

RESTORING THE WRITING HUT

Tony Evans

MANY TIMES OVER THE PAST TWENTY YEARS I passed Ox's Cross, hoping to catch a glimpse of Henry Williamson. On one occasion I did see him, wending his way slowly between the trees. I often wondered about the hut and what it was like inside. Little did I realise that one day I should be engaged in its restoration.

I was asked to carry out a survey on behalf of the Henry Williamson Society, with a view to restoring the hut. The roof was found to be unsafe and deteriorating, the elm weather-boarding rotting. It was decided that the roof should have priority.

The day arrived for starting the restoration work. I advised my son, who was to assist me, to wrap up warm; it's always cold and windy at Ox's Cross! I was soon to be proved wrong. The first day, as I had predicted, was cold and windy, but the following days were warm and sunny, and remained so until the work was completed almost a month later.

Our scaffold was soon rigged and the Cornish 'peggles' were leaving their place on the roof where for half a century they had kept out the wind and rain sweeping in from the Atlantic. As HW stated in *The Children of Shallowford*, the slates were nailed direct to two-inch thick compressed straw slabs.* This is not normal building practice and it is difficult to understand how the roof has survived for so many years.

As we removed the slates from the hipped gable, a blue tit flew out from between the elm boarding and the oak framework. On inspection we found a nest with two eggs. We didn't think we should see the bird again, but thought that she would search somewhere for a new nest site. She refused to give up her nest, laid a further ten eggs, hatched her young, and was still feeding them when we left.

A pair of spotted flycatchers decided that the top of the wooden rainwater downpipe would make a suitable nest site. We left them inspecting it one Friday evening. On our return on Monday morning, the nest was almost complete. Unfortunately, unlike the blue tit, they decided they could not live with us and with the noise of hammers and saws. They went elsewhere, but not far away; we saw them frequently afterwards. If HW had not planted the large number of trees in his hilltop field all those years ago, it would not now support the birdlife that abounds here.

I had hoped that HW had left some message in the roof for someone in future years to discover, but I was disappointed. All we found was a small inscription in the pointing of the brickwork of the chimney; it said simply, "HW 1934".

*For a description of the building of the hut, see Chapter 7.

The roof completed, the peggles back in place, nailed to battens and rafters, we packed our tools and drove slowly down the driveway, across the downs, past what I imagine to be HW's Linhay, on to 'No Man's Land', the fork in the road where (HW said) stood the gibbet in days gone by. I imagined as we travelled homeward how many times HW must have travelled this same road down into Braunton.

I now look forward to the next stage of the hut restoration, fitting the new elm weather-boarding, which (weather permitting) will be started this coming summer. I look forward once again to spending some pleasant days at Ox's Cross.

And we look forward to reading about them in these pages! Ed.

CORRECTIONS TO THE LAST ISSUE

The Editor regrets crediting Guy Priest with working in INTERNAL construction; this should have read INTERNATIONAL construction. A more obvious error, which occurred somewhere along the telephone line to our printers, was the transposition of the captions to the two photographs.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE HWS JOURNAL

Valerie Belsey on Henry Williamson, broadcaster.
Further Memories of Henry Williamson by Guy Priest.
Henry Williamson on his life in Fleet Street.

ARTHUR WITHAM

With regret we record the death on March 2 this year of Arthur Witham, for many years resident at Shallowford House, Filleigh. A very early member of the Society, he knew Henry Williamson, and over the years invariably bore stoically the requests to view made by innumerable visitors. If not always patient with the casual and uninformed 'sightseer', as many will recall he was kind and hospitable to the genuine enquirer.