

A Day Out in Brockley

Pat Murphy

Henry Williamson shared with Thomas Hardy a deep sense of place in all his writings and when I first read the early volumes of the *Chronicle*, I knew instinctively that he was writing about actual localities known in his young life and not an imagined landscape created in a novelist's fertile mind.



I visited Lewisham, Ladywell and Brockley in 1970 for the first time with the express purpose of confirming that my belief was well founded. Armed with an A-Z guide and some key passages from the London novels, I soon found Hillside Road fronting on to Hilly Fields Recreation Ground and using this short road as a base reference most of the locations were revealed, Henry's simple code being easily broken. Since then, I have made several "pilgrimages" to the district plus two informative visits with the Society when Lewisham was chosen

as a venue for spring meetings.

My last time in the area was on a hot August Sunday in 1989: in the company of two friends from the Society, one of whom being Margaret White whose superb sketches illustrate this piece, we set out to discover some of the places which had remained unexplored on earlier occasions. Our first goal was the church of St Simon's to the north west of Hilly Fields. A service was in progress when we arrived so we strolled around the vicinity of the church. Large, three-storied detached houses were a feature of the wide roads; mainly in multi-occupation now, they must have been fashionable residences of the middle class at the turn of the century when young Phillip Maddison was growing up.

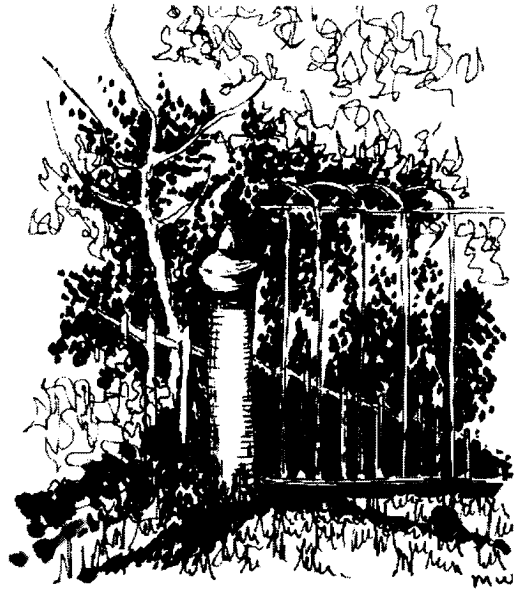
When the service was over we went into the church to find the memorial tablet commemorating all those in the parish who had served in the First World War. Coffee was available in a transept and we were kindly invited to join a dozen or more parishioners who had remained behind after the service to socialise. One man, having learnt the reason for our presence there, led us over to the opposite transept where, high up on the wall and dimly lit, the memorial showing Henry Williamson's name among at least a hundred others was situated. We also saw a tablet commemorating the real life vicar on whom the character of the Rev. Ernest Mundy was based who had lost his life

in a bicycling accident during the war. Outside, the site of the tennis courts where Richard Maddison once employed his cannonball service to such effect was pointed out to us. Unhappily, the incident of Mona Monk led to Richard's self-imposed exile from all social activities at St Simon's even to the extent of changing his railway season ticket to Randiswell to avoid passing near the place on his way to and from work.

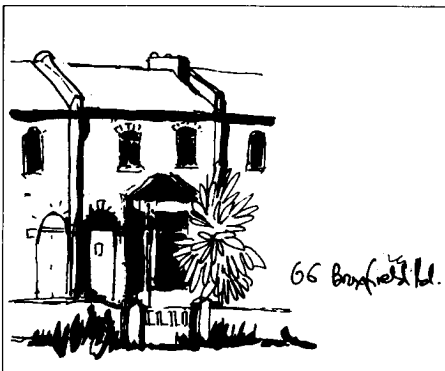
We now walked down to the High Road and, turning to the south, we eventually came to Braxfield Road on the right and to the small, well maintained terrace house which was the birth place of Henry Williamson. A left and then a right turn brought us to Comfort Road where Phillip Maddison was born. The old Lock-Keeper's house was empty and boarded up but we found the side door leading to the back garden was unlocked and we rather guiltily crept round onto the small, overgrown lawn with the trains passing in the cutting alongside the garden. A melancholy place now and we were glad to be on our way, past the Catholic church, back to the High Road and towards 'The Jack', our next destination.

Mrs Feeny's husband would still have found much to recognise today at his favourite watering-hole for although there have obviously been some alterations since his time it remains very much a working man's pub. While we were enjoying a much needed drink, we noticed several photographs of local interest seemingly of later Victorian vintage decorating the walls of the main bar. One which particularly fascinated us was of a poorly dressed, foreign looking little man with a barrel organ; could this possibly have been The Ning a Ning Man, the recipient of Richard's walking boots and the donor of Hetty's much-cherished aspidistra?

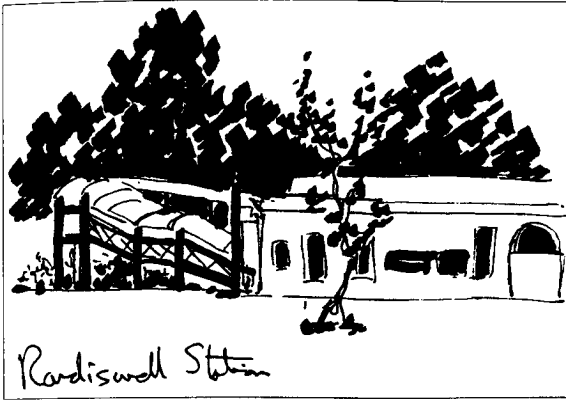
The amenities of 'The Jack' did not run to food on a Sunday lunchtime so we crossed the road to a take-away establishment and took our repast into the nearby Randiswell cemetery to eat on a bench shaded by a large tree. As the three of us had taken part in the first battlefields tour where of necessity most of our al fresco meals were consumed in war cemeteries, it seemed quite a normal place to have lunch.



Benches backing onto Hollyhills.



66 Braxfield Rd.



While we were there we thought we would have a look at the Turney family grave; we knew roughly the part of the cemetery where it was situated but a search of over half an hour failed to find it. We left by the Ivy Lane gate and made our way down to the Randiswell Recreation Ground with its memories of the gentle Lily Cornford and her vindictive oppressor, Keechy. On over the bridge spanning the murky Randisbourne brook

and we followed the path at the side of the parish church which led us out to the High Street. (The High Street runs almost parallel to the High Road where we had been earlier but about a mile east of it). A turn to the left almost immediately took us towards Randiswell station and The Railway pub. A drink at this tavern seemed called for. Well, it was very hot and we had walked a good distance, but it was too crowded inside for comfort so we took our drinks outside to a low wall in Station Approach. We wondered how much the surroundings had changed since both Richard and Phillip had travelled on this line.

Suitably rested and refreshed, we made towards our last objective, the block of flats where Mrs Neville and Desmond had lived. We took the right hand fork into Charlotte Road and at the foot of Hillside Road saw that the two-storied property was in a dilapidated state and clearly earmarked for demolition. The flats were occupied by squatters who showed evident displeasure at our close scrutiny of their temporary abode so we judged that a dignified retreat onto the Hill behind us was a prudent move.

As we were standing on the grass opposite Phillip's old home in Hillside Road where we had left the car, a young man came out of the next door house higher up the road and walked across to us; he asked rather brusquely if we were from the Council. At that time there were plans to sink a 180-foot shaft at that spot on the Hill in connection with the Channel Tunnel rail link which was due to follow a line right under Hilly Fields. We had noticed that most houses around had posters in their windows protesting about this development.

The young man, once we had explained that we had nothing to do with the Council and divulged our Williamson interest in the area and pointed to the blue plaque on the house next to his, became quite friendly. He was aware of the fact that Henry Williamson had lived in the adjoining house and admitted





that he had read one or two of his books. He was organising a petition against British Rail's plans and asked if we would sign it. We readily agreed and he turned back to get it from his house.

I followed him across the road and told him that his house had once been occupied by Henry's maternal grandparents and featured prominently in the early part of the *Chronicle*. Would he mind if I had a quick look inside? He had no objection and told me that he was a student, sharing the property with other students but he would show me his part of the house. We went into the back downstairs room which was his bedroom. This was where Uncle Hugh had spent his last pain-filled years and which Henry himself had used as a writing room in the early twenties when his mother owned the property. My guide said that the front room upstairs was "too good to use as a bedroom – beautifully moulded ceiling and a fine marble fireplace – we share it as our living room." Unfortunately he did not offer to show it to me and after an inspection of the kitchen, he picked up his petition and took it out onto the Hill for all of us to sign. At the time of writing it appears that British Rail have changed the route of the rail link and Hilly Fields is no longer threatened.

It was time to leave, as one of our number had to return to South Wales that day, but on our way back to Surrey we thought to prolong the Williamson connection by breaking our journey at a house at the foot of the North Downs. This place, in Phillip's schoolboy code Sq. Norfolk Broadses, Easterbacon, was one of his favourite 'preserves'. The fine house and gardens are often open to the public and it was a fitting end to our day to sit on the lawn in front of the lake and contentedly discuss the events shared in Brockley earlier.

NOTE: Where appropriate, I have followed the nomenclature used by Henry Williamson in the *Chronicle* for names and locations in the district.

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