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## Wreath-Laying in The George Eliot Memorial Garden, Nuneaton

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## **WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN, NUNEATON, 11 JUNE 1995**

The Guest of Honour was Richard Thompson who gave the following Address:

For those of you who don't know who I am, I am currently the Managing Agent on the Arbury Estate, where I am lucky enough to live in South Farm, which will be familiar to you all as the birthplace of Mary Ann Evans.

I arrived at Arbury approximately 183 years after Robert Evans, Mary Ann's father, who was also the Agent on the Estate and on whom it is my intention to reflect today.

Robert was born in 1773, the son of a carpenter. He had a limited early education in the local school which was run by Bartle Massey, whose name reappears some eighty years later as the teacher in *Adam Bede*. He spent his early years learning a variety of skills from his father, including the construction of farm implements, some of which were still made of wood, furniture and a variety of buildings. These were to prove to be useful skills to acquire and were to be put to great service during his working life.

Robert was clearly a man who accepted change in his commercial activities and seems to have warmly embraced the changes in agriculture and industry that occurred during his life, though perhaps, as we shall see later, less readily the social adjustments these developments brought with them.

During Robert's life the open field system of agriculture was almost completely to disappear, with some 7,700 square miles being enclosed between 1760 and 1820. The new farming systems enabled landowners to experiment with breeding and crop rotations, perhaps most significantly introducing fodder crop production, enabling livestock to be overwintered. Robert took these methods to heart, clearly putting them into practice at Spring Farm in Kirk Hallam, Derbyshire, whilst a tenant of Francis Parker, his mentor. It was Francis Parker who asked Robert to come to Arbury. He strove to improve the farming methods, experimenting with breeding as well studying scientific agriculture.

Industrial developments in technology and transport must also have affected Robert's working life. For example James Watt's improvements to Newcomen's steam pump must have impacted on Robert's employer's mining activities, as must the increasing construction of the canal network, with in excess of 4,000 miles being constructed by 1830.

It is apparent that this period of change also influenced Robert's daughter, probably as a result of her father's activities. In 1843 Robert reported to Charles Newdigate Newdegate that he had bought thirty copies of 'Chemistry made easy for the use of Agriculturists'. It was intended that these should be for the use of young tenants of Charles's, and of Lord Aylesford's on the neighbouring Packington Estate. It is interesting to note that this modern approach was also reflected in Mary Ann's writing, with Sir James Chettam, the

‘excellent baronet’ in *Middlemarch*, making a study of Sir Humphrey Davy’s *Agricultural Chemistry*. Sir James’s purpose in this study was to take one of his own farms in hand and set a modern standard of farming for his tenants. This was an idea much supported by Dorothea Brooke – whose views possibly reflected those of George Eliot herself.

Robert’s work, particularly at Arbury, involved a wide variety of activities including: building, surveying, valuing timber, draining fields and collecting rents. These are all activities which form part of the modern surveyor’s life. However, Robert was also involved in organizing the political support of the tenants, which is happily, something I do not have to be involved with. However, in Robert’s day this was regarded as important and necessary.

Matters of politics were also subject to change with an increasing political awareness in the country. Robert’s political activities on behalf of Charles Newdegate both in seeking to influence the Estate tenants in 1837 and in 1839, when he organized a petition to prevent the overthrow of the corn laws, were significant in a time of rising population – Birmingham’s population doubled between 1760 and 1800 – and an underlying political fear in the ruling classes in the aftermath of the French Revolution, these concerns being explored in *Felix Holt*.

Robert’s relationship with his daughter, Mary Ann, was said to be good and while she differed in her views on certain matters it is possible that the hardworking and progressive Caleb Garth was perhaps a characterization of her father.

If this is the case then, contained in the text of *Middlemarch* there are one or two interesting insights into the relationship of father and daughter. It was always said that Robert bettered himself in his marriage to George Eliot’s mother, Christiana in 1813. This belief is perhaps confirmed in a conversation in *Middlemarch* between Mr Farebrother and Lydgate about Garth when he was said to be ‘a fine fellow, but who would hardly have pulled through as he has done without his wife’. This perhaps is a cruel remark if based on her father – but was George Eliot more bitter about her poor inheritance from her father than has been thought? While this speculation may seem a little unkind it is interesting to note that Garth was retained to manage a number of properties around Middlemarch, as was Robert around Nuneaton and Coventry.

Mary Ann’s decision not to attend Church with her father challenged Robert’s ‘modern’ credentials too severely. While he was not a deeply religious man, he was a man of the establishment and it was not easy for him to accept his daughter’s new approach. Possibly for fear it might damage his standing in the community.

From 1845 Robert’s health was failing and while he survived for a number more years he finally succumbed in 1849 at the age of seventy-six. As has already been suggested, Mary Ann fared worst out of his family from Robert’s will, and while this has been considered somewhat ungrateful in view of her previous devotion, perhaps her strong opinions and

the long period of uncertainty with her father owing to her religious stance impacted on Robert more than has been thought.

Robert was in his own way progressive for the times that he lived in, and accepted new ideas in his work readily and though, perhaps, less receptive than his daughter to the social changes of the time, I think that some measure of his daughter's achievements must be credited to Robert and his approach to his work. However, George Eliot's ability to convert her observations of her time into fiction were, without doubt, remarkable both then and today.

[Kathleen Adams writes:

In view of Richard Thompson's close association with that part of Warwickshire so much loved by George Eliot, the quotation on the Fellowship wreath was taken from 'Brother and Sister' Sonnet VI, written in 1869:

The wide-arched bridge, the scented elder-flowers,  
The wondrous watery rings that died too soon,  
The echoes of the quarry, the still hours  
With white robe sweeping-on the shadeless noon,

Were but my growing self, are part of me,  
My present Past, my root of piety.]