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Chairman's Annual Report for 2014

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CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2014

By John Burton

No wonder we all felt exhausted by December! In preparing this report I have realized what an extraordinary number of things the Fellowship did last year; certainly the biggest workload since I became chairman but, one hopes, a year which brought new insights and pleasures to members and non-members we attract to our events.

Our normal pattern of meetings took place but was supplemented by several other large-scale events. Thus the AGM in March, which included the routine election of officers and council members, was enclosed by two much more exciting events. In February we had a full house at Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre for a rehearsed read-through by professional actors of *A Ploughed Heart* by Vanessa Oakes, a beguiling play which links the young Mary Ann in her Coventry days with a Japanese visitor in search of the real George Eliot today. Then in March, as well as the AGM we had a study group at Aldersgate in Nuneaton, and the following day another sold out meeting at Chilvers Coton to hear Rebecca Mead, on tour from the USA and now an old friend of the Fellowship, talk about her delightful book *The Road to Middlemarch*. Members and visitors bought 40 copies that day and several more since!

For many years Brenda Evans has produced two events a year where members meet to discuss a book – sometimes by George Eliot but not always, and her regular team of experts includes John Rignall, Eric Lees and Vivienne Wood, with Sheila Woolf a recent addition. The Fellowship has also set up a more extended and in depth reading group, usually attended by 12 to 15 members, meeting either at Griff House in the snug, or at Bedworth Almshouses. A huge amount of preparation for these meetings (usually between four and six sessions per book) is undertaken by Denis Baylis and Vivienne Wood and I thank them here for all their efforts on our behalf. It is our intention to put some of their background notes and discussion points they raise onto our website, so that others might read them or use them in reading groups elsewhere. In 2014 the chosen text was *The Mill on the Floss* and so to discuss it at Griff House was an added pleasure.

The theme for the year was George Eliot and London and we took that up in the George Eliot day in May. Chilvers Coton is proving to be a good meeting point for us, and its free car park an added bonus. Professor Rosemary Ashton gave her usual sparkling paper and got the day off to a great start with her talk on *142 Strand*. She was followed by Dr Valerie Fehlbaum, who linked those crucial months spent at Geneva after Robert Evans's death, with her subsequent thinking, and her future life in London. Finally, your chairman showed some old lantern slides acquired from America which showed how Americans interpreted Eliot, insofar as we can tell from the slides, and included views of some of her London homes.

The summer months were full of events and activities which brought the Fellowship to the attention of many new people. In May we took part in a new event at Warwick called 'Show and Tell' where we and many other county groups had a stall and told people all about George Eliot and the Fellowship. We were happy to enlighten the many people who wondered what George Eliot had to do with Warwickshire. In June we held the Nuneaton wreath laying where our guest of honour was Alex Hackitt-Anwyl, who has helped us in many ways in recent years. She also delights in wearing our replica George Eliot dress. The website and Facebook site show her if you wish to see the proof.

But another highlight of June was our second year at Astley castle and church. We had full houses for the two performances where people brought a picnic, with music from 5Bar Brass in the background, explored the Landmark Trust's castle and then heard readings from *The Mill on the Floss* and listened to singing from some of the Cantabile choir from Nuneaton in Astley church, Eliot's Knebley of course. The evening was billed as 'A Great Rush of Sound'.

July was as busy as June, with another first in Nuneaton as well as the biennial wreath laying in Westminster Abbey, where our guest of honour was Dr Beryl Gray, joint editor of the *George Eliot Review*, a vice-president and long time friend to the Fellowship. The event in Nuneaton, which put George Eliot close to the heart of events, was the visit of the six metre high model of Godiva, created in 2012 for the London Olympics. It was an amazing sight, but even better, for us, was that at each of the six points around the town where she stopped a scene from *Silas Marner* was enacted by groups directed by Simon Winterman and Bethany Dyson. To add to that the Fellowship had a stall in the town where we gave away our bookmarks and postcards and sold pens, little bags and copies of *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss*.

The August Study group was led by Dr John Rignall and then in September the Fellowship was back at Astley Castle for Heritage Open Days. The Fellowship invited all 50 or so local councillors from north Warwickshire plus other key people. We fed and watered them and they watched Bethany Dyson's group perform *Silas Marner* and we then told them about the forthcoming Visitor Centre and asked for support for all the efforts being made by us and others to bring visitors to the area. It is a theme your chairman continues to pursue, but one which really will be more important if our Visitor Centre at Griff is to thrive. I would not describe the response from our elected representatives as electrifying, but we cannot allow them to continue to hide behind the need for austerity as an excuse for inaction. To accompany the Heritage Weekend at Astley, visited by about 1000 people, we mounted a display linking text to photographs, of George Eliot and Warwickshire landscape. We are in discussions about producing a book along the same lines for the Visitor Centre.

In September also we held the annual lecture at Chilvers Coton, where a good audience heard a fascinating paper by Dr Cynthia Gamble on 'John Ruskin: George Eliot's Mentor', designed in part to give an introduction to those of us who were embarking on the Fellowship trip to Venice in November. But before that we held our annual Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks afternoon of readings from George Eliot, again using London as a theme. The venue was a new one, in Kenilworth, and we had hoped that we would attract a bigger audience for such wonderful performers. The venue was good, the audience hugely appreciative, but we had difficulty getting information to the people who needed to know, despite several days of distributing posters, flyers and press releases.

September was an important month for us beyond the UK as well. In Weimar a plaque was unveiled on the side of the building on the same site where Marian Evans and G. H. Lewes stayed when they eloped in 1854, and where they had felt welcomed and at home. A huge thank you to member Bob Muscutt for his efforts in persuading the relevant German authorities to give their assent to the plaque, which cost some £1800, £1000 being the contribution from Fellowship members – to whom, additional and sincere thanks. It would not have happened without the input of the Fellowship.

November saw a party of 35 embark for a six day trip to Venice. Organized by the indefatigable and extraordinarily knowledgeable Denis Baylis this was a triumph on the scale

that the trip to Florence two years earlier had been. One does not need an excuse to visit Venice but we justified it by visiting some of the places George Eliot and G. H. Lewes visited, even the building, now no longer a hotel, where she stayed with John Cross on their honeymoon trip round Europe. Though lacking the summer sun, Venice also had fewer visitors and we were able to visit all the major sites without long queues, and only needed our wellies on the first morning.

On our return to England there were two more events to finish the year. The London Conference, which we support but don't organize, was a triumph – overbooked, as one might predict, for a really interesting selection of papers on *Middlemarch*, and because of the high numbers, held in the main hall in the Senate House. Our thanks and congratulations go to Professor Barbara Hardy and Dr Louise Lee for all their work in arranging the day. And out of the day we also gained half a dozen new members, and a new Essay prize, details of which appear elsewhere.

The following day we had our last event of the year, the Annual Birthday Luncheon. We have now had three visits to Ansty Hall, where they look after us very well indeed. Our guests of honour this year were Michael and Ruth Harris, a very popular choice by members who have marvelled at their loyalty and their contributions to the Fellowship over many years, with Ruth still one of our vice-presidents. They did a wonderful double act of a conversation between Dickens and George Eliot, which as you would expect, both amused and educated us. It was a fitting finale to a very busy year.

But let it not be thought that the published programme of events was all that we did. Other activities for the Fellowship included going to Meriden with Bob Muscutt in search of Chrissey, George Eliot's sister, so beset by misfortune and premature deaths. In June members attended the funeral of John Bunn, who had been Treasurer of the Fellowship in earlier years and did a great job in getting us onto a firm financial footing. Joan Bunn had stepped down as vice-chairman earlier, but I am pleased to say that she has now returned as a Council member, where her knowledge and advice are invaluable.

We have also tried to keep involved with Coventry. We attended the launch of a new Coventry literary guide in booklet form. It was lovely to be able to take Bill Adams to this event. He related how his time at King Henry VIII School in Coventry overlapped that of Philip Larkin, by whom he was not impressed! We hope that if Coventry's attempt to be City of Culture is to succeed, they will take more notice of George Eliot (including spelling her name correctly on street signs) and Philip Larkin, just as a start. We do think we could offer substantial help in a serious bid to bring more visitors to the city. Throughout the year we have held our Fellowship Council meeting (usually eight a year) but we have also had the steering group meetings for the Visitor Centre, chaired by Vivienne Wood and which we hope to bring to fruition in 2016.

We have had fewer organized George Eliot Country Tours, but they do still take place, usually when a group asks for a tour and a guide. In 2014 we helped groups from Hinckley, Kenilworth and Burbage in this way, as well as offering our services as guides, helpers, and taxis to several American enthusiasts. A proposed visit from our Japanese members did not take place.

Talks and slide shows remain a key way of introducing George Eliot to audiences in the region and your chairman delivered twelve talks to audiences, mostly local to Nuneaton, but also in Stoneleigh, Hinckley, Kenilworth and Bidford.

Finally, but actually most importantly, my thanks go to all those who help and support the Fellowship in so many ways. The Fellowship Council is supportive and hard working, always there to discuss our programme of events, help run stalls, serve tea and make cakes, and then distribute Newsletters. The steering group overseeing the Visitor Centre has met when there seems to be no progress but have kept cheerful and hopeful, and will soon be rewarded for their vision and commitment. Our vice-presidents who always respond to requests with help, suggestions and advice are invaluable to me; the judges for our annual essay, who take hours assessing and discussing and awarding, and our editors of this Review, John Rignall, Beryl Gray and Mike Davis who labour mightily but produce this highly respected academic review. They all contribute to our successes. A member recently rejoined the Fellowship, after a gap of a few years. She said she had tried several literary societies but the GEF was the one that suits her best. We do take pride in making everyone welcome – and fortunately, they respond!