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GEORGE ELIOT UNVEILED

by Kathleen Adams

The excitement associated with the unveiling of John Letts' beautiful statue of George Eliot began for the four officers two days before the ceremony. On March 20th she travelled from the bronze casters in High Wycombe, somewhat ungracefully, on the back of a lorry! The plinth, all clean and bright, was ready and waiting, as was a very large crane, hired from Coventry, and causing a traffic warden slight concern as it was parked on double yellow lines; but, happily, she joined in the spirit of the day, and no parking ticket was issued. The press were there from the local papers, a film cameraman was in an upstairs window in Newdegate Square, and an assortment of bemused Nuneatonians looked on, wondering what was to happen. When the lorry arrived and they saw a strange figure, shrouded and covered from the waist upwards, they were still a bit bemused. 'It looks like the elephant man', one was heard to say!

The crane swung into action, yellow nylon straps were placed around George Eliot's waist and under her arms (what indignity for a dignified Victorian lady!) and she was lifted slowly into the air and gently towards the plinth for a trial run. A few problems were solved and she rose again so that I could place beneath her skirt a stainless steel box, a sort of 'time capsule', containing those items relating to the Fellowship, the sculptor and the town which might be of interest to anyone who finds it in centuries to come, if and when the statue ever has to be moved. This done, she was lowered finally and tightly screwed down. The covering remained and hoardings were placed around the entire thing so that no-one could anticipate the Great Day to come. Even a security guard was mounted for the following two nights. No-one was to be allowed a sneak preview.



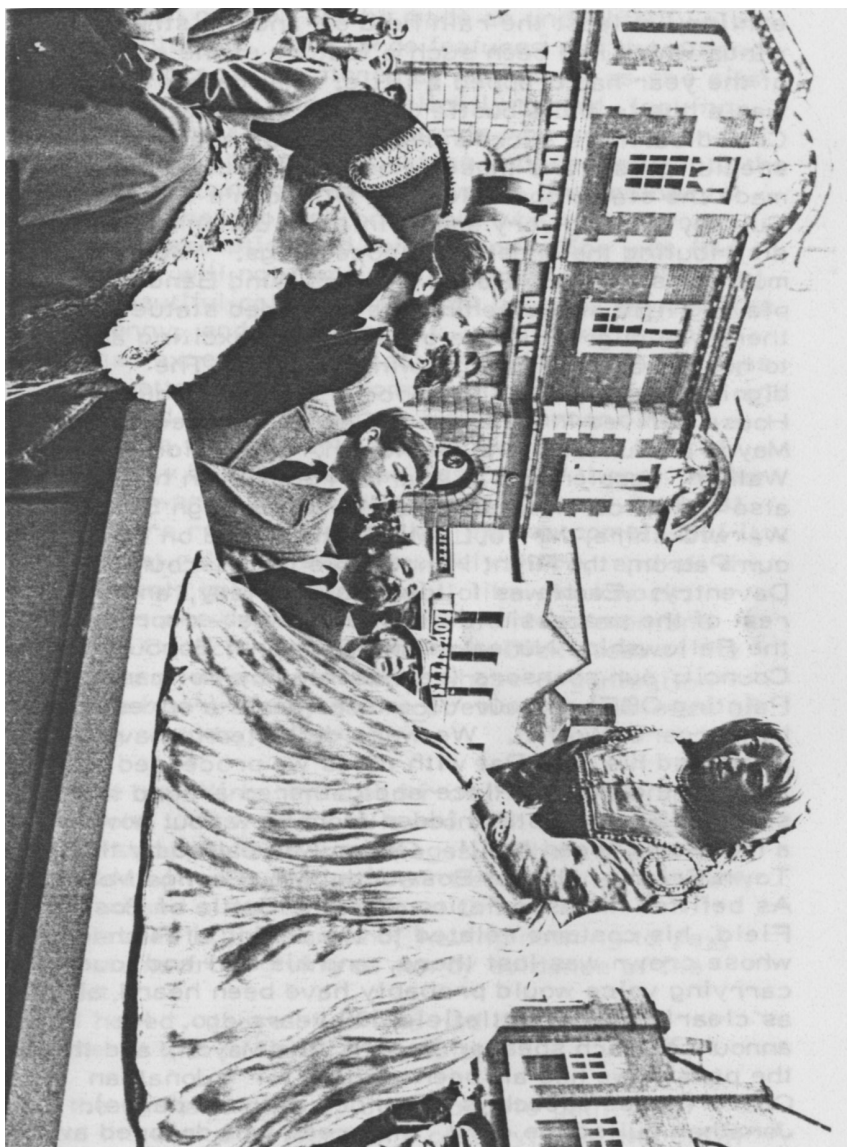
The arrival of the statue from the bronze casters. Kathleen Adams placing the 'time capsule' beneath the skirt. On her right, Kathleen Porter and John Letts; on her left, Bill Adams and Ann Reader.

Picture by courtesy of Coventry Evening Telegraph



Councillor Bill Olvey, Leader of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, addressing the crowd at the Unveiling Ceremony. On his right, Kathleen Adams; on his left, Jonathan Olvey.

Picture by courtesy of Nuneaton Evening Tribune.



The Mayor of Nuneaton and Bedworth, Councillor Albert Walker, with Jonathan Ouvry, Councillor Bill Oliver and the sculptor, John Lettis
Picture by courtesy of Coventry Evening Telegraph.

March 22nd arrived and, although there was no welcoming sunshine as there had been two days earlier, at least the rain held off and the strong winds which had been such a feature of the early part of the year had dropped a little. Newdegate Square was a hustle and a bustle of eager anticipation. Crowd barriers surrounded the area reserved for special guests and those whose contributions had made the statue possible, and St. John's Church Guides, looking very smart in their uniforms, were distributing the orders of proceedings. Young musicians from the Round Towers Wind Band were playing light music behind the shrouded statue and there was a great sense of something exciting about to happen amongst the growing crowds. The dignitaries who were to process from the Council House arrived in Newdegate Square, headed by the Mayor of Nuneaton and Bedworth, Councillor Albert Walker, resplendent in scarlet robes. On his right, also in full ceremonial dress, was the High Sheriff of Warwickshire, Mr. J.L.M. Graham, and on his left, our Patron, the Right Honourable the Viscount Daventry. Each was followed by his lady, and the rest of the procession followed in twos - representing the Fellowship, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, our sponsors (represented by Norman Painting OBE) and our Vice Presidents (represented by Margaret Wolfitt). We were delighted to have John Letts and his wife Pat with us as we processed through the Market Place and gathered around the statue. She was still hidden from view, but now by a handsome green 'veil'. Order was called by the Town Crier of Market Bosworth, Mr. George Moore. As befitted his association with the Battle of Bosworth Field, his costume related to the period of Richard III whose crown was lost there, and his bell and loudly carrying voice would probably have been heard almost as clearly on the battlefield 500 years ago. He announced each speaker in turn, the Mayor, and then the person we had all been waiting for - Jonathan Ouvry (whose speech is recorded in these pages). Jonathan pulled the cord, the green veil dropped away, and a gasp of delight arose from the large crowd. She was beautiful! I hasten to add that John Letts has not

made her face beautiful, for that would not have been correct, but neither has he made an undoubtedly plain woman grotesque. The large features and the strong face are there, but softened as in thought as she sits on a low wall with her head slightly bowed, looking down gently on all those thousands who will, year by year, look up at her. Not gazing impersonally into the far distance, but downwards towards the ordinary people she knew so well and about whom she wrote with such perception and compassion. She was (but presumably will not remain so because of weathering) a most beautiful colour – a bright bronze, almost like a new penny, and, surprisingly, she looked smaller than I had expected. The last time I had seen her was in John Letts' Studio, a comparatively small area, and now she had all of Newdegate Square around her. Many people were clearly very moved to see her; I could hardly believe that she was really there. After working towards this great day for so long, I almost felt we were rehearsing for the final outcome! But it was a great relief to see her safely there, and all the arrangements going, apparently, like clockwork. Our thanks are due to the officers of Nuneaton and Bedworth Council, but particularly Dick West of the Chief Executive's Department, whose organisation was superb – and they had no previous experience of unveiling statues, either!

After the unveiling, the Leader of the Council spoke, as did John Letts, and I followed with a short speech which also appears in these pages. The ceremony concluded with a quotation from George Eliot herself, read loud and clear by the Town Crier:

'Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say,
abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the
fact.'

We all hoped – those of us who had delivered speeches – that it didn't apply to us!

With the formal ceremony over, people gathered around the statue to look more closely, and were full of admiration for all aspects of it. No-one was critical, and nothing but compliments heard.

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council most generously sponsored a Luncheon at the George Eliot Hotel to follow the Unveiling, and this was a very pleasant and less formal occasion when we could say thank you to the many people and organisations who had helped us with our task. The George Eliot Hospital was represented, the local Joint Arts Association who sponsor our annual Memorial Lecture, the company who had cast the statue in bronze, the families of both George Eliot and George Henry Lewes, the local press, the University of Warwick, and the Council and Officers of the Fellowship as well as the Chairman and Secretary of our new London Branch. Everyone enjoyed the opportunity to relax and enjoy a very happy occasion.

Two things should be mentioned, I think, which were a source of real regret to the Fellowship Council. One was that our request for a Royal Lady to unveil the statue was turned down, particularly as we have since been aware that there have been several Royal visits to surrounding towns during the same period. We were given to understand that Warwickshire was not listed for Royal patronage during the early Spring, and accepted that we were not going to be thus honoured. So we are left with a feeling that, somehow, we missed out in this way. On the other hand, we were delighted with our subsequent choice of unveiler, as Jonathan Ouvry, our President, performed the ceremony with charm and dignity, and by being our Guest of Honour, rather kept the ceremony 'in the family'. The warm atmosphere that resulted would have been lost, no doubt, amongst the protocol and formality (not to mention the tight security) which would inevitably have gone hand in hand with a Royal guest. Our other regret still rankles. Despite a barrage of publicity material being issued, there appears to have been no media coverage of our unveiling, apart from the usual splendid and supportive cover in Nuneaton. George Eliot is an international figure of great repute, and we feel that a statue to her memory in her native town deserved some national recognition. Sadly, it received none, but we shall not let that particular

regret shadow our joy at our achievement. We are so proud and pleased that, by public subscription, and with the affection and admiration of people all over the world, this splendid tribute in bronze will look down on the faces of her admirers for, we hope, centuries to come.