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## WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN, NUNEATON 18 JUNE 2000

*The Guest of Honour was Lord Daventry of Arbury Hall, Nuneaton, on whose estate in 1819 George Eliot was born. He gave the following Address:*

To be asked to lay a wreath and say a few words in celebration of George Eliot, the great authoress, is an honour. I am sure that most of you here today have much more knowledge and understanding of her life and works than I do. But having spent my childhood at Arbury and living there now with my wife and children, I believe that I have a small bond.

It is astounding to think that she, who is so much a part of the fabric of Arbury, is a world famous figure. Her talent was acknowledged during her lifetime which was not always the case – even Queen Victoria so admired her work that she commissioned artists to paint passages from her books. Maybe this was in part due to the fact that she was such a forward thinking person whose views were not too different from modern times and quite different from her peers.

Mary Ann Evans was born at South Farm in 1819 and lived there a year before moving to Griff House where she remained for 21 years. Naturally her writing is greatly influenced by her childhood home, the scenery, people and architecture, some of which you can still see today.

When Mary Ann Evans lived at South Farm the land would have been very similar – despite the orange glow of Nuneaton at night. But her beloved Griff House, or rather its surroundings would be a shock. Even I as a child remember bicycling for tea with the Helps family who lived there – down a small lane. If you venture there now, walking across the Bermuda Park Estate, you are transported to a different world. Superplexes, McDonalds, vast thundering lorries. Fields where we used to picnic are now Dairy Crest Warehouses. Mary Ann and Isaac used to watch for the two stage coaches to pass by Griff as the excitement of their day. Nowadays you'd be dizzy following the never ending fleets of lorries and constant traffic flow that drowns out the birdsong.

She was very fond of the canals that surround Arbury and refers to them often in her writings. They used to provide a way of travelling to London, but very few now run freely as the levels have altered due to underground mining for coal. Back in the 1950s my father successfully won a large court battle with the Coal Board which prevented them from mining underneath the house itself. Can you imagine such a thing!

George Eliot documents the vast changes that had occurred at Arbury in her book *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Sir Roger Newdigate had passed away before her birth but his legacy remained for her to marvel at. And it is this great heritage that we appreciate as a family. She accompanied her father to the house, gazed at the majestic plasterwork and even borrowed books from the library; rooms which we have the privilege of using on a daily basis.

Arbury is still an oasis surrounded by vast conurbations, We are holding on to this small piece of old-fashioned England but only just. My late father, who was your Patron, returned to Arbury after the war, having been ADC to Wavell and Mountbatten in India, to find the park and house an abandoned prisoner of war camp. The garden was overrun and the house neglected. His life's work was to restore it to former glory, as Sir Roger Newdigate would have liked it, and Mary Ann Evans would have remembered it. This is how you see it today. My hope is to be able to pass it on to my son Humphrey. However, deep down I know that this is going to be quite a stiff challenge as the world continues to change.

It is a fascination to compare the physical changes at Arbury from her life-time to ours, and through her stories of the countryside, her characters and her humour, we can compare the social domestic side of life then and now. Nothing illustrates this more than the fact she had to adopt a male name in order to publish successfully. A truly remarkable legacy.

To be associated with George Eliot and to live in a place that is a focus for all her fans worldwide is a rare privilege. I am honoured to be part of this worthy celebration and to welcome George Eliot supporters to Arbury in the future.

[The following quotation from 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' (*Scenes of Clerical Life*) appeared on the Fellowship wreath (Cheverel Manor is George Eliot's evocation of Arbury Hall, now Viscount Daventry's home):

I, who have seen Cheverel Manor, as [Sir Christopher] bequeathed it to his heirs [...] in walking through those rooms, with their splendid ceilings [...] have felt that there dwelt in this old English baronet some of that sublime spirit which distinguishes art from luxury, and worships beauty apart from self-indulgence.]