

The Georgeham Village Hall Sign Incident

Lois Lamplugh

A column on page 3 of the issue of the *North Devon Journal* for August 15th, 1929, was headed:

VANDALISM IN THE VILLAGE.

'Mr. Henry Williamson and Georgeham's Sign of St. George.
The Big Idea – and an Apology. A New use for the Local Newspaper!'

The Following letter has been received by the Secretary of the Georgeham Institute, Georgeham, North Devon:-

"Sir,

With reference to our recent conversation about the apology for the pasting up of the Institute sign by myself and two friends, when two sheets of the local newspaper were affixed with gum to the corners of the aforesaid sign, I beg to confirm with willingness that on Whit Monday I and my fellow culprits went to the Rector, as Chairman of the Institute Committee, and humbly confessed and apologised for the act of vandalism, and that our apology was most graciously accepted by the Rector.

I have the honour to be, sir,

Your most obedient servant, (Signed) Henry Williamson."

The Rector referred to above was the Rev. Alfred Rose; he moved to another living the following year. HW's letter to the *North Devon Journal* is followed by an interview given to a reporter.

The Institute sign, which has attracted some attention from residents and visitors in Georgeham, depicts the figure of the legendary and equestrian George in the act of spearing a monstrous kind of armoured lizard, which is believed to be extinct in the neighbourhood,' explained Mr Williamson to a representative of the 'North Devon Journal'. It is rumoured locally that this lizard used to live in Baggy Hole, but it must have been some considerable time since it was last seen in Georgeham, for while there are many links with prehistoric times still lingering in various ways in the parish, I can find no reference to such a monster in either our folklore or superstitions.

On the reverse of the sign stands a figure clad in Saxon dress, accompanied by dogs of a breed which originated in Elizabethan times, and a lurcher dog which is most pleasing, since, as you know, the lurcher plays a considerable part in your local life, particularly at night.

Why was the paper pasted over the sign? It was a foolish and impatient act, a hasty substitute for a long-planned publicity campaign, which was to surprise the village in the following way. I intended to ask my friend, Mr C.R.W. Nevinson, one of the most distinguished of modern painters, to paint a sign that would fit into the swinging space, a sign depicting characteristic acts of modern village life: such as a black pig grunting in a dark, damp space, a rabbit in a trap; two men shouting at each other in argument over the ways of the Parish Council; a man ploughing a field with seagulls following the new-turned furrow; a child with a pair of old perambulator wheels falling into the stream; a summer visitor with face and legs burnt red by the sun, etc.

One night we intended to hang this substitute sign; and then, when it had been

much viewed, to hold an auction and sell the Nevinson painting together with an autographed pamphlet explaining the Big Idea, to some rich American who had threatened to come and see me and acquire my autographed first editions. With the proceeds of the sale it was hoped to obtain a playing field for village children.

Of course the original sign would have been replaced as soon as the 'joke' had received sufficient attention. But procrastination set in; and the scheme degenerated, like all other schemes in our human history, into a parody of our original idea. However, it is still hoped that a playing field will be acquired, and for this purpose I have opened a fund. If you know of anyone who would like to send a shilling or so to it, and would let them know through the medium of your valuable paper, I would be grateful to you and to them. The size of the field would be about an acre and a half to two acres, a place where kids would be out of the way of the motor-cars and monstrous dragonish char-a-bancs that thunder along the narrow lanes, and where they could play football, cricket, rounders, swing and climb, and, for the tiny ones, a pit filled with sand for the making of pies.

On August 29th, 1929, the North Devon Journal contained a column headed

THE GEORGEHAM VILLAGE SIGN

Col. Elliott's Vigorous Reply to Mr Henry Williamson 'A Silly Extravagance'

"The publication in a recent issue of The North Devon Journal of a remarkable statement made to a representative by Mr Henry Williamson, the author, who resides at Georgeham, relating to the covering with paper by Mr Williamson and others of the sign at the Village Institute, has drawn from a much-esteemed former resident, Col. Elliott, the following trenchant protest against Mr. Williamson's action.

"Dear Sir,

Although I have left your neighbourhood, I was interested to receive a cutting from your Press, entitled "Vandalism in the Village", having reference to the Georgeham Village Institute Sign.

Had Mr Williamson apologised and left it at that, I myself as a member of the community should have accepted it in silence as a genuine expression of regret for a silly extravagance, but when it is accompanied by the report of a lengthy interview, in which Mr Williamson criticizes his neighbours, I find myself compelled to take up my pen in our common defence.

As regards the Institute itself, my interest is perhaps sharpened by my own share in its erection, and of this none but the happiest memories remain.

I asked to be allowed to add to its exterior one or two objects that would, I hoped, give it character, and provide a relief from what, often unconsciously, weighs on our lives, viz., the machine-made article. I had the pleasure of looking up records in the Barnstaple Library, and providing the artist, Miss Kemp-Welch, with some facts to work on.

If the facts can be disputed by antiquaries does that matter, and if Miss Kemp-Welch's fantasy contains an anachronism does that matter either?

I do not know what Miss Kemp-Welch's reputation as a modern artist may be, but I do know that she has enriched the chancel of the Parish Church of Georgeham with four panels, for which posterity should be grateful, and I was delighted when she promised to undertake the work as a labour of love.

It is this sign, then, the property of the Institute of the people of Georgeham, that Mr Williamson not only defaced but which, so he tells us, he had a mind to remove for purposes of his own.

Could impudence go further?

A considerable space in your paper has been given to Mr Williamson's scheme. What does it amount to? Nothing that I can see but a kind of defence of a foolish act. Preceded by an apology three months in arrears, we have an interview which scoffs at a countryside that is behind the times, and criticizes its efforts in a social undertaking. Then follows his plan of intentions to be carried out on the most modern lines, aided by a distinguished painter, and reminding us of the value of the author's signature.

Will it astonish Mr Williamson to learn that ordinary folk who tried to do something, however humble, object to an affectation of superiority that produces only a prank? I have reason to know that I voice a resentment that would otherwise be inarticulate.

*I remain, sir, Yours faithfully,
E.H.H. Elliott, Shipton Bellinger* August 26th, 1929.

Col. Elliott, DSO, had been the owner of the Pickwell Manor for a number of years before his move, shortly before this episode, to Shipton Bellinger, Bucks.

The editor of the *North Devon Journal* at this time was Arthur Manaton. In his usual weekly column, 'From the Editor's Chair', under the heading 'The Georgeham Incident', he added his comment:-

The extraordinary happenings in the village of Georgeham, described by Mr Henry Williamson, the novelist, in an interview published a fortnight ago in the columns of the 'Journal', have naturally aroused widespread interest. It was only to be expected that Mr. Williamson's version of the motives which led him and his associates into the act of misplaced humour which found expression in the obliteration of the painting on the public signboard at the Village Institute, should be questioned and criticized by those who resent the particular form of practical joke so ingloriously attempted by the author of Tarka the Otter. It is therefore with pleasure that I respond to the request of Col. Elliott, one of the founders of the Institute, to give equal prominence in our columns to his observations upon the incident. I feel certain that Col. Elliott's attitude is the attitude of most sensible folk. Everybody in Georgeham and outside it will be glad of the initial success which has come to Mr Williamson in his literary work, and particularly his success in winning the Hawthornden Prize with Tarka the Otter. But few people will, I think, be willing to concede to Mr Williamson the right to play pranks with public property, especially if such pranks are really a presumptuous form of criticism of others who have done more for the village community which he caricatures than Mr Williamson can hope to achieve for many years to come.

It seems probable that Henry would not have undertaken the ludicrous gesture of papering over the sign unless he had had the encouragement of his companions – one of whom was John Jeygate, then a man of 26. It sounds like a piece of tomfoolery carried out after an excitable evening in the Kings Arms or the Rock. But he compounded the absurdity by allowing his letter of apology to the Rector to be published, and then giving the spoof interview to a *North Devon Journal* reporter.

By the time it appeared he had arranged to give up his tenancy of Vale House. Within a few weeks his first period of life in Georgeham would be at an end, and there would no longer be any confusion over his address. From Michaelmas, 1929, it would be Shallowford, Filleigh, and his landlord would be Lord Fortescue of Castle Hill.