

HENRY WILLIAMSON'S BEDFORDSHIRE ROOTS

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HENRY WILLIAMSON? NOVELIST AND NATURE WRITER? was born in Bedfordshire on 1 December 1895 in a house "which four generations of his family had occupied". So states the *Everyman's Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Another work of reference goes even further, saying he was born in Bedfordshire "in a house which had been his family's home for more than four hundred years". So when, early this year, Joan Read told us that the Henry Williamson Society had arranged a visit to his birthplace in Lewisham, we felt obliged to investigate. After all, we reasoned, the biographical details concerning HW were published during his lifetime and where else would the publishers obtain these facts but from the man himself?

We decided to look for clues in his novels. In *Donkey Boy*, young Phillip Maddison (aged about nine) is taken to visit his country cousins at a house called 'Beau Brickhill' which has been built upon land held by a branch of his mother's family, the Turneys, since the 16th century. It is near a great ducal estate surrounded by a twelve mile wall, enclosing a wildlife park. This obvious reference to Woburn Abbey immediately drew our attention to the nearby village of Bow Brickhill, but we soon dismissed this as a red herring. After all, we were looking for a Bedfordshire birthplace, and Bow Brickhill lies just over the border in Buckinghamshire. The "Duke of Gault's" residence is referred to as Husborne Abbey in the novels, so we decided to visit the church of St James in Husborne Crawley, where a Williamson family had been prominent in the 17th and 18th centuries. Imagine our astonishment when, walking around the churchyard, we came upon a row of ancient tombstones all commemorating *Turneys*!

In *Donkey Boy* Phillip is taken into the churchyard to look at the tombstones. His mother says, "Look, Sonny, at all your Turney ancestors, they go back hundreds of years". There they were, just as described in the book. One thing was clear. To have written that sentence, Henry Williamson must have stood upon this very spot at some time of his life.

The church was locked, so we called at the old vicarage nearby. Mr Bednall, who lives there now, and who is keenly interested in all matters concerning local history, was most helpful. He produced a key and took us into the church to see the tablets commemorating the Williamsons who had held the manor in the 18th century. He also showed us an old map showing Williamson and Turney fields side by side and the manor complete with fishponds. Could this be the Williamson birthplace we were looking for? Alas, no: the manor was purchased by the Duke of Bedford in 1794 and subsequently demolished. The Williamsons then moved out of the area.

It was at this point in our investigation that we received bad news, and good. The bad news was that our friend Joan Read in London had located the registration of Henry Williamson's birth and the birthplace was given as Brockley in the Borough of Lewisham. Joan also told us that the maiden name of his maternal grandmother had been a *Turney*. (In fact her name had been Henrietta Turney just like Phillip's mother in *The Dark Lantern*!) So not only did the Turney tombstones in the novel exist, they could well belong to Williamson's own ancestors! An interesting speculation now arose. In the novels Phillip's Uncle Hughie is described as being obsessed with tracing his genealogy back to a family of ancient lineage (the le Tournets). Could Henry Williamson himself have come to Husborne Crawley on such a mission?

We could now make sense of the passage in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* where Henry tells us "There was farming blood in me. My mother's family had been farmers; some of them had farmed the same land under the dukedom of Bedford for more than four centuries". This could not have applied to the Leavers who came from Worcestershire. Could he have meant his grandmother's family, the Turneys?

It was now clear that we had been on the wrong track in looking for a *Williamson* family home as the original for Beau Brickhill. We should be looking for a *Turney* family house. Much searching through records produced two likely candidates: Redfield Farm, known to have been continuously occupied by the Turneys for 340 years, but now derelict and cut off from the rest of the valley by the M1; and Crawley Mill, also operated by Turneys in days gone by, and possessing the ponds left by the disused brickworkings as described in *Donkey Bay*. Neither of these, however, fitted the description of the house from which Phillip was able to step straight into the village street. The 1881 census shows two such houses occupied by Turneys: 130 Mount Pleasant, Aspley Guise, housed Mary Ann Turney, a grocer's widow, her son Charles Matthew Turney and daughter Harriet Adams, also a widow. At 134 Mount Pleasant lived Thomas P. Turney, an 83 year old retired miller, and his housekeeper. Then we heard of an old lady living in a nearby village who had known Henry Williamson as a boy!

She turned out to be a remarkably young old lady with very clear memories of her "Cousin Harry" as she calls him. They were distantly related through their grandmothers (both Turneys) who were first cousins. Their families had been visiting each other's homes for holidays ever since their grandmothers had been girls. Her "Auntie Gertie", as she called Henry Williamson's mother, had often told her anecdotes about the times Bert Pickering and Percy Adams had taken their mother and herself to dances. This would have been in the 1880s. Henry Williamson must also have heard these tales from his mother, for he combined the names of the two young men to produce "Percy Pickering", Phillip Madison's young cousin.

As a boy Henry Williamson had often come with his mother to stay in the large double-fronted house built in the 1830s by Abraham Page Turney and now known as No. 34 Mount Pleasant. Abraham had had a brother George who had gone to London. He had four daughters, one of whom,

Henrietta, became Henry Williamson's grandmother.

Was this house "Beau Brickhill", which Phillip thought "a wonderful house, the best in the world?" There are many parallels which would seem to indicate it. For also living there were Harriet Adams (nee Turney) to whom the house belonged, and Charles Matthews Turney. The young Henry Williamson called these old folk Grandma and Grandpa, just as Phillip did "Grandma and Grandpa Thacker" at "Beau Brickhill". Harriet Adams's son-in-law was, like Jim Pickering in the novels, "secretary of the local gas company, whose ironworks adjoined the railway station". The gardens of the house were just as described in *Donkey Boy* and there had been an old stable in whose ivy clad walls Henry Williamson and his cousin had shot sparrows at night using a dark lantern. Like Phillip's Cousin Percy in the novels, Henry Williamson's 'cousin' was killed in action during the First World War.

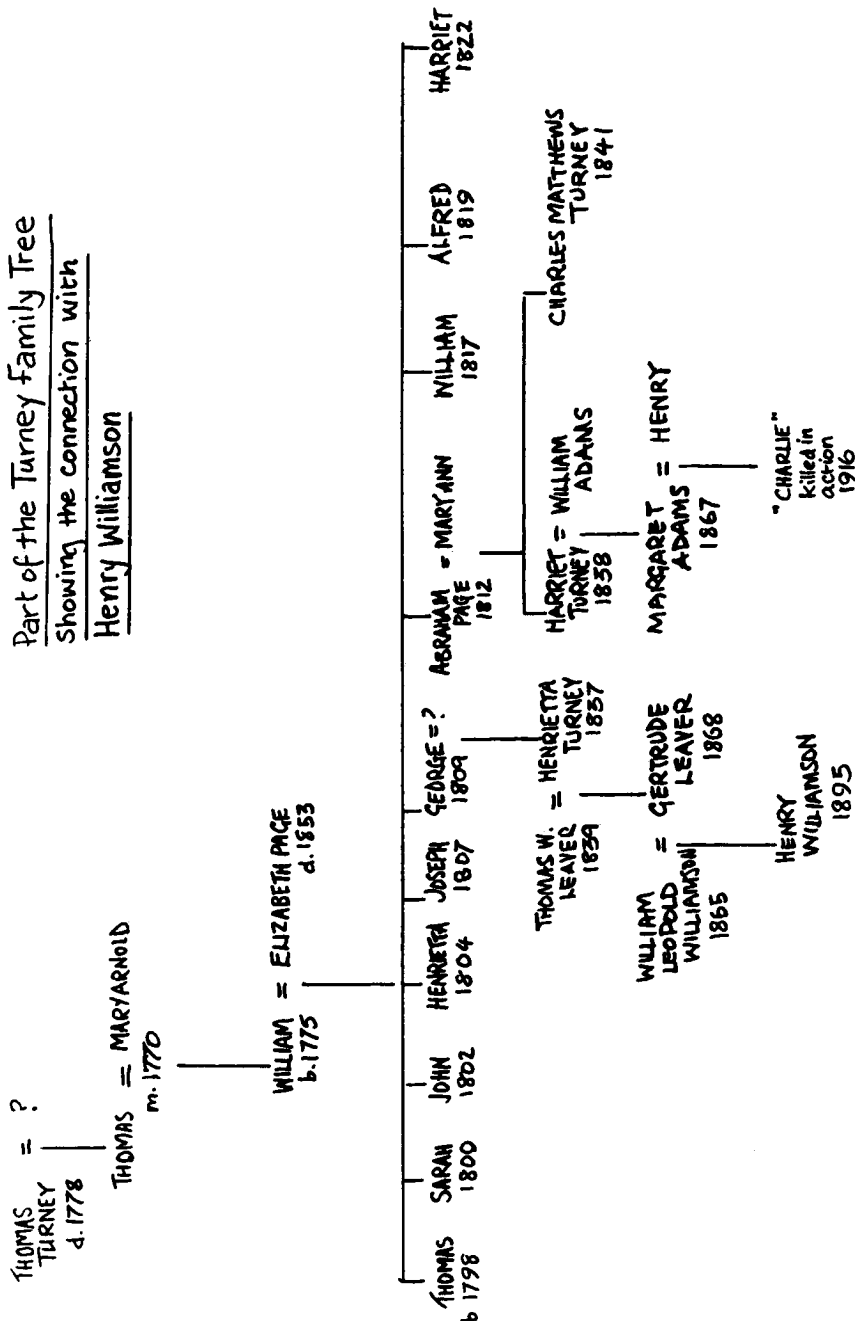
During his stays at Aspley Guise the young Henry Williamson frequently visited other Turney relatives at Redfield Farm, and he also went fishing with his cousin in the ponds at Crawley Mill. In *A Test to Destruction* Phillip Maddison recalls fishing with his cousin Percy behind Uncle Jim's gasworks. There is still a large pond behind the site of the old gasworks at Woburn Sands and in view of the family connections with the gas company it is most probable that HW did fish there as a boy.

The families had worshipped at St James's Church, Husborne Crawley, and later we were able to retrace the route they took past the tall holly hedges and along the footpaths just as described in the novel. Apparently the children were frequently taken to see the tombstones. The church music had been provided by a harmonium (a hurdy-gurdy to Phillip). There had been a talking jackdaw in the village and, and our new acquaintance recalled that her brother had been given one as a pet by one of the village boys, Jim Holliman. It is interesting to note that the name "Jim Holloman" appears in *Dandelion Days*. She remembered bird-watching with Harry and her brother, and roaming the fields around Crawley Brook (the Satchville brook in *Donkey Boy* and the subject of Phillip Maddison's scholarship-winning essay). One can imagine much of Henry Williamson's love of the countryside being formulated during these boyhood visits to Bedfordshire.

Henry Williamson's Grandfather Leaver was remembered very clearly. He had lived next door to the Williamsons in Brockley and when she and her brother had visited Cousin Harry he had often taken the children to the theatre as a treat. She recalled that he had been a partner in a large printing and stationery firm called Drake, Driver and Leaver. This reminded us of Phillip Maddison's grandfather Thomas Turney. He too had been a partner in a stationery firm...Mallard, Carter and Turney!

We also recalled that Thomas Turney and his wife Sarah had come from neighbouring farms in "Gaultshire". Their ancestors had been tenants of the Duke for more than four centuries, farming "the blue gault clay two score miles and ten north east of London". This is Bedfordshire so thinly disguised that one cannot help feeling that HW wanted us to make the identification. In a preface he wrote for *Winged Victory*

Part of the Turney Family Tree
Showing the connection with
Henry Williamson



(a novel by his boyhood friend Victor Yeates) he openly admits to laying clues in his novels to the pre-existence of certain characters. Was he laying similar clues here to direct us to the area where his own Turney ancestors could be found? In the novels we are told that Thomas Turney's forebears had held the copyhold of their land since the seventeenth century, and that Turneys had been known to have farmed there since the Wars of the Roses. Searching through the parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, we came upon Turney after Turney living out their lives in that small corner of Bedfordshire seemingly content to till the fields their fathers and grandfathers had tilled before them.

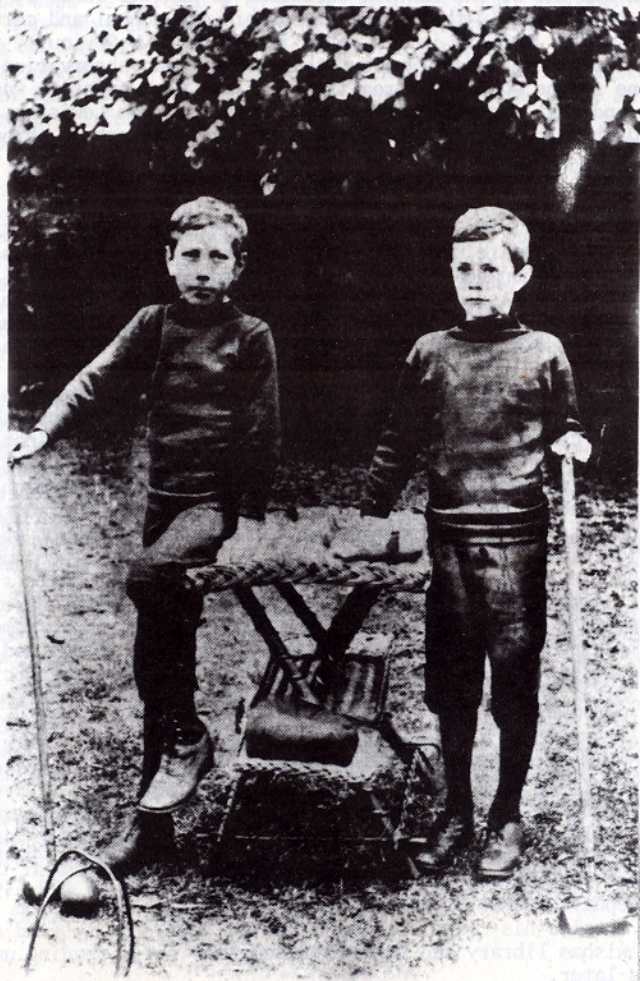
At least, it was so until comparatively recent times. In *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* HW tells us that on his way from Devon he called upon a distant cousin of his mother on the borders of Beds. and Bucks., where he heard "an unhappy pessimistic tale of farming in the face of the competition of cheap imported food; and all capital finally lost". When we next saw our informant she confirmed that the slump in farm prices between the wars (coupled with an outbreak of contagious abortion among their dairy herd a few years earlier) had caused her family to give up farming in 1937. It cannot have been an encouraging start to HW's own farming venture.

At this meeting we were shown the family tree of the Turneys, going back to the 14th century. It was, unfortunately, incomplete, there being a gap in the record between 1687 and 1778. We remembered that Phillip Maddison's Uncle Hughie had experienced a similar problem in tracing his own ancestry back to the "le Tournets". Hughie's other obsession had been with his father's resemblance to the then Prince of Wales. As we had entered the old lady's house we had seen a portrait of Abraham Page Turney, bearing a more than slight resemblance to the same personage. The young Henry Williamson must often have seen that portrait and heard the likeness remarked upon.

We asked if Henry Williamson had ever thought he was related to the eighteenth century Williamsons of Husborne Crawley Manor. We were told that it was much talked about, both by "Uncle Willie" (his father) and Cousin Harry, but the idea was eventually given up. An interesting fact now emerged, which was that Henry Williamson's grandfather and namesake, Henry William Williamson, had been the architect responsible for the building of the rectory at Aspley Guise. Was it sheer coincidence that his son later married a girl whose grandfather had been born in the same village?

Why, we asked, had the reference books given Henry Williamson's birthplace as Bedfordshire? The answer was illuminating. She thought he had become confused about it as a child because, owing to his mother's poor health, he had been brought to Aspley Guise for a prolonged holiday when only a few weeks old. Hearing so much about when he was a baby in Bedfordshire, he may have got hold of the notion that he had been born there. We recalled the passage in *A Test to Destruction* where Phillip Maddison gives Beau Brickhill as the address of his next-of-kin before being sent to the front. Various reasons are given for this, one being that he has 'adopted' Gaultshire because he felt more at home there in the formative years of his childhood!

No matter how the idea arose that Henry Williamson was born in Bedfordshire, one thing is clear. His visits to Aspley Guise and Husbome Crawley made a lasting impression on his memory and formed an integral part of his development as a writer. Again and again his thoughts return to the area and throughout his writings we get an impression of one who is deeply conscious of his ancestral ties with the land. To paraphrase his idol Richard Jefferies, he may well have been proud of his descent from those farmers of Bedfordshire...it is better to be born from the grass or the corn than from the counting house.



The young Henry Williamson with his country cousin.

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