

Meetings

North Devon AGM – October 1993

Over seventy members of the Society came together for this weekend. We arrived in torrential rain on Friday but Saturday morning was dry and bright and it remained so until Sunday afternoon. Such conditions brought to mind HW's broadcast description of 'this up and down land, drenched by rain and blessed by sun'.

We gathered at the Devon Beach Hotel on Friday night for a superb buffet dinner followed by the rare privilege of meeting and listening to Fr. Brocard Sewell, now in his eighty second year. Introduced by Wheatley Blench, Fr. Brocard ranged widely – his first meeting with HW in the mid-1950s; the 20-minute instruction on how to open the door of HW's motor car(!); the beginnings of the *Aylesford Review* and the encouragement to new writers. Recognising that stories about animals are not universal favourites, Fr. Brocard praised *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* which in his judgement is not far behind the work of Charles Dickens. He spoke also of HW's many letters, quoting Dr. Newman (later Cardinal) who said that a man's biography lies in his letters.

Saturday morning was free to enjoy the coastal walks, and in the afternoon we made our way to Georgeham Village Hall, where the Society's first General Meeting had been held in November 1980. After welcoming our President, Richard Williamson, Will Harris conducted the 1993 AGM with authority and humour. It was decided to tidy up the wording of the Society's 'Aims' to be finalised in the (then) forthcoming Committee Meeting (Ed. - See back cover for finalised new wording).

The Margaret Clarke Award for best contribution in the *Journal* for last year was made to Dr. Wheatley Blench for his articles on 'The Influence of Richard Jefferies on Henry Williamson' whilst John Gregory received the award 'for services rendered' for his excellent work in preparing the Society publications. Brian Fullager made a compelling case for developing an educational package for students etc. and this will be put in hand. Anne Williamson's plea for help on the publicity side brought a response from Ann Bishop, who was duly installed as Press Officer combined with responsibility for Education. The work of the Centenary Committee was reported and the need for greater national emphasis was recognised.

Finishing in good time for a welcome cup of tea, we then repaired to the Churchyard, where, in the pale after sunlight Fr. Brocard conducted a short remembrance for HW and laid a wreath of poppies from the Society on his grave. Georgeham Church was beautifully decorated for harvest festival.

In the evening, after an excellent dinner, Brian Carter, author of *A Black Fox Running* and other books, gave a spirited and passionate account of his affinity with nature, his varied art and prose work, and obvious influence of the nature writings of Henry Williamson with special emphasis on *Tarka*.

Sunday morning began with Derek White's book swap. There were many more books than last year but members' eagerness to buy was tempered with courtesy! It was great fun.

Then we assembled to hear readings from Margaret White and Brian Fullager, sensitively drawing comparisons between HW's real-life letters to his nephew Brian Busby (courtesy of the HW Literary Estate) and related passages from *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, thus linking fact with fiction. A most interesting discussion ensued

in which Richard Williamson recalled relevant family incidents.

Out into the sunshine we said our goodbyes: some visited the Writing Hut, others went straight home. Some lucky ones were seen walking at the Estuary on Monday!

Ted Wood



Baggy from Pickwell

Sketch by Althea Wood

South Eastern Area Meeting—Redhill, 6 November 1993

This year's annual meeting was attended by 30 members who enjoyed a varied programme which began with a celebration of 'Henry's Early Ladywell'. A presentation of readings from the *Chronicle*, slides, maps, photographs and personal reminiscence. All of which were enhanced by the pleasure of listening to the memories of Barbara and Malcolm Stewart and Barbara's brother John, who had spent their childhood in Brockley where they became friends of Henry's sister Biddy and her children. This gave a fascinating glimpse of Ladywell and Brockley during the wartime years 1939-45. After a break for refreshment and the usual book sale a video was shown of the ITV film narrated by Richard Williamson in which he describes the varied wildlife and flora to be found on his beautiful nature reserve at Kingley Vale, near Chichester. Following the film, Margaret White introduced us to some further interesting examples from her collection of HW ephemera. This comprised several letters and postcards written by Henry to a family he befriended who owned the renowned Lydford Gorge in the early Twenties at a time when Henry was writing the *Starborn*. There was also a letter from Charles Tunnicliffe thanking the same family for their assistance when he was visiting the gorge whilst engaged on illustrating the *Starborn*. Margaret also entertained us by reading a 'poem' (?) written by Henry which amusingly caricatures his Lydford friends. To mark the anniversary of the heroic death of Wilfred Owen, on the 4th November 1918, Brian read the poet's famous 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. The meeting closed with a lively discussion on Henry and his writing. Our thanks are due to the Henry Williamson Literary Estate for their kind permission to quote from letters and, extracts from the *Chronicle* novels.

Brian Fullagar

Poets and Patriots – A tour of the Loos and Arras battlefields 10-11 July 1993

Early on a sunny July Saturday morning, a group of people set sail from Dover for an intensive two-day tour of the battlefields of Loos and Arras. We were a mixed but very harmonious group, ably led by Paul Reed and Brian Fullagar, and with members from the Henry Williamson Society, the Edward Thomas Fellowship, the Western Front Association, and the Orders and Medals research Group.

After visiting John Kipling's grave at St Mary's ADS Cemetery, we arrived at Le Rutoire Farm, a very familiar image from "A Fox under my Cloak" and, although the original farm was destroyed, the present buildings managed to convey the impression that, as Brigade HQ, they could quite well have been at the hub of the coming and going during the heat of battle on 25 September 1915. Brian's reading from *A Fox Under My Cloak* which described Phillip's wanderings in the area after completing his gas officer duties, and whilst still under German fire, reinforced that feeling.

On to the Loos Memorial at Dud Corner, a cemetery in a beautiful English garden, surrounded by a mixture of cornfields and slag heaps. Here we listened to a poem by Charles Hamilton Sorley, killed in action at Loos on 13 October 1915, aged 20. His death is commemorated at the Loos Memorial. Our last stop of this first day was at the Arras memorial; where we heard Siegfried Sassoon's short and pithy poem "The General" (set in the time before the Battle of Arras).

We stopped twice on the way to Arras. First, briefly, at a small cemetery at Maroeuil to pay our respects to a relative of a member of our party – a gunner, aged 21, killed in his dugout along with his two mates, whose graves were next to his. There was a field by the cemetery filled with poppies in bloom. Secondly, at Notre Dame de Lorette; the huge French cemetery on a hill overlooking the Artois plain. There we visited the excellent museum with its very well presented "Trench Experience".

Early next morning we visited Edward Thomas' grave in a peaceful little cemetery tucked away in a corner in the village of Agny. Readings of his poem 'A Private', and also Walter de la Mare's 'To ET, 1917' added to the poignancy of the moment.

Via Bullecourt, (where, inter alia, there is a memorial to Henry Williamson's 62nd West Riding Infantry Division), Oppy Wood and Gavrelle, we arrived at the cemetery where Isaac Rosenberg is now buried. This artist and poet, who was so unsuited to being a soldier, died on 1 April 1918 aged 27. I hope that he felt the warmth of our sympathy towards him as Brian read his poem "Break of Day in the Trenches".

Then, with the rain beginning to fall, we went on to the German Concentration Cemetery with its thousands of stark black crosses making infinite geometric patterns. Perhaps today the landscape has softened, with the soft clover-filled grass and the many beautiful trees. Brian's reading from *Wet Flanders Plain* Described the close-packed black crosses as a 'vast and terrible sight'.

In contrast, our final stop of the week-end was our visit to Vimy Ridge where, in sunshine once again, the impact of the Canadian Memorial was, for me, much greater than I could have imagined from the photographs. And so, off to the boat, with the memory of Canada's sacrifice, together with the memory of the hundreds of thousands of names in whose presence we had been for just two days.

Pamela Waugh