

**DISCOVERING MORE ARTISTIC THANET:  
THE ISLE'S ARTISTIC AND LITERARY BYWAYS FURTHER EXPLORED  
A local history book by Richard Lewis**

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Dennis Wheatley: To Margate A Best-Selling Son**

If Margate had a hall of fame, Dennis Wheatley, one of the biggest selling and highest earning fiction writers of the twentieth century, would surely figure prominently in it. Sent from London to a boarding school in Margate in 1905 at the age of eight, he spent his youngest and most formative years in the town. As a creative talent he was not alone in this. Before him, Margate's most famous son, J M W Turner, had been sent from London to Margate to go to school there at a similarly young age, and after him Margate's most currently famous artistic daughter, Tracy Emin, grew up there. For them, as for Dennis Wheatley, the town and its environment nurtured those young interests and gifts that would later bring such fame and success.

Wheatley proudly called himself the modern Dumas and, when he started writing thrillers, openly modelled his band of fictional heroes on the musketeers in Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, a story he first discovered at school in Margate and which always inspired him. His love of thrilling adventure stories started here.

Wheatley wanted to be a writer from the earliest age, but following in his father's footsteps in the wine and catering business came first and he had to make his way in the world of trade and commerce. It was only after a restaurant supply company he had started in the late 1920s collapsed, a consequence of the Depression, that he started writing seriously, hoping to make some money to get out of debt. During his first marriage to Nancy Robinson he had turned his hand in a dilettante kind of way to writing a novel, plays and short stories. Now, in financial straits, and remarried to the well-connected Joan Pelham Burn, he wrote his first published novel, *The Forbidden Territory*.

Wheatley used his new wife's connections and all his commercial marketing and networking skills to get his book circulated and sold. This was the start of his financial salvation, and he never looked back. He became 'Public Thriller Writer No. 1' in the 1930s, 'Prince of Thriller Writers' in the 1940s and the main purveyor and populariser of Black Magic stories in the 1960s and 1970s. Together with Edgar Wallace and Agatha Christie he was part of a triumvirate that dominated much of the century's popular fiction, with books including spy, crime and Satanist-themed thrillers, historical romances and even board games. One of his action-man heroes, the tough-but-suave, snobbish, amoral Gregory Sallust, became the clear model for Ian Fleming's later and even more famous character, James Bond. He sold some fifty million books worldwide in his lifetime, making him one of the wealthiest authors of his day.

How, then, was the seed for such story-telling success sown at Margate, and why was it that London-boy Wheatley was sent to school in Margate in the first place? Surprisingly, in view of the tough super heroes he would later create, Wheatley was a slight, delicate child whose health gave his parents cause for concern. The family doctor recommended that he should be sent to a boarding school where would benefit from the sea air. Margate was chosen, and the school agreed on was Skelsmeagh House School, where his Uncle Johnny and cousin Laurie had gone before him. A further reason for choosing Margate was that his paternal grandparents had retired to Westgate and Wheatley could conveniently be parked with them during half-term and summer holidays.