

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

2012

Chairman's Annual Report 2011

Jphn 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, Jphn, "Chairman's Annual Report 2011" (2012). *The George Eliot Review*. 611.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/611>

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.

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT 2011

By John Burton

It was a good year for the Fellowship. Our membership numbers held their own, and although some older members have difficulty getting to events, we have attracted new members who have been enthusiastic in their support.

The theme for the year was *Silas Marner*, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2011. The first event of the year was the AGM, which we had hoped to expand with a keynote lecture to start the year by Barbara Hardy. Unfortunately, Barbara had to cancel due to ill-health but undaunted, we arranged a review of the previous year and had useful discussions about the rest of the year. Doing something over and above the bare bones of reports and elections at the AGM makes it more interesting for members, and encourages them to attend. Tea and cakes at the end add a social note to the proceedings.

The George Eliot Weekend has now established itself as a two day event instead of the original one day, and each year a few more members travel and take part in events on both days. In 2011 we wanted to have a local theme, to try to tease out some of the more interesting pieces of George Eliot research conducted in the Nuneaton area in recent years. Kathryn Hughes revealed some of her research into the Dodson/Pearson sisters; David Paterson explained how accurate George Eliot's delineation of Hugh Hughes was; and Alan Cook gave details of some of his research into Teddy Kem, a possible source for Silas Marner. The day finished with some part improvised acting of scenes from *Silas Marner* by students from King Edward College, and a chance to watch Simon Winterman directing them.

The following day was our special George Eliot Country tour in a 1929 charabanc. Though more expensive than a traditional coach, participants love the experience and so far we have been lucky with the weather.

At the wreath-laying in Nuneaton a record 15 wreaths were laid, the guest of honour being Lily Woods, who had played Mrs Poyser and Maggie in the college productions. She spoke eloquently of her enjoyment of playing such important roles. We were delighted too that Griff House was represented and manager Mike Wastell and his wife laid a wreath.

There were three new ventures during the summer. The first was called 'An evening with Silas' and was held at Pool Farm at Marston Jabbett, near Bedworth. Owners Andy and Shirley Axon welcomed us to their grounds which include a large water filled quarry close to a 19th century cottage. The venue is only a few hundred yards from Marston Hall, home to Pearson sister Mrs Johnson and we had a feeling that the young Mary Ann would have known this site. It was a lovely summer evening, there was a fine buffet, and the audience watched scenes from *Silas Marner* from an early version of Vivienne Wood's adaptation performed by students, with readings from members.

Some members set up a reading group with six sessions devoted to *Silas Marner* which started by looking at motivation in the novel seen from a psychotherapist's viewpoint. It was arranged by Pam Weight and Viv Wood. Another group was set up for residents and friends at Bedworth Almshouses and ran very successfully under the leadership of Barbara Elson.

In September we had another George Eliot Country Tour, and there met Valerie Fehlbaum, about whom more later. All the tours were successful although it is sometimes difficult to ensure enough places are booked to cover all our costs. This tour started and

finished at Griff, and the manager allowed us the use of the conference room for the introduction to the day.

The annual lecture in October was a fascinating joint presentation on *Silas Marner* by Giles Foster and William Greenslade, with excerpts from Giles Foster's Ben Kingsley production of the film. We have used Bedworth Civic Hall for a couple of years for our lectures and have been well looked after. But now that the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre is improving its facilities many of our events will take place there, where parking is free and the George Eliot links are close by.

Also in October we held the annual readings by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks. Their selection of readings from *Silas Marner* was wonderful, as always, and the audience was thrilled by the skill with which Gabriel and Rosalind bring George Eliot to life and convey her humour, compassion, and wisdom.

Our remarkable partnership with King Edward Sixth Form College in Nuneaton continued in 2011. Vivienne Wood adapted the novel for the stage and Simon Winterman again directed the wonderful students in three performances to packed audiences in Bedworth and Nuneaton. We think such a close and long record of working between a literary society and a college or school is unique, as is the fact that one student, Jack West, took lead roles in all three plays.

The Fellowship supports the London conference every November and makes a contribution towards the reception at the end of a day of lectures and papers in the Senate House. In 2011 the subject was *Silas Marner* and *The Lifted Veil* and those attending were treated to a series of excellent and stimulating papers. I was able to take stage pictures from the College production and sing their praises.

I mentioned Valerie Fehlbaum earlier. After her return to Geneva University she came up with the idea of inviting Vivienne Wood and Simon Winterman to deliver a paper to her students on adapting George Eliot for the stage, and at the end of November Simon and Viv had a lovely two days with the students, as well as discovering more about the city Mary Ann lived in for several months after her father's death. We also did a rush job of getting the script of *Adam Bede* published so that they could be distributed to the Geneva students.

The annual luncheon was well attended and superbly arranged for us by Juliet Hopper. The large number of diners then heard from playwright Vanessa Oakes, who was just completing a writing residency at Nuneaton Museum. Vanessa also helped plan the newly arranged and displayed writing room at the museum, which features George Eliot and has space for visitors to sit and write or read, surrounded by George Eliot artefacts.

During the year our members received three full colour Newsletters, which seem to be popular, although the rising cost of postage is a major worry for us. They also receive the Annual Review, and I offer my sincere thanks to Beryl Gray and John Rignall for the meticulous care they take to produce this superb professional journal. The Fellowship also awarded its annual £500 essay prize, in 2011 to Sarah Bunney.

In the Nuneaton and north Warwickshire area the Fellowship continues to give talks and slide shows up to a dozen or so times a year. Last year we once again set up guided walks showing George Eliot's Nuneaton, and another one based on Griff House and *The Mill on the Floss*. They are free of charge and give local people a pleasant way of learning a bit more about George Eliot. We also miss no opportunities to gain coverage in local papers and on local radio.

I again express thanks on behalf of the Fellowship to Linda Robertson, who co-

ordinates membership for our American members, and to Kimitaka Hara who does the same in Japan. Thanks also to all the members of the Fellowship Council for their enthusiasm and support, their ideas and willingness to try new ideas for bringing our great writer to new audiences. Finally I offer my thanks to our Vice-Presidents, who are marvellous and quick to respond when I seek their advice and support.