'LINDENHEIM'

John Glanfield

HAVE YOU TRIED to fathom the floorplan of 11 Hillside Road? Maybe you have jotted notes on such seeming trifles as the house and district, or the Maddison and Turney families and their genealogies?

It takes a very exceptional novelist to compel such interest. And yet of course we are responding to more than a novel. We soon sense, for it is not necessary to be told, that Henry Williamson's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* is the story of *his* heart, a personal testament embodying much the same measures of wisdom and unwisdom as condition all mortal men. What distinguishes it for so many is his total honesty of purpose, and his self-awareness so far as this can be judged. These and the sheer literary art which contains them are compelling forces. Semi-autobiography iy may be, but much of the characterisation and description of that Edwardian household is surely too achingly evoked, too lacking on fictional contrivance, to be anything but a true recollection of the author's boyhood. The house and neighbourhood are real enough, and, save for teasing name changes, they are faithfully detailed.

This reminiscence of visits to the house follows a chance meeting with the late owners. No. 11 figures largely in the second and third books of the London trilogy of *The Dark Lantern*, *Donkey Boy* and *Young Phillip Maddison* which are perhaps HW's finest writing. I am not sure that such work can be stripped down like an engine on a bench to analyse construction and performance, without destroying some of its intrinsic magic. The trilogy has this quality, and though I am eager to separate fact from fiction, I cannot yet so distance myself as to contemplate a general technical dismemberment. Perhaps that is best left to the experts anyway! These visits resolved for me a major mystery, and answer a question raised earlier by John Gillis *(HWS Journal 2 - Ed.)* Before we go through the gate, let's look up and down this road in Brockley, South London.

Eastern Road's 150 yards or so climb straight up the south flank of the 40 acre Hilly Fields Park, ending in a gulley leading to the hilltop. Looking up from the lower end at its junction with Adelaide Avenue (Charlotte Road), the grass of the park borders the left-hand pavement of Eastern Road ('Hillside Road'). On the right the first four houses at the bottom have gone, replaced by a small block of flats, but Nos. 5-13 survive. No. 14 ('Turret House' of the unattainable Helena Rolls), the top house by the gulley, unfortunately burned down four years ago. It did indeed have a small turreted front bay. Ar some time all the houses were re-numbered by adding 10. Thus Lindenheim's No. 11 as 'chronicled' is now 21. Here are the survivors:

No. 5 "Not quite good enough to know."
No. 6 The 'Higher' Lows.
No. 7 The Todds. Including Mrs Muriel and children Gilbert and Flossie.
No. 8 'Sailor' Jenkins, special constable, and Mrs Jenkins, "a back-street woman".
No. 9 'Chatsworth'. Mr and Mrs Goat, she of the glass eye, the "boss-eyed fool".
No. 10 'Montrose'. Josiah and Amelia Bigge and daughter Norah.
No. 11 'Lindenheim'. The Maddisons/Williamsons.
No. 12 'Wespaelar'. The Turneys/Levers.
No. 13 The Pyes. Lecherous Mr and deaf Mrs, and children.

Henry Williamson is confusing about the Todds, placing them at No. 7 in *Young Phillip Maddison* p. 79, but moving them to No. 6 on pp. 105 and 268, with the Lows at No. 7. His detailed descriptions of No.11 appear to be faultless. Semi-detached, its uphill half housed the Turneys. The sash-windows are now all-glass, the foundations have just been underpinned, but all else externally is as it was. The little balcony still bridges the bay windows of the two houses. The green wooden gate has gone, but behind a privet hedge the terra cotta tiled path still flanks the right side of the house to the 'front' door. This passage is still covered by the glass and iron canopy, while a low wall separates it from the Bigges' house a few feet away.

The upper half of Lindenheim's front door and an adjoining window are still a leaded and stained glass mosaic of blues, greens and reds. One half expects to see the initials of the wretched Basil Jones, aspirant to the Bloodhound Patrol, where he carved them on that window-sill in the summer of 1908 waiting for Phillip's return (*YPM*, p.144).

One remembers other damage and drama on this narrow threshold. A foggy late November night in 1897. Phillip was then 2½ years old; sister Mavis only six months. Housemaid Mona Monk's pregnancy had that day been noticed by Hetty Maddison. Mona's drunken father came to No. 11 and smashed the door's stained glass before kicking it open. Some minutes later he was to be flung back out in handcuffs. A few years ago a panel of this door's stained glass was in fact broken by a burglar. The owners, Jim and Marthe Burbidge, took great trouble to have the mosaic matched and replaced. They found a craftsman in Belgium.

Richard Maddison ultimately had two locks, three bolts and a chain on that door (*YPM* pp. 90 & 334). Its reflection of his equally encumbered spirit has, one feels, a direct parallel with HW's father, Leopold.

The accompanying drawings (which are not to scale) contain the answer to a mystery which has hitherto baffled me. The building comprising Nos. 11 and 12 is not the usual rectangular 'box' shape. Instead the two semis together form a 'U', joined only at their road frontage, their respective rear wings extending back in parallel. Hence each dwelling has great depth from front to back, and the 'U' shape explains those otherwise impossible references to facing windows between them. For example, 15 year old Phillip's Peeping Tom proclivities in observing

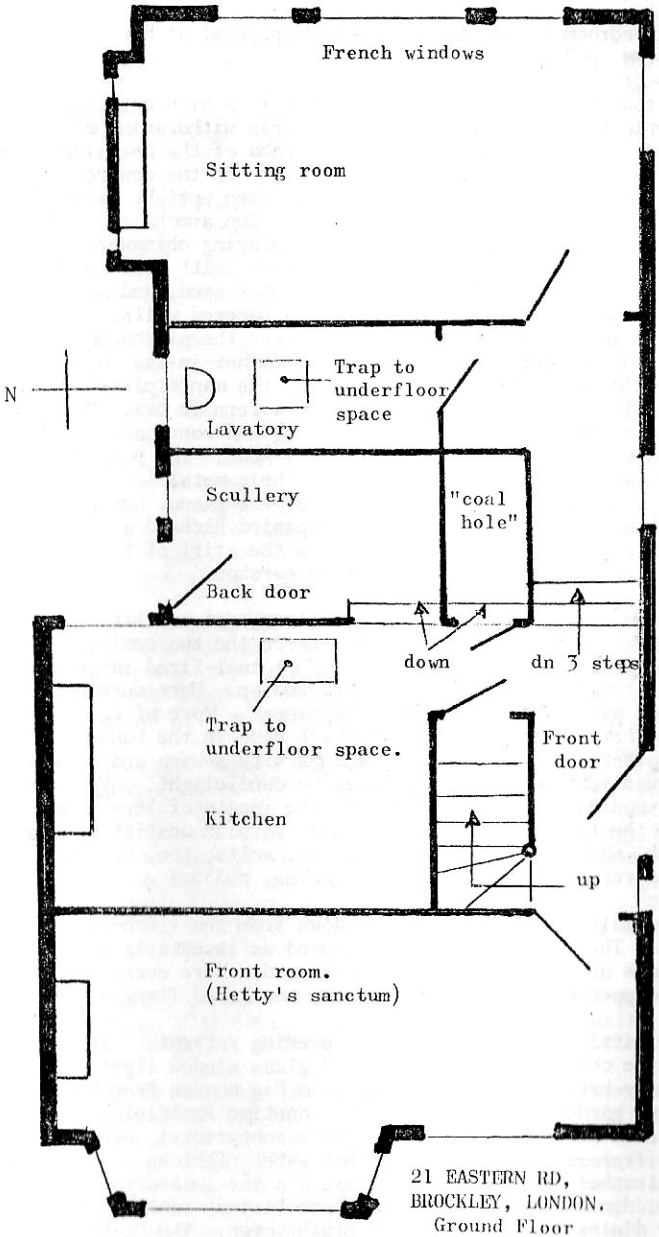
from his bedroom window the nubile cousin Petal at hers, next door at No. 12 (*YPM* p.280).

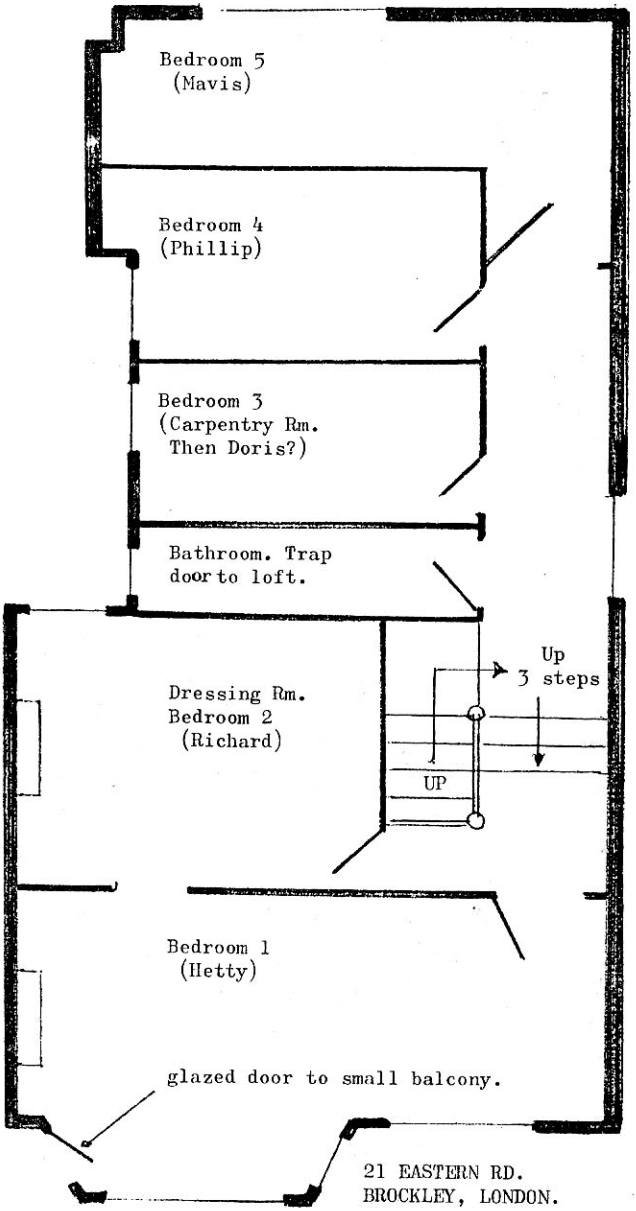
By today's standards the ground floor is high-ceilinged. The front room overlooking the park faces west. This withdrawing room was Hetty's 'sanctum'. It features little in the drama of the *Chronicle*, but its appearance can be accurately put together. In the centre a maplewood Windsor table. Round the walls half a dozen upright mahogany chairs with black leather seats, "seldom used". Two armchairs, a piano and a sideboard. A Chippendale side table displaying chinaware on lace doyleys, framed photos, a bowl of pot-pourri with rose leaves from Cross Aulton (Carshalton), and another of lavender seed, and souvenirs of Hetty's Canadian trip. The yellow-gold papered walls, varnished for durability in the custom of the time. Over the sideboard two steel engravings commemmorating Waterloo, from brother-in-law John, and hung there by Richard in Hetty's absence. On the mantelpiece Dresden china figures. In the window bay an aspidistra fern in brass bowl on a tall stand. The fern was acquired from a rag and bone man in exchange for Richard's boots, at Comfort (Comberford) Road. The polyphone's steel fingers twanged and hummed here once, their metallic melodies heard by a small enraptured boy. Hetty played the piano, her party piece "The Highland Schottische". She accompanied Richard as he sang his: "The Arab's Farewell to his Steed". In the still of that room those Edwardian echoes seem only just beyond earshot.

The adjoining kitchen is a cosy place, not overlit by its single sash window above the long passage between the two semis, which were then linked by an arch of jasmine.. The coal-fired range and adjoining gas stove have gone, their recess bricked up. Here were Hetty's lonely tears, and many of her moments of happiness. More of her being is concentrated here, perhaps, than anywhere else in the house. The little family gathered here on winter evenings with sewing and homework, or Mother read from Grimms' Fairy Tales by candlelight. Washing on the upright wooden frame. They awaited "the jingle of keys. One key, the yale, in the lock. Crack of front door varnish unsticking from paint on door jamb. Rub-rub of boot sole, heels, welts, toe, on mat...." Richard's return. (*A Test to Destruction*, p.355.)

The small scullery, two steps down from the kitchen, leads out to the yard. This back door is seldom used as it entails a long walk round three sides of the house to reach the road. Here every Monday Mrs Feeney lit the copper and did the wash. Here too lived Timmy Rat.

The sitting room was Richard's evening retreat. It is probably very little changed. A small stained glass window lights each side of the chimney breast. Lots of light from big wooden French windows. The diminutive garden sloping down to the onetime Backfield. Now houses, all houses. Recollections of Richard's sooty toast, evening chess, the Trident (*Express*?) newspaper, the hot water nightcaps. His green Russian leather 'Sportsman' armchair, and the locked rolltop desk with its forbidden cargo from Paris. A cane-bottom rocking chair. The big mahogany dining table beneath its plush cover. The "mahogany cupboard below the book-case with the Gothic glass front", home of the sherry





decanter and Richard's napkin. A horsehair sofa broken in one place. Green roll-blinds. Hetty mending socks pulled over a cowrie-shell, a present from brother Charley. Here also the gramophone cabinet and records bought from "the stores in Queen Victoria Street" (Army and Navy?) "for nearly £5". By the clock on the mantel, a matchbox containing gristle from Richard's dinner plates, for later teasing games with the faintly repellent big yellow neuter tomcat.

Now we come to the lavatory and John Gillis. I hope John will excuse this association, but readers will recall his most interesting account in *Journal No. 4* of his subterranean exploration via the trapdoor in that room. The underloor space is not a true cellar. Headroom is very limited, the cavity resulting from the raised groundfloor level on the sloping site. Here was stored Richard's annual case of Cooper's Oxford marmalade in china pots, a regular Christmas present from brother John. Here also the toboggan. Here above all the "violoncello", its immurement by Richard a self-wounding and symbolic abandonment of the things of happier days. "The 'cello, which had split its belly in the damp of years, standing against a brick support to the floor above."

John Gillis has described his understandable excitement on hearing that a violin had recently been seen down there, and we shared his dismay on finding nothing. He wondered if there may have been another cellar. There is indeed, beneath the kitchen. David Hoyle and I managed to see it, but it yielded nothing save old electrical switchgear and the like.

That lavatory is now a bathroom, the ground floor having been converted into a flat. Once it housed Richard's revered Starley Rover - "my machine", replaced eventually by the "new, magnificent, all-black, gold-lined Sunbeam with Little Oil Bath which he had admired and desired". Against the other wall stood Phillip's Murage's (Gamage's) second-hand Boys Imperial bought for 30/-. 68 gear, single speed, lever brakes. Latwr, jhis three-speed Swift, £4.19.6, black and gold. Also stored there were old books and tennis racquets.

One's emotions when inside this house run contrarily, like hounds following two different scents. The stronger of these is paradoxically the fiction of the *Chronicle*, rather than constant awareness that here lies a glimpse of Henry Williamson's boyhood. The curious thing is that because the Maddisons are so well documented and the Williamsons so little known, one finds that at each warming recognition of a room and recollection of 'Chronicled' events therein, effort is needed to remember factual implications behind them. On at least one question, however, reality presses. Which was HW's bedroom? Where did he dream his dreams?

Phillip occupied "the end bedroom but one" (*Donkey Boy* p.138), from the spring of 1900 when he would have just turned 5 years old. It remained his until between 1916 and 1919 when he moved into the end room overlooking the backfield. The fidelity with which HW wrote of all the still recognisable aspects of the house and neighbourhood persuade me that in this, too, he faithfully identified his old bedrooms.

The first, smaller, room is perhaps 12ft X 10ft, and darkish. The single sash window faces across to its equivalent in the Turneys' wing; some 9ft distant. A chimney in the corner once concealed starlings' skins nailed on boards to cure; also gunpowder! (*The Golden Virgin*, p. 386). The explosive was presumably hidden following Hetty's confiscation of the horse pistol, after Phillip had fired a champagne cork breaking Groat's window (*DB*, p. 387). As to furniture, there was a tall mahogany chest of drawers with a mirror on it. Also "Strand magazines, in their thin pale blue covers, which filled an entire drawer below the clothes curboard in his bedroom" (*DB*, p.333). Henry Williamson refers again to this hoard and its repository six volumes later in *A Test to Destruction*, p.247. Such detailed continuity at so great a remove is arguably beyond belief as fiction, but entirely credible as recalled fact, which surely it is with much else of the minutiae of the household and its characters. HW virtually confirms this when on pp.446-7 of *Test* Phillip confides his "hope one day to write a family trilogy of novels which will bite deeper than Galsworthy's"... "I recognise the importance of all details of past living...it is detail which makes books last, true detail". True detail: doesn't that say it all?

The large adjoining end bedroom's first occupants in that summer of of 1897, were Phillip and Minne, the old Nanny of Rookwood days. Poor Mona Monk succeeded her that autumn. Eventually his sister Mavis took the room, before Phillip occupied it by 1919. Here "by the window was a card-table, its green baize covering blotted and blotched with ink shaken from an old army wooden pen...he was secretly writing a novel" (*Test*, p.389). HW went on to describe the novel which clearly was, in truth, his own *The Beautiful Years*. It all began in this room.

Arguably the best room in the house is the front (main) bedroom with its fine outlook across the park. Its communicating door with the dressing room which leads off it was blocked up in 1972. There remains a stray shaft of the Ancient Sunlight of 16 March 1897, Richard's first day in his new home. It is the small and unquestionably original fireplace,and mantel decorated in the Adam style, into which he threw those floor sweepings so prudently gathered "lest the surface of the wooden boards be impressed and injured further". This was to become almost exclusively Hetty's room, Richard having by about 1907 become a near-permanent resident of the dressing room.

"'Come on now, off with your nightshirt.' The bath was a third full, a quivering oblong of pale green coldness." The reader can imagine an ensuing silence, the small boy with trembling lip, the echoing 'bloink' of a frigid droplet from the tap. "'Don't stand there shivering...don't be a namby-pamby!'" Later this was Phillip's reading and smoking room. His first penny packet of 5 Ogden Tabs was hidden on the wooden casing of the bath pipes behind the lavatory pan.

The trapdoor into the roof space is just inside the bathroom. How could Phillip have hauled himself up there? Perhaps by the stepping-stones of bath, door knob, top of door, trap door. His route across the joists to No. 12 is bricked up. Was there ever an access? The brick obstruction looks pretty ancient. I heard once that John Gillis may

actually have crossed the roof from bathroom to bathroom. Can you perhaps confirm, John? The shallow roof pitch gives little clearance in the loft; perhaps 4ft from joists to ridge board, it is adequate for storage. Adequate for a long, narrow japanned tin trunk. Is its dark lantern still with the family? There is an intriguing inventory of the bric-a-brac in this attic on page 254 of *Donkey Boy*.

There remains"the carpentry room", between the bathroom and Phillip's bedroom. "A wonderful place full of strange and exciting things" to 5 year old Phillip. Richard decided that this should initially serve as a workshop before ultimately becoming his den. Accordingly, his precious and partly ruined butterfly collection had to go into the attic where the "pile of yellow butterfly boxes" joined his other valued possessions. The workroom is much like Phillip's, with a single window, but lacking a fireplace. Not that fires upstairs were usual. When in 1916 Phillip put a match to his draft letter of adoration to Helena Rolls, in his bedroom grate, he reflected that "it must be the first time that anything had been burnt in it".

I cannot recall any reference to this room's later use as Richard's den, as planned; nor is daughter Doris's bedroom ever identified. I feel certain that if he had a second sister then she slept here, as Doris must have.

Outside again, access to the back garden is blocked by a garden door in the side passage "which was unlocked only on Tuesdays when the dustman came". The small neat rear garden slopes down from an over-large concrete terrace fronting the French window of the sitting room. The terrace occupies nearly half the garden. In Phillip's/HW's time this included a small elm at the back fence, and Hetty had planted a lilac and a sumach tree in the far left corner beside the boundary with No. 12. At the same time her father planted an apple tree on his side of the fence. Today there is indeed an old apple tree of thick girth and great height in just that position.

Many questions arise. Exactly when did the Williamsons fist occupy No. 11? The *Chronicle* relates that the Maddisons moved there in March 1897, immediately after its construction, when Phillip would have been 23 months old. However, the Society's Research Co-ordinator Dr David Foyle believes the house was not built before 1900, and possibly as late as 1902, when Henry was 6. His preliminary searches of local directories confirm that the Williamsons lived at 66 Braxfield Road, Brockley, before moving to 165 Ladywell Road where their name is recorded for 1898 and 1899. They do not appear in the Eastern Road list of residents until 1903. Indeed, an 1899 directory records only Nos. 1, 2 and 3 in occupation, thus clearly implying that 4-14 were empty, perhaps still unbuilt, in that year.

Further checking is necessary to corroborate these dates and to establish when No. 11 was built. Understandably, Henry decided for the sake of narrative continuity to ignore the interlude at Ladywell Road. (See also the excellent contribution by John Gillis in *Journal 2*.)

Certainly Henry Williamson's youth and early manhood were spent at No. 11. His first published book *The Beautiful Years* was written here, and probably also at No. 12 in his grandfather's house, June-November 1920. But the dominant mind-picture as one closes the front gate and rejoins the jet-age, is of a small, rather unhappy boy standing at a window, awaiting the release which was to lead him to enduring literary achievement, and the hearts of so many English men and women.