

The Hardy Society Journal

Spring 2008

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

The Hardy Society has a new President – subject only to formal ratification at this year's AGM. He is Julian Fellowes, who is probably already known to you in one or more of his diverse professional capacities. He has been an actor for many years, on stage and screen. You may have seen him, for example, in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies*, or on television as Lord Kilwillie in *Monarch of the Glen*. As a writer he published historical fiction under several pseudonyms and adapted *Little Lord Fauntleroy* for TV. In 2000 he received a phone-call out of the blue that was to supercharge his career. It was an invitation from the distinguished director Robert Altman to attempt a film-script about British aristocratic life before the Second World War. The resulting film, *Gosford Park*, was a great international success, and won Julian Fellowes an Oscar for best original screenplay. Since then his writing has flourished, most notably with the novel *Snobs* and the book for the musical *Mary Poppins*, currently playing in the West End. He has also written and directed the film *Separate Lies*. Meanwhile on television, in *A Most Mysterious Murder*, he has dramatised, presented, and boldly offered a verdict on half a dozen succulent unsolved crimes.

What's Hardy to him or he to Hardy? To start with, he's an admirer, who sees Hardy as 'one of the great authors – up there with Dickens and Tolstoy'. He has put down local roots, living at West Stafford House, which Hardy knew and visited, and has already welcomed the New Hardy Players to perform there. More generally he and his wife Emma have immersed themselves, with great zest and affability, in a variety of local activities and good causes, to the extent that they could have a full diary independently of professional engagements.

This very busyness might have been a barrier to his acceptance of the Presidency. His commitments are so numerous and unpredictable that he was concerned that he would find it impossible to guarantee in advance that he could put in an appearance at this or that Society event. The Society Council were touched, not to say impressed, by such unfashionable scrupulosity.

The counter-case we pressed was a particular one: Dorchester is entering a period of major re-development (see below), and it's important for the town as much as for our Society, that Hardy features prominently in the changing scene. Julian Fellowes, as a local resident and a major figure in the arts, with a professional authority in the area of theatre, can be a powerful voice on our behalf. By a pleasant coincidence he also bears a marked physical resemblance to the much-missed Jim Gibson. If a biopic should ever be made...



Julian Fellowes



Dorchester is in process of being transformed – even re-defined. Conferencegoers who haven't seen the town since 2006 will this summer have only to alight from the train to be confronted by evidence of change. The site of the Old Brewery, adjacent to the South Station, has been largely cleared, and is to be subject to major re-building – accommodating some 11 acres of shops, restaurants, apartments and other buildings.

The effect will be to radically develop the central commercial area of the town, extending it all the way to Dorchester South – which is to become the UK's first solar-powered railway station.

For a preliminary idea of what is to happen take a look at http://www.waterhouse.uk.com/brewery_square/index.html The buildings projected include a conference-centre, a 450-seat theatre, a cinema and an outdoor performance space. If the traditions of Dorchester are to be preserved and celebrated Hardy should surely figure prominently in this new annexe to the town. But there is naturally, and

rightly, strong competition between various interest-groups for representation there. We hope to be offering a detailed and updated account of the project in the course of the summer Conference. One of suggestions on the table is that the Hardy statue should be transferred to the new plaza from its present roadside site, where admirers are at grave risk of death by traffic. Should this happen, it is to be hoped that it will not suffer the sort of indignities inflicted upon Sir Nameless.



There's a hidden educational economy in this country involving, for example, evening classes, book-groups, literary societies and local history. It produces, variously as product or by-product, a great deal of valuable grass-roots research. Recently Graham Roberts sent the Society copies of a publication called *Hook Remembered again*. This proved not to be yet more recollections of the late Captain by sentimental shipmates but a beautifully produced and illustrated glossy book about the parish of Hook in Surrey, and in particular about Hook Road. Biography-nerds will immediately recall that this was the road in which Hardy and Emma chose to reside for the first few months of their marriage. The great triumph of the book (published in 2001) was to identify for the first time the exact house in which they lived – and even to come up with a photograph of it, although it was demolished in 1960 and has been replaced by a block of flats. Graham Roberts for some years ran a dental practice in a building opposite the site of the lost house, and reckons that that the 'holm-trees' in 'A Light Snowfall after Frost' were the ones still outside it in his time there. The winter of 1874 was a particularly cold one, and Hardy could have written the poem while looking out from the front room of 13 Hook Road at the holly across the road.

The researchers who tracked down 'St David's Villa', Mark Davison and Colin Prendergast, worked for two years on the case, variously in London, Hastings and Cambridge. In doing so they have provided another small building block for biographers – and indeed Ralph Pite and Claire Tomalin both incorporated the information concerned in their recent studies of Hardy.

Some of the ancillary detail takes on a vivid life of its own. The fellow occupants of the house concerned were a Mr and Mrs Hughes and their young child. Mrs Hughes had been previously married to Joseph Matthews, who ran a chemist's shop in Royston. The shop stayed in the Matthews family, eventually passing to a grandson, Ernest, who 'became an intelligent recluse'. The story of this poor man, known locally as 'Barmy Matthews', could itself be the stuff of a novel – or of a sad Hardy short story:

He failed to stock up the shop and it fell into disuse. Even though customers boycotted it, Ernest went through the motions and opened the doors each day. It is said he did not wash and wore the same clothes for thirty years. His toe nails were so long, they formed a type of cap around his toes. His boots were so worn, there were no soles and his bare feet were in contact with the ground. His old raincoat was tied up with a belt and his long hair

stuck through holes in his hat. In 1943, he was found dead after being struck by a branch while picking apples in his orchards. He had lain on the ground undiscovered for two days.

Hook Remembered again is a mine of information, recollection and anecdote. It was published by the author, Mark Davison, who may be contacted by e-mail at mark.davison1@virgin.net



It was natural that the eightieth anniversary of Hardy's death should prompt tributes. The *Guardian* reprinted an article from 12 January 1928, full of praise for 'one of the most compassionate of all writers.' The same evening that writer's heart was being surgically removed in order to facilitate a double funeral. The cremated body was interred in a service at Westminster Abbey on 16 January, in the presence of most of the country's major writers, from Housman and Kipling to Virginia Woolf and Walter de la Mare. Simultaneously Hardy's heart was being buried in Stinsford churchyard. His friend Edward Clodd found the proceeding 'very repellent'; his brother Henry heartily disapproved of it. His cousin, Teresa, did not go to the Stinsford ceremony: 'I was too upset by the idea of Tom's heart being separated from his body that I think I should have fainted if I had gone to the service.' From this distance in time the arrangement seems so tasteless as to be barely credible - the literary establishment conniving at voodoo.

Curiously, however, there was an oblique precedent in the obsequies of one of Hardy's favourite poets. After Shelley had been drowned at sea off the coast of Italy his body was burned on a funeral pyre in a ceremony attended by his friends Byron, Trelawny and Leigh Hunt. The poet's ashes were later interred in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome. His heart, however, remaining unconsumed, was retrieved by Trelawny, and passed on to Mary Shelley. It was eventually buried with her, in St Peter's churchyard in Bournemouth. There is a further Hardy link. When first working in London he presided over the removal of 'many hundreds of coffins' to make space for a railway cutting. He remarks in the *Life*:

It may conceivably have been some rumour of the possibility of this lamentable upheaval in the near future of Old St Pancras Churchyard by the railway company, which had led Sir Percy, the son of Mary Shelley, to remove the bodies of her parents therefrom to St Peter's, Bournemouth, where she had been buried in 1951, and where they now lie beside her...

MICHAEL IRWIN