

WORTHIES
OF
WOTTON - UNDER - EDGE

BY

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Introduction

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Wotton-under-Edge in Gloucestershire has been described as the southernmost town in the Cotswolds. For most of its history, a modest prosperity was provided by the manufacture of woollen cloth, involving both home weavers and the cloth mills and dye-houses which were built along local streams. With this support the population, estimated at 1,200 in 1548, rose to a maximum of 5,482 at the census of 1831. The cloth industry then declined and Wotton's population fell to around 3,000 in the early twentieth century. More recently it rose again and was estimated to have reached 5,000 in 1979. Yet this small population produced a surprising number of notable personalities. Some of these served their fellow-citizens locally and were not known beyond their own county; others acted on a wider stage and gained national fame. The names of some are still familiar in the mouths of Wottonians; others have been almost forgotten by the modern inhabitants of the town. One of the objects of this book is to preserve the memory of some of these men and women who made the most notable mark in their time and locality, and to enable modern generations of Wottonians to draw inspiration from the achievement of those who have lived in the town before them.

Why was it that such a small population produced so many people of note? The biographer of Henry Oliver, who was born in a cottage in Wotton parish, says of him, "Reared amid such beauty he always had a great love for the countryside from which he never roamed and this may well have had much to do with the lovely disposition that remained with him through the whole of his long life." A similar thought on the connection between environment and character was expressed in a prospectus of Wotton Grammar School published about 1910: "It would be difficult to find a spot more suitable for boys and girls to spend their school days than this." Many authors have paid tribute to the natural charms of the Wotton neighbourhood. Leland described Wotton under King Henry VIII as "a pretty market town, well occupied with clothiers, having one fair long street, and it standeth cleaving towards the roots of an hill." Dr. Robert Hall (1764-1831), a noted Baptist preacher, when visiting the Rev. Rowland Hill at Wotton said to him, "Sir, it is the most paradisaical spot I was ever in." L. Sidney in his life of Rowland Hill describes the site of Wotton Tabernacle as "one of the most romantic situations that can be conceived." George Litt, when as Lord Mayor of Manchester he revisited his native Wotton in 1931, said in a speech at the British School that he thought Wotton-under-Edge "one of the most beautiful spots in the world." The only dissentient writer on the town seems to be Mrs. Midge Cooke, grand-daughter of the Rev.