

REPORTS OF MEETINGS

The reports are listed in descending chronological order.

The World of Short Stories

Presented by Robin Taylor on Tuesday 10th March 2020 at the Octagon. St Mary's Lillington at 200 p.m.

At very short notice, the Hon. Treasurer, Robin Taylor kindly brought forward the first of his planned talks on the world of Short Stories from the May slot. Trevor expressed our gratitude at his willingness and flexibility to adjust his diary in this respect.

Robin outlined the normally accepted features of a short story, namely the length being approx. 20,000 whilst the style encompassed few characters, a dramatic opening incident or a description of the setting with some feature being highlighted. Often one character is described at length and goes on to dominate the story.

Having given a brief example of each approach, Robin then started a chronological overview of the development of the short story in the European context, beginning with the Classics and continuing through to the late C19th . Presumably he left the C20th for part 2 as there were no examples from English short story writers either from Chaucerian times through to James Joyce, H G Wells or Kipling to mention just a few. Each period was illustrated by lengthy extracts from the work of iconic writers of the period. Perhaps these extracts could have been shortened or read by other voices. A notable exception was that in Parts 1 and 2 of the evening, Trevor Humphreys read with verve and panache an extract thus giving Robin's voice a rest.

Authors culled from included the great Russian writers, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Dostoevsky as well as French masters of the genre, Flaubert and Maupassant. Each extract showcased a different format used by each, but characteristic of their style.

A vote of thanks was proposed to Robin, followed by the Chairman reminding the group of the next meeting to be held (Covid 19 permitting) on Tuesday 14th April. The speaker will be Laura Malpas of the National Trust. The topic is "Secrets and Scandals of Canons Ashby".

Report by Claire Spivey

By George! Why read George Eliot at 200?

Presented by John Button

This joint meeting of the Society and Warwick Words took place on 10th October 2019, at Christchurch Hall, 2, Priory Terrace.

Graham Cooper, the vice chairmen, welcomed the visitors and David Howe introduced the speaker, John Burton, the chairman of the George Eliot Fellowship. He explained that John is managing to persuade Coventry, Nuneaton and Bedworth people to recognise the role their towns had played in the life of George Eliot.

Mr. Burton began by explaining that the ambition of the fellowship is to spearhead an appreciation of the importance of the 200th anniversary of George Eliot's birth and to highlight the relevance of Warwickshire areas where she had lived. He said the society had been celebrating the two hundredth centenary of her birth since March despite the birth not happening until November. The talk was illustrated with slides of places of significance in the life of George Eliot, some portraits of her and of her statue in Nuneaton. The speaker used these as he outlined her life. She was the third child of Robert Evans and his second wife. They called the child Mary Ann. Her birth took place at South Farm on the Arbury estate. The house is still visited by many, including international delegations.

The following year, the family moved to The Griff, between Nuneaton and Bedworth and lived there for 21 years. It is now used by Premier Inn! Griff house was a delightful place for the three children, Chrissy, Mary Ann and Isaac. In 1821, twins were born but both died days later. A passage from 'Mill on the Floss' was read at this point, describing Maggie Tulliver and a slide showing the attic at The Griff. Mary Ann went first to a local Dame school, to a boarding school in Attleborough, and then to another boarding school in Nuneaton, now used by Loveitts. The Nuneaton school was run by the Franklin sisters who were evangelicals. It was an inspirational establishment and where Mary Ann became a serious writer. She was a shy child but her writing already impressed. Her mother died in 1836, so at 16, Mary Ann left school to help out on the farm. Private teachers came to Arbury and had access to the estate house at Griff and in 1840, Isaac her brother stayed at Griff. Mary Ann adored Isaac but her devotion was not reciprocated, a relationship mirrored by Tom and Maggie in 'The Mill on the Floss.' In 1842, her father retired and moved to Coventry, to Bird Grove, a big out of town house. Mary Ann went with him. Here she met intellectual, radical thinkers and lost her evangelical faith. She refused to attend church, upsetting her father, finally agreeing to attend but always think her own thoughts. Charles Gray's sister lived next door to them so she met Gray and read his books. He lived at Rosehill, Radford, Coventry. They became engaged but this did not lead to marriage and when her father died, in 1849, Coventry friends took Mary Ann to Geneva for several months, where she thought about her future. She returned to London and took lodgings with John Chapman, a non practising doctor and living a bohemian life style. He had a wife and mistress and is rumoured to have had sex with Mary Ann, now called Marian. Marian was employed as an editor of 'The Westminster Review' at this time, the first woman editor of an intellectual magazine.

She met literary London, seeing George Henry Lewis in a bookshop. She became infatuated with this philosopher, theologian and writer and they eloped to Germany. They lived together for 24 years but could not marry as he was already married. Consequently, she was ostracised by polite society and by Isaac her brother, who

forbade all contact with family members. Marian was often lonely until her novels brought fame and wealth. Her literary soirées became very popular Lewis encouraged her to write. A passage from her first novel, 'Scenes of Clerical Life' was then read by the speaker, illustrating Marian's desire to write about the lives of clergy. Lewis persuaded Blackwoods to publish the book saying it was written by a friend. Marian wrote under the name of George Eliot. 'Amos Barton', followed and was set in Chilvers Coton. Another short story was based on a Nuneaton lawyer. Slides were shown of appropriate places around Nuneaton.

In 1878, George Lewis died and Marian was heartbroken. However, two years later she married John Walter Cross. He was 20 years her junior. She was now rich and he helped her with her investments. They married in Hanover Square and honeymooned in Europe. At this time, strangely, he attempted suicide by jumping into a canal. George Eliot died on Dec 22nd 1880, aged 61. She had been married for less than a year. She was buried in Highgate cemetery.

The meeting concluded with refreshments and then questions and ended with the vice chairman thanking the speaker.

Talk On Thomas Traherene

By Reverend Jim Dobson on Tuesday 14th May 2019 at the Octagon. St Mary's Lillington at 200 p.m.

We heard an interesting talk by the Rev. Jim Dobson on the little-known 17th century poet Thomas Traherene. His poetry was not published until 1903, following a lucky find of his MSS in an antique stall. He was born near Hereford, son of a shoemaker, but sent to school thanks to a wealthy innkeeper, twice Mayor of Hereford. After taking a degree at Oxford, he became Rector of Credenhill, where he spent his life, moving to London a year before his death in 1674.

His poetry is reminiscent of Wordsworth's, in his emphasis on the joys of childhood, but his main theme is the mystical yearning for closeness to God. He gives ecstatic thanks for God's goodness and expresses his sense of wonder at the mysteries of the Universe. He is a minor but interesting poet in the tradition of the metaphysical poets, and foreshadows the Romantic poets of the 19th century.

A E Houseman - A Worcestershire Lad

Talk by Julian Hunt on Tuesday 19th April 2019 at the Octagon. St Mary's Lillington at 7.45 p.m.

One of the many ironies in relation to Housman is that the poetry for which he is chiefly remembered and loved is set in a county that he asserted in a letter that he spent very little time in. Housman was born near Bromsgrove and went to school there. He retained a love of the town and is remembered in the fine statue there.

But equally his association with Shropshire is physically indicated by the plaque on Ludlow's parish church and the nearby cemetery containing his ashes.

Julian Hunt, of the Housman Society, gave a fascinating and well illustrated account of Housman's life with a compelling argument that "A Shropshire Lad" was inspired by his lifelong unrequited love for Moses Jackson, a fellow student at Oxford. Housman shocked his fellow students and tutors by failing his Finals, his failure perhaps being partly caused by the psychological turmoil that his homosexual feelings were creating. However, it has also been suggested that he was so vain over his classical learning that he failed to give proper consideration to other parts of the course. Whatever the truth, he subsequently became so famous within the recondite world of classical textual analysis that he was first appointed to a post at UCL and later the professorship of Latin at Cambridge. He went on to become the last great textual critic, who was notoriously scornful of those he thought of as lazy.

Housman remained faithful in his adoration of Jackson for the rest of his life, although Jackson died 13 years before him and failed to invite him to his (Jackson's) wedding. Their friendship did endure, however. Poignant though veiled references appear in Housman's diaries indicate his obsession. In other areas of his life he could be brutal and unfeeling, even towards his own brother, Laurence Housman. But somewhat like Larkin, Housman will always be loved and remembered for his poetry, the feelings and sentiments of which belie his unsympathetic personality. His legacy endures in unexpected ways, not just in the music that "A Shropshire Lad" was set to by Ralph Vaughan Williams. but also in its quotations. What other modern poet has inspired a non-biographical television play and a museum? (Dennis Potter's "Blue Remembered Hills" and the marvellously nostalgic "Land Of Lost Content" in Craven Arms"). Like Larkin's, some of his lines are deeply embedded in our memories. "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" was the only poem my daughter was required to learn by heart at school.

"A Shropshire Lad", published early in his life and initially at his own expense, has at its heart a profound sadness at the impermanence of life and a bitter rejection of a God who looks on impassively at our fates. Death figures very prominently as a lurking presence. Housman's inspiration was the Greek and Latin Lyricists and elegists that he loved so much. The simplicity of the verse is reminiscent of Wordsworth at his best, as in the Lucy poems. There is warmth and humour too in some of the poems, a feature that is frequently overlooked. For example, from "Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff":

" Oh I have been in Ludlow Fair
And left my necktie God knows where,
And carried half-way home, or near,
Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer.
Then the world seemed not so bad
And I myself a sterling lad;
And down in lovely muck I've lain,

Happy till I woke again”
Or equally, though bitter-sweet, “Are My Fields A-ploughing” ends with the dead young man asking after the welfare of his girlfriend and male friend, gets this response:

“Aye, she lies down lightly
She lies not down to weep.
Your girl is well contented
Be still, my lad, and sleep”

Followed by:

“Yes, lad, I lie easy
I lie as lads would choose
I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart
Never ask me whose”

Report by Barry West

John Milton and “Paradise Lost” - his life and work

As told by the Milton Mummers on Tuesday 12th February 2019 at the Octagon. St Mary's Lillington at 200 p.m.

The Chairman introduced proceedings with the statement that John Milton is arguably our greatest poet after Shakespeare, though few people claim to have read much if any of his poetry, even of ‘Paradise Lost’, his greatest work. He welcomed Mr Thomas Pugh from Oxford who has specialised in presenting a staged version of ‘Paradise Lost’ to make it more approachable for a wider public. Mr Pugh had trained a group of 5 people from the Leamington area to make a presentation as the ‘Milton Mummers’.

Milton was born in 1608 and died in 1674, so had lived through turbulent times, including the execution of Charles 1st , the Commonwealth and the Restoration of the monarchy. His father was a scrivener , prosperous enough to send young John to St Paul’s School and Cambridge, and for John to travel quite a lot in Europe when he was a young man, especially Italy (where he met Galileo among other scholars) . Italy, of course, was the home of Virgil whose epic ‘The Aeneid’ together with Homer’s ‘Iliad ‘ and ‘Odyssey ‘ had made such a mark on him. Though his grandfather had been a Catholic, John Milton supported Cromwell. He married 3 times – in 1642, to a wife who bore him a son and 3 daughters but died in 1652 as the 3rd was born; in 1656, by which time he was going blind, so he never saw the child to whom she too died giving birth; and again in 1663, to a woman who acted as his scribe and outlived him.

Milton was a very learned man – he often wrote in Latin and wrote many political and theological essays as well as poetry, and had a post in the equivalent of our Civil Service. He published a lot of poetry – sonnets and longer works like ‘Lycidas’; but for a man so soaked in Classical literature, it is not surprising that he aspired to write an epic –regarded as the height of literary achievement. He thought about writing one on King Arthur, but decided not to (a theme too often used as a justification for the monarchy to satisfy his republican sympathies). The

theme he eventually (1658) adopted was greater still –the fall of Man and the struggle between good and evil. Book 9 deals with the temptation by Satan – with the serpent as his instrument – of Eve, and hers of Adam.....

There followed a reading by the 5 ‘Milton Mummers’ of an abridged version of Book 9, showing how Satan , after being driven out of Heaven (books 1 & 2) attacks God through His newest creation – mankind., causing them to commit ‘the mortal sin original’.

After the reading, questions were asked of Mr Pugh, and a discussion ensued. The richness of Milton’s language and imagery were much appreciated, while it was admitted that their density makes the poem a ‘hard read’. Being able to hear it, well read, was enormously beneficial and the Chairman thanked the readers and Mr Pugh most warmly. Professor John Carey’s publication “The Essential Milton” was recommended as a good way in to the poem . ‘Paradise Lost’ had been broadcast in its entirety on Radio 4 and can be reached via Google in 21 episodes. In conclusion, the Chairman declaimed Wordsworth’s ‘Sonnet to Milton’, containing the apposite couplet “Milton, thou should’st be living at this hour / England hath need of thee” (!)

Refreshments were then served and a collection taken for Mr Pugh’s chosen charity , the Oxfordshire Association for the Blind. The meeting closed at 3.15 p.m.

Literary Society Christmas Party 2018

On December 11th 2018 the Society held its Christmas party.

This was well attended and all appreciated the attractively laid out refreshments. A small group of members presented a dramatised reading of ‘A Christmas Carol’. This was our last meeting at St Peter’s Conference Centre. We look forward to resuming our meetings in the New Year at the Octagon, St Mary Magdalene Church, Lillington.

The life Poetry and local Connectivity of Philip Larkin

A talk by Sheila Woolf, a writer on Larkin's work on Tuesday 13th November 2018

The Leamington Literary Society held its annual joint meeting with the Leamington Society in the Dormer Conference Centre.

About 70 people attended to hear Sheila Woolf speak on The Life, Poetry and Local Connectivity of Philip Larkin. The meeting, chaired by the Leamington Literary Society’s chairman, Trevor Humphreys, began at 7.30 p.m. and finished at 9.30 p.m., with an interval for drinks, interaction and the possibility of looking at Larkin material and Chris Arnot’s book, Larkin about in Coventry.

Sheila Woolf considers Larkin (1922-1985) the greatest poet of the latter half of the

twentieth century and one not sufficiently celebrated in the Midlands. She expressed a hope that would be rectified when Coventry takes on the role of City of Culture in 2021. In brief,, Sheila Woolf told th audience that Larkin gained a number of awards, was offered the post of Poet Laureate (which he turned down) and spent his working days as a librarian, gaining the post of University of Hull Librarian in 1955. In addition to his poetry for which he is best known, he wrote two novels and numerous jazz reviews for the Daily Telegraph.

He was born and brought up in Coventry: the Cathedral, where he was christened, was his parish church; the Old Grammar School, now King Henry VIII, his local school. He spent 1930-1940 there both as a junior and senior pupil. His first published poetry appeared in the school magazine, *The Coventrian*, which he was later to edit; and his first publication (prose) at the age of twelve 'Getting Up in the Morning', was also in the school magazine. One of his school reports (again at the age of twelve) said he had 'a real sense of rhythm and beauty'; in another the head master noted he had a 'tendency to foolishness'. His father, Sydney, Coventry City's Treasurer, was a fascist, a great admirer of Hitler's efficiency and kept Nazi paraphernalia in his office. He took Philip to Germany with the unwanted consequence of instigating in him a dislike of foreign travel in later life. The local Free Library, known then as the Gulson library (established with donations from the mayor John Gulson in 1873) was one of Larkin's favourite childhood haunts — he is known to have read a book a day. He took a first in English literature at Oxford (St John's College). He then failed the army test due to flat feet and poor eyesight and went into librarianship.

When Larkin left Coventry it was largely a medieval town. In 1941 his school was bombed. In later years he returned to Coventry to see how the city had changed. He wrote up his findings in 'Reminiscences'. He was also a keen photographer. The Ring Road went through what had been his home, but his school remained. On the day he visited, a cricket match was in action. The well known poem 'I remember, I remember', written after one of these return trips, has been misinterpreted by many as a rejection of his home town but Sheila Woolf told her audience that this was not the case: Larkin was making fun of other poems which romanticised their childhood home while Larkin was telling the reader this is where he spent his childhood and that it was not the place's fault.

Sheila Woolf engaged her audience in her excellent reading of some of Larkin's poems: 'Winter Nocturne' a sonnet written when he was sixteen published in *The Coventrian* in 1928; 'Spring Morning' also in *The Coventrian* in 1940; and for the 1985 centenary edition 'Wild Oats', a typically self-deprecatory poem. Sheila Woolf was then herself editor of *The Coventrian* and recalled her correspondence with Larkin, mentioning how conscientious Larkin was in replying to letters. She also read and drew the audience's attention to what she considers one of Larkin's finest poems, 'Aubade' which gives expression to Larkin's fear of death (he was a man of no religious feelings).

Sheila Woolf feels that Coventry and the local area have not commemorated Philip Larkin appropriately. There is now a memorial in the Poets' Corner in Westminster

Abbey (2016). His school celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2002 and Sheila Woolf and others created the Larkin Room and a memorial plaque was placed in 2015, but there is no statue at Coventry Station. Hull, she reminded the audience, had a splendid statue of Larkin sculpted by Martin James at the Railway Station.

During the question time Sheila Woolf corroborated that the Larkin family had moved to Warwick in 1943 and had lived on the Mason Road. She mentioned two biographies by James Booth and Andrew Motion and also drew the audience's attention to very recently published family letters in which it is possible to explore his relationship with his mother and sister. She confirmed that Larkin was right-wing and a great admirer of Margaret Thatcher — but he had lunch regularly with his left-wing friend, John Saville. He was not shy of making friends but was not eminently gregarious. He kept in touch with old school friends during later life and was a great friend of Kingsley Amis.

The audience much appreciated Sheila Woolf's clear, informative and detailed talk.

"George Orwell - Writer and Parent"

Talk by Richard Blair, George Orwell's adopted son.

On Tuesday 9th October 2018

It was an astonishing and delightful surprise to learn that Richard Blair, Orwell's adopted son, lives just a few miles outside Leamington, at Long Itchington. It was almost equally surprising to learn from Richard that although there is a George Orwell Society and a George Orwell Foundation, these were set up as recently as 2007 and 2009, nearly 60 years after Orwell's death. It was good to hear that Richard is at the centre of these important institutions keeping Orwell's vitally important and enduring political and literary legacy alive. His talk attracted the biggest audience to a Leamington Literary Society meeting in living memory – at least 100 crowded into the St Peters Hall to hear him speak.

Though he died very early at just 46, Orwell packed more into his life than most ordinary mortals can only dream of. Richard gave us a fascinating description of it, from his birth and early years onwards.

Born in Bengal (his father was Sub Deputy Opium Agent, 4th Grade) he subsequently spent his childhood in England, first in Suffolk, then via a scholarship, at Eton. After school he joined the Indian Civil Service, and it was there that he became politically aware, seeing at first hand what the ruling British Empire entailed, particularly in its treatment of the native population. His experience was put to use in his first novel, "Burmese Days" and also, perhaps more grippingly, in one of his essays. This was a major change in Orwell's life, leading directly to his becoming a lifelong socialist and major literary figure. Back in England, he deliberately put himself through the horrors of destitution, before chronicling them in "Down and Out in Paris and London" and later, in 1936, "Road to Wigan Pier", commissioned by Victor Gollancz.

1936 also saw his marriage to Eileen O'Shaunessy. She remained a rock in his life, even following him during his participation in the Spanish Civil War. Richard gave a graphic account of his few months there, where he almost lost his life. A bullet through his neck miraculously missed his main artery and gullet. Returning to England, he joined the BBC, which saw him become the finest political essayist of his generation. However, his health was already failing, and very sadly he also lost Eileen to cancer in 1945. The year before, Richard was born, and adopted by the Orwells. According to Richard, Orwell was a wonderful father, and here his account became both very personal and insightful, as he described his years on the Isle of Jura, where Orwell lived from 1946 to 1948, courtesy of David Astor. This is where he wrote "1984", for which, together with "Animal Farm" (an odd omission from Richard's talk) he will be forever remembered. Richard gave a graphic description of a near drowning when out on a boat.

Orwell died in January 1950, finally succumbing to TB, which the new drug Streptomycin sadly failed to cure. Shortly before his death he married Sonia Brownell, who became his literary executor and responsible for later publishing his huge output of essays, which stand as testament not just to his profound political and literary legacy but also to his enduring influence.

Richard's talk unsurprisingly drew a large number of questions from the record audience. We came away with a fresh appreciation of Orwell's extraordinary life and work, but also with a new insight to Orwell's humanity as a loving father. (A delightful photo of Orwell with Richard on his knee appears on the front cover of D.J. Taylor's definitive "Orwell: the Life" published in 2003.) Richard's very full account unfortunately left little opportunity to discuss Orwell's continued relevance to today's highly polarised world, where aspects of the nightmare vision of "1984"s are being realised. The Ministry of Truth (i.e. lies) precisely prefigures the Trump era, where "alternative facts" are set against objective facts (and frighteningly believed), and impartial reporting is dismissed as "fake news", with the media vilified as "enemies of the people". All of us who fear where the present political climate is leading would do well to go back and read the words of the real seeker after truth that Orwell was.

Report by Barry West

AGM - Tuesday 12th June 2018 at the Dormer Conference Centre.

After the Chairman's opening address the agenda was followed as planned. At item no.9 there was some discussion of the pros and cons of raising the annual subscription, a proposal originating in response to the increase in the Centre's room hire charge. The chairman explained that, subsequently, it had been established that the venue to be used from January 2019 onwards (The Octagon at St Mary Magdalene Church Lillington) was actually going to be less expensive and it was agreed to apply no increase at this stage.

Reports were read out from the leaders of the poetry, drama and fiction groups, all of which are much enjoyed by their members.

The committee was re-elected as a group, with Robin Taylor replacing John Henderson (retiring for health reasons) as Treasurer and Fiona Williams taking over from Anna Schmidt (retiring because of increased family commitments) as Membership Secretary.

Our President, Lady Hamilton, has sadly decided to retire after many years of service. She said how much she had enjoyed being our President, and being in the company of fellow book-lovers. Trevor Humphreys thanked her very much indeed for serving for so long and presented her with flowers and wine. Margaret Watkins gave a very appreciative speech thanking Lady Hamilton for being such a good President and taking a keen interest in the society.

After the break, during which the book sale was held, we enjoyed a balloon debate. The four authors taking flight were Agatha Christie, Mary Shelley, John Galsworthy and JRR Tolkien. After a series of votes, Mary Shelley emerged as the survivor.

Frances Havergal, a well-known hymn writer of the 19th Century

Talk by Patsy Spiller on 20th February 2018
at All Saints Church, Leamington Spa.

Frances Havergal was born in 1836, the youngest daughter of a clergyman. Her home life was comfortable, she was well educated and musical, and had a lovely singing voice from her youth. However, it was a strictly evangelical household. No fairy tales, poetry, novels or plays (not even Shakespeare) were allowed, in case youthful imaginations should be led astray. Frances, however, was sensitive to natural beauty and landscape; in later life she came to love Switzerland, becoming a good climber and walker.

After her much older siblings married and left home, and her beloved dog died, she felt alone and increasingly questioned her spiritual life, finding it difficult to reconcile her love of nature with the sternness of God. She constantly worried that her attitude to God was wrong. Sadly her father moved to Worcester, where they had no garden; her father called her a "caged lark". Luckily, she had a married sister to stay with. Her mother endured a long illness and Frances went to a French-speaking school, with an evangelical curriculum. She still felt sinful because she did not feel truly spiritual. A friend, Mrs. Cook, helped her by telling her to imagine that Jesus was standing next to her. Mrs. Cook later became the second Mrs. Havergal and Frances went to boarding school again; her relationship with her stepmother was sometimes difficult. She was academically good, becoming a writer of poetry and hymns, which she continued all her life. She visited her sister in Dublin and became close to the Irish and finding many good causes to support. She set up collections for Irish causes in Sunday Schools.

At 23 she became a governess. She earned money from her writings on religion and was in great demand for her beautiful contralto voice. Her father and stepmother came to live at 43 Binswood Avenue, Leamington Spa and she

continued to live there after her father, to whom she had always been very close, died. She very much enjoyed a series of trips to Switzerland, where she loved walking and climbing in the mountains. She felt fitter, and, above all, closer to God. In her thirties she suffered from typhoid fever, which damaged her health. In Leamington she wrote religious books for children, and prayers for them to say, helped at Sunday School classes and ran a choir. She also visited patients in the Pump Room.

After her step-mother died in 1878, she went to live in Wales with her unmarried sister Maria. Here she threw herself into temperance work, but her health had been weakened and she died of peritonitis in 1879, at the age of 43. She is remembered for her poems and many popular hymns, especially "Take my life and let it be."

The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry – Past, Present and Future

A talk by Hannah Barker on Tuesday 13th February 2018

A disappointingly small audience attended for this very lively and fascinating presentation, which got off to a difficult start because of the lack of success connecting the speaker's laptop to the projector. This meant that the audience had to view her excellent photographs on the laptop itself. Despite this handicap, we were given a thoroughly engaging account of the history of the Belgrade, named after funding donated from the then Yugoslav government back in the 50s. This was a different era, when the local council and it seemed the majority of Coventry's population were enthusiastically behind the project, seeing the benefits deriving from a thriving live theatre. And in the early days, the Belgrade welcomed through its portals a whole galaxy of men and women of the theatre who went on to become star names including Trevor Nunn and Ian McKellan.

The Belgrade's reputation was however solidified by their Theatre in Education project, by which they worked with local schools to promote the educational potential of role play and other dramatic techniques in children's development, whilst at the same time encouraging their interest in live theatre. The project became nationally well-known and this reviewer well remembers two members of the company coming to Hull University in the mid-60s to explain their work.

The 70s and 80s marked something of a decline in the Belgrade's fortunes, when the public expenditure crises led to the withdrawal of much of the local government funding that regional theatres had come to rely upon for their viability. Various marketing techniques were used to overcome these difficulties, but the net result was an inevitable concentration upon the need for "bums on seats" and reliance on the tried and tested productions rather than the innovative approach of earlier years. The requirement for such a policy was accentuated by the rise of the Warwick Arts Centre. Having a ready made "intellectual" audience on the spot enabled the latter to attract highly regarded touring companies putting on plays beyond the scope of the Belgrade. This I remains the case, although the Belgrade can still excite its local audience from time to time with strong, relevant productions, such as "One Night in November" , a powerful play based upon the

bombing of Coventry in November 1940. So successful was it that it has had 2 repeat runs.

The Belgrade continues to occupy an important role in the cultural life of Coventry. Testament to its determination to survive and thrive is the major refurbishment it has recently undertaken, in line with Coventry's own modern makeover of the City Centre.

So what of the future? Undoubtedly the most exciting development is the announcement of Coventry being named as the City of Culture 2021. This gives the Belgrade a huge opportunity to be at the centre of a year of cultural events, and our speaker was unsurprisingly upbeat at the prospect. Indeed, the City has already been in close contact with Hull, which had such a successful year as City of Culture 2017, and the hope is that Coventry, including The Belgrade, will make a 2021 a turning point in its position both within the West Midlands and beyond.

"Somerset Maugham, Man of Letters"

Talk by Robin Taylor, well-known local speaker and friend of the Society on
Tuesday, 9 January 2018

The Society Chairman Trevor Humphreys welcomed members and visitors and introduced the speaker Robin Taylor. Robin, who is a native of Leamington Spa, went to Warwick School and studied history at Oxford. While in Oxford he picked up a book by Somerset Maugham while browsing in a large bookshop and was immediately hooked.

William Somerset Maugham was born in the British Embassy in Paris in 1874. His father was legal adviser to the embassy at the time. Somerset was a family name but anyone who knew him well called him Willie. Maugham grew up bilingual and by the time he was 18 he had also learnt German and Italian, then Spanish while he was living in Seville and became fairly good at Russian when he was an agent in Russia. He trained as a doctor, qualified at St. Thomas's but did not practice.

While he was training he wrote 'Liza of Lambeth' which is still very readable. It had certain success and he decided he might make his living as a writer so he took the risk. During his 20's he wrote several novels, none of which sold well. He was always a traveller because he had a gift for languages. He had written some plays, mainly light comedies, which no one wanted to put on the stage. When he was 34 the Royal Court had a play which failed, and with nothing else prepared Maugham was approached and 'Lady Frederick' (a very funny and cynical play) ran for a year. Towards the end of that year he had four plays running in London. After that he never had financial problems and was able to travel even more.

At the beginning of the war he had gone to the western front and done what doctors do, but since he spoke so many languages it was obvious to the intelligence people that it was a job for him. He was sent to Russia and believed that if he had been sent there six months earlier he might have succeeded in

keeping the Provisional Government in power and stop the Bolsheviks taking control.

He wrote 'For Services Rendered' about WW1, 'Home and Beauty' and 'The Constant Wife'. His short stories in particular made him famous – 91 of them in three volumes.

In the Ashenden stories he wrote about himself, Ashenden being one of the names he called himself when he ran spies during WWI. He wrote six stories based on his experiences, one of them called 'The Hairless Mexican' but destroyed others when Churchill told him they would be a breach of the official secrets act.

Robin read excerpts from Ashenden, The Hairless Mexican and many of Maugham's other works, plays and stories.

Maugham was commissioned by an American magazine, Cosmopolitan, to write short stories. About six of his novels are masterpieces. In 'Cakes and Ale' which is exceptionally readable and one of his best, he was very good at mixing tragedy with comedy without one cancelling out the other.

'Of Human Bondage' is an autobiographical novel, 'Christmas Holiday' about political 1930's in Paris and 'The Moon and Sixpence' a fictional account of a man who is not unlike Paul Gauguin. 'Rain' was made into a TV play.

Maugham lived in France for many years and died in Nice in 1965 at the age of 91. Most of his novels are still in print.

The Vice Chairman of the Society, Graham Cooper, gave the vote of thanks.

Christmas Party 12th December 2017

A very convivial evening opened with a reading of two poems by Thomas Hardy on Christmas themes. We then enjoyed some carols played and sung by Immanuel's Ground, Warwick's West Gallery Quire. This is a most delightful group of enthusiasts, members of the West Gallery Music Association, who keep alive the tradition of local church bands, so well described by Hardy, who accompanied their church choirs. The group's members wore most attractive, authentic-looking costumes, the ladies in pretty white bonnets, mostly made by the members.

Readings by our members from Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott followed. We then enjoyed refreshments, joined by the musicians and singers, interesting and entertaining people with great enthusiasm for their traditional music-making and its history.

Afterwards came more readings, from Washington Irving and Hardy, and more carols. Trevor Humphreys thanked Immanuel's Ground very much for a most enjoyable evening, evoking the spirit and good cheer of Christmas past. He then thanked Jean and Julie for the delicious refreshments. Sadly, snow and ice had

made it impossible for many of the Society's members to attend.

Nikolaus Pevsner - Author of the Buildings of England

Presented by Chris Pickford -

Joint meeting of the Leamington Society and the Leamington Literary Society on 07th November 2017.

58 members of the two societies enjoyed a fascinating and very professionally presented talk by Chris Pickford, author of *The New Pevsner Guide to Warwickshire*. He began with an account of how Sir Nikolaus Pevsner originated *The Buildings of England* series in 1947. The first series, published by Penguin Books, was completed in 1974. The updated versions are being published by Yale University Press. The focus of the books is to detail each county's buildings of architectural significance; they are neither tourist guides nor local histories.

For the purpose of the updated edition, the area covered includes Warwickshire and Coventry but not Birmingham and the Black Country, which featured in the first version. The full process of preparation, visit, research, write and edit took from 2007 to 2015 and involved 21,863 miles of motoring, the taking of 32,000 photographs and four shelves of paperwork. About 40% of his time was spent on revision and about 60% on new writing. He gave a detailed account of those buildings in Leamington that feature in the book and concluded by saying that, in spite of some lack of information and difficulty of access, the whole process had been a privilege, and very rewarding.

George Eliot and Warwickshire

Talk by Vivienne Wood of the George Eliot Society on the 10th October 2017

The Chairman, Trevor Humphreys, opened the meeting with four apologies for absence. He introduced the speaker, Vivienne Wood, Vice-Chair of the George Eliot Society. Members were given free copies of 'Felix Holt', donated by the Society to promote her works. Vivienne explained her mission – to bring the work of Mary Anne (her childhood name) to a modern audience. She had adapted 'Felix Holt' for the stage to help in this, and had successfully staged it at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Mary Ann Evans was born in 1819, the daughter of the energetic and capable land agent at Arbury Hall. She was close to her father, who took her on a great variety of visits in the course of his business, getting to know the surrounding country well and meeting local people. Often she would be left in the charge of a housekeeper and servants, hearing news and gossip and forming the basis of a deep knowledge of the countryside, and of people in all stations of life. Vivienne directed us to page 7 of 'Felix Holt', where there is a most vivid description of both the north and the south of Warwickshire, the one deprived, the other prosperous.

In 1841 Robert Evans moved to Coventry, with Mary Ann as his housekeeper

following the death of her mother. Here she met radical new friends like Charles Bray, and began to develop independent views, even refusing to go to church. Robert died in 1849, giving Mary Anne the opportunity to travel in Europe before moving to London to become Assistant Editor of the Westminster Review. Here she met radical, free-thinking people and fell in love with George Henry Lawes. They eloped to Weimar in Germany. Lawes was married, so for Marian, as she renamed herself, a life began as a social outcast. Her health suffered; Lawes, however, encouraged her to write, and this remarkable and intelligent woman produced eight novels. Six of these were set in the Midlands, for which she had a warm and lasting affection.

Vivienne was sad that not more had been done to promote George Eliot in North Warwickshire. However, she was hopeful that Coventry's bid to be the next UK City of Culture might release funds to commemorate her; in fact there are also plans to dedicate part of the Nuneaton museum to her. Mary Ann's childhood home is now a Premier Inn – but visitors from abroad love this and it does help to preserve the house!

Vivienne gave a vivid and complete picture of George Eliot's life; she is an enthusiastic and knowledgeable promoter of this classic writer, who is now less widely read than in the past.

Claire Spivey thanked Vivienne warmly for her most interesting talk, which was part of the 'Warwick Words' History Festival.

Midlands Regional Dialects

Talk by Brendan Hawthorne on Tuesday 14th February 2017

The Vice-Chairman, Graham Cooper, opened the evening, with 5 apologies for absence. He then introduced the speaker, Brendan Hawthorne, author of several books on dialect, specialising in his own, that of the Black Country, and 'poet laureate' of Wednesbury. He started writing in 2000, poems in Black Country dialect with its many distinctive words and speech rhythms. At this time he lived in Tipton, "the smoky bit of the Black Country", later moving to Wednesbury "out of love". Although so near, Wednesbury is socially so far removed from Tipton that his future father-in-law at first refused to have him in the house!

His school career was badly affected by being left-handed; he was forced to use his right hand. He left school with 2 GCE O levels and a love of English Literature. However, he found that he could read electrical diagrams, so worked in a factory for 18 years. This experience of local dialect and humour was of the first importance, his love of Black Country speech inspiring his poetry. He conveyed his strong belief in the importance of inherited language, which shapes our identity and is an essential part of our culture. He described his grandfather in the dialect, which is difficult to understand, and interpreted it. He analysed some words that showed Germanic origin, dating back to the Saxon invasions. Black Country expressions are also shaped by industry.

Next he related how he was lucky enough to fall easily into publishing. His poems in a small magazine were spotted by a publisher who asked him to write some poems for charity. These were so popular that the publisher asked for more, and from there his writing career took off. He has written some booklets for the Bradwell local interest series. They asked him to do some on Warwickshire, which, as a different area, he had to research. This brought home to him how much language differs even in nearby regions, and how words and expressions travel with working people from one area to another.

His publisher asked him to compile, for visiting Americans, some phrases in Shakesperean language, which was popular. He realised that many folk words, sayings and craft terms that Shakespeare used came in particular from hawking, e.g. 'old codger' and 'under my thumb'.

Brendan did some very interesting research into the Vernon manuscript, a medieval work on vellum in the Bodleian library, written in Mercian dialect. The speech patterns and dialect were familiar to him and the historian Michael Wood was impressed by his reading, which brought the moral tales to life. He recited some of his poems, explaining dialect words, many of which come down in families, as well as in crafts and industries.

After the interval, he recited more poems and reminisced about experiences, such as sitting on Anthony Gormley's vacant fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, making short speeches to a mixed crowd, some drunken and vociferous! A very genial, outgoing personality, he said things tended to happen to him; e.g. the time he was waiting for his wife outside Selfridges in Birmingham, and was addressed by an unknown lady who said he looked like someone who had led an interesting life! He was mystified and questioned her; she turned out to be from 'Smooth Radio' and before he knew where he was, he found himself being interviewed, in bright orange make-up, for an appearance in Manchester. He was chosen to do an advertisement for Smooth Radio, using his gift for humour.

His poems covered a wide variety of topics; love poetry, the collection of debris in space, the chaos that ensued after trying to enter the house at night, without waking his wife, after a night down the pub, childhood in the seventies, Black Country character studies, full of humour. Brendan finished with interesting answers to questions about the changes in dialect in recent times, and the importance of recording speech from the older generations.

Graham Cooper thanked the speaker for his excellent talk on a fascinating subject, agreeing that the enjoyment of language was of great importance, along with understanding of its origins and development.

The Art of Interviewing

On a typical January evening earlier this year (2015), the members of the Leamington Literary Society were warmed by the verve, vivacity and charm

exhibited by our speaker, Joan Cummins as she spoke on the topic of Interviewing. Currently part of the BBC Midlands Today Regional news team, Joan brought to her subject many years of experience of radio and TV journalism working in many outlets.

As a broadcast journalist, Joan has met and interviewed many famous people as well as ordinary folk caught up in local, dramatic incidents. From Prime Ministers, (three of them) to play school teachers, Joan brings a tried and trusted technique into play. She aims to get her interviewee to comment directly on the situation usually using the Who? What? When? Why? And How? Format.

She interspersed her comments on technique with amusing anecdotes illustrating the interviewer's need for flexibility of approach. On the spot reports can be knocked off line by the intervention of a child, an animal, an over-enthusiastic fan or a new development which calls for the interviewer to think on his / her feet.

Joan fielded questions adroitly, honestly and amusingly. She was pleased to find that the majority of her audience in agreement with her assertion that most of the media strove for sensitivity on emotional, personal issues, e.g. the deaths of the four fire-fighters in the Atherstone incident, the Charlie Hebdo affair, whilst trying to convey the distressing facts. Her description of a broadcast journalist's typical day was enlightening, obviously based on reality and again underlining the need for a swift response and flexibility of action.

With contemporary references very much to the fore, this was an enlightening and entertaining talk given by a true professional.

Report by Claire Spivey