**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930)**

**Professor Carolyn Oulton**

Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh in 1859, the year [Charles Darwin](/19c/19c-darwin-biography) published \_On the Origin of Species\_, and knighted in 1902. The creator of the world’s most famous detective Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle was never fully comfortable with his success as a populist writer. Tellingly his own literary heroes included the notoriously arcane [George Meredith](/19c/19c-meredith-biography): at one point in ‘The Boscombe Valley Mystery’ Holmes says firmly, ‘And now let us talk about George Meredith, if you please, and we shall leave all minor matters until to-morrow.’

Like both [Dickens](/dickens) and [H. G. Wells](/20c/20c-wellshg-biography), Conan Doyle has strong links to Portsmouth and London, although he moved to Sussex in 1907 when he married his second wife Jean Leckie. His links to Kent are less well-known, although Jean herself had been born in Kidbrook in 1874.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While his writing was lucrative enough for a growing family (at least once the definitely dead Sherlock Holmes had been revived for an Edwardian audience), other speculations were less than successful. Like the Micawbers in [\_David Copperfield\_](/dickens/david-copperfield-curated-walk), Conan Doyle learned the hard way that the Kent coal trade ’may require talent, but that it certainly requires capital.’[[2]](#footnote-2) He was sufficiently enthralled to have gone underground to see the mines for himself, and defended the Burr coal group against attacks in the press in 1913. But later admitted the impossibility that what he had once termed ‘a stupendous movement which is destined to revolutionise the most historical corner of England’[[3]](#footnote-3) could in practice be successful if it was ‘wildly financed and extravagantly handled’.[[4]](#footnote-4) His study of prehistoric life proved equally unsuccessful – if less ruinous – when he failed to unearth dinosaur bones in the High Rocks area of Ashdown in 1909.[[5]](#footnote-5)

He had a happier time exploring thousands of feet above the ground rather than below. In 1903 he told a journalist (the future author P. G. Wodehouse) about his flight in a hot air balloon the year before. He vividly invoked the fear and excitement of this experience, ‘To see people running about, looking the size of dogs, and to feel that there was only a sort of strawberry-basket between me and *that*!’[[6]](#footnote-6) Luckily the strawberry-basket landed safely somewhere in Sevenoaks.

Like Holmes, Conan Doyle clearly enjoyed risk, and in the absence of hot air balloons he made do with the motor car. Here too there was the potential for things to go wrong; after one encounter with an unimpressed official in 1905, the outraged author was fined for speeding when he was caught doing 26 miles per hour on the Cheriton Road in Folkestone.

While he lived in Sussex after his marriage to Jean, Conan Doyle was close to the Kent border and was on good terms with the family of [Vita Sackville-West](/20c/20c-sackville-west-biography), dining with Lord and Lady Sackville at Knole and inscribing a copy of the historical novel \_Micah Clarke\_ to Lady Sackville.[[7]](#footnote-7)

But perhaps the most extraordinary circle in which Conan Doyle was moving during these years was an amateur cricket club, J. M. Barrie’s Allahakbarries. As one historian has noted, ‘if you were to draw a Venn diagram with each circle representing a well-known writer from the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, the greatest area of convergence between them all would be the Allahakbarries’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Other members included P. G. Wodehouse (who played with Conan Doyle against the Royal Engineers in Chatham in 1903),[[9]](#footnote-9) [H. G. Wells](/20c/20c-wellshg-biography), [Jerome K. Jerome]( /19c/19c-jerome-biography) and A. A. Milne.

Conan Doyle himself regularly played hockey and cricket in Tunbridge Wells. He was therefore less than amused when the pavilion was burned down, apparently by suffragettes, in 1913. None of this can have helped his relationship with fellow author [Sarah Grand](/19c/19c-grand-biography). As president of the local branches of the National Council of Women and the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, she and her colleagues were doubtless ‘tired of explaining that they were not suffragettes and did not approve of burning buildings’.[[10]](#footnote-10) While Conan Doyle spoke at a meeting held to condemn the arson, he did make a point of distinguishing between the tactics of ‘the honest constitutional suffragist’ and the ‘malicious monkey tricks’ of the suffragettes.[[11]](#footnote-11) Grand meanwhile arranged for a man with a sandwich board to carry posters round the town, denying that her own organisations had been involved, and sent a statement to the same effect to be read at the meeting.[[12]](#footnote-12)

On the outbreak of war in 1914 both writers would support local initiatives, with Conan Doyle addressing at least one recruitment meeting in Tunbridge Wells in 1914 (he pointed out that a skilful cricketer should be good at artillery fire)[[13]](#footnote-13) and giving lectures on major battles.[[14]](#footnote-14) In 1919, with the suffrage problem resolved, [Grand](/19c/19c-grand-biography) invited Lady Conan Doyle to join the committee of a new women’s club in Tunbridge Wells, which she hoped (with or without irony) would break up ‘mischievous cliques’ and encourage women to ‘do their duty as citizens.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

But within a few years Conan Doyle would also fall out with his old friend [Jerome K. Jerome]( /19c/19c-jerome-biography), who was deeply and publicly sceptical of Conan Doyle’s belief in spiritualism. Groombridge Place had already provided a mysterious setting for \_The Valley of Fear\_ in 1915. But in the later essay [‘The Edge of the Moat’](<https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=The_Edge_of_the_Unknown#IV._The_Ghost_of_the_Moat>)[[16]](#footnote-16) he claimed to have witnessed psychic happenings connected with the house.

After [Jerome’s](/19c/19c-jerome-biography) death in 1927, Conan Doyle would claim that his spirit had made contact to admit that he had been wrong in doubting psychic phenomena. For good measure he would also claim to have made contact with [Dickens](/dickens) and [Joseph Conrad](/19c/19c-conrad-biography). But Conan Doyle was not to have the last word after all. Controversially he had also came out in support of the ‘Cottingley fairies’ supposedly seen by two children, Elsie Wright and her cousin Frances Griffiths, in 1917. Having seen the photographs in 1920, he was sufficiently convinced to published them in \_The Strand\_ magazine, where the arch sceptic Holmes had made his first appearance. Frances later married and moved to Ramsgate, where she finally admitted in 1983 to having hoaxed the public for over half a century.

**Bibliography**

# [Arthur Conan Doyle Encylopedia](<https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=File:The-sporting-life-1903-06-06-royal-engineers-chatham-v-alahakbarries-p8.jpg>). Accessed 15 December 2022.

‘The Burning of the Nevill Ground Pavilion’. *\_Kent and Sussex Courier\_.* 2 May 1913. 5.

# Carwardine, Anne. *\_Disgusted Ladies: The Women of Tunbridge Wells Who Fought for the Right to Vote.\_* Matador, 2018.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. ‘Kent Coal. “Coming Triumph”. A Defence.’ \_Pall Mall Gazette\_. 26 February 1914. 4.

\_The Edge of the Unknown\_. London: John Murray, 1930.

\_Memories and Adventures\_. Cambridge: CUP, 2012.

‘”Female Hooligans”: Protest Meeting at Tunbridge Wells.’ \_Free Press\_. 2 May 1913. 6.Grand, Sarah to Lady Jean Conan Doyle. 1919. British Library. Add.MSS.88924/1/57

Grand, Sarah. Letter to Lady Jean Conan Doyle. 9 April 1919. British Library. MSS.88924/1/57.

‘In the Spring.’ 12 December 1914. \_ Sheerness Times Guardian.\_7.

Lellenberg, Jon, Daniel Stashower and Charles Foley. \_Arthur Conan Doyle: a Life in Letters\_. London: Harper, 2007.

## ‘”Great Battles of the War.” Lecture today at Town Hall, Folkestone.’ 10 April 1915. \_Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald\_. 4.

## Lycett, Andrew. \_[The Man Created Sherlock Holmes: the Life and Times of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Man-Created-Sherlock-Holmes-Arthur/dp/0743275233/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=9780743275255&linkCode=qs&qid=1670710076&s=books&sr=1-1)\_ Free Press, 2007.

Miller, Russell. \_*The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle\_*. London: Harvill Stocker, 2008.

Oulton, Carolyn W. de la L. \_Below the Fairy City: A Life of Jerome K. Jerome\_. Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2012.

‘Public Notices’. 20 March 1915. \_Folkestone, Sandgate, Hythe and Cheriton Herald\_. 4.

Pugh, Brian W. \_A Chronology of the Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle\_: Revised 2018

‘Recruiting Week at Tunbridge Wells.’ 11 December 1914. \_Kent and Sussex Courier\_. 9.

‘Sir A. Conan Doyle defends Mr Arthur Burr, and is criticised by the “Pall Mall Gazette”. 16 August 1913. \_Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald.\_ 2.

‘Sir A. Conan Doyle’s Opinion.’ 23 August 1913. \_Folkestone, Sandgate, Hythe and Cheriton Herald\_. 7.

Telfer, Kevin, *Peter Pan’s First XI: The Extraordinary Story of J. M. Barrie’s Cricket Team* (London: Sceptre, 2010).

1. For the death of Lady Conan Doyle’s brother at the Pavilion Hotel in Folkestone see \_Folkestone, Sandgate, Hythe and Cheriton Herald\_. 14 June 1930. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \_David Copperfield\_ [Chapter 17.]( http://www.literaturepage.com/read/davidcopperfield-303.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Kent Coal’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. \_Memories and Adventures\_ 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lycett 347-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. \_Victoria Club Magazine, 2 July 1903\_. Cited in Miller 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.manhattanrarebooks.com/pages/books/1594/arthur-conan-doyle/micah-clarke?soldItem=true> accessed 13 December 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Telfer, Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. With thanks to Alan Cutts of Tunbridge Wells Cricket Club for drawing my attention to this event. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Carwardine 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ‘”Female Hooligans”: Protest Meeting at Tunbridge Wells.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Her statement was printed by the \_Sussex Courier\_ on 2 May. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Recruiting Week at Tunbridge Wells.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A lecture in Folkestone Town Hall on 10 April 1915 was titled ‘Great Battles of the War’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Letter from Sarah Grand to Lady Jean Conan Doyle. 9 April 1919. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Collected in the essay collection \_The Edge of the Unknown\_. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)