

## CHILDREN'S HOSPICE SOUTH WEST AND STARBORN

As a member of a local professional group, I was invited in early 2007 to visit the newly developed Children's Hospice South West at Charlton Farm, Wraxall, near my home in North Somerset. I was struck by the use of the name 'Starborn' for the room in which the children are laid to rest and wrote to the Director of Care Ms Mandy Robbins: '... Henry Williamson wrote a book called *The Star-born* (1933) which begins with the loss of a child and I wondered whether your organisation had this in mind when naming this room – particularly since the ceiling of the room contains a star window ...' She replied with a letter from which I reproduce with permission the following passages:

You are absolutely correct in the conclusion you have come to, we did have Henry Williamson and 'The Star-born' in mind when we first named the special room at Little Bridge House [Fremington, near Barnstaple] in 1995. The name has become so integral to our service that we decided that the special room at Charlton Farm should share the same name. I am attaching a piece which I wrote to record the 'history' of this decision – before those of us who were involved in deciding on the name move on from the organisation and the story is lost!

Interestingly, we have never sourced a copy of 'The Star-born', although we have often spoken of the fact that we should try and find a copy for the hospice. I was, therefore, unaware that the book begins with the loss of a child and was fascinated to read this in your letter – it makes the choice of name even more appropriate. It has also made me even more determined to locate two copies of the book, one for Little Bridge House and one for Charlton Farm, so that we can keep the book in Starborn ...

Over the years we have increasingly used the image of a star in much of our bereavement care, we have star shaped lamps in Starborn at Little Bridge House, use star shaped candle holders, and you noted the 'star window' in Starborn at Charlton Farm. Many families seem to draw comfort from the imagery and symbolism of stars.'

Her 'history' reads:

### Starborn

When the new Care Team at Little Bridge House started in 1995, the 'special room' – where children would lie after death – had not been named. During their induction programme, the Care Team spent a lot of time considering this – as it was clearly going to be a very important decision. It was one of the newly appointed teachers (Rosie Cornish) who came up with the name 'Starborn'.

Rosie was a keen fan of the author Henry Williamson's works. Henry Williamson spent a holiday in North Devon just before the outbreak of the First World War and became enthralled with the wild scenery. After the war he determined to become a writer and moved to North Devon in 1921, living firstly in Georgeham and subsequently in Shallowford, near South Molton. Henry Williamson is mainly known as the author of 'Tarka the Otter' (which won the Hawthornden Prize for Literature in 1928 and was filmed in 1977) but actually wrote a wide range of literary works encompassing many of his life's experiences. One of the books Henry Williamson wrote later in his writing career was called 'The Star-born'.



'Starborn' at Charlton Farm. Copyright Ted Wood

'The Star-born' was an addition to a trilogy [*sic*] that had already been written ('The Flax of Dream' novels). The story is set in the gorge of the River Lyd on Dartmoor, but has a surreal element as the spirit world of nature pervades our world, until we no longer know which is the real world.

It was generally agreed that Starborn would be the perfect name for the 'special room' at Little Bridge House because:

- Little Bridge House was sited in the heart of 'Tarka' country.
- It paid tribute to a well known West Country writer.
- The mythical content of 'The Star-born' (which brings the spiritual world together with the natural world in an integrated whole) offers a symbolism which many would be able to relate to.
- 'A star is born' is a phrase that has been used after the death of a child and many families look to the stars for comfort.
- Families have spoken of children being 'star borne' as in being carried towards the stars, heavenwards.

But most of all it was chosen because of the many symbolisms which could be drawn from the name. The death of a child is such a personal and private thing and it was felt to be important that everyone was able to make their own, unique interpretation of the name.

When Charlton Farm was opened in 2007, it was felt that that name Starborn had become an integral part of Children's Hospice South West and that the 'special room' at Charlton Farm should share the same name.

Ms Mandy Robbins, Director of Care, March 2007

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I am happy to say that Ms Robbins received a copy of *The Star-born* courtesy of Michael Coultas in November 2009. In her letter of thanks she writes: 'It is wonderful to have a copy at the hospice, the origin of the name of our special rooms is very much part of the history of Children's Hospice South West and our strong roots in the West Country. Having a copy of the book is a very concrete symbol of our connection with Henry Williamson.'

TED WOOD