

TO THE FISHPONDS AND BACK AGAIN

John Gillis

Up to a year ago I lived in Sidcup, and was ideally placed for those expeditions into the background of H.W. and his monumental work. A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight. What follows is a report I compiled after one such research expedition in the winter of 1971.

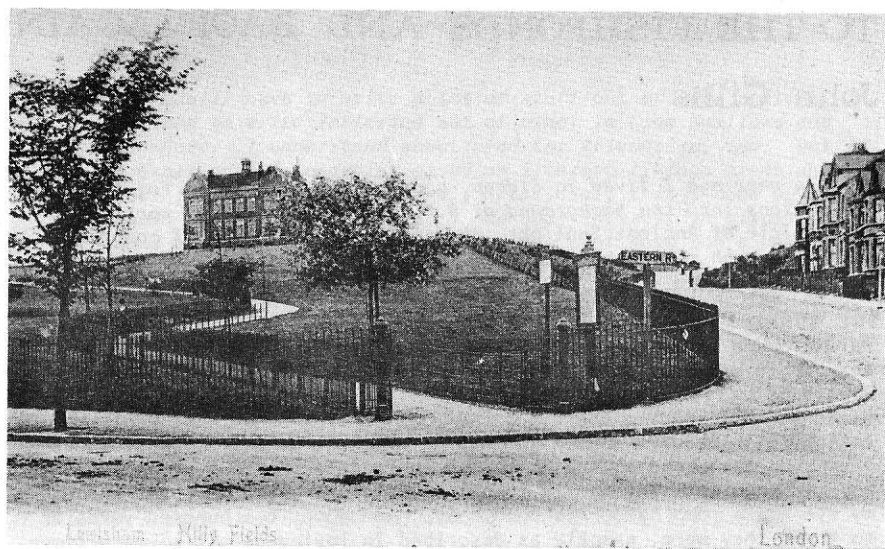
ONE SUNNY SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN JANUARY I decided to follow the well trodden path from Lewisham southwards through Bromley in an endeavour to discover something tangible from the pages of the *Chronicle*. Past Bromley, 'up the hill and through the town' I continued, until a signpost indicated to the right the road to Biggin Hill and Westerham. Taking this road, I went on another mile or so, across a junction, and then suddenly stood on the brakes, bringing the car to a squealing halt and my long-suffering family to the point of revolt. What had caught my eye was a road named Fishpond Road. And down it a hundred yards or so there they were, exactly as described in loving detail so many times in the novels. The Fishponds: two ponds, one higher than the other, the upper pond still with water-lilies on its surface. Whether fish still survive in the waters of the Fishponds I know not, but the week-end fishermen gathered round the lower end of the pond seemed to think so.

Around the ponds the exposed roots of pine trees still trip the unwary (see *The Golden Virgin*, p.408) and the gorse bushes thrive in the woods and open spaces of Keston and Leaves Green Common (Reynards Common?). There is an old windmill above the Fishponds, perhaps the very one referred to on p.313 of *The Golden Virgin*. I have been back there three or four times since stumbling on them, and I find the place most evocative. Every time I think of Richard Maddison cycling there for a secret swim in those days before the crowds came; of Phillip and his mother on a picnic before he went out to take part in the Battle of Loos; of Phillip with Desmond and Eugene; with Lily Cornford in the early summer of 1916. The place is still the same, I have no doubt, though it is possible that the roads are wider than they were when the Boy Scouts under Purley-Prout went there for summer camp around 1911.

The station where our dear characters would travel to for their picnics and expeditions, where they would watch while the engine was turned round on a wooden trestle was, presumably, Hayes. It is still the end of the line.

I never did find the Lake Woods or Knollyswood Park. Each time I went to the Fishponds I tried in a different direction, hoping to stumble on these wonderful secret lakes. But I never did, and returned to the Fishponds to enjoy again for a brief time the *camera obscura* of the mind, as Richard Maddison would have said.

Then we went on to Bleak Hill - well, not quite Bleak Hill, per-



haps, but the area around Crowborough in Sussex where Bleak Hill doubtless still exists. We were on our way to Brighton, cutting across from Kent via Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells and on the A26 to Crowborough. Jarvis Brook Station is a detour off the main road. It was from Jarvis Brook that Phillip left for London on his embarkation leave, and it was here that Richard and Hetty came to visit Phillip and took him to lunch at the Beacon Hotel. There are many bleak hills in this part of Ashdown Forest, and perhaps the army camp situated in the area is a descendant of the original tents of the Territorials of 1914.

Brighton also has its memories for HW devotees. Hetty convalescing in 1900; Phillip and Gerry with Uncles Charley and Hugh; and the meeting with Lord Castleton. And in 1971 the electric railway still ran between the Aquarium and Black Rock.

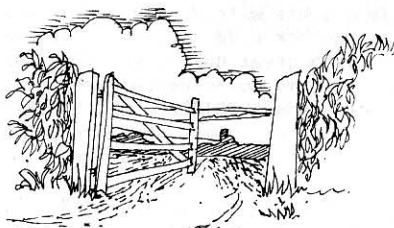
But let us return swiftly to Ladywell, and to the centre of activity in the earlier novels of the *Chronicle*. To No. 11 Hillside Road - actually 21 Eastern Road, Brockley, London SE4. The occupants of this most important of historic sites in 1971 were a Mr and Mrs Burbidge. Jim Burbidge is a postman, his wife Marthe comes from Belgium, and they had heard that a famous author used to live in the house; and it was my pleasure to tell them, with great gusto, who the 'famous author' was. There is rather a strange name coincidence here, by the way. Note the unusual spelling of their name BURBIDGE - not BURBRIDGE, as is more common. In the 1910 list of residents of Eastern Road we find, at No. 3, a Valentine Burbidge! But no known relation, Jim said.

I was in Eastern Road one day, gazing at No. 21, and at No. 24 with its distinctive turret where Helena Rolls used to live. (Alas, Turret House has since been demolished.) A lady came out of No. 21 and, moving quickly to starboard, I politely raised my hat and asked if I might have a peep inside such an historic house. Marthe Burbidge, for she it was, explained that her husband was sleeping, having just come off shift work. So I had to be content with a look inside the front door. There it all was, just as Henry had described it in his books. And there was the tessellated pavement leading from the front door to the gate, there the low wall overlooking the Bigges' entry-way where Phillip had sat lost and distraught when he returned from Ypres in early 1915. There is still a greenhouse in the Bigges' garden - surely not the one at which Phillip took pot-shots? And from ground-level it seemed that over the rear fence is still the Backfield, until one goes upstairs and sees that houses now cover this area.

On my second visit I went upstairs and was shown around (there is a sub-tenant on the ground floor so I could not prowl around there as well). Here, I thought, would be the master bedroom, here the room in which Richard had kept his case of butterflies, there the girls' bedroom and there, surely, Phillip's room. In the ceiling of the upstairs bathroom is the trap-door through which Phillip would crawl and, crossing the beams, appear - usually unexpectedly - in Grandpa Turney's house. It was all very exciting actually to be here in the house I knew so well vicariously. Mrs Burbidge mentioned casually to me that an electrician who had recently been doing some work in the cellar had

remarked that there was a violin down there. At this I pricked up my ears, recalling that Richard had resignedly left his beloved cello in the cellar eighty years ago. I told myself it could not still be down there, but I prevailed on the occupants to let me look. Until I went to it under the carpet in the downstairs bathroom they were not even aware that there was a trap-door! I assumed the electrician had used another entry. Borrowing a torch, and quivering with excitement, I went into the cellar, only to meet disappointment. There were a few mildewed objects around, including a 1939 civilian gas-mask and some old books, a couple of pairs of boots and other bits and pieces of nondescript rubbish; but no sign of violin or cello, nor even the rotted remains of one. Yet the electrician would hardly have made a remark about a violin without some reason. I had to give up. Perhaps there was another part of the cellars of these two houses I had not yet seen? I vowed to return when I could decently do so.

But I never did.



The photographs reproduced on page 28 show Hillside Road then and now.

Top: 'Hillside Road' and 'The Hill' at the turn of the century. No.11 ('Lindenheim') can be clearly seen, and at top right of the picture the famous house with the tower, home of Phillip's goddess, Helena Rolls. The zig-zag path in the foreground leads up to the top of 'The Hill' past the solid bulk of the West Kent Grammar School on the right and the stunted 'Socialist Oak' on the left.

Bottom: 'Hillside Road' (Eastern Road) as it appears today. Notice how the trees have grown (their foliage hides the West Kent Grammar School). Gone are the iron railings taken for scrap during the last war. Felled too, the ancient 'Socialist Oak', victim of the erection of pre-fab houses at the foot of the hill. Helena Rolls' house was demolished some years ago, alas, but fortunately the facade of 'No.11' and its familiar neighbours remains much as it was in Henry's day.

Brian Fullagar

Photographs © 1981 Brian Fullagar & Joan Read