

## Richard Jefferies in Eltham

A large party of Richard Jefferies Society members visited Eltham in South East London on the 17th May this year, and inevitably a number of Williamson Society members were involved including, of course, Brian and Beryl Fullager. The local antiquarian society, The Eltham Society, acted as hosts for a number of activities which ended with the fixing of a G.L.C. Commemorative Blue Plaque on Jefferies' Eltham home at 59 Footscray Road. This was one of the very last acts of the much lamented G.L.C., for whom Ken Livingstone had added his support to try to establish a small public garden opposite the house, which was to be named after the great naturalist, but sadly road widening plans have prevented this. Apparently, Ken Livingstone is not only an authority on newts, but also a keen Jefferies reader.

As a long standing Eltham Society member, I was delighted to be able to help show the guests around nearby Eltham Palace and also King John's Walk, which Jefferies had so beautifully described in one of his essays published under the title *The Open Air*. This essay describes a walk down a country lane past a mediaeval palace, and contains many evocative descriptions of a long, hot Summer day in 1884 when he took his folding stool out to a cabbage-field near Eltham to see the poppies because "every spot of colour is a sort of food".

Although Williamson was much influenced by Jefferies and took a great interest in his life and work, he does not appear to have realised that Jefferies lived here at Eltham for a short period so near to his own home at Lewisham. The particular lane so beautifully described by Jefferies was also, by chance, well known to Henry, for it formed part of the Colfe's School Harriers course, this being the only sport at which Henry excelled, apart of course, from shooting, for he went with Colfe's to Bisley in 1911. The country lane down which the young Henry ran so well now borders a large council estate, but there is still a special atmosphere, particularly along the part which lies beneath the ancient banqueting hall, and a little of the spirit of both Jefferies and Williamson must surely still linger there.

Eltham was a particularly sad home for Jefferies, for it is here that his third child Richard, died from meningitis aged by one year and eight months and was buried at St. John's Church in the High Street.

Fred Shepherd

(Fred contributes other small items elsewhere in this issue)