

A GAULTSHIRE GUIDE

Tom and Joan Skipper

SINCE SUBMITTING OUR PREVIOUS ARTICLE ON 'GAULTSHIRE' we have discovered many more clues buried in the novels of Henry Williamson which make it quite clear that he is referring to the small area of Bedfordshire shown on the sketch map accompanying this present article. The passages may be scattered, and often brief, but almost everything he wrote contains some reference to the countryside around Aspley Guise, the village which we now know he regarded as his second home throughout his boyhood. All but one of the locations mentioned can be found in these few square miles. We will begin with the exception.

KEMPSTON BARRACKS (Map reference 1)

Chapter 4 of *A Solitary War* sees a now middle-aged Phillip Maddison driving through 'Gaultford':

Over the bridge and to the right by the shaded green traffic light: past dim buildings and more yellow-moving spots and there were the Barracks suddenly looming - the Regiment! Would any of the names of his day be known there now, Captain (temp. Brigadier-General) 'Spectre' West, Mowbray, Harry Gotley, Denis Sisley, Ghosts had no names. (p.57)

If one follows the same route out of Bedford today, making due allowance for modern one-way systems) one passes Kempston Barracks. Opened in 1878 this was the headquarters of the Bedfordshire Regiment to which HW is believed to have been attached for a period of his army service.*

MARSTON MORETAINE (Map reference 2)

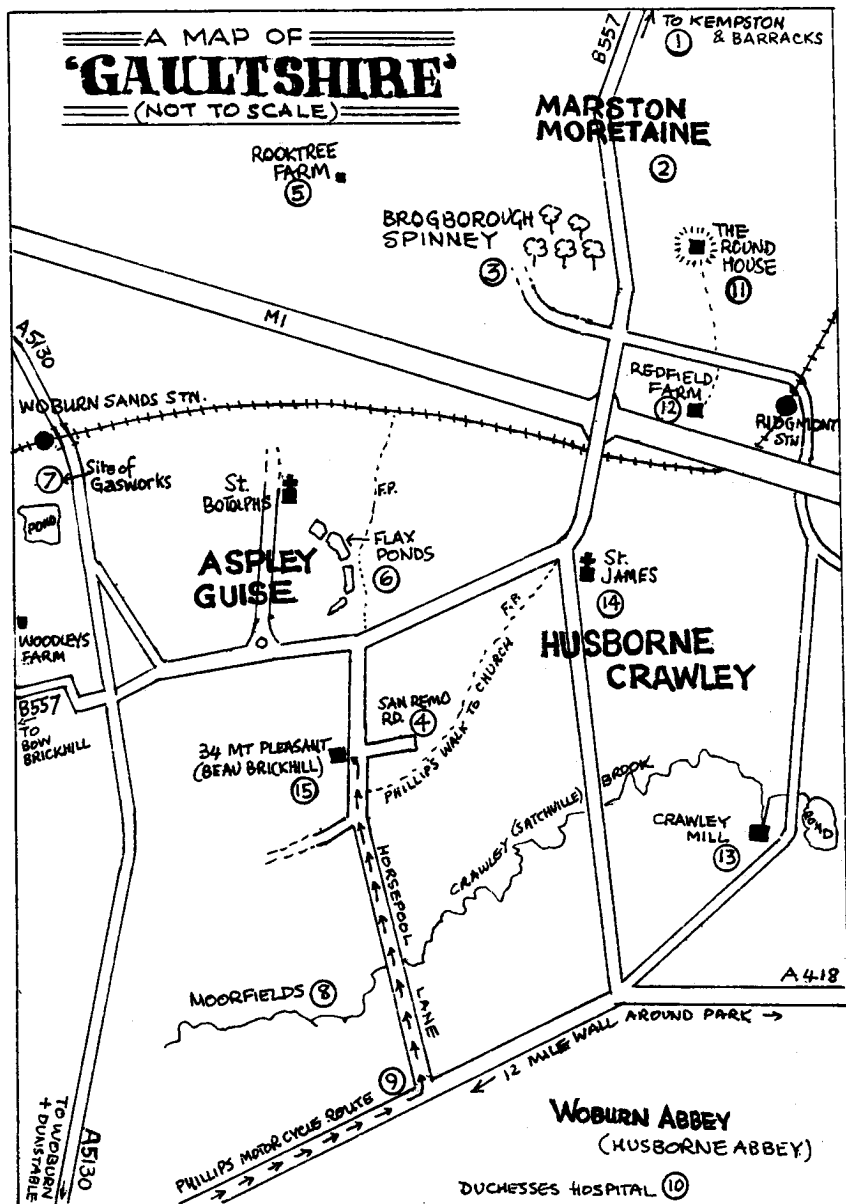
Some 5 or 6 miles from Kempston lies the village of Marston Moretaine where the cottage industry of lace making is known to have been established as early as 1641. The craft was still practised there in the early years of this century. In *How Dear Is Life*, Polly and Percy Pickering take Phillip to see Great Aunt Hepzibah making pillow-lace at 'Marston Conquest'. Chapter 7 of *The Dark Lantern* has Sarah Turney making lace on a pillow with her mother's lace-stool beside her.

**John Homan provides this confirmatory note: HW's commission was recorded in the magazine of Colfe's Grammar School, The Colfeian, in a Supplement of October 1915.*

ROLL OF HONOUR

Page 7. BEDFORDSHIRE REGIMENT. 10th. Bn. Williamson H.W. 2nd Lieutenant

HW's own record of this may be found in *A Fox Under My Cloak*; see p.129 for Phillip Maddison's commission into '10th Battalion the Gaultshire Regiment' and pp.142-3 for a transcript of the actual commission, 20.3.15



BROGBOROUGH SPINNEY (Map reference 3)

Driving on from Marston towards Husborne Crawley, just before reaching the M1 flyover, one passes Brogborough Spinney. In *A Solitary War*, Chapter 4, Phillip revisits Brogborough Spinney (the name is unchanged) and recalls bird-nesting there with Cousin Percy. As a matter of fact this episode is not previously mentioned in any of the Phillip Maddison novels, although in *The Beautiful Years Brogborough Wood* (transported to Devon) is where Willie Maddison springs the jay traps before running away to join Jim Holloman, the crow-starver.

JIM HOLLIMAN (Map reference 4)

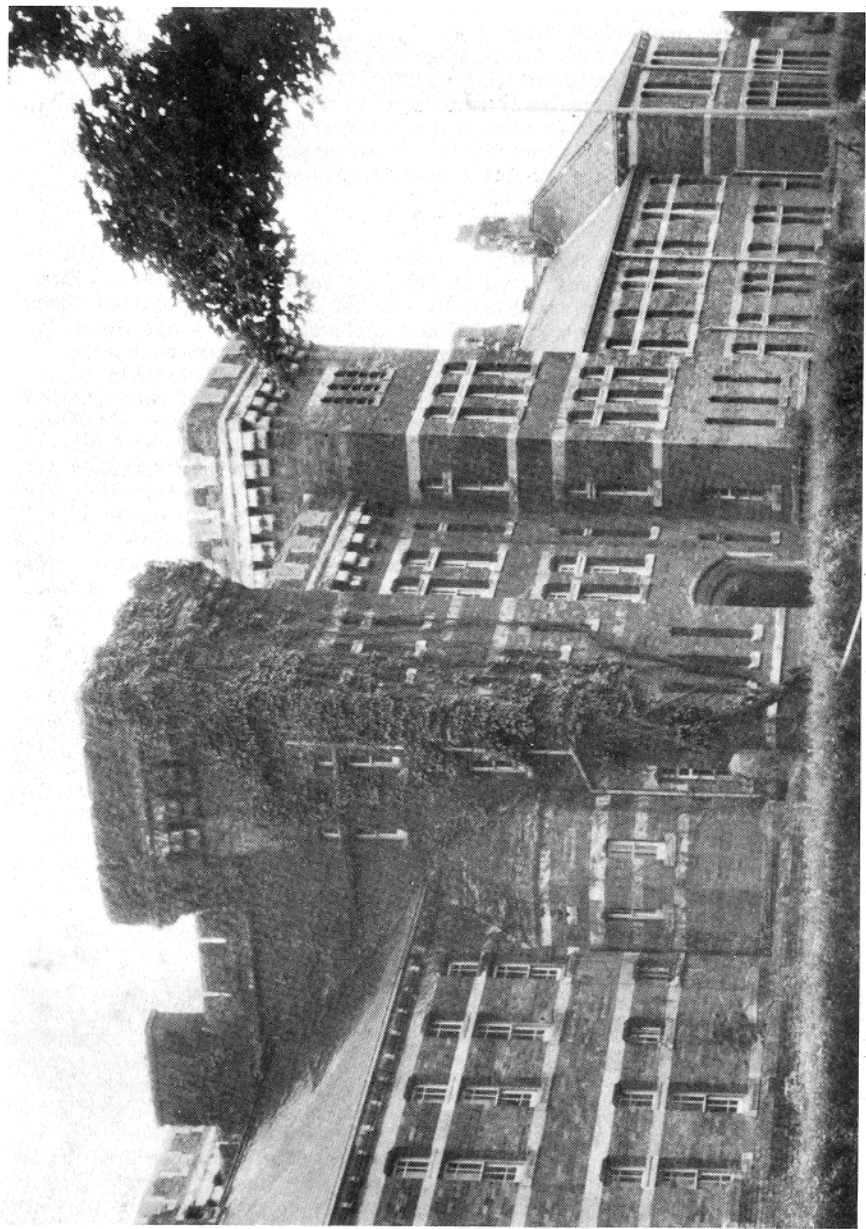
There was, so our research reveals, a James Holliman (note the slight difference in spelling) who lived in San Remo Road, Aspley Guise. This road is directly opposite the house HW visited as a boy and called 'Beau Brickhill'. Sadly, lance-corporal James Holliman of the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry was killed in action on the Somme on 1 July 1916, and is commemorated on a Roll of Honour outside St Botolph's church, Aspley Guise. A strange fact is that on the Roll of Honour Jim's name is misspelled HOLIMAN, recalling that other spelling error also involving 'l' on Phillip Maddison's birth certificate. HW's cousin (whom he calls Percy Pickering in the novels) was killed in November 1916 and is commemorated on the same Roll of Honour. HW refers to their deaths in *A Clear Water Stream*, Chapter 2, when recalling a day's fishing in a pond "a dozen miles from the county town of Bedford". Jim Holliman is not mentioned by name but HW refers to a boy who was a 'crow-starver' (as was the fictitious Jim Holloman) and who, like his cousin, died on the Somme.

ROOKTREE FARM (Map reference 5)

Although HW's early novels are ostensibly set in the West Country they nevertheless contain many Bedfordshire names. 'Rookhurst' may well have been suggested by Rooktree Farm only a mile from Brogborough Spinney. The Normans, Turneys, Eliza Boon, Bill Adams and, of course, Jim Holliman can all be found in the Husborne Crawley Parish Registers. In *Dandelion Days*, Chapter 26, there is even a genial, pipe-smoking, gas works boss foreshadowing Jim Pickering of *Donkey Boy*, whom we know to have been based on HW's 'uncle' at Aspley Guise. Farmer Turner's goat makes a brief appearance here, and in *The Epic of Brock Turner* the Colham Badger-digging Club meets in Farmer Turney's yard.

FLAX PONDS (Map reference 6)

The general title of these early novels is, of course, *The Flax of Dream*. We were naturally excited, therefore, to discover a stretch of water in Aspley Guise known locally as Flax Ponds. HW tells us in the Foreword to the 1936 edition that the title is a quotation from *The Incalculable Hour* written in 1910 by his aunt J. Quiddington West. However, Stephen Clarke has investigated this for us at the British Museum and can find no record of such a book or writer. Flax Ponds could well be those described in *A Clear Water Stream*, Chapter 2. The distance from Bedford is right, and a footpath leads to the ponds from the end of the road in which HW stayed as a boy. Could it be that his boyhood memories of those





dreamlike days contributed at least in part to his choice of title for the tetralogy?

UNCLE JIM'S GASWORKS (Map reference 7)

In *A Test to Destruction*, Chapter 20, Phillip recalls fishing for roach with his cousin Percy in the pond behind Uncle Jim's gasworks. HW's 'uncle' at Aspley Guise was also Secretary to the Woburn Sands Gas Company. The gasworks have gone but the pond remains. Behind it lies Woodleys, which we have reason to believe is the farm concerning which HW was told "an unhappy pessimistic tale of farming" in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, Chapter 9.

THE DUKE'S MOORS (Map reference 8)

In Chapter 8 of *A Fox Under My Cloak* Phillip and Polly Pickering walk down to the Satchville Brook "running through the Duke's moors". We have seen old maps of the area in the County Records Office on which these fields are designated 'Moorfields'. Satchville is, of course, very close to Sackville, one of the family names of the Duke of Bedford. The stream is usually called the Crawley Brook.

PHILLIP'S MOTOR CYCLE ROUTE (Map reference 9)

We are told that some HWS members have attempted to retrace Phillip's route as described in *The Golden Virgin*, Chapter 8. HW's description of the ride is difficult to follow if one does not have the advantage of knowing the destination beforehand, but once 'in the know' it is quite easy to follow Phillip's progress alongside the Abbey wall, turning off into Horsepool Lane, over the brook and up the hill to 'Beau Brickhill' (Mount Pleasant). Alas, Horsepool Lane is no longer sandy and the brook is now piped under the tarmac road, so Phillip's well-loved bridge too is vanished.

HUSBORNE ABBEY HOSPITAL (Map reference 10)

When blinded by mustard gas Phillip is treated at a hospital run by the Duchess of Gaultshire at Husborne Abbey. He is put in the Tennis Court Ward (*A Test to Destruction*, Chapter 12). During the 1914-18 war the Duchess of Bedford did, in fact, run such a hospital converted from the riding stables and tennis courts in the grounds of Woburn Abbey (see *The Flying Duchess*, a biography by John, Duke of Bedford).

THE ROUND HOUSE (Map reference (11)

In *A Test to Destruction*, Chapter 20, Phillip is told that his cousin Polly Pickering is to marry another cousin 'of Round House Farm'. Broxborough Park Farm is a well known local landmark better known as The Round House. It is known to have strong Civil War connections. Cromwell is believed to have slept there and the regicide John Okey once lived there. It now belongs to the London Brick Company and for the last nineteen years has been occupied by a family with the name of... MADDISON! At the time of writing we do not know that this is any more than a staggering coincidence, but it would be nice to think that yet another key name in the novels has proved to be of local origin.

REDFIELD FARM (Map reference 12)

HW's own Bedfordshire cousin did, in fact, marry another distant cousin but he came from Redfield Farm, not from the Round House. The Parish Registers show that HW's sister Doris Mary Williamson was a witness to the ceremony. Although not mentioned by name in any of the novels, Redfield Farm was, in fact, the land which HW's Turney ancestors had "farmed under the duke for four centuries". (See *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, Chapter 4, and *The Dark Lantern*, Chapter 13.)

CRAWLEY MILL FARM (Map reference 13)

Like Redfield Farm, Crawley Mill is not actually mentioned by name in the novels. However, according to a Parish Survey carried out by the Bedfordshire Archaeological Society this was a water mill operated in the 1870s by an H. Turney. This would probably be Henry Turney, the son of Thomas Page Turney, who is listed in the 1881 census as a retired miller. Thomas Page Turney was the brother of Henry Williamson's great grandfather, George Turney.

The brickmaking industry had been centred at the mill in the early 1800s (see the history of Brickhill House in Chapter 20 of *Donkey Boy*), and the clay pits and kilns are referred to in the Duke of Bedford's accounts in 1806. The ponds left by the clay diggings remain to this day.

THE TURNEY TOMBSTONES (Map reference 14)

The description of the Turney tombstones in Chapter 20 of *Donkey Boy* is exactly matched by reality in the churchyard of St James, Husborne Crawley. A footpath leads from Mount Pleasant, Aspley Guise, where HW stayed as a boy, to the corner near the church.

BEAU BRICKHILL (Map reference 15)

Described by Phillip in *Donkey Boy* as "the best house in the world", 34 Mount Pleasant, Aspley Guise was built by Abraham Page Turney, another brother of HW's great grandfather George Turney. In Craven's Directory for 1853 Abraham Page Turney is listed as a grocer and cheesemonger. In those days the house was No. 116 New Town, but by the time of the 1881 census this had become No. 130 Mount Pleasant and later still it was renumbered 34. In 1881 the head of the house was Mary Ann Turney, a 72 year old grocer's widow, living with her widowed daughter Harriet Adams, her son Charles Matthews Turney and a grocer's assistant, James Fuller. Living almost next door, at No 134, was Thomas Page Turney, aged 83, a retired miller, and his unmarried housekeeper, Mary Ann Turney, aged 23.

By the time HW stayed here the house was an exact replica of that described in *Donkey Boy*; a matriarchal widow who owned the house (Harriet Adams, corresponding to Granny Thacker), her unmarried brother (Charles Matthews Turney corresponding to Grandpa Thacker), her daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren (corresponding to the Pickerings). The house itself possessed a small courtyard and stables (now converted to mews cottages) as described in the novels.

POSTSCRIPT: Readers should note that this article was written well before the publication, in 1995, of Anne Williamson's definitive biography *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic*, which clarified some of the suppositions proposed by Tom and Joan Skipper. In particular, J. Quiddington West's *The Incalculable Hour* did indeed exist, and was the source of Henry Williamson's title *The Flax of Dream*. The full text of *The Incalculable Hour* is published in The Henry Williamson Society Journal, no. 31, 1995.

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Henry Williamson Society
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