

## Commentary: Tolkien's Birmingham

Bob Blackham

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, who preferred to be called Ronald, had Birmingham roots and lived for much of his early life in and around that city. His father, Arthur Tolkien, came from Moseley, and his mother Mabel from King's Heath. He was, however, born far away: Mabel and Arthur left for South Africa where Arthur had a job in a bank. They were married in Cape Town in 1891 and Ronald was born in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, on 3 January, 1892.

Ronald's brother Hilary was born on 17 February 1894: Mabel and her two sons returned to England in the spring of 1895 and stopped with her parents in Ashfield Road, King's Heath. That November Arthur Tolkien became ill with rheumatic fever: he remained in poor health for some months, had a severe haemorrhage on 14 February 1896 and died the next day.

In the summer of 1896 Mabel Tolkien and the two brothers rented 5 Gracewell Cottages on Wake Green Road in the hamlet of Sarehole on the rural edge of Birmingham. This was a golden time in Ronald Tolkien's life. He was taught by his mother and there were wonderful places to see and explore in the countryside around the hamlet.

In a rare interview in 1966 in *The Guardian* (reproduced in *The Guardian* in 1991), Tolkien described how important Sarehole had been in the development of his fiction:

It was a kind of lost paradise... There was an old mill that really did grind corn with two millers, a great big pond with swans on it, a sandpit, a wonderful dell with flowers, a few old-fashioned village houses and, further away, a stream with another mill... I could draw you a map of every inch of it. I loved it with an (intense) love...

Further on he re-emphasizes the importance of his childhood memories of the area:

I was brought up in considerable poverty, but I was happy running about in that country. I took the idea of the hobbits from the village people and children...

This love of a more simple life was very much to Tolkien's liking and re-emerged many years later in his description of the hobbits as a people in *The Lord Of The Rings*.

...for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skilful with tools.



**Left:** looking up Wake Green Road towards Moseley Village at the hamlet of Sarehole, Gracewell Cottages are on the left hand side. **Right:** Sarehole Mill.

While living at Sarehole, Mabel, Ronald and Hilary would have walked to King's Heath to see her parents in Ashfield Road and they most likely walked up Green Hill Road in Moseley. The memory of these walks must have been in his mind when writing the chapter *Three is Company* in *The Fellowship of the Ring* as the three Hobbits, Frodo, Sam and Pippin pass through Green Hill Country on their journey to Crickhollow.

## Moseley and King's Heath

In 1900 Ronald passed his examination for King Edward's School in New Street in Birmingham city centre, but travelling from Sarehole was a problem. So the family packed their belongings and most likely loaded them onto a horse-drawn cart or even a handcart and travelled up Wake Green Road to Moseley Village, where Mabel had rented a house. This was on the hill leading out of the village towards King's Heath and was on tram route, where the steam-powered trams ploughed back and forth, in and out of the city centre. The houses on the route were blighted because of the noise and smoke, so the rents were discounted: no bad thing for Mabel, who by this time had been a widow for nearly four years. But there was another reason for the location. Just before leaving Sarehole, Mabel had converted to the Roman Catholic religion, and the church at St Anne's Alcester Street was a short tram ride away. Ronald did not like the house in Moseley. He thought it 'dreadful', and Moseley itself, with the noise, smoky chimneys, horse-drawn traffic and lots of people was such a change from his rural haunts.



**Left:** A steam tram in Moseley Village outside the Fighting Cocks. **Right:** The Moseley Road leading towards Birmingham city centre. This would have been Ronald's route to school.

Tolkien's time in Moseley was short, however. The family soon moved again, to Westfield Road on the Grange Estate in King's Heath. This house backed on to the railway line and looked across fields to two grand mansions, Highbury and Uffculme. Coal was King in those days, and coal trucks from the South Wales coalfields passed through King's Heath Station a short way from their house. The strange-sounding names on the trucks led to Ronald's discovery of the Welsh language.



**Left:** The now lost King's Heath railway station. **Right:** The inside of The Oratory old church

By then the Tolkiens were attending the small Catholic church of St Dunstan's, on the corner of Station Road and Westfield Road. The church was a small iron building with a pine-board interior, opened in 1896. But in 1902, they moved again, this time to Oliver Road, Edgbaston (the house now long gone as a result of road redevelopment). Religion, once again, played a big factor, for the Birmingham Oratory Church was a short walk away.

## Edgbaston and Rednal

The Birmingham Oratory Church was the first English community of the Congregation of the Oratory, the order started in Rome by St. Philip Neri in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This community was founded by John Henry Newman in 1848 and moved to the present site on the Hagley Road in 1852.



**Left:** The Hagley Road, Edgbaston, with a horse drawn bus coming down the road, just opposite the Plough and Harrow hotel with the Oratory community just behind the bus. **Right:** Beatrice Suffield's house in Stirling Road as it is today. The Tolkien brothers lived in the attic rooms at the top of the house, which would usually have been servants' quarters.

In 1904 Mabel became ill with diabetes and spent some time in hospital. In those days the only known remedy for illnesses such as diabetes was thought to be fresh air. So the family moved once again, to Fern Cottage in the large grounds of Oratory House in Rednal, just outside Birmingham. Oratory House itself stands on the wooded slopes of Rednal Hill, part of the Lickey Hills and was used as a retreat by members of the Oratory community.

But after a wonderful summer in the woods and fields of the Lickey Hills and the glorious colours of the trees in the autumn, Mabel's diabetes overcame her and she died in the November. After a short while Ronald and Hilary returned to Edgbaston, to live with their aunt Beatrice Suffield in Stirling Road, a short distance from the Oratory. Living on the other side of the road was the widow of the locally famous surgeon, Dr Joseph Sampson Gamgee. He founded the Birmingham Hospital Saturday Fund in 1873, which helped its members with hospital bills, as it still does today. He also invented Gamgee tissue, a cotton wound-dressing. He died in 1886 but his name lives on as a major character in *The Lord of the Rings*.

At the end of Stirling Road stands a tall chimney. But this is not your common circular brick chimney but a beautiful Italianate structure with ornamental cream brickwork built in 1862. Standing next to the chimney were the boiler house, engine room and workshops of the Edgbaston Water Works. This would have been a busy place at the time when the Tolkien brothers lived in Edgbaston, with much horse drawn traffic coming and going. The carts would have been carrying coal, most likely from the canal a short distance away, to feed the ever-hungry boilers that supplied steam for the beam engines that pumped the water. From outside the great chimney would have sometimes belched black smoke and the sound of the engines pumping would have been felt and heard. A short distance further down the aptly named Waterworks Road, just before the junction of Monument Road, stands a second tower - but this is a true tower in every sense. This beautiful jewel of architecture was built in brick in 1758 for one Humphrey Perrott, next to his hunting lodge.



**Left:** Duchess Road, with (rare) motor car. **Right:** A modern view of the Two Towers with Perrott's Folly in front and the chimney of Edgbaston Waterworks in the background.

The tower, known as Perrott's Folly, is 96 feet tall, and has a spiral staircase of 139 steps, with small rooms on each floor. In the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the tower became one of the world's first weather stations under the guidance of the pioneering meteorologist, A. Follett Osler. It must have been a mysterious place at night during this period with lighted windows at all hours through the evening and night as weather readings were being taken. The two towers – the waterworks chimney and Perrott's Folly - are locally believed to be Minas Morgul and Minas Tirith but Tolkien himself was very ambiguous about which pair of towers are commemorated in *The Two Towers*.

While living in Stirling Road, Ronald would most likely have walked past a Victorian public house on the corner of Monument Road and the Hagley Road as he went to and from school. The public house is called the Ivy Bush and this would reappear many years later - in Hobbiton.

In 1908 Ronald and Hilary moved from Stirling Road to into lodgings at one Mrs Faulkner's house in Duchess Road. Living there at the time was Edith Bratt, another orphan. Romance started to blossom between sixteen-year-old Ronald and Edith, then nineteen.

They most likely would have gone for walks around Edgbaston Reservoir, a short walk from Duchess Road, which in those days was like an inland seaside attraction. It had a band stand, rowing boats for hire, and even beaches.

This relationship was frowned on by Father Francis Morgan – parish priest at the Oratory as well as the boys' guardian - and he had Hilary and Ronald moved out of Duchess Road into a house in Highfield Road just over the road from the Oratory, presumably so he could keep an eye on them. This was to be Ronald's last Birmingham address. While he was living at this house, Father Francis banned Ronald from pursuing his relationship with Edith, who moved to Cheltenham.

But before she left, she and Ronald met by chance, one lunchtime, at the Prince of Wales public house in Moseley Village. The tale now moves away from the Birmingham area as Ronald went up to Oxford. As soon as he attained his majority, at the age of 21, Tolkien felt that Father Francis' strictures no longer applied, and proposed to Edith in a letter. She accepted (a complicated matter, as she was at the time engaged to someone else). Ronald finished at Oxford in the summer of 1915, by which time the Great War was raging. Ronald joined the Lancashire Fusiliers, but he and Edith were married in the spring of 1916.



*Left: The bandstand and boathouse at Edgbaston Reservoir. Right: The Plough and Harrow*

The couple returned to Birmingham in the June and stayed overnight at the Plough and Harrow hotel just over the road from the Oratory.

Ronald was most likely on embarkation leave as he was shortly to go the Western Front and it would be nice to think that they were returning to the places of their childhood sweetheart days. They stayed in room 116: a Blue Plaque records it.

*Bob Blackham is a noted expert on Tolkien's Birmingham connections and an obsessive collector of old postcards.*

## Commentary: **John Ronald's Schooldays**

*Maggie Burns*

When you think about Tolkien's Birmingham you may well think of Sarehole, and of the annual weekend at Sarehole Mill - this year on 17-18 May. Two other places in Birmingham should also be remembered as they were vitally important to Tolkien's life and to his career; the Oratory Church in Edgbaston, and King Edward's School.