1887 From Clee to heaven the beacon burns
Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
THE RECRUIT: Leave your home behind, lad
REVEILLE: Wake: the silver dusk returning
Oh see how thick the goldcup flowers
When the lad for longing sighs
When smoke stood up from Ludlow
‘Farewell to barn and stack and tree’
On moonlit heath and lonesome bank
MARCH: The sun at noon to higher air
On your midnight pallet lying
When I watch the living meet
When I was one-and-twenty
There pass the careless people
Look not in my eyes, for fear
It nods and curtseys and recovers
Twice a week the winter thorough
Oh, when I was in love with you
TO AN ATHLETE DYING YOUNG
Oh fair enough are sky and plain
BREDON HILL: In summertime on Bredon
The street sounds to the soldiers’ tread
The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair
Say, lad, have you things to do?
This time of year a twelvemonth past
Along the fields as we came by
‘Is my team ploughing’
THE WELSH MARCHES: High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam
THE LENT LILY: ‘Tis spring; come out to ramble
Others, I am not the first
On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble
From far, from eve and morning
If truth in hearts that perish
THE NEW MISTRESS
On the idle hill of summer
White in the moon the long road lies
As through the wild green hills of Wyre
The winds out of the west land blow
‘Tis time, I think by Wenlock town
Into my heart an air that kills
In my own shire, if I was sad
THE MERRY GUIDE: Once in the wind of morning
THE IMMORTAL PART: When I meet the morning beam
Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>If it chance your eye offend you</td>
<td>0:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Bring, in this timeless grave to throw</td>
<td>1:01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>THE CARPENTER’S SON: ‘Here the hangman stops his cart’</td>
<td>1:13</td>
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<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle</td>
<td>1:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly</td>
<td>0:27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Clunton and Clunbury, Clungunford and Clun</td>
<td>1:03</td>
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<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Loitering with a vacant eye</td>
<td>0:59</td>
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<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Far in a western brookland</td>
<td>0:41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>THE TRUE LOVER: The lad came to the door at night</td>
<td>1:29</td>
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<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>With rue my heart is laden</td>
<td>0:22</td>
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<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Westward on the high-hilled plains</td>
<td>0:39</td>
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<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>THE DAY OF BATTLE: ‘Far I hear the bugle blow’</td>
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<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>You smile upon your friend to-day</td>
<td>0:18</td>
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<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>When I came last to Ludlow</td>
<td>0:20</td>
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<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>THE ISLE OF PORTLAND: The star-filled seas are smooth to-night</td>
<td>0:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Now hollow fires burn out to black</td>
<td>0:20</td>
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<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>HUGHLEY STEEPLE: The vane on Hughley steeple</td>
<td>0:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>‘Terence, this is stupid stuff’</td>
<td>2:52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>I Hoed and trenched and weeded</td>
<td>0:43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total time: 64:03**
Alfred Edward Housman was not himself a Shropshire lad. He was born in Bromsgrove in neighbouring Worcestershire in 1859, relating in later life that ‘Shropshire was on our western horizon which made me feel romantic about it.’ A Shropshire Lad was in fact not written in a rural retreat at all, but many miles from the ‘blue-remembered hills’, in Highgate, London. When he could not find a publisher, Housman had the collection privately printed in 1895. Though not an immediate success, by 1898 the melancholic and nostalgic tone of the poems had struck a chord with the Victorian public, who were feeling that the 1890s had marked the end of a glorious era, and the beginning of an uncertain future. Themes of lost love, lost youth and early death suited the Victorians’ inclination for morbidity exactly. But the theme of A Shropshire Lad was to strike a chord with the next generation, so many of whose young men were to die on the battlefields of Flanders, was the militarism that recurs throughout the poems. Housman’s youngest brother Herbert had enlisted in 1889, and died in the Boer War in 1900. He was the model for the young men in Housman’s poems who become soldiers, recklessly seeking death and glory in war.

It was said that every ‘Tommy’ in World War I had a copy of A Shropshire Lad in his knapsack, and the sales figures of the poems go a long way to support that myth. The book averaged 13,500 sales a year during the Great War. Housman insisted that the price of his poems should be kept low to encourage soldiers to buy them; he never took a royalty for A Shropshire Lad.

Post World War I, A Shropshire
Lad became a set book for school examinations for several decades, its highly emotional themes appealing to adolescents. By 1940, 130,000 copies had been printed, and its position as a classic of English literature was assured.

A Shropshire Lad is a collection of 63 poems that were originally going to be published as The Poems of Terence Hearsay. Terence is the ‘lad’, and is our guide through the narrative that loosely links his verses. He talks of the untimely deaths of other young lads, thwarted friendships, unfaithful girls, male bonding, of losing one’s sense of self in London, and the uncertain glories of being a soldier. Above all, the poems deal with the exuberance of youth – its aspirations and disappointments, its naïve certainties and tragic mistakes. An adolescent obsession with death overshadows the verses, and the death-count, whether by suicide, hanging, murder, or on the battlefield, is high. It appeals to young and old, and the collection has never been out of print.

Housman wrote the poems in an easy folk style, with jaunty rhythms and simple direct language, peppered with colloquialism and local dialect. For example, Poem 9 refers to ‘a careless shepherd once would keep the flocks by moonlight there.’ ‘Keeping sheep by moonlight’ is Shropshire slang for a felon hanging in chains.

If the poems seem somehow familiar to us, it is because Housman draws on diverse and recognisable sources, such as Shakespeare (Poem 54) and Kipling (Poem 56), with a passing reference to Milton (Poem 62).

At times the verses recall the old English ballad tradition, and it is not surprising that so many of the verses have been set by composers, most notably Ralph Vaughan Williams and George Butterworth, himself a victim of World War I. Housman made it a principle never to refuse permission for his poems to be set to music. ‘I always give my consent to all composers in the hope of becoming immortal’, he once joked.

Housman was the eldest of the seven children of a country solicitor. When he was 12, his mother died. His sister Kate recalled: ‘The cruel loss of her seems to have caused in him an early resentment
against nature’s relentless ways of
destruction… Death that cuts short both
joys and sorrows became an obsession
with him. It was already there in boyhood.’
Despite being a natural scholar, winning a
scholarship to St John’s College, Oxford
in 1877, Housman failed miserably in his
exams there and left without a degree.
His brother Laurence put the failure down
to his intellectual arrogance, but he was
going through a difficult emotional time.
He had met and fallen in love with a fellow
student, Moses Jackson. A deep friendship
developed, but Jackson was heterosexual
and did not return Housman’s love. His
rejection and subsequent marriage had a
devastating effect on Housman.

Housman’s homosexuality is a hidden
theme throughout the collection. The
‘luckless lads’ and ‘lads like me’ that
Housman refers to in the final poem
may be hiding their sexuality as he did.
But, startlingly, in Poem 44, Housman’s
anger erupts in a tribute to a Woolwich
cadet driven to suicide by guilt about his
homosexuality and fear of the persecution
society would inflict on someone who did
not conform to its sexual code. 1895, the
year of A Shropshire Lad’s publication,
was also the year of Oscar Wilde’s
trial for homosexuality which, after his
imprisonment, left him a broken man. It
is understandable that Housman, in Poem
30, reveals that ‘fear contends with desire’
within him. Poem 44’s frank style is at
odds with the rest of the collection, but
obviously comes from deep in Housman’s
heart.

On leaving Oxford, Housman took
a job as a civil servant at Her Majesty’s
Patent Office. Continuing his classical
studies and publishing many erudite
essays, he won, in 1892, the Chair of Latin
at University College, London, despite not
having an honours degree. In 1911 he
became professor of Latin at Cambridge
and a Fellow of Trinity College, becoming
a virtual recluse there until his death in
1936. He was a brilliant classicist. There
are references in A Shropshire Lad to the
Greek myth of Narcissus in Poem 15, and
the god Hermes who is the Merry Guide
of Poem 42.

Some found Housman impossible; he
could be cold, cutting, and sarcastic. Of
Jowett’s edition of Plato he commented:
'The best translation of a Greek philosopher which has ever been executed by a person who understood neither philosophy nor Greek.' Others, however, remember him playing with the Master of Trinity’s grandchildren – and their toys. Housman carried the memory of Jackson with him to the end of his life, as his brother Laurence recalled: ‘In Alfred’s rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge, I asked him whose was the portrait which hung over the fireplace. In a strangely moved voice he answered, “That was my friend Jackson, the man who had more influence on my life than anyone else.”’

**Notes by David Timson**
Samuel West was widely praised for his performance as Leonard Bast in the Merchant Ivory film *Howard’s End*. Other film credits include *Carrington* and *Reunion*, and he has been seen on TV in *Persuasion* and *Heavy Weather*. Theatrical roles have included Valentine in *Arcadia* and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He also reads *The Great Poets – Keats, Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age, Great Speeches in History, Peter Pan* and Lord Windermere in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, for Naxos AudioBooks.

Credits

Produced by David Timson
Recorded at Motivation Sound Studios, London
Edited by Malcolm Blackmoor

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Cover picture: Alfred Edward Housman English scholar and poet at the age of 35; courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library
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In *A Shropshire Lad*, A.E. Housman recreates a nostalgic world of lost love, lost youth, thwarted friendships, unfaithful girls, male bonding, untimely death and the uncertain glories of being a soldier. The poems deal with the exuberance of youth – its aspirations and disappointments, its naïve certainties and tragic mistakes. Though written in 1895, it struck a chord with the generation of young men who fought in World War I. It was said that every ‘Tommy’ had a copy in his knapsack. It has never been out of print.

Samuel West was widely praised for his performance as Leonard Bast in the Merchant Ivory film *Howard’s End*. He has also read *Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age*, *Great Speeches in History*, *The Great Poets – John Keats* and *Peter Pan*, all for Naxos AudioBooks.

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