The Shallowford Scene

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In the autumn of 1929, eight years after he had settled in Georgeham to live and write, Henry Williamson moved himself and his family fifteen miles to the south-east, as the buzzard might fly, to the hamlet of Filleigh, on the Fortescue estate of Castle Hill. He became the tenant of Shallowford, a long, low thatched house beside the river Bray, on the edge of what was still known as the Deer Park. Although tame deer grazed there no longer, wild red deer sometimes visited the woods of the estate, and indeed do so today. (In Sir John Fortescue's *The Story of a Red Deer*, Bremridge Wood, just behind Shallowford, was a favourite resting place of the book's stag hero.)

The Fortescues are among the oldest land-owning families in Devon. According to family tradition, Sir Richard le Fort, cup-bearer to Duke William of Normandy, threw up his *fort escue* to ward off a blow that might have ended his master's life, and was given wide acres of the conquered island as his reward (the family motto is 'Forte Scutum Salus Ducum'). Unfortunately, as the history of the family written by Lord Clermont, one of the Irish branch, admits, 'Domesday Book does not record, in any recognisable form, an ancestor of the Fortescues among the persons who received grants of land from William the Conqueror'. In any case, it is said that Sir Richard went back to his native Normandy and left his eldest son, Sir Adam, to found an English branch of the family. It is known that a Sir Adam Fortescue was living at Wimpstone, in the parish of Modbury, not long after the Conquest. Deeds establishing Fortescue possessions date back to the twelfth century, and Manor Court Rolls for Filleigh exist from 1279. There were Fortescue lands in Gloucester, Cornwall, Lincolnshire and Ireland. In north Devon alone they extended far beyond Filleigh, on to Exmoor, to Georgeham and Morthoe, and to Weare Giffard, where the Hall was a family residence.

Castle Hill is a comparatively new name, adopted in the mid-18th century when the former Filleigh Manor, built in 1684, was greatly enlarged by the addition of the long east and west wings to be seen today, and a sham castle was built on the summit of the hill that rises steeply immediately behind the house to the north. It is said, however, that a Fortescue dwelling has stood on the site since the mid-15th century.

To quote Pevsner, the present house has a "long plain Palladian front of two storeys with a minimum of emphasis on the centre, just the cupola (originally built in 1684) and a door pediment'. Each wing has nine bays. The centre part was burnt out in 1934, and was rebuilt during the next three years in the original, pre-Victorian form. A few hundred yards to the south is a triumphal arch, approached by a fine beech avenue. Like the sham castle – in which, according to Sir John Fortescue, the first Earl's huntsman lived – the arch was built by an earlier Sir John, who became Earl Clinton and was created Baron Fortescue in 1746. He did not marry, and evidently spent much time and money on his house and its surroundings. After a severe storm had damaged the arch, it was rebuilt by Lady Margaret Fortescue some years ago, as a memorial to her parents.

The old main road from Barnstaple, the A361, runs through the Fortescue estate, and from it one has a good view of Castle Hill and its parkland. Until the opening of the North Devon Link Road in July 1989, it carried a great deal of traffic, especially in summer, when thousands of cars were on their way to or from holiday places on the coasts of north Devon and Cornwall. Nowadays it is comparatively quiet – almost, perhaps, as quiet as it would have been when Henry knew it in the Thirties.

For strangers to the area, Shallowford is not easy to find. It lies a little less than a mile from Castle Hill on a narrow road running from the Filleigh Sawmills eastwards. Where this road emerges near Aller Cross, on the way to South Molton, one may turn right to

rejoin the A361 or left to reach the Link Road. The sawmills have for long formed a useful part of the estate, a large area of which is given over to forestry. Today modern machinery is driven by electricity, and work goes on as busily as ever. In Henry's time, the motive power was water from the Bray. As he wrote in Chapter 20 of the first edition of *The Children of Shallowford*, 'River in Flood':

> *The great circular saws, which whirl round and cut swiftly into the trunks with rasping, screeching noises, are silent on Sundays. No timber-waggons, with horses muddied to the knees, stand there; no men heave at the straight and massive trunks with crowbars, or make piles of new-sawn wood. The sawmills are silent, save for the thresh and ply of water cascading down the spillway of the overflow.*

Readers of that book will remember the heart-stopping moment on one such Sunday in 1936 when one of the children nearly drowned. Henry was away. John took the three-year-olds, Robbie and Rosie, to play on the sawdust piles beside the river. Robbie, thinking that sawdust floating on the water was a solid surface, tried to walk on it. Only his long hair and John's presence of mind saved his life.

Two miles of fishing on the Bray went with the tenancy of Shallowford; this was one of its attractions for Henry. A small river, rising near Challacombe on Exmoor, the Bray takes in more than half a dozen little runnels, or runners, to use the name Henry favoured, in the first few miles of its meandering course. A short distance west of George Nympton it joins the river Mole, that gives its name to North and South Molton, and the Mole in its turn flows into the Taw at Junction Pool.

Henry, with Loetitia and Windles, first visited Shallowford on a summer day in 1929. Standing on the little ornamental bridge – Humpy Bridge – gazing down into the water, they saw several trout. 'While I stood there I experienced a feeling that the day was fixed immortally, for ever, in blue space. For a moment I was back in a summer of boyhood. Water, mysterious water, was speaking to me again', Henry recalled nearly thirty years later in *A Clear Water Stream*. On a second visit during the period of waiting for approval of Henry's eager application to take the lease, they glanced discreetly over Shallowford's garden hedge and asked one another what more they could desire. In November they moved in.

Henry's landlord, Earl Fortescue, was the eldest son of the third Earl's family of seven sons and seven daughters, all but one of whom survived infancy. Sir John Fortescue was one of his younger brothers. Denied a hoped-for military career by poor physique and eyesight, Sir John began, in 1889, a history of the British Army. Originally projected to comprise two volumes, it eventually ran to thirteen. He finished it in 1929; Henry observed, in his essay 'Staghunting' in *The Linhay on the Downs*, that the thirty-year labour of research, compilation and analysis had exhausted him. He died in 1933, just before the publication of his autobiography, *Author and Curator*. 'I had received much encouragement from this man, my senior in letters', Henry recalled, and it was of course Sir John who had written the introduction to *Tarka*, a kindness that probably did much to help the initial reception of the book.

In *The Children of Shallowford* and *A Clear Water Stream* Henry gave brief accounts of the past of Shallowford. The Fortescue clerk of works told him much local history, 'including his grandfather's life in the house I now occupied'. Until the 19th century it had been three cottages – built, no doubt, for workers on the estate. The clerk of works of the time, the aforementioned grandfather, presumably, had converted them into a single dwelling for himself. The original cottages may have dated back at least to the 18th century; certainly Henry thought that the slate slab of the hearth in the living room, 'a lovely thing, deep blue and gentle, worn hollow in places with many feet resting on it',

was possibly two or three hundred years old. He mourned the loss of this slab when, in his absence and contrary to his instructions, a local mason smashed it while reconstructing the hearth, and replaced it with concrete.

The Shallowford years were eventful. During them Henry visited America twice and Germany, fatefully, once. He built his writing hut in his field above Georgeham on his 'hill of winds' – and evidently began to use it as a refuge from family life. Finding the Bray depleted of fish, he obtained the permission of Lord Fortescue – who, he was delighted to learn, was known as the Lord of All, while his eldest son was the Young Lord – to restock it. From a fish farm near Dulverton he bought Loch Leven fingerlings and two-year-old trout. These fish, introduced into the river, were fed daily by Henry or, in his frequent absences, by his wife and children, and flourished.

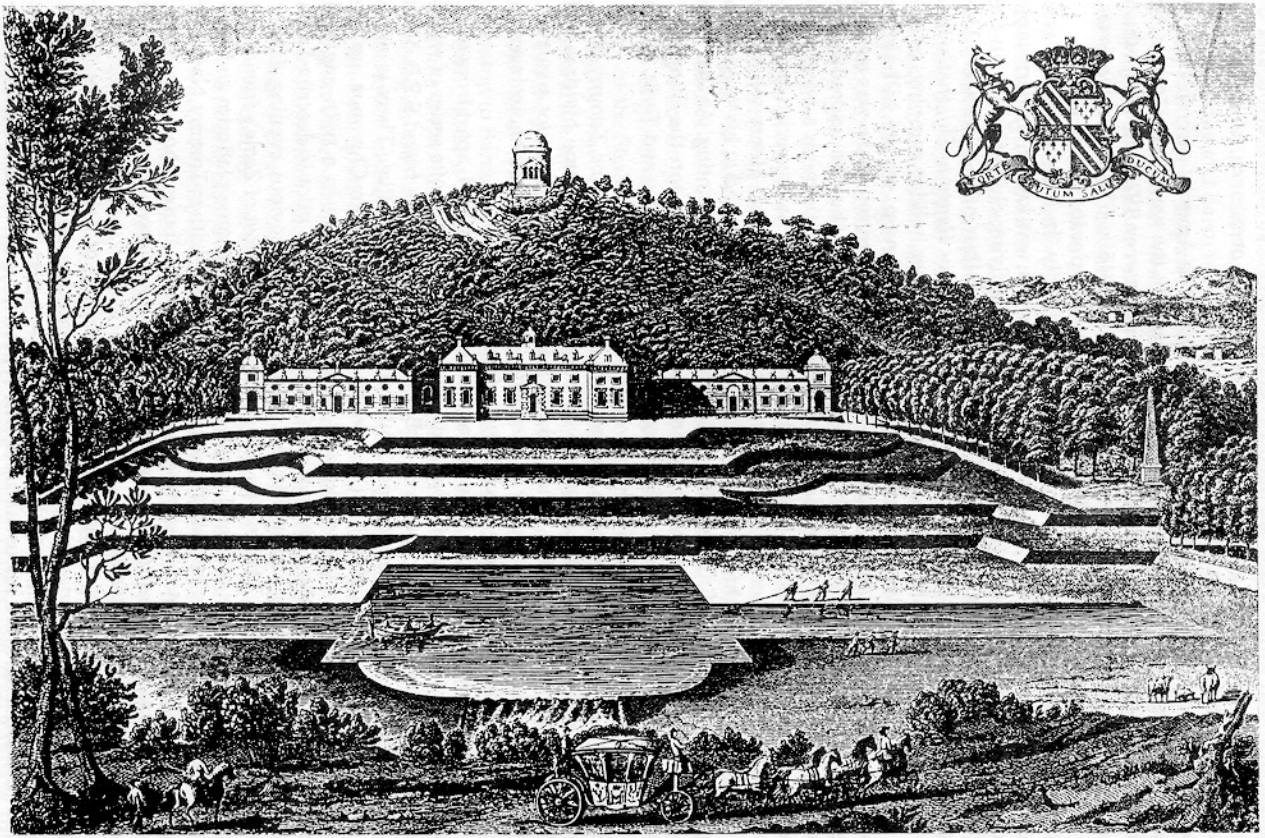
Another interest was a new car, a Silver Eagle tourer of the make first introduced by the Alvis motor company in 1930. In this he made long journeys. One took him, with Loetitia, as far as Tarbert, en route for a visit to the Hebrides. For this car Henry felt a great affection, even an affinity. Its driving seat bore some resemblance to the open cockpit of a small aircraft of those days. Two of his friends, 'Julian Warbeck' and Victor Yeates, had been pilots in the First World War. The central character of *The Gold Falcon*, published in 1933, is a much-decorated former fighter pilot. Did Henry sometimes, when he drove at speed, windscreen flat, wearing helmet and goggles like an airman, imagine himself flying on patrol over the Western Front?

The fourth Earl Fortescue died in 1932, and his son succeeded him. Henry remained as a tenant of Shallowford, but it seems that a dissatisfaction with his life there was beginning to grow. In the next two years came news of other deaths. He mourned men he had admired. As has been said, Sir John Fortescue died in 1933, as did John Galsworthy, whose novels Henry had read 'night after night in the winter of 1918, alone in that grey asbestos cubicle of Shorncliffe Camp after mess dinner', and who had presented the Hawthornden Prize for Literature to him ten years later. At the end of 1934 Victor Yeates, Henry's former schoolfellow whose remarkable book, *Winged Victory*, had been published by Cape through Henry's recommendation, died of tuberculosis. Most shockingly of all, T.E. Lawrence, Henry's supreme hero, died following an accident on his powerful motorcycle in the following May.

From the beginning, the house by the Bray had been something of a disappointment. Seeing it first in summer, Henry had not realised how much it was overshadowed in winter by the wooded hill opposite; for many weeks of the year its rooms were dark. The weather, for the first year or two, was very wet; Henry looked back with nostalgia to 'summer joys in the old village' – Georgeham – and revisited it often. Temperamentally unsuited, it would seem, to monogamy, he fell in love several times, but at least two of these loves were teenage girls who remained proof against his ardour, causing him Werther-ish anguish. He was oppressed by the need to write for money to support his growing family (by the mid-Thirties there were, in all, six children in the house). In *The Linhay on the Downs* he told himself that there were nearly a dozen people dependent on him, and in *Goodbye West Country* claimed that for three years he had been 'the support, or part support, of five families, comprising in all seven adults and twelve children'. There were few days in any year, he said, when life seemed full and positive; 'the rest was mooning about by the river, or in the writing room, losing one's life away in strings of words'.

Yet all that mooning about by the river, building dams, watching fish, herons, mayfly, feeding the trout he had introduced and sometimes fishing for them, served as an apprenticeship for what is surely his greatest achievement during his time at Shallowford, the writing of *Salar the Salmon*.

In the Twenties, in the midst of much other work, he had repeatedly sought to absorb



This engraving is based on a painting by James Wootton which has been dated as 'certainly before 1746'. The domed rotunda on the hill may be imaginary; the sham castle shown in the slightly later engraving was in existence by 1752. Like the triumphal arch and various follies in the grounds of Castle Hill, the sham castle was built by the first Baron Fortescue.

himself into the life of a semi-aquatic mammal, and so had written *Tarka*. Now, also in the midst of much other work, he used his acute powers of observation and of imaginative visualisation, and his empathy with wild creatures, to enter and triumphantly capture in prose a wholly aquatic world.

He was to have written the book during his second visit to America early in 1934; he had signed a contract with Faber before he sailed. Instead, in the warmth of Georgia, he revelled in the happy evocation of his life in Georgeham between 1921 and 1924, which would remain unpublished until Faber brought it out in 1945 as *The Sun in the Sands*. Even when he returned to England in May 1934, he put off beginning *Salar*..

That summer an opportunity arose for him to learn to fly. In June an airfield was opened at Chivenor, beside the Taw near Heanton Court. It was known as Barnstaple Aerodrome or Airport, and was the home of a flourishing flying club at which, in the next five years, many members would obtain their civilian pilot's licences. The remarkable airwoman, Ann Welch, says in her autobiography *Happy to Fly*, that when she was seventeen, in 1934, she and her family spent a summer holiday camping, as she puts it slightly inaccurately, 'in Henry's barn in north Devon, on the hill above Barnstaple aerodrome'. She had first met Henry two years earlier, while she was staying at Torcross with an aunt. He visited her family often, she says, but his unpredictable behaviour – disappearing in the middle of a meal or arriving through a window – 'caused consternation to my father, who was never sure whether to appreciate a genius or complain about bad manners'. Nevertheless, her parents consulted Henry when they were disturbed by their daughter's apparent obsession with flying, and at his suggestion she spent some time with C.F. Tunnicliffe and his wife, studying painting. At that time Tunnicliffe had just finished his work, commissioned by Putnam, on the illustrated uniform edition of *The Lone Swallows, The Peregrine's Saga, The Old Stag* and *Tarka*, which were brought out between 1932 and 1934.

At Chivenor, Ann Welch took flying lessons from the club's instructor, Tommy Nash, and went solo in September. Henry, not to be outdone, had overcome his dread of airsickness and decided that he too would take flying lessons. They were not a success. By the end of the third – or was it only the second? – he had exhausted his instructor's patience, and any idea of qualifying as a pilot was forgotten.

It would seem that Henry wrote little during the second half of 1934, apart from what he called 'a mule of a book', *Devon Holiday*. This includes descriptions of a series of walks on Exmoor, Dartmoor and along the coast of Barnstaple Bay with his friend S.P.B. Mais (here called Masterman Funicular Hengist Zeale) and Mais's wife Gillian. There is also a somewhat facetious account of a flight, evidently undertaken from Chivenor, up the Torridge to Petersmarland clay works and on to Okehampton in a twin-engined passenger plane – probably the Chivenor club's Short Scion. The pilot is described as a friend of Zeale's, whom they had met in the village pub the previous evening. Henry makes the startling assertion, 'I believe he had stolen that kite; most of Zeale's friends are crooks. The pilot wore a large diamond ring, I noticed, and had some platinum and gold cigarette cases. Moreover, his moustache ends were waxed'. Neither Tommy Nash nor his partner Robert Boyd made this spiv-like impression on those who knew them. Perhaps Henry was compensating for the fiasco of his flying lessons by portraying an imaginary pilot in this unflattering way.

In the spring of 1935 Henry could postpone the writing of *Salar* no longer. Faber wanted it for the Christmas market. He set to work, beginning the book at Shallowford and finishing it in his writing hut at Georgeham. There was no opportunity for the repeated revisions that were his usual habit. The typescript went to the printer in time for publication in the late autumn; by the end of the year he knew that it had sold

exceptionally well. In the meantime, however, he had spent several weeks in Germany with his friend John Heygate, attended the Nuremburg Rally of 1935, and begun that idealisation of a wholly unreal and benevolent Hitler which was to colour so much of his later thinking and harm his reputation.

By this time his impulse to begin a new life in a new place had taken a definite form. He would be a farmer – but where? The search took him farther and farther afield until, staying at the holiday cottage near Cromer belonging to his friend and publisher Richard de la Mare, he found Old Hall Farm, Stiffkey.

He took public leave of Shallowford in two books, *Goodbye West Country* (1937) and *The Children of Shallowford* (1939). The first edition of the latter (Henry cut and altered it considerably for another edition twenty years later) contains a chapter entitled 'Ancient Sunlight', that phrase he used so often for the past. In it he spoke of being sad 'when I re-enter the ancient sunlight of our valley life, and see the golden ghosts of the children playing by the summer river, or under the lime trees' rustling leaves. There is no return; and as I am made, and always have been, I long to return'. In eight years' time he would indeed return, though not to Shallowford; he would never say a final goodbye to the west country, especially that part of it that was his Land of the Two Rivers.

Between 1929 and 1937 Henry published a dozen books, varying considerably in length and quality. *On Foot in Devon* and *Devon Holiday* were avowed potboilers, although in them are to be found interesting sidelights on Henry's life at Shallowford. *The Patriot's Progress* stands as his first published story of war experiences. *The Village Book* and *The Labouring Life* offer lively and highly individual representations of life in and around the Georgeham of the Twenties. *The Gold Falcon*, that odd one out among Henry's novels, gives the reader an impression of New York in Prohibition days as seen by an Englishman of uncommon sensitivity. *Salar the Salmon* remains the outstanding work of the Shallowford years, and its completion finally ended Henry's interest in his life by the Bray. Too optimistically, he pictured himself going '. . . far away, to a new life, a natural life, of easy body working . . .' How hard and exhausting reality was to prove!

For the past twenty-one years I have had the good fortune to live within four miles of Shallowford. When we first came to live here, the rails of the former G.W.R. line from Taunton to Barnstaple, closed in 1966, had gone and Filleigh Station, from which Henry so often made a winter journey to Bristol to broadcast from the BBC's studios, was to become a dwelling. The trackway made a good path for walkers. But the M5 was pushing its way south-west, and a Link Road to join it to north Devon was proposed. After much discussion, many protests and a public enquiry, it was decided that the stretch from South Molton to Barnstaple should follow the route of the old railway, and the great valley-striding viaduct that had carried it over the Bray, half a mile upstream from Shallowford, should be strengthened and widened to carry the new road. In July 1989 this section of the Link Road was opened. Where Filleigh Station used to stand it runs in a cutting. Yet only a few hundred yards to the south-west, over a rise in Castle Hill's parkland, Shallowford, from the outside, looks much as it did in the photograph that forms a frontispiece to *The Children of Shallowford*. The Bray still flows from Exmoor through the ancient Deer Park and away south to join the Bray. It runs in spate in winter, as Henry and his family often saw it; it runs very quietly in summers such as those of 1989 and 1990. A child might wade across, no more than ankle deep, just below the narrow bridge that carries the road from the Sawmills: a shallow ford indeed.

Resting in shade on hot days of drought, watching a dazzle of sun striking through branches overhead on to stone-rippled water, it is still possible to feel that a noonday may be 'fixed immortally, for ever, in blue space', and to believe that with a turn of the head, the golden ghosts of the children might still be glimpsed somewhere under the lime trees.