stirred Anna into writing to keep herself mentally active.

The following several years saw Anna's health deteriorate. Where the pain was too great for her to write, she would dictate her text for the book. Anna completed her book in early 1877 and it was published later that same year by Jarrold & Sons for a single payment of £40 without royalty provision.

The book was an instant success and received much critical acclaim in its day. It also had a profound influence on the general treatment and care of horses. It is said that the book led directly to the banning and eventual abolition of the cruel bearing-rein. The book was read by adults and children alike and was often used as a manual of horse care for those working with horses.



Anna and her family were elated at the near instant success of *Black Beauty*. Towards the end of her writing there was no doubt that Anna's life was ebbing away. It may be that the writing of her book had prolonged her life.

Anna was not to survive long after the publication of her book and she never saw the phenomenal success of the book or the profound impact it had on the care of horses. Anna's last few months were ones of debilitating pain and total confinement to the house. On Thursday 25th April 1878, Anna Sewell died in her parent's home in Old Catton. She was 58 years old.

The following Tuesday, on the 30th April, Anna's mother Mary watched from the drawing room window as the horse-drawn hearse pulled up outside. It was a cruel irony that the undertaker, perhaps with a sense of occasion, had harnessed all of the horses in bearing-reins. A very distressed Mary rushed from the house and had the drivers remove them from every horse in the cortege.

It was to be Anna's final journey to Lammas near Buxton where her parents had married fifty-nine years earlier. She was buried close to her grand-parents of whom Anna had been so fond. There Anna's grave remained until September 1984 when without warning or permission, bull-dozers arrived and destroyed trees, graves and tombstones including that of Anna's.

This desecration caused total outrage, but despite much effort, the graves were never re-established. Instead, the gravestones were cleaned and repaired. Anna's gravestone is set into a flint wall outside the old Quaker meeting house in Lammas. On either side of Anna's gravestone is that of her parents and her grandparents.



Anna Sewell at the about the time she wrote *Black Beauty*.



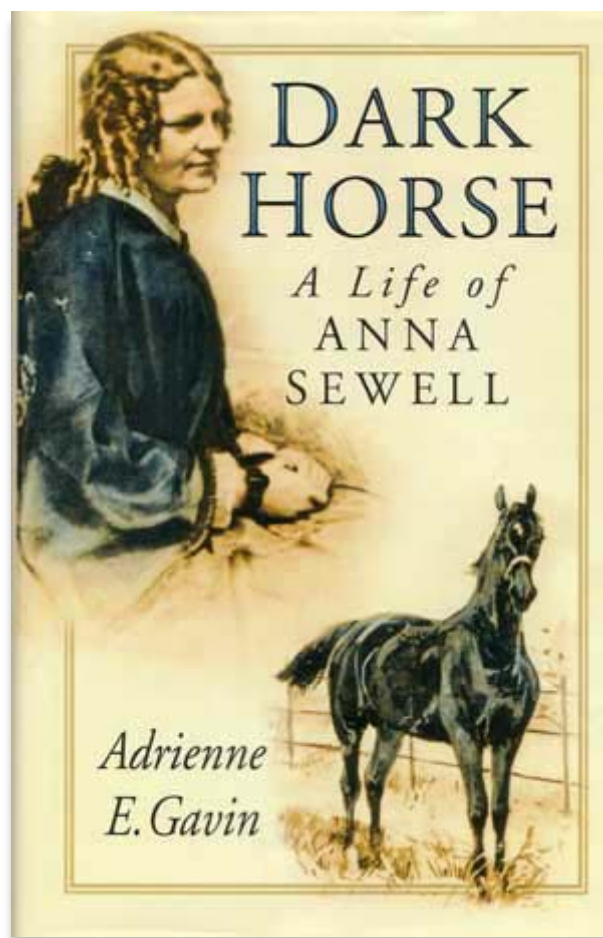
Anna Sewell's gravestone set into the wall at Lammas.



Finally - a word of thanks. There are many references to the life of Anna Sewell but we are extremely grateful to Sutton Publishing and to Adrienne E. Gavin for allowing us to refer to sections of Anna Sewell's biography as part of this article.

Adrienne Gavin is a biographer and she has spent much time reconstructing the life of Anna Sewell and how that life resulted in a book that has sold more copies than all Charles Dickens books put together.

Our article has attempted to focus on Anna's life in and around Old Catton. But this book offers a much more detailed and formative view Anna's whole life and we would heartily recommend it to anyone who has found this article of interest and would like to learn much more about Anna, her family and her life.



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Larger versions of the photographs in this article, together with additional photographs can be viewed in the photo archive at [www.oldcatton.com](http://www.oldcatton.com).