**Julian Symons (1912-1994)**

‘But to come back to Folkestone. I loved the little zig-zag paths that went down to the lower level from which one might approach the sea, the water-drawn lift cage in which for twopence (it costs more now) one might go down or of course up, for the cars work in couples, to the deliciously ugly red brick Victorian lifthouse, the small shops around the harbour and the harbour itself, the rows of solid hotels that stand back from the front’[[1]](#footnote-1)

*\_The Belting Inheritance\_* (1965)

Julian Symons was a poet and a prolific author of both history and crime fiction. [Martin Edwards](/21c/21c-edwards-sepulchre-street) notes that when he was elected to the Detection Club in 1951 ‘on the strength of a handful of promising books, long before he became a master of the crime novel', he was also the first Jewish member.**[[2]](#footnote-2)** He went on to become President in 1976 and also became President of the [Conan Doyle](/19c/19c-conan-doyle) Society in 1979. Like other writers before and since, he was drawn to the imaginative possibilities of [Romney Marsh](/landscape/romney-writers). A late novel, \_The Kentish Manor Murders\_, imagines a ‘lost’ Sherlock Holmes manuscript including ‘smuggling activities by local fishermen, a body washed up by the tide near **Dungeness**’ and a dash across the Channel.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Like Holmes, Symons spent much of his life in London. But he enjoyed time in Kent as early as 1938, when he spent a formative holiday with the poet Roy Fuller and his wife. They initially considered **St Margaret’s Bay**, before opting for the area of [**Romney Marsh**](/placesqz/romney-overview).[[4]](#footnote-4) The journey started at the Fullers’ home in **Kennington near Ashford**, from where the party took a train to **Sandling** to connect with the **Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch railway** to **St Mary’s Bay**.[[5]](#footnote-5) Here they spent a fortnight in a bungalow, where they ‘read poetry aloud, talked about current poetry and poets, argued about politics, discussed cricket prospects, played a sort of tennis quoits in the garden’ until ‘At the end of two weeks we had all run out of money.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

This experience probably influenced the backdrop of \_*The Paper Chase\_* (1956), in which gangster and former MP Johnny Bogue makes his headquarters in Bramley Hall in an isolated area of [Romney Marsh](/placesqz/romney-overview) before WW2. Symons had been conscripted in 1942 after his request for exemption on conscientious grounds had been refused. As his protagonist Charles Applegate investigates the mystery surrounding Bogue, his encounters with the veterans who knew him reveal that they all have an ambivalent past. Between 1950 and 1955 Symons had been living with his wife at Corner Cottage, **Badlesmere Lees[[7]](#footnote-7)** (their second child was born in the Kent and **Canterbury** hospital),[[8]](#footnote-8) so he knew the area well.

The action of \_The Paper Chase\_ is set in the mid-1940s, by which time attempts had been made to build new communities along the coast through the creation of the new town **Lydd-on-Sea** and the rerouting of the branch line from Ashford. When Applegate gets the train from **Ashford** to Romney Marsh[[9]](#footnote-9) he therefore goes via **Ham Street, Brookland** and **Lydd-on-Sea** (which he mistakenly refers to as **Lydd**).[[10]](#footnote-10) His destination Bramley Hall is in **Greatstone-on-Sea** (the Bramley of the novel).[[11]](#footnote-11) Set pieces include picturesque if reckless drives between here and **New Romney** (Murdstone),[[12]](#footnote-12) where Applegate and his friends fight a battle of wits at the Grand Marine Hotel (possibly the Dormy House Hotel). The novel presents a town in flux and perhaps slightly unsure of itself:

a long avenue of pines which ended abruptly in a narrow street full of glossy-fronted, neon-lighted shops. … From the High Street they emerged into a decaying square. Through a gap slate-grey sea could be glimpsed.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

By this time Symons and his family had moved back to London, but they came back in 1963[[14]](#footnote-14) to take up residence at Barling House, Brookland, in [**Romney Marsh**](/placesqz/romney-overview).

His own literary interests can glimpsed in the nod to [Dickens](/dickens). [David Copperfield](/dickens/david-copperfield-curated-walk) of course makes his way to [Dover](/19c/19c-dover/) a few miles along the coast, where he will successfully plead with his aunt to rescue him from the guardianship of Mr Murdstone. Symons had published a book on [Dickens](/dickens) in 1951; as a guest on Desert Island Discs many years later he opted for [\_Bleak House\_](/dickens/bleak-house-deal) as his island book.

*\_The Belting Inheritance\_* (1965) also speaks to the complexities of the past. The narrator tells the story of his informal adoption some years after the war, by an ageing relative with an estate near **Folkestone**, ‘My immediate reaction as I looked at the forbidding spires of the Victorian Gothic front was that I was being taken to live in a church.’[[15]](#footnote-15) When a letter arrives purporting to be from the woman’s adored son (believed to have been killed in action), the rest of the family are not convinced.

Symons once said that ‘My object in writing detective stories is to free myself from the rigours of an ordinary office job’.[[16]](#footnote-16) They continue to fulfil this role. But like the best of [Wilkie Collins](/19c/19c-collins-biography), these acutely perceptive novels also have the power to destabilise the reader, jolting us out of our complacency in unexpected ways.

Despite using it as a setting for several of his novels, Symons was apparently unable to settle in **Romney Marsh**, heading back to London and later the United States just six years after moving to **Brookland**.[[17]](#footnote-17) But he and his wife moved down to Kent for a third and final time in 1980, to Groton House, 330 Dover Road, **Walmer**.[[18]](#footnote-18) Symons died here in late 1994 and was cremated at **Barham** crematorium.

With thanks to Christine Symons for information and images.

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1. *The Belting Inheritance* 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edwards 409. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘The Enterprise of St Mary’s Bay’ 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘The Enterprise of St Mary’s Bay’ 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘The Enterprise of St Mary’s Bay’ 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dates from Kathleen Symons, address from\_The Spectator\_, 12 March 1954. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kathleen Symons 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. \_*The Paper Chase\_* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The original branch line began in Appledore and ran from Lydd to New Romney via Dungeness and back. Following plans to develop new housing in the area the branch station was re-sited, opening on 4 July 1937 nearer the coast. White 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Greatstone-on-Sea was the only stop on the Ashford branch line between Lydd-on-Sea and New Romney. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. New Romney is lightly fictionalised as Murdstone, but easily recognisable from its position between Hythe and Dungness and the description of its historic water tower. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. \_*The Paper Chase\_* 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kathleen Symons 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. \_*The Belting Inheritance\_* 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. To Graham Greene 23 October 1946. NYPL. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kathleen Symons 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kathleen Symons 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)