Chairman's Annual Report for 2016

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CHAIRMAN’S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2016

By John Burton

The most noteworthy events of 2016 were the deaths of Bill and Kathleen Adams, a couple whose extraordinary dedication and hard work from 1968 until 2008 enabled the Fellowship to prosper and become a genuinely influential literary society. Bill was the first to die, just a couple of days after laying the wreath for us in June in Nuneaton, an event he loved, and where he met and chatted to so many old friends.

The immediate problem was what would happen to Kathleen without the constant loving attention of Bill. She moved to an excellent nursing home in Coventry where several of us visited her regularly, including, wonderfully, two from America. Kathleen’s memory was fading, she was lonely and unhappy despite the high quality care, and nine weeks later she joined Bill. Funeral tributes were given for both by Michael Harris and you can read his tribute elsewhere in this issue. We managed to put an obituary for Bill into last year’s Review. You can read one for Kathleen in this issue.

In the ten years since Kathleen and Bill ceased to be actively involved we have continued to be a successful literary society. We have built on and expanded the regular patterns of events established in the early 1970s; we have changed venues, notably from the Town Hall in the wake of austerity measures which meant the Borough Council won’t open on a Saturday, and charge extortionate amounts at other times. But I am always conscious of what Kathleen and Bill set in place and our debt to them. I will miss the occasions when I used to go over to share a pot of tea and cake whilst updating them both on our latest activities. They loved to hear about our plans and took a quiet pride in what they had achieved in earlier years.

The AGM in March saw the existing team of Council members renewing their positions, with a request from Hon. Treasurer Jill Bridgewater that we should find a replacement for her, and an offer from Linda Mayne to learn the ropes and effect a gradual takeover.

Also in March we held a pleasing ceremony at the statue in Newdegate Square to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary. Sadly, sculptor John Letts is no longer with us but his son Stephen attended the ceremony, along with the Mayor, consort and leading councillors and officers from the borough council, and members of the Fellowship. Best of all was that our president, Jonathan Ouvry, who unveiled the statue in 1986, was there to say a few words thirty years later, in his usual amusing and fluent style.

In April, following our study of The Spanish Gypsy in 2015, a party of members, including two from the USA, embarked on a tour of Andalucia in the steps of George Eliot and G. H. Lewes. It was a great holiday but also illuminating for the light it shone on the narrative poem and the influence that part of Spain had on the writer. As usual the trip was organised by Denis Baylis and we are greatly indebted to him for his careful planning on our behalf.

By the time we returned from Spain our own edition of Felix Holt, a reprint with a new cover showing nineteenth-century Nuneaton, or Treby Magna, and our own preface, had been dispatched from Wordsworth Classics and we have been selling it ever since, sometimes at cost price to reading groups.

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The Annual George Eliot Essay Prize of £500 was awarded to Dr Anna Gutowska, a Polish academic whom we hope to welcome to Nuneaton sometime. Her essay appeared in the Review and on the website.

In May we held the annual George Eliot Day at the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre. Attendance was good and the speakers were excellent. We were particularly pleased that two of our local members produced papers of an exemplary standard which widened our knowledge through original research. The theme for the day, indeed for the year, was Felix Holt. David Paterson, now an established contributor to the Review, detailed the scrupulous research he has done into the Reform Bill in 1832, notably in its local ramifications, and showed how several Eliot scholars had got it wrong. Sheila Woolf enlarged on her research into the likelihood of Transome Court being based on Stoneleigh Abbey, and Melissa Raines, from Liverpool University, spoke powerfully about different aspects of radicalism and Felix Holt. The day concluded with a fascinating insight into the embryonic production of Felix Holt. Simon Winterman brought some actors who were given one scene from Vivienne Wood’s adaptation of the novel and we watched as Simon and the actors teased out motivation and characterization. There was then a discussion between audience, actors and director which was eye-opening for us all.

We held a George Eliot Tour late in May and the twenty-five people who joined it had a wonderful day. The weather was good, the readings appropriate and we heard good reports after the event. It is difficult to let the public at large know about these tours without a Tourism Officer in the borough but we do our best to let people know though social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and local sites.

In June we held the annual Nuneaton wreath-laying and as readers will know the guest of honour was Bill Adams. He loved to be asked, spoke movingly about his 50 years with the Fellowship and really enjoyed conversations with members he had not seen for years. It was a joyful occasion but little could we know that two days later Bill would be dead. In retrospect, apart from his worries for Kathleen, we think Bill would have loved the idea of going out on such a high.

July saw our Westminster Abbey wreath-laying, with Professor Constance Fulmer and Margaret Barfield from Pepperdine University doing the honours. Professor Fulmer gave an interesting and thoughtful address and so it was particularly annoying that the Abbey had made no provision for seating, and no formal procession to start the event properly. I wrote to complain but do not feel that the Abbey authorities understood why I was so cross with them! A similar event is already booked for 2019 so I hope they will be more understanding of the importance to us of somewhere to sit, at the very least.

During the summer we held a very successful series of six sessions to study Felix Holt. They were at Bedworth Almshouses with up to twenty at each session, with notes and background information provided by group leaders Denis Baylis and Vivienne Wood. Our thanks to them both for the huge amount of work they undertook to make it so successful. Twice a year Brenda Evans arranges a study session for us at Aldersgate In Nuneaton when one of her team of experts chooses a book to study and leads the discussion on it. There is a regular core of supporters but it would be good to see a few more as the evenings are always enjoyable.

In June we worked with the Landmark Trust to organize a literary weekend, which was called Writers in Warwickshire. It gained financial support from the County Council and
Vivienne Wood worked tirelessly to set up two days of speakers and performers. Publicity is always a problem. The event was terrific but not enough people knew about it which was a great pity as every speaker was excellent.

Vivienne Wood was also key to the success of Sudden Impulse Theatre Company’s production at the Edinburgh Fringe of her adaptation of *Felix Holt*. The company was terrific and produced performances of it and *Much Ado About Nothing* every day, with Shakespeare outside, and Eliot inside. They did justice to our two great Warwickshire writers, got excellent four star reviews and then put on two sell-out performances in Bedworth Arts Centre in September. Saul Bache, who played Felix, was guest of honour at the wreath-laying in June 2017.

October saw an extra special Annual Lecture day. Keynote paper was by Dr Ruth Livesey who showed some of the fascinating research she has done showing the links between dissemination of ideas and travel, notably stage coaches, and previewed some of the research she is embarking on into the Newdigate papers. We look forward to hearing more. We also heard from Dr Beverley Rilett, who is working with Nebraska University on a digital project to put all our past *George Eliot Reviews*, and much else, onto a free access website linked to our own. This is very exciting since it will put online over 40 years’ worth of scholarship which hitherto has been difficult to access. We are hugely grateful to Beverley for what she is doing. The day concluded with contributions from Vivienne Wood and Alex Anwyl Hackett about producing *Felix Holt* for the stage.

In October we were regally entertained by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks with their superb dramatized reading entitled *Happy Birthday, Felix*. It was held at the Old Meeting URC in Bedworth, which provides a superb intimate space where the audience is close to the actors.

The final event of the year was the Annual Birthday Luncheon held at Ansty Hall. We had been pleased in earlier years with the standards at Ansty but felt they did not match former years and we are looking at alternate venues. Our guest of honour was Will Adams, who spoke with humour and sensitivity about *Living with George Eliot* as he remembers his childhood.

Membership numbers dipped a little, mainly caused by the death of older members, but we are gaining new members, if not in the numbers that would make planning easier for us. Most events run on a knife-edge. We don’t like to charge more if we can avoid it and in many cases just three or four people paying on the day makes the difference between covering our costs and suffering a loss. Nevertheless I must thank all our loyal members who attend many of our meetings regularly. Their loyalty allows us to plan and cost meetings fairly accurately.

The proposed Visitor Centre has been just that for nearly five years. Members would be excused for wondering what has happened. There have been many delays and the project was held back in 2016 by the unexpected death of our contact and supporter at Whitbread, Chris Orton. However, we are back on course, about to submit a renewed application and have enough written support as evidence to warrant submitting our application to Heritage Lottery, just as soon as we can convince the charity commission that we are worthy of becoming a registered charity. That will enable us not to pay VAT on the £150,000 project. 2019 draws ever closer but we hope to have a functioning Visitor Centre well established, with programmes of community involvement, before the bi-centenary dawns. Meanwhile the Fellowship has collected £6,652 towards the project costs. Contributions are still welcome!
As ever, it is important to point out how many people are involved in making the Fellowship the success it is. I record my thanks to all our members in America, many of whom take a great interest in our activities; and to our Japanese members for their support and enthusiasm. At home I record my thanks to our vice-presidents, several of whom I know will always give sound and impartial advice when I seek it. Members will recall Ruth Harris as being an active member and vice-president, always supported by her husband Michael. Ruth is not well but can sometimes attend meetings and we all send her our best wishes.

Finally, to our Fellowship Council, who are always enthusiastic, always full of ideas, and bring them to our regular meetings, supporting events with extra refreshments and smiling welcomes. They all take the name Fellowship to heart, and I hope it shows in our meetings. Kathleen Adams always ended by thanking her long suffering husband Bill, and I should offer the same thanks to my wife, Lynda, for putting up with so much George Eliot related paraphernalia in the house. She did, wisely, put her foot down at the suggestion of storing 2,600 copies of Felix Holt in the house, and who can blame her?