The Worcester Park Jelly Dogs

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It is now over thirty years since I occasionally enjoyed a pint of beer in a Victorian public house called the 'Huntsman's Hall' at Worcester Park in Surrey. In those days I was a young art student without much spare money and in contrast to modern ways, publicans did not welcome trade from young people. The 'Huntsman' was very much a local for regulars, most of whom remembered Worcester Park as arable farmland in the years following the First World War.

At that time I did not know the writing of Henry Williamson, but now realise that in my own early days I experienced rather similar emotions to those felt by the young Williamson while growing-up in a landscape which had also succumbed to what Cobbett called the 'Great Wen'. Indeed, the housing estate where I lived had been built in 1936 by a well-known firm of south London builders on the land used as the country shooting school of the Army and Navy Stores. I was fascinated by this country-past of my suburb and delighted to overhear the regulars in the 'Huntsman' still refer to the town as 'the Village'. One constant reminder of those lost fields of heavy London clay was a sepia photograph hanging on the bar wall; it showed a group of huntsmen and their pack. The mount had the brown-ink inscription: 'Worcester Park Foot Beagles, 1910'.[1]

Several years ago I purchased a copy of Henry Williamson's *The Old Stag* (first illustrated edition, February 1933) and dipping into the book, began to read at 'My Day with the Beagles'.[2] Henry Williamson had set this short story in the countryside near to London, and with growing amazement, instinctively I detected it was a lost land which I already knew. C.F. Tunnicliffe's illustration reinforced this impression, especially the one entitled: 'Jelly-dogs in Surrey'. Gradually, the memory of the public bar in the 'Huntsman's Hall' came back with its old photograph of the beagles. Had Henry Williamson visited Worcester Park in the early 1920s to follow the hunt? That was a question I now asked myself.

The hunt met on the green before the 'Feathers Inn', not the green which was also a feature of the 'Huntsman's Hall', but then I thought, Henry Williamson often modified the topography in his books. However, I read on to: 'About half-an-hour later the line took them to a quarry, where a crane was swinging a bucket of earth into a truck standing on rails. The crane was a tall web of steel, painted scarlet. About a dozen men were digging crude Fuller's earth on ledges, or steps, thirty feet below the field edge, which was guarded by a fence made of rotting railway sleepers and two sagging, rusty steel-wire cables, the higher about a yard from the ground'.

When an art student, I had drawn in many quarries along the North Downs, and remembered the scarlet painted lorries and plant owned by a large firm which then worked them. I also knew that Fuller's earth was principally extracted in Surrey around the town of Redhill. Several pages later and Henry Williamson confirmed this proximity. He wrote: 'Half a mile away and below smoke rose from the chimney pots of Redhill'.

Having been brought-up in a suburb of London with very little notion of the rule of 'country' or the strict delineation of territory over which a pack of hounds may either hunt a fox or hare (the latter in the case of harriers and beagles). But the chance discovery of an old edition of *Baily's Hunting Directory* in a second-hand bookshop gave full details of the 'country allocated to the Worcester Park Beagles at the end of the First World War, as well as outline dates for the hunt.

Although the hunt maintained its kennels in Green Lane at Worcester Park, the country then hunted was described as 'mostly arable, with some grass and woodland in parts, and is rather hilly. It includes the Surrey highland, Epsom Downs, Ewell, Banstead, Woodmansterne, Merstham, Caterham Valley, Nutfield, Oxted and Addington; a substantial area of Surrey lying outside Kingston and Croydon which has now mostly disappeared under avenues of semi-detached houses or is blighted by motorways north of Redhill.

The direct antecedent of the Worcester Park Beagles were the Morden Harriers pack, established in 1834, which not unusually for that time, also fielded a captive deer and staghounds on occasions.

Mr H.G. Hoare was Master of Hounds from 1848 until 1863 when Charles Blake of Bluehouse Farm (just on the Merton side of the parish boundary with Malden) took over the pack. Blake was a solicitor and his practice is believed to have been in Croydon (an example of the new professional class turned landowner and huntsman). Charles Blake accordingly lived in some style and employed a footman! He became known throughout Merton and Malden parishes as 'Squire' Blake. It seems that the harriers were kenneled at Bluehouse Farm and the 1871 census lists a Mr Dabbs being in Blake's employ 'as a whip to harriers'. Blake gave up the Mastership of the Morden Harriers in 1886 and had left Bluehouse Farm, Motspur Park, by the next year.

The pack was re-formed with beagles in 1886 and removed itself to nearby Worcester Park where kennels were erected in a field alongside the Beverley Brook in Green Lane. Members of the Worcester Park Beagles under their Master, Mr H.W. Bonsor, now established headquarters in the 'Railway tavern' soon to change its name to the 'Huntsman's Hall'. The country hunted was exactly the same as that of the Morden Harriers and identical to that quoted from *Baily's* above. The hunt was a major feature of rural community life and in 1897 presented the new Malden & Cuddington Institute (the Worcester Park village hall) with fifty chairs to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Not long after the First World War, the fields of north-east Surrey began slowly to fill with suburban housing estates and, in addition, it was a changed social order at the 'Huntsman's Hall', where the 'Slate Club' of public bar regulars was now able to organise its very first day-outing to Brighton by motor-omnibus in August 1920. Soon times were changing for the Worcester Park Beagles as well. The hunt merged in 1922 with the Buckland Beagles; a pack which had a tradition of choosing Masters of Hounds who held either volunteer or army commissions (the MH from 1914 until 1922 was Major L.F. Ricardo).

However, the combined Worcester Park and Buckland Beagles continued to use kennels in Green Lane for several more years and on 12 April 1922 held their puppy show in the covered playground of the Manor House, Cheam (by permission of the Reverend H.M.S. Taylor, Headmaster of Cheam School). Probably many local people present on that day realised that the hunt was fast becoming a thing of the rural past in a growing middle-class suburb of bridge meetings and lawn-tennis clubs.

But let us now return to Henry Williamson and *The Old Stag*. One Saturday in February, and my guess would be that the year was 1924, a 'writer of little stories about swallows and weeds, old men, children, dogs, and other humble things', stood on the green outside the 'Feathers Inn', at Merstham in Surrey. The man was dressed in grey flannel trousers and threadbare coat of tweed. He had come to follow the Worcester Park and Buckland Beagles; a pack on that day of twelve couples of $15^{1}/_{2}$ inch (stud book) beagles, which impatiently yapped on their hind

legs before the 'inn'. The huntsmen wore green coats with a scarlet collar. The author, wearing the shabby country coat, recorded the gathering huntsmen and spectators with the eyes of an artist. He was, of course, Henry Williamson of Skirr Cottage, Georgeham, Devon, author of the recently published *The Peregrine's Saga* (November 1923): a collection of short stories which included 'A Weed's Tale', 'Bluemantle' (a swallow) and 'The Chronicle of Halbert and Znarr' (the former being a slum child of Arcady Street, Waterloo Road).

The 'Feathers' still looks the same externally today as it did seventy years ago. It was built in 1898 after the Norman Shaw tile-hung and half-timber style popular in Surrey, and in reality was a large road house serving Brighton-bound traffic rather than a country inn. Located on the bend of the busy A23, the green has long vanished under the tarmac of the large pub car park.[3]

Henry Williamson's story begins with Halbert (the Cockney pronunciation of Albert with an initial 'H') coming round the corner and who upon seeing the beagles before the 'Feathers' exclaimed: 'Crikey, whata lota dawgs! Corlumme! 'Ere, quick, boys!' Halbert is a Williamson character who previously appears in *The Peregrine's Saga* as the back-street boy who 'wanted to reach the country and get an armful of bluebells'. In the beagle chapter of *The Old Stag* he reaches the Surrey countryside with his friends by hanging on the backs of lorries and climbing on the footboard of buses.

The other principal figures are Gerry, the ex-naval officer who had been seriously wounded in the Zeebrugge raid on St George's Day 1918 and his girlfriend, Miss Betty Calmady. As all three play their parts with overt symbolism, it is probably correct to ascribe them as fictitious creations of Williamson.

The *persona* of the huntsmen are based on real-life people seen by Williamson while following the beagles on that day in February 1924 and as such it is possible to identify the Master of Hounds and the Kennel Huntsman from a contemporary edition of *Baily's*. Henry Williamson wrote: 'There were twelve couples, some of them standing on hind legs with paws on the skirts of girls fondling long thin ears, stroking short and tapering muzzles or patting shoulders that sloped and ribs round and deep. Some sat shivering in the grass, gazing with soft, full eyes at the kennel-huntsmen'. The Kennel Huntsman is listed as J. Powell (appointed to that position with the Buckland Beagles in 1919). It is just following this description that Halbert, having ventured his hand towards Columbine is nearly bitten by the beagle!

After the hunt moved off, Williamson continues: 'Then came the Master, an elderly man who lived in a south-eastern suburb of London and was a chartered accountant by profession'. Thus is pictured H. Graham King, *esquire*, of the 'The Briars', Upper Tulse Hill, London, SW2, Master of the Worcester Park and Buckland Beagles from 1922 until 1930.

Tulse Hill was sufficiently close to Williamson's childhood territory for him to consider it a 'south-eastern suburb of London'. The occupation of Graham King follows very much in the tradition of his nineteenth-century predecessor, 'Squire' Blake of Motspur Park – that of the professionally qualified townsman turned part-time gentry.

Williamson was very observant of the subtlety of English society as it emerged in the wake of the Great War; we note that as someone who himself had held a temporary 'King's Commission' in the conflict, he decries the 'underwriter's clerk at Lloyd's who had been a temporary major during the war; the three-guinea annual subscription (he thought) was a good investment (although the rules permitted but six Saturday mornings 'off' a year) as it entitled him to membership

The locals pose in front of 'The Huntsman's Hall' at Worcester Park, circa 1910.
Photograph: Collection of Sutton Heritage Service, Sutton Central Library

of the Hunt, and therefore he felt himself to be a Somebody, especially after his photograph had appeared in the *Tatler'*. (Although it is probable that the 'Major' is now dead, I have refrained from searching the pages of the *Tatler* at the British Library in order to preserve his anonymity).

The direction that the hunt took as it proceeded from the 'Feathers' was along the main-road or 59 bus-route towards Gatton Corner, but after about a hundred or more yards, the field moved down a lane leaving on the left and which soon passed under two bridges carrying the Sussex-coast lines of the Southern Railway worked by steam express trains. Beyond the railway was farmland bounded in the Croydon direction by the chalk ridge of the North Downs and to the south-east by the villages of Nutfield and Bletchingley (the latter was recorded by Louis Jennings in his *Field Paths and Green Lanes* in 1876 as 'at first sight to be made up of butchers and beagles'). It was over this ground that the ill-fated hare now ran in a figure of eight course for many miles pursued by beagles carrying the names of Columbine, Whirligig, Reveller, and Snowdrop – the last mentioned having been owned by Mr I.B. Stoddart, and which won the first prize for bitches at the Cheam puppy show in April 1922. Snowdrop was entered as sired by WP & B Wrangler and damed by WP & B Prudence.

Eventually the hare drops from exhaustion and in its dying moments the 'writer of little stories', alias Henry Williamson, remembering back to a West Country sportsman, Parson Jack Russell, who had leapt before harriers to save a hare, breaks 'correct hunting etiquette' and allows Halbert to retrieve the gallant beast which expires in his arms. Unbeknown, though, Gerry the survivor of Zeebrugge spots Halbert but cannot bring himself to stop the act of what huntsmen consider extremely bad form taking place. Later he confesses to Miss Calmady: 'I didn't interfere when that boy took the hare? I couldn't, Bet. I've dragged myself like that, and I know. Bet, they say animals don't feel, but I –'. It is the voice of a man who has suffered terribly facing a determined enemy and whose body remains scarred by German machine-gun bullets and pieces of shrapnel.

Gerry is introduced as 'a man in a brown tweed golfing suit, wearing Service tie and black naval shoes without toe-caps'. He is described as being 'an officer retired from the Royal Navy who had been in the same ship as Miss Calmady's brother, who had been killed at Zeebrugge'. Again: 'He wondered how the sailor (Gerry) had lost a finger; there was a scar on his hollow cheek; his limp. Perhaps splinters of a German shell, or a flight of nickel machine-gun bullets, at Zeebrugge'. A brief account of the Zeebrugge action will perhaps help to illustrate the sailor's war.

One of the most original minds of the First World War was Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keys (later Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Keyes); architect of the Zeebrugge raid and pioneer of what later became known as 'Combined Operations' or the commando raid. Without a doubt, the swashbuckling and hazardous nature of the Zeebrugge raid appealed to Williamson in the same way as did the romance of Lawrence's *Revolt in the Desert*.

Admiral Keys' intention was to block the sea canal linking Zeebrugge with Brugge (Bruges). The complex of Belgian waterways allowed German submarines and coastal smallcraft safe operating and repair facilities. The entrance to Zeebrugge was sheltered by a massive mole (harbour arm). The plan was to land naval and marine shore parties on the mole while three old cruisers, *Thetis, Intrepid,* and *Iphigenia* were scuttled as blockships across the canal to Bruges. The mole and harbour were heavily defended by over a thousand German naval artillery ratings, manning the batteries called *Lübeck – 15.0 cm* naval guns, *Württemberg (Zeppelin)* – 10.5cm/15.0cm naval guns and *Goeben* – 21.0 cm naval guns. There were countless

machine gun emplacements and blockhouses as well all helping to make Zeebrugge an impregnable fortress.

Although over seventy British naval craft of all sizes took part, the landing parties were from the obsolete cruiser HMS *Vindictive* and two requisitioned Mersey ferries, the *Iris* and *Daffodil*.

The *Vindictive* had recently been out of commission and therefore, did not have a permanent crew of officers and ratings. Keys recruited a new crew mainly from volunteers in the Grand Fleet and training was carried out in great secrecy, both at Chatham and finally in 'The Swin'; an isolated anchorage in the Thames Estuary, near Gunfleet Sand off Clacton.

Gerry and Calmady as 'RN' rather than 'Reserve' (RNR) and 'Volunteer Reserve' (RNVR) officers would have joined *Vindictive* at Chatham. They would have known each other from previous ships or stations and were both probably allocated to a 'blue-jacket' landing party rather than staying aboard to 'fight the ship'.

The *Vindictive* came alongside the Zeebrugge harbour mole at one minute past midnight on the 23 April 1918 (St george's Day). The RN and Royal Marine storming groups met terrible shell and machine-gun fire as they landed and casualties were very high. Many of the wounded and dying had to fend for themselves as fierce fighting developed. Gerry's wounds and memory of dragging himself (along the mole while shells in depressed-trajectory and machine-gun fire raked it) are consistent with those experienced by survivors and accounts of Zeebrugge.

The Zeebrugge raid was widely publicised and as early as the year of the raid, J. Keble Bell's book, *The Glory of Zeebrugge*, was published by Chatto and Windus. Therefore, it would not have been difficult for Henry Williamson to invent the convincing personality of Gerry. The official list of naval officers killed or wounded at Zeebrugge does not include a name 'Calmady' or anagram of its letters.

At the opposite end of the British social scale to Gerry is the street ragamuffin named 'Halbert'. As already mentioned, Halbert previously appears in *The Peregrine's Saga;* a book which was published several months before Henry Williamson followed the Worcester Park and Buckland Beagles in the countryside around Merstham.

Halbert was still a fresh creation in Williamson's mind during 1924 and this factor allows us to learn something of the boy's deprived circumstances by referring to the earlier book. Therefore, we are able to find out that Halbert lived at 'No. 17 Arcady Street (adjoining the Board School playground), a big house with sooty bricks and rotten roof that sheltered twenty-three families similar to Halbert's'. This was supposed to be a street coming off from the Waterloo Road in south-east London and not far from both the main-line railway terminus and also the Elephant & Castle.

The above is a fictitious address, but Waterloo Road Elementary School did exist during the 1920s and had a roll of about one thousand pupils (the School Board for London was established under the Education Act of 1870 and had built 469 schools before handing over its responsibility in 1904 to the London County Council; nonetheless, the term 'Board School' lived on for many years). The site of the school is now partly occupied by the modern Headquarters of the London Ambulance Service and amenity spaces.

The Waterloo Road before housing re-development in the 1930s and devastation of the London 'Blitz' of 1940/1, was a notorious slum district, and its earlier Victorian misery formed the basis of the late Michael Sadleir's well-known novel *Forlorn Sunset* (published in 1947). Sadleir referred to the area as a 'bad patch' and it

was not much improved during Halbert's childhood, although the LCC was progressively trying to clear the slums there and had commenced with their replacement dwelling-block scheme at Webber Row in 1906/7.

As a Lewisham lad himself, Henry Williamson knew all about the slums south of the Thames and Halbert in spite of his ragged appearance, is portrayed as a sensitive nature-loving child of about fourteen years of age who in 'The chronicle of Halbert and Knarr' is always getting into scraps with Winking Wooldridge, the bully newspaper boy of the Elephant & Castle.

In 'My Day with the Beagles' we leave Halbert and his three friends illicitly sharing a cigarette under a hedge near where the motor-buses for London will pass. The 'writer of little stories,' on his way to Merstham station, overhears Halbert relate his exploits in the last moments of the unfortunate hare: "... it diden 'arf bite the dorgs! 'Lumme, I won't 'ave one left, 'cried the bloke wiv the grinnat onnisead. 'Ere mate, 'I says to im, 'give us yer whip,' and I dashed in and dots it one on the boko. Crikey, boys it didden 'arf come for me. I 'it it 'arder and 'arder, and when it was dead the bloke says to me, 'e says, 'you kin 'ave it, me boy, and thank you fer saving me dorgs, and tell yer ma to cook it fer Sundis dinner,' he says.'

Halbert does not appear again in any Williamson story, which to my mind is rather a pity because he would have been a ready-made character to appear in a fictional role set during the Second World War. As a grown-man in 1939, he would have been about twenty-nine years of age. In my own imagination, I see him as a brave Cockney infantryman fighting his way back to the French Coast during the second Battle of Flanders of May and June 1940 – 'Would that I were with them wrote Henry Williamson as he sat in East Anglia thinking about those of Halbert's generation still fighting south of the Somme on 13 June 1940. 'My old tunic hangs on its peg, reproaching me. It is not the young who should die: but the older generation, which has failed them.' (Quote from the 'Epigraph', *The Story of a Norfolk, Farm*, Faber, February 1941).

However, one result of that conflict was the decision of the LCC in 1947 to build a large 'out-of-county' cottage housing estate for Londoners at Merstham, covering many acres where hares had once been pursued by beagles in the 1920s. Although, Henry Williamson would certainly have been sad that ancient farm land such as Albury Manor gave way to the LCC estate, it would have pleased him that socially – deprived dwellers of inner London were to be provided with decent modern homes at the foot of the North Downs. Thus, were some of the ills experienced by Halbert's generation addressed.

In these days when the issue of 'blood sports' is so contentious Henry Williamson clearly stated his position through his character 'the writer of little stories' – 'He cared nothing for the hunting. Beagles were amusing little creatures to watch but his sympathies were with the hare, one of the purest and most timid of animals'.

So much for the history of the Worcester Park and Buckland Beagles prior to 1924 and also the main players who met outside the 'Feathers Inn' at Merstham on a Saturday morning seventy-years ago – an era when: 'The old world was still in ruins from the War, the new world yet unformed'.

Halbert and his urchin friends travelled back to the slums of the Waterloo Road no doubt by jumping on the tailboards of numerous 59 buses as they chugged up the long Surrey valley to Coulsdon and beyond. Henry Williamson finished his pint of beer in the 'Feathers' and after a false start, returned the tankard he had walked out with and turning round one side of the green, passed the village fire station and made the Southern Railway station just as a train came in. Whether Gerry ever married Betty Calmady is left to our imagination.

On a closing note, the Worcester Park and Buckland Beagles moved their kennels to Mugswell, near Chipstead at about the time Graham King handed over the Mastership to Mr E.H. Field (MH 1930-37). During the Second World War it joined with the West Surrey and Horsell Beagles in 1942, from then on hunting each others country on alternate dates. The packs resumed their separate identities in 1947, but again merged in 1970. As a permanent arrangement, the hunt was re-named the Surrey and North Sussex Beagles, with a country which now covers all Surrey except in the west near Farnham.

Notes:

1. Sadly this photograph was no longer on the wall of the 'Huntsman's Hall' when last visited about eight years ago. 'Beagles' are dogs used for hunting hare.
2. Henry Williamson's short story, 'My Day with the Beagles' was included in *The Old Stag*, first published by Putnam's, 1926. It was an annotated copy of this edition that Henry Williamson sent to '338171 A/c T.E. Shaw, RAF, Karachi. See 'Books at Clouds Hill in *T.E. Lawrence by his Friends*, edited by A.W. Lawrence, London 1937.
   Putnam's rev. and illustrated edition of 1933 of *The Old Stag* was incorporated into Henry Williamson's *Collected Nature Stories*, Macdonalds 1970.
3. The 'Feathers' was also an important terminus for the buses of the East Surrey Traction Company (route S25 Merstham 'Feathers' to Horsham via Dorking) and a through bus-stop for London General Omnibus company route 59, Camden Town – Reigate service, introduced from 6 December 1922 (the open-top red buses on the latter being the ones observed by Henry Williamson). Both the East Surrey and 'General' used the AEC 'K' class bus which could carry 46 passengers. The 'K' type was a larger development of the earlier AEC 'B' type of Western Front fame and still to be found on some East Surrey and General routes in 1924.

In preparing this article, I consulted material held in the following: New Malden Public Library (*The Surrey Comet*) and British Library (various editions of *Baily's Hunting Directory*). Book sources for the early history of the Morden Harriers (1834 to 1886) or its successor, the Worcester Park Beagles (1886 to 1970) are Kenneth Ross *A History of Malden*, New Malden 1947; E.M. Jowett, *A History of Raynes Park*, London 1987; and Dr E.M. Lancet *Kingston Then and Now*, Esher 1977. Map evidence for features of the country of the hunt is from the *Ordnance Survey* 'One-Inch: One Mile' scale (South London) special sheet, 1925 (which covers the area from Worcester Park to Merstham); and for that around Merstham village from the 'Six-Inch: One Mile' scale sheets, published 1914-20. A comprehensive history of the Zeebrugge action based on many eye-witness statements is Philip Warner, *The Zeebrugge Raid*, London 1978. All Henry Williamson quotations are from 'My Day with the Beagles' unless otherwise indicated in the text.

Finally, I wish to thank the Heritage Section of Sutton Leisure Services, Central Library, Sutton, Surrey, for locating photographs in its collection of the Worcester Park Beagles and a pre-1914 view of the 'Huntsman's Hall' at Worcester Park. Also for kindly granting permission to reproduce them.

The Worcester Park Beagles gathered in the grounds of Cheam Park House on an unknown date, circa 1910. This photography is very similar to the one remembered by the author in his article.
Photograph: Collection of Sutton Heritage Services, Sutton Central Library.