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Wreath-Laying in The George Eliot Memorial Gardens, Nuneaton- 1989

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**WREATH-LAYING IN THE
GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDENS, NUNEATON,
on June 18th 1989,
WHEN THE GUEST OF HONOUR WAS
Mrs. BERYL KERBY,
CHAIRMAN OF THE NUNEATON SOCIETY.**

Mrs. Kerby laid the Fellowship's wreath and gave the following address:

I felt greatly honoured when I was invited to lay the Fellowship's wreath at today's ceremony. It was much later, when considering this address, that I realised I had studied none of George Eliot's works and had read very few.

However, I did know something of her. My parents and their friends all seem to have been involved, in some way, with the George Eliot Centenary celebrations in 1919 and very early on I was given a copy of Scenes of Clerical Life. How easy it is at Arbury Hall to look at the painting of Sir Roger Newdigate but see in the mind's eye Sir Christopher Cheverel coming through the bow window to look at the 'petrified lace work' of the ceiling.

It was really left to the television production of Middlemarch to bring home to me George Eliot's powers of observation, and her genius in portraying the characters; how well we can still recognise those same people today.

At the moment I am very much involved with the old Free School in Chilvers Coton. The Chilvers Coton Centre Trust, with the help and support from the Nuneaton and Bedworth Societies and the George Eliot Fellowship, hopes to turn the building into a craft / heritage centre with facilities for exhibitions, small meetings, a retail area and facilities for refreshments.

You may wonder what this has to do with George Eliot. Miss Swinnerton, whom I remember as a rather formidable lady unlikely to give way to flights of fancy, wrote that 'local legend' had it that Mary Ann Evans went to the school for a 'very short time'. Writing in 1888 S. Parkinson said in Scenes in George Eliot Country that when he visited Isaac Evans at Griff House he was told that his sister had joined him there 'for a short time' (see Editor's footnote). How I would love to go into the girls' schoolroom and say 'George Eliot sat here' but must admit that there is no conclusive evidence to show that Swinnerton or Parkinson were right.

All the same, the young Mary Ann must have been familiar with the building whose history is slowly being pieced together. An account exists for Lady Newdigate's building dated 1735. Sir Roger's involvement is fairly well documented, including his plan and sketch of the main part of the construction of the 1760's, as are his accounts of Lady Hester's frequent visits. On Sir Roger's death, Francis Parker Newdegate and his agent Robert Evans became chief Benefactors of the school. It is hard to believe that Mr. Evans's duties would not take him there, maybe accompanied by Mary Ann; certainly it would be seen by the family as they went to Chilvers Coton Church or travelled along the toll road to Nuneaton or along Pingles Lane into Attleborough.

A George Eliot Trail would not be complete without including this building and we wondered why this unusual stone building, one of the oldest in the town, was not listed as of outstanding architectural or historic interest ¹.

Inside we hope to show something of the town which George Eliot knew. Nuneaton, not yet joined to Chilvers Coton, had some 6,000 inhabitants, 287 pig styes, 385 privies, 346 cesspits and 15 slaughter houses. It was linked to the outside world by coach companies vying with each other for profitable routes and reliable service. The canals, whose very existence owed so much to Sir Roger Newdigate, were in their heyday, alive with trade and the frequent excitement of barges full of troops stopping at Coton Wharf, a common occurrence in the 1820's and 1830's. Sadly, the Wharf was destroyed in 1988, despite its historic importance.

Social life for the well-to-do seems to have centred around the numerous charity dinners and balls at the Town Hall. While for everyone there was Market Day, the May Fairs, both granted by ancient charter, and the Coton and Attleborough Wakes with their fiddlers, travelling mountebanks and menageries to add to the fun.

In 1823 hundreds of people went to Tuttle Hill to watch Mr. Green's balloon and could see it all the way to Coventry. Did four year old Mary Ann watch it as it went over Griff?

1832 seems to have been quite a year. The passing of the Reform Bill was marked by a torch-lit procession, and a few wealthy citizens provided 5,000 people with one pound of beef and one pint of ale. With 44 public houses and 35 new beer-selling houses one can imagine the scale of the celebrations.

The same year there was an election and 500 wagon-loads of people were plied with bread, cheese and ale on their way to Coleshill for the Nomination, and returned in happy mood in a torch-lit procession.

Election day itself was marked by horse soldiers galloping down Coton Road, swords drawn to deal with events in the Market Place. Mary Ann must have heard of these and of the cholera deaths in the town the same year.

In George Eliot's time at Griff House she would have known four different monarchs on the throne. Three times the family would have known the mourning for the royal dead and the proclamations and coronation festivities for the new monarch.

The fortunes of the populace depended much on the ribbon trade in those years. Trade was good in the early 20's and 40's but had bad spells. In January 1830, 1,000 gallons of soup a week were distributed, each gallon made with one pound of beef, and served with bread. The 30's also saw the opening of the first steam factory, Barnwell's in Wheat Street, followed by one in Horeston Lane, and in Attleborough.

We know Geroge Eliot was involved in helping the weavers during their hard years. Did she, I wonder, go and marvel at the new gas lights in Wash Lane in 1837, or follow the plans for the first railway in the town?

For years now, the Fellowship has worked untiringly and successfully to promote the works of George Eliot. I hope that the George Eliot Country will remain an area worth visiting - Arbury Hall most certainly is, but we will have to fight to keep other parts of the countryside. Nuneaton has not, so far, had a good record for identifying and looking after key buildings which would have shown our historic and industrial development. I think there is only one top shop left from the days of the weavers, and that altered, and one beehive kiln from the 2,000 years of clay workings. Let us hope that they and places like the Griffin and King William IV inns and cottages in Bull Street can be looked after so that visitors to the George Eliot Trail have some work-a-day places to look at, not just two churches and sites. We lost the Wharf Inn last year, largely through local apathy and lack of knowledge; maybe we should be working harder.

1. The Free School was, at last, listed as from March 1st 1990

Editor's footnote: A document in the possession of Mrs. Susan Womersley, Isaac Evans' great granddaughter, entitled 'Suggestions to J.W. Cross on Introductory Sketch of Childhood of George Eliot in his Book' in Isaac's own handwriting, states, in referring to the manuscript of Cross's first chapter of his book, 'page 14 line 11. I went to the Free School for a short time but Mary Ann never did.'