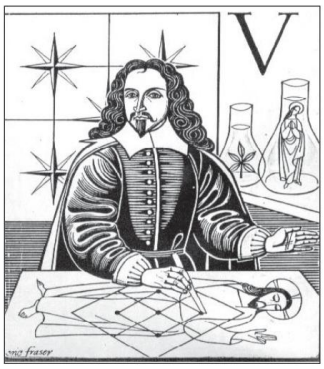


Celebrating

SIR THOMAS BROWNE DAY

19 OCTOBER EACH YEAR

www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk

Sir Thomas Browne Day Newsletter 2026

Happy birthday Sir Thomas, born in London 19 October 1605*, died in Norwich 19 October 1682. Sir Thomas Browne was an English physician, naturalist, philosopher, scientist, wordsmith and polymath who contributed hundreds of words to the English language (such as medical, electricity, migrant, computer, ambidextrous and many more).
He lived on the corner of Brigg Street and Gentleman's Walk in Norwich for most of his adult life, practicing as a doctor and writing about the diverse subjects that interested him. He was buried in St Peter Mancroft Church.

This year's Thomas Browne Day event is the presentation of a 3D printed replica skull, scanned from a 1922 cast and on Monday 19 October 2026 given to St Peter Mancroft Church. There will also be the publication of a new City of Stories feature on the **Visit Norwich website** which honours great characters of Norwich who deserve to be remembered.

A new skull for Thomas Browne

There is a story about Thomas Browne and his skull. In 1847, Browne's grave in St Peter Mancroft church was disturbed and his skull was stolen by the sexton of the church at the time, George Potter. After some touting around, it was sold to a local GP, Edward Lubbock, who kept it until his death when it went to the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital. There was a great interest in skulls and phrenology at that time, so many were stolen, sold and studied. Thomas Browne was considered to be an very intelligent man with many ideas and original thoughts and so his brain and skull were of great interest.

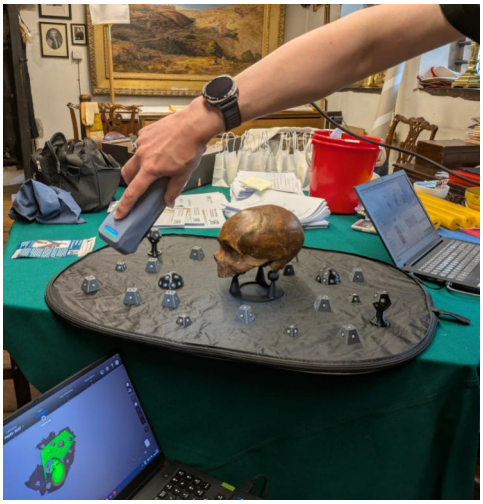
The skull was eventually reclaimed by the vicar of St Peter Mancroft (the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital was very reluctant to let it go!) and the original skull was reburied 4 July 1922. Before that, it was studied, measured and drawn, and four plaster casts were made, one is in St Peter Mancroft, one in the Sir Thomas Browne Library at NNUH, one in London with the Wellcome Trust and one is in Canada in private ownership. Over the years, the plaster casts have suffered and have become chipped and broken so 3D scanning expert Steve Kingsley from Pixel Past has made a new facsimile.

Steve specialises in scanning and reproducing historical artefacts. He scanned the plaster skull with a hand-held scanner as we couldn't remove the plaster original from the church, cleaned up the file digitally and then printed a new one in bone-coloured PLA (Poly-Lactic Acid, a kind of milk-based plastic). On Thomas Browne Day 2026, we will give it to the church to keep on display at the church, relieving pressure on the plaster version.

Some of you will have seen a prototype skull in 2025. Over the last year Steve has refined and improved the 3D print and magnetised the jaw. It is now ready to be shown to the public - to visitors that turn up and are interested in Browne as they can safely handle the 3D replica version. You can see the 3D printed skull , the plaster cast and other artefacts in the Treasury of the church.
You can find out more about Steve and his work at www.pixelpast.co.uk

**Acknowledging that some people dispute the birth date*

The finalised 3D printed replica skull



Scanning Browne's facsimile skull

Browne's plaster facsimile skull from 1922

Annual talk by Kevin Faulkner

Kevin Faulkner is also delivering a talk at the Norfolk Heritage Centre at the Norfolk & Norwich Millennium Library on **Tuesday 20 October 2026, 1pm.** Join Kevin as he explores 17th century Norwich polymath Sir Thomas Browne's multi-faceted interest in the world of ancient Rome - free entry but booking essential via eventbrite - there are a few tickets left - please book at **norfolkheritagecentre.eventbrite.co.uk**

You can also email heritagecentre@norfolk.gov.uk for tickets. The talk will be live-streamed if you can't get there, but you also need to book to get the link.

Each year, Kevin writes an essay and a talk to mark Sir Thomas Browne Day which he publishes on the **aquariusofvulcan.blogspot. com**, amongst other interesting observations on Browne, philosphy and life.

It is fair to say that he has been the most constant and prolific promoter of Browne and his works and ideas over the years since Tony Batty-Shaw, and also the person with the most in-depth knowledge of his writings. More recently he has partnered with the Norfolk Heritage Centre to enable him to share some of his theories and understanding of Browne's ideas which few people can manage.

We are lucky to have him here in Norwich, where Browne settled and created a family, as well as a legacy, through his writings.

With a visual show of books once in Browne's library as well as Roman coins collected by the Norwich doctor-philosopher, Kevin will outline why he believes Browne to have been 17th century England's greatest authority on the Romans and their world. Please book to get the last few available tickets. Again, here at **norfolkheritagecentre.eventbrite.co.uk**

Norwich City of Stories honours Sir Thomas Browne

A few weeks ago, I was asked to write a short piece about Sir Thomas Browne for the Visit Norwich website for the series **Twenty Stories, One City** where people from the past are honoured and remembered for what they contributed in their time, not only to Norwich but to the world. From medieval rebels and mystics to pioneering reformers, artists, entrepreneurs and unsung heroes, these are the people who shaped Norwich over its almost 1000 year history - and whose legacy can still be discovered across the city today. Sir Thomas Browne joins Julian of Norwich, Edith Cavell, Harriet Martineau , Pablo Fanque, Samuel Bignold, Rumsey Wells and many more, all with rich and interesting stories to offer. With a brief of an 800-word count, it was only possible to scratch the surface of what Browne contributed through his life and work, but great to see him profiled here. Thank you to Visit Norwich for the opportunity. The piece will go live on 19 October 2026.

Pegram statue of Browne on Hay Hill, installed 1905

A new project - Browne and a Cabinet of Curiosities

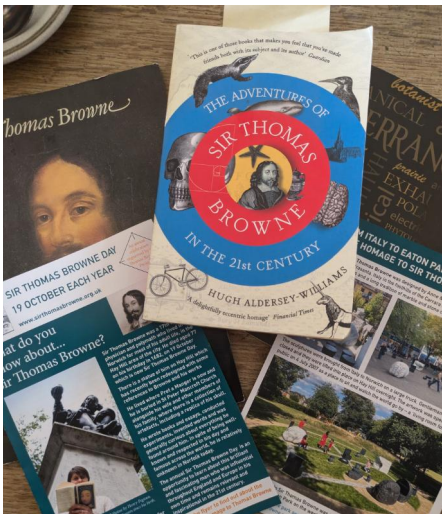
Thomas Browne was known for his curious mind and the weird and wonderful experiments he conducted, often to the discomfort of wildlife and his family. John Evelyn, after a visit to Norwich, wrote in his diary that Browne's *'whole house and garden is a paradise and Cabinet of rarities'*. For a while Browne owned an ostrich, which lived in his garden feeding on his plants so he could observe the motion of its gullet and he regularly conducted similar, strange experiments and then wrote down the findings.

This has interested the people at Norwich Puppet Theatre who have built a cabinet and intend to fill it with 'rarities' and objects – and even puppets – to help children learn about Browne and other aspects of life and natural history, when visiting the theatre, and for outreach projects. The details of the project have yet to be discussed but we will post on the **Sir Thomas Browne website** when more is known about the Cabinet.

Norwich Puppet Theatre at Whitefriars

Virginia Woolf wrote: 'Few people love the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, but those who do are the salt of the Earth.'

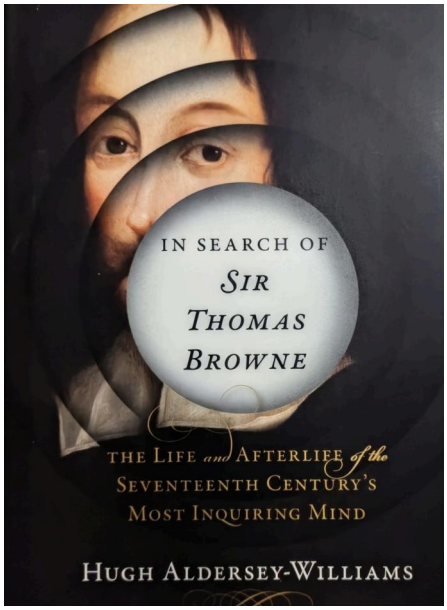
The Gift of Books



Over the years, I have bought and given many copies of *The Adventures of Sir Thomas Browne in the 21st Century* by Hugh Aldersey Williams, to people interested in Browne as a way of introducing people to his life and works. It is a good way of getting started if they are not quite ready to read Browne in the original 17th century English, which can be tricky (although apparently easier if read out loud).

The book is available as a paperback under its original title and a hardback edition intended for the American market called '*In Search of Sir Thomas Browne*'. However, they are now out of print and hard to get hold of. In a recent house move, Hugh passed me his remaining stock of books. **I have five copies to give away to the first five people that request a free copy - please email culture@theshiftnorwich.org.uk to ask for one.**

The rest I will keep to give to people as and when they need an introduction, or when people want to order a copy and can't find it in a bookshop, or maybe as prizes in a competition. We will give a copy to St Peter Mancroft Church when we present them with the 3D printed skull so it can be available as a reference copy, and I will make sure that the library has enough copies to lend out.



Please get in touch if you need a copy of a Browne primer. There are of course many other very good publications by people such as Dr Kevin Killeen of York University, Dr Gavin Francis, a GP in Edinburgh, Professor Claire Preston and the very much missed Anthony (Tony) Batty-Shaw who championed Browne for many years and write a small book, (Sir Thomas Browne of Norwich Norwich, Browne 300 Committee) to mark the tercentenary of his death in 1982. There are few precious copies of that very comprehensive and informative booklet about Browne and his life left so if you find one, please look after it.

Meanwhile, don't forget, five copies to give away on application by email.

Music and Sir Thomas Browne - A new commission

Although music isn't known as one of Browne's special interests, the 17th century was full of changes and developments in music. There have been a few pieces composed in the past such as Quincunx by Elisabeth Lutyens and Symphony No. 5 Hydrotaphia by William Alwyn which was commissioned for the Norfolk & Norwich Festival in 1973.

For some time I have had an idea to commission a contemporary piece related to Browne, his life and his work. We have such a rich supply of great musicians, composers and singers in this county and we should find a way to animate Browne musically. I have been in conversation with musicians Rachel Stacy and Ivan McCready of Chaos Collective. Both are extremely accomplished and experienced string musicians who have played in high level ensembles and orchestras across the country. As Chaos Collective, they can be more experimental and work on projects suited to their own creative abilities.

For the Five Churches Festival in North Norfolk, they composed Glaven Rhapsody, a multi-media composition that included imagery and film as well as music and poetry. We are commissioning a similar piece that would pull together various of Browne's literary works, places, ideas and interests relating to his life in Norwich and Norfolk, to be performed live at St Peter Mancroft Church or a similar venue linked to Browne as well as being recorded as a short film which would be more portable and accessible to people who can't attend a live event for any reason. Ivan and Rachel are keen to take up this challenge and we are looking forward to updating you in 2027

A Hallowe'en ghost story

And finally, as Hallowe'en is coming up, here's a link to a YouTube video of an audiobook of Quincunx, a ghost story by Walter de la Mare - one to revisit at the end of the month!

Scan the QR code to go straight to the file on **YouTube here**

The following pages are not news but general information about Browne that has been included in previous newsletters which may be of interest to people new to the list

Where to find Browne in Norwich

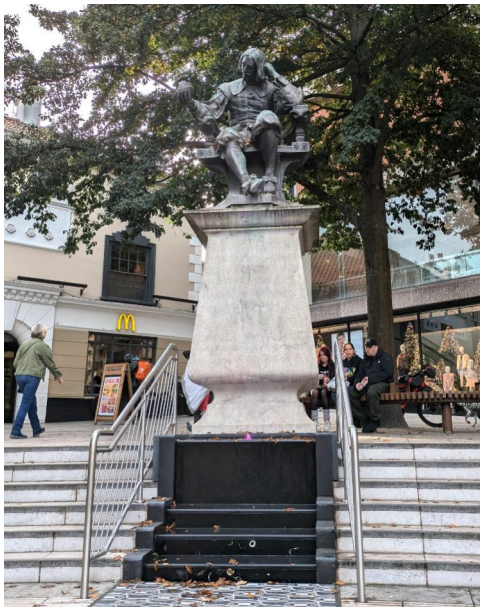
Hay Hill

It was a little controversial when Norwich City Council proposed to clear Hay Hill and redesign it as a kind of amphitheatre in the city centre. It meant moving the Homage to Sir Thomas Browne artwork, a set of 20 sculptures and lights which together formed a 'living room for the city', and which clearly claimed and stated the legacy of Thomas Browne, one of the very few tributes to the man in Norwich who was so important in his time. Hay Hill sits between the place where Browne and his family lived, and St Peter Mancroft Church where they were buried. Hay Hill ands the Haymarket were on Browne's doorstep.

In 1905 a statue by Henry Pegram was commissioned and inveiled, and which has moved position on Hay Hill several times (this is possibly the fourth move). This statue is protected by Heritage England and has been repostioned on Hay Hill in the middle of some steps leading up to NEXT.

In front of the statue is a water feature which runs down some black granite steps towards a pattern inset stone with a quincunx pattern engraved into it. Apparently there is due to be some interpretation which explains the relationship of Browne to the area but it is not there yet.

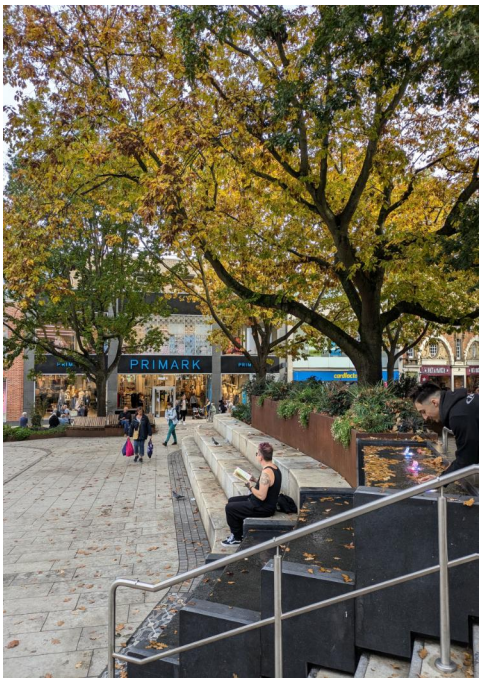
The *Homage to Sir Thomas Browne* artwork which was previously on Hay Hill has now moved to Eaton Park, near to the children's playground .



Hay Hill, Henry Pegram statue 1905, in its new location on Hay Hill with water feature in front *Photo Marion Catlin*

The Quincunx pattern *Photo Marion Catlin*

View towards Gentleman's Walk *Photo Marion Catlin*



New seating *Photo Marion Catlin*

Hay Hill as it was, April 2023 *Photo Damian Street*

Where to find Browne in Norwich

Homage to Sir Thomas Browne, Eaton Park

In 2024, the decision was made to move the public artwork, the *Homage to Sir Thomas Browne* artwork, a set of 20 sculptures designed by French artists Anne & Patrick Poirier which together formed a 'living room for the city', and which clearly claimed and stated the legacy of Thomas Browne, one of the very few tributes to the man in Norwich who was so important in his time. It was a site specific artwork for Hay Hill, which sits between the place where Browne and his family lived, and St Peter Mancroft Church where they were buried. Hay Hill and the Haymarket were on Browne's doorstep and were a day-to-day part of his life, as was St Peter Mancroft Church where Browne and his family worshipped.

The *Homage to Sir Thomas Browne* artwork is located near to the children's playground. You can find it on a grassy space where the quincunx shape that sets it out has been more explicitly shown, as a set of paths. Children and adults are encouraged to climb and sit on the solid stone pieces. Eaton Park is one of Norwich's heritage parks and the postcode is

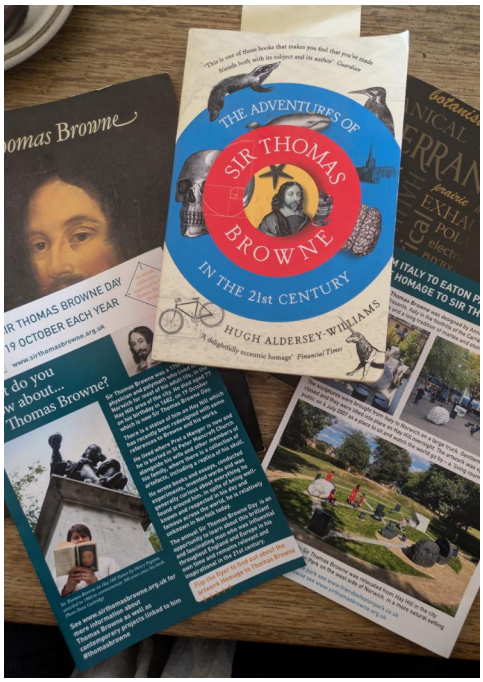
Each year, on 19 October, a group of Thomas Browne champions visit the marble and granite pieces for a picnic of Thomas Brownies and to pay homage to the historic character we have become friends with over the years. We take the opportunity to explain the relevance of the sculptures, and who Thomas Browne was, and **we will be there at around 1pm this Monday 19 October (in the café if it is raining!)**

The sculptures were made in Pietrasanta, Italy and near Pisa in the Cararra foothills, Left is Patrick Poirier, artist and right is Gianni Tinunin, marble craftsman from Bottega Versiliese in Pietrasanta

People using the sculptures as they should *Photo Marion Catlin*

Homage to Sir Thomas Browne at Eaton Park *Photo Marion Catlin*

Thomas Browne Day 2025 *Photo Marion Catlin*



Publications at the Eaton Park Thomas Browne Day picnic *Photo Marion Catlin*

Thomas Browne at St Peter Mancroft Church, Millennium Plain, Norwich

St Peter Mancroft Church, Hay Hill - the home of Sir Thomas Browne in Norwich

St Peter Mancroft Church was built in 1430 and dedicated in 1455, around three hundred years before Dr Thomas Browne settled in Norwich to practice medicine, get married to Norfolk-born Dorothy Mileham and bring up a family of children, 6 of whom survived and 5 children who didn't. They were all buried in the church as is Thomas Browne. There are memorial plaques to Browne and his wife Dorothy. In a cabinet in the Treasury, there are artefacts - a maquette of his statue made by Sir Arthur Pegram which has just been relocated to a more prominent position on the refurbished Hay Hill, books that show his household inventory.

Beneath his memorial in the sanctuary, a Latin inscription on a paving stone marks the re-interment of his skull in 1922, and underneath the explanation that this is Sir Thomas Browne, '*Dr in Physick, author of Religio, Medici and other learned Bookes'.*

There is also a portrait painting of Thomas Browne, from 1670. The skull was taken from his coffin when the grave was accidentally opened in 1840. It was kept for many years in the museum of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital until its return and re-interrment in July 1922.

During his life-time, in his book Urn Burial, Browne asked, "*... who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? Who hath the oracles of his ashes, or whither they are to be scattered? ... To be gnawed out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking-bowls, and our bones turned into pipes to delight and sport our enemies, are tragical abominations.*"

This turned out to be a strange premonition as his own grave was disturbed many years later. If you want to read more about Browne and what happened to his skull, his house and many other gems of information please read Colonel Unthank's excellent entry in his Norwich history blog which is where this information is taken from.

The inscription on his grave plate reads , '*Dr Thomas Browne, Knight, Doctor of Medicine, born seventy-seven years ago, died on the same day in October 1682. Sleeping in this coffin, he converts lead into gold by the dust of this alchemical body*' – possibly written by his son Edward and acknowledging Browne's fascination with alchemy.

St Peter Mancroft has proved to be an enthusiastic home for Thomas Browne as well as a very active parish church with concerts and art installations, bell-ringing and church services. Barbara Miller's daughter Alexandra Atherton and the Reverend Edward Carter are both keen champions and the volunteer stewards will always be glad to show you the Browne artefacts that the church holds.

For more information about St Peter Mancroft's association with Browne and their 2024 publication visit the church website https://www.stpetermancroft.org.uk/our-history

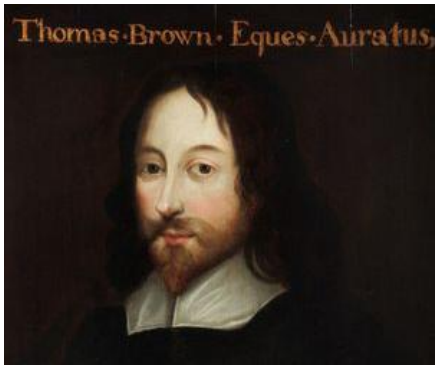
St Peter Mancroft Church, Hay Hill

Reverend Edward Carter showing Browne artefacts to Dr Gavin Francis in May 2023

Barbara Miller was a long-term parishioner at St Peter Mancroft and used to conduct tours of the church to tell people about Sir Thomas Browne and the artefacts that pay tribute

Memorial stone in th church

The Century That Wrote Itself - a BBC documentary series



Sir Thomas Browne

While looking at references to Sir Thomas Browne something that popped up was a BBC documentary series called '*The Century That Wrote Itself*'. It is in three episodes and episode two *'The Re-written Universe'* focusses on Browne from about 25 minutes in.

Presented by Adam Nicolson, who has an excellent way of explaining the series explores the 17th century's contradictory attitudes and responses to the changes that were taking place across the world at a time when science was becoming more relevant than philosophy, facts and observation more important than long-held beliefs and myths.

In episode 2, Adam talks about Browne's life, his work and describes his approach to thinking about the world he inhabited, writing down his thoughts and applying reason to his observations of nature and the world. At a time when developments such as the microscope and telescope were taking lace, Browne had an endless curiosity which he applied to every area of his life. In any case, the 2nd episode brings to life the man that lived and worked near Hay Hill in Norwich and travelled across the county practicing medicine and noticing the details of nature around him. His house was full birds and animals, both dead and alive as well as many, many books - as well as his family.

Adam also highlights the many words that Browne invented and some of the experiments he conducted on various hapless creatures, perhaps the most notable being an ostrich which he fed a wide range of objects including an onion, beer and a lump of iron wrapped in pastry.

It really is worth watching this whole series but especially episode two

Link to the YouTube video here

Norfolk Heritage Centre on the 2nd floor of the Millennium Library has original books by Thomas Browne that you can see. Please ask the staff if you want a closer look.

St Peter Mancroft has a range of artefacts related to Browne in the Treasury - please ask the stewards to show you where they are.

Don't forget the talk in the Heritage Centre by Kevin Faulkner on Tuesday 20 October, 1pm and live-streamed. The live talk is nearly sold out but you can get tickets for the livestream here

Thomas Browne in Norwich

St Peter Mancroft Church

Thomas Browne's home was on Gentleman's Walk moreorless where Prêt 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. You can also pick up information and the new book by Hugh Aldersey-Williams. St Peter Mancroft Church has become the remaining home for Thomas Browne in Norwich with many artefacts, so please visit soon!

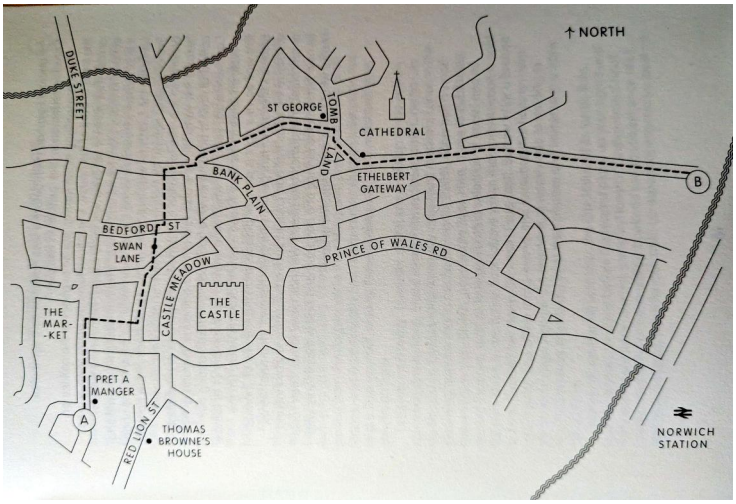
A Quincunx for Sir Thomas Browne - a film

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 17th 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.

A walk with Sir Thomas Browne in Norwich

Writer and science journalist **Hugh Aldersey-Williams,** also author of T*he Adventures of Sir Thomas Browne in the 21st 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 ftrom the National Centre for Writing at Dragon Hall www.nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk*



Walking the City - the Thomas Browne walk

*If you can't find it, I will be posting a pdf of a better resolution map and the text that accompanies it on the Thomas Browne website when I get permission to do so

Newsletter written October 2026 by Marion de Mello Catlin, founder of the Sir Thomas Browne Project and web editor. If you have anything to report about Browne, please send it to me at info@theshiftnorwich.org.uk and I will add it to the website www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk where there is a wealth of information about Browne.

A book bench for Sir Thomas Browne?

Norwich Book Benches

Many of you will have seen the Book Benches around Norwich as part of the UNESCO City of Literature and Norwich City of Stories campaign.

They are made from a variety of materials including wood and metal but the majority are made from carved stone, crafted by stonemason Ryan James. They commemorate many of the city and county's writers but most of the writers acknowledged are contemporary, living people - which is great and absolutely applaud this but there were four (at least) that are so far missing from our long legacy of great literary figures.

These are, of course, **Thomas Browne** but also **WG (Max) Sebald** who died of a sudden heart attack, who was inspired by Browne and quoted him in his book *'Rings Of Saturn'*. Max taught at UEA and although there is no Sebald Society as such, a number of his former colleagues and his widow still miss him, and would like to see him permanently commemorated. You can read more about Max and what his colleagues and students think of him here.

So he is definitely a worthy candidate. Alongside Max is **Harriet Martineau,** journalist and writer, was best known as a populariser of political economy, though her career spanned many other aspects of Victorian literary culture.

She was born in Norwich and despite years of ill-health he earned a living through writing and, shot to fame in 1832 as author of *Illustrations of Political Economy* – twenty-five short stories showing how economic conditions impacted on the lives of ordinary people in a variety of social environments.

The fourth worthy writer is **George Borrow** born in East Dereham in 1803. He wrote novels about travel based on personal experiences in Europe, which gave him a close affinity with the Romani people of Europe, who figure strongly in his work. His best-known books are *The Bible in Spain* and the novels *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, set in his time with the English Romanichal (Gypsies). Many Norwich streets near the university are named after him and his books, so he does have a permanent legacy but a book bench would be welcomed by both the Martineau Society and the George Borrow Society.

The plan is to join forces to try and commission a set of four 'stack' style benches, one for each of these writers. Ryan the stonemason is keen and so are the relevant organisations and families, though we will need to do some fundraising.

The tricky bit is where they might get permission to be sited - ideally near St Peter Mancroft Church and The Forum area - so watch this space! If you help, let us know.

If you haven't followed the book bench trail, you can find out more about them here and see their location on the right.

See https://www.visitnorwich.co.uk/book-benches/

Book stacks near St Giles' Church, Upper St Giles

The Book Bench Trail map

Norwich Book Festival 24-30 October

While we are on the subject of books, it is the third year of the successful festival run by The Forum Trust at the Forum. The **Norwich Book Festival** is a celebration of stories. In partnership with the National Centre for Writing, Norfolk County Council, UEA and St Peter Mancroft Church and has many events over ten days or so. Find out more here

Publications

There are also some informative publications - a series of essays by Browne scholar Kevin Faulkner on www.aquariumofvulcan.blogspot.co.uk, with a new one published every year on 19 October, Sir Thomas Browne Day.

Sir Thomas Browne and the Opium of Time' by Edinburgh-based GP Dr Gavin Francis, published by Oxford University Press, (ISBN 9780192858177)

'Thomas Browne Selected Writings' by Dr Kevin Killeen, also published by Oxford University Press (ISBN 9780198797654).

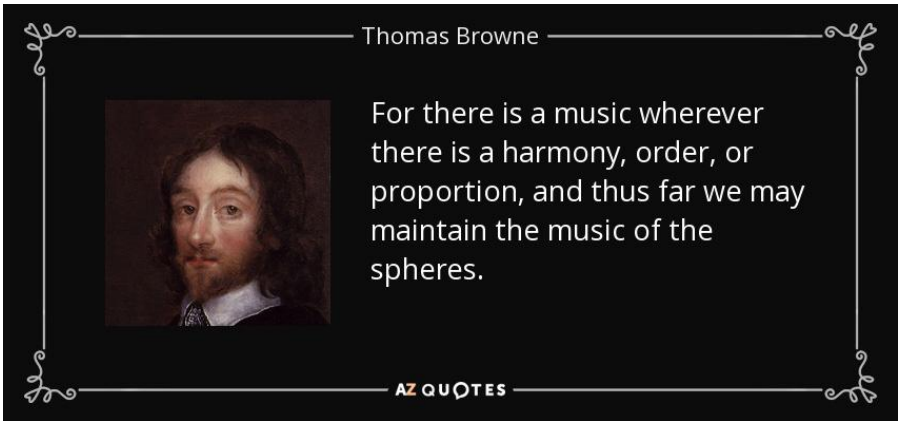
'The Adventures of Sir Thomas Browne in the 21st Century' written by Aylsham-based writer Hugh Aldersey Williams, published by Granta (ISBN 9781847089021) but currently out of print. You can get copies on Amazon and a Kindle version is available. There are copies in the Millennium Library too. This book is an excellent way to get started on understanding who Browne was and to get a feel for his major works and their topics.

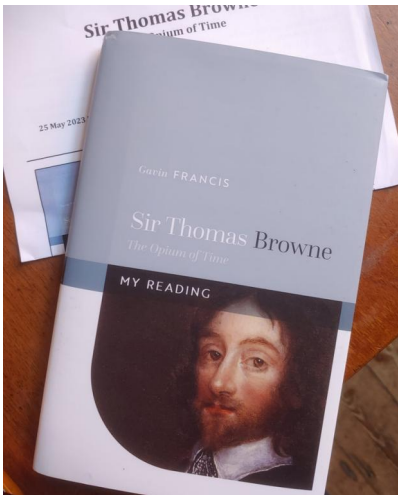
Hugh has also written a small book, *'The Debt of Our Reason'* commissioned by St Peter Mancroft, available in the church, price £8

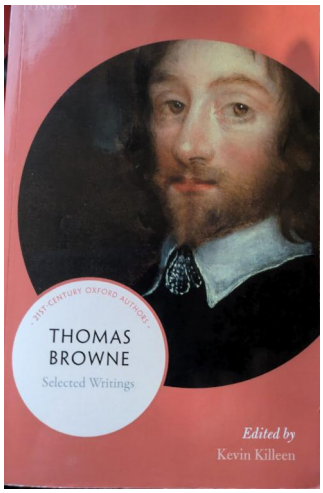
Publication of Volume One of the new edition of the Complete Works of Sir Thomas Browne

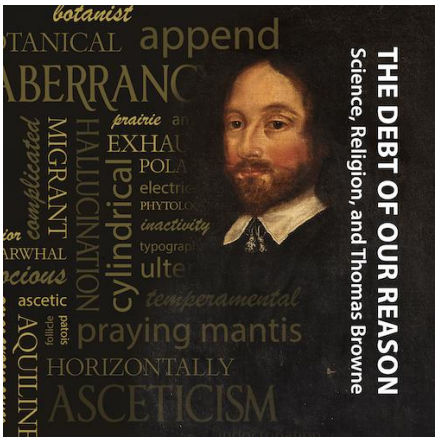
The ongoing project to edit a new *Complete Works of Thomas Browne* has reached a significant landmark with the publication of Volume One *Religio Medici in three distinct versions,* edited by Reid Barbour and Brooke Conti. Chief editor of the project **Professor Claire Preston** took early retirement from her full-time role at Queen Mary University in 2020, to concentrate on her research, writing, editing and overseeing the new Browne edition.

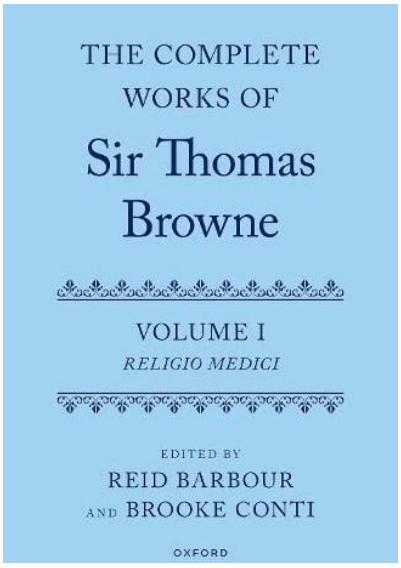
We are hoping to bring Claire and fellow editor Dr Kevin Killeen to Norwich next year to talk to us about the editing process and the new volume so please keep an eye out for details of when and where this will be. Volume One is pricy at just under £200 but the Norfolk & Norwich Millennium Library has purchased a copy for general reference.
For more information about the project follow this link
http://www.thomasbrowne.qmul.ac.uk

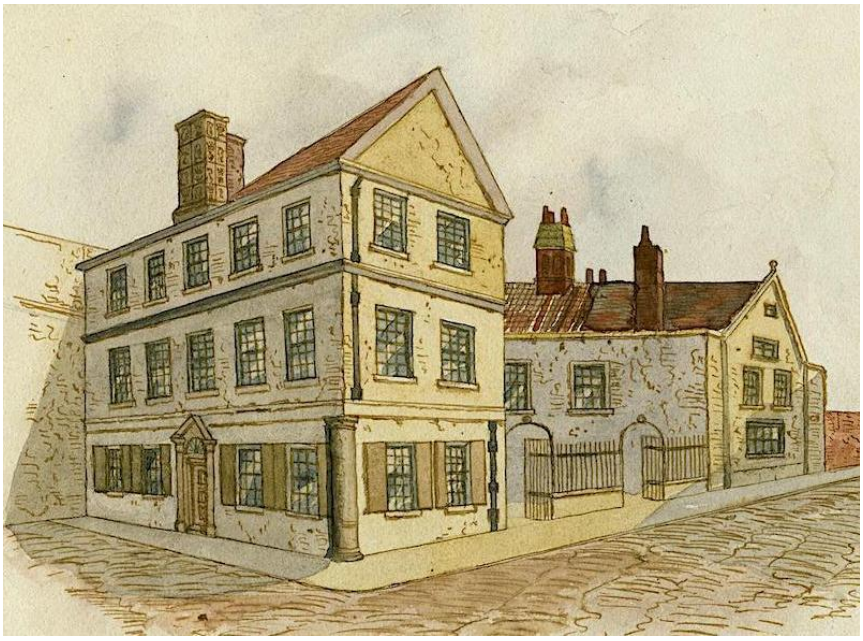












Browne's house which was on Gentleman's Walk and Brigg Street

Coleridge on Browne

He looked at his own Soul with a Telescope. What seemed all irregular, he saw and shewed to be beautiful Constellations: and he added to the Consciousness hidden

Faces of Browne

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

Portrait of Thomas Browne who had a tendency to blush!

Maybe the etching was derived from the portrait - they seem similar