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COMMEMORATIVE OCCASIONS IN 2002

By Kathleen Adams

The George Eliot Memorial Garden in Nuneaton reached its half century in May 2002. In 1930 several literary men, amongst them George Bernard Shaw, were asked if Nuneaton should erect a memorial to George Eliot. Most of them expressed astonishment that one was not already in existence. They may have been even more amazed to discover that it would be another twenty-two years before one appeared, for it was not until 1952 that the George Eliot Memorial Garden was established.

The Newdegate family at Arbury Hall was one step ahead of Nuneaton as an obelisk had already been erected by Sir Francis Newdegate near to George Eliot's birthplace at South Farm on the Arbury estate. The family kindly gave the obelisk to stand in the new garden in 1952 as a permanent memorial.

The first plans for the garden were discussed in 1947 when a compulsory purchase order was issued to buy land in Church Street upon which 'Dempster House' ('Janet's Repentance') had stood until it was destroyed in an air raid on 17 May 1941. These negotiations clearly took time for it was not until the beginning of 1951 that an appeal for funds was made by the Mayor, Alderman W. R. Chamberlain and the Fellowship's President, The Hon. Mrs L. C. S. FitzRoy Newdegate. The total cost was expected to be about £8,000 and the Borough Council had already made what was described as a 'handsome contribution'. Members of the small George Eliot Fellowship contributed almost £600, this having a much higher value than present day inflated figures.

A competition was opened to members of the Institute of Landscape Architects and was won by Miss Mary Braendle, a joint designer with Mr Ronald Sims.

The appeal was very successful with donations coming from far afield by George Eliot admirers. The Government of Israel gave three almond trees from Jerusalem and these were planted near to the riverside. Altogether about 200 trees and shrubs were planted, many having been given by local associations and individuals.

Although the garden had originally been intended as part of the 1951 Festival of Britain events in Nuneaton, it was not until 1 May 1952 that the opening took place. The Mayor, Alderman W. S. Johnson officially opened the Garden and said that for the first time there was a memorial to George Eliot. He did not add that, for all of those twenty years, the George Eliot Fellowship, founded in 1930, had been pressing for some sort of a memorial to the lady who had been born in the vicinity of Nuneaton 133 years earlier. It had taken a very long time for something tangible to be done but at last the Garden was in existence and the memorial obelisk in place.

In the Millennium year the Fellowship paid for new paving to replace the old around the obelisk and every year in June holds a wreath-laying there with schools, churches and other organizations with a George Eliot connection as well as with the Mayor laying a wreath on behalf of the Borough. It was hoped that there might have been many other events taking place



Kathleen Adams at the Caroline Bray Memorial,
Greyfriars Green, Coventry (July 2002)

to mark the 50th anniversary of the Garden but the Borough Council's plans fell by the wayside and only the Fellowship organized anything to celebrate. This we did in the presence of our President, Jonathan Ouvry, the Mayor of Nuneaton and Bedworth and Lord and Lady Daventry to represent the obelisk's original home at Arbury. Fifty years later the original enthusiastic participants were remembered with gratitude for their efforts. During those fifty years there have been and will be many changes to the Garden but the obelisk still stands, now a little worn and with an occasional crack but it is a constant reminder to passers-by of the importance of George Eliot in the literary world as well as in her native Nuneaton.

The other commemorative event also took place in a garden – this time in Coventry's Greyfriars Green, and instead of an obelisk we had a horse trough! The trough was erected early last century as a memorial to George Eliot's beloved Coventry friend, Caroline Bray. Cara, as she was affectionately known, had a deep concern for the welfare of animals and wrote a book for children in which she encouraged kindness to animals. She formed the Coventry Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and was its secretary until she was 80 years of age. The society eventually became the Coventry branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals – the RSPCA.

The horse trough with its memorial tablet was erected in Queen's Road, very close to George Eliot's Coventry school and was probably well used. However, when horses disappeared from Coventry's streets and that part of Queen's Road was to become a section of the city's new ring road, the trough and the memorial tablet were separated; the trough went to the War Memorial Park and the memorial tablet was set in the wall of the RSPCA's premises in one of the city's suburbs. In later years the RSPCA moved their premises to the outskirts of the city but the plaque remained in its old setting. The Fellowship felt that the memorial to Cara Bray was going to be completely forgotten and might even be destroyed so we asked the RSPCA if we might arrange its removal until a suitable place might be found for it. With their agreement the tablet was removed and taken for temporary safe keeping to London Road Cemetery where Cara, her husband Charles, her sister Sara Hennell and their adopted daughter Nelly are buried. There it lay for some years while the fellowship kept reminding Coventry City Council that something should be done with it. Eventually, with help from the City Council and Coventry and Warwickshire Promotions a new home was planned. The horse trough was located and dug out in the Park, the tablet was collected from the cemetery and the two were reunited in Greyfriars Green, again close to George Eliot's school. In July 2002 there was an 'unveiling' by Coventry City Councillor Anne Lucas, and I gave a short address about Cara's life and her friendship with George Eliot. This friendship is recorded on a plaque and the trough is filled with flowers. Cara will never be forgotten by those who love George Eliot but it is very satisfying that a memorial to her should have been restored after so many neglected years.