

The Gaskell Society



KNUTSFORD PARISH CHURCH

NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 1988

NO. 6

EDITOR'S LETTER

Literary societies come in all sizes and styles but have in common a commitment to one particular writer. Members join to share this interest in various ways. Our Society is still developing and our committee welcomes suggestions and comments. Are you getting what you expect from the Society? Participation can be on various levels and many members are happy just to receive our literature, even if distance does not preclude them from attending meetings in person. I sometimes get carried away with enthusiasm and almost chartered a train to go to Silverdale, then found I had difficulty in filling a coach! So we need feedback on what members like and expect.

For local members, I hope we will have regular study/discussion meetings this autumn, but I need to know whether this idea appeals and what times will be suitable.

I hope that through the newsletter and journal all members feel in touch with the Gaskell world. During the forthcoming Gaskell year I hope a London meeting will be arranged - perhaps S.E. members will suggest a venue.

Most of us have wide literary interests, so contact with other societies is enjoyable. We were pleased to welcome a hundred members of the Bronte Society to Knutsford on June 7th. After lunch at The Royal George - the Old Assembly Rooms of Cranford and 'Wives and Daughters' - Gaskell Society members guided them around the town. We all enjoyed meeting and were blessed with a fine day.

The Alliance of Literary Societies has been a loose federation, acting at times as a pressure group, but the meeting held at Birmingham on April 30th resulted in such a useful exchange of ideas that a further seminar is to be held on October 8th to further the formation of a new, closer Alliance of member societies, with a committee to be appointed.

I have a list of many other literary societies, so if you have another favourite writer you might like to check it. I have been sent literature by the newly-formed Ghost Story Society, as Mrs Gaskell's 'Old Nurse's Story' is a fine example of the genre. Elsewhere in this newsletter there are details of the Dickens Fellowship.

Literary Societies seem to be making news: BBC Radio 4 are researching for a programme and a journalist from Harper and Queen magazine came to Knutsford to find out about us.

We have something to look forward to in the shape of a television documentary on Mrs Gaskell and the Gregs of Styal. Julian Farino, who researched for the film, has kindly written about this for us.

Lastly, to wind up our year in style, Professor Yamawaki has written to me with the news that the Gaskell Society of Japan is well on the way to being formed. What a pleasure it is to make friends through literature.

JOAN LEACH

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OBITUARY

Just as this newsletter was going to press we received the sad news that our chairman, Dr Ken Walley, had died on August 12th. He had been in poor health for some time but carried on courageously with his interests and commitments; only three days previously he had been at a local council meeting, and the day before he died I had seen him to discuss Gaskell meetings.

When the 150th anniversary of Mrs Gaskell's birth was celebrated in Knutsford, Dr Walley was actively involved. He loved Knutsford and its history and traditions, working on town and county councils for the public good.

We shall miss him in the Gaskell Society.

JOAN LEACH

GETTING TO KNOW MRS G.

by Julian Farino

When I picked up Winifred Gerin's biography of Elizabeth Gaskell, I was struck immediately by the quotation chosen as the frontispiece. "I am myself and nobody else, and can't be bound by another's rules".

Unfortunately, the same cannot always be said for the life of a television researcher. We are bound by the rules of producers and executive producers, we work to order; it is not difficult to perceive that researching Blind Date is a far cry from World in Action.

Consequently, when I first heard about a series of films to be made detailing historical individuals of the 19th Century - in the North West, as these were 'local' programmes - I was suitably excited. Whereas a lot of television has a fast turnover rate, this was a meaty subject into which to sink my teeth.

The original idea was a loose one. The films - an hour's length each - would focus on the lives of lesser known philanthropists or radicals. Preliminary reading was done, largely by producer Bill Jones. One film would be about soap king Lord Leverhulme, another about the early women's movement. The third had an original working title of "The Manchester Set", and was to include figures such as Ruskin, Engels and James Kay as well as Mrs Gaskell. The Gregs of Styal were also floating around as a possibility, given the beautiful locations and a story of family intrigue to rival Dallas.

It didn't take long to realise that to do justice to all these notables in a one-hour film was ambitious to say the least. How we came to decide to limit the film to just the Gregs and Mrs Gaskell isn't entirely clear. True, they are connected (William Rathbone Greg's famous review of Mary Barton, Mrs Gaskell's friendship with Samuel Greg junior etc.) and it would open the possibility of exploring the world of the non-conformist Unitarians. Perhaps it was simply that Bill Jones enjoyed Mary Barton so much.

When I joined the production - comprising just three of us, producer, director and researcher - I had five weeks to set up two weeks' filming. That is, to become an expert on Mrs Gaskell, to view all the possible locations, and to decide how we would tell the story. Obviously I wouldn't be idle, my days were to be of William Gaskell proportions.

I had already read Mary Barton and North and South, when I was at University doing a social history paper. Mary Barton I remember particularly; I read it in just over a day, unable to put it down, revelling in the chance to read 'a good yarn' rather than another dense text. I easily forgave the corny ending (North and South I found a tamer version of the same theme), and for a couple of days wandered round saying "It's the poor, and only the poor, as look after themselves" (six years on, this is probably a gross misquote).

Even so, I didn't feel I knew Mrs Gaskell the person at all before this project. Trying to probe her character - not an easy task - was the most enjoyable challenge. Gerin's cogent biography, whilst brilliant on detail, I didn't find that illuminating; if anything, just a touch sycophantic. John Chapple's edited letters I enjoyed much more*: Mrs Gaskell's energy and impulsive enthusiasm became far more apparent.

Alongside all this reading, plenty was happening. It was decided that the films would include at least ten minutes of 'drama-documentary', so the director was busy casting "Mrs Gaskell". Eileen Tully, who plays her, has a distinctive and extremely Victorian face, and turned out to be excellent. The scene at young Williams's grave in Warrington is very moving, and apart from seeing Eileen smoking off-camera, she was entirely convincing. Later, in the cutting room, we discovered there is an uncanny resemblance between Eileen and Mrs Gaskell's daughter: do watch out for it in the film.

*Elizabeth Gaskell - A Portrait in Letters.
J A V Chapple. MUP 1980

As we pieced together the story, draft storylines were written and re-worked. Contacts were made - obviously to Joan for general information at the drop of a hat and for expertise on Knutsford, and to John Chapple, plus several people in connection with the Gregs. We visited Heathwaite, Plymouth Grove, Cross St Chapel, The Portico Library and various other Manchester locations still in existence, but it was at Silverdale where we grew really excited. One could totally empathise with Mrs Gaskell's urge to escape there, and we decided that - with the owner of Lindeth Tower, Mrs Horsley's, permission - we would shoot the bulk of the drama there. When it came, we were blessed with the only sunshine of this miserable summer.

The days preceeding our two weeks filming were hectic. Everything has to be in place, one has to be sure that pictures will match words and justice will be done to the story. We filmed in Knutsford, Manchester and Silverdale for the Mrs Gaskell part of the story. Everybody enjoyed it immensely - always a good sign for the final product.

One never has much time to linger in this business. As the director finished editing the film, I was already well underway researching a film about dogs. In hindsight, I enjoyed working on 'Voices for Change', as the three films are to be collectively known, immensely. When Joan asked me to write these notes, she suggested I say how I thought of Mrs Gaskell both before and after. Well, perhaps a little cheekily, I'll leave you to see the film to find out, for my impressions are accurately reflected there. It now looks as though transmission won't be until January, since the schedules have been thrown by the Olympics. I hope you enjoy it, and feel we give a fair appraisal. As they say, you've read the books, now ...

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THE PORTICO LIBRARY and THE GASKELLS. While researching the Portico Library records for her book on William Gaskell, Barbara Brill noted that these show books borrowed by William and, no doubt, read by ELIZABETH. Barbara plans some further research.

OUTING TO SILVERDALE

by Joan Leach

On a fair morning, on July 3rd, a group of intrepid Gaskellians set forth from Knutsford by coach en route for Silverdale with me as guide - that is why I call them 'intrepid' for, as I had not had the opportunity of travelling the route ahead, it was something of a journey of discovery, akin to a pilgrimage. Of course, I had been thorough in my research and our destination was certain for Silverdale might well be the Mecca of Gaskell followers.

Mrs Gaskell wrote to Lady Kay Shuttleworth (G.L.72a, undated but probably 1850) of the family's 'annual migration' to Silverdale 'with grey limestone rocks on all sides which in the sun or moonlight glisten like silver' and 'our children learn country interests and ways of living and thinking'. And, later, 'I think - and it is pleasant to think, - that one is never disappointed in coming back to Silverdale ... such wide plains of golden sands with purple hill shadows, - or fainter wandering filmy cloud shadows & the great dome of sky. - We have not sat up all night on our tower this time ...' (G.L.401, July 1858). This description was to Charles Eliot Norton and in a previous letter she had drawn him a sketch 'We live in a queer pretty crampy house at the back of a great farmhouse. Our house is built round a square court, - Stay. We have all that is shaded'. Here in the printed version of the letters is a reference to the footnote, 'Mrs Gaskell is referring to a plan she drew here'. The original letter is owned by Harvard University Library, so I requested a photocopy.

She was so economical with her use of paper that it is difficult to interpret, but they clearly had more living space than the Tower. '... the rectangular piece is two stories high, the little bit by the lane one story' - this was the kitchen, the lower storey of the Tower being the larder.

town with his brother / to Silverdale (near
Lancaster - you must have heard of
- speak of it, - close to Lancaster Sands.
+ Mrs Gaskell's house at Silverdale
comes to stay with me, - need there be
I shall come here ~~for~~ ^{down} for six weeks, and at
it as strong as horses it is to be hoped
we live in a queer pretty crampy
house, at the back of a great farmhouse.
Our house is built round a square
court, - Stay. ^{Good} ^{down} ^{the} ^{house} ^{is} ^{shaded}, the
kitchen ^{is} ^{shaded}, the
Hoddy
Fields
Lane ^{Locks} ^{Head} ^{is} ^{two} ^{stories}
high, the little bit by the
lane one story. Said little
bit being kitchen & larder
bed rooms; the kitchen is round with

Plan of Silverdale

Up to 1852 at least, William accompanied the family, he liked to 'play pranks, go cockling etc etc and feel at liberty to say or do what he likes' without any visitors, to make him 'feel constrained and obliged to be proper'. In later years he had to be coaxed to take a break from Manchester cares and relaxed on holiday away from family responsibilities; perhaps too, he found the open house hospitality at Silverdale overwhelming. He was not one of the party of '15 people who had to dine on shrimps & bread and butter,- and when they asked for more (I) had to tell them there was no bread nearer than Milnthorpe 6 miles off' (G.L.394).

Knowing Silverdale was so much a part of the Gaskell family life gave it a special significance for us, as we saw the same sandy bay, the wide sky, grey limestone walls, rocks and lichens.

After we left the motorway, near Carnforth, the roads became narrow and winding but we had no difficulty in finding The Silverdale Hotel for coffee, where we met more of our party and our local guide, Audrey Fishwick, who, having learnt of our Society when I made enquiries, joined as a member and offered to guide us. This was no easy task as access was restricted for coaches.

First we sought the Tower which was unmistakable against the skyline, set back behind a high stone wall, in a delightful garden. Mrs Horsley, the owner, had agreed to let ten of us see inside the Tower and mount the narrow staircase to the top where Mrs Gaskell loved to write, with the expansive view of sea and sky. All our party had the pleasure of walking in the garden close to the Tower and being able to mount the 'high terrace at the top of the broad stone wall, looking down on the Bay' (G.L.391). Only a week or two before our visit the Granada film crew had filmed here, so we hope all Gaskellians will share the experience.

Close by we visited the Wolf House, now an art gallery and gift shop, before making our way back to the village for lunch. It would have been pleasant to have more



time to explore the area which Mrs Gaskell knew so well. 'Oh! we are getting so sorry to leave Silverdale. We know all the people here & they know us'. Just how true this was is evident from a letter of October 1857 (G.L.376a) when she and Meta took an unplanned, impromptu holiday and tramped around the village, seeking accommodation at various houses.

The Silverdale area can be recognised in several Gaskell works; the treacherous Morecambe Bay crossing

It stands alone
 Up in a land of stone
 All worn like ancient stairs,
 A land of rocks and trees
 Nourished on wind and stone.

And all within
 Long delicate has been;
 By arts and kindliness
 Coloured, sweetened, and warmed
 For many years has been.

Safe resting there
 Men hear in the travelling air
 But music, pictures see
 In the same daily land
 Painted by the wild air.

One maker's mind
 Made both, and the house is kind
 To the land that gave it peace,
 And the stone has taken the house
 To its cold heart and is kind.



where lives were lost and from Lindeth Tower the guide could be seen 'a square man sitting stern on his white horse (the better to be seen when daylight ebbs) ... leading (the) slow moving train of crossers' (G.L.394) gave the setting for 'The Sexton's Hero'. It also became 'Abermouth' where the dramatic scenery added to the emotional tension of the story (chapter 24). The water-lily scene (chapter 6) was drawn from Gaskell's memory of Deepdale Pool but we were not able to visit it on this occasion as it involved a rural walk.

We did however enjoy a lovely field-walk overlooking the Bay. Audrey directed us to this and tried to persuade our driver to rendezvous with us at the other end; unfortunately he gave up trying to negotiate the narrow road and Audrey had some difficulty in reuniting us. We almost missed this walk when a few spots of rain made us hesitate but were so glad we had not been deterred; it encapsulated the beautiful, unspoilt natural beauty which drew the Gaskell family here. At the top of a lane called The Cove was the house which Rev Carus Wilson bought as a holiday convalescent home for the Cowan Bridge school, but there is no evidence that any of the Bronte children stayed there - surely Mrs Gaskell would have mentioned this?

We had one more stop to make, at The Sheiling. This was the house built by Meta and Julia Gaskell - the Miss Gaskells - as their retreat from Manchester. The recent owners, Mr and Mrs Baker, kindly allowed us to visit this attractive house, with something of the Swiss chalet in its design, set in its own woodlands. Edward Thomas wrote a poem about it (see opposite) from which it seems that the house was once less enclosed by woods and that it retained the Gaskell aura. The poet had been visiting Gordon Bottomley, poet and dramatist who bought the house in 1914. At a sale of his furniture two chairs were listed as having been given to Mrs Gaskell by Charlotte Bronte and acquired by him with the house.

To complete our day we visited Levens Hall with its fascinating topiary gardens. We were sorry to go home without thanking our guide, Audrey, as we had unwittingly parted company. She arrived at Leighton Hall, but our coach driver had difficulty with narrow roads so we got lost.

The countryside was so lovely and there was so much to see that a weekend would be the best way to enjoy it. Now that reminds me, some day I shall want to visit Whitby, Sylvia's country; would any members like to consider a long weekend trip?

14. IX. 00
From the two
Miss Gaskells
(we hate "the
Misses G."!)



You will receive copies of all
the volumes of the New Edition*
from us, for the library; but
please don't think it necessary
to acknowledge each volume.

* Referring to the complete KNUTSFORD EDITION in 8 volumes

BOOK NOTES

by Christine Lingard

The Folio Society has added Cranford to its collection. The text is based on the 1864 edition and the illustrations are the wood-engravings of Joan Hassall which first appeared in the Harrap edition in 1940 and are also available in an edition published by Black Swan Press, in 1984. Added is a six page introduction by the novelist Susan Hill praising the subtleties of the novel. Folio society publications are normally only available to members but a copy is available in the Gaskell collection, Manchester.

There have been no new books devoted to Mrs Gaskell since the last issue with the exception of Brodies notes on Mrs Gaskell's 'North and South' by Graham Handley published by Pan at £1.95. These slim volumes are intended as revision aids for students of GCE 'A' level and consist of plot summaries, character studies, textual notes and sample questions. There is a similar volume devoted to Cranford.

The framework of fiction: socio-cultural approaches to the novel by J.A. Bull (Senior Lecturer at Manchester Polytechnic) Macmillan, 1987. (£20.00). Chapter 5, entitled 'The Novelist in the Market Place: Dickens and Mrs Gaskell', deals with the structure of the novel and, in particular, how the demands of publishers and circulating libraries such as Mudies for a three volume work influenced not only the form and length of the novel but also the change of title from John Barton to Mary Barton, made at the behest of Chapman and Hall, altered the whole emphasis of the book.

The Victorian novelist: social problems and social change edited by Kate Flint. Croom Helm, 1987 (£27.50). A series of extracts from contemporary English literature and documentary material which bear directly on the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens. In particular the Unitarian Domestic Mission Society Reports of the Mission to the poor; Peter Gaskell's Manufacturing population of England - 1833; and Thomas

Middleton's Annals of Hyde and district, 1899, which itself drew on earlier source material such as local newspapers describing the murder of Thomas Ashton as a possible source for the murder of Henry Carson in Mary Barton. In contrast strikes prevented by a Preston manufacturer (John Goodair) is quoted as a contrast to Mrs Gaskell's treatment of the strike in North and South.

The Gaskell collection, Manchester, has also benefited from the gift by Mrs Eileen Ellison of a copy of her thesis for the degree of B.A. at Liverpool Polytechnic School of Librarianship and Information Science. Mrs Ellison is to be congratulated for her work: Feminine self-sacrifice in the nineteenth century novel; Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell, a critical bibliography of a much overlooked novel. All entries provide annotations averaging two hundred words and results in one of the most extensive studies of Ruth ever produced.

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BROOK STREET CHAPEL

Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 came the Act of Toleration in 1689 which allowed dissenters to build their own chapels. Brook Street Chapel dates from this time so will be celebrating its tercentenary next year.

The name of Peter Coulthurst appears on the first trust deed of 1694. It was through this ancestor of Mrs Gaskell's that Sandlebridge Farm came to the family, the Heathbridge of Cousin Phillis. The graves of Coulthursts and Hollands are close to Mrs Gaskell's in the graveyard. Among the ministers were a Holland and a Turner.

This chapel which she knew and loved from cradle to grave is showing signs of its age; 'the plain white-washed walls' are damp; 'The little diamond-shaped loaded panes still cast a green gloom, not without its solemnity within' but some have fallen into disrepair and are now replaced by plain glass temporary windows. At least £30,000 will be needed for restoration work. Any donation will be appreciated.

THE DICKENS FELLOWSHIP

This Fellowship was founded in 1902 with membership open to all lovers of the works of Charles Dickens. There are some twenty branches in the UK and a similar number in North America, and others around the world.

Manchester formerly had an active branch and it is hoped to re-establish this. A meeting with a Dickens entertainment is planned for December in Manchester; if you would like details, please send s.a.e. to - Rev R.R. Carmyllie, 27 Oaks Lane, Bradshaw, Bolton BL2 3RR.

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BLEAK HOUSE IN CHESHIRE?

Barbara Brill noticed an interesting paragraph in 'Cheshire' by T.A. Coward (Methuen, 1932) chapter IX, p.204:

'Robert Langton, author of 'The Childhood and Youth of Dickens' believed that Tabley Old Hall may have suggested the Chesney Wold of 'Bleak House' for he learnt that Dickens and Hablot K. Browne visited the neighbourhood more than once and knew Lord de Tabley. The owner of Chesney Wold is called Sir Leicester Dedlock ...'

The family name of Lord de Tabley was Leicester - the last owner Colonel Leicester Warren died some ten years ago. Bleak House original - if either Dickens or his illustrator had one in mind - is more likely to have been Rockingham Castle in Lincolnshire. Alan S. Watts, hon. secretary of The Dickens Fellowship, Barbara Brill and myself, having considered the evidence, find very little to confirm the idea of Tabley being an inspiration for Bleak House. Mrs Gaskell met illustrator, Hablot Browne at Dickens' dinner table (G.L.45a).

It is interesting to note that F.R. Leavis in his introduction to 'Felix Holt' by George Eliot (Everyman edition) thought Treby Manor owed much to Chesney Wold of 'Bleak House'.

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WIVES AND DAUGHTERS: A FURTHER NOTE

by Angus Easson

I was delighted by the Newsletter's review of my edition of Wives and Daughters. Christine Lingard is of course correct in noting that the Penguin edition claims to be the first based on the Cornhill Magazine serialisation, but the claim itself cannot be sustained. As comparison of even just the first chapter shows, whatever the Penguin is using as the basis of its text, it is not the Cornhill. By basing the World's Classics on the magazine serialisation and taking the opportunity of incorporating corrections from the manuscript, I can claim to represent more faithfully than any previous version what Elizabeth Gaskell intended.

More controversial is the question of setting, which Joan Leach picks up in 'Hollingford alias Knutsford'. First, we clearly do agree that many of the characteristics of Hollingford are those of Knutsford and that Tatton and the Egertons are drawn on for Cumnor Towers and its family. However, the references to Hamley being in the midland shires (p.319), to the sight of the Malvern Hills (p.482), and to the Birmingham-London railway ("this new line between Birmingham and London", p.638), minor though each may be, do build up a sense that Elizabeth Gaskell had in mind for many details of the topography somewhere other than Cheshire, deeper south, and most likely Warwickshire in the main. But no novel needs be tied to one fixed and unchanging spot.

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LITERARY COURSES

Embassy Hotels run a popular series of Leisure Learning Weekends which include literary themes. Next July, I am conducting a Gaskell weekend with a lively programme of visits. Send for brochure to:

Leisure Learning Weekends Ltd
107 Station Street
Burton upon Trent, Staffs.

JOAN LEACH

FOR YOUR SHELVES

We can supply copies of 'Wives and Daughters' OUP/PB, £3.95;

'William Gaskell, a Portrait' by Barbara Brill, M/C Lit and Phil. £7.95;

Marshall Cavendish, 'Elizabeth Gaskell' (part work magazine and copy of 'Cranford') £3.95.

Also, we have FOR LOAN -

'Cousin Phillis' on tape. £1.00 if posted, 50p otherwise

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REMINDER

If you will not be at the AGM, please renew your subscription - £5.00* - s.a.e. appreciated, to:

Mrs L. Clode
15 Mereheath Park
Knutsford
Cheshire WA16 6AT

*increase to be ratified at the AGM. When we set membership at £4 there was no Journal, and postage costs keep rising

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Material and suggestions for future Newsletters should be sent to the Hon. Secretary, Mrs Joan Leach, Far Yew Tree House, Over Tabley, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 0HN. Tel: 0565 4668

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