



LEWISHAM 1984

Brian Fullagar

THE RAIN THAT HAD THREATENED ALL WEEK did not materialise, and Saturday 19 May 1984 dawned bright and fair. After months of planning and not a few set-backs, the great day was at last here: Brockley's famous son was about to be honoured by Borough Council Officers, local residents, and loyal enthusiasts alike. After many years forgotten save by the faithful few, a great writer would have a permanent tribute acknowledging his literary stature.

The celebrated facade of 'Lindenheim' was bathed in sunlight. Above the upstairs window a pair of plush royal blue curtains hung from a small pelmet: the stage was set. In the road outside No. 21 stood a line of young children dressed in the clothes of the late Victorian period, adding colour and nostalgia to the scene; these were some of the pupils from Henry's first school, Brockley Primary (Junior) School.

The crowd assembled and local dignitaries began to arrive. The Society's Chairman, John Glanfield, greeted the Mayor and Mayoress of Lewisham, Cllr and Mrs Norman Smith, and then introduced them and other guests to members of the Williamson family: Richard, our President, and Mrs Loetitia Williamson along with other family members with whom we were glad to be sharing this happy day. The introductions over, the official party took up its place in front of No. 21.

While we were waiting for the ceremony to begin a boy from Brockley School drew my attention to a huge grey Privet Hawk moth clinging to his jacket. As we transferred the sleepy moth to the comparative safety of one of Eastern Road's plane trees my thoughts dwelt on this strange coincidence, and in my mind's eye a tall bearded figure carrying a butterfly-net strode over the hill in the twilight as the gas-lamps came on one by one down in misty Randiswell. Surprising it is how these associations lead one back to Henry and his writings. The source of inspiration still lingers, like the Barn Owl that appeared above the quarry at Old Hall Farm during our first visit to Norfolk.

At noon John Glanfield commenced the ceremony by welcoming guests and all present on this historic occasion and reminding us of the affection with which the old house was held by so many readers and how fitting it was that we should be gathered at this place to honour the memory of Henry Williamson. The commemorative plaque would be a constant reminder of the great contribution made to English literature by one who had spent his boyhood here and obtained much of the inspiration for his best writing from this very locality. John went on to thank all of those who had worked so hard to make the dream of this day become a reality.

His Worship the Mayor of Lewisham paid warm tribute to Joan Read - 'Mrs Lewisham' as he called her - whose original idea it was that first

fired enthusiasm for the Plaque project, following the plan through to completion and ironing out the many problems on the way. Cllr Smith suggested that there might well be other young people in the Borough today developing a talent for writing as did the young Williamson.

John Glanfield then introduced Mr John Silkin, the local M.P., who spoke of Henry's vast output of writing that had given pleasure to so many and continued to delight readers today. It was right that he should be remembered by a fine blue plaque. (There was some amusement later at Mr Silkin's embarrassment when the plaque was finally revealed and found to be maroon.)

Mrs Loetitia Williamson spoke next, recalling her first visit to the house in Eastern Road having travelled up from Devon with Henry to meet his parents. It was interesting to hear Mrs Williamson remark on how little the area seemed to have altered since those far-off days.

Next came a brief word of thanks from Joan Read to all the many groups and individuals, including Lewisham Borough Council, Colfe's School, Brockley School and the Henry Williamson Society, who were among those who had co-operated so well to bring about this historic occasion, long overdue. Mrs Williamson and Joan then pulled the cord which parted the curtains to reveal the plaque gleaming as it caught the bright mid-day sun.

Richard Williamson then said a few words of thanks on behalf of the Williamson family. He had a vision of a young boy flying a kite atop the wind-swept Hill, and a young soldier in khaki walking up Eastern Road, home from the horrors of the Western Front. Richard was sure that his father was up there on the hill smiling with pride on this happy day.

The official formalities over, members and guests moved off towards Brockley School where the next phase of the celebrations was due to take place. En route Joan Read led a large group to visit the Leaver (Turney) grave in Ladywell Cemetery. The interested group included a number of I.L.E.A. officials and school governors, as well as HW Society members.

At Brockley School (Wakenham Road School of the *Chronicle*) we were welcomed by the pupils, many of whom were still dressed in their period costumes. All present were much impressed by the courtesy shown throughout the day by children, staff, and parents, a credit indeed to the headmaster and to Henry's own views on child development. In the school hall there was a talented and often amusing display of the children's handicraft and written work, all part of a project on the life and times of Henry Williamson. Also on show was a splendid exhibition of old photographs and memorabilia illustrating the Lewisham of Henry's boyhood. After an enjoyable buffet lunch provided by the

school there followed a special presentation of a musical play written by one of the staff and performed by the pupils. 'Scenes from a Victorian Childhood' was a play full of lively, catchy tunes and amusing dialogue. It recreated actual events described in *Donkey Boy* through the eyes of two children living in Brockley on the day of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The young cast performed the play with great enthusiasm and obvious enjoyment which was well appreciated by the audience. Mr John Statton, the headmaster, and his team of staff and helpers, had put in a deal of effort and preparation to make not only their play but the whole day's events such a pleasurable experience, and our thanks are indeed due to them for providing such a fine tribute.

The evening programme began with a paper from Dr David Hoyle entitled 'Why I Think Henry Williamson is Still Worth Reading'. Members who had heard David speak at previous meetings were looking forward to yet another of his thought-provoking and perceptive analyses of Henry's writing, and again they were not disappointed. John Homan provides a summary of David's paper in his 'Secretary's Notes' elsewhere in this issue. After David's talk, members adjourned for a grand buffet supper, again provided by the hard-working staff and helpers from the school.

The last session of the evening was Christopher Palmer's talk on James Farrar, the young R.A.F. navigator whose posthumous collection of writings was edited by Henry Williamson and published under the title *The Unreturning Spring*. Christopher Palmer's memorable and sensitive B.B.C. Radio presentation *Spring Returning* was already well known to many, so it was a pleasure to have this opportunity of listening to the fine recording once more, this time greatly enhanced by Christopher's commentary on how the programme came to be written and of the fascinating interwoven links that exist between Henry Williamson, Jim Farrar and the hauntingly evocative music of Delius which calls up such clear images of the English countryside. Christopher Palmer has such a deep feeling for music and for the work of both writers: one, a renowned master of his craft and the other, a skilled apprentice whose flowering talent did not survive the cruel harvest of the war.

On Sunday morning a group of members met at Brockley School to explore under the expert guidance of Joan Read some of the more significant locations associated with Henry and the early novels of the *Chronicle*. First, down to Phillip Maddison's birthplace, 'Comfort House' in Comerford Road, then round the corner into Braxfield Road to No. 66, that spruce artisan's cottage where Henry was born. On to Cranfield Road, stopping to gaze at No. 19, where Richard Maddison lodged with Mrs Cummings when he was courting Hetty. Here we met the young lady who now lives there and shares our interest in her home's link with *The Dark Lantern*. It had been hoped that we might see the war memorial in St Peter's Church (St Simon's of the *Chronicle*) as it contains Henry's name, but a service was in progress and while we waited the rain that had held off throughout the past two days now began to fall steadily. But it was time to go our separate ways, heading back across the damp Hilly Fields catching a last glimpse of the bright new plaque on No. 21, a lasting reminder of all that this memorable weekend had stood for.