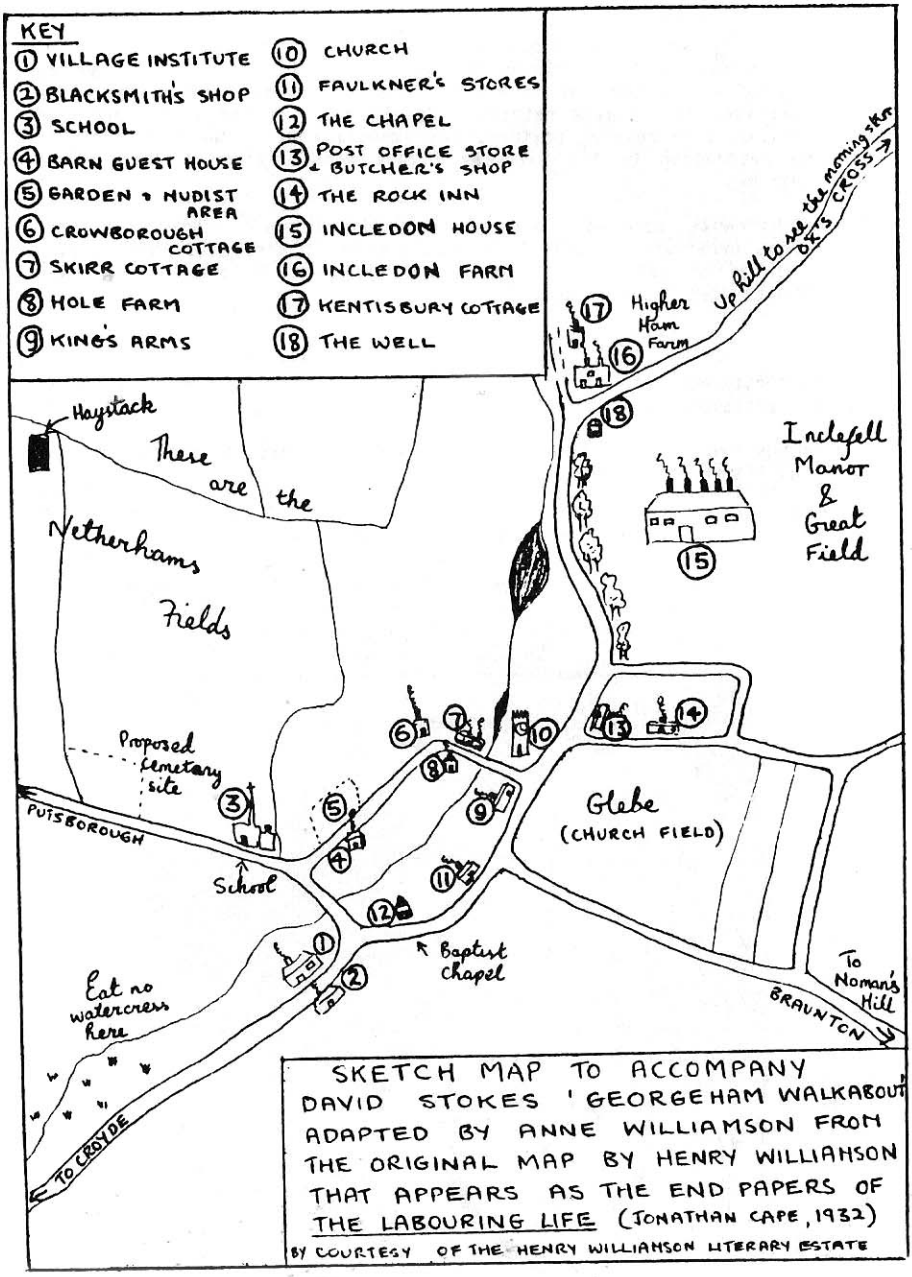

LIVING IN GEORGEHAM

David Stokes

This impression of living in the village as it used to be was provided by David Stokes. He led members round it during the Society's AGM in 1984. He recalled his early days at Incledon Farm House and leavened his commentary with uproarious anecdotes which gave a sense of a hearty,close-knit community in tune with its natural setting. His reference to Williamson's village tales confirm how often they were connected with actual people and events. The commentary was recorded on tape by John Millar, and while this transcription has been suitably abridged and edited for the printed page, the aim has been to preserve the spontaneous nature of his reminiscences as the walkabout took place.

I moved to Georgeham in the spring of 1936 and stayed until the early 50s but was away for part of the war. My father, a retired sea captain, rented Incledon Farm House at Higher Ham. He grew garden produce while my mother took in visitors during the summer and sold cream teas. Lots of villagers had to do similar things, to make a living.

Sometimes we had people stay who were keen on Henry's books, and he would tell them to meet him in the King's Arms, but seldom turned up. He got fed up with visitors trying to look him up at Ox's Cross; sometimes he fired a shotgun over their heads. Fame was enjoyed at a price, even in far-off Ham. But the important thing was - he inspired people to explore a wonderful part of North Devon in detail. I often saw him when he called on R. W. Thompson, a travel writer whose cottage was near us. Sometimes I saw Henry driving his old Alvis and roaring round the corner. I wish I had lived in Georgeham in the twenties, whih was when Commander Stokes was here - my namesake and a friend of Henry's - whom I've never met as far as I know. Then, in spite of the animosity of a few locals, I might have had the privilege of knowing Henry better.

(The group had assembled near the village centre. They were in Frog Street at the point marked A on the accompanying sketch-map.)

We are standing outside the Georgeham Institute (or village hall, the Devonian meaning of Institute). It was not here in '21 when Henry first came to the village. Across the road, the white cottage was where Mr.Gammon, the smith, lived - the smithy was underneath. It was always a busy place and fascinated us kids; there was a chance of a ride on one of the large farm-horses brought in to be shod. There's a story of Henry's early days in the village: that he found an ancient bye-law that said 'If your horse casts a shoe the smith must shoe it at any time of the day or night'. So, with a friend, Henry thumped on the smith's door at four in the morning: 'We've got a mare that needs shoeing'. The smith swore

something terrible, but they cited the law and sure enough the mare got shod. You can imagine the gossip this would cause in the village. The gossip must have been terrible for a sensitive writer to bear.

In the direction of Croyde you find the buildings mentioned in the stories are Northole Farm, Streamways, Forda, The Cross (cottages) and Fig Tree Farm. In one of the stories, HW follows the stream down from Ham; and it flows right through Croyde to the sea, having gone past The Cross between Georgeham and Croyde and past Fig Tree Farm. In reaching Croyde, beyond the sharp corner, he mentions the Mill House on the right; and at one time a water-mill was there and is featured in the 'Muggy' stories. Old 'Muggy' talks about trying to sell mill stones to visitors, which is rather nice.

> (In 'Tiger's Teeth', an outstanding story in 'The Lone Swallows', we are given the following affectionate glimpse of 'Muggy':
> The village historian told me the story one rainy night in the Nightcrow Inn. He was a great friend of mine, and universally known as 'Muggy'; he had been in most places on the earth, returning eventually to his remembered village, happy in the open air with his simple livelihood. The returned wanderer did all kinds of jobs in the hamlets round about, gathered and sold watercress and mushrooms in their seasons, arranged for the purchase of patent manures by the farmers, representing many firms, and was also -'I be nothing if I be not up to date, zur, do 'ee see?' - an agent for fire insurance in the big town eight miles away.For generations his family had lived in the village; his grandfather had bought the wreckage of H.M.S. Weasel, that went on the rocks of the Leap over a century ago, all but one man being drowned. He had the newspaper cuttings of the wreck, and sure enough, his ancestor was mentioned. He cherished that cutting.')

Close to there was the Croyde Institute - and you will know the story in which Maddison dressed up like an owl or bird and went to an evening dance there.

> (... Village boys cheered as I arrived on my Norton. Quickly up the wooden steps to the dance rooms I ran; it was an interval between dances: uttering a great screech I announced myself as a Barn Owl. My joke of fancy at the Fancy Dress Dance fell flat and lifeless as a slab of wet putty ...)

The Institute was up some steps on the left. The steps are still there, but are part of a private house now. I can remember the dances there: the floor was almost falling in and moved up and down as people

jumped about. There was always a weekly dance in the area, for this was the main entertainment right until the war. I danced with many a pretty maid - I can remember Daisy Brown (Daisy Gammon in the book) who was one of the village beauties. She is also mentioned in the story about the dedication of the new churchyard in Georgeham.

Well, I thought we would go up over Netterham Hill on the Putsborough road, to the school. In the stories on the school, you may recall the haranging that occurred between the school board and the vicar. Colonel Ponde was mentioned (in reality Admiral Biggs) and he lived just beyond the Manor pub in Croyde. Now his house is a hotel, a beautiful thatched building. Then it had water gardens round it and he made a big dam for his trout pond and blocked the stream. In the story, it once rained so much that the dam burst, and the whole of Croyde high street was flooded. This actually happened. Henry wrote about a similar flood occurring in Georgeham. At school here, children were taught their tables by the teacher putting a circle on the blackboard and numbering it one to twelve. He pointed with a cane at a figure in the centre, say nine, and then a number on the circle, and if you got two answers wrong you received a cut across the hand with this wretched cane. They say they learnt quickly.

(The members walked along Church Road in the direction of St. George's Church.)

On the rise there, on the right, stood a guest house (The Barn) and it was run by a German lady called Miss Johnson. On the opposite side, she had a sort of sun-bathing and nudist club with a swimming pool and gardens. To begin with she had a screen put around it, and she would massage very fat German gentlemen who lived on vegetarian food. (Laughter). The kids could see it by standing on the wall, so the villagers complained and the screen, a galvanised iron fence, was put up higher. But still some could see it from a top window, so finally she had a fence put up that was 20 feet high. Another story is about her employing a chap called Percy - an ex-sailor, I think. When you spoke to him, he seldom said more than - 'Arrrh'. He did a bit of gardening, and collected his wages every Friday. The story goes that he knocked on her door one Friday and heard her say 'Come in, come in', so he went in. Then he heard 'Come upstairs', so he went upstairs and knocked on one door and heard her say 'Come in, come in', and knocked on another and heard her repeat it. And there she were, me dear, stark naked in the bath, and poor old Percy, he was that frightened he ran down the stairs back to the pub, and has never been back for his wages since. (Laughter).

In those days, the cider they made was unsweetened - a proper rot gut, almost like vinegar. You could find the cider presses in Croyde until quite recently. Some farmers drank three to four pints a day; a farmer at Croyde regularly drank a pint at breakfast, another at lunch and three more at night-time. In the war when the servicemen came, bets were made that they couldn't equal the cider-drinking of the locals. The locals would start drinking, and the servicemen would end up paralytic drunk: it was terrible.

(Members were opposite Crowborough cottage, which was where Henry lived after his marriage. It contained the 'apple room' from where he had observed village life and done his writing.
Soon they were opposite Skirr cottage. In 'Early Devon Papers', Henry had written of its appeal and charm for a young writer - 'My Devon Hermitage is rented at four pounds a year. There are two bedrooms, very small and lime-washed, and a living room with a stone floor and open hearth. A simple place, built of cob, and thatched, with a walled-in garden before it, and then the village street.The churchyard with the elm-rookery is on one side, a small brook below the wall. Even in the hot summer the water runs; I have made a pool of stones where the swallows and martins can go for the mud to build their homes. Beautiful it is to see, in the shadow of the trees, these birds alighting softly on a boulder, or by the pool's edge, and shovelling the red mortar in their beaks ...'
Entry was allowed into Skirr cottage, due to the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Yeo, the owners. The appreciation of members was conveyed to Mrs. Yeo.)

The cottages were all individual, as far as I know. the one next to Skirr then belonged to Revvy Carter, in real life Revvy Gammon. The one next belonged to Thunderbolt Carter, as he was called in the book - he was known as Club Foot and by other odd names, and was supposed to be richer (and hence a Vandebilt). You will know the story of the owl getting in under the thatch at that gable end - of the references in 'The Sawyers'. Round the churchyard were lovely tall elms, and there was a rookery that the Sawyers were troubled by. Sadly, as is the way with elms, they were all well 'lopped' and they died of Dutch elm disease in the end. Opposite the cottage was Hole Farm, as you can see. Mr. Norman still farms there, and it's nice to think that cows come into the village here, to be milked. Note the stream. It was known as Low Farm when Henry lived here. In the stories, Stroyle George was said to farm here (in reality Mr. Lovering); the term Stroyle meant fowl grass or cutts (couch) grass, a sort of creeping grass that's hard to get rid of. Nowadays I think they use a special weedkiller - but then you could only cultivate it and hope to destroy it. It killed whatever you put in and would even grow through potatoes.

In a story called *A Farmer's Life*, Stroyle had a very hard life. He owned a horse that refused to go at the right time, and once, when it was harnessed to a cart, he hit it across the rump and it tried to leap a five-barred gate. In my day we would call here, using this side-door. Inside was the dairy and they made the most lovely Devon cream, the right way. They put big pans on very small slow-burning oil stoves, and kept these going all night. Gradually the cream rose to the top, and it was skimmed off when you called for some. You also bought a pint of what was called Scald - similar to scalded milk with the fat removed, as in fat-

free milk today. It made a lovely milk pudding at halfpenny a pint. They also gave it to calves and pigs. In all, the Devon cream of those days was totally different from the stuff you get now.

(Members continued to walk along Church Road, until they reached the King's Arms pub, HW's Lower House or Nightcrow Inn.)

This was always the front door in those days. In real life the Landlord was Mr. Ovie, a rugged individual, who had been a professional boxer. He had a famous terrier called Mad Mullah, which he used for badger hunting. The bar was facing you as you went in at this entrance. During an evening session, when you went to the toilet it was a rough old place and hard to find in the dark. So some just used the wall over the road. Sometimes Henry would try to wash the marks out, using a bucket of water. I don't know why I mention this - it's chiefly as a joke - but he relates in a story that some maids saw him doing it, and said: 'Oh Henry, what have you done, you've made a bigger mark than the one there before'. (Laughter).

I wonder if anyone knows the book called 'Home in Ham'? It was written by R.W. Thompson and came out just before the war. While not in the category of literature, it's a good yarn about that older community, and Thompson included a portrait of Mr.Ovie whom I remember very well - one story has it that on one occasion Mr. Ovie belched so hard that he blew a lady's hat off. When winter came, the villagers were thankful that the visitors had gone, that they could have the village to themselves - and particularly the pub. However if you entered the pub then and went close to the fire to warm your backside, Mr. Ovie was inclined to come over and say 'Get over, whose fire is it anyway?' - and seemed very much the landlord.

(Members next entered the churchyard, visiting the grave of HW. Later they moved to the new churchyard, and among the graves seen was that of Negley Farson.)

Mr. Hyde gave this new land to the church before the war. He lived with his sister in what is now the Baggy Hotel - the building is mentioned in the story about the dedication of this church land. A strange thing that after he donated it, he became the first to be buried in it. Miss Hyde gave generously towards its upkeep, and a beautiful garden was made by the sexton, Mr. Thomas. Pre-war, people came from quite distant places to look at a garden in a churchyard. In at least one story about the church, Henry is alluding to Mr. Thomas in his description of 'Old Clibb with a red poll' (red head). I remember the sexton well, and also his daughter Mary, who sang in the church choir - I recall her beautiful soprano voice. She is now Mrs. Hancock and lives just round the corner. The vicar in my time was the Rev'd Sharples, a great preacher: and he also is given a special pen-portrait in 'Home in Ham'.

(The group had paused at the thatched-roof corner building lying at the foot of Rock Hill. It had been a store-cum-Post Office (and also a butcher's shop), and used to be run by Arty Thomas (Harry Brooker in *Life in a Devon Village*) together with his wife, and his daughter Zilla.)

When you shopped here, she always used the back of an old paper bag to add things up. The shop had some of the finest bacon and ham going, and seemed to sell everything, from paraffin lamps to sealing wax - whatever you wanted. And talking of lamps, there was electricity in the village, but there were few people who could afford it. Most of the cottages had paraffin lamps; and well I should know, for I ruined my eye-sight in doing my homework for the grammar school by the glow of one, or a candle. Most people took up a lighted candle at bedtime, and that went on until - oh '37/38. There was no mains water, and no sewage. usually they had septic tanks or the old 'privy' down the garden. Very few had running water, and all of Rock Hill was dry. Some had wells, but not many. Round the corner below us (at the bottom of Rock Hill) was a well and an old pump - the womenfolk went to it twice a day carrying crock jugs or buckets. On washdays especially, the villagers met up; Mrs. So and So, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Carter, have a good old conflab, and carry the water up again. It made for a social outing that was taken for granted.

(Ascending Rock Hill, the group had drawn level with its pub.)

This is the Rock pub (Higher House). You can see the old part and the bit added to it. In all, it has been enlarged considerably, though the front door is the same. It used to have a small parlour on the right, a fairly small bar, a very low ceiling, and, as is mentioned in a story, when you went in there, particularly in winter, the doors were shut tight and even the keyhole was stuffed with paper: and everyone smoked like mad, some playing table skittles - which is still there. I can remember old Browner whose photo is still displayed there; he was father to the Brown family and the cottage they lived in lies on the right, two doors up. He toddled over to the pub for years, and always did the scoring whenever you played skittles. It was understood that you bought him a pint for his trouble. Later he had a stroke and the beer came out of the side of his mouth, so every time you played skittles you bought him a double whiskey. Granfer Brown, his father, had beautiful white mutton-chop whiskers, and he liked meeting people. One story is connected with him - I think it is in *The Village Book* - that features a donkey. I remember the bit where Henry asked the donkey questions: e.g. 'Who charged the Rector so many pounds to put new horse dung at the bottom of his greenhouse?', and the donkey nodded and said 'Yes, my master'. And in being asked who had gone back at midnight and dug it all up again, the donkey replied 'Yes, my master' - which pointed to one of the Browns getting his own back. The left-hand turning at the bottom leads to what was known as No Man's Land. You pass that way on the shorter route to Braunton. One of the villagers living here was Middy Hancock, and she had

twelve children whom she named after national disasters!

In one story there's a lovely description of Henry being torn between hurrying on that Braunton road to buy some needed articles for the baby (Windles), and his yearning to stop and look over the hedge at the view. For you see a glorious panorama from there, it shows the coast stretching down to the Two Rivers estuary and beyond. I still find fresh delight in his sensitive eye in the books. I well remember a walk from Ham that took you over the fields and the long slope down to Putsborough sands. I walked it many times with my father and came to know and enjoy every yard of it. Henry describes the same walk in a story called *First Day of Spring* in *Life in a Devon Village*, and it is uncanny how he catches the small things that you notice after doing it so often - like a fallen tree still growing in a particular way, or coming on yellow marsh Irises ...

Most of the village consisted of working men's cottages. That is the difference now. The village appeared so busy then - even by day - with people going about their business. Now it seems - subdued. You don't see the children playing about now, that's what disturbs me. People used to curse the kids because they played about your gate. In Henry's stories, they played on his gate and in one, *Survive and Farewell*, after he'd moved from Skirr to Crowberry cottage, the lady who lived in Skirr (who was known as 'The Maltese') became ostracised by village society and died in an infirmary, I think. And her child was always in trouble because he *would* play in the stream and she would scold him over and over, and thump him, and amid all the tears he'd play there again and get wet. Or he'd plague Henry when he was trying to write, playing beside his cottage. This story was another based on actuality; I checked with several people who have knowledge of it happening.

> (The final move was to Higher Ham, and members paused to look at Incledon House.)

That is Incledon House on the right, and Mr. Jacob Thorn lived there (Mr. Furze in the story called 'The Well'). He farmed two hundred acres and was somewhat richer. A lot of Higher Ham is much as in Henry's time, apart from the new houses put up since. And gone is the lovely avenue of elm trees, which were presumably victims of Dutch elm disease. Incledon Farm was inherited by Fred Thorn, who now lives at Northole Farm (which is referred to in another story), and his son now runs Incledon Farm.

> (The final stopping-point was by the gravel lane that joins the Ilfracombe road at the sharp bend.)

When we were kids we called this part 'the suburbs'. That is Incledon Farm House where my people lived, and beyond is Kentisbury cottage, rented by R.W. Thompson in the late 30s and early 40s. As I said, Henry came on visits quite often; and at the outbreak of war Thompson rushed up to Ox's Cross and removed some material that could have been detrimental to Henry, who was away. The act of a friend, and indeed

they got on well together. And in the beginning, so did Negley Farson and Henry though it did not last, unfortunately. You know that Farson lived on the Vention estate in a grey stone house, a lovely place that overlooks Putsborough beach. A fitting home after all his far-flung travels with a typewriter. We came to know Negley and Eve Farson well, and found them very hospitable and friendly towards us.

I have really only scratched the surface in talking of what it was like living here in those years. They are rich in memories. I have tried looking up some who were here in Henry's day, but find a general reticence over being communicative about him and his work. Perhaps, either in local pieces or in some social way, perhaps more generally in politics, he trod on some toes; but if the Society can stir up more local interest in him, a lot of material is there to be gathered. I wish it could happen. It needs someone who lives locally, and who can bring a deep commitment to it and has plenty of time on hand.

So, are there any questions, the usual thing to say. I don't know if I can put anything else together. I am sure some of you are far more academically experienced that I in putting it together.

> (Among the questions put, one was concerned with the shallow well that was visible close at hand,situated by the stone wall at the corner.)

Henry wrote about it in a story called *The Well*. And this is an extract taken from the opening paragraphs of the story -

> *.... At the bend of the lane the curve of the wall held a well ... The well was enclosed by a mason's wall - the stones were held by mortar. Who paid for the mortar? It was a subject which caused periodic argument and mental heat in the village - every fifteen years, said Jonathan Furze. There the well was, the spring welling imperceptibly out of the rock which showed so clearly in the little square of water, under the wraith of its inner walls. Ferns like lizards uncurled out of the chinks of the mortar, and sometimes in the hot summer a lizard looking like a fern basked there, ready to whisk away to its chink if a shadow fell athwart the dream which was its life. Mosses grew there, with their seeds upheld on hair-like stalks, amidst the dragon-yellow and silver-curd lichens spread over the stones.*

It never dried up, and in my day was used regularly for watering cattle. The water was collected by a chap called Jimmy Lovering, and I often sat with him on his cart. One day he asked me if I knew 'old Henry Williamson' and I said no (I was then 12), and he said 'Don't 'ee tell t'un, cause if ye do, he'll put'ee in a book surenuff. Don't 'ee tell to

'un'. Sadly this happens to many writers. John Millar heard at a meeting of the Hardy Society that local people in Dorchester were not that interested in Hardy. The same is said of Eastwood and D.H. Lawrence. Once a person is put in a book, some feel it can do something - perhaps like the old native idea that to take a photograph of them risked their soul being drawn into the 'eye' of the camera. Yet the work of such writers can achieve a poise that helps to keep the approach from spilling over into unreal make believe: and Henry's books cast a fresh, clear light on the past here, when villagers often had hard lives even if the setting was lyrical and natural.

HW's early writings on Georgeham and the local area were published in *The Village Book* (1930) and *The Labouring Life* (1932).The former had 55 stories and essays, and the latter 30, and they were grouped under *The Spirit of the Village* and *Air and Light of the Fields and the Sea*. Later came a revised compilation, for he had doubts about the unity of the material in book form, and this was published as *Tales of a Devon Village* (1945) and *Life in a Devon Village* (1945). Recently published have been paperback editions of these books; one has kept the title *Life in a Devon Village* (1983) but the other is known as *Village Tales* (1984), a reissue of *Tales of a Devon Village*. The village and environs are sometimes featured in other books, being present in a major way in *The Dream of Fair Women* (1924). You notice the odd reference in, for example, *The Lone Swallows* (1933) or *The Linhay on the Downs* (1934). *Nature in Britain* (1936), an illustrated survey of nature writing,has HW's introduction with its light-hearted village writing. *The Sun in the Sands* (1945) includes nostalgic writing on his early escape to Georgeham, though the material was recast and given the fulness of one of the Chronicle novels, *The Innocent Moon* (1961). In this version the village is now Malandine and its location put somewhere on the south coast. Village writing in unpublished material, especially in letters, could aid the appreciation of this side of his achievement if made available to readers; and there are references in miscellaneous pieces that he produced in a long writing career, in which, after his Norfolk period, he came back to where his creative springs were most rooted.