



MAIN COURSE

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West Suffolk College



GOOD BOOKS

Author Francesca
Armour-Chelu's
debut novel success



HARD TALK

Sarah Howard
speaks up for
local business

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SUFFOLK

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THE LIFE
OF A WEST
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WIFE

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The prophet & poet

Think we're obsessed by the weather nowadays? We have nothing on 19th century Suffolk weather forecaster Orlando Whistlecraft. Sarah Doig tells his story. Photography: Tony Scheuregger

Orlando Whistlecraft's former home

SUFFOLK visitors and residents alike can be forgiven if they have never heard of Thwaite, pronounced by locals as Twaite after the Norse origin of the name. Many of us have driven through this small village, which now lies either side of the busy A140, without giving it a second glance. But in the 19th century, one ordinary, working-class man put Thwaite firmly on the weather map of Great Britain. The wonderfully named Orlando Whistlecraft was a household name in his main field of endeavour, much the same as his 20th century counterpart, Michael Fish.

Born in 1810 the son of a Suffolk farmer, Orlando Whistlecraft was a weak child. He had suffered from rheumatic fever, which made the muscles in his right limbs contract, leaving him partially physically disabled. Recognising in him a sharp intellect, Orlando's parents sent him to nearby schools and then to board at Mr Robert Clamp's Academy in Ipswich, where he later became pupil teacher. There Whistlecraft excelled at art – a hobby which he kept up throughout his life – and poetry, and regularly attended scientific lectures at the Ipswich Mechanics' Institute. But it was the Suffolk countryside and the climatic effects on all aspects of rural life



Thwaite village sign depicting sun and rainclouds.

which most interested him. His first teenage letter to a local newspaper, the Ipswich Journal, was in November 1827 about flowers then in bloom, as proof of a mild season. This was also the year in which Orlando Whistlecraft embarked on keeping a record of daily thermometer and barometer readings in Thwaite, which he maintained for 66 years. These weather diaries are now kept in the National Meteorological Archive, testament to their value to the history of Britain's climate.

Whistlecraft continued to write to local papers, mainly about the weather, and until 1854 he was a regular contributor on his observations of atmospheric phenomena to the Suffolk Chronicle, the Essex and Suffolk Times and the Ipswich Journal. In August 1835, he wrote of a storm in Suffolk.

“A furious tornado burst over a field, where it was vertical, levelling the stubble as if by a heavy roll in a long narrow course, and removing large clods of earth, and some pigs in its passage”. So, flying pigs were not unknown in the 19th century.

From his marriage in 1835, until his death, Orlando Whistlecraft lived in Mimosa Cottage, now The Old Post Office, in Thwaite, which lies set back from the main Ipswich Road.

When he first moved back to the village he ran a school for local children, but gave that up in 1843 to become a shopkeeper, initially with an elder brother, James. By this time, Orlando had already published one of his better known works, *The Climate of England*. In his notes for the year 1833, he writes under June:

“At 10pm on 25th, an awful thunderstorm came on, and lasted several hours... At Orford, many trees were torn to atoms by the lightning. A house burnt at Bungay, also at Rumburgh, and a man was killed therein. Great hail fell at Mellis and Palgrave, and destroyed the bean crop. Flat pieces of ice, 5 inches in circumference, fell so thick as to cover the fields there to a great depth.”

In 1850, Orlando Whistlecraft's *Rural Gleanings* appeared. As the book's title and subtitle – *Facts Worth Knowing*, as recorded from many years national observation in the Eastern Counties – suggest, his offerings extended wider than just meteorological comments. Alongside records of the coldest, wettest and warmest weather, he describes the birds one might expect to see and hear in each season. He prefaced his general observations for each month with a poem he wrote himself, this one heading the April entry:

*The welcome Cuckoo sounds his cheering note,
And ev'ry warbler strains its little throat;
The thoughtful bee resumes his sally out,
And now returns the swallow from his route.*

Whistlecraft also details trees and flowers. For April, he writes “The foliage of trees comes on nearly in the following order: - Horse Chestnut, larger Maple or Sycamore, Willow, Hornbeam, smaller Maple, Oak, Ash, Elm”. And the rather quirky and naïve nature of his writing comes through. Under the same month: “Here we have in the meadow an abundance of Oxlips and Cowslips, and who can find a greater delight than is now afforded to the troop of urchins, and to little girls, by the first cowslip plucking for the season”.

Orlando Whistlecraft's love for making up poems to accompany his meteorological observations were combined once again in the publication that transformed him into a local celebrity. The *Weather Almanack* – later spelled *Almanac* – was a yearly register first published between 1856, with predictions for 1857, and 1884, containing forecast for the coming year. In its first few years of publication, between 4,000 and 6,000 copies were sold, and at its peak in the early 1860s, the circulation was around 10,000. In each issue, Whistlecraft prefaced a brief, monthly forecast with a seasonal poem. He set out the daily times for the rising and setting of both the sun and moon. Over the years, he also offered little essays on subjects such as garden operations for the month, summer clothing and sleepwalking. And his

APRIL, 1859.

PREDICTIONS OF THE WEATHER FOR THE MONTH.

At the commencement of the month very unsettled weather and some showers.

Probably thunder near the 7th day.

Often showery from that time to the 19th day of the month.

On the 20th day more fair weather may be expected for a few days.

From the 24th the weather will be cloudy and showery for the most part to the end of the month.

N. B. If the N. E. wind prevail, the rain may be less, but the cold will then be more.

Extract from April from the *Weather Almanack* 1859

fascination for longevity resulted in regular columns recording East Anglia's oldest residents. In 1879 the record was held by Sarah Anne Good, of Woodbridge, at 103.

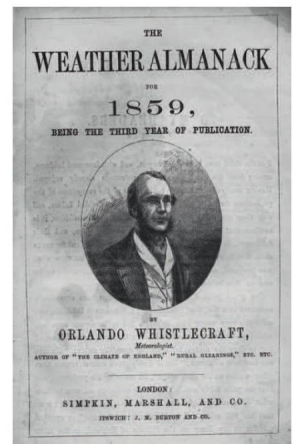
There were those who were sceptical of Whistlecraft's weather forecasts, just as we tut today when we fail to take an umbrella on a shopping trip because Carol Kirkwood has told us it will be a fine summer's day. In an interview published in the *East Anglian Daily Times* in September 1892, he answered such critics:

“Of course, I didn't propose to say exactly what would happen on certain dates. My forecasts related only to the general character of the weather each month... I took daily observations of wind, sunshine and temperature and in time I got to know that from certain signs in the sky and clouds, a certain kind of weather might be expected – just as a doctor would see that some diseases would follow particular symptoms”.

Orlando Whistlecraft died the following year and was buried on March 3, 1893 in the graveyard of St George's, Thwaite, just outside the east end of the church. A year later his friends erected the cast iron memorial cross which is still there today. It bears the simple inscription “Weather Prophet and Poet”. The church is sadly now decommissioned, but it is owned and maintained by a local charity.

Orlando Whistlecraft's fame lived on into the 20th century, at least until all those with living memory of him died too. The author MR James even made mention of him in his short ghost story, *The Rats*, set in Suffolk and written in 1929 “...so fine was the April of that year, which I have reason to believe was that which Orlando Whistlecraft chronicles in his weather record as the ‘Charming Year’”.

For residents of Thwaite, Whistlecraft will remain one of their best-loved sons, so much so that he is immortalised in the village sign, erected to mark the millennium, which depicts both the sun and rainclouds. ♦



The famous weather almanac



Orlando Whistlecraft's grave