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**WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN,
NUNEATON 11 JUNE 2006**

*The Guest of Honour was Mr Tim Over, Head Teacher of the George Eliot
Community School in Nuneaton. He gave the following Address:*

May I begin by thanking the Fellowship for the invitation to be the principal guest at the annual wreath-laying ceremony. My association with today's event goes back over a number of years bringing students to lay a floral tribute at the obelisk. Indeed, when I first came more schools were involved. It is fitting that the secondary school named after many would say the greatest Victorian woman novelist, still comes along faithfully to the Memorial Garden. Kathleen and Bill Adams have visited the school, talked to groups of students and presented the school with a portrait of George Eliot and copies of her writings. During English lessons students visit the exhibition about George Eliot at the local museum. Indeed George Eliot will play a major role in our new Year 7 'Learning to Learn' course. I hope that by the time the youngsters who attend George Eliot leave school, they will have some knowledge of George Eliot and her writings. I am afraid there are still many visitors to the school who ask me 'And who was George Eliot?'

I thought it would be appropriate this afternoon to remind ourselves of the education Mary Ann Evans received prior to the introduction of a state system of education; then with the help of some of my students we will look at an extract from one of her novels that touches on education today.

Mary Ann Evans was born on 22 November 1819 at South Farm, the family home on the Arbury Estate. When she was four months old the family moved from South Farm to Griff House, a spacious home with a dairy attached.

It was estimated that at the time just one child in every ten went to some form of schooling. From the age of three to five years Mary Ann went to a Dame School opposite Griff House. For a few pence a week the children were taught to read and write, but for most of the time the children were just looked after and kept out of mischief. Can you just imagine what the new Ofsted style report to children might say? 'We are sorry you do not learn very much, but your teachers keep you out of trouble!'

From the age of five to eight years of age Mary Ann was a boarder at Miss Latham's Boarding School in Attleborough. It was from all accounts a cold, damp and dismal place and she was miserable and unhappy, so there was still a problem about schools being fit for purpose! Indeed she was always much happier in the company of adults than children. No doubt she would have been no happier if her parents had sent her to Chilvers Coton Free School opposite Chilvers Coton Church, that had been founded by Lady Newdigate in 1745. At the time when Mary Ann was a girl there would have been over 100 pupils there, taught in separate boys' and girls' classes. A new idea some secondary schools are experimenting with today! This would have provided a very limited education and only those who attended Chilvers Coton Church were admitted, a condition of course that Mary Ann would have met.

At this time there were limited choices for a girl's education. Beyond the Dame Schools and Charity Schools, either a girl stayed at home with a Governess or was sent away to Boarding

School, both of which depended on being able to provide the finance. Secondary education for girls did not come in till after 1902 when County Councils were allowed to provide fee paying Grammar Schools. For Jessie as the representative of the girls at George Eliot School it is worth remembering that secondary education was not free until after the 1944 Education Act.

From eight years of age Mary Ann was a pupil at Miss Wallington's Boarding School in Nuneaton. It was at this school that she came under the influence of a governess, Miss Maria Lewis, a deeply religious lady. When she was thirteen years old her teachers confessed that they could teach her no more. So for the next three years she was sent to a school in Coventry, run by two sisters, the Misses Franklyn, daughters of a Baptist Minister. At the age of 16 she returned to Griff House because her mother was seriously ill and had not long to live. Her education was to continue and teachers came to Griff from Coventry. Mary Ann was a great reader. She eventually had tutors who instructed her in theology, Latin, science, maths and metaphysics. She then went on to Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish and German. She loved music and was an accomplished pianist. She was motivated by a desire for knowledge and chose what interested her. Languages enriched her life and widened her field of knowledge. If only this message could impact on youngsters today, many of whom want to drop languages at the end of Key Stage 3!

Mary Ann received an exceptional education for a girl in the early part of the nineteenth century. Her thirst for learning was to lead her to become one of the most remarkable intellects of her age. In her novel *The Mill on the Floss*, in writing about the childhood of Maggie and Tom Tulliver she also writes about herself and her brother Isaac, three years her senior. Interestingly, unlike her brother Tom, who disliked all school books, Maggie was excited by Latin and other learned books, including Gibbons's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. What a lover of learning Maggie (Mary Ann) must have been! A joy for any school teacher! Here, in this short, adapted extract from Chapter 3 of *The Mill on the Floss*, we would like to present to you Mr Riley's advice concerning a school for Tom. I hope we have captured something of Mary Ann's literary style:

'Mr Riley Gives His Advice Concerning A School For Tom'

The gentleman in the ample white cravat and shirt-frill taking his brandy and water so pleasantly with his good friend Tulliver, is Mr Riley: a gentleman with a waxen complexion and fat hands, rather highly educated for an auctioneer and appraiser There was a subject on which Mr Tulliver was in pressing want of Mr Riley's advice

Tulliver: There's a thing I've got i' my head.

Riley: Ah? (*in a tone of mild interest*)

Tulliver: It's a very particular thing. It's about my boy Tom. You see, I want to put him to a new school at Midsummer. He's comin' away from the 'Cademy at Ladyday, an' I shall let him run loose for a quarter; but after that I want to send him to a downright good school, where they'll make a scholar of him.

- Riley: Well, there's no greater advantage you can give him than a good education. Not that a man can't be an excellent miller and farmer and a shrew sensible fellow into the bargain without much help from the schoolmaster.
- Tulliver: I believe you but that's where it is. I don't *mean* Tom to be a miller or farmer. I see no fun i' that. I shall give Tom an eddication an' put him to a business, as he may make a nest for himself an' not want to push me out o' mine.
- Riley: Your lad's not stupid, is he? I saw him, when I was here last, busy making fishing-tackle; he seemed quite up to it.
- Tulliver: Well, he isn't not to say stupid ... But he's slow with his tongue, you see, and he reads but poorly, and can't abide the books, and spells all wrong Now, what I want is, to send him to a school where they'll make him a bit nimble with his tongue and his pen, and make a smart chap of him
- Riley: You're quite in the right of it, Tulliver. Better spend an extra hundred or two on your son's education than leave it him in your will. I know I should have tried to do so by a son of mine, if I'd had one, though, God knows, I haven't your ready money to play with, Tulliver; and I have a houseful of daughters into the bargain.
- Tulliver: I daresay, now, you know of a school as 'ud be just the thing for Tom.
- Riley: I know of a very fine chance for any one that's got the necessary money, and that's what you have, Tulliver. The fact is, I wouldn't recommend any friend of mine to send a boy to a regular school, if he could afford to do better. But if any one wanted his boy to get superior instruction and training, where he would be the companion of his master, and that master a first-rate fellow I know his man. He's an Oxford man.
- Tulliver: What! A parson? (*said doubtfully*)
- Riley: Yes – and an M. A. The bishop, I understand, thinks very highly of him: why, it was the bishop who got him his present curacy.
- Tulliver: Ah? But what can he do with Tom, then?
- Riley: Why, the fact is, he's fond of teaching, and wishes to keep up his studies, and a clergyman has but little opportunity for that in his parochial duties. He's willing to take one or two boys as pupils to fill up his time profitably.
- Tulliver: And what money 'ud he want?

- Riley: Why, I know of a clergyman who asks a hundred and fifty with his youngest pupils, and he's not to be mentioned with Stelling, the man I speak of.
- Tulliver: But a hundred and fifty's an uncommon price. I never thought o' payin' as much as that.
- Riley: A good education, let me tell you, Tulliver – a good education is cheap at the money. But Stelling is moderate in his terms – he's not a grasping man. I've no doubt he'd take your boy at a hundred, and that's what you wouldn't get many other clergymen to do. I'll write to him about it, if you like.

So, what would Mary Ann Evans make of a free, mixed, comprehensive school like George Eliot Community School and indeed the fact that we are a Specialist Business and Enterprise College? She would no doubt applaud the Prime Minister's desire to leave as part of his legacy a truly radical programme of educational reform – a programme intended to bring our schools firmly into the twenty-first century. Personalized learning (surely not a new idea!), the importance of the student voice and significant curriculum and qualification reforms are helping schools to try to meet the needs of all students. One of Mary Ann Evans's admirers said education should be adapted to the individual's own talents. It is a great pity party politicians did not take note of this when in recent years they have introduced a rigid National Curriculum for schools. George Eliot was a great thinker and analyst but also a great novelist, perhaps the greatest Victorian woman novelist. Let us hope that today's educational reforms will continue to produce young people with the talents to shape our future society.

[The following quotation appeared on the Fellowship's chaplet of laurel leaves and five white carnations:

It was one of those grey mornings after light rains, which become delicious about twelve o'clock, when the clouds part a little, and the scent of the earth is sweet along the lanes and by the hedgerows. (*Middlemarch*, ch. 56)

(Secretary's note: This was hardly a suitable choice as it was read aloud during a very hot and humid afternoon!)]