

# The John Harris Society

Newsletter No41

Spring 2011



Reverie  
By  
John Harris

*Thought now is like a bark,  
Toss'd where the waves are dark,  
Drifting bewilderd on some nameless clime:  
And so I turn my skiff,  
And clear this dangerous cliff,  
Anchor in the peaceful port of rhyme.*

*Here soothing sounds delight,  
And on my gladden'd sight  
Stretch emerald landscapes, sweetly summer'd o'er:  
Castle, and old grey tower,  
Rude ivy-mantled bower,  
And harpers, rush-screen'd, trilling on the moor.*

*No hours so sweet to me,  
With harp upon my knee,  
On some smooth moss-bank, circled round with  
fays:  
Or be it wild with broom,  
Or still with solemn gloom,  
'T is ever sunshine, where I chant my lays.*

*If from my lattice low,  
As evenings come and go,  
The mountain tops and purple clouds I see;  
Or hear the shepherd's strain,  
The wind, or gentle rain,  
I'm not alone— this is enough for me!*

*Through the hot dust of strife,  
On the broad road of life,  
The rhyme-paths of my youth my dim eyes fill:  
When morn, and noon, and night,  
Deep vale, and dizzy height,  
Wore robes song-cover'd, as they ever will.*

*O, bliss! To turn my feet  
To some old cave's retreat,  
Far from the tumult of the torturing crowd;  
Where nothing meets the eye,  
But sea, and earth, and sky,  
And Cynthia riding o'er a snow white cloud*

*Continued over.....*

*To hear the tinkling rills,  
To mark the fading hills,  
To watch the light wane from the marshy moor;  
To catch the labourer's song,  
As home he hies along,  
To kiss his children, watching by his door.*

*Perchance, some old weird mill,  
With buckets bulged and still,  
May on the common, like a Druid, stand:*

*Whose shadow in the lake  
Shall sweet psalm-dreams awake,  
Leading the muser into fairy land.*

*O, may this joy be mine,  
Even till life's decline,  
At dusk of day to watch the dwindling spire!  
So, take the crowd for me;  
I am content to be  
Alone with Nature, and her mighty Sire!*

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### CHAIRMAN'S RAMBLINGS

Having been elected as Chairman of the Society at February's AGM, I am feeling very remiss as I failed to immediately make special mention of three office holders who have done sterling work for the Society, so I now want to put that right. Eve Parsons had been chairman for a number of years, during a period when there had not been a Secretary and this obviously meant more tasks falling on her. She coped well with these extra duties with help from Eric, our Press & Publicity Officer, and Elisabeth, our Treasurer. Joan Biscoe fulfilled the role of Vice-Chairman and had been a real support to Eve. I must record a very sincere 'Thank you' to all three and trust I will be forgiven for my error. Eve now serves as Vice-Chairman and Elisabeth continues as Treasurer.

Well, who is this new Chairman? The youngest of six children raised by Christian parents, I committed my life to Christ when I was 10 years old. I am a Methodist Local Preacher, a member of Lanner Methodist Church and, over the years, have held most offices open to a layman. As well as Church offices and being a member of the John Harris Society, I am an official speaker in Cornwall for the Bible Society, a trustee of Cory Environmental Trust in Carrick & Kerrier, and I sing bass with Cantabile Choir. I am blest with a wonderful wife, two lovely children, a son-in-law, a daughter-in-law and three grand-daughters! Life is good!

So, back to Society matters. As a relative of John Harris (my Granny Langford was the Poet's niece), it is a great honour to chair the Society. I am often humbled as I look at my own life and reflect on what my ancestors achieved in very primitive, difficult circumstances, when they had to walk everywhere and communication was so non-existent compared with today. With my cousin, Tony, elected as Secretary, I look forward to serving the Society to the best of my ability and would thank you all for your support.

*Paul Langford*

## Peeps At A Poet – by David Everett.

In an autobiographical piece, John Harris gives us some “Peeps at a Poet” (1) or “Lines in my own Life.” He mentions that “a few books are piled up in a corner on some narrow shelves, and three of the most conspicuous are Walker’s Dictionary, sweet Burns, and the immortal Shakespeare. We must not omit his Bible....” (2)

Burns (1759–1796) we know about. Harris was later to write two poems about Burns. (3) Shakespeare we know about. Harris was later to win the Shakespeare Tercentenary Prize. (4) But there are three other poets who are quoted in in “Peeps at a Poet”: Keble, Capern, and Pollock.

The piece begins with a quote from Keble (1792—1866). He was one of the initiators of the Oxford Movement. An Oxford College is named after him and his most famous work was “The Christian Year.” (1827) His hymns are sung regularly in churches, such as New every morning is the love. Blest are the pure in heart (verses 1 & 2 Capern is mentioned in one of Harris’ poems, “Song for a little Boy.” (5)

*Once Capern came here with a soul full of joy,  
And talk’d the moor high in the home of this boy;  
He cheerfully chanted the lays of this land,  
And made a great speech where the Nine Maidens stand;  
He shouted “Farewell,” as the brook he stepped o’er,  
Still bursting with song, and we saw no more.*

He was therefore a contemporary of Harris, and was a postman from Devon.

Pollock, (1799—1827) lived a short life and was obviously dead when Harris wrote his poems. Like Burns, he was Scottish and the son of a farmer. He was educated at Glasgow University and became a minister of the United Secession Church. His most famous poem was “The Course of Time” (1827), a didactic poem in Ten books. (5a)

There is one poet who is not mentioned in “Peeps at a Poet,” but received a long essay in “Luda: a Lay of the Druids” (1868), Robert Bloomfield (6). He was born in Honington, Suffolk 1766 and died in 1823 in Bedfordshire. His most famous work was “The Farmers Boy.” His father was a farmer and Bloomfield was brought up on a farm, although he was himself a shoemaker.

“The Farmers Boy” was written in 1800. This was followed by “Rural Tales” (1802) and by “Good Tidings (1804), and by “Wild Flowers (1806). This was followed by “The Banks of Wye” in (1811), which calls to mind Harris’ poem, “The Winding Wye.” (7)

On the way back to Cornwall from Coventry, Harris visited not only the River Wye but also Bristol. He wrote a poem, “The Monument of Chatterton” (1752—1770). He died at a young age by committing suicide, no doubt because his poems were believed to be forgeries, having bogus antiquity. Harris seems to be unaware of this, and the matter was settled after John Harris had written his poem. This must be the only itinerary guided by places of poetical significance.

John Harris stood in a long line of working class poets – shoe makers, postmen, farmers. He was aware of his predecessors.

In a later “Items not found in Peeps at a Poet” (8), he starts with a quote from Wordsworth, then mentions Burns. “Though it was somewhat difficult to understand its meaning

in the Scotch dialect, yet, by repeatedly perusing it, I was enabled to do so, which filled me with much delight.” He then mentions Bloomfield. This started him on composing his own rhymes, which he read to his friends. He later put them on to the fire.

This piece closes with a short quote from Wordsworth, and a longer quote from Milton. These extremes – the rhymes of a poet of the earth (or in Harris’ case, under the earth) and the compositions of largely Oxbridge educated poets (Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson) lie at the heart of Harris’ poems. This tension will never be resolved, though I think Harris will always be a Cornish poet, and prophet.

David Everett. 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011

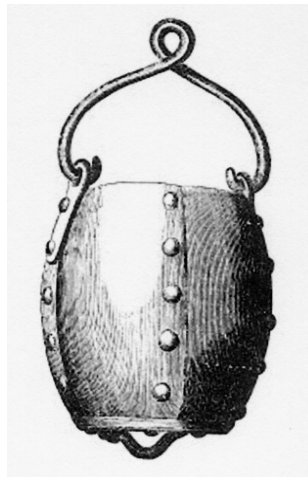
References:-

- 1 “A story of Carn Brea” p 3 – 15
- 2 *ibid.* p 11
- 3 “Linto and Laneer” (1881)  
“Robert Burns” p 132-134  
“The Ayrshire Ploughman” p 145-146
- 4 “Shakespeare’s Shrine (1866) p 131-135
- 5 *ibid.* p 78+
- 5a see Everyman’s Encyclopaedia. Vol 10 1958 edition
- 6 see “Robert Bloomfield – selected poems,” 1998, Nottingham Trent University,  
Edited by John Goodridge and John Lucas.
- 7 Shakespeare’s Shrine (1866) p 156+
- 8 *Ibid.* p 3-7

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A request from Diane Hodnett.

Wanted for the copper mine museum in Allihies, West Cork: a SMALL kibble. (Mine bucket). I will be in Cornwall in June, and can collect. Thank you. Diane Hodnett. (Replies to Eric Parsons, in the first instance, please).



## Cornish Village, Western Ireland

*As our car clung to the coast road  
Curving along the edge of the high hinterland,  
Twentieth century technology,  
The smooth change of gears,  
Had not prepared us for this.*

*A narrow pass, and suddenly  
High above the landscape  
Tufted with thrift  
Tough heath and pallid trefoil,  
A mine stack, huge, irrevocably Cornish,  
Solid, reassuring, proud,  
A king of Mines, dominating  
The Irish cliffland.*

*A map gave the name, ALLIHIES.  
A name for all the world  
Like some Swiss yodeller's call  
Across the mountains –  
The puzzlement remained.*

*Later, wandering among the shafts  
Alone with sheep and black curling birds,  
(Choughs, ravens, the souls of long-dead  
miners?  
Nothing seemed too fanciful here)  
I traced the deep chasms, dark, mysterious,  
Huge, like the minestack –  
Giants stalked the hillside.*

*And yet, the pattern was familiar.  
Copper-coloured quartz and sandstone,  
Gigantic piles of waste  
Tumbling towards the sea-cliffs;  
Colossal adits of dark, still water  
Reflecting only the grey-white of the sky  
And the mine-building, a shelter for sheep.*

*Here, more personal memorials –  
Metal stanchions, handholds for miners  
From St. Day or Camborne perhaps,  
A ruined shed, roofless, deserted,  
And one red fuchsia bush  
Which could have grown  
In some far Cornish garden.  
Lifting my eyes to distant horizons  
I saw stacks on the following hills  
Dear, familiar, lonely,  
Cousin Jack had conquered the landscape.*

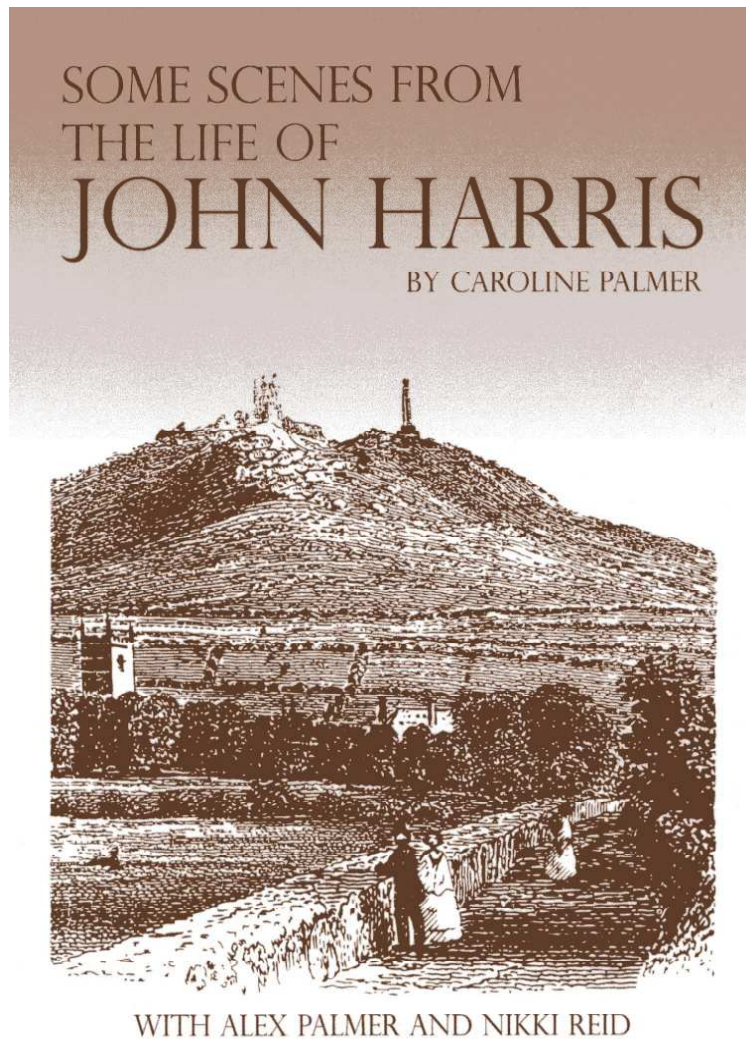
*In the fold of the hills  
A sheltered stretch of succulent grass,  
Perfect haven for its dwellers –  
Lay further crumbling ruins,  
Old cottages, squat and permanent;  
But time had played false  
And they lay empty-socketted,  
Blind to the sky.*

*No-one remains. The sheep, rabbits,  
Birds are outside history,  
But a rusting miner's barrow  
Stands waiting for the workers to return.  
The drooping fuchsia petals fall  
Bleeding to the Irish ground  
For Cornish miners  
Who stamped their presence here.  
Empty and forlorn, this Irish place  
Remains yet peopled  
By the ghosts of Cornishmen.*

By Ann Trevenen Jenkin.

The DVD of 'Some Scenes From The Life of John Harris,' the 10 minute docudrama written and produced by Caroline Palmer, can be obtained for the price of £4 plus £1 p and p.

Including some of John's poems set to music and sung by Sue Farmer, this film resulted from the coming together of local writers and film makers, members of Bodmin Stagecoach, and the John Harris Society, and the filming and editing work was performed by postgraduate students from the Media Department at University College Falmouth.



If you would like a copy of this DVD, contact Caroline on 01209 890102 or [tregoyne@hotmail.com](mailto:tregoyne@hotmail.com)

More extracts from the West Briton---Life in Cornwall in the early nineteenth century.

### PHILLACK WOOL FAIR

An annual show fair for wool, as well as cattle of all sorts, will be held at Phillack Church-town, on the 30th of June. A considerable quantity of wool, grown on the Phillack and Gwithian Sands, which has long been esteemed some of the finest in the West of England, will be exhibited at the ensuing fair, which will render it well worth the attention of wool traders in general.

13 May 1814

[The north coast towans or sand-hills supported a singular breed of sheep, compact and small, which produced unusually fine wool and flavoursome meat. The latter was attributed to the numerous snails on the towan grass, the sheep apparently relishing the one as much as the other.]

### CONTRACT FOR CONVEYING PRISONERS

To the worshipful magistrates of the county of Cornwall. The present contract for conveying prisoners from Truro to Bodmin, being nearly expired, I beg to submit to your consideration the terms on which I am ready to contract with your worships, for conveying prisoners (from Truro to Bodmin) for any period of time you may think proper, viz. For conveying one prisoner only, £1.0.0.; for two ditto £1.7.0; for three ditto £1.14.0. And so on in proportion for any greater number. Should your worships approve of the above terms, I am prepared with security for my performance of the contract, I am, gentlemen, your obedient humble servant, Edward Parker Payer.

13 October 1820

[Prisoners from areas west of Truro were conveyed to Redruth, Camborne or Helston and thence into Payer's hands. It was not unknown for those convicted to be allowed to escape, so that there was a chance of charging for their conveyance a second time.]

### EXPLORING GREAT SEAL HOLE

Perhaps it is not generally known, even to our Cornish readers, that one of the sublimest scenes in the county, is the cavern from which the adventurers of Great Seal Hole mine, in the parish of St. Agnes, commenced their adit . . . This cavern which runs inland from the base of the cliff, upwards of 50 fathoms, was first explored, about 50 years ago, by the late Captain Thomas Stephens, father of the present Capt. Thomas Stephens, who nearly forfeiting his life for the indulgence of his curiosity. It appears that on a calm day, at low water, he managed, by the assistance of two able miners, to land from a boat at the mouth of the cave, and leaving them on the outside, proceeded to explore the interior. Having inadvertently remained until the sea had risen above the top of the entrance, all hope of escape appeared to be precluded, when one of the men who waited for him, heroically ventured his life for the chance of rescuing the captain from his fearful situation. Taking a rope in his hand, he dived through the aperture, which is very small, and found Captain Stephens on his knees on the highest rock he could discover, calmly awaiting his fate. The miner succeeded in fastening the rope around the captain, and making his way through the waves which were roaring over the entrance, he and his companion succeeded in getting him in safety into the boat.

23 May 1823

Continuing extracts from a dissertation on John Harris by Jacqueline Anne Harding:-

Failure is caused by the system not the labourer but Harris' focus is on the effect on the individual rather than the development of a critique of class structure. Although the story speaks for itself,

He was a tributer; a man who worked  
on speculation, digging through the ground  
In search of ore, the sweetener of his toil.  
If found, he flourished, if not found, he fell;  
Nor fell alone, fell wife and family.  
(*Songs from the Earth*, 20)

enjambement emphasizes the urgency and desperation experienced by the miner. Fricative alliteration adds to our understanding of his frustration and repetition highlights the futility of his situation.

Harris records the harsh realities of Cornish mining, 'miners' wages were inadequate, injury and death a constant threat. He records the stark reality of child labour and physical hardship. In *A Story of Carn Brea* Harris introduces a narrative about a blind former miner who eked out a living as an itinerant minstrel, accompanied by his six-year old daughter. He dramatizes the explosion which maimed him and employs powerful imagery to describe his injuries;

Alas! Alas!  
When beating down the second floor, a spark  
Ignited the closed charge, and off it crash'd  
Like a great peal of thunder, dashing him  
Back several fathoms; and when consciousness  
Came, like a stranger, wondering at the change,  
His eyesight had departed, and his limbs  
Hung like blasted branches of the beech,  
Licked with vivid lightening  
(*Carn Brea*, 61)

The personification of the injured man's own 'consciousness' as a 'stranger' powerfully conveys his sense of disorientation and dislocation. This section builds on the earlier powerfully evocative, almost gothic, description of the injured man;

One hand was splinter'd half the fingers gone,  
And the dried wrist, all blackened with the blast,  
Seem'd like a moving cinder of charr'd wood,  
Guiding the bow across warbling strings.

His suffering is dismissed in two lines, however, which reinforces Cornish stereotypes of strength of character and pragmatism and reflects the resignation and acceptance fostered by Cornish Methodism;

And yet he sang and played so pleasantly,  
As if he were the happiest man alive.

In the first half of the nineteenth century regular food shortages caused by poor harvests and economic depression meant that 'miners were living on the verge of famine'. Harris personifies 'Hunger', 'Death', 'Horror' and 'Desolation' as 'stalking' the mining community. He describes hungry children; 'The stamp of famine is on their face' and 'untold gnawings shake through all their frame', and evokes the horror of starvation in a terrible image, 'creeping down to death with feet of bone'.

Harris introduces a vivid cast of characters into the narrative who bring to life the ravages in Cornwall wreaked by all aspects of social injustice and economic deprivation; a 'shipwreck'd sailor', a 'limb-lopp'd soldier', a 'friendless orphan on a winter's night, Blue with the blast, and crying with the cold', 'the hungry man, in valleys not his own', 'A starving labourer', 'unsuccessful striving fisherman', 'failing farmer', 'heart-crush'd struggler', 'weeping widow', 'drunkard', and 'poor corn-gleaner'.

The bailiff 'rudely' enters a cottage and takes an inventory of the few belongings he finds; 'And now his goods were all distraint'd for rent / which would be sold at once'. A desolate young man grieves for his dead love. A 'fallen woman' is left to 'writhe alone'. The suffering cannot be ignored.

The accumulation of horror culminates in a gothic image of fate, witnessed by his family, of a drowned man's corpse;

Then from the highest, furthest, fullest crag,  
A huge sea-bird dropp'd on the floating corpse,  
And with rapacious beak began to pick  
His stiffening scalp.

The symbols of light at the end of *A Story of Carn Brea*, 'A little glow-worm shining in a rift' and 'a meteor, like a stream / of purest silver' counter these images of misery and suffering and confirm Harris' 'vision of ultimate harmony'. Harris' Methodist faith underlies the sense of ungrudging acceptance in the poem.

In *A Story of Carn Brea*, there is, alongside the Christian message of hope and redemption, a sense of quiet heroism. The dignified domestic and familial lives which provide the characters with the strength to endure contribute to the construction of Cornish identity. The notion of independence, resourcefulness and diligence is introduced; Harris-the-narrator is prompted by two men 'cutting granite block to build a cottage of their own' to remember when he did the same.

To be continued in next issue.

This Newsletter is published quarterly by the John Harris Society, free to members.

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The editor wishes to thank those who have contributed to our newsletters in the past and welcomes more articles from you, our readers, for possible inclusion in future editions. Anything remotely connected with Cornwall, John Harris, poetry, including other poets and Cornish life please.

### **John Harris (1820-1884)**

John Harris was born in 1820 at Six Chimneys on Bolenowe Carn, near Camborne, the eldest of eleven children.

Largely self-educated - he started school when he was six or seven years old before finishing at the age of nine - John had an insatiable appetite for reading from his early years. On his ninth birthday he started work, briefly as a ploughboy, then for a tin-streamer, or—tinner operating in Forest Moor. When he was thirteen, John went to work underground at Dolcoath. He was to ply this arduous occupation for twenty-four years, seeing the famous mine pass from copper to tin.

Poetry, or verse-making as he called it, had been part of John's life since his first attempts at rhyme in school when he was just eight years old. Whatever he was doing, verses were forming in his mind and he scribbled these down whenever and wherever and on whatever he could. He used the clean side of cast-off labelled tea wrappers, and when no paper was available would scratch his poems on slate, using a sharp pointed nail. In his mining days his miner's 'hard' hat was sometimes used for this purpose. When no ink was available, he used blackberry juice. He fitted his writing into a busy life that, apart from his work and his family responsibilities, included being a Methodist lay preacher and a Sunday School teacher.

John Harris left Dolcoath in 1857 to take up an appointment as a Scripture Reader at Falmouth, a post which he threw himself into with enthusiasm. He continued writing poetry, and began writing peace tracts and became a Quaker.

John Harris died in 1884 and lies buried in Treslothan Churchyard.

Tony Langford 2008