DR W 0 HASSALL (1912-1994)

An address given at a celebration, in St Mary's Church, Wheatley, of the life of Dr Hassall, 8 October 1994, by David Vaisey, Bodley's Librarian.

It is strange to find myself giving this address surrounded by people many of whom knew Bill Hassall far better than I did and for far longer. We are gathered in a village in which he occupied the Manor House for going on sixty years, whose history he researched and wrote and which I hardly know at all, and whose church we occupy, to remember a man who said once (and, knowing Bill Hassall, probably said many times) that he and Averil were married in a Register Office because he regarded marriage as something 'far too serious to have the church involved'.

I am however delighted to remember with you the Bill Hassall whom I knew, from whom I learned an immense amount - most of it intangible- and whom I, along with I imagine all of you in your various ways, regarded as one of the most memorable and remarkable people I have ever met. To begin with, to those of us who were his junior colleagues in the Bodleian Library he was never Bill Hassall: he was W 0 Hassall, WOH, or Dr Hassall. And to him I was not David Vaisey or Mr Vaisey; I was Vaisey. He had been brought up in that tradition and preserved it long after the moderns abandoned the use of the surname in favour of the forename.

I first met him I suppose, at the end of 1958 when I was sent to him in my final year as an undergraduate anxious to discover whether I might be considered as a candidate for training as an archivist - a training then under Bill Hassall's wing in the Department of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian. I knew, as I went into that interview, where I was coming from: a working-class background of the most conventional kind; exhibition at Oxford; national service as an officer in an infantry regiment in the army in Kenya; heading for a respectable 2:1 in Modern History; conventional middle-of-the road political views; rather too must time spent both at school and as an undergraduate playing hockey, rugby and cricket. But who was this man I was about to meet whom I had seen once or twice in Duke Humfrey's Library, but whom I had more often seen sitting somewhat untidily in an unkempt fifteen hundred weight van

in Brasenose Lane distractedly eating his lunch and reading at the same time?

He could scarcely have been more different from me. He had been born into a well-to-do and well-connected family and seemed to have (at least to judge from his many stories about them) a large number of much married (or unconventionally allied) relatives in the world of the arts. His own father was a military man whose career, starting in the Victorian age, had taken him to all parts of the Empire and who had fought in the Matabele and the South African war. The father eventually specialised in military prisons in one of which, York, Bill Hassall was christened in a silver rose bowl. His childhood was spent in Devon from where he was sent first to prep school in Twyford (where he was unhappy) and then on to Wellington where, once settled in, he received a scholarship which, later in life, surrounded by medieval manuscripts and historical archives, he was delighted to tell us was awarded on the strength of his Mathematics. Despite Wellington's military bias and the fact that his housemaster had played cricket for England, the young Bill Hassall resolutely set his face against both the corps and sporting achievement. Instead, as he grew and found his feet, he espoused with enthusiasm the twin causes of pacificism and socialism, putting the latter into practice by organising a cooperative for the redistribution and recycling of school text books out of which (he considered) the local bookseller was making a disproportionate profit.

By the time that he reached Corpus Christi College at Oxford as a classical scholar he was a convinced socialist, and indeed soon a communist. He had a natural compassion for the underdog and a desire to change whatever was wrong with the depressed society of the early 1930s; and he thus set himself to work hard at Oxford not only at the classics (and, more particularly, Modern History, to which he switched after two years) but also to learn Russian. His voracious appetite for knowledge of every kind was already evident. Later on, he always seemed not only to have read but also to have remembered absolutely everything one wished one could have read oneself: and at Oxford as an undergraduate he regarded the weekly essays for his tutor (on which he spent as little time as possible) as tiresome interruptions from his reading.

The tensions produced by this regime of hard work, by the ideological struggle involved in trying to reconcile His communist beliefs with his all-enveloping middle-class surroundings and also the collapse of his parents' marriage, led to a mental breakdown. He took a year off from Oxford, acquired an understanding of the feelings of those who collapse under such burdens which was one of his hallmarks in later life, and returned to get a first in Modern History and win a prize which, typically, he spent not on books for himself but on bocks for Averil whom, by this time, he had met.

Marriage to Averil followed and a brief period in London doing odd historical jobs in and around London University before, within a period of eighteen months, he was appointed to posts in the two libraries which he served until retirement: the library of the Earl of Leicester at Holkham, and the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Averil and he moved to Oxford and then to Wheatley; and here their family grew around them.

But before establishing his formidable expertise as an authority on local archives and local history and as a leading scholar on medieval illuminated manuscripts - on which his national reputation was founded - he had been swept into the Second World War. To begin with he must have been a source of considerable wonderment on the part of his' fellow squaddies in the 148th battery of the 43rd Light Anti-Aircraft regiment of the Royal Artillery. Untidy, unable to clean his boots properly (except on one occasion when he returned from a short leave with them polished to perfection by the wife of a general with whom he had been staying) , and not good at the job of aiming guns at aircraft however hard he tried, it was fortunate that as a result of a chance remark made to Lord Gort during one of his periodic visits to Holkham, Bill Hassall suddenly found himself removed from active service, sent back to the Bodleian Library and then almost immediately whisked away on loan to the Ministry of Economic Warfare.

This was in May 1941 just a month or so after he had been awarded an Oxford doctorate for a thesis which had begun life as a proposed London University MA. Typically, perhaps, the subject of his thesis had been chosen because its principal source material was to be found in the British Museum and Bill Hassall was very keen to become known there with

a view to finding permanent employment. The post went to someone else, as it happened, but by the time he moved to Oxford his enthusiasm for his subject had taken over.

At the Ministry of Economic Warfare, he used his initiative and his experience of how to gather historical information to build up what would now be called a database: an enormous printed database on the whereabouts of enemy economic resources and installations. Postcards, bus timetables, town plans produced for cyclists were all grist to his mill and in pursuit of his aims he frequently followed up chance remarks, or comments overheard in trains. He was very proud, for instance, of finding at one stage the only copy in the country of the most up-to-date directory of France in the hands of a Hungarian refugee in Leicester.

For many years afterwards he would not talk about this period of his life, nor about the period after the war when he was sent on something like a dozen missions to occupied Germany for various government departments. When he felt he could tell us about his work he had become the master of embroidering a good story, and, given a chance, we would egg him on to tell us more. In truth he was the sort of person to whom stories became attached - some very much taller than others. Most were true but some might not have been and it was not always easy to tell how many of them - in either category - had been started by himself. When asked if a particular story were <u>really</u> true he was apt to say 'Oh well that was the sort of thing that might well have been true. I've really forgotten now if it <u>was</u> true or not'.

One thing that <u>was</u> true was that on his last trip to occupied Germany which happened after he was demobilised and thus not subject to military orders, he refused to go unless Averil accompanied him - knowing how much she pined for foreign travel after the war. When the War Office demurred he said that she was the only person he knew who was both prepared to work all night if necessary and who could also read his handwriting! Since by this time he was a Lieutenant Colonel Averil was given a made-up rank of 'Senior Commander' and supplied with a uniform for the occasion.

Of course, I knew nothing of all this when I, a callow undergraduate, walked into that interview late in 1958, but it had all gone into the making of the Bill Hassall under whose spell I fell. Within the Bodleian his interests were changing from archives and local history in which he had built up a great reputation to the recording of illuminations to be found in medieval manuscripts. Later he said that this was because he wanted to be able to share his work more with Averil and it was easier for him to switch into her area - art history -than it was for her to acquire all the Latin and the Greek necessary to switch into his. I was, I think, the last of his archive trainees: afterwards that work passed to others.

My trainee year with him was a whirlwind one in which certain things stand out. His theory was that the archivist's life was one of constant interruption and so one was never permitted to settle to anything for very long before being diverted on to something else. When he discovered that I was coming back after hours to finish something from which he had deflected me, his response was 'Oh, if you have spare time in the evenings, I have something much more interesting for you to do', and he set me" to work transcribing the early probate inventories of the Oxfordshire Peculiars - transcripts which eventually found their way into the edition of such documents being undertaken by Michael Havinden. I had been subtly exploited, but I had enjoyed it and it gave me a lifelong interest in that historical source.

I remember, too, being 'volunteered' to tidy up the strong-room in the estate office at Blenheim Palace to which Bill Hassall would ferry me once a week in his van - a journey so hair-raising that I used to insist on coming home by bus.

And I remember going with him to the Annual General Meeting of the British Records Association in 1959 and during the lunch interval being introduced to about 75 different archivists in half-an-hour, on the basis that since I would soon be applying to one or other of them for a job it would be good for them to have met me already. It was unsubtle: but it certainly worked!

If I am asked now what Bill Hassall was like as a teacher: I have no

hesitation in saying 'Wonderful: probably the best teacher of anything that I ever had'. If I then try and analyse that, and seek to remember what he taught me, I cannot recall a single thing except the most important thing of all: enthusiasm. He didn't instruct: he fired you up to find out things for yourself and in no time, you found yourself acquiring skills in many areas - skills for which, as often as not, Bill Hassall then found a use. It was certainly a technique which he used night after night in village halls and further education centres all over Southern England as, true to his beliefs and his interests, he spread enthusiasm for local history to anyone who was interested regardless of their educational background - through the Workers Educational Association and Continuing Education Departments. By this time the communist political philosophy of his youth had gone, and he was much more on the side of continuity than that of change. But retained was the desire to share the knowledge gained from a privileged position with those deprived of these advantages. If I might make an analogy with a current television personality: I often think that Bill Hassall was, then, to local history what Keith Floyd, now, is to cooking - but without the alcohol. Endlessly spilling over with words; demonically enthusiastic; apparently permanently on the verge of losing control; occasionally exasperating his colleagues and superiors; but in the end making people happy by showing them the interest and the fun in his field of expertise; and producing wonderful things.

He possessed the great ability not only to communicate his enthusiasm so that you wanted to be part of it, too, but also to convince you that you were capable of doing more, learning more, acquiring more skills than you thought and, what is more, were an absolutely key member of a team whose work - if you were to stop playing your humble part in it - would completely collapse. He was a splendid motivator.

Had he not been, the achievement for which he is now best known in the Bodleian could never - in those pre-computer days - have succeeded. This was the mission to capture on microfilm and to index every illumination in every medieval manuscript in the Library. Later on when it had become a tool which attracted scholars to the Library from all over the world, people would say 'The Library was fortunate to have someone like Bill Hassall to take on this grand scheme, and see it through', but those of

us who saw its construction in those early days at close quarters knew that he achieved it almost against the Library's wishes and without the Library's authorities knowing - taking on and motivating volunteers (many of them as a form of rehabilitation after breakdown), doing somewhat dubious deals with microfilm companies - but in the end providing, in lists typed by amateurs (and looking like it) and cards stored in shoeboxes begged from Duckers and Walters in the Turl, a great scholarly aid. This band of workers were known to us as 'Hassall's vassals', and so famous did Bill Hassall become in using and motivating volunteers on this project that (and this was a story he told with great glee) someone, once meeting the head of the Bodleian Library*' Dr Nowell Myres in the United States and knowing only that he came from Oxford, suggested that he enrol as a volunteer to forward Dr Hassall's wonderful work.

This same absorbed, almost obsessive enthusiasm and drive also coloured his work at Holkham. A regular path was beaten between Oxford, Wheatley and Holkham by a succession of Hassall vans, and even on occasion by Hassall bicycles. Here he inherited the care of a fantastic library and archive which had been neglected. He became the master-curator of it, and of much else in the house, spreading knowledge of it, encouraging others to use it, convincing its owners of its importance, and ensuring that when it became financially necessary to break up the library the books and manuscripts migrated to other scholarly libraries. At the same time, he researched the collections and published many books on both the library and the Holkham estate and its archive. It was an immense achievement for one man.

It was a setting that provided him with some of his best stories. He enjoyed immensely the fact that he had served five of the seven Earls of Leicester, and that serving the 3rd Earl (who appointed him) gave him contact with someone whose grandfather, born in 1754, had been a fervent supporter of George Washington. Though still clinging to his socialist principles Bill Hassall had found himself in a world of white tie and tails, ballrooms, and large landed estates; and the 3rd Earl, who had been born in 1848, was a high Tory who clearly fascinated Bill, and who would come out with memorable remarks like 'I'm bound to admit that Mr Gladstone was always perfectly civil to me'; while his tenants

were apt to say 'We needn't worry about the Germans invading Norfolk: his lordship will call out the gamekeepers'. Bill always delighted, too, in telling how when he and Averil moved to their first small house in Headington, the 3rd Earl told him to go and have a word with the foresters on how to lay out his woodland, and then sat him down and gave him some man-to-man advice on what principles to adopt when called upon to appoint clergymen to his livings.

This was the Bill Hassall whom I knew and it is how I remember him. I knew, too, of his devotion to his family, and especially to Averill whose intrepid foreign visits he used to report to us with glee. I remember, too, from the points of view firstly of a student and then a junior colleague, but later as the head of the Department of which he had been such an outstanding member, how his administrative abilities left so much to be desired. No plan was ever straightforward: indeed, Mark has pointed out to me that his father usually had five plans for everything - four of which were to be discussed and rejected and the fifth was the one to be followed. In the days before computers made things easy, his technique for retrieving information was to make six copies of everything and file them in six different places in different orders. This always worked for him, but could cause immense confusion for others. I remember, too, his spectacularly untidy appearance, the almost unreadable handwriting sloping down across any sheet of writing paper even if it had printed lines on it - and those vans.

But most of all I remember - and I expect that we all do - a man full of knowledge; a man willing to put that knowledge, and his time, at the disposal of anyone - schoolchild or the most powerful of scholars - if they needed it; a man who could be impatient (who wouldn't be, having so many gifts and so little time?); but a man, above all, constantly intrigued by his fellow human beings and their history; and a man with the sort of boundless enthusiasm, which we can admire and hope, in our small way, to emulate.

Wheatley's Historian: Tom Hassall

David Vaisey has spoken eloquently and amusingly about my father's public life and there are many aspects of his private life about which I could speak: his childhood in Devon, his camping in the temple at Holkham in Norfolk, above all about him as a loving, generous and amusing parent and grandparent. However, on this occasion and in this setting, it seems more appropriate to talk about his life here at Wheatley - a village whose history he put on the map with his book Wheatley Records which was published in 1956.

My father arrived in the village seventeen years before, when my mother and grandmother set about the restoration of the Manor House. Their intervention literally saved the house from falling into total ruin. The wall of the east wing was rebuilt and the house turned back into a single-family home. My father used to make the point that the Hassalls and the Archdales who had rebuilt the house in 1601 and whose initials appear on a plaque on the east wing, were the only resident owners of the Manor House throughout its entire history.

My father arrived in Wheatley shortly after the outbreak of War. After his brief and bizarre stint on an ack ack gun he was loaned to the Ministry of Economic Warfare. This allowed him to commute daily to London by train from Wheatley Station. He forged important friendships on the train with the other commuters. Thus the branch line had a special place in his affections. When it was closed to passenger traffic in 1963 as part of Dr Beeching's cuts he rode in the last train resplendent in his scarlet and blue Doctor of Philosophy's gown. When asked by an Oxford Mail reporter who he was, he replied, 'Dr Beeching.'

His wartime service entitled him to become a member of the Wheatley branch of the British Legion. He would regularly turn

out on parade on Remembrance Sunday. I am sure that he thought of himself on those occasions as Lance Bombardier Hassall rather than his dizzy acting rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. But what he really liked

about the Wheatley British Legion was the annual dinner. This was one of the highlights of his Wheatley social life, others being in recent years, the old People's coffee morning at the Merry Bells to which he was dragged by our terrier, Patch. Above all he enjoyed the Annual Dinner of the Wheatley Village Produce Association, the VPA.

The VPA was founded in the War as part of the Dig for Victory campaign. My father was always a staunch supporter although he was certainly no gardener - at least not in the conventional sense. Although the garden at the Manor House was almost entirely turned over to the production of prodigious quantities of vegetables, he left most of the skilled tasks to others. For instance, I only recall one occasion when he sowed vegetable seeds. The normal practice is to sow in straight lines. This was not my father's way. With his accustomed eccentricity he sowed the peas in a series of wavy lines, his explanation being that he thought he could grow more crops in this way. He may have been right but it certainly made hoeing more difficult and it was hoeing and weeding that he mostly practised. His great delight was to weed the asparagus bed, particularly if someone could be persuaded to talk to him while he did so. Again, his weeding technique was peculiar to himself. In order to cover the ground quickly we used to say that he removed every tenth weed rather than totally weeding the whole area. What he really loved in the garden was picking soft fruit, or at this time of year, gathering nuts. He was by nature what anthropologists call a hunter-gatherer rather than a farmer. But there was constant competition between him and the grey squirrels. His grandson, Oliver, who studied zoology suspects that with the loss of competition we may see a burgeoning of the squirrel population at the western end of the village in the coming years.

What my father Lacked in gardening finesse he made up for in the application of his enormous strength. I estimated that he alone moved something like eighty tons of earth to level our tennis court while in recent years the coming of dutch elm disease allowed him to move vast logs of elm from the Breach Fields behind the house to be burnt on the old kitchen fire. These logs were almost invariably damp and so long that they projected out into the room filling it with acrid smoke.

It was in the old kitchen that my father conducted his last' courses for the Wheatley Branch of the Workers Educational Association. He began teaching for the Wheatley WEA after the War. These early classes were set to work indexing the earliest parish registers and studying early seventeenth century Wheatley families.

This was the start of his great enterprise to study the history of Wheatley and it culminated in the publication of Wheatley Records to celebrate the village's recorded millennium. The style of the book reflected the man. It consisted of transcripts of a collection of original documents illuminated by a vast number of footnotes which allowed him to transmit his enormous anecdotal knowledge of Wheatley's past. There is much of my father in that book. Students of his writing style know that he was fond of the word 'juxtaposition'. He succeeded in using it twice in one paragraph in the introduction alone. The book was heavily illustrated often with pictures whose relevance seemed somewhat tangential to the work itself. But these illustrations reflected his ability to extract photographic blocks from an astonishing collection of donors, ranging from The Church Times via the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, The Grand Priory of the British Realm of the Venerable Order of St John of Jerusalem to J and E Tate Animal Waste Merchants. The block that the latter provided, showing strata of the claypit which now houses the caravan park, was one of the few good things to come from J and

E Tate who Wheatley residents will remember used to operate the notorious Bone Factory whose noxious smells used to waft over the village. I think that my father was one of the few people to extract something useful from the Bone Factory.

Wheatley Records also allowed my father to air his personal views, particularly on what he considered to be the iniquities of the Bullingdon Rural District Council whose planning policies were threatening to ruin the physical appearance of the village, for example promoting and allowing the building of houses on the village green. My father's awareness of such issues helped to create the climate in which the Wheatley Society was founded and whose president he was to become.

Wheatley Records drew out the special nature of Wheatley whose history was dominated not by squires but by yeomen, innkeepers and stonemasons. He saw in the Wheatley of the 1950s a direct continuum with the Wheatley of the past. People like Hugh Choch- who held the close called the Breach in the late thirteenth century or Thomas Prat who provided Wheatley stone for the building of Merton College chapel in the early fourteenth century were as real to him as the late Tom Barlow, Wheatley's last yeoman farmer who rented the Breach Field from my father or the late Arthur Smith whose photograph he published holding the model of Wheatley Church spire made by his father while building it, the church spire which, of course, the village is now raising money to repair. Photographs of both Tom Barlow and Arthur Smith were included in the book.

I remember at the time Wheatley Records was published wondering why my father had included photographs of well-known people of 1950s Wheatley but now those self-same people have become part of Wheatley's history. It was typical of my father's modesty that although one photograph shows him pointing at the Archdale plaques on the Manor House, he did not identify himself in the caption. He may have been anonymous in that plate, but Wheatley Records will allow his name to be remembered in Wheatley's own