



The 150th anniversary of the passage of Jules Verne and Aristide Hignard through Oakley in 1859

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Abstract

A group of enthusiasts in the Archives Department of Dunfermline in Fife decided to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the passage of Jules Verne and Aristide Hignard through Oakley in 1859. They established a magnificent series of events over three days, 26, 27 and 29th August 2009.

Résumé

Pour célébrer le 150e anniversaire de la visite de Jules Verne dans le comté de Fife, un groupe d'archivistes de Dunfermline a organisé trois jours de festivités. Celles-ci comprenaient une reconstitution en costumes d'époque de la marche de Jules Verne, accompagné d'Aristide Hignard et du Révérend Smith, de Crombie Point à Inzievar House. Le lancement d'une nouvelle traduction du *Rayon Vert* eut lieu à la bibliothèque Carnegie de Dunfermline. Des acteurs recréèrent à Inzievar House l'arrivée de Verne au château; des prix furent attribués aux enfants des écoles primaires d'Oakley pour leurs peintures sur des thèmes verniens; une réception fut organisée à l'Hôtel de Ville de Dunfermline par l'adjoint au maire suivie de la projection de deux films basés sur les œuvres de Verne. Tous ces événements furent organisés par des acteurs enthousiastes et furent l'objet de nombreux reportages dans la presse et à la télévision.

A group of enthusiasts in the Archives Department of Dunfermline in Fife decided to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the passage of Jules Verne and Aristide Hignard through Oakley in 1859. They established a magnificent series of events over three days, 26, 27 and 29th August.

The first event on the 26th was a reconstruction of the walk from Crombie Point where Verne disembarked from the steamer from Edinburgh where he was met by the Reverend Mr Smith. By studying old maps it was possible to reconstruct the route taken by Verne. Members of the Dunfermline Dramatic Society were dressed in period costume as Verne, Hignard and the priest. The start of the walk was covered by Scottish Television in its evening news programme and there was substantial press coverage including a two page article in the Daily Mail national paper. The walk started from the pier, paused at the Black Anchor Inn,

where Verne had had a whisky and then traversed fields to Inzievar House (which Verne refers to as Ockley Castle in *Voyage à Reculons*) the baronial mansion of the Smith family. Many of the tracks that Verne took have disappeared so the leaders had to get permission from farmers to cross fields to follow the route exactly. Needless to say the walk was accomplished in pouring rain just as when Verne did it! Because of the problem of crossing fields, the walk took almost twice as long as Verne. The participants were rewarded with a badge bearing a humorous cartoon of Phileas Fogg and Passepartout!



Actors recreate the arrival of Verne at Oakley Castle. From left to right: a servant girl, the Reverend Smith, Verne, Hignard and Amelia. In front is the present Catholic priest of Oakley.

The main event on the 27th was an evening book launch of *The Green Ray* in Dunfermline in the magnificent setting of the Carnegie Library (Carnegie was a native of Dunfermline before making his fortune in the States).

I gave a talk on the relationship between *The Green Ray* and Verne's own voyage to the Hebrides. There was an audience over 50 including some local Councillors and also an exhibition of photographs of underground mining scenes taken by a former miner which gave some impression of conditions in *The Underground City*.

The audience had a convivial evening with wine supplied by the publisher, Luath Press.

Saturday 29th was the busiest day of the programme. A reception for twenty guests was held in the very magnificent entrance hall where Verne arrived. While we sipped champagne we were treated to a short performance by the actors. A young lady took the part of Amelia Bain and read from her diary an account of Verne's visit to her home in Edinburgh. The other actors played the arrival of Verne in Inzievar... dressed in costume and spoken in a French accent! Among the guests was the present catholic Canon of the parish, now in his eighties who enjoyed the portrayal of the Reverend Mr Smith. After the reception we were taken on a guided tour of part of the estate garden which Verne had admired so much.



Actors recreate the arrival of Verne at Oakley Castle. From left to right: Hignard, Verne, the Reverend Mr Smith and Amelia.

From Inzievar we moved on to Oakley village Community Centre, the focal point of this now rather depressed mining village which Verne had seen in full activity before the closure of the ironworks and mines. Here we had an audience of c50 for the award of prizes to young children from both the Catholic and State schools who had participated in a painting

competition of scenes from Verne. The actors repeated their presentation and I gave a very short talk on Verne and writing for children. This was followed by an address by the Deputy Provost of Dunfermline, then another by the General Secretary of the Franco-Scottish Society (like Verne a Breton) who then presented the prizes (children's editions of Verne's novels) and then unveiled a plaque commemorating Verne's visit. It is decided that the Oakley Council will name a street after Verne... the first in the UK as far as I know.

From Oakley we progressed to Dunfermline to the superb City Council Chambers for a buffet reception hosted by the Deputy Provost. About 50 people were present including Councillors from both Dunfermline and Oakley. I said a few words about Verne's role as a town councillor and then a few gifts were given to people involved in the events. I was offered two excellent framed photographs of the Black Anchor Inn (the photo that I posted was inaccurate although almost identical...this time there is no doubt of the authenticity but I will need copyright clearance before I can post them).

The reception finished with the unveiling of an enormous iced cake in the form of a book and covered in Verne motifs.

The final event was the showing of two films in the Carnegie Hall: *Around the World in 80 days* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*. The children were all given a packet of "Phileas Fogg" potato chips the brand name used by a local biscuit company.

It was a marvellous celebration, entirely the result of hard work and research by a group of enthusiasts, without commercial sponsorship.

A wonderful three days, and apart from myself not an academic in sight!

Ian Thompson (Ian.Thompson@ges.gla.ac.uk) graduated in Geography from Durham University (UK) in 1957 and completed a Masters degree at Indiana University in 1958 and a PhD from Durham in 1960. Subsequently he taught at Leeds and Southampton Universities and was an Associate Professor at Miami University Ohio before becoming Professor of Geography at Glasgow University, Scotland in 1976. He is presently Emeritus Professor and Senior Research Fellow at Glasgow University. His research interest has been in the economic and social geography of France and North Africa and has written, edited and translated numerous books on this area. He was made an honorary Life Fellow of La Société de Géographie de Paris and in 2007 was promoted to Commandeur dans l'Ordre National des Palmes Académiques by the French Government. He was for many years President of the Alliance Française de Glasgow. Since retirement he has researched Verne's Scottish connection and published numerous articles on this subject.