



View of Castle Street from the top of the Castle steps.

Impostor', the American writer W.D. Howells, Bruce Chatwin the novelist, and April Ashley, Britain's first transsexual. The best-known Hay character of recent years is Richard Booth, owner of Hay Castle, who from modest beginnings in 1961–62 built up a massive book business in the town. Booth crowned himself King of Hay on April Fools' Day 1977. This protest against what he saw as the parsimony and corruption of local and central government was also a shrewd publicity move which soon elevated him to cult status and put Hay on the international stage. The new king bestowed peerages and printed passports; but underlying the media farrago and flim-flam lay Booth's passionate conviction that he could regenerate the ailing fortunes of the small market town single-handed. By default a member of the 'Establishment'—educated miserably, he claims, at Rugby and Merton College, Oxford—Booth una-

shamedly 'ruled' his kingdom along feudal lines. He is now in semi-retirement, devoting his energies to promoting the concept of the 'Booktown' worldwide. But he remains an Arthurian presence, ever ready to return to the heartland of Hay should it need him—even though (a recent development) he was decapitated in effigy by a breakaway group of what he called 'revolting' peasants led by book-dealer Peter Harries. The ascent of Hay-on-Wye as a 'Booktown' brought about the Hay Festival, founded by the Florence acting dynasty on the proceeds of a poker game (*see p. 85*). Other players who have invested in Hay include the developer Leon Morelli and the philanthropist Hilary Lawson.

### **Origins of the name**

The town was not known as Hay-on-Wye until 1947. Residents say 'Hay' and newcomers soon follow their lead,

## Interior of the church

The church interior is wide and spacious, divided into nave and lateral aisles by the arrangement of the pews. A wide organ loft and gallery, attractively supported on slender pillars, extends over the west end and north side. The windows are simple lancets, untraceryed, with some glass.

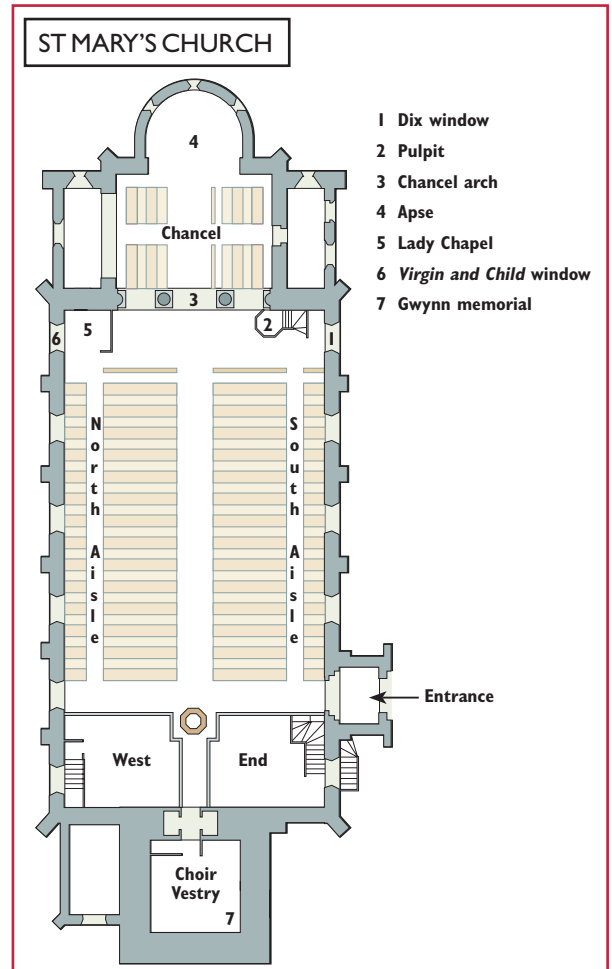
**West end:** There is a **recumbent effigy**, possibly 14th-century, by the south door. Local legend has it that this is a representation of Maud de St Valery (nicknamed Maud Walbee), the consort of William de Braose, but this is fanciful (see p. 19 and illustration on p. 20). Stairs lead up to the organ loft. By far the most dramatic innovation at St Mary's is the installation of a fine **Grade II listed organ**, built in 1883 by Bevington of Soho, London. This instrument, housed in what the Historic Organ Scheme describes as a 'unique case of flamboyant Classical design', belonged originally to John Carbery Evans of Hatley Court in Cambridgeshire. It is well

suited to the church acoustics.

**Framed drawings** hanging here are the original window designs that were never executed (see below).

**South aisle:** At the end of the aisle is a fine **stained-glass window (1)** by Arthur Dix of London, depicting Abraham and Isaac (1906). The framed drawings at the west end are the original Dix designs for two other windows on the south side.

The octagonal alabaster **pulpit (2)** of 1879 is in the style of Nicola and Giovanni Pisano's 13th–14th-century pulpits at Pisa and Siena. The pedestal is surrounded by eight





the shortage of public space in Hay and noting also that the church tower was hardly visible from the centre of town, decided to put the legacy towards a new town clock, a public hall and a corn exchange. This project, intended to burgeon into a major extravaganza of off-the-peg Gothic, foundered through lack of support and only the Clock Tower was built, at a cost of £600. It is an entertaining structure, with much detail, including an open bellcote and a weathervane. It remains the traditional gathering point of the Golden Valley Hunt's Boxing Day Meet, though the Hunt's activities are much curtailed by recent legislation. The transsexual Hay resident April Ashley was photographed standing by the Tower along with the caption 'If I can change, why can't Hay?'.

The clock does not strike

THE CLOCK TOWER

at night: according to Cyril Marwood (*Wisps of Hay*, 1962), the night strike was discontinued because of complaints from Birmingham travelling salesmen staying at Kilvert's about the terrible 'donks' on the quarter, all through the night. When the 'Hay Poisoner', local solicitor Major Herbert Rowse Armstrong (*see box below*), first came under suspicion, the Tower served as a hide for the local constabulary, who crouched behind its machicolations, carefully noting the frequency with which the Major walked across town to buy arsenic 'for his dandelions'.

#### **Herbert Rowse Armstrong** (1870–1922)

To many people who knew him, one of the most striking characteristics of the 'Hay Poisoner' was his diminutive stature. He was scarcely more than five feet tall. A keen and accomplished dancer, he could often be seen at Hay functions, nimbly steering a much taller partner to and fro across the floor. He was as light as a feather and his drop, we are told, was one of the longest ever calculated by his hangman, John Ellis. The story of his arrest, trial and execution is well known. Armstrong was a solicitor practising in Hay and a retired Territorial Army officer. A respected man—he was a member of the local Masonic Lodge, read the lesson in church and so on—he was perhaps the last person one might suspect of murdering his wife. True, Mrs Armstrong had been unusually domineering, and it was common knowledge that she had imposed a repressive domestic regime: she rebuked Herbert in public for keeping the servants waiting, forbade him alcohol, called him away from dances because it was 'bath night'. Yet despite all this they were both well respected in Hay ►



## THE KINGDOM OF BOOKS

There is a defining moment in the film *Borderline*, a documentary about Hay revolving around the life and work of Richard Booth. In one scene, Booth is pictured in the back of a lorry unloading the last of yet another bulk purchase of books. He gathers a final armful of volumes and flings them exuberantly into the street, as profligate with books as Mark Antony was with provinces: ‘realms and islands were as plates dropp’d from his pocket’. In his Honesty Bookshop outside Hay Castle there is an open-air courtyard lined with bookcases on all sides. Clustering round the Castle walls are open lean-to shacks full of books: if you are honest, you pay and may take them at any hour of the day or night. These volumes sit outdoors throughout the Welsh winter waiting to be bought or stolen. As Booth muses in his autobiography, *My Kingdom of Books*, ‘...at the end of the summer season the books become like wilting autumn leaves; faded and rain-soaked, they tumble damply from the shelves’.

### **The life and legacy of Richard Booth**

Booth was born in 1938, the son of Colonel Philip Booth of Brynmelin House at nearby Cusop Dingle. He underwent the conventional rites of passage for one of his class: prep school, public school, university. He developed an early interest in books as a result of meeting Edward Fineron, a former Guards officer whose shop in Woking afforded Booth some consolation from the Spartan rigours of public school life. He went up to Oxford with some reluctance and his time at Merton was to some extent enli-