

Letters

My eighty two year old father has only now been introduced to the Chronicle and has just read the "Golden Virgin". He was thrilled to read the accurate description of the Temperance Billiard Halls which he and his brothers had frequented for so many hours in the years just after the great war. We went down to Ladywell and found much of the building still surviving and he was able to point out the former Conservative Club premises where Dr. Dathwood spent so many happy hours. He was sure that he recognised the doctor and believes he brought my sister into the world. The doctor had been a local legend for many years.

My father lived in Pascoe Road immediately behind Nightingale Grove and so remembers the traumatic night when five homes were destroyed and so many died - including poor little Lily Cornfield. When the explosion occurred his father rushed round to help with the rescue work and warned my father and his young brothers to stay in the house, but the excitement was too great and as soon as his father had turned the corner they too were soon at the scene of the tragedy. In the morning they were to find a mattress in their garden at the top of an apple tree, the blast having thrown it over the railway and houses opposite.

All Lewisham was shocked and many attended the funeral at Hither Green cemetery where a special memorial still stands.

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My wife and I recently paid our first visit to Kingley Vale - a visit long overdue, but we have only recently moved over the border from West Surrey into West Sussex. We enjoyed the visit immensely, and it was a golden day with plenty of sunshine to light up the berries. We enjoyed seeing the little museum too, and must thank Richard for the care lavished on the Reserve. We had walked up from the Chilgrove road, but I was particularly pleased that cars were kept well away from the Reserve, so that people must use their legs to get there.

You may be interested to know that it is almost fifty years since I met Richard's father. That was in May 1937, just before the Coronation of that year. With a girl friend I had walked from Lynmouth and Simonsbath, over Span Head and down the valley of the Bray, and under the railway viaduct. At the entrance to the Deer Park we sat and rested by the river. Henry came across, instantly recognisable to me from photographs, and wanted to know if we were going to swim. No, we said, much too cold anyway. I didn't betray that we knew who he was; I felt then, as I do now, that writers, artists, actors, should have their privacy respected. So I couldn't say that there was a copy of *The Pathway* in my rucksack.

H.W. asked where we had come from and where we were going to. I told him that the following day we had planned to walk on, over the Burrows and Saunton Sands.

'I envy you', he said. I asked, why? I'd already mentioned that although I knew Exmoor well, it was our first visit to the Burrows coastline.

'Because you're seeing it for the first time', he replied. I thought I knew how he felt.

It was then that he told me that he was shortly leaving Devon for Norfolk, which came as a great shock. One simply couldn't imagine H.W. living anywhere else than in Devon. We talked

for about half an hour. He didn't reveal his identity and I didn't let on, but maybe with intuition he knew we'd recognised him and appreciated my reticence.

The last we saw of H.W. was when he was driving off in the Silver Eagle with all the family, as we walked on down to the Stags Head at Filleigh for tea. You were all off to Norfolk for the week-end, as he told us.

I have never forgot the chance meeting. Like many other young people I'd been greatly influenced by his pre 1939 writing, and I daresay many of my friends were heartily sick of hearing H.W. quoted. I walked again over the Burrows a week or so after war was declared, to say goodbye, not knowing what would be in store, and went back again just after VE day as a sort of thanksgiving. I walked and cycled over North Devon and Exmoor many times afterwards, but of course, H.W. was right; you never can recapture the first thrill.

Like many another artist, Elgar for example, Henry will grow in stature over the next fifty years. I personally prefer his pre-war writing, which is fresh and youthful and captures the spirit of Devon in happier days. I thought he was using too broad a canvas in *The Chronicle*, and I feel sure that he was exhausted by it.

I was very moved by Richard's Introduction to the new Illustrated Edition of *Tarka the Otter* which will take its place on my shelves with my old 1935 Putnam edition which if I recall was 3/6! Alas, in a rash and besotted generous gesture I once gave away my first edition of *The Starborn* which I purchased for 7/6 in 1940!

Yours sincerely,

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'How H.W. has influenced my life'

I read with interest the paragraph in the Journal's last issue about the new houses being built in Georgeham. I have, in fact, bought one of these houses and would like to recount, briefly, how this came about.

In 1965 whilst I was looking through the rather limited stock of paperback books in a back street newsagents in Hampton, I came across a copy of *Test to Destruction*, Panther edition. As my lifelong interest has been the history of the Great War, I was attracted by the splendid cover illustration; the author's name meant nothing to me.

At first I did not like the use of fictitious names of Regiments, i.e. Gaultshires, etc. and found it rather heavy going. I was not aware that it was part of a chronicle. Over the following years I found myself looking in secondhand bookshops for Henry Williamson books. Yearly visits to Mary Heath filled in most of the gaps, and I now find myself in the pleasant position of searching for the few remaining missing copies to add to my collection of first editions. During the summer of 1970 I made my first visit to North Devon with my wife and young children and drove over to Georgeham from Berrynarbour. In the "lower house" I made enquiries as to the whereabouts of H.W.'s house, and much to my disappointment was told that he had left the pub just a few moments before I arrived. An old chap leaned across the bar and asked me if I had read *The Village Book* because "I'm in it" he said. We had an interesting hour over a couple of pints.

From then on I visited or stayed in Georgeham at least twice a year, and armed with the knowledge from Henry's village books, enjoyed and became to love the surrounding area. About this time I sat down and wrote a long letter to Henry and he very kindly replied when he returned from Ireland.

On my visit to Georgeham with my wife last year, we saw the notice about the new development to be called Williamson Close. My heart sank, because I had known about the proposed development for two years and was hoping it would not be commenced until after my retirement. However, we called to see the agent, looked at the plans and decided to buy a property immediately. In great excitement we made three visits in late 1985, even sitting in the garden at Ox's Cross having tea and scones in late November. Completion was in February and on a bitterly cold day, my wife, our African Grey parrot and I, arrived to spend our first night in our new

house in Georgeham. The house name "Barley Cottage" in Welsh granite was put up, the Henry Williamson reading copies installed in the bookcase and Henry's picture hung on the wall. Now I look forward to our monthly visits to Georgeham and already feel part of the community. By the time I retire, the transition from urban London to Georgeham should be complete. All because of one paperback book.

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Brock Survives

In January a Chislehurst lady doctor was discovered in the woods alongside Kestor Ponds where she had been dumped after having had her throat slit from ear to ear. Her life had been saved by the cold night which had so chilled her body that the rate of bleeding slowed and because she was discovered in the early hours of Sunday morning by a badger watcher.

How wonderful that there is still the expectation of discovering this splendid animal of the wild so near to London and at Henry's favourite ponds.

F.G.S.

'A La Carte'

After another enjoyable meeting at Georgeham I extended my stay in Devon for a few days visiting the Commodore Hotel at Instow. From my balcony I was able to watch the gravel dredgers pass on their way to clear the mouth of the Taw-Torridge estuary and I thought again of Salav. I head once again from the pathway and marvelled at having just met the lovely Mary Gilvie.

At dinner I realised the extent to which Henry is now identified with this beautiful country for on the menu was 'Sole Tarka'!

F.G.S.