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ANNUAL REPORT 1985

With an awareness of something positive to do, the Fellowship entered 1985 with a feeling of optimism, and with our thoughts very much occupied with the George Eliot Statue Appeal. By the beginning of the year, and six months in from the launching of the appeal, we were more than halfway to our target, and a lot of work continued to go on to raise the rest of the money and to negotiate all that was necessary in connection with the erection of the statue. These negotiations continued throughout the year in conjunction with Nuneaton Borough Council. The Chief Executive Mr. Ian Clarke, his assistant Mr. West, and the Leader of the Council, Councillor Olnor, have all been extremely helpful, encouraging and supportive. Not only has this made a great deal easier the effort of raising funds for the statue, but it has forged a strong link between the Fellowship and Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, has shown the Council what our enthusiasm and know-how can do, and has proved that they fully support our work to obtain local recognition of the greatness of the lady who was born so close to Nuneaton and whose roots so deeply influenced what she later wrote.

Among special fund-raising projects during the early part of the year was 'An Evening with Steve Race' at the University of Warwick Arts Theatre when this popular entertainer gave his services free. With generous sponsorship from Anglia Building Society, this event raised over £500. Sean Patterson, the proprietor of the George Eliot Hotel, raised over £300 with a Barn Dance at the hotel, and our President, Jonathan Ouvry with his wife Marjorie and three friends who call themselves 'The Parlour Performers', gave an excellent performance at St. John's, Abbey Street, and this raised over £200.

In June, just a year after launching the appeal, we reached our target of £8,000. We had been confident

of our ability to do this, but didn't think we would do it in so short a time. However, our pleasure was somewhat dampened by the news that our invitation to H.R.H. The Duchess of Kent to unveil the statue in the Autumn had been turned down but would be reconsidered by the Duchess for her Spring programme if we were prepared to wait for a further decision later. After some discussion, the majority view was that we should wait, even though this might result in a second refusal. Sadly, this is what happened. Neither the Duchess, nor Princess Alexandra to whom an invitation was also sent, could fit us into a busy Spring programme. This was very disappointing, particularly when we heard of other Royal visits being planned to take place nearby, but one has to accept that there must be very many invitations to members of the Royal Family which are not able to be accepted, and ours was only one.

A decision was then made to invite Jonathan Ouvry to unveil the statue and, to our great pleasure, he accepted. By the end of 1985, therefore, all our plans were made and our ends neatly tied as we waited for the Great Day in March 1986.

Our normal programme for 1985 began in March with a very uneventful Annual General Meeting at which, there being no other nominations, all four officers and both retiring members of the Council were re-elected.

For the first time in 16 years we made a loss on Gabriel Woolf's visit to Warwickshire to present the George Eliot Readings. Gabriel and the Fellowship lost about £100 each. Our costs were higher because Rosalind Shanks joined him at the Arts Centre, but the principal reason was a large and unaccountable drop in both audiences. The Arts Centre audience was down by 140, and only 43 people came the following evening to the Nuneaton performance. Gabriel puts in a tremendous amount of work in selecting a new programme each year, and it was very depressing that he and the Fellowship had worked so hard and so long for so few. We

considered abandoning the Nuneaton recital, but response to a local questionnaire reassured us that there would be an audience for the 1986 programme, and we trust that this confidence will be justified. Also, we would be sad to withdraw the event from George Eliot's native Nuneaton. If it ought to be a success anywhere, it should be in the town where she had her roots. We wait and see!

In June, and after a rather long gap, the Study Group resumed to discuss, under the enthusiastic leadership of Dr. Graham Handley, 'Brother Jacob' and 'The Lifted Veil'. For the first time we met at Griff House but the venue was less than perfect. We had an overflow of pop music from the bar being transmitted just outside our door, and the air-conditioning in the room in which we met was so very noisy that we had to hear what was said and wilt... or stay cool on a very warm evening and hear nothing! But we were a larger group than usual and, under Graham's guidance, a lively discussion took place.

Sculptor John Letts was our Guest of Honour at the Nuneaton Wreath-laying on June 16th, and on June 29th at Westminster Abbey, Margaret Wolfitt laid our wreath and addressed us. She had been chosen as our principal guest because of her splendid work in 1984 in raising such a large sum for the Statue Appeal. At the service, Gabriel Woolf and Tenniel Evans read, and the service itself was conducted for the last time by our good friend, Dr. Edward Carpenter, before he retired as Dean of Westminster. Edward has been a very supportive friend of the Fellowship, and to show our appreciation of all he has done for us, we presented him, on his retirement, with a bronze head of George Eliot.

A Celebration Supper was planned for September, not only to celebrate our achievement in raising the money for the statue but also as a fund-raising event; our working capital had been much depleted by our efforts to reach our target. Unfortunately, only five tickets were sold so the supper was cancelled.

On October 12th, Dr. Michael Bell, Chairman of the English Department at the University of Warwick, delivered the George Eliot Memorial Lecture on 'George Eliot and G. H. Lewes: Their Conception of Literature as seen from the 1980's'. Our audience was rather small, which added to an already present concern about somewhat flagging support. I am assured that this is happening to other societies, but it is worrying and we wonder where we are failing.

However, when the Vice Chairman, the Chairman and I attended the Inaugural meeting of the London Branch on November 9th we were very heartened by the response. An enthusiastic group readily elected officers and a committee under the Chairmanship of Dr. Graham Handley. We have high hopes of the London Branch!

Graham Handley was our Guest of Honour at the George Eliot Birthday Luncheon on November 24th and, in his toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot, spoke on the theme of 'Children in George Eliot's novels' - a rather appropriate subject, since the youngest diner was less than two years old!

The Christmas Party was in danger of cancellation, but we rustled up enough support to enable us to go ahead, and this did prove to be a fund-raiser with the generous gifts of many raffle prizes.

The Vice Chairman and I have continued to represent the Fellowship on the Borough Council Tourism Working Party during the year and have been most gratified to see the continued emphasis on the importance of George Eliot in relation to tourism in the town.

At the end of February the Chairman and I represented the Fellowship at a lecture at the University of Warwick. Given by Sally Shuttleworth, it was entitled 'Middlemarch and Science'. We were afterwards entertained to dinner by the Chairman of the English Department. Again, this is a happy link

between ourselves and an establishment with which we should have much in common, and ought to be to our mutual benefit.

The BBC Radio 4 programme, 'Down Your Way' visited Nuneaton in March and I was invited to take part. What I said then about the Fellowship attracted some new members as well as a number of donations for the Statue Appeal Fund.

Independent Television presented a children's programme centred on George Eliot and 'The Mill on the Floss' in the Spring, but clearly the finest contribution to this popular medium was the BBC television film of 'Silas Marner', starring Ben Kingsley and Jenny Agutter, shown at Christmas. The Chairman and I visited the location in the Cotswolds and saw about 1½ hours of filming which later appeared as about 10 seconds in the finished production. We were also invited to a preview of the film in London and enjoyed this enormously as well as the showing on TV later.

The University of Warwick put on a course on George Eliot and her early novels in Nuneaton during the early summer with Dr. John Rignold and I as tutors. We included two outings to places of local interest but the course attracted little support from either the public or our own members.

In May the Mayoress of Nuneaton, Mrs. Williams, gave to her 'At Home' to the Mayoresses of other local boroughs the theme of George Eliot, and I was asked to be their guide on a tour of the George Eliot country. I'm sure they all enjoyed the trip but I am less certain how much they got from their introduction to George Eliot!

We noted with dismay that the small and supposedly permanent George Eliot exhibition at Coventry's Herbert Museum had been withdrawn and had not reappeared. I wrote to the Museum to express our concern, and was told that the removal was not intended to be a permanent one - but I don't feel very

confident of Coventry's interest in George Eliot, even though she spent nine very influential years in the city.

In July we received from the Borough Council details of plans relating to the erection of barbecue housing on the front lawn of Griff House, now a Beefeater Restaurant. The Fellowship Council met to discuss what our reaction should be to this development, only to discover that Beefeater had already anticipated planning permission and the barbecue housing was in position. The Borough Council shared our concern at the action by the Restaurant but, nevertheless, granted planning permission. We were less happy with the plans as we felt that the structure and its attendant benches and tables would have been better sited further from the front of the old part of the house and not consuming almost all of the front lawn.

Arbury Mill raised its head again this year, although this time it was the farmhouse rather than the mill building, and plans to demolish the house and build a modern house for the tenant farmer. Since preservation was out of the question for such a dilapidated building and as the house has no real association with George Eliot we could raise no objection. Still nothing has been done to the old mill building itself, and I am often tackled about it being the original of the mill on the Floss by local people who will not accept that we doubt the authenticity of such an opinion. That George Eliot knew it as a child cannot be disputed, and she certainly had her first experience of a working mill in that vicinity, but with the other claims by Gainsborough having to be taken into account, and the very poor condition of the Arbury mill and the loss many years ago of the working parts, we continue to feel that preservation would be expensive, and without much point since a rebuild (and that is what would be required) would remove what little is left of the mill as George Eliot once knew it. It might well have been worth restoring if its condition had merited it, but it is now far too late.

In my 1984 report I said something about our efforts

to get help for the West Indian Church in George Eliot's Foleshill home in their attempt to restore this sadly neglected building, but I cast doubt on whether the minister had followed up our suggestion to approach English Heritage. They did, in fact, apply for a grant but were turned down on the grounds that the house was not considered of sufficient importance. Not to English Heritage, perhaps, but how sad for us not to be able to preserve this once gracious home. It is now a mammoth task and quite beyond us; again, massive neglect in the years when few people cared enough about George Eliot has taken its toll, and only a Getty or a Rothschild or a Gulbenkian could really be of much help now. And we have none of these amongst our membership!

Once more, the Fellowship has been asked to provide names at the George Eliot Hospital. In a rapidly growing General Hospital, they needed two more ward names; we suggested Dolly Winthrop and Bob Jakin and both were accepted. Someone else had felicitously suggested Mirah for an extension at the Daniel Deronda Centre, and we couldn't have bettered that, although I must admit to a little surprise that someone outside the Fellowship was even aware of Mirah! We are simply not used to such specialised knowledge being used without our assistance and that is not being patronising - just realistic! On the other hand, I am sure no-one could have bettered our choice of 'Lewes House' for the new administrative block on the hospital campus which houses the offices of the North Warwickshire Area Health Authority. The Authority manages the George Eliot Hospital, so the name of George Henry Lewes, George Eliot's 'business manager' seemed an apt choice, and it was accepted with enthusiasm.

The plaque at the foot of the acacia tree planted outside George Eliot's Coventry school disappeared during 1985, apparently stolen by vandals. We approached Coventry City Council who are arranging for another one - and hopefully proof against vandalism - to be placed there.

An approach was also made to George Loveitt and Sons at 29, Warwick Row, Coventry (the building which housed George Eliot's school), to ask if a clearer and more prominent plaque might be put on the front of the building in place of the small, almost unreadable one there now. Loveitts are pursuing this and hope to have a better plaque installed in due course.

In my last report I expressed concern at the state of the Lewes and Cross graves in Highgate Cemetery, and I said that the cemetery superintendent had been asked to arrange for them to be cleaned. Despite several attempts, contact with him could not be made, and eventually, the Friends of Highgate Cemetery, who have done such wonderful work in the area, cleared and cleaned all three graves for us at a cost of £25.00. However, it is hoped that future maintenance of the graves will become the responsibility of the London Branch.

Gabriel Woolf and Margaret Wolfit continue to keep George Eliot's writings in the public eye. Gabriel performed none of his all-George Eliot programmes during 1985, but she does appear in a mixed programme called 'George Eliot and Friends', and this was given at Broadstairs . . . very suitably, since Charles Dickens was one of the friends! Margaret did a splendid series of performances of her one-woman 'The Mill on the Floss' in a three week run at London's Fortune Theatre. We heard excellent reports from those who attended. She did the same programme at Rugby School in September, but the Director of Drama there told us about it at the very last minute, making it impossible to support it, even though it was almost on our doorstep.

I have spoken to six societies during the year and two of these occasions included a tour of the George Eliot country - a slight drop on previous years, but audiences clearly find George Eliot's life story fascinating. I also spoke at the Wirksworth Festival in Derbyshire where interest in George Eliot and her association with the area is growing.

The Fellowship Council met nine times during the year and it has been a very busy year administratively. As always we met in members' homes which makes each meeting particularly pleasurable, and we are grateful for such generous hospitality.

The 1985 Review came out rather later than we had hoped and was much more expensive than we had anticipated. The typing agency fees inexplicably increased from £17.00 to £117.00 in three years. The printer's charges also increased dramatically and, again, we suffered from muddled collation of pages. We are changing our printer for the 1986 issue and hope that we may avoid all the earlier pitfalls. Of course, we want to produce a magazine which looks professional and which will command respect, particularly as several universities subscribe to it, but it is a difficult thing to achieve when we are only ordering about 400 copies annually.

Our membership rose in 1985 to 409 (171 ordinary members and 238 life members) after three years of a slight decline. Undoubtedly this is due to extra interest aroused by the statue. We hope this increase will be maintained into 1986, even when the statue excitement has died down. But we have to remind ourselves that, 20 years ago, our membership was only a total of 59, and a year later had dropped to an all-time low of 26! What strides we have made since then.

At the end of the year we heard of the death of Gordon S. Haight. We had not always seen eye to eye with him, and he resigned his Vice Presidency of the Fellowship after a disagreement of his own making some years ago. But we never ceased to acknowledge the great work he had done over a period of almost 50 years, and to be immensely grateful for the Biography and the nine volumes of George Eliot's letters. So aware were we of his unique contribution to George Eliot scholarship that we had no hesitation in asking him to unveil the Memorial Stone in Westminster Abbey in 1980. He came from America to perform this ceremony, and we know that the

invitation meant a great deal to him. This was the last occasion on which many of us saw him, and it is nice that this was so, for it had healed a breach and we met together for a common purpose - to honour the lady who had become his life's work. There will, inevitably, be many more books about George Eliot and her work, but I feel sure that no scholar will do for her what Dr. Haight did. The Fellowship was represented at the memorial service in Connecticut by Professor Michael Wolff, and Margaret Wolfit, too, flew out to attend the service.

At the end of 1985, Mr. Len Struebig retired as Curator of Nuneaton Museum because of ill health. During his years in office, the George Eliot collection had vastly increased, not only because of his enthusiasm but also because the Herbert Museum in Coventry was persuaded to transfer their mass of George Eliot material which was never displayed to Nuneaton. Under Len's guidance, the George Eliot Gallery was instigated, and has become a unique display of George Eliot memorabilia - the finest and largest collection in the world, and an attraction to tourists and George Eliot admirers. We thank Len for his enthusiastic work and wish him better health in his retirement.

As always, we owe a great deal to a growing number of people and organisations without whose work and interest the Fellowship would not function half so well. At the top of the list must be Ann Reader, whose untiring and painstaking work in handling our finances so meticulously has increased enormously during the period of the Statue Appeal. She has handled vast sums of money and done it so efficiently and with such good humour. We are also grateful to Nuneaton and Bedworth Joint Arts Association whose annual grant enables us to present the George Eliot Memorial Lecture, to Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council who allow us to use their beautiful Council Chamber for the same occasion (and I have already recorded our gratitude for their support during the Statue Appeal), to Nuneaton Library who allow us to use them as a ticket agency, to Nuneaton

Museum for their help, and, on a more personal level, to Dr. Graham Handley for the help he gives me in editing the Review, to Dr. Ezell in America who, despite a period of ill health, will not allow me to take away from him the work he does in keeping in contact with all our American members, and he continues to do this entirely at his own expense, to Kathleen Porter who, as Vice Chairman, is not often called upon to chair meetings because of the good health and support of the Chairman, but who is immensely supportive in many ways and never seems to say 'no' to any request for help! And, finally, of course, to the Chairman who doubles that job with the one of being my husband in such a way that I know I could not have done this job as secretary for the past eighteen years without his ever present support. Without the help of all these people, and without the support of many of our active members, the Fellowship would be very much the poorer.

Kathleen Adams
March 1986