

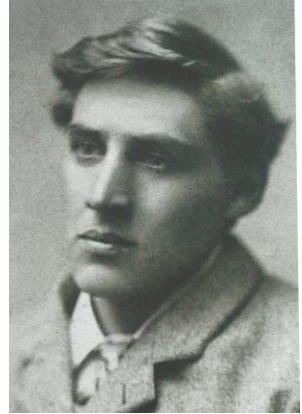
HASLEMERE UNCOVERED



A Hand in History

Among my books on the evolution, history and architecture of Haslemere are the biographical notes on several of the town's worthies who all expired in 1913: Hutchinson, Hodgson and Hunter. (This alliterative bunch prompts the choice of title of course.)

All were undeniably great men who did much for Haslemere, but Robert Hunter was really in a class of his own, for it was he who was the brains behind the creation of the National Trust. A lawyer by profession, Hunter was Chief Solicitor to the General Post Office and had moved to Haslemere in 1882. He was part of the great exodus from London brought about by the coming of the railway to Haslemere in 1859.



Robert Hunter (picture courtesy of the National Trust archive)

Robert Hunter, with his family, came to live in Meadlands in Three Gates Lane and very soon realised that the great expanse of heathland at Hindhead was threatened by the expansion of housing required to accommodate the many well-heeled writers and thinkers (and their retinue) who were moving to benefit from the pure air of the place then becoming famous as 'Little Switzerland'.

A London builder named Grover had retired to Hindhead at around that time and, realising the huge profit potential, abandoned thoughts of retirement, found a source of brick clay, at Wey Hill - the now infamous car park but at that time called Cley (sic) Hill - and started work. Large houses needed large grounds and lots of staff and the land was being built over at an alarming rate. Settlements at Hindhead and Grayshott came into being and Beacon Hill was created to provide housing for their staff.

Hunter was a clear thinking, able and very industrious man and soon realised that if action was not taken urgently, the very thing that was attracting people to the area would disappear forever under swathes of¹

brick and acres of neat gardens. Together with a few other local characters he founded the ***Haslemere Commons Preservation Society*** on 16th December 1884 (in an upper room at the White Horse Inn, in the High Street). The experience he gained from setting up the Society was to be instrumental in the creation of a far bigger organisation a few years later.

As a result of his travels round the country, Robert Hunter had taken an active part in saving several tracts of open space. It was probably the frequent letters from Canon Hardwick-Rawnsley published in The Times highlighting the need to protect the Lake District that brought them together. His work was also well known to another strong character, Octavia Hill. These three very different individuals were, of course, to become the founders of the National Trust which was created in 1895 and which bought its first property, the Clergy House in Alfriston, in 1896 for the princely sum of £10.

The area of land which had so fired Hunter's vision fortuitously came on the market in 1906, following the conviction of the great gold swindler Whittaker Wright of Witley Park. It was bought at auction by a group of well-placed local individuals who then passed it to the newly created National Trust, thus ensuring that The Punchbowl and Gibbet Hill would be forever inalienable.

Sir Robert Hunter, who was knighted in 1911, was a remarkable and delightfully modest man whose foresight and determination brought about what is probably the world's greatest conservation body. It grew from humble beginnings in Haslemere and we are delighted that the original movement, after a few name changes down the years, survives – and thrives - as The Haslemere Society).

The life and work of the great man are worthy of more research and the Society is delighted that the National Trust has taken up the challenge presented by the anniversary. As a result Mr Ben Cowell, the Deputy Director of External Affairs for NT, is researching the background in some detail and will be speaking at Haslemere Hall on Friday April 19th at the Society's Spring Meeting. Other Haslemere events are planned throughout the year. For details see the Haslemere Town Diary at www.haslemere.com and click on 'What's On'.

Robert Serman
(Robert is the President of the Haslemere Society)²