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GEORGE ELIOT AT SOUTHFIELDS

by

Pat Bailey

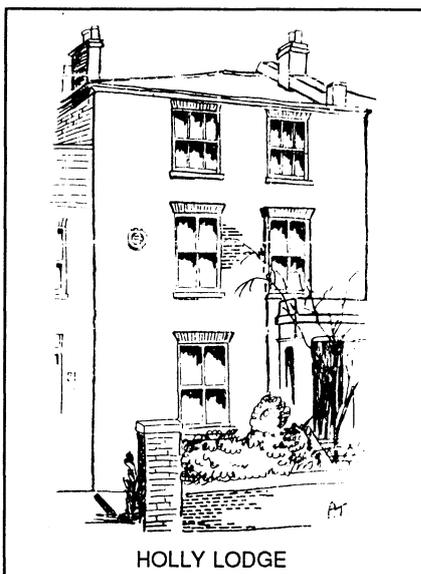
George Eliot (Marian Evans) was quite delighted with Holly Lodge, Wimbledon Park Road (now No. 31) when she and George Henry Lewes took possession of it on a seven year lease on 5th February 1859. The four storey house with "wide horizons, well ventilated rooms and abundant water" was a welcome change for them after four years in very cramped furnished lodgings at 8 Park Shot, Richmond, where their favourite evenings of songs at the piano had been restricted because a clergy-man happened to live on the floor below. In a letter to Sara Hennell several weeks later she was anxious, however, that her friend in the Warwickshire countryside should not picture it as "a snug place, just peeping above the holly bushes. Imagine it rather as a tall cake, with a low garnish of holly and laurel" - as it remains to this day.

Lewes was already known in academic circles as a philosopher, literary critic and writer on natural history topics, but for reasons of discretion and natural inclination, neither of them wished to be part of the literary scene. Wanting a quiet life, the still quite rural district of Southfields seemed as ideal a place as they could manage, with opportunities for the walking they had enjoyed so much around Richmond. They had been disappointed about a Mortlake house "after my own heart" which "turned out to have a premium fixed to the lease which made it too expensive for prudence."

Holly Lodge, a semi-detached house with open parkland to south and west, had been leased from a Captain William Thomas Rivers, RN, of Wimbledon Park, who, anxious to boost the area and flatter his tenants, told them "we visit with everyone round here and there are very pleasant soirees." When they expressed horror at this with the words "We don't visit and have no desire to be called upon", Rivers countered with a mention of a Mr. and Mrs. Congreve "who visited no-one." The two couples did indeed become close friends and the Congreves were, it seems, the sole comfort in their growing disillusionment with the area.

The only immediate problem was that of a servant. Within a week of moving in, Lewes's journal refers to "the servant we engaged on recommendation of Captain Rivers turning out to be, like all his other recommendations, a bad lot." That same day they had walked to Richmond to speak to the keeper of the Sheen Gate about a possible servant, and there is mention of a Caroline beginning work on March 7th, but after one day Marian is describing her in a letter as though a good woman, "also frightfully inefficient." Advertisements were placed in *The Times* and requests made to friends in the country "just in case there were girls who would like a place near London we would give high wages." She describes her wants to Mrs. Charles Bray: "a servant who will cause me the least possible expenditure of time on household matters. Cooking is the material thing, not because Mr. Lewes is epicurean (for he is stupid of palate) but because he is, amongst his many other eminences, eminently dyspeptic. I am anxious therefore to have a cook who is not only honest, but soup making and full of devices - as good a cook as your Hannah of oldtime. Honesty and cleanliness are the two other emphatic requirements and a not unimportant one is a power of keeping simple accounts," What seems to have been wanted here was a mature (and well educated) cook-house-keeper and not a young girl with an offered wage of £12 per year.

By the middle of May, Marian writes to Sara Hennell that they now have a new servant who seems promising and the subject drops from her letters and her husband's journals. It was perhaps just an extra vexation at a time of great sorrow as her sister Chrissey died of consumption on 15th March. They had formerly been very close, but two years previously their brother Isaac, on learning of Marian's illicit relationship with Lewes, had forbidden all contact. A few weeks before she died, Chrissey had written expressing great regret for having lost touch, and Lewes notes in his journal: "Polly (this and Pollian he often used) seems much affected and I almost wish the silence had never been broken. She had got used to that!" In her letters to Sara Hennell, the optimism she had expressed at the end of February when she felt she was getting over the "unusual worry and muscular exertion in arranging the house" was dashed by this tragedy. "Chrissey's death has taken from me the possibility of many things towards which I looked with some hope and yearning for the future. I had a very special feeling towards her, stronger than any third person would think likely."



HOLLY LODGE

Their life at Southfields was, however, brightened by the growing friendship with the Congreves - the reclusive couple mentioned by Captain Rivers. "We called on the Congreves and found them both charming and likely to be agreeable neighbours." In fact, from now on the local references in their letters and journals are either of affection for this family, particularly Marian's for Maria, or of dislike and disappointment with the district. It was discovered that Maria's surgeon father had attended Marian's father's last illness in Warwickshire.

As always, moving house had proved very expensive, and by April Lewes was appealing to Blackwoods, his publishers, that "moving into my new house has so far exceeded second payment for the *Physiology (of Common Life)*." And it does seem that Marian quickly regretted her choice. Within a month, the neighbourhood is referred to as "undestroyed Babylon" and unschooled. A little later, in writing to Sara Hennell, who had expressed a desire to take lodgings near to them, she is suggesting Wimbledon "which is within half an hour's delicious walk and I don't think there is a single case of apartments to let in South Fields. I should be sorry for that if I thought the quarter would suit you for the railway, but it is a fatiguing ugly walk to Wandsworth Station - we always go to Putney when we can." Other friends are advised "come to Putney Station, the walk is prettier and not long, from Putney." There are references to walking through park and woods to the station. In one further reference to the district in the early months of 1859 when Marian and George were on a trip to Italy she wrote to Maria "the thought of seeing you again makes the South Fields look brighter in our imagination than they could have looked from the dreariest part of the world if you had not been living in them." They happily looked after the Congreve's dog Rough, "the daily companion of our walks", when they in turn went abroad, and

Marian confides in her journal, "this new friend, which I have gained by coming to Wandsworth, is the chief charm of the place to me. Her friendship has the same date as the success of *Adam Bede*. Two good things in my lot which ought to have made me less sad than I have been in this house."

There were professional reasons for distress at this time. *Adam Bede* had been a success and speculation as to the author, both in private circles and correspondence in *The Times*, had finally concentrated upon a Mr. Liggins, who had at one time been connected with the book's locales. He does not seem to have instigated this suggestion himself but had allowed others to promote the idea even to the extent of hinting that his publishers had withheld monies. Marian had at first treated this as a joke, but when a committee was formed openly soliciting subscriptions she, Lewes and Blackwood started their own letters in *The Times*, having eventually to reveal the author to be a woman. Thus Marian very suddenly and unexpectedly (even her publisher had known the truth for only a short time) found herself the focus of intense curiosity and some social obligations that the geographical position of South Fields did not make very easy. Dickens came to dinner in November - being met at Putney Station - and told her that reading *Adam Bede* had made an epoch in his life. Wilkie Collins had been a month earlier for a "charming musical evening." Mrs. Gaskell wrote a letter of praise with an apology that she had once believed the Liggins story. Bulwer Lytton called. The first English woman surgeon, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, visited, evoking a remark in Lewes' journal: "estimable for the energy, courage and perseverance she has shown in studying medicine and taking a doctor's degree, but very repulsive and school-marmish in her manner."

By early summer 1859 Marian was confiding to Maria, who was abroad: "I want to get rid of this house, cut cables and drift about. I dislike Wandsworth and should think with unmitigated regret of our coming here if it were not for you. this place becomes drearier as the summer advances. The dusty roads are all longer and the shade is further off." This was malcontent indeed, as walking was one of their greatest pleasures - there are many references to walking to Richmond through Wimbledon and the Common was much admired: "It is such a grand stretch of heathclad level ground. This fine Common is the chief thing we have, to make amends for the loss of the Richmond walks which are so various and so beautiful."

However, her journal at the end of 1859 records that they spent a very happy Christmas day with the Congreves, accompanied by the servant and Pug, the dog that had recently been given to Marian by Blackwood, who noted that on the whole Marian was apt to wear a vexed and anxious look during her Holly Lodge period. To her publisher she wrote: "When Maggie is done and I have a month or two at leisure, I should like to transfer our present house, into which we were driven by haste and economy, to someone who likes houses full of eyes round him. I long for a house with some shade and grass close round it."

Their days were divided between working in the morning, lunch at 1.30, an afternoon walk with dinner at 6.30 followed by reading aloud or music. Nowhere does she mention the domestic details of the house hold such as the tradespeople or the purchase of food. By Christmas she was absorbed in the writing of her new novel, eventually to be called *The Mill on the Floss*, for which research visits were made to Weymouth for its mills and to Gainsborough for the Trent tides.

In April 1860 when the book was published, she and Lewes were on a three-month visit to Italy and Switzerland, the journey to the latter country being chiefly to enable him to visit his sons who were at school there. Charles, the eldest, was ready to leave and steps were taken over the summer of 1860 to get him settled in London. Through the initiative of the novelist and GPO official Anthony Trollope, the boy was appointed to the Post Office after coming top of the entrance examination.

During this continental visit Marian wrote several letters to a Mrs. Bell, who as 'Nursie' had looked after the Lewes children when young and was now taking care of Pug and the house. She asks for blinds and windows to be cleaned and for a room to be got ready for Charles. Marian got on very well with Lewes's boys, and enjoyed having them to stay, but generally they made it quite clear to friends that no spare room was available: "Not ready" or "Too uncomfortable" were the words used to dissuade would-be visitors.

They were by now quite determined to move house, on account of "its inconvenient situation", especially for Charles, who would be travelling up to town daily. Other considerations must have applied too. She was no longer anonymous; their liaison was gradually - but never wholly - accepted; they had plenty of money from the success of *The Mill on The Floss*, and though no more gregarious (they always insisted on people visiting them) they could no longer hide away. She had been asked to sit for the painter Lawrence, but sittings became rather difficult because of the weather. In August it was raining too much to go to the train: "That comes of our inconvenient situation, so far off from the railway, and alas no-one comes to take the house off our hands. We may be forced to stay here after all." Mr. Barry (son of the architect of the Houses of Parliament) expressed an interest, but appeared to have been deterred by the distance.

Then quite suddenly, early in September, "a lady and gentleman wanted to be in by quarter day", and they only had two or three weeks to settle on somewhere else. They first of all decided that buying was the best policy. They wanted a particular house in Regents Park but in the event they settled for more rented accommodation until in 1863 The Priory, 21 North Bank, on the edge of the Park, was purchased, and there they lived for the next fourteen years. In a letter she says: "It is not at all like a London house with rooms piled one above the other like boxes. It stands in a garden detached from all other houses and the living rooms are all on one floor."

Although Marian and George left Holly Lodge with relief and no regrets, it is possible for us to see her eighteen-month stay in Southfields as one of great importance to her life and work. In some ways it was a turning point. It saw the real birth of her career as a writer, when she was revealed to be a woman and realised she could no longer hide under a pseudonym; the death of her sister was both a personal tragedy and a reinforcement of the estrangement from her family. Most important of all, *The Mill on the Floss*, her best known novel (if not her best loved) was entirely written here. The inscription on the manuscript reads thus:

"To my beloved husband, George Henry Lewes, I give this MS of my third book written in the 6th year of our life together, at Holly Lodge, South Field, Wandsworth, and finished 21st March 1860."