

An Exercise in Trail Guiding

Barry Kitts

Tutor-in-Charge in Third Year Major Projects, BA (Hons) Course in Graphic Design, Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication

Alan Gregory's endpapers for Reginald Arkell's *Richard Jefferies and His Countryside*, first published in 1933, delineated the Wiltshire territory of perhaps the major literary influence upon Henry Williamson's nature writing. As with Jefferies, there are several 'landscapes' associated with Henry Williamson. Clearly, Devon is the county that the public associate with his name, but should a future book appear with the title: *Henry Williamson and His Countryside*, it would have to include main entries for those parts of Kent and Surrey now in Greater London, together with Flanders and Norfolk.

In deciding to set an information design project around Henry Williamson for my BA graphic design students, I had to consider the potential of easily accessible visual source material.

Although Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication at Chislehurst is located within the lands of the young HW (or his main characters, Richard and Philip Maddison), and indeed, takes its name from a Kentish stream which features in his books, it would have necessitated an extensive reading of the early books in the 'A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight' saga in order to decode the local topography. For instance, an example of one of these disguised references could have been: 'and to think that this was once crystal-pure water, coming from the ponds of Reynard's Common.' (Chapter Fifteen.) *The Dark Lantern*, Macdonald, 1951). Once deciphered, HW is here describing the Ravensbourne (Randisbourne) itself, which rises as a pure stream on Keston Common, near to an ancient public house called 'The Fox' (hence Reynard's Common).

Therefore (and somewhat reluctantly), local descriptions from the saga were ruled-out as forming the basis of a sign-system marking a walk or cycle trail through south-east London and Kent.

As my draft ideas were abandoned for a route based on the 'Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight' series; luck had it that I came across a copy of the *Tarka Line* leaflet, published by British Rail. This mentioned the proposed 'Tarka Trail', and had a wealth of background information. All this made a student sign-system project based on walks around Barnstaple very feasible, especially as all the 'field work' had already been carried out by the 'Tarka Project' in Torrington. As for the book itself, *Tarka the Otter* existed in the College library! Another good starting point was the visual information contained in C.F. Tunncliffe's splendid line map of 'The Country of the Two Rivers'. A further factor in favour of a 'Tarka Trail' project was David Cobham's film, which was easily obtainable on hire from video shops.

During May 1990, two of my students, Sarah-Jane Selvey, and Simon Miskin, decided to undertake the design of a hypothetical sign-system for the 'Tarka Trail' as part of their course work counting towards the award of a BA(Hons) degree in Graphic Design (both have now been successful, and received their degrees at a convocation ceremony last July). Early in the visual research stage, they contacted the 'Tarka Project' team, and wish to acknowledge the help and material they received from the staff at Torrington.

The finished sign-system scheme consists of a primary information panel showing the whole 'Tarka Trail' route and surrounding places of interest. This standard panel would be sited where the trail is joined. At locations along the route, secondary sign panels, incorporating a detail from the Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 scale map, allow local features of historic, physical and geographical note to be read-off along 'leader lines'.

Directional signs have place-name legends such as 'Braunton', and an arrow pointing towards the intended location. A colour-coded bar is placed beneath place-name lettering, and conforms to the colour accorded to that route or path. The lettering used for all panel headings and directional signs is called 'Frutiger' (designed by the Swiss typographer, Adrian Frutiger, and derived from his alphabet used at the Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris). All signs conform to three panel formats; all legends, text, illustrations and maps being laid-out on a grid in order to ensure visual consistency. The trial panels were taken to the Darent Valley, where Sarah-Jane and Simon tested them in an outdoor environment, and they also photographed them in proximity to this famous trout stream standing in for the river Taw!

In conclusion, it must be said that the cost of implementation for sign-systems such as this is high, especially as each individual sign has to be silk-screened and laminated. In reality, if this scheme became a 'real-world job', fees would also have to be considered if the two students were paid a realistic remuneration for their expertise. In all events, the student work just carried out at Ravensbourne serves as a reminder of what could be done if information design for the countryside received the correct funding.

Ed. Last July both the Henry Williamson Society and the Literary Estate were invited to send representatives to the students' exhibition. Unfortunately no-one was able to attend at short notice. I include this item because although it is very much a 'fringe' area, it is of interest in showing how HW still influences young people.