

## SHANKLIN VILLA AND ITS PEOPLE

Cyril Wright, 1987

A house gains personality and interest from these who have lived in it. Richard Jefferies, writer on nature and rural life, novelist and mystic, who died, a hundred years ago in 1887, lived or stayed from time to time, in this house, with members of a remarkable and famous family - the Harrilds of Sydenham. Through an amazingly close inter-relationship of several families associated with printing, publishing, and book-binding, Richard Jefferies was drawn into the book trade as irresistibly as the fields and woods around his birthplace in Wiltshire had made him a nature-writer.

Shanklin Villa, a handsome, commanding, but not pretentious house at 20 Sydenham Park Road, was for him the hub of that influential circle. Here he spent most of his early childhood, a grateful exile from the farm-house at Coate, near Swindon, where he was born in 1848. The reasons for his feelings will soon be made clear.

The occupants of Shanklin Villa were Thomas Harrild and his wife, Ellen. The house was one of several properties built in that developing area to the south-east of London, by Thomas's father, Robert Harrild, senior, founder of the highly successful business of Harrild and Sons. They were manufacturers of printers' joinery and presses; and book-binders equipment, with a worldwide connection. The house was on leasehold land, and as we shall see later, this was to have unfortunate consequences.

Ellen was the sixth child of Charles and Elizabeth Gyde.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, it was Fleet Street that brought Thomas and Ellen together, for he had his own business of chromo-lithographer, first in Dudley Court, Wood Street, Cheapside, and later in Shoe Lane. Ellen's father was Manager for Richard Taylor, printer of Red Lion Court, who later combined with Dr. William Francis, in the firm of Taylor & Francis, which still flourishes.

The Gydes lived at Clerkenwell, and most of the children were baptised in St. James's Church. Thomas and Ellen, first settled at Albany Cottage, Dartmouth Road, Sydenham, and later they moved to the more imposing Shanklin Villa, not far away. Meanwhile, some problems were brewing in the family of Ellen's eldest sister, Elizabeth, known familiarly as Betsy, who in 1844 had married at Holy Trinity Church, Islington, James Lockett Jefferies, an associate of her father. James was born in 1816 at Somers Town, not far removed from Clerkenwell, but he came from an old Wiltshire family, whose roots were deep in farming, baking and milling. Soon after their marriage, circumstances made it essential for James to take his pretty, pleasure-loving, but unpractical little wife to Coate, to become the mistress of a very small farm, which, he had inherited from his father, on crippling terms.

Even had tragedy not visited that remote household so quickly, it is doubtful if Betsy would have coped successfully with the demanding job of a farmer's wife. In the seventh year of their marriage, the first-born Ellen, named after her aunt, was knocked down by a runaway horse as she returned along the main road from a visit to her grandfather at the Bakery in Swindon. She was carried home by the maid and died in her mother's arms. At that time the only other child, Richard, was 2½ years old. Betsy

found the situation too much to handle, and Aunt Ellen came to her aid, as she was to do on several subsequent occasions.

Without children, Thomas and Ellen welcomed to Shanklin Villa, or perhaps in the first place to Albany Cottage, the little lad who was to become famous. There he stayed for about five years, going home for the summer holidays. Richard's aunt and uncle made themselves responsible for their nephew's education at a local preparatory school kept by a lady. They took him on trips to London, where he became familiar with his Uncle's printing works, and with Taylor's press in the 17th. century premises, 7a Red Lion Court, off Fleet Street.<sup>2</sup> Also he would have met another uncle, Fred Gyde, who lived at Clifford's Inn. Fred Gyde was a clever artist and engraver, a much-travelled man, generous though dissipated. Richard must have marvelled at the coloured relief on the wall at Red Lion Court, of a greek lamp being re-filled with oil, and the inscription ALERE FLAMMAM - Feed the Flame (or learning). He was to use this motto in *Amaryllis at the Fair*, to name the character based on Fred Gyde.

Another favourite venue to which Richard accompanied his aunt and uncle, was Exeter Hall, in the Strand, famous for mass assemblies on religious and philosophical subjects. Richard's reactions, though obedient enough as a child, were sceptical as he drew away from, organised religion.

Aunt Ellen was described by her niece, Christine Billing, as a sober lady and a *very* diligent one; she left behind many handmade shawl as evidence of this. In the Richard Jefferies Museum at Coate is a sampler that she completed at the age of 8, no mean accomplishment. But she had a rather surprising side to her nature. In spite of being in her niece's words, "a conventional, Victorian lady, shocked by anything unorthodox," Christine goes on to say, "yet she showed amazing understanding of young Richard, encouraged his ambitions, and urged him on when the rest of the family would have kept him back. This refers to the continuing associations between Richard and his beloved aunt, throughout his youth and early manhood.

In his apprentice fiction, particularly, Richard himself was far from, orthodox, yet he dedicated his first novel *The Scarlet Shawl* to "ELLEN HARRILD, as an acknowledgement of my early training, and of my esteem former generous disposition." A photograph of her, taken in 1868, at the age of 43, shows her calm, open and sympathetic face, with dark hair in little coils over her forehead, held by a lace fichu. Thomas, on the other hand, has the dark cravat and stiff, white shirt-front that one would link with an earlier period. With his long face and nose, and receding hair, he looks the successful and dignified Victorian gentleman.<sup>1</sup> He left Ellen a widow in 1867 and was buried at St. Bartholomew's, Westwood Hill, Sydenham, in the family tomb, where his father and mother also rest. It had been Uncle Thomas who introduced Richard to the intricacies of the printing business, and no doubt his contacts with publishers, helped his young nephew in his early endeavours. There were however, times when uncle and nephew did not see eye to eye, and this troubled the young man, after his uncle died.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is no known photograph of Thomas Harrild. The description relates to his father Robert Harrild.

The Harrilds were well-to-do, and were generous, not only with books, but with gifts of money. Whether Richard always used such presents to the best advantage is uncertain. After writing to his aunt - "You need not be under the slightest apprehension regarding my spending the money, I know its value far too well for that, even if there were no other consideration," he set off in November 1864, at the age of 16, with his elder cousin, James Cox, on an abortive expedition to Europe, with Moscow as a possible objective. But such experiences proved important to a budding author.

There is a curious story which emerges from Richard's correspondence with the Harrilds, concerning an electrical machine - shades of William Cowper and John Wesley<sup>3</sup> - with which Uncle Thomas "gave himself such a shock that he actually jumped off the ground." Richard refused the offer of this apparatus, but accepted it after his Uncle's death. "I shall carefully preserve it in remembrance of him," he wrote, "and I only wish he could be with you now to read this note, and smile at my cowardice. For I was a coward in days gone by, especially of thunder." One wonders what came of this machine.

Another family enters into the chronicle in the shape of the Baxters of Lewes. John Baxter was a versatile and inventive printer, famous for the two-volume Baxter Bible and such books as Lambert's Cricketers' Guide. Wynne Baxter became Mayor of Lewes. Among the most celebrated in the family was George Baxter, 1804-1867, pioneer colour-printer and engraver, whose pictorial Guide to the Great Exhibition of 1851, in the Crystal Palace, won him considerable publicity. The connection with Sydenham is that he married Thomas Harrild's sister, Mary in 1827, and they lived at "The Retreat," Sydenham, a bungalow of unusual design, which was demolished in 1904. George and Thomas collaborated in the relatively new art of colour-printing.<sup>4</sup>

When a young man, Richard recalled his childhood visits to Sussex - "running about the Lewes downs with the young Baxters and pelting each other with pieces of putty blown down tin tubes." Later he was indebted to Wynne for certificates of identity, which enabled him to travel to Brussels.<sup>5</sup> It was during those early days at Sydenham that the Crystal Palace was removed from Hyde Park and re-erected in a commanding position so near to Shanklin Villa that a glimpse of it could be seen from the garden. For Richard this magnificent structure, to which he must often have been taken, had fond memories.

His younger sister, Sarah, to whom he was much attached, herself a clever artist, and a lovely personality, also enjoyed the hospitality of Aunt Ellen, living with her as a companion. Richard often sent his endearments to her when writing to his aunt. It was at Sydenham that Sarah married Robert Billing of Guildford. He was the son of Joseph Billing, whose first wife, also called Sarah, was Thomas Harrild's sister. Joseph was the nephew of Edward who had been Robert Harrild's partner at the Bluecoat-Boy Printing Office in Bermondsey as early as 1801. One can see how closely these families were associated and related. Sarah Billing died after a series of heart attacks in 1913; her husband lived into his 93rd year.

A near neighbour of the Harrilds, Mrs. Ada Bessemere, the daughter of a City linen-merchant, lived only a field away from Shanklin Villa, a

description which suggests a still, partly rural aspect at that time. She took a kindly and abiding interest in Richard's literary efforts, and her name appears in his letters as one whose opinion he valued. He wrote to his aunt on Good Friday 1868: "The last Mrs. Bessemere read of mine was written at the beginning in a hand a child could read, and at the end I couldn't read it myself." He promised later to send her a copy of his novel "Fortune," but it was never published. Younger than Ellen, she was still living in 1910.

Aunt Ellen's concern for her sister's relations seems to have known no limits. She arranged for the education at Dulwich College both of Richard's younger brother Charles, and of his son, Richard Harold. Before he went to sea, Harold worked for his Uncle Robert at Guildford. The name "Billing & Sons," will be found at the end of several books by or about Jefferies and his family, including *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* by Walter Besant, and "The Jefferies Family Tree: 1686 - 1925," published privately by Fanny Hall and Florence Bott, Richard's first cousins.

Christine and Helen were the daughters of Robert and Sarah Billing. Christine remembered of Shanklin Villa - "In the front garden were two Monkey Puzzles, one on each side of the door - tall and symmetrical and excitingly prickly to young fingers, and in the back garden was a fountain with goldfish and a croquet lawn and a tall pine-tree and a walnut tree and a distant peep of the Crystal Palace." The monkey puzzles have gone, but the pine-tree in the large rear garden remains and is the subject of a preservation order.

During his struggles to establish himself as a writer, Richard continued to visit Shanklin Villa. He was there in 1876, no doubt using it as a base to get to London, and to search for a new home. This he found in Surbiton about ten miles away, and he and his wife and small son, moved there from Swindon early in the following year.

His attitudes towards the highly respectable folk of Sydenham appear rather ungracious at times. He was not inclined to conventional dress, and perhaps was called to task by his aunt, to whom he wrote in 1867; "I hope to see Sydenham soon. I will be as smart as possible - I only hope my idea of smartness will agree with those of the Sydenham people." Richard was then 19. Later, when he was at Eltham, 1884-1855, he confided to his diary some rather scathing comments; "Sydenham Morals. The Stuffing Institution. Where they can cure the brain with beef, iron spoon, chaw, chaw, chaw." In another entry, he thought that the Sydenham creed was to produce the villa man. It is ironical that in his frequent movements from, place to place, Jefferies had often to resort to a villa for accommodation. He seems to have made the best of this, but we know that the world of nature was his true home.

Ellen Harrild outlived her husband by 44 years, and died in 1911, at the age of 86. In her later years she was less comfortable financially losing her income from property built on leasehold land. It is probable that she left the Sydenham area, as her burial is not recorded there.

The story of Richard Jefferies might have been very different had not his kind aunt, Ellen Harrild of Shanklin Villa come to his mother's rescue at a time of great distress, and helped to keep the family together for so many years.

## NOTES

1 Gyde. There seem to be some differences as to pronunciation, but in the Painswick area of Gloucestershire, from, which the family stems, they say Jide.

2 Crane Court and Red Lion Court are narrow lanes off Fleet Street, just beyond Fetter Lane.

3 The poet William Cowper (1731-1800) experimented with an electrical machine, which may be seen in the Cowper Museum at Olney, Bucks. John Wesley (1703 -1791) also used one.

4 Among examples of the work of Thomas Harrild in the possession of the Jefferies family, is a handsome Invitation Card to view the Funeral procession of the late Duke of Wellington, November 1852, numbered 16, and bearing the name of Mrs. Thomas Harrild. It was printed at Silver Street, Falcon Square. Also his professional card at 4a Shoe Lane. A more substantial item is a handsome slim volume of 1840, "The Resolutions of Mary Christian upon the day of her marriage," printed in attractive colours. A trade card printed at Silver Street with the arms of the City of London is in the John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

5 Letters from Richard Jefferies to his aunt June 21st. 1868, and September 7th. 1870 (British Library.)

## REFERENCES

- THE HOUSE OF HARRILD S. Liveing 1949 Illus.
- 1801 - 1948
- GEORGE BAXTER COLOUR PRINTER *His Life and Work*. C.T.Courtney Lewis, Sampson Low Marston and Company Ltd., London 1908 Illus.
- RICHARD JEFFERIES MAN OF THE FIELDS. S.J. Looker and Crichton Porteous, John Baker 1964.
- THE NOTEBOOKS OF RICHARD JEFFERISS Ed. Samuel J. Looker-The Grey Walls Press. 1948
- THE JEFFERIES FAMILY TREE 1686 - 1925 Fanny C- Hall and Florence S. Bott.
- "The Gydes, the Jefferies and the Harrilds." Audrey Smith. Unpub. MS. A well-researched narrative by a member of The Richard Jefferies Society.
- MS of an Address by Christine Billing June 24th 1960 intended to be read in the Richard Jefferies Museum at Coate, Swindon. Swindon Reference Library.