

HENRY WILLIAMSON AT STIFFKEY

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AN ITEM IN OUR 'WHAT'S ON SECTION brought *The Paper* to Stiffkey, to the farm made famous by the late Henry Williamson both as the subject of his *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* and as the setting for several novels in his series *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. The Henry Williamson Society was holding a special meeting there: about seventy members were to be shown round the farm by its present owner.

We parked in the old chalk quarry where H.W. almost killed himself when excavating chalk with dynamite. He moved to Norfolk from Devon in 1936, a few months after the death of his friend T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia). 'During my seventeen years in the West Country I had written about twenty books and become the father of several children.' Two of them, Richard and Margaret, were at Old Hall Farm that afternoon, with their mother. 'The things that happened on this farm!' she murmured to herself at one point.

Judging by the books, life with H.W. must have been far from easy, but the nostalgia for ancient sunlight coloured his Society's visit on an idyllic summer afternoon. 'This was the sort of day H.W. loved,' his son said as we stood on Hilly Piece - the field which caused him more heartache than any other. 'This was his favourite field; he would go back and forth all day on his tractor, gazing out to sea, to the Great Barrier Sand as he called it.'

'It was all a marvellous game for him,' said his son.

Was it? We were standing on the spot where a Beaufighter from Langham had crashed. In the book *Lucifer Before Sunrise* the crew survived, but according to Richard Williamson they were both killed. In any case, after the crash H.W. had been concerned, had in fact complained, because the rescue services had ruined a fine crop of sugar beet.

'I remember the smell of burning nylon parachute,' said Richard, adding that his father's attitude after the crash had been 'much misunderstood' by the local inhabitants.

In fact, the present owner of the farm had failed to turn up so we were being shown round by his family, every step heavy with memories. Someone asked H.W.'s widow what she remembered. 'Having to look after all those damned turkeys!' was her unexpected reply.

One of the visitors asked if this was the spot where Phillip Madison had been shot by the soldiers. Richard confirmed that it was,

adding that he had used some of the characters from his father's books in his own novel. Indeed, with the Williamson story it is hard to tell where fiction took over from fact. H.W.'s autobiography, which his son is planning to write, should be a formidable undertaking.

The locals thought H.W. was 'a bit strange' we are told, especially when he cleared the river Stiffkey of generations of filth and rubbish. H.W. was horrified by the pollution of the stream by domestic sewage and by the failure of the local council to do anything about it. Over and over again he refers to the filth in the river: it becomes a symbol of what he saw as the main fault of society, poisoned by the 'golden tape-of international finance.

H.W.'s involvement with Oswald Mosley's party had also got him into trouble at the outbreak of war (some chapters of his *Norfolk Farm* have never been published) and when he built bridges on the marshes it was assumed that he was preparing an invasion site for the Germans.

Back at the farm buildings after a short tour of some of the farm, the Williamsons found things looking very much as when they had left in 1946. In the Granary a sharp-eyed visitor spotted a newspaper cutting pinned to a high rafter. The tallest man present - Ben Serjeant - craned upwards to read it: entitled "Goodbye West Country" it was a gossip column entry describing H.W.'s move to Norfolk. Dated 1936, he must have put it up there when he arrived.

Outside in the yard, everyone stood looking at the owl outlined on the ground - the symbol which H.W. placed on everything with which he was associated. Reading his work now, it is another of his owls which comes to mind: that dreadful maimed creature, its claws cut off by a trap, doomed to hunt despairingly, swooping on its prey with half-healed stumps - until it died of starvation.

It was during his time at Stiffkey, farming the Bad Lands, as he called the farm in his novels, that H.W. confronted the lie which like a maggot has eaten into the souls of nearly all those known and encountered, the lie with which we all sought to deceive ourselves... slowly sickening us away from a true life which is to build, to create beauty, and not merely to frustrate.'

Frustrated and worn out, separated from his family, H.W.'s hero returned to the West Country 'to live alone on Exmoor in a shepherd's cote' to write 'a work that would enshrine the agonies and hopes and "tears of things" in this our time'.

After the tour of the farm there was a film show and lecture in the Blakeney Hotel. I decided to give them a miss. The visit had been enough. That unique blend of joy and sadness, of frustration and fulfilment which informs Williamson's work had never seemed closer. On a golden summer's afternoon some of his family and a host of his admirers had come to pay their respects - as if at a martyr's shrine.

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