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John Burton

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**WREATH LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDENS,
NUNEATON ON JUNE 12th 1988, WHEN THE GUEST OF HONOUR WAS
JOHN BURTON, CHAIRMAN OF THE BEDWORTH SOCIETY.**

Mr. Burton laid the Fellowship's wreath and gave the following Address:

In the short time at my disposal I would like to talk briefly about four aspects of my interest in George Eliot and this area, from the standpoint of my position as chairman of The Bedworth Society. The four are the buildings in Bedworth; the buildings associated with George Eliot, especially Coton Free School; future developments for local societies like ours; and the need for integrity in all we do.

To start then, with buildings in Bedworth. As a preliminary to deciding what I would say today, I was making a mental list of the buildings still existing in Bedworth which George Eliot would have known. I confined my list to the buildings in the town before George Eliot left the area in 1840. Travelling from Griff, the house itself is still there, as is the Griffin Inn, and the cluster of cottages between those two. One farm in Arbury Lane remains. Certainly this is in contrast to Collycroft where nothing that George Eliot might have seen now remains. Into Bedworth and the Old Meeting chapel remains, a fine building. Despite her strong early Anglican connections, I can't help thinking that she would have liked this outpost of non-conformity, with its ability to prick the pomposity of the Anglicans! In the town centre the line of shops in Mill Street would have been there, possibly as ribbon weavers dwellings and workshops rather than shops.

Of the present parish church, only the tower would be recognisable. During her early life the church was rebuilt by Rev. Henry Bellairs and by the time of her death plans for a second, major, rebuilding were well advanced, ironically by her nephew, Rev. F. R. Evans. He, of course, is still remembered by older Bedworth residents, since he did not die until 1927.

In Bedworth marketplace, George Eliot would have seen the building of the second almshouses in 1840, just as she was leaving the area, but such a large project in what was then only a village would not have escaped her notice. The only other building still there would have been the White House in Coventry Road, which was built in 1832.

Such is the nature of change, that in our area only a handful of buildings remain after 150 years. The Fellowship is aware of the buildings in the Nuneaton area mentioned in her publications. One in particular has concerned us during the last twelve months. This is Chilvers Coton Free School, in recent years used by the Parks Department. In our view it is a building which should be Listed and saved, regardless of its connection, or not, with George Eliot. But the building was very nearly lost through a combination of ignorance by the general public and their elected councillors, of financial pressures on local authorities, and by the continuing intransigence of English Heritage.

However, good has come out of it. Firstly, and most important, the local authority changed its mind (how that happened is another story in itself). Second, The Nuneaton Society was formed. Third, The Bedworth Society, The Nuneaton Society and The George Eliot Fellowship were drawn much closer together as a consequence of the fight to save the building, and fourth, the Chilvers Coton Centre Trust was formed, with representation from all three groups on it. We hope the building will in future years provide an opportunity to afford a high profile for George Eliot.

Turning to future developments, obviously the Fellowship will always be specifically concerned with the writer and her work, but the Chilvers Coton Centre might enable her work to reach more people through events or exhibitions. No doubt there will be other opportunities for

closer co-operation by the societies - either to save buildings or to draw attention to threats; or on a social level to inform each other of our meetings and to share social get-togethers. Thus we retain our specific interests but pool common ones to benefit our locality.

Finally, a word of warning. I mentioned integrity. Everyone, everywhere, is onto 'tourism' as possibly the biggest growth area for generating income in the country. George Eliot will not escape that fate of a coach load of people pursuing George Eliot landmarks. Nor should she. But we - the independent local groups - must fight hard to ensure that the integrity remains.

Robert Hewison, in his recent publication 'The Heritage Industry' describes a Britain as a huge heritage park, seeking security in its past because it dare not face its future. Hewison's major criticism is that the heritage being portrayed is false. It is romanticised and safe. It shows coalmining without the risks or the harsh oppression; Victorian schoolrooms without the smell, the malnutrition, the ill-fitting shoes, the rickets.

It is easy enough for groups like ours, or even local authorities, to declare their opposition to the worst excesses of tourism - the Ye Olde Worlde George Eliot Teashoppe and the Kiss Me Quick hat, but money, big money, talks. It is talking already. Often in seeking to enhance our heritage appeal we destroy the very heritage we want people to see.

Thus M and B Brewery destroyed the Old Wharf in Nuneaton, have their eyes on 'improving' the Griffin and have closed the White Lion in Bedworth. Yet all over the country breweries which twenty years ago tore out old but functional fittings are now busily recreating them. Integrity can be swamped by the need to make money. In the present political climate this is difficult to oppose, though examples do exist. Margaret Rylatt, Coventry's Field Archeologist, puts integrity and honesty above all, and consequently the Lunt Fort and the Six Centuries of Gardens are classics.

We, as interested, intelligent observers and participants, owe it to George Eliot, for she was, above all else, a woman and a writer of integrity.

The quotation on the Fellowship's wreath:

We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and loved because it is known?

From The Mill on the Floss