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CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2013

By John Burton

We can be pleased with the Fellowship's year in 2013. For some time now we have tried to add extra events to the well established series of meetings built up over the years. In 2013 we looked towards Coventry to provide a theme for the year, and were delighted with the results, much helped, it has to be said, by the enthusiasm and new ideas brought to the Fellowship by Vanessa Oakes, whose writing skills have much enhanced our programme. The other major event for the year was our emergence, blinking and floundering, into the world of websites and Facebook (Twitter might well be waiting in the wings) and in this we have been much helped by designers Papertree Digital who produced a distinctive web presence for us and coped with our naivety, and by Juliet Hopper and Alex Hackitt-Anwyl who held our hands and persuaded us that we could do it.

The year started with the AGM in March, with the usual 30 or so members enjoying tea and cakes after the formal business was completed, discussing the future programme and watching slides of our trip to Florence the previous November. All this took place at Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre, which has been considerably improved in recent years and has now become our natural home.

In May we moved the annual day of George Eliot studies to Coventry. The old Blue Coat School is adjacent to Holy Trinity church, which Mary Ann Evans refused to attend with her father in 1842. The day started with a wonderful introduction to Coventry's history by Bill Adams. There were then papers from Dr Francis Twinn on the geographical landscape of *The Mill on the Floss* and John Burton on the Brays of Coventry. After lunch we held the first of three 'George Eliot's Coventry' walks, which had been planned by Vanessa Oakes and took us to several places important in the George Eliot story, with readings by actor Sonia Ritter, dressed in one of our George Eliot dresses! Accounts of the walks, and pictures, are available on our website.

Also in early summer last year we held the annual wreath laying event in the George Eliot Memorial Gardens. Guest of honour was member Joy Redfern, who is a regular and loyal participant in most of our events and she spoke warmly of her love of George Eliot and her links with the fellowship.

In June we had a superb evening of music and George Eliot at Astley Castle and church. This was a new venture and we were delighted with its success. Astley Castle features as Knebley in 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story'. It had been falling into decay for over thirty years until rescued by The Landmark Trust. It went on last year to win the Stirling Prize for architecture, an extraordinary and well-deserved achievement. It now provides holiday accommodation for eight and is fully booked for a year ahead. The Fellowship, as supporters of the scheme, is allowed an evening of free use. We had a picnic in the castle grounds, explored the new rooms and then went to Astley church for some wonderful singing by the Cantabile Academy interspersed with readings from 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story'.

In August, having spent a lot of money on it, we finally launched our new website. There is always something to do for those who run websites. When a book goes to the publisher there is nothing the author can add or correct until a second edition. But a website can be updated, altered, corrected, tweaked, finessed at any time of the day or night. Consequently it

takes up a great deal of time. But we are pleased with it and feedback has been excellent. There is still much to do but it will gradually become a reliable source of information for our members and for the wider world. We have tried to make it visually interesting, with illustrations wherever possible. Vivienne Wood, Juliet Hopper and I had training in its use from Papertree Digital and we are discovering that indeed practice makes perfect, but finding the time to practise is the problem. Alex Hackitt-Anwyl, being only 20, needed neither practice nor training since her age means that she understands how the information revolution is working and we are grateful to her for her patience with us, her special needs pupils. Alex also set up the Facebook page for us. This allows a quick response from us or a quick input and we are using it a lot as a reminder about events. Anything we place on Facebook automatically transfers to the website. We had good press coverage for the launch and we are finding that the website is helping to sell tickets online for our events.

We had to cancel one of our George Eliot Country Tours last year through lack of support, though the other one was fully booked. This is leading us to look very closely at what we offer in the way of walks, tours and the whole George Eliot experience and we are developing a wider selection which we can tailor to meet the interests and time available for visiting groups. Many of these new ventures are arising from talks and slide shows given by the chairman and vice-chairman, and we have more flexibility as a consequence of our access to Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre and its facilities, which can include buffet meals. We expect this flexibility to be enhanced even more when the George Eliot Visitor Centre is complete and open.

During the summer we worked with Vanessa Oakes in Coventry to have two more George Eliot's Coventry walks. They were very successful, very well planned, and made even more interesting by Sonia Ritter's dramatic readings. The third walk took us up the towpath of the Coventry Canal as far as Bird Grove, where Sonia posed for photographs under the street sign which gives George Eliot two ls. Coventry City Council has assured me that the signs will be replaced. At present they have simply painted over one of the letters, an inadequate response, but at present typical of their interest in George Eliot.

Beyond Nuneaton we have found a lot of interest in George Eliot. I gave a breakfast presentation and slide show to nearly 100 in Kenilworth to raise money for their church, and a U3A Kenilworth group had about 80 members there; one in Dorridge another 100. Hopefully the website will link us to some of those people and persuade them to come along to events. I continue to give about a dozen presentations a year on George Eliot and usually sell a few copies of the Pitkin guide each time.

In September we witnessed the first version of Vanessa Oakes's play about George Eliot and Coventry, *A Ploughed Heart*. Vanessa had gained Arts Council and Coventry City Council financial support for her work, and the fellowship also supported her. The audience was thrilled by the first rehearsed read through in Coventry. Next year's report will explain how a revised version thrilled a sold out audience in Nuneaton, and how we all hope to see a full stage version in the fullness of time.

In October we held two events. The first was the annual lecture by Dr Brenda McKay, who spoke about George Eliot and illness, a fascinating subject which provoked some lively and interesting discussion. The second event was our annual Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks readings, last year with Coventry as the theme. We held it for the second year running at the Old Meeting URC in Bedworth, a building dating to 1726. It was the fortieth occasion

that Gabriel had given us a programme of readings, almost certainly a unique sequence in any literary society, and we are enormously grateful to him, and to Rosalind for their dedication and support.

In November the Fellowship supported the Annual London Conference at the Senate House. We are always pleased to support it and to encourage our London and Home Counties members to attend it where they might not wish to come up to the Midlands. There were some excellent papers and it was the best attended day for some time, on the subject of *Felix Holt* and 'The Lifted Veil'.

Within the Fellowship we continue to have the twice yearly reading study group, with members reading a text in advance and a leader taking the discussion forward. We have also developed in recent years, under the inspiring leadership of Vivienne Wood and Denis Baylis, a longer series of reading groups, up to six sessions of two and a half hours each, on a George Eliot text. They have included *Romola*, *Silas Marner* and *Scenes of Clerical Life*. As I write, and strictly for next year's review, the group is studying *The Mill on the Floss* and it meets in the snug at Griff House.

The last event of the year was the annual birthday luncheon, held for the second year at Ansty Hall, convenient for motorway access, but more importantly, providers of good food in a pleasant setting. Juliet Hopper showed again her organizing skills and handled all the booking details and allocation of seats to suit guests in an exemplary way. We also dispensed with the rather formal long top table and seated our honoured guests and speakers at round tables like everyone else. It worked very well and met with the approval of all concerned. Our guest of honour was member Sheila Woolf, who spoke movingly of her childhood in Bedworth and her discovery in the local library, as a studious and bookish little girl, of the joys of reading the classics of English literature, and hence of George Eliot.

So it was a successful year for us. We miss some of our older members who find it difficult to get out, and we have lost several others to age and infirmity. New members are joining but we would like more to do so. The Fellowship is blessed with a hard working group, the Council, whose members ensure that events run smoothly, that new ideas are aired and excitement maintained. The forthcoming Visitor Centre will make more demands on us and we always welcome new Council members prepared to take on responsibilities.

So many people help to make our Fellowship a friendly, successful association of George Eliot lovers. Special thanks go to John Rignall, Beryl Gray and Michael Davis for their tremendous work in putting together and editing this *Review*; to John Rignall, Tonny van den Broek and Michael Davis for their work in judging the Essay Prize; to Vivienne Wood for her constant support as vice-chairman, and to all the Council members for their many, many contributions to the successful running of the Fellowship.