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Constance Holme's Beautiful End

Rooting a Creative Project in the Landscape of the Kent Estuary

by Heron Corn Mill artist in residence Carran Waterfield

While in the early stages of my residency at Heron Mill in Beetham I came across the novels of Milnthorpe writer Constance Holme (1880-1955) buried in the office-cum-attic there. A slim water-soiled royal blue volume with gold lettering stole my attention. Within its pages I found a vivid but painful story embedded within the recognisable landscape around the River Bela forming part of the Kent Estuary.

'Beautiful End' was published in 1918, though it began life as a one-act play 'The Home of Vision' receiving a short London run mounted by Edith Craig's Pioneer Players¹. Like much of Holmes' once lauded and now forgotten work the story concerns a rural community undergoing change prior to the First World War, and harking back to an age of perceived simplicity and innocence. Issues of ageing, class, isolation and family relationships are tangibly raw. Its themes as pertinent now as then, asking deep questions about what we really mean by 'home'.

Old man Kit Sill is being passed from the care of his youngest son, into that of his eldest, who now lives on the old farm at Beautiful End (now known as Waterside Fold, adjacent to College Green Farm). Kit had formerly lived and worked there

as a young tenant farmer bringing up his family of three boys. More a musician than a farmer and not very astute financially, Kit is now destitute and in his twilight years but his fiddle playing keeps him alive. The novel charts his journey from one son's home to another navigating a common familial dilemma: how to best look after an ageing parent.

I fell in love with 'Beautiful End' and decided to pursue the locations, its author's own history and the novel's essence. So I took the bumpy route along Marsh Road, Milnthorpe accompanied by local historian Roger Bingham. I documented this first adventure in three short films I called "Calling Up Constance". An appeal in the Westmorland Gazette, introduced me to John Caldwell, a former scholar of Earnside School in Arnside, now Ashmeadow Care Home. He took me on a guided tour of some of the locations in Holmes' other novels. I found in the work of the Canada-based academic Philip Gardner a familiar frustration with the loss of Holmes' importance and relevance.

You have an idea for a creative piece of work and it's always bigger than you can realise. My big idea was a realisation of 'Beautiful End' within its real-life marsh landscape

setting: a kind of trail with sporadic performances ending at Waterside Fold; where the novel itself culminates. At the invitation of Audrey Steeley, the creative manager at Heron Mill, I am working to realise this with two talented musicians (Luke Crookes and Carolyn Francis) in a process that draws on the experiences of people who are being cared for. We have so far led workshops with the residents of Stonecross Manor in Kendal and Wings School near Milnthorpe who have generously shared stories and worked creatively with us. We hope to make a 'folk opera'² in response to the novel and realise it along the route to Waterside Fold. Of course this is a long way off but I look forward to sharing with you another instalment on the progress of the project in the next issue of Keer to Kent and indeed invite readers to join me on the journey in any way they can - find more information on the Heron Corn Mill website.

¹ Gardner, P. *Trumpet in the Dust - in search of Constance Holme Collections*. Dalhousie Review, Volume 71, Number 2, 1991.

² "drama as a living, social practice. Or... what separates folk opera from other forms of music drama is its inherent social consciousness." Eddy, J.M., *Young Feminist Wire* <http://lyfa.awid.org/> accessed 19.4.18

Image: Carran interviews a resident of Stonecross Manor (by Darren Andrews)