

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

2010

Annual Report 2009

John Burton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Burton, John, "Annual Report 2009" (2010). *The George Eliot Review*. 583.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/583>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

ANNUAL REPORT 2009

By John Burton

I am pleased to report that last year was a successful one. There are things we might have done better, or differently, but I think we can say that 2009 was marked by events which provided huge pleasure and satisfaction for our members, and for a much wider audience beyond our membership.

The AGM last year heard a request from Liz Mellor for some sabbatical time whilst she dealt with health problems and members agreed to that request. We then held a discussion about the Fellowship and what we hoped to see develop in the future. Members enjoyed the chance to participate and I thank Viv Wood for her teacherly suggestion that we move the furniture to make discussion easier.

The next event was the Study Day in May, and this had been planned and arranged by Liz very effectively. I thank her for the huge effort she put into organizing the day. The theme was *Adam Bede* and we were greatly helped by the willingness of our Vice-Presidents to contribute. In the morning we had papers from Dr John Rignall, Michael Harris and Dr Tonny Van Den Broek. It did seem a bit of a rush to have three papers before lunch but Liz planned it so that in the afternoon we could witness a quite extraordinary performance by Cathy Tempelsman and her team of eight actors who came up from London and read through Cathy's play about the early professional life of George Eliot. I know that everyone present that afternoon felt they had witnessed something very special. An added bonus for the Fellowship was that Cathy Tempelsman refused any payment for either herself or her actors, or their travel from London, or in Cathy's case from New York.

Sadly this was to be the last event the Fellowship held at the Town Hall, which in a cost-cutting exercise now closes at the weekend, so the two or three annual events we used to hold there have to find new venues. The short-sightedness and philistinism of the present Council administration, at officer and member level, is a wonder to behold. I say that with some feeling since in the early days of the Fellowship both Borough Council officers and elected Councillors were actively involved in the Fellowship and saw its importance. We are now often regarded as mere irritants – though there are occasional exceptions to that blanket condemnation, one being the mayor for 2009/10, Tom Wilson, who supports us wholeheartedly.

A few days after the Study Day Liz wrote to say that she wanted to stand down as Secretary and so your Council had to decide how best to proceed. What has evolved is still evolving but we have found ways of working effectively by distributing jobs, using sub-committees and being positive. Nevertheless, a new Secretary would help!

The next event was the Nuneaton wreath-laying in June, with tea and biscuits in St Nicolas church afterwards. To keep to the theme of *Adam Bede* we had asked two Methodist ministers to take part and they did a splendid job – Dr Robert Bean from Bedworth and Revd Ian Worsfold from Nuneaton Methodist churches. The usual groups laid wreaths and we also tried to involve more local groups, with some success, although the library service did not take part, a matter of some regret bearing in mind the contribution the Fellowship has made over the last

forty years to the George Eliot Collection in Nuneaton Library.

Last year there were two George Eliot Country Tours, one in August, the other in September. The Fellowship had worked closely with Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council for many years to put on the tours and we had been much helped by Rose Selwyn as tourism officer. Rose is now called an economic development officer and is not allowed to have any input to George Eliot events.

We decided to make a break with past arrangements and now have links with Bedworth Civic Hall, whose new manager, Tim Norton, is keen to develop an Arts Network. Tickets were booked for the tours through the Civic Hall Box Office, and the coach started and finished in Bedworth. There were several other tours where the Fellowship provided guides and information, including an interesting one by a feminist reading group from Dunstable. Working with them, we arranged with Griff House to have a mid-day lunch, and there have been several spin-offs since then, and a willingness by Griff to accommodate George Eliot related events which is very pleasing. For 2010 we have planned four GE Tours, again using the Civic Hall Box Office for booking. There is a cost but their phones are manned and it is one less task for us.

Two other events in the normal pattern of the year are the Annual Lecture and the Gabriel Woolf readings. These took place last year but were positioned so that they could be part of the *Adam Bede* Festival, for which we produced a special full colour Festival programme which went out to all members and to other outlets like libraries and museums.

The annual lecture was held at St John's Methodist church, to keep to the theme of *Adam Bede*, and it was delivered with the help of film clips from his own adaptation for the BBC by director Giles Foster (who had also directed *Silas Marner* with Ben Kingsley a few years earlier). The new venue seemed to work well and it is good to involve other buildings and groups in spreading the word about George Eliot.

The Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks readings were held at Chilvers Coton church. I think they were amongst the best readings they have ever given and those present felt moved by the power of George Eliot through the skills of Gabriel and Rosalind, several staying behind afterwards to thank the actors for their performance.

Unfortunately, the audience was the smallest I have known for Gabriel and Rosalind. The Fellowship Council has given much thought to this and for 2010 the event will take place during the afternoon rather than at night, since many older members have told us they are unwilling to go out after dark.

The rest of the Festival included slide presentations about *Adam Bede*, an exhibition, two lectures arranged in conjunction with the Museum, both of which sold out, a trip to Adam Bede Country and Wirksworth in the rain, and the King Edward Players production of *Adam Bede* which was performed in Bedworth Arts Centre, Nuneaton Arts Centre and St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry. To be involved, albeit on the edges, with the gestation and birth of that production was the most satisfying thing I have done with the Fellowship. We had £2500 from the local authority's Community Fund which helped enormously and enabled us to pay a director, Simon

Winterman, who is Director of Drama, Performing Arts and Media Studies at King Edward College, Nuneaton, and was fantastic. The students went from nothing to performing in a mediaeval hall in six weeks and they deserve our thanks and congratulations.

But of course this triumph would not have happened without the inspiration and the text provided by Viv Wood. It is our intention to publish Viv's text, which has an ending perhaps more dramatic than George Eliot's. I thank Viv most sincerely for all her work, at a time when she was in a new job as Head of Year 12 at King Edward College. The creative part of the *Adam Bede* Festival was the play adaptation which involved students in a production they will never forget and which will encourage them to be proud of their town and their literary heritage.

The final event of the year was the Annual Birthday Lunch, which we again held at Weston Hall's Middlemarch Suite. The toast to the immortal memory was given by Beryl Gray who also pointed out that last year was the 150th anniversary of 'The Lifted Veil' as well as *Adam Bede*. It was a pleasing occasion, helped also by the confident and amusing response from Tom Wilson, the mayor.

We also contributed financially towards the University Of London Day Conference on *Adam Bede* in November and I went down for the day and was able to talk briefly about the Fellowship, run a stall and gain two new members. It is a really good event and helps our Home Counties members to feel they can take part in something the Fellowship supports.

During last year we also appointed two new Vice-Presidents, following the deaths of Margaret Wolfit and Tenniel Evans, both of whom in earlier years had made great contributions to the Fellowship. Lucy Amis, Margaret Wolfit's daughter, has presented part of her mother's collection of George Eliot books to the Fellowship, an act of great generosity for which we thank her.

The new Vice-Presidents were Professor Kathryn Hughes, who was a Guest of Honour several years ago at a Luncheon after the publication of her biography of George Eliot, and later became better known for her biography of Mrs Beeton. She is a frequent broadcaster and contributor to the Guardian. The second new Vice-President is Giles Foster. He has a great love of George Eliot and after the annual lecture, having given an earlier one during the Scenes Festival in 2007, he volunteered to look at Viv's script for *Adam Bede*, then came up to Nuneaton for the Saturday production and took a great interest in it. He also attended the London Conference and I asked him then to become a Vice-President.

Other things which we hope to tackle in 2010 include the restoration of Isaac Evans's gravestone at Chilvers Coton, the installation of a colour photo-copier to make newsletter production more efficient (assuming we can get a grant), and the establishing of two new websites, one of which will deal exclusively with the Review and will encourage young and enthusiastic academics to submit papers for publication and essays for the Annual Prize.

Finally I wish to thank all members of Council for their unfailing support throughout the year and for the huge contribution they make to the smooth running of the Fellowship. Turning out for extra meetings, usually in a building where it can be cold, and then always being present at events makes considerable demands on their time and I thank them all for what has been achieved.