ELIZABETH BOWEN (1899–1973)



Elizabeth Bowen in the 1960s

A Life Shaped by Place, Family and Loss

Elizabeth Bowen (7 June 1899 – 22 February 1973) was one of the twentieth century's most distinguished Anglo-Irish writers. Best known for her novels and short stories, she was an acute observer of human relationships, social change and the emotional significance of houses and landscapes.

Although Elizabeth is often associated with Ireland, London and the literary circles of Bloomsbury, Hythe in Kent was also an important place in her life. She first lived in the area as a child, during a period of family upheaval and bereavement. Decades later, she returned to Hythe and spent her final years at Carbery, her home on Church Hill.

Her connection to the town includes the family tragedies associated with Clyne House, the death of her aunt Dr Constance Colley, her uncle Edward Pomeroy Colley's death aboard the Titanic, her mother's grave in Elizabeth's story illustrates how a town can become part of a writer's imagination and personal history. Although some of the buildings associated with her have disappeared, memorials, photographs and local records preserve important traces of her life.

Family roots and childhood

Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen was born in Dublin on 7 June 1899, the only child of Henry Charles Cole Bowen, a barrister, and Florence Isabella Bowen, née Colley. Both families belonged to the Anglo-Irish gentry.

Her father's family home was Bowen's Court, a substantial eighteenth-century house at Farahy in County Cork. Elizabeth spent childhood summers there, and the estate remained central to her sense of family identity and inheritance. The house later became the subject of her book Bowen's Court, published in 1942, in which she explored her family's history and the Anglo-Irish world in which she had grown up.

Elizabeth's childhood was disrupted by her father's mental illness. In 1907, when she was about seven, Florence took her to England on medical advice. This move separated Elizabeth from her father and her familiar Irish surroundings during a formative period.

The family eventually settled in Hythe, Kent. The move introduced Elizabeth to the landscape of the English coast, which would remain important to her memory and her writing.



Florence Isabella Bowen(nee) Colley, Elizabeth's mother

The family moves to Kent

After leaving Ireland, Florence and Elizabeth lived for a time in Lyminge and Seabrook before settling at Clyne House in North Road, Hythe.

For Elizabeth, the move meant more than a change of address. Her childhood was divided between two countries, and the separation from her father was accompanied by uncertainty about the future. Such experiences of displacement, separation and the loss of familiar surroundings would later find echoes in her fiction.

Elizabeth developed a remarkable sensitivity to the atmosphere of places. Houses, gardens, streets and landscapes in her writing often carry emotional meanings beyond their physical appearance. Her early experiences in Ireland and Kent helped shape this way of seeing the world.



Church Hill, Hythe

Clyne House and the fire of 1911



Elizabeth and her mother are believed to have been among the first tenants to occupy Clyne House after the fire in January 1911 (fig. 2).

According to the local historical account, the owner, Frederick Butler, had been attending a Town Council meeting when he was called away because a candle in the nursery had set the curtains alight. Mrs Butler rescued the children, but the roof and upper storey of the house were destroyed.

Although Elizabeth's stay at Clyne House was relatively brief, it was during this period that the family suffered a series of tragic losses in 1912. These events left a lasting mark on Elizabeth's childhood and strengthened Hythe's place in her family history.

Clyne House was still there when Elizabeth returned to Hythe later in life. It was eventually demolished and replaced by a modern apartment block.



The Bay View development, consisting of 10 luxury apartments on North Road in Hythe, was completed around October 2016 on the plot where Clyne House once stood.(picture by author)

The tragedies of 1912

The year 1912 brought three devastating losses to Elizabeth Bowen's life. These events unfolded while Elizabeth and her mother were living in the Hythe area, profoundly changing the course of her childhood.

Constance Colley

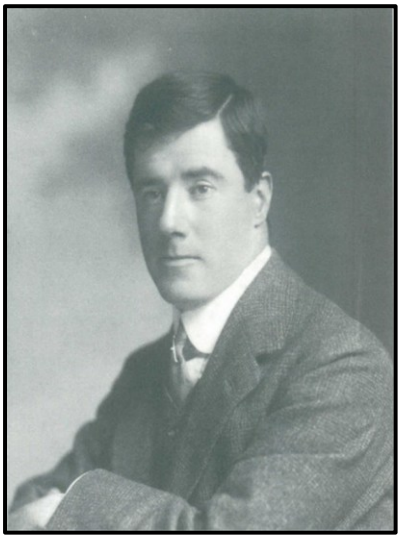
Florence's sister, Constance Colley, was a medical doctor. She suffered from tuberculosis and had received treatment, including time in Switzerland. Her health did not recover, and she returned to the Kent coast.

Constance died in Folkestone on 15 February 1912, aged 40, and was buried in Cheriton Road Cemetery. Her death was the first of three major family bereavements that year.



Dr Constance Colley's grave in Folkestone

Edward Pomeroy Colley and the Titanic



Florence and Constance's youngest brother was Edward Pomeroy Colley, born on 15 April 1875. He worked in Vancouver during the Klondike Gold Rush and developed business interests in mining brokerage. His work took him between Canada and Ireland.

Edward visited Clyne House on 6 April 1912. After his stay in Hythe, he travelled via London to Southampton, where he boarded the **RMS Titanic** as a first-class passenger.

The ship struck an iceberg and sank in the North Atlantic on 15 April 1912. Edward died on his thirty-seventh birthday. His body was never recovered.

Edward is commemorated by a brass memorial plaque inside St Leonard's Church in Hythe. Elizabeth also arranged for a memorial plaque to be erected in his memory at the church in Harpenden, where she had spent part of her adolescence.

The inscription on the Hythe plaque reads:

In dear memory of Edward Pomeroy Colley

*Born 15 April 1875, Entered into Eternal Life 15 April 1912 through the sinking of the Steamship "**Titanic**"*

Whoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it.



Edward Pomeroy Colley's memorial plaque inside St Leonard's Church

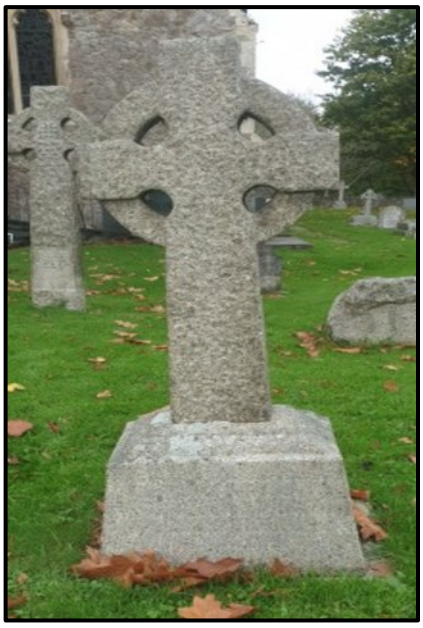
The plaque links Hythe, the Colley family, and the sinking of the Titanic.

Florence Isabella Bowen

Only months after the deaths of Constance and Edward, Elizabeth suffered a further devastating loss with the death of her mother.

Florence had been diagnosed with cancer, and Henry Bowen travelled from Ireland to be with his wife at Clyne House. Florence died there on 23 September 1912, aged 48, and was buried in Saltwood churchyard.

Elizabeth was just thirteen years old. Her mother's death brought to an end the period during which they had lived together in Hythe, leaving Elizabeth to rely on other members of her family for support.



Florence Bowen's grave in the churchyard of St Peter and St Paul, Saltwood. The gravestone is identical to that of her sister.

Elizabeth leaves Hythe

After her mother's death, Elizabeth went to live with her aunt Laura Colley in Harpenden, Hertfordshire. Laura was housekeeper to her brother, the Reverend Wingfield Colley, curate in charge of St John's Church.

Elizabeth later described the arrangements made for her care as a "committee of aunts". Her childhood in Hythe had ended abruptly, following a period of illness, separation and bereavement.

The family's circumstances are also recorded in a statutory notice published after Florence's death. The notice appeared in the Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate, and Cheriton Herald on 23 November 1912. It identifies Clyne House as Florence's residence at the time of her death and records the formal arrangements for handling her estate. It also names Henry Bowen and Laura Colley as executors, linking the family's affairs in Ireland and England. *(fig1)*

Education and the beginning of a literary career

After leaving Hythe, Elizabeth continued her education in England. She attended Downe House, where her headmistress encouraged her writing. She later studied art before turning increasingly towards literature.

At the age of nineteen, she began writing poems and short stories. Her early submissions to magazines were not successful, but she persevered. Her first collection of short stories, Encounters, was published in 1923. It established her as a writer with a distinctive ability to convey complicated emotional relationships through dialogue, gesture and atmosphere.

Elizabeth's writing drew on her experience of Ireland and England, as well as the social and political changes of the twentieth century. Her stories and novels often examine relationships and family life.

Marriage and literary friendships

In 1923, the year her first book of short stories, Encounters, was published, Elizabeth married Alan Cameron, an educational administrator. Their marriage lasted until Cameron's death in 1952. They had no children.

As she became more involved in London's literary world, Elizabeth met writers and artists including Edith Sitwell, Walter de la Mare and Aldous Huxley. Her friends and associates later included Virginia Woolf, Cyril Connolly, Isaiah Berlin, Rosamond Lehmann, Iris Murdoch, Anthony Powell and Muriel Spark.

Her association with Woolf and the Hogarth Press was particularly important to her early career. Elizabeth and her husband also became close friends of John Buchan and his wife, Lady Tweedsmuir, who lived near them in Oxford.

Elizabeth's friendships connected her with the artistic experimentation and literary debate that helped shape modern writing. She was remembered as a generous hostess who welcomed friends and writers, even when her own home was small.

The Second World War and Ireland

During the Second World War, Elizabeth lived in London through the Blitz and worked for the Ministry of Information, writing reports on political and social conditions in neutral Ireland. Her Anglo-Irish background gave her a valuable perspective on relations between Britain and Ireland. The wartime atmosphere also influenced her novel The Heat of the Day (1949), which explores the uncertainty and divided loyalties of life during the Blitz.

Major works and literary achievement

Elizabeth published novels, short stories, memoirs, essays and criticism. Her novels include:

The Hotel (1927)

The Last September (1929)

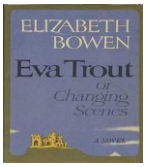
The House in Paris (1935)

The Death of the Heart (1938)

The Heat of the Day (1949)

The Little Girls (1964)

Eva Trout; or Changing Scenes (1969)



Her memoirs include Seven Winters (1942), about her early life in Dublin, and Bowen's Court (1942), about her family and their home in County Cork.

She was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1948 in recognition of her services to literature.

Bowen's Court: inheritance and loss

When her father died in 1930, Elizabeth inherited Bowen's Court in County Cork. She wrote about the house and her family history in Bowen's Court, published in 1942. After her husband, Alan Cameron, died in 1952, she found it increasingly difficult to maintain the estate. She sold the house in 1959, and it was demolished by its new owner in 1960.

Returning to Hythe: Carbery

In 1965, Elizabeth returned to Hythe, a town she had known as a child. She bought a small brick house on Church Hill for £4,700. The property had originally been called Wayside, but she renamed it Carbery, after her mother's family connection in Ireland.

Carbery stood opposite St Leonard's Church and close to the site of Clyne House, where Elizabeth and her mother had lived during her childhood.



Carbery, Church Hill, Hythe: the house, its commemorative plaque and a view of St Leonard's Church from Carbery

A generous hostess: the White Hart Hotel

Carbery was a small house and not suitable for entertaining large numbers of visitors. Elizabeth therefore arranged accommodation for her guests at the White Hart Hotel in Hythe High Street.

The White Hart, which dates from 1395 (Hythe Celebrities, Hythe Civic Society), provided a place for her visitors to stay while they came to see her at Carbery. Victoria Glendinning's biography records that rooms were paid for in advance and that she even left coins for the meters.

This arrangement reflects her generosity and her continuing friendships with writers and people from the wider literary world.



The White Hart Hotel or Hythe High Street

Death and legacy

Elizabeth was a heavy smoker for much of her life. In late 1972, after spending Christmas in Ireland with friends, she became unwell after returning to England. She was diagnosed with lung cancer and died at University College Hospital in London on 22 February 1973, aged 73.



She is buried alongside her husband, Alan Cameron, in the churchyard of St Colman's Church in Farahy, County Cork, Ireland, located right next to the gates of her former ancestral home, Bowen's Court.

Conclusion:

Elizabeth Bowen had important family connections with Hythe during her childhood and returned to live there in the later years of her life. The town was associated with important events in her family history, including the deaths of her mother, aunt Florence, and her uncle, Edward Colley.

Her return to Hythe in 1965, when she bought Carbery on Church Hill, renewed that connection. Today, the plaque at Carbery and the memorials in St Leonard's Church provide lasting reminders of the Bowen and Colley families' links with the town.

Hythe therefore has a place in both Elizabeth Bowen's personal history and the story of her life as a writer.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to:

- *Anne Petrie, for her research on Edward Pomeroy Colley and the Titanic memorial in Hythe (Writing Hythe History at https://hythehistoryblog.wordpress.com/*
- *Rita Weisz, for locating Florence Bowen's grave in Saltwood churchyard.*
- *Martin Easdown & Linda Sage on pictures of Clyne House. (Hythe Through Time -Amberley Publishing-2010)*

References

- *Bowen, Elizabeth. "By the Unapproachable Sea." In People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen, edited by Allan Hepburn.*
- *Glendinning, Victoria. Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer.*

Books:

- *Duncan Forbes, Hythe Haven (Shearwater Press, 1982)*
- *John Woodward, Hythe Celebrities (Hythe Civic Society, 2010)*

Websites

- *Heritage Hythe and Hythe Civic Society, for local historical information (https://www.hythecivicsociety.org/)*
- *https://www.hythecivicsociety.org/post/st-leonards-graveyard*
- *https://www.hythecivicsociety.org/hh-e-books*

Articles

Diana Hirst, How 'Kent's dramatisable coastline' plays a significant role in the novels of Elizabeth Bowen in Archaeologia Cantiana (Volume 144, Kent Archaeological Society, 2023).

Supplementary Note: Elizabeth Bowen and Hythe in her Writing



- **The House in Paris (1935):** Features Hythe, with the fictional Ram Hotel based on the Swan Hotel in the High Street.
- **The Death of the Heart (1938):** Hythe appears as fictional Seale-on-Sea, while Folkestone is Southstone.
- **The Heat of the Day (1949):** Includes references to Hythe and Kent's Jutish history.
- **Ivy Gripped the Steps (1945) and The Little Girls (1964):** Both draw on Elizabeth's memories of Folkestone and its seaside life.
- **Eva Trout (1969):** Features Broadstairs and North Foreland, extending her literary connections along the Kent coast.

- **By the Unapproachable Sea:** In *People, Places, Things* (2008), Elizabeth recalls Hythe and describes its hillside:

  "Its High Street runs along the base of a steep hill; all the way up the hill climb houses and gardens."

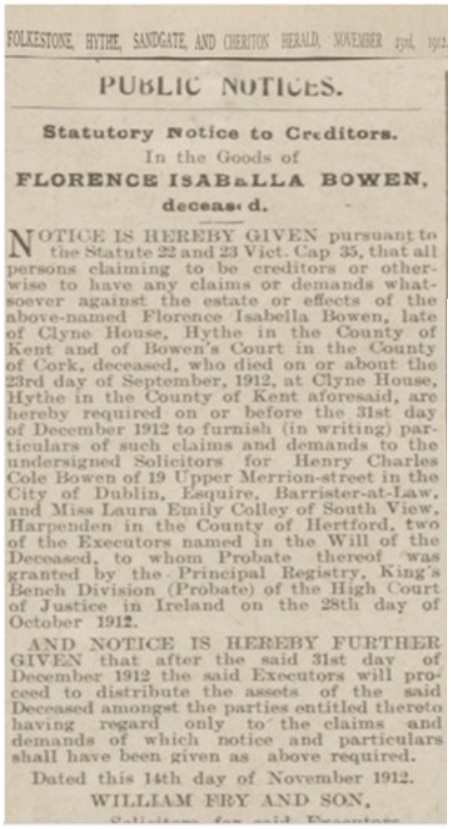
— Elizabeth Bowen, edited by Allan Hepburn, Edinburgh University Press, 2008.



- **The Cinque Ports (1952):** Elizabeth wrote the foreword to R. F. and F. W. Jessup's book on the historic Kent ports.

  Based on research published by the Kent Archaeological Society (KAS) and Elizabeth Bowen's writings.

The newspaper notice published after Florence Bowen's death.



FOLKESTONE, HYTHE, SANDGATE, AND CHERITON HERALD, NOVEMBER 23rd, 1912.

PUBLIC NOTICES.

Statutory Notice to Creditors.

In the Goods of

FLORENCE ISABELLA BOWEN,

deceased.

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN pursuant to the Statute 22 and 23 Vict. Cap 35, that all persons claiming to be creditors or otherwise to have any claims or demands whatsoever against the estate or effects of the above-named Florence Isabella Bowen, late of Clyne House, Hythe in the County of Kent and of Bowen's Court in the County of Cork, deceased, who died on or about the 23rd day of September, 1912, at Clyne House, Hythe in the County of Kent aforesaid, are hereby required on or before the 31st day of December 1912 to furnish (in writing) particulars of such claims and demands to the undersigned Solicitors for Henry Charles Cole Bowen of 19 Upper Merrion-street in the City of Dublin, Esquire, Barrister-at-Law, and Miss Laura Emily Colley of South View, Harpenden in the County of Hertford, two of the Executors named in the Will of the Deceased, to whom Probate thereof was granted by the Principal Registry, King's Bench Division (Probate) of the High Court of Justice in Ireland on the 28th day of October 1912.

AND NOTICE IS HEREBY FURTHER GIVEN that after the said 31st day of December 1912 the said Executors will proceed to distribute the assets of the said Deceased amongst the parties entitled thereto having regard only to the claims and demands of which notice and particulars shall have been given as above required.

Dated this 14th day of November 1912.

WILLIAM FRY AND SON,

Fig 1

Clyne House damage after the fire (Fig 2)



Compiled and researched by Iris Pearce
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