

Meetings

North Devon AGM – October 1991

Such a lot to report, so first, the bare facts. Weather excellent, numbers high hotel good, people warm and friendly. And a very full programme!

The first event was John Millar's Friday evening presentation 'The Shore of the World'. The title conjured up (correctly) Wagnerian echoes – 'A Wild, Rocky Place', and similar mythic settings. John's aim was ambitious, being nothing less than to illuminate for his audience, in all its fullness, what Henry sought to convey about Creation and the natural order – of which man and woman, in relation to each other and to the world about them, should form a harmonious part. This vision was unfolded to us as the speaker's personal journey of discovery and heightened perception, beginning from Branton Burrows, in which episodes from *The Flax* – chiefly *The Pathway*, passages from which John read to us – were beacons along the way. Integral to it were recorded excerpts from Wagner's *Ring* cycle and his *Parsifal*, and from Delius's *Irmelin*. Some of these paralleled in music, Henry's descriptions of things in the natural world, such as water. Others were of music referred to, directly or obliquely, in the texts. The relevance of the whole thrust of the talk to the exploitation of the world's resources was inescapable. These are high matters indeed, intensely serious for us all.

Saturday afternoon saw the usual visit to Ox's Cross, where we were joined by some thirty members of 'The University of the Third Age' – retired people who yet wish to cultivate the mind. The Exhibition had returned to the Studio for this week-end also.

A lengthy Annual General Meeting dealt with a wide range of activities: a full account is in the Minutes accompanying this *Journal*.

Rushing on – at dinner we again had the pleasure of the company of Mrs Loetitia Williamson and several of her family, with Robert proposing the now traditional toast to the dear memory of Stephen Henry. There ensued the serious business of fund-raising, through the medium of Stephen Clarke's raffle. A light-hearted draw for the prizes (forty one of them, no less) preceded the main entertainment of the evening, President Richard's conducted slide-show of the family photograph album. Ostensibly scripted (or else what was Richard's tiny torch for?) but in practice full of ad libs, it is never the same twice running, and, like Africa, something new always comes up. Another pleasure is the ready prompts from parent or sibling if ever the speaker's memory fails or deceives him!

Sunday morning began with a sale of members' books, genially supervised by Derek White, and ended on a high note with Ronald Walker's talk 'The Honour of Life'. This shone like a good deed in a naughty world, and warmed like the sun itself.

Discussing Williamson's integrity as a writer – his pursuit of truth, his eschewal of sensationalism – Ronald distinguished three contrasting strands, which he related to Henry's own symbolism in *The Gold Falcon*, namely, the gentle nature of the dove; the ruthless falcon, relentless in the seeking out of truth; and the phoenix, here standing for soaring idealism. Through readings from the *Chronicle* each symbol was shown to have its roots in character and episode. Nor was humour wanting. The talk ended with a grand look at Henry's major concerns of love and war, and at his ardent faith that "we must love one another or die". And the hefty emotional impact of those and all the other words came across the more powerfully for being so sensitively read.

An inspirational end to an excellent week-end. One felt very much in Fred Shepherd's debt for laying it all on.

Robert Tierney

South Eastern Area: Local Meeting

Sunday 7th July 1991: Visit to Camp Hill Crowborough

Following a suggestion from one of our members, Terry Whippy of Eastbourne, a Sunday afternoon visit was planned to Crowborough in East Sussex in order to visit the site of Camp Hill Camp in the Ashdown Forest. This area is one of outstanding natural beauty, comprising miles of heathland and woods, giving wonderful views of wealden Kent and Sussex. Readers of the *Chronicle* war novels will recall Henry's description in *How Dear is Life*, of that painful and exhausting 3-day route march undertaken by Phillip and the London Highlanders during the long, hot summer days of August 1914. The rhythmic tramps of feet: grit, sweat, aches, blisters, glare and thirst. Each man carrying 56 pounds of kit, rifle and ammunition. The journey taking them, mile after weary mile out of London past Clapham Common and Wimbledon, on to East Horsley and Reigate. Out of Surrey and into Sussex on towards East Grinstead and Forest Row until at last their arrival at the military training camp at Camp Hill. On that same journey of course, marched Henry Williamson himself, with his Territorial battalion of the London Rifle Brigade to train at Camp Hill before going out to France.

In *How Dear is Life* Henry describes Phillip's first days as a soldier stationed near Crowborough in the Ashdown forest in Sussex. Phillip and his friend Baldwin walk up to Camp Hill in the evenings, and 'from the high ground of six hundred and fifty feet covered in bell heather and ling, fringed by dark clumps of pine... looked southwards towards the high beacons of Firle and Ditchling, the castle of Lewes, the skiey rampart of Devils Dyke. Northwards lay the escarpment of the North Downs, the wooded Weald between... and the faint glow of London.'

On a warm Sunday in July a small party of Society members met to retrace Phillip's steps. We walked up to Camp Hill through the heather and ling, up to the ring of pines, and sat there listening to Brian reading extracts from *How Dear is Life*. It didn't take much imagination to see the rows of tents below us and to imagine Phillip's feelings as a very new soldier, not knowing what was to happen to him. Henry was with us too, as we played th part of the tape where he describes the march from London and the camp at Crowborough. It felt as though little had changed since 1914. We sat there for a long time in the sun, talking about the *Chronicle* before walking back down to our parked cars and our picnic teas.

Earlier we had passed the site of the Beacon Hotel, scene of Phillip's embarrassing lunch with his parents, and the station from which the London Highlanders had set out for France. In Crowborough we saw the two houses where Richard Jefferies lived briefly – two or three months at the red brick Rehoboth Villa at Jarvis Brook, next door to the Rehoboth Chapel; and then to the stone villa 'the Downs', two and a half miles away.



We were very privileged to welcome Richard Williamson to our annual winter Redhill meeting at the Harlequin Centre on November 2nd, 1991, to talk about his father, through slides and readings and personal reminiscences. It was a delight to see photographs of the family which recalled so vividly some of the scenes in the novels – there were the girl guides lining the path as Loetitia and her father arrived at the church for the wedding; Henry in army uniform; Henry on honeymoon on the battlefields of France (twice); the growing family of children. And to hear all the family anecdotes attached to the photographs, making all the characters in the novels even more real. By the end of the evening the distinction between novels and reality had blurred considerably. More importantly, Henry had emerged through Richard's eyes as very human, difficult at times, but a very real person, viewed with deep affection.