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Chapters on Churches

By the Peripatetic Philosopher

*Reprinted, for the first time, from the North Wilts Herald, 5 January 1867.
Chapter I was printed in Number 3 of this Journal (1994) and Chapter II in
Number 4. This Chapter, which was also headed Chapter II, deals with
Jefferies' visit to Chiseldon.*

A cold morning was that of the other Sunday, wanting nothing of the true characteristics of December but frost and snow. Dirt in December is what one expects, still I was scarcely prepared for the indescribable mud through which I made my way: destination – Chiseldon. Manes of Macadam! Mighty enemy of mud! Thou hast done much, but I rejoice I have not the postman's morning walk. On entering the village of Coate, I once again passed over the bridge which spans a stream known as Coate water, and here observed inserted on the left-hand parapet, on the side furthest from Swindon, a stone with this mysterious inscription:

Here ends Coate Road.

This is the great Coate problem. Where ends Coate Road – on the side of the stream furthest from Swindon, or on that nearest the town? Those who live on either bank describe themselves as resident at Coate, who then shall decide? Where ends Coate Road? Shout it, and the echo replies, Where ends Coate Road? This is the reel in the bottle; one sees the stone, but how did it get there; this, like squaring the circle, runs into recurrent decimals, and, shout as long as you may, nothing will answer but, Where ends Coate Road? Some despairing of other solution, following the track of Pantagruel, visit the oracle of the bottle, *viz.*, the landlord of the Sun Inn, forty paces further. Useless: the weak-minded sink in contemplation of the mystery, the strong-minded proceed. I walk on, ascend the hill, and observe upon my left-hand a stile, upon my right a white swing gate. The stile, I am informed, leads to a region called Snodshill, but like

That impracticable place – Timbuctoo,
Geography finds no one to oblige her
With such a chart as may be safely stuck to.

One declares that Snodshill lies on this side of the brook, another the other; a third informs you that there are *two* brooks, a fourth, that it may be found between them. All depends upon the solution of the first query – Where ends Coate Road: Calculation would have then a fixed point to proceed from, a meridian, a local Greenwich, a data to get at the latitude. However, my watch informs me that it is already half-past ten, there is no time to be lost in investigation, accordingly I push open the white swing gate, enter a narrow road known as Day House lane, and here

commences another struggle with the mud. Passing under an avenue of bare-branched elms, I leave upon my right hand a large stone-built mansion known as Day House, and presently pause to contemplate – a little further on upon the left – a wide pond beside the road. I imagine a drunken man reeling in of a drunk night with the geese giving him a cackling welcome, and a distant turkey gabbling “halter! halter! halter!” as much as to say, drown yourself and escape the hangman’s rope. Convenient things I should think, these ponds, to get rid of the surplus part of the population. Further still, crossing a stream that passes over the road, and now much swollen by the recent rains, you pass through another white swing gate, known as Daniel’s, and reported to be haunted at dusk by a spectre rattling in chains. Certes, the lane just there must be dark enough at night, with its wooded high banks, to give rise to any superstition. On again, past Badbury Wick, past a brick-kiln, out at last upon the highway, leaving the mud behind. This is something like a road, just such a one as the friends of Macadam, if they had any sort of “idea” about them, must have conveyed him to his last resting place upon. Up a long, seemingly endless hill, and there stands a sign-post informing the traveller that Chiseldon lies upon the right, but all the signs of that village one perceives is a windmill, and some fir trees. However, a few steps, and church bells strike the ear; further, the battlemented church top is just visible, and one sees far away upon the right the distant town of Swindon with its steeple and tower. Louder and louder grow the chimes until turning the corner, the church rises high above one.

I observed something rather peculiar in shape just as I was about to enter the gate way, upon my left, and turning aside found that it was the village stocks. In the nineteenth century, within very plain hearing of the church bells, within six miles of a railway station, I actually beheld – *The Stocks*. In good preservation too was the instrument of punishment, and I should think might be put to the use for which it was designed at any moment; although it was tolerably evident that such had not been the case for many a long day as long grass grew through the holes. There it stands, a memento of the past, a warning to the urchins who play around its gaping but now harmless and powerless jaws, and it does not require any very great strength of imagination to see an incarcerated offender suffering from the gibes and finger pointings of the church-goers.

The bell-ringers stand in the church-porch – so primitive in arrangement is this ancient building – and as, I passed through, I found that the pavement was composed of monumental slabs; all then who went in walked above the dead. Most of the inscriptions were either entirely or partially obliterated, one still displayed the date 1686. The clerk accommodated me with a pew at the extremity of the church facing the pulpit and the chancel, beneath a stained glass window; a pew on the olden style, with high sides where one might sit and read the newspaper during the sermon and none be much wiser. These pews have one advantage, there is nothing to distract attention. The church does much credit to the designer. The aisle is entered from the porch between the chancel and the other extremity; there are two rows of pillars; and it is very evident that the beams of the roof have seen many generations of congregations beneath them. Over the entrance to the chancel are suspended the

tablets of the law, and the Lord's prayer, higher the arms of the crown with the mottoes. The tablets are also to be seen at the communion tables, apparently upon black oak. Over them is a window partially stained, displaying a crown, probably an emblem of the crown of glory; through this may be seen the bare branches of leafless trees, reminding those who notice them of inevitable death. Many marble slabs are suspended upon the walls, several of which have urns cut out upon them, others display the arms of the dead whom they record. On the right of the pulpit – as I faced it – is the Squire's pew, apparently of carved oak. The Squire was there, a tall fine made gentleman, whom I understand is the owner of the beautiful domain of Burderope Park. On the left, scarcely so near, is another family pew, that of the wealthy family of the Brownes. Down the aisle on well-worn forms sit the school-children; the boys separate from the girls. Close to the organ, if such I may call it, sits the clerk, whose voice once strong and well qualified for his vocation, though somewhat yielding to age is nevertheless of good service in leading the singing.

The services concluded, the Rev. T. Rolph mounted the pulpit, taking as his text the seventh and eighth versus of St. Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians. "So that ye come behind in no gift, waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Who shall also confirm you until the end *that ye may be* blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." The preacher said:

It was to be hoped that Jesus Christ would confirm them to the end, keep them steadfast in their faith, and it should be the first aim of their lives to be blameless in the day of Christ. The three matters were closely connected with each other. How could they be blameless unless Christ confirmed, and how have satisfaction in waiting, or even help being afraid of his coming, unless persuaded they should see it blameless? How could they be waiting for the coming who would be sorry were it now to come, and how welcome it if not now willing to die? The two amounted nearly to the same thing. The coming of Christ and the hour of death would, no doubt, seem close upon each other. Many generations might grow up and pass away, but to those dead death would seem as a single night, or rather as a single moment from which they would awake into a morning of glory. What would be their feelings if they saw Him now coming – if there were suddenly to be a new heaven, a new earth, and everything around were to put on a new form of glory? Would they have most of joy, or fear? This was a question which demanded the most serious attention. For this day must come ere long, and who should say how soon? Who could hinder it merely by not wishing it to arrive? That day must come, must come speedily. The time was short – "the day is at hand", this was the language of the apostle many hundreds years ago, so short a time were hundreds of years to God; and if the time was short then, what must it be now? What manner of persons ought we therefore to be, what manner of lives ought we to lead? What love too perfect, what piety could be sufficiently excellent? They remembered the mother of Sisera, looking from the window and crying, "Why is his chariot so long in coming?" That might serve to show them how they ought to be waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, their greatest friend. They ought to be searching the scriptures, that window which opened towards heaven,

to see the signs there were of his approach. They ought to be listening for the sound of his chariot wheels, to be welcoming His messengers, to be fervently asking Him in their hearts not to be absent so long, but to hasten his kingdom, to deliver them from the burden of the flesh, from the peril of temptation, from the liability to sin, from the risk of perishing for ever. But how could they think these thoughts, how then wait for the coming of Christ, unless they trusted that He would confirm them until the end? "Behold, now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation." Even if the best did wrong they were able to trust in Him for forgiveness. They repented, they renewed their resistance against the enemy of souls. Should they imagine that these should be as criminals sentenced to death and then spared? Far from it; they should be accounted blameless. Their pardon had long since been sealed. They would hear only the words of forgiveness. There was no reason to expect that mercy would take the place of judgement; now was the time for mercy. Now he called them, invited, entreated them to believe. Then they must be blameless as forgiven sinners, or they could not stand. How might they now lead a blameless life? By Christ confirming them unto the end, by His strength made perfect in their weakness, by going from strength to strength, from grace to grace, until they arrived at the end. Who could keep them steadfast in the faith, but Christ? What hindered Him from confirming them but their not asking Him? Today f they heartily believed; on the morrow they should believe still more. The life which Christ would have them lead was one of growth in grace, a life of hope and peace, and steadfastness. There was much reason to fear that the lives of many were in a perpetual vicissitude between hope and terror. Could the Apostle give thanks for them as waiting for the coming of Christ, could he expect that they should be found blameless? If not, what did they expect? How could they help being afraid of His coming, when they were aware that he came not to pardon, but to judge? Let them seek that He might confirm them not for a time, but until the end. The only religion that was worthy of the name was religion f the heart; whole religion. There was no such thing as half religion – half waiting for His coming, half wishing that He might not come – or if there was, there was no half sentence; it must be all Heaven or all Hell. God grant that they might have the blessings of both worlds, of that which now is and that which is to come.

Thus finished the sermon of a proportionate length, containing as much matter in a condensed and digested form as many taking up twice the time, and wearying the congregation. Ere I departed, I spent a few minutes in looking round the grave-yard. "God's Acre", as the Saxons called it, is very full here. Whole families – nay, perhaps, whole generations of families – lie decaying beneath the rank grass. The stones are numerous – some are enclosed by iron railings, others again may be described as sarcophagi; and I noticed one cross with the monogram I.H.S. The pathway by which the chancel is entered from without was for some distance from the door literally paved with grave-stones. Near the door rose a sarcophagus, if such I may call it, built of brick, and covered with a stone. It reminded me of the New Orleans "ovens" of which I have heard. There are in the neighbourhood of that city cemeteries in which may be seen numerous brick edifices, something after the shape

of a small oven, and the contents of these are bodies – not buried beneath the surface, but just below the covering – thus they are exposed to the full heat of a tropical sun. In a year, when decomposition, it is said, has sufficiently proceeded, the “oven” is opened, the remains taken out, and burnt. The “oven” is then ready for another occupant. As I proceeded on my homeward path, I recognised the self-sacrifice made by the Rev. T. Rolph, in performing divine service at Coate, in a building which I have before described. There are two routes which he can take, one is long, the other is – mud. I am driven to think that the road-menders are in league with the cobblers.

The Dragon at Ashdown

Transcribed from an unpublished MS by Jefferies in the British Library, reference Add. Mss 58814. Though the MS bears no date, the mauve ink used by Jefferies indicates late 1876.

Sida's arm was hidden in the soft odorous cushion of thyme upon which she leant, like Cytherea; the "forceless flowers" seemed to support her graceful form. Temple thought that couch of sward on the wild hills under the sunshine gave her the charm of Nature itself, a charm which no velvet lounge, no rich carpet could impart. The Immortals know this well: in those happy times when the goddesses revealed themselves to men it was always in the sunshine or under the trees, somewhere where flowers and grass and the very Heavens overhead heightened the glory of their perfect shape. Love makes every man an artist: an artist lying there could have gazed upwards into the azure of the sky for hours - it is always more blue over the hills - so Temple gazed into her eyes, dreaming. Her hand touched his lightly, contented, heart-whole in the present, her mind roamed backward into the past.

"I should like to see a real king" she said, "Easy enough you will say, there are plenty still in Europe. But I do not call them kings, they are bound by laws, restricted by customs, weak images of monarchs. I mean a king of men, like Ulysses then - like the man who wore this crown."

She showed him a small brass coin which she had that moment taken up from the ground - cast up by the earth grubs perhaps, it had glittered in the sunlight and caught her eye. There was on it the rude profile of a face, and a rayed diadem.

"Ah," said Temple, "There were real kings in our own land in those days, masters of men by force or fraud; that tiny disk of metal is fourteen centuries old. Where you are lying the feet of kings have marched - feet ages since disjointed from their ankle-bones - such kings as you wished to see, sword in hand, followed by their armed swarms. See," he pointed westwards, "This broad green band of turf lying like a river between the cornfields is a road, archaic almost as the hills themselves along whose ridges it runs, a military track in the days of the Caesars, aye, and ages before the Caesars."

"I trace it," said Sida, "It winds like a serpent. I trace it eastwards also, up over Ashdown, to the Camp. And real kings walked here - I will kiss the earth; you smile - but there are none now -."

"There are monarchs of thought, true kings -"

"Yes, yes, but you cannot tell them from the crowd - they are not a head and shoulders taller like Saul; they do nothing but talk and write, I like deeds -fighting then, there" - and her eyes lit up, and flashed on him.

"It is of no use," he said, half sorrowfully. "We cannot be heroes now - the dragon is dead. At least he is so scotched and broken any puny schoolboy can kick at him."

"The dragon - there never was a dragon: and besides what do you mean by a dragon?" asked Sida.

"The very gutter children go to school now, the ploughboys too, and learn all things; how *can* the dragon live?" said Temple, enigmatically.

"I suppose you mean that knowledge destroys evil, under the symbol of the Old Serpent."

"So the world thinks, now it has grown old. But the Dragon did live once nevertheless, and the noise of his wings was heard over these wide downs."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite serious. His latest, or one of his latest haunts was hereabouts."

"I shall grow superstitious in the sunlight: tell me, how long was that ago?"

"How long was it that the real kings walked upon this turf - fourteen centuries, and even then the hills were very, very old. It was when the hills were young. He died over yonder - just below the White Horse."

"What authority have you for such a statement?" said Sida, sitting up.

"That of tradition - the only true history. The very cottagers and shepherds will show you the Dragon's grave, - it is a great round mound under which he lies, and so fiery was his blood that to this day no grass will grow on its top. They say it was St George who slew him - that is probably a later addition."

"And in the full daylight, in the nineteenth century you ask me to believe such things" -

"Do you believe in Ulysses' voyage? No. Do you believe Columbus discovered America? Yes. There lies my answer. What is history in one age, is legend in the next: a day will come when philosophers will argue that Columbus was a myth. Seriously, I ask you to believe that the Dragon lived: quite as seriously as I should ask you to believe that the mammoth lived."

"I always thought the dragon a mere poetical fancy: prove to me that he was a reality."

"It is not difficult. The Chinese are the oldest existing race that possesses a literature. The negroes are certainly older: but they cannot speak of the Past. They have no books. Think for a second of a nation - a race going back perhaps to primeval man; and yet without a single Book. Is it not strange - inexplicable? But the Chinese have a literature, and their national emblem is - the Dragon. Not only on their standards, on their sacred cups and vessels, but upon everything - in everything the dragon is found.

His horrible, contorted form is familiar in every household - he is the national ornament. Now - why did glacial man, the Dwarf who dwelt in the caves of England and France when they were joined and were covered with ice, why did he

carve on ivory and bone the rude outline of the mammoth? For the same reason that the earliest Chinese depicted the winged serpent because they had seen it, and thought it the grandest and most terrible embodiment of brute force, much as the lion on our own ensign. The Egyptians - the competitors of the Chinese in the claim to antiquity - painted the winged snake everywhere. Almost all nations had the same legend. I believe that the earliest experience of man - the dawn of his history - just touched the final stage, the end as it were of the Dragon's life, the time when he became extinct as the Moa. And the geologists prove it: they have found his bones."

"The Dragon's bones?"

"Yes, veritable dragon's bones: fossilized of course. Some of the largest too, not many miles northward from where we sit. Pterodactyle is the learned name for Dragon, literally wing-finger - like the bats wings then: vulgarly, a flying lizard. Restored by Owen and such men, the figure of this creature is the ail-but exact counterpart of the popular dragon. Without a doubt huge flying serpents, perhaps reptiles is a better word, winged their way through English air. Did I not tell you that tradition was the only true history?"

"And the last was killed under White Horse Hill in Berkshire, dose to where we sit?"

"There - there, that is too literal, too practical an application of my words. The real dragon, the reptile was probably extinct very early in the history of man, and mercifully so. Armed with flint headed spears and arrows how could they approach his terrible den? They invested his memory with every horror fear could imagine: fear was the origin of religion (that religion) as you may see by the fetish of the savages in our own time. In a word, the Dragon left something behind him - i.e., his worship. A worship by the bye spread nearly over the known globe - to this day, the Serpent, the dragon's nearest relation, is adored in some places, and consecrated in others. It was the worship of the Dragon that was overthrown under White Horse Hill."

"You mean something like the slaying of the priests of Baal?"

"On a larger scale - yes. Who worshipped the Dragon? When? Who destroyed it? What succeeded? You overwhelm me with questions that I cannot fully answer. This however we know, it has been gradually proved of late years, that ages before the Romans reached Britain, races had inhabited these islands, had been driven back and succeeded by other races with different features, different funereal customs and therefore different religions. One of these may have sculptured a great Dragon their idol on the side of the hill and worshipped it, till overthrown in battle by invading hosts with different creeds."

"But I thought it was a Horse - it is called White Horse."

"And has been called so for nine centuries, which proves pretty conclusively that the dragon races were prehistoric, so far as England is concerned."

Nevertheless it was not a horse at first: but a dragon, a great Dragon Idol, hewn out, sculptured on the side of the hill, as the giants on the slope of the hill far away by the sea in the South Downs. Any one unprejudiced can see that this figure here was never intended originally for a horse. Why the cave men, the dwarfs of the ice-age, sculptured the mammoth and the reindeer more artistically, and truer to life. The sculptors were not compelled by the rudeness of their material - cutting away the turf to the chalk - to be content with such a caricature: turf and chalk will afford a good picture of a horse as may be seen elsewhere on these hills at Calne, and Marlborough. Examine the figure itself: why the tail is as long as the body and neck, and *as thick or* very nearly. That is a striking fact: it is a condition that exactly represents a snake but cannot possibly depict a horse. The most suspicious circumstance is the perfect state of what is called the head: here the turf is cut into thin walls such as could never have stood the ravages of time and the successive scourings. And such a head: a horse's head is very large relatively to the rest of the body. This huge horse extended over half an acre has a very small head, such as would suit a serpent. The legs are separated from the body, and disjointed in themselves. Take the conventional dragon, endeavour to produce it in outline on a flat surface, with the wings and legs awkwardly cramped as they usually are: and you have the famous White Horse. Just beneath it stands the Dragon's Mount - retaining its name to this day, from whose summit the Idol was in full view: a splendid sacrificial spot. In the caves have been found metal bracelets in the shape of dragons, with the wings and legs placed as such a creature would double them as it grovelled on the earth - going upon its belly - dragons almost the very shape of this so-called horse. Why called a horse then? When one religion sweeps away another it endeavours to replace its idols with its own. Examples - down to the early days of Christianity and the statues of Jupiter - are so numerous that they need not be quoted. We know there were races to whom the horse was sacred, and the horse was on the standard of peoples who lived later still. It would naturally be their policy to alter the name, and if possible the outline of the idol. Through successive generations down to very recent times men have done their best to make this figure approximate to that of a horse, with but poor success after all. The dragon was the ancient British symbol: our Laureate knew this when he placed above Arthur's helmet -

The Dragon of the great Pendragonship."

"You have filled me with dreams and visions," said Sida. "You have hidden the sunshine with thick shadows and dim forms of monsters moving amongst them: the hiss of the wind in the long grass startles me like the hiss of your serpents."

"Wagner has revived the great northern legend of the Dragon lately" continued Temple. "His *libretto* is a travesty of it but the elements are there. We have all

read of Sigfried and the dragon, and the wonderful sword, and the cunning dwarf. Do you see that copse of fir and beech on our right, not a hundred yards distant? Hidden under those trees is Wayland Smith's Cave -it is a dohnen, a sepulchre. Every one has heard the legend of the invisible smith shoeing horses so long as the owners kept out of sight, but when one intruded on him, disappearing wrathfully in a cloud. In the early Anglo Saxon poems Wayland is a worker in metal, a maker of wondrous armour, the pupil of Mime or Mimer the Dwarf: his story is told fully in the Sagas and the Edda, how he makes the sword, and the dragon is there also, and the treasures of the Rhine. Wayland's son Wittich actually occurs in the *Nibelungen Lied*. It was once a matter of religious belief in England."

"I remember" said Sida dreamily "a picture somewhere, I think in the National Gallery of Apollo killing the dragon -"

"You mean the python - yes, another form of the dragon: light, heroism triumphing over monstrous darkness. We call Apollo St George, and stamp the same story on our golden coins. I know the picture you mean well: it is a noble one. The arrows quivering in the huge serpent, the writhing agony of its curling form: the calm brow of the god with light on it, not of savage battle, but of faith almost - a human being deified, by courage, skill, intellect conquering evil."

"I wish," said Sida, suddenly throwing her arms round his neck, "I wish the Dragon was not dead."

"Why-dearest?"

"That you might slay it, and I might see the people raise an altar to my hero."

Then as the old writers say "they fell to a-kissing." Under that old hawthorn bush whose hard fruit was already turning colour, on the sweet short sward and the thyme, with the delicate thistledown floating over head like white stars against the blue sky, unseen of any but the bees busy after the honey in the heath, why should not they kiss when loving Nature told them to?

For all this talking above was but a brief episode in that long happy day at Ashdown. Has it not been sung of old how at the dawning "two lovers sat on a hill", and when the sun went down "they had not talked their fill?"

Sun-spots

Transcribed from an unpublished MS by Jefferies in the British Library, reference Add. Mss. 58817. Editor's title

There was a great sun-spot at that time and every afternoon as the sun sank I used to sit facing the west under the russet apple tree waiting till the thin vapour on the horizon absorbed the glow of light so that I could see it. The great black speck with a smaller one near it became distinct upon the broad red disk, and I watched it till the sun went down. This I did every evening the sky was clear of clouds and the spot visible. That there were spots upon the sun of course I knew from reading and I had seen them through a telescope, but that was quite different; neither to read of or see them through a telescope was like this, that was artificial and this real. I had no scientific thoughts under the apple tree - though I had read all that was then known of faculae - no thought at all that I remember. It was like a miracle like those great events of ancient days when the Titans heaved up and tore the solid earth, a verse from Hesiod in fact instead of letters, something that I felt. Forces were at work similar to those that shaped the world and I could seem to see the hidden cause of the works of the sky. For centuries backwards perhaps no one with the naked eye had seen a sun-spot; for centuries to come no one might see them again; so that the moment of my existence in it seemed a link between the illimitable past and future; this moment made more vital, more fierce in its existence by the consciousness the sunspot gave of the long bygone and the endless to be.

So much behind the golden glow of the light: hidden all day by the very beauty and power of the sun: a sudden revelation here of the things that were proceeding beyond. In like manner, now today the light at present our only medium of acquiring knowledge may really obscure it, checking and interfering perhaps with other mediums of communication not yet known. Perhaps instead of concentrating the light with lenses and trying to see more in time it may be found best to shut off the light to admit other more subtle rays.

To me it was a wonderful and never-wearying spectacle, evening after evening as I watched it under the low boughs of the russet apple, the great fiery disk slowly dropping beyond the brook and the meadow, beyond the elms on the rise, beyond the distant hills. The green leaves over and the grass under the quiet rush of the brook, the evening song of the birds, the hushing hum of the bees at the hives set just there, I forget all but these and the sun -by the spot I could touch out almost to it.

Yet then I thought little of it, I did not value it, it was only one of the things I should see - hundreds more wonderful as life went on. It has not been so. I have never seen anything more wonderful than the things I saw then; never felt or thought like I used to in those youthful times. Nothing then was of any value; now if I could only get back those moments they would be to me more precious than gold.

Richard Jefferies at Tolworth

Peter K Robins

Richard Jefferies moved to Surrey from Wiltshire in 1877; he left Surrey for Brighton in Sussex in 1882. His move to Surrey was prompted by his need to be near London, but he might have chosen any one of a number of suburbs there, and I should like to offer suggestions as to why he chose Surbiton. It is usually agreed that the breakdown in his health was the major reason for the decision to leave Surbiton for Brighton, but there may have been other reasons, and these I shall also set out.

Jefferies' move to the London area seems to need some explanation: on the surface it seems quite wrong for him. Yet as a boy he had lived in Sydenham, and he himself, in later life, insisted on London's attractions for him: in a letter to T. Hanson Lewis, dated 11 October 1884, he wrote: 'some people have an idea that my knowledge is confined to the fields; as a matter of fact I have had quite as much to do with and in London ... I dream in London quite as much as in the woodlands.' At the same time, he shared the country person's fear of the dangers of a large city, in particular at the time we are considering, the dangers of disease carried in impure drinking water. This danger was increasing with the growth in city populations and the consequent waste-disposal problems. Hardly a day went by without a newspaper article on the problems of water supply, hardly a summer without an epidemic of some sort, often cholera. For evidence of his awareness of the threat posed by London, we need only look at the pages of *After London*. His other main needs apart from a healthy environment for his wife and baby, were easy access to central London, and attractive rural surroundings.

Although there were many suburbs to choose from, Surbiton in 1877 had many advantages, and enjoyed the reputation of being 'Queen of the Suburbs'. For example from 1877 the Medical Officer of Health for Surbiton, Owen Coleman MD, published annual reports summarising births, deaths, and mortality from certain diseases. These reports show that Surbiton was a healthier place to live than London or many other parts of England; the death rate there in 1877 was 12.6 per 1,000 compared with 215 for London and 20.3 for England and Wales. The MOH was able to claim that 'It is eminently satisfactory to find that the reputation of being the most healthy of the London suburbs is well deserved and maintained.' An additional point in favour of Surbiton was the proximity of the Thames. As for the rural attractions, Jefferies himself does full justice to them in his introduction to *Nature Near London* (1883): 'Along the roads and lanes the quantity and variety of life in the hedges was really astonishing ... There was material for many years' observation ...'

Once he was reconciled to a move to London, and had decided that Surbiton was his chosen area, he presumably studied newspaper advertisements until he found something he could afford. For example the *Surrey Comet*, a weekly newspaper, published an advertisement in November 1876 as follows: 'To Be

Let. Surbiton. 7-roomed recently built house. Rent £28 per annum or the same can be purchased. Apply M & W Goodall, Arlington Road, Surbiton.' In fact the initial

development was around Surbiton Hill, and on land towards the Thames, but by the 1860s elegant houses had been established along the Ewell Road to the boundary with Long Ditton. Since there were no planning controls at that time, houses could be put up anywhere and this led to strange irregularities with densely packed houses next to farm land or ending abruptly at a land boundary.

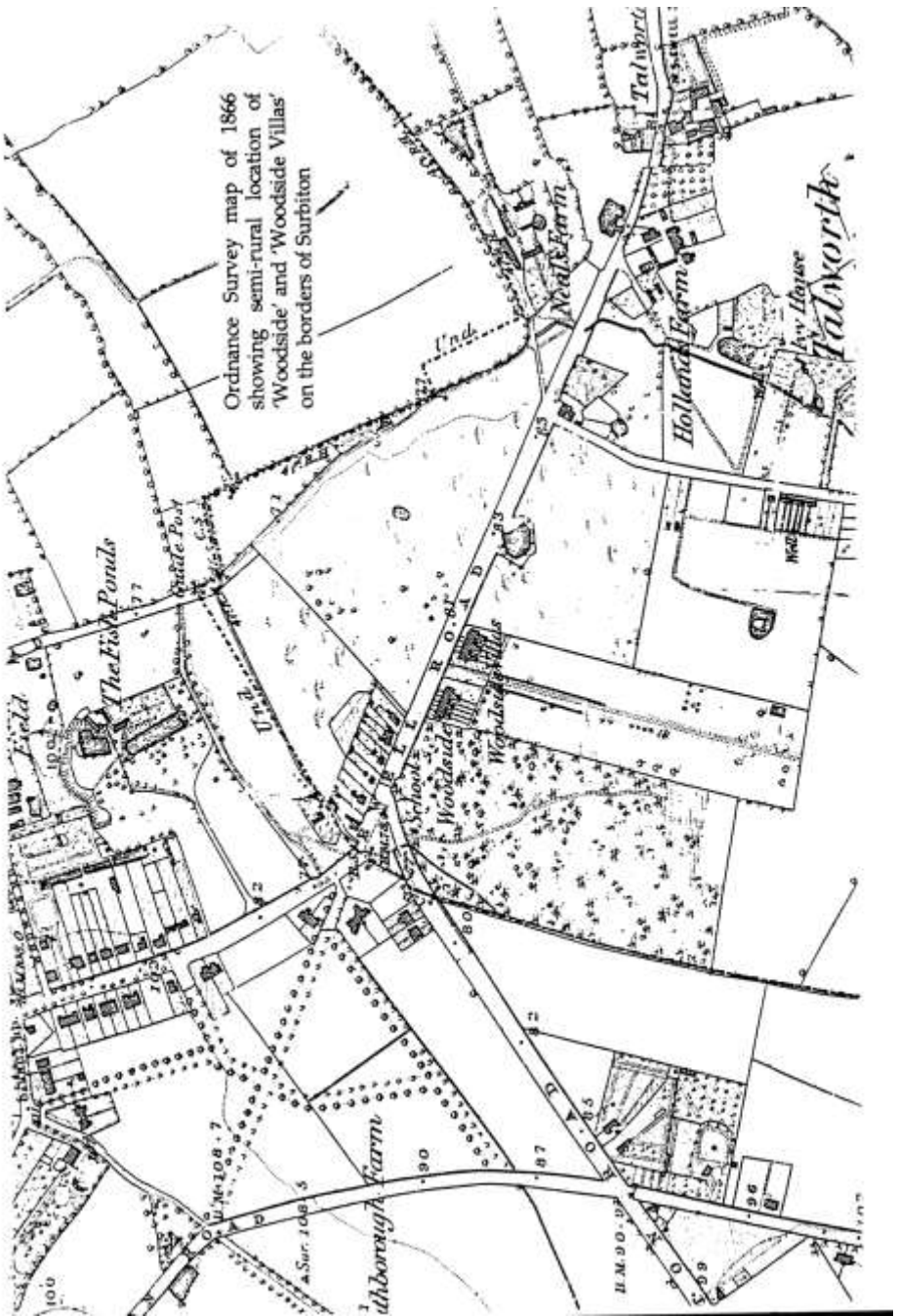
A Surbiton resident, Robert Marshall Straight, a barrister, decided to build two identical blocks of three-storied terrace houses just across the Surbiton/Long Ditton parish boundary in what was technically the hamlet of Tolworth. Although adjacent to Surbiton, Tolworth did not enjoy the benefits of Surbiton's improvements. The Georgian design of Straight's houses reflected those more commonly associated with Mayfair or Pimlico and were essentially town houses in a semi-rural location. They were probably the last of the type to be built as there was a transition at this time to the detached or semi-detached house (or 'villa') which became for a century and a half the preferred form of middle-class residence.

The two adjacent terraces were named 'Woodside' and 'Woodside Villas', perhaps deliberately named by the developer to attract both the traditional tenant and the new villa-loving middle class. (See map.) Separated by a wide track and consisting of six dwellings in each block, they were aptly named, as 'Woodside' did in fact abut a small wood, later described by Jefferies in 'Round About a London Copse'. 'Woodside Villas' adjoined some marshy ground with a pond by the roadside. Both overlooked typical Surrey common land with silver birch, ash trees, and bracken, and afforded good views from the upper floors.

It was to number 2, 'Woodside' that Jefferies came with his wife, Jessie, and eighteen-month old Harold in February 1877. The setting was attractive and the house itself was elegant, almost grand. It was not quite up to the standards of 'Shanklin Villa', his Aunt Ellen's house at Sydenham, but far superior to the accommodation in which he and Jessie had been living in Victoria Street, Swindon. Jefferies seemed to perpetuate this taste in houses as those at Hove and Eltham were similar in style.

'Woodside' and its adjoining block do not appear in the 1861 census and the first record of them is in the 1864 edition of *Phillipson's Almanack and Directory for Kingston and Neighbourhood* and then on the 1866 edition of the Ordnance Survey, so they were fairly new when Jefferies began to rent. Subsequent editions of *Phillipson's*, and the 1881 census, recorded 'Woodside' only, numbered 1 to 12, taking in the houses of both blocks. However, the 1898 edition of the Ordnance Survey denotes only 'Woodside Villas', so there was obviously some flexibility in the address until the whole of the Ewell Road was renumbered with 2 'Woodside' becoming 296 Ewell Road. Although we have no record of Jefferies' first lease, there is one extant from 24 February 1880 which shows that the rent was £28 per year (BL Add Mss 58817).

To what sort of neighbourhood had Jefferies moved? If we compare the list of residents of 'Woodside' published in sequential editions of *Phillipson's* with



the census record, it is interesting to note that there was a fair turnover of residents from 1876 to 1881. Only four of the houses had been occupied by the same people for more than five years when the census was taken on 3 April 1881. In this census, Jefferies is recorded along with Jessie, Richard Harold, Jessie Phyllis, and their maid, Martha Hayes who had originated in Baydon, Wiltshire. Most of the other residents of 'Woodside' employed a maid, with a widow and her daughters living at number 12 having both a cook and a maid. Many of the servants are shown as having come from the country.

The residents themselves were prosperous middle-class and included a barrister, a classics master at King's College, London, a Royal Navy lieutenant, a retired farmer, and residents who were annuitants or derived income from property. Jefferies makes no mention of any of them in his published work, nor do his notebooks indicate whether he knew any of them socially. Walter Besant provides us with details of Jefferies' daily routine and his habit of solitary walking but if he made friends in Surbiton we are not told about them.

Despite the daily walks and observations around Tolworth, Jefferies' focus at this time was on Wiltshire folk and farming, or agriculture in general and in 1877 and 1878 he was at his most successful with essays and articles published in at least ten publications including the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Livestock Journal*, *New Monthly Magazine*, *New Quarterly*, *Globe*, *World*, *Graphic*, *Fraser's Magazine* and *London Society*. The articles published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* were collected to form *The Gamekeeper at Home* which was issued in June 1878.

As early as July 1877, however, the *Surrey Comet* carried an advertisement for '65 plots eligible building land near Red Lion, Tolworth'. This public house was a few hundred yards along the Ewell Road from 'Woodside' and would have been a familiar landmark to Jefferies. Whilst we have no way of knowing if Jefferies was aware of this land being offered for development, he *was* aware of the building expansion, for in 'The Crows' published in *The Standard* for 12 November 1880, he wrote: 'The numerous pieces of waste ground, "to let on building lease", the excavated ground, where rubbish can be thrown, the refuse and ash heaps - these are the haunts of the London crow.' But there was worse to come and much closer to home. In the *Surrey Comet* for 17 May 1879 there appeared a straightforward report about a recent meeting of the Surbiton Improvement Commission:

May 12. Drainage at Tolworth. A letter was read from Mr Wright, asking that the main drainage should be extended to Mr Justice Straight's land at 'Woodside', Tolworth. At present Mr Straight had twelve houses there, with a gross rateable value of £350 per annum. In the rear were nine acres of capital land, which he had been endeavouring to let for building purposes, but the fatal objection to it was want of proper drainage.

It was ordered that Mr Wright be communicated with to the effect that 'Woodside' was outside the Commissioners' district.

Despite Mr Justice Straight's failure to develop his land at 'Woodside', others were successful and by 1880 the track between the terraces gave access to three new

properties, Myrtle Villa, Bedale Villa and Wistaria Villa, at its southern end and presumably beyond the land owned by Mr Straight. This was the beginning of the development of this area, and the track eventually became Douglas Road, another suburban street. A year later, to meet the demand for education among the growing population of Surbiton and Tolworth, St Mark's School was built on the common directly opposite 'Woodside', thus Jefferies was robbed of previously uninterrupted views from both his front and rear windows.

It was not surprising that drainage had been on Mr Straight's mind in May 1879. Summers from 1875 onwards had been wet; during December 1878 and January 1879 the temperature in England stayed mainly below freezing point and it was very snowy. Jefferies' notebook for 27 February 1879 recorded 'snow on ground since morning of 21st.' The spring of 1879 was cold, with May colder than April; the summer was the wettest and one of seven coldest on record. The Great Agricultural Show at Kilburn, which Jefferies and his father attended, was a washout. A notably cold autumn followed and December was another near freezing month. The cold wet weather delayed the harvest, so that even in East Anglia in some places the corn had not been gathered in by Christmas. Mr James Bell, a resident of Surbiton since 1852, was invited in the *Surrey Comet* of 25 December 1899 to reminisce about Surbiton, Tolworth and Hook fifty years before. He recalled: The Alpha, Britannia and King Charles roads were almost impassable in winter... Maple Road was a very narrow muddy lane, with ruts a foot deep and impassable in winter, in fact impassable in summer for all vehicles except strong carts.' These routes were only yards from the Ewell Road and it is clear that the locality was prone to waterlogging and 'Woodside' built on undrained land.

In spite of the threat from new building, there is no sign that Jefferies was dissatisfied with his home or his health. It is true that the attack on 'villadom' begins to intrude into his work, but it begins as early as 1877 with 'Flowers and Fruif and continues as late as his introduction to *Selbome*. Nor is it uniquely connected with Surbiton, indeed it probably had its roots in Sydenham.

In 1879 he took his family on a long summer holiday to Brighton, and in 1880 they spent several weeks at Eastbourne. His undated letter to his father in which he writes 'I swam 500 yards and came out as fresh as I started' probably refers to this holiday, and indicates how fit he felt. In December 1880 Jessie Phyllis was born. In late 1881 or early 1882 he became seriously ill, and the year 1882 was one of great pain and anxiety. Having perhaps chosen to live at Surbiton because it was 'healthy', it would be surprising if Jefferies did not consider leaving it once his own health was threatened. Although with modern

medical knowledge we now know that Jefferies' fistula was probably tubercular in origin, it would not have been seen so at the time, nor would his lungs have given him any special concern. Nevertheless, he might still have paid attention to local health statistics even though he failed to apply them to himself. For, although these annual reports for 1877 to 1887 make it clear that the Improvement Commissioners had done much with their drainage schemes and sanitary arrangements to reduce the incidence of major diseases such as typhoid and cholera, there was a fifty per cent increase between 1877 and 1880 in the incidence of phthisis (Jefferies' own disease) and other lung diseases in the district, a result, they claimed, of the continuous inclement weather conditions during those years. The report for 1880 states '... the increased mortality of the first six months was largely due to the natural consequences of the severe weather which occurred at the beginning of the year, together with the prevalence of fogs; these combined produced a proportionately excessive number of deaths from diseases of the respiratory organs among the young and old.' The reports go on to demonstrate that cases of death from phthisis and other lung diseases fell in 1881 and 1882 but rose again in the following four years. In other words, although the conditions in Surbiton in the early 1880s and the weather of those years were not directly responsible for his own illness, Jefferies may, in common with others, have thought that they were, and decided it was time to move elsewhere.

Jefferies lived longer in the Surbiton house than anywhere else except his parents' home and so his reasons for moving there, staying so long, and eventually leaving, seemed to deserve some scrutiny. It is fairly clear that one reason for moving to Brighton was his health; the reports cited above suggest that the authorities themselves no longer held out Surbiton as 'the most healthy of London suburbs' whereas Jefferies himself, in "The Breeze on Beachy Head" had listed the sea, sky and sun of Sussex as 'the three potent medicines of nature'. A second reason could have been the need to escape from 'villas' and the values they stood for, though these were likely to be encountered whenever people with money were concentrated together. In particular, the invasion of all his precious paths, fields, and hedges by houses and suburban gardens must finally have driven him away.

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I have made use of the following sources and I should like to thank the staff of Kingston Heritage Centre, The County Record Office (Surrey) and Surbiton Public Library for their patient assistance:

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Voyage to the unknown island: an exploration of Richard Jefferies' *Bevis*

Jonathan Colder

Anyone who studies Jefferies' critics soon learns that there are as many versions of Jefferies as there are critics. As George Miller and Hugoe Matthews argue, this is hardly surprising when, for economic reasons, Jefferies was writing at the same time as a sportsman, an agriculturist, a mystic, an artist, a conservative and a radical.

The view of Jefferies I have come to adopt was formed as a reaction against the Samuel Looker and Henry Williamson view of him as a philosophic recluse or solitary mystic. So my Jefferies is not the unworldly man who wandered the downs and lanes of Wiltshire: he is the ambitious journalist who moved closer to London to be in easy reach of his publishers and his markets. He is the young man we see in *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies* drinking in Swindon with Daniel Gooch the railway engineer and attending a literary dinner in London where Matthew Arnold, Henry James and Thomas Hardy were also present.² He is the man who wrote such acute social observation as 'One of the New Voters' and 'John Smith's Shanty'. In short, my Jefferies is a well-connected writer who is thoroughly aware of the social, political and economic realities of rural life.

When we turn to *Bevis*, we find that there are almost as many versions of it as there are of Jefferies. Yet if one view has predominated it is that presented in the blurb of my 1981 Everyman edition³:

Never were the horizons of boyhood so limitless in imagination as the adventures of Mark and Bevis on this wide stretch of water, and the discovery of the island they called New Formosa. We owe the idyllic settings, the interaction of nature and the human spirit, to the rare quality of the writer's temperament which readily sought a kinship with nature in his early years. As Henry Williamson says, 'He saw what other men did not see, or were too preoccupied by the problems of earning a living, to bother about.'

So the problem we face is this: how could the worldly, socially conscious Jefferies have written a book whose attraction lies precisely in its unworldliness and its distance from mundane cares?

Our puzzlement may deepen if we come across a passage in *Change in the Village* by George Sturt, writing as George Bourne, as it emphasises that the 'natural' childhood which Bevis and Mark enjoy is in fact a function of their

position in the class system. Bourne describes his experience of 'playing the absurd part of irate property owner' and chasing boys away from the tree in his garden. While the village boys would scurry away 'like rabbits', he recalls finding two grammar school boys one afternoon:

Upon being told crossly that they were a nuisance, the boys apologised -an act which seemed to put me in the wrong. In my annoyance at that, I hinted ironically that, in fact, I was a benevolent person, quite willing to admit boys inside the hedge to pick up nuts, if nuts they really must have. Then I turned away. To my astonishment, they took me at my word, followed me into the garden, and calmly began to pick up nuts.⁴

Bourne uses this anecdote to open a wider discussion about the different degrees of freedom enjoyed by boys of different classes. Speaking of working-class boys, he observes:

The bigger boys, of from ten to thirteen years old, do not go into the woods. They play in the roads and pathways, or on the corners of unused land, and as a rule within sight or call of home. I have never seen any of them, as I have occasionally seen middle-class boys from the town, rambling far afield in the outlying country, and my belief is that they would be considerably scared to find themselves in such unfamiliar scenes.⁵

Why this difference? Bourne continues: 'Just as meddling with my nut-tree, so everywhere they are in danger of trouble with people of the propertied or employing kind; and behind these people stands the policeman, and behind the policeman that dim object of dread called a "summons"'.⁶ Observing that 'somehow, middle-class boys do not get into trouble with the law', Bourne goes on to say:

... it happens not infrequently that a few little villagers are 'pulled up' before a magistrate ... and if the worst punishment inflicted upon them is a shilling fine and costs, which their parents pay, that is enough to make 'a summons' a very dreadful thing to a little boy. Out of eighteen shillings a week, his father cannot afford 'a shilling and costs' for a piece of mischief, as the little boy is but too likely to be shown.⁷

With this passage in mind we may return to *Bevis* with a wariier attitude. We are apt to be charmed by the way that Bevis and Mark turn their whole life into a game by renaming everything to turn it into something more romantic and in keeping with their reading. But having read Bourne, we may begin to wonder whether Jefferies' heroes aren't merely wealthy boys playing foolish games while those about them are engaged in a far grimmer struggle. In this light, the book can easily take on a different aspect. At the very beginning of the book,⁸ Bevis takes possession of a packing case and makes a raft from it. After various futile attempts to drag it to the water's edge, he bullies and bribes the carter's boy into bringing the horse to help him. They drag the raft to the stream, and Bevis launches it.

Mark arrives, and as he and Bevis play, the carter's boy is seized by the bailiff and marched back to work. Attentive readers may be a little more observant than Bevis or Mark and wonder what befalls the carter's boy, but the action of the book is so absorbing that they are likely to be swept up again soon enough.⁹

Yet if they had come across a passage from Patricia Home's *The Victorian Child*, they would have wondered a little longer: Home quotes a report from the 1860s which said that carters' boys were required to arrive at the stables soon after 4 a.m. and work for 11 or 12 hours with only 15 or 30 minutes for lunch. The report added:

The long hours of the carter are thought by several witnesses to be injurious to his health, and it is said that where such boys are hired by the year, and lodged either with the carter or in the farmer's house (a very common custom in Berkshire) they are often subject to rough usage at the hands of the carter.¹⁰

There are dangers in looting passages from secondary sources, yet this account comes from the neighbouring county to Jefferies' Wiltshire and, if we follow the usual practice of regarding Jefferies' own boyhood as the inspiration for *Bevis*, then it comes from more or less the right decade too.

This presents us with a problem. My worldly Jefferies, as a young Wiltshire journalist, must surely have known about the lot of carters' boys. Yet he passes over this episode without further comment. Why? In an attempt to answer this question, we may look elsewhere in Jefferies' writings. Does he habitually play down the sufferings of poor children, or is *Bevis* something apart in his writing? In his first letter to *The Times* on the Wiltshire labourer, Jefferies observes of the labourer that: 'His style of walk is caused by following the plough in early childhood, when the weak limbs find it hard to pull the heavy nailed boots from the thick day soil. Ever afterwards he walks as if it were an exertion to lift his legs.'¹¹ I have always found something distasteful in the tone of these letters - the labourers are treated more as scientific specimens than as people - but this extract does at least confirm that Jefferies was well aware of the lives which the children of the rural poor lived and, even in a piece designed to win him favour with Conservative opinion, he did not varnish that truth.

A second, more substantial, example is the sketch "The Acorn-Gatherer" - one of Jefferies' 'Bits of Oak Bark'. This is an extraordinarily bleak piece of writing. The acorn-gatherer is a boy, but he is described more as part of the landscape than as a human child: he has a 'set angry frown ... like the grooves in the oak bark.'¹² He lives with his grandmother, who beats him and makes him stare uselessly at the Bible: 'No,' said the old woman, 'he won't read, but I makes him look at his book.'¹³ Going off to fish in the canal, he falls in and drowns. The first person to see his body takes it for a dead dog and goes about his business; the second, a steerswoman on a narrow boat, knows what it is, but there is no reward, so she too

passes on. Jefferies comments: 'This was the end; nor was he even remembered. Does any one sorrow for the rook, shot, and hung up as a scarecrow? The boy had been talked to and held up as a scarecrow all his life: he was dead, and that is all.'¹⁴ It is difficult to know what to make of this piece. As a short sketch 'The Acorn-Gatherer' is free of any context, and its very flatness and denial of human emotion invite us to detect irony or anger behind it. But whatever we make of it, it confirms that Jefferies was thoroughly aware of the realities of a working-class rural life. Indeed this is a singularly cheerless picture of such a childhood.

A third example is Jefferies' description of the labourer's son in *Hodge and His Masters*. In many ways it was the most interesting. Here Jefferies does appear to be making an attempt to idealize such a childhood, but ultimately he is too honest a writer and his material too intractable for this to be fully accomplished. Take, for instance, his picture of the labourer's son at the age of three or four. His description of the child's dress is delicately poised between pathos and a celebration of its practicality:

His hat is an old one of his father's, a mile too big, coming down over his ears to his shoulders, well greased from ancient use - a thing not without its advantage, since it makes it impervious to rain. He wears what was a white jacket, but it is now the colour of the prevailing soil of the place; a belt; a pair of stumping boots, the very picture in miniature of his father's, heeled and tipped with iron.¹⁵

In appearance, the 'child's cheeks are plump and firm, his round blue eyes bright, his hair almost white, like bleached straw.' This makes him the sort of child you might find in any polite Victorian oil painting. Yet though his legs are 'thick and strong', they are also 'red with cold', which makes Jefferies' picture more ambivalent. Jefferies then goes on to describe the boy's unsupervised wanderings about the farmyard. He contrasts this life with the cosseted existence of the children of 'prosperous parents' from 'highly-rented suburban villas', but the emphasis is quite as much upon the dangers of so young a child wandering abroad as the benefits.¹⁶

Thus far the evidence that Jefferies must have known of the lot of the carter's boy is merely circumstantial, but a fourth passage clinches the argument:

Now, the way they made the boy John Brown hardy was to let him roll about on the ground with naked legs and bare head from morn till night, from June till December, from January till June. The rain fell on his head, and he played in wet grass to his knees. Dry bread and a little lard was his chief food. He went to work while he was still a child. At half past three in the morning he was on his way to the farm stables, there to help feed the cart-horses, which used to be done with very great care very early in the morning. The carter's whip used to sting his legs, and he sometimes felt the butt. At fifteen he was no taller than the sons of well-to-do people at eleven.¹⁷

So Jefferies did indeed know all about the carter's boy. Why, then, did he not use that knowledge in *Bevis*?

One may read on, believing that Jefferies had simply set aside his knowledge of social conditions to please his public. Quite soon one comes across the episode where the boys, attempting to walk round the lake, come across the hamlet of labourers' cottages. And, yes, there is as much snobbery as the modern critic could wish to find: "They be Measter Bevis and Measter Mark. You know, as lives at Longcot' says the girl, and the old woman gets up and curtsies. Then they enter the garden of one of the cottages and, having ascertained that the old woman is not a witch, attempt to buy some gooseberries from her. Whereupon this exchange takes place: "'You med have some if you wants 'em; I shan't take yer money.'" "What country is this?" said Bevis, going closer, as Mark came up beside him. "This be Calais."¹⁸ The reader, used to the boys' habit of renaming every feature of the landscape, might well think that it is Mark who has spoken. Only the dialect "*be*" tells us that it is the old woman who has spoken and that 'Calais' really is the name of the settlement. The point is subtly made that the labourers' homes are as much a foreign world to the boys as any of the places about which they fantasize.

Such subtlety suggests a new approach to the critic. Rather than being read as a children's book, *Bevis* should be read as a novel. So easily does *Bevis* flow, so facile, in the old sense of the word, is the writing, that it is easy to forget that there is an author's intelligence behind it all. But here Jefferies is writing as a novelist, and we must allow him to have intended the effects he produces as much as we would any other author. Once we have decided upon this approach, the problem of the carter's boy simply disappears. Jefferies was indeed aware of his likely fate, but Bevis and Mark need not have been. Once we accept that Jefferies is a novelist, we need no longer be worried that he knows things that his characters do not. We can use concepts like irony and truthful characterization to explain it - qualities which we admire in other novelists and should admire in Jefferies too.

If we read on with this new view of Jefferies in mind, it soon proves to be a far more fruitful approach. Almost at once we see that Jefferies was fully aware of the privileged position of his heroes. The game of exploring which the boys are playing sours after they leave Calais. The girl, knowing the land better than they do, points out that their plan of making their way home by following the shore of the lake is impracticable: they have to go back by road instead. And Jefferies says: "They found the road very long, very long and dull, and dusty and empty... the road was vacant, and every step they took they went slower and slower. There were no lions here, or monstrous pythons, or anything magic."¹⁹ The encounter with the real world of poverty and squalor has suddenly robbed their world of its magic. Jefferies was clearly aware that this magic depended upon the existence of places like Calais, and in the episode I have just quoted, Bevis and Mark have been made aware of it too.

This impression that Jefferies is quite aware of the acute class differences at work in *Bevis* and indeed makes use of them for artistic effect becomes the stronger when we look at a second, related episode. In the middle of a game of 'savages' the two boys come across the following scene:

There was a courting going on between these two, and all the other women married and single, collected round them, to aid in the business with jokes and innuendoes.

Bevis and Mark instantly recognised in the girl the one who at 'Calais' had shown them the road home ... Bevis did not speak. He and Mark were a little taken aback, having jumped through the gap so suddenly from savagery into haymaking. They hastened through a gateway into another field.²⁰

Here their world of endless play collides with two adult worlds at once: that of work and that of sexual knowledge.

When I had reached this point in my thinking, I happened to read again the introduction to the recent Oxford World's Classics edition of *Bevis*. This was, of course, written by Peter Hunt, who I now know is to give the Birthday Lecture in 1997. Despite that, I have to take issue with him because he writes in that introduction:

There are certain passages in *Bevis*, however, which even the most sympathetic commentator might feel inclined to suggest that most readers should 'skip'. Some of these are the sections which seem to be fragments of other novels, where Jefferies is apparently indulging an urge to 'fictionalize' more radically than he does with the central characters of *Bevis*. For example, there are the scenes at 'Calais' or with the haymakers.²¹

Hunt, you will see, wants to delete precisely those passages I have just based so much upon. If we were to edit these passages out, it would indeed be easier to see Jefferies as at best naive when it comes to matters of class. And that is very much the view that Hunt takes. Yet it seems to me that he is criticising a sort of ideal *Bevis* that he feels Jefferies ought to have written, not the more complex and more interesting book that he actually did. One may say in Hunt's defence that the passages he wishes most readers to ignore and which I set so much store by are only marginal passages. But that would be to beg the question. These passages are only marginal if one accepts that *Bevis* is an essentially naive book. But that is just the reading of it that I am challenging.

So I stand by my belief, based largely upon the passages that Hunt dislikes, that Jefferies is fully aware of the realities of life around Bevis and Mark and makes use of that knowledge in the book. Indeed, as we read on, it becomes apparent that Bevis and Mark themselves are well aware of their privileged status. Take the episode where Mark attempts to obtain information about making a gun from the blacksmith without giving away why he wants to know it. The blacksmith, becoming irritated by his persistence, takes up a stick and makes it whistle

ominously through the air. Yet Mark has no fear: knows he need only flounce off without giving the man a tip to gain the upper hand: 'The smith swore ... He was angry with himself - he thought he had lost half a crown, at least, just by swishing the stick up and down.'²²

And yet at other times the boys can seem unconvincingly innocent. Think of the chapter where Bevis and Mark apprehend the 'tiger' on their island. You will recall that they have discovered that something has been entering their hut and taking food, and decide that it must be a tiger. This episode is built up with humour and the boys' state of mind - half afraid that there really is something fierce out there and half afraid that there isn't - is well conveyed. Eventually they discover that the culprit is Loo, a labourer's daughter, and at first they are furious: 'It's not proper,' said Bevis in a towering rage. Tigers are proper, girls are not proper.'²³ but then they learn that she has stolen to feed her brothers and sisters. 'Loo said they were all hungry, but Samson was most hungry. He cried almost all day and all night, and woke himself up crying in the morning',²⁴ They began to think differently: 'Bevis became much agitated, he said he would tell the Governor, he would tell dear Mama, Samson should not cry any more. Loo should take home one of the tins of preserved tongue, and the potatoes, and all the game there was - all except the hare.'²⁵

The first thing to say here is that it is another example of Jefferies using the collision between the boys' play world and the real world of work and poverty for artistic effect. Yet there is a problem for my reading of *Bevis* here. How can Mark be so knowing in the episode with the blacksmith and yet Bevis be so innocent here? One could simply say that Jefferies is lapsing here and presenting Bevis as a conventionally pious Victorian child doing good by giving alms to the poor - another popular subject for sentimental Victorian paintings. But having come this far with him, my instinct is to trust Jefferies and wonder whether he is not telling us something interesting. Yes, the boys are fully aware of their privileged status and of how to exploit it, but they normally see little of the domestic lives of the poor. Thus Bevis might very well be shocked by what Loo tells him.

Of course Jefferies is not infallible. There is a danger that once the critic becomes an enthusiast for a writer, he will lose his objectivity and try to justify every line that the writer wrote. But when I recall that detail of Bevis giving Loo all the game 'except the hare' I think I detect a wry grin from Jefferies and am sure that there is an intelligent author at work here.

We lovers of Jefferies are often defensive about Jefferies the novelist. If we do attempt to restore his reputation, it is usually as the author of *The Dewy Morn* or *Amaryllis at the Fair*. Yet I now wonder whether we have not been looking in the wrong place all along. If, as I have argued, we should accept *Bevis* as an adult novel, is it not by some way the best of Jefferies' novels? And if we are reassessing *Bevis*, should we not look at *Wood Magic* too? It was written for

adults every bit as much as *Bevis* was. That need not make it an equally good book, but *Wood Magic* does contain in its final chapter a far clearer and more compelling expression of Jefferies' ideas about nature and eternity than he ever achieves in *The Story of My Heart*. That is one example at least of Jefferies the novelist being a superior writer to Jefferies the mystic.

I had thought that this paper was going to be essentially a development of Miller and Matthews' summing up of *Bevis*:

Much of what *Bevis* and Mark get up to was never wholly commendable, and is not lawful and scarcely possible today. It may be that the status of *Bevis* as a boys' classic will be seen as a historical phase of its reputation, and that it will come to be regarded less as a genre work, isolated from the rest of Jefferies' output, and more a part of the entire realistically and poetically truthful picture he left us of life ... in his times.²⁶

You will see that says very concisely what I have been saying at length in this paper. But if my original idea was that part of this re-evaluation of *Bevis* would be a stripping away of its magic to reveal the realist novel underneath, I now wonder if it is not precisely the magic of *Bevis* that we need. We live in an age where childhood is almost feared. It seems to be something to be tested, curfewed and policed; something on which to build professional careers, not something of value in its own right. Perhaps the next meaning that *Bevis* will take on for us will be in pointing the way to a more rational and generous view of childhood. Whatever happens, we can be sure that *Bevis* will continue to be read and to be argued over, because ultimately Jefferies will always be more interesting than his critics.

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2. Hugoe Matthews and Phyllis Treitel, *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies: a chronological study*, 1994, pp 70,130.
3. *Bevis: The Story of a Boy*, Dent, 1981.
4. George Bourne (George Sturt), *Change in the Village*, Penguin Country Library, 1984, p 100.
5. Bourne, p 101.
6. Bourne, pp 101-2.
7. Bourne, p 102.
8. *Bevis*, pp 8-13.
9. *Bevis*, p 10. Interestingly, I have since discovered that Peter Hunt also draws attention to the carter's boy in his *Criticism, theory and children's literature*, OUP 1992.
10. Pamela Horn, *The Victorian Country Child*, 1974, pp 87-8.

11. Richard Jefferies, 'Wiltshire Labourers: Letter to *The Times*' in Richard Mabey (Ed.) *Landscape with Figures: an anthology of Richard Jefferies' prose*, Penguin 1983, p 29.
12. "The Acorn-Gatherer' in *The Life of the Fields*, OUP 1983, p 43.
13. *ibid*, p 46.
14. *ibid*, p 47.
15. *Hodge and His Masters*, Quartet, 1979 pp 233^.
16. *ibid*, pp 233-4.
17. 'My old Village' in *Field and Hedgerow*, 1889, p 312.
18. *Bevis p. 61*.
19. *Bevis p. 63A*.
20. *Bevis p. 93*.
21. Peter Hunt, Introduction to *Bevis*, OUP 1989.
22. *Bevis p. 212*.
23. *Bevis p. 380*.
24. *Bevis p. 382*.
25. *Bevis p. 383*.
26. Miller and Matthews p. 270.

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