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# The Shire Way

The argument for the creation of a long-distance footpath in the West Midlands dedicated to the author J.R.R. Tolkien

# Contents




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# Executive Summary

The year 2023 marks fifty years since the death of the author J.R.R. Tolkien and it behoves the West Midlands, the region which he considered his home by ancestry and upbringing, to honour this world-famous writer in a fitting manner.

As numerous scholars have documented, places and events from the life of J.R.R. Tolkien occasionally found their way into his fiction. What is less appreciated is the degree to which some of the names and geographical details of the Shire, a setting in *The Lord of the Rings*, echo (deliberately or not) those of the West Midlands:

- In the Shire, The East-West Road [which I have marked as '1' on the map of the Shire on page 4] is reminiscent of the partially lost road in the Midlands known as Icknield Street. The latter ran in a north-south direction past some important landmarks of Tolkien's youth, including the four Edgbaston houses in which Tolkien lived between 1902 and 1911.

- My own research reveals that, not far from the line of Icknield Street and within half a mile of the young Tolkien's residences, lived his mother's second cousin, Lilian Suffield, whose husband's occupation was 'Ring Maker'.

- The East-West Road runs parallel to a stream called The Water [2], which joins the larger River Brandywine [3]. Icknield Street ran beside the Rivers Rea and Arrow to where the latter meets the larger River Avon. The word 'Avon' stems from the Brittonic word *abona*, meaning 'river'. Thus, both the names 'Brandywine' and 'River Avon' are tautological, being made up of two words which have roughly the same meaning.

- The East-West Road crosses the Brandywine over the Bridge of Stone Bows, relatively near a place called Budgeford in Bridgefields. Icknield Street crossed the River Avon at Bidford-on-Avon, where there is still a medieval stone bridge with seven arches.

- On the east bank of the Brandywine lies a territory called Buckland. On the south side of the Avon, where Tolkien's brother Hilary lived, Icknield Street is also known as Buckle Street.

[*cont.*]

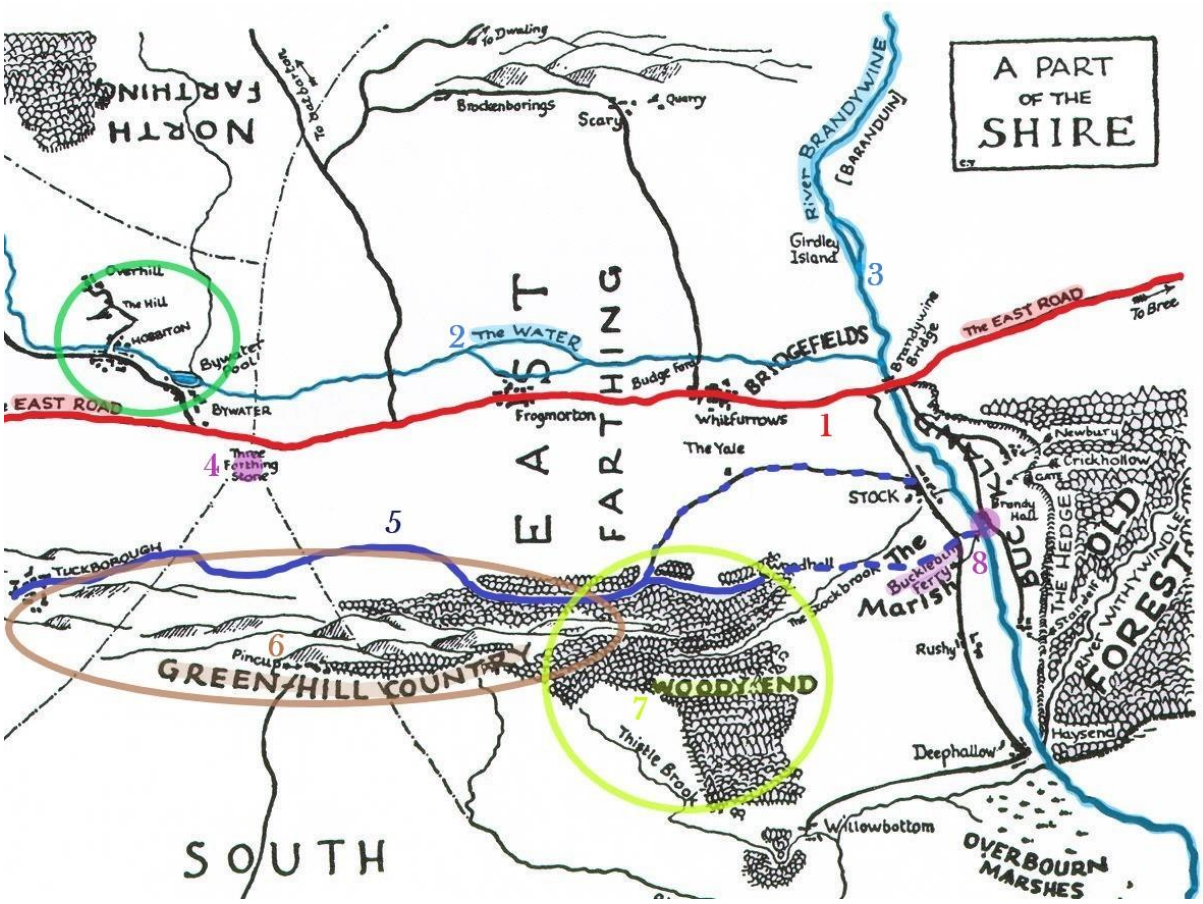


*Figure 1: A section of the map of the Shire which has appeared between the prologue and first chapter of* The Lord of the Rings *since it was first published in 1954. I have coloured certain details to highlight similarities with the West Midlands.*

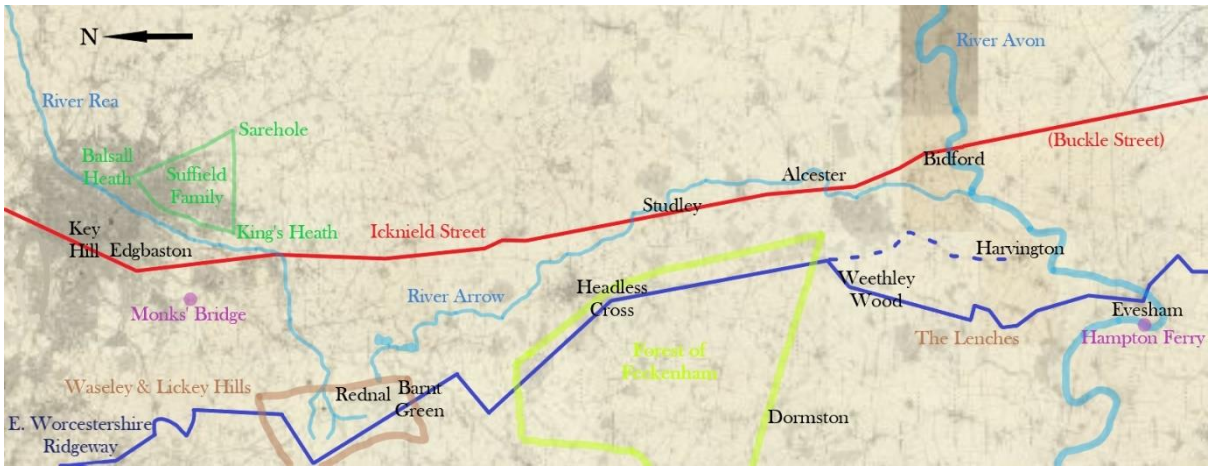


*Figure 2: Some of the locations in the West Midlands to which I refer, marked on a composite of 1888-1913 Ordnance Survey maps.*

[*cont.*]

Furthermore, various locations on the East-West Road may be related to real places that lie along the route of Icknield Street:

- Bywater, a village above a 'wide, grey pool', bears some resemblance to Edgbaston.

- Hobbiton, the settlement in which the Baggins family have long resided, is situated on the slopes of a hill across the valley from Bywater. Between the 1870s and 1910s, Tolkien's maternal family, the Suffields, were concentrated around the hill at Moseley, on the other side of the River Rea from Edgbaston. Tolkien himself lived in this general vicinity from 1895 to 1902.

- Between the villages of Bywater and Hobbiton is the Old Mill. Until the 1960s, Avern's Mill stood beside the River Rea on the road between Edgbaston and Moseley. Its existence was first recorded in 1231.

- The distance between Hobbiton and the Brandywine Bridge is forty miles. It is twenty miles (as the crow flies) from Moseley to Bidford-on-Avon. However, given we are told that Hobbits are 'about half our height' or 'between two and four feet of our measure', it may be argued that Hobbit 'miles' are about half as long as our own.

- A short distance south-east of the East-West Road at Bywater stands the Three Farthing Stone [4]. This marks the centre of the Shire and the meeting point of three of its quarters. At a similar spot relative to Edgbaston and Icknield Street, where Harborne Lane crosses the Bourn Brook at Monks' Bridge, exists the erstwhile juncture of the counties of Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Although no ancient boundary marker is obviously present today, Ordnance Survey maps published in 1885 and 1888 show that a stone worthy of note was located about 200 metres north of the bridge.

- Two Hobbit settlements lie on the East-West Road between Bywater and the Brandywine, called Frogmorton and Whitfurrows. In the early twentieth century, there were two towns on Icknield Street between Birmingham and Bidford: Studley and Alcester. Nearby Studley is Coughton Court, the seat of the Throckmorton family. The name Alcester is a conjunction of the Brittonic word for 'white' (from the local river) and the Latin word for 'fort'. Today, the only remaining evidence of the Roman fort is a few ridges or furrows, hence perhaps 'Whitfurrows'.

[*cont.*]

The Shire road which Tolkien describes in greatest detail in *The Lord of the Rings* is not the East-West Road but one which runs parallel to the south and is narrow and winding in character [5].

- Relative to the East-West Road, the position and orientation of the narrow road evokes the East Worcestershire Ridgeway, which likewise shares the north-south alignment of Icknield Street but lies two or more miles to the west.

- It is conceivable that Tolkien was inspired by G.B. Grundy's essay on 'The Ancient Highways and Tracks of Worcestershire and the Middle Severn Basin', in which the E. Worcs. Ridgeway is described as 'one of the most remarkable ridgeways in England'. Grundy's essay was published in 1934-5, not long before Tolkien began writing *The Lord of the Rings*.

- Travelling towards the Brandywine from the west, the narrow road first ascends into the uplands known as Green Hill Country [6]. This terrain could be related to the Clent, Waseley and Lickey Hills, which Tolkien knew and loved from his time living in Rednal and from his stays at the cottage of his aunt's family in Barnt Green.

- Beyond the Green Hills, the narrow road goes down into an arboraceous area called Woody End [7], just as the Ridgeway descends towards the medieval Feckenham Forest.

- The Woody End terminates in some unnamed hills which stand out into the lower land of the Brandywine valley. Between the hills and the river sits an inn called *The Golden Perch*, in the Hobbit village of Stock. The real village of Harvington, between the high ground of the Lenches and the River Avon, contains an old pub called *The Golden Cross*. Another word for cross is 'rood', which is also an archaic measurement of length. One fortieth of a rood is a 'perch'.

The likeness between the Shire and the West Midlands is very far from exact and many of the walkable lanes which Tolkien knew are now busy main roads. Nevertheless, there is considerable potential to create an official footpath which simultaneously explores aspects of the author's biography and alludes to one of the best-known journeys in world fiction, the flight of Frodo Baggins and his friends from the Black Riders in *The Lord of the Rings*.

That expedition crosses the Brandywine River by ferry at Bucklebury [8], whence Frodo's Brandybuck family originate. The E. Worcs. Ridgeway meets the Avon at the town of Evesham, where one of the oldest river ferries in England still operates. It transports pedestrians from Evesham to a village on the south bank called Hampton, where some of Tolkien's maternal ancestors dwelt before the nineteenth century.

# Introduction

## Why J.R.R. Tolkien merits greater recognition than he already receives

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in South Africa in 1892. His parents, Arthur and Mabel, had been married in Bloemfontein the previous year, but by birth and upbringing they were natives of Birmingham. In 1896, while Mabel was visiting her family in England, accompanied by John Ronald and his infant brother Hilary, her husband died in Bloemfontein, and she decided not to return to South Africa but to settle in Birmingham. The young Tolkien lived with his mother and brother at various addresses in or near the city before her death in 1904 and continued to do so under the guidance of a Catholic priest, Father Francis Morgan, until his schooling ended in 1911. It was while boarding at a house in Edgbaston in 1908 that he met his future wife, Edith Bratt. Tolkien would return to the city for visits during his undergraduate degree at Oxford University and again during the Great War as an invalided army officer recovering from trench fever. After the war, Tolkien embarked on an academic career in the field of English Language and Literature at the University of Leeds and, from 1925, at Oxford. In his spare time he invented and wrote down stories for his children, including what would become *The Hobbit*, published in 1937 to almost immediate critical and popular acclaim. Since then, it is estimated that over 100 million copies of *The Hobbit* have been sold worldwide.[1]

Following the remarkable and unexpected success of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien was encouraged by his publishers to produce a sequel, which he worked on between 1937 and 1949. The critics' reaction to this book, entitled *The Lord of the Rings*, was less unanimous, but for the poet W.H. Auden it was a 'masterpiece', in some respects outdoing the achievement of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.[2] *The Lord of the Rings* has since become one of the best-selling books ever written, with over 150 million copies sold in approximately fifty different languages.[3] In 2003, the BBC's 'Big Read' survey found that *The Lord of the Rings* was the UK's best-loved novel; *The Hobbit* was ranked twenty-fifth.[4] The two books have become prominent reference points for contemporary popular culture, in part due to their adaptation into the second and third most lucrative film trilogies in cinema history.[5] More recently, Amazon has embarked on a television series based on the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* that, at a projected cost of $1 billion, could prove to be the most expensive ever produced. In a 2021 article for *The Daily Telegraph*, the historian Niall Ferguson wrote that 'Leaving aside the great monotheistic scriptures, the Bible and the Koran, and the effectively religious texts of Mao Tse-tung, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of*

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[1] 'Tolkien's Hobbit fetches £60,000'. *BBC News*, 18 March 2008. And, in 2015, a signed first edition fetched £137,000 at auction in London.

[2] Auden, W. H.. 'At the End of the Quest, Victory'. *The New York Times*, 22 January 1956.

[3] Wagner, Vit. 'Tolkien proves he's still the king'. *Toronto Star*, 16 April 2007. See also 'Translations of *The Lord of the Rings*'. *Wikipedia*, 22 July 2022.

[4] 'The Big Read'. *BBC*, April 2003.

[5] 'The 10 Highest-Grossing Movie Trilogies, Ranked According to Box Office Mojo'. *Screen Rant*, 25 October 2021.

*the Rings* is the most popular book in the history of publishing ... Modern writers don't get more popular. Not even J.K. Rowling.'[6]

All this is to say that if Tolkien's position in the pantheon of great British literary figures were to be judged on the basis of book sales, enduring popularity and cultural influence, he would surely rank alongside the likes of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Dickens, Milton and even Shakespeare. Indeed, as Ferguson suggests, according to those criteria he would hardly be out of place among the prophets of the world's major religions. And yet there has been a subtle but discernible reluctance among the recent gatekeepers of British cultural heritage to sanction the elevation of Tolkien to such a level of esteem, with its accompanying monuments, museums, exhibitions, eponymous performance venues, guided tours, walking trails and software applications.[7] Of course, Tolkien *has* been favoured with some such tokens of recognition, but not yet on a scale commensurate with his popularity and cultural footprint, and they tend to be concentrated in the city of Oxford.[8] By contrast, as the policy and data analyst Ben Brittain has observed, Birmingham has done comparatively little to claim Tolkien as its own.[9] He writes,

> Birmingham Museum has a relatively unheard-of Tolkien Trail. Sarehole Mill is only open twice a week. The city has no statue, no iconic feature that links Tolkien to the city, and no businesses that are boastful of Birmingham as the city of Tolkien... In the recent West Midlands Combined Authority tourism strategy there was no mention of Tolkien. It is unthinkable that Stratford-upon-Avon council would release a tourism strategy and not mention Shakespeare...

As Brittain mentions, a Tolkien Trail backed by Birmingham Museums and the Birmingham Tolkien Group does already exist, but it is un-signposted, under-promoted and modest in scale, taking in only ten sites across the city.[10] In his 2004 book *There and Back Again:*

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[6] Ferguson, Niall. 'How the world misunderstood Tolkien, the ultra-Tory'. *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 December 2021.

[7] Monuments: e.g. the cross on Tennyson Down on the Isle of Wight.
Museums: there are three dedicated to Wordsworth in the Lake District: Wordsworth House, Cockermouth; Dove Cottage, Grasmere; and Hawkshead Old Grammar School. The cottage in Chalfont St Giles where Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* is now a museum. In Holborn one can visit the Charles Dickens Museum and The Old Curiosity Shop. In and around Stratford numerous former residences of Shakespeare and his family members have been transformed into museums, including Shakespeare's Birthplace, Anne Hathaway's Cottage, Mary Arden's Farm and Hall's Croft.
Performance venues: Shakespeare's Globe being the obvious example.
Guided tours: One can take a 'Charles Dickens Tour' across the South-East of England, between such disparate locations as London, Portsmouth and Broadstairs.
Walking trails: The Coleridge Way stretches 51 miles through Somerset and Devon. The Hardy Way is a 220-mile loop in Dorset. Shakespeare's Way runs 146 miles from Stratford-upon-Avon to London's South Bank. The Brontë Way is a 43-mile path in West Yorkshire and Lancashire. There is also a semi-official Tennyson Trail near the town of Louth in Lincolnshire.
Software applications: the Wordsworth app is reviewed here: 'Not just daffodils – Wordsworth Country makes a comeback for literary tourism'. *The Guardian*, 18 September 2016.

[8] I refer primarily to the exhibition at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, but also the exhibition at the Morgan Library, New York. Existing Tolkien tours and trails include the Lancashire-based Tolkien Trail and the Oxford-based Tolkien Tour and the C.S. Lewis & J.R.R. Tolkien Walking Tour.

[9] Brittain, Ben. 'Birmingham Has Yet to Embrace Tolkien – Why?'. *The University of Birmingham City REDI Blog*, 3 March 2020.

[10] 'Birmingham Tolkien Trail'. *Birmingham Museums* & *The Birmingham Tolkien Group*. 2013.

*in the footsteps of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Matthew Lyons praised Birmingham for 'working increasingly hard to promote its associations with Tolkien' by means of a 'park in the Sarehole area' (completed 2005) and 'annual Tolkien days at the mill'.[11] Two decades on, no 'Middle-earth Festival' has been held for a number of years. In 2007, planning permission was granted to locate a twenty-foot statue of *The Lord of the Rings* character Treebeard on Moseley Green, but fifteen years later the Ent has yet to appear, even in its revised and less prominent setting of Moseley Park.[12] Thus, in the entirety of his cherished West Midlands, Tolkien is commemorated only by three privately funded blue plaques, the slender Shire Country Park, and the intermittently open museum at Sarehole Mill.[13] The overall pattern points to an author underappreciated not only by his 'home town' (as Tolkien himself referred to Birmingham) but by the nation's cultural establishment. How else does one account for the fact that two other members of Tolkien's literary coterie, the 'Inklings', are memorialised in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey but Tolkien is not?[14]

A number of explanations may be given, and indeed have been by Tom Shippey in his classic work of Tolkien scholarship *The Road to Middle-earth* (1982). Fundamentally, Shippey says, Tolkien suffers from being misunderstood by both his detractors and his admirers ('especially those who happen to be professors of English literature'), from whom he is cut off by 'an enormous "culture-gap", which they cannot bridge and usually have not noticed'.[15] Firstly, Tolkien was antipathetic to the mainstream literary tastes of the twentieth century. He disliked, often for personal as much as artistic reasons, many of the 'modern' writers generally held in high esteem, including Edmund Spenser and Shakespeare, whom in 1931 he excised from his part of the Oxford English syllabus.[16] Central to Tolkien's 'Eng. Lang.' syllabus were the Old and Middle English romances, such as *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tolkien's own writing painstakingly combined aspects of 'ancient and modern, realistic and fantastic', but his tales are nevertheless romantic aberrations amid the 'low mimetic' or 'ironic' style of most twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction.[17] Perhaps a hangover from the gothic revivalism of the nineteenth century, there is still a prevailing contempt for the conventions of romance, which are seen as suitable only for children's stories. This widespread belief, which Tolkien himself contested repeatedly, has contributed to the idea that he is an author of books for juveniles and escapists,

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[11] Lyons, Matthew. *There and Back Again: in the footsteps of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Cadogan. 2004. 115 & 139.
[12] Elkes, Neil. 'Outrage as Tolkien statue is approved'. *The Birmingham Mail*, 1 March 2007. The statue is to be designed and crafted by Tolkien's great-nephew, Tim Tolkien.
[13] 'Memorials'. *The Tolkien Society*.
'Sarehole Mill'. *Birmingham Museums*.
[14] Note that, of the five writers mentioned, Dickens and Tennyson are buried in Poets' Corner, while Milton, Shakespeare and Wordsworth are memorialised there. Numerous twentieth-century writers, including C.S. Lewis and Adam Fox, also have plaques in Westminster Abbey; even the broadcaster David Frost. Tolkien was not opposed to receiving honours from the British state and commented wryly on the absence of such official recognitions in a 1965 letter (no. 267). He was finally awarded a C.B.E. in 1972.
[15] Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-earth (Revised Edition)*. Harper Collins. 2005. 380.
[16] Shippey, 200, 251 & 389. Shippey points out that Tolkien's relationship with Shakespeare was actually more ambivalent than his public pronouncements suggest, as motifs from *Macbeth* are scattered throughout *The Lord of the Rings* (205).
[17] Shippey, 240 & 366.

which are not to be treated entirely seriously.[18] *The Hobbit* may be so classified, but then it is 'one of the best children's stories of [the twentieth] century' (W.H. Auden again).[19] Its composition may have served as 'therapy for a mind wounded in war', as the historian Hugh Brogan believed, but it can equally be read as an allegory of the experience of the naïve draftee transported to the mayhem of the Western Front.[20] For Shippey, it was fantasists like Orwell, Golding, Vonnegut and Tolkien who most memorably confronted the horrors of the twentieth century, 'while the E.M. Forsters and John Updikes stayed within their sheltered Shires'.[21]

A second factor which Shippey identifies is a progressive élite's disapproval of Tolkien's somewhat reactionary religious and political views. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic from boyhood, a monarchist and a social conservative, sceptical of egalitarianism; beliefs which remained intact amid the general iconoclasm resulting from the First World War and which, though often overlooked by readers, pervade *The Lord of the Rings* in particular.[22]

> Unlike many men of his age, [Tolkien] had not been alienated even by the Great War from the traditions in which he had been brought up. Unlike Robert Graves, his near-contemporary and fellow-Fusilier, he never said 'Goodbye to All That'. As a result his elementary decencies – over patriotism, over euphemism, perhaps especially over sex and marriage – soon become an object of satire, provoking automatic derision from much of the literary world and preventing a fair reading.[23]

After the war, the English literary world came to be dominated by a circle subsequently known as the *Sonnenkinder* ('frivolous, upper class, often Etonians, often Communists'), whose dandy, 'xenophile' (i.e. oikophobic) descendants continue to be influential as editors and reviewers to this day. According to Shippey, they form a 'small closed society of critics whose members too readily reach agreement with each other, not least by way of the "automatic snigger"'.[24] This was the response of the 'dictators of literary culture' to *The Lord of the Rings*, to its 'half-educated'

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[18] Carpenter, Humphrey (ed.). *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Harper Collins. 1981. Tolkien wrote that 'the connexion in the modern mind between children and "fairy stories" is false and accidental' (Letter 163) and that the 'fairy-story' is 'really an adult genre' (Letter 159) and 'one of the highest forms of literature' (Letter 165: To the Houghton Mifflin Co. (June 1955)). He was unequivocal in stating that *The Lord of the Rings* was 'not written "for children"' (Letter 234), rather addressed 'to any one who enjoyed a long exciting story' (Letter 215).

[19] Auden, W. H.. 'The Hero is a Hobbit'. *The New York Times*, 31 October 1954. In contrast to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien did have a young audience in mind for *The Hobbit*, namely his own children. He says he was also influenced by the erroneous convention that 'there was a real and special connexion between children and fairy-stories' (Letter 215).

[20] Hugh Brogan, as quoted in Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*. London. Harper Collins, 2003. 293. Then, Carpenter, Humphrey. 'Review: Tolkien and the Great War by John Garth'. *The Sunday Times*, 23 November 2003.

[21] Shippey, 371.

[22] As Niall Ferguson makes clear in his newspaper article cited above. According to Carpenter (*J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. Unwin. 1987. 132), Tolkien was 'right-wing' in that he honoured his monarch and his country. He did not believe in the rule of the people because he felt it would lead to 'universal greatness and pride' and, finally, slavery (Letter 186: From a letter to Joanna de Bortadano (drafts, April 1956)).

[23] Shippey, 383.

[24] Shippey, 365. Philip Toynbee comes in for particular criticism from Shippey.

author and to Auden for his positive reviews.[25] Shippey encapsulates their position as '*Some* people may like reading Tolkien... but they are wrong to do so, and whoever they are, they are not "us"!'[26] Tolkien could at least agree with the latter sentiment:

> A sharp distinction must be drawn between the tastes of reviewers... and of readers! I think I understand the tastes of simple-minded folk (like myself) pretty well.[27]

[25] Shippey, Tom. 'Foreword' in Cilli, Oronzo. *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist*. Luna Press. 2019. Xiii. See also Letter 327: From a letter to Robert H. Boyer (25 August 1971).
[26] Shippey. *The Road to Middle-earth*. 3.
[27] Letter 228: From a letter to Allen & Unwin (24 January 1961).

## Tolkien's opinion of the West Midlands: 'Mordor in our midst'?

For Ben Brittain, yet another reason for the neglect of Tolkien at a local level is the characteristic self-effacement of Birmingham's inhabitants. Perhaps, living more in the shadow of London than cities like Manchester or Glasgow, Brummies have indeed become reconciled to the stereotypical view of the city as a monotonous post-industrial wasteland and reticent about its successes, past or present. However, if such a crisis of confidence obtains, it might to some seem foolishly counterproductive to invoke Tolkien as a kind of posthumous envoy between the region and the wider world. With his deep appreciation for the beauty of rural landscapes, Tolkien famously abhorred what he saw as the destruction wrought on the English countryside by industrialisation. By the 1940s, he particularly resented the proliferation of motor cars, heavy lorries and the fume-drenched tarmac roads, or 'dragon-trails', which bore them.[28] His biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, reports that,

> Later in life, [Tolkien] would see a new road that had been driven across the corner of a field and cry, 'There goes the last of England's arable!' By this time of his life he would maintain that there was not one unspoilt wood or hillside left in the land, and if there was, then he would refuse to visit it for fear of finding it contaminated by litter.[29]

And the antagonism which Tolkien felt towards modernity was not mere aesthetic sensibility but a cornerstone of his moral outlook, laid in reaction specifically to the growth and development of the city of Birmingham.

Of particularly fond remembrance for Tolkien was the small hamlet of Sarehole, where he had lived as a young boy at the close of the nineteenth century. It was, as he would later write, 'four years, but the longest-seeming and most formative part of my life.'[30] Sarehole was at that time in rural Worcestershire (not Warwickshire, as Carpenter suggests) and of a quite separate character from nearby Birmingham, for motor cars were rarely seen there.[31] However, Tolkien recalled that his bucolic haven was already being 'shabbily destroyed before I was ten' and felt there was a sense of inevitability about its disappearance: 'I always knew it would go – and it did.'[32] In 1908, the North Warwickshire railway line began operating for passengers, connecting neighbouring Hall Green with the city-centre, and Sarehole was soon transformed into a suburb of Birmingham - a conquest officially recognised in 1911, when the county boundaries were redrawn.[33] Nevertheless, when Tolkien returned on a visit in 1933, he still hoped to show his

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[28] Garth, John. *The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Frances Lincoln. 2020. 181.
[29] Carpenter. *Biography*. 130.
[30] Carpenter. 32.
[31] Carpenter. 180.
Garth. 180.
[32] Tolkien. J.R.R.. 'Foreword to the Second Edition', *The Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin. 1965. xxv.
Ezard, John. 'Tolkien's Shire'. *The Guardian*, 28 December 1991.
[33] Garth. 181.
Bratman, David. 'In Search of the Shire: Tolkien and the Counties of England'. *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, No. 37. December 1999. 7.

children some of the picturesque places he had cherished in boyhood. His diary records what he found instead:

> I pass over the pangs to me of passing through Hall Green – become a huge tram-ridden meaningless suburb, where I actually lost my way – and eventually down what is left of beloved lanes of childhood, and past the very gate of our cottage, now in the midst of a sea of new red-brick. The old mill still stands, and Mrs Hunt's still sticks out into the road as it turns uphill; but the crossing beyond the now fenced-in pool, where the bluebell lane ran down into the mill lane, is now a dangerous crossing alive with motors and red lights.[34] The White Ogre's house (which the children were excited to see) is become a petrol station, and most of Short Avenue and the elms between it and the crossing have gone.[35] How I envy those whose precious early scenery has not been exposed to such violent and peculiarly hideous change.[36]

Tolkien's language here verges on the biblical in its references to bewilderment and inundation.[37] It suggests that Carpenter had good reason to claim that the twentieth-century gobbling of Sarehole by Birmingham was, in Tolkien's mind, bound together with the demise of his mother as indicative of the fallenness of the world:

> If the world were unfallen and man were not sinful, he himself would have spent an undisturbed childhood with his mother in an untouched Sarehole. But his mother had been taken from him by the wickedness of the world (for he believed ultimately that she had died through the cruelty and neglect of her family), and now even the Sarehole landscape itself had been wantonly destroyed.[38]

The fact that, in one of his later letters, Tolkien described the noise and fumes of modern life in general as 'Mordor in our midst', referring to the land that epitomises evil in *The Lord of the Rings*, seems to confirm that he interpreted the urbanisation of rural England, and primarily rural Worcestershire, in metaphysical terms.[39] So, beginning with Carpenter, various commentators have regarded Birmingham and its environs as inspiring Tolkien's depiction of Mordor, noting supposed similarities in the 'industrial, smoky, desolate' character of the two

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[34] 'Mrs Hunt's' is the cottage of Mrs Caroline Hunt (born *c.* 1843), a laundress who lived with her two sons (Joseph, a builder's carter, and Thomas, a gardener) at what is now the junction of Wake Green Road and Gracewell Road. The cottage no longer exists.

[35] Tolkien refers to Sarehole Farm and the stretch of Wake Green Road running south from Swanshurst Lane; not even the petrol station survives today.

[36] Carpenter. 129-30.

[37] A psychologist might suggest a link between the suburbanisation of Sarehole and the recurring nightmare which haunted Tolkien from childhood: of a 'stupendous and ineluctable wave' 'either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands' (Letters 257 & 276).

[38] Carpenter. 130. This contrast between the freedom, beauty and joyfulness of an adolescence spent with his mother amid nature, and the anxiety and confusion of subsequent years is apparent in a pair of Tolkien's illustrations entitled *Undertenishness* and *Grownupishness*, *c.* 1913 (Wayne G. Hammond & Christina Scull. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist & Illustrator*. Harper Collins. 1998. 38-39).

[39] Letter 135: From a letter to Rayner Unwin (24 October 1952).

landscapes.[40] David Bratman stresses that in Tolkien's Elvish language *Mordor* means 'the Black Country', the name of the region abutting Birmingham to the west.[41] John Garth also believes Birmingham 'must have been an ingredient' in Tolkien's conception of his fictional evil land.[42] He and Robert Blackham both point to the fact that Tolkien composed the passages describing Frodo's approach to the fallen realm in April 1944, after he had returned from a school reunion in his home town.[43] Just as in 1933, Tolkien was appalled by the changes that had taken place, especially the loss of the Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin building on New Street which had housed his alma mater King Edward's School, demolished one hundred years after its erection in 1835:

> Except for one patch of ghastly wreckage (opp. My old school's site) [Birmingham] does not look much damaged: not by the enemy. The chief damage has been the growth of great flat featureless modern buildings. The worst of all is the ghastly multiple-site erection on the old site. I couldn't stand much of that or the ghosts that rose from the pavements; so I caught a tram...[44]

There is clearly some basis for the idea that Tolkien associated the changes wrought on the West Midlands landscape since the nineteenth century with a widespread cultural and moral degeneration. So, one understands the impulse, perhaps also felt by those who formulated the tourism strategy omitting Tolkien, not to celebrate a figure seemingly antipathetic to modern Birmingham. But does it follow that, because he regarded the twentieth-century development of Birmingham as pernicious, Tolkien loathed the city itself and wished it to be usurped in its entirety by nature? And does he necessarily gainsay the present citizenry's opinions regarding Birmingham's architectural inheritance and their visions for its future improvement?

Tolkien's account of his return to Birmingham city-centre demonstrates that he in fact cherished a great many aspects and memories of his home town, over which he felt soulless modernity had trespassed. Garth cites certain buildings which likely exerted an influence on the writer's imagined edifices and interiors, from the prolific Gothic revival architecture manifested in King Edward's School, the School of Art, the University and Highbury Hall, to the Edwardian baroque of Birmingham Oratory.[45] Ultimately, Garth deems that Tolkien felt a profound admiration for the vitality and creativity that suffused the 'great toy shop' of Birmingham, or 'giddy old Brum' as the author called it.[46] He finds 'little sign of Mordor in Tolkien's life in Birmingham'.[47] For, as Maggie Burns reminds us, Tolkien's Birmingham was not the congested,

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[40] Humphrey Carpenter on BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour*, as quoted in 'Old Brum'. *The Listener*, 30 June 1977. 853. See also Garth. 176 & 198. Ian Hislop has gone as far as to claim that Mordor, 'a wasteland of furnaces and factories', *is* Birmingham ('Ian Hislop's Olden Days: The Power of the Past in Britain', Episode 3: 'Green Imagined Land'. *BBC Two*. 2014).

[41] Bratman. 11. 'The Black Country' is also used as a synonym for Mordor by a non-Elvish speaker at ***RK***, 967.

[42] Garth. 184.

[43] Garth. 179.

Blackham, Robert. *The Roots of Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Tempus. 2006. 131.

[44] Letter 58: To Christopher Tolkien (3 April 1944).

[45] Garth. 178.

[46] Garth. *Tolkien and the Great War*. 206.

[47] Garth. *Worlds*. 175.

flyover-dominated sprawl which appalled Carpenter in the 1970s, nor even the Victorian hellscape of slag heaps that some would have us imagine; but a relatively verdant hub of thousands of independent manufacturers and artisans, the matrix of the Arts and Crafts movement.[48] She also points to a letter written by Tolkien to Graham Tayar, a BBC radio journalist (and former pupil of King Edward's School), in which he explains that he drew the inspiration for the setting of Mordor from the trenches of the Western Front in 1916.[49] Instead, it was Tolkien's grief at returning to a childhood home unexpectedly shorn of trees and treasured landmarks that inspired another imagined landscape quite separate from Mordor.

The 'scoured' Shire of Book Six of *The Lord of the Rings*, linked by its polluting red-brick mill (and by the name 'Saruman', as I mention below) to industrialised Sarehole, is described by Sam as 'much worse' than Mordor 'because it is home, and you remember it before it was all ruined' (*RK*, 1018). And yet, despite the machine-enamoured Saruman's claims to have inflicted much that will be 'hard to mend or undo in your lives' and that the Shire will be accursed and 'wither and never again be healed', the land goes on to become more bountiful and virid than ever; not such a bad model for contemporary Birmingham! In truth, Tolkien was demonstrably attached to the entire West Midlands, from its bustling metropolis to its most secluded farmsteads. Although born in South Africa, he defined himself in 1955 as 'a West-Midlander at home only in the counties upon the Welsh Marches'.[50] In his eyes, the connection he felt with the region was based on something much more instinctive and indelible than a mere accident of birthplace or childhood residence; it was a legacy of his ancestry. It appears from certain statements that Tolkien, in common with many intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gave at least some credence to the evolutionary theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, whereby the habits and environment of an organism influence the congenital traits of its descendants. This belief lent great significance in Tolkien's mind to the circumstances of his forebears' lives, especially on his mother's side, the Suffields.

Before Tolkien's Suffield great-great-grandfather moved to Birmingham in 1810, members of that family had dwelt since at least the year 1667 beside the River Avon, near the town of Evesham, in the county of Worcestershire.[51] Thus, it was with Worcestershire that Tolkien claimed the greatest affinity: 'Any corner of that county (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way "home" to me, as no other part of the world is.'[52] We inhabitants of the twenty-first century would attribute this bond wholly to his early sojourns in Sarehole and Rednal, to his

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[48] Burns, Maggie. 'A local habitation and a name'. *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, No. 50. Autumn 2010. 26 & 28. (See also Garth. 176.)
[49] Burns. 26.
[50] Letter 165.
[51] This is the date of the earliest recorded baptism of a Suffield in the Evesham area which I could find.
[52] Carpenter. 27. That being so, Tolkien esteemed many other parts of the Midlands. Between 1913 and 1916, his fiancée Edith and her middle-aged cousin (Jennie Grove) lived together in Warwick, where Tolkien would join them when he could. According to Carpenter, Tolkien 'found Warwick, its trees, its hill, and its castle, to be a place of remarkable beauty. The weather was hot and he went punting with Edith down the Avon' (74). He and Edith were married in the 'sordid' Catholic church there in March 1916, and one of his poems, written in France the same year, yearns for the 'citadel' town of Warwick, 'Where echoing through the lighted elms at eve / In a high inland tower there peals a bell: / O lonely, sparkling isle, farewell!' (quoted in Garth. 47). However, Tolkien was less fond of Stratford-upon-Avon, which he referred to as the 'filthy birthplace' of William Shakespeare (Carpenter. 48).

memories of his mother in these places, as well as to later visits to his aunt's farm at Dormston and to his brother Hilary's smallholding in Blackminster. But Tolkien made it quite clear in a letter to Auden that he felt his connection to the West Midlands to be innate and determinative of his linguistic faculties and literary tastes, writing: 'I am a West-midlander by blood, and took to early West-midland Middle English as to a known tongue as soon as I set eyes on it.' Whether this was pure imagination on Tolkien's part or not, his identification with the Midlands certainly ignited his passion for medieval poetry, such as *Sir Gawain*, *Pearl* and the *Ancrene Wisse*, all of which he regarded as vestiges of the ancient dialect spoken by his ancestors in the kingdom of Mercia.[53]

Far from reviling Birmingham and the surrounding counties, from an early age Tolkien felt an affiliation with the area that would define his academic and literary career and, in the words of his biographer, would lead him to create 'a character that embodied everything he loved about the West Midlands: Mr Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit'.[54] It is high time that the present inhabitants of the West Midlands show that we share and reciprocate Tolkien's affection, and create a memorial befitting the world renown of his fiction. Such a project could take a number of forms, and Ben Brittain's suggestions of basing a permanent Tolkien exhibition in Birmingham or naming a new Metro line in his honour should both be implemented, but I shall attempt to demonstrate why the creation of a long-distance footpath would be the most appropriate means of celebrating the connection with J.R.R. Tolkien.

[53] See Carpenter. 43, 72, 137 & 179.
[54] Carpenter. 179.

# The case for an official Tolkien footpath in England

## The shortcomings of the present Birmingham Tolkien Trail

Walking played a central role in both the life and works of Tolkien. As a boy, he was a prolific explorer of the outskirts of Birmingham. According to Andrew H. Morton, the young Tolkien 'loved to roam [the remarkably scenic corner] just south of the city of Birmingham, the area between Kings Heath, Kings Norton, and what is now the M42'.[55] As Tolkien himself explained, 'Children walked long distances in those days'.[56] In the years following the death of their mother, Tolkien and his brother were taken by Father Morgan on summer trips to Lyme Regis, where John Ronald was 'happiest rambling along the shore'.[57] In 1911 they accompanied their recently widowed aunt, Jane Neave, on a walking holiday in Switzerland.[58] During a university holiday in 1912, Tolkien tramped the Berkshire downs.[59] On a 1914 sojourn in Cornwall, he and Father Vincent Reade took long walks near the Lizard Peninsula.[60] And when Tolkien had leave from the army in wartime, he and his wife enjoyed wandering the wooded countryside near Roos, Yorkshire.[61] Inevitably, once he became a father encumbered by work and the needs of his children, Tolkien found less time for cross-country walking tours, such as those organised by C.S. Lewis.[62] Nevertheless, he did join the Lewis brothers and their friend George Sayer for treks along the Malvern Hills, on which occasions his tendency to pause often to identify wayside plants reportedly caused the others some irritation.[63]

The details of Tolkien's life suggest a man who cherished the companionship of familiar walks, but who also felt a call to venture alone into distant and wonderful places. He had an unfulfilled desire to see Africa again, for example:

> Much though I love and admire little lanes and hedges and rustling trees and the soft rolling contours of a rich champain, the thing that stirs me most and comes nearest to heart's satisfaction for me is space, and I would be willing to barter barrenness for it... if there was not bare rock and pathless sand and the unharvested sea, I should grow to hate all green things as a fungoid growth...[64]

As Tolkien deemed local strolls somehow insufficient, so it is with his characters. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins has a large map in his hallway of the 'Country Round', with his favourite walks marked on it in red ink, and yet is 'swept off' to stranger lands by the road outside his door. Likewise Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, having tramped as a youth the length and breadth of

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[55] Morton, Andrew H.. *Tolkien's Bag End*. Brewin Books. 2009. 1.
[56] Brace, Keith. 'In the Footsteps of Hobbits'. *Birmingham Post*, 25 May 1968.
[57] Carpenter. 45.
[58] Ibid. 58.
[59] Ibid. 66. Some of the art he produced on this walking trip is reproduced in Hammond & Scull. 16-17.
[60] Hammond & Scull. 24.
[61] Carpenter. 104-5.
[62] Ibid. 129.
[63] Lyons. 81 & Burns. 125.
[64] Letter 78: From a letter to Christopher Tolkien (12 August 1944).

the Shire with his friends and with Bilbo, once he matures is seen wandering by himself, 'far from home walking in the hills and woods under the starlight' (*FR*, 43). For Tolkien, the fascination and significance inherent in such adventures was transformation, not of the scene so much as the travellers themselves:

> On a journey of a length sufficient to provide the untoward in any degree from discomfort to fear, the change in companions well-known in 'ordinary life' (and in oneself) is often startling.[65]

Given his love of walking, it is right and proper that Birmingham City Council produces a leaflet outlining a 'Tolkien Trail' between Sarehole and the city-centre, designed in 1992 by Dr Chris Upton. Following revisions in 2001 and 2013, the brochure presently consists of a potted biography, information about ten sites associated with Tolkien, and three maps. While reliable data is hard to come by, the fact that (at time of writing) the Trail ranks at one-hundred-and-thirty-five on Tripadvisor.com's list of 'things to do in Birmingham', below Kingstanding Wellbeing Centre, suggests that it is not much used and probably not well-known.[66] This lack of popular engagement should not be interpreted as disinterest in Tolkien; after all, five of the locations that comprise the Trail appear much higher on the Tripadvisor list.[67] Rather, the success of the Trail is hampered by a lack of physical signage, insufficient publicity and unevenly distributed attractions and facilities in a wholly suburban setting. But, to my mind, the route has one cardinal limitation.

The fundamental shortcoming of Birmingham's Tolkien Trail is that it pertains almost exclusively to the life of the author and does not tie in the world of his most beloved fictional works, Middle-earth; specifically the Shire, which drew so much on Tolkien's early surroundings. The Peter Jackson film adaptations of Tolkien's books popularised such a link between Middle-earth and the New Zealand landscape, contributing to an increase in visitors to that country of between forty and fifty per cent in the ensuing years.[68] No doubt there are legal obstacles to the concept of a footpath referencing locations in a fictional work still under copyright; but any prohibition would be unjust, given that New Zealand is dubbed the 'Home of Middle-earth™' by its national tourist board, which claims to offer visitors the chance to 'step inside the imaginative mind of Tolkien'. 'Whether or not you're a Tolkien fan, you'll find it almost impossible not to compare New Zealand to Middle-earth™', the website of New Zealand Tourism asserts.[69] The New Zealand Customs Service has even been permitted to stamp the passports of arriving travellers with the words 'Welcome to Middle-earth'.[70]

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[65] Letter 183: Notes on W.H. Auden's review of *The Return of the King*.
[66] 'Things to Do in Birmingham'. *Tripadvisor.com*, 2022.
[67] Birmingham Library (no. 5 on the list); Moseley Bog (59); Sarehole Mill (63); The Oratory (71); and Perrott's Folly (100).
[68] 'The Impact (Economic and Otherwise) of Lord of the Rings/The Hobbit on New Zealand'. *Forbes*, 2012.
'More than Middle-Earth: How Film Tourism Changed New Zealand'. *Cathay Pacific Discovery Magazine*, 2019.
[69] 'Home of Middle-earth™'. *New Zealand Tourism*, 2022.
[70] *Forbes*, 2012.

Of course, Tolkien did not create Middle-earth by exactly replicating the topography of any single country or region. But I believe that there is sufficient resemblance between the West Midlands of England and the Shire that a footpath could be routed so as to turn the fictional setting of Frodo's flight from Hobbiton to Bucklebury into a physical reality for those who follow it. A 'Shire Way' allied with Tolkien's narrative would become greater than a collection of scattered biographical sites; it would become a journey to be completed and an imperative to visit the West Midlands.

## Middle-earth as our world in an earlier age

There is nothing radical about the notion that Tolkien's imagined settings have elements in common with real places of which he had some knowledge or experience. The cocoon of scholarship that has been woven around the corpus of his work consists of numerous tomes discussing the compositional origins or veiled significance of Tolkien's landscapes, with probably the most definitive being John Garth's 2020 publication *The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Garth tells us that, when creating backdrops for his lesser-known stories, Tolkien commonly drew on quite localised parts of the English countryside: in *Roverandom* (composed mid-1920s; published 1998), a Persian wizard finds himself by mischance in Pershore; while Tolkien's illustrations for *Mr. Bliss* (comp. 1930s; pub. 1982) evoke the hills and villages of the Cotswolds.[71] The author himself wrote that *Farmer Giles of Ham* (comp. *c.* 1937; pub. 1949) is 'a definitely located story (one of its virtues if it has any): Oxfordshire and Bucks, with a brief excursion into Wales. The places in it are largely named, or fairly plainly indicated.'[72] The capital of the Little Kingdom described in *Farmer Giles* is the market town of Thame, twelve miles east of Oxford, and Tolkien recalled taking his young family to 'beat the bounds of the L.K. in an ancient car'.[73] Of Tom Bombadil, a character based on a doll belonging to one of the author's children which appeared in various poems and in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien said that he embodied 'the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside'.[74]

Englishness is furthermore an inescapable feature of Tolkien's main 'legendarium', of which *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are just a part. This is because its creation was originally motivated by Tolkien's dismay at the paucity of England's mythology, which had been filleted of anything deemed unhealthily pagan by monks, and by his desire to replenish this depleted store with a body of legend 'which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country...'[75]

> It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our 'air' (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be 'high', purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry.[76]

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[71] Scull and Hammond speculate that Tolkien composed the book during or shortly after a visit to the farm of his brother near Evesham (86).

[72] Letter 116: From a letter to Allen & Unwin (5 August 1948). See also Garth. 16-17 & Shippey, who writes that *Farmer Giles* also contains references to Tamworth, the Pennine mountains and the Rollright Stones (111).

[73] Letter 121: From a letter to Allen & Unwin (13 July 1949).

[74] Letter 19: To Stanley Unwin (16 December 1937). Shippey sees Bombadil as the *genius loci* of the willow country in the valleys of the Thames and Cherwell rivers (123).

[75] Letter 131: To Milton Waldman (probably 1951). Also Letter 180: To 'Mr Thompson' [draft] (14 January 1956). Tolkien's patriotism was not jingoistic or imperialistic (see Letter 183: 'I have not that [With-the-flag-to-Pretoria] spirit'). He was, for example, a supporter of Home Rule in Ireland (Garth. *Great War*. 230). What he loved above all about England was its tradition of freedom (Garth. *Worlds*. 56).

[76] Letter 131 contd.

Tolkien would infuse his tales with the 'cool and clear' quality of North-West Europe by borrowing from the region's flora and fauna, and from its languages, including Old Brittonic, Welsh, Old English and Finnish.[77] But he sought primarily to replicate its 'situation', 'with the Shoreless Sea of [one's] innumerable ancestors to the West, and the endless lands (out of which enemies mostly come) to the East'.[78]

Tolkien produced several iterations of his mythological world between the outbreak of the Great War and the late-1920s, but Garth says that 'at the outset, the relationship [between Tolkien's imaginary deeper past and England's real history and geography] was astonishingly direct'.[79] Tom Shippey is more sceptical about the connection, but he admits that 'one extremely unexpected aspect of Tolkien's early writings is his determined identification of England with Elfland'.[80] The premise of Tolkien's first collection of stories, composed before 1919 but not published until 1983-4 as *The Book of Lost Tales*, is that an Elvish realm called *Tol Eressëa* or 'the Lonely Isle' would in time become the homeland of the Anglo-Saxons, at least some of whom could boast a blood tie to their immortal forerunners.[81] Tolkien confers venerable Elvish heritage on at least four present-day English settlements of personal significance to him and his wife:

- Cheltenham (or 'Celbaros' as it was to the Elves), where they had become engaged and where their first child was born;
- Warwick (transformed into the Elvish capital of 'Kortirion'), where Edith lived during their engagement and where they were married in 1916;
- the Staffordshire village of Great Haywood (which becomes the riverine settlement of 'Tavrobel'), where Edith rented accommodation between May 1916 and February 1917 so as to be near Tolkien's army quarters;
- and Oxford (which is known as 'Taruktarna' or 'Taruithorn').[82]

By the time Tolkien came to write *Aelfwine of England* in around 1920, he had amended his mythology to make the Lonely Isle and Britain distinct places, with the latter instead equating to *Luthany* or *Lúthien*, the Elves' last foothold in the mortal world, from which they set sail westwards.[83] The idea of *Lúthien* as an embryonic Britain is still present in Tolkien's *Sketches of the Mythology* (1926) and in the 1930s *Silmarillion* manuscripts (where *Lúthien* becomes

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[77] See Letter 144: To Naomi Mitchison (25 April 1954).
[78] Letter 163: To W.H. Auden (7 June 1955).
[79] Garth. 30-31 & 46.
[80] Shippey. 345.
[81] Garth. 52.
[82] Garth. *Great War*. 107-108, 126-127, 207, 225-229 & 272-274. Also *Worlds*. 48-49. Kortirion is situated on a river called 'The Gliding Water' (the River Avon) amid 'Alalminórë', the Land of Elms (Warwickshire). Tavrobel is close to the 'House of the Hundred Chimneys' (Shugborough Hall) and the scene of a terrible battle on the ruined High Heath (Cannock Chase). Furthermore, Garth (50) mentions Exeter, which gave its name to Tolkien's Oxford college; Withernsea in Yorkshire, where Tolkien was posted in 1917; and a house near Teddesley Hay, Staffordshire, where he and Edith lived in 1918. See also Lyons. 18.
[83] Garth. 53-54.

*Leithien*), though the hidden references to specific English places have been removed.[84] Nevertheless, readers are left in little doubt that Middle-earth, the name which Tolkien struck upon during the 1930s for the terrestrial domain of his cosmology, is our world in an earlier mythical age.[85]

Tolkien was at pains to explain that, although 'many reviewers seem to assume that Middle-earth is another planet', it is the globe humanity now inhabits.[86]

> I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world. The name is the modern form (appearing in the 13th century and still in use) of *midden-erd* > *middel-erd*, an ancient name for the *oikoumenē*, the abiding place of Men, the objectively real world, in use specifically opposed to imaginary worlds (as Fairyland) or unseen worlds (as Heaven or Hell). The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary. The essentials of that abiding place are all there (at any rate for inhabitants of N.W. Europe), so naturally it feels familiar, even if a little glorified by the enchantment of distance in time.[87]

Further to the chronological setting of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien said that 'I have (of course) placed the action in a purely imaginary (though not wholly impossible) period of antiquity, in which the shape of the continental masses was different.'[88] He suggested a gap of 'about 6,000 years' between the present day and the events he describes: 'The Fall of Man is in the past and off stage; the Redemption of Man in the far future.'[89] This supports Shippey's assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* is 'a story of virtuous pagans in the darkest of dark pasts' and, without knowledge of God, they are hard-pressed to resist the evil powers that assail them.[90]

The saving grace of the Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves etc. is that they are also pre-modern, but once the Ring has been destroyed they are superseded by mankind.[91] Hence, in his revelation of Middle-earth's future, Gandalf conjures a vision of Tolkien's England: '"And all the lands that you see, and those that lie round about them, shall be dwellings of Men"' (*RK*, 972). Tolkien had dispensed over time with any overt links between real and imaginary locations, but he was consistent in maintaining the centrality of England in his scheme: 'The English countryside seemed to me wonderful. If you really want to know what Middle-earth is based on, it's my wonder and delight in the earth as it is, particularly the natural earth.'[92]

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[84] Garth. 55.
[85] Note also that the night sky in *The Lord of the Rings* contains the same astronomical objects and constellations, albeit by different names. The Hobbits' name for *Ursa Major* (or 'The Plough') is 'The Sickle'.
[86] Letter 211: To Rhona Beare (14 October 1958). See also Letters 151 & 165.
[87] Letter 183.
[88] Carpenter. 98.
[89] Letter 211 & Letter 297: Drafts for a letter to 'Mr Rang' (August 1967).
[90] Shippey. 226-27. The Christian theme rises to the surface when one considers the date on which Sauron falls: 25th March (for Anglo-Saxons, the date of the Crucifixion and of the Annunciation). The character that comes closest to attaining a Christian outlook is Frodo, through his pity for Gollum (248).
[91] Shippey. 176.
[92] Resnick, Henry. 'An Interview with Tolkien', *Niekas*, no. 18. 1967.

## The Shire: England or merely English?

If Middle-earth is our world in an earlier age and Tolkien's original motivation for its creation was the re-invention of a mythology for England, it seems logical that a particular region of Middle-earth should incorporate the quintessence, and perhaps even the geographical features, of an *Ur*-England. No one who has read *The Lord of the Rings*, and who knows rural England, would have any doubt that the region in question is the Shire. However, according to Carpenter, when Tolkien first outlined the unnamed homeland of the Hobbits in chapters 1 and 2 of *The Hobbit* during the early 1930s, he 'had at first no intention that the bourgeois comfortable world of Bilbo Baggins would be related in any way to the vast mythological landscape of *The Silmarillion*'.[93] How then did the correspondence between England and the Shire come about?

*The Hobbit* certainly takes place in our own past, 'long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green, and the hobbits were still numerous and prosperous' (*H*, 31), but in origin it seems to have been an ambiguous compound of fairy-story and 'historical' legend. This explains, on the one hand, why the first iteration of the Shire setting is largely shorn of realistic detail, which Tolkien believed would act as an oppressive curb on the imagination of the reader. In his 1939 lecture *On Fairy-Stories*, he argued against the pictorial illustration of such tales on the basis that an artist 'may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision' of a hill or a river-valley 'but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but specially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word'.[94] Accordingly, Tolkien chose not to bestow place-names on Bilbo's homeland that might be construed as idiomatic of a single region or country: the reader is told only that he lives in the neighbourhood of 'The Hill', above a stream called 'The Water'.[95] On the other hand, Tolkien did undertake numerous vivid illustrations of *The Hobbit*. And if his undeveloped written depiction reads like 'almost a generic landscape, generically named,'[96] it also contains, like the illustrations, enough details of villages, gardens, lanes, meadows, streams, trees and flowers to suggest the gently rolling verdure of a rural scene that is generically English.

It was not until Tolkien further incorporated *The Hobbit* narrative into his wider paracosm, when writing the Prologue and opening six chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* in the first half of 1938, that Bilbo's homeland was transformed into a deliberate and more detailed

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[93] Carpenter. 182. Tolkien himself wrote in his correspondence that *The Hobbit* was 'quite independently conceived' from his legendarium (Letter 131), but 'naturally became attracted to this dominant construction in my mind' (Letter 257) so that 'its shadow was deep on the later parts of *The Hobbit*' and 'captured *The Lord of the Rings*' (Letter 124). Garth says that the process began because Tolkien gave to a half-elf whom Bilbo encounters a name he had already used in *The Silmarillion*, 'Elrond', and in his mind these two Elvish characters soon became one and the same (*The Great War*. 282). Tolkien wrote that the discovery that *The Hobbit* 'belonged' in his wider mythology 'proved to be the discovery of the completion of the whole, its mode of descent to earth, and merging into "history"' (Letter 131 again). Only Tolkien's claim that *The Hobbit* was 'torn rather at random out of a world in which it already existed' (Letter 109) somewhat contradicts this account of its origins.

[94] Tolkien, J.R.R.. *Tree and Leaf*. 46 & 70. As quoted in Hammond & Scull. 187.

[95] Tom Shippey further remarks on Tolkien's tendency in *The Hobbit* as a whole to 'make place-names out of adjectives, to turn words into things' (80), though several of the adjectives and words in question can be found in the Norse *Elder Edda*.

[96] Hammond & Scull. 95.

representation of mythical England.[97] Gone is the air of universality. The non-descriptive nomenclature is supplemented by a profusion of peculiarly Anglo-Saxon place-names, including 'The Shire' itself. Tolkien confirmed that such had been his intention in a letter to his publisher regarding a translator's liberal experiments in making the setting more Dutch:

> 'The Shire' is based on rural England and not any other country in the world – least perhaps of any in Europe on Holland, which is topographically wholly dissimilar... The toponymy of The Shire... is a 'parody' of that of rural England, in much the same sense as are its inhabitants: they go together and are meant to. After all the book is English, and by an Englishman...[98]

Reflecting the newfound significance of Hobbits in the history of Middle-earth (and thus ancient Britain), the sequel contains a myriad of scenic embellishments which prompted Shippey to assert that 'the landscape and the beings attached to it are in a way the heroes' of the first hundred pages.[99] Likewise, Carpenter opines that, although the Shire features only at the very beginning and the very end of *The Lord of the Rings*, 'the heart of the book was to be found in the inns and gardens of The Shire, Tolkien's representation of all that he loved best about England'.[100]

Consider some of the information which Tolkien provides concerning the Shire and the extent to which it is a scene redolent of pre-industrial England. Its latitude, and its situation in relation to sea and mountain, gives the Shire a 'natural fertility'.[101] The weather in autumn, from lingering mists to strong winds and streaming rain, is that which typifies England at the same time of year. Like England, the topography is undramatic. The Shire's most rugged terrain is comprised of hills, downs or exposed moors, where ling and broom may be found.[102] From these uplands, streams may tumble over low waterfalls, past standing stones, through hollows containing meadows of rustling grass, before wending between thickets of briar and bramble to join a small river amid the rushes of a marshy plain. The trees that grow in the benign and sleepy woods, coppices and spinneys of the Shire are either native to the British Isles, like willow, alder, birch, oak, blackthorn, hazel, elm, ash, beech, dogwood and pine, or not uncommon colonists, such as chestnut, cedar, cypress and fir. Their decaying stocks are hidden by bracken and fern, and mushrooms thrive between their exposed roots.

Above all, the Shire is characterised by 'an ordered, civilised, if simple and rural life'.[103] There are well-tilled fields and drainage dikes, sustaining crops such as barley, cabbages, turnips, potatoes, strawberries and raspberries (as well as vines and tobacco in the warmest and most

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[97] Carpenter. 190.
[98] Letter 190: From a letter to Rayner Unwin (3 July 1956).
[99] Shippey. 124.
[100] Carpenter. 192.
[101] Letter 154: To Naomi Mitchison (25 September 1954). In Letter 294, Tolkien writes that the Shire is intended 'to be at about the latitude of Oxford'.
[102] I base this assertion on *TT*, 652, where it is implied that ling and broom are known in the Shire. The existence of villages called 'Broome' and 'Broom Hill', west and south of the Clent Hills, attests to the presence of that shrub in Worcestershire; likewise, the village of 'Broom' near Bidford-on-Avon in Warwickshire (Jenkins, Mike. *The History of Place Names in England and Worcestershire*. Youcaxton. 2021. 158).
[103] Letter 131.

sheltered spots).[104] Between kempt hedgerows and steep banks, lanes lead to farmhouses and barns surrounded by orchards of apple and plum, which young hobbits like to raid. The animals of the Hobbit farms are all familiar to us, from the dogs and fowl in the yard, to the bees in the beehives, to the livestock in the field; likewise those wilder species mentioned – the fox, rabbit, rat, mouse, finch, spider and perch. Only the elves processing under the trees at night would seem strange in England. The farms are connected by roads to villages and small towns, in which are mills, malt-houses, warehouses, inns and Hobbit-holes (or -houses) with lawned gardens. Here are cultivated some native British flowers, such as daffodils, and other non-native species which are nevertheless common, like sunflowers, nasturtiums, laburnums, lilies and snapdragons (which may in fact be the Common Toadflax, native to Britain).

Hobbits are merely an extension of the Shire, being literally and figuratively in 'close friendship with the earth' (*Prologue*, 2), and if the Shire approximates a pre-industrial England, its inhabitants are, in Tolkien's own words, 'just rustic English people'.[105] Their language is 'remarkably like English, as one would expect' and their names (especially among the labouring classes) are 'very Saxon'.[106] For Shippey, there is not an exact equivalence, and so it is more accurate to say that the Shire is 'calqued' on England, but the details of the foundation of Hobbit society certainly betray the influence of Anglo-Saxon history in a number of respects.[107] Both peoples immigrated from elsewhere fourteen centuries before 'present' events. Both were formed out of three tribes that have since merged: the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, versus the Stoors, Harfoots and Fallohides. Both nations were supposedly founded by pairs of brothers whose names were derived from Old English words for 'horse': Hengest and Horsa; Marcho and Blanco.[108] And both societies have benefitted from prolonged periods of civil harmony, with approximately 270 years elapsing since the last battle fought on home soil (Greenfields in the Shire; Sedgemoor in England).[109]

In the Hobbits' favourite pastimes of hunting, archery, beer-drinking, singing, pipe-smoking, golf and gourmandising, one is able to recognise an 'idealised and old-fashioned self-image of the English'.[110] Just as significantly, Tolkien imbued the average Hobbit with the same vulnerabilities and flaws, but also the same 'latent power', that he discerned in his fellow countryman. Like Hobbits, the English are in a way small because of 'the generally small reach of their imagination'.[111] In particular, neither group is able to imagine the evils which menace their well-ordered existence, rendering them helpless to insatiably acquisitive members within their

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[104] It seems that Hobbits are also familiar with coffee, as Bilbo serves it to the dwarves in *The Hobbit*; though whether coffee beans grow in the Shire is unclear.
[105] Carpenter. 180.
[106] Letter 25: To the editor of the 'Observer' (February 1938) & Letter 72: To Christopher Tolkien (31 May 1944). Sam is an abbreviation of Samwise (the Old English for 'half-wit'). Likewise, his father's name (Ham) stands for the Old English Hamfast, meaning 'Stay-at-home'. Tolkien was not entirely happy with the surname Gamgee and wrote: 'I should have given all the hobbits very English names to match the Shire' (Letter 76: To Christopher Tolkien (28 July 1944)).
[107] Shippey. 115-16.
[108] See also Garth. 22.
[109] 'The present' being the year 1418 in the Shire and our 1954, when *The Lord of the Rings* was published (see Shippey. 116).
[110] Shippey. 116. He tells us that, throughout much of England, afternoon tea may be called 'baggins' (82).
[111] Carpenter. 180.

own society and the destructive marauders from without. Thus, we discover from 'The Scouring of the Shire' that the Hobbits' democratic tradition of mayoral elections, as well as their strict social conventions and notions of propriety, are inadequate deterrences against collaboration with an authoritarian and murderous despot.[112] Their admiration for gardening, farming and the cultivation of nature in general fails to prevent the ruinous destruction of their environment. Their neighbourly bonhomie and enthusiasm for genealogical minutiae can easily devolve into unfriendliness, suspicion and spying. And their love of comfort and security will not ultimately protect them from food shortages and a deterioration of their living conditions. Fortunately, they also possess the hidden reserves of courage and resilience which Tolkien observed in English soldiers on the Western Front and which make both groups, when hard-pressed, such unexpectedly fierce adversaries.[113]

The Shire in *The Lord of the Rings* was evidently a more intricately fashioned setting than it had been in *The Hobbit*, and probably the most naturalistically rendered of either book. Shippey observes that the density of seemingly redundant details concerning Hobbit life, which slow the early chapters of the story literally to walking pace, 'suggest very strongly a world which is more than imagined, whose supernatural qualities are close to entirely natural ones'.[114] Indeed, so radical is Tolkien's departure from his contemporaneous advice concerning the depiction of fairy-stories that one wonders to what extent he continued to regard the Shire as 'romance' and no more than an impression of a vaguely pre-industrial and idealised Englishness.[115] 'We are not in "fairy-land", but in real river-lands in autumn', Tolkien wrote of those chapters in a letter of 1958.[116] Could the post-*Hobbit* Shire's representation of reality emulate specific geographical features of England which were The Hill, The River, The Valley of Tolkien's own early experience?

Tolkien did not encourage such speculation. He described a Swedish foreword which implied that Oxford's Headington Hill featured in *The Lord of the Rings* as 'impertinent nonsense'.[117] Perhaps he felt that such an uprooting of the real and relocation to the imaginary realm would have been odiously mechanistic, contrary to the organic, spontaneous and mysterious process by which a story 'grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind'.[118] Despite this scornful response from the author, the belief that Tolkien's world-building

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[112] Like the English, Hobbits prize etiquette and formalities: 'such a matter would have required a great many more words and bows' in the Shire (*TT*, 692). Their conservatism is apparent in the importance which they place on 'respectability' and 'decency', which depend on never doing anything unexpected (perhaps a wry satire of the social *mores* of Edwardian England, to which Tolkien himself ascribed).

[113] Of the people he encountered during the First World War, it was not only the British Tommy that influenced Tolkien's conception of Hobbits, for the idea of Hobbit-holes was based on 'German trenches which were often very habitable indeed' (Norman, Philip. 'The Hobbit Man'. *Sunday Times Magazine*, 15 January 1967).

[114] Shippey. 124. He is not the only scholar to feel there is something unusually authentic about the Shire. Garth cites one scholar, Maria Artamonova, for whom the Shire 'feels like a real portrait of a real landscape' (21).

[115] Tolkien admitted in later life that Book I of *The Lord of the Rings* (the first twelve chapters) is 'really very different to the rest' (Carpenter. 196).

[116] Letter 210: From a letter to Forrest J. Ackerman (June 1958).

[117] Carpenter. 228. See also Letters 228 & 229.

[118] Carpenter. 131. The idea that Tolkien's landscapes were largely composed from his own imaginative faculties is borne out by the difficulties he experienced in rendering his visions as illustrations, requiring many attempts before he could capture the details (Hammond & Scull. 126). Conversely, he did in some instances admit real-world influences on his fictional landscapes, such as the parallels between Bilbo's 'glissade down the slithering stones [of

is founded on reality has launched a number of scholars on the quest to find hidden geographical similarities (one which ended in disillusionment for Lyons).[119] Some have even speculated whether it is possible to trace England in outline onto a map of Middle-earth in the vicinity of the Shire.[120] This possibility has been addressed most comprehensively by Garth in *The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

Garth finds signs in *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien 'foresaw the British Isles emerging from the Shire and the area around it', including the region to the west known as Lindon (which Tolkien tells us elsewhere is the remnant of the land of *Lúthien*).[121] And he presents two possible ways of overlaying the British Isles onto a map of Middle-earth, whereby Lindon roughly equates to the Celtic west (Cornwall, Wales and Ireland) and the Shire is located in either Oxfordshire or the Home Counties.[122] However, Garth simultaneously sounds a note of scepticism regarding this approach, warning that by the time he came to write *The Lord of the Rings* 'Tolkien imagined only the most general geographical match between Middle-earth's north-west and Europe'. Ultimately, Garth finds the scale of that part of Middle-earth and the British Isles to be incommensurate with one another and therefore little sustained correspondence between the two territories.[123] In respect to comparisons of this scope, Garth is fully justified in his conclusions. Where I dissent from his analysis is in relation to the internal geography of the Shire, which he depicts as a largely generic English scene or 'Everyshire', influenced of course by the West Midlands countryside of Tolkien's youth, but just as likely to be inspired by locations in Berkshire, Essex, Yorkshire, Somerset and especially in Oxfordshire.[124]

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the Misty Mountains] into the pine woods' and his own alpine adventures in 1911 (Letter 306: From a letter to Michael Tolkien (August 1967)).

[119] In *There and Back Again*, Matthew Lyons records his visits to various sites with reputed connections to Tolkien's mythology. A real-life 'Tom Bombadil's cottage' in the Ribble Valley leaves him 'feeling a little deflated, almost disappointed, despite the incontrovertible evidence in support of the identification' (137). And of Cheddar Gorge's association with Tolkien's Glittering Caves, Lyons writes: 'In a way, the fact that we know of a direct correlation with a place in *The Lord of the Rings* serves to diminish the work a little. What could have been described as an act of imaginative translation now seemed to hover perilously close to plain exaggeration... I came to the conclusion that Tolkien was right to be wary about conceding such points about the relation between real places and his imaginary ones, since it is the ambiguity of his world's relationship to England that generates meaning, not its explicitness...' (144).

[120] After all, the Hobbits live in 'the North-West of the Old World, east of the Sea' (FR, 3), just as the British Isles are located north-west of Europe and east of the Atlantic. There is, for example, a resemblance between the shape of Middle-earth's Gulf of Lune and that of the estuaries of the Afon Dwyryd (close to where Tolkien holidayed in August 1914), as well as the Afon Mawddach (where Tolkien's first cousin twice removed, Mary Laura Suffield, lived, after relocating from Brighton Road, Balsall Heath, during the 1900s, and where she remained until her death in 1941). See Mary Laura Suffield, 1911 Census & Mary Laura Suffield, 1939 Census.

[121] Garth. 46 & Tolkien, J.R.R.. *The Lost Road*. London. Unwin Hyman. 1987. 33.

[122] Garth. 58-9. For Garth, the River Lhûn of Lindon conforms to the shape of the Severn, with the Grey Havens equivalent to Clevedon, where Tolkien and his wife honeymooned (58-59 & 110).

[123] Garth. 58.

[124] Garth. 18.

# Why the path should span the West Midlands between Birmingham and Evesham

## The alternative: Oxfordshire and Berkshire

The assumption that Oxford lies at the figurative and geographical heart of the Shire has been a feature of Tolkien scholarship since Carpenter's seminal 1977 biography, which he wrote 'with a desire to show [Tolkien] as a man from Oxford'.[125] The same presupposition is evident in Lyons's *There and Back Again*, where he writes that 'the Shire is a shadow of Oxfordshire'.[126] And despite the thorough consideration Garth gives to traces of the West Midlands in the Shire, an underlying Oxford-centrism emerges at times in *The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien*, such as when he asserts that the Oxfordshire village of Brill may have inspired Tolkien's imagined settlement of Bree partly on the basis that 'Brill is east of Oxford, the same direction as Bree from Hobbiton'.[127] Only in the Westmarch, the less consequential country along the western border of the Shire, does Garth find the closest match for 'the March-counties of England ... the home of the Suffields, maternal ancestors of Tolkien'.[128] In this respect I take the reverse view.

There is much to connect the lands beyond the eastern boundary of the Shire, encountered in chapters 6 to 10 of Book I of *The Lord of the Rings*, with Oxfordshire and Berkshire. The link between Brill and 'Bree on Bree-hill' is tenable.[129] The Barrow-downs may be calqued on the Berkshire Downs, home to the greatest concentration of such burial mounds in England.[130] The Old Forest is the stomping ground of Tom Bombadil, whom we know Tolkien explicitly associated with the Oxford and Berkshire countryside. Bombadil encounters his longstanding adversary, Old Man Willow, in the valley of the River Withywindle (derived partly from the Old English *windol*, meaning 'winding brook'), a soporific environment which Shippey likens to Oxford's River Cherwell (meaning 'winding river').[131] Tolkien made a drawing of Old Man Willow which, according to his eldest son, John, was modelled on a tree beside the Cherwell.[132] However, the Old Forest, the Barrow-downs and Bree are categorically distinct from

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[125] Burns. 26.

[126] Lyons. 149. Lyons also gives consideration to the argument that the configuration of the Shire's rivers (the Brandywine, the Withywindle and the Shirebourn) deliberately mimics that of the Hodder, the Ribble and the Calder near Stonyhurst College, Lancashire (123-138). Tolkien regularly visited Stonyhurst between 1939 and 1941, while his son John trained there as a priest, and during the late 1940s, while his son Michael taught there. However, to my mind, the fact that Tolkien wrote the Shire chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* before 1939 weakens the case that Lancashire was his main source of inspiration. The same river layout is evident in his 1937 sketch of the Shire map.

[127] Garth. 19. See also Garth's supposition that a story of Tolkien admitting that the mountains of Rohan were inspired by the Malvern Hills must be founded on a mishearing (89); in the following sentence, Garth connects the name 'Dunharrow' with Oxfordshire instead.

[128] Garth. 59. Garth appears to make the mistake of thinking that Worcestershire is one of the 'March counties'.

[129] Lyons suggests that the connection with Brill (actually just inside Buckinghamshire) is strengthened by the names of surrounding villages, for example Chetwode, which resembles 'Chetwood' in Tolkien's Bree-land (*There and Back Again*. 147).

[130] Shippey. 123-24.

[131] Shippey. 123. Tolkien described Oxford as having a damp, sleep-inducing atmosphere that made getting out of bed to study difficult (Carpenter. 70).

[132] Hammond & Scull. 156.

the Shire. It is puzzling that scholars should insist on equating the Shire with Oxfordshire because Tolkien could hardly have been more clearly opposed to such speculation:

> I am sure that without [being known by the title of] 'professor' I should have heard less about my donnishness, and no one would have said 'The Shire is not far from North Oxford'. It is in fact more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee – that is as far away as the Third Age from that depressing and perfectly characterless straggle of houses north of old Oxford, which has not even a postal existence.[133]

Although multifarious in its origins and a testament to Tolkien's immense imaginative faculties, in terms of place-names and geography the Shire is evocative of the West Midlands above all other English regions. [See the Appendix on pages 49 to 54 for a summary or reminder of what Tolkien tells us, by text or map, about the geography of the Shire.]

[133] Letter 178: From a letter to Allen & Unwin (12 December 1955).

## Connections between the place-names of the Shire and the West Midlands

Volumes with such titles as '*Ablaut in Flussnamen*' and 'Introduction to the Survey of English place-names' in Oronzo Cilli's annotated checklist of *Tolkien's Library* (2019) confirm that the author had a particular interest in toponymy, which informed his choice of names for locations in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien was concerned that these should be etymologically plausible or 'meaningful': 'If in an imaginary land real place-names are used, or ones that are carefully constructed to fall into familiar patterns, these become integral names, "sound real".'[134] Thus, some names for the settlements and natural landmarks of the Shire which are pure inventions with no obvious connection to actual places, such as Waymeet and Tuckborough, still feel authentic, in spite of their novelty.[135] Other names, such as The Shire itself, Whitwell or Buckland are so general or so common in England as to have no regional connotations and be difficult to connect to individual real-world models.[136] But we also know that the nomenclature of the Shire was shaped by Tolkien's memories of real places and their names.

In a 'private jest', he named the Hobbit character Rosie Cotton after the lane in Moseley where his Suffield grandparents lived from *c.* 1904: just one of those 'childhood memories which are a large ingredient in the make-up of the Shire', as he later admitted.[137] According to Garth, Tolkien may have named the lowland district of the Marish after a railway stop, Marishes Road, on the network he would have used while an army officer based in Holderness in 1917-18, for the name of another Yorkshire station, Wetwang, crops up elsewhere in Middle-earth.[138] And it is a remote possibility that Tolkien had a more extensive tendency to populate the Shire environs with names approximating those of British railway stops, from Bagshot in Surrey, Hedge End in Hampshire, Norbury in South London and Woodhall in Inverclyde, to the now demolished stations of Bamfurlong near Wigan and Loudwater in Buckinghamshire.[139]

Tom Shippey is surely correct to assert that 'Tolkien took most of his Shire-names from his own near surroundings', although I am surprised an alumnus of King Edward's School would substantiate that claim with examples solely given in reference to their proximity to Oxford.[140] Oxfordshire, where Rushey Lock and a village named Buckland lie close together beside the River Thames, is just one of a number of counties containing a small concentration of place-

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[134] Letter 190. See also Carpenter. 102.

[135] Garth also cites Overbourne, Longbottom and Rushey (19), although there is a Longbottom Farm north of Cheddar Gorge (which Tolkien visited during his honeymoon in 1916 and again in the 1940s) and there is a Rushey Lock on the River Thames, near Buckland, in Oxfordshire.

[136] 'Buckland' is generally derived from *bócland*, land 'booked' to the Church by charter, in contrast to 'folkland', which was inalienable (Shippey. 117). However, in The Shire, the name Bucklebury perhaps suggests that 'buckle' is the stem word from which 'Buckland' derives. Echoes of actual English names are to be expected in *The Lord of the Rings*, which purports to be a translation into English from the Common Speech (or 'Westron') used by Hobbits. Readers are not told the words used by the Hobbits themselves regarding the Shire.

[137] From a draft of Tolkien's 'Nomenclature of The Lord of the Rings', as quoted in Garth. 20.

[138] Garth. 109.

[139] One could also point to multiple stations called Woodhall in Inverclyde and Lincolnshire; Rushey Platt in Wiltshire; Tiffield in Northamptonshire; and Underhill Halt in Cumbria. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Woodhall is the location of an Elvish abode amid the trees, but in Old English the suffix *-halh* or *-healh* meant 'a sheltered place' or 'a nook' (Lyons. 142).

[140] Shippey. 117. Shippey does not specify what he means by 'near surroundings' but all his subsequent examples are given in reference to Oxford.

names with Shire near-equivalents. Berkshire is home to a village called Bucklebury and to Scary Hill (reminiscent of the Shire's Hills of Scary), around three miles north of Lambourn, where Tolkien walked and sketched in 1912. Although there is no record of him visiting the Vale of Usk in Powys, one strikes a particularly rich vein of Tolkienian names in Crickhowell, Buckland Hill, Standel (resembling Standelf) and Sarnau (similar to the Sarn Ford at the extremity of the Shire).[141] Further to the north, the medieval kingdom of Powys comprised a commote named *Îâl* or Yale, meaning 'farmed upland' in Welsh. In the part of Gloucestershire near Cheltenham, one finds Cleeve Hill, where Tolkien proposed to Edith Bratt (Pippin's wife hails from Long Cleeve), as well as hamlets called Needlehole and Bamfurlong, and an Iron Age hillfort called Norbury Camp (Kings Norbury is a long-abandoned and grass-covered fortress north-east of the Shire).[142] However, the region which is home to by far the most clusters of Shire-names is the West Midlands.

Of the many names to be found on the Shire map, Tolkien wrote that 'even those that seem unlikely (as Nobottle), are in fact devised according to the style, origins, and mode of formation of English (especially Midland) place-names'.[143] Again, *Tolkien's Library* lists several books which furthered his toponymic knowledge of the region.[144] In Birmingham, a clear-cut example of a real location resurfacing in the Shire is *The Ivy Bush* inn, located on the Hagley Road, Edgbaston, closely surrounded by four of Tolkien's former residences.[145] According to the scholar Maggie Burns, there is nothing surprising about Tolkien including physical and linguistic details drawn from his home city:

> Sometimes Tolkien's writing is seen as pure fantasy – airy nothing – but it has roots in the earth, so can be given a local habitation, and a name. Tolkien wrote in 1956 that he took his 'models from life'. So we might expect to find echoes of Birmingham in Tolkien's work, drawn from the 16 and a half years he spent in Birmingham when young – from the spring of 1895 to the autumn of 1911.[146]

Tolkien's fiction consequently evinces 'an outlook on life characteristic of Birmingham', she insists.

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[141] *Sarn* means 'causeway' in Old Welsh and 'stepping stone' in Old English. Regarding Standelf, an alternative source may be Anglo-Saxon charters, where *stan gedelf* refers to a quarry. 'Crick' is of Celtic derivation: in Brittonic, *cruc* or *crug* meant 'hill' or 'mound' and is evident in such modern names as Crouch in Oxfordshire and Crutch in Worcestershire (Jenkins. 42). In Old Welsh, *carrecc* meant 'rock' (Shippey. 115).

[142] Garth. 20. Carpenter tells us that part of the conversation took place under a railway viaduct (69). This was probably one of those on the Cheltenham-Honeybourne line, now the Gloucestershire-Warwickshire Steam Railway. Cheltenham was also the birthplace of the Tolkiens' eldest son, John.

[143] Letter 276: To Dick Plotz, 'Thain' of the Tolkien Society of America (12 September 1965).

[144] These are Elijah Wood Bowcock's *Shropshire Place-names* (*Cilli.* 26); *The place-names of Northamptonshire* (1933) by Gover, Mawer & Stenton (101); and G.F. Northall's *A Warwickshire Word-book: Comprising Obsolescent and Dialect Words, Colloquialisms* (1896) (224). The absence from the inventory of books relating to the place-names of Worcestershire and Staffordshire does not mean Tolkien had not made use of them (as Cilli recognises, xv).

[145] There is also a more tenuous Birmingham connection to the 'Battle of Greenfields': Tolkien's childhood friends Wilfred and Ralph Payton lived on Greenfield Road in Harborne, while Christopher Wiseman lived on Greenfield Crescent in Edgbaston.

[146] Burns. 26.

Burns is of course including in 'Birmingham' the valley of the River Cole and the once picturesque village of Sarehole, Tolkien's glowing memories of which 'must be counted as the major inspiration for The Shire, Hobbiton and Bag End', according to Andrew Morton.[147] Nor is the connection mere idle speculation, for Tolkien himself told *The Scotsman* newspaper that the Shire 'was inspired by a few cherished square miles of actual countryside at Sarehole'.[148] It would therefore be natural for the Shire to reverberate with place-names found along this stretch of river. According to Shippey, one of Tolkien's secondary intentions behind the dénouement of the Scouring of the Shire, with Saruman being murdered 'at the very door of Bag End', was to fabulise an alternate etymological origin for the name of Sarehole.[149] About four miles south of Sarehole, the River Cole rises from Hob Hill, a name which refers to the sprite-like creatures of English folklore.[150] Further downstream lies Buckland End, where there was a Maggotty Lane in Tolkien's time, and Shard End (a near homophone of Sharkey's End).

Tolkien also transplanted to the Shire Sarehole's inhabitants. If Bilbo Baggins initially resembles Tolkien himself, being the son of one of three remarkable Took sisters and having similarly bourgeois tastes in food and clothes, then the other more rustic Hobbits, with surnames like Boffin, Brockhouse and Gamgee, are the neighbours of his childhood: 'I took the idea of the Hobbits from the village people and children,' he said in a 1966 interview.[151] Sam, in particular, is Tolkien's recollection of the typical English soldier on the Western Front 'grafted on the village-boys of early days' who 'fascinated by their dialect and by their pawky ways'.[152] And even Farmer Maggot was partly contrived from a local farmer who had once pursued Tolkien for picking mushrooms without permission.[153]

As Garth points out, there is limited geographical consonance between Bag End's elevated situation and riparian Sarehole, and the Shire is more than just a scaled-up version of Tolkien's memories of a single village.[154] It draws on the West Midlands as a whole, once the heartland of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, the highest form of Tolkien's national ideal, where Celts, Angles and the Saxon Hwicce tribe (with whom he particularly identified) co-existed

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[147] Morton. 20. A sentiment echoed by Hammond & Scull (12).
[148] Foster, William. 'An early history of the hobbits'. *Edinburgh Scotsman*, 5 February 1972.
[149] Shippey. 194. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, the first element of the name 'Sarehole' is derived from a personal name *Searu*, or *Saru* in the Mercian dialect. Saruman is killed by Gríma Wormtongue, who in turn is shot dead by Hobbit archers. The names 'Grimes Hill' and 'Grimpits Lane', places near the headwaters of the River Cole, are both derived from Gríma, which was an Old Scandinavian personal name but also the Old English for 'ghost' (Jenkins. 171).
[150] Jenkins. 133. A Hob Moor was also situated next to the River Cole, about three miles north-east of Sarehole.
[151] Quoted in Blackham. 12. See also Carpenter. 179. Tolkien once wrote: 'I am in fact a hobbit in all but size. I like gardens, trees, and unmechanised farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not travel much.' Garth points out that Birmingham manufactories churned out huge quantities of tools, jewellery, buckles, buttons and other 'toys'; exactly the kind of knick-knacks beloved of Hobbits (176-77). David Bratman tells us that such surnames as those quoted are especially prevalent in the West Midlands (11).
[152] Tolkien to H. Cotton Minchin, 16 April 1956; & Brace, Keith. 'In the Footsteps of the Hobbits.' *Birmingham Post*, 25 May 1968.
[153] Garth. 21.
[154] Garth. 15.

as a single polity between the 7th and 10th centuries.[155] He imagined that, for centuries after the Norman Conquest, parts of the West Midlands remained secluded, long sheltering the uncorrupted remnants of an ancient English way of living and speaking. His main professional preoccupation was literature of 'the westerly lyric, whose little world lay between Wirral and the Wye'.[156] Herefordshire was certainly part of this repository of Anglo-Saxon culture and, in Shippey's words, 'a strong component of Tolkien's later conception of the Hobbits' "Shire"'.[157] So, too, Warwickshire, whose farmland has been hacked from the Forest of Arden as the Shire has been from the Old Forest.[158]

Between those two counties, however, lies the country which most of all inspired Tolkien's Shire. As Carpenter recognises, 'Worcestershire, the county from which the Suffields had come, and in which his brother Hilary was at that time cultivating the land, is of all West Midland counties The Shire from which the hobbits come'.[159] Tolkien himself cited as an influence on his fictional land his memories of visiting Hilary at Orchard House, Blackminster, not far from their Suffield roots at Evesham, in the south east of the county.[160] In this part of Worcestershire, one finds another elongated Cleeve Hill, a Whitfurrows Farm and, on the border with Gloucestershire, yet another Buckland. In the Worcestershire heartland can be found 'Bag End', the farm in the village of Dormston which once belonged to Tolkien's aunt and which he visited during the 1920s.[161] Within a short walk are the hamlets of Stock Green, Stock Wood and Morton under Hill; in the opposite direction are Stonebow and Throckmorton, which is also the name of a venerable family of the region whose name features prominently in the history of post-Reformation English Catholicism.[162]

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[155] Tolkien wrote about Anglo-Saxons from the West Midland area in Letters 95, 124 and 152. He even expressed a preference for speaking 'Old Mercian' over the global *lingua franca* of modern English (Letter 53).

[156] Tolkien, J.R.R.. 'Ancrene Wisse and Hali Meiðhad'. *Essays and Studies*, 1929. 116. *Tolkien's Library* attests to his geographical bias in favour of the West Midlands, containing as it does volumes relating to *The Vision of Leofric, Earl of Mercia* (220), the works of the 14th-century Staffordshire 'Gawain poet' (14, 220 & 261), William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (14th-century Worcestershire; 154 & 235) and *Guy of Warwick* (111). Here is also listed a book in German on a 9th-century Bishop of Worcester (116), as well as *Early English alliterative poems in the West-Midland dialect of the fourteenth century* by Richard Morris (202). As Lyon notes, Mercian origins have also been attributed to Tolkien's favourite epic poem, *Beowulf* (*There and Back Again*. 159).

[157] Shippey. 48. There is even a hill in south Herefordshire called Great Bilbo (83).

[158] The parallel between the formerly wooded landscapes of Warwickshire and the Shire is strengthened by Elrond's recollection in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 'Time was when a squirrel could go from tree to tree from what is now the Shire to Dunland west of Isengard' (265). A semblance of this saying was quoted by Tolkien and E.V. Gordon in their 1925 edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where it refers to the Wirral Peninsula. However, Cilli has shown that, during the nineteenth century, the image of a squirrel travelling great distances by leaping from tree to tree was most often used in relation to the Forest of Arden, including by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (*Tolkien's Library*. Xxiv). That there is a Warwickshire railway station called Wood End, on the line which once connected Sarehole and Blackminster, may just be coincidence.

[159] Carpenter. 180.

[160] Brace, Keith. 'Perspective: Tolkien dismissed idea of a deeper meaning.' *Birmingham Post*, 27 November 2001. 11.

[161] Andrew Morton argues that Dormston is the model for Hobbiton (6, 7, 21 & 22). He notes that 'the general topography of Hobbiton is far more like Dormston than Sarehole, which is low-lying', and he sees a parallel between the East-West Road and the A422 Stratford-Worcester Road (22).

[162] Settlements named Stock may be derived from the Old English *stocc*, meaning 'tree trunks', 'stumps' or 'logs', and are often found in formerly wooded areas now cleared of trees (Jenkins. 156). An alternative derivation is the Old English *stoc* or *stok*, meaning 'small settlement depending on a larger nearby settlement' (5 & 168).

In North Worcestershire, the Shire is conjured by the names of another string of hamlets: Brockencote, Cakebole and Rushock, where in 1678 the Catholic friar (later saint and martyr) John Wall was apprehended.[163] A figure whom we know for certain Tolkien admired is the twelfth-century poet Laȝamon (or Layamon/Laghamon), known as the last great lyricist of Old English, who also inhabited this area.[164] Tolkien was interested in the name of the Gladder Brook or River Gladdon, which flows into the River Severn where Layamon was a priest at Areley Kings, and he used it to denote a marshy land in Middle-earth.[165] His Gladden Fields lie outside the Shire but were the native territory of a primitive and piscatorial tribe of Hobbits called Stoors. Also flowing into the Severn near Layamon's Gladdon is the River Stour. In short, the Shire echoes with many names that typify or derive from the West Midlands. There is limited geographical correspondence between these similar-sounding real and imagined places, but there are nevertheless striking parallels between the landscapes with regard to some particulars I shall now consider.

*Figure 3: The Worcestershire farm of Tolkien's aunt, Jane Neave (née Suffield), known as 'Bag End', Dormston.*

[163] Rushock is probably named after the Old English *ryscuc* and means 'the settlement near the rushes' (Jenkins. 160). Also in this general area (near Lineholt) is a hamlet called Wyneyards (from the Old English for 'vineyard', *wín-geard*). 'Old Wineyards' is a place in the South Farthing of the Shire. (Another theory is that this Shire-name originates from the term for alumni of the Wynyard School in Hertfordshire which C.S. Lewis attended and detested.)

[164] Laȝamon's *Brut* also appears in Tolkien's library (Cilli. 158).

[165] Shippey. 69 & 394. See also Letter 297, where Tolkien explains that 'gladdon' is another name for the 'stinking iris', *iris foetidissima*. By following the Gladder Brook to its source one reaches the Wyre Forest, beyond which, on the Shropshire side of the border, is located the hamlet of Bagginswood.

## Icknield Street

One aspect of the Shire landscape that stands out is the importance of roads. Tolkien used roads both as a means to structure his imagined landscapes and as an image in his creative work more generally. According to Hammond and Scull, paths permitting escape into the distance or admission through a gate are a Romantic 'symbol of freedom' that recur in his pictorial art.[166] For Shippey, the straightness and openness of the road makes it one half of the symbolic contest that is fundamental to *The Lord of the Rings*: 'the traveller walking down the branching road becomes in the end an image of "the Good" in Tolkien and one opposed to the endless self-regarding circuits of the Ring'.[167] The three verses or versions of Bilbo's song 'The Road Goes Ever On' are distributed at different points of that tale, reiterating the moving similitude between roads, rivers, the story's various journeys and life itself. All contain confluences where 'paths and errands meet', and all are seemingly fateful, sweeping travellers along until they can stumble on no longer and must 'turn towards the lighted inn, / My evening-rest and sleep to meet'.

The axial road of the Shire is the East-West Road, one section of a much longer whole that runs in an apparently straight line for around six hundred miles from the Misty Mountains to the Grey Havens. Hobbits have no collective memory of its origins, but it was first laid by the Dwarves and subsequently maintained by the High Men of Arnor, exiles from the fallen civilisation of Númenor. As the name 'Orthanc' (the tower at Isengard) suggests, many in Middle-earth's Third Age perceive such mysterious bequests from the past in the same way the Anglo-Saxons regarded the seemingly superhuman engineering feats of the Romans: as *orþanc enta geweorc*, or 'the cunning work of giants'.[168] In more than this regard does the part that Númenor plays in Tolkien's legendarium resemble the historical development of Rome: both are founded (according to Virgil at least) by heroes escaping the destruction of their homeland; both reach the highest pinnacles of cultural and scientific achievement; and both are seduced by an increasingly acquisitive imperialism before their downfall.[169] The fate of the vestigial Númenorean kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor thus echoes that of the later Roman Empire, as Tolkien confirmed in a letter:

> But in the north Arnor dwindles, is broken into petty princedoms, and finally vanishes. The remnant of the Númenóreans becomes a hidden wandering Folk... In the south Gondor rises to a peak of power, almost reflecting Númenor, and then fades slowly to decayed Middle Age, a kind of proud, venerable, but increasingly impotent Byzantium.[170]

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[166] Hammond & Scull. 37.
[167] Shippey. 212.
[168] Garth. 142. See also Letter 157: From a letter to Katherine Farrer (27 November 1954), where Tolkien refers to the 'peculiar A. Saxon word *ent* for a "giant" or mighty person of long ago – to whom all old works were ascribed'. Tolkien's exegesis of the phrase '*enta geweorc*' appears in his essay under the section 'Philology: General Works' in *This Year's Work in English Studies*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, January 1925. 21.
[169] Garth. 150.
[170] Letter 131. In another letter, Tolkien drew alternate comparisons between Gondor and Venice, as well as Arnor and England (Letter 168: To Richard Jeffery (7 September 1955)). And in Letter 211, he wrote that 'In many ways [the Gondorians] resembled "Egyptians"'.

Descriptive details of the East-West Road are hard to come by in *The Lord of the Rings*, but in this context few are required. If it is anything like the similarly ancient highway in Ithilien, where 'the handiwork of Men of old could still be seen in its straight sure flight and level course' (*TT*, 651), the East-West Road is very much like a Roman road.

Discussions of Roman roads appear in Tolkien's academic writing in the mid-1920s, when he argued that the name used by Anglo-Saxons for the ancient road between Dover and Chester, *Wæcelinga Stræt* or 'Watling Street', was the same term they applied to the Milky Way.[171] However, his interest in the subject began much earlier.[172] It may just be an intriguing coincidence that Tolkien was a contemporary during his undergraduate years at Exeter College with Ivan D. Margary, the man who would go on to become, and remains, the most comprehensive documenter of Britain's Roman roads.[173] But we know for certain that Tolkien shared an early enthusiasm for talking and walking over these half-forgotten ways with his closest Birmingham school-friends. Robert Quilter Gilson, one of the King Edward's boys with whom Tolkien founded the intimate 'Tea Club, Barrovian Society', referred to a joint ambition to hike the Fosse Way when he wrote to Tolkien from Lincoln in 1913. He announced that he had 'set foot upon [the Fosse Way] with a thrill of long-cherished anticipation', adding 'Would we were starting now!'[174] Gilson was not the only member of the T.C.B.S. to record their thoughts upon beholding an ancient road, for the image features in Geoffrey Bache Smith's 'Songs on the Downs', a poem published in *Oxford Poetry 1915*, which begins:

> This is the road the Romans made,
> 	This track half lost in the green hills,
> Or fading in a forest-glade
> 	'Mid violets and daffodils.
>
> The years have fallen like dead leaves,
> 	Unwept, uncounted, and unstayed
> (Such as the autumn tempest thieves),
> 	Since first this road the Romans made.[175]

The road in Smith's poem provokes the same melancholic contemplation of the unequal contest between human monuments and natural oblivion as Tolkien's ancient highways.[176] And, for Shippey, 'Songs on the Downs' is evidence that Smith and Tolkien shared 'a feeling for the

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[171] Tolkien, J.R.R.. Chapters in *Y.W.E.S. Vol. 4*. 21.

[172] The young Tolkien's knowledge of the period in general would have been advanced by the class prize he was awarded at King Edward's School in 1905: a copy of W.W. Capes's *Roman History* (Burns, Maggie. *Roots and Reality*. Unpublished. 163.)

[173] Margary was the author of *Roman Roads in Britain* (1955). Tolkien matriculated to Exeter College in 1911, Margary in 1913.

[174] R.Q. Gilson to Tolkien, 8 July 1913 (Tolkien papers, Bodleian Library), as quoted in Garth. 142.

[175] Smith, G.B.. 'Songs on the Downs'. Cole, G.D.H. & Earp, T.W. (eds.). *Oxford Poetry 1915*. Oxford. 60.

[176] It would appear that the poem as a whole exerted a particular influence on Tolkien, who wrote a 'lament' for Galadriel which begins (in translation): 'Ah! like gold fall the leaves in the wind, / long years numberless as the wings of trees!' (FR, 377).

ancient roads, the "old straight tracks" and "crooked lanes" of England'.[177] Given that one of the japes of their young coterie was to 'clothe a Roman remain in trousers', it is plausible that they jointly traced and even tramped such roads, including in the West Midlands.

We do not know how the Romans referred to the road which they drove through the country now occupied by the city of Birmingham. Being a made road, the Anglo-Saxons called it a *straet*, in combination with the name *Ichenild*, possibly a goddess who was supposed to protect wayfarers.[178] Another female name *Buggilde* was applied to the adjoining construction south of the River Avon and survives in the present-day alias of 'Buckle Street'.[179] By the Late Middle Ages, the definite article in the Old English phrase *aet thaere Ichenilde Straet* had become fused with the name itself to create *Rikenilde* or *Rykeneldes Strete*, a route which the monk Ranulf Higdon in his *Polychronicon* (1344) described as extending from St David's in Wales to Tynemouth in North East England.[180] According to the archaeologist Michael Hodder, the Romans themselves had no conception of such a road as a unified whole, but rather of individual stretches linking forts.[181] Nevertheless, nineteenth-century antiquaries accepted the appellation Ryknield or (more often) Icknield Street, as well as the idea that it continued south-west after crossing the Avon.[182] For over a century, however, 'Icknield Street' has denoted the aggregate of sections running from Little Chester, near Derby, to Wall in Staffordshire, and thence in a more-or-less north-south alignment to Birmingham's Metchley fort and, via Buckle Street, to Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire.

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[177] Shippey. 38. He further claims that 'it isn't very hard' to identify the Roman road to which Smith refers as 'Akeman Street', on the basis that this route between Cirencester and St Albans is the better preserved of the two Roman roads near Oxford (36). Shippey may be correct, but Akeman Street does not cross much downland (except in the Chiltern Hills). We know only that the poem was composed before Summer 1914: in the collection which Tolkien edited following his friend's death in 1916, 'Songs on the Downs' does not feature in the third and final part, which 'contains only poems written after the outbreak of the war'. In a letter of Autumn 1915, R.Q. Gilson refers to Smith's poem as having been written 'some time ago'. Smith and Tolkien might have walked Ermin Street on the Berkshire Downs in the spring of 1914, when the daffodils and violets were blooming. Or perhaps Smith was recalling Crutch Lane, the Roman road from Droitwich to Greensforge in Worcestershire, which passes within a mile of what was the Smith family farm, near Hagley.

[178] Grundy, G.R.. 'The Ancient Highways and Tracks of Worcestershire and the Middle Severn Basin, Part I'. *The Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 91. 1934. 93.

[179] Della Hooke (*The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce*. Manchester University Press. 1985. 208) wonders whether 'Burghild Street' was named 'perhaps after the daughter of a Mercian king'.

[180] Grundy. 91.

[181] Hodder, Michael. *Birmingham: The Hidden History*. Tempus. 2004. 59.

[182] The Icknield Street of the West Midlands is not to be confused with the Roman road of the same name between Old Sarum and Silchester, or with the Icknield Way, an Iron Age trackway between Norfolk and Dorset. Drawing on the mid-sixteenth-century *Itineraries* of John Leland, Collen's 1833 map of Saxon Britain traces the straight line of Icknield Street from South Littleton (near Blackminster) only as far as Gloucester (Collen, George William. *Britannia Saxonica: A Map of Britain during the Saxon Octarchy*. W. Pickering. 1833). But Witt's *Archaeological Handbook of the County of Gloucester* (1883) posits a slightly more northerly course via 'Sedgebarrow, Tewkesbury, Berry Hill, near Ross, and probably by Abergavenny to St David's' (Witts, George. *Archaeological Handbook of the County of Gloucester*. Norman. 1883. 116-17).

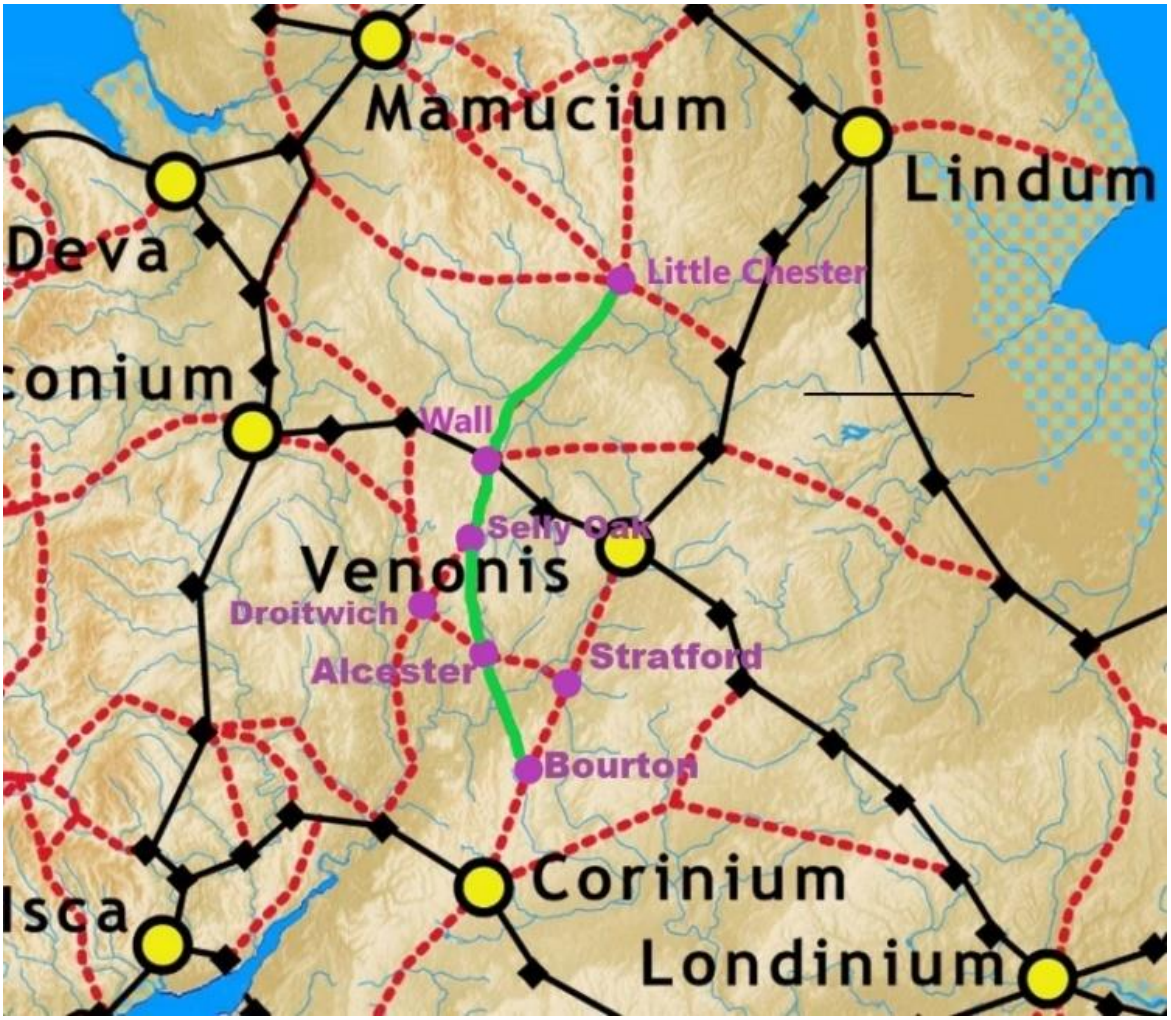


*Figure 4: Map highlighting the route of Icknield Street (green), according to the present consensus.*

Stretches of Icknield Street's original metalling were in use as recently as the seventeenth century, with the section in Sutton Park (six miles north of Birmingham city-centre) mentioned in William Dugdale's *History and Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656).[183] Thanks to excavations which first took place there in the 1850s, the original agger and flanking ditches are visible today and have been described as 'a mile and a half of one of the most perfect examples of a Roman highway left in Britain'.[184] According to Hodder, the nine-metre width of the excellently preserved gravel and pebble surface places it in the second class of Roman roads, as defined by Margary.[185] In general, however, the original Icknield Street has been largely lost or destroyed. The fact that at least one parallel ridgeway was preferred for the transport of salt during the Middle Ages suggests that parts of it were not constructed with the same care or proficiency as other major Roman roads and may have decayed at a relatively early age.[186] In places where wagons and horses

[183] Hodder. 14.
[184] Midgeley, William. *A Short History of the Town and Chase of Sutton Coldfield With Two Maps and Many Pictures*. Midland Counties Herald. 1904. 6.
[185] Hodder. 60-61. The distance between the parallel ditches is eighteen metres.
[186] I refer to what Grundy calls the 'Second Bourton Branch Ridgeway'.

kept to the fields on either side of the fragmented road, the line of the street at least was roughly preserved, but elsewhere even this can only be conjectured. The greatest uncertainty surrounds the passage of Icknield Street between Stirchley and Perry Barr in Birmingham, where it has been almost entirely lost to the plough and then to the urban growth and modern road network of the last two centuries.

One of the earliest descriptions of this stretch of Icknield Street, 'discoverable by its barren track through uncultivated meadows', can be found in William Hutton's 1783 *History of Birmingham*, and has confused rather than settled the issue. Hutton's route passes 'within two or three stones cast' of the camp at Metchley, where 'pieces of armour are frequently ploughed up, particularly parts of the sword and the battle-axe', before bisecting Harborne (to the west) and Birmingham (to the east).[187] It then passes 'a stone's cast east' of the 'Observatory in Lady-wood-lane', meaning Perrott's Folly, one of the 'Two Towers' in Edgbaston frequently and erroneously cited as the inspiration for the title of the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*.[188] From what is now Monument Road, Hutton posits a largely straight course, through Hockley Circus, to a crossing of the River Tame at Holford (then 'Offord-mill').[189] Hutton's theory would appear to be corroborated by the existence of an Icknield Street in Hockley, except that this road probably received its name in the first quarter of the nineteenth century on the back of Hutton's popular history. In fact, two twentieth-century authorities took quite different views.

In his *Roman Roads in Britain* (1903), Thomas Codrington seems to agree with Hutton's proposed line between Stirchley and Perrott's Folly; however, from there he has Icknield Street crossing the Dudley Road and going 'along Worstone Lane, passing five furlongs north of the Navigation Bridge in Great Charles Street, Birmingham'.[190] This implies two radical changes in direction, on the west and east sides of the Jewellery Quarter. Codrington's route then follows the undeviating Wheeler Street in Lozells towards the River Tame.[191] Ivan Margary concurs with Codrington on the latter point in his own *Roman Roads in Britain* (1955), but he believes the road achieved this heading much further south and thus cut through present-day Edgbaston further east than either Hutton or Codrington had imagined:

> [Icknield Street] is continued by Stirchley Street to within ¾ mile of the point on the highest ground between the Bourne and the Bourne Brook near Selly Park where a change of the main alignment from west of north to east of north was probably made ...

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[187] Hutton, William. *An History of Birmingham (second edition).* 1783. 370. Hutton felt that the size of the earthworks at Metchley meant they must have been built by the Danes. Subsequent historians believed it to be Roman, but this was not confirmed until excavations of the site in 1934 revealed pieces of Roman pottery. It is now thought that the fort was in use between around AD 48 and AD 200 (Hodder. 14 & 51).

[188] The image of '*The Two Towers*' did not originate in Tolkien's childhood but was an expedient made necessary by the publisher's decision to divide *The Lord of the Rings* into three volumes. Tolkien was 'not at all happy' about the 'ambiguous' and 'misleading' title of the second volume, which could refer to any two of at least five towers in the story (Letters 140 & 143).

[189] Hutton. 140.

[190] Codrington, Thomas. *Roman Roads in Britain.* Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. 1903. 274. He means the railway bridge that crosses canal and road at the entrance to Snow Hill Station.

[191] 'Low' is the Old English word for a tumulus and it may be that the Romans built a mound in this area as a signal post, according to Dargue, William. 'Lozells/The Lozells'. *A History of Birmingham Places and Placenames from A to Y.* 2008-2022.

> This new alignment is sighted on high ground at King's Standing to the north of Birmingham, and it is fairly certain that the road passed straight through the city, going ¼ mile to the east of the University and later on the line of Great Hampton Row, Wheeler Street, and part of Welhead Lane over the railway at Birchfield.[192]

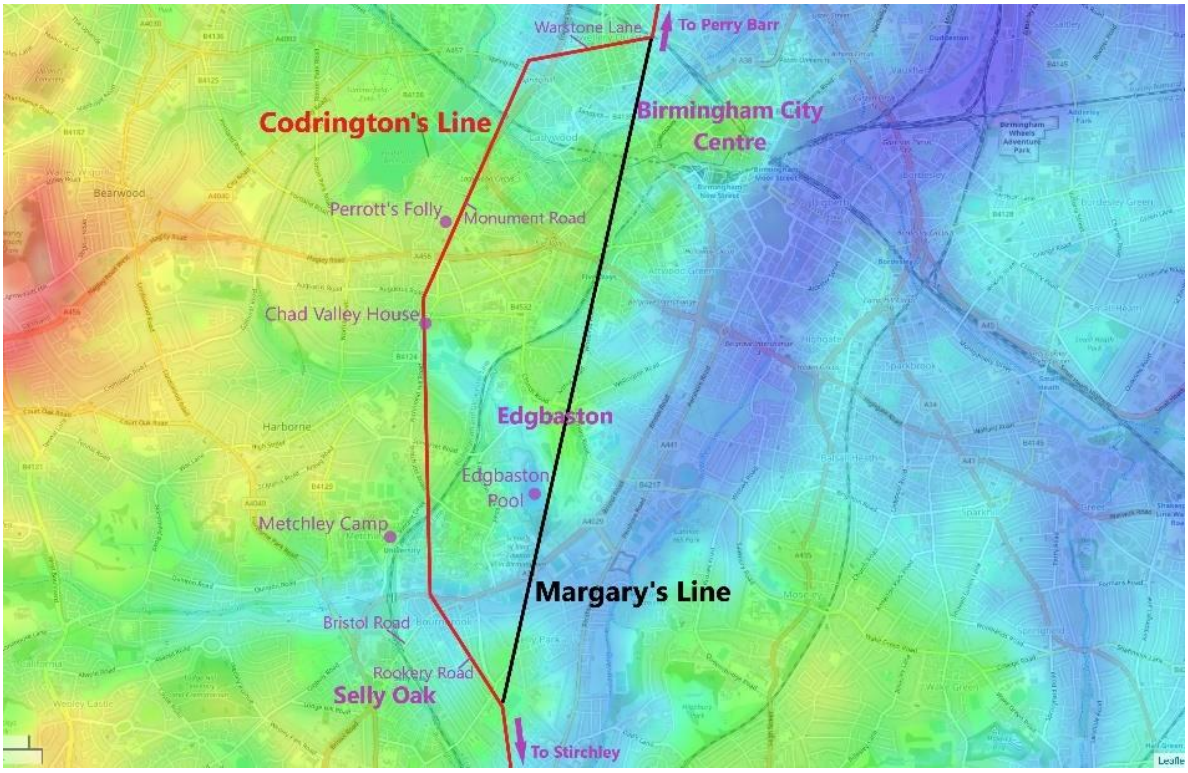


*Figure 5: A topographical map of south-west Birmingham showing two possible routes of Icknield Street, as posited by Codrington (red) and Margary (black).*

Margary's view appears to have been common at this time, judging by *A History of the County of Warwick* (1964), which declares, 'The theory that the Rycknield Street made a circuitous westward bend as it passed Birmingham is no longer accepted'.[193] Of course, it is possible that changes in the road's alignment took place within the Roman period and no single route can be considered definitive, but there are reasons for giving greater credence to Codrington and rejecting Margary's theory.

A slight change in the trajectory of Icknield Street around the high ground of Selly Park in a NNW rather than a NNE direction would fit with Francis W. Leonard's assertion, in *The Story of Selly Oak, Birmingham* (1933), that Rookery Road was 'part of an old Roman Road'.[194]

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[192] Margary, Ivan. *Roman Roads in Britain, Vol. II.* Phoenix House. 1957. 20.

[193] Houghton, F.T.S.. 'The Rycknield Street in the Neighbourhood of Birmingham'. *The Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, *c.* 1935/6. lx.42-55. As cited in 'Communications'. *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7, the City of Birmingham*. Stephens, W.B.. (ed.). 1964. 25-42.

[194] Leonard, Francis W.. *The Story of Selly Oak, Birmingham.* 1933. 7. Contradictory evidence of a Roman road where Harborne Lane crosses Dudley No. 2 Canal may relate to a possible route between Selly Oak and Greensforge, Staffordshire. The archaeological report for this road can be found here: Roman road, Harborne

By fording the Bourn Brook in Selly Oak, Icknield Street would have avoided the watery terrain where three streams meet near Pebble Mill and not travelled the length of the Chad Valley, now inundated by Edgbaston Pool. It would also have passed closer to Metchley Camp, facilitating connections with several other Roman roads which likely converged on the fort from Greensforge to the west, Penkridge to the north-west and Mancetter to the east, as well as the saltway from Rednal, Droitwich and Worcester to the south-west (on roughly the present line of the Bristol Road).[195] North of Metchley, Icknield Street may have traversed the vicinity of Richmond Hill Road and Farquhar Road, where the archaeologist Adrian Oswald unearthed a sixty-centimetre thick gravel road in 1955. According to Hodder, 'a similar gravel spread was observed in a water pipe trench nearby in 2002, together with a feature that could have been a roadside ditch'.[196] Thence, Icknield Street would have crossed the Chad Brook near Chad Valley House, where a portion of Roman road was uncovered in 1865.[197]

The details of Codrington's theory are of relevance to this inquiry in so far as they shed some light on what a young Tolkien may have understood about the ancient landscape of his home territory and the degree to which he viewed Icknield Street as a hidden but consistent geographical axis in an otherwise peripatetic adolescence. There is no evidence to suggest that Tolkien read *Roman Roads in Britain*, which was published when he was an eleven-year-old Birmingham schoolboy, but he did subsequently own books on similar topics, including R.G. Collingwood's *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1930) and *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936), as well as two editions of Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon*.[198] Given his precocious interest in ancient Britain one can reasonably speculate that Tolkien was aware of the Roman road's existence. As Burns points out, his maternal family would have taken the overlying turnpike road when they migrated from Evesham to Birmingham in 1810.[199] And if Icknield Street did indeed pass along the line of Monument Road, Tolkien lived within a quarter of a mile of it for around nine years, at four different addresses: 26 Oliver Road (1902-1904), 25 Stirling Road (1905-1908), 37 Duchess Road (1908-1910) and 4 Highfield Road (1910-1911).[200] Also

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Bridge. The possibility of a Roman extension to the Celtic route known as *Hen Ffordd* ('The Old Road') between Greensforge and Craven Arms is discussed here: https://www.roman-britain.co.uk/places/hen-ffordd/.

[195] Hodder postulates the existence of these roads in *Birmingham: The Hidden History*. 49 & 59. There is some debate as to whether the Worcester-Bournbrook saltway is in fact medieval in origin, but Margary's belief that it is a Roman road would appear to be confirmed by the discovery of Roman coins along its route; for example, a coin of the Emperor Constantine at 78 Frederick Road in 1952, and 16 Roman coins at the site of Pigeon House, Northfield (what is now the junction of Hill Top Road and Park View Road).

[196] Hodder. 59. This may also explain the Roman road found close to the campus of Birmingham University: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=959142204437372

[197] Harman, T.T.. 'Icknield Street'. *Showell's Dictionary of Birmingham.* Walter Showell & Sons. 1885. A contemporary adherent of Codrington's hypothesis would appear to be Professor Carl Chinn, who has written that Icknield Street 'headed across Edgbaston and by the camp at Metchley [and] followed the line of Monument Road' (from Prof. Chinn's introduction to Bernard J. Taylor's *'The Quinton': A Century in Birmingham, 1909-2009*, as quoted on the website for Quinton Local History Society: http://www.qlhs.org.uk/society/society.htm).

[198] The other volumes to which I refer in *Tolkien's Library* are O.M. Dalton's 1924 *A guide to the mediaeval antiquities and objects of later date in the department of British and mediaeval antiquities* (66) and *The Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (1913) by Edward Thurlow Leeds (160). The references to Collingwood and Higden can be found on pages 59, 174 and 235.

[199] Burns. *Roots and Reality*. 13.

[200] Greenfield Crescent, Edgbaston, where Christopher Wiseman lived, is also within half a mile of Icknield Street.

living just off Monument Road prior to 1911, less than half a mile to the north, was Tolkien's second cousin once removed, Lilian Suffield (b. 1883) and her husband Frederick J. Turner (b.1877), who described himself as a 'Ring Maker'. Another mile beyond that, where the routes of Hutton and Codrington diverge, is Key Hill Cemetery, in which the graves of Tolkien's paternal grandparents and some of their children can be found, including an inscription memorialising Tolkien's father.[201]

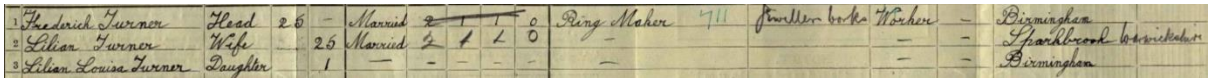

*Figure 6: The 1911 Census record for Tolkien's cousin, Lilian Suffield, and her husband, a 'Ring Maker', who lived on Monument Road.*

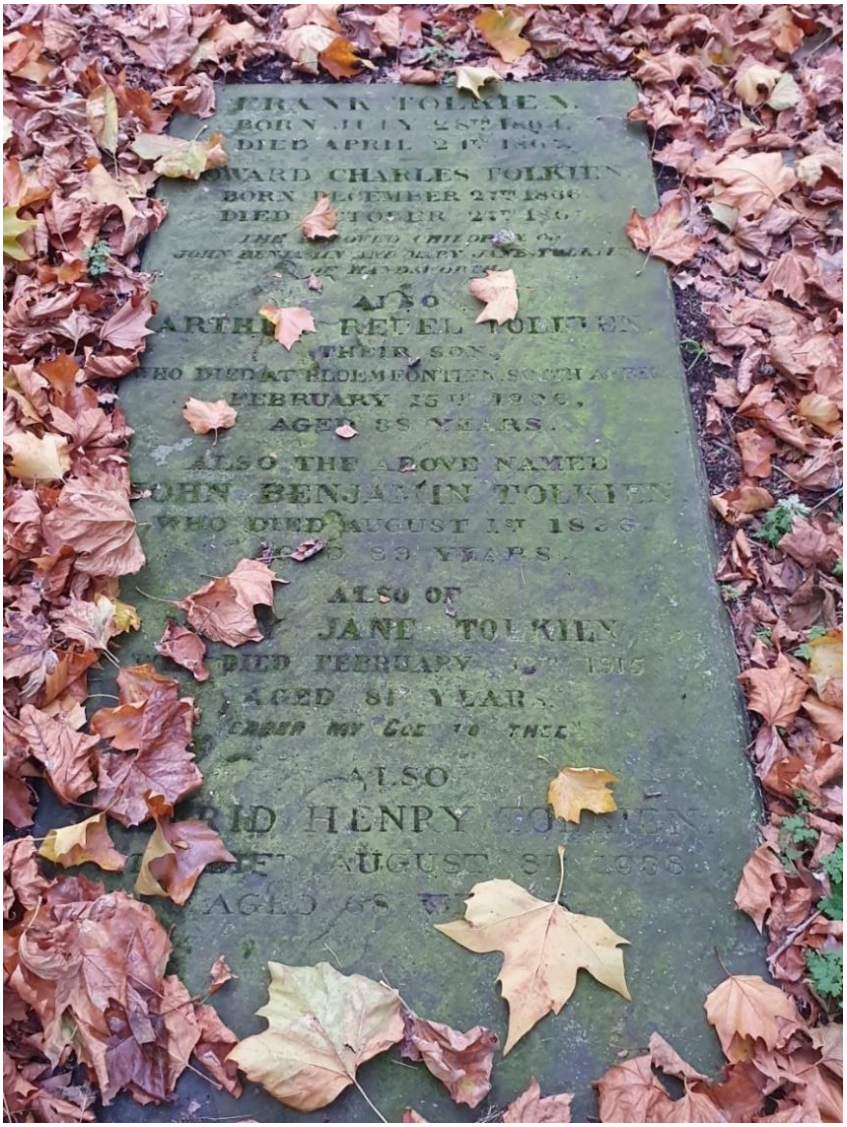


*Figure 7: The memorial to Tolkien's father on the gravestone of his grandparents, Key Hill Cemetery.*

[201] Tolkien's great uncle Mark Oliver Suffield (1838-1915) is also buried there.

In the other direction, one and a half miles south of Tolkien's Edgbaston neighbourhood, Icknield Street may lie beneath the campus of the University of Birmingham, where the 1st Southern General Hospital was headquartered during the First World War. Tolkien was brought here in November 1916 to convalesce for six weeks in the shadow of the 328-foot Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clocktower. From the higher ground of the University he could have looked across the Rea Valley towards the suburbs of Moseley and Kings Heath on their hilltop two miles to the east, around which the Suffield and Tolkien families had begun to congregate fifty years before, and where he had lived between 1895 and 1902.[202] Further south, Icknield Street crosses the Rea near King's Norton and emerges into the countryside beloved of Tolkien, coming at last within three miles of Hilary's smallholding in Blackminster. I have seen no direct written evidence that Tolkien had any emotional or intellectual attachment to Icknield Street, but it strikes me as unlikely that, having discussed with a school-friend the possibility of walking the Fosse Way, which passes Birmingham no nearer than Leamington Spa, he would have been unmoved by the thought of a Roman road running through some of the very places he knew and loved best.

It is a further leap to suppose that the straight and ancient road through the heart of Tolkien's fictional Shire, the East-West Road, is in some respects a likeness of Icknield Street, for the orientation of the former is almost exactly perpendicular to the north-south alignment of the latter. But if one considers them in relation to local watercourses, some basis for a geographical comparison becomes apparent. Icknield Street adheres to the Rivers Rea and Arrow (and to the Worcester & Birmingham Canal in between), just as the East-West Road runs parallel to The Water until its confluence with the Brandywine River. There, the fictional road crosses the Brandywine via the Bridge of Stone Bows in the same way that Icknield Street once traversed the River Avon at Bidford, where a medieval stone bridge with seven arches still stands. I do not know of any scholars who have previously associated the Brandywine with the Avon. Garth dissents from Karen Wynn Fonstad's estimation that the Brandywine at Buckland is 'comparable to the upper Mississippi' at around half a mile wide, and he submits instead that Tolkien had in mind a river no wider than the Thames at Oxford or the Severn near Malvern (i.e. about sixty metres broad).[203] There are good grounds for the analogy with the River Severn, for one passage excised from *The Lord of the Rings* explains that the older name for the Brandywine was *Malvern*.[204] However, Tolkien had already equated the Severn with a river on his Lonely Isle, the *Sirion*, and possibly also with the *Lhûn* in Middle-earth.[205] The River Avon has in common with the Brandywine the fact that it is a tautological place-name: 'Avon' is derived from the Brittonic *abona*, meaning 'river' (thus River Avon means 'River River'), just as brandy is distilled from wine.

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[202] I include Sarehole, which is at the bottom of the hill's eastern slope.
[203] Wynn Fonstad, Karen. *The Atlas of Middle-earth* (revised edition). Boston. Houghton Mifflin. 1991. 120-1.
[204] 'Malvern' is both the Elvish for 'golden-brown' and a town above Worcestershire's largest river.
[205] Garth. 110.

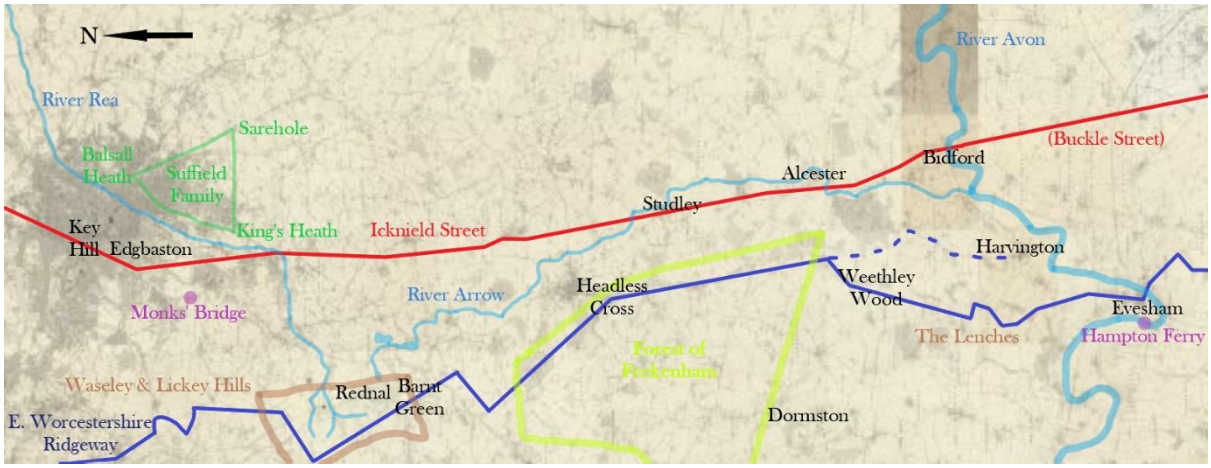


*Figure 8: A comparison of a map of the West Midlands (above) and the Shire (below). The area where the Birmingham Suffields congregated between the 1860s and 1910s, centred on Moseley/Wake Green, is within the green triangle.*

Apart from the disparity of orientation between Icknield Street and the East-West Road, there is the question of distances. We are told in *The Lord of the Rings* that it is 'a good forty miles from the [Brandywine] Bridge to Bag End' (*RK*, 1000). By contrast, it is only twenty miles from Bidford to Moseley in Birmingham.[206] However, considering that Hobbits are 'about half our height' (*Hobbit*, 2) or 'between two and four feet of our measure' (*FR*, *Prologue*), it could be argued that a Hobbit mile (a word derived from the Latin *milia passuum*, meaning 'a thousand paces') must be about half as long as a standard mile. In which case, the stretch of Icknield Street

[206] Evidence of a Roman causeway confirms that the Roman road crossed the Avon at a ford upstream of the medieval bridge at Bidford, where there is still a small road named Icknield Street.

north of the Avon corresponds exactly in length to the East-West road between Bywater and the Brandywine.[207]

It is true that other distances between locations along the East-West Road do not harmonise so felicitously with the West Midlands. Bidford, Alcester and Studley were the three main population centres on Icknield Street between the Avon and Birmingham prior to the expansion of Redditch in the 1960s. Similarly, Budgeford, Whitfurrows and Frogmorton are the only three named villages on the fictional straight road from the heart of the Shire to Buckland, itself a name perhaps derived in part from the real Buckle Street. 'Budgeford in Bridgefields' could be a nod to Bidford-on-Avon, but the map 'A Part of the Shire' places it too far west of the Brandywine Bridge. Frogmorton is 'about twenty-two miles from the [Brandywine] Bridge' (*RK*, 1001) and 'about eighteen miles to Bywater' (*RK*, 1003), but Studley is only around eight miles from Bidford. Nevertheless, it does have an etymological connection with Frogmorton, as to the south of Studley is Coughton Court, since 1409 the seat of the Throckmorton family. According to the etymologist Mike Jenkins, the name 'Throckmorton' is probably derived from the Old English *þroc* (or *throc*), which refers to a beam of wood such as is used in the construction of a jetty, and as a whole means 'the place near the mere with a wooden jetty': an image which the name of the tavern in Tolkien's Frogmorton, *The Floating Log*, may be intended to evoke.[208]

*Figure 9: A few furrows in a field are all that remains of the Roman fort at Alcester (Photo: W.A. Baker).*

Like Alcester, Whitfurrows is 'about halfway from the Bridge to Frogmorton' (*RK*, 1003), but that is a distance of eleven miles, as opposed to only four between Alcester and Bidford. But again, Whitfurrows may be etymologically linked to Alcester, which takes its prefix from the River Alne, a name derived from the Brittonic *alaunо*, meaning 'shining' or 'white'; the suffix comes from the Latin for 'camp', of which only a few ditches (or furrows) have been rediscovered.[209]

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[207] Evidence for a rebuttal can be found in Letter 210, where Tolkien writes: '*The Lord of the Rings* may be a "fairy-story", but it takes place in the Northern hemisphere of this earth: miles are miles, days are days, and weather is weather... [It is a world] in which as I have said "miles are miles"'.

[208] Jenkins. 156.

[209] James, Alan G.. The Brittonic Language in the Old North: A Guide to the Place-Name Evidence, Vol. II. 2019. 8. Seel also 'Our Warwickshire'. *Heritage and Culture, Warwickshire*. 2022.

The next Shire landmark close to the East-West Road in the direction of Hobbiton, 'nearly fourteen miles' west of Frogmorton (*RK*, 1003) and therefore four miles from Bywater, is the Three-Farthing Stone. Marking the very centre of Tolkien's Shire, this feature is often said to have been inspired by the Four Shire Stone near Moreton-in-Marsh, the former meeting place of the counties of Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire. However, another candidate is to be found half a mile to the west of Icknield Street in the suburbs of Birmingham. Monks' Bridge, which carries Harborne Lane over the ancient boundary of the Bourn Brook, 'used to be beloved by children because on it they could be in three counties at once, viz., Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Staffordshire'.[210]

It may be that the origins of this lost intersection went back even further than the creation of the English shires in the 10th century, for southern Mercia once bordered the northern lands of the Hwicce on the Birmingham plateau, still remembered in names such as Northfield and King's Norton.[211] The territories of least two Hwiccan folk-groups, the *Husmeræ* (of the Stour valley) and the *Stoppingas* (of west Warwickshire), as well as the Mercian *Tomsætan* (of the Tame valley) and *Pencersætan* (of the Penk valley), converged in what is now the south of the city.[212] In her book *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape*, Della Hooke suggests that the wooded 'southern fringe of the plateau may have been a region of inter-commoning between folk-groups'.[213] Going even further back in history, Hodder points out that Birmingham was at the junction of three Iron Age tribal territories (that of the *Corieltauvi* to the east, the *Cornovii* to the north-west and the *Dobunni* to the south-west) and says this fact may explain the location of the Roman fort at Metchley, which overlooks Monks' Bridge.[214]

The practice in England of associating such boundary points with one or more 'stones' goes back at least as far as the time of the Anglo-Saxons, who sometimes used for this purpose great boulders, immovable except by the glaciers which had deposited them at the end of an ice age. Where the counties of Yorkshire, Westmorland and Lancashire met, a boulder known as 'The County Stone' has denoted the spot for almost a thousand years. The West Midlands is home to a surprisingly large number of glacial boulders or 'erratics', some of which were transported by glaciers from northern Wales around 450,000 years ago. One such exposed erratic, 'The Gilbertstone', was used from as early as the year 972 to signify a sharp turn in the boundary between Warwickshire and Worcestershire in what is now east Birmingham.[215] Many more boulders lay beneath the surface and were only uncovered by the construction boom in the late nineteenth century. Birmingham's boulders became the subject of great public interest and speculation. For example, the so-called 'Aston Webb boulder', now located outside the

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[210] Leonard. 12. Today, the bridge is more commonly known as Harborne Bridge. 'Monks' Bridge' derives from the name of the family who operated the reservoir's sluices from its construction in the early 1800s until it was drained in the 1950s, and who lived at the now demolished 245 Harborne Lane.

[211] Hooke. 86 & 173.

[212] The territory of a further Hwicce tribe, the *Arosætna* (based in the Arrow valley), also extended northwards from the Avon (Hooke. 93). It is tempting to speculate that their name may have inspired the group of proto-Hobbits known as 'Harfoots'.

[213] Hooke. 86.

[214] Hodder. 48.

[215] I am grateful to Elizabeth Andrews, Project Manager of *Birmingham's Erratics*, for providing me with this information.

Physics Department of the University of Birmingham, was discovered during the construction of the campus in 1909, while Tolkien was a schoolboy.[216]

Today, there is no sign of a 'Three Shire Stone' in the vicinity of Monks' Bridge. Two visible boulders do lie beside the Bourn Brook east of this point, one of them within eighty metres of the bridge; however, they are part of a modern art installation and of the wrong rock type to be ancient residents of the area.[217] Nor do the 1904 and 1905 Ordnance Survey maps of the area record any stones of significance in existence at that time. The 1885 and 1888 O.S. maps, however, contain the same small but tantalising detail, brought to my attention by Julie Schroder (a member of the Erratics Project steering group). At a point equivalent to around 200 metres north of Monks' Bridge, in what is now the southbound lane of the A4040, both maps are annotated with the word 'stone'. Whether this lost feature was a 'Three Shire Stone' may yet be clarified by further research.


*Figure 10: Two maps showing the former county boundaries of Staffs (blue), Warks (pink) and Worcs (green) where they converge at Monks' Bridge, and the location of a possible 'Three Shire Stone'.*

[216] Lapworth Museum of Geology, the University of Birmingham. *Birmingham's Boulders – Temporary Exhibition*. 2022. Reverend Henry W. Crosskey (b. 1826), one of the late-Victorian period's foremost authorities on glacial boulders was a neighbour of Tolkien's aunt, Edith Incledon (née Suffield) in the early 1890s. Crosskey lived at 117 Gough Road before his death in 1893. Tolkien's aunt and her family were living at no. 81 when the 1891 census took place.

[217] 'Boulders by Bike: A Cycle Tour around South West Birmingham'. *ErraticsProject.Org*. 2022. Two much larger boulders were found less than half a kilometre away in 1899 and 1926, respectively, and are now on display in Selly Oak Park.

Some may think it an unlikely spot to inspire the focal point of Tolkien's Shire, as it is not a part of Birmingham usually associated with the author, but Monks' Bridge is positioned between the three areas of the West Midlands which Tolkien knew best: it is two miles south of the Oratory in Edgbaston (marked 'E' on the map above), three miles west of the Suffield enclave around Wake Green ('WG'), and four miles north-east of Rednal ('R').

Bywater, the next settlement along Tolkien's imaginary East-West Road, is fundamentally a hilltop village, below which a road curves around a large pool. Such a description could also apply to Edgbaston, especially around the turn of the twentieth century when Edgbaston Pool was larger and much of the Chad Valley (or 'Strawberry Vale') was given over to leisure activities, including archery, a favourite activity of Hobbits.[218] Tolkien would have been quite familiar with the road which curves around the Pool, Edgbaston Park Road, as it constituted the nicer cycling route between his neighbourhood, close to the Oratory, and the King Edward's School playing fields on Eastern Road.[219] Carpenter tells us that Tolkien 'spent many afternoons on the muddy school sports ground in Eastern Road, from which there was a long ride home, often in the dark with the oil-lamp flickering on the back of his bicycle'.[220]

*Figure 11: Edgbaston Pool.*

[218] Dargue, 'Strawberry Vale'. This area suffered its own 'scouring' after the War, when the houses known as the Vale, Maple Bank and Wyddrington were bought by the University and then demolished to make way for modern blocks of student accommodation. See also 'Oldest Lawn Tennis Club in the World'. *Edgbaston Lawn Tennis and Archery Society*. 2022.

[219] These fields had hosted King Edward's School cricket matches since 1876. Journeying via the Bristol Road would have been an alternative, shorter route, but this arterial road was navigated by trams, for which we know Tolkien had little affection.

[220] Carpenter. 56.

Whereas Tolkien's East-West Road runs parallel to The Water (which is around 'a mile or two further south' (*FR*, 71)), the Bywater Road crosses that stream near an old flour-mill, before ascending to the twin neighbourhoods of Hobbiton, Underhill and Overhill. Similarly, Edgbaston Road crosses the River Rea where formerly stood Edgbaston (or Avern's) Mill, the existence of which was first recorded in 1231, with visible evidence of a mill-house persisting until the 1960s.[221] Edgbaston Road then climbs the slope beyond to merge with Alcester Road, which connects Moseley on the north side of Greenhill with Kings Heath on the south side.


*Figure 12: A 1905 O.S. map showing the route Tolkien took to Moseley from Edgbaston, including Edgbaston Road (purple), Salisbury Road (yellow), Alcester Road (green) and Chantry Road (orange); also, the houses where his aunt's family (1) and he (2) lived in c. 1900/01.*

To visit his various Suffield relations who inhabited this hilltop quarter, in his later school years Tolkien would have cycled up Edgbaston Road from the direction of the Oratory to the north-west. We know from a 1915 diary entry that he also travelled this route by the No. 1 bus, which reaches Moseley village green via Salisbury Road.[222] When it was laid in 1896, the latter road had

[221] Dargue, 'Edgbaston'. Watermills to grind corn into flour multiplied rapidly across England during the tenth century and several are known to have existed in Birmingham; however, Hodder tells us that there are no surviving or excavated remains of these medieval mill buildings (124). Trenching at the Edgbaston Mill site in 2001 located the wheel pit of the eighteenth-century structure (150).
[222] Burns. *Roots*. 216.

split the grounds of Moseley Hall, carving off a small private park on the north side. Among the first residents of Salisbury Road and Chantry Road able to circumambulate the estate's former fish pond had been the family of Tolkien's maternal aunt, Edith May Incledon.[223] And it would not be unreasonable to assume that a nine-year-old Tolkien, living less than four hundred metres away during the winter of 1900/01, had visited the house named 'Woodville' on Chantry Road and played with his cousins in the park. Thus, one can well imagine him peering into the earth-covered, eighteenth-century icehouse, wondering what manner of civilised subterranean creature had once dwelt in this brick-lined hole.[224]

*Figure 13: The icehouse in Moseley Park.*

A real equivalent for the site of the Battle of Bywater is difficult to locate, for *The Lord of the Rings* specifies a place about a furlong from the East-West Road (i.e. 220 yards, or perhaps 110 of 'our yards') which sounds typical of a holloway, running 'for some way sloping up between high banks with low hedges on top' (*RK*, 1015). Moreover, there should be an old sand-pit nearby containing the ruffian dead, as well as a great stone in a garden marking the Hobbit grave. It may be that the battle had no geographical inspiration and was instead, as I shall argue in a second

[223] The 1901 Census record showing the family of Tolkien's maternal aunt (the Incledons) living at 'Woodville' on Chantry Road, now no. 56.
[224] For further information concerning Moseley Hall's icehouse, see Hodder. 159.

essay on the need for a Shire Way, based on an historical account of the Birmingham Chartist riots of July 1839, written by Tolkien's grandfather. There is no obvious connection to any of the holloways in south Birmingham, such as the former line of the Bristol Road, remembered in the name Holloway Head.[225] Westbourne Road, Harborne Road and Edgbaston Park Road are all sunk to some small degree into the hillside of Chad Valley, and one could speculate that the battle is an attempt by Tolkien to fabulise the origins of the ancient weapons unearthed around Metchley Fort, including the Anglo-Saxon spear discovered in Harrison's Road in 1877 and put on display in Birmingham Museum.[226] However, a more convincing case can be made for the Jewellery Quarter, one and a half miles north along Icknield Street, where Tolkien's own relatives are buried in Key Hill Cemetery. The adjacent Brookfields Cemetery used to be a pit from which casting sand for metalworking was obtained and just inside its railings can be found another glacial boulder, long known as the War Stone.[227]

There is little else along the northern section of Icknield Street which agrees with the East-West Road, although it would be remiss not to mention the Dwarf Holes, caves delved into the Sandstone cliffs along the River Tame at Copeley Hill. These were mentioned in a record dating from 1490 and were rediscovered in 1900, but tragically destroyed in 1973 to make way for Spaghetti Junction.[228] A case could also be made that Waymeet, 'fifteen mile' from Hobbiton (*RK*, 1010), corresponds to Kingstanding, where Icknield Street has of old met the roads from West Bromwich (to the south-west) and Castle Bromwich (to the south-east) seven or eight miles north of Edgbaston. Here squats a late Neolithic or early Bronze Age burial mound, now much reduced in size, from which Charles I reviewed his troops in October 1642 and where 'a considerable treasure of silver chains' was found in the early nineteenth century.[229]

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[225] Hodder tells us that these ancient roads, which gradually sank with the corrosion caused by centuries of human and animal traffic, include Bell Holloway in Northfield and Yardley Green Road near the River Cole (130). Holloway Head was the intended destination of the Chartist procession on Monday 13th July 1839.
[226] Dargue, 'Edgbaston'.
[227] Hodder. 136.
[228] Dargue, 'Dwarfholes'.
[229] G.B. Benton (1906), as quoted in Hodder. 25. See also Dargue, 'Kingstanding'.

## The East Worcestershire Ridgeway

The East-West Road is, of course, the way taken by the four Hobbit companions when they return home at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. But Frodo, Sam and Pippin left the Shire by another route which runs roughly parallel to the south, at first picking up a 'narrow road' through Green Hill Country, to Woodhall, Stock and the Bucklebury Ferry. In this section, I will provide an abridged description of their journey to the ferry in three parts. These will be highlighted in blue to distinguish them from my comparative sketch of a real road of antiquity in the West Midlands, the East Worcestershire Ridgeway.

The narrow road described in *The Fellowship of the Ring* may be at least as old as its lowland counterpart to the north but it is of poorer quality, described at one point as a 'deeply cloven track' (*FR*, 71) and at another as 'not much used, being hardly fit for carts' (*FR*, 74). The byway is initially characterised by its circuitousness, both in terms of vertical rolling and horizontal winding 'like a piece of string': it will climb to the top of one hill 'in a weary zig-zagging sort of way' before running steeply downhill. But just before reaching Woody End the road straightens and keeps to level ground 'for some miles' (*FR*, 76). Finally, surrounded by thickets of trees, it bends left and down towards the Water and the Brandywine, 'making for Stock' (*FR*, 77); at which point the hobbits take a winding lane that branches right to Woodhall.

If one accepts the premise that the East-West Road is akin to Icknield Street turned through ninety degrees on a map, then Green Hill Country coincides with the elevated tract of the Black Country which stretches from Sedgley Beacon near Dudley to the Rowley Hills, thence to Quinton, Bearwood and Frankley, before merging with the even higher Clent, Waseley and Lickey Hills of North Worcestershire. The latter at least were places which Tolkien knew and loved, for he spent the summer of 1904, the happiest of his life, in Rednal. Later, he often returned to the Lickeys: with Edith by bicycle, to visit his aunt's family in Barnt Green and to sketch the scenery. These hills were also the setting for what the historian G.B. Grundy, another of Tolkien's contemporaries at Oxford, described as 'one of the most remarkable ridgeways in England'.[230] Tolkien may well have read Grundy's three-part essay 'The Ancient Highways and Tracks of Worcestershire and the Middle Severn Basin' shortly before he began writing *The Lord of the Rings*, for it appeared in the 1934 and 1935 editions of *The Archaeological Journal*.[231] In it, Grundy explains that, prior to the seventeenth century and as far back as the Mesolithic, the lowlands of England were 'practically untraversable save for short distances in wet weather' and hence wayfarers instead 'chose the comb of a ridge, where any ridge existed which ran in the required direction'.[232] He then proceeds to set out in detail the line of the 'great north and south highway of East Worcestershire' along 'The Stow-on-the-Wold – Evesham – Dudley Ridgeway'.[233]

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[230] Grundy, G.B.. 'The Ancient Highways and Tracks of Worcestershire and the Middle Severn Basin, Pt. II'. *The Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 91. 1934. 242.

[231] Grundy's essay also discusses in outline the course of Icknield Street. According to Tolkien, he began writing *The Lord of the Rings* in 1936 (Letter 131) or 1937 (Letter 226).

[232] Grundy. 66-7. See also Jenkins. 176.

[233] According to Jenkins, the name is also venerable, for the track was called *Ricgweg* or *Rycgweye* in Anglo-Saxon charters (180).

North of Birmingham the ridgeway passes a Wood Hall near Boscobel House, where the future Charles II hid among the branches of an oak tree while attempting to evade capture following defeat at the Battle of Worcester in 1651, a journey of flight and evasion which Garth says 'had special resonance for Catholics like Tolkien'.[234] However, the section between Birmingham and Evesham is more comparable geographically to Tolkien's narrow road through the Green Hills. Like the narrow road, the ridgeway negotiates undulating terrain as it threads its way from Quinton to Woodgate, Frankley Beeches, Waseley Hill and among the fir-woods and streams of the Lickeys. At this point the ridgeway passes through Barnt Green, close to the home of Tolkien's Incledon relations, the subject of more than one of his paintings.[235] Perhaps this cottage on Fiery Hill once afforded him a morning view, such as Frodo surveys, of 'a red sun, mist, and gold and red autumn trees' (*FR*, 72).

In accordance with Tolkien's description, the rolling landscape and the winding course of the real ridgeway straightens out between Vigo and Headless Cross, the latter being at an elevation (*c.* 170m) which the ridgeway does not exceed until it reaches the Cotswolds on the south side of the Avon. Although a clear line of sight is now impeded by buildings of modern construction, it is at least theoretically possible to overlook from Headless Cross the country once dominated by the medieval forest of Feckenham, just as the hobbits pause to look across the Woody End towards the Brandywine River (*FR*, 73).[236]

*Figure 14: 'In front of them they saw the lower lands dotted with small clumps of trees that melted away in the distance to a brown woodland haze.' A view over Feckenham, from Callow Hill towards the Malverns.*

[234] Garth. 115.

[235] Note that the name Barnt Green derives from the Old English *bernet* ('burning') and as a whole means 'the woodland place cleared by burning'. This image is echoed at a later point in Tolkien's story by Bonfire Glade in the Old Forest, where the Hobbits burnt hundreds of trees (*FR*, 111).

[236] Although 'forests' in the medieval sense were not necessarily heavily wooded, the number of places names in central and north-east Worcestershire containing the suffix *-lēah* (meaning 'woodland clearing' in Old English), e.g. Bentley and Bradley Green, confirm the presence of woodland in the area which became the Forest of Feckenham (Jenkins. 139). Hooke cites evidence in Anglo-Saxon charters (172) to suggest that the large parish of Feckenham 'represents a tract of land in country which was still heavily-wooded in the early medieval period' (137). Today, little of the original woodlands are left, but ancient trees are found in greater density than elsewhere.

From here the ridgeway descends very gradually, sticking to the high ground until reaching the site of a 12th century nunnery, south of Cookhill. The modern Evesham Road (B4088) continues straight on, down towards Harvington and the Avon in the same way that the narrow road makes for Stock, a village well-known to Pippin for the *Golden Perch* inn and supposedly the 'best beer in the Eastfarthing' (*FR*, 88). Harvington also has an old pub, *The Golden Cross*, which Tolkien could have had in mind as the model for the *Golden Perch*.[237] Another word for 'cross' is 'rood', which is also an archaic English measurement of length: there are forty roods in every furlong, and in every rood there are forty perches. Meanwhile, the ancient ridgeway runs south-west from the Cistercian priory, through Weethley Wood. This could be related to the lane that branches right 'through a wood of ancient oak-trees'.[238]


*Figure 15: The Golden Cross at Harvington.*

The hobbits' encounter amid the trees with Gildor's company of elves is both a relief and the moment they deviate from Frodo's planned route to Bucklebury, contributing to their bewilderment the following day. The description of their journey becomes hazier, which conveys the hobbits' weariness and awed submission to their ethereal guides, but makes any attempt to

[237] 'The Golden Cross, Harvington'. *Harvington History*. 2020.

[238] One alternative must be considered. It appears that Frodo's original intention had been to follow the lane as far as Woodhall, where (according to the Shire map) it terminates, and then to cut back to the narrow road in the vicinity of Stock. That, and the beer at the *Golden Perch*, is anyway what Pippin anticipates. However, after an evening meal inside the hollow trunk of a great, decayed tree, the hobbits fall in with a company of elves. In deciding how best to emulate this portion of the hobbits' journey, one might contemplate diverging from the ridgeway around two miles north of the Cookhill nunnery, near Astwood Bank or New End. In his chapter on Worcestershire in *The Roots of Tolkien's Middle Earth*, Robert Blackham relays a local legend around Dragon Farm in Edgiock, a short distance west of the ridgeway, where the farmer was once plagued by the inexplicable disappearance of his sheep (126-27). The farmer consults a holy man, who tells him to watch and pray. The next night it is discovered that the lambs are being seized and hauled inside a huge oak tree by two dragons. After killing the dragons, the farmer enters the hollow tree and finds the space is so large that a coach could turn around inside it. Whether Tolkien knew of this tale is unknown, but it surely would have appealed to him. It should also be noted that oak trees were religious symbols in both British paganism and Christianity, and 'holy oaks' engraved with the sign of the cross (such as the *cristel mæl ac* of Tardebigge, Worcestershire) could be found at the side of roads (Hooke. 169).

locate them in a real landscape more challenging. We are told that it is 'some miles' to 'the woods on the hills above Woodhall', in a direction that will shorten the hobbits' onward journey (*FR*, 81). The lane descends through a wood like the ridgeway near Weethley, but the elves then turn aside, passing between thickets on the right and onto a hidden 'green ride', which ascends 'a shoulder of the hills that stood out into the lower land of the river-valley'. In relation to the River Avon, such a description could apply to the area known as the Lenches (from the Anglo-Saxon for 'rising ground', *kline, hlinc or hlenc*), which are directly north of Evesham, just as the hills above Woodhall are directly west of Bucklebury (*FR*, 88).[239] The Lenches include woody eminences named 'Rough Hill' and the 'Rough Hills'.[240] It is perhaps only coincidence that, of the thick vegetation on the slopes he is forced to scramble down, Pippin complains 'The country is rough round here'.[241]

In light of his conversation with Gildor above Woodhall, Frodo elects to cut straight across country to the east, so as to 'make for Bucklebury Ferry as quickly as possible' (*FR*, 88); although, as Pippin predicts, the hobbits end up losing their way amid the streams and woods of the Marish. After they glimpse Buck Hill across the Brandywine, they are able to correct their course and, with the help of Farmer Maggot and his waggon, approach Bucklebury Ferry in darkness, at last crossing the river within sight of Brandy Hall, the ancestral home of Frodo's Brandybuck relations. Likewise, between Atch Lench and Sheriffs Lench, the East Worcestershire Ridgeway turns due south and maintains that heading until it reaches the Avon at Evesham, a town which according to Grundy owes its size to its 'being at a point where a great ancient ridgeway crossed a river'.[242]

As I have mentioned, the Vale of Evesham had been the ancestral home of Tolkien's maternal family, the Suffields, for at least two centuries before his great-great-grandparents William and Lucy Suffield moved to Birmingham in 1810. The young Tolkien was more interested in the history of his mother's side of the family than that of his deceased father's relations, and he came to feel an almost preternatural bond to his Worcestershire ancestors. As Carpenter records, 'Being in a sense a homeless child... he held on to this concept of Evesham in particular and the whole West Midland area in general as being his true home. He once wrote: "Though a Tolkien by name, I am a Suffield by tastes, talents and upbringing."'[243] Garth tells us that while an Oxford undergraduate, Tolkien delighted in making train journeys to the Vale of Evesham.[244]

The precise neighbourhood in which the largest portion of Tolkien's Suffield forebears resided was Bengeworth, southeast of Evesham and on the opposite bank of the Avon. But

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[239] Jenkins. 153.
[240] In this context, 'rough' means 'lacking soil suitable for agriculture'. Rubery, a now suburbanised village the foot of the Lickey Hills, derives from the Old English *ruh-beorg*, meaning 'rough hill'. It was still known as 'Roughberrow' in the 16th century (Jenkins. 155).
[241] A potential flaw in the idea of connecting the hills above Woodhall with the Lenches is that Frodo reckons the distance between the 'rough country' and Bucklebury to be eighteen miles in a straight line (*FR*, 89). The Lenches are at most 7 miles from Evesham. Inkberrow, at 9 miles, would better match the 2:1 distance ratio previously discussed.
[242] Grundy. 244.
[243] Carpenter. 27.
[244] Garth. 15.

Tolkien may also have heard from his grandfather that at least one ancestor, the renowned John Suffield who was 'engraver in ordinary to his majesty [William IV]', lived a short distance downstream in Hampton, on the southwestern bank of the U-shaped river bend in which Evesham sits.[245] There, between the 11th and 13th centuries, monks from Evesham Abbey cultivated vines on the low hill in whose shadow the village nests, which they reached by what is now one of the oldest surviving river crossings in the country, Hampton Ferry.[246] Whether or not Tolkien had the ferry in mind while describing Bucklebury Ferry in *The Lord of the Rings*, it would be a fitting and desirable destination on the Shire Way.[247]


*Figure 16: Hampton Ferry, Evesham.*

*Figure 17: An illustration of Bucklebury Ferry by J.R.R. Tolkien, c.* 1938.

[245] 'John Suffield, abt. 1773-1833'. *WikiTree*. 2022.

[246] A *vinea novella* (a 'young vineyard') is mentioned by the Domesday survey as having been planted at this location (Hooke. 221).

[247] South of the River Avon, the topographical parallels with Tolkien's Shire are less pronounced. However, one could make a case that Manor Farm in Hinton on the Green, where Tolkien and his family stayed with Edith's schoolfriend Mabel Sheaf during the 1930s, is geographically equivalent to Crickhollow (See *The Tolkien Family Album*. Houghton Mifflin. 1992. 67).

# Conclusion

2nd September 2023 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of J.R.R. Tolkien's death. Were he still living, he would by then be 131 years old – the age at which Bilbo Baggins, in *The Lord of the Rings*, becomes the oldest ever Hobbit and sails away to the Undying Lands. 2023 would therefore be a fitting year in which to put aside any unwarranted embarrassment and celebrate the role which the West Midlands played in the life and works of the world-famous author. The inauguration of a long-distance walking route would be the most apposite and effective means of doing so. This footpath across the region which Tolkien called home could connect many of the sites he frequented in his adolescence and to which he felt an instinctive affinity. Moreover, since the West Midlands influenced his conception of the Shire to a greater extent than many realise, by threading its way between the hill at Moseley and the ferry at Evesham, this path would roughly emulate the flight of Frodo and his friends from the Black Riders in Book One of *The Lord of the Rings*. The Shire Way would be a more complete and authentic experience of Middle-earth than is available anywhere else in the world, and the possibility of re-living an adventure that could formerly exist only in the mind's eye or on a screen doubtless holds an attraction for some of the many millions of Tolkien readers. They may hear of the Shire Way and, like Frodo, muse to themselves, 'Perhaps I shall cross the River myself one day' (*FR*, 43).

Ben Felderhof
November 2022

# Appendix

## A summary of the geography of the Shire

Besides the texts of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, a third source of detailed information concerning the Shire is a map, entitled 'A Part of the Shire', which appeared in the first and subsequent editions of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings*). Although the published final version was drawn by J.R.R. Tolkien's son, Christopher, it was based on sketch-maps which the author himself had made and updated as he wrote.[248] Like his fictional languages, Tolkien found maps invaluable as tools in world-building and plot development. There had been no map of the Shire in *The Hobbit*, but it was one of the first things he created when writing the sequel and he was quite clear about its impact upon the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*: 'I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit (generally with meticulous care for distances).'[249] This statement makes all the more consequential the question of which real landscapes may have influenced Tolkien's geographical conception of the Shire.

'A Part of the Shire' was reworked several times before and after publication. Christopher Tolkien first produced a version in 1943, at which point he had some freedom to elaborate on the northern area of the Shire. He inserted (with permission) place-names like 'Nobottle', while the author himself requested the addition of further labels, such as 'Budgeford' and 'Bridgefields'.[250] J.R.R. Tolkien excised some names 'he thought poorly of' when Christopher undertook a further re-drawing in 1954, and he added 'The Yale' to the map in time for the publication of the second edition in 1966.[251] Even so, the elder Tolkien was never entirely satisfied with the exactitude of 'A Part of the Shire': he felt that Bucklebury Ferry was shown to be about 'three miles too far north' and that a wood described in the chapter 'A Short Cut to Mushrooms' was missing.[252] Furthermore, the spelling of several names and the course of what appears to be the 'Hobbiton/Bywater Road' is not consistent with text of *The Lord of the Rings*.[253] For these reasons, although the map catalogues numerous locations that are never mentioned in the story and provides in some ways a more complete overview of the terrain, my understanding of the geographical features of the Shire is guided primarily by the written narrative.[254]

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[248] Tolkien felt he did not have the cartographic skills himself to create a map of the Shire that could fit onto a single page and still be meaningful (Letter 141: From a letter to Allen & Unwin (9 October 1953)).
[249] Letter 144. Carpenter (198) also recorded him as saying, 'If you're going to have a complicated story you must work to a map; otherwise you'll never make a map of it afterwards'.
[250] Garth. 19-20.
[251] See Carpenter. 221.
[252] Letter 274: From a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Co. (28 July 1965).
[253] Is it Brockenborings [map] or Brockenbores [text]? Is it Waymoot [map] or Waymeet [text]? Is it spelt Bindbole or Bindbale on the map? What seems to be the 'Hobbiton Road' runs east of the Hill; in Tolkien's illustrations it runs west.
[254] In Letter 276, Tolkien indicated to Dick Plotz that even 'A Part of the Shire' records many fewer place-names than Tolkien had included in his own sketches.


*Figure 18: Tolkien's 1937/8 sketch-map of the Shire.*

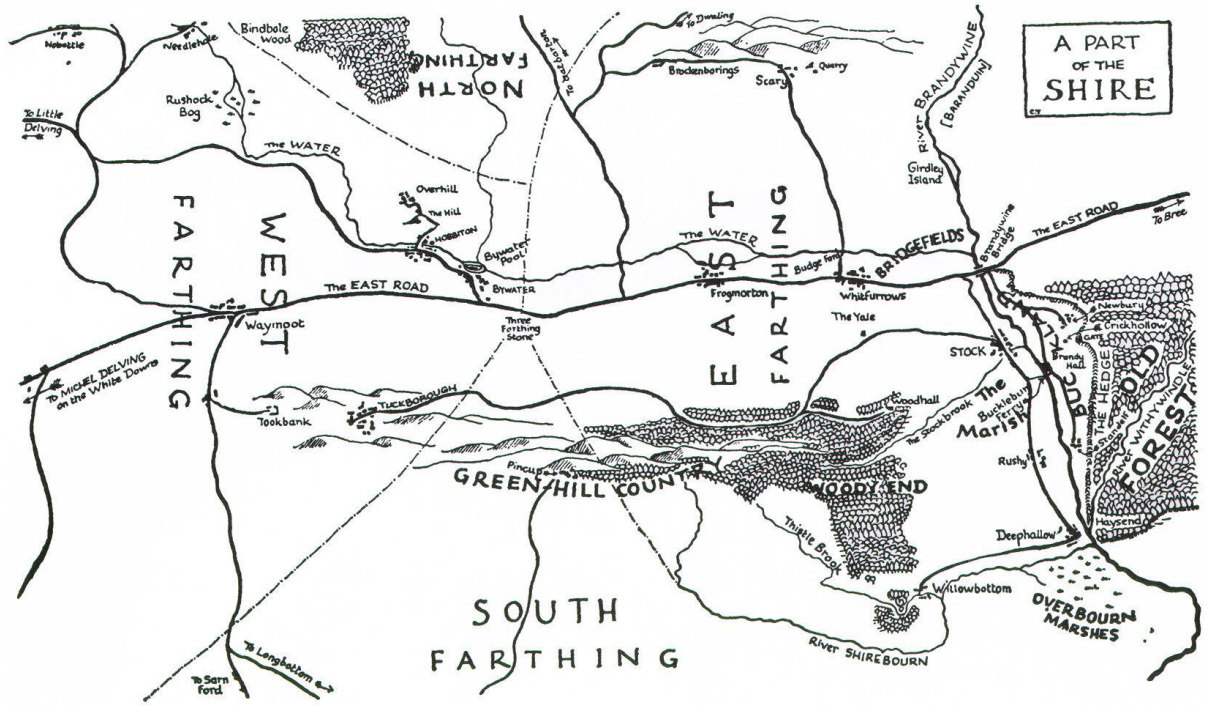


*Figure 19: The entirety of the published map entitled 'A Part of the Shire'.*

In the texts of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, most of the Shire-based action takes place in Bagginsland, the area at the heart of the Shire where the Baggins family have lived for time out of mind, though it is no longer predominantly populated by them. Bagginsland is centred on the old village of Hobbiton, sometimes referred to as Hobbiton-across-the-Water, for it is dug into all sides of The Hill (or Hobbiton Hill) which sits in the valley of a small river or stream called The Water. The Water flows parallel to the ancient East-West Road (or East Road) at a distance, west of Hobbiton, of between one and two miles. After 'a good forty miles' (*RK*, 1000), The Water flows into the Brandywine River near the Brandywine Bridge.

The most notable building in Hobbiton is an old flour-mill powered by The Water. Under Lotho's rule, the Mill is temporarily replaced by a large-chimneyed brick building that straddles the stream. However, the most luxurious Hobbit dwelling on either side of The Water is Bag End, built in the neighbourhood of Underhill (as opposed to 'over The Hill') by Bungo Baggins for his wife, Belladonna Took. It is subsequently the residence of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, though it has room enough for 'as big a family as you could wish for' (*RK*, 1025). The numerous wood-panelled rooms of Bag End are accessed via a single hallway, and only the rooms on the left side have windows, which face 'westward' (*RK*, 1017 & *FR*, 25) over the garden and The Water. We may reasonably assume, therefore, that Bag End's round, green door faces approximately south. On the west side of Bag End, a long sloping path runs through the garden to a low place in the bottom hedge and to the meadows beyond. Across the meadows, at the bottom of the Hill on its western side, is a gate opening onto a narrow lane. This route from Bag End avoids the village of Hobbiton. Fifteen miles west from Hobbiton, across country, is Waymeet (*RK,* 1010).

From the gates of Bag End near the top of the Hill, towards the centre of the village, runs the Hill Road. South of Bag End, the Hill Road passes the large Party Field in which the Party Tree (and later a mallorn tree) stands. A short way further down the road and round a corner (*FR*, 70) is a turning on the right to Bagshot Row, which adjoins the Party Field. It is possible to cut along Bagshot Row to reach the lane on the west side of the Hill. At Number 3 Bagshot Row (the third of three Hobbit-holes) live the gardeners past and present of Bag End, Sam and 'Gaffer' Gamgee.[255] When the original Bagshot Row is dug up by the Chief's Men and turned into a sand and gravel quarry, the restored Hobbit-holes of 'New Row' are excavated in the 'southward face' of The Hill (*RK*, 1022).

Further down the slope, the Hill Road either becomes or joins the Bywater Road, which continues past the Old Grange and crosses The Water near the Mill.[256] On the south side of The Water, along each side of the road, is built the 'mean houses' of 'new' Hobbiton village. The Gaffer is re-housed in one such house, not above a mile from the end of Bywater. At some point along the Bywater Road is a small inn called *The Ivy Bush.*

After climbing a mile or more from The Water, what is now the Hobbiton Road (*RK*, 1006) reaches *The Green Dragon* inn, the first house of Bywater. The village of Bywater, a more significant settlement than Hobbiton, is around another corner of the road, which now runs

[255] As well as Marigold, Sam's younger sister, and perhaps also Widow Rumble (*RK*, 1024).
[256] The Old Grange sat on the west side of the road, prior to its demolition and replacement with rows of tarred sheds.

(seemingly downhill) close to an avenue of trees on the bank of a wide, grey pool.[257] There is a pleasant row of Hobbit-holes (subsequently deserted) along the north side of the pool. The road continues away from Bywater to join the East-West Road. Before this juncture, the Hobbit rebels build one of an unspecified number of barriers during the Scouring of the Shire.

Resolving the question of the number of barriers is helpful in clarifying the layout of Bywater, for we are told that they are erected 'across the road at each end of the village' (*RK*, 1009). Although barriers are mentioned on three occasions, it is probable that there are only two barriers and therefore two main ways out of Bywater, as the map suggests. If so, the 'lower' barrier which so dumbfounds the fatigued troop of Shirriffs upon their late arrival from Frogmorton (*RK*, 1009) must be the same as the 'stout barrier of old farmcarts upturned' encountered by the ruffians arriving from Waymeet the next day (*RK*, 1015). Here, on the west side of the road as it bends between high banks mounted by low hedges, around a furlong (220 yards) from the East-West Road, is the site of the Battle of Bywater. The Hobbit grave lies on this hill-side, marked by a great stone in a garden; the Battle Pit containing the dead ruffians is also nearby. Given the existence of a 'lower' barrier, a second ('upper') barrier must logically be that which closes surreptitiously behind the ruffians from Hobbiton (*RK*, 1010). However, Tolkien is not clear on this matter and it is conceivable that the ruffians from Waymeet take a third route into Bywater, which branches off further west from the East-West Road.[258] We know for sure that Bywater is centred around the confluence with one other road not marked on the map: South Lane, which runs towards the farm of Tom Cotton, the chief person in the village.

A short distance south of the East-West Road, four miles east of Bywater, is the Three-Farthing Stone, which is 'as near the centre of the Shire as no matter' (*RK*, 1003 & 1023). This is where Sam scatters into the air what little is left of the dust from Galadriel's box and utters a blessing. Beyond the Stone to the south, at the western end of the Green Hills, lies Tookland, the folkland where most of the Took family live. Pippin's father, Paladin, farms the land around Whitwell, but the older and more notable village is nearby Tuckborough, where the ancestral residence of the Tooks, Great Smials, is situated, about fourteen miles across the fields from Bywater (*RK*, 1010).[259] In Tookland can be found a hard but narrow road, which climbs away from the East-West Road before rolling up and down the skirts of the Green Hills towards Woody End, Woodhall, Stock, and the Bucklebury Ferry.

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[257] Here, Sam once paddled with Rosie Cotton and her brothers, feeling the cool mud between his toes (*RK*, 939).

[258] The 'Bywater Road' and the 'Hobbiton Road' appear to be different names for the same thoroughfare, depending on which village is in the direction being travelled. However, there remains the possibility that the Hobbiton Road curves around the Pool from the east before being subsumed by the greater Bywater Road beyond the village of Bywater. The Bywater Road may then join the East Road near the site of the battle, no more than four miles further west (for the ruffians from Waymeet continue 'tramping along the East Road' after being reported as four miles distant from the village (*RK*, 1014-15)). Some evidence for this theory is that when the ruffians outside *The Green Dragon* are put to flight in the direction of Hobbiton, they run away 'up the Hobbiton Road' (*RK*, 1006); however, when the hobbits later draw near old Hobbiton across the Water, we are told that 'all along the Bywater Road every tree had been felled' (*RK*, 1016). If the hobbits are walking the same road in the same direction as the ruffians, what is the explanation (other than an authorial error) for the difference in name?

[259] The Great Smials consists of both a house and deep holes in the Green Hills. It has a large library, which may be the very same old and unchanged room where the Old Took, Pippin's great-great-grandfather Gerontius, lived for many years.

East of the Three-Farthing Stone one enters the East Farthing. The next settlement on the East-West Road, about eighteen miles east of Bywater and twenty-two miles west of the Brandywine Bridge (*RK*, 1001 & 1003), is the village of Frogmorton, where *The Floating Log* inn has a good reputation.[260] South of the East-West Road is the Woody End, a wild and sparsely populated corner of the East Farthing. At its west end it consists of lower lands with small clumps of trees, eastwards becoming a denser woodland of ancient oaks and a haunt of wandering elves. At its most easterly extent, some outlying hills, whose slopes are covered with tangled woods, overlook the Marish, a lowland area of bogs, ditches, and wide grasslands to the west of the Brandywine River.

A district inhabited by the descendants of the bearded and water-loving Stoors, the Marish is bounded to the south by the village of Rushey, and to the north by a winding lane. This road leads first to the comparatively low-lying Yale, at the heart of Boffinland, before striking the causeway road north of the village of Stock.[261] South of the Stock-brook lies Farmer Maggot's Bamfurlong, a large thatched brick-house and farm-buildings amid a small clump of trees and surrounded by a wall. Rutted, and lined by two well-laid hedges, Maggot's lane begins at a gated field west of Bamfurlong and proceeds past the house for another mile or two to the causeway, a high-banked road running north-south beside a deep dike (*FR*, 96).

At the halfway point of its twenty-two-mile journey from Frogmorton to the slow, brown River Brandywine, the East-West Road passes through Whitfurrows. It then reaches Budgeford in Bridgefields, before crossing the river at the Brandywine Bridge (or 'the Bridge of Stone Bows').[262] The next crossing-point to the south is the Bucklebury Ferry, which is ten miles from the bridge (*FR*, 100) and directly east of Woodhall in the hills above the Marish; it is also five miles or more from the entrance to Maggot's lane (*FR,* 96). Ferry Lane is a hundred yards long, straight, well-kept and edged with large, white-washed stones (*FR*, 98). There are pairs of high white posts at either end, holding lamps. At the river there is a broad wooden landing-stage, with a large flat ferry-boat operated by use of a pole.

Where the ferry crosses to the eastern bank of the river sits the low-rising Buck Hill, at the front of which can be seen the many doors and round windows of Brandy Hall, the ancestral home of the Brandybucks.[263] Here Frodo spent his earliest years, before his parents died in a boating accident. Clustered around the eastern slopes of the hill is Bucklebury, the chief village of Buckland, which is a strip of land between the river and the Old Forest, over fifty miles (in a straight line) from Hobbiton.

Buckland was colonised by Hobbits from the south long ago and is now thickly inhabited. To prevent encroachment by the forest and outsiders, Buckland is bounded by a huge hedge

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[260] To the north of Frogmorton is Brockenbores, by the hills of Scary, where Fredegar 'Fatty' Bolger and his band of rebels hide before being smoked out by ruffians. The quarries at Scary are subsequently used by the ruffians to store their plunder.

[261] It is curious that Tolkien refers to the 'lowlands of the Yale' (*FR*, 77), for *yale* is an Anglicised version of the Welsh term for 'cultivated upland'. Of course, a yale is also a hybrid creature of mythology and heraldry. Stock is where the Puddifoots are the Hobbit family of greatest import.

[262] Budgeford is the home of Fatty Bolger.

[263] Like the Great Smials, Brandy Hall is a combination of house and excavations (begun by Gorhendad Oldbuck, who changed his name to Brandybuck). It, too, contains a large library.

called the High Hay, which runs in a curve of well over twenty miles from the North Gate at the Brandywine Bridge to another entrance in the south at Haysend (*FR*, 99), where the River Withywindle flows into the Brandywine. A road runs between the two entrances. It can be reached at the edge of Bucklebury by climbing the steep and winding path from the ferry, keeping Buck Hill and Brandy Hall on the left.[264]

These are the Shire districts and landmarks that feature most prominently in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and which are therefore of greatest relevance here.[265] My purpose in presenting such a lengthy description is not only to apprise any readers unfamiliar with the books in question, but also to draw attention to the surprising realism of the Shire landscape. It is a sizeable region, replete with settlements and homesteads, hills and woods, waterways and pathways, many with their own names, histories and characters, and all correlated with one another in terms of distance and orientation.

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[264] To reach the village of Crickhollow, one must travel northwards on the road for half a mile, before taking an undulating lane on the right and continuing for a couple miles more (*FR*, 100). Here, about an hour's ride from the High Hay, the Brandybucks built an old-fashioned country house, long and low like a Hobbit-hole, as a remote bolt-hole from the hectic Brandy Hall. The house is located away from the lane, surrounded by a belt of low trees and an outer hedge, in the middle of a wide circle of lawn.

[265] One could also mention the warmer South Farthing, where tobacco is grown at Longbottom and grapes at Old Winyards; or the fresh and fragrant uplands of the North Farthing, the scene in 1147 of Bandobras Took's victory over invading orcs at the Battle of Green Fields. The West Farthing is more populous, hosting such settlements as Waymeet, Hardbottle, the home of the Bracegirdles, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins's family, and Tighfield, where Sam's grandfather and his uncle Andy (the Gaffer's eldest brother) manufactured rope for many years. Here, too, is located the chief township of the Shire, Michel Delving, site of the Free Fair and the museum of the Mathom-house amid the chalky White Downs. Travelling still further west, one reaches the Far Downs, between 120 and 140 miles from the Brandywine Bridge, and then the West March. This border region, added to the Shire in 1452, features three high and ancient turrets atop the Tower Hills, below which sits Undertowers, home of the Fairbairns, the Wardens of the Westmarch and keepers of a large library of historical records.

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