

# Sir Thomas Browne Day

Wednesday 19 October 2022

[www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk](http://www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk)

## Sir Thomas Browne Society Newsletter 2022

Happy birthday Sir Thomas, born in London 19 October 1605\*, died in Norwich 19 October 1682.

Unfortunately, this year we have no physical events for **Thomas Browne Day**, mainly due to lack of capacity and a bit of ill-health but there has been plenty going on to let you know about to celebrate Sir Thomas Browne Day this year.

### Thomas Browne Annual Essay by Kevin Faulkner

As is customary Browne scholar **Kevin Faulkner** has published a new essay on his blog *the Aquarium of Vulcan*, found at <https://aquariumofvulcan.blogspot.com/>. This year's essay is called 'In the bed of Cleopatra' *Thomas Browne's Egyptology*. The link will go live on 19 October.

The essay looks at Browne's lifelong interest in Egyptian artefacts and reveals how literary symbolism involving Ancient Egypt links and unites his diptych discourses, *Urn-Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658). On Kevin's blogsite you can also read essays from previous years as Kevin has tackled various subjects about Browne's thinking and writings Kevin has spent many years reading Browne's works and promoting awareness of them.

*NB For those who are interested in Egyptology, this essay is a natural partner for the **Visions of Ancient Egypt** exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre which runs until 1 January 2023. [www.scva.ac.uk](http://www.scva.ac.uk)*

### The Sir Thomas Browne Colo-rectal Unit at Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital

On Thursday 20 October 2022, the Sir Thomas Browne Colo-rectal Unit at NNUH will be officially blessed with its adopted name three years after opening. In the meantime the unit has become the acclaimed front-runner in robot-assisted colo-rectal and pelvic surgery, enabling delicate operations to be performed without major incisions in the patient which means less trauma, quicker recovery and also better for the NHS as the beds are freed up more quickly - so a win for everyone. The blessing is part of a conference for professionals and researchers.

**Richard Wharton**, Regional Director of the Royal College of Surgeons (East of England) and Consultant Colorectal Surgeon said *'I heard about Browne when I listened to Melvyn Bragg's In Our Time about Browne in 2019. I knew he was from Norwich and this made me want to find out more. I realised that it was perfect to name the Unit after him - he would have no doubt have approved of the advances that we have made. We already have a Thomas Browne library and he was a truly original thinker with a thirst for knowledge. I really do believe that it is time that more people recognised what a treasure we have in Browne as a son of Norwich'*

If you would like to know more about the work of the Unit, please follow this link:

<https://www.nnuh.nhs.uk/press-release/celebrating-the-success-of-robotic-assisted-surgical-programme/>

### Article about NNUH and Dr Thomas Browne

Coinciding with Browne's annual day and to celebrate 250 years of the Norfolk & Norwich hospital, journalist **Rowan Mantell** has written an article about the origins of the hospital and its collections and archives. *'Over the past two-and-a-half centuries, spanning treatments with leeches and herbs to robotic surgery and cancer immunotherapy, the hospital has acquired a fascinating archive, including the world's largest collection of bladder stones and the skull of the man who coined the words coma, computer, electricity, hallucination and medical, plus many more that we use in our everyday live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

*Full disclosure, the skull is a replica – but it was once the real, stolen, skull of the great Norwich scientist Thomas Browne until the hospital returned the original for reburial exactly a century ago. You can read the whole article here: <https://www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle/heritage/norfolk-and-norwich-hospital-history-9326120>*

*\*Acknowledging that some people dispute the birth date*

[www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk](http://www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk)

## Update on Professor Claire Preston's work on a new edition of the Complete Works of Sir Thomas Browne, funded by AHRC and a new work from Dr Gavin Francis due 2023

There is an [ongoing project](#) to edit a new *Complete Works of Thomas Browne*. Chief editor **Professor Claire Preston** took early retirement from her full-time role at Queen Mary University in 2020, to concentrate on her research, writing, editing and overseeing the new Browne edition, with the first volume appearing in the next few months – *vol 1, Religio Medici in three distinct versions*, edited by Reid Barbour and Brooke Conti. There will be more news and a publication date in the new year. <http://www.thomasbrowne.qmul.ac.uk/>

**Dr Gavin Francis**, GP and Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and the Royal College of General Practitioners has also written a new book *Sir Thomas Browne :The Opium of Time* which will be published in summer 2023 by Oxford University Press. We hope that Gavin will be able to come to Norwich to do a talk in October 2023 following the launch of the book.

He is the author of seven award-winning books of non-fiction including *Adventures in Human Being*, *Island Dreams*, and *Recovery: the Lost Art of Convalescence*. His work has been translated into eighteen languages. You can read more here <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/sir-thomas-browne-9780192858177?lang=en&cc=gb#>

## Re-siting of the public artwork 'Homage to Thomas Browne' from Hay Hill, Norwich

Earlier in 2022, Norwich City Council made a decision to refurbish Hay Hill, a square in the centre of Norwich which commemorates Browne, set as it is between the site of the house that he lived in for most of his adult life as a physician and the church, St Peter Mancroft, where he is buried. Hay Hill would have been his 'patch', the place that he wandered his way out to visit a patient or back home to rest, write and experiment, a space he would have crossed to go to church to worship and pray for his family and patients.

In 1905, to celebrate the tercentenary celebration of Browne's birth, a statue of Browne was installed in the centre of Hay Hill commissioned from sculptor Henry Alfred Pegram. Thousands of people turned out to see it unveiled (see photo on last page). It has been moved onsite a number of times, but he continues to survey the square from his high pedestal, often accompanied by a pigeon or two. See photos on last page.

In 2005 a new public artwork was commissioned from French artists, Anne and Patrick Poirier, who live near Montpellier in the south of France, one of the universities that Browne studied at during his medical training. The artwork was installed on 4 July 2007 as a 'living room for the city' conceived as a place for people to sit and ponder the world in the centre of a busy place. Consisting of 20 pieces of stone sculpture and 22 lights set into the paving, the arrangement is based around a quincunx, a five-pointed shape that Browne wrote about in *The Garden of Cyrus*. A large marble brain and eye line up with the quincunx tracing a line between the site of his house, and his burial place and many of the pieces are inscribed with the titles of his works and other references.

The sculptures have been well-used on Hay Hill in the way the artists intended, as street furniture to sit on, to meet friends and pass the time of day, eat their lunch, for children to climb on, teenagers to congregate on. Now the council want to clear the space and re-shape the steps and walkways, plant it and add a water feature. They have decided to relocate the sculptures - the new home is yet to be decided. There is nowhere that will be as suitable - the site-specific work was designed especially for Hay Hill but hopefully they will find somewhere that will be accommodate it. The Pegram sculpture on Hay Hill will be more prominent and there are plans for other kinds of interpretation. They have yet to apply for planning permission to move the artwork but hope to start work early in 2023. Keep an eye on [www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk](http://www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk) for updates and more about the artwork [here](#).

## St Peter Mancroft Church

Thomas Browne's home was on Gentleman's Walk more or less where Pret a Manger stands now in 2022 and he worshipped in St Peter Mancroft Church, adjacent to Hay Hill (see photo on last page). His house was demolished many years ago but there are still a number of artefacts in the church including a replica of his skull which was reburied after being accidentally dug up by workmen many years before and sold to a local doctor who kept it until it was finally reunited with Browne on 4th July 1922. The church is open every day and you are welcome to go and see his portrait, memorial plaque, his wife Dorothy's stone as well as books and documents related to Browne.

## A walk with Sir Thomas Browne in Norwich

Writer and science journalist **Hugh Aldersey Williams**, also author of *The Adventures of Sir Thomas Browne in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (ISBN 978-1847089021) a really good primer for anyone wanting to know the Browne basics as well as the relevance to contemporary living. In 2020, Hugh was commissioned by the National Centre for Writing to create a walk in Norwich as part of a series of literary walks called *Walking Norwich*. It takes you on a route from Hay Hill to Pull's Ferry in the Cathedral Close passing spots that would have been of interest to Browne including Browne's Meadow where he used to grow medicinal plants. You can download a map and find out more here: <https://nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/residencies/walking-norwich/a-walk-with-thomas-browne/>



## A Quincunx for Sir Thomas Browne - a film

In case you haven't seen it, there is a very lovely and informative film about Browne made by the **Royal College of Physicians** to accompany an exhibition, *'A cabinet of rarities': the curious collections of Sir Thomas Browne* in London in 2016. It is a very good source of accessible basic information about the man, his life and his works and how he fits into both 17<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary living.

*'A cabinet of rarities': the curious collections of Sir Thomas Browne* explores RCP physician, philosopher, collector and polymath Thomas Browne's curious approach to the world through his writing and his collection. Browne (1605–1682) saw the extraordinary in the ordinary, and introduced over 700 new words to the English language, while inspiring literary greats such as Virginia Woolf and Edgar Allan Poe. His collection reveals a fascinating perspective on 17th-century scientific and medical research.

About the exhibition <http://www.replondon.ac.uk/museum>

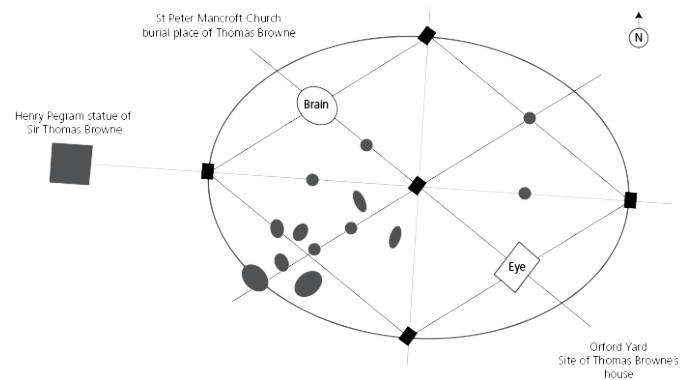
Watch the film [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPu\\_43Mtbzs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPu_43Mtbzs)

If you have anything to report about Browne, please send it to me at [info@theshiftnorwich.org.uk](mailto:info@theshiftnorwich.org.uk) and I will add it to the website [www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk](http://www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk) where there is a wealth of information about Browne.

Finally, an obituary for **Barbara Miller OBE** who was a long term parishioner of St Peter Mancroft and a Thomas Browne Champion, delivering a tour and talk of St Peter Mancroft Church and its Browne artefacts every year. Sadly she passed away on 1 December 2021 and is greatly missed, although she made excellent use of her long and active life. RIP Barbara. You can read an article about her life [here](#).



Hay Hill, Poirier artwork Homage to Thomas Browne



Hay Hill, Poirier artwork Homage to Thomas Browne layout based on the quincunx



Hay Hill, Henry Pegram statue close up 1905.  
Photo Sarah Cocke



Hay Hill, Henry Pegram statue 1905  
Photo Sarah Cocke



Browne's house on Gentleman's Walk and Brigg Street



Unveiling of the Henry Pegram statue on Hay Hill 19 October 1905



Portrait of Thomas Browne