

Spring Meeting May 7-9 1993 'Henry Williamson in South Devon'

For members of the Henry Williamson Society who take particular pleasure from visiting locations linked by landscape or written description to the author and his work the prospect of a new venue hitherto unexplored comes as a special joy. This year's spring meeting held at Hope Cove, near Kingsbridge, South Devon, offered an unusual treat in literary exploration. Unlike most venues previously chosen for the spring gathering of the society, places where Henry had lived and written about in his novels, this area of South Hams is a mystic never-never land of the imagination. For, it was here that Henry chose to site his fictitious village called, 'Malandine' to where he transported characters, events and scenes from the Georgeham story of *Sun in the Sands* to re-appear in fresh guise at a South Devon location in *The Innocent Moon*.

Fred Shepherd and Mick Loates in organising the event did a splendid job basing the weekend at the excellent Cottage Hotel built high on the cliff above Hope Cove giving magnificent views of the fishing village and the wide sweep of Bigbury Bay. After dinner on Friday evening we were treated to a most entertaining opening to the meeting when Mick Loates introduced the speaker, local naturalist Gordon Waterhouse who presented an absorbing talk on the flora and fauna of South Hams, illustrated with magnificent coloured slides taken by Brian Ashby and supported by Mick Loates own splendid wildlife paintings. On Saturday morning Mick led a cliff path walk across Bolberry Down past Fernyhole Point and Redrot Cove, round the majestic promontory of Bolt Tail (a headland very reminiscent of Baggy Point) and back to the Cottage Hotel. Along the route Mick gave selected readings from *The Innocent Moon* which caught the mood of the dramatic, windswept coastal scene. After lunch members set off on yet another bracing walk this time westward, from Hope Cove on the coast path up the 'Great Ledge' with spectacular views towards Thurlestone Village ('Turnstone' of the novels)





dominated by the unique Thurlstone Arch Rock from which the village takes its name. On then down to South Milton Sands and the Ley, now a nature reserve. This is where it is thought Henry may have chosen to place his legendary 'Malandine' village. Back at the hotel after a long day in the bracing wind and sea air members had time to reflect on all they had seen and to rest awhile before coming down to a memorable dinner. Valerie Belsey was our after-dinner speaker, her thought-provoking subject was Henry's incomparable 'Spirit of Place' as demonstrated in that now somewhat neglected work, *On Foot in Devon*. Valerie had recently followed in Henry's footsteps along most of that journey made back in 1933. With a perceptive re-appraisal Valerie skillfully brought the book to life supported by passages from Henry's writings and her own observations.

On Sunday morning Mick Loates drew the weekend reluctantly to a close with an astute enquiry into the literary significance of Henry's South Devon writings, enhanced by extracts from *The Innocent Moon* beautifully read by Ronald Walker. So ended our brief stay in South Hams, as usual at these welcome gatherings there was time for good fellowship and lively conversation. This is as important to the success of the weekend as the 'official' programme itself. The debate will continue as to just how much use Henry made of actual South Devon locations for his novel but, one thing that *is* certain is that the lush green South Hams countryside with its bright, spring wild flowers have ensured that we shall return there again. Our grateful thanks to Fred and Mick, their enthusiasm and hard work gave us yet another glimpse of 'Ancient Sunlight'.

Brian Fullagar