GEORGE ELIOT'S COVENTRY

Alice Lynes

Cover Illustration : View of Coventry from the south west, from a print c.1847 ; the first house on the left is Nantglyn.

Portrait of Mary Ann Evans by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery ; map and other illustrations by courtesy of Coventry City Libraries.

Coventry & North Warwickshire History Pamphlets : No. 6

GEORGE ELIOT'S COVENTRY

a
provincial town
in the
1830s and 1840s

by

ALICE LYNES

A paper read at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, 28th November, 1969, in connection with the City Libraries, Art Gallery and Museums Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the birth of George Eliot, 22nd November, 1819.

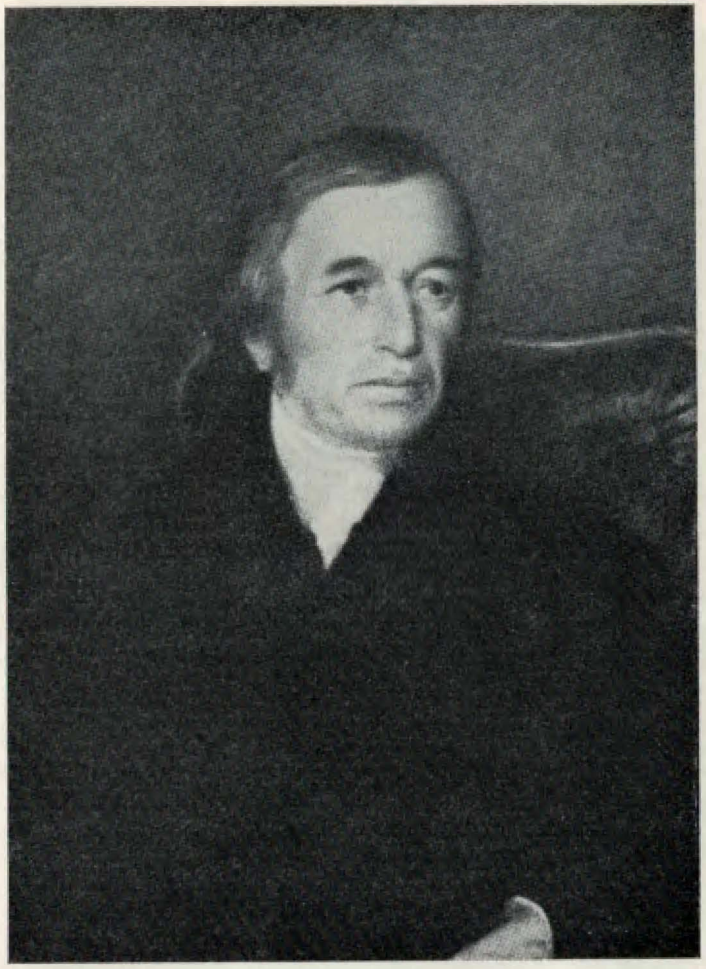
Published by the Coventry Branch of the Historical Association
1970

MARY ANN EVANS

from a water-colour by Caroline Bray, 1842

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The title of this paper may appear a misnomer, for at the time it covers George Eliot did not exist. The woman who assumed that name in 1859 rose to fame on her novels of rural life, for which she drew largely on vivid recollections of childhood days spent in the Warwickshire countryside. But her acknowledged masterpiece, "Middlemarch", is a story of life in a provincial town. It was during the years she lived in Coventry that she formed many of the associations that were to influence her thinking and lay the foundations of her future work. They were years which saw great change in the social scene and it was the events taking place in the town at that time that are reflected in the pages of "Middlemarch". This is an attempt to relate what those associations and events were and to draw a sketch of Coventry, as she knew it, based on material available in the Coventry City Libraries' Coventry and Warwickshire Collection.



ROBERT EVANS

from a miniature by Carlisle, 1842

In the year 1832 Robert Evans, of Griff House in the Parish of Chilvers Coton, was persuaded to send his daughter, Mary Ann, to school in Coventry. He was agent to Mr. Francis Parker Newdigate of Arbury Hall, on whose estate he also farmed. By his own efforts he had acquired an expert knowledge of land values, building, forestry, surveying and road making, coal mines and other matters connected with estate management and had earned for himself a high regard among Warwickshire landowners who were eager to employ him. His wife had died in 1809, leaving a son and daughter, aged seven and four, and four years later he had married as his second wife, Christiana Pearson, somewhat above him socially, the daughter of a yeoman farmer of Astley, with a brother and three brothers-in-law all prosperous farmers in the neighbourhood. They had three surviving children, of whom Mary Ann was the youngest, born 22nd November, 1819.

Her first school had been Mrs. Moore's dame school across the road from Griff House, where she went with her brother Isaac, three years her senior and her adored companion in all their childish pursuits about the farm and its surroundings. When she was five they were parted ; he to a boarding school at Foleshill, and she to join her sister Chrissy at Miss Lathom's boarding school at Attleborough, where the older girls made a great pet of the grave, sensitive child. Four years later she was sent to Mrs. Wallington's boarding school at The Elms, Nuneaton. Here she came under the influence of the Evangelical young teacher, Miss Maria Lewis, who took a great interest in her plain, earnest pupil, giving her encouragement and affection and imbuing her with a pre-occupation with religion and the habit of enquiry and self-examination. She was an apt pupil and by the time she was thirteen, had learned all that Mrs. Wallington's could teach her, so the move was made to a superior school.

The establishment she came to was in Warwick Row, Coventry, where most of the dignified houses, the first of which had been built in 1764 on the site of an old brick-kiln, were occupied by "the nobility and gentry",[1] of whom only 32 are recorded for the whole city and surroundings. The school was at Nantglyn, the last house, now the Pepper Pot Cafe and offices. The front windows looked on to Greyfriars Green, described as being "in the suburbs",[2] then unfenced and used by boys to play cricket and other games. Near the north end of the green was a pit, used for watering horses and, in former times for the ducking-stool, a contrivance for the chastisement of nagging wives and other unruly women. It was known as the Red Sea, from the colour the clay gave to the water, an added discomfort for anyone who had the misfortune to find himself in it. Across the green was the Park, the old park of Cheylesmore Manor, enclosed towards the end of the 18th century and divided into gardens crossed by an old path called the Irishman's Pad (a name echoed in St. Patrick's Road), leading from what is now the Eaton Road Junction with Warwick Road to

[1] West. History of Warwickshire, p. 765.
[2] Municipal Commissioners' Report. Section VII. Revenues : Fair tolls.

NANTGLYN, WARWICK ROW
from a photograph, 1919

Cheylesmore and the London Road. The north end of Warwick Road was occupied by the Sheriff's Orchard, which was to provide the site, some twenty years later, for the Quadrant. At the end of Little Park Street and behind St. John Street and Much Park Street, remnants of the city wall marked the boundary of the Park.

At the back of the school, with its large garden with fruit trees, was the Poddy Croft, Lammas Land over which the freemen had the right of pasturing two horses and one cow, or one horse and two cows from Lammas (1st August) to Candlemas (2nd February). Bounding this was the River Sherbourne, then a more prominent feature than it is today and used for dyeing silk for the ribbon industry, which provided work for nearly 5,000 weavers among the 27,000 townspeople. Some development had taken place on the north side of Summerland Butts Lane (now Queens Road), leading to Spon End, but on the south side was the Bull Field, common land and open country, across which one of the pupils recalled the gusty winds sweeping to slam the school's side door.

The school was one of more than a dozen private establishments, principally for "ladies" and most of them boarding "academies or seminaries".[3] Only the more prosperous citizens could afford to send their children to these. Among the weavers, there was a general indifference to the education of their children. They were employed in the ribbon industry at an early age and, although many sent their children to the Sunday schools which had spread rapidly since the end of the 18th century, only the most ambitious sent them to the few day schools which existed apart from the academies and dame schools. These were the four gift schools for boys, Bablake, Katherine Bayley's, Fairfax's, and Baker, Billing and Crow's ; Southern and Craner's, intended primarily for the education and clothing of poor Quaker girls, the Blue Coat School for girls, King Henry VIII Grammar School, then "in a great measure useless to the city and neighbourhood",[4] the Lancasterian School in a yard off the Burges, the National School in Union Street, a Roman Catholic school in Hill Street and a recently-opened infants' school in Well Street.

The proprietors of Nantglyn were the Misses Mary and Rebecca Franklin, daughters of the Reverend Francis Franklin, minister of Cow Lane Baptist Chapel since 1799. The school had been started by Mary, in her father's house adjoining the chapel, before she was joined by her sister, returned from a year at school in Paris. After a period in Hertford Street, the school was now installed in premises in keeping with its elevated status, with girls from London, one from India and a niece of the Miss Franklins from New York.

At Nuneaton Miss Lewis had satisfied Mary Ann's earlier expressed preference for talking to grown-up people rather than playing with children, so that when she arrived at the school she was no longer the "queer, three-cornered, awkward girl, who sat in corners and shyly watched her elders".[5] The other girls were

[3] West. History of Warwickshire, pp. 765-782.
[4] Charity Commissioners' Report, p. 129.
[5] Blind. George Eliot, p. 16.

MISS MARY FRANKLIN

immediately impressed by her superior mental capacity and some of them became her friends. Teaching at the school was, on all subjects, "thorough to the lowest foundations, from Holy Scripture to the correct Parisian accent". The curriculum included music, history, drawing taught by the Franklin's brother, George, arithmetic by Miss Mary and French and English by Miss Rebecca.

"Miss Mary, motherly, warm-hearted, business-like, bustling and self-sacrificing, rendered homage to her sister's superiority. Miss Rebecca lived in a totally different atmosphere, but struggled hard to bring herself down to the level of ordinary thought. A sort of intangible, diffusive, and yet exquisite elaboration of diction clothed all her ideas. She was a perfect gentlewoman ; her conversational and epistolary powers were without precedent".[6] Mary Ann was quick to adopt this "measured, highly cultivated mode of expression"[7] but, happily, did not forget the country talk she had known at home, which was to contribute so much to the living pictures of rural life she drew in her novels. She also modelled on Miss Rebecca the low, beautiful voice which, throughout her life, surprised and attracted all who heard it.

The Miss Franklins were proud of their clever pupil. She made rapid progress in French, winning the first-year prize, was proficient in arithmetic and painting and her English composition, from the start, was far ahead of the rest of the school. With Miss Rebecca's encouragement she read widely among the English authors. Scott, who died in her first year at the school and whom she had first discovered at the age of seven, remained her "longest-venerated and best-loved Romancist",[8] but she read also Bulwer Lytton and G. P. R. James. It was on his romances that she based her earliest known fiction writing, an historical tale of "Edward Neville", written in a school notebook discovered in a Wiltshire bookshop in 1943.

Mary Ann, always emotional, was deeply moved by music, which remained one of her chief delights. As a little girl she had had lessons from William McEwan, organist of Hinckley parish church, and at Nantglyn she became the best performer in the school. The other girls loved to listen to her playing and it was always she who was summoned to perform before visitors, although this reduced her to floods of tears when she fled, on being released, to the privacy of her room. The leading musician in Coventry at this time was Edward Simms, organist of St. Michael's Church since 1828. He had an extensive teaching connection among the families and schools throughout the county, in the winter months leaving home in his gig before it was light and not returning until after dark. He gave an annual concert in St. Mary's Hall with himself as solo pianist, sometimes playing his own variations on airs ; re-established the Coventry Choral Society, which practised in St. Michael's Church and also played and composed for the annual charity sermons held in support of the gift schools. Rosamund

[6] Morris. George Eliot reminiscences.
[7] Bray. Autobiography, p. 76.
[8] Eliot. Letters, vol. 3, p. 240. n. 9.

MISS REBECCA FRANKLIN

Vincy's music master at Mrs. Lemon's school, described in Middlemarch as "one of those excellent musicians to be found here and there in our provinces",[9] could well have been modelled on him.

Miss Mary and Miss Rebecca were "women of stern integrity, purest, highest aims, simple fervent piety, expending their energies for the benefit of others"[10] and the girls followed their example. On Sundays they walked across Greyfriars Green past the old Greyfriars' spire, incorporated in the newly-built Christ Church, into Greyfriars Lane, through Ford's Hospital and its garden and by a door in the wall around the burial ground to Cow Lane Chapel, where they heard their teachers' father preach. He subscribed to the more liberal doctrines of his sect and devoted himself, utterly, to the work of the church. He was loved and respected throughout the city and surrounding district, where he did much to strengthen the Baptist Church, and was familiarly known as "Grandpa Franklin". During the period of his long ministry there arose among the Baptists as in other churches, serious differences concerning doctrine, which were to result in break-away groups.

Apart from his preaching, his person so impressed itself upon the young Miss Evans as to provide the original, although not the character, of the Reverend Rufus Lyon, in "Felix Holt" more than thirty years later. Her description fits exactly a surviving portrait of him in a mid-19th century print. "The minister was much given to walking about during his hours of meditation, and very narrow passages would serve for his small legs, unencumbered by any other drapery than his black silk stockings and the flexible, though prominent bows of black ribbon that tied his knee-breeches. He was walking about now, with his hands clasped behind him . . . His face looked old and worn, yet . . . his large, brown, short-sighted eyes were still clear and bright. At the first glance, everyone thought him a very odd-looking rusty old man ; the free-school boys often hooted after him . . . and to many respectable Church people, old Lyon's little legs and large head seemed to make Dissent additionally preposterous".[11]

In school during the week, the girls held their own prayer meetings at which Mary Ann was one of the leaders. The Evangelicalism with which Miss Lewis had inspired her took on a sterner quality. The need of atonement for what she became convinced was her sinfulness, produced in her extreme piety. Her view of life was austere ; she denied herself the mildest pleasures and welcomed the epithet of "saint" which she earned by her zealous performance of charitable works.

There was, in Coventry at this time, great need for charitable works. The ribbon trade was undergoing a period of change. Removal of the prohibition on the importation of Swiss and French ribbons, although subject to a duty ranging from 25% to 45% had resulted in a loss of trade. Manufacturers brought women on

[9] Eliot. Middlemarch, chap. XVI.
[10] Morris. George Eliot, reminiscences.
[11] Eliot. Felix Holt, chap. IV.

to the looms and tried to cut wages. To combat foreign competition, Jacquard looms, which enabled the easy manufacture of fancy ribbons were installed in rapidly increasing numbers and an attempt was made to introduce steam power. The result of this had been the burning down of Josiah Beck's factory in New Buildings in 1831, by a mob of weavers fearful for their jobs.

The habits of the journeymen operated adversely for the industry. They seldom worked on Mondays and came "a little out of order on Tuesdays", when they did no more than half a day's work. On Wednesdays to Fridays they worked from early morning till late at night, and on Saturdays till 6 or 7 p.m. On Sunday they were not in any condition to appear in public and by Monday they had finished all their money.[12] The reluctance of other manufacturers to introduce steam power following Beck's experience, and the resistance to moves to improve control of the industry by bringing weavers into factories retarded its growth by at least five years. Added to this, the trade was subject to seasonable fluctuations which often brought unemployment to large numbers of weavers during the winter months. Some belonged to benefit clubs, but since most of these were associated with public houses, there was an added inducement to spend money on drink. It was small wonder that they and their families, on an average, subsisted for at least two months of the year on poor-relief, charity and borrowed money. In 1835 there were six pawnbrokers in the city.

Coventry's poor-relief was not administered under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, but under a local act of 1801, which united the parishes of Holy Trinity and St. Michael's, including St. John's. The parish workhouses had been sold and a combined House of Industry established in 1804 in the old Whitefriars monastery. Eighteen Directors of the Poor were to administer the Act, ten from St. Michael's parish, which was to provide two-thirds of the rate and eight from Holy Trinity, which provided one-third. The Directors were empowered to maintain the poor by setting them to work for private persons and to compel "all other people who shall beg, seek or want relief" to remain in the workhouse until they were able to provide for themselves ; also to "detain and keep all idle and disorderly persons and set them to work until they have reimbursed the corporation for their maintenance".[13] It was envisaged that out-relief would be given only in exceptional circumstances, in cases of sickness, accident or to defray the cost of burial.

In fact, the reverse was the case ; in 1833 out of a net cost of over £12,000 for poor relief, four and a half times as much was spent on out-relief as on in-maintenance. The scale of weekly earnings above which no relief could be considered in 1830 strikes one now as inhuman : for a single person, 3/- ; a man and wife 5/-, for each child up to three, an extra 1/6, for the fourth child a further shilling and for a man, wife and however large a family earning 12/-, no relief. These were not figures to which wages

[12] V.C.H., p. 223.
[13] Poor Law Commissioners. ... Report, p. 254.

would be made up, but those above which none was given. In cases where nothing was being earned, the limit of relief was 2/- a week for an adult and 1/6 for a child. It was not the practice to give relief to able-bodied male applicants without requiring them to work at the hand flour-mills. 1/3 was given for a strike and a half, which they were expected to do in a day. In some cases, where a man had a large family he was given, in addition, a loaf or two.

The work done by the inmates was silk-throwing. A room was provided which the outside employer, who contracted annually, set up his machinery ; workers were paid 1/- a week (as against 6/- or 7/- which was the general wage), of which they received 1d. and the rest went to the funds. In addition, the employer allowed them 2d. to 4d. each, weekly. These rewards, it was said, were an inducement to their remaining in the house a long time. In addition to the hardship caused by the uncertainty of labour, there was a large amount of dependent widowhood and orphanage produced by the premature age of death.

How much Mary Ann saw of the town beyond the immediate surroundings of Nantglyn we do not know, but she would have not have needed to go far to find conditions very different from the gracious living of Warwick Row. The town was "very irregularly built".[14] Many of the houses in the older parts were of the 16th century, timber-framed, in-filled with brick, the upper stories projecting into the streets ; close to these were modern houses, little better in comfort or accommodation. Altogether, it was reported, the construction of the houses, the narrow, ill-arranged, ill-paved and uncleansed conditions of the streets, gave a sombre and very unfavourable appearance to the town. Lanes, courts and alleys abounded in every direction, and of the worst description.

Tenements intended for letting to the "humble classes",[15] were built on a principle "the most selfish, unsympathetic, and detrimental to the health of the tenantry that could be devised". They were built in rows; each was about 12 feet wide and 18 feet from front to back. The basement storey consisted of a kitchen, 12 by 10 feet ; the remainder comprised a back-kitchen, pantry, coal-hole and staircase. Above this were two rooms of the same size, intended as bedrooms, but often used for business purposes ; the upper storey was a workshop to take four looms. "By the ungenerous principle of erecting the greatest possible number of dwellings on the smallest space of ground, ill-arranged, ill-constructed and ill-provided for", some of the best building sites were entirely spoiled. Construction was the cheapest possible, of poor materials, and, once tenanted, landlords rarely did anything to keep them in a state of cleanliness and repair, although by the terms of letting such property it was their responsibility to do so.

[14] Health of Towns Commission. Report, p. 19.
[15] ibid, p. 20.

Bad and unhealthy quarters were to be found at the back of streets throughout the town, in yards and courts where the inhabitants were so huddled together that disease "took root in the human frame as speedily as though the locality itself was pestiferous".[16] The worst area was that between the bottom of Bishop Street and Foleshill Road, but Cow Lane, Warwick Lane, Greyfriars Lane and Barrack Yard, on Nantglyn's doorstep, were all declared neglected and unhealthy.

As a result of insanitary conditions and privations suffered by the poor, the visitations of epidemic diseases were frequent and often of a fatal nature. Apart from these, the most common illnesses were digestive disorders caused by "close confinement, cares, poverty, the exhausting labours of an ill-remunerated trade, and inadequate and innutritious diet".[17] Diseases of the chest, functional rather than organic, came next, followed by chronic rheumatism.

Apart from the House of Industry, which had four medical officers covering the city for out-relief cases and attending inmates on a three-monthly rota, there were two institutions for the treatment of sickness, both for out-patients only. These were the General Dispensary, which had existed from as early as 1793, and the Provident Dispensary, founded in 1831. The earlier institution was entirely charitable, supported by subscribers, for the benefit of those who had "such claims to respectability that they should be saved from resorting to parish aid".[18] The Provident Dispensary was intended for the wage-earning class to make their own provision for medical treatment by regular subscriptions—basically 1d. a week, with an extra payment for attendance in childbirth. It was further supported by the subscriptions of honorary members, the well-to-do who believed in encouraging self-help.

For the more prosperous citizens — the professional people, manufacturers, tradespeople, watchmakers, who were increasing in numbers and who were highly skilled and better paid than the ribbon weavers, and the first-hand journeymen weavers working on their own account, there were social and cultural organizations and institutions. The Coventry Library Society, which had been founded in 1791, provided in its Hertford Street premises books for its 200 subscribing members. In 1819 the Theatre Royal was opened, built by the mayor, Sir Skears Rew, in a yard in Smithford Street near the Barracks. It held an important position among provincial theatre circuits and some of the leading players made their appearance on its stage. Shakespeare, adaptations of Scott's novels, Sheridan and Gay were regularly performed. In 1833 the Coventry Herald reported that "this well-conducted place of rational entertainment increased nightly in popularity".

A Mechanics' Institution was founded in 1828 by several men of "very advanced opinions who thought working men were in

[16] ibid, p. 21.
[17] ibid, p. 29.
[18] V.C.H., p. 284.

need of better education". Its aim was "to instruct the members in the principles of the arts they practice[d], and in other branches of useful knowledge", but "party politics and controversial theology"[19] were excluded. It provided classes in writing, arithmetic, geometry, geography, grammar and music. In addition to classrooms, the Hertford Street building had a museum, library, a reading room and a lecture hall to hold 500 people. In spite of declared policy, the committee and members were largely Radicals and Dissenters, so when Owenite socialists became prominent, the Anglican minority withdrew and appealed to Dr. Walter Hook, Vicar of Holy Trinity, an outstanding man "who set everything a-going".[20] In 1835 he started the Coventry Religious and Useful Knowledge Society, with premises in Little Park Street, where a library and reading room, courses of lectures and classes in elementary subjects as well as in design, philosophy, architecture and music were provided. It, too, was said to be non-political and non-sectarian but, in fact, the committee was composed almost entirely of Anglican clergy and the membership of Tory Anglicans.

There were two newspapers : the Coventry Mercury, first issued by James Jopson in 1741, of Conservative persuasion, and the Coventry Herald and Observer, representing the Whigs and Dissenters. At 7d. an issue, their circulation was, doubtless, limited.

Mary Ann's schooldays in Coventry were those years immediately before the passing of the Municipal Corporations Act, when there was a growing awareness of the need for the public provision of services to improve living conditions. Provision for sanitation was almost non-existent. There was no main sewerage and no enforcing Act or regulation ; what sewers there were discharged into the River Sherbourne. There was a Local Act for lighting, paving and cleansing, but this was largely inoperative. Refuse was thrown into the streets and cleared on to waste-land only when the selling-price to farmers greatly exceeded the cost of clearance. The town's total annual expenditure on this service was £30. Water supply was completely inadequate. Waterworks at Swanswell, established early in the 17th century, and the Conduit Meadow waterworks, constructed about 1780, supplied less than five hundred houses of the well-to-do out of about seven thousand in the city, and that unreliably. The rest of the people were dependent on springs and pumps, which also had to be used for fire-fighting. There was no water for street cleaning and no public or open bathing places.

The Police comprised the Chief Constable, the only permanent salaried officer and sixty to eighty constables, elected annually by the wards and paid 2/6 a day when they were working. They were described as an efficient and respectable body, although "rather excitable on political occasions",[21] when special constables were sometimes sworn in to reinforce them. In addition, ten watchmen were hired to keep watch and ward during the hours of darkness. The Post Office was at a house in Smithford Street, nearly opposite

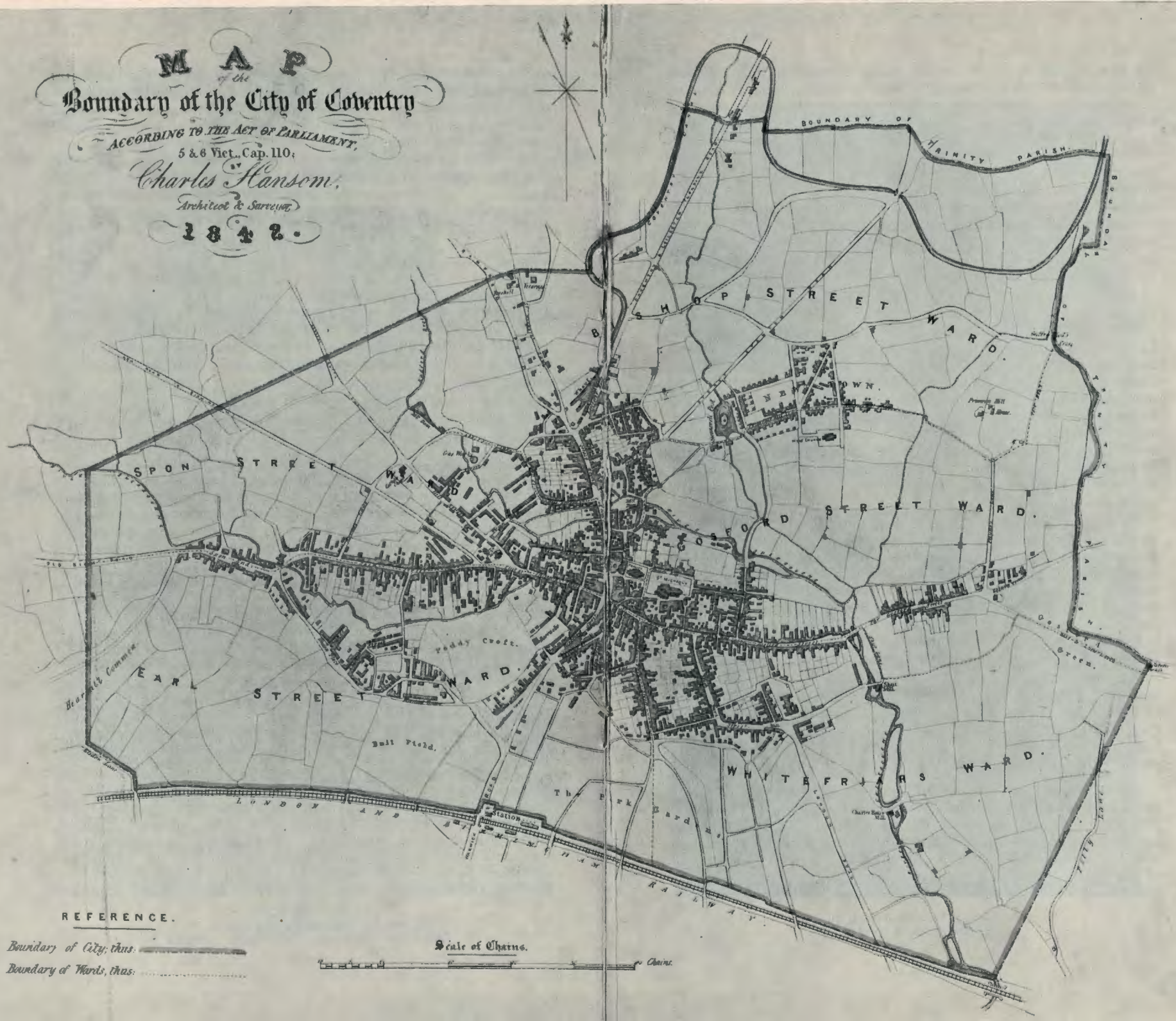
[19] ibid, pp. 228-9.
[20] Searby. Coventry politics, p. 7.
[21] Municipal Commissioners' Report. Section V.

MAP
of the
Boundary of the City of Coventry

ACCORDING TO THE ACT OF PARLIAMENT,
5 & 6 Vict., Cap. 110;

Charles Hansom,
Architect & Surveyor.

1842.



REFERENCE.

Boundary of City, thus:

Boundary of Wards, thus:

Scale of Chains.

Chains.

the King's Head Hotel, where the public despatched their business, standing in the street, through a hole 12 inches square. A notice announced that letters between Coventry and Atherstone would go via Northampton, at a charge of 9d. Markets and fairs, spreading around the central streets from the top of Bishop Street to Greyfriars Green caused much congestion. Fridays, Wednesdays and Saturdays were official market days, but street trading in cattle, horses, sheep and pigs, corn, foodstuffs and other goods were carried on every day except Sunday. The Women's Market, erected in Market Place early in the 18th century, was incapable of containing the retail market and at fair times the inhabitants of Hertford Street often paid the toll leviable on the ground fronting their houses, to avoid the nuisance of having stalls placed there.

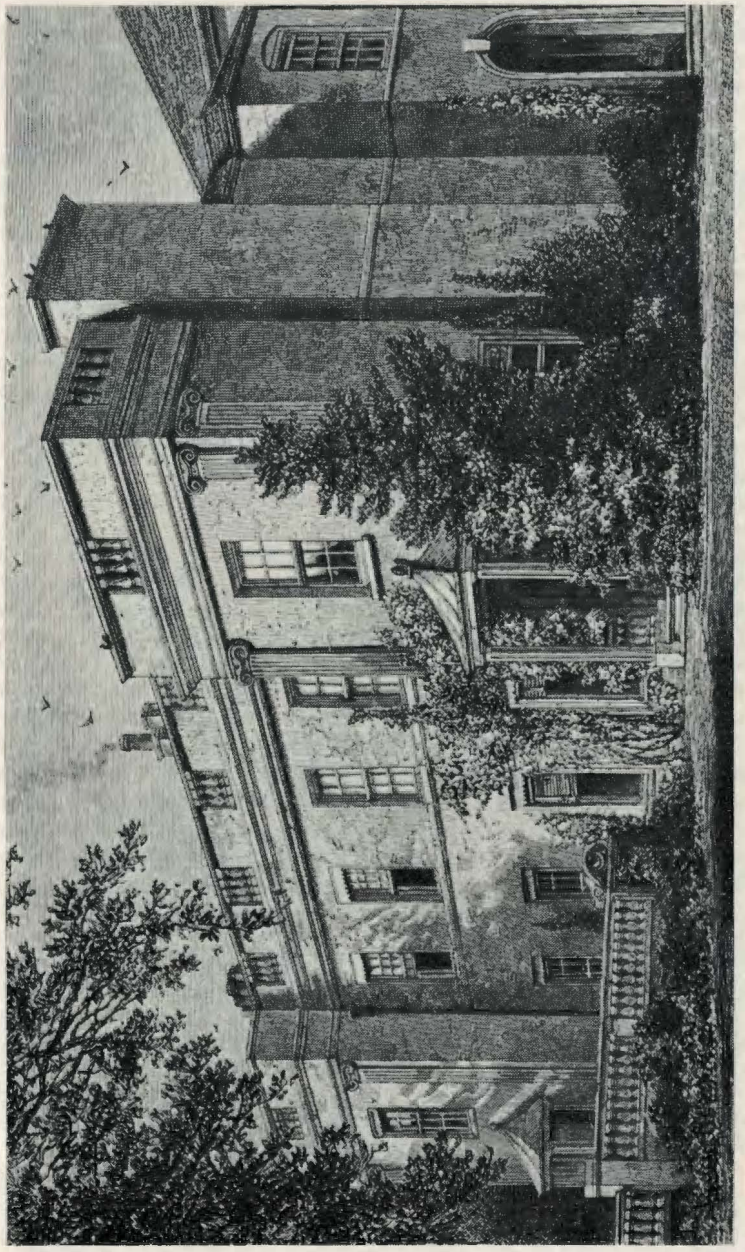
The streets were a-bustle, too, with coaches and carriers' carts. Thirty-two passenger coaches daily and two three times weekly left from three coach offices for London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leicester, Stafford, Northampton, Shrewsbury, Holyhead, Warwick and Leamington, Bath, Bristol, Cheltenham and Cambridge. The journey to London took about ten hours and this was the usual means of transporting ribbon made in Coventry to the London warehouses. The surrounding villages were served by carriers' carts, of which more than a hundred ran weekly. But a new means of transport was soon to come, for the London and Birmingham Railway was under construction and the Company had selected, of two alternatives, a route passing through Rugby and Coventry.

Early in 1836, Mary Ann's mother died, so she returned home to Griff to her father, for whom she had a "deep, strong love",[22] but she still retained her Coventry connections. She visited old school friends and they her, as also the Miss Franklins with whom she kept up a life-long correspondence. When told of Miss Rebecca's death in 1873 she wrote "It touches me deeply . . . She was always particularly good and affectionate to me, and I had much happiness in her as my teacher".[23] With Martha Jackson, or Patty, seriously Evangelical, she corresponded for years.

In spite of the household duties she took over when her sister married Dr. Edward Clarke, of Meriden, in 1837, she found time to pursue her studies. Signor Brezzi went out once a week from Coventry to give lessons in Italian and, later, German, and she continued her music lessons with Edward Simms. She read avidly, particularly in religion ; the Bible she studied closely.

Her religious fervour was intensified and her outlook became more Puritanical, even to her attitude to music. On 3rd October, 1838, while she was staying with the Franklins in Coventry, she attended a "grand musical performance" in St. Michael's Church with Miss Rebecca. Mr. Simms conducted the choruses "sustained" by the Coventry Choral Society and presided at the organ in a programme which included selections from Handel's "Jephthah",

[22] Eliot. Letters, vol. 1, p. 284.
[23] ibid., vol. 5, p. 419.



BIRD GROVE

from an engraving in George Eliot's Life, by J. W. Cross

"Judas Maccabeus" and "Israel in Egypt", Haydn's "Creation" and a new oratorio, Mendelssohn's "Paul". In letters to Martha Jackson and Miss Lewis afterwards, she denounced oratorios as a blasphemous use of the Scriptures, saying that she was determined to attend no more. She worked strenuously for the welfare of the sick and needy, visiting them and praying with them and organizing a clothing club for the families of unemployed ribbon weavers.

Mr. Evans was proud of his daughter's reputation for learning and gave her the means to buy all the books she wanted ; in addition she was given the freedom of the library at Arbury Hall. Her reading began to range wider, in philosophy, pure literature and all branches of science and there were signs that she was becoming "less simply devoted to religious ideas".[24] She also confessed to enjoying the "Messiah" and selections from Handel's and Haydn's oratorios during a visit to Edgbaston in 1840.

In March 1841, Mary Ann returned to live in Coventry. Her father had decided to retire and leave Griff House to his son, Isaac, who was now ready to become agent to the Newdigate family and was shortly to be married. The house they came to was Bird Grove, a large semi-detached house near the city boundary, set back from the Foleshill Road, from which it was screened by trees. A footpath beside the entrance gates led to the Springfield Brook winding through fields to Swanswell. The house still stands, but shops fronting Foleshill Road now occupy most of the garden, and the adjoining house and fields have given place to streets and small houses. Through the fields on the opposite side of the road, ran the Coventry Canal, by means of which "an immense trade with the coal districts of Warwickshire" was carried on.[25] It was the same canal she had known in her childhood, further along its course at Griff.

Many changes had taken place in Coventry since Mary Ann left Nantglyn. The railway had been opened ; five carriages of officials had arrived at Coventry Station from Rugby 25th March, 1838, and by September the line between London and Birmingham was completed. The first station was on Warwick Road bridge, but the amount of traffic had been grossly underrated and this soon proved inadequate, and was replaced by another, built further down the line, where the present station stands. Traffic was revolutionized. The journey to London now took six hours, as against ten by coach ; the single fare was first class (four in a carriage) 27/6; (six in a carriage) 25/- ; 2nd class, by day (in open carriages) 16/6 and at night (closed) 21/-. Seven trains ran on weekdays and three on Sundays. No provision had been made for goods traffic and the necessity to use Birmingham station for the despatch and collection of London parcels caused much delay and produced many complaints.

The beginning, in 1833, of parliamentary grants for educational purposes had resulted in several new schools being built. In 1839 St. John's replaced its inadequate Sunday school for boys,

[24] ibid.; vol. 3, p. 176.
[25] Lascelles. Directory, p. 23.

and day and Sunday school for 50 girls by a new school in Holyhead Road, accommodating 140 boys and 100 girls. The British School Society replaced the Lancasterian School by establishing a girls' school in 1833, in the premises attached to Vicar Lane Chapel which were also used by Southern and Craners' Girls' Charity School, and a new school in King Street for boys in 1840. An infants' school had been built in Thomas Street in 1835 by Joseph Cash, a Quaker, in his garden at Sherbourne House, in Summerland Butts. Conditions at the Grammar Schools were improving ; but it was "said to be appropriated to the education of the middle and upper classes".[26] The Franklins' school had moved to grander quarters in Hertford House.

There was now a hospital. Developing out of the charitable General Dispensary, the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital was established in 1838. A private house at the end of Little Park Street had been bought for £700 and converted. For some years only twelve beds were provided, for it was intended to deal with accidents rather than diseases, which were nearly always treated in the home.

In the ribbon industry, steam power had been more generally introduced, there had been many improvements in the looms and some factories had been established, but the "New Town" at Hillfields, begun in 1828, had been extensively built up to house the expanding industry, in opposition to the factory-system. The houses had top shops to take three looms and power was supplied by means of shafting running through a row of houses from an engine in a yard at the back. As yet, only a cart-track leading from Swanswell Gate linked the district with the town. The larger manufacturers were giving place to many smaller employers who had risen in the trade, but were not prepared to keep agreements, with resulting unrest in the industry.

The Municipal Corporations Act had taken effect 1st January, 1836. The old close corporation was replaced by a council consisting of twelve aldermen and thirty-six councillors. Councillors were elected by the burgesses, ratepayers of three years standing and the aldermen were elected by the councillors. The professional men and gentry, who comprised the council before 1836, tended to be replaced by the richer and more ambitious among the manufacturing class. New officers were appointed, committees constituted and reforms put in train. The management or, as it had sometimes been, the mismanagement, of the charities was no longer in the hands of the corporation, but the council was responsible for appointing trustees.

Installed at Foleshill, Mary Ann had little social life outside the family, who visited them often from Griff, Meriden and Baginton, where her half-sister, Fanny Houghton, lived. The rather worldly attitude of the young people she met did nothing to commend them to her serious mindedness, nor her to them. Her father

[26] V.C.H., p. 300.

was not too well and missed the busy life which had taken him around the county ; their evenings were often spent in her reading to him the Waverley novels they both loved. Lacking social distractions, she had more time for pursuing her studies. She did Latin and Greek with the Reverend Thomas Sheepshanks, Headmaster of the Grammar School and Rector of St. John's Church, offices which had been jointly held since the Act of 1734 establishing the parish of St. John's, and she continued her lessons in Italian and German with Signor Brezzi. She attended lectures on chemistry and continued to read widely, including astronomy and the relation between science and religion.

The Miss Franklins had proudly commended the accomplished Miss Evans to their friends, including the Reverend John Sibree, minister of Vicar Lane Independent Chapel, and his family, who lived on the Heath at Foleshill. The son and daughter, John and Mary, younger than she, became her life-long friends. Her neighbour in the adjoining house, Mrs. Abijah Pears, too, was soon "growing into the more precious character of a friend"[27] and helping her to run a clothing club for miners' families. Before her marriage she was Elizabeth Bray, a member of the prosperous family of ribbon manufacturers. Her husband was also a ribbon manufacturer who, later became associated in business with Mr. William Francis Franklin, of the family of Mary Ann's teachers. It was with Pears and Franklin that Thomas Stevens learned the craft that was to make his name world famous. Abijah Pears had been active in Liberal Party affairs for many years and was to become Mayor in 1842-3.

It was Mrs. Pears who introduced Mary Ann to the circle of people who were to have so great an influence on her development as a thinker and, ultimately, as a writer. One morning in November 1841, they went to call on Mrs. Pears' brother and sister-in-law, Charles and Caroline Bray, at their house, Rosehill, in St. Nicholas Street, Radford, then in rural surroundings and a short walk over the canal bridge and through fields from the Foleshill Road. In 1835, at the age of 24, Charles, one of a family of eight, had taken over control of the family ribbon weaving business on the death of his father. The following year, he had married Caroline Hennell, youngest daughter of a highly cultured Hackney family, whom he had met when she was in Coventry visiting her uncle, Samuel Hennell, also a ribbon manufacturer. Cara, as she was always called was then 20. With an income of £1,200 a year they had sufficient to provide a comfortable town house, a summer house in the country, horses, dogs, a carriage and the means to entertain their many friends, In 1840, with an income reduced to £800 a year, they had bought Rosehill, a pleasant stuccoed house, with Ivy Cottage adjoining, set in a large garden.

Charles Bray, after a period of Evangelical fervour, had abandoned Christianity and adopted a philosophy based on the obligation to accept the consequences of one's actions, a system he

[27] Eliot. Letters, vol. 1, p. 90.

CHARLES BRAY

CAROLINE BRAY
from a daguerrotype, c.1850

published in "The Philosophy of Necessity" in 1841. He was a kind-hearted man, frank, generous and impulsive, with a boisterous sense of humour. He was a philanthropist, "a healthy and stimulating agitator",[28] with a passion for social reform, a Radical in politics and had a consuming interest in phrenology and philosophical speculation. His wife was intelligent and accomplished, gentle and unaffected, with an intuitive sense of the fitness of things. She, too, was a philanthropist, worked for the education of the poor, wrote books for children on physiology, kindness to animals and morality, and founded the Coventry Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She had been brought up in a Unitarian family and, like her husband, had discarded her religious beliefs, but although she no longer conformed to the rites and ceremonies of a creed, she "led a life of saintly purity".[29]

Mary Ann's hope that by meeting the Brays she would "effect a breach in the thick wall of indifference behind which the denizens of Coventry seem[ed] to entrench themselves"[30] was fulfilled. She had, at last, found people to talk to about the things that interested her and they became friends at once. Charles said that his sister's object in introducing her had been "that the influence of this superior young lady of Evangelical principles might be beneficial to our heretical minds".[31] In fact, she found that they had already resolved the doubts which had been assailing her own religious belief as a result of her reading, and they "found that her mind was already turning to greater freedom of thought in religious opinion".[32] In "An Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity", published in 1838, Caroline's brother, Charles Hennell, had undertaken to re-examine the Biblical evidence for Unitarianism in the hope of converting Bray, only to find that he himself was now unable to accept Christianity as a divine revelation. Mary Ann was much impressed by this book and by Bray's "Philosophy of Necessity", and they helped to confirm the views to which she had been moving. Her reason rejected what she considered out of date interpretations of Christianity and 2nd January, 1842, she announced that she could no longer attend church.

Mr. Evans was a respected member of Holy Trinity Church and was acutely conscious of the position in which his daughter's action had placed him. He blamed the Brays for what he considered her rebelliousness and, after an initial outburst, refused to discuss the matter with her. The family, Miss Lewis, Mrs. Pears, the Reverend John Sibree and the Franklins all tried to reason with her, but to no effect. Unable to get any understanding, she wrote her father a long letter, desperately trying to convince him of her sincerity. She told him "While I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life . . . to be the most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its in-

[28] Coventry Herald, 10 October 1884.
[29] Blind. George Eliot, p. 26.
[30] Eliot. Letters, vol. 1, p. 120.
[31] Bray. Autobiography, p. 76.
[32] ibid.

SARA HENNELL

from a daguerrotype, c.1850

fluence on individual and social happiness". She ended "if ever I loved you I do so now, if ever I sought to obey the laws of my creator and to follow my duty wherever it may lead me I have that determination now and the consciousness of this will support me though every being on earth were to frown on me."[33] He would not be moved ; he was determined to give up Bird Grove and send her away until she came to her senses. Grieved at the thought of having to leave him, she considered going to Leamington and earning a living by teaching, but went instead to Isaac and his wife at Griff. After four unhappy months, friends prevailed on Mr. Evans to have her back ; she agreed to go with him to church and was given the right to think what she liked during service.

For the next nine years Mary Ann was a frequent visitor at Rosehill. "There was a free-and-easy mental atmosphere, harmonizing with the absence of all pretension and conventionality, which . . . gave a peculiar charm"[34] to the place ; the Brays found her a delightful companion and a close life-long friendship developed. Sara Hennell, who often stayed with her sister and brother-in-law and, later, came to live next-door at Ivy Cottage, afforded Mary Ann the closest intellectual companionship. She was nine years older than Mary Ann, a woman of extraordinary brain-power and one of the few women writers in the field of philosophy ; her best known work, "Thoughts in aid of faith", was a scientific attempt to trace the evolution of religion. Gladstone wrote of her as an intelligent and upright critic. This remarkable household was often joined by Charles Hennell, whose "Inquiry" had so much impressed their young friend, not only by the arguments it advanced, but by its close reasoning, clever induction and clear style.

These were not the only people Mary Ann met at Rosehill, for the Brays had a large circle of acquaintances, "of the better sort of literary people, for most of whom, however, [they] were obliged to go beyond the town".[35] Bray says that it was their custom, in summer, to spread a bear-skin on the sloping lawn under an old acacia, where eminent thinkers of the day gathered for talk and the interchange of ideas. In this way she came to meet Robert Owen, Dr. John Conolly, reformer of treatment of the insane, James Simpson, champion of free education, George Dawson, lecturer and preacher, John Bright, Richard Cobden, George Combe, the phrenologist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, J. A. Froude and many others, for everyone who was supposed to be a "little cracked" found his way to Rosehill. In this atmosphere Mary Ann blossomed; her shyness disappeared and what she had to say, well considered before she said it, was listened to with attention and respect.

Charles Bray's widely ranging activities in public affairs must have kept Mary Ann well informed about local events. He was strongly opposed to the indiscriminate bestowal of charity and the projects he concerned himself with were all calculated to increase the independence and self-reliance of the working classes. The

[33] Eliot. Letters, vol. 1, pp. 128-130.
[34] Bray. Autobiography, p. 70.
[35] ibid., p. 76.

Provident Dispensary and the Mechanics' Institution had his generous support ; he was secretary until 1853 and served on the committee of the Dispensary for forty-five years and, with John Gulson, was joint secretary of the Institution. With him, also, and his brother-in-law, Abijah Pears, he was on the committee of the Coventry Library Society. In 1843 he was one of the founders of the Coventry Labourers' and Artizans' Co-operative Society, with the object of providing gardens for working men as a healthy occupation to counter the ill-effects of long hours working at the loom. About four hundred gardens were provided at Coundon, Brick Kiln Lane (now Gulson Road), Hill Street and London Road, each member paying 1d. a week in addition to the rent. This covered the expenses of the Society and left a surplus to provide loans to buy looms and pigs. Trading began ; coal was brought by canal direct from the pits and sold to members at cost price, flour-mills were taken and a store opened for the sale of groceries to more than a thousand shareholding members. The Society flourished for a time, although Bray continually opposed the credit-system on which it was run, a factor which was to bring about its demise in the early 1860s.

About 1846, somewhat ahead of his time, he started a Working Man's Club, initially for his own weavers, but later open to all, where a reading-room, smoking-room, with tea, coffee or lunch and some sleeping accommodation were provided. The men found more attraction in public houses and so, after losing money on the project, Bray closed it. This and the Co-operative Society lost him his seat on the Council, which he had held from 1845 to 1848, for the publicans and small shopkeepers combined to defeat him at the next election.

He continually campaigned for improvements in sanitation. In 1837 he published a pamphlet, "The Education of the Body", the result of a lecture he gave on a "new"[36] subject, the simple rules of health, and he was a member of the local committee which furnished information in 1843 to the Health of Towns Commission, leading to the Public Health Act of 1848. Two factors menacing to health were the existence of old mill dams near Swanswell Gate, at the bottom of Mill Lane (now Cox Street) and at Brick Kiln Lane, and the state of the burial grounds. The dams sent "forth nauseous sights and vapours in summer and autumn, and inundations in winter, damaging houses, gardens, and meadows, along the sides of the river".[37] The burial grounds, in the centre of the city, were less than five acres, little more than they had been when the population was 6,000. It was necessary to exhume some bodies before others could be buried ; the grounds presented "the most revolting scenes . . . to the passers by and the inhabitants in the immediate neighbourhood"[38] ; in wet weather, particularly, they were indescribable and were considered responsible for the high mortality rate.

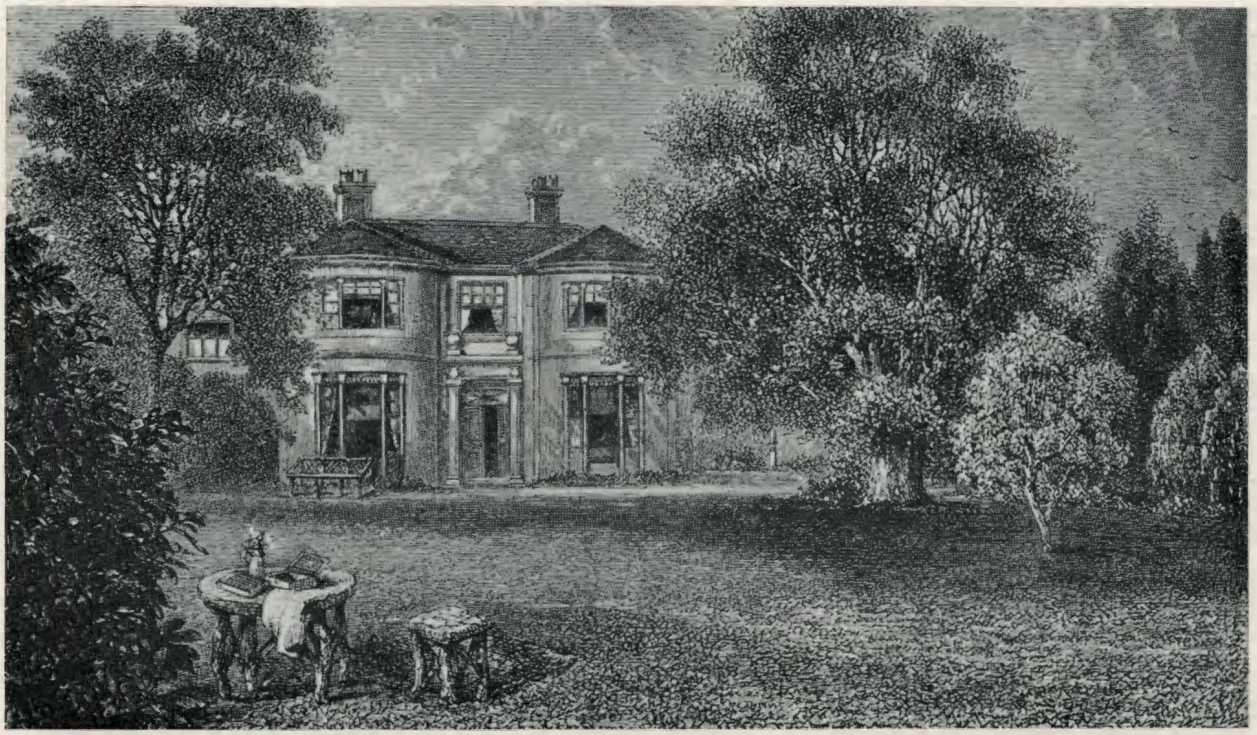
[36] ibid., p. 51.
[37] Health of Towns Commission. Op. cit., p. 23.
[38] ibid., p. 32.

The exertions of Bray and others like him had results. Under local Acts of 1844, the London Road Cemetery was laid out according to Sir Joseph Paxton's plans, at a cost of £12,500 and consecrated in 1847. New Waterworks, costing about £20,000, were built at Spon End the same year, and about the same time the mill dams were drained. Hales Street and White Street, leading to Hillfields—by this time largely developed, were made on reclaimed land and the Smithfield was constructed to accommodate the stock markets, which had formerly been held in the streets. In 1849 the city was brought under the operation of the Public Health Act, with the Council as the Local Board of Health to administer it.

One of the schemes Bray advocated was not to be implemented for many years. The right of pasturage which the freemen had had since medieval times, over large tracts of land surrounding the town, prevented the townspeople from building their houses in airy situations and compelled them to crowd into the centre, building on the gardens of the older houses. In 1844 Bray drafted a Bill to extinguish the right by commuting it for a cash settlement; he had many supporters, but the freemen, who were insistent on compensation by land, raised strong opposition and the Bill was thrown out.

The ribbon industry was experiencing less frequent periods of distress and the lot of the first-hand journeyman was improving. The self-help Bray preached was beginning to be practised. Many provident societies were established to provide aid in cases of sickness, childbirth, burial and unemployment. Of these the Benevolent Burial Society, founded in 1839, is still in existence with the subscription, ½d. a week, the same as it was then. The Coventry and Warwickshire Benefit and Freehold Building Society was started in 1849 to extend to all the means of acquiring freehold property. This, too, still flourishes ; within its first quarter-century thirty streets and terraces had been laid out, well paved, drained and fenced in the city and its surroundings. The Odd Fellows movement, for the provision of mutual aid in time of need, spread rapidly in the 1840s, after the Coventry district of the Manchester Unity, formed from the Birmingham district in 1842, opened with three lodges.

Mary Ann's Coventry had some parallels with our own, for there were administrative changes and new buildings were springing up all over the town. In 1842 the County of Coventry was abolished as the result of a boundary dispute with the outlying parishes. The city no longer had jurisdiction over the extensive area it had administered since 1451 and the Coventry Quarter Sessions were abolished. New churches were built ; St. Peter's, Hillfields, and St. Paul's, Foleshill in 1841, St. Osburg's in 1845 and St. Thomas's, in Summerland Butts, in 1849. In 1846 nursery gardens at Spon End were laid out for building and the first house in the district, named Chapel Fields, from the remains of the old Leper Hospital still standing, was built the following year. The railway was extended ; a line to Leamington was opened in 1844, and another to Nuneaton, running close to Rosehill, in 1850.



ROSEHILL

from an engraving in George Eliot's Life, by J. W. Cross

BROADGATE, COVENTRY, 1855

from a lithograph by John Sunman Austin

Arrangements for postal business were improved. In 1847 a large house opposite the Barracks in Smith Street, "roomy and convenient"[39] was taken on a 21 years lease, and branch offices for receiving stamped letters only, were opened in Jordan Well and Bishop Street. The following year a handsome building was erected on the east side of Hertford Street, as chemical works and warehouse for Wyleys and Brown. This now houses the General Post Office. Early advantage was taken of the Government scheme to establish Schools of Design for providing art education for the working classes. The school, opened in 1843 in an old ribbon warehouse on St. John's Bridges (the Burges), was a great asset in training men for the staple industries of ribbon weaving and watchmaking. Archaeological discoveries were being made. In 1849, when new foundations were being dug after old tenements in the woodyard in New Buildings had been demolished, a length of wall was discovered, five or six yards long and about four feet high, with the basement of two buttresses in perfect condition. It was thought to be one extremity of the Cathedral Church of the Priory.

In 1846, with his projects for social reform under constant fire from the "Coventry Standard", Charles Bray purchased the "Coventry Herald", as a medium for hitting back and for ventilating his ideas, acting as editor until 1867. It was in "The Herald" that Mary Ann's first published original work appeared—anonymous reviews and essays, including the five entitled "Poetry and Prose from the Notebook of an Eccentric". In 1847 she wrote "Vice and Sausages", a satirical squib on John Vice, the Chief Constable of Coventry, and his connection with a current scandal concerning butchers. A review of Froude's "Nemesis of Faith", of March 1849, brought her a charming note from the author, requesting her to reveal her identity.

Her most exacting work was a translation from German of Strauss's "Leben Jesu", fifteen hundred pages, with quotations in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. She toiled for two years, "Strauss-sick"[40] ; it was only by the sight, in her study, of a plaster cast of Thorwaldsen's Risen Christ and an engraving of Delaroche's head of Christ that she was able to endure it. It was published in 1846 by John Chapman, who was, later, to play an important part in her life. The work earned her the commendation of the author — and £20.

On 30th May, 1849, Robert Evans died, after an illness in which Mary Ann nursed him devotedly. She wrote to Cara "What shall I be without my Father ?".[41] The Brays were about to leave for a holiday on the Continent ; they took her with them, leaving her behind in Geneva until the following Spring. After some months back in the affectionate atmosphere of Rosehill, she had made up her mind what she must be. She would end her "provincial life", go to London and earn her living as a writer.

[39] Lascelles. Directory, p. 21.
[40] Eliot. Autobiography, v. 1, p. 206.
[41] ibid. Vol. 1, p. 284.

SOURCES

Blind, Mathilde. George Eliot. 1883.

Bray, Charles. Phases of opinion and experience during a long life : an autobiography. [1884].

Charity Commissioners. Further report of the Commissioners for inquiring concerning charities. 1834.

Cross, John Walter. George Eliot's life as related in her letters and journals. 1885. 3 vols.

"Eliot, George". The George Eliot letters ; ed. by Gordon S. Haight. 1954-55. 7 vols.

Haight, Gordon Sherman. George Eliot : a biography. 1968.

Health of Towns Commission. Report on the state of Nottingham and other large towns [including Coventry], by James Ranald Martin. 1845.

[Heap, Arthur]. Coventry 1837-1897. A retrospect and comparison ; reprinted from the "Coventry Herald". 1897.

Lascelles & Co. Directory and gazetteer of the city of Coventry .... 1850.

Miles, Horace. The Coventry silk ribbon industry from the introduction of the use of the Dutch engine loom (c.1770) to the Cobden Commercial Treaty (1860). 1930. Unpublished thesis.

Morris, Irene. George Eliot reminiscences [by her grandmother, née Rebecca Hine]. From the "Coventry Herald" George Eliot centenary number. 1919.

Moyle, Frank Walter. The modernism of George Eliot : [a sermon preached to the George Eliot Fellowship]. In The Modern Churchman, January 1939.

Municipal Commissioners. Report ... on the city and county of the city of Coventry. 1835.

Osborne's London & Birmingham railway guide. 1840.

Pigot & Co. [Directory, including Warwickshire]. 1835.

Poole, Benjamin. Coventry : its history and antiquities. 1870.

Poor Law Commissioners. Ninth annual report ... with appendices. 1843.

St. Michael's Church, Coventry. Grand musical performance, scheme of ... sacred music. October 3, 1838.

Searby, Peter. Coventry politics in the age of the Chartists, 1836-1848. [1967].

Smith, Frederick. Coventry : six hundred years of municipal life. 1945.

Victoria history of the county of Warwick. Vol. VIII.

West, William. The history, topography and directory of Warwickshire. 1830.

Whitley, Thomas W. Humorous reminiscences of Coventry life. 1888.

MAPS

Plan of the city of Coventry from actual survey. 1837.

City of Coventry. Based upon the Ordnance Survey of 1851.

Coventry and Warwickshire History Pamphlets : No. 6
4/6 GEORGE ELIOT'S COVENTRY — Alice Lynes

Coventry and North Warwickshire History Pamphlets are published by the Coventry Branch of the Historical Association and are the responsibility of the Publications' Sub-Committee.

The Officers of the Sub-Committee are :

Chairman : Mrs. M. H. M. Hulton, B.A.

Editor : F. West, J.P., M.A., Ph.D.

Treasurer and Business Manager :

T. Galassini, B.A., 120 Hinckley Road, Nuneaton, Warwickshire, from whom further copies of the present or previous pamphlets may be obtained :

No. 2 : **Plague and Enclosure : A Warwickshire Village (Clifton-upon-Dunsmore) in the Seventeenth Century—**
A. Gooder. 6s. post-paid (Published jointly with the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Birmingham).

No. 3 : **Victorian Schools and Scholars :** Church of England Elementary Schools in Nineteenth Century Coventry—
J. W. Docking. 4s. post-paid.

No. 4 : **Coventry's Town Wall**—Eileen Gooder. 4/6 post-paid.

No. 5 : **Coventry Through the Ages**—D. J. H. Smith. 4/6 post-paid.

The following pamphlets in the series of Coventry Papers, published by Coventry Corporation, may be obtained from the Public Relations Officer, the Council House, Coventry, CV1 5RS.

No. 1 : **Godiva of Coventry**—Joan C. Lancaster and H. R. Ellis Davidson. 12s. 6d., plus 1s. 4d. postage.

No. 2 : **Coventry City Charters**—A. A. Dibben. 8s. 6d., plus 6d. postage.