2016

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CHAIRMAN’S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2015

By John Burton

Another successful year’ is always good to report, and is expected of a chairman. But it really was a terrific year for the Fellowship. The only damper was the slow, painfully slow progress on the Visitor Centre.

I start with thanks to the Fellowship Council, strengthened in March by the election of Joy Hunter, Joy Redfern and Linda Mayne as full members. The Fellowship has added several new events to its traditional sequence, and they all take time and effort to organize. Without the Council members, and several other active members who volunteer to help at these events we would not be able to put them on. I give my heartfelt thanks to them all, as I do to our vice-presidents, president and patron who work so hard at things like editing the Review, judging essay entries, presenting papers at conferences, making our name known more widely, and even now, beginning to look ahead to the 2019 bicentenary, which promises to be extraordinary.

The George Eliot Essay Prize was won in 2015 by Jen Davis, and her essay appeared in last year’s Review. Also early in the year we saw a refurbishment at Griff House. The Premier Inn reception area now has a large picture of the George Eliot statue in Nuneaton with an invitation to ‘find out more’ about her. But in the Beefeater restaurant next door every reference to George Eliot has been removed in favour of pictures of stylized cows, ribs of beef and a sort of anglicized Texas. Very odd.

On a more positive side, we think Whitbread is still committed to helping create a Visitor Centre; and in Nuneaton’s George Eliot Memorial Gardens the borough council opened up the area around the obelisk, cutting down overhanging trees and shrubs and making the memorial more visible to passers-by. Another event in the Spring was a visit from Cerys Matthews to make a feature for ‘The One Show’ about The Mill on the Floss, which included cameo appearances by Viv Wood and by John Rignall in Gainsborough. Cerys has subsequently been very supportive, and she persuaded us to open a Twitter account (@GeorgeEliotLove) to complement our Facebook presence, with the more serious material going to the website.

Soon after that, we worked with BBC Scotland to help in their OU programme about The Mill on the Floss, an interesting feature fronted by Fiona Shaw and drawing on the expertise of Kathryn Hughes.

As part of our regular programme we held our annual George Eliot Day in May at Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre. There were excellent papers from John Rignall on Middlemarch and the Franco-Prussian War, Valerie Fehlbaum on the time spent in Geneva by Mary Ann Evans after her father’s death, and Brenda McKay setting the scene for The Spanish Gypsy. Brenda’s knowledge was shared with the subsequent reading group on the dramatic narrative poem during the summer; all of which set us up for our Fellowship trip to Spain in the Spring of 2016. Once again the reading group was arranged and led by Vivienne Wood and Denis Baylis, who deserve our profound thanks for what they contribute to the Fellowship in time, knowledge and enthusiasm.

The following day in May we held one of our George Eliot Country Tours. Attendance was low but those who took part loved it. They included two new friends of the Fellowship,
Sarah and her husband Hussain, who have gained funding from Oxford to record and archive the progress on the Visitor Centre. More support for the Visitor Centre will come from several local branches of the WI, who are working together on a piece of embroidered art work depicting aspects of George Eliot and her life. It will be used initially to celebrate the centenary of local WI branches, but after that will be loaned to the Visitor Centre where it can be displayed for all to see.

Our next regular event was the wreath laying in Nuneaton in June. On this occasion our guest of honour was Beth Dyson, a young woman who enlivened our outdoor activities with her dance academy students, in 2014 at the Nuneaton Lives Day where she presented short scenes from *Silas Marner* at the six stopping points for the giant model of Godiva. Beth then worked with us in 2015 on short adaptations of *The Mill on the Floss* as well as helping to produce special words for an event at Astley Castle to celebrate the 50th anniversary of The Landmark Trust. The wreath laying was well attended, with seventeen wreaths laid by groups whose representatives then enjoyed tea and cake at the Museum.

2015 was another year when we went out and about to tell people about George Eliot. We had a stall in Warwick Market Place at the Museum Service’s ‘Show and Tell’ day where, with student Alex dressed in our George Eliot dress, we disabused those who asked what George Eliot had to do with Warwickshire. That same month we also were asked to take part in a special 50th anniversary event at Astley Castle, George Eliot’s Knebley, at which we produced words about the three queens associated with Astley, with our own fourth queen (you might guess her name) and sung by a locally recruited choir to music which had been commissioned for use at the same time on the same day in 25 Landmark Trust buildings. It was indeed a landmark event and has helped us to maintain a valuable link with Astley.

This link was demonstrated again a few weeks later in June when our vice-chairman Vivienne Wood organized a ‘Writers in Warwickshire’ literary festival over a weekend when Astley was open to the public. It was a great success, with short talks from about twenty speakers, all connected in some way with Warwickshire. It was done on a shoestring but with dedication by Viv and her team, and a few hundred pounds from the Fellowship. Our sincere thanks go to Viv for her marvellous efforts. At a later date you will read of a similar event in 2016.

More talking to people took place in Atherstone in the late summer when we had a stall and supported efforts by Northern Warwickshire Tourism to bring more visitors to the area and to make local residents more aware of what they have around them. In July we also had a stall for the second ‘Nuneaton Lives’ day and did our best to tell people of the amazing woman who grew up just down the road. At every available opportunity we are telling those with influence about the importance of 2019. Some of them are listening, I’m very pleased to report.

In August three of our members travelled to Highgate, armed with trowels and secateurs and set about tidying George Eliot’s grave. Denis Baylis even returned a few weeks later to plant some bulbs. It is good to be able to continue the tradition undertaken in the past by Beryl Gray and Rosalind Shanks of adding a personal touch to tidying the area around the grave. Still in London, we learnt at about this time that 4 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea had been sold to New York billionaire Michael Bloomberg for £17m. The house was of course George Eliot’s last home, but she was barely in it a month before she died. Kathryn Hughes wrote a delightfully tongue in cheek article suggesting that Bloomberg could gain a better insight into George Eliot by scattering some loose change our way to enable us to create a Visitor Centre.
in a building Mary Ann knew for twenty one years. Rebecca Mead produced an excellent blog for the New Yorker with advice for new owner Bloomberg based on characters in Eliot’s novels. I wrote to the Bloomberg Foundation suggesting they might like to fund us. They answered the email and said we would hear more. Eleven months on we have heard nothing!

Our last three regular events went very well indeed. In October we welcomed Patricia Duncker for the Annual Lecture. She was a wonderful speaker who had already impressed many of us with her novel *Sophie and the Sibyl* earlier in the year. She has also joined the Fellowship! A fortnight later we welcomed Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks for a wonderful afternoon of readings at Old Meeting URC in Bedworth. The selection was one of ‘Everybody’s Favourite Pieces from George Eliot’. The last event was the annual luncheon, held again at Ansty Hall. Guest of honour was Professor Mark Evans from Coventry University, who subsequently put us in touch with key people for planning events in 2019. A significant and interesting extra dimension to the luncheon was provided by Bill Adams, who spoke about his early association with the Fellowship fifty years ago.

The Fellowship supported the Institute of English Studies conference at the Senate House on Daniel Deronda. It was a sparkling day, full of good and interesting papers, and poignant in hindsight for the fact that it was the last time many of us heard Barbara Hardy.

Even when we get our Visitor Centre we are unlikely to be collectors of much original material. Such items are best held in a secure and properly maintained environment. But in the autumn of 2015 we jumped at the chance of acquiring some items relevant to Griff, and we purchased a pair of spectacles belonging to Robert Evans, a leather satchel belonging to Isaac Evans and three letters posted to Isaac at Griff. Our Japanese members sent us £1000 towards the Visitor Centre and they are happy for us to pay for the items and a display cabinet to hold them with their donation, which brings items once used there back to Griff. It seems very appropriate. Shortly after this purchase we were sent a lovely slim cream glove that once belonged to Mary Ann Evans. The provenance seems fine, and Kathryn Hughes has kindly researched the line for us.

We have worked with an Infant School close to Griff and talked to a year of five year olds. They even sang Happy Birthday to our model George Eliot, since we visited the school in the week before 22 November! This too is part of our longer term planning for involving the local community in the 2019 celebrations.

During the year we welcomed visitors from the USA. In May we showed Dinitia Smith some of the George Eliot sites. She was in the UK before putting the finishing touches to her novel about George Eliot’s marriage called *Honeymoon*. Later in the year we welcomed Beverley Rilett from Nebraska University, researching George Henry Lewes. Out of our meeting with Beverley there is now in process a scheme to digitize and give free access to our back numbers of the *George Eliot Review*, an exciting prospect for us, and a good way to increase our contact with George Eliot enthusiasts across the world.

In America we are grateful to Linda Robertson for her work in looking after membership subscriptions for us, and back home we are grateful to Brenda Evans for continuing to organize the twice yearly study evenings, usually in March and September. I am glad to report that membership numbers are holding their own and that our website is enabling more people to reach us more quickly; we are also getting better at using our Facebook and Twitter presence in an attempt to encourage a younger group of people to learn more about George Eliot.
Application to Heritage Lottery Fund for serious money for the Visitor Centre is imminent and our own members have contributed £5646 towards the appeal. It would be lovely this time next year to be able to report that it is up and running. I sincerely hope I shall be able to do so!