

While researching and writing my now completed biography *TROUBLE WITH TRIFFIDS: THE LIFE AND FICTION OF JOHN WYNDHAM*, I, as a long-time resident of South Hill Park, was struck by this episode in Chapter 8 of *The Day of the Triffids* (1951):

I [the sighted Bill Masen] broke that [an argument] off by telling them [a blinded group of people led by Masen] that now I was no longer encumbered with my two *i.q.*-minus watchdogs we would be ordering things differently. I was going to get a lorry, and I would be back in ten minutes or so to run them back to the billet in it.

The finding of another organized party at work produced a new anxiety, but we found the place intact. The only news they had for me there was that two more men and a woman had been taken with severe belly pains and removed to the other house.

We made what preparations we could for defence against any marauders arriving while I was away. Then I picked a new party, and we set off in the lorry, this time in a different direction.

I recalled that in former days when I had come up to Hampstead Heath it had often been by way of a bus terminus where a number of small shops and stores clustered. With the aid of the street-plan I found the place again easily enough—not only found it, but discovered it to be marvellously intact. Save for three or four broken windows, the area looked simply as if it had been closed up for a week-end.

But there were differences. For one thing, no such silence had ever before hung over the locality, weekday or Sunday. And there were several bodies lying in the street. By this time one was becoming accustomed enough to that to pay them little attention. I had, in fact, wondered that there were not more to be seen and had come to the conclusion that most people sought some kind of shelter either out of fear, or later when they became weak. It was one of the reasons that one felt a disinclination to enter any dwelling house.

I stopped the lorry in front of a provision store [the Co-op] and listened for a few seconds. The silence came down on us like a blanket. There was no sound of tapping sticks, not a wanderer in sight. Nothing moved.

'Okay,' I said. 'Pile out, chaps.'

The locked door of the shop gave way easily. Inside

there was a neat, unspoiled array of tubs of butter, cheeses, sides of bacon, cases of sugar, and all the rest of it. I got the others busy. They had developed tricks of working by now, and were more sure of their handling. I was able to leave them to get on with it for a bit while I examined the back store room and then the cellar.

It was while I was below, investigating the nature of the cases down there that I heard a sound of shouts somewhere outside. Close upon it came a thunder of trampling boots on the floor above me. One man came down through the trap-door, and pitched on his head. He did not move or make another sound. I jumped to it that there must be a battle with a rival gang in progress up there. I stepped across the fallen man, and climbed the ladder-like stair cautiously, holding up one arm to protect my head.

The first view was of numerous scuffling boots, unpleasantly close, and backing towards the trap. I nipped up quickly and got clear before they were on me. I was up just in time to see the plate-glass window in the front give way. Three men from outside fell in with it. A long green lash whipped after them, striking one as he lay. The other two scrambled among the wreckage of the display, and came stumbling further into the shop.

They pressed back against the rest, and two more men fell through the open trap door.

It did not need more than a glimpse of that lash to tell what had happened. During the work of the past few days I had all but forgotten the triffids. By standing on a box I could see over the heads of the men. There were three triffids in my field of view: one out in the road, and two closer, on the pavement. Four men lay on the ground out there, not moving. I understood then why these shops had been untouched; and why there had been no one to be seen in the neighbourhood of the Heath. At the same time I cursed myself for not having looked at the bodies in the road more closely. One glimpse of a sting mark would have been enough warning.

'Hold it,' I shouted. 'Stand where you are.'

I jumped down from the box, pushed away the men who were standing on the folded back lid of the trap, and got it closed.

'There's a door back here,' I told them. 'Take it easy now.'

The first two took it easy. Then a triffid sent its sting whistling into the room through the broken window. One man gave a scream as he fell. The rest came on in panic, and swept me before them. There was a jam in the doorway. Behind us stings swished twice again before we were clear.

In the back room I looked round panting. There were seven of us there.

'Hold it,' I said again. 'We're all right in here.'

I went back to the door. The rear part of the shop was out of the triffids' range-as long as they stayed outside. I was able to reach the trap-door in safety, and raise it. The two men who had fallen down there since I left re-emerged. One nursed a broken arm; the other was merely bruised, and cursing.

Behind the back room lay a small yard, and across that a door in an eight-foot brick wall. I had grown cautious. Instead of going straight to the door I climbed on the roof of an outhouse to prospect. The door, I could see, gave into a narrow alley [Triffid Alley] running the full length of the block. It was empty. But beyond the wall on the far side which seemed to terminate the gardens of a row of private houses, I could make out the tops of two triffids motionless among the bushes. There might well be more. The wall on that side was lower, and their height would enable them to strike right across the alley with their stings. I explained to the others.

'Bloody unnatural brutes,' said one. 'I always did hate them bastards.'

I investigated further. The building next but one [artistic licence on Wyndham's part] to the north side turned out to be a car hire service [named Pri-Tax Ltd., private car hire, then, from 1950, No Risk Car Services, chauffeur-driven cars, at 1a Maryon Mews, a mews beyond the alley, off and parallel to, South End Road and normally accessible by a narrow entrance between 17 and 19 South End Road or a wider one further north between 29 and 31] with three of its cars on the premises. It was an awkward job getting the party over the two intervening walls, particularly the man with the broken arm, but we managed it. Somehow, too, I got them all packed into a large Daimler. When we were all set I opened the outer doors of the place, and ran back to the car. The triffids weren't slow to be interested. That uncanny sensitiveness to sounds told them something was happening. As we drove out, a couple of them were already lurching towards the entrance. Their stings whipped out at us, and slapped harmlessly against the closed windows. I swung hard

round, bumping one, and toppling it over. Then we were away up the road, making for a healthier neighbour hood.

(The Penguin edition, pp. 142-45; courtesy of Penguin Books)



Like many other residents of and visitors to Hampstead (including all survivors in the vicinity of the specific 1976 triffid assault described above!), I recognized the bit of London that *John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris* (I have italicised the names he used in his daily life), via his narrator, Bill Masen, is describing. I first rented a flat on South Hill Park during my 1973-74 first sabbatical from the Canadian university I taught at.

At the time, Masen's 'provision store' (the 1914 established Co-op at 7 South End Road) still existed (see my December 1980 photo below). Wyndham based Masen's 'car-hire service' on Pri-Tax Ltd., at 1a Maryon Mews which had begun operating in 1938. In 1950 the company merged with No Risk Car Service Ltd., Chauffeur-Driven cars, and the Maryon Mews branch of the company closed the following year. The Co-op closed in 1981 and together with the adjoining number 5 South End Road are now a Starbuck's and Pri-Tax's original office premises are a private residence. My dating of the triffid incident is based on a superseded opening manuscript stage of *Triffids* that includes the statement that it is 'a bit ironic that in 1965 no one was superstitious enough to give Gabriel [with his trumpet] a passing thought.' After artificial satellites were inserted in the *Triffids* MS, '1965' became '1976.'



Photo by David Ketterer

The Co-op in December 1980

My proposal to the South End Green Association in the summer of 2014 was that the still existent and then still unnamed 'narrow alley' (off the east end of Pond Street and part of Warwick Mansions) be henceforth named 'Triffid Alley'.

My reasons were and are as follows:

- (1) *The Day of the Triffids* is a 'Modern Classic' and has been so published by Penguin.
- (2) All South End Green's and Hampstead's significant literary associations should be noted and celebrated.
- (3) Wyndham's invented word 'triffid' is in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and has entered the English language. Virtually every English speaker knows what a triffid is.
- (4) The "Hampstead Heath" episode in *Triffids* is dramatically memorable and of importance to the seventeen chapter structure of the novel because it anticipates the move from London to the country following Chapter 9, 'Evacuation.' Wyndham regarded Hampstead Heath as the country within London.
- (5) From the very detailed description of South End Green and its alley, it is apparent that Wyndham knew the area very well. He and his eventual wife Grace Wilson (who both lived for many years at the Quaker-run Penn Club in Bloomsbury) were good friends of Howell and Becky Davies who lived from 1935 (to his death in '85) at 2 Pond Square in Highgate. Howell was a very Welsh Welshman and an author who, in 1938 and '39 as 'Andrew Marvell' (the metaphysical poet's cottage was once

just south of the present 2 Pond Square), published three unusual Gollancz science fiction novels. Wyndham was himself half Welsh and there is reason to suspect that he was, in part, inspired to try a new British style of science fiction by Howell's example. Wyndham mentions the 'bus terminus' at South End Green. On the occasions that he and Grace visited Howell and Becky, Wyndham and Grace would, in all probability, have taken the 24 bus from Tottenham Court Road to Hampstead Heath, walked across the Heath to Highgate and then up Swain's Lane to Pond Square. Sometimes during the Blitz while Grace and the London school where she taught were evacuated to Wales, Wyndham stayed with Howell and Becky. In case the Penn Club were bombed, he left a few changes of clothes at 2 Pond Square. It should also be noted that one of the two women Wyndham thought he should have married, Molly Cathcart Borer, lived at 28 and later 21 Langbourne Mansions off Swain's Lane from 1931 to '35 while his Bedales School life-long friend Bill Sykes lived with his recent wife at 7 Langbourne Mansions from 1933 to '36.

- (6) It seems likely that, in 1949, after completing what was then intended as the final draft of *Triffids*, Wyndham, impressed by Orwell's catastrophic dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, revised his somewhat routine opening sentence to convey a sense of time disorientation similar to that of the first sentence of Orwell's masterpiece which has clocks 'striking thirteen' (because, the reader is encouraged to reflect, future timepieces have adopted the 24 hour clock). *Triffids*, as published, opens with this: 'When a day you happen to know is Wednesday starts off sounding like a Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere.' We know that Wyndham read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the year of its publication because, in Grace's diary entry for 12 June 1949 (four days after the publication date of Orwell's classic when Wyndham must have bought his copy), she records that 'I read the first part of *Nineteen Eighty Four* by George Orwell. This is very brilliant and important. He stresses the falsification of history that is a necessity of the totalitarian state. J is disappointed (or rather his worst fears are confirmed) because I cannot read the later Gestapo torture part. So I was hurt and angry with him.' By coincidence, the University of London Senate House figures as the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and as an important setting in *Triffids*. As a censorship civil servant during WWII, Wyndham worked at Senate House when it became the Ministry of Information (and

disinformation). By a happy coincidence the kinship between Orwell and Wyndham is reflected in the fact that the (now restaurant) Booklovers' Corner second-hand bookshop where Orwell worked from the middle of October 1934 through to the end of January 1936 (while writing *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*) is at the 1 South End Road corner a few feet down Pond Street from Triffid Alley! It is reasonable to assume that almost every time Wyndham visited Molly Borer, Bill Sykes, or Howell and Becky Davies while Booklovers' Corner existed (about 1933-39), he would have checked the books on offer, and, on some of those occasions, he and Orwell would have been inside Booklovers' Corner at the same time.

Indeed, there is evidence that Wyndham did know Orwell. Sister Bede (Marion Tess Barker, one of the two daughters of Wyndham's best friend Harry "Biff" Barker) has a section on the subject in the "Reminiscences" of Wyndham that she has recently donated to the Wyndham Archive at the University of Liverpool. She writes that although she does not know when and how Wyndham and Orwell met, she affirms that they did "meet several times" and recalls that Wyndham gave her parents, "Biff" and Eileen Barker, a copy of *Nineteen Eighty-four*. She suspects that Wyndham and Orwell would not have been especially compatible.

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