

Considering Folkestone

Fred Shepherd

At a Devon meeting a few years ago our much loved member, the late Margaret Clarke, suggested that we should meet as a society at Folkestone because the town had many associations with Henry Williamson's life and work. As I occasionally visit Folkestone, and am appalled at the manner in which much of the town centre has been re-developed, I cringed at the thought of actually staying there. This was to my mind Lewisham by Sea! But a recent visit from a different direction found me by chance on the Leas, and has completely changed my opinion. I only wish I could let Margaret know just how right I now think she was, for we had enjoyed many friendly arguments especially when on the first Society visit to the battle fields of the Great War with Paul Reed.

The Leas consists of 1½ miles of well-kept greens bordering the steep cliffs commanding fine views of the Channel and leads into the Road of Remembrance down which millions of troops marched to and from the First World War. There is a fine memorial depicting an officer on horseback and a soldier marching and it is planted with rosemary, traditionally the emblem of remembrance. Our members, however, will not need a cenotaph, for the view across the grey seas to France is more than enough to inspire memories of ancient sunlight.

The western end of the Leas is adorned by two vast hotel buildings which have been beautifully restored and converted into high class residential apartments. Their imposing elevation, crowned with domes, and with white paint gleaming in the sunlight, remind us of Folkestone's elegant past as reflected in Henry Williamson's beautiful novel, *A Dream of Fair Women*.

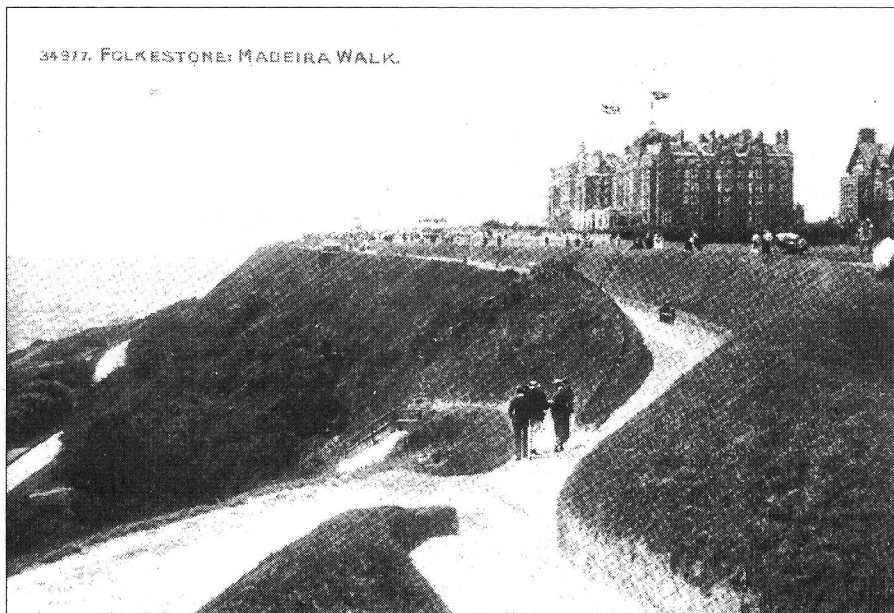
The Grand was built in 1904 and was soon established as one of England's finest seaside hotels. It was the scene of the 'Victory Day' celebrations described so vividly in Williamson's novel and stands alongside the large field in which the giant bonfire was lit. Today this is but a large well-kept lawn, but for me I could imagine still '... the spectators who were lying on the grass in attitudes of abandonment. Only a few small boys braved the heat of the ruddy mass and dared to venture within a fifty feet radius. Several young civilians and soldiers, overcome by heat and drink were sprawled on the ground', and, of course, Julian Warbeck was there reading Swinburne.

The very steep paths and steps which lead down to the beach from the Leas were replaced in 1921 by the now famous zig-zag path. Promenading along the Leas had become a popular custom, as was walking down the steep paths and returning later for meals at the many popular hotels. The new path was designed to make it easier for perambulators and bathchairs to be manoeuvred especially as there were many wounded soldiers now wishing to stay here. Sadly, this vast construction caused the loss of many mature trees which the young Henry would have loved. The gardens are, however, still very attractive and retain their natural appearance, but in more recent years some steps have had to be replaced following earth slips so that the zig-zag path lost some of its unique character. Fortunately, bath chairs no longer have to be pushed up the hill!

There are several fine groups of period homes on and just off the Leas, and members could retrace Willie Maddison's steps to establish which was Radnor Park Gardens and where stood the Paragon. I have no doubt, however, that Williamson borrowed the 'Paragon' from near his old school at Blackheath where the elegant crescent was often the home of senior army officers. One of the most charming houses set just back from the cliff has been marked by the Dickens Fellowship as the home of the great novelist in



The Grand Hotel, Folkestone. From a period postcard.



Madeira Walk, Folkestone. Postcard postmarked 1939.

1855 where he wrote much of *Little Dorrit*.

Past the Leas the Road of Remembrance leads down to the old harbour which still holds many attractions in spite of some appalling modern developments which welcome visitors off the ferry from France. A short walk up the sadly neglected, but ancient High Street leads to a small but charming square surrounding SS Mary and Eanswythe Church. (In the Churchyard is a stone to Rebecca Rogers, a crusader against the chimney tax. Will our poll tax evaders be honoured in stone?) Henry would have known this scene well.

Next to the Grand stands the Metropole, a magnificent hotel building erected in 1896 and now housing a renowned art centre which has attracted many famous artists to its staff, including Fred Cuming RA. For some years it has presented much of the successful Kent Literature Festival which last year included over 40 events with talks by Beryl Bainbridge, A.S. Byatt, P.D. James, and John Mortimer. Could we not one day break with tradition, and hold an Autumn meeting here in Folkestone so that we participate in these well publicised events with at least an exhibition at the Metropole Gallery. The Festival takes place each year at the end of October.

I was reminded of *The Dream of Fair Women* on a recent visit to the Rodin Museum in Paris where I was astonished to come across the beautiful bust of a later Edwardian beauty, Eve Fairfax. At first I dismissed the connection as being impossible but on reflection my imagination soon worked wonders. Was not the Fairfax home at Folkestone decorated with photographs of Rodin's sculptures? Secondly, was not Rodin's mistress just after the Great War, Gwen John, the lovely artist sister of Augustus John RA, the famous red bearded "Lion of Tenby". He makes several appearances in the *Chronicle*, painting the dejected troops as they struggled through the mud at the Front and at other times, enjoying bohemian parties at the Café Royal in Piccadilly with Willie and his friends.

His is a salutary tale for Augustus John gained enormous fame during a life which was crowned by the award of The Order of Merit in 1942, a distinction so many believe should also have gone to Henry Williamson. His sister Gwen became a recluse and died in the streets of Dieppe forgotten, let alone honoured, in 1939. However, today Augustus John is less highly regarded than his sister whose reputation continues to soar and is now much admired all over the world. So much for our Honours system!

Should the Henry Williamson Society visit Folkestone? Perhaps I have convinced members that we should have a commemorative bohemian dinner at the Café Royal or perhaps have a Swinburne poetry reading on the Leas following a day trip to Paris! Should we be able to find a hotel large enough to house all our activities at a reasonable cost, then there is much to discover still at Folkestone. A Spring meeting would be most attractive with perhaps a visit to Aylesford Priory, a plate of Folkestone's famous cockles eaten alongside the harbour wall to the shrill sound of seagulls, or perhaps a browse in Marrin's excellent antiquarian bookshop. This was where Henry Williamson found his copy of *The Story of My Heart* and so changed the course of his life.

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Since this article was submitted the Committee, due to the pressing need for advance organisation, have made a definite decision to hold the next Spring Meeting at Folkestone. Details will be available in due course.