

Meetings

Norfolk in Spring 1991

We gathered on a truly glorious spring evening, which cheered up the rather austere concrete surroundings of our base – the University of East Anglia, on the outskirts of Norwich.

The weekend proper commenced with a recording of HW's choice of 'Desert Island Discs', introduced and expanded by June Emerson. We were joined for the evening by members of the Williamson family, including the redoubtable Loetitia, now in her 91st year.

A lively discussion ensued between those who were disappointed that Henry's choices included no truly 'great' music, and those who felt that his appreciation of music was on a romantic, emotional level and that their hero remained undiminished. This was interspersed with some priceless anecdotes from Margaret Williamson, shedding new light on the eccentric Wagnerian.

Saturday morning was free for sightseeing in Norwich. We regrouped after lunch and travelled north by coach to visit the Norfolk Farm itself. The numbers outside the old church in Stiffkey had swollen to seventy or eighty, and the party was becoming distinctly unmanageable. Loetitia, Margaret, Richard and Robert Williamson accompanied us, and enlivened the tour with personal memories and tales of childhood escapades. Robert confessed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between actual memories and events from his father's writings.

We walked around the three cottages purchased and modernised by Henry, now in pristine condition and looking thoroughly gentrified.

And so, via Stiffkey village, to the farm itself, approached by Henry's fine, concrete road, lined with daffodils. The yards and buildings were explored and the anecdotes continued, both from the family and the excellent Douglas Jordan, who spent his entire working life on the farm and whose respect and admiration for HW remain considerable.

What sticks in my mind is the hardship suffered by the unfortunate Windles – removed from school and compelled to do a man's job running the farm and policing his younger siblings, in return, it would seem, for very little thanks from his father.

Time was pressing, so the visit was curtailed and we travelled a few miles to the Blakeney Hotel for tea.

The main event of the evening was a hearing of the recent radio broadcast of 'The Perfect Stranger' by David Clayton and Neil Walker, who joined us in person. The programme comprised an account of Henry's farming venture and the events surrounding it, and included extracts from Henry's own writings and interviews with members of the Williamson family, Douglas Jordan and other local people. Some of the latter contributions had to be edited out when the programme was broadcast nationally, as the Norfolk dialect was impenetrable.

The evening at Blakeney was a great success. Reprints of HW books were on sale, as well as copies of 'The Perfect Stranger', on tape.

Sunday morning saw the final event of the weekend – the film 'The Vanishing Hedgerows' starring HW. This fascinating piece provoked what transpired to be the liveliest debate of the whole meeting. Was HW a 'Green' before his time or simply a romantic hankering after the good old methods of the past. In some ways both seemed true. His commitment to modern technology was beyond question when he felt it to be beneficial. Yet he certainly resented the intrusion of world market forces into the security of British Agriculture.

The input of several farmers into the discussion was especially welcome. Was the farm ever a viable proposition anyway? Probably not. The divided land with steep fields

and damp watermeadows made it a daunting prospect, even for an experienced farmer. That he achieved as much as he did is ample testimony to his dogged singlemindedness.

From a business standpoint he should have delayed some of his capital intensive improvements and simply concentrated on getting the show on the road. Driven by his quest for perfection he ran inevitably into cashflow problems. Now much of the land has reverted to what is possibly its optimum use, a duck shoot.

This compelling exchange could well have gone on longer, but the time had come to part, and we ended this most stimulating weekend on a high note.

HAMISH CARLISLE

P.S. During the evening I was asked on more than one occasion which of HW's books had triggered my interest. I had to confess that none of them was originally responsible.

About 1970 I was a student of Physics at Edinburgh University. I was invited to attend the instalment of Kenneth Allsop as Rector, a rather grand event. On stage with Allsop, the Duke of Edinburgh, and various other dignitaries, was an elderly man of very striking appearance, clad in a white jacket, if I remember rightly. I was told that this was Henry Williamson, boyhood hero of Allsop and author of some book about otters.

The festivities continued with a dance in the Assembly Rooms in George Street. As I entered the vestibule with my young lady, I was approached by this same man who greeted me, "Hallo, Mr Lion!"

I realised he was referring to my mane of red hair, then fashionably Afro, but was lost for words.

"Your name IS Mr Lion, isn't it?" he continued.

"No. . ." I protested.

"Well, it bloody well ought to be young man, with a head of hair like that!"

After this, how could I resist?

The Northern Circuit of the Tarka Trail

Further to the mention made under 'Secretary's Notes' you might like to know that the opening ceremony was attended by your President, Richard Williamson and his wife, and Vice-Chairman George Heath accompanied by Mary, whilst Lois Lamplugh and her husband were also present, so the Society was well represented. The HW Literary Estate had loaned a selection of *Tarka the Otter* editions for display at the North Devon Museum, where everyone gathered first for coffee and a chance to meet.

Television and newspaper journalists were present in strength and Richard was prominent in the news coverage that evening, whilst a nice photo of him stroking the otter sculpture appeared in the *North Devon Gazette*. Of course, this was not a 'Society' event, but it did provide an opportunity to 'show the flag' and to meet various officials, including renewing acquaintance with Tony Speller (North Devon MP), who is always interested in the progress of HW affairs. Intervet had arranged a nationwide competition among schoolchildren about otter conservation and the young winner was present to receive her prize and help unveil the sculpture, which is situated in the small garden outside the North Devon Museum.

A choice then had to be made between an invitation to lunch by courtesy of Devon County Council at the Imperial Hotel or to set off on the first leg of the walk. Richard, Anne, George and Mary decided to support Nicola Oliver and the other Tarka Project Staff and set off (twelve of us in total) on what we were told would be a three-mile stroll along flat terrain – but what was in reality six miles of fairly tough walking on what was a suddenly (and unusually!) hot day. The Trail took us first along the bank of the River Taw and then inland along the stream that runs past Venn Quarry and onto Landkey. Here we parted company as our commitments would not allow us to continue the serious business of the full walk and a double decker bus transported half the company

(seven of us!) back to Barnstaple, leaving the Tarka Project Staff to continue the full way and, of course, picking up a diversion to the Field and The Writing Hut on the following Sunday (see Secretary's Notes).

There is a brief guide to the walk available, but you are seriously advised to buy also detailed large scale maps suitable for hikers. The Trail is to be way-marked (but wasn't at the opening) and this is a very necessary item to be attended to urgently. But if you are prepared and able to cope with serious walking then this is certainly the way to relive *Tarka*. We were shown otter spraint on a half-submerged tree trunk at Venn Bridge by the very enthusiastic Trail warden, so it is quite possible that determined and patient watchers (the dawn and dusk type) could see otters.

The highlight of this short stretch must surely be the breathtaking view of Venn Quarry from the route we took on the south side of the stream, the sheer naked rock now rearing skywards whilst the stream puzzles its way through luscious undergrowth grown rampant from the marshy bed. Eight buzzards soared in the sky at one place, revelling in the updraft. Henry's presence was very strong. (He would surely have rejoiced to find these old haunts being put to such a use?) But he hardly mentions this area in *Tarka* except to imbue it with loneliness. After a happy interlude with Whitetip, she suddenly vanishes after a nasty encounter with man, dog, and ferret. Tarka is alone and hungry. He is faced with these sheer cliffs which seem to go as deep under the water as they now tower over it.

Hu-ee-ic! The whistle echoed from the face of rock across the water . . .

Hu-ee-ic!

Only his echo replied, and he wandered on.

AW

Opening of Richard Jefferies and W.H. Hudson Memorial Garden at Broadwater Cemetery, Worthing 15 May 1991

On a sunny but cold May morning at Broadwater Cemetery, Worthing, several members of the Henry Williamson Society joined representatives from the Richard Jefferies Society with whom they share joint membership. Many had travelled up by minibus from Jefferies' home town of Swindon in order to attend this special gathering, which was called in order to celebrate the opening of a recently constructed memorial garden. This is dedicated to the proud memory of two illustrious adopted sons of Worthing, the nature writer and mystic, Richard Jefferies, and his fellow country writer, the great 'Birdman of Patagonia', W.H. Hudson, both of whom have their last resting place in Broadwater. A brief opening ceremony was performed by the Mayor of Worthing followed by short readings from the works of Jefferies and Hudson. This marked the successful conclusion of an enlightened project funded by the Worthing Borough Council. The memorial takes the form of a small but well-stocked wildlife garden complete with imposing entrance gate and a rough stone cairn surmounted by a hewn slab inscribed with a quotation from Jefferies' *Field and Hedgerow*. A sturdy wooden bench seat is provided for the pilgrim to sit and enjoy this unexpected haven for wild flowers and plants. A Mulberry tree is the gift of the Richard Jefferies Society. This fair garden, opened as part of Worthing's contribution towards National Environment Week, is in direct contrast to the ugly vandalism which is betrayed by the many broken headstones and crosses that litter the fine old Victorian burial ground. (The grave of poor Hudson whose last wish was to be buried near his beloved Jefferies, has been violated on at least three occasions.) We left that quiet memorial garden with its bluebells and cowslips already bringing a splash of colour amid the grey, drab stones; and expressed the earnest hope that they would be allowed to bloom again next year.

BRIAN FULLAGAR