

The Norfolk Weekend (Henry Williamson Society Spring Meeting May, 1994) Richard Williamson

If the chalk quarry face at The Old Hall farm, Stiffkey had suddenly bulged outwards released by a blast of dynamite, I should not have been surprised. If two bay carthorses had plodded past, if soldiers in a Bren-gun carrier had rumbled up the hill, my tumble into the old world would merely have been accelerated. Everything else is in place, after all. Here is mother sitting in the Silver Eagle Alvis fitting her feet back onto the pedals. Here is Windles describing the difference between Fox Covert and Fourteen Acres, and the view of the North Sea beyond the Camping Hills woods, over the old farm. Here is sister Margaret watching over the wild Williamson brood with the care and thought as she shows in the photographs of *Children of Shallowford* and *Goodbye West Country*. Here is brother Robert putting his younger brother in his place. And my goodness, here is baby Sarah walking past the corn barn. Only a week ago, it seems, she returned from Cromer hospital a few days old, her long feet and hands just like Dad's. Where is brother John? No doubt on some far away wild adventure to do with a boat or an aeroplane. Ah, that's him, talking on the telephone. Thought so, he's on the bottom of the world, near Sydney.

The only person who won't be on my memory film is Henry. But sixty people, having read his thoughts through his books and broadcasts, represent him, a kind of immortality; all good friends and all enjoying themselves just as Dad would have done at such a lovely party in the corn barn. Yes, that is where we are, on my film. The barn no longer has piles of wheat or sugarbeet pulp, but family portraits of the present owner's ancestors, with sofas, stuffed birds, and soft music playing. He is Lord Buxton who with his wife is bringing us cups of tea and biscuits after our tramp in heavy rain along The Entries woods to see Hilly Piece. All of the old farm buildings, whether cow shed, hay barn, granary, tool sheds or tractor sheds are in excellent condition, their Elizabethan flint and tile walls much as they were built three centuries ago. Nowadays they are habitable. Even Henry's brick owl, the representation of his colophon, is there on the concrete road, almost exactly as left nearly fifty years ago. Old Hall Farm could not have a more caring owner. The buildings will be there in another 300 years: how HW would have loved to see it now.

We move on to Blakeney, first to a banquet which again is a suitable madeleine to those war years of stringency and make-do. All at once a man who seems to be very like father walks in. Tall, wild and with expressive eyes – it is Henry's last child, the youngest of all, Harry. More is to come at this extraordinary gathering. The ghosts of two famous artists whom father knew in the 1940s, Alfred Munnings and Edward Seago, are recreated for us in our entertaining after dinner talk by their biographer. Memories are started and hunted in the hour that follows of horses, Cafe Royal ballads, East Anglian skies and late night granary parties.

The next morning, the rain gone and the marshes shining as if enamelled by the sun, we are invited to drive again in Henry's 1929 sports car, bought all the way from Newcastle by its present owner, Alex Marsh. The Silver Eagle roars out along the road to Stiffkey, sweeping past the meadows and the view of Spong Breck. Did Dad really drive at 85 in it? Windles and I in turn can only manage 56 m.p.h. Many others are taken for their ride: the owner seems to be enjoying himself as much as us. It seem strange not to be sitting behind Henry, but up front, in the driver's seat.

My film finally runs its course, and the weekend, one of the best that I can remember, is over. You who were there are all in it, and so I can look at you whenever I like, at the turn of a button. What would Proust have made of a camcorder? Lewis Carrol would have preferred his mind's mirror, for sure.