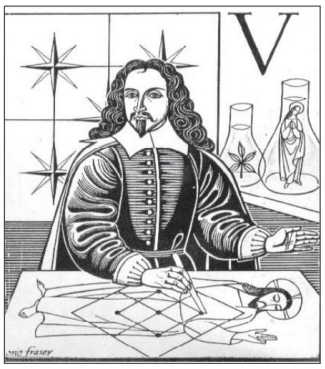


Celebrating

SIR THOMAS BROWNE DAY
19 OCTOBER EACH YEAR

www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk

Sir Thomas Browne Day Newsletter 2025

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.

This year's Thomas Browne Day event is an informal outdoor meetup - a birthday picnic if you like - on the Poirier sculpture artwork *Homage to Thomas Browne* in Eaton Park, Norwich from **11am on Sunday 19 October** 2025. Bring a flask, a brolly and a folding chair (or sit on the sculptures) and we will bring some (Thomas) brownies and quincunx cakes.

It's an opportunity to sit and chat about Browne, the state of the world, new ideas etc and we will be joined by Browne scholar Kevin Faulkner who will be on hand to answer questions about Browne and his work, stimulate discussion and recite some passages from Browne's work.

Come and join us in Eaton Park for a birthday picnic!

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 21 October 2025, 1pm** - free entry but booking essential via eventbrite **norfolkheritagecentre.eventbrite.co.uk** or by emailing 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.

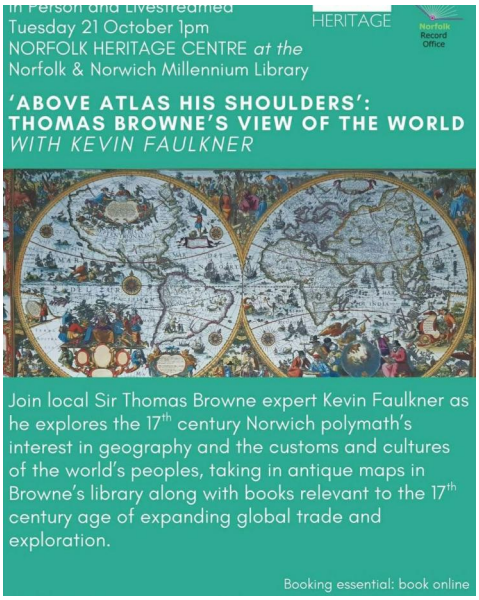
Kevin will be talking about Browne's interest in geography and the customs and cultures of the world's peoples, taking in antique maps in Browne's library along with books relevant to the 17th century age of expanding global trade and exploration.

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 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

*Acknowledging that some people dispute the birth date

The Poirier artwork in Eaton Park



Kevin's talk " 21 October 2025

A plaster facsimile of Browne's skull

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 and the jawbone digitally repaired.

Steve is specialising in scanning and reproducing historical artefacts. The version he made for us is scanned with a hand-held scanner as we couldn't remove the plaster original from the church and then printed in bone-coloured PLA (Poly-Lactic Acid, a kind of milk-based plastic) but at some point we would like to make a higher resolution copy which will be on display at the church, relieving pressure on the plaster version. You can see the skull and other artefacts in the church. You can find out more about Steve and his work at www.pixelpast.co.uk

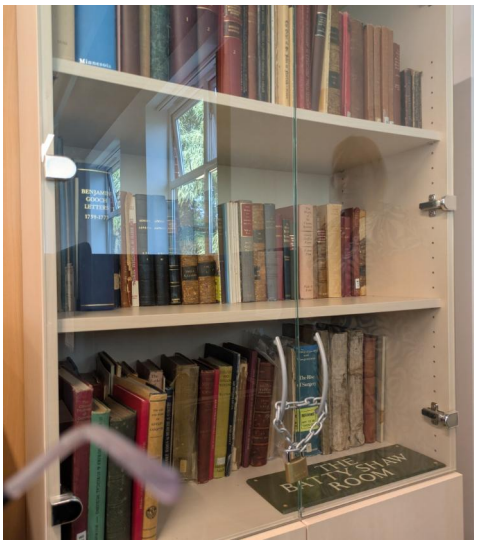
The Sir Thomas Browne Library

While researching the skulls, we also went to visit the Thomas Browne Library at the Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital where they have another of the plaster facsimile skulls made in the late 19th century. We met the librarians there who have an encyclopaedic knowledge of Browne's books in their collection. There used to be a much bigger dedicated library which is now much smaller since the library moved. Nevertheless, is is a great resource for researchers and people more generally interested in Browne.

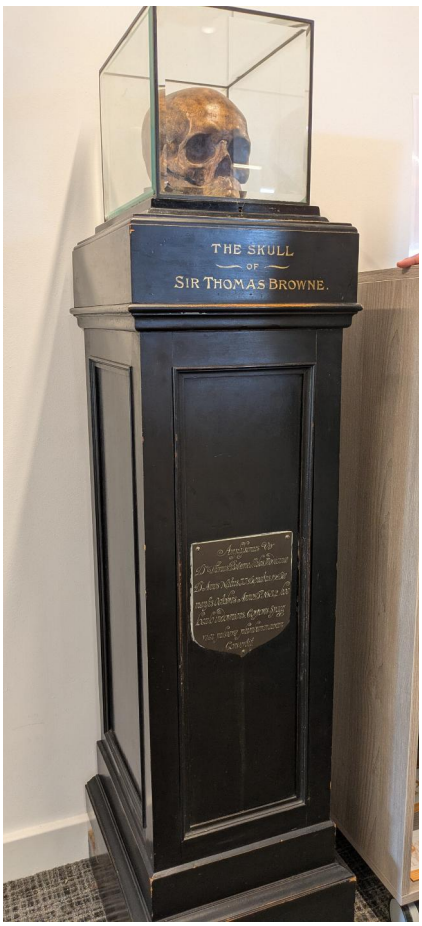
We also saw the second plaster skull protected by a cabinet, which was commissioned by the acknowledged father of modern medicine and Browne admirer Sir William Osler who paid for a cabinet to protect the skull and subsequently the facsimile, and a brass plaque commemorating Browne's life.

Many thanks to Kim Barker-Ottley, Library and Knowledge Services Manager and her colleagues for showing us around. Visiting the library is by appointment only, please email Kim at Kim.Barker-Ottley@nnuh.nhs.uk

Above top: Steve Kingsley working on the scan of the skull, repairing the broken jaw, prior to creating a 3D image of the skull which was later printed (below)



Above top: Signage above the door of the library building at NNUH and books in the library locked cabinet (below)



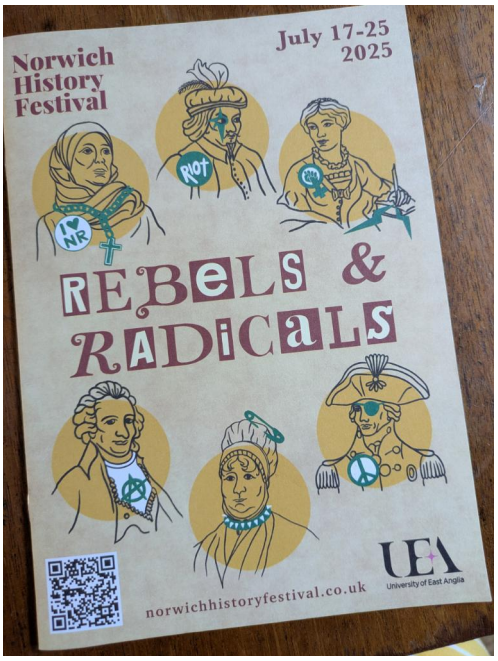
Above: The Osler cabinet contaning a plaster replica of Thomas Browne's skull. There is another skull in St Peter Mancroft Church

The casket was made in 1901 at the instigation of Sir William Osler to house Browne's skull in the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital museum. When the skull was reburied, the original was replaced by a cast. Sir William Osler, the father of modern medicine and an admirer of Browne paid for the protective case, now for the facsimile skull which stands just inside the door of the Sir Thomas Browne Library at NNUH

Scan the QR code for a link to the Norfolk Records Office list of references to Browne in Norfolk

https://norfolkrecordofficeblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/thomas-browne.pdf

Thomas Browne and Norwich History Festival



2024 saw the first year of a new Norwich History Festival, instigated by historian and arts organiser Stuart Hobday and a team of volunteers. Long overdue for Norwich, the History Festival is a chance to explore and celebrate the many stories, events and characters that have made Norwich what it is today. The Norwich History Festival aims to present history as a living topic relevant to life in the city with the rich historical tapestry of Norwich at its core. They aim to engage the community through events, talks, and exhibitions that highlight the city's remarkable past and we were very happy that Thomas Browne was included.

If you missed it this year (as many people did) keep an eye out for the programme because it was quickly booked up and very popular with the people that did know, rather like Heritage Open Days.

In July a double-act team of Marion Catlin and Kevin Faulkner delivered a well-attended talk as part of the Festival, at St Peter Mancroft Church, describing the life of Browne in Norwich, and why he is important to the city combined with Kevin's recitations of quotes and passages from Browne's writings. The slides from the talk are available from the Thomas Browne website www.sirthomasbrowne.org.uk.

The Festival was supported by UEA and the National Centre for Writing, plus a great team of helpers and it was a brilliant inaugural year. Bravo! Hopefully Thomas Browne will be back alongside the Norwich History Festival in July 2026.

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. In the next few weeks I am meeting 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. The have both settled in Norfolk independently and have been working together as the Kavolini Quartet and Chaos Collective. As Chaos Collective, they can be more experimental and work on projects of their own creative abilities.

For the Five Churches Festival in North Norfolk this year, they composed Glaven Rhapsody, a multi-media composition that included imagery and film as well as music and poetry. We have been talking about 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. Hopefully this would 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. We don't have any detail as yet as there are creative discussions to have. Ivan and Rachel are two composers/musicians that have been keen to take up this challenge but others based in Norfolk are also motivated to compose using Browne as an inspiration and starting point so maybe we will have more compositions in the future.

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

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

Sir Thomas Browne on Hay Hill

The new 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.

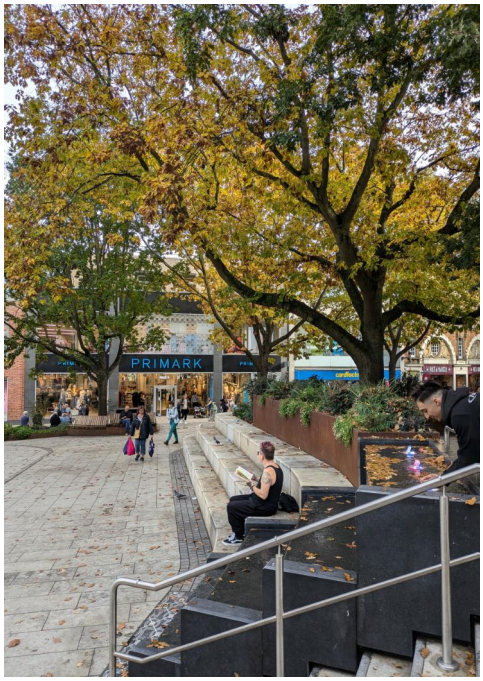
The *Homage to Sir Thomas Browne* artwork which was previously on Hay Hill has now moved to Eaton Park.

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*

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



New seating *Photo Marion Catlin*

The Century That Wrote Itself - a BBC series

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.

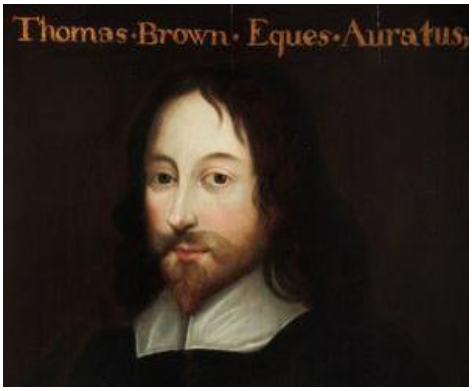
Presented by Adam Nicolson, who has an excellent way of explaining the series explores the 17th century's contradictory attitudes and responses to the changes that were taking place across the world at a time when science was becoming more relevant than philosophy, facts and observation more important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



Sir Thomas Browne Day

On Saturday 19 October and the following week, the Norfolk Heritage Centre on the 2nd floor of the Millennium Library will have original books by Thomas Browne that you can see. Please ask the staff if you want a closer look.

St Peter Mancroft Church has an organ concert dedicated to Browne at 1pm played by organist Ashley Grote.

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

Don't forget the talk in the Heritage Centre by Kevin Faulkner on Tuesday 21 October, 1pm and live-streamed. The live talk is sold out but you can get tickets for the livestream here

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. The Head Verger Chris Sanham 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

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).

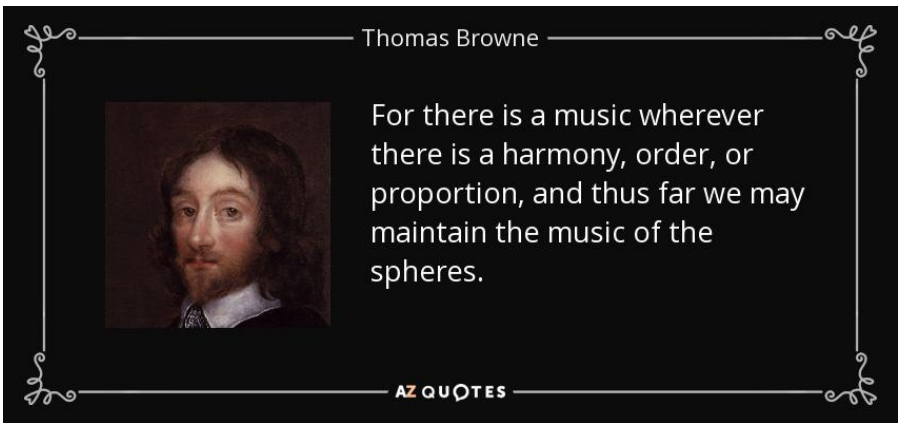
'The Adventures of Sir Thomas Browne in the 21st Century' written by Aylsham-based writer Hugh Aldersey Williams, published by Granta (ISBN 9781847089021) but currently out of print. You can get copies on Amazon and a Kindle version is available. There are copies in the Millennium Library too. This book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

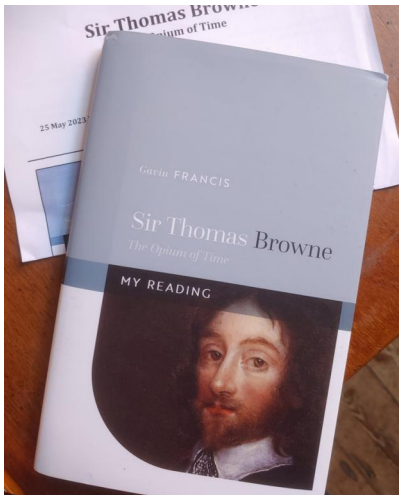
Hugh has also written a small book, *'The Debt of Our Reason'* commissioned by St Peter Mancroft, available in the church, price £8

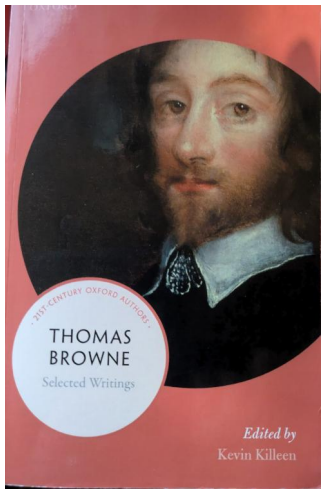
Publication of Volume One of the new edition of the Complete Works of Sir Thomas Browne

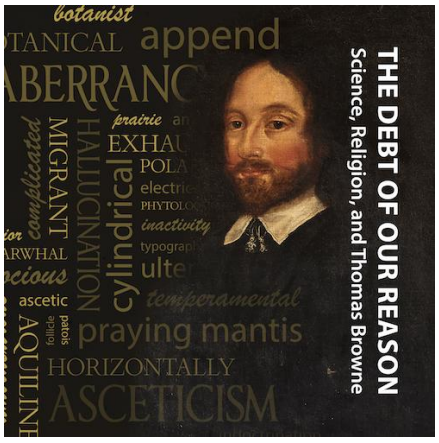
The ongoing project to edit a new *Complete Works of Thomas Browne* has reached a significant landmark with the publication of Volume One *Religio Medici in three distinct versions,* edited by Reid Barbour and Brooke Conti. Chief editor of the project **Professor Claire Preston** took early retirement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

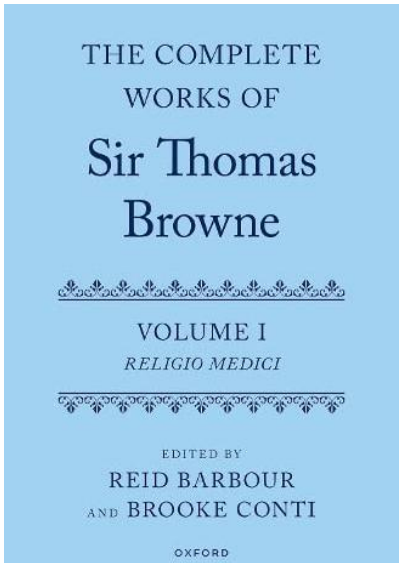
We are hoping to bring Claire and fellow editor Dr Kevin Killeen to Norwich next year to talk to us about the editing process and the new volume so please keep an eye out for details of when and where this will be. Volume One is pricy at just under £200 but the Norfolk & Norwich Millennium Library has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











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!

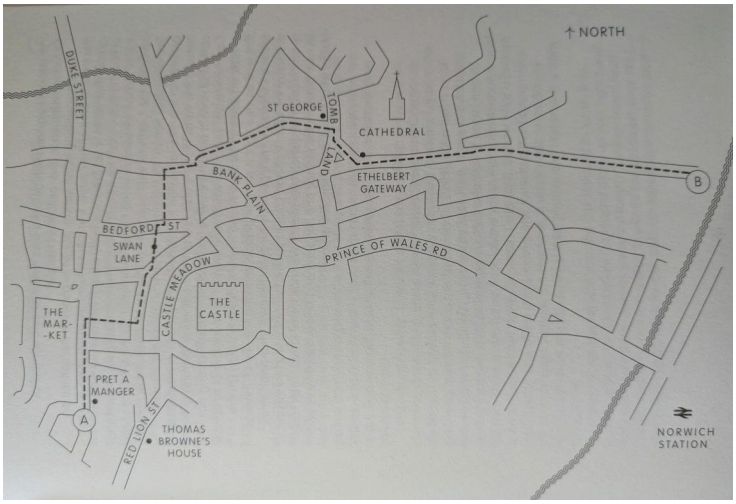
A Quincunx for Sir Thomas Browne - a film

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 Narional 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 2025 by Marion de Mello Catlin, founder of the Sir Thomas Browne Society 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 haven't followed the book bench trail, you can find out more about them here and see their location on the right.

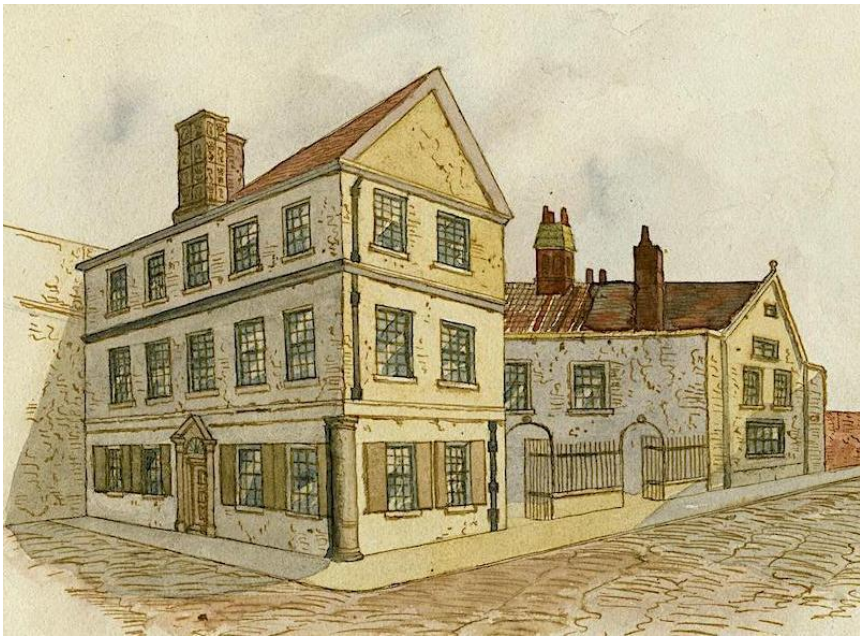
See https://www.visitnorwich.co.uk/book-benches/

Book stacks near St Giles' Church, Upper St Giles

The Book Bench Trail map

Norwich Book Festival 24-31 October

While we are on the subject of books, it is the second 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



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 worlds within worlds.

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