Preface

The human race chooses its own icons. Which members will be put on a pedestal is decided by popular opinion alone. The status cannot be bought, nor decided upon by governing bodies.

James Dean made a handful of films, where others have made dozens, yet he remains the cult figure of films. Marilyn Monroe could never be considered a great actress, yet her name is still on everyone's lips many years after her death. Many artists from the rock and roll era are no longer with us, but as an influential icon, John Lennon still stands head and shoulders above the others. Oscar Wilde wrote only a few plays, one novel and some poetry, before being carted unceremoniously off to jail, and yet people still argue over a century later as to the colour of the grapes that Lord Alfred Douglas insisted Oscar buy him.

So what are the ingredients? A tragic death – a young death, vulnerability, rebelliousness, an enigmatic persona, an unfulfilled life, an undefinable charisma, and identification with a large enough group of people who regard their icon as a touchstone. Invariably and somewhat implausibly, the powerful feeling for these people fails to diminish with time, each generation keeping the flame alive and maintaining the spirit of the person they cherish.

Rupert Brooke had only one small book of poems published in his lifetime, and yet his image and everything he was meant to have stood for is as alive in the late 1990s as it was in the Edwardian and Georgian periods. In spite of suffering periods of bubble-bursting iconoclasm, the 'Young Apollo' of the First World War will not lie down.

Many poets have lived a full, rich, long life, with their output spanning forty, fifty, sixty years or more, yet Brooke's name shines more brightly and his image looms larger than most.

Following his death in 1915 at the age of twenty-seven on the way to Gallipoli, his Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Ian Hamilton, reflected on why Brooke seemed special:

> Is it because he was a hero? – There were thousands.
> Is it because he looked a hero? – There were a few.
> Is it because he had genius? – There were others.
> But Rupert Brooke held all three gifts of the gods in his hand…

So who was Rupert Brooke, and why does his likeness and poetry still affect millions a hundred years after his death? This was the quest I set myself when I decided that I would track down and experience at first hand the places that influenced this extraordinary young man to write his poetry and letters, and the areas that he loved. My travels took me to the banks of the Teign, Eden, Beaulieu, Ouse and Granta rivers, to Dartmoor, the depths of the

New Forest, the very tip of the Lizard, and the hills of Surrey. My wanderings also took in the picturesque villages of Penshurst, East Knoyle, Market Lavington and Bucklers Hard, and the seaside towns of Eastbourne, Hastings, Bournemouth, Sidmouth and Clevedon. I journeyed south to Rye on the East Sussex coast, north to Moffat in Scotland, east to Cley-next-to-the-Sea and west to Cornwall and the Welsh coast. The dozens of other places visited included Rugby, Brooke's birthplace and home, and Cambridge, where he attended King's College.

Everywhere, I met with interest, information and a fascination for a man that all but three had never met, and those only as young children. Many people were eager to know more about his life, and were surprised at his links with certain areas of the country.

Living in a media-conscious age, we have become used to people claiming relationships with the rich and famous who are no longer with us, although the phenomenon is clearly not new. I talked to many women who knew someone who had been engaged to, or had a serious affair with Brooke. When both parties are dead, it's foolish to speculate, so I've let them lie, until any details arise which might in future substantiate the claims.

For several days in the summer of 1994 I stayed in Brooke's old room at the Orchard, Grantchester and, without wishing to appear mawkish, or appeal to the cloyingly sentimental, one feels that the spirit of Brooke and his friends might just be here. 'Here', being the small corner of England that encompasses the Orchard, the Old Vicarage and the stretch of the Granta that runs past them.

In writing this book, I was fortunate enough to become acquainted with three people who had met Rupert Brooke, albeit they were very young at the time. Winifred Kinsman was Brooke's cousin, who recalled him chasing her around the garden as a little girl. Winifred was a delightful lady who told me many tales and opened the

Rupert Brooke Museum at Grantchester for us in 1999. Peter Ward was the son of Brooke's great friend Dudley Ward and was also an excellent host. It was Peter who brought down old boxes from the attic in which I found the trail of letters that led to the discovery that Brooke had fathered a child. Peter also gave me artefacts for the Brooke Museum. Patricia Aldington, the sister of Richard Aldington, met Brooke briefly as a young child when he visited the family at the Mermaid in Rye. In April 2015, the British Plaque Trust will be erecting a Blue Plaque on Orchard House, Grantchester, where Brooke lived, loved, wrote and entertained his friends.

Chapter 1

Laughter and the Love of Friends

Rupert Brooke's parents, William Parker Brooke and Ruth Mary Brooke (née Cotterill), first came to Rugby School in January 1880, two weeks after their wedding, when his father took up the post of tutor for the School House. Their home was 5 Hillmorton Road – a two-storeyed red-brick villa with twin gables and bay windows, where Mrs Brooke gave birth to their first son Richard, the year after they took up residence. Their second child, a girl, died in infancy, and Mrs Brooke gave birth to Rupert on 3 August 1887; his second Christian name, Chawner, was taken from a seventeenth-century parliamentarian ancestor. A third son, Alfred, was born in 1891. The following year a vacancy occurred at the school

for housemaster of School Field. Parker Brooke secured the position and with it a substantial new home – a large and late Victorian house that adjoined the school.

Rugby School was founded in the mid-sixteenth century by Lawrence Sheriffe, a member of the Livery of the Grocers' Company, who had been born early in the reign of Henry VIII. During a serious illness, Sheriffe made a will that included provision for a scheme to found a school at Rugby, beginning with a schoolhouse. Subsequently he added a codicil that was to make the fortune of Rugby School. A previous legacy of £100 was revoked and in its stead the school was bequeathed one-third of a 24-acre field then 'near London', now the Lamb's Conduit Street and Great Ormond Street area of the capital. The parcel of land yielded £8 a year in 1597 and £5,700 a year by 1900.

Rupert was tutored at home by a governess, Miss Tottenham, until the summer of 1897, when he began school at nearby Hillbrow as a day boy. There he befriended James Strachey, whose elder brother Lytton was to become an eminent writer and member of the Bloomsbury Group, and cousin of Duncan Grant, who was to become a well-known painter.

The school was only a hundred yards or so along the road from Rupert's home at School Field. His elder brother, Richard, saw him across what was then Watergate Road (now Barby Road), a main thoroughfare into Rugby from Coventry, among other places. From the top of the hill, the school looked out towards the village of Barby.

Hillbrow was built by William Butterfield, the Gothic Revival architect, in the 1860s as a private residence, before becoming a prep school. Later, during the 1930s, it was bought by Rugby School, and a sizeable portion of it was demolished, leaving the end of the house nearest the road as a separate building. A purpose-built boarding house was completed by 1941, next to the remaining portion of the original house, and the whole was named Kilbracken after Lord

Kilbracken, the chairman of the governors (who had been Prime Minister William Gladstone's private secretary). The boarding house that already bore his name, previously sited at 1 Hillmorton Road, moved lock, stock and barrel to the new position.

In 1893, the Brookes went to St Ives in Cornwall for their summer holidays, where they met up with the English critic Sir Leslie Stephen and his family, who had taken Talland House, high above the bay, every year since 1882. The younger children, including Richard, Rupert and the two Stephen girls – who would one day find fame and be better known by their married names, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell – played cricket together on a small pitch in the grounds of the house. The ball would invariably be covered with a layer of luminous paint, in order for play to continue as dusk fell. Virginia was a formidable bowler – better, apparently, than most boys of her age. In 1891,at the age of nine, Virginia had started her own domestic periodical, *Hyde Park Gate News*, at the family's London home, as a vehicle for her early writings. It may well have inspired Rupert, five years her junior, to start his own newspaper at Rugby School some while later. In 1894, the Stephens decided to quit Talland House following the building of a new hotel in its gardens, which obstructed the sea view. There were no more visits to Talland House for Rupert, and his family spent the following year's holiday at Brighton, where he bumped into his friend from prep school, James Strachey, and met his older brother Lytton for the first time.

That Christmas, Hillbrow staged a show comprising nine items. These included *The Peace Egg; A Christmas Mumming Play*, in which Rupert's schoolfriend W. H. G. Saunt, who would go on to Rugby with him, played the Fool; a scene from Shakespeare's *Richard III*; 'The Tyger', by William Blake; H. W. Longfellow's 'Hiawatha's Chickens'; and Act IV, Scene i from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Brooke played Portia, and another friend, Owen O'Malley,

played Shylock. O'Malley's nickname was 'Bug', while Brooke was called 'Oyster', because of his reticence in allowing his fellows to have access to his thoughts and dreams. A letter from 'Ye Oyster' to 'Ye Bug' in the early summer of 1901 is the earliest existing piece of correspondence from Brooke. In it he bemoans the fact that he has played only 'four games of cricket this century'.

In December 1900 Brooke won the first form prize, for which his reward was a copy of naturalist Charles Waterton's *Wanderings in South America*, which had been published three years earlier. The headmistress at Hillbrow in Brooke's day was Mrs Eden, who James Strachey remembered as 'an embittered martinet who intimidated her husband and the form assistant masters quite as much as the boys'. Her husband, the easy-going Tommy, was clearly more popular with the boys, although he was moved to comment on Rupert's attempt at Greek: 'He is inclined to throw caution to the wind.' James Strachey also recalled being sent back to the changing-room with Rupert to comb their hair properly, and being told, 'You look like a couple of girls!'

In September 1901, Michaelmas Term, Rupert was transferred to his father's house at Rugby School, School Field. The houses were known by the name of the housemaster – Collins's, Stallard's, Mitchell's, Brooke's, etc., with the exception of School House and Town House. Now Brooke showed his prowess for sport, which had begun to display itself during his time at Hillbrow. School records show him taking five wickets for Brooke's against School House on 6 and 7 June 1904, hitting a 3 not out and 18 with the bat; and later that month scoring 13 against Stallard's. Leading lights for Brooke's at cricket were J. E. Gordon and Perth-born twins David and William Burt-Marshall, both of whom would be wounded during the First World War, William dying of his wounds while in enemy hands. In *The Meteor*, the school magazine since 1867, an article called 'Characters of the XI 1906' described Rupert as:

'A slow bowler who at times kept a good length and puzzled the batsmen. A safe catch.'

The panoramic view from the drawing-room at School Field took in most of New Bigside, a splendid cricket pitch, which was, and still is, a cricket lover's dream setting. Cricketing heroes of the day were W. G. Grace, who was still playing first-class cricket, C. B. Fry, the great sporting all-rounder and former captain of the Rugby School Cricket XI, and Pelham 'Plum' Warner, of Middlesex and England. Doubtless rugby's cricketing schoolboys were delighted in the recent elevation of their county team, Warwickshire, to first-class status.

Rupert also played for the house XV at Rugby football, the game invented at Rugby School in 1823. Prior to that, soccer players were allowed to catch the ball and drop-kick it, but not to run with it in their hands. M. H. Bloxham, who entered the school in 1813, noted that during the second half of a match being played on Bigside in 1823, pupil William Webb Ellis 'for the first time disregarded this rule, and on catching the ball, instead of retiring backwards [to take his kick] rushed forwards with the ball in his hands, towards the opposite goal'. This move was adopted as part of the game between 1830 and 1840, legalised at Rugby School in the 1841–42 season, and eventually became adopted everywhere when the rules to Rugby football were drawn up in 1846. For many years after this a ball that was on the ground had to be played with the feet, and it was still admissible to pick up the ball only when it was bouncing. The origins of Rugby football are undoubtedly much earlier than 1823, a variation of it having been played as 'Harpastum' by the Romans during their occupation of Britain. Various match reports refer to Rupert's ability: 'before half-time both Brooke and Fargus crossed the line'; 'from an opening by the halves Brooke scored far out'. Again the Burt-Marshall twins and J. E. Gordon were key players.

As well as being skilled at cricket and rugby, Rupert was also a

competent athlete, excelling in the steeplechase, for which he won a silver cup. But he was never very robust, the slightest ailment laying him low; he often had to miss sporting fixtures and events through illness. He was so bad over Christmas 1904 that the family doctor recommended removing him to a warmer country for a period of recuperation. He was sent to stay with Dr and Mrs Gibbons, who were friends of the Brookes, at the Villa Molfino, Rapallo, near Genoa, close to the Ligunian Sea and 100 miles east along the coast from Monaco. Accompanied by his younger brother Alfred, he spent two months in the sunshine, building up his strength, and writing poems intended for the school magazine, *The Phoenix*, a literary supplement to *The Meteor*, which Rupert and another boy had been given permission to found and edit.

The Path of Dreams

Go, heart, and pluck beside the Path of Dreams,
Where moans the wind along the shadowy streams,
Sad Garlands wreathed of the red mournful Roses
And Lilies o' moonbeams.

Strange blossoms faint upon that odorous air,
Vision, and wistful Memory; and there
Love twofold with the purple bloom of Triumph
And the wan leaf of Despair.

Go, heart; go quickly; pluck and weave thereof
Dim garlands, scattering pallid dew above,
And far across the sighing tides of darkness
Lay them beside my Love.