

Dr Ben Felderhof

The Shire Way

II. The biographical ingredient of a proposed footpath in the West Midlands dedicated to the author J.R.R. Tolkien



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Executive Summary

Tolkien's early years in the West Midlands were the most tumultuous of his life and the story of his resilience in the face of great loss is both affecting and salutary. The qualities which equipped the author for greatness were acquired in many ways and in many places across the region, of which the most important fifty or so are listed here:

Rank	Present (and past) address	Also nearby	Significance	Building extant?	Chapter and map references
1	264 Wake Green Road (then 5 Gracewell Cottages), Sarehole	Tolkien's 'sandpit'	Tolkien's residence from summer 1896 until autumn 1900, a period he described as 'the longest-seeming and most formative part of my life'. It was subsequently the home of his maternal uncle, William.	YES	II.ii Map 7
2	'Fern Cottage', 430 Lickey Road (then 'Woodside Cottage'), Rednal	The Oratory Retreat & Rednal Hill	Tolkien's residence between June and November 1904, initially a happy time partly spent exploring Rednal Hill. The cottage was the scene of the most pivotal event of Tolkien's life, the death of his mother.	YES	II.vi Map 8
3	Birmingham Oratory, Edgbaston	The Plough and Harrow Hotel & 96 Hagley Road	Tolkien's main place of worship from c. 1902 to 1911 and the home of his guardian, Father Francis Morgan. Tolkien was educated there from April to July 1902. Nearby are the hotel where Tolkien and his wife stayed before he embarked for war in 1916 and the house which belonged to his mother's cousin, George Suffield Marris, a possible model for the Hobbit character Otho Sackville-Baggins.	YES	II.v Map 4
4	9 Ashfield Road, King's Heath	-	The house of Tolkien's maternal grandparents from the early 1890s until 1904-5 and Tolkien's own residence from April 1895 until summer 1896. He was living there when the family received news of his father's death in Bloemfontein.	YES	I.iv Map 6
5	Sarehole Mill	-	The mill where Tolkien and his younger brother played (1896-1900) and which he said 'dominated' his childhood. It may have inspired Ted Sandyman's mill in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> .	YES	II.ii Map 7

6	25 Stirling Road, Edgbaston	6 Stirling Road	Tolkien's residence from January 1905 until summer 1908, a period in which he began to excel academically but was less than happy in the care of his aunt. The widow of Dr Joseph Sampson Gamgee lived opposite at no. 6.	YES	II.vii Map 4
7	4 Highfield Road, Edgbaston	-	Tolkien's residence from autumn 1909 until autumn 1911, when he was a boarder in the MacSherry household.	YES	II.ix Map 4
8	86 Westfield Road (then also 'St Malo'), King's Heath	The Birmingham - Gloucester railway	Tolkien's residence from early 1901 until early 1902, where he may have acquired his interest in the Welsh language from coal-trucks on the adjacent railway.	YES	II.iv Map 6
9	'Westfield', 30 Fiery Hill Road (then 'The Cottage'), Barnt Green	Barnt Green railway station	Home to Tolkien's maternal aunt, Edith May Incedon, from the 1900s to c. 1916. Tolkien spent at least two Christmas holidays there and painted several watercolours in the garden. He had previously used the nearby station to commute to school in Birmingham.	YES	I.v Map 8
10	'Dormston Manor Farm' (then 'Bag End')	Church Cottage, Dormston	The residence of Tolkien's maternal aunt, Emily Jane Neave, between 1923 and 1931, after which time she lived in a nearby cottage until 1947. Tolkien visited the farm at least twice during the 1920s and borrowed its name for the home of his Hobbit protagonist.	YES	I.v Map 1
11	Moseley Bog nature reserve (known to Tolkien as 'Bumble Dell' due to the abundance of wild blackberries)	-	The former site of a mill pond which by Tolkien's time had become 'a wonderful dell with flowers' and where he and his brother played together (1896-1900).	YES	II.ii Map 7
12	The site of what was then either 21 or 37 Duchess Road, Edgbaston	-	Tolkien's residence from summer 1908 to autumn 1909, where he met his future wife, Edith Bratt, a fellow boarder.	NO	II.viii Map 4

13	The site of King Edward House, 131-138 New Street (then King Edward's School), Birmingham	The jeweller's, E.H. Lawley & Sons	Tolkien's school from September 1900 to April 1902 and January 1903 until July 1911. He had the 'deepest affection' for the 'magnificent' and 'educative' old buildings, which were demolished in 1936. Opposite was the jeweller's where Tolkien and Edith met and bought each other presents in January 1910.	NO	II.ii-ix Map 3
14	The site of what was then 26 Oliver Road, Ladywood	-	Tolkien's residence between early 1902 and spring 1904. It was reportedly 'only one degree better than a slum'.	NO	II.v Map 4
15	The site of Hazeldene Surgery (then a house called 'Hazel Dene'), Main Road, Great Haywood	'Rock Cottage', Main Road	The house where Tolkien boarded with his wife while on leave from the army between May 1916 and February 1917. They may have resided during the latter three months at nearby Rock Cottage.	NO & YES	II.Epilogue Map 9
16	The site of 214 Alcester Road, Moseley	171 Alcester Road	Tolkien's residence during the winter of 1900/1901. He remembered the house as 'dreadful'. His mother's second cousin, Winifred Elizabeth Johnson (1875-1963), would live opposite.	NO	II.iii Map 6
17	18 Cotton Lane (then 'Ivy Cottage'), Moseley	58 Grove Avenue (then 'Glen Lynn')	The house of Tolkien's maternal grandparents from 1904/5 until John Suffield's death in 1930. Tolkien said the address was one of the 'childhood memories which are a large ingredient in the make-up of the Shire'. The house opposite was occupied by John's cousin, Thomas Hillman Suffield.	YES	I.iv Map 6
18	'Orchard House', Station Road, Blackminster	-	The smallholding where Tolkien's brother, Hilary, lived between c. 1923 and 1976 and where the author was a regular visitor.	YES	II.Epilogue Map 2
19	15 Victoria Street, Warwick	-	The house where Edith lived while engaged and then married to Tolkien, and where he also stayed on numerous occasions between June 1913 and May 1916.	YES	II.Epilogue Map 1

20	Gipsy Green, Teddesley Hall Park	-	The house where Tolkien stayed with his wife and newborn first child, John, between April and June 1918. He made a coloured pencil drawing of the building, which also featured as a setting in his early collection of stories, <i>The Book of Lost Tales</i> .	YES	II.Epilogue Map 9
21	The Church of St Mary Immaculate, West Street, Warwick	-	The church where Tolkien and Edith were married on 22 nd March 1916.	YES	II.Epilogue Map 1
22	'Brackley' and/or 'Dunkeld', c. 81-103 Middleton Hall Road, Cotteridge	-	The house(s) of Tolkien's uncle, Laurence, where the newly orphaned Tolkien lived for a few weeks at the end of 1904.	YES	I.viii Map 1
23	The site of 185 Monument Road, Edgbaston	Perrott's Folly	The house where Tolkien stayed in early 1916. The 18 th -century tower Perrott's Folly is on the other side of the road.	NO	II.Epilogue Map 4
24	11 Frederick Road, Edgbaston	-	The boarding house where Tolkien stayed for a few days in autumn 1911.	YES	II.ix Map 4
25	'Manor Farm', Hinton on the Green	-	The home of Edith's oldest friend, Mabel Sheaf, whom the author's family would visit during the 1930s. Its location bears some resemblance to that of 'Crickhollow' in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> .	YES	II.Epilogue Map 2
26	The site of Wake Green Park (then 'Abbotsford', 69 Wake Green Road), Moseley	-	The house of Tolkien's paternal aunt Mabel Mitton (c. 1900s-1930s). Tolkien and his brother stayed there a number of times, particularly during the 1914-18 war.	NO	I.viii Map 6
27	St Peter's Church, Bromsgrove	-	Where the Tolkiens would attend mass while living in Rednal; and, from 1904, the location of the grave of Tolkien's mother.	YES	II.vi Map 1
28	The site of 74-78 Corporation Street (then 'Barrow's Stores'), Birmingham	-	The department store where Tolkien's fellow school librarians began to meet in the summer of 1911 and which lent its name to the resultant artistic coterie, the <i>T.C.B.S.</i>	NO	II.ix Map 3

29	The site of c. 102 Bull Street (then 'Old Lamb House', nos. 106-109), Birmingham	Carrs Lane: site of the Chartist riots of 4 th July 1839	The 16 th -century building which housed the Suffield drapery business from 1826 until demolition in 1886. It was the birthplace of Tolkien's grandfather, whose account of the nearby 1839 Chartist riot contributed some details to the 'Battle of Bywater' in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> .	NO	I.ii-iv Map 3
30	12 Greenfield Crescent, Edgbaston	Harborne Road: Tolkien's route to school	The family home (c. 1888-1913) of Christopher Wiseman, Tolkien's closest friend while they were at King Edward's together. Their argumentative walks to school would begin here.	YES	II.vii Map 4
31	The Aston Webb Building (then the First Southern General Hospital), Birmingham University, Edgbaston	The Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clock Tower	The temporary military hospital where Tolkien was treated for trench fever during November and early December 1916. The adjacent clock tower had loomed over south Edgbaston for about a decade by that time and may have inspired the towers in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> .	YES	II.Epilogue Map 5
32	Key Hill Cemetery, Hockley	Warstone Lane Cemetery	The graves of Tolkien's maternal great-great-grandparents and of a great uncle; also, the gravestone of his paternal grandparents, uncles and aunts, which includes the name of Tolkien's father. Samuel Wilson Suffield (I) was buried in nearby Warstone Lane Cemetery.	YES	I.ii Map 1
33	The site of 2-4 Willersey Road (then Sarehole Farm)	-	The home of Arthur Purser, whom Tolkien and his brother in childhood called 'The Black Ogre', as well as his wife, Alice Burgoyne, daughter of the diminutive local farmer Jabez Buggins.	NO	II.ii Map 7
34	<i>The Ivy Bush</i> , 181 Hagley Road, Edgbaston	-	A pub at the heart of Tolkien's north Edgbaston neighbourhood (1902-1911), the name of which he gave to an inn in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> .	YES	II.vii Map 4
35	56 Chantry Road (then 'Woodville'), Moseley	-	The house of Tolkien's Aunt May around the turn of the twentieth century, where he and his cousins may have invented their secret languages.	YES	I.v Map 6

36	90 Trafalgar Road (then 'Malvern House'), Moseley	-	The childhood home of Tolkien's mother (c. 1870s-1891).	YES	I.iv Map 6
37	Trittiford Mill Pool (then Titterford Mill), Yardley Wood	-	The location of a mill and pond where a young Tolkien and his brother would cut reeds to fashion into whistles (1896-1900).	YES	II.ii Map 7
38	The site of 64 Yardley Wood Road (then 'Firfield'), Showell Green	The site of 58 Yardley Wood Road (then 'Mayfield')	The house of Tolkien's great-grandfather from c. 1867 until 1891. In 1871, Tolkien's grandfather was living next door, in a house that was the probable birthplace of the author's mother.	NO	I.iii Map 6
39	The Church of All Saints, Evesham	The Church of St Lawrence	The parish churches of some of the earlier Suffields, including John (c. 1644-1712), whose plaque can be found in the narthex of All Saints' Church.	YES	I.i Map 2
40	An unknown address on Stockfield Road, Acocks Green	-	The location of the house where Tolkien's uncle William Suffield lived with his wife Beatrice (c. 1898-1900). Tolkien recalled walking there from Sarehole with his mother.	?	I.v Map 1
41	An unknown address on Hall Road, Handsworth	-	The birthplace of Tolkien's father in 1857.	?	I.vii Map 1
42	c. 164-174 Birmingham Road (then 38 Grove Crescent), West Bromwich	-	The row where Tolkien's close friend Geoffrey Bache Smith and his family lived (c. 1890s-1916).	?	Appendix B Map 1
43	70 New Street, Birmingham	87 New Street	The music shop of Tolkien's paternal grandfather from 1848 until he was obliged to relocate to the other side of the street in 1870. The shop remained at no. 87 until 1877.	YES	I.vii Map 3
44	28 Forest Road (then 'Elmdon'), Moseley	-	The house of Tolkien's father at the time he met and became engaged to Mabel Suffield (c. 1886-1891).	YES	I.vii Map 6
45	55 Church Road (then no. 15), Moseley	53 Church Road (then no. 16)	The house of Tolkien's paternal grandmother and her youngest sons, Wilfrid and Laurence (c. the late 1880s until c. 1900). In 1891, Tolkien's Aunt Mabel and her family lived next door.	YES	I.vii-viii Map 6
46	All Saints' Church, King's Heath	The site of the King's Heath Institute	The church where Tolkien's paternal grandparents were married on 16 th February 1856.	YES	I.vii Map 6

47	The site of 93-97 Elmdon Lane (then 'Canterbury House'), Marston Green	-	The house (c. 1900-1929) of Tolkien's headmaster at King Edward's, Cary Gilson, and of his close schoolfriend, Robert Quilter Gilson.	NO	II.vii Map 1
48	The vicinity of Overdale Court (then the location of a house called 'Ivy Lodge'), Moseley	-	The house(s) where Tolkien's father lived during his adolescence (c. 1870s).	?	I.vii Map 6
49	The King Edward's School playing-fields, Eastern Road, Edgbaston	The post-1936 K.E.S. Edgbaston campus	The pitches where Tolkien used to play rugby (1902-1912), including as the team-mate of the future Field Marshal Slim. An intraschool match on these fields in 1911 was the subject of his juvenile mock-heroic poem 'The Battle of the Eastern Field'. On the opposite side of the Bristol Road are the K.E.S. premises which Tolkien viewed in 1944 and found 'ghastly utterly third-rate'.	YES	II.ix Map 5
50	A site in the vicinity of 65 Rodney Close (then 10 Dawlish Place, Monument Road), Ladywood	-	While Tolkien was living a short distance away, this was the house (c. 1911) of one of his mother's second cousins. Lilian Suffield had married Frederick J. Turner, whose occupation was 'ring maker'.	NO	Appendix A Map 4
51	206 Leach Green Lane, Rednal	-	One of the two boarding houses where Tolkien may have stayed during summer 1909 to prepare for an Oxford University exam and where he took Edith during the secretive excursion which resulted in their long separation.	YES	II.viii Map 8

Maps

Map 1: An Overview of the West Midlands

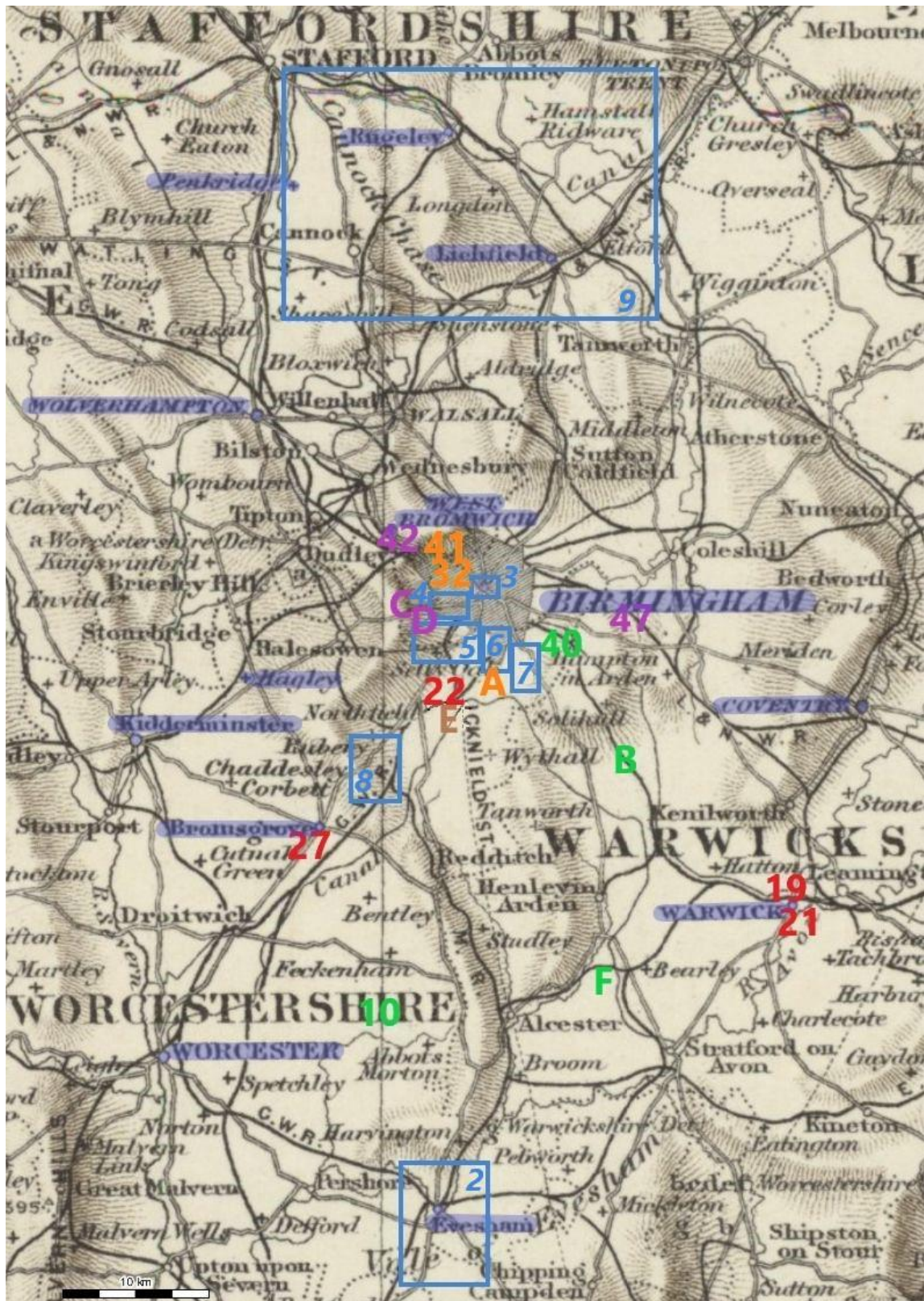


Figure 1: An Ordnance Survey map of the early 1900s showing some of the locations mentioned in this essay. The numbered blue rectangles correspond to the more detailed maps which follow.

Key

Sites of greater importance:

- 10 'Bag End', Dormston
- 19 15 Victoria Street, Warwick
- 21 The Church of St Mary Immaculate, Warwick
- 22 'Brackley'/'Dunkeld', Middleton Hall Road, Cotteridge
- 27 St Peter's Church, Bromsgrove
- 32 The Key Hill & Warstone Lane Cemeteries
- 40 Stockfield Road, Acocks Green
- 41 Hall Road, Handsworth
- 42 Grove Crescent, West Bromwich
- 47 Canterbury House, Marston Green

Sites of lesser importance:

- A The Tolkien family home on the Alcester Road, c. 1881
- B The Forest Hotel, Dorridge, where Tolkien's uncle was the innkeeper in the late 1890s
- C 49 Sandon Road, Edgbaston: home of Tolkien's school-friend G.F. Cottrell in 1911
- D 'Earlsfield', Westfield Road, Edgbaston: home of Tolkien's school-friend T.K. Barnsley in 1911
- E St Nicolas' Church, King's Norton, which Tolkien painted from a distance in 1913
- F Lower Farm, Newnham: where Tolkien's cousin, Frank Sydney Suffield, hosted other family members, c. 1930s-1950s

The colours used for each notation signify the following:

- RED A site of direct relevance to Tolkien himself
- GREEN A site related to members of the Suffield family
- ORANGE A site related to members of the Tolkien family
- PURPLE A site related to one of Tolkien's school-friends
- BROWN Other sites

Map 2: The Evesham Area

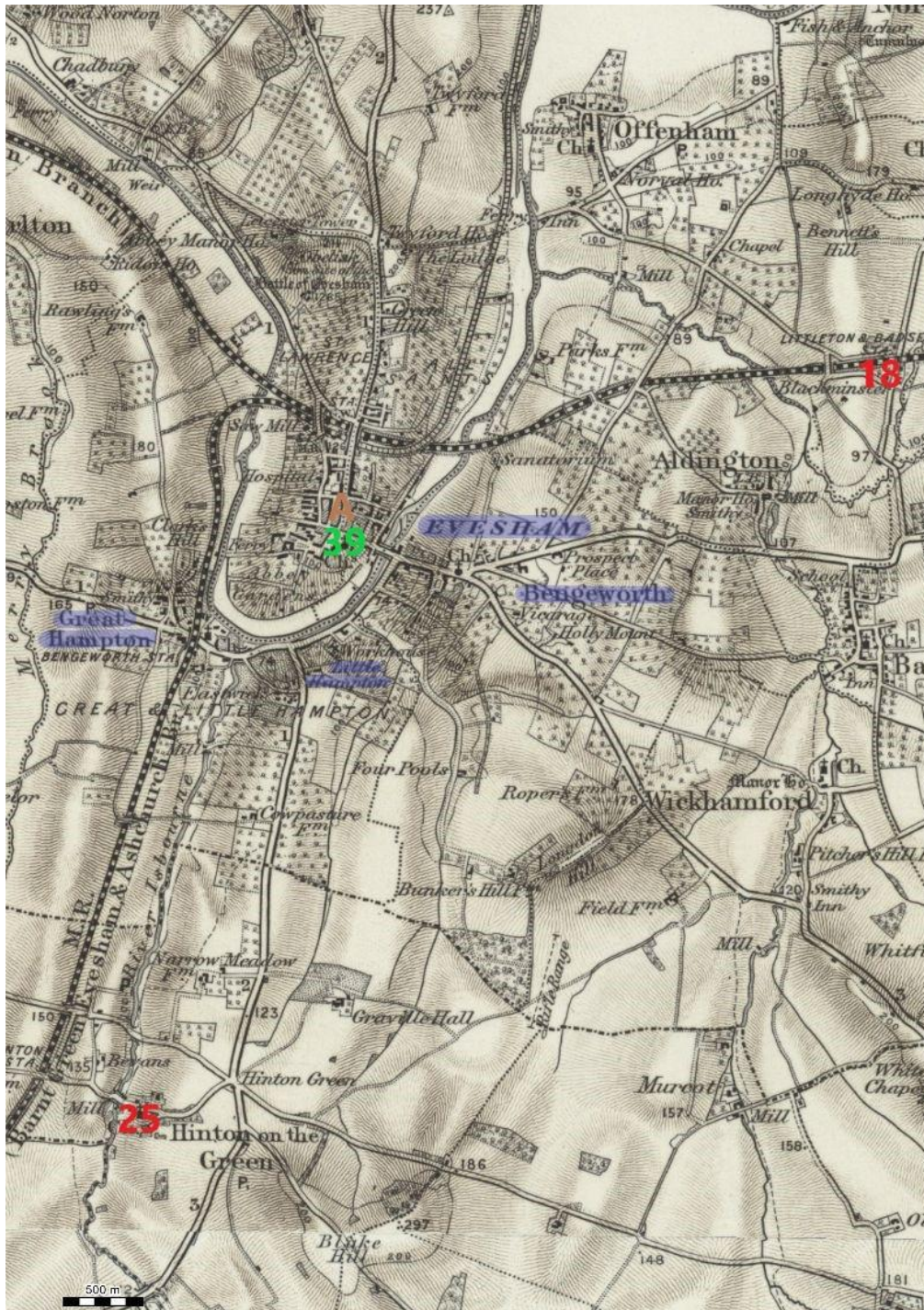


Figure 2: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing the Evesham area in more detail.

- 18 Orchard House, Blackminster
- 25 Manor Farm & St Peter's Church, Hinton on the Green
- 39 All Saints' Church, Evesham

- A Dresden School (now 51 High Street), Evesham, where Tolkien's wife was educated

Map 3: Birmingham Centre

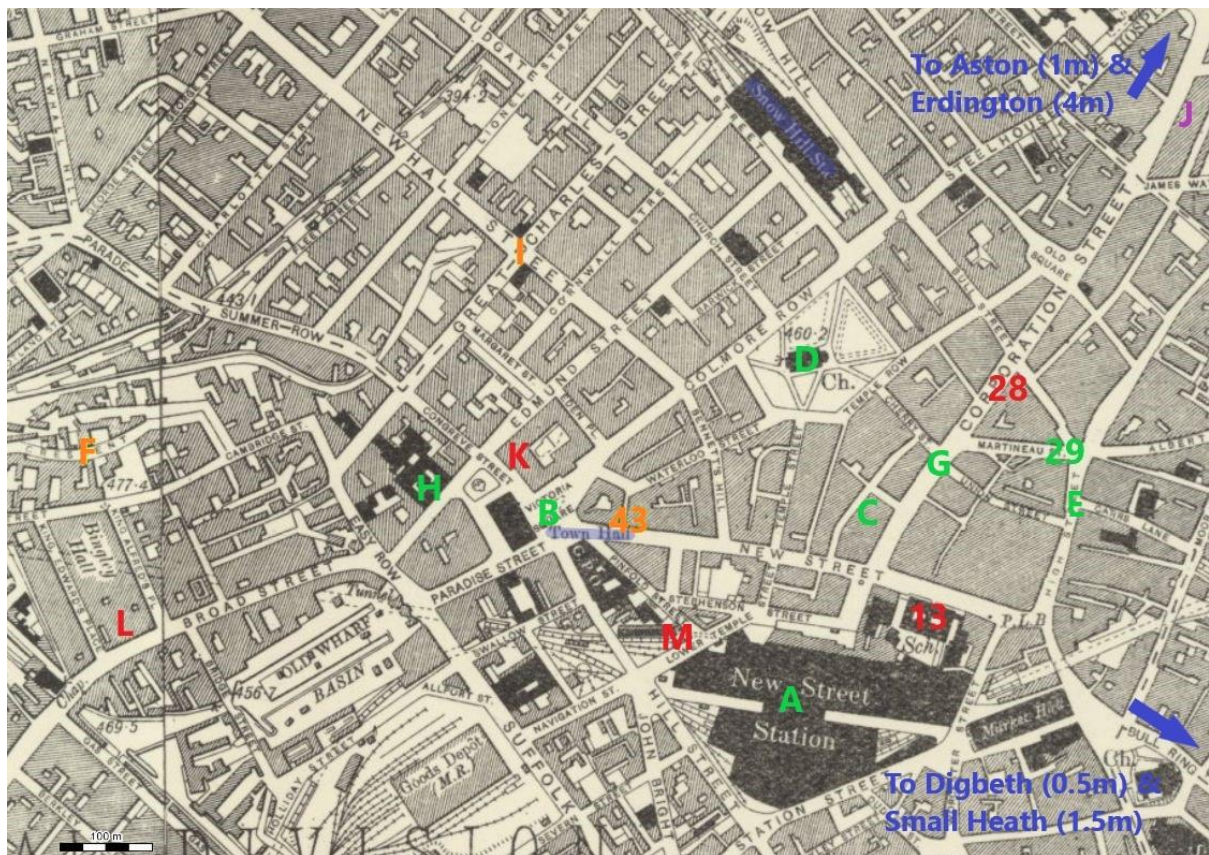


Figure 3: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing Birmingham centre in more detail.

- 13 King Edward's School, New Street (& the jeweller's, E.H. Lawley & Sons)
- 28 Barrow's Stores, Corporation Street
- 29 Old Lamb House, Bull Street, & the Suffield warehouse on Crooked Lane
- 43 70 New Street: John B. Tolkien's music shop (& 87 New Street opposite)
- A The site of William Suffield's early printing shop, c. 1810-1813
New Street Station, where Tolkien's aunt acted as his parents' go-between, c. 1888
- B The site of Samuel Wilson Suffield's grocery, c. 1830s & 1840s
- C The site of the Baptist chapel where Tolkien's maternal grandfather was baptised in 1833
- D St Philip's Cathedral (then Church), where John Suffield was christened for a second time, c. 1830s
- E The scene of the Chartist riots, 4th July 1839
- F The Crescent, a childhood home of Tolkien's father, c. mid-1860s
- G 39 Corporation Street: the Suffield drapery shop shortly before bankruptcy, c. late 1880s
- H Mason College, where Tolkien's maternal aunt received physiology tuition, c. late 1880 & early 1890s
- I Great Charles Street, where Tolkien's paternal uncle Wilfrid lived around 1901
- J Methodist Central Hall, Corporation Street: one achievement of Christopher Wiseman's father, 1903-4
- K The Council House, whose clock tower Tolkien and Edith could hear during their late-night 'window talks', c. 1909
- L The Prince of Wales Theatre, where Tolkien met Edith on 16th February 1910
- M The stop on Navigation Street where Tolkien likely caught the tram to the K.E.S. grounds in Edgbaston, early 1900s & 1944

Map 4: North Edgbaston

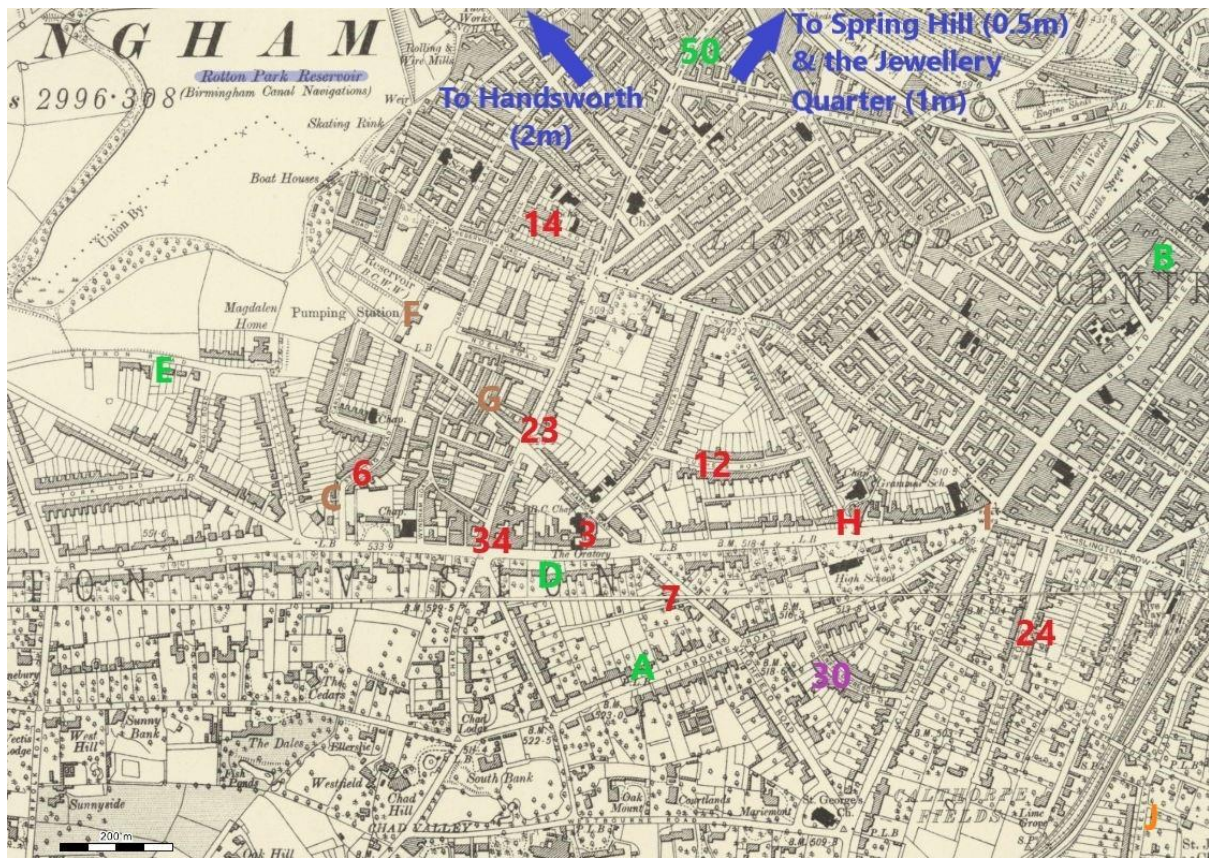


Figure 4: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing north Edgbaston in more detail.

- | | |
|----|--|
| 3 | Birmingham Oratory, Hagley Road |
| 6 | 25 Stirling Road |
| 7 | 4 Highfield Road |
| 12 | 21/37 Duchess Road |
| 14 | 26 Oliver Road |
| 23 | 185 Monument Road |
| 24 | 11 Frederick Road |
| 30 | 12 Greenfield Crescent |
| 34 | <i>The Ivy Bush</i> |
| 50 | Dawlish Place, Monument Road |
| A | 93 Harborne Road, the house of Tolkien's maternal great-grandparents, c. 1851 |
| B | The site of the iron foundry where John Suffield worked, c. early 1890s |
| C | 6 Stirling Road, home of the family of Dr J. Sampson Gamgee, c. 1891-1901 |
| D | 96 Hagley Road, home of Tolkien's cousin once removed George Suffield Marris, c. 1901 |
| E | 22 Vernon Road, home of George Suffield Marris, c. 1911 |
| F | The Edgbaston Waterworks |
| G | Perrott's Folly |
| H | The corner of Francis Road and the Hagley Road, where Tolkien saw Edith for the last time before she left Birmingham, 2 nd March 1910 |
| I | Five Ways junction, on Tolkien's route to and from school |
| J | 62 Wheelays Road, the house of Tolkien's Uncle Wilfrid in 1911 |

Map 5: South Edgbaston

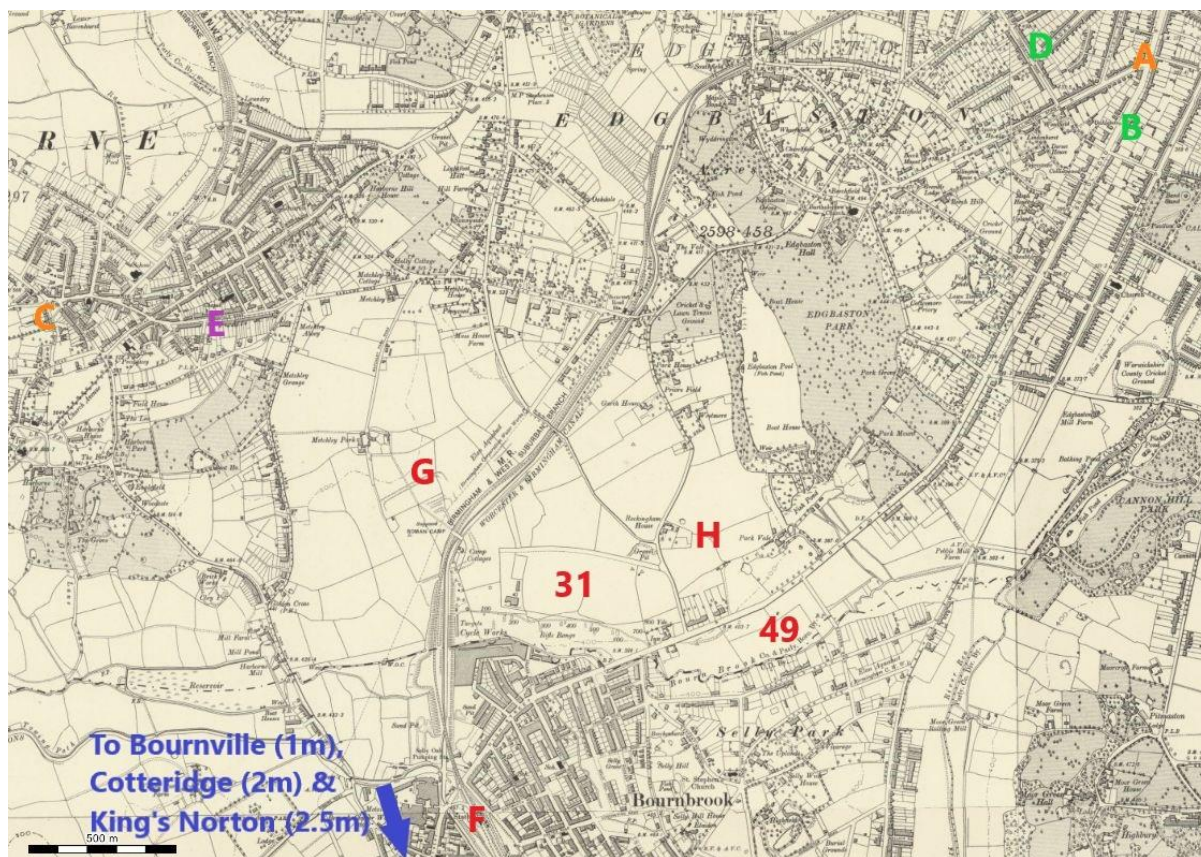


Figure 5: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing south Edgbaston in more detail.

- 31 The site of the University of Birmingham and First Southern General Hospital
- 49 The Eastern Road playing-fields

- A The site of Haydn Place, where Tolkien's paternal grandfather lived in the late-1840s and where he likely met Tolkien's grandmother, Mary Jane Stow
- B The site of what was then 382 Bristol Road, the house of Tolkien's maternal great-grandfather, c. 1861
- C 6 Albert Road, the house of Tolkien's half-aunt, Louisa Holden, c. 1881
- D The site of what was then 81 Gough Road, the house of Tolkien's aunt, Edith May Incedon, c. 1891
- E 77 Greenfield Road, home of Tolkien's school-friends, W.H. and R.S. Payton, c. 1901-1911
- F Selly Oak railway station, where the invalided Tolkien was disembarked on 9th November 1916
- G Birmingham University Hospital, where Tolkien was assessed by an army medical board on 23rd January 1917
- H The site of King Edward's School from 1936 until the present day

Map 6: Moseley and King's Heath

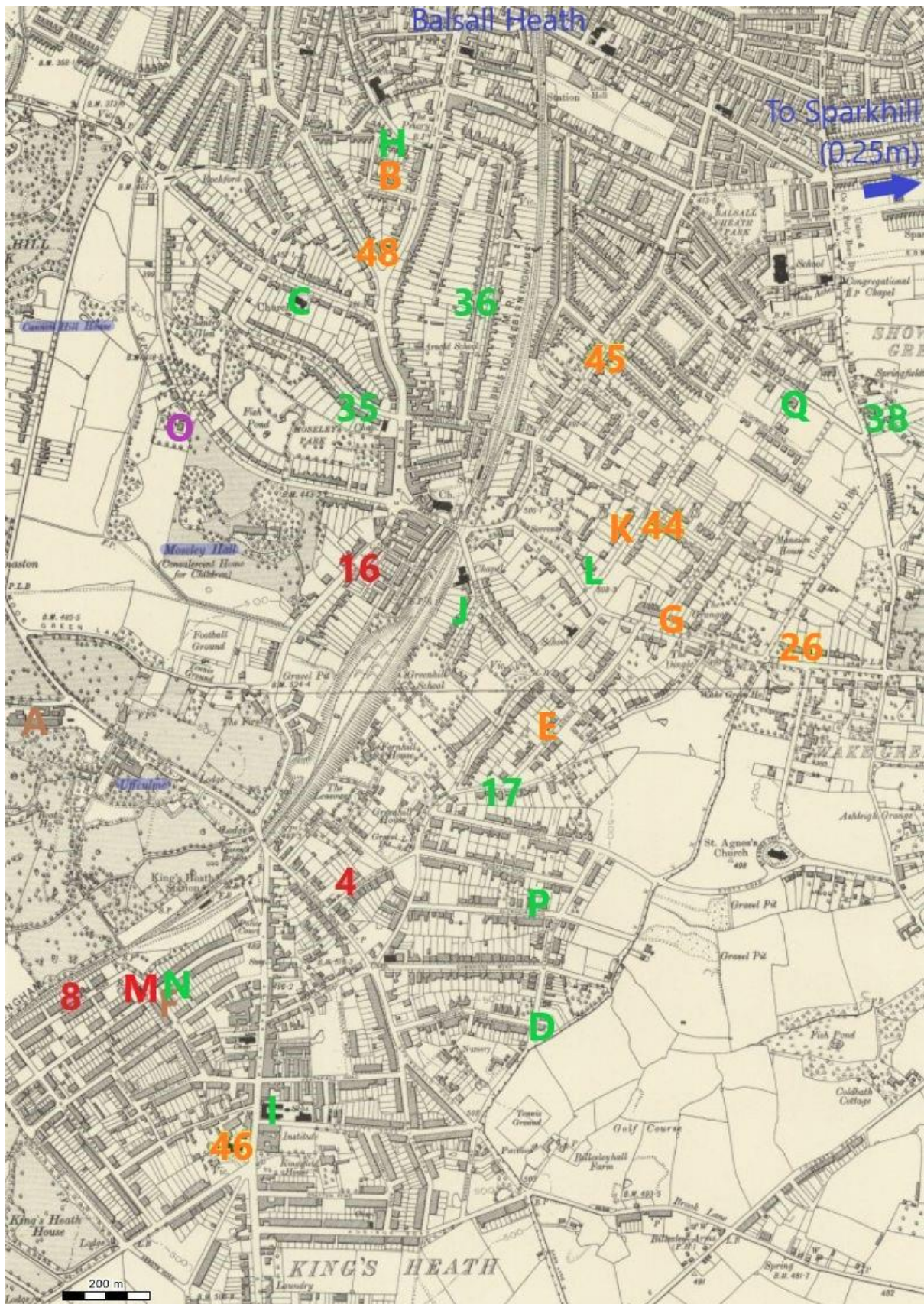


Figure 6: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing the Moseley area in more detail.

- 4 9 Ashfield Road
- 8 86 Westfield Road (& the Birmingham-Gloucester railway to the rear)
- 16 214 Alcester Road (& 171 Alcester Road)
- 17 'Ivy Cottage', 18 Cotton Lane (& 'Glen Lynn', 58 Grove Avenue)
- 26 'Abbotsford', Wake Green Road
- 35 'Woodville', 56 Chantry Road
- 36 'Malvern House', 90 Trafalgar Road
- 38 'Firfield' & 'Mayfield', Stoney Lane/Yardley Wood Road
- 44 'Elmdon', 28 Forest Road
- 45 55 & 53 Church Road
- 46 All Saints' Church
- 48 'Ivy Lodge', Park Road
- A Highbury Hall, the residence of the Chamberlain family, 1878-1919
- B 4 Augusta Road, the first marital home of Tolkien's aunt Mabel Mitton, *c.* 1881
- C St Anne's Church, where Tolkien's Aunt May was married to Walter Incedon in 1890
- D 'Nora Villas', 87 Clarence Road, house of Tolkien's uncle John Suffield (III), *c.* 1891
- E 34 Grove Avenue, probably the first marital home of Tolkien's aunt, Florence Hadley, *c.* 1891
- F Site of 'The Grange', a mansion demolished in 1895 to make way for terraced housing
- G 'Kylemore', 45/47 Wake Green Road, house of Florence and Tom Hadley in 1901
- H 11 Edgbaston Road, the boarding house run by Tolkien's great-grandfather's widow, Eliza Suffield, *c.* 1891-1904
- I The King's Heath Institute, where Tolkien's mother and Aunt Jane attended a party in September 1895
- J 'The Vron', 6 Ascot Road, house of Mabel Tolkien's aunt Sarah Swindall Marris, *c.* 1901
- K 'Carisbrooke', 130 Anderton Park Road, the Mittons' house in 1901
- L 'Winterdyne', 23 Wake Green Road, home of Samuel Wilson Suffield (II)'s family, *c.* 1901
- M St Dunstan's Church, one of the first Catholic churches which Tolkien attended, 1901-2
- N 95 Station Road, house of Mabel Tolkien's cousin, Mark Oliver Suffield (jr.), *c.* 1911
- O 2 Amesbury Road, the home in 1911 of Tolkien's adversary in 'The Battle of the Eastern Field', E.B. Alabaster
- P 79 Blenheim Road, house of Tolkien's second cousin once removed Samuel Wilson Suffield (III), *c.* 1911
- Q 64 Woodstock Road, house of Tolkien's cousin twice removed Joseph Willey Suffield, *c.* 1911

Map 7: Sarehole and the River Cole

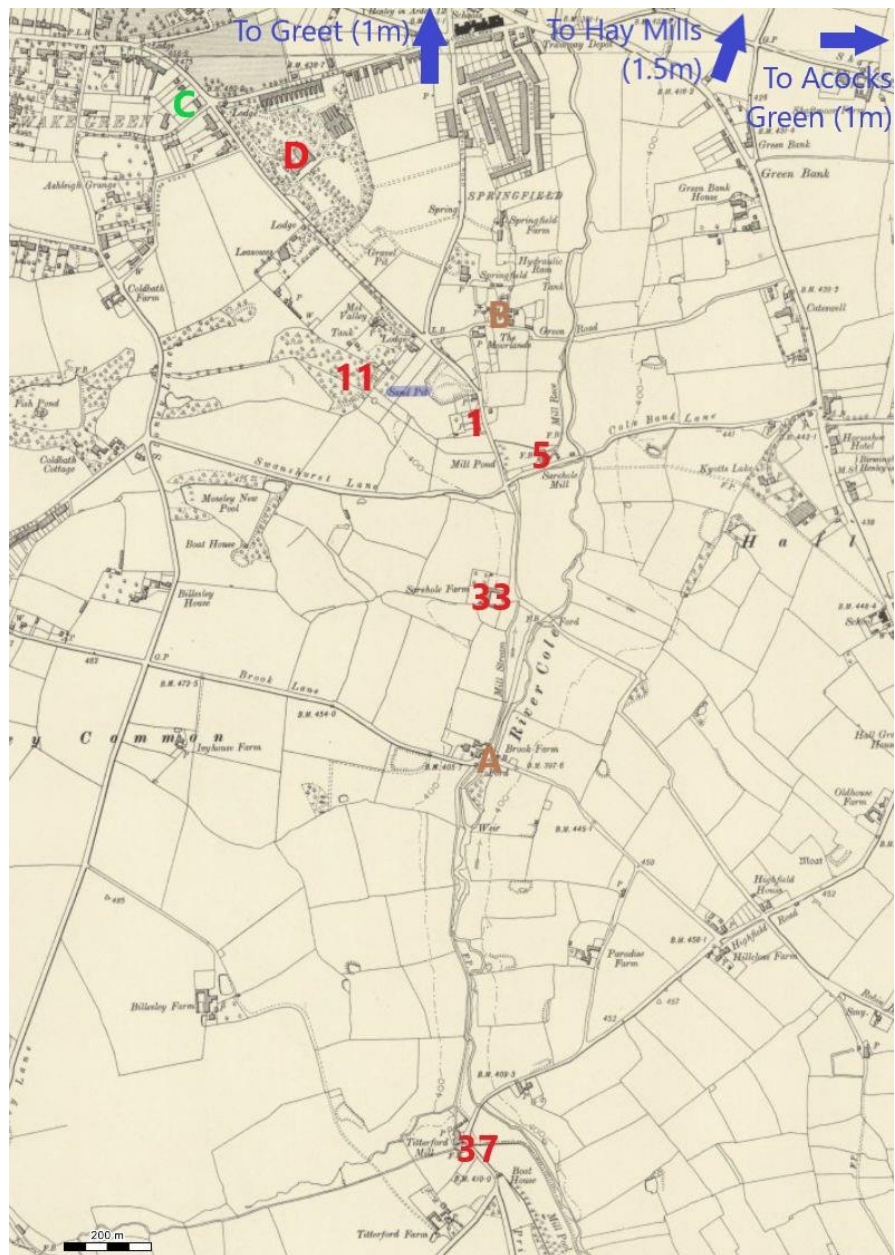


Figure 7: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing the valley of the River Cole in more detail.

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | 5 Gracewell Cottages, Wake Green Road |
| 5 | Sarehole Mill |
| 11 | 'Bumble Dell' or Moseley Bog |
| 33 | Sarehole Farm |
| 37 | Titterford Mill Pond |
| A | Four Arches Bridge, c. 1820-present |
| B | Arthur H. Foster's 'Chalet' on Green Road, c. 1880-1928 |
| C | 'Gleneader', 1-3 Hayfield Road, house of John Suffield's cousin Thomas Hillman Suffield, c. 1881-91 |
| D | The Pine Dell Hydropathic Establishment & Moseley Botanical Gardens, 1892-1900 |

Map 8: Rednal, Barnt Green and the Lickey Hills

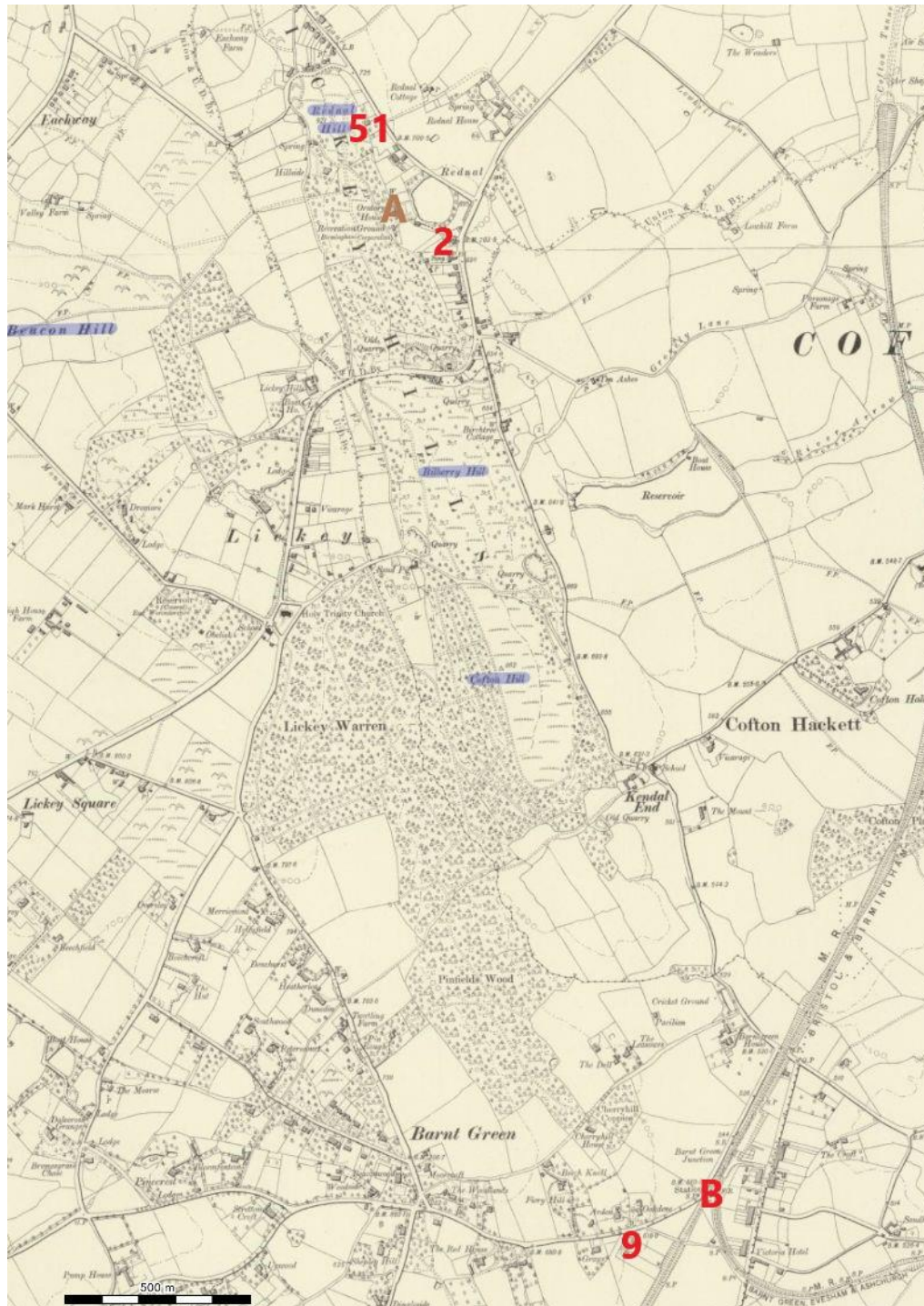


Figure 8: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing the Lickey Hills in more detail.

- 2 'Woodside Cottage', 430 Lickey Road
- 9 'The Cottage' or 'Westfield', 30 Fiery Hill Road
- 51 206 Leach Green Lane

- A The Oratory Retreat
- B Barnt Green railway station, part of Tolkien's journey to and from school in 1904

Map 9: Lichfield and Cannock Chase

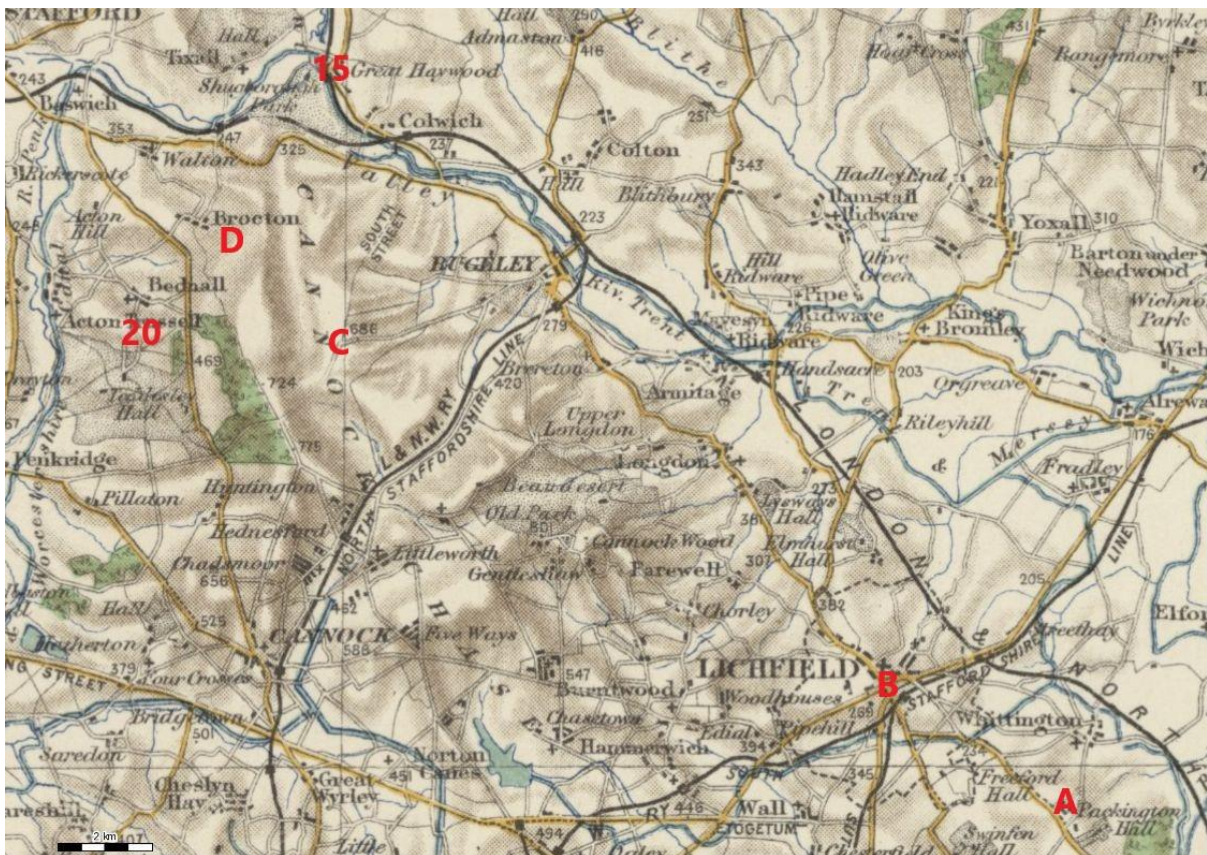


Figure 9: An O.S. map of the early 1900s showing Cannock Chase in more detail.

- 15 'Hazel Dene' & 'Rock Cottage', Great Haywood
- 20 Gipsy Green, Teddesley Hay

- A Whittington Heath, where Tolkien was encamped during August & September 1915
- B The George Hotel, Lichfield, where the core of the T.C.B.S. gathered for the last time on 25th September 1915
- C 'Penkridge', Rugeley Camp, where Tolkien was billeted from October to December 1915 and again in the spring of 1918
- D Brocton Camp, where Tolkien was billeted from December 1915 until May 1916 and again in the summer of 1918

Introduction

In my first essay justifying the creation of the Shire Way, I argued that a walking route across the West Midlands of England could sufficiently imitate a journey described in *The Lord of the Rings* as to kindle the imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien's international readership, motivating some to seek in the region a physical connection to his Shire landscape. I also asserted that the popularity of Birmingham's present Tolkien Trail was constrained by its entirely biographical purview and lack of association with the author's fictional works. It may seem logically inconsistent of me, therefore, to dedicate so large a sequel to a history of the lives of Tolkien, his ancestors and his relatives. However, the essence of my complaint about the ten sites which constitute the Trail is that they do not adequately convey the breadth and depth of Tolkien's association with the area. And, although the ambition of the Shire Way is to entertain as well as inform, a detailed biographical ingredient is nevertheless indispensable.

The main appeal of the footpath to readers of *The Lord of the Rings* will lie not in its realism but in its authenticity. And we should not underestimate the number of people whose imaginations are stimulated less by the sight a row of colourful round doors or an actor wearing prosthetic Elf-ears than by the notion that the road, river, woodland or hillside being traversed is one which Tolkien may have experienced and envisioned while he wrote. Such credibility will not be easy to establish, especially in the parts of Birmingham which have undergone the greatest change since the turn of the twentieth century, but wholly impossible if the wayfarers are unaware of the narrative of Tolkien's early life and the significance which he may have attached to specific Midland locations.

Tolkien himself believed that biography can shed little light on an author's narrative art, the origin of an idea being of less importance to him than how it is used.¹ This conviction grew during his later years in proportion to his celebrity, strengthening from a 'doubt' in 1957 to 'one of [his] strongest opinions' by 1971.² In one letter, he wrote that 'only one's guardian Angel, or indeed God Himself, could unravel the real relationship between personal facts and an author's works. Not the author himself (although he knows more than any investigator), and certainly not so-called "psychologists".'³ However, his main objection, as a scholar who had himself theorised about the identity and attributes of the medieval 'Gawain Poet', was to the impertinence of those who wrote speculatively about *still-living* authors, causing 'distaste and irritation' to the victim:⁴

Still I wish it could be forbidden that after a great man is dead, little men should scribble over him, who have not and must know they have not sufficient knowledge of his life and character to give them any key to the truth.⁵

¹ Carpenter, Humphrey (ed.). *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Harper Collins. 1981. Letter 337: From a letter to 'Mr Wrigley' (25 May 1972).

² Ibid. Letter 199: From a letter to Caroline Everett (24 June 1957) & Letter 329: From a letter to Peter Szabó Szentmihályi (October 1971).

³ Letter 213: From a letter to Deborah Webster (25 October 1958).

⁴ Letter 284: To W.H. Auden (23 February 1966).

⁵ Letter 261: From a letter to Anne Barrett, Houghton Mifflin Co. (30 August 1964).

One of the ‘little men’ he may have had in mind was the Swedish translator Åke Joel Ohlmarks, who made the claim in his introduction to *The Lord of the Rings* that the story contains ‘reminiscences of journeys on foot in his own youth up into the Welsh border-regions’. Tolkien complained to the publisher: ‘As Bilbo said of the dwarves, he seems to know as much of my private pantries as I do myself. Or pretends to. I never walked in Wales or the marches in my youth.’⁶ The English Midlands, as we shall see, are another matter.

It is not the intention of this essay to criticise Tolkien’s narrative art, except in the limited sense of exploring a very few of the roots of *The Lord of the Rings*. I will not exaggerate the similarity between Tolkien’s childhood haunts and places within his Shire setting. The Shire Way will be an attempt only to imitate the journey of Frodo and his friends, based on arguably fortuitous geographical correlations; one can use no stronger words than that. Nor will this essay elucidate the secret depths of Tolkien’s personality, except perhaps in suggesting that his early experiences of coping with bereavement can be detected in his mythology’s central theme of mortality as a ‘gift’ and the enticement of a ‘counterfeit immortality’.⁷

My own opinion is that an author’s biography can clarify the relationship between real and fictional settings, but also between real and fictional persons (or, in this case, hobbits). We may be sure that Tolkien extrapolated certain Hobbit characteristics from his own personality and experiences. This idea can be taken too far, of course, as Tolkien complained that BBC producers had done in obliging him to attend a firework display for the filming of a 1968 documentary: ‘a thing,’ he said, ‘I have not done since I was a boy. Fireworks have no special relation to me.’⁸ But I believe that the Hobbit preoccupation with genealogy and family politics *is* autobiographical in origin, with Tolkien transposing into his fiction some of the characters he knew and heard about in childhood.⁹

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins is described as the product of two contrasting families, with the two sides of his nature pulling him in different directions. The inhibited but respectable Baggins in him enjoys most of all being ensconced in his own arm-chair and causes Bilbo to collapse ‘shaking like a jelly that was melting’ at the first mention of mortal danger. He looks and at first behaves ‘like a second edition of his solid and comfortable father’, but Bilbo has also ‘got something a bit queer in his make-up from the Took side, something that only waited for a chance to come out’. This wildness in the blood, attributed by others to a union betwixt Took and fairy in the remote past, is responsible for the disreputable tendency among members of that clan to have adventures. In Bilbo, it presents as an urge to ‘go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking-stick’.

The biographer Humphrey Carpenter saw the incongruous familial traits striving within Bilbo as an explanation of Tolkien’s own character, which begot a life that was in some respects

⁶ Letter 229: From a letter to Allen & Unwin (23 February 1961).

⁷ See Letter 154 on the Elves as ‘embalmers’ of mortal Middle-earth and Letter 212 on counterfeit immortality as ‘the chief bait of Sauron’.

⁸ Letter 301: From a letter to Donald Swann (29 February 1968). See also ‘[Tolkien in Oxford](#)’. BBC Television. 30th March 1968.

⁹ See, for example, Arthur Tolkien’s letter to his mother of 4th January 1892, as quoted in Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. George Allen & Unwin. 1987. 20.

extraordinary but in others remarkably humdrum. He points out furthermore that Bilbo was ‘son of the lively Belladonna Took, herself one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took’, just as Tolkien was ‘son of the enterprising Mabel Suffield, herself one of the three remarkable daughters of old John Suffield (who lived to be nearly a hundred)’.¹⁰ Thus, Carpenter implies, we may read Bilbo’s lineage as a likeness of Tolkien’s own, with the curious Took standing for the artistic Suffields and the Baggins family for the solid and respectable Tolkiens.

There are flaws in this theory.¹¹ John Suffield would have scoffed at the comment, made about the corresponding Hobbit families, that ‘[the Suffields] were not as respectable as [the Tolkiens], though they were undoubtedly richer’. My own research suggests a less direct relationship between the family histories of Tolkien and his Hobbits, with aspects of the Baggins ancestry also having a Suffield provenance. For example, he writes of how Laura Baggins remained leader of the dynasty after the death of her husband and until she was one hundred and two years old, meaning that ‘her son Bungo [Bilbo’s father] did not become “head”... until he was 70’.¹² It strikes me as more than just coincidental that when Tolkien’s deceased great-grandfather’s second wife died in Birmingham during the first half of 1904, John Suffield was the eldest son and aged exactly seventy.

How extensive and accurate was Tolkien’s knowledge of his own family, it is hard to say. Late in life, he wrote that he would have liked to find out more about his ‘kith and kin’ but thought it now unlikely he would ever do so.¹³ As a boy he had been regaled with the supposedly heroic exploits of his German forefathers by his Aunt Grace, and yet we are told by Carpenter that Tolkien ‘came to feel far closer to [his mother’s family] than to the family of his dead father’.¹⁴ This was partly due to the influence of his maternal grandfather, in whose Birmingham house Tolkien lived upon arriving from South Africa, aged three. John Suffield was enormously proud of his ancestors, who had been engravers and plate-makers, and he demonstrated some of their skill in his own craftsmanship. He would ‘talk with pride about how King William IV had given the family a coat of arms because they did fine work for him, and how Lord Suffield was a distant relative (which was not true)’.

There is a hint of disdain in Carpenter’s depiction of an old man’s hauteur ‘in the matter of ancestry which in many ways was all he had left to be proud of’. Andrew Morton, by contrast, writes in *Tolkien’s Bag End* that John Suffield was ‘right at least in asserting the proud pedigree of his family’:

The Suffields went back several generations in the district of Evesham known as Bengeworth, where they had connections with the printing and publishing trade. They were on the top rung of the artisan ladder. Some of the family were certainly highly literate

¹⁰ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 179.

¹¹ Note that Tolkien’s paternal grandfather also reached old age, dying at the age of eighty-nine, and was father to three daughters by the author’s grandmother (and several more by his first wife).

¹² Letter 214: To A.C. Nunn (draft), c. 1958/59.

¹³ Burns, Maggie. *Roots and Reality*. Unpublished. 6.

¹⁴ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 26.

craftsmen at least, and a copy of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, signed 'Sam Suffield, Bengworth 1789', shows that intellectual traditions in the family went back a long way.¹⁵

The late-eighteenth-century Suffields were nonconformist in their religious beliefs but, as a mixture of influential burgers and itinerant tradesmen, very much part of a nascent English middle class.¹⁶

Tolkien seems to have been less interested in the Suffields' recent history than in their deep past, as a letter encouraging his son Christopher to read Frank Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England* indicates:

Still, I hope one day you'll be able (if you wish) to delve into this intriguing story of the origins of our peculiar people. And indeed of us in particular. For barring the Tolkien (which must long ago have become a pretty thin strand) you are a Mercian or Hwiccian (of Wychwood) on both sides.¹⁷

The Hwicce were the Anglo-Saxon people whose territory was roughly consonant with that of the old diocese of Worcester and is probably a reference to Tolkien's maternal heritage. He is not dismissing the importance his father's family: his intention is rather to downplay Christopher's Germanic roots and emphasise the fact that all four of his own grandparents were born in England. This betrays a sensitivity, exacerbated by the war-blighted period in which Tolkien lived, that his surname, his birthplace in the Orange Free State and his interest in Teutonic languages and mythologies might lead others to doubt his national allegiance.¹⁸

Three further passages from Tolkien's correspondence, reproduced below in reverse chronological order, confirm that he used his family background to justify his claims to a regional and therefore a national homeland. The adumbration with which Tolkien proclaims himself a Suffield is noteworthy because his relationship with both branches of his family in the years immediately after his mother's conversion to Catholicism in 1900 was far from positive. He came to believe that at least some of the Suffields had cut their ties with Mabel for her religious beliefs, leading to her premature death.¹⁹ And this bitterness may be cited *erroneously* as a reason to doubt the salience of the family in Tolkien's self-image and therefore as a defect in the rationale for a Shire Way between Birmingham and Evesham.²⁰ It is also important to perceive his

¹⁵ Morton, Andrew H.. *Tolkien's Bag End*. Brewin Books. 2009. 3. The book is probably that also mentioned by Burns (*Roots*. 10) as belonging to Jane Neave (née Suffield).

¹⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 11. However, none of the three Suffields who built the new Methodist chapel in Evesham in 1808 was Tolkien's direct ancestor (see [May, George. The History of Evesham. 1834. 135-6](#)).

¹⁷ Letter 95: From a letter to Christopher Tolkien (18 January 1945).

¹⁸ Beside his German-sounding name, Tolkien described his birthplace of Bloemfontein as 'another fallacious fact', 'since I was shipped home in 1895, and have spent most of 60 years since in Birmingham and Oxford, except for 5 or 6 years in Leeds' (Letter 165: To the Houghton Mifflin Co. (June 1955)).

¹⁹ Tolkien's letters contain hints of religious tensions between him and members of his family. For example, in Letter 153, Tolkien remembers 'a Protestant relation who to me objected to the (modern) Catholic habit of calling priests Father, because the name father belonged only to the First Person'.

²⁰ Indeed, I have seen no evidence explicitly confirming that Tolkien visited Evesham, though it is probable he did so while visiting his brother in Blackminster or his wife's closest friend in Hinton on the Green (both of their houses

distinction between ‘the marches’ of Wales, meaning approximately the historic counties of Cheshire, Shropshire and Herefordshire, where Tolkien said he never walked in his youth, and ‘the counties upon the Welsh Marches’, primarily Staffordshire and Worcestershire, where Tolkien says he is at home:

After 150 years (now 200) my father and his immediate kin were extremely ‘British’. Neither among them nor others of the name whom I have since met have I found any who showed any linguistic interests, or any knowledge of even modern German. My interest in languages was derived solely from my mother, a Suffield (a family coming from Evesham in Worcestershire). She knew German, and gave me my first lessons in it. She was also interested in etymology, and aroused my interest in this; and also in alphabets and handwriting.²¹

I am in fact far more of a Suffield (a family deriving from Evesham in Worcestershire), and it is to my mother who taught me (until I obtained a scholarship at the ancient Grammar School in Birmingham) that I owe my tastes for philology, especially of Germanic languages, and for romance. I am indeed in English terms a West-midlander at home only in the counties upon the Welsh Marches; and it is, I believe, as much due to descent as to opportunity that Anglo-Saxon and Western Middle English and alliterative verse have been both a childhood attraction and my main professional sphere.²²

Though a Tolkien by name, I am a Suffield by tastes, talents, and upbringing, and any corner of that county [Worcestershire] (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way “home” to me, as no other part of the world is.²³



Figure 10: A map showing the historic boundaries of the English counties bordering Wales.

being around two miles from the town). Evesham station was accessible by train from Oxford, as it lies on the Oxford-Worcester line.

²¹ Letter 294: To Charlotte and Denis Plimmer (8 February 1967).

²² Letter 165: To the Houghton Mifflin Co. (June 1955).

²³ Letter 44: From a letter to Michael Tolkien (18 March 1941).

While Tolkien's identification with the Suffields in adulthood was categorical, the reason he describes them as 'coming from Evesham' does merit some scrutiny, given that Tolkien's great-great-grandfather had moved his family to Birmingham the better part of a century before the author was born. It could be, as Morton suggests, because members of the family were never at home in the industrial town and felt themselves at heart to be exiles from their Worcestershire roots.²⁴ However, I suspect that part of the appeal of Evesham to Tolkien was the antiquity of that settlement, which originated with the foundation of the Abbey around AD 700. By locating his ancestors there, rather than London, Birmingham or Oxford, where his grandparents were born, Tolkien conjures a direct connection between himself and the medieval culture which became his 'main professional sphere'. According to his evolutionary ideas, which were purposive and already old-fashioned by the early decades of the twentieth century, every individual's nature has been shaped by the experiences, habits and willpower of their progenitors.²⁵ Even something as circumstantial as a language could become instinctive within a line of descent, perhaps weakening through disuse but remaining nonetheless accessible. This explains Tolkien's comment to W.H. Auden that 'linguistic tastes... are as good or better a test of ancestry as blood-groups'.²⁶ In his own case, membership of a family from a venerable Worcestershire town meant he 'took to early west-midland Middle English as a known tongue as soon as [he] set eyes on it'.

An even greater source of Evesham's appeal to Tolkien was, I believe, its location at the heart of agricultural England. The Vale of Evesham, where the River Avon winds through the fertile and sheltered lowland between the Cotswolds, the Lenches and Bredon Hill, is famous for its fruit and vegetables, the cultivation of which once employed the vast majority of the local population. C.S. Lewis implied that this vanished tradition of subsistence farming was his friend's ideal:

Tolkien once remarked to me that the feeling about home must have been quite different in the days when a family had fed on the produce of the same few miles of country for six generations, and that perhaps this was why they saw nymphs in the fountains and dryads

²⁴ Morton. 4. Burns (6) does warn against exaggerating Tolkien's ancestral connection with Evesham, given that none of his grandparents were born there (two were born in Birmingham, one in London and one in Oxford). However, emphasis on the importance of Evesham comes from Tolkien himself.

²⁵ The fact that Tolkien's second son suffered from the same recurrent dream which had plagued him since earliest childhood, of a 'Great Wave, towering up, and coming in ineluctably over the trees and green fields', led the author to conclude that the vision was 'possibly inherited' (Letter 163: To W.H. Auden (7 June 1955)). Evidence of Tolkien's purposive evolutionary ideas can be found in a letter where he remembers 'actually [seeing] an evolutionary change take place [in a daisy] - which might in favourable circumstances become permanent': 'In a former garden I had a border planted with garden daisies (mostly red); but they seeded into the lawn, where in the struggle for life they reverted to ordinary daisies and conducted their battle with the grass like their ancestors. Some seeds, however, managed to reach a place where an enormously rich soil had developed (rotting grass and deep black bonfire ash). One hardy adventurer tried to do something about it - but could only do it in daisy fashion: it grew four times the size with a flower the size of a half-crown. I said "magnificent; but a little coarse? No real improvement on *bellis perennis*." It or Something may have heard. Next morning it had put out from its flower, on delicate stalks rising in a ring out of the rim of the disc, six pink-tipped little elvish daisies like an airy crown.' (Letter 312: From a letter to Amy Ronald (16 November 1969).)

²⁶ Letter 163.

in the woods – they were not mistaken for there was in a sense a real (not metaphorical) connection between them and the countryside. What had been earth and air and later corn, and later still bread, really was in them.²⁷

Thus, in associating his simplified ancestry with a particularly agrarian corner of rural Worcestershire, the ‘homeless’ child of Carpenter’s description was planting his roots deep in England’s soil. If Victorian Birmingham was in his heart, Anglo-Saxon Evesham was in his blood.

In the following essay, I cannot claim to have brought much to light that was previously unknown. It is not a descriptive biography in the mould of Humphrey Carpenter’s excellent 1977 tome. From the outset, my focus has been upon place and my aim to gather in one document what is known of Tolkien’s life and familial connections in the West Midlands. In this endeavour I discovered that I was treading in footsteps of the Tolkien scholar, Maggie Burns, who was writing a monograph on the same topic at the time of her sudden death in 2012. My enquiries via the Archives & Collections department of Birmingham Library resulted in Maggie’s family very generously sharing with me the unpublished manuscript of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Roots and Reality*. Although in need of some revision, *Roots and Reality* is a more ambitious and expansive work than anything I could have written based solely on my research into the Suffield family. And, as the footnotes demonstrate, my ‘Biographical Ingredient’ is somewhere between an abridgment and a commentary on the work of Maggie Burns.

²⁷ Hooper, Walter (ed.). *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)*. Harper Collins. 1979. Letter of 22 June 1930.

J.R.R. Tolkien's Family in the West Midlands

The Evesham Suffields from the 1660s to the 1860s

As it is relevant to this enquiry obliquely, and anyway difficult to discern with much certainty, I shall only sketch the distant past of the Suffield family in Evesham. One of the earliest records of a Suffield living in the vicinity of Evesham relates to the baptism of a William Suffield, son of John, on 4th March 1667.²⁸ It is likely that the father was the same John whose monument can be found in the narthex of **All Saints' Church, Evesham** [Map 2:39], telling of his death in 1712, aged sixty-eight.²⁹

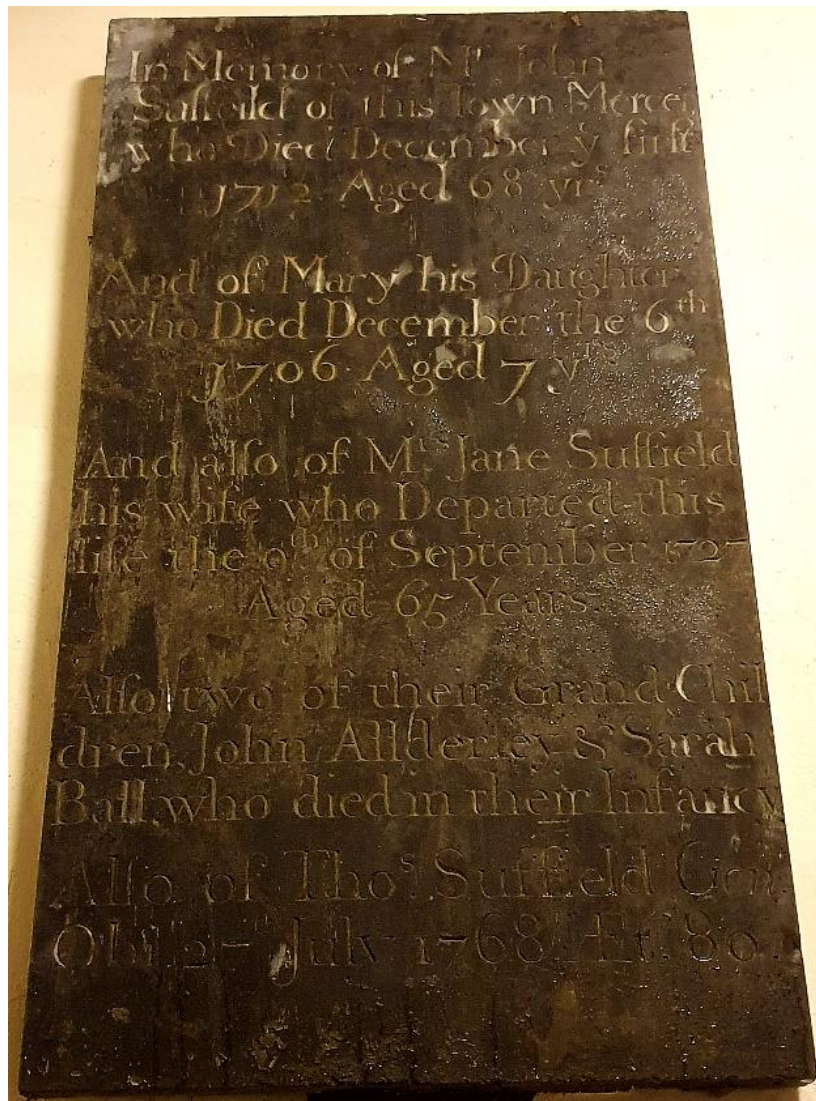


Figure 11: The memorial of a John Suffield (c. 1644-1712) in the Church of All Saints in Evesham.

²⁸ *England Births & Baptisms, 1538-1975*. ['Baptism of William Suffield, 4th March 1667'](#). Findmypast.com. 2023.

²⁹ ['Parish of All Saints' with St Lawrence, Evesham: Inscriptions on the Gravestones, Monuments, Floors and Windows'](#). 2002. 54. Inscription 61.

The inscription records the premature deaths of a daughter, Mary, and two grandchildren, as well as the passing of his wife, Jane, in 1727, aged sixty-five. It does not mention that Jane (née Smith) was John's second wife and that his first wife possessed the same name as J.R.R. Tolkien's mother, Mabel.³⁰ John had raised a number of children with Mabel and at least two more with Jane, including the Thomas Suffield (1688-1768) also mentioned on his monument. It seems probable that from one of these children was descended the shoemaker Samuel Suffield, who, in 1766, married Elizabeth Wilson of **Bengeworth**, a parish opposite Evesham on the south bank of the River Avon.³¹

Samuel and Elizabeth appear to have settled in Bengeworth, raising to adulthood four sons: Samuel Wilson Suffield (c. 1771-1816), John (c. 1773-1833), William (c. 1777-1847) and Joseph (c. 1779-1863).³² John it was who worked in London as an engraver, printer and stationer, first in Fleet Street and then the Strand, becoming 'Seal Engraver' to the Duke of Clarence (later William IV). In 1830, he was embroiled in a scandal surrounding the election of the two Tory Members of Parliament for the constituency of Evesham, wherein he was suspected of being one of the agents who secured the seat for Sir Charles Cockerell and Lord Kennedy by means of bribery and threats. We learn from the *Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee on Evesham Election Petition* (December 1830) that, besides his house in the Strand, John Suffield owned a house in Hampton, the parish to the west of Bengeworth.³³ This is confirmed by death notices announcing that his wife and he both died in Hampton in 1831 and 1833, respectively, at which point the house in question passed to their son.³⁴

John Powell Suffield (c. 1809-1874) lived in the area for the remaining thirty-three years of his life, first in **Little Hampton**, beside the Navigation Inn (later *The Crown*), and then close to St Andrew's Church in **Great Hampton**.³⁵ Thus, within the lifetime of Tolkien's mother, at least one Suffield resided on the south bank of the Avon, no more than 750 metres from the Hampton ferry crossing (which bears a resemblance to Bucklebury Ferry in *The Lord of the Rings*, as I have shown in my 'Argument'). However, John and the other Suffields living along the bend in the river were not Tolkien's direct ancestors, who by this time had not lived in the Evesham area for half a century.³⁶

³⁰ John (or 'Joannes') [married Jane Smith in Fladbury, Worcestershire](#), on 13th November 1684 (*England Marriages, 1538-1975*).

³¹ *England & Wales Hardwick Marriage Index, 1754-1837*. '[Evesham All Saints' Church](#)'. 20 July 1766.

³² See the annotation in the aforementioned volume of Sterne. It is also recorded in the Registers of the Board of Stamps that a 'cordwainer' (shoemaker) by the name of Samuel Suffield took on apprentices in Bengeworth in [1778](#) and [1784](#) (*Britain, Country Apprentices, 1710-1808*. Findmypast.com. 2023).

³³ The House of Commons. *Reports from Committees*. '[Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee on Evesham Election Petition, Vol. 3](#)'. 14 December 1830. 138.

³⁴ *The Star* (London). 16 April 1831. 4 & *The Worcester Journal*. 29 August 1833. 3.

³⁵ Although I am yet to identify the exact house in which John Powell Suffield lived between the 1850s and 1874, based on census records I estimate that it was located within two hundred metres of St Andrew's Church in Great Hampton.

³⁶ Among 'the other Suffields' to whom I refer is Samuel and Elizabeth's fourth son, Joseph, who retired from his post as a customs officer in the West Indies to Avon Terrace on Waterside, Bengeworth. This is recorded as his address in the censuses of [1851](#) and [1861](#) (findmypast.com. 2023).

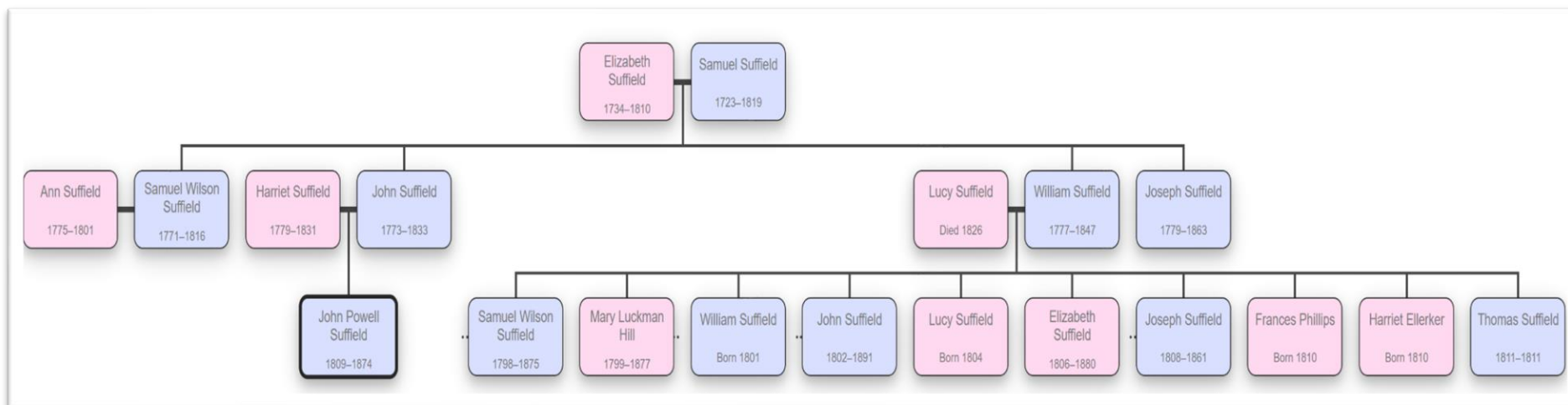


Figure 12: A family tree showing Tolkien's maternal great-great-grandparents and their known children and grandchildren.

William Suffield (c. 1777-1847) and the move to Birmingham in 1810

J.R.R. Tolkien's great-great-grandfather was the third of Samuel and Elizabeth's four adult sons, William. While most of their children were baptised in Bengeworth, William was born around the year 1777 in Leicester. In the 1790s he was apprenticed to a Baptist printer and bookseller of **Coventry**, Mary Luckman, who had taken over the business following the death of her husband, Thomas, a former lord mayor of the city.³⁷ By 1797 William had entered into a partnership with Mary, creating the firm of Luckman & Suffield, and together they would publish a number of books with religious themes.³⁸ In that year, he also married the youngest of Mary's daughters, Lucy. Their first child, Samuel Wilson Suffield (named after his uncle but the first of a line of Birmingham Suffields so known), was born in 1798. However, in around the year 1800 or 1801, William ended the partnership with Mary and returned with Lucy to Bengeworth, where he was more than once obliged to bail out his father's shoemaking business. William and Lucy's fourth child and Tolkien's great-grandfather, John, was born in Bengeworth in 1802. The family remained in William's hometown until around 1805, before moving to Brackley, Northamptonshire, and then in 1810 to Birmingham.

According to Burns, one factor prompting William and Lucy to relocate to Birmingham may have been the possibility of greater freedom of worship. The new-grown centre of industry was attractive to nonconformists because the Church of England held less sway there than in the older county-towns, and the Suffields would take full advantage of the increased latitude, attending at various points Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist, Unitarian, Anglican and Catholic places of worship and institutions.³⁹ Of course, there were also many more business opportunities for William in Birmingham than in Evesham or Brackley. At first, he partnered with several established printers and, operating from **Prince Street (on what is now the site of New Street Station [Map 3:A])**, published such tracts as Reverend J. Fleetwood's *The Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. But, by 1813, William was operating independently from Bull Street. At this point he suffered a double blow.

In September 1816, at the age of just forty, Lucy died 'after a long illness, which she bore with unparalleled resignation'.⁴⁰ Then, in November 1819, he is reported in *The London Gazette* as having gone bankrupt.⁴¹ Fortunately, he was able to resume business by 1823, operating until 1831 from a shop in the half-timbered **Old Lamb House, Bull Street [Map 3:29]**, where some of his customers were the most eminent inhabitants of Birmingham, such as the manufacturers Matthew Boulton (jr.) and John Cadbury.⁴² It was during these years that he helped to create the sadly short-lived *Mechanics' Institute*, which aspired to educate the city's craftsmen and artisans.⁴³

³⁷ Burns, *Roots*. 11.

³⁸ Ibid. 12.

³⁹ Ibid. 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 14.

⁴¹ *The London Gazette*. 23 November 1819. 4.

⁴² According to Tolkien's grandfather, John Suffield (jr.), Old Lamb House was built in 1555 and was perhaps originally an inn (Burns, *Roots*. 57).

⁴³ Burns, *Roots*. 19.

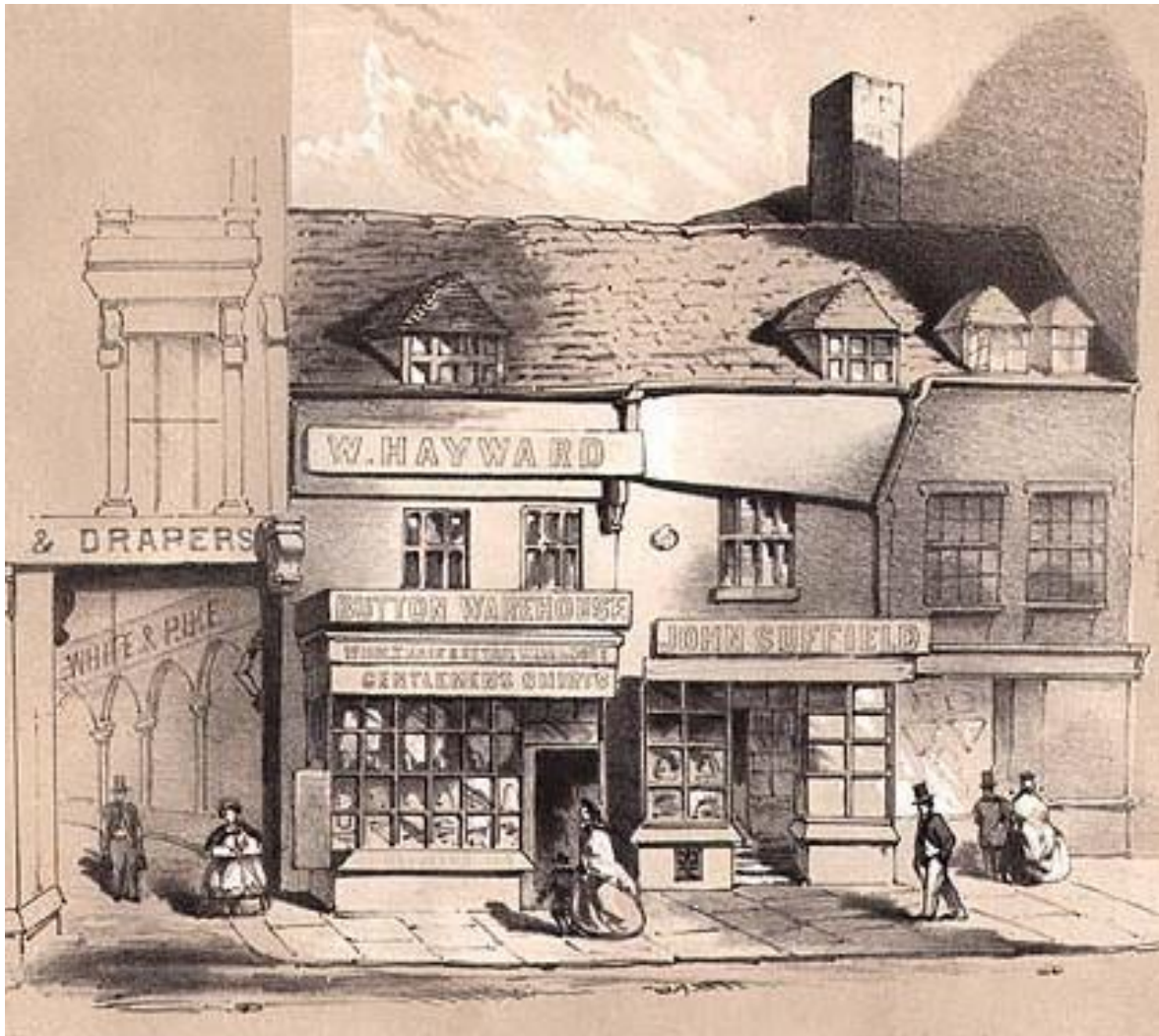


Figure 13: Old Lamb House on the corner of Bull Street and Crooked Lane (1865).

By 1826, William's son John (Tolkien's great-grandfather) was also operating his drapery business from a shop in Old Lamb House; and, in around 1830, Samuel Wilson Suffield (I) took charge of another premises on **the corner of Ann Street and Congreve Street** [Map 3:B], running it as a chemist's and grocer's shop.⁴⁴ William Suffield spent his last years living with his daughters in Leicester, where he died in 1848, aged seventy-one. He and his wife, Lucy, are buried in the nonconformist **Key Hill Cemetery** [Map 1:32], north-west of Birmingham.

⁴⁴ These streets were demolished in the 1870s.

Tolkien's maternal great-grandfather, John Suffield (1802-1891)

By the middle of the nineteenth century, members of the Suffield family were playing a significant role in the commercial and intellectual life of their new hometown. William Suffield was survived by nine children: Samuel (c. 1798-1875), Mary (c. 1799-1877), William (b. 1801), John (1802-1891), Lucy (c. 1804-1879), Elizabeth (b. 1806), Joseph (1808-1861), Frances (b. 1810) and Harriet (b. 1810).⁴⁵ In the context of this investigation, the most significant branch of the Suffields originated with William and Lucy's fourth child, John, the great-grandfather of J.R.R. Tolkien. However, further information concerning Tolkien's more distant maternal relatives in Birmingham can be found in Appendix A.

Having been born in Bengeworth, John Suffield moved with his parents and siblings to Birmingham at around the age of eight, and yet he seems to have maintained some links to his birthplace, for in 1863 he would prove the will of his uncle Joseph Suffield in Evesham. As we have seen, John became a dealer of drapery, lace, hosiery, gloves and carpets, founding what was to become the family firm in the mid-1820s. In 1830, he married Jane Oliver (1805-1859), who was originally from County Durham. Their first child, Jane, was born in 1831, and over the next seventeen years they would have a further eight children at least, including J.R.R. Tolkien's grandfather, John (jr.), in 1833. The latter would recall the family moving from quarters above their shop in Old Lamb House to their 'first villa or country house in Monument Lane [later Monument Road], semi-detached and with a splendid garden'.⁴⁶ After a spell near the nonconformist theological college on Spring Hill, to the north-west of the city-centre, by 1851 the family were living on **Harborne Road, Edgbaston** [Map 4:A], where their neighbours included George Dawson, the renowned Unitarian preacher.⁴⁷ John senior cannot have been dogmatically nonconformist, for he got married and baptised his children in the Anglican St Philip's Church (later Birmingham Cathedral), but he was nevertheless motivated to help those worse off than himself: an 1847 parish record lists him as one of those 'guardians' who supervised the giving of poor relief.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Nor were William and his children the only Evesham Suffields to have migrated to Birmingham around this time. A Joseph Suffield (b. 1828) had set up as a cooper and was living with his wife, Elizabeth, on Swallow Street in 1851. How he may have been related to William is unclear: the census ten years earlier has the thirteen-year-old Joseph living away from his parents at the Lyganbury Inn, Broadway. He and Elizabeth went on to have eight children, who would predominantly find employment in metalworking.

⁴⁶ John Suffield (jr.), as quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 27.

⁴⁷ The Suffields lived at what is now 93 Harborne Road (then no. 23; see the [1851 Census](#)). Not only did George Dawson live nearby, at a house on the site of what is now the concrete Chamber of Commerce building, but the civil engineers Edwin Gwyther and George Branson lived at nos. 87 and 89, respectively.

⁴⁸ Burns. *Roots*. 27. She notes that a prohibition on baptisms in nonconformist churches had been lifted in 1837 and yet Mark Oliver Suffield (b. 1838) and at least two of his younger siblings were christened at St Philip's Church (30).

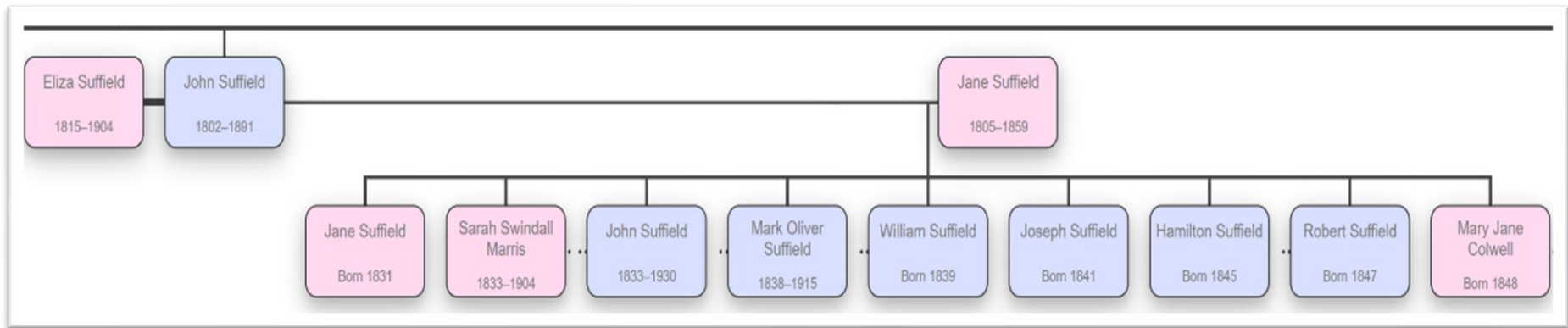


Figure 14: A family tree showing Tolkien's maternal great-grandparents and their children.

John's spouse, Jane, died in 1859, and the following year he took Eliza Latham (1815-1904), the daughter of a local pin manufacturer, as his second wife. Meanwhile, John's drapery business had prospered and expanded in 1853 to occupy another of the three shops comprising Old Lamb House (107 & now 108 Bull Street), as well as a warehouse on **Crooked Lane**. Like other successful Birmingham entrepreneurs of the period, John would seek to relocate his family from the overcrowded city and instead commute from a larger house in a more rural setting. Burns writes that John signed the lease on a property called 'Firfield' in Showell Green, just east of the village of Moseley, in 1857, but the 1861 Census shows the newly-wed couple and four of John's sons living in a house on the **Bristol Road in Edgbaston** [Map 5:B], near the site of the (then) recently created Calthorpe Park.⁴⁹ The family certainly occupied **Firfield, on Stoney Lane (now Yardley Wood Road)** [Map 6:38], onwards from 1867, when John signed an agreement allowing him to erect a vinery in the grounds.⁵⁰ Subsequent censuses record Eliza and him living at the house with two of his sons in 1871 and with a granddaughter in 1881.⁵¹



Figure 15: The Suffields at Firfield (1880), with Tolkien's mother second-from-left in the front row.

Firfield is described by Burns as 'the kind of upper-middle-class home on which Bag End is based'.⁵² It was the focal venue for family gatherings during these decades. The Suffields' Christmas festivities would entail a family play at the 'Royal Firfield Theatre', complete with

⁴⁹ Burns. *Roots*. 61; and the somewhat contradictory [1861 Census](#).

⁵⁰ The Post Office directories for 1867 and 1872 list Firfield as the family's address.

⁵¹ Firfield in the [1871 Census](#) and the [1881 Census](#) (findmypast.com. 2023). The house is no longer extant but was opposite the junction with Woodstock Road, north of the lane now known as Fernside Gardens.

⁵² Burns. *Roots*. 62.

printed programmes (two of which survive from 1872 and 1883).⁵³ Tolkien's grandfather, John (jr.), and his brothers, Mark and Hamilton, were prominent performers and singers on such occasions. In an 1880 photo of the 'Suffield clan', probably taken in the back garden at Firfield, J.R.R. Tolkien's mother, Mabel, then aged ten or eleven, sits on the ground in the front row. John (sr.) is in a chair at the very centre. He would remain living at Firfield until his death, aged 89, in 1891. Afterwards, his widow, Eliza, ran a **boarding house on Edgbaston Road in Moseley** [Map 6:H], where she died in 1904.⁵⁴

A number of John's children left Birmingham during the 1880s to raise families elsewhere, including William (in Sunderland), Robert (Colorado) and Mary Jane (London). Three settled locally, forming further clusters of the family across the city. In 1855, John's eldest surviving daughter, Sarah Swindall Suffield (1833-1904), married George Marris (1829-1906), a manufacturer of brass and copper fern pots, bedsteads and bedding, with a showroom on Bull Street.

Established for the Manufacture of BEDSTEADS and BEDDING exclusively.

GEORGE MARRIS,
No. 29, BULL STREET, BIRMINGHAM,
(WORKS, LICHFIELD STREET.)
HAS ALWAYS ON VIEW IN HIS SPACIOUS SHOW ROOMS
A LARGE AND ELEGANT VARIETY OF

No. 465.

IRON BEDSTEADS,
FEATHER BEDS, BOLSTERS, AND PILLOWS,
Horse-hair, Spring, French, and Wool Mattresses, Straw Palliasses,
IN EVERY SIZE AND READY FOR INSTANT USE,
DAMASK & GENUINE DRAPERIES, BLANKETS, QUILTS, & SHEETINGS.

A MARRIS' New Illustrated Price List, containing Drawings and Sizes of every description, free by post, on application.

MANUFACTURER OF THE IMPROVED WORKHOUSE BEDSTEAD.
FOR WHOLESALE PRICE LISTS APPLY AT 29, BULL STREET, BIRMINGHAM.
The ONLY ESTABLISHMENT in the Midland Counties for the Manufacture of Bedsteads and Bedding exclusively.

Figure 16: An 1856 advert for George Marris's bedsteads.

⁵³ Burns. *Roots*. 63.

⁵⁴ Her boarding house, 5 Edgbaston Road in the [1891 Census](#), had become no. 11 by the time of the [1901 Census](#) (findmypast.com. 2023).

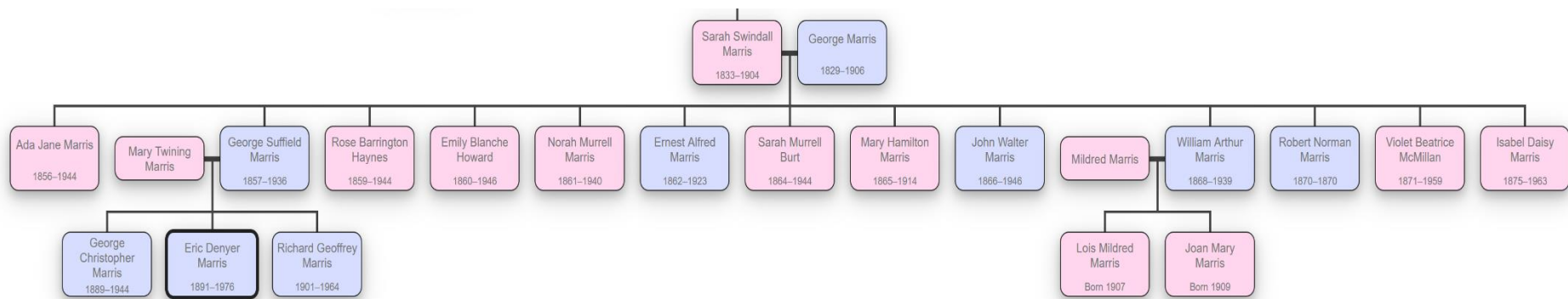


Figure 17: A family tree showing Tolkien's great-aunt Sarah Swindall Marris and her thirteen children, known here as the 'Suffield-Marrisess'.

Her husband's business expanded and moved upmarket during the 1870s as the partnership of Marris & Norton Furniture, which produced not only metal furnishings but bespoke cabinets and sideboards.⁵⁵ George consequently grew in local influence, becoming a town councillor and magistrate who was on friendly terms with Joseph Chamberlain. Sarah thus exceeded most of her family in wealth and social rank. From comfortable residences in Acocks Green and Wake Green during the 1860s and '70s, the couple moved their prodigious family to grander addresses in Edgbaston and (by 1901) **Ascot Road, Moseley** [Map 6:J].⁵⁶

Of Sarah and George's thirteen children, a daughter, Mary Hamilton Marris (1865-1914), worked as a teacher while living in Moseley and King's Heath, where her younger brother William Arthur Marris (1868-1939) also had a house and medical practice.⁵⁷ Nora Murrell Marris (1861-1940), though handicapped by partial deafness, was an author who wrote and lectured on the life of Joseph Chamberlain. In the early 1900s she lived in Chelsea but returned before the Second World War to a house on Anderton Park Road, Moseley, where she was knocked down and killed by a motor vehicle during a blackout in 1940.⁵⁸ The eldest son of Sarah and George was 'Young' George Suffield Marris (1857-1936), who took over his father's foundry in around 1880 and dissolved the furniture-making partnership five years later; his interest lay in the manufacture of stoves and kettles under the brand name of 'Sirram' (his surname spelt backwards).⁵⁹ He married Mary Twining George in 1888 and lived during the first decades of the new century very nearby J.R.R. Tolkien in north Edgbaston, first at **96 Hagley Road** [Map 4:D], opposite the Oratory, and then at **22 Vernon Road** [Map 4:E].⁶⁰ Neither 'Young George' nor the two of his sons who were approximately Tolkien's age, George Christopher Marris (1889-1944) and Eric Denyer Marris (1891-1976), feature in any account of the author's early life, suggesting that Tolkien did not have a close relationship with these descendants of his mother's aunt.⁶¹ However, it is tempting to wonder whether there are echoes of the 'Suffield-Marrises' in the haughty and materialistic Hobbit dynasty, the Sackville-Bagginses.

Apart from the assonance of their surnames, a link between George Suffield Marris and the character of Otho Sackville-Baggins can perhaps be inferred in Tolkien's letter to A.C. Nunn explaining the patrimonial traditions of Hobbits. He writes that, while descent of the family headship was strictly through the male line in the Tooks,

In other great families the headship might pass through a *daughter of the deceased* to his *eldest* grandson (irrespective of the daughter's age). This latter custom was usual in

⁵⁵ '[Marris & Norton \(1875-1889\)](#)'. *British and Irish Furniture Makers Online*. 14 December 2021.

⁵⁶ Sarah and George were recorded at a no longer extant house on Harborne Road in the [1891 Census](#) and at 6 Ascot Road, 'The Vron', in the [1901 Census](#).

⁵⁷ Mary's address in the [1901 Census](#) was 'Stockwood' on Forest Road, Moseley (probably what is now no. 4); by the [1911 Census](#), she was resident in the nursery and preparatory school which she ran at 2 All Saints' Road, Kings Heath. According to the [1911 Census](#), William lived at 35 Valentine Road, which adjoins Ashfield Road, while his surgery was at no. 67.

⁵⁸ '[Family of John Marris of Thornton Curtis \(1714-98\)](#)'. *Marris Family History*. 30 September 2015.

⁵⁹ '[George Marris & Co \(Sirram\)](#)'. *Classic Camp Stoves*. October 2012-April 2013.

⁶⁰ George Suffield Marris and his family in the [1901](#) and [1911 Censuses](#) (findmypast.com. 2023).

⁶¹ Eric Denyer Marris would go on to study at Cambridge, becoming Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Education ('[Supplement](#)', *The London Gazette*. 2 January 1950) and father to the economist Stephen Nicholson Marris.

families of more recent origin, without ancient records or ancestral mansions. In such cases the heir (if he accepted the courtesy title) took the name of his mother's family – though he often retained that of his father's family also (placed second). This was the case with *Otho Sackville-Baggins*. For the nominal headship of the *Sackvilles* had come to him through his mother *Camellia*.⁶²

Just as Otho was the eldest grandson in the Sackville family, 'Young George' was the eldest grandson of John Suffield (sr.), likewise receiving the family name via his mother. It may be that George felt a sense of primacy among his maternal cousins, including Tolkien's mother, and entitled to exercise some authority over them, as in the matter of Mabel Tolkien's conversion to Catholicism. However, I have seen no evidence for this nor any connection between George's sons and Otho's even more pernicious offspring, Lotho Sackville-Baggins.

Sarah Marris's younger brother, Mark Oliver Suffield (1838-1915), also remained in Birmingham, going into the family business of selling hosiery and lace. In 1862, he married Mary Martha Maddy from Winchcombe and by 1871 they had four children and were settled in Balsall Heath, where they stayed for over forty years.⁶³ Several of Mark and Mary's children continued living in the house until middle age, perhaps indicating that they were an especially close family (Mark certainly worked and socialised closely with his brother John, Tolkien's grandfather). The eldest son, also named Mark Oliver Suffield (1865-1936), attended King Edward's School, New Street, married and became a successful portrait photographer. By 1911, he and his wife had moved, but only as far as **Station Road, King's Heath** [Map 6:N], where they accommodated Tolkien's first cousin and exact contemporary, Rupert Oliver Suffield (1892-1951).⁶⁴ The younger Mark Oliver's sister did wander further afield to become a school mistress in Barmouth between the 1900s and 1940s, however the likeness between the estuary of the Afon Mawddach (on which Barmouth sits) and the Gulf of Lune in Tolkien's Middle-earth (where the Grey Havens lie) might indicate that family ties endured.⁶⁵

⁶² Letter 214.

⁶³ Mark and his wife lived in at least two different houses in approximately the same location, the corner of Moseley Road and Brighton Road.

⁶⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 58. The address was 95 Station Road, according to the [1911 Census](#).

⁶⁵ Tolkien almost certainly travelled to the Llŷn Peninsula in 1920 on the Cambrian Coast Railway, which passes through Barmouth on its way from Shrewsbury, thus affording him the opportunity to visit his mother's cousin should he have wished to do so.

Tolkien's maternal grandfather, John Suffield (1833-1930)

The eldest son of Jane and John Suffield (sr.), Tolkien's grandfather, was born in Old Lamb House in 1833 and educated at first in Leicester. At the age of six, while at home during the summer holidays, John (jr.) witnessed at close quarters the Chartist riots which took place in Birmingham on 4th July 1839. Although he was caught up in the violent government response, he later professed little sympathy for the mob, particularly its agitators.⁶⁶ John's recollection of the clash between the special constables ('armed with stout staves') and the protestors ('every man armed with stick or knife') was set down by local newspapers in 1908 and 1928, and elements seem to have found their way into Tolkien's fictional 'Battle of Bywater'. Just as the Chartists marched between the shopfronts of the High Street, towards Holloway Head, and found themselves confronted at **Carrs Lane** [Map 3:E] by a police cordon, so the ruffians are caught between the high banks of the Bywater Road by hobbits likewise armed with 'stout staves' (*RK*, 1008). Neither the ruffians in *The Lord of the Rings* nor the Chartists were willing to lay down their knives and clubs, with sanguinary consequences. Tolkien's grandfather recalled that:

The processionists were met by the 'specials' and ordered to break up and return. This they declined to do. Then the constables charged and drove the whole crowd that filled the street before them, paying special attention, however, to the Chartists among the mob... The uproar was tremendous, and whether I was on or off my feet I know not; but I found myself carried by this flood of fugitives a good way down New Meeting-street. There the tide seemed to stop and turn, and I crouched down in the doorway of a bakehouse which my people were wont to use a good deal... Next there came up a bevy of pursuers calling upon those with whom I had just mingled to surrender. To these loud cries of 'Surrender!' the mob shouted 'No, no,' in angry and indignant tones. The reply was a forest of staves and cudgels hurtling in the air, and in a moment scores of faces were smothered in blood.⁶⁷

John was subsequently educated in **Kidderminster**, where he encountered another riot around the time of the 1842 general election.⁶⁸ By the age of 13, after attending two schools in Birmingham, he was registered at the Methodist college in Taunton and was excelling in French, Latin, history and drawing.⁶⁹ Following the end of his schooling, he worked for a short time in London, but returned before 1851 to his parents' home in Edgbaston to earn his living as a 'ribbon and lace warehouseman' in the family business.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 22-26.

⁶⁷ John Suffield. 'I Remember'. *The Birmingham Gazette*. 1908.

⁶⁸ Burns. *Roots*. 28. John's schooling in Kidderminster perhaps explains why his father was staying with the Oliver family in the town at the time of the [1841 Census](#).

⁶⁹ Burns, Maggie. "An unlettered peasant boy" of "sordid character" - Shakespeare, Suffield and Tolkien'. *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*. No. 49, Spring 2010. 17.

⁷⁰ As per the 1851 Census record cited earlier.

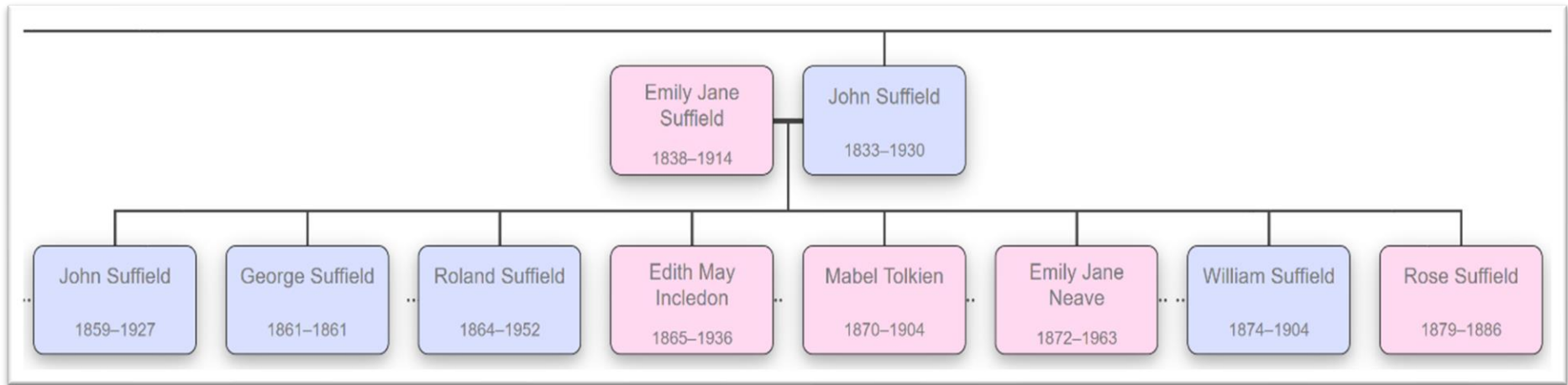


Figure 18: A family tree showing Tolkien's maternal grandparents and their children.

In 1858, John married Emily Jane Sparrow (1838-1914), the daughter of another draper. Although the wedding took place in Banbury, the hometown of the mother of the bride's family, the Stockleys, Emily had been born and schooled in Oxford.⁷¹ The couple's eldest child, a third successive John Suffield, was born in 1859, around which time they were living two miles south-east of Birmingham, near the bridge across the River Cole in **Greet**.⁷² Another son, George, was born and died in 1861. More children were to come, including Roland (1864-1952), Edith May (1865-1936), Tolkien's mother, Mabel (1870-1904), Emily Jane (1872-1963) and William (1874-1904), but the lives of John and Emily were to be blighted by the early deaths of their offspring, including their youngest daughter, Rose (1879-1886). The 1860s and '70s were nevertheless good years for the family, during which they occupied the house in Showell Green beside Firfield, called **Mayfield**.⁷³



Figure 19: A photograph of John Suffield (jr.), c. 1880.

The Suffield drapery firm, of which John became the director, did not suffer much from the economic depression of the 1870s and '80s. By 1875, 'John Suffield and Sons' occupied the entirety of Old Lamb House, plus the shop next-door (i.e. 106-109 Bull Street), and various members of the family were gaining considerable cachet in Birmingham society, particularly with

⁷¹ After Emily joined John in Birmingham, some of her family moved with her, living near what is now Camp Hill Circus in the Deritend area. The 1871 Census locates three of her siblings in the town, including [Caroline Sparrow](#), who was working as a draper's assistant on the High Street, near Old Lamb House.

⁷² The [1861 Census](#).

⁷³ The [1871 Census](#).

respect to the cultural scene.⁷⁴ In the late-1850s, the brothers John (jr.), Mark and William Suffield joined the Central Literary Association, which published a magazine and organised talks, debates and other social events for its membership.⁷⁵ Tolkien's grandfather played a particularly prominent role in the organisation, serving as Vice President between 1876 and 1884.⁷⁶ He also participated in several debates, lectured on Chaucer and Dryden, and wrote essays under the pseudonym 'Jayesjay'. In a written exchange with the antiquary Howard Shakespeare Pearson in 1888, John argued that the plays attributed to William Shakespeare must have been written by Francis Bacon, as the former was no more than an 'unlettered peasant boy' who had 'allowed his favourite daughter Judith to grow up unable to read or write'.⁷⁷ John and Mark also joined the Birmingham Dramatic Society (est. 1865): select aficionados of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, such as the scholars J.A. Langford and Samuel Timmins, as well as George Dawson. John served as the Society's president between 1871 and 1873, Mark from 1873 to 1875.⁷⁸ The brothers were clearly mixing in quite a rarefied social stratum. However, more difficult times lay ahead.

In 1875, Birmingham mayor Joseph Chamberlain initiated an Improvement Scheme which would demolish the slum housing of the town-centre and replace it principally with a wide, Parisian-type boulevard, named Corporation Street. The warehouse of John Suffield and Sons on Crooked Lane fell within the area designated for clearance; so, too, the sixteenth-century Old Lamb House, which was pulled down in 1886.⁷⁹ The Suffields had leased part of the latter building since 1826, but they were not the owners and so received no compensation for the loss of their premises.⁸⁰ The shop was probably already closed in 1884, with a deleterious effect on the family's financial and social standing, when both John and Mark submitted regretful letters of resignation to the Dramatic Society.⁸¹ The letters were declined and the Suffield drapery business reopened at **39 Corporation Street** [Map 3:G] before 1888, but it was not long until the family suffered another devastating misfortune. It seems that, in the course of a night in 1889 or 1890, some sprinklers in the new shop drenched and ruined the stock. By 1891 the business had failed and numerous family-members were forced to find new ways of making a living, including John at the age of 58.⁸²

⁷⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 29.

⁷⁵ At his death in 1915, Mark Oliver Suffield (sr.) was one of the Association's longest-serving members, having joined fifty-six years earlier (Burns. *Roots*. 70). The articles which appeared under the pseudonym 'Champ de sud' were likely his (74).

⁷⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 70.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 76. John Suffield had already made this argument at a C.L.A. debate in 1877 (73). J.R.R. Tolkien would express a similar opinion in a 1911 debate at King Edward's School. The accomplishments of John's own daughters demonstrate that he felt strongly about the importance of educating women. He also subscribed to the 'Protestant Dissenting Charity School for... maintaining and educating for Domestic Service, Poor Girls' (61).

⁷⁸ Ibid. 77.

⁷⁹ The fact that John felt wounded by the loss of Old Lamb House, where he had been born, is suggested by an article he wrote about the building in 1887, entitled 'My Old Home' (Burns. *Roots*. 20).

⁸⁰ Ibid. 56.

⁸¹ Ibid. 78. Neither brother gave a talk to the Society after 1889.

⁸² While Robert chose to emigrate, Mark Oliver Suffield went into partnership as a metal broker, becoming a freemason and a notable figure in the city (Ibid. 58).



Figure 20: A drawing (owned by Tolkien's grandfather) of the frontages on the south/west side of Bull Street. The three coloured dots are positioned above Old Lamb House (red), the Cadburys' shop at no. 93 (brown) and the corner of Monmouth Street/Colmore Row (blue).

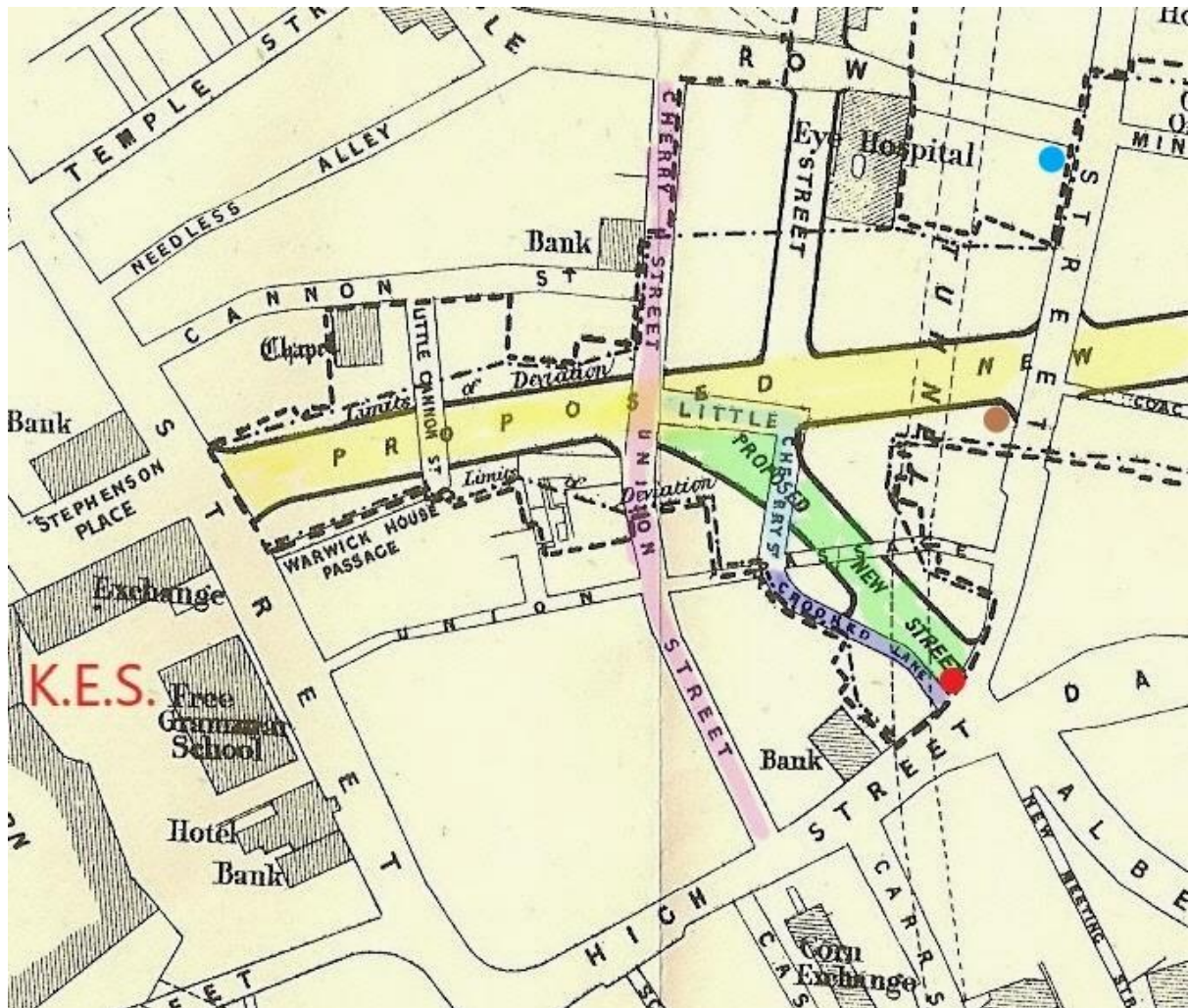


Figure 21: A map showing Chamberlain's proposed Improvement Scheme, with the new boulevards (Corporation Street and Martineau Street) marked in yellow and green. The coloured dots correspond to buildings in the print above.

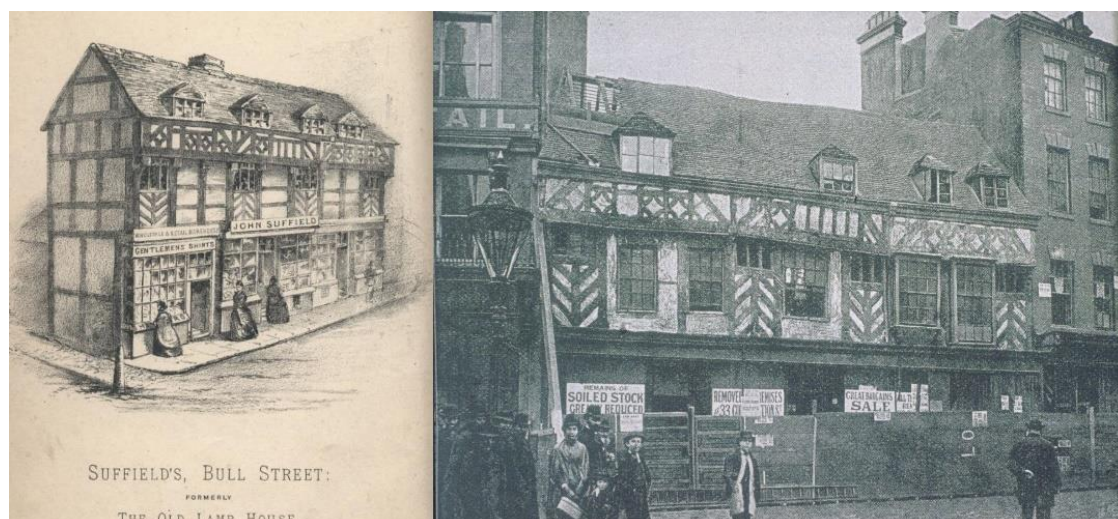


Figure 22: A sketch of the Suffield shop as a going concern and a photograph of Old Lamb House on the point of demolition in May 1886.

Before 1881, John had moved his family from Mayfield to **‘Malvern House’ on Trafalgar Road, Moseley** [Map 6:36], where they are again recorded as living in 1891.⁸³ By that time, John described himself as an ‘ironfounder’, a line of work which he pursued until 1894 in **St Peter’s Place, on the north side of Broad Street** [Map 4:B].⁸⁴ Around this time, he surrendered his membership of the Central Literary Association.⁸⁵ By 1895, John had become a commercial traveller for Jeyes Fluid, a position he seemed to be able to tolerate, for he held it until the age of eighty-six.⁸⁶ In that year, Mabel returned from South Africa on a visit, bringing her two sons, the three-year-old J.R.R. Tolkien and his younger brother, to stay at their grandparents’ new address of **9 Ashfield Road, King’s Heath** [Map 6:4].

John and Emily lived on Ashfield Road until late 1904 or early 1905. 1904 was an *annus horribilis*, with the deaths of both Mabel and their youngest son William, as well as Sarah Marris (John’s elder sister) and his step-mother, Eliza. By the time their daughter Jane was married, in August 1905, Tolkien’s grandparents had moved to **‘Ivy Cottage’ on Cotton Lane, Moseley** [Map 6:17].⁸⁷ As Tolkien later admitted, this sloping byway and its name, which derived from George Cotton (c. 1775-1855), a builder with a house on the corner of Wake Green Road, were one of the ‘childhood memories which are a large ingredient in the make-up of the Shire’.⁸⁸ For partly

⁸³ In the intervening period, Burns claims that John and his family moved from Trafalgar Road to ‘D’Arcy House’ on Russell Road, ‘the most prestigious part of Moseley’ (62), but I am unable to confirm this using only the censuses of 1881 and 1891. The Lucas family, manufacturers of the ‘King of the Road’ bicycle lamp (c. 1880), underwent a similar relocation in the early 1880s, from a house called ‘The Firs’ on Stoney Lane (now 165-167 Yardley Wood Road) to Denmark House, Trafalgar Road. Oliver Lucas, whose father ran the family firm, attended King Edward’s School at the same time (1903-1907) as J.R.R. Tolkien (Price, Fred. [‘Joseph, Harry and Oliver Lucas’](#). *The Moseley Society*. 2017).

⁸⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 59.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 77.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 80. Jeyes Fluid, patented in 1877, was the first effective disinfectant.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 81. The house is now No. 18, Cotton Lane.

⁸⁸ Tolkien, J.R.R.. ‘Draft of “Nomenclature of The Lord of the Rings”’. As quoted in Garth, John. *The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Frances Lincoln. 2020. 20. The house of George Cotton was on the south-east corner of Cotton

this reason, and as a ‘private jest’, he gave the maiden name of Cotton to Sam Gamgee’s wife in *The Lord of the Rings*. More poignantly, the character’s given name, Rose, belonged to the child of his grandparents who had died at the age of seven.

After Emily passed away in 1914, John did not move house again.⁸⁹ He retired in 1919 but kept himself busy by writing his autobiography.⁹⁰ That Christmas, as he had done for at least the previous three Yuletides, he sent cards to family members which he had designed himself. They bore his drawings and humorous rhymes and seem to have inspired Tolkien’s own *Letters from Father Christmas* (1920-43).⁹¹

One of Tolkien’s public recollections of his grandfather concerned a visit during the author’s stint at the University of Leeds. Tolkien lay in bed with pneumonia, while the eighty-nine-year-old Suffield stood over him and scoffed at the feebleness of the younger generation, before setting off on a boat tour of the British Isles.⁹² This account of a severe, black-clad figure jars with the impression of a Birmingham newspaper reporter, who interviewed John on his ninety-fifth birthday in 1928. Writing in *The Evening Despatch*, R.J. Buckley rhapsodised about John Suffield’s ‘insuppressible vivacity, his merry humour, his geniality and his boyish playfulness, [and] his exuberant vitality’, as well as ‘his varied gifts as tenor singer, expert reciter, inexhaustible and dramatic raconteur’.⁹³ The readership was further informed that John was still able to climb ladders and gather his apples, even at such an advanced age.⁹⁴

Age finally caught up with John Suffield in 1930 and he passed away in September, two weeks after his ninety-seventh birthday.⁹⁵ According to Tolkien, the previous spring John had mown a large lawn, likely at the manor house in rural Worcestershire owned by his daughter Jane, and afterwards ‘sat in the wind without a jacket’.⁹⁶ He must not have fully recovered from the resultant chill, though a photograph taken on his birthday shows him standing in the doorway of the house, looking fit in spite of his illness. Upon his death, a Moseley newspaper commented: ‘The deceased was truly a most remarkable man, and shortly before his death was as alert as many men half his age; he possessed his faculties until the very last’.⁹⁷

Lane and Wake Green Road (see [‘Moseley, 1838’](#). *Andy Underscore*. 20 January 2018. Also, the [1841 Census](#)). Burns cites an 1843 map of the Woodlands Estate, which Tolkien perhaps viewed, for the land to the east of the Wake Green Road/Yardley Wood Road intersection is labelled as the property of a Mr (Richard) Underhill (62).

⁸⁹ John Suffield ostensibly lived alone during much of this period, but in 1930 he is recorded as living at Ivy Cottage with Marjorie Allen and Sarah Ann Langford (Burns. *Roots*. 82). The latter was the daughter of the Birmingham writer and historian John Alfred Langford (1823-1903).

⁹⁰ Burns. *Roots*. 81.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 83 & 85. Burns further suggests that the illustration on John’s 1927 Christmas card, of a town on an island in a lake, may have influenced the Lake Town in *The Hobbit* (87).

⁹² Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 113.

⁹³ ‘Birmingham News Cuttings’. *Birmingham Biography*. Vol. 15. As quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 88.

⁹⁴ Burns. 81.

⁹⁵ Tolkien was under the false impression that his grandfather had survived until his ‘ninety-ninth year’ (Hammond, Wayne G. & Scull, Christina. *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader’s Companion*). While Burns writes that he died at Ivy Cottage in Moseley, his death was registered in Pershore, making his daughter’s farm in Dormston a more likely venue ([‘John Suffield death record’](#). *England & Wales Deaths, 1837-2007*. Findmypast.com. 2023). Nevertheless, he was buried at Witton Cemetery, Birmingham.

⁹⁶ Hammond & Scull. *A Reader’s Companion*.

⁹⁷ As quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 88.

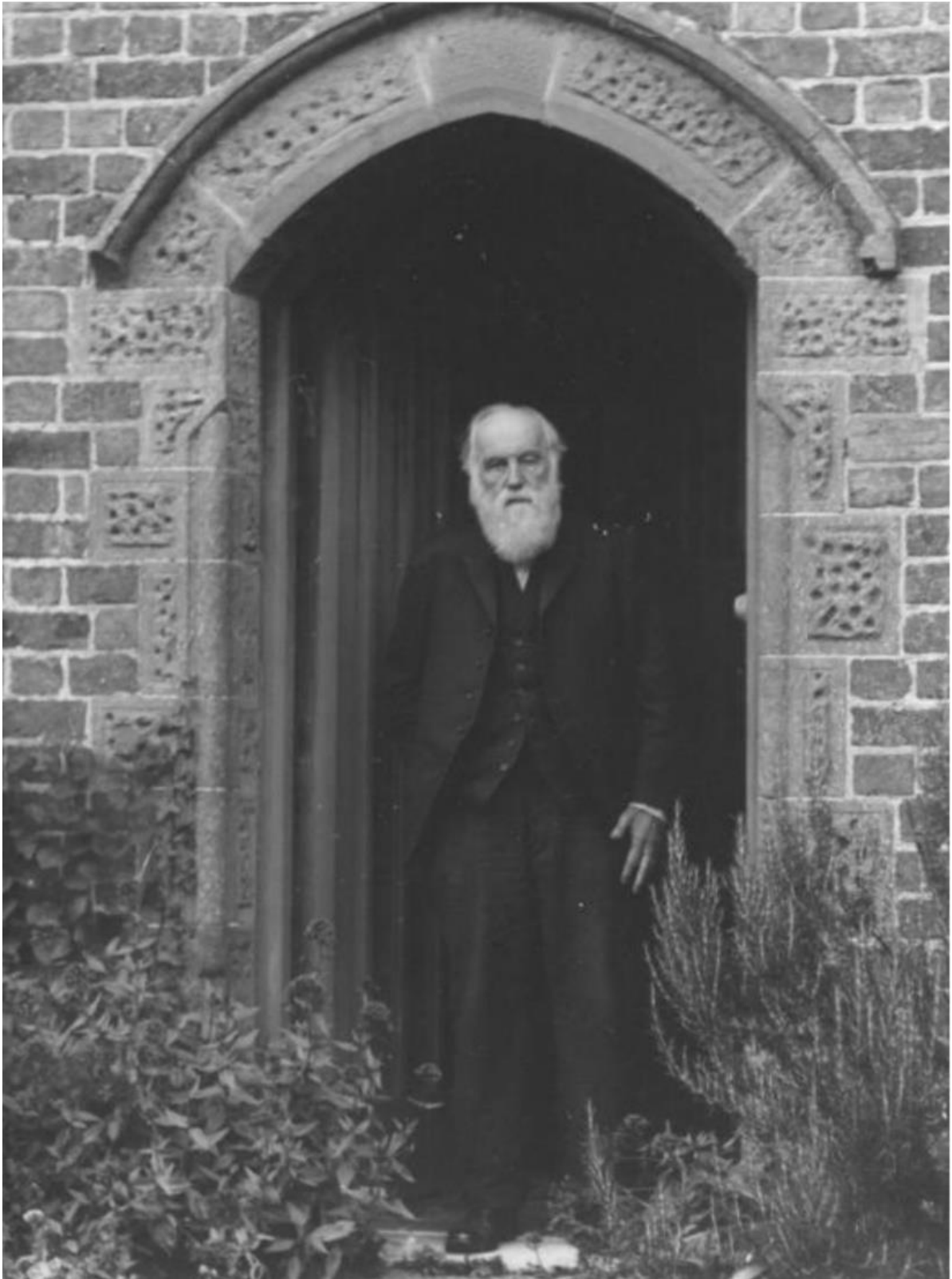


Figure 23: A photograph of John Sulfield (jr.) taken shortly before his death in September 1930.

Tolkien's maternal aunts and uncles

In adherence to a family tradition, the first son of John Suffield (jr.) had inherited his father's Christian name. For this reason, Burns sees Tolkien's grandfather as a possible model for the hobbit known as the Old Took, who gains his moniker 'not so much for his age as for his oddity, and because of the enormous number of young, younger, and youngest Took's'.⁹⁸ The need to distinguish between family members of the same name may have led the Suffields to use the prefatory handles of 'Old' and 'Young'.⁹⁹ They certainly had a tendency to refer to each other by middle names, hence Tolkien's aunt Edith was known as May and his aunt Emily as Jane or Jennie, while the author himself was known to his 'near kin' as Ronald.¹⁰⁰

'Young John' (1859-1927) followed his father into the family drapery business, working as a commercial traveller, and lived in the family home in Moseley until at least 1883. In this year his thirteen-year-old sister Mabel (Tolkien's mother) painted him sitting slightly apart from a girl on a bench, probably in the garden of Malvern House, with the caption 'Faint heart never won fair lady'.¹⁰¹ This subtle sororal advice seems to have been heeded in general, for in 1888 he married Kate Ollis from Wiltshire, and by 1891 the couple were living in **King's Heath** [Map 6:D].¹⁰² In around 1895, following the demise of the family business, Young John became the innkeeper of the **Forest Hotel in Dorridge, Warwickshire** [Map 1:B]; however, before 1901 he and Kate moved to **Worcester**. Later, they lived in Bristol, where he died in 1927.¹⁰³

John's younger brother, Roland (1864-1952), was one of the first Suffields to attend King Edward's School in Birmingham. Initially a brassfounder by trade, he too moved out of the family home during the 1880s and married the American-born May Gertrude Hind in 1893.¹⁰⁴ Roland and his wife settled close to her family, near Manchester, but would return to the Midlands in the 1930s to live with their son, Frank, on his farm in **Newnham, Warwickshire** [Map 1:F].¹⁰⁵ The third son of Old John Suffield and the youngest of his children to survive into adulthood, William (1874-1904), worked as a clerk and married Beatrice Mary Bartlett (b. 1867), the daughter of a Dorset innkeeper in 1898. They lived at first on **Stockfield Road, Acocks Green** [Map 1:40] and Tolkien remembered his mother taking him and his brother on the two-mile cross-country walk from Sarehole in order to visit them.¹⁰⁶ When Mabel and her boys reluctantly vacated 5 Gracewell Cottages in the autumn of 1900, it was 'Uncle Willie' and his wife who moved in. William succumbed to peritonitis shortly before Mabel's death, and by January 1905 Tolkien and his

⁹⁸ A note in *The Return of the Shadow*, an early draft of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 80.

⁹⁹ In which case, Tolkien's grandfather would have become known as 'Old John' following the death of his own father in 1891.

¹⁰⁰ Letter 309: From a letter to Amy Ronald (2 January 1969).

¹⁰¹ Burns. *Roots*. 64.

¹⁰² The [1891 Census](#).

¹⁰³ Burns. *Roots*. 59.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 64.

¹⁰⁵ Roland's younger sister, Jane, would also live there in the 1950s.

¹⁰⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 121.

brother were living with the widowed Beatrice in Stirling Road, Edgbaston; an unhappy experience of more than three years' duration.¹⁰⁷

It was the three daughters of Old John, Tolkien's aunts and his mother, who had the more sustained connection with the West Midlands. The eldest of the three became Edith May Incedon (1865-1936) when she married Walter Bury Incedon in **St Anne's Church, Moseley** [Map 6:C] in 1890. Walter, originally from Sheffield, was the commercial manager of a factory producing wrought-iron tubes and was subsequently a hardware merchant. It was his success in these enterprises that allowed May and their children, Marjorie May (1891-1973) and Frieda Mary (1895-1940), to live in greater comfort than most other Suffields, first near Walter's mother and brothers on **Gough Road, Edgbaston** [Map 5:D], and then (by 1901) at a new house called **'Woodville', on Chantry Road, Moseley** [Map 6:35], which had a garden running down to what was then a private park.¹⁰⁸ It could have been at this house that Tolkien learnt his cousins' made-up language 'Animalic', according to which his name was 'Otter'.¹⁰⁹ Later, he and Mary invented another language called 'Nevbosh'.¹¹⁰

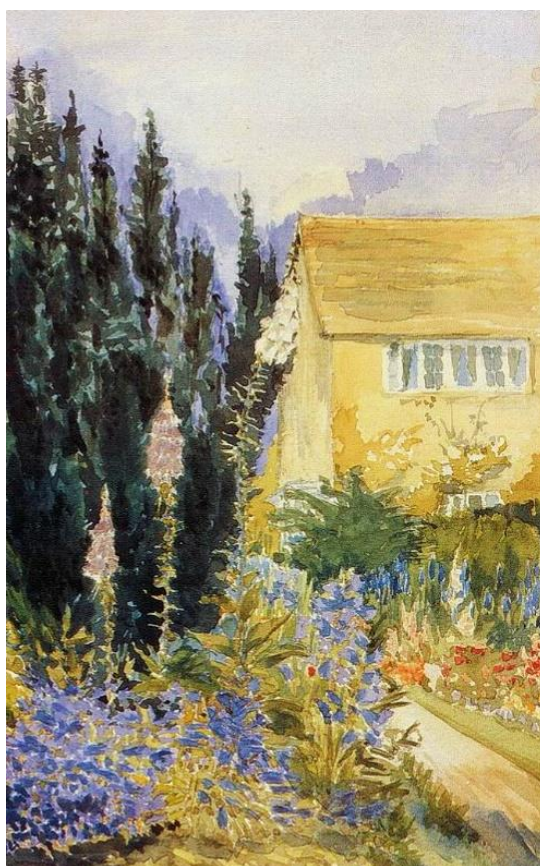


Figure 24: Tolkien's watercolour of the Incedons' 'Cottage' in Barnt Green.

¹⁰⁷ Beatrice continued to take on young male boarders with a family connection, however. In [1911](#), she was still living in the same Edgbaston neighbourhood and accommodating a pair of boarders, including a Leonard Incedon.

¹⁰⁸ The address of the house is now no. 56, on the south side of Chantry Road, quite near the junction with Alcester Road.

¹⁰⁹ Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*. Harper Collins, 2003. 225.

¹¹⁰ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 43-44.

By 1911, the Incedon family had moved to **'The Cottage' (now 30 Fiery Hill Road) in Barnt Green** [Map 8:9], where the young Tolkien visited them on a number of occasions. He evidently cherished the time he spent there, for in July 1913 he made three watercolours and a pencil drawing of its colourful garden, perhaps supervised by Marjorie, who would go on to become an art student.¹¹¹

The youngest and highest-achieving of the Suffield sisters was Emily Jane (1872-1963), whose long life is worth recounting in some detail.¹¹² Old John Suffield was firmly committed to the education of young women, an aspect of his nonconformist outlook from which Jane in particular would benefit. In 1883, a reorganisation of King Edward's School led to both a boys' and a girls' High School being accommodated side-by-side in the building on New Street.¹¹³ Jane took the entrance examination for the latter in November 1884 and was admitted as a fee-paying pupil.¹¹⁴ The pioneering head mistress, Miss Creak, aimed to give her girls a grounding in the sciences as well as the arts, which clearly suited Jane, for she became the first female pupil to be given extra physiology tuition by a professor at **Mason College** [Map 3:H] (a predecessor college of Birmingham University).¹¹⁵



Figure 25: The neo-Gothic Mason College in 1892, with the Chamberlain Memorial Fountain in the foreground.

¹¹¹ Hammond, Wayne G. & Scull, Christina. *J.R.R. Tolkien, Artist & Illustrator*. Harper Collins. 1995. 33. Tolkien and Marjorie Incedon corresponded until their deaths in late 1973 (see Letter 341).

¹¹² Morton. viii.

¹¹³ The Girls' High School occupied the space vacated by the Boys' Middle School. The proximity of the two schools appears not to have been deemed ideal. The Head Mistress strove to keep the boys and girls separate within a hundred-metre radius of the school, including brothers and sisters. And, in 1887, the Girls' School moved half-a-mile away to the former Liberal Club on Congreve Street, near the Town Hall (Burns. *Roots*. 94).

¹¹⁴ The admission fee was ten shillings, on top of an annual tuition fee of nine pounds. Jane was one of twenty pupils admitted in that month, to a school consisting of 184 girls (Burns. *Roots*. 93).

¹¹⁵ Here, again, Jane was kept apart from male students and was forced to leave by a back staircase if any interrupted her lessons. She continued to attend classes at Mason College after she left school. The building was demolished in 1964 to make way for the brutalist Central Library, itself torn down in 2013.

At the same time, under her father's influence, Jane was learning a great deal about literature, so that later in life colleagues at the University of St Andrews deemed that 'her knowledge of English was so vast that one felt she should have been a Professor, perhaps of Poetry, a scholar and the author of many books'.¹¹⁶ Not that she was wholly bookish in her schooldays, for Carpenter records that, at New Street Station, on her train journeys to and from Moseley, Jane would pass letters from Mabel to her elder sister's admirer, Arthur Tolkien.¹¹⁷

After Jane left school in 1892, she applied for a teaching post at the King Edward's grammar school for girls on Bath Row, beginning work there the following year.¹¹⁸ During this period of employment, she also took (by correspondence) a BSc degree in botany and geology from the University of London, which she attained in 1895.¹¹⁹



Figure 26: Tolkien's aunt, Emily Jane (Jennie) Neave.

¹¹⁶ Burns. "An unlettered peasant boy" of "sordid character". 20.

¹¹⁷ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 17.

¹¹⁸ Burns. *Roots*. 94. In 1911, this institution merged with two others to form the K.E. Handsworth School for Girls.

¹¹⁹ Oliver Suffield, the grandson of 'Young John' Suffield, told Burns that his Great Aunt Jane knew everything about the plants they saw on their country walks together (100).

In April of that year, Jane met her elder sister (now Mabel Tolkien) and her two sons at Southampton docks, upon their arrival by boat from South Africa. The next year (1896) she left her parents' home in King's Heath to teach science at a girls' school in Liverpool but returned to the school on Bath Row in 1899.¹²⁰ Here, she was not far from Mabel's family on Oliver Road, enabling her to coach J.R.R. Tolkien in geometry for the King Edward's School admissions exam in 1900.

Like her sisters, Jane was a devoted Christian, though (unlike them) her gradual journey away from nonconformism did not at first go beyond high Anglicanism.¹²¹ And so, when the leader of the Church Party in Birmingham, Bishop E.A. Knox, was looking for a 'lady School Board candidate' to vote in favour of instituting a daily non-sectarian religious service in schools across the city, Jane's name was put forward by her old head mistress, Miss Creak, and her candidature confirmed in October 1900. She explained her reasons for standing in a letter to the electors, signed 'Jennie Suffield':

I have gladly accepted the invitation to take part in this important work for my native city, because it enables me to work for what I believe to be the true education of its children. I cannot believe that any training is worthy of that name which neglects character, and trains intellect only.¹²²

Jane was elected to the School Board three times between 1900 and 1903, and religious instruction was duly introduced into Birmingham schools.¹²³

Following her return from Liverpool, Jane had continued to reside at 9 Ashfield Road with her parents, but by 1901 they were not the only ones to be living there. John and Emily had taken in a boarder, an insurance inspector called Edwin Neave, to whom Jane became engaged. Her father was appalled, thinking Edwin to be somewhat common, and the pair were parted for a time. Tolkien, however, appears to have been quite fond of his banjo-playing prospective uncle. When Mabel was hospitalised in 1904, the twelve-year-old Ronald went to stay with Edwin in Brighton, making a series of sketches of their life 'without a Mother (or Wife)'.¹²⁴ Jane and Edwin were married in Manchester the following summer, both aged 33, but their union was sadly childless and short-lived, with Edwin dying in 1909.¹²⁵

Jane Neave would have been obliged to give up her teaching post when she got married in 1905, but she now resumed her academic career at St Andrews University, where she was appointed as the warden of a female hall of residence (University Hall) in 1909.¹²⁶ In that capacity she met the daughters of Ellen Brookes-Smith, who became a close friend. Jane resigned her

¹²⁰ Ibid. 95.

¹²¹ According to Burns, Jane was later a regular attendee of services at the Anglican church in Dormston and enjoyed reading 'the female mystics of the High Middle Ages, such as Julian of Norwich, Mechthilde and Hildegard von Bingen' (89).

¹²² Ibid. 98.

¹²³ Ibid. 99.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 143-44.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 100 & 138.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 100.

wardenship at St Andrews in 1911, and after the respite of an Alpine walking tour with her Tolkien nephews that summer, she and Ellen bought Phoenix Farm in Edwin Neave's home village of Gedling, Nottinghamshire.¹²⁷ The two women ran the farm in partnership until 1922. After a brief spell in Devon, Jane settled again in the West Midlands in 1923, purchasing the Elizabethan 'Manor Farm' in Dormston, Worcestershire, to which she restored the erstwhile name of 'Bag End' [Map 1:10].¹²⁸



Figure 27: 'Bag End', Dormston.

In Dormston, Jane was never short of visitors. Tolkien stayed at her farm on at least two occasions, in 1923 and again later in the decade with one or more of his children.¹²⁹ In a letter of 1968, he wrote: 'In the case of Bag-End, I did not invent it, it was, in fact, the local name for a house an aunt lived in in Worcestershire: an old tumbledown manor house at the end of an untidy lane that led nowhere else.'¹³⁰ But whether the correspondence in Tolkien's mind between the real house and the abode of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins went beyond their shared name is uncertain. Andrew Morton points out that both dwellings feature wood panelling and that the Dutch tiles of the hearth at the real Bag End are reminiscent of the chequered floor of Bilbo's home.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Ibid. 101.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 89 & 104. Also, Morton. Viii. The farm as a whole is older, but the house was substantially rebuilt in 1582, according to Morton (8). The old name, which Jane found on some documents preserved in a chest, probably refers to the location of the farm at the end of a lane; however, Morton notes that *bag* in Germanic languages can denote livestock (38).

¹²⁹ Morton. 25.

¹³⁰ Drout, Michael D.C. (ed.). *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*. Routledge. 2007. 'Letter to Ken Jackson, 29th January 1968'. 455.

¹³¹ Morton. 23. He also suggests (21) that Tolkien would have enjoyed discovering that a place near Dormston was named in a boundary clause of an Anglo-Saxon charter as *Eomaeres medwo* ('Eomer's Meadow').

A more regular guest at Bag End was Tolkien's brother, Hilary, whom Jane had helped establish on his fruit farm, ten miles away, near Evesham; as was Old John Suffield during the last seven years of his life.¹³² And a former pupil from the Bath Row school, Edith Marjorie Attlee (1900-1985), was a resident assistant at Bag End until, in 1927, she married Tolkien's cousin, Frank Sydney Suffield (1904-1958).¹³³ These must have been tiring but happy years for Jane.¹³⁴ Unfortunately, the farm proved financially untenable during the Great Depression and she was forced to sell the manor house in 1931.¹³⁵ She retained two farmworkers' cottages on the estate: one to give her a rental income and another, Church Cottage, as a bolt hole for herself.¹³⁶

The peripatetic pattern of Jane's life continued, though she was now in her sixties. In 1933, she moved to Pleshey, Essex, to be near the Diocesan Retreat House of the Catholic mystic Evelyn Underhill.¹³⁷ After briefly moving to Kent in 1936, she returned to Church Cottage the next year, remaining in Dormston for the ensuing decade. Between 1947 and 1951, Jane lived at Rottingdean, near Brighton, and then, aged eighty, came to live in caravan on Hilary's smallholding.¹³⁸ In her final years, she was looked after by Frank (before his own death in 1958) and Marjorie Suffield, first at Newnham in Warwickshire and ultimately in the remote and beautiful village of Gilfachrheda, Ceredigion, where she died and was buried in 1963.¹³⁹

Both J.R.R. and Hilary Tolkien attended Jane Neave's funeral. Orphaned in 1904, their aunt had since been something of a surrogate mother to the pair, though perhaps more so to the less successful younger brother. From childhood, Ronald was independent and assertive, especially on the religious questions which divided him from his aunt while she adhered to Anglicanism. She may even have been among the family members Tolkien blamed somewhat for the fate of his mother. If Burns is correct in supposing that Tolkien modelled the umbrella-wielding termagant Lobelia Sackville-Baggins on Jane, then his attitude towards his aunt was indeed ambivalent.¹⁴⁰ However, they had much in common, such as an enthusiasm for both art and literature, and his letters to Jane in later life, addressed to 'My dearest aunt', convey only admiration and affection.¹⁴¹ These missives record that she motivated Tolkien to publish 'a small book with Tom Bombadil at the heart of it' and that she proof-read his lectures.¹⁴² And he knew that her interest in his 'personal details' was in earnest: 'That is because you are a dear, and take

¹³² Jane apparently blamed herself that the farm did not prosper and that Hilary struggled to make ends meet (Morton, 30 & Burns, *Roots*, 90).

¹³³ Frank Sydney Suffield (1904-1958), son of Roland, is not to be confused with Frank Sidney Suffield (b. 1889), one of Tolkien's more distant Birmingham cousins.

¹³⁴ In the 1950s, Jane wrote to Oliver Suffield recalling 'the happy days we used to have together, making bonfires and chasing cows' (Burns, *Roots*, 90), though whether these were memories from Dormston I know not.

¹³⁵ Morton states that her father's death in 1930 may also have been a factor in her decision to sell (Plate VI).

¹³⁶ Burns, *Roots*, 104 & Morton, 32.

¹³⁷ Morton, 32.

¹³⁸ Burns, *Roots*, 90 & Morton, 33.

¹³⁹ Burns, *Roots*, 64 & 91. Morton, 33.

¹⁴⁰ Burns, *Roots*, 90. This supposition is based on Letter 177: From a letter to Rayner Unwin (8 December 1955), in which Tolkien writes, 'One elderly lady - in part the model for "Lobelia" indeed, though she does not suspect it - would I think certainly have set about Auden (and others) had they been in range of her umbrella. . . .'

¹⁴¹ Letter 234: To Jane Neave (22 November 1961).

¹⁴² Letter 231: From a letter to Jane Neave (4 October 1961) & Letter 241: From a letter to Jane Neave (8-9 September 1962).

an interest in other people, especially as rightly your kin'.¹⁴³ Tolkien's true opinion of his Aunt Jane was best expressed in a letter to another:

I always like shrewd and sound-hearted maiden aunts. Blessed are those who have them or meet them... The professional aunt is a fairly recent development, perhaps; but I was fortunate in having an early example: one of the first women to take a science degree.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Letter 241.

¹⁴⁴ Letter 232: From a letter to Joyce Reeves (4 November 1961).

The early Tolkiens

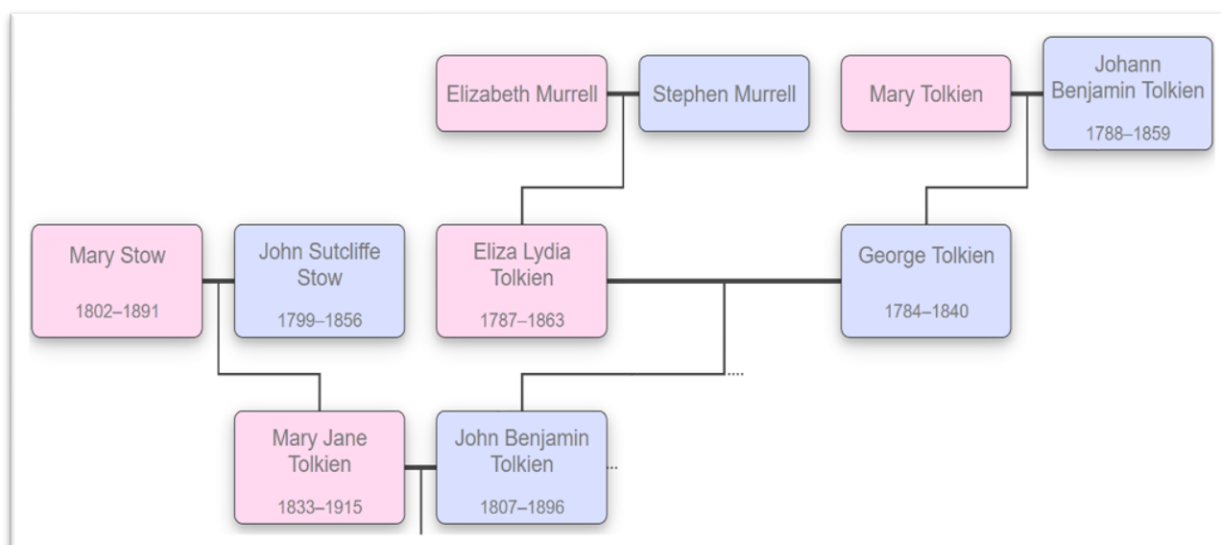


Figure 28: A family tree showing the parentage of Tolkien's paternal grandfather, John Benjamin Tolkien.

It is not necessary, given the scope of this enquiry, to recount at length the early history of J.R.R. Tolkien's paternal family. Although eager to learn more of his 'German' genealogy, the author felt it exerted a less powerful influence upon him than his Midland ancestry. In the inaugural O'Donnell Memorial Lecture at Oxford in 1955, he stated:

I am not a German, though my surname is German... I have inherited with my surname nothing that originally belonged to it in language or culture, and after 200 years the 'blood' of Saxony and Poland is probably a negligible physical ingredient.¹⁴⁵

Even the Tolkien name, in his eyes the only legacy of his eighteenth-century Saxon ancestry, he felt ill-suited him, for he believed it to be an anglicisation of *Tollkiehn*, or *tollkühn*, meaning 'foolhardy' (which Tolkien claimed he was not, 'whatever some remote ancestors may have been').¹⁴⁶ However, according to a blog, *Tolkniety*, which has delved into this topic in great detail, the author was mistaken (or perhaps being wilfully inventive), for his surname derives instead from a medieval Prussian village more recently known as Tollkeim, where his paternal forebears lived.¹⁴⁷ These ancestors migrated westwards along the southern shores of the Baltic and North

¹⁴⁵ Tolkien, J.R.R.. 'English and Welsh'. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. (ed. Christopher Tolkien). Harper Collins. 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Letter 165. See also Letter 324: From a letter to Graham Tayar (4-5 June 1971). This tendency to play down the significance of his Teutonic surname conformed to a wider pattern in contemporary British society, evident not least in the 1917 decision of George V to change the name of the royal house from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor. The author may also have absorbed some of the hauteur of his Suffield grandfather with regard to his Tolkien 'in-laws', who had not moved in same circle of Birmingham society for as long as his own family (Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 18 & Burns. *Roots*. 42).

¹⁴⁷ ['The Long-father Tree of J.R.R. Tolkien'](#). *Tolkniety*. 10 September 2022.

Seas over a number of generations, until Johann Benjamin Tolkien (1752-1819), a maker of clocks and watches, arrived in London in around 1772.¹⁴⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien knew the century in which his great-great-grandfather had crossed the Channel but he was exaggerating when he wrote in 1955 that the family had ‘migrated to England more than 200 years ago, and became quickly intensely English (not British), though remaining musical...’¹⁴⁹

In his new homeland, Johann married consecutively two Englishwomen, both called Mary, the second of whom (Mary Wall) bore him a son, George (1784-1840), who was to be J.R.R. Tolkien’s great-grandfather.¹⁵⁰ Among other things, George was a bass singer in the Drury Lane opera company and organist at St Pancras Church.¹⁵¹ In 1805, George married Eliza Lydia Murrell (1787-1863), with whom he had as many as fourteen children, including John Benjamin Tolkien (1807-1896), the author’s grandfather.

¹⁴⁸ According to Burns, there is some record of a ‘Tolkien and Dancer, watch movement and tool manufacturer’ in Clerkenwell in 1808 (*Roots*. 31).

¹⁴⁹ Letter 165. See also Letter 30: To Rütten & Loening Verlag (25 July 1938): ‘My great-great-grandfather came to England in the eighteenth century from Germany: the main part of my descent is therefore purely English...’

¹⁵⁰ [‘Four John Benjamins: watchmaker, gentleman, music-seller and freemason’](#). *Tolkniety*. 25 April 2018.

¹⁵¹ [‘Tolkien’s great-grandfather was a bass singer’](#). *Tolkniety*. 4 November 2022.

Tolkien's paternal grandfather, John Benjamin Tolkien (1807-1896)

By the 1840s, the Tolkien family firm in Clerkenwell had shifted from clock to piano manufacture. It was in order to expand this business that John Benjamin relocated from London to Birmingham in around 1843, as J.R.R. Tolkien was aware:

The emigrant family seems originally to have resided in London, but my grandfather moved to Birmingham. In German manner, music and craftsmanship have been their chief works – though there is a ‘sea-strain’ (probably coming in from English marriages). My oldest uncle was a sailor. But they turned their hands to clocks and pianos. One still sees Tolkien (Henry Tolkien) on old grandfather clocks and Tolkien pianos were once renowned, especially J.B. Tolkien pianos made by my grandfather. He was once a wealthy man, but not one of business and a rigidly religious Baptist and would not deal with music halls or theatres. He was a dear old and poor man in the nineties when I knew him.¹⁵²

As Burns writes, there was logic in John B. Tolkien's decision to sell pianos in Birmingham. Not only could goods and materials be transported by canal and railway from London, but the town was gaining a reputation as a centre of musical activity. The Triennial Festival was set up between 1768 and 1784, hosting works by eminent composers. Mendelssohn was commissioned to write and perform his Second Piano Concerto for the 1837 Festival and he performed again in 1840 and 1846.¹⁵³ The original venue for the Festival was St Philip's Church, but from 1834 concerts were held in the newly built and more commodious Town Hall. It was opposite this grand building, emblematic of Birmingham's surging confidence, that John leased a shop in 1848.¹⁵⁴ His ‘music warehouse’ would occupy **70 New Street** [Map 3:43] until 1870.

According to Burns, John B. Tolkien may also have decided that Birmingham, once known as ‘the town of gardens’, would be a pleasant place to bring up his family. However, the deaths in 1844 and 1847 of two of his daughters, both called Jane, at the ages of eight and one, must have been heavy blows to his hopes.¹⁵⁵ John had married Jane Sarah Holmwood (1806-1854) from Hampshire in 1835, following the death of his first wife.¹⁵⁶ Apart from the elder Jane (1836-1844), two other daughters were born to them in London: Emily (1838-1921) and Louisa (1840-1900); as well as a son in Birmingham, also named John Benjamin (1845-1883). It seems that the family lived in **Aston** until 1847, when they moved to **Haydn Place, Edgbaston** [Map

¹⁵² From a 1951 letter to Florence Tolkien, a third cousin by marriage who lived in the United States. Tolkien goes on to describe the family coat of arms and the tradition that the eldest son be called John. See also Burns. *Roots*. 31. *Tolkieniety* states that the English Tolkiens were probably not Baptists but Methodists. John Benjamin Tolkien was a local philanthropist and a member of the evangelical Church of the United Brethren in Christ, whose main place of worship in the mid-nineteenth century was the school on Ann Street (now Colmore Row) (See *The Victoria County History of Warwick*. Vol. VII, ‘Birmingham’. ‘Places of Worship’.)

¹⁵³ Burns. *Roots*. 34-35. The Triennial Festival would run until 1912, making it the longest running music festival in the world, and would witness debut works by other great composers such as Bruch, Gounod, Dvořák and Elgar.

¹⁵⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 36.

¹⁵⁵ The girls were buried in the same grave in Key Hill Cemetery (Burns. *Roots*. 32).

¹⁵⁶ John B. Tolkien's first wife seems to have been Emma Baker, who died shortly after they had been married in Southampton in 1832 ([John Benjamin Tolkien](#). *Tolkieniety*. 25 January 2018).

5:A], close to the present junction of the Bristol Road and Wellington Road.¹⁵⁷ However, by 1851, the family were again in north Birmingham, near **Erdington**.¹⁵⁸ They had moved yet again and were living on Villa Road, **Handsworth**, when John's second wife died in 1854.¹⁵⁹



Figure 29: A view of central Birmingham in the direction of New Street, with the factories of Digbeth and Small Heath beyond. The classical Town Hall is right of centre.

On 16th February 1856, at the age of forty-eight, John B. Tolkien wedded for the third time, at **All Saints' Church, King's Heath** [Map 6:46]. His bride was the twenty-two-year-old Mary Jane Stow (1833-1915), who had lived with her family at 1 Haydn Place five years earlier, around the time that the Tolkiens had resided at 2 Haydn Place. The 1851 Census shows Mary in charge of three younger brothers, with her father (a commercial traveller) absent and her mother, Mary Bindley, staying with her sister in Derby.¹⁶⁰ Mary's father, John Sutcliffe Stow, must have died very shortly after her wedding to Tolkien, for his funeral took place on 8th March 1856.

¹⁵⁷ Burns. *Roots*. 38.

¹⁵⁸ John B. Tolkien's family in the [1851 Census](#).

¹⁵⁹ Burns. *Roots*. 38. Jane Sarah Tolkien, too, was buried at Key Hill with her daughters.

¹⁶⁰ Mary Jane Stow and her brothers in the [1851 Census](#).

Almost a year to the day of their wedding, John and Mary's first child and the author's father, Arthur Reuel Tolkien (1857-1896), was born at home in **Hall Road, Handsworth** [Map 1:41].¹⁶¹ There soon followed the arrival of three daughters, Mabel (1858-1937), Grace Bindley (1861-1947) and Florence Mary (1863-1944), so that the house on Heathfield Road, Handsworth, where John is recorded in 1861 as living with both his new family and the two surviving daughters from his previous marriage, must have felt quite cramped.¹⁶² By 1863, the Tolkiens had moved to **The Crescent** [Map 3:F], a Bath-style edifice built (but never completed) near the canal wharves north of Broad Street, Birmingham.¹⁶³ In 1867, John and Mary lost two young boys, Frank Winslow and Howard Charles, and buried them in a new family grave at Key Hill. Thankfully, two more boys, Wilfrid Henry (1870-1938) and Laurence George Hammond (1873-1939), would survive into adulthood.¹⁶⁴

During the late 1860s John and Mary had moved to the southern side of Birmingham, just as the Suffields had done a few years earlier. If they were not already acquainted, as New Street merchants or through King Edward's School, John would certainly have encountered members of the Suffield family when he joined the Central Literary Association in 1871.¹⁶⁵ Before settling at **'Ivy Lodge', near the junction of Park Road and Moseley Road** [Map 6:48], around 1870, the Tolkiens lived briefly on **Balsall Heath Road**. There, they were joined by John's elder brother, George William (1806-1877), who had been assisting in the family business for some time.¹⁶⁶ Unlike the Suffield's drapery firm, the Tolkien family's piano-making business did suffer during the 1870s depression. The shop had changed premises by 1870, moving across to **87 New Street**, but there were no other indications that it was financially unsound.¹⁶⁷ However, a general decline in Birmingham's metalworking industries (c. 1873-1896) had knock-on effects for the whole economy of the region, including the manufacture of luxury items, such as pianos. In 1877, after three decades in business, John B. Tolkien's pianoforte and music warehouse went into

¹⁶¹ Burns. *Roots*. 38. According to J.R.R. Tolkien, the name Reuel originally belonged to a friend of John B. Tolkien, but there are very few people with a surname of that spelling in the census records. 'Ruel' is more common.

¹⁶² John B. Tolkien's family in the [1861 Census](#). The elder daughter, Emily, was only five years younger than her step-mother. Confusingly, the age given on the census record for Mary looks very much like '25', which is incorrect by two years.

¹⁶³ Burns. *Roots*. 38.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 39. Another girl, Marian Esther Tolkien (1866-1934), is listed on numerous genealogical websites as the daughter of John and Mary, but she appears in none of the obvious census records nor on the family tree in *The Tolkien Family Album*. Furthermore, her birth record does not mention Mary, rather someone with the maiden name of Hemery. A Mary Ann Hemery (b. 1849), from North Harborne, would have been around seventeen years old at the time of Marian's birth. One possibility is that Marian was the daughter, out of wedlock, of the younger John Benjamin, who was twenty-one in the year of her birth and had been married to Agnes Marion Tyrrell in London in 1865. This would explain the discrepancy in the number of children he is supposed to have had, with J.R.R. Tolkien mentioning three daughters (Letter 309) and other sources only listing his daughter with Agnes, Beatrice Emily Louise Tolkien (1867-1935).

¹⁶⁵ Burns cites the younger John B. Tolkien's entry to King Edward's School in 1857 as evidence that the Tolkiens were approaching the same social status as the Suffields (*Roots*. 42). And the December 1872 edition of the King Edward's School newspaper, *The Chronicle*, contains advertisements for the Suffield and Tolkien family businesses on the same page (48).

¹⁶⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 39-40. [The 1871 Census](#), showing the family in a house near Moseley village.

¹⁶⁷ Burns. *Roots*. 39. No. 87 is part of a stuccoed, Grade II listed building at the top end of New Street, next to Town Hall Chambers.

liquidation.¹⁶⁸ There are no records of a Tolkien music shop in Birmingham after 1881, though the good reputation of Tolkien pianos endured.¹⁶⁹

Now into his seventies, John continued to work as a piano teacher and tuner. His eldest son, John Benjamin (III), who had become a partner in the family business and lived in Handsworth, was obliged to move to London to work as a newspaper reporter, dying in 1883 before his thirty-ninth birthday.¹⁷⁰ His wife, Agnes, and daughter, Beatrice Emily Louise Tolkien (1867-1935), a painter, continued to live in the capital. By 1881, the elder John and Mary were living on the **Alcester Road in King's Heath** [Map 1:A] with five of their children.¹⁷¹ Arthur was still at home and working as a clerk in Lloyd's Bank, however after he moved to a house called **'Elmdon' on Forest Road, Moseley** [Map 6:44] in around 1886, his father seems to have joined him there.¹⁷² The census of 1891 shows John residing with his daughter Louisa on Bell Lane (now Orphanage Road), Erdington, where he would die in 1896, aged eighty-nine, before being buried at Key Hill.¹⁷³ Mary, however, was living with her two youngest sons on **Church Road, Moseley** [Map 6:45], next door to her daughter, Mabel.¹⁷⁴ Whether there was any loss of affection in the final decade of their marriage or not, there is no doubt that John had for a long time doted on his wife. More than a quarter of a century after their wedding, he was still writing verses 'to my beloved wife Mary Jane'.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 40.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 41. The last directory entry is for a shop on Colmore Row.

¹⁷⁰ The younger John Benjamin Tolkien was probably the 'sailor' to whom J.R.R. Tolkien referred. He had also been a member of a stonemasons' lodge in Halesowen.

¹⁷¹ John B. Tolkien's family in the [1881 Census](#). The house was probably on the east side of Alcester Road, between Wheeler's Lane and Taylor Road, perhaps around the current no. 239 or 241.

¹⁷² It is now 28 Forest Road, on the south side of the road.

¹⁷³ J.R.R. Tolkien claims that he was 'dandled on the knee of old J.B., as the heir, before he died' (Letter 309); although he was mistaken in saying that his grandfather reached the age of ninety-two.

¹⁷⁴ John B. Tolkien was the seventh member of the family to be buried in the family grave there.

What was 15 Church Road in the [1891 Census](#) is today 55 Church Road. Mary remained there until 1900. She appears to have spent some of her remaining years visiting her daughter Grace in Northumberland, for that is where the [1901 Census](#) finds her and that is where she died in 1915 (though she, too, was buried at Key Hill).

¹⁷⁵ ['Granny: Mary Jane Tolkien'](#). *Tolkniety*. 13 February 2020. John B. Tolkien also wrote poems to commemorate the births of Arthur and J.R.R. Tolkien.

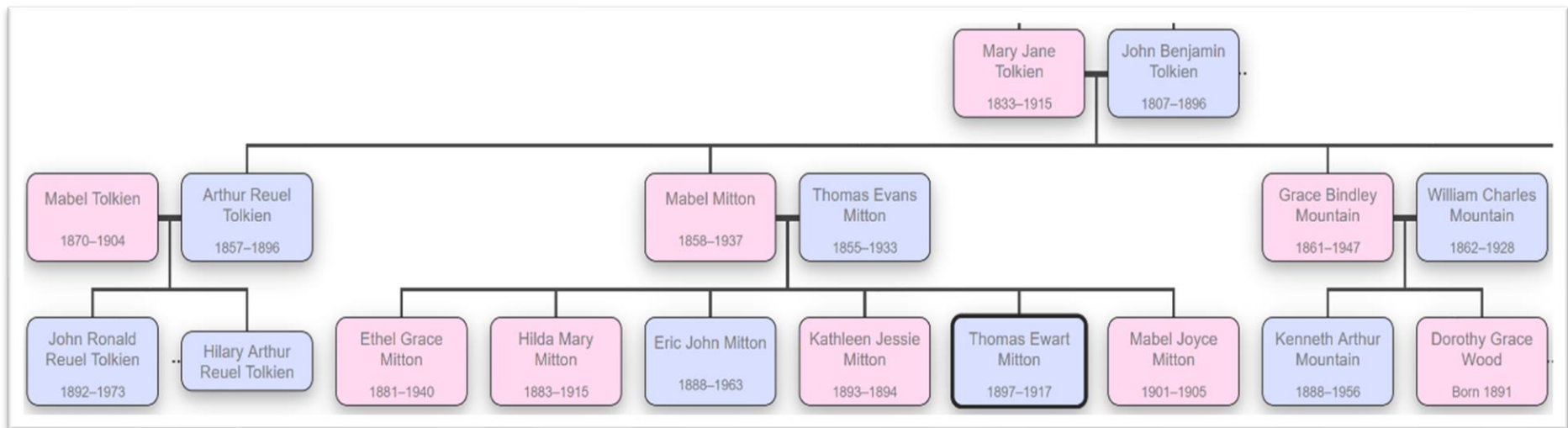


Figure 31: A family tree showing the elder children and resultant grandchildren of John B. Tolkien's third marriage, including J.R.R. Tolkien.

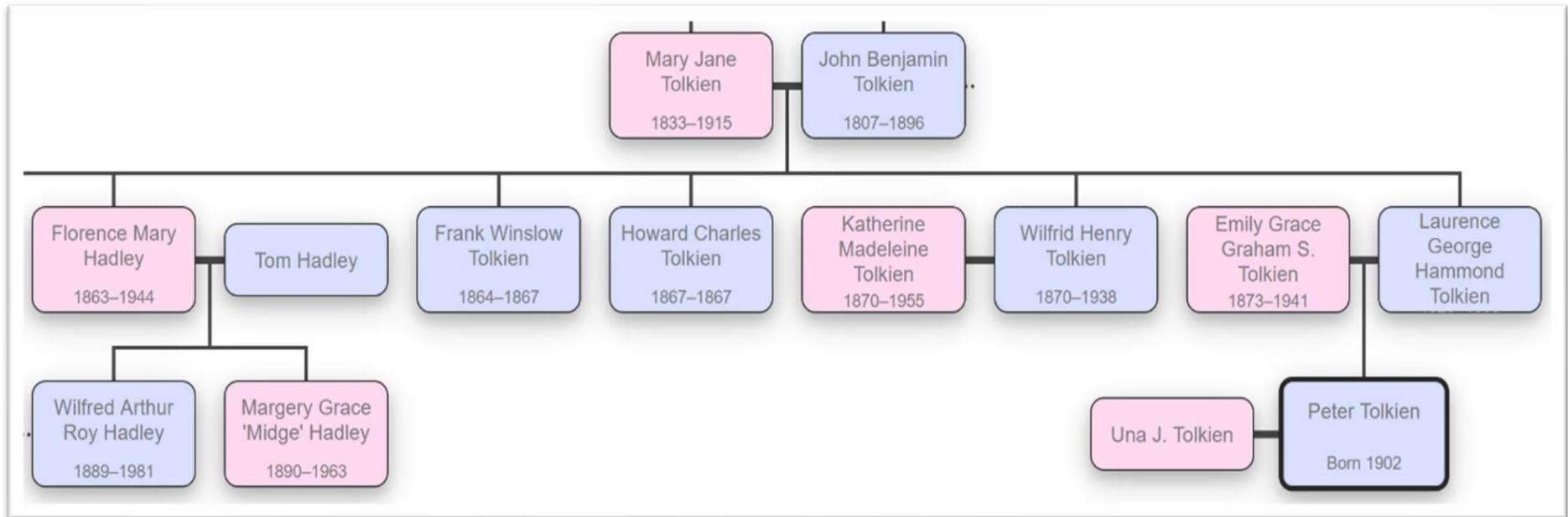


Figure 32: A family tree showing the younger children and resultant grandchildren of John B. Tolkien's third marriage.

Tolkien's paternal aunts and uncles

Although the only son from the marriage of John Benjamin Tolkien and Jane Holmwood left Birmingham following the collapse of the family business, dying shortly thereafter, the two surviving daughters remained and raised families in the area. Emily (1838-1921) left the home of her father and step-mother when she married Richard Pardoe, a Birmingham jeweller, in 1864. Apart from a stint in **Small Heath**, they remained in Handsworth for the rest of their lives, raising six children, of whom only the eldest, Elsie Emily Pardoe (1865-1945), appears to have married and started her own family. Three of Emily and Richard's children were still living together in Handsworth in 1939.¹⁷⁶ The second daughter of John and Jane, Louisa (1840-1900), married a commercial clerk, Henry Holden, in 1861. She and Henry moved to **Harborne** [Map 5:C] prior to the birth of their second child, Sydney Holmwood Holden (1864-1939), and are recorded as living there still in 1881.¹⁷⁷ By the time their elder daughter, Lilian Louisa Holden (1862-1888), had died at the age of twenty-five, the family had relocated to Erdington, where John B. Tolkien joined them in his final years. During J.R.R. Tolkien's childhood, Sydney, his wife Sophia and their three sons lived at 24 Arthur Road, Erdington, while Henry (widowed in 1900) and his younger daughter, Helen May Holden (1869-1922), lived at no. 8, until both Henry and Helen passed away within six weeks of each other in 1922.¹⁷⁸

The first of the author's 'full' uncles and aunts to leave the house of John and Mary Tolkien on the Alcester Road in King's Heath was Mabel (1858-1937), who married in 1880. Her Baptist husband, Thomas Evans Mitton (1855-1933), had entered King Edward's School in 1866 and then emulated his own father in becoming an engineer and owner of a brass foundry which employed twenty.¹⁷⁹ The couple would live affluently in Moseley for the rest of their lives, at first on **Augusta Road** [Map 6:B] and then, by 1891, at **16 Church Road (now no. 53)**, beside Mabel's mother and brothers.¹⁸⁰ In 1901, they lived at '**Carisbrooke**' on **Anderton Park Road** [Map 6:K] with their five children: Ethel Grace (1881-1940), Hilda Mary (1883-1915), Eric John (1888-1963), Thomas Ewart Mitton (1897-1917) and the short-lived Mabel Joyce Mitton (1901-1905).¹⁸¹ By 1911, the family were living in quite a grand but sadly no longer extant house, called **Abbotsford, on Wake Green Road** [Map 6:26].¹⁸²

The two Mitton boys were schooled at King Edward's like their father, with Ewart's time there overlapping with J.R.R. Tolkien's by a few months. Like his cousin, Ewart had a talent for writing poetry and won the K.E.S. Governors' Prize for English Verse in 1915.¹⁸³ Burns identifies

¹⁷⁶ The Pardoe siblings in the [1939 Census](#). Elsie married George Gill Mark, a printer and stationer, in 1897, whereupon they moved to Kidderminster.

¹⁷⁷ Henry and Louisa Holden in the [1861 Census](#).

¹⁷⁸ Sydney and his family in the [1901 Census](#) (they had moved to Handsworth by 1911); and the Holdens in the [1901 Census](#) and the [1911 Census](#).

¹⁷⁹ Burns. *Roots*. 41 & 44.

¹⁸⁰ The Mittons in the [1891 Census](#).

¹⁸¹ The Mittons in the [1901 Census](#). Another girl, Kathleen Jessie Mitton, had lived for just a short time during the winter of 1893-94. Carisbrooke was subsequently known as no. 130 but has now been demolished.

¹⁸² The Mittons in the [1911 Census](#). The exact location of Abbotsford is difficult to identify precisely but it lay somewhere on the north side of Wake Green Road, between Belle Walk and Yardley Wood Road.

¹⁸³ '[Mitton, Thomas Evans](#)'. *King Edward's School and the Great War: Memorial Roll of Honour, 1914-1918*. He probably won the prize for a poem concerning the Dardanelles Expedition.

a poem by him ('T.E.M.') in a 1916 edition of the school newspaper, with the final line: 'Young spirits nobly vow that each will do his duty'.¹⁸⁴ Also like Tolkien, Ewart served as a Signals Officer on the Western Front, but was killed in an accident on the railway near Ypres in December 1917.



Figure 33: Tolkien's cousin, Thomas Ewart Mitton.

Both Ronald and his brother remained in close contact with the Mittons, visiting them often. Burns suggests that Hilary may have lived at Abbotsford while doing his army training in 1915.¹⁸⁵ She also relates how Ronald stayed with his aunt Mabel following the death of her husband in 1933 and was named as an executor and heir in her will.¹⁸⁶ The Mittons had by then attained some acclaim in the city, being singled out by the *Birmingham News* as a family which had 'played a prominent part in the public and religious life of the district for the past fifty or sixty years'.¹⁸⁷

The younger sisters of Arthur Tolkien and Mabel Mitton, both of whom were teachers, were next to marry. In 1887, Grace Bindley Tolkien (1861-1947) married William Charles Mountain, the managing director of his family's electrical engineering company. By 1891, they had moved to Newcastle, where they raised two children. But Grace must have returned on visits to Birmingham, for Carpenter tells us that she regaled the young J.R.R. Tolkien with tales of his

¹⁸⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 201.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 204.

¹⁸⁶ Burns, Maggie. 'A local habitation and a name'. *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*. No. 50, Autumn 2010. 27.

¹⁸⁷ '[Mitton, Thomas Evans](#)'. *King Edward's School and the Great War: Memorial Roll of Honour, 1914-1918*.

German ancestors, whom she claimed were a branch of the House of Hohenzollern.¹⁸⁸ The author's other paternal aunt, Florence Mary Tolkien (1863-1944), married a King's Heath solicitor, Tom Hadley (1862-1911), in 1888. The couple remained in the area, living on **Grove Avenue (perhaps no. 34, 'Combermere')** [Map 6:E] in 1891 and at **'Kylemore' on Wake Green Road** [Map 6:G] in 1901.¹⁸⁹ The 1911 Census finds the Hadleys living on a house boat in Exmouth with Mabel Mitton, six months before Tom's death. Ultimately, Florence emigrated to British Columbia, where she and her daughter Margery Grace (or 'Midge') passed away in 1944 and 1963, respectively.¹⁹⁰ The son of Florence and Tom, Wilfred Arthur R. Hadley ('Roy'), had made the journey to Canada in 1913 but maintained a sporadic correspondence with J.R.R. Tolkien into the 1970s.¹⁹¹

Of the author's paternal uncles, Wilfrid Henry Tolkien (1870-1938) had preceded him through King Edward's School during the mid-1880s, excelling in mathematics.¹⁹² This education formed the basis of a stockbroking career in Birmingham, where he lived on **Great Charles Street** [Map 3:I] and, following his 1910 marriage to Katherine Madeleine Green, the daughter of a well-to-do jeweller, at **62 Wheelleys Road, Edgbaston** [Map 4:J].¹⁹³



Figure 34: A group including Wilfrid Tolkien (second from left) and Tom Hadley (extreme right).

¹⁸⁸ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 26.

¹⁸⁹ The Hadleys in the [1891 Census](#) and [1901 Census](#). Today, the address of Kylemore is either no. 45 or 47.

¹⁹⁰ The Hadleys in the [1911 Census](#).

¹⁹¹ ['J.R.R. Tolkien Airmail Family Letter of 14 December 1970'](#). *The Tolkien Library*.

¹⁹² According to Burns (*Roots*. 49 & 65), Wilfrid attended K.E.S. from 1884 to 1885, possibly thanks to the generosity of his brother, Arthur Tolkien.

¹⁹³ Wilfrid Henry Tolkien in the [1901 census](#) and the [1911 census](#). The house he lived in on Wheelleys Road is no longer extant but was in the vicinity of present no. 62.

Wilfrid's younger brother, Laurence George Hammond Tolkien (1873-1939), may have been named by John and Mary after the family's Congregationalist minister in Handsworth.¹⁹⁴ Following a spell living with Wilfrid and his mother in Moseley, Laurence married the daughter of a Scottish drapery salesman, Emily Grace Graham S. McGregor, in 1900.¹⁹⁵ By the following year, the couple were living in a house called **'Brackley' on Middleton Hall Road, King's Norton** [Map 1:22], with Laurence working as a life and fire insurance secretary.¹⁹⁶ Burns describes the route that J.R.R. Tolkien may have walked from King's Heath, when brought by his mother to visit the relation who was paying his school fees.¹⁹⁷ Little could he then have guessed that, for a few weeks in 1904, he would live in the house of his uncle as an orphan.

¹⁹⁴ ['Aunt Grace and the mystery of the Tolkiens' second names'](#). *Tolkieniety*. 6 May 2018.

¹⁹⁵ According to various genealogy websites, Laurence and Grace had a son, Peter Tolkien (b. 1902), although his birth record does not give the maiden name of his mother. Peter emigrated with his wife Una to South Africa in around 1930. There is no trace of Laurence or Peter in the 1911 Census, where Grace can be found as [a visitor in the Sutton Coldfield home of Abraham Edward Godrich](#), an iron and steel wire manufacturer.

¹⁹⁶ Laurence and Grace in the [1901 Census](#). The exact location of this house is unknown to me but was probably located between Lomaine Drive and the private drive running northwards at around 126 Middleton Hall Road.

¹⁹⁷ Burns. *Roots*. 138.

Tolkien's parents

J.R.R. Tolkien's mother, Mabel Suffield (1870-1904), was the fifth child and second daughter of John and Emily Jane Suffield. Her birth on 29th January 1870 was registered by her mother, who gave her husband's occupation as 'warehouseman'.¹⁹⁸ The first home which Mabel Suffield knew was Mayfield in Showell Green, but she lived for the majority of her youth at Malvern House on Trafalgar Road, Moseley. Although Mabel did not attend the King Edward's High School for Girls, as her younger sister Jane would do, she was educated to a high standard, perhaps by a governess.¹⁹⁹ She was able to teach her sons French, German, Latin, English literature and botany, instilling in them a lifelong passion for nature and its cultivation. As the similarities between her and her son's ornate handwriting demonstrate, Mabel passed on from her own father a talent for calligraphy and artistry in general.²⁰⁰ Some of J.R.R. Tolkien's youthful essays in drawing and painting were made in the back of a sketch-book which had belonged to Mabel in childhood.²⁰¹

As Burns writes, Mabel tutored her sons to pass the entrance exam for King Edward's School not only because her brother (Roland) and cousin (Mark Oliver Suffield, the portrait photographer) had been educated there, but because it was the *alma mater* of her deceased husband, Arthur Reuel Tolkien (1857-1896).²⁰² He had started at King Edward's in 1870, aged twelve, and remained enrolled until 1873; however, his enduring ties to the school were strengthened by the creation of the Old Edwardians Association in 1883.²⁰³ He became an active member of the Old Edwardians' Literary and Debating Society and was elected its honorary secretary in 1886 and 1887. At its conclaves, he gave speeches in favour of free trade and on the topic of 'Marmion' by Sir Walter Scott.²⁰⁴ A shared interest in literature may provide an answer to the question of how Arthur and Mabel first met.²⁰⁵

J.R.R. Tolkien's parents had independent connections to the Central Literary Association: Mabel's father was a prominent figure in the organisation between 1871 and 1894, and two of her uncles were also longstanding members.²⁰⁶ John Benjamin Tolkien's involvement lasted from 1871 until 1877, at which point he seems to have transferred his membership to Arthur, who maintained it until leaving for Africa in 1889.²⁰⁷ The talks and debates, such as the one Arthur addressed in January 1883, were probably all-male affairs, but the C.L.A. also held

¹⁹⁸ Burns. *Roots*. 62.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 64.

²⁰⁰ Hammond & Scull. *Artist & Illustrator*. 201.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 12.

²⁰² Burns. *Roots*. 65.

²⁰³ Ibid. 45. Arthur had to pass the entrance exam (instituted in 1865) as the other means of entry (being nominated by a Church of England school governor) was not open to nonconformist boys such as himself. At that time, tuition at King Edward's School was still free.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 65-66.

²⁰⁵ Burns (67) mentions a couple of other possible connections, aside from the general contact between the families as residents of Moseley and as New Street shop owners: both Roland Suffield and Arthur Tolkien were Old Edwardians; and Mabel may have received piano lessons from John Benjamin Tolkien.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 70. John Suffield's brothers, Mark Oliver and William were both members of the C.L.A. from around 1859-60 until, in Mark's case, 1915.

²⁰⁷ Arthur's brother-in-law, Thomas Evans Mitton, was also a member of the C.L.A. at this time.

conversazioni, mixed social gatherings at which postprandial dancing took place.²⁰⁸ Whatever the circumstances of their first encounters, a thirty-one-year-old Arthur proposed to Mabel shortly after her eighteenth birthday in 1888. By this time, Arthur was a clerk at Lloyd's Bank and had moved out of the family home. However, John Suffield, who seems to have anyway harboured a sense of social superiority towards the Tolkien family, insisted that the couple wait until Mabel had turned twenty-one before marrying. It was at this point that Mabel's younger sister, Jane, acted as the paramours' go-between at New Street Station.

Arthur and Mabel must have continued to correspond after he left England in May 1889 to take up his position as manager of the Bloemfontein branch of the Bank of Africa, for it was almost two years before the now twenty-one-year-old Mabel made the eighteen-day voyage from Southampton to Cape Town.²⁰⁹ Arthur travelled the seven hundred miles across South Africa to meet Mabel in Cape Town, where they were married on 16th April 1891.²¹⁰ Concerning the married life of Arthur and Mabel Tolkien in the Orange Free State, little detail is needed here. They lived in Bank House on Maitland Street in Bloemfontein, with a nurse, a cook and a manservant.²¹¹ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, their first child, was born somewhat prematurely on 3rd January 1892. His first name was dictated by a desire to sustain the traditional Tolkien name of John, following the death of the younger John Benjamin Tolkien in 1883; however, to his family, he would ordinarily be known by the name his mother chose: Ronald.²¹² Physiognomically, the infant Ronald was likewise a blend of the two families, possessing Tolkien eyes and a Suffield mouth, as Arthur informed his mother.



Figure 35: Tolkien's parents, Arthur and Mabel.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 67.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 66-67 & 107.

²¹⁰ Ibid. 108.

²¹¹ Ibid. 110.

²¹² Letter 309 (See also Burns, 31 & 110). An infant Ronald referred to himself as 'Wanild Toekins', an 1893 Christmas card for his father suggests (113).

Another boy, Hilary Arthur Reuel Tolkien, was born two years later, on 17th February 1894, but it seems that Mabel was by then unhappy with life in South Africa. She described the Orange Free State to her family as “Owlin Wilderness! Horrid Waste!” and found the winters there especially bleak; moreover, she disliked the attitude of the Boers to other races.²¹³ The author later wrote that his mother ‘hated [South Africa] (as a land) and was alarmed to see symptoms of my father growing to like it’.²¹⁴ Mabel’s homesickness was little assuaged by an 1893 visit from her sister May, whose husband Walter simultaneously surveyed his business interests in the gold and diamond mines of the Transvaal.²¹⁵ Thus, in April 1895, with local political tensions between the Boers and the ‘uitlander’ population also increasing, Arthur was obliged to bid farewell to his wife, Ronald and Hilary, as they and a nurse departed aboard the S.S. Guelph for England.²¹⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien would never return to the land of his birth or see his father again.²¹⁷

²¹³ Ibid. 109 & 112.

²¹⁴ Letter 78: From a letter to Christopher Tolkien (12 August 1944).

²¹⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 113.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 114.

²¹⁷ Nevertheless, Tolkien seems to have retained a lifelong interest in South Africa and a vague desire to go back. One of the four books which he donated to the King Edward’s School library was *Scouting for Buller* by Herbert Hayens, which is set in South Africa (Burns. *Roots*. 118).

J.R.R. Tolkien's Life in the West Midlands

The death of Tolkien's father (King's Heath, April 1895 – summer 1896)

Mabel Tolkien and her two young sons were met on arrival at Southampton by her younger sister Jane and together they travelled to the Midlands.²¹⁸ There, they stayed at the house of Mabel's parents, 9 Ashfield Road, on the upper slopes of 'Green Hill' in King's Heath. The contrast with South Africa presented by the early spring verdure of England seems to have made a lasting impression on the three-year-old Ronald; however, his memories of his grandparents' house would elide with those of his Bloemfontein home, which had a veranda at the front.²¹⁹ He later wrote, 'I can still remember going down the road in Birmingham and wondering what had happened to the big gallery, what happened to the balcony...'²²⁰

Mabel made the most of this interlude with her family, attending a coming-of-age party with Jane (or Jennie, as her name is recorded in the *Moseley Society Journal*) at the **King's Heath Institute** [Map 6:I] in September 1895.²²¹



Figure 36: The King's Heath Institute in 1882.

²¹⁸ Burns. *Roots*. 114.

²¹⁹ Tolkien said: 'If your first Christmas tree is a wilting eucalyptus and if you're normally troubled by heat and sun then, just at the age when imagination is opening out, to suddenly find yourself in a quiet Warwickshire village...?' ('Interview with Dennis Gerrold'. *BBC Radio 4*, January 1971.)

²²⁰ Op. Cit.

²²¹ Burns. *Roots*. 114. Edwin Neave was also in attendance that night. The Institute, built in 1878, was located on the south-east corner of Institute Road and the High Street. It was demolished in 1933 to make way for a Woolworths shop.

But in November she received the worrying news that Arthur had been laid low by a bout of rheumatic fever and was now recuperating. Mabel made preparations to return to the Orange Free State in early 1896, which she was determined to do despite the ireful consequences of the abortive British coup against the Boers, known as the Jameson Raid. On 14th February, Ronald dictated a letter to his nurse, which began ‘My dear Daddy, I am so glad I am coming back to see you it is such a long time since we came away from you’. The letter was never sent, for word came that Arthur had the next day haemorrhaged and died.²²² Ronald’s only enduring memory of his father would be of him painting the family name on the trunk they would take with them to England; perhaps the same trunk, marked ‘Tolkien’, which Burns says can still be found in the Birmingham Oratory.²²³ The news was also a grievous blow to the eighty-nine-year-old John Benjamin Tolkien, who lived for only a further six months.²²⁴

²²² Ibid. 115. See also Blackham, Robert. *The Roots of Tolkien’s Middle-earth*. Tempus. 2006. 17.

²²³ Burns. *Roots*. 115.

²²⁴ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 26.

'The most formative part of my life' (Sarehole, summer 1896 – autumn 1900)

Following Arthur's death, Mabel had little inclination to return to South Africa. She had every reason to believe that she and her boys would have a more assured future while living in day-to-day contact with their extended family. Nevertheless, Mabel's financial position was far from rosy and neither her parents nor Arthur's could be of much help in this regard, given the demise of their respective family businesses and the death of John Benjamin Tolkien. Mabel's brother-in-law, Walter Incedon, did give Ronald and Hilary an allowance, but the family's small income derived primarily from Arthur's investment in a company called 'Bonanza Mines' in South Africa.²²⁵ And so, Mabel was forced to look for inexpensive, independent accommodation beyond the well-to-do suburbs where the Suffields lived. This she had found by the summer of 1896 in the bucolic hamlet of 'Sare Hole', one and a half miles east of King's Heath and south-east of Moseley.²²⁶



Figure 37: The gables and chimneys of Gracewell Cottages from the south.

The semi-detached **5 Gracewell Cottages (now 264 Wake Green Road)** [Map 7:1] was one of six such properties built as servant quarters in 1892 by a solicitor, Arthur Henry Foster (1843-1928), who himself lived in a residence called 'The Chalet' on nearby Green Road [Map

²²⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 116. See also White, Michael. *Tolkien: A Biography*. Penguin. 2003. Ch. 1.

²²⁶ The name of the settlement was then comprised of two separate words, now elided. According to Blackham, the 'hole' component probably derives *ab origine* from *holm*, meaning 'flood meadow' (*Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 35).

7:B].²²⁷ In a 1968 interview, Tolkien (mis)remembered that ‘A man called Forster [*sic*] owned a row of extremely nice-looking semi-detached cottages, in which he mostly seemed to have housed his gardeners’.²²⁸ Mabel appears not to have paid the entire rent for the cottage herself: as Burns points out, the registered rate payer in 1896 was ‘Mary Tolkien’, Arthur’s mother.²²⁹

J.R.R. Tolkien’s recollections of Sarehole in those days emphasise its rusticity and pre-modernity: ‘I lived in childhood in a cottage on the edge of a really rural country – on the borders of a land and time more like... the lands and hills of the most primitive and wildest stories... than the present life of Western Towns (in fact and wish).’²³⁰ In 1968, he characterised the setting as ‘a very tree-ish part, like open parkland’.²³¹ His memory of details was occasionally false, tricking him into asserting in 1971 that the village had lain in Warwickshire, rather than the easternmost parish of Worcestershire. But he was clear that his ‘love of central Midlands English countryside, based on good water, stones and elm trees and small quiet rivers, and, of course, the rustic people there’ originated in his childhood apprehension of Sarehole as a miraculous but fragile vestige of a vanishing pre-Lapsarian world.²³² ‘I could draw you a map of every inch of it... I loved it with an intensity of love that was a kind of nostalgia reversed’, he said elsewhere.²³³

Sarehole is located in the gently sloping valley of the River Cole, five miles north-east from its sources on the slopes of Forhill and Weatheroak Hill. Along the upper course of the Cole are dotted various sites which Tolkien frequented as a child and which subsequently lodged in his mind, some of which were incorporated into the Shire Country Park in 2005. The centre of his ‘lost paradise’, where Sarehole’s once quiet lanes bridged and forded the stream, featured ‘an old mill that really did grind corn with two millers, a great big pond with swans on it, a sandpit, a wonderful dell with flowers, a few old-fashioned village houses and, further away, a stream with another mill’.²³⁴

Tolkien said that **Sarehole Mill** (or the ‘old mill’) [Map 7:5] ‘dominated’ his childhood.²³⁵ The red-brick building with its forty-foot chimney lay across the lane from Gracewell Cottages, at a distance of two hundred yards. In the absence of today’s tree cover it would have been visible, and very likely audible, from no. 5. A corn mill had existed on the site since 1542, but by the 1750s it had become a rolling mill under the ownership of Matthew Boulton (sr.), supplying sheet metal for his button and buckle factory in Snow Hill, Birmingham.²³⁶ The absence at that time of a millpond large enough to generate sufficient water power seems to have contributed to the

²²⁷ [1891 census](#) and [1901 census](#). See also Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 27-28 & Blackham. *Tolkien’s Middle-earth*. 23.

²²⁸ ‘[In the footsteps of the hobbits: interview with Keith Brace](#)’. *The Birmingham Post*. 25 May 1968. As Burns comments (*Roots*. 120), the 1901 Census records only one gardener living there.

²²⁹ Letter 303: From a letter to Nicholas Thomas (6 May 1968).

²³⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R.. *On Fairy Stories* (ed. Fieger, V.). Harper Collins. 2008. As quoted in Burns. ‘A local habitation and a name’. 27.

²³¹ *The Birmingham Post*. 25 May 1968.

²³² *BBC Radio 4*. January 1971. See also Burns. *Roots*. 125. The parish in question is Yardley. Hammond and Scull claim that Tolkien’s years in Sarehole instilled in him ‘considerable affection for marshy areas and river banks’, evident in his artworks such as ‘Goosegrass’ (1967) (*Artist & Illustrator*. 6 & 197).

²³³ Ezard, John. ‘[Tolkien’s Shire](#)’. *The Guardian*. 28 December 1991.

²³⁴ Ezard.

²³⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 122.

²³⁶ ‘[Sarehole Mill](#)’. Acocks Green History Society & Garth. *Worlds*. 182.

younger Matthew Boulton's decision not to develop Sarehole as he would Soho, Handsworth. From this time on, the mill had the dual function of corn and blade-grinding (perhaps also gun-barrel boring), carried on simultaneously by means of two water wheels of different size.²³⁷ In the 1850s, a supplementary steam engine was installed, along with the chimney stack, which was still in use during Tolkien's childhood.

Tolkien told of how he and his brother would play in the meadow adjacent to the mill and beside the pond, where he was fond of a particular tree: 'There was a willow hanging over the mill-pool, and I learned to climb it. It belonged to a butcher on the Stratford Road, I think. One day they cut it down, they didn't do anything with it; the log just lay there. I never forgot that.'²³⁸ Occasionally, the boys peered inside the building at the machinery of the engine, getting too close for the liking of the tenant-miller and his son, 'characters of wonder and terror to a small child', who would regularly chase them away.²³⁹ Both millers were named George Andrew but, according to Hilary, Ronald called the younger man 'the White Ogre', due to the persistent layer of dust on his clothes and his apparent animus for the two children.²⁴⁰ The appearance and perceived malicious character of George Andrew (jr.) doubtless influenced Tolkien's depiction of the miller Ted Sandyman in *The Lord of the Rings*. Likewise, the fate of Sandyman's mill elaborates on the transformation of real mills like Sarehole during the Industrial Revolution, for it is knocked down to make way for a larger, chimneyed building of brick, straddling the stream and 'full o' wheels and outlandish contraptions' which flatten metal rather than corn (*RK*, 1013 & 1016).²⁴¹

The mill was bought by Arthur Foster in 1913. The sales catalogue described it as 'Sarehole Corn Mill, a compact holding extending to 7 acres, 2 roods, 39 perches'.²⁴² When Foster died in 1928, he bequeathed the land to the city, to be kept in perpetuity as a recreation ground for the benefit of the public, but only after the death of George Andrew (jr.). The mill had ceased to produce flour in the aftermath of the First World War, but Mr. Andrew went on living there in his new vocation as florist until 1959, whereupon it was left vacant and prey to vandals.²⁴³ In 1965, Tolkien wrote as part of the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, 'Recently I saw in a paper a picture of the last decrepitude of the once thriving corn-mill beside its pool that long ago seemed to me so important. I never liked the looks of the Young miller, but his father, the Old miller, had a black beard, and he was not named Sandyman.'²⁴⁴

²³⁷ Acocks Green History Society.

²³⁸ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 30.

²³⁹ Letter 303.

²⁴⁰ As Blackham points out, given that the mill was probably grinding not just corn but also animal bones and cattle feed, creating large amounts of harmful dust, the millers were certainly chasing the Tolkien boys away for their own good (*Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 35).

²⁴¹ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 37 & Garth. *Worlds*. 182.

²⁴² Acocks Green History Society.

²⁴³ Acocks Green History Society. Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 37 & Burns. *Roots*. 124. Burns believes that the flower-garden in front of the mill in Tolkien's 1937 colour illustration of 'The Hill: Hobbiton-across-the Water' represents the large greenhouses which George Andrew erected against the west wall of the mill and bakehouse. Tolkien would have noticed these on his 1933 visit to Sarehole ('A local habitation and a name'. 27).

²⁴⁴ Tolkien, *J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Harper Collins. 2020. xiv.

Fortunately, the mill was saved by a local campaign and subscription, including money from Tolkien himself, and it opened as a working museum in 1969.²⁴⁵

The sand pit and ‘wonderful dell with flowers’ mentioned by Tolkien were situated west of the lane which became Wake Green Road. **The sand pit** was immediately uphill from Gracewell Cottages and is now a disused and wooded area beside a retirement village called ‘The Shires’.²⁴⁶ The dell was a short walk from the rear of the Tolkien house, across a field leased (according to Hilary’s remembrance) by the Andrews, who didn’t appreciate the boys straying from the narrow path to go after ‘corn-cockles and other pretty things’.²⁴⁷ The field in question is now occupied by the modern housing along Thirlmere Drive, but the dell itself has been conserved in the guise of **Moseley Bog nature reserve** [Map 7:11]. Once a millpond, the area was drained in the 1850s and allowed to run to wilderness, full of trees to climb as well as orchids and mushrooms to pick.²⁴⁸ Of uncommon excellence were the blackberries, fruits known locally as ‘bumbles’. Hence the brothers’ private name for Moseley Bog: ‘Bumble Dell’.

A further five hundred metres up Wake Green Road from the sand pit stood the neo-gothic building which, for the twenty-nine years after its construction in 1857, had housed Spring Hill Theological College, for the training of non-conformist ministers. Between 1892 and 1900, it was instead the **Pine Dell Hydropathic Establishment and Moseley Botanical Gardens** [Map 7:D]. To celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897, a public garden party was held there, involving electric illuminations and fireworks, which Tolkien may well have recalled when describing Bilbo’s farewell party in *The Lord of the Rings*.²⁴⁹ Hilary Tolkien would return to Spring Hill as part of his military training in 1915, after it had been requisitioned and converted into barracks for the 16th Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Since 1923, the building has hosted Moseley School.

Many of the ‘old-fashioned village houses’ of Sarehole are no more, including two cottages opposite Tolkien’s house, which were replaced by a mock-Tudor manor house called Millmead in 1910.²⁵⁰ **Sarehole Farm** [Map 7:33] had become a petrol station by the time of Tolkien’s 1933 visit and has now been demolished and replaced by residential flats and a fitness centre. The farmer at the time, Arthur Purser, seems to have guarded his property even more fiercely than the millers, for which tendency the Tolkien brothers assigned him the corresponding title of ‘the Black Ogre’.²⁵¹ Purser, who was not of farming stock, had married the

²⁴⁵ Blackham. *Tolkien’s Middle-earth*. 37.

²⁴⁶ As Blackham speculates (Ibid. 25), Tolkien’s memory of the Sarehole sand pit perhaps helped to inspire his vision of the destruction of Bagshot Row, which makes way for a sand and gravel quarry in ‘The Scouring of the Shire’; or it may feature as the sand pit where the ruffian dead are buried.

²⁴⁷ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 29.

²⁴⁸ Garth. *Worlds*. 114 & Blackham. *Tolkien’s Middle-earth*. 29. According to Garth, the boys would climb a particular Sycamore tree and pull up after them a basket of treats to enjoy while they sat in its branches.

²⁴⁹ Blackham. *Tolkien’s Middle-earth*. 26-27. Some of the rockets were perhaps made at the fireworks factory on Forman’s Road, beside the River Cole, one mile to the north of Sarehole.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 23.

²⁵¹ The resident of Sarehole Farm in the [1891 census](#) was George William Peace, but the birthplaces of his children in the [1901 census](#) hint that he had moved elsewhere by the late 1890s. Arthur Purser is living at Sarehole Farm with wife and child in the [1901 census](#). At the time of his marriage in 1896, he was living in King’s Heath; however, his eldest child, William (Mac) Stanley Purser, was born at Sarehole Farm in December 1898 (Robert Burgoyne. [‘Buggins and Burgovne: Descendants of George Buggins’](#). 2008).

reportedly commanding Alice Gertrude Burgoyne in St Agnes Church, Moseley, in 1896. Interestingly, Alice's family *were* local farmers of venerable lineage, though not under the surname of Burgoyne, which had been adopted by Alice's grandfather in 1863 or 1864. Her father, Jabez (1841-1923), had for over thirty years cultivated Millpool Hill Farm (2 miles south-west of Sarehole) and, in the 1890s, Sandy Hill Farm (1.5 miles south-east of Sarehole), before retiring to King's Heath. He was a colourful local character, said to be under five foot tall, and had been around twenty-two years old when the family name changed to Burgoyne from Buggins.²⁵²



Figure 38: Jabez Burgoyne (née Buggins), 1841-1923.

Alice's 'ogrish' husband once caught the Tolkien boys in the Frodo-like act of stealing mushrooms and drove them off his land. However, Hilary's account suggests they got off comparatively lightly: 'We spent lovely summers just picking flowers and trespassing. The Black Ogre used to take people's shoes and stockings from the bank where they'd left them to paddle, and run away with them, make them go and ask for them. And then he'd thrash them!'²⁵³ The

²⁵² Burgoyne. Having discovered this fact independently, I have since seen it referenced in article about the Moseley missionary Teresa Chuah Hui-Ling at: Father John Boles. '[A mission to the Shires](#)'. *Columban Missionaries, Britain*. 25 April 2022. The short leap from 'Buggins' to 'Baggins' was actually made by a Thomas Alfred Buggins (1895-1917), who belonged to a branch of the family which had been agricultural labourers on the Ragley Estate, outside Alcester. Despite having been born a Buggins, Thomas enlisted in the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1914 using the surname Baggins. Sadly, he was discharged from the services in 1916 with bronchitis and tuberculosis, from which he died in 1917 (see '[Bingham at War](#)', *Bingham Heritage Trails Association* & '[Thomas Alfred Buggins](#)', *Nottinghamshire County Council*).

²⁵³ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 28-29.

Pursers' farmhouse was situated where the River Cole was forded by Robin Hood Lane (until construction of the Birmingham to Stratford railway resulted in a rearrangement of the local lanes in 1906).²⁵⁴ The ford, now hard to find except for some thick wooden posts, once provided an opportunity for animals being driven to market in Birmingham to be watered, but was also prone to dangerous flash floods.²⁵⁵ Tolkien would have witnessed the severe flooding of the river in the summer of 1900, perhaps contributing to his depiction of the inundation of the Black Riders at the Ford of Bruinen in *The Lord of the Rings*.²⁵⁶

Another crossing point, consisting of a ford and a foot bridge, was located four hundred metres up the river, where Brook Farm stood at the entrance to a narrower section of the valley called 'The Dingles'. Gone are the lanes (Brook and Webb), but the brick-built **Four Arches Bridge** [Map 7:A], first recorded in 1822, has been rescued from dilapidation.²⁵⁷

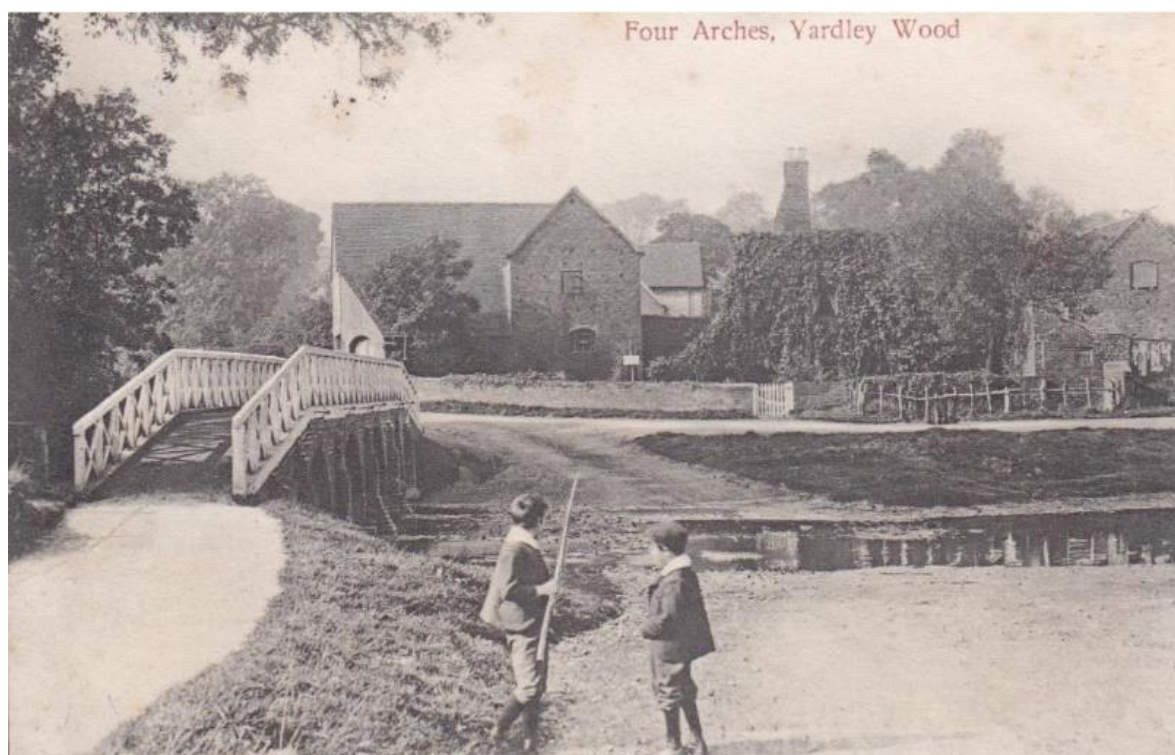


Figure 39: Four Arches Bridge, with Brook Farm beyond (1907).

A hundred and fifty metres further south is another small bridge above a weir, at a place called 'the Whyrl-hole' because of the small basin formed by the swirling water. From here was cut the head-race for Sarehole Mill in 1768.²⁵⁸ Ultimately, one mile upstream from Tolkien's old house is the 'stream with another mill' of which he spoke. Regretfully, **Titterford Mill** [Map 7:37], which had sat at the confluence of the Cole and the Chinn Brook since 1779, was damaged by fire in

²⁵⁴ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 41.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 41 & Garth. *Worlds*. 105.

²⁵⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 119 & Garth. *Worlds*. 105.

²⁵⁷ Blackham, *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 44.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 46.

1926 and demolished, though the millpond remains under the more sober name of Trittiford Pool.²⁵⁹ Here, the Tolkien boys often approached the water's edge to procure reeds from which to fabricate whistles. When on one occasion Hilary fell in, his mother was apparently so relieved by his survival that she forgot to scold him.²⁶⁰

It is important not to romanticise Tolkien's Sarehole existence excessively. He spent many a happy hour exploring that stretch of the River Cole, but there are hints he did not fail to notice the condition and resentment of some of his neighbours, whose poverty was even greater than his own.²⁶¹ Of the village people and children who he claimed were the inspiration for Hobbits, he said: 'They rather despised me because my mother liked me to be pretty. I went about with long hair and a Little Lord Fauntleroy costume.'²⁶²

Late-nineteenth-century Sarehole was not Arcadia, but it did constitute 'the longest-seeming and most formative part' of Tolkien's life. Physically, Ronald had developed into a svelte boy whose speech was swift and difficult to comprehend.²⁶³ He held strong opinions from an early age, particularly regarding the kind of books he liked. On the one hand, he 'used (before 1900) to be read to from an "old collection" - tattered and without cover or title-page', which 'contained one story [he] was then very fond of called "*Puss Cat Meow*".'²⁶⁴ He was deeply impressed in his 'earliest years' by books on astronomy and his lifelong fascination with philology was sparked 'when about 8 years old [he] read in a small book (professedly for the young) that nothing of the language of primitive peoples (before the Celts or Germanic invaders) is now known, except perhaps *ond* = "stone"'.²⁶⁵ On the other hand, he despised 'the shallow vulgarity of [Robert] Browning' and his version of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*.²⁶⁶ Ronald was fond of acting but profited little from 'the efforts spent on trying to teach [him] the fiddle in youth'.²⁶⁷ He later said that the musical faculties of the Tolkiens were manifested in him as a love of words, which had caused him to explore and invent languages 'since [the moment he] could write'.²⁶⁸ He cited as an early example of this lifelong enthusiasm a story which he had composed when about six or seven years old and living at Gracewell Cottages:

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 47 & '[Trittiford Mill](#)'. Acocks Green Historical Society.

²⁶⁰ Tolkien, Hilary. *Black and White Ogre Country: The Lost Tales of Hilary Tolkien* (ed. Gardner, Angela). ADC. 2009. 6.

²⁶¹ Tolkien felt he had lived 'a poor boy's childhood' (Letter 306: From a letter to Michael Tolkien (August 1967)); and he was undoubtedly penurious in comparison with King Edward's School friends like R.Q. Gilson, who said of Tolkien to his sweetheart that 'he has always been desperately poor' (Burns. *Roots*. 44). But he fortunately never experienced the prolonged malnutrition or destitution that was the lot of many paupers in late-Victorian and Edwardian England.

²⁶² 'Interview with John Ezard'. *The Oxford Mail*. 1966.

²⁶³ Letter 294: To Charlotte and Denis Plimmer (8 February 1967).

²⁶⁴ Letter 319: From a letter to Roger Lancelyn Green (8 January 1971). Green informed Tolkien that the volume in question was *Stories For My Children* by E.H. Knatchbull Hugessen, which may have been one of Mabel's childhood books, having been published in 1869.

²⁶⁵ Letter 154: To Naomi Mitchison (25 September 1954) and Letter 324.

²⁶⁶ Letter 234.

²⁶⁷ Letter 301: From a letter to Donald Swann (29 February 1968) and Letter 142: To Robert Murray, S.J. (2 December 1953).

²⁶⁸ Letter 131: To Milton Waldman (late 1951).

It was about a dragon. I remember nothing about it except a philological fact. My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one could not say “a green great dragon”, but had to say “a great green dragon”. I wondered why, and still do.²⁶⁹

Tolkien’s sojourn in Sarehole came to an end in the late autumn of 1900, when he was eight years old. In November 1899 he had sat the entrance examination for **King Edward’s School** [Map 3:13] in the centre of Birmingham, which provided the best education in the city.²⁷⁰ It is an indication of the scale of his mother’s ambitions for him that he took the exam so early, for he was a year younger than the minimum age stipulated by the rules. He was initially unsuccessful, but at the second attempt in June 1900 he was admitted as one of the school’s September intake.²⁷¹ It was an eight-mile round trip from Sarehole to the school, beginning with a one-and-a-half-mile walk along the Stratford Road to the steam-tram terminus at St John’s Church, **Sparkhill**.²⁷² The school hours were 9 a.m. to midday from Monday to Saturday, plus 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, so the young Tolkien must have found the unfamiliar combination of commuting and schoolwork difficult.²⁷³ His mother decided that she would have to find accommodation that was at a more convenient distance from King Edward’s. And so, after four years in Sarehole, she, Ronald and Hilary moved one-and-a-half miles north-west to Moseley.

²⁶⁹ Letter 163: To W.H. Auden (7 June 1955). See also Letter 165.

²⁷⁰ Both Arthur Tolkien and his brother Willfrid were schooled at King Edward’s, as well as their brother-in-law, Thomas Evans Mitton. On the Suffield side of the family, J.R.R. Tolkien’s Uncle Roland was enrolled there.

²⁷¹ Burns. *Roots*. 127. Tolkien was one of only three eight-year-olds admitted that year; most other entrants were eleven years old.

²⁷² *Ibid.* 129.

²⁷³ *Ibid.* 133.

Conversion to Catholicism (Moseley, autumn 1900 – early 1901)

Apart from the length of Ronald's school commute, Mabel Tolkien had another reason to relocate to a small rented house two hundred metres uphill from Moseley village green, on the site of what is now **214 Alcester Road** [Map 6:16].²⁷⁴ Since the spring of 1900, she and her elder sister, Edith May Incedon, had been receiving instruction in the Roman Catholic faith at St Anne's Church in the central Birmingham district of **Digbeth**. They had done so in secret, without telling members of their family, who they felt sure would not approve. A letter sent at that time by May to Mabel gives some indication of how momentous and agonising was their decision:

Dear old darling... I feel sure we are right to do this... Oh Pet my heart feels like a huge cabbage – does yours? But my mind is clear as crystal and happy because it feels sure.²⁷⁵

The Suffield family's allegiances to denominations under the umbrella of Protestantism were various and fluid. J.R.R. Tolkien's great-grandfather and his great uncle Mark Oliver Suffield (sr.) had attended the Congregationalist meeting-house in Carrs Lane for many years.²⁷⁶ His grandfather was christened at the **Baptist church on Cannon Street** [Map 3:C] in 1833 and re-christened nine years later at the Anglican **St Philip's Church** [Map 3:D]. He was then educated at the Methodist College in Taunton, before adhering to Unitarianism in later life. However, John Suffield (jr.) had little affection or trust for Catholicism.²⁷⁷ For example, in an 1876 article for the Central Literary Association magazine, he refused to countenance that the Jacobean playwright Ben Jonson could have converted to the Church of Rome of his own volition, instead blaming illness, depression and an overweening priest.²⁷⁸

Mabel and May completed their conversion in June 1900.²⁷⁹ 'Immediately the wrath of their family fell upon them', writes Carpenter, mentioning in particular the dismay of their father.²⁸⁰ We know also that Mabel's mother-in-law was critical and may have ceased to pay the rent for 5 Gracewell Cottages at this point.²⁸¹ May's husband, Walter Incedon, whose father was 'a clerk in holy orders', forbade her to enter a Catholic church again and likewise ended the financial support he had been giving to Mabel.²⁸² Nevertheless, Mabel continued to attend St Anne's Church without her sister, taking her sons instead.

²⁷⁴ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 50 & Burns. *Roots*. 129 & 131.

²⁷⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 139.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 13.

²⁷⁷ Burns attributes this widespread prejudice to an association between Catholicism and the relatively poor Irish population of Birmingham, some of whom had been involved in the 'Murphy Riots' of 1867 (*Roots*. 151).

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 150.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 96.

²⁸⁰ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 31.

²⁸¹ See Mabel's letter to Mary Tolkien at Christmas 1903, in which she refers to Ronald's 'First Communion': 'I don't say this to vex you...' (Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 36).

²⁸² *Ibid.* 32. Walter's father had performed the Incedons' nuptials in 1890 (Burns. *Roots*. 65). Instead of a Catholic, May would become a spiritualist and member of the International Club of Psychological Research (139).

It is unclear how complete and lasting was the rift between her own small branch of the family and their relatives. On the one hand, Tolkien never wavered in his conviction that his mother had been victimised for her faith, consigning her to a penury which damaged her health and contributed to her premature death.²⁸³ He referred to himself as ‘a man whose childhood was darkened by persecution’.²⁸⁴ On the other hand, it would have been difficult for Mabel to afford the expense of educating Ronald at King Edward’s School without some familial support. Between 1900 and 1902 he did not have a scholarship, and the tuition fees in 1900 were £12 per annum (rising to £15 in 1903).²⁸⁵ Mabel’s income was only about thirty shillings a week, or £78 per annum.²⁸⁶ According to Carpenter, ‘a Tolkien uncle who was uncharacteristically well-disposed towards Mabel paid the fees’.²⁸⁷ Moreover, we know that Mabel kept in touch with her mother-in-law and her sister Jane after her conversion, and she chose in late 1900 to live at the heart of the village suburb of Birmingham which, above all others, thronged with Suffields and Tolkiens.

As we have seen, John Suffield (sr.) and family had settled in the vicinity of Moseley (more precisely, in the nearby hamlet of Showell Green) in approximately the 1860s, with the Tolkiens arriving a little later. The intervening years had seen the Suffields proliferate and colonise the area as far as King’s Heath and Wake Green to the south and east, which grew into one of the most affluent suburbs of Birmingham while remaining virid and relatively unpolluted, thanks to its elevated situation. They lived in comfortably sized houses and diligently cultivated gardens, attended by at least one live-in servant. Moseley was also where some of the most eminent members of Birmingham society chose to reside amid large private parks, including Joseph Chamberlain at **Highbury Hall** [Map 6:A] and the chocolate magnate Richard Cadbury at **Moseley Hall** and (after 1890) **Uffculme**. Another grand estate, **Cannon Hill House and Park**, had been bequeathed in 1873 by Louisa Ann Ryland to the Corporation of Birmingham, so that it ‘may prove a source of healthful recreation for the people’.²⁸⁸

Carpenter gives the impression, perpetuated by later biographers, of an eight-year-old Tolkien cast from bucolic bliss into a strange and depressing industrial environment. He describes Tolkien’s home-life in Moseley as ‘very different from what he had known at Sarehole... the view from the windows was a sad contrast to the Warwickshire countryside: trams struggling up the hill, drab passers-by, and in the distance the smoking factory chimneys of Sparkbrook and Small Heath. To Ronald the Moseley house remained in memory as “dreadful”’.²⁸⁹ The steam-trams, which were not replaced by electric ones until 1906, were notoriously noisy and dirty, emitting a sulphurous smell, and the service on the Alcester Road, which Ronald used to travel to and from King Edward’s, saw trams arriving every seven minutes.²⁹⁰

²⁸³ See Letters 44, 142, 250 and 267.

²⁸⁴ Letter 306.

²⁸⁵ Admission and tuition fees for K.E.S. had been introduced in 1878, with around one-third of pupils benefitting from Foundation scholarships (Burns. *Roots*. 47).

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 120 & 127.

²⁸⁷ As Burns suggests, this may have been Laurence Tolkien (*Roots*. 139), though he was still young in 1900 and newly married. He certainly played a custodial role in the weeks after Mabel’s death in 1904.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 135.

²⁸⁹ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 33.

²⁹⁰ Burns. *Roots*. 132.

It is little wonder, therefore, that Mabel only rented the house for the winter of 1900/1901, after which it was demolished and to make room for a fire-station.

The schoolboy Tolkien, however, would not have found the Moseley area daunting, having lived for more than year with his grandparents, who were still on nearby Ashfield Road. No doubt his mother took him to visit other relations, such as his Aunt May's family on Chantry Road, and pointed out her own childhood home on Trafalgar Road. There would also have been opportunities to return to Sarehole, given that the new occupants of 5 Gracewell Cottages were Mabel's younger brother and his wife, William and Beatrice Suffield. As Burns points out, Ronald would hardly have seen Moseley as antithetical to the surrounding Worcestershire countryside. The factories of Small Heath did not dominate the skyline, being on low ground over two miles away, and the nearest mills were powered by water or wind.²⁹¹ In a 1911 poem, Tolkien would refer to the abiding characteristic of the neighbourhood as 'Moseley's emerald sward'.²⁹²

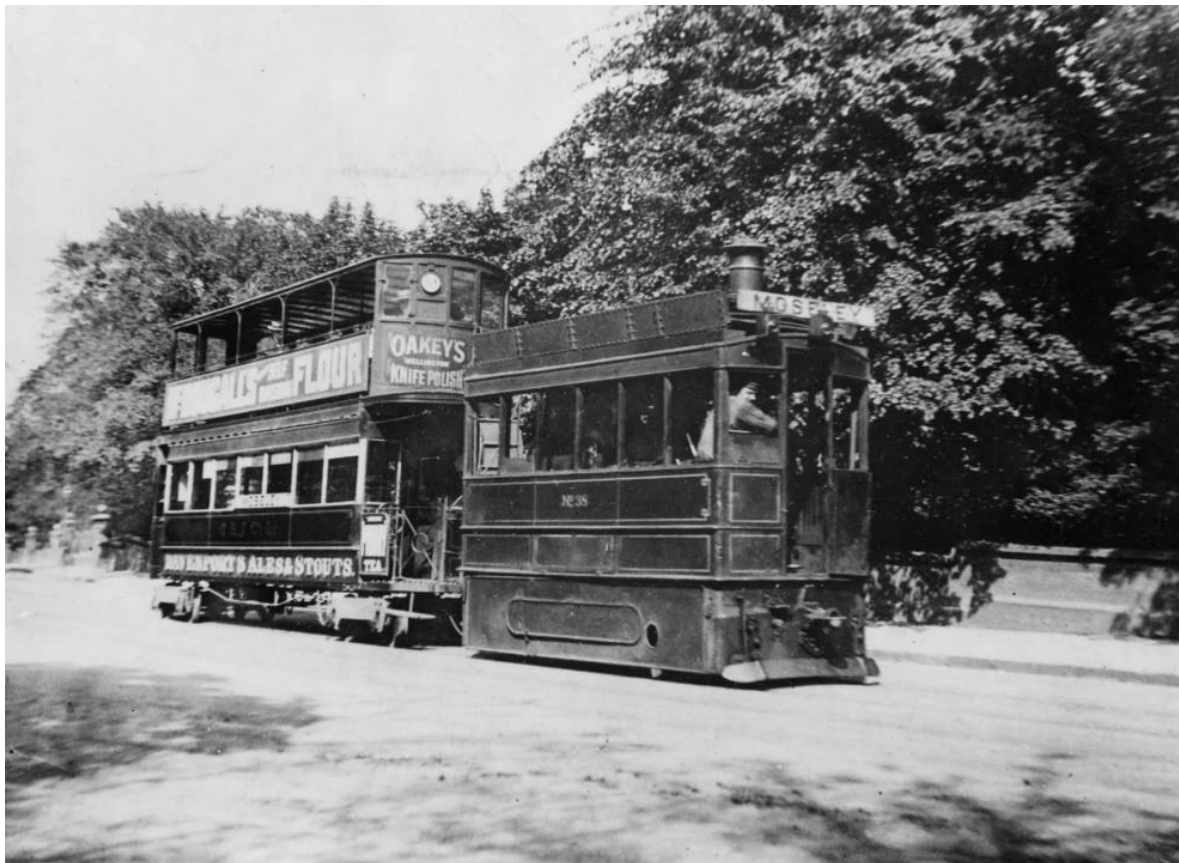


Figure 40: A steam tram on the way from Moseley to King's Heath, 1903.

²⁹¹ Burns. *Roots*. 131.

²⁹² Burns, Maggie. 'The Battle of Eastern Field'. *Mallorn*. No. 46, Autumn 2008. 15-22.

Coal-trucks from Wales (King's Heath, early 1901 – early 1902)

Having lived at the centre of Moseley for the duration of one winter, by the time the 1901 census was taken on 31st March the family had moved three-quarters of a mile south-west to **86 Westfield Road in King's Heath** [Map 6:8].²⁹³ One motivation for moving, apart from the 'dreadfulness' of the Alcester Road house, was the small Roman Catholic church, **St Dunstan's** [Map 6:M], at the junction of Westfield Road and Station Road.²⁹⁴ The new house, called 'St Malo', was farther from the city-centre and King Edward's School but was part of a terrace behind King's Heath railway station and conveniently near the terminus for the Alcester Road trams.²⁹⁵ Here, a number of streets had been newly constructed on the site of **The Grange** [Map 6:F], an eighteenth-century mansion which had been sold off and demolished in 1895.²⁹⁶ It is possible that the destruction of the house, and the levelling of its fields, trees and hedges, made an impression on the infant Tolkien while he was living on nearby Ashfield Road; a building called 'The Grange' appears in his fictional Hobbiton and is destroyed during the Scouring of the Shire.



Figure 41: *The Grange in 1876 (photograph courtesy of the King's Heath History Society).*

²⁹³ The [1901 Census](#).

²⁹⁴ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 79 & Burns. *Roots*. 139. Mass was first celebrated in St Dunstan's at Christmas 1896 and the church was formally opened in April 1897. It is now based on the east side of the Alcester Road.

²⁹⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 137. The house is referred to as 'St. Malo' in the K.E.S. 'Blue Book' (the list of pupils' contact details) for September 1901 (138). (See also Blackham, Robert. 'Tolkien in Kings Heath'. *Mallorn*. No. 61, Winter 2020. 36.) King's Heath railway station has been closed since 1946 but is scheduled to re-open in December 2023.

²⁹⁶ The parcel of land sold in March 1895 amounted to 54 acres, but The Grange's parkland had formerly covered around 350 acres, westwards from the Alcester Road to Moor Green (Budd, S.A.. ['The Grange, King's Heath'](#). *King's Heath Local History Society*. Occasional Paper No. 1. 2).

The new houses of the Grange Estate were still under construction in 1901 and the Tolkiens were the first residents of no. 86, with the census records showing that many of the houses on Westfield Road were unoccupied.²⁹⁷ St Malo belonged to the largest of three types of house built on the Estate, being comprised of three storeys, including a drawing room, dining room, kitchen and scullery. A separate toilet was located to the rear of the house, as was usual for the period.²⁹⁸ At the bottom of the garden runs the **Birmingham and Gloucester railway**; Tolkien remembered the flowers on the slopes of the cutting.²⁹⁹ One might well imagine Ronald and his brother watching the trains pass by, some bound westwards for the Rhondda, for in a 1955 letter to W.H. Auden he traced his fascination with Welsh names back to his childhood and reading the lettering on the side of coal-trucks.³⁰⁰ Of even more appeal to the young Tolkien would have been the view beyond the railway, of the farmland and private gardens of Joseph Chamberlain's Highbury Hall and Richard Cadbury's Uffculme, perhaps especially at night when electric light poured from their windows.³⁰¹ However, Mabel Tolkien was fond of neither the house nor the church on Westfield Road; and, after living there for just one year, the family moved again, this time to Edgbaston.³⁰²

²⁹⁷ Burns. *Roots*. 138 & Blackham. 'Tolkien in King's Heath'. 36.

²⁹⁸ Burns. *Roots*. 137.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 138.

³⁰⁰ Letter 163. Burns (*Roots*. 138) suggests the vacation Tolkien spent making sketches near Pwlheli, North Wales, in 1912, as an alternative source for this recollection. In the letter, Tolkien goes on to complain that 'people only gave me books that were incomprehensible to a child' when he asked for more information about the language.

³⁰¹ ['Highbury: The History Within'](#), *Highbury Park Friends*. In 1922, the grounds of The Henbury's became a public park, which then encompassed Highbury in 1930-32. Highbury Hall was one of the first houses in Birmingham to be electrified in 1888-89.

³⁰² Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 34.

The Oratory (north Edgbaston, early 1902 – spring 1904)

Mabel Tolkien would have had a number of reasons for moving in the spring of 1902 to a new house in north Edgbaston, just under a-mile-and-a-half west of Birmingham city-centre. Dissatisfied with St Dunstan's, she and her sons had begun to attend Mass in that neighbourhood, at the **Birmingham Oratory** [Map 4:3] on the Hagley Road. The church there was modest at that time, but the institution was nonetheless significant, being the first English community of the Congregation of the Oratory, an order founded by St Philip Neri in the sixteenth century and brought to this country by John Henry Newman in 1848.³⁰³ Burns speculates that Oratory House, designed in imitation of a Renaissance palazzo by the Irish architect Terence Flanagan, influenced Tolkien's description of Bag End in *The Lord of the Rings*.³⁰⁴ And it was there that the family met Father Francis Xavier Morgan (1857-1935), described by Tolkien as 'an upper-class Welsh-Spaniard Tory', who had received his education under Newman and was to become a key figure in the lives of the boys.³⁰⁵

It is conceivable, too, that financial and moral support from her family was even less forthcoming by 1902, as they realised that her conversion to Catholicism was no passing fancy. Certainly, in April of that year, she withdrew Ronald from the fee-paying King Edward's School and enrolled him and Hilary, now aged ten and eight, at the grammar school attached to the Oratory, St Philip's.³⁰⁶ Whatever Mabel's main motive for relocating, the result was not an improvement in the standard of accommodation she and her boys had enjoyed on Westfield Road. Although Edgbaston in general was, and continues to be, one of the most affluent areas of Birmingham, the streets on the north side of the Hagley Road were of a different character to those grander residences of the Calthorpe estate to the south.³⁰⁷ And, according to Carpenter, the Tolkiens' new home at **26 Oliver Road** [Map 4:14] was 'only one degree better than a slum': a far cry from the commodious house of Mabel's cousin, George Suffield Marris, opposite the Oratory.³⁰⁸

By July 1902, Mabel had realised that Ronald was not learning as much at St Philip's as at King Edward's, perhaps because he was already as academically knowledgeable as many of the Fathers. She reported to her mother-in-law in 1903 that, 'One of the clergy... says [Ronald] has

³⁰³ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 95. Though founded by Newman in 1848, the Oratory occupied two sites before moving to the existing Hagley Road premises in 1852. Oratory House, Newman's library and his room have been left as they were when he died in 1890. Construction of a grander church was begun in 1903 and completed in 1909.

³⁰⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 154.

³⁰⁵ Father Morgan was born in Spain but related, via his father, to Baron (soon to be Viscount) Tredegar and the High Sheriff of Warwickshire. Morgan was schooled by Newman between 1868 and 1874 (Burns. *Roots*. 155).

³⁰⁶ Ibid. 140. There was no admission exam for St Philip's Grammar School, which was of relatively recent creation (1887) and possessed no playing-field of its own, using instead one beside Edgbaston Reservoir (153). Another famous alumnus of St Philip's was Hilaire Belloc, whose mother had also converted to Catholicism and sent her son away from the family home in London to receive a Catholic education. From 1910, the headmaster of St Philip's was Father Vincent Reade, who became a friend and correspondent of Tolkien. The pair went on holiday together to Cornwall in the summer of 1914.

³⁰⁷ According to Burns (*Roots*. 152), when (from 1807 onwards) the Calthorpe family leased much of their estate for development, they insisted that the housing be of a larger type.

³⁰⁸ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 35. The King Edward's 'Blue Book' gives this as Ronald's address until January 1904 (Burns. *Roots*. 141).

read *too* much, everything fit for a boy under fifteen, and he doesn't know any single classical thing to recommend him'.³⁰⁹ And so, over the course of the summer and autumn of 1902, Mabel tutored her son at home (with Jane providing geometry lessons), hoping that he might win a scholarship to attend King Edward's again.³¹⁰ Ronald sat the K.E.S. admissions exam for the third time in November 1902 and was awarded a Foundation Scholarship.³¹¹ He would remain at the school until July 1911, bar an interruption in 1904, a tragic year for Tolkien and his family.

At Christmas 1903, in the letter relaying the priest's perplexity in finding new reading material for Ronald, Mabel mentioned to Mary Tolkien that she kept 'having whole *weeks* of utter sleeplessness, which added to the internal cold and sickness have made it almost impossible to go on'.³¹² In the New Year both of her boys contracted measles and then whooping-cough; Hilary also had pneumonia.³¹³ Having little money to pay for help, Mabel had to nurse them herself. Her woes were compounded by several deaths in the Suffield family: her aunt Sarah Swindall Marris in Moseley, at the age of 71; her youngest brother William from acute peritonitis on 27th February, aged 30; and her step-grandmother Eliza, also in the first half of 1904.³¹⁴ Eventually, Mabel collapsed under the strain and, by April, was herself seriously ill in hospital. There, she was diagnosed with hereditary (or 'Type 1') diabetes, for which there was no effective treatment at the time and generally resulted in death within two years.³¹⁵ The Tolkiens' furniture in the Oliver Road house was put into storage and the boys were sent away, Ronald to live with Edwin Neave in Sussex, Hilary with his bereft Suffield grandparents on Ashfield Road.³¹⁶

³⁰⁹ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 36.

³¹⁰ Letter 294.

³¹¹ Foundation Scholarships did not involve the disposition of a sum of money but entitled the beneficiary to 'receive gratuitously all the benefits of the school' (Burns. *Roots*. 141).

³¹² Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 36.

³¹³ Burns. *Roots*. 142.

³¹⁴ [Sarah Swindall Marris's death record](#); [William Suffield's death record](#) and [Eliza Suffield's death record](#) (*England & Wales Deaths, 1837-2007*).

³¹⁵ Insulin was not discovered for another seventeen years, in 1921.

³¹⁶ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 37. Tolkien was still registered at King Edward's School in July 1904 but was recorded as absent at the end of the summer term (Burns. *Roots*. 144).

The death of Tolkien's mother (Rednal & Cotteridge, June – December 1904)

By the summer of 1904, Mabel had recovered enough to be discharged from hospital, although she may have been advised that she would benefit from a spell in the countryside rather than returning to cramped accommodation in the city.³¹⁷ Father Francis Morgan proposed that she convalesce in Rednal, a small village eight miles south-west of Birmingham, where Cardinal Newman had built a house which the clergymen of the Oratory used as a 'Retreat' [Map 8:A].³¹⁸ He found lodgings for her and the boys in 'Woodside Cottage' (now Fern Cottage) [Map 8:2], beside the entrance to the Retreat. The cottage was owned by a retired local postman, John Till (1849-1923), and with Mabel in no state to cook, the Tolkiens would have their meals prepared for them by John's wife, Louisa Till (1849-1928).³¹⁹ And so, in June 1904, Mabel met her two boys on a train, describing their appearance as that of 'weak white ghosts', and together they travelled to their new home.³²⁰

Tolkien would look back on the summer of 1904 as one of his happiest, a return to the rustic life he had so enjoyed in Sarehole.³²¹ Rednal sits in the lee of the **Lickey Hills**, a tree-covered country park donated to the public in stages between 1888 and 1933 by philanthropists, including the Cadbury family; and so the area afforded Ronald and his brother opportunities for outdoor adventures.³²² Mabel recorded some of these in a letter to her mother-in-law: 'We've had perfect weather. Boys will write first wet day but what with Bilberry-gathering - Tea in Hay - Kite-flying with Fr Francis - sketching - Tree Climbing - they've never enjoyed a holiday so much.'³²³ Here, 'Hay' is surely a reference to the fifteenth-century Hay Hall and its nearby village **Hay Mills**, about two miles north of Sarehole; an excursion by train to the town of Hay-on-Wye on the Welsh border, via Hereford, being much less likely.

The frequent visits of Father Francis established a strong bond with Ronald, who up to this point had not seen the priest in his more relaxed, pipe-smoking guise.³²⁴ Dismayed when Father Francis was obliged to postpone one of his visits, the twelve-year-old wrote to him on 8th August under the pseudonym 'R. Tomkins' and in the form of a rebus, a combination of pictures and letters which together represent encoded words. He told '[his] dear wise owl Francis' that he and Hilary 'each have found two lovely walks to take you [on] when you do! come out here,

³¹⁷ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 95.

³¹⁸ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 37. The Retreat was also known as 'Oratory House', like the building in Edgbaston.

³¹⁹ Ibid. 37 & Burns. *Roots*. 145. Both cottage and the Retreat still stand but are now separated by a modern housing development. John and Louisa Till (née Sandford) in fact lived three miles away, [in the Lickey End post office](#), with their two daughters and a son, as well as their adopted son (the appropriately named Fred Field), who was Ronald's age. See also the [1911 Census](#).

³²⁰ Burns. *Roots*. 144.

³²¹ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 37.

³²² In 1904, the area of the Lickey Hills open to the public did not extend much beyond Rednal Hill, which had been purchased by 'The Birmingham Society for the Preservation of Open Spaces' in 1888. Edward, George and Henry Cadbury bought Beacon Hill and presented it to the City of Birmingham in 1907. Bilberry Hill (and Pinfield Woods) was leased to the City in 1913, enabling Tolkien to paint the view from the top that summer. And the remaining tracts were acquired in the early 1920s (['Worcestershire: Lickey Pubs'](#), *Midland Pubs*).

³²³ As quoted in Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 37. Garth suggests that these summer days of tree-climbing helped to inspire various episodes in Tolkien's writing, where characters gain relief from danger or oppression in the treetops, amid the breeze and the butterflies (*Worlds*. 115).

³²⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 145.

which we hope will be soon'.³²⁵ When Father Francis was away, Mabel and her sons would drive to Mass at **St Peter's Church, Bromsgrove** [Map 1:27], in a carriage shared with George and Annie Church, the gardener and housekeeper of the Retreat.³²⁶

At summer's end, Ronald restarted school at King Edward's. His daily journeys were more arduous than ever, for the tramline along the Bristol Road did not yet extend as far as Rednal, nor had the train station at Longbridge (one mile north-east) been constructed.³²⁷ So, to get to the city-centre, Tolkien had first to walk nearly two miles in the wrong direction: south, to **Barnt Green station** [Map 8:B]. On his return, which in late autumn was often after sunset, Hilary would go to meet him with a lantern.³²⁸ Nevertheless, their stint in the countryside did the brothers some good: 'Boys look ridiculously well', Mabel had exclaimed.³²⁹ The same could not be said of their mother, whose health worsened again as the nights drew in. In early November 1904, she fell into a diabetic coma. And in Woodside Cottage on the 14th of that month, with family and friends present, including her sister May Incedon and Father Francis, Mabel Tolkien died.³³⁰

The death of J.R.R. Tolkien's mother was the most pivotal event of his life. Initially, it jolted the orphaned Ronald into an awareness of universal evil and cruelty, a feeling which returned to him upon the death of his wife, sixty-seven years later:

...suddenly I feel like a castaway left on a barren island under a heedless sky after the loss of a great ship. I remember trying to tell Marjorie Incedon this feeling, when I was not yet thirteen after the death of my mother... and vainly waving a hand at the sky saying "It is so empty and cold".³³¹

But afterwards, and for the rest of his life, the memory formed the foundation of his Catholic faith, for it had been his mother who heroically sacrificed herself to bring him 'out of Egypt' and into that church, as he explained in a 1965 letter to his son, Michael:

When I think of my mother's death (younger than Prisca [Tolkien's daughter]) worn out with persecution, poverty, and, largely consequent, disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith, and remember the tiny bedroom she shared with us in rented rooms in a postman's cottage at Rednal, where she died alone, too ill for viaticum, I find it very hard and bitter, when my children stray away [from the Church].³³²

Other passages in Tolkien's later correspondence imply that his religious devotion was rooted in honouring and vindicating 'the heroic sufferings and early death in extreme poverty' of his

³²⁵ Bridoux, Denis. ['Tolkien's Rebus Letter: Decryption and Comments'](#). *Beyond Bree*. November 2020.

³²⁶ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 38 & Burns. *Roots*. 145.

³²⁷ The Bristol Road tramline reached Rednal in 1924.

³²⁸ Burns. *Roots*. 145.

³²⁹ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 37.

³³⁰ Burns. *Roots*. 146.

³³¹ Letter 332: To Michael Tolkien (24 January 1972).

³³² Letter 267: From a letter to Michael Tolkien (9-10 January 1965).

mother.³³³ Christianity, in turn, was intrinsic to Tolkien's composition of *The Lord of the Rings*, which he described as 'of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work', a result of 'having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know'.³³⁴ His rejection of desolation and despair following his mother's death, in favour of a purposive interpretation of the world, was possible partly because (in his words) Christianity reconciles the 'long defeat' of history with 'final victory'.³³⁵ He said he 'fell in love with the Blessed Sacrament from the beginning', but Tolkien also gave credit to the man whom Mabel had arranged to look after Ronald and Hilary in her absence.

Francis Morgan proved to be a shrewd choice as the boys' guardian, for the priest became like a 'second father' to them.³³⁶ Indeed, he was almost exactly the same age as Arthur Tolkien would have been.³³⁷ At that moment of greatest despondency, Ronald was 'astonished' by Morgan's generosity: 'In 1904 we (H[ilary] & I) had the sudden miraculous experience of Fr Francis' love and care and humour...'³³⁸ Among other duties, Morgan took the brothers on various holidays, paid their school fees and supervised their academic progress. Burns attributes a steady improvement in Ronald's school examination grades to his custodian's concern and high standards.³³⁹ Inevitably, the priest also guided his charges in moral and religious matters, as Tolkien would recall:

I first learned charity and forgiveness from him; and... the light of it pierced even the 'liberal' darkness out of which I came, knowing more about 'Bloody Mary' than the Mother of Jesus - who was never mentioned except as an object of wicked worship by the Romanists.

However, immediately after Mabel's death, the 'liberal darkness' threatened to reclaim her sons, for Carpenter tells us that there was 'some talk [among Suffield and Tolkien relatives] of contesting Mabel's will and of sending the boys to a Protestant boarding-school'.³⁴⁰ And so, during the last weeks of 1904, Ronald and Hilary were instead housed and fed by their uncle Laurence Tolkien, an insurance manager who lived in a spacious residence on Middleton Hall Road in Cotteridge, about three and a half miles north-east of Rednal.³⁴¹

³³³ Letter 250: To Michael Tolkien (1 November 1963). Burns says that Tolkien cited the memory of his mother as an argument for Edith to convert to Catholicism before their marriage (*Roots*. 147). She supposes that Tolkien sympathised with Catholicism's emphasis on the figure of Mary, echoes of which are apparent in his fiction in the figure of Galadriel (156). He also wrote in 1953 to Father Robert Murray (Letter 142) that he owed his faith to his mother 'who clung to her conversion and died young, largely through the hardships of poverty resulting from it'.

³³⁴ Letter 142.

³³⁵ Letter 195: From a letter to Amy Roald (15 December 1956).

³³⁶ Letter 332.

³³⁷ Tolkien noted that both Father Francis and Arthur Tolkien 'were born in 1857, Francis at the end of January, and my father in the middle of February' (Ibid).

³³⁸ Letter 250 & Letter 332.

³³⁹ Burns. *Roots*. 147. Lyme Regis was a favourite destination for their joint holidays.

³⁴⁰ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 40.

³⁴¹ Burns states that the K.E.S. Admissions Register for November 1904 gives the address for Ronald as 'Dunkeld, Middleton Hall Road, King's Norton' (*Roots*. 146).

Ronald and his brother did not stay long at their uncle's Cotteridge home, which had been named as 'Brackley' in the 1901 Census but 'Dunkeld' in the King Edward's School admissions records for November 1904: when Hilary started at K.E.S. in January 1905, he was registered at the boys' new address in Stirling Road, Edgbaston.³⁴² But the twelve-year-old Ronald observed with a degree of bitterness the comfortable middle-class lifestyle of his father's younger brother and was struck by 'the contrast between [Laurence's] large house and the cottage where his mother had just died'.³⁴³ His experience of the Middleton Hall Road house may have embedded the idea that his mother's demise at the age of thirty-four had been the result of poverty-induced stress, which went unalleviated by her relations due to their religious differences.³⁴⁴

For Carpenter, Mabel and the natural wonders of 'Lickey Hill' [*sic*] were associated in Tolkien's mind because both belonged to an irretrievable past: 'it was the loss of his mother that had taken him away from all these things'.³⁴⁵ And yet, the country park was not beyond his reach. In the years that followed, Tolkien would return to the Lickeys on numerous occasions, some of which are well-documented. He stayed in Rednal during the summer of 1909, while studying for a university exam.³⁴⁶ In the late autumn of that year, he secretly arranged to cycle there with the girl whom he would later marry. Further visits were justified by the presence of the Incedons in Barnt Green, including in the summer of 1913, when he took the opportunity to paint several views of the landscape. Tolkien had experienced great loss before the age of thirteen, but he obviously found much that was of comfort to him in his regular trips to the Lickey Hills. They were significant to him not only as the last rural hideaway of his blissful early childhood and the scene of his mother's 'martyrdom', but as the matrix of his lifelong religious faith. And all three of these elements combine in the view from Beacon Hill across the Worcestershire countryside to the south-west, where four miles distant lies the grave of Mabel Tolkien in the churchyard of St Peter's, Bromsgrove.³⁴⁷

³⁴² The discrepancy in house name is a small puzzle. Perhaps the couple had moved to a different abode on the same road (though 'Dunkeld' cannot be found in any of the census records). It is also possible that Emily had renamed Brackley to better reflect her Scottish heritage. Burns writes that 'Dunkeld is still standing' and hints at a location on the south side of Middleton Hall Road (*Roots*. 146).

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.* However, Burns points out that, in the context of the period, Mabel was not living in penury.

³⁴⁵ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 40.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 49.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 39.

King Edward's School (north Edgbaston, January 1905 – summer 1908)

It was perhaps as a form of compromise with the boys' extended family that Father Francis Morgan paid the rent for Ronald and Hilary to live with Beatrice Suffield, the widow of Mabel's youngest brother, at **25 Stirling Road, Edgbaston** [Map 4:6], around five hundred metres from the Oratory.³⁴⁸ The three-storey house which Ronald and Hilary were to call home for the next three years was then mid-terrace but is now semi-detached, the residences to the south (nos. 19 to 23) having been demolished. Their bedroom was on the top floor, with a view of almost unbroken rooftops and distant factory chimneys which Tolkien hated, according to Carpenter.³⁴⁹

Regardless of his feelings about the sight of Smethwick to the north-west, the fact that north Edgbaston landmarks and names are reflected in details of *The Lord of the Rings* suggests Tolkien did not despise the memory of the immediate neighbourhood. A right turn out of the front door of 25 Stirling Road and a two-hundred-and-fifty-metre walk would have brought Ronald to Waterworks Road, where there are still located two towers. The first is the chimney of the Victorian **Edgbaston Waterworks** [Map 4:F] (built 1870), disguised as a neo-Gothic interpretation of a Venetian Renaissance campanile. The second, slightly lower but considerably older, is the embattled building named interchangeably as 'The Observatory', 'The Monument' or '**Perrott's Folly**' [Map 4:G], having been commissioned in 1758 as part of a hunting lodge by John Perrott (1702-1776).³⁵⁰ Perrott, the High Sheriff of Worcestershire, used the tower to survey his estate of Rotton Park and to entertain his friends in the domed room on the sixth-floor.³⁵¹

Contrary to frequently repeated suppositions, neither the chimney of the Waterworks nor Perrott's Folly evinces features in common with Tolkien's fictional tower of Orthanc, which he initially illustrated (in 1942) as a circular 'ziggurat of ancient Mesopotamia... with echoes of [Bruegel's] Tower of Babel', before it gradually became carved out of a single crag of rock, 'black and gleaming hard'.³⁵² Nor is it likely that Tolkien's recollection of the Edgbaston turrets played a part in the naming of the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*. The tale was awkwardly divided in three at a late stage of publication due to a post-war paper shortage and the author's eventual suggestion of 'The Two Towers' was an attempt to unify through ambiguity the incohesive middle instalment.³⁵³ The real significance of Perrott's Folly in relation to Tolkien's writing is that it was used between 1884 and the 1970s as a meteorological observatory, and at its top was installed a telescope (a Greek word meaning 'far-seeing'). In Tolkien's legendarium, a set of interlinked 'far-seeing stones' or *palantiri*, used by rulers as a means of long-distance

³⁴⁸ Burns cites records in the Oratory which show that Father Morgan paid rent to Beatrice Suffield and continued to give her money after the boys had moved on (*Roots*. 158).

³⁴⁹ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 40.

³⁵⁰ '[The Perrotts of Bell Broughton, Worcestershire](#)', 1985. 16.

³⁵¹ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 103.

³⁵² Hammond and Scull. *Artist & Illustrator*. 169-70.

³⁵³ Burns (*Roots*. 152) and Garth (*Worlds*. 155) both discredit this theory. 'Ambiguous' because '*The Two Towers*' refers to at least five bastions: Orthanc, Barad-dûr, Cirith Ungol, Minas Tirith and Minas Morgul. Ultimately, Tolkien decided that the towers in question were Orthanc and Minas Morgul, which featured in his illustration for the cover of the 1954 edition, second volume.

communication and reconnaissance, are set atop towers.³⁵⁴ It would therefore also be remiss not to list as a possible influence Birmingham University's **Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clock Tower**, which grew in south Edgbaston throughout the years from 1905 to 1908 until it reached a height of 315 feet. It was used in 1940 for radar experiments by Sir Mark Oliphant.³⁵⁵

Turning left from the front door of 25 Stirling Road, Tolkien would soon have passed a house on the opposite side of the street (**6 Stirling Road** [Map 4:C]), now demolished, where lived Marion Gamgee (née Parker, 1840-1912), the widow of the Dr Joseph Sampson Gamgee (1828-1886) who had invented the cotton surgical dressing known as 'Gamgee tissue'.³⁵⁶ Tolkien makes no mention of his childhood proximity to Mrs Gamgee and his correspondence is slow to enlarge upon the connection between Dr Gamgee and the surname of the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*.³⁵⁷ This may be a simple case of ignorance, as he claims.³⁵⁸ It could also be seen as an example of Tolkien's reluctance to discuss the biographical stimuli behind his fiction, for there is reason to believe that Tolkien met the son of Marion and Joseph in Birmingham in February 1938, just as he was embarking on the early chapters of his sequel to *The Hobbit*.³⁵⁹ His fullest account of the connection between the real and fictional Gamgees appears in a 1956 letter:

I lived near Birmingham as a child, and we used 'gamgee' as a word for 'cotton-wool'; so in my story the families of Cotton and Gamgee are connected. I did not know as a child, though I know now, that 'Gamgee' was shortened from 'gamgee-tissue', and that [it was] named after its inventor (a surgeon I think) who lived between 1828 and 1886. It was probably (I think) his son who died this year, on 1 March, aged 88, after being for many years Professor of Surgery at Birmingham University. Evidently 'Sam' or something like it, is associated with the family - though I never knew this until a few days ago, when I saw Professor Gamgee's obituary notice, and saw that he was son of Sampson Gamgee - and looked in a dictionary and found that the inventor was S. Gamgee (1828-86), & therefore probably the same.³⁶⁰

Continuing southwards along Stirling Road, the young Tolkien would very soon have reached the east-west Hagley Road. To the right, it was a fifteen-minute walk to reach the open countryside north of Harborne. Turning instead left, after two hundred and fifty metres, he would have passed a pub called *The Ivy Bush* [Map 4.34], which lends its name in *The Lord of the Rings* to 'a small inn on the Bywater road' (*FR*, 22). At their stage in life, the pub would have

³⁵⁴ Another tower-cum-observatory features in *The Monsters and the Critics*, where Tolkien compares the *Beowulf* poet to a man who reuses the ruins of his ancestors' hall to build a tower from which he is able to look out upon the sea. See also his (c. 1925) illustration of *Roverandom* that shows the Man in the Moon at the top of his tower, watching Rover's arrival through a telescope (Hammond and Scull. *Artist & Illustrator*. 80).

³⁵⁵ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 119.

³⁵⁶ Dr Joseph Gamgee had also founded the Birmingham Hospital Saturday Fund in 1873 (Ibid. 98).

³⁵⁷ In 1944, Tolkien cast doubt on whether the name in question was English: 'I knew of it only through Gamgee (Tissue) as cottonwool was called being invented by a man of that name last century' (Letter 76: To Christopher Tolkien (28 July 1944)). Ten years later, he acknowledged that the character Sam Gamgee was 'in a sense a relation of Dr. Gamgee' and that 'there was I believe a Dr. Gamgee (no doubt of the kin) in Birmingham when I was a child. The name was any way always familiar to me' (Letter 184: To Sam Gamgee (18 March 1956)).

³⁵⁸ Tolkien: 'I knew nothing of its origins' (Letter 257: To Christopher Bretherton (16 July 1964)).

³⁵⁹ See Chapter II.10, 'Returning home'.

³⁶⁰

been no more than a curious waymark on the Tolkien brothers' daily walks to the Oratory, where they continued to attend Mass until they moved out of Birmingham. The original church was in use until 1906 but around it was built a magnificent new one. At one point, during the years of its construction from 1903 to 1909, traffic on the Hagley Road was brought to a standstill by the arrival of huge marble columns from Italy.³⁶¹ Tolkien later wrote that, during these years, he had been 'virtually a junior inmate of the Oratory House, which contained many learned fathers (largely "converts")' and this gave him 'the advantage of a (then) first rate school and that of a "good Catholic home" - "in excelsis"'.³⁶² One possible inference from this statement is that his aunt's ménage was neither Catholic nor 'good'.

Tolkien was nevertheless fortunate in receiving spiritual and intellectual succour at not one but two distinctive and distinguished institutions.³⁶³ His other haven was King Edward's School, to which he had returned in September 1904 and where he would remain enrolled until the summer of 1911. The school buildings were located at the lower end of New Street, a further mile and a half beyond the Oratory from Stirling Road. Tolkien would later recall how he and Hilary, by 1905 also a pupil at King Edward's, would serve Mass 'before getting on our bikes to go to school in New Street'.³⁶⁴ When they didn't cycle or take the horse-bus, the brothers walked to school via **Five Ways** [Map 4:I] and Broad Street, perhaps with other King Edward's boys such as Reginald Abrahams or Christopher Wiseman.³⁶⁵



Figure 42: Five Ways, part of Tolkien's daily journey to and from school.

³⁶¹ Burns. *Roots*. 154.

³⁶² Letter 306.

³⁶³ This was the 'two-front state' in which Tolkien grew up, symbolised by the Italian pronunciation of Latin at the Oratory and the strictly 'philological' pronunciation at King Edward's School (Letter 306).

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 41. Burns (*Roots*. 153) mentions that Reginald George Abrahams (1891-1979), who subsequently had a medical practice on the Hagley Road, recalled walking to and from King Edward's with Tolkien. At the time, Reginald lived with his parents at [27 Carlyle Road](#) and then [28 Clarendon Road](#), Edgbaston, very near Stirling Road.

Ronald's friendship with the latter boy, who lived at **12 Greenfield Crescent** [Map 4:30], would endure from 1905 until the author's death in 1973, with Tolkien naming his third son Christopher.³⁶⁶ The twelve-year-old Wiseman was already a talented musician, with one of his compositions appearing in the *Methodist Hymn-Book*, no doubt under the aegis of his father.³⁶⁷ The elder Wiseman, Frederick Luke, was the President of the Wesley Methodist Conference and Father Morgan called him 'The Pope of Wesley'. Tolkien said he was 'one of the most delightful Christian men I have met'.³⁶⁸ F.L. Wiseman had been sent to Birmingham in 1887 to establish the Methodist Central Mission in the slums north of the city-centre and in 1903-1904 had overseen construction of the towered **Central Hall** [Map 3:J] on Corporation Street. Thus, as the author later wrote, contrasting Christian traditions were the 'moving force and at the same time the foundation of both [Ronald and Christopher]' and their walks to school often entailed passionate discussions of theological issues.³⁶⁹ In a subsequent epistolary exchange, Wiseman compared a disagreement over Tolkien's poetry to the 'Old days, Harborne Road and Broad Street again... A grand old quarrel!'³⁷⁰ But religious differences proved no bar to the formation of a close bond between the two schoolboys; and, in an allusion to Castor and Pollux in Macaulay's poem 'The Battle of Lake Regillus', they called themselves 'The Great Twin Brethren'.³⁷¹

King Edward's School was not 'of ultimately medieval foundation', as Tolkien wrote in 1957, though its buildings on New Street at the beginning of the twentieth century were evocative of the Middle Ages.³⁷² A 'free Grammer Schole' was founded on the site in 1552 and rebuilt in 1707; however, in 1824, this edifice was declared unsound and the governors sought to obtain a private act of Parliament to fund the reconstruction. This process led to considerable public scrutiny of the school's fundamental mission. The townsfolk put a stop to one plan to remove the school from New Street, 'where it is accessible to the largest portion of the population of Birmingham'.³⁷³ And some wealthy nonconformist burgers petitioned for the school's Church of England predispositions to be diluted and their sons given greater access to what was considered the best education in Birmingham.³⁷⁴ Eventually, in 1831, the Birmingham Free Grammar School Act was passed by Parliament, sanctioning the borrowing of thirty thousand pounds to erect both a 'Classical' and a 'Commercial School' on the ancient site; as well as five elementary schools elsewhere in the city, three for 'Boys of a lower Class' and two for girls.³⁷⁵

³⁶⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 182. The Wiseman family are recorded as living at 12 Greenfield Crescent in the censuses of [1891](#), [1901](#) and [1911](#). The house number remains the same and is located on the south side of the street.

³⁶⁷ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 4.

³⁶⁸ Letter 306.

³⁶⁹ As quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 156.

³⁷⁰ As quoted in Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 121.

³⁷¹ Burns. *Roots*. 182.

³⁷² Letter 199.

³⁷³ Burns. *Roots*. 43.

³⁷⁴ As Burns writes, King Edward's would become *alma mater* to one of Queen Victoria's archbishops and some of the age's finest scholars of Ancient Greek (Ibid. 42).

³⁷⁵ Ibid. 44-45.



Figure 43: King Edward's School, New Street, Birmingham.

The chosen architect, Charles Barry, had recently lost out on the commission for the new **Town Hall**, which instead went to Joseph Hansom and Edward Welch's neo-classical design, using the proportions of the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Roman Forum.³⁷⁶ By contrast, Barry would draw on the uniquely English Perpendicular style of the Late Middle Ages to create, at the opposite end of New Street, an early exemplar of the genre which would epitomise the age: Victorian neo-Gothic. The buildings, when finished in 1838, enclosed two courtyards. The head master lived at one end of the school, at the other end the second master; both houses affording views of New Street via two-storey oriel windows. In between was 'Big School', the great hall where eight or nine classes of the Classical School might be in session at any one time.³⁷⁷ This was linked to the Library by a traceried Upper Corridor with stained-glass windows, later reconstructed as the chapel on the school's Edgbaston campus. Such quasi-ecclesiastical interiors were the fruit of Barry's new partnership with Augustus Pugin (like Tolkien, a convert to Catholicism), with whom he went on to design the present Palace of Westminster. Barry and Pugin's school, demolished in 1936 and replaced by the Art Deco 'King Edward House', was built with little consideration for ergonomics, but Tolkien remembered with 'deepest affection... the magnificent old buildings, so inconvenient but so educative'.³⁷⁸

Apart from the construction of New Street station behind the school, on land the governors leased to the London & Birmingham Railway Company in 1846, the next major change in the character of King Edward's took place in 1883. At this point, the elementary Middle Schools were replaced by various grammar schools at Camp Hill, Handsworth, Aston and on Bath Row near Five Ways (where Tolkien's Aunt Jane would teach). In the same year, a High School for girls was set up alongside that of the boys in the Barry building, although a greater degree of separation was soon deemed desirable.³⁷⁹ The Boys' High School was

³⁷⁶ Upton, Chris. 'A lost masterpiece: Birmingham's original King Edward's School'. *Business Live*. 30 May 2013.

³⁷⁷ Burns. *Roots*. 46.

³⁷⁸ '1955 letter to F.C. Banton'. *The Old Edwardians' Gazette*. As quoted in Burns (45).

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 47, 92 & 135. The grammar schools provided secondary education for girls and boys (separately) until the age of sixteen; the high schools until nineteen. This made the pupils of the King Edward's Foundation the most

meanwhile enjoying the era of its greatest celebrity under the stewardship of five successive head masters, who together served for sixty-six years from 1834 onwards and whose names (Jeune, Prince Lee, Gifford, Evans and Vardy) are memorialised today in the school's house system.³⁸⁰ Two months before Tolkien was first admitted to King Edward's in September 1900, the fifth of these men, the Reverend Albert R. Vardy, had died suddenly from a stroke at the age of fifty-nine. Fortunately, for the school and for Tolkien, the thirty-seven-year-old who replaced Vardy was at least as capable. Robert Cary Gilson had excelled in classics and natural sciences at Cambridge and had an exceptional memory, which he once demonstrated by writing on a blackboard, without error, the value of π to sixty-three decimal places.³⁸¹ However, he was not elitist and took a close interest in the welfare of his pupils and staff. Speaking at an Old Edwardians' dinner in 1909, Gilson praised what he saw as the school's meritocratic ethos: 'our utter disregard of grades of rank or grades of wealth, or differences of opinion'.³⁸²

Tolkien would become a close friend of Cary Gilson's son, Robert Quilter Gilson, and would visit the family at Canterbury House near Marston Green [Map 1:47]; but he was not taught regularly by the head master (whom he called 'the Beak') until 1907, when he was elevated to Class II.³⁸³ The forms at King Edward's were then organised not by age but by attainment, with boys placed in the class which best matched their academic progress, regardless of whether they were eight or nineteen years of age.³⁸⁴ In January 1905, Tolkien was still in Class VI, as he had been since 1903. The form teacher was a veteran of the school, George Brewerton, who had been on the staff since 1871.³⁸⁵ It was Brewerton who lent Tolkien an Anglo-Saxon primer in which he first learnt about the roots of the English language.

If Tolkien's academic development had been understandably affected by the events of preceding years, during 1905 he made great strides under the benevolent vigilance of Father Morgan. That summer, he came joint top of his form and won various class prizes, as he would every year until he left the school.³⁸⁶ Tolkien then spent one term in Charles H. Heath's Class V, coming top in mathematics.³⁸⁷ From January to July 1906, Ronald was in Class IV with Richard ('Dickie') Williams Reynolds, who was unique in encouraging his pupils to read English rather than classical literature. In a 1964 letter to one of his old classmates, Tolkien wrote:

privileged in the city, as the free Board Schools set up by the 1870 Elementary Education Act were restricted to children under the age of twelve (135). While the grammar schools retained the names associated with their original premises, in the 1930s, the Camp Hill and Five Ways schools moved to King's Heath and Bartley Green, respectively.

³⁸⁰ Today, the other three of the eight houses are named after the assistant masters Rawdon Levett (who taught at the school between 1869 and 1902) and C.H. Heath, as well as the head master during Tolkien's time, Robert Cary Gilson. Note that the names of the houses were different during Tolkien's time at the school and included 'Richards' and 'Measures'.

³⁸¹ Burns. *Roots*. 165.

³⁸² Ibid. 169. Burns suggests that Cary Gilson provides 'a convincing model' for Gandalf in *The Hobbit*, with Father Francis Morgan's pipe smoking thrown in (167).

³⁸³ Ibid. 167. Cary Gilson remained Head Master of King Edward's until retiring at the age of 66 in 1929. Tolkien stayed in touch with him until Gilson's death in 1939.

³⁸⁴ Ibid. 141.

³⁸⁵ Ibid. 163.

³⁸⁶ Ibid. Tolkien gained two prizes in 1906, including one for grammar. From 1908 onwards, he won an additional 'division prize'. He also won prizes for German.

³⁸⁷ Ibid. Tolkien described Heath as 'strict'.

I do remember very clearly the old IVth class room and Dickie; indeed I even remember that we read with him a non-classical Greek text furbished up by a German (Willamowitz Möllendorf?) *in usum scholarum* which bored me extremely. I behaved very badly, together with that later model of rectitude and headmasterly seriousness Christopher Wiseman, as did many of those released from the strict regime of the class below under Heath. Dickie was not an inspiring form-master and made Greek and Roman history as boring as I suspect he felt them to be; but he was immensely interesting as a person.³⁸⁸

Tolkien elsewhere described Reynolds as ‘a mild man of whimsical humour but broad experience’, no doubt an allusion to his early spells as lawyer, secretary of the Fabian Society and critic at *The National Observer*, under its editor W.E. Henley.³⁸⁹ Further evidence of Reynolds’ literary connections (and political sympathies) can be found in the 1901 Census, which finds him a visitor at Well Hall, Eltham, home of the socialist authors E.E. Nesbit and Hubert Bland.³⁹⁰ Tolkien may not have wholly shared Reynolds’ tastes but he nevertheless sought his old teacher’s opinions of poems he had written, even long after leaving school.³⁹¹

In September 1906, Tolkien entered Class III with Alfred Ernest Measures, his house master and an outstanding teacher of Greek and Latin.³⁹² In 1907, he quickly progressed to Class II, taught jointly by both Measures and Cary Gilson, before reaching the top of the school in September of that year.³⁹³ At this point, he found the time to compose another imagined language called ‘Naffarin’, based on the sounds of the Spanish language.³⁹⁴ As one of Gilson’s ‘Olympians’ in Class I, where he was to remain until 1911, Tolkien would have spent more time studying autonomously in the Library.³⁹⁵ The small amount of money associated with a King Edward’s Scholarship, which Tolkien was awarded in 1908, would also have helped with the purchase of books.

While Tolkien was excelling academically, it seems that he and Hilary were not altogether happy living at the dingy house on Stirling Road with their Aunt Beatrice. Carpenter describes her as ‘deficient in affection’ and recounts how, without consulting the boys, she thoughtlessly burnt the personal papers and letters of their deceased mother.³⁹⁶ Reginald Abrahams recalled that the Tolkien boys had ‘no social life’: ‘I’d walk Ronald to his front door, it would open, and he would disappear from sight until the following morning. There was no question of his ever asking us in for tea and buns.’³⁹⁷ Father Francis perceived the boys’ misery during one of their summer holidays in Dorset and, in 1908, looked about for alternative lodgings.

³⁸⁸ Letter 254: To the Rev. Denis Tyndall (9 January 1964).

³⁸⁹ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 93.

³⁹⁰ R.W. Reynolds in the [1901 Census](#).

³⁹¹ Burns. *Roots*. 164. Known instances of Tolkien sending his own poetry to Reynolds occurred in 1913 and 1926.

³⁹² *Ibid.* 165. It was A.E. Measures, an Old Edwardian, who set up the house system at K.E.S. in 1903.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 15. Garth discerns the influence of Father Morgan here.

³⁹⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 167. However, tuition would have included a weekly science lesson from Cary Gilson.

³⁹⁶ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 41.

³⁹⁷ ‘Interview with Reginald Abrahams’. *Birmingham Evening Mail*. 1977. As quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 159.

Meeting Edith (north Edgbaston, summer 1908 – autumn 1909)

In the first half of 1908 Father Morgan found a new home for the sixteen-year-old Ronald and fourteen-year-old Hilary on Duchess Road, Edgbaston [Map 4:12], which the author remembered as ‘a rather decayed road’.³⁹⁸ The ‘gloomy, creeper-covered house, hung with dingy lace curtains’ was around two hundred metres north-east of the Oratory, which could be reached via the even more run-down Beaufort Road.³⁹⁹ It was kept by a Mrs Faulkner, who hosted musical soirées which several of the Fathers attended. It has been generally restated by Tolkien scholars since Carpenter that the house in question was 37 Duchess Road, though neither the 1901 nor 1911 Census contains evidence of a Mrs Faulkner at that address.⁴⁰⁰ The former instead finds a Mrs Louisa E. Faulkner living with two female servants at no. 21.⁴⁰¹ This must be the same woman who rented a second-floor room to the Tolkien brothers, for Carpenter tells us that she was married to a ‘wine-merchant with a taste for his own wares’ called Louis, and that she had a daughter, Helen.⁴⁰² Ultimately, it is in most respects immaterial whether Tolkien lived at 21 or at 37 Duchess Road, since all the Victorian dwellings in the area were demolished during the 1960s to make way for the Chamberlain Gardens housing estate.

Also living in the house in 1908 was Edith Bratt, a dark-haired nineteen-year-old whom the Tolkien boys soon discovered was also an orphan. Her mother, Frances (or Fanny) Bratt (1859-1903), had been the fourth of eight children in a wealthy boot and shoe manufacturing family from **Wolverhampton**. While still young, no more than twenty-two, she had gone to live in the Handsworth house of the printer, stationer and paper dealer, Alfred Frederick Warrillow (1842-1891), as governess to his infant daughter, Nellie Elizabeth.⁴⁰³ At some point over the next seven years, it seems that Frances and Warrillow began an affair, leading in 1888 to her becoming pregnant with Edith and to Warrillow being divorced by his wife, Charlotte Harrison Warrillow.⁴⁰⁴ Probably in a vain attempt to quell the scandal, Frances gave birth in January 1889 in Gloucester, where Edith lived the early part of her life in the home of a deal porter (dock worker), George

³⁹⁸ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 46. Carpenter asserts that the move took place ‘early in 1908’, while Burns (*Roots*. 160 & 173) writes that it happened in the summer of that year.

³⁹⁹ Beaufort Road was where the author Joseph Henry Shorthouse (1834-1903) had formerly lived. Tolkien felt that Shorthouse had become ‘very unBrummagem not to say UnEnglish’ in his old age, considering himself the reincarnation of a Renaissance Italian and dressing the part. ([Letter to Christopher Bretherton, a reader \(16 July 1964\)](#). *Tolkien: The Official Site of the Tolkien Estate*. 2023.)

⁴⁰⁰ Burns refers at one point to 33 Duchess Road (*Roots*. 173), but census records show that no. 33 was almost certainly occupied during those years by a family with the surname of Rhodes (33 Duchess Road in [1901](#) and in [1911](#)).

⁴⁰¹ 21 Duchess Road in [1901](#). I have established that there was no alteration to the numbering of the houses between 1901 and 1911. No. 37 was occupied in 1891 and 1901 by the Kenway family, and unoccupied in 1911. It’s feasible that the Faulkner’s moved from no. 21 to no. 37, or that Carpenter’s misapprehension derives from the 1901 census schedule number for no. 21, which was 137. My survey of the occupants of Duchess Road between 1891 and 1911 reveals that Tolkien’s class tutor between 1903 and 1905, George Brewerton had also lived on the road, probably at no. 35.

⁴⁰² Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 46.

⁴⁰³ The [1881 Census](#), showing Frances in the Warrillow household on Heathfield Road, Handsworth.

⁴⁰⁴ Duriez, Colin. *J.R.R. Tolkien: The Making of a Legend*. Lion. 2012. 33. The [1888 record of the Warrillow divorce](#) (*The England & Wales Divorce Index*. Findmypast.com. 2023).

Walter Clifford.⁴⁰⁵ Meanwhile, Frances returned to the West Midlands, residing at first in the village of Stechford with her younger sister. After Warrillow died in 1891, naming Frances as executrix and leaving her a substantial sum of money, she must have felt able to live again among gossips of Handsworth.⁴⁰⁶ There, she raised Edith with the help of a diminutive maternal cousin, Mary Jane ('Jennie') Grove (1864-1938), until April 1903, when Frances also sadly died.⁴⁰⁷



Figure 44: A photograph of Edith Bratt, taken at a studio on Broad Street in 1906.

Edith, conscious of having been conceived out of wedlock, was always reticent about her father's identity and never spoke about him to her children. And perhaps her parentage meant that she grew up somewhat adrift from her family in Handsworth and Wolverhampton, just as Ronald felt his mother had been shunned by some of his Tolkien and Suffield relatives. Certainly, like Mabel Tolkien, Frances chose to name as Edith's guardian the solicitor Stephen Gateley, instead of one of her seven brothers and sisters.⁴⁰⁸ It was decided that Edith, aged

⁴⁰⁵ The [1891 Census](#). Here perhaps began Edith's connection with the Cheltenham area, for [Mr Clifford originally hailed from Charlton Kings](#).

⁴⁰⁶ The [will of Alfred Frederick Warrillow, 23rd April 1891](#). (*The National Index of Wills and Administrations, 1858-1957*. Findmypast.com. 2023.)

⁴⁰⁷ Jennie Grove was only 4'8" in height (Tolkien, John & Priscilla. *The Tolkien Family Album*. Houghton Mifflin. 1992. 36).

⁴⁰⁸ Edith's maternal grandmother lived on [Holyhead Road, Handsworth](#), with her daughter, Alice Maude. However, she was into her seventies by that time and would herself pass away in 1904.

fourteen and a gifted pianist and singer, should attend an Evesham boarding school specialising in music, known as **Dresden House** [Map 2:A].⁴⁰⁹ At the end of her education she could have worked as a piano teacher but was not encouraged to do so by Mr Gateley. He placed her in Mrs Faulkner's house, where Edith found her life 'rather restricted'. On the occasions that she hosted evening recitals, Mrs Faulkner made use of Edith's piano playing as accompaniment to other performers, but she was otherwise intolerant of Edith practising on the instrument.⁴¹⁰ And once, when Edith informed her landlady that she planned to attend a *matinée* at the Theatre Royal on New Street, Mrs Faulkner insisted on her taking a book with her 'to read in the interval to avoid the risk of being talked to by strangers'.⁴¹¹ On such evidence, the older woman comes across as oddly overbearing and prudish, however a closer examination of various documents relating to her life renders her behaviour more explicable.

Mrs Faulkner was born Louisa Elizabeth Whitaker in late 1848, the daughter of a Cambridge college porter.⁴¹² By the age of twenty-two, she was lodging in Newington, London, with another woman of similar age.⁴¹³ In 1881, she was still living in the vicinity of London but by now with Louis Faulkner (1844-1911), the Kent-born son of an Irishman, and using his surname.⁴¹⁴ The unusual part is this: first, her marriage to Faulkner is recorded in the year 1884; second, her daughter Helen was born Ellen Louise Whitaker in Lambeth in 1870 and only baptised Ellen Louise Faulkner in Cambridge the following summer.⁴¹⁵ There are clear parallels between the early lives of Helen Faulkner (who is brought up in Cambridge by her aunt and recorded at the age of twenty-one only as 'visitor' to her mother) and of the Gloucester-born Edith Bratt, who in 1901 is described for official purposes as her mother's 'niece'.⁴¹⁶ One obvious explanation is that, like Edith, Helen was born out of wedlock, and Mrs Faulkner's draconian regime at Duchess Road was forged of her own experience as an unwed mother in Victorian England.⁴¹⁷

If the intention behind Mrs Faulkner's severity was to sequester and insulate Edith, the approach seems to have backfired, for the young woman gradually became allies with the Tolkien brothers against the lady of the house.⁴¹⁸ Given their similarly tragic pasts and uncertain futures,

⁴⁰⁹ The school was run by two sisters, the Misses Watts, who had received their musical education in the German city; hence the institution's name (*The Tolkien Family Album*. 27).

⁴¹⁰ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 47.

⁴¹¹ *The Tolkien Family Album*. 28.

⁴¹² The birth record for [Louisa Elizabeth Whitaker, 1848](#).

⁴¹³ The [1871 Census](#).

⁴¹⁴ The [1881 Census](#) and [the record of Louis Faulkner's birth](#).

⁴¹⁵ The [register of Louisa's marriage in 1884](#). The [birth record of Ellen Louise Whitaker](#) in 1870, and [the record of the baptism of Ellen Louise Faulkner](#) the next year. She can be found [living with a family named Powter in Cambridge](#) in that year's census.

⁴¹⁶ 'Ellen' in the [1881 Census](#), being looked after by Louisa's younger sister, Eleanor, in Cambridge; and as 'Helen' in the [1891 Census](#), 'visiting' her mother, a restaurant manageress on Oxford Street, London. Also, the [1901 Census](#), showing Edith Bratt as 'niece' to her mother, Frances.

⁴¹⁷ The [1911 Census](#) is the only one to show the Faulkner family as a whole (father, mother and daughter), while living together in the picturesque village of Blockley, Gloucestershire, shortly before Louis's death. Both mother and daughter seem to have been economical with the truth concerning their ages. When Louisa Faulkner died in a home for elderly women in Cheltenham in 1940, [her age was accurately recorded as 91](#).

⁴¹⁸ I say 'gradually' because Tolkien dates his first encounter with Edith to 1909, a year after moving in (Letter 332). Little could he have guessed that his maternal family was connected to Edith's paternal family by marriage: a first

it is understandable that Ronald and Edith should become close. Towards the end of his life, Tolkien referred to ‘the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods, from which we rescued one another, but could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling’.⁴¹⁹ Perhaps initially, when the three-year age gap seemed at its widest, Edith took on the role of surrogate mother. Carpenter tells us that she persuaded a maid to smuggle food from the kitchen to the hungry boys, and when the ‘Old Lady’ was out, they would be invited to Edith’s room for secret feasts.⁴²⁰ However, she and Ronald also led one another astray, frequenting a Birmingham café with a balcony, from which they would throw sugar lumps into the hat-rims of passers-by on the street below.⁴²¹

By late 1909 or early 1910, ‘at the approximate age of 18’, Tolkien had fallen ‘quite genuinely’ in love with Edith.⁴²² At night, they would lean out of their bedroom windows to talk, sometimes until daybreak. Much later, in a letter to her, Tolkien recalled these ‘absurd long window talks’ and ‘how we watched the sun come up over town through the mist and Big Ben toll hour after hour [probably the 1885 clock tower on the Council House, nicknamed ‘**Big Brum**’; see Map 3:K], and the moths almost used to frighten you away...’⁴²³ He goes on to mention ‘our cycle-rides’, one of which (already alluded to) was to lead to the discovery of their romance and dire consequences for both of them.

Edwardian social mores circumscribed rigidly the interaction of single young men and women. Where conversation between two such individuals was unavoidable, the exchange was not to be prolonged beyond the minimum. Therefore, cycle-rides into the countryside would have been one of the few ways for Ronald and Edith to spend time alone together; but they needed to be carefully arranged. On an autumn morning in 1909, Tolkien turned out of Duchess Road on his bicycle, heading two miles south, as was his wont, to the school playing-fields on Eastern Road. Perhaps a little later, Edith let Mrs Faulkner know that she was setting off to visit Jennie Grove, the maternal cousin who had helped to raise her. Jennie probably still lived in Handsworth and so Edith would have turned her bicycle right at the western end of Duchess Road, as if making north. In fact, she doubled back, meeting Tolkien at a pre-arranged spot. Together, they then pedalled south-west through Selly Oak and Northfield to Rednal, a journey of around seven miles in total.⁴²⁴

How Tolkien and Edith passed that day in the Lickeys is recorded in a single sentence in Carpenter’s biography: ‘They spent the afternoon on the hills and then went into Rednal village in search of tea, which they were given at a house where Ronald had stayed some months previously while working for his scholarship.’ The scholarship in question was an Oxford University exam, for which he had begun (inadequately) preparing during the summer of 1909.

cousin of his grandfather, Charles Radford Suffield (1831-1898), had been married to the sister (Emily Mary) of Edith’s paternal grandfather, Alfred John Warrillow.

⁴¹⁹ Letter 340: From a letter to Christopher Tolkien (11 July 1972).

⁴²⁰ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 47. The maid was Agnes ‘Annie’ Barns (b. 1890), who married John Gollins in 1910 but kept in touch with Edith for many years thereafter.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

⁴²² Letter 43: From a letter to Michael Tolkien (6-8 March 1941).

⁴²³ Quoted Carpenter, 47.

⁴²⁴ Burns, 175.

There is no other record of where in Rednal Tolkien stayed on that occasion and any guess based on such a small amount of information can only be speculative. The obvious place to find refreshments in Rednal would have been the **Billberry Hill Tea Rooms** at the foot of **Rose Hill**, now a derelict former youth centre.⁴²⁵ But it is not ‘a house’, for the 1911 Census gives no indication that it provided overnight accommodation, and it was probably too public a place to bring Edith in any case.⁴²⁶ It is quite possible Tolkien had been put up in a private home by a mutual acquaintance of **Father Morgan**, who would have paid for the room. However, such a venue for tea would neither be conducive to secrecy nor somewhere to drop by unexpectedly. A more likely setting is a boarding house, of which the Census reveals three in the village at that time: one halfway up **Rose Hill** and a further two in a single extant building on **Leach Green Lane**. The establishment at **206 Leach Green Lane** [Map 8:51], run by a spinster in her late forties called **Laura Laight**, shows indications of a connection to the **Missionary Society**.⁴²⁷ It lies within 250 metres of **Oratory House**. But crucially, the clandestine couple would not have had to pass the driveway of the **Retreat** to reach it.

Having made the seven-mile return ride, **Ronald** and **Edith** arrived back at **Duchess Road** separately to allay suspicion; but all their precautions were in vain. **Carpenter** relates what happened next: ‘The woman who had given them tea told **Mrs Church**, the caretaker at the **Oratory House**, that **Master Ronald** had been to call and had brought an unknown girl with him. **Mrs Church** happened to mention it to the cook at the **Oratory** itself. And the cook, who always liked telling tales, told **Father Francis**.’ Upon receiving the information, the priest flew into a rage, according to another **Oratory Father** in a 1977 interview: ‘**Father Morgan** was... rather volatile, shall we say? I wouldn’t have been in **Tolkien’s** shoes that time.’⁴²⁸

Morgan’s fury was spurred on by a concern for his charge’s moral well-being, given that **Edith** was a non-Catholic woman three years his elder and living in the same house.⁴²⁹ **Burns** hints that **Father Francis** may even have hoped that **Tolkien** would enter the priesthood.⁴³⁰ But no doubt he also felt a sense of personal betrayal, that the youth whom he had supported with a view to improving his academic prospects had instead squandered time and money on a secret love affair. For, in late November, **Tolkien** ‘muffed’ his exams in **Oxford** and failed to secure a scholarship. ‘The combined tensions nearly produced a bad breakdown,’ he remembered.⁴³¹ Fortunately, his guardian gave him another chance by allowing him to stay at **King Edward’s** for a further year, but he arranged for the **Tolkien** boys to leave **Mrs Faulkner’s** house for new lodgings immediately.

⁴²⁵ There was also a tea shop at **Rose Cottage** in **Lickey End** (now 278 Old Birmingham Road), near but not *in* **Rednal**.

⁴²⁶ The **Billberry Hill Tea Rooms** in the [1911 Census](#).

⁴²⁷ The [1911 Census record for 206 Leach Green Lane](#).

⁴²⁸ 1977 interview with **Father Lynch**, quoted in **Burns**, 176.

⁴²⁹ Letter 43: ‘Your mother was older than I, and not a Catholic. Altogether unfortunate, as viewed by a guardian.’

⁴³⁰ **Burns**. *Roots*. 176.

⁴³¹ Letter 43.

'The source of effort' (north Edgbaston, autumn 1909 – autumn 1911)

That Father Morgan at first found the Tolkien brothers temporary lodgings at **11 Frederick Road, Edgbaston** [Map 4:24], for the duration of only a few days, reflects the urgency with which he treated the problem of Ronald's relationship with Edith.⁴³² The priest had perhaps already made contact with his parishioners Julia and Thomas MacSherry (the director of a whiskey company from County Tyrone) about rooms in their nearby residence on Highfield Road; and the couple may have suggested placing the boys in the boarding house on Frederick Road where they had previously lived, until their own house could be made ready.⁴³³ While his stay on Frederick Road was too brief for Tolkien to become acquainted with his neighbours, he may have been aware that no. 16 was occupied by the pre-Raphaelite artist Robert Catterson-Smith (1853-1938), who had worked with Edward Burne-Jones on the Kelmscott Press edition of Chaucer's works, or that at no. 7 (now demolished) lived the eminent expert in the field of mushrooms and other fungi, William Bywater Grove (1848-1938).⁴³⁴

Tolkien was to live at **4 Highfield Road** [Map 4:7] for the next two years.⁴³⁵ It was his last long-term address in Birmingham and, at a distance of less than two hundred metres, the one in closest proximity to the Oratory. If it had been Father Morgan's intention to keep a closer eye on his wayward charge, his scheme initially proved unsuccessful. Edith had accepted an invitation to live with a retired solicitor and his wife in Cheltenham, but meanwhile Tolkien saw her a number of times. In January 1910, when Ronald celebrated his eighteenth birthday and Edith her twenty-first, they met to buy each other presents (a fountain-pen and a watch) at the jeweller's **E.H. Lawley & Sons** on New Street, opposite King Edward's School.⁴³⁶ Unfortunately, this meeting was observed and reported to Morgan, who now forbade Tolkien from seeing Edith again, except on the day she departed for Cheltenham. Ronald acquiesced, but prayed he might meet her again 'by accident'.⁴³⁷ As he recorded in his diary, he was lucky enough for three such accidents to befall him in quick succession. Just before one o'clock on Wednesday 16th February, perhaps as he was returning from morning classes, he saw Edith outside *The Prince of Wales theatre* [Map 3:L] on Broad Street and arranged to see her off when she left for Cheltenham.⁴³⁸ He met her again five days later when he saw her 'sloshing along in a mac [a raincoat]', and once more on 23rd February.

⁴³² Burns. *Roots*. 176.

⁴³³ The [1901 Census](#) shows that Thomas and Julia were then boarders at 11 Frederick Road.

⁴³⁴ [Robert Catterson-Smith](#) and [William Bywater Grove](#) in the 1911 Census. The latter was not a close relation of Edith Bratt, via her maternal grandmother, but some distant connection is possible: both Grove families originated in the Black Country (Halesowen and Bilston respectively).

⁴³⁵ The building currently exists as a nursery under the same address on the west side of the road, close to the junction with the Hagley Road. It is emblazoned with a blue plaque, installed by Birmingham Civic Society and the Tolkien Society.

⁴³⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 177. The receipt for these items has survived among the Tolkien family papers.

⁴³⁷ As he recorded in his diary (Ibid).

⁴³⁸ The location was almost certainly the theatre in the city-centre, not the Prince of Wales pub in Moseley as Blackham suggests (*Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 105). The theatre sadly no longer exists, having been bombed during a blitz in April 1941 and demolished, but it stood on the present site of the International Convention Centre.



Figure 45: *The Prince of Wales Theatre, Broad Street, c. 1930s.*

Three days later, Ronald received a furious letter from his sacerdotal benefactor, threatening to cut his university career short if he did not cease all contact with Edith until he had reached the age of majority.⁴³⁹ He later outlined to his son the dilemma in which he found himself:

...trouble arose: and I had to choose between disobeying and grieving (or deceiving) a guardian who had been a father to me, more than most real fathers, but without any obligation, and ‘dropping’ the love-affair until I was 21.⁴⁴⁰

Tolkien said of Morgan that he ‘seemed to some just a pottering old snob and gossip’.⁴⁴¹ If this reflected Edith’s view, she had grounds for such an appraisal. But the bonds between Ronald and Father Francis were strong: ‘I owe all to Fr. F. and so must obey’, Tolkien wrote in his diary. No words were exchanged at his final glimpse of Edith on the Hagley Road a further four days later on 2nd March: ‘At **Francis Road corner** [Map 4:H] she passed me on bike on way to station. I shall not see her again perhaps for three years.’⁴⁴²

Several weeks after Edith left Birmingham, Tolkien requested and was granted permission to write to her. Within the resultant lengthy missive, dated 26th March 1910 (Easter Saturday), was Tolkien’s earliest known surviving poem, ‘Morning’. Edith replied that, in

⁴³⁹ This was twenty-one years old prior to the Family Law Reform Act of 1969.

⁴⁴⁰ Letter 43.

⁴⁴¹ Letter 267.

⁴⁴² Tolkien’s diary, quoted in Burns (*Roots*. 177).

Cheltenham, she was now much happier and that the ‘horrid time at Duchess Road seemed like a dream’, which may have been cold comfort to Tolkien. He was finding it more difficult to awaken to a new reality without her. After seeing a production of *Peter Pan* at *The Prince of Wales* in mid-April 1910, he wrote in his diary: ‘Indescribable but I shall never forget it as long as I live. Wish Edith had been with me.’⁴⁴³

Tolkien later felt that his separation from Edith brought about the return of ‘folly and slackness’ in his academic work.⁴⁴⁴ He seems particularly to have wearied of the diet of ‘civilised’ classical languages which he received at the Oratory and King Edward’s School.⁴⁴⁵ Having studied Anglo-Saxon since the age of thirteen ‘as a boyish hobby when supposed to be learning Greek and Latin’, he ventured deeper among the ‘barbarians’ in 1910 by purchasing a copy of Joseph Wright’s *Primer of the Gothic Language* from a school-friend, who had misguidedly ‘thought it a Bible Society product’.⁴⁴⁶ This accidental acquisition would open Tolkien’s eyes to novel linguistic horizons, including Germanic philology and Old Norse, but one of his first attempts to write Gothic (in June 1910) defaced the back page of a copy of Thucydides.⁴⁴⁷ Regardless of these small acts of insouciance and rebellion, Tolkien’s ‘romantic upbringing’ predisposed him to make his love for Edith ‘the source of effort’.⁴⁴⁸ And, just as in the wake of his mother’s death, life at King Edward’s furnished him with numerous welcome opportunities to transfigure defeat into purposeful endeavour; this time, in the field of extracurricular pursuits.

Although Tolkien finally gained an Exhibition (a kind of lesser scholarship) to Exeter College, Oxford, in the autumn of 1910, he remained at King Edward’s until July 1911, when he was nineteen years old.⁴⁴⁹ With fewer exams to take during these final terms, Tolkien devoted much of his time to a range of school clubs and sporting activities. He joined the two societies over which Dickie Reynolds presided, Debating (in 1909) and Literary, giving papers to the latter on the ‘English Nonsense Poets’ and ‘Norse Sagas’.⁴⁵⁰ Debates were conducted in either English or Latin and Tolkien contributed prolifically to both varieties, gaining a reputation for his humorous if eccentric orations. These included diatribes against the ‘polysyllabic [Norman] barbarities which ousted the more honest if humbler native words’ and, very much in the manner of his Suffield grandfather, against the notion that William Shakespeare could have written the works attributed to him.⁴⁵¹ During his last year, Tolkien was appointed Secretary to the Debating

⁴⁴³ Ibid. 178-79 & 210.

⁴⁴⁴ Letter 43.

⁴⁴⁵ Tolkien was ‘allowed’ by Father Morgan to attend Cary Gilson’s classes on the New Testament in Greek (Letter 306), but he tended to prefer Latin (Letter 338). Even so, he neglected both: ‘I was clever, but not industrious or single-minded; a large part of my failure was due simply to not working (at least not at classics)... because I was studying something else: Gothic and what not.’ (Letter 43.)

⁴⁴⁶ Letter 297: Drafts for a letter to ‘Mr Rang’ (August 1967) and Letter 272: From a letter to Zillah Sherring (20 July 1965).

⁴⁴⁷ Letter 308: To Christopher Tolkien (2 January 1969) and Letter 272.

⁴⁴⁸ Letter 43.

⁴⁴⁹ Tolkien had taken the examinations for the Oxford and Cambridge Higher Certificate in July 1910 (Burns. *Roots*. 171).

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. 164 & 168. The latter paper was given in February 1911.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. 188-89. In the Annual Open Debate of 4th April 1911, Tolkien poured ‘a sudden flood of unqualified abuse upon Shakespeare, his filthy birthplace, his squalid surroundings, and his sordid character. He declared that to believe that so great a genius arose in such circumstances commits us to the belief that a fair-haired European infant could have a woolly-haired prognathous Papuan parent.’ The extent of Tolkien’s ‘cordial’ dislike for Shakespeare’s

Society and so penned accounts of its meetings for the school newspaper, the *Chronicle*.⁴⁵² His March 1911 report on the Latin Debate (the ‘Acta Senatus’) used only the speakers’ Romanic pseudonyms, such as *T. Portorius Acer Germanicus*, translatable as ‘Toll Keen the Gothic’.⁴⁵³

Like other members of the Suffield family, Tolkien also enjoyed treading the boards, and the school’s annual Speech Day afforded him opportunities to act in modern and classical plays in their original languages. In 1910, the *Chronicle* singled out his performance as ‘The Inspector’ in Aristophanes’ *The Birds* as ‘especially deserving praise’.⁴⁵⁴ The next year he embodied ‘a spirited Hermes’ in *Peace*, and when waiting relatives afterwards sent a school porter backstage to find him, the man witnessed Ronald ‘clad in himation and sandals... giving what [Tolkien] thought [was] a fair imitation of a frenzied Bacchic dance’. ‘Just now, he’s the life and soul of the party’, the man tactfully reported.⁴⁵⁵



Figure 46: Tolkien as Hermes in Aristophanes’ *Peace*, 1911.

work has been much discussed: he blamed the Warwickshire playwright for debasing the image of elves and ‘Faërie’ with ‘his damned cobwebs’, but he also emulated Shakespeare in his poem ‘Goblin Feet’ (Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 81 & 261; see also Letter 151: From a letter to Hugh Brogan (18 September 1954) and Letter 163). I wonder if Tolkien’s outburst in April 1911 was partly a manifestation of the rivalry with King Edward VI School in Stratford-upon-Avon, which Shakespeare probably attended.

⁴⁵² Burns. *Roots*. 186 & 216. She asserts that Tolkien was probably responsible for several other anonymously penned pieces in the February, June and December editions of the newspaper (213-14).

⁴⁵³ It was traditional for such Latinised names to be used during the contest itself. Tolkien’s first recorded appearance at a Latin debate was in April 1909, under the pseudonym *Spurius Vestigialis Acer*. In 1910, he was referred to as *Eisphorides Acribus Polyglotteus*. Tolkien was probably responsible for the Latin nickname of Sidney Barrowclough, *Tumulus Vallis*, meaning ‘barrow in a clough [steep valley]’ (Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 19).

⁴⁵⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 191-92. William Tait recalled one such end-of-year play where ‘Wiseman and Gilson... chatted away as though Greek were their normal tongue’ (193).

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 192.

Tolkien had joined the school's 130-strong C.C.F. (Combined Cadet Forces) in January 1910, which that year participated with other schools in inspections at Aldershot, carried out by an ailing King Edward VII, Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener.⁴⁵⁶ He received a nasty cut on his hand as a result of some horseplay at an O.T.C. (Officers' Training Corps) camp on Salisbury Plain but was nevertheless promoted to corporal in September 1910.⁴⁵⁷ The following year, he was one of twelve cadets sent by the school to line the route of George V's coronation procession and who were stationed 'outside Buck. Palace great gates to the right, facing the palace'.⁴⁵⁸

Sports were voluntary at King Edward's School, but since Tolkien 'did not dislike games' (except for cricket, which he found 'a ridiculous bore'), he participated in several, including swimming events which took place at the baths on Woodcock Street in Aston.⁴⁵⁹ In athletics, he finished third in the One Mile Flat Race on Sports Day in both 1910 and 1911.⁴⁶⁰ However, Tolkien implied that the 'effort' he derived from his thwarted romance with Edith yielded the greatest results in rugby: 'Naturally rather a physical coward, I passed from a despised rabbit on a house second-team to school colours in two seasons.'⁴⁶¹ The earliest record of his involvement in a competitive rugby match relates to a fixture in October 1909 between K.E.S. and Jesus College, Oxford. At the end of the contest, Tolkien was awarded his 2nd XV Colours, having scored a try and 'shown himself throughout the afternoon a keen forward'.⁴⁶²

Another member of the second string had begun at the school only the previous September, though Tolkien would have recognised him from the Oratory. This was William Joseph Slim (1891-1970), who would command the victorious Fourteenth Army in Burma during the Second World War, later to be elevated to Field Marshal and 1st Viscount Slim. He was not an academic highflyer like Tolkien, but they otherwise had much in common: Slim was brought up in the Catholic faith by a passionately religious mother and spent four years at St Philip's Grammar School (1904-1908); one of his hobbies was cycling to the Clent Hills for camping expeditions; his favourite subject was literature; and he was, of course, an enthusiastic member of the C.C.F..⁴⁶³ Slim was obliged by straitened financial circumstances to leave King Edward's in the summer of 1910 and take up a teaching position at an elementary school in

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid. 198. This would not have been Tolkien's first glimpse of Edward VII, who had processed past assembled King Edward's pupils on New Street on 7th July 1909, when he came to open the new Edgbaston campus of Birmingham University (196).

⁴⁵⁷ An Old Edwardian, William Tait, recounted the incident at Tidworth Pennings in 1972 (quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 198): 'One evening Tolkien came charging in, leapt up and clasped the central pole high up and slid down it to the ground, not having noticed that someone had fixed a candle to the pole with a clasp knife. Tolkien must still carry the scar of the very nasty cut that resulted.' Garth states that this incident took place in 1909, not 1910 (*Tolkien and the Great War*. 24). If Burns is correct, T.E. Lawrence attended the same camp with the O.T.C. of Oxford University ('[Lawrence of Oxford: University of Oxford – Officer Training Corps](#)'). *Not a Suitable Hobby for an Airman*. 2023).

⁴⁵⁸ Letter 306.

⁴⁵⁹ Letter 183: Notes on W.H. Auden's review of *The Return of the King* (1956) and Letter 199. The venue for swimming was not, as Burns writes (*Roots*. 184), Woodcock Lane.

⁴⁶⁰ Burns. *Roots*. 172.

⁴⁶¹ Letter 43.

⁴⁶² Burns. *Roots*. 185.

⁴⁶³ Miller, Russell. *Uncle Bill: The Authorised Biography of Field Marshal Viscount Slim*. London. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 2013. Ch. II. Slim lived within two miles of Tolkien, at [144 Poplar Avenue, Bearwood](#).

Ladywood; but for one season in 1909/10, Britain's greatest writer and greatest general of the twentieth century rucked, mauled and scrummaged together on a pitch in south Birmingham.

The farmland beside the Bourn Brook in Edgbaston, where **Eastern Road** [Map 5:49] meets the Bristol Road, had been procured by the school in 1872 to further the boys' education 'in the Sciences of Cricket and [Rugby] Football'.⁴⁶⁴ But even by Tolkien's time, the fields retained their agricultural character, with a 1901 edition of the *Chronicle* decrying their unsatisfactory condition and the 'practice of pasturing animals upon them'.⁴⁶⁵ The pavilion, a 'miserable, worm-eaten, tumbledown cowshed' was replaced in 1903. It seems that Tolkien spent a significant portion of his time there, especially after gaining his 1st XV Colours in November 1910 and becoming the captain of Measures House and Secretary of the Football Club for his final year. When not required to play, he would engross himself in his Gothic primer on the touchline. His slight build had initially thwarted his progression, but reports in the *Chronicle* suggest that he more than made up for this deficiency through hard work, determination, 'dash' and reckless tackling.⁴⁶⁶ This playing style had injurious consequences, however, including a broken nose and, as he later told his son, 'having my tongue nearly cut out'.⁴⁶⁷

The boys sometimes ironically likened the violence, wounds and camaraderie of the rugby pitch to warfare, with Christopher Wiseman recalling in a letter to Tolkien, 'both being in the scrum we were each in support of the other on the battlefield'.⁴⁶⁸ A poem about a rugby match between two house teams, Measures and Richards, entitled 'The Battle of the Eastern Field', was published in the March 1911 *Chronicle*.⁴⁶⁹ It is introduced by a writer 'G.A.B.', who claims he found the partially indecipherable manuscript in a wastepaper basket in the prefects' room. It was (and, to some extent, still is) the practice at King Edward's to refer to a person by their initials, so Tolkien was only called 'John', 'John Ronald' or some other nickname by his closest school-friends, and was otherwise known by his surname or 'J.R.R.T.'.⁴⁷⁰ But Maggie Burns, finding no evidence of anyone with the initials G.A.B. at the school during this period, avers that the author of the aforementioned poem is in fact Tolkien, whom Wiseman addressed as 'Gabriel' in a letter the following month.⁴⁷¹

'The Battle of the Eastern Field' is largely a parody in mock-heroic style of T.B. Macaulay's 'The Battle of Lake Regillus'.⁴⁷² In the opening stanzas, the opposing captains, Edward Beric Alabaster and Tolkien, accept battle 'hard by Brum's great river' (meaning the threadlike

⁴⁶⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 48.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 184.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 185.

⁴⁶⁷ Letter 250.

⁴⁶⁸ 'Letter to *The Old Edwardians' Gazette*'. 1974. As quoted in Burns. *Roots*. 200.

⁴⁶⁹ The poem can be read online here: Burns. '[The Battle of the Eastern Field](#)'. 15-22. According to Burns, the same match was described in the June 1911 K.E.S. *Chronicle* as 'one of the finest games ever seen on the School ground' and finished 11-3 in Richards' favour.

⁴⁷⁰ Letter 58: To Christopher Tolkien (3 April 1944) and Letter 309.

⁴⁷¹ Burns states that there was no other K.E.S. pupil with those initials at that time (*Roots*. 210).

⁴⁷² As demonstrated by another scholar: Yates, Jessica. 'The Battle of the Eastern Field: A Commentary'. *Mallorn*. No. 13, January 1979. 3-5. Burns relates how Hilary Tolkien would have attempted to learn Macaulay's poem by heart for the Old Edwardians' Association poetry prize in 1906. Other lines in Tolkien's parody are based on 'Horatius' by Macaulay (*Roots*. 211).

River Rea, which combines with the Bourn Brook nearby). There follows a description of some members of the opposing teams, first Richards in green and then Measures in red:

Around the Green-clad Chieftain,
 Stands many a haughty lord,
 From Edgbastonia's ancient homes,
 From Moseley's emerald sward;
 Towers Ericillus of the sands;
 Glowers Falco of the Bridge.
 But noblest stands that Chiefest Lord
 From the Fountain's lofty ridge.
 Among the blood-red ranks were seen
 'Midst many an honour'd name
 Great Sekhet and those brethren
 The Corcii of fame.

Once battle is joined, the two teams prove to be equally matched, with Homeric figures on each side performing mighty deeds:

Swiftly rushed out that Chiefest Lord
 And fiercely onward sped,
 His corselet girt about his waist,
 His close helm on his head.
 Now round in thickest throng there pressed
 These warriors red and green,
 And many a dashing charge was made,
 And many a brave deed seen.
 Full oft a speeding foeman
 Was hurtled to the ground,
 While forward and now backward
 Did the ball of fortune bound:
 Till Sekhet marked the slaughter,
 And tossed his flaxen crest
 And towards the Green-clad Chieftain
 Through the carnage pressed;
 Who fiercely flung by Sekhet,
 Lay low upon the ground,
 Till a thick wall of liegemen
 Encompassed him around.

At last, a player known as Cupid breaks through Measures' defences to score the decisive try. At least that is the assumption; at the critical point, there is supposedly a lacuna in the manuscript:

Meanwhile in the centre,
 Great deals of arms were wrought,
 Where Cupid ran on cunning foot,
 And where the Hill-lord fought.

But Cupid lo! Outrunning
 The fleetest of the hosts,
 Sped to where beyond the press
 He spied the Great Twin Posts:
 He crossed the line ...
 [he scored a try? G.A.B.]

Burns has identified all of the K.E.S. pupils to whom the grandiloquent sobriquets refer.⁴⁷³ The ‘Green-clad Chieftain’, Alabaster, was the fifth son of a jewellery manufacturer and lived on **Amesbury Road, Moseley** [Map 6:O].⁴⁷⁴ ‘Ericillus of the sands’ denotes Leslie Kelham Sands, the eldest son of a Church of England canon in Small Heath.⁴⁷⁵ ‘Falco of the Bridge’ was Frank Thomas Faulconbridge, who lived in Sparkhill, the only son of a linotype machine operator.⁴⁷⁶ The ‘Chiefest Lord/From the Fountain’s lofty ridge’ was the School Captain, George Frederick Cottrell, the son of a commercial clerk, who lived on **Sandon Road, Edgbaston** [Map 1:C].⁴⁷⁷ At the junction of Sandon and the Hagley roads, as both climb towards Bearwood, there used to exist a tall neo-Gothic fountain (built c. 1870), which was dismantled in the mid-twentieth century.

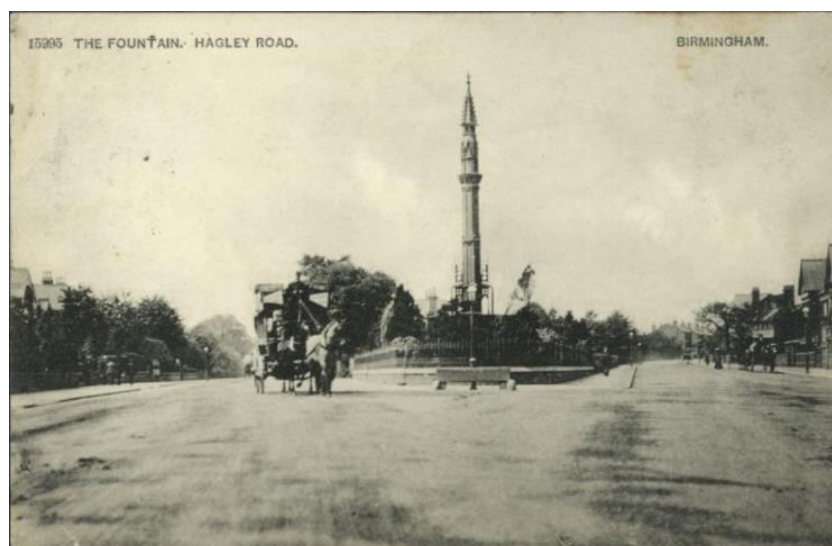


Figure 47: The fountain at the junction of Hagley Road and Sandon Road.

‘Great Sekhet’ with his ‘flaxen crest’ signifies the blond-haired Christopher Wiseman. The ‘Corcii of fame’ were the Payton brothers, Wilfrid Hugh (‘Whiffy’) and Ralph Stuart, of **Greenfield Road, Harborne** [Map 5:E], who had copious school prizes to their names.⁴⁷⁸ Finally,

⁴⁷³ Burns. ‘The Battle of the Eastern Field’. 18.

⁴⁷⁴ E.B. Alabaster in the [1911 Census](#).

⁴⁷⁵ L.K. Sands in the [1911 Census](#).

⁴⁷⁶ F.T. Faulconbridge in the [1911 Census](#).

⁴⁷⁷ G.F. Cottrell in the [1911 Census](#).

⁴⁷⁸ W.H. and R.S. Payton in the [1911 Census](#). Garth reports Wilfrid’s nickname in *Tolkien and the Great War* (18). Burns (*Roots*. 171) records that he was a more accomplished Classics scholar than Tolkien at the time. Writing about his experience of attending an Old Edwardians’ reunion in 1944, Tolkien said he was surprised to discover that his fellow alumni remembered him chiefly for two things: rugby and wearing coloured socks (Letter 58).

‘Cupid’ represents Harry Leslie Higgins from **Bournville**, who would go on to play county cricket for Worcestershire; while the ‘Hill-lord’ was Eustace Leonard Hill from Acocks Green, the son of a professor of medicine.⁴⁷⁹ Tolkien must have cherished these friends and the experiences they forged together at Eastern Road, for he kept photos of his school rugby teams until the end of his life.⁴⁸⁰



Figure 48: The King Edward's 1st XV, 1910-11, including Tolkien (middle row, extreme right) and others who are described in 'The Battle of the Eastern Field'.

There was some overlap between Tolkien's rugby teammates and the scholarly group, mostly younger than himself, with whom he attended debates and helped to run the library in his final year. Christopher Wiseman was one of this number, of course; as was Whiffy Payton. The headmaster's son, Robert Quilter Gilson, was a sub-librarian; likewise, the afflicted Vincent Trought, son of the headmaster of another school, whose house was on the opposite side of **Edgbaston Reservoir** from Tolkien; and Thomas Kenneth ('Tea Cake') Barnsley, who lived near

⁴⁷⁹ H.L. Higgins in the [1911 Census](#) and E.L. Hill in the [1911 Census](#).

⁴⁸⁰ Burns. *Roots*. 186.

Tolkien on the south side of the Hagley Road (**Westfield Road** [Map 1:D]). The last of these was the son of the contractor (Sir John Barnsley) who built Birmingham's Council House, the Museum and Art Gallery, the Hall of Memory and much else besides.⁴⁸¹ In the summer term of 1911, Tolkien, Wiseman and Trought began an unofficial 'tea club', the first gatherings of which took place covertly in a cubby-hole of the library and were soon attended by those others mentioned above.⁴⁸² Following the exam period, a lack of morning lessons allowed them to meet instead at the oak-panelled 'General Café' of **Barrow's Stores, at 74-78 Corporation Street** [Map 3:28], where they had a favourite table and settles in a secluded alcove which they called 'The Railway Carriage'.⁴⁸³

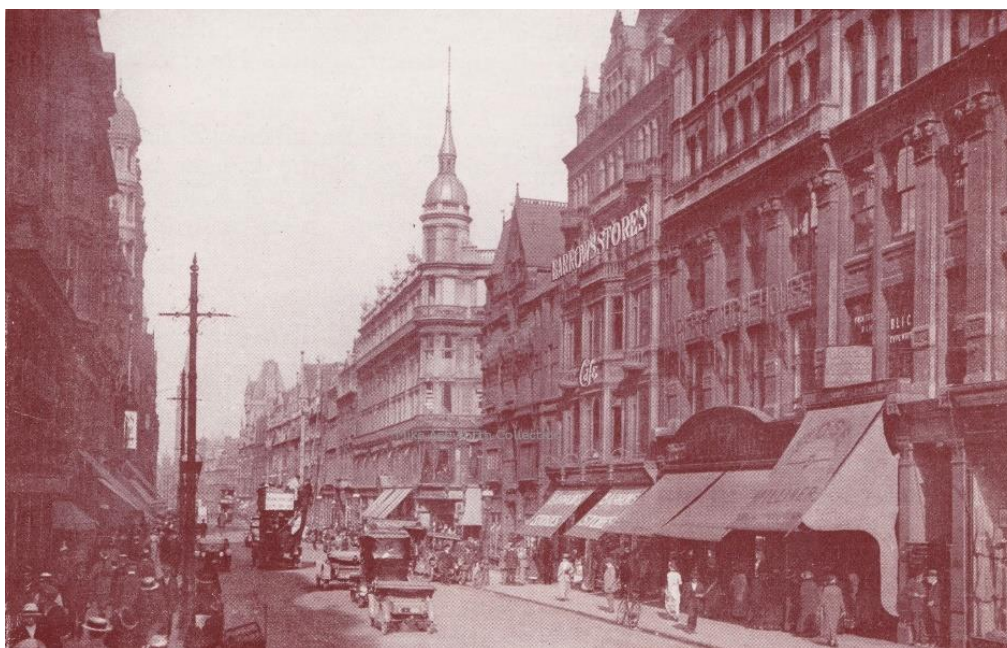


Figure 49: Barrow's Stores, on the corner of Corporation Street and Bull Street, Birmingham.

The initial band of schoolboy friends who gathered at Barrow's had no settled purpose, membership nor name. Some shared with Tolkien the pain of having prematurely lost a parent:

⁴⁸¹ Sidney Barrowclough in the [1911 Census](#), Thomas Kenneth Barnsley in the [1911 Census](#) and Vincent Trought in the [1911 Census](#). Trought was to pass away in January 1912, an event presaged by his seemingly feverish behaviour. An April 1911 *Chronicle* article on the activities of the Debating Society records that he 'spoke often in a dreamy, weary fashion... his nightmare phantasies and grotesque conceits were one of the features of the Meetings' (Burns. *Roots*. 190). Burns (193) also lists Frederick Scopes (later Sir), an engineer's son from Sparkhill, who would become the chairman of the British Coking Industry Association; and John Nesbitt Ernest Tredemick from Sparkbrook, the son of a vicar. They appear [here](#) and [here](#) in the 1911 Census.

⁴⁸² Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 53. In his correspondence to Tolkien of November 1914 (quoted in Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 55), Wiseman suggests that the only other original member of the T.C.B.S. was Vincent Trought.

⁴⁸³ Burns. *Roots*. 194 & Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 53. The Barrow family were intimately connected to the Cadburys: in 1823, John Barrow had married Sarah Cadbury, sister of the John Cadbury who founded the chocolate manufacturer. John Cadbury in turn married Barrow's sister, Candia, in 1832. The latter couple had a son called Richard Barrow Cadbury (1835-1899), who co-founded the factory at Bournville. A son of the first couple (thus R.B. Cadbury's double-cousin) was called Richard Cadbury Barrow (1827-1900), and it was he who inherited the drapery shop which became 'Barrow's Stores'.

Rob Gilson's mother had died 'after a brief illness' in April 1907; W.H. Payton had lost his father in 1908.⁴⁸⁴ Gilson also had artistic ambitions in common with Tolkien, who likened their collective to the 'Birmingham Set' or 'Brotherhood' of King Edward's pupils in the 1850s (including Edward Burne-Jones), who had bonded with William Morris at Oxford University and thereafter shaped the Arts and Crafts Movement.⁴⁸⁵ Above all, they were all intellectually gifted young men. Over sixty years later, Tolkien received a letter from another Old Edwardian, C.V.L. Lycett (like Slim, a high-ranking officer who served under Lord Mountbatten in India and South-East Asia), who confessed to having felt a quiet yearning to participate in 'the wit of that select coterie... of J.R.R.T., C.L. Wiseman, G.B. Smith, R.Q. Gilson, V. Trought, and Payton. I hovered on the outskirts to gather up the gems.'⁴⁸⁶ And yet Wiseman felt that the group, while still at school, 'did very little except live in a state of acute tension, act *The Rivals*, clothe a Roman remain in trousers, run Latin debates, and have tea in the Library'.⁴⁸⁷ (For an outline of the development of the tea club into a quartet of ambitious but ill-starred artists, including Geoffrey Bache Smith, as well as details of some associated locations in the West Midlands, please refer to Appendix B.)

Wiseman would reflect on his time at King Edward's as 'the seventh heaven I lived in my younger days'.⁴⁸⁸ Tolkien's assessment of his school career was more equivocal. Upon leaving in the summer of 1911, he wrote in the *Chronicle*, 'Twas a good road, a little rough, it may be, in places, but they say it is rougher further on'. Nor, after the passage of half-a-century, had Tolkien glossed over the more sober tones of his remembrance, which stemmed from disappointment with himself: 'I was as happy or the reverse at school as anywhere else, the faults being my own. I ended up anyway as a perfectly respectable and tolerably successful senior.'⁴⁸⁹ Of the institution of King Edward's, New Street, however, the author was whole-hearted in his eulogy:

I remember the School with deepest affection (and gratitude); though memory is also painful... On the very rare occasions on which I either walk down New Street, or come within sight of the Bristol Road Ground, I am filled with melancholy (not unmixed with anger).⁴⁹⁰

It is a further measure of the esteem in which Tolkien held King Edward's School as an academic institution and personal sanctuary that he said of exchanging it for Oxford University in October 1911, 'I felt like a young sparrow kicked out of a high nest'.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 159.

⁴⁸⁵ See Garth. *Worlds*. 177. Richard Watson Dixon and Edwin Hatch were two other Old Edwardians in the Birmingham Set. Perhaps Tolkien's desire to emulate Burne-Jones influenced his choice of Exeter College, Oxford. According to Garth (*Tolkien and the Great War*. 14), Wiseman disagreed with the comparison.

⁴⁸⁶ Letter 350: To C.L. Wiseman (24 May 1973).

⁴⁸⁷ As quoted in Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 184.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 251.

⁴⁸⁹ Letter 199.

⁴⁹⁰ '1955 letter to F.C. Banton'. *The Old Edwardians' Gazette*. (As quoted in Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 45.)

⁴⁹¹ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 57.

Epilogue: Returning home (1911 onwards)

Although relatively old when he left school, Tolkien demonstrated by many returns to his hometown a reluctance to move on entirely from King Edward's and the friends he had made there. During Tolkien's first vacation from university, at Christmas 1911, he came back to participate in the Old Boys' Debate on 'the principle of gratuitous public service' and to play Mrs Malaprop in a school production of R.B. Sheridan's play *The Rivals*.⁴⁹² He was in Birmingham again on 2nd April 1912 for the K.E.S. Open Debate, the motion being 'That it is better to be Eccentric than Orthodox'. Perhaps anticipating a time when the traditional values of Edwardian England would no longer be the norm, Tolkien 'maintained the possibility of a man's being both at the same time'.⁴⁹³

Blackham suggests that, at Christmas 1911, Tolkien had lodged with his brother Hilary at 4 Highfield Road.⁴⁹⁴ We know that Tolkien's younger brother finished at King Edward's School in 1910, aged sixteen, having advanced as far as Class 5.⁴⁹⁵ He continued to live in Highfield Road until at least April 1911, while working as a clerk to his uncle, Walter Incedon, the hardware merchant. However, around this time he pursued an agricultural vocation and went to work in Sussex, on the family farm of Jane Neave's friend, Ellen Brookes-Smith.⁴⁹⁶ This was likely before July 1911, when Jane and Ellen bought and began running the second of two farms in Gedling, Nottinghamshire, and would have welcomed Hilary's assistance. He certainly joined them at Gedling some time prior to volunteering for military service in 1914.⁴⁹⁷ Thus, it cannot be stated with certainty either that Hilary was still lodging with the MacSherrys by Christmas 1911 or that his elder brother returned there.

We do know that Ronald spent the following two Christmas holidays with the Incedons, as Carpenter says was 'usual' for him and his brother.⁴⁹⁸ Before 1911, the family of his mother's elder sister had moved from their house on Chantry Road, Moseley, to 'The Cottage' in Barnt Green. Walter Incedon's wrath at May's attempt to convert to Catholicism in 1900 must have been long forgotten, for it is apparent that Tolkien greatly enjoyed spending time in his household. By Christmas 1912, his cousins Marjorie (21) and Mary (17) would have been too old for imaginary languages, but they acted in a play he had written for the amusement of the family, entitled *The Bloodhound, the Chef and the Suffragette*.⁴⁹⁹ Shortly afterwards, on the day Tolkien came of age, the cottage on Fiery Hill Road became the setting for a more fateful event in Tolkien's life when he wrote to Edith Bratt in Cheltenham, ending their long separation. He

⁴⁹² Burns. *Roots*. 190 & 193. The debate took place on 15th December. Tolkien declared himself strongly in favour of the motion to pay MPs a wage. The *Chronicle* described Tolkien's part in the K.E.S. Musical and Dramatic Society's version of *The Rivals* as 'excellent in every way and not least in make-up'. Christopher Wiseman and R.Q. Gilson featured in the leading roles.

⁴⁹³ Burns. *Roots*. 191.

⁴⁹⁴ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 106.

⁴⁹⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 172. Hilary had begun in Class 13 (the lowest class) in January 1905.

⁴⁹⁶ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 50.

⁴⁹⁷ Hammond, Wayne G. and Scull, Christina. '[Addenda and Corrigenda](#)' to *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide, Vol. 2: Reader's Guide*. Harper Collins. 2006. 141-2, 'substitute for entry on the Brookes-Smith family'.

⁴⁹⁸ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 43.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 67.

recounted this memory to his son Michael twenty-eight years later: ‘On the night of my 21st birthday I wrote again to your mother – Jan. 3, 1913. On Jan. 8th I went back to her, and became engaged, and informed an astonished family.’⁵⁰⁰

After agreeing to marry Tolkien and to convert to Catholicism, Edith was ordered to leave the house of the couple whom she had come to know as Uncle and Auntie Jessop.⁵⁰¹ She then rented a house in Warwick (**15 Victoria Street** [Map 1:19]) with Jennie Grove and her dog, Sam.⁵⁰² Tolkien stayed with her there in June 1913, before visiting the Incedon cottage again at the beginning of July. He had bought a new sketch-book, in which he painted watercolours of several scenes in and around Barnt Green.⁵⁰³ On Wednesday 2nd July, he captured a stand of foxgloves growing wild in a clearing of the nearby woods. The name he appended to the watercolour, ‘Foxglove Year’, suggests that the plant was particularly abundant in the Lickes that summer.⁵⁰⁴



Figure 50: Tolkien's watercolour 'Foxglove Year', July 1913.

⁵⁰⁰ Letter 43.

⁵⁰¹ *The Tolkien Family Album*. 30 & 36. The address of the house was then 2 Lyefield Lawn, Charlton Kings. Today, it is either 8 or 10 Lyefield Road West. According to the Tolkiens, she was banished by Charles Hale Jessop, a martinet who dominated his much younger wife (he was twenty-three years older).

⁵⁰² *The Tolkien Family Album*. 36. Tolkien's children record that they called Jennie 'Auntie Ie'.

⁵⁰³ Hammond & Scull. *Artist & Illustrator*. 19 & 41.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 20-21.

On Tuesday 8th July, he climbed **Bilberry Hill** to paint the outlook over the farmland to the north-east. As Hammond and Scull note, a tree in foreground gives ‘the sense of viewing the scene with the artist from a grove of fir trees’.⁵⁰⁵ The spire of **St. Nicolas Church in King’s Norton** [Map 1:E] is the salient feature on the horizon but slightly to the left of centre, implying that it is not the focus of the artist’s gaze. A further three and a half miles into the distant haze, in line with the midpoint of the vista, lies Sarehole.

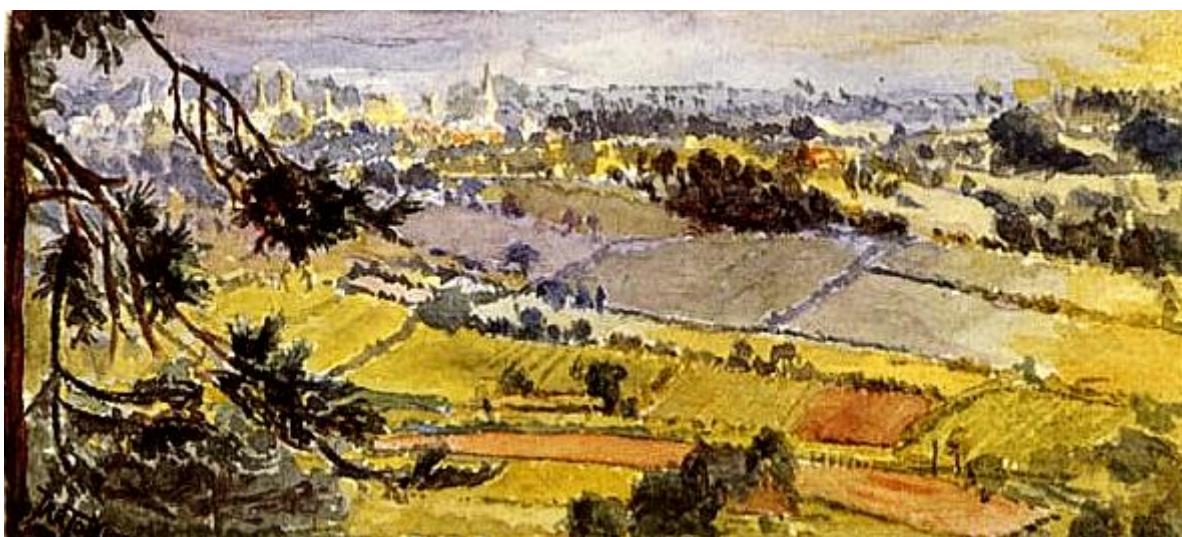


Figure 51: Tolkien's watercolour of the view from Bilberry Hill, July 1913.

On the next day (9th July) and the following Saturday (12th), Tolkien painted views of the Incledon's garden. The second of these watercolours (see Chapter I.v), concerning primarily the boisterous colours of the toppling foxgloves and delphiniums, also includes one end of ‘The Cottage’. The exact dates on which he depicted the garden from the opposite direction and made a further pencil drawing of the cottage are unknown.⁵⁰⁶ What is clear from all these artworks of that summer are Tolkien's feelings of joy and affection at the sight of the Incledon's home in Barnt Green. Tolkien was a guest of the Incledons in Barnt Green again at Christmas 1913, when on 16th December he played in the annual rugby match between the King Edward's School 1st XV and the Old Edwardian Oxbridge undergraduates at Eastern Road.⁵⁰⁷

In October 1914, Tolkien spent the last Sunday of the long vacation with Father Morgan at the Oratory.⁵⁰⁸ He had begun to construct his Elvish languages in earnest earlier that year, ‘after

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid. 20. In truth, it is hard with an amateur's eye to tell whether the tree in question is a Douglas fir, a Norway spruce, a Corsican pine or some other species of conifer. However, one is tempted to think of the patch of dry fir-wood where the journeying Frodo and friends spend their first night after setting off from Hobbiton (*FR*, 72).

⁵⁰⁶ See Hammond & Scull. *Artist & Illustrator*. 33. FN 24.

⁵⁰⁷ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 3. Tolkien had missed a second consecutive Old Boys' debate on 15th December 1913 through illness (4).

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. 48. See also Letter 1: To Edith Bratt (October 1914), in which Tolkien states that he ‘was at the Oratory last week’.

many tentative starts in boyhood'.⁵⁰⁹ And, discovering just as the Great War broke out that languages are mutually dependent on their store of legends, he also embarked on the creation of his epic mythology. He was spurred on by a revelatory meeting with Wiseman, Rob Gilson and G.B. Smith in December.⁵¹⁰ This germinal work continued after he had joined the army and was 'mostly done in camps and hospitals between 1915 and 1918'.⁵¹¹ A soldier's life is by nature peripatetic, but Tolkien's war years were particularly unsettled and its shifting scenery best expressed here as a list. Even so, far from curtailing his visits to the West Midlands, Tolkien's enlistment as a signals officer in the Lancashire Fusiliers was followed by eleven months of training (July 1915 – June 1916) largely in the vicinity of Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, which gave him ample opportunity to see the old haunts of his Birmingham childhood:

- Easter 1915: Warwick

Tolkien stayed at Edith's house, where he translated the Middle English poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*.⁵¹²

- July 1915: Barnt Green & Birmingham

Tolkien spent around three weeks on leave at the Incedons' cottage and with other family members in Birmingham. We know from his diary that on the 8th and 9th July 1915 he composed two poems, 'The Princess Ni' and 'The Shores of Faery', while travelling ('walking and on bus') between Moseley and Edgbaston.⁵¹³ Burns supposes that he may have been visiting his grandfather on Cotton Lane, who had been made a widower by the loss of Emily Jane Suffield the previous spring, and perhaps also the Mittons on Wake Green Road.⁵¹⁴ She notes that several omnibus routes had been established in Birmingham in 1914, including what three years later became the 'Number 1 Bus' between Acocks Green and Five Ways. Assuming that the route has remained unchanged, the bus plied Edgbaston Road, crossing the River Rea where the remains of the old Avern's Mill would have been visible from the open upper deck. On Saturday 24th July, in Barnt Green, he wrote 'Happy Mariners' about a figure imprisoned in a tower of pearl who listens to the voices of men as they sail away into the West.⁵¹⁵

- July/August 1915: Warwick

Tolkien used his weekends on leave from a training course in Bedford to visit Edith in Warwick, accomplishing the hundred-mile round trip on a motorcycle he had purchased with a fellow officer.⁵¹⁶

- August/September 1915: Whittington Heath, Lichfield & Marston Green.

⁵⁰⁹ Letter 297 and Letter 115: To Katherine Farrer (15 June 1948?).

⁵¹⁰ Letter 165.

⁵¹¹ Letter 180: To 'Mr Thompson' [draft] (14 January 1956).

⁵¹² Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 64.

⁵¹³ Burns. *Roots*. 216. See also Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 83.

⁵¹⁴ Emily Jane Suffield passed away on 26th May 1914.

⁵¹⁵ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 89.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.* 93.

After finishing the course in Bedford, Tolkien joined his battalion, which was encamped on **Whittington Heath** [Map 9:A], just outside the cathedral city of Lichfield.⁵¹⁷ As Garth points out, this was the heartland of the old kingdom of Mercia. On 12th September, he wrote ‘A Song of Aryador’, a poem about a camp of warriors in a landscape resembling the Tame Valley and the nearby uplands of Cannock Chase.⁵¹⁸

On Saturday 25th September, Tolkien and his three closest school-friends, Wiseman, Gilson and Smith, spent the evening in ‘delightful and valued conversation’ at **The George Hotel in Lichfield** [Map 9:B].⁵¹⁹ The following day they repaired to Gilson’s house in Marston Green. It was the last time they would all be together.⁵²⁰

- October 1915: **‘Penkridge’, Rugeley Camp** [Map 9:C]

In mid-October, Tolkien’s battalion relocated to a section of Rugeley Camp on Penkridge Bank, Cannock Chase, where he began to write his poem ‘Kortirion among the Trees’.⁵²¹

- November 1915: Warwick

Following some inoculations, Tolkien spent a week of frosty weather with Edith in Warwick.⁵²²

- December 1915: **Brocton Camp** [Map 9:D]

The 13th Lancashire Fusiliers now moved from Penkridge to another camp west of the Sher Brook on Cannock Chase.⁵²³

- c. February 1916: Birmingham

Tolkien visited Father Morgan to inform him that he was to marry Edith, but his nerve failed him. He delayed giving the priest news of his wedding until two weeks before the event (i.e. the first week of March), by which time Morgan’s offer of the Oratory as a venue came too late.⁵²⁴

- March 1916: Warwick

While visiting Edith, Tolkien completed a long poem, ‘The Wanderer’s Allegiance’, which contrasts the landscape settled by the speaker’s paternal ancestors with the towns of Warwick (‘this dear town of old forgetfulness’) and Oxford.⁵²⁵

⁵¹⁷ Ibid. 93.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid. 95.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid. 101.

⁵²⁰ Ibid. 102.

⁵²¹ Ibid. 103.

⁵²² Ibid. 110.

⁵²³ Ibid. 114.

⁵²⁴ Ibid. 129.

⁵²⁵ Ibid. 130.

On Wednesday 22nd March, Tolkien and Edith were married at the **Church of St Mary Immaculate** [Map 1:21], near Warwick Castle.⁵²⁶

- May 1916: Warwick & Great Haywood

On 13th May, Tolkien made a final two-day visit to Edith and Jenny Grove in Warwick.⁵²⁷ They were reluctantly giving up 15 Victoria Street and moving to the village of Great Haywood, Staffordshire, near to Brocton Camp.⁵²⁸ There, they would live in rooms within a house belonging to a Mrs Kendrick, called '**Hazel Dene**' [Map 9:15].

On Saturday 27th May, the Tolkiens were visited in Great Haywood by G.B. Smith, who stayed the night and most of the following day.⁵²⁹

- June 1916: Birmingham

After receiving a telegram on 2nd June 1916 instructing him to embark for France three days later, Tolkien and Edith spent what could have been their last night together at the **Plough and Harrow hotel** in Edgbaston, close to the Oratory.⁵³⁰ Late on Sunday 4th June, Tolkien departed Birmingham for the war. He described leaving his wife as 'like a death'.⁵³¹

- November & December 1916: Birmingham

Happily, Tolkien and Edith were able years later to bring their children to stay at the Plough and Harrow; for, at Beauval in late October 1916, Tolkien received a 'lucky louse-bite' (Garth's words), leading to a crippling bout of trench fever.⁵³² Having initially been hospitalised in France (at Gézaincourt and then Le Touquet), Tolkien was before long shipped back to England and immediately transported by train to Birmingham.⁵³³ There, he would have detrained at **Selly Oak station** [Map 5:F] and been hauled on a two-wheel trailer to the University, which had housed the **First Southern General Hospital** [Map 5:31] since September 1914.⁵³⁴ Tolkien was a patient on the campus of Birmingham University for about six weeks and used Abbotsford, the Mittons' residence on Wake Green Road, as a forwarding address.⁵³⁵ There was a growing risk that he would be thrown back into the fighting. Perhaps persuaded by his Aunt Mabel, Tolkien considered a transfer to the Royal Engineers, the non-combat corps in which her son

⁵²⁶ Ibid. 134.

⁵²⁷ Ibid. 134.

⁵²⁸ *The Tolkien Family Album*. 38.

⁵²⁹ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 135.

⁵³⁰ According to Blackham (*Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 108), they occupied Room 116.

⁵³¹ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 138. In a subsequent letter, he claimed that he crossed the Channel for 'the carnage of the Somme' in May 1916 (Letter 43).

⁵³² Garth, John. '2nd Annual Tolkien Lecture'. University of Birmingham. 12 May 2023.

⁵³³ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 93 & Garth. *Worlds*. 172. Carpenter states that Tolkien fell ill on 27th October and was embarked on 8th November 1916. Garth writes of 'a few weeks' passing between the onset of the fever and Tolkien's evacuation to England, but in *Tolkien and the Great War* (205) it is clear that he spent the night of Thursday 9th November in Birmingham, having arrived at Southampton that morning.

⁵³⁴ Blackham. *Tolkien's Middle-earth*. 121. University Station was not built until 1977-78. The patients of the First Southern General were cared for by the Medical Corps, with the assistance of Red Cross and St John Ambulance volunteers (Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 205).

⁵³⁵ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 207.

Thomas Ewart Mitton was a signaller.⁵³⁶ However, repeated pyrexial relapses meant Tolkien spent much of the rest of the war in various hospitals, mostly further north than Birmingham, and being tended by Edith in rented cottages near Cannock Chase.⁵³⁷ He never again returned to the slaughter of the trenches.

- December & January 1917: Great Haywood

Tolkien marked his return home to Edith with a six-stanza ballad entitled ‘The Grey Bridge of Tavrobel’.⁵³⁸

- January & February 1917: Birmingham, Great Haywood and Lichfield

To be available for duty after his leave of absence ended on 12th January, Tolkien went to stay at **185 Monument Road, Edgbaston** [Map 4:23].⁵³⁹ However, his fever had returned by the time he faced a medical board at **Birmingham University Hospital** [Map 5:G] on 23rd January.

Another month’s rest at Great Haywood came to an end on 22nd February and Tolkien returned to Birmingham, first Monument Road and then Abbotsford.⁵⁴⁰ A medical board at a Lichfield military hospital on 27th February found that his health had improved a little.

Around this time, the Tolkiens learnt that Hilary had been wounded (for the second time). Having enlisted in September 1914 and trained in Moseley as a bugler (probably while lodging with the Mittons), Hilary acted as a stretcher-bearer during the war and received minor shrapnel wounds on several occasions.⁵⁴¹ According to Oliver Suffield, his first cousin once removed, Hilary was ‘a brave and gentle man’.⁵⁴²

- November 1917: Cheltenham

Edith was six months pregnant in August 1917 when she relocated with Jennie Grove from Yorkshire to Cheltenham.⁵⁴³ At the Royal Nursing Home there, the Tolkiens’ first child John Francis Reuel was born on 16th November 1917. The baby’s father arrived on leave a week later and Father Francis Morgan came from Birmingham to perform the baptism.⁵⁴⁴

- April - June 1918: Penkridge and Brocton Camps, and Teddesley Hay

Tolkien had occasion to visit Moseley from Yorkshire in December 1917, when Thomas Ewart Mitton was killed in an accident on the railway at Ypres. It is certain that he returned to the West Midlands the following April. Having been found fighting fit, Tolkien was posted back

⁵³⁶ Ibid. 207.

⁵³⁷ Blackham. *Tolkien’s Middle-earth*. 121 & Garth. *Worlds*. 172. Garth mentions spells in hospitals in Harrogate, Hull and Blackpool.

⁵³⁸ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 207.

⁵³⁹ Garth does not mention the address of the house on Monument Road (*Tolkien and the Great War*. 231) but it is apparent from Tolkien’s ‘[Letter to the War Office](#)’, 2 January 1917.

⁵⁴⁰ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 231.

⁵⁴¹ *The Tolkien Family Album*. 39.

⁵⁴² Burns. *Roots*. 204. Burns suggests that Hilary originally learnt to play the bugle at King Edward’s School.

⁵⁴³ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 240.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid. 242.

to Cannock Chase, first to Penkridge Camp and then Brocton Camp.⁵⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Edith, baby John and Jennie secured lodgings in Teddesley Hay, a manorial estate at the foot of the Chase. While staying with them, Tolkien made sketches of the house, named **Gipsy Green** [Map 9:20], and of scenes from the family's day-to-day life. This happy interlude came to an end on 29th June, when Tolkien was stricken by gastritis at Brocton Camp.⁵⁴⁶

Tolkien's shock and dismay in 1933 at the transformation of Hall Green into a 'huge tram-ridden meaningless suburb' suggests that there was a long hiatus in his trips to Birmingham, perhaps commencing in 1917/18. He had fewer reasons to return to the city after the war: the Incledon's had moved to Devon and Hilary to his **fruit farm in Blackminster** [Map 2:18].⁵⁴⁷ Thus, Worcestershire became a more likely venue for meeting family and old friends during the 1920s and '30s. Tolkien may have encountered his grandfather at Bag End in Dormston, for example, where John Suffield was a regular guest of Jane Neave. Tolkien and his wife also brought their children to visit Edith's school-friend Mabel Sheaf at **Manor Farm in Hinton-on-the-Green** [Map 2:25], near Evesham.⁵⁴⁸ When Tolkien at last came back to Birmingham in 1933, it seems he did so partly in order to visit G.B. Smith's mother. However, Carpenter tells us that he was also 'driving his family to visit relatives'.⁵⁴⁹ The relative in question could have been his aunt Mabel Mitton, whose husband died that year in Birmingham.

Between November 1937 and 1941, Tolkien sat on the Board of Governors of King Edward's School and made visits to Birmingham in that capacity.⁵⁵⁰ He attended a 'Special Board Meeting' in February 1938, regarding the school's ongoing move from New Street to a more spacious **campus in Edgbaston** [Map 5:H].⁵⁵¹ His signature in the Governors' register appears immediately above that of Leonard Gamgee, Professor of Surgery at the University of Birmingham between 1919 and 1931, implying that the pair were seated together. Leonard was the son of the inventor of cotton-wool, Dr Joseph Sampson Gamgee, and Burns is perhaps correct to conclude that the encounter 'reminded Tolkien of the name he had known in his childhood, and that he decided to incorporate it into the sequel to *The Hobbit*'.

Tolkien had the opportunity to view his old school's newly completed Edgbaston campus on 1st April 1944, when he attended a reunion with around a hundred and twenty Old Edwardians, 'many of [his] vintage'.⁵⁵² Upon arrival at **Snow Hill Station**, as he related in a letter

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid. 245-6.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. 246.

⁵⁴⁷ Hilary lived on the smallholding near Evesham until a few months before his death in 1976. On one family excursion between Oxford and Blackminster in 1932, Tolkien crashed a newly purchased car into a wall (*The Tolkien Family Album*. 63).

⁵⁴⁸ *The Tolkien Family Album*. 67. The Sheafs emigrated to New Zealand after the Second World War, but Edith kept in touch with Mabel by post for the rest of her life.

⁵⁴⁹ Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien*. 129.

⁵⁵⁰ Edith also made at least one visit to Birmingham around this time. Tolkien's missive to his son Michael of 9th June 1941 ('Letter 45') mentions that 'Mummy carried your letter off to Birmingham, before I had time to do more than glance at it'.

⁵⁵¹ Burns. *Roots*. 226. At that time, the school was temporarily housed in the Great Hall of the University, perhaps the location of the Governors' meeting. The venue would have brought back memories of Tolkien's time in the First Southern General Hospital.

⁵⁵² Letter 58.

to one of his sons, Tolkien 'had some bad coffee in the refreshment room' with an American officer he had met on the train. He then 'strolled about' town for a bit, visiting the site where King Edward's had stood before its demolition in March 1936. After which sombre experience, he caught a tram 'from the same old corner at which [he] used to catch it to go out to the playing fields', probably **the stop on Navigation Street** [Map 3:M], just west of the junction with Pinfold Street.



Figure 52: The tram stop on Navigation Street, to which Tolkien is probably referring in Letter 58.

As the remainder of his letter demonstrates, Tolkien was far from impressed by his alma mater's new premises:

Down the shabby (much bomb-pocked) Bristol Road to Edgbaston Park Road at 12.15 (half an hour too soon). I won't weary you with impressions of the ghastly utterly third-rate new school buildings. But if you can imagine a building better than most Oxford colleges being replaced by what looks like a girls' council school, you've got it and my feelings. And apparently the new Head Master's. In a speech after lunch he hinted (or more than that) that they were pretty foul, and the school would never recover from the blow if something were not done about it.

After 1944, there are no more written records of Tolkien returning to his hometown. He would have been less inclined to make pleasure trips to Birmingham following the loss of his dear old school on New Street and the invasion of his 'precious early scenery' by red-brick houses, motor cars, traffic lights and petrol stations. Nevertheless, I have spoken to one local resident who recalls encountering Tolkien in his later years, treading the wooded paths of the Lickey Hills once more.

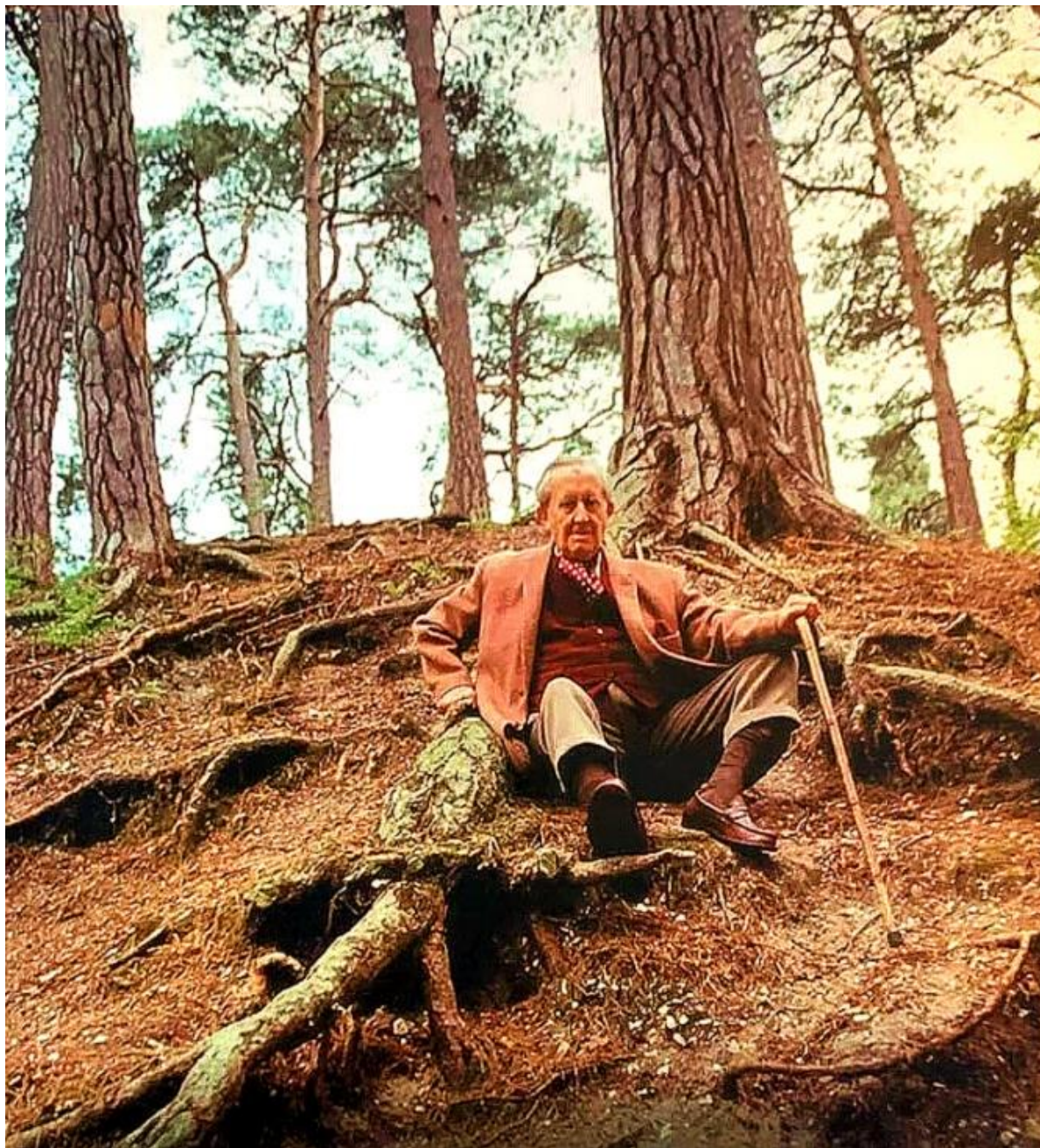


Figure 53: A later photograph of Tolkien in the Lickeys, probably Cofton Hill.

Conclusion

In the course of my research I have identified nearly two hundred locations across the West Midlands with some form of connection to the life and family history of J.R.R. Tolkien, from church monuments and graves to the workplaces and habitations of the author, his ancestors, relations, school-friends and wife. Around fifty of these I have classified here as being of greater importance, which were either verifiably or inferably meaningful to Tolkien. No single footpath could possibly be configured to take in all these sites but the overall context they provide is nevertheless invaluable. Together, they convey a historical depth and geographical breadth in Tolkien's relationship with the region that has eluded many local people and even some scholars, reinforcing the premise of my argument for the creation of *The Shire Way*: that Tolkien gave to Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* a homeland which in many respects resembled his own in 'the counties upon the Welsh Marches'.

Ben Felderhof

February 2024

Appendices

Appendix A: Tolkien's distant maternal relatives in Birmingham

To reiterate, the children of William Suffield (c. 1777-1847) were: Samuel (c. 1798-1875), Mary (c. 1799-1877), William (b. 1801), John (1802-1891), Lucy (c. 1804-1879), Elizabeth (b. 1806), Joseph (1808-1861), Frances (b. 1810) and Harriet (b. 1810). But for the investigator seeking to trace any Suffield who may have inhabited Birmingham during J.R.R. Tolkien's youth, some branches of the family yield greater rewards than others. For example, a son of Mary, Henry Hill (c. 1828-1878), may have married and continued to live in Birmingham but I have not identified any of his children. William, a librarian at Birmingham New Library, did not marry and had no children; likewise, Lucy, who ran a school in Leicester, and Elizabeth. Frances married a Birmingham grocer and druggist, John Phillips, and lived for a time on Camden Street, near the Jewellery Quarter.⁵⁵³ Harriet married John Ellerker, a salt dealer, and later moved to Australia. So, apart from the progeny of Tolkien's great-grandfather, John, the later Birmingham Suffields derived principally from two other of William's children.

- The 'Hillman-Suffields'

As we have seen, Samuel Wilson Suffield (I) ran a grocer's and druggist's shop, opposite which Birmingham Town Hall was built in 1834. He married Elizabeth Hillman of Kidderminster in 1830 and together they had four sons. In 1841, he and his young family were living at Watery Lane Cottage, near *The White Swan* pub, Edgbaston. Later, he and Elizabeth lived in Balsall Heath and then Highgate. Following his death in 1875, he was buried at **Warstone Lane Cemetery**. Samuel's eldest son, Charles Radford Suffield (1831-1898), a surgeon, lived in 1861 with his wife, Emily, near the old Methodist chapel on Harborne High Street (then Heath Road), and later at Five Ways and Ladywood Road, Edgbaston. By 1891 he was living with his two sons Percy (1868-1932) and Charles Augustus Suffield (1870-1943) in Handsworth. Samuel Wilson Suffield's second son, Thomas Hillman Suffield (1834-1925), became a travelling varnish and colour salesman. At first, he lived with his wife Fanny in Sparkbrook, but during the 1880s and '90s they resided on **Hayfield Road, Wake Green** [Map 7:C].⁵⁵⁴ He and Fanny then lived with their daughters Ada Frances (1866-1931) and Clara Elizabeth Suffield (1868-1934) on **Grove Avenue, Moseley**.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ A number of the earlier Suffields appear to have dwelt close to each other on the south side of the Jewellery Quarter. Besides Frances on Camden Street, her sisters Mary and Elizabeth lived together on Newhall Hill.

⁵⁵⁴ The house was known as 'Gleneader' and was situated on the site of what are presently nos. 1 and 3 Hayfield Road (see the [1891 Census](#)).

⁵⁵⁵ No. 58 Grove Avenue, known as 'Glen Lynn' in the [1901 Census](#).

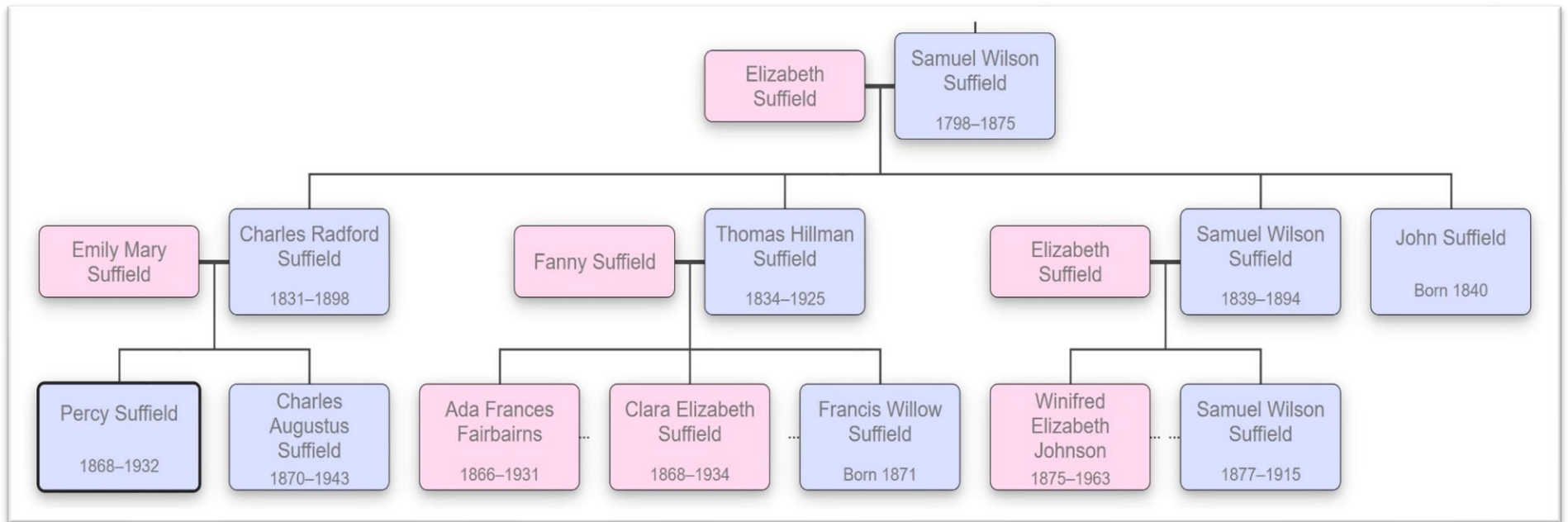


Figure 54: A family tree of the 'Hillman-Suffields'.

Samuel Wilson Suffield (I) bestowed his own name on his third son, who rose from draper's assistant to affluent manufacturer. Like his older brother, Thomas, Samuel Wilson Suffield (II) (1839-1894) moved with his wife Elizabeth and children to Wake Green during the 1870s. Over the years the family migrated closer to Moseley proper and, after Samuel's death, lived in a large house on the corner of Wake Green Road and Anderton Park Road called 'Winterdyne' [Map 6:L].⁵⁵⁶ By 1911, Winifred Elizabeth (1875-1963), daughter of Samuel Wilson Suffield (II), was living with her husband, a Dr Samuel Johnson, and daughter (Winifred Eleanor Gertrude, b. 1904) on the Alcester Road in Moseley.⁵⁵⁷ At the same time, a son and manufacturer of stationers' goods, Samuel Wilson Suffield (III) (1877-1915), was living with his wife and young son, Geoffrey S.W. Suffield (b. 1905), on **Blenheim Road, Moseley** [Map 6:P].⁵⁵⁸



Figure 55: The shop of Tolkien's great-great-uncle Samuel Wilson Suffield, with Birmingham Town Hall behind.

⁵⁵⁶ See the [1901 Census](#). Winterdyne is now no. 23 Wake Green Road and houses a nursery.

⁵⁵⁷ No. 171 Alcester Road (see [1911 Census](#)) is now owned by a home care provider.

⁵⁵⁸ No. 79 Blenheim Road (see [1911 Census](#)).

- The ‘Willey-Suffields’

The scions of William Suffield’s fourth son comprised a generally less affluent branch of the family, located predominantly in Balsall Heath. Joseph Suffield (1808-1861) became an ‘Eating House keeper’ in Union Passage, off New Street, where he lived with his first wife Jane until her death in 1853. The following year he re-married and at the time of his death in 1861, he and his second wife Eliza (née Willey) had five children and were running a hotel on Moseley Road, Balsall Heath. Eliza married again and remained living in the same hostelry, perhaps until her Suffield children had reached adulthood in the late-1870s, at which point she moved to London. The eldest of Joseph and Eliza’s children was Joseph Willey Suffield (1855-1919), a bank clerk who married a Suffolk gardener’s daughter, Frances Devereux, in 1877. They lived at various houses in Moseley (including **Woodstock Road** [Map 6:Q] by the 1910s), together with their three children, Joseph Devereaux Suffield (1878-1907), George Percival Suffield (1880-1956) and Maud Frances Suffield (1882-1972).⁵⁵⁹ In 1914, Maud achieved something of a reconnection with the family’s past by marrying the manager of a printing firm, Harold Reeves, at All Saints’ Church in Evesham. The couple then moved with her parents to the nearby village of Cleeve Prior, where Joseph Willey Suffield’s name is inscribed in the church.

The second of Joseph’s sons, William Suffield (1857-1907), became a manufacturer of brass and tin coffin furniture, married Mary Cartwright in 1882 and afterwards lived with his family at addresses in Greet, Balsall Heath and Sparkbrook. Of their seven children, Arthur William Suffield (b. 1885) plied his father’s trade and continued to live in Balsall Heath, while Ernest (1894-1918) became an officer of the Royal Artillery before being killed in France during the Great War. Their daughter Lilian (b. 1883) it was who married a ring maker, Frederick J. Turner (b. 1886), and lived off Monument Road (**10 Dawlish Place** [Map 4:50]) at the same time as Tolkien.⁵⁶⁰

The fourth and youngest of Joseph’s sons, Hedley Joseph Suffield (b. 1861), learnt his trade as a draper in Brighton and London before returning to live in Balsall Heath with his wife and four children, who were of a similar age to Tolkien.

⁵⁵⁹ By the time of the [1911 Census](#), the family were living at 64 Woodstock Road, Moseley.

⁵⁶⁰ See the [1911 Census](#). Dawlish Place has since been demolished but was located on the east side of Monument Road, in the vicinity of what were then nos. 105 to 107 (now an open space beside the Ladywood Middleway). The couple remained living in Birmingham for the most part and, I believe, passed away there during the late 1940s.

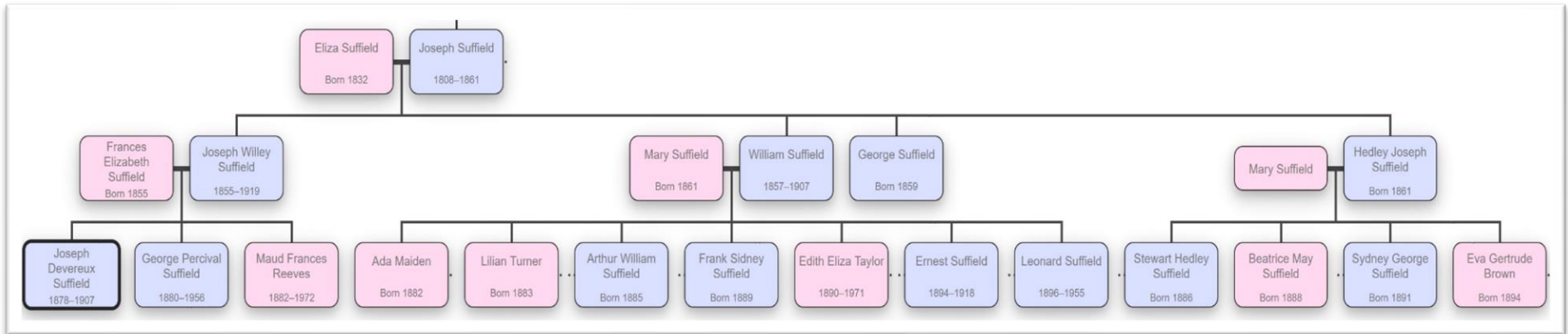


Figure 56: A family tree of the 'Willey-Suffields'

Appendix B: The T.C.B.S. and Geoffrey Bache Smith

It wasn't until the autumn of 1911, when Tolkien went up to Oxford University, that Wiseman assigned the clique of former school librarians a name: the 'Tea Club, Barrovians' Society', or 'T.C.B.S.' for short.⁵⁶¹ By that time, Vincent Trought was no longer present at their meetings. Already seriously ill, he would die in January 1912. His place had been filled three times over: by the younger Payton brother, Ralph, also known as 'the Baby'; by Sidney Barrowclough, who lived around the corner from Tolkien's first Birmingham residence in King's Heath and whose father managed a rubber works; and by the youngest member of all, Geoffrey Bache Smith (b. 18th October 1894) from West Bromwich [Map 1:42].⁵⁶² Smith was a pupil of King Edward's Commercial (or Modern) School and thus the only member of the T.C.B.S. not to have learnt Greek.⁵⁶³

According to Wiseman, it was Tolkien who introduced G.B. Smith to 'the brotherhood of the library since they shared a vivid literary interest'.⁵⁶⁴ They were both poets, both relatively poor and, after the death of Thomas Smith in January 1911, both fatherless.⁵⁶⁵ However, Tolkien felt he had not really known his junior colleague at King Edward's and only became his close friend in 1913, after Smith had joined him at university in Oxford.⁵⁶⁶ Wiseman, who had begun his degree alongside Rob Gilson at Cambridge University the previous autumn, wrote to Tolkien to grumble about the latter's good luck in this respect: 'I envy you Smith, for, though we have Barrowclough and [Ralph] Payton, he is the pick of the bunch.'⁵⁶⁷

Tolkien and Smith had only a brief time together as varsity companions, due to the outbreak of the Great War. Smith enlisted in the army in 1914, while Tolkien remained in Oxford to finish his degree, supposedly to the disapproval of family members:

In those days chaps joined up, or were scorned publicly. It was a nasty cleft to be in, especially for a young man with too much imagination and little physical courage. No degree: no money: fiancée. I endured the obloquy, and hints becoming outspoken from relatives, stayed up, and produced a First in Finals in 1915. Bolted into the army: July 1915.⁵⁶⁸

Tolkien connived unsuccessfully with Smith to serve as officers in the same battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers.⁵⁶⁹ Burns sees echoes of this episode in *The Lord of the Rings*, where

⁵⁶¹ Burns. *Roots*. 194. Dickie Reynolds gave Tolkien a lift from Birmingham to Oxford in his car, together with another boy, 'in the October of that astonishing hot year 1911' (Letter 254).

⁵⁶² Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 27. Sidney Barrowclough in the [1911](#) Census and Geoffrey Bache Smith at 38E Grove Crescent, West Bromwich, in the [1901](#) and [1911](#) Censuses.

⁵⁶³ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 18.

⁵⁶⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 194.

⁵⁶⁵ [The record of the death of Thomas Smith](#), Geoffrey's father, on 17th January 1911.

⁵⁶⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 196 & 217. Smith studied history at Corpus Christi College (Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 31).

⁵⁶⁷ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 31.

⁵⁶⁸ Letter 43.

⁵⁶⁹ Burns. *Roots*. 196. Smith had transferred to the 19th Battalion, but Tolkien was placed in the 13th and then the 11th upon reaching France.

Peregrin (or Pippin) and Beregon are disappointed not to be placed together in the Third Company of the Citadel (*RK*, 772).⁵⁷⁰ The youth of Pippin, relative to his Hobbit friends, also brings to mind Geoffrey Bache Smith; as do certain details about Pippin’s family.

We are told in *The Return of the King* that Peregrin Took’s father ‘farms the lands round Whitwell near Tuckborough in the Shire’ (*RK*, 769) and that Tuckborough, the chief settlement of the Took’s ancestral lands amid the Green Hills, is ‘only fourteen miles or so over the fields’ from Bywater (*RK*, 1010). According to the scheme I set out in my *Argument*, if Tuckborough had a real West Midlands equivalent, it would lie approximately seven miles west or south-west of Edgbaston, in the vicinity of Hagley and Clent, a village ‘tucked’ into a cleft of the surrounding hills. While Smith’s maternal family (the Peacocks) hailed from Tipton in The Black Country, some miles to the north of the Clent Hills, the Smiths had long cultivated Trehern’s (or Three Urns) Farm, near **Hagley**.⁵⁷¹

Whether Tolkien had the Smiths and Hagley in mind when referring to the Took’s and Whitwell is a matter of speculation, but it is perhaps significant that one landmark of the Clent Hills is St Kenelm’s Well, supposedly the site of the martyrdom of a boy-king of Mercia at the beginning of the ninth century.

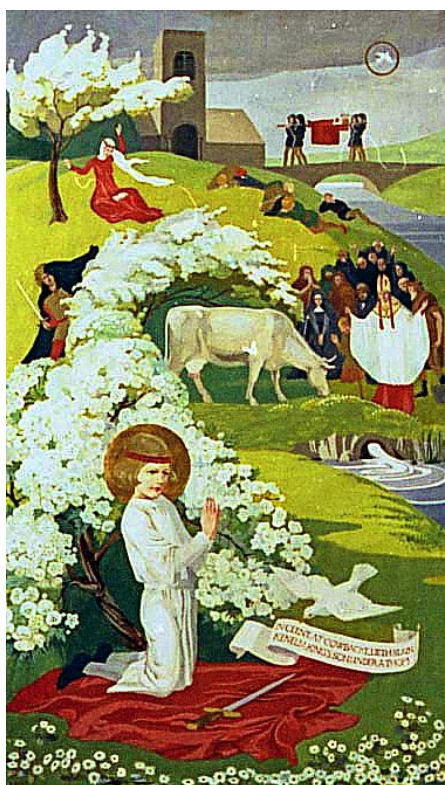


Figure 57: 'The Story of St Kenelm' by Irene Christobelle Pownall Williams (1885-1971).

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ The [1841 Census](#) showing the family of Geoffrey’s great-grandfather, Nathaniel, living at ‘Tree Burnes Farme’, then consisting of 400 acres. In 1842, Geoffrey’s grandfather, also called Nathaniel, [married Penelope Bache/Beech from Bewdley](#). By [1861](#), the younger Nathaniel had inherited the now 331-acre sheep and dairy farm, where Geoffrey’s father lived alongside five brothers and sisters. After his grandfather’s death in 1874, some combination of the siblings ran the farm until, by [1911](#), Geoffrey’s 23-year-old cousin (Nathaniel Hardy Smith) was in charge.

The tale originates from several sources, the oldest of which is a twelfth-century manuscript by a monk named Wilfin. It tells of how, during a hunting expedition, the young ruler was decapitated by his sister's lover. At the moment the blow fell, Kenelm was singing the words from a hymn 'The White-robed army of martyrs'. Thereupon a white dove arose from Kenelm's body and delivered to the Pope in Rome a snow-white scroll containing the secret of the corpse's whereabouts. A party of monks from Winchcombe was then guided by a shining pillar of light to the spot beneath the white blossoms of a hawthorn tree. As they lifted Kenelm, a health-giving spring burst from the spot, which would become a site of pilgrimage (note that the Latin for 'pilgrim' is *peregrinus*), with John Henry Newman known to have made frequent visits there. In later versions of the tale, the search party is led to the dead king by a white cow.⁵⁷² Thus may Tolkien have arrived at the name of Whitwell.

It is not within the province of this essay to describe at length the sad end of the T.C.B.S., but some details are required to explain why his school friends and the places Tolkien associated with them may have crept, decades later, into *The Lord of the Rings*. By the end of 1912, Tolkien was regularly missing opportunities to meet other members of the club. He took no part in Wiseman and Gilson's last hurrah at King Edward's, an October 1912 revival of their earlier production of *The Rivals*, and he absented himself from the Old Edwardians' debate that Christmas.⁵⁷³ Tolkien's absenteeism was a response to a schism within the T.C.B.S., between ambitious idealists like himself on the one hand and the glib sceptics Barrowclough, Barnsley and Whiffy Payton on the other. By 1914, it was clear to Wiseman that the boyish cadre must shed some dead weight in order to survive, and he beseeched Tolkien to attend a decisive conclave 'by all the memories of VT [Vincent Trought], of Gothic, of binges in Highfield Road, of quarrels about philology'.⁵⁷⁴ Only they two, Gilson and Smith were present in December of that year at the Wisemans' new Wandsworth home, where Tolkien spoke about 'religion, human love, patriotic duty and nationalism'.⁵⁷⁵

Following 'The Council of London', each remaining member felt the T.C.B.S. had found its true moral or spiritual purpose. They opposed the nihilistic destruction of Victorian moral standards by writers like George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen, favouring instead the precepts of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc.⁵⁷⁶ Smith felt it was the group's burden to 're-establish sanity, cleanliness, and the love of real and true beauty in everyone's breast'.⁵⁷⁷ Tolkien agreed, responding in August 1916 that the TCBS was 'a great instrument in God's hands... an achiever of great things'.⁵⁷⁸ By that time, Robert Quilter Gilson had been killed, leading his men on the

⁵⁷² The later versions being the thirteenth/fourteenth-century *South English Legendary* and *The Golden Legend* (c. 1260) by Jacobus de Voragine, quoted at length here: [St Kenelm's Walks](#), 2022.

⁵⁷³ Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 31.

⁵⁷⁴ As quoted in Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 55.

⁵⁷⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 217.

⁵⁷⁶ Burns. *Roots*. 218.

⁵⁷⁷ Burns. *Roots*. 217.

⁵⁷⁸ Letter 5: To G.B. Smith (12 August 1915).

first day of the Battle of the Somme. Four months later, Geoffrey Bache Smith was also dead from blood-poisoning, having been hit by shrapnel on 29th November 1916.⁵⁷⁹

In early 1917, Wiseman wrote to Tolkien, ‘As you said, it is you and I now, Greenfield Crescent and Gothic, the old and original.’⁵⁸⁰ But with the loss of Gilson and Smith, as well as Ralph Payton at the Somme in July 1916 and T.K. Barnsley at Ypres in July 1917, the T.C.B.S. ceased to exist.⁵⁸¹ Geoffrey’s death was the first of two catastrophes to strike his mother, Ruth Annie Smith. Her elder son, Roger, a lieutenant in the South Wales Borderers, was killed in action two months later in Mesopotamia, unaware of his younger brother’s fate.⁵⁸² She wrote to Tolkien: ‘I cannot believe the terrible thing that has befallen me. To lose two such fine sons is indeed crushing.’⁵⁸³ She also wrote to R.W. Reynolds concerning the publication of Geoffrey’s poems, some of which had already appeared in the *Chronicle*, *Oxford Poetry* and *The Westminster Gazette*.⁵⁸⁴ Reynolds in turn contacted Tolkien, who spent part of his own convalescence ordering the verses into a collection, which appeared in June 1918 under the title *A Spring Harvest*.⁵⁸⁵ The dedication read: ‘To His Mother’. Tolkien’s daughter Priscilla recalled a trip to Birmingham with her parents during the 1930s, when they visited ‘an old blind lady’: ‘With tears in her eyes the old lady said, “You know, I lost both my boys in that war.” It was Mrs Smith.’⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁷⁹ Burns. *Roots*. 196.

⁵⁸⁰ As quoted in Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 232. According to Garth, Tolkien remained friendly with Wiseman in later life but they drifted apart (281). They did meet up again in 1972, shortly before Tolkien’s death, when both were living in retirement on the south coast of England (283).

⁵⁸¹ Two hundred and fifty-four Old Edwardians died during the First World War, including Tolkien’s rugby teammates John Drummond Crichton, G.F. Cottrell and L.K. Sands; the latter two near Ypres, in May 1915 and April 1916, respectively. ‘Teacake’ Barnsley had been buried alive and shell-shocked by an explosion in August 1916 but recovered and returned to meet his death at the front the next year (Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 250). Their names appear on a brass plaque which was installed in the school’s Upper Corridor in December 1920 and which can now be found in the chapel on the Edgbaston campus (Ibid. 203).

⁵⁸² ‘[Lives of the First World War: We Remember Roger Smith](#)’. *The Imperial War Museum*. 2023.

⁵⁸³ Quoted in Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 232.

⁵⁸⁴ Burns. *Roots*. 218.

⁵⁸⁵ Burns. *Roots*. 219.

⁵⁸⁶ *The Tolkien Family Album*. 41.

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