

The Lost Heart of the Little Kingdom

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Concerning *Farmer Giles of Ham*¹, Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter stated that Tolkien wrote it some time during the 1930s in part to amuse his children but chiefly to please himself.² The Little Kingdom is Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Worminghall (meaning 'dragon-hall') is a place a few miles East of Oxford. Early in 1938 he read a revised version at Worcester College and it went down well, but Carpenter states that by 1945 Tolkien could not write the sequel since Oxfordshire had changed so much.

It is perhaps strange for those not acquainted with the area concerned to think that as early as 1945 Tolkien bemoaned the passing of the Oxfordshire and Midlands countryside, and that he might have given this as his main reason for not writing anything more concerning the Little Kingdom that contained *Farmer Giles of Ham*³: 'The heart has gone out of the Little Kingdom, and the woods and plains are aerodromes and bomb-practice targets.' A casual reader might think such a conclusion reactionary. Tolkien had a great love for all things natural, and trees in particular⁴, but I shall show that his concerns for the environment were well-founded even as early as 1945. Taken today, his fears for it verge on the prophetic.

One is always confronted when reading Tolkien's so-called minor works with this innate passion for the English Midlands countryside, a passion that his detractors might say has almost a hint of the ridiculous about it. But that would be to look at the parody of the man, and not the man himself and his surroundings and scholarship. I say 'so-called' minor works, for Shippey has suggested that, on another

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level, *Farmer Giles of Ham* could easily be seen as an allegory of Tolkien's switch from academicism to creativity.⁵ Shippey points out that the allegory of the short tale is very precise, with the Parson being perhaps the idealised philologist, the blade Tailbiter and the rope which the Farmer used standing for philological science, Giles the creative instinct, the dragon representing the ancient world of Northern imagination, and the king standing for literary criticism that takes no account of historical language study. Shippey reveals to us that Tolkien illustrated with *Farmer Giles of Ham* that 'Thame' should be 'Tame', 'for Thame with an "h" is a folly without warrant'; this was a linguist's dig at the irrational spellings within the English language.

One can discover by examining several sources how life in Oxfordshire changed drastically from the 1910s when Tolkien first came to Oxford and grew to love Oxfordshire and its countryside, to the 1940s and 1950s and indeed beyond that time to when it fell from his esteem.

— This paper examines the population growth, the increase in the Oxford city housing stock, the changes in rural Oxfordshire due to the defence of the realm during World War Two, and the increase in road traffic.

First of all, the growth in population. Why should a sleepy University town grow at all? The answer is the rise in prominence of the motor car.

William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) and his production-line car manufacture brought British-built cars within the reach of millions. The Cowley works in Eastern Oxford were established in 1910 but it was well after 1918 that car production really expanded. In 1919 Morris Motors employed only two hundred workers. By 1924, this figure had risen to 5,500. With the incorporation of the Pressed Steel car-body making factory in Cowley, and Osberton Radiators in the North of Oxford, in 1926, 6,500 people worked for the Oxford motor car industry. It is estimated that by the Second World War thirty per cent of the population of Oxford worked for the motor industry, and Morris had built his millionth car.⁶ This manpower was satisfied by immigrant labour drawn to the city by the prospect of work in this ever-expanding industry. The rise of the motor industry continued right up to the 1960s and brought with it its own by-product, the proliferation of large fast road networks at the expense of the English countryside. Tolkien would say late in his life when he saw a new road being built: 'There goes the last of England's arable!'⁷ He was for instance concerned by plans in the mid-1950s to build a relief road across Christchurch Meadows, a local government scheme that thankfully never went beyond the planning stage.⁸ So great was the public outcry at the time that a plan was seriously considered to build a two-mile-long tunnel from The Plain running under Christchurch Meadows and emerging at the other side of Oxford in order to relieve traffic with minimal environmental impact, though this was eventually proven to be too expensive.⁹

Another road that Tolkien would

Alex originally dedicated this paper to the memory of Mr Percy Broadiss, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford; 1906-1989, his 'Gaffer Gamgee'.

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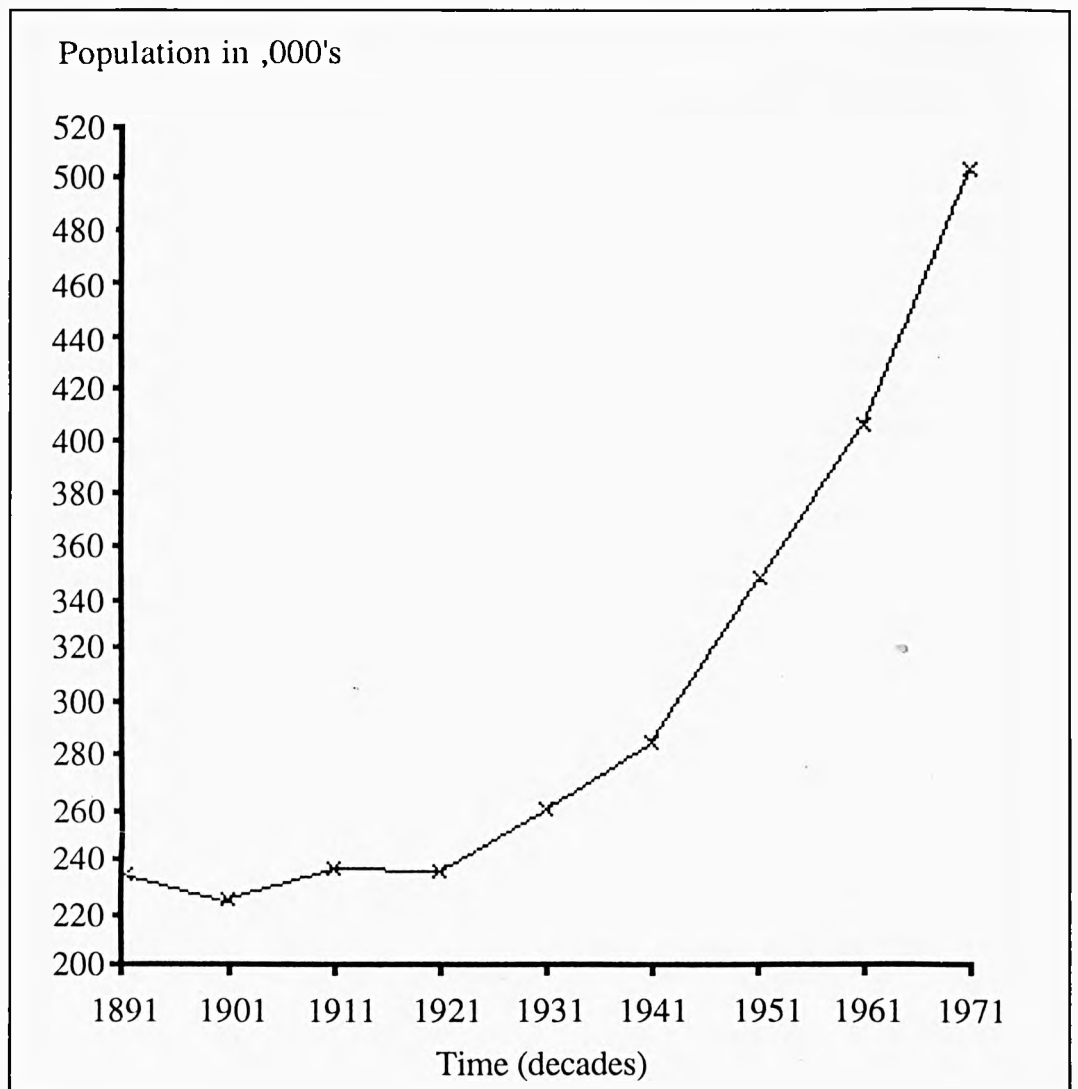
likely have been opposed to would have been the Marston Ferry Link Road, completed in 1971, but discussed for many years before that.¹⁰ In the years that the Tolkien family lived in Northmoor Road¹¹ they often hired a punt for the summer and went up the Cherwell to Water Eaton and Islip and picnicked, or to Wood Eaton looking for butterflies, or took drives to Worminghall, Brill, Charlton-on-Otmoor or West into Berkshire up White Horse Hill to see the ancient long-barrow known as Wayland's Smithy. Looking to the present day he was correct to fear the incursion of the road system on the countryside. For instance, Phase 2 of the M40 motorway that first linked Oxford and London in the 1970s was a reality by 1990, and it cuts right across Otmoor and the areas of natural beauty that lie there (including Worminghall, Brill, Charlton-on-Otmoor, Islip and Water Eaton) to bring more volumes of traffic faster to Banbury and

Birmingham. From 1986 onwards, £133,000 per year was allocated to the land acquisition budget for building new roads in Oxfordshire.¹² How Tolkien would have hated the 'motor cars' progress' at the cost of yet more precious Midlands countryside.

Along with the rise of the motor car, one might well add the spread of the London commuter belt beyond the Berkshire town of Reading to engulf Oxford, as contributing to the loss of self and the fading of the uniqueness of Oxford as a university city. Oxford was fortunate and yet unfortunate to be only fifty-five miles from central London. Commuters first began to use the rail system to travel from Oxford to London via Reading in numbers during the 1950s and the two-and-a-half-hour journey by car from Oxford to London was cut to a mere one-hour drive by the building of the M40 motorway in 1969-1972, completing the 'suburbanisation' of a city that once possessed a being

and a heart of its own. Yet this 'London effect' is only a more recent phase of the capital's threat to the Oxfordshire countryside, and to the city of Oxford itself, which had begun in earnest during World War Two with the evacuation of many Londoners to Oxford, which was a 'safe city', in order to escape the Blitz. Only one enemy aircraft ever flew over Oxford, and that was late in the war to photograph the Cowley works then used for aircraft repairs¹³. Thomas Sharp called it a whim of luck that Oxford was never bombed, unlike its close neighbour Coventry and the city of Exeter to the south-west. It was this fundamental change in the population of the city of Oxford which brought about a loss of Oxfordshire character in its people; a dilution, if you like, of the Midlander, supplanted by the Cockney refugee and also the labourers who came to look for work from the poorer regions of the country. The Sam Gamgees of Oxfordshire were becoming a rarity.

Figure 1.
Population of
Oxfordshire
(as defined
1.4.74) plotted
against time.



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This as much as anything would have reinforced the strangeness of the city Tolkien once came to love as an undergraduate, when he looked at it during the late 1930s and early 1940s, and it is little wonder that he was disheartened. In that light the threat of Southern refugees moving into Bree in *The Fellowship of the Ring* can be seen as an echo of the loss of Oxford the familiar to Tolkien the man¹⁴: 'If room isn't found for them, they'll find it for themselves', declares the squint-eyed ill-favoured traveller at The Prancing Pony.¹⁵ The same might have been said, by someone of the time, to be happening to Oxford.¹⁶

That such roots were important to Tolkien is evident. In a diary entry of 1933, Tolkien makes a significant statement about the subject of the loss of early memories.¹⁷ He had returned in 1933 to the area around Sarehole Mill, where he had spent the pleasanter times of his child-

hood, and found that it had changed almost beyond his recognition: 'How I envy those whose precious early scenery has not been exposed to such violent and particularly hideous change.' This was a grievous loss for him of childhood memories, and in Oxford too the changes were coming fast and furious. From 1921 to 1931 the rate of increase of the city population was greater than in all but two towns throughout the whole country at 26 per cent. From 1931 to 1951 the rate of increase was scarcely less at 23 percent.¹⁸ Look at a graphical representation of this population growth from 1891 to 1971 (*figure 1*). It is important to note that up to 1921 the figures are nearly constant, but grow sharply thereafter.

Oxford housing stock had of course to increase in order to accommodate the growth in population. The two are interdependent. In the 1931 Census¹⁸, under the heading 'structurally separate dwellings',

there were listed 50,638 as opposed to 44,527 in 1921. Examining the statistics of housing stock, there was a lower proportion of the larger houses (9 rooms and more) and of the very small houses (4 rooms and less) built in this period, and most houses built were of 5-6 rooms. This meant that suburban housing estates of redbrick, mostly terraces and semi-detached homes, sprang up in that period. These 'production-line dwellings' to match their 'production-line worker-dwellers' would not have harmonised with the Gothic-style Oxford of Cotswold stone buildings that Tolkien knew. If one examines the map of housing stock¹⁹ (*figure 2*) it is immediately clear how large an area of countryside the city ate up during this period of its growth – the areas in question are the darker ones in the figure. It might be thought²⁰ that the building of the houses to the North of Oxford city centre for the dons, and their fami-

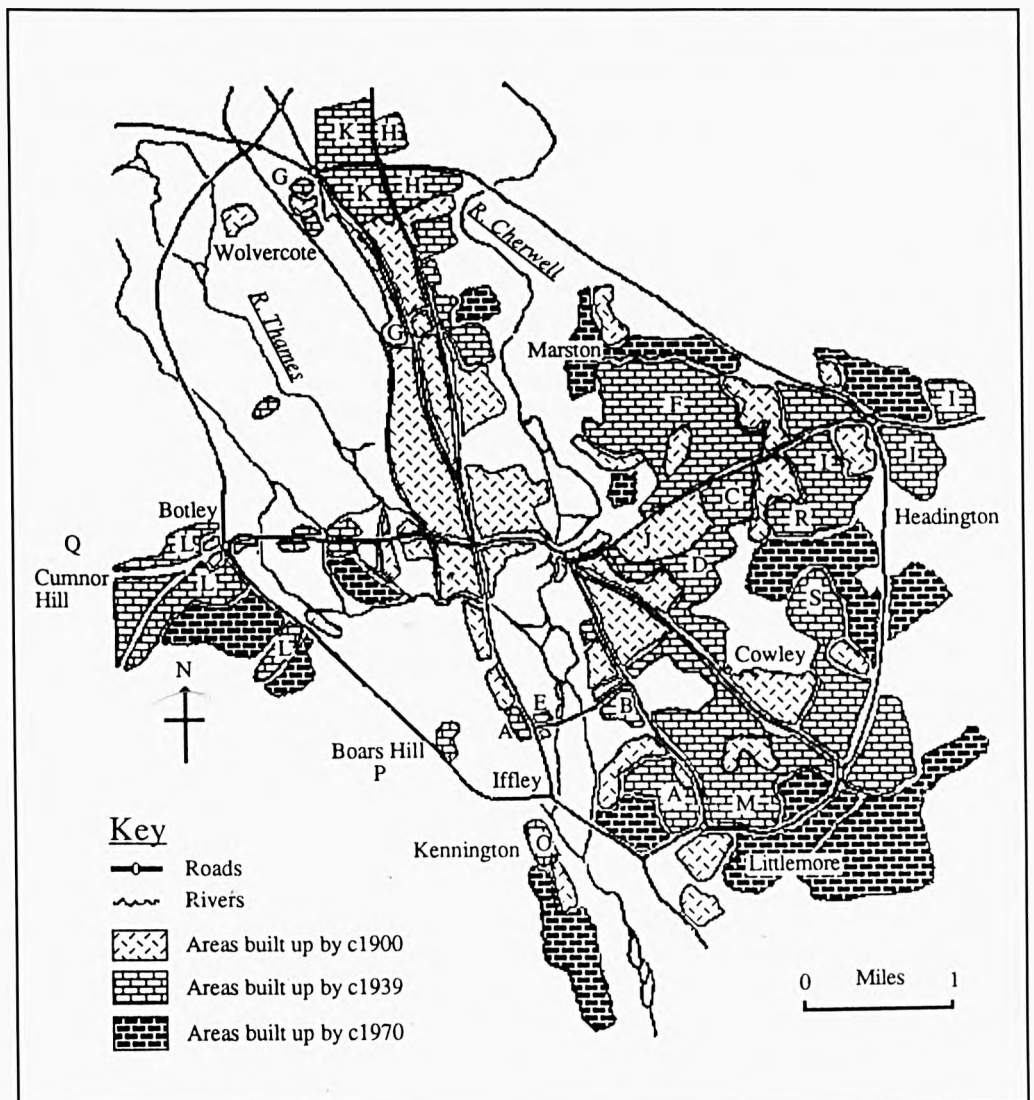


Figure 2. Oxford city housing stock development to 1970.

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-lies once they were allowed to marry, could have been a contributory factor to Oxford's loss of uniqueness, but this cannot have been the case for Tolkien. By 1877 North Oxford was already developed, and indeed Summertown dates from 1832, so that Tolkien would have accepted these houses when he first arrived in the city as part of its character. To visit North Oxford and examine the old houses now, it might be difficult to see how the character of these large Victorian dwellings could ever be seen as a part of Oxford, but I myself lived on the Banbury Road from 1963 to 1971 between North and South Parades, and in the early 1960s, when the volume of road traffic was considerably less and the houses had not been turned into schools of languages or offices or guest houses or flats, they possessed a stately air of opulence not at odds with the grandeur of the older city in the centre. They were each individualised buildings, no two exactly the same, each standing in almost half an acre of gardens. Their grandeur was the mock-Gothic splendour of Keble College. It is to be remembered that Tolkien himself chose to live in North Oxford from 1925 to 1949 at numbers 20 and 22 Northmoor Road.²¹

The districts where the housing stock increased dramatically were the areas where the greatest population increases were recorded. Conclusively, between 1921 and 1931 the population of Cowley and Iffley districts increased by 122 percent and Headington district by 79 percent.²²

By 1939 Oxford Corporation had built more than 2000 new council houses, most of them at Rose Hill, Iffley [A], Freelands [B], Gypsy Lane [C], South Park [D], Weirs Lane [E], New Marston [F], Wolvercote [G], Cutteslowe [H] and Headington [I]²². Some of the houses, such as those on Morrell Avenue, [J] were of a high standard, though of the others little is mentioned (see figure 2 for the areas designated by capital letters). Private developers by 1937 had built more than 4,700 new houses, mostly in areas added to the city in 1929, North of Summertown [K] and extending beyond the ring road.' Beyond the city boundaries suburbs grew up in Botley [L] and Littlemore

[M] and several nearby villages such as Kidlington [N] and Kennington [O] became more suburban in character. The hills around the city were favoured by the prosperous middle classes for the building of larger houses: Boars Hill [P], Cumnor Hill [Q], Headington Hill [R] and Shotover [S]. This was no longer the city Tolkien had known during his undergraduate days. His fears of unbridled growth were well-founded. Kidlington [N] is now the largest village in England and was almost turned into a town in 1987, but the villagers decided against it, though the matter is far from concluded.

The Second World War was the 'War of the Machines', as Tolkien himself declared.²³ It meant that aerodromes were required and, since these aircraft included bombers, bombing practice areas were needed, mainly to improve accuracy. Unfortunately we have no information on bomber-practice target areas, but there are plenty of facts on the aerodromes available. Looking at the map, (*figure 3*) at the time of the First World War the Cotswolds and Central Midlands had five aerodromes: Witley (training), Halton, Weston-on-the-Green (training), Bicester and Upper Heyford. By the time of the end of the Second World War there were 96 of them²⁴. A quick glance at the map shows how the Oxfordshire countryside had been gutted. Few names are marked, for the sake of clarity, and the ones closer to Oxford Tolkien would have known of and objected to. It is important to understand the scale of the devastation I am talking about; it is perhaps fortunate that I was able to work at Oakley aerodrome during April, 1974. I was a student working temporarily during the Easter vacation moving cars parked on one of the runways at Oakley aerodrome for Autocar Transporters. These cars, belonging to the Austin Rover Group (i.e. the old Morris Motors Ltd), were parked by mistake on the wrong runway. Oakley aerodrome has three such runways. During the time I worked there, we moved over four thousand cars of various sizes from one runway to another, and the runway we were moving them from was by no means entirely covered by cars when we began the task. It

took a large team of people working over seventy hours a week four weeks to make a visible impression upon the runway. We did not finish the task that Easter. Imagine then the acreage subordinated to aerodromes of Oxfordshire's arable land. It is hardly any wonder that Tolkien was so angered by all that he saw happening around him.

The proliferation of traffic on the roads of Oxford city had been a great social problem for many years. It was not only cars that caused the damage, but all forms of transportation. In 1913 William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) started an illegal motor bus service between the station and Cowley Road²⁵, in order to compete against the inefficient Electric Tramway Company. As he was not allowed to collect fares on the new buses, vouchers were sold to people in shops. In the first four days of this illegal service, seventeen thousand people travelled on it. Licences were eventually issued to Morris, but he later sold his rights to the Electric Tramway Company, who then changed their name in 1931 to City of Oxford Motor Services. Bus passenger numbers rose right up until the early 1940s when the subsequent boom in private car ownership forced fewer, more economical services. Thomas Sharp²⁶ in a very highly regarded work said in 1948: 'The heavy concentration of traffic is threatening to break down the entire organisation of Oxford as a centre of civilised life', and that: 'People wait in queues for buses that wait in queues.' The fumes from these buses at that time were apparently most unpleasant for pedestrians in Oxford city centre. Then one had the humble bicycle to consider. Sharp²⁷ shows that in 1938 there were over 24,000 bicycles in Oxford and that by 1946 there were 44,500 of them, according to police records. As Sharp points out, the single bicycle, like the single locust, is no problem, but in swarms they rapidly become a plague.

So perhaps one might be tempted to say that Tolkien's sensibilities were irretrievably wounded by the metamorphosis that had befallen his beloved Oxford, and so he wrote no more about it.²⁸ He had bought a car in 1932, but when he realised the damage that cars were causing

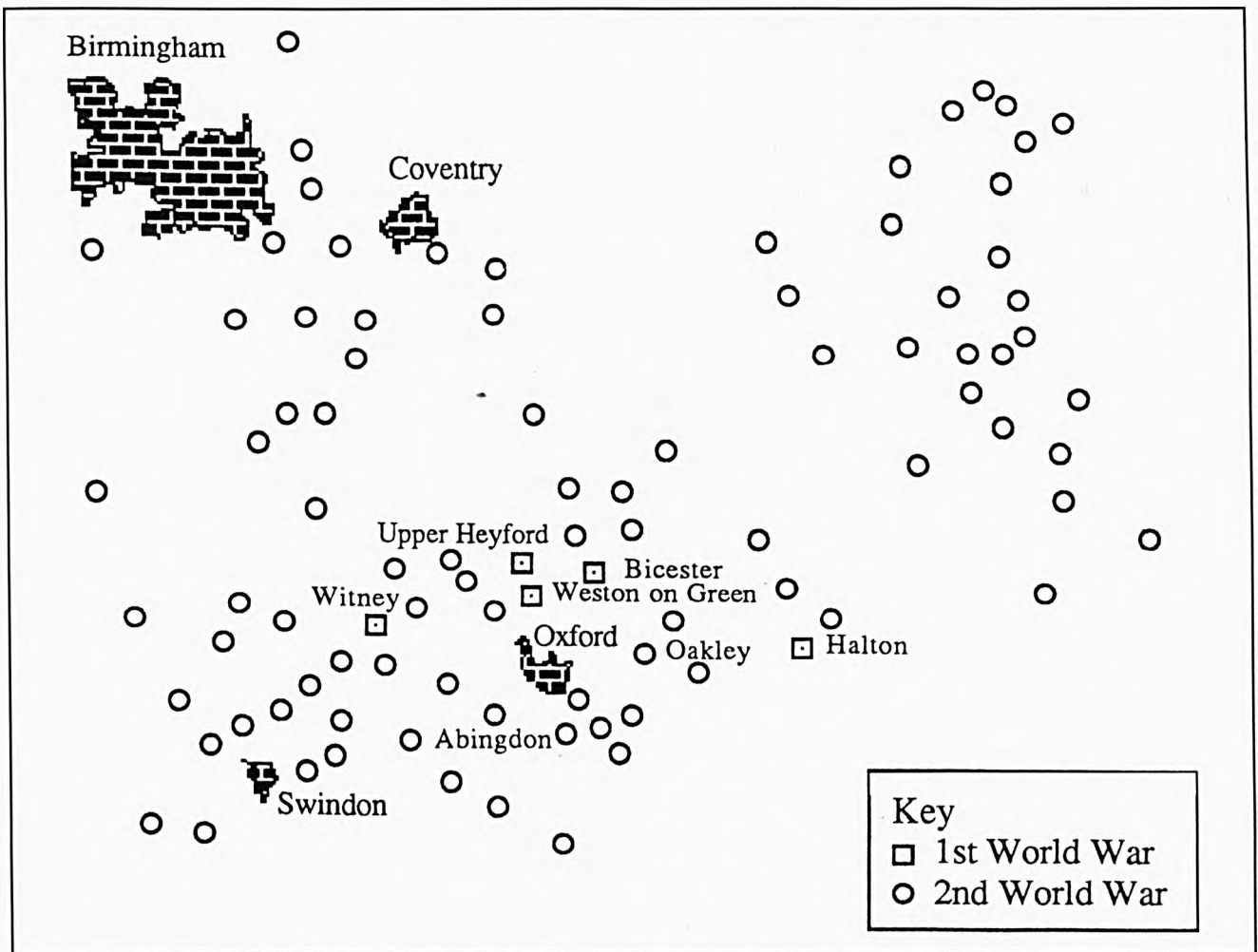


Figure 3. Aerodromes of the Cotswolds and Central Midlands

to the environment, and the large tracts of land being relegated to road usage, he abandoned driving at the outset of World War Two.²⁹ In his early years of driving, he took his family around the Oxfordshire countryside, and it is said that his style of driving caused him to write *Mr Bliss*.³⁰

Tolkien also wrote the unpublished allegorical *Bovadium Fragments*³¹ – a parable about the destruction of Oxford by the *motores* (i.e. cars) that block the streets, asphyxiate the inhabitants and finally explode. This has a truly modern flavour to it, if one considers the current figures of increases in private car usage³² and the present anxieties about lead in petrol, car exhaust emission control³³ and pollution clouds covering many large cities in Europe, such as Athens, where car usage is regulated.

But that is not the whole story. The threads of the sequel to *Farmer Giles of Ham* take a few more twists in their development before they

become the weave that we recognise. Tolkien's letters after 1945 show a definite softening of his attitude towards his sequel based in the Little Kingdom. Asked if he could provide other stories to make up a sufficiently large volume³⁴ Tolkien responded: 'I should, of course, be delighted ... to publish "*Farmer Giles of Ham*" ... With leisure I could give him company.' This is not the same 'The heart has gone out of the Little Kingdom' we had before. Later still in 1949 Tolkien responded to Alien & Unwin³⁵: 'As for further "legends of the Little Kingdom": I put a reference to one in the Foreword in case they should ever come to anything, or a manuscript of the fragmentary legend should come to light. But Georgius and Suet remains only a sketch, and it is difficult now to recapture the spirit of the former days, when we used to beat the bounds of the L[it]tle K[ingdom] in an ancient car.' There seems now to be something else at work in terms of recapturing the spirit, and the

'something' can readily be ascertained from the letters that followed in 1950³⁶: 'the *Silmarillion* and all that has refused to be suppressed. It has bubbled up, infiltrated, and probably spoiled everything ... which I have tried to write since. It was kept out of *Farmer Giles* with an effort, but stopped the continuation ... I can turn now to other things, such as perhaps the Little Kingdom of the Wormings³⁷, or to quite other matters and stories.' Also at much the same time: 'I always thought, that in so far as he has virtue, it would have been improved by other stories of the same kingdom and style; but the domination of the remoter world was so great that I could not make them. It may now prove different.'

It may now prove different.

How tantalising to think that he might have done so! But of course he could no longer let go of 'the *Silmarillion* and all that'. It was in his blood and that is what he continued

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with up to his death. If there had been a sequel written, The Little Kingdom of the Wormings, or whatever it would have been called, what might it have contained? Tolkien did give us some clues. In a letter to Alien & Unwin in 1939 he wrote³⁸ of: '... the adventures of Prince George (the farmer's son) and the fat boy Suovetaurilius (vulgarly Suet), and the Battle of Otmoor.' Carpenter had access to some of Tolkien's papers when writing the *Biography* and informs us³⁹ that Chrysophylax the dragon was to be re-introduced into the sequel. There are perhaps more philosophical reasons why the

sequel did not get written. Shippey⁴⁰ suggests that Tolkien had despaired, perhaps, by the time of the 1960s of eventually finding the Lost Straight Road to rejoin his own creations after death – like Smith, or even Frodo, who doubt that salvation will be theirs, for, like the Silmarils, they are lost forever. But this would be to ignore a short tale that sprang into being in the evening of his life in 1967: *Smith of Wootton Major*.

I would suggest that this short tale heralded a new creative strand for the Little Kingdom, albeit very late in the coming. Wootton Major

and Minor are two villages that appear in the story, and there are several Woottons in and around Oxfordshire, notably one close to Abingdon and another not far from Kidlington. Far Easton and Westwood are names that could have come from the Midlands, but most interestingly the name Nokes is probably derived from Noke, a village nestling on the edge of Otmoor.⁴¹

So had Tolkien recaptured the lost heart of the Little Kingdom after all? Had it taken him 22 years to do so? I would like to believe so. Time, after all, is a great healer.

Notes and References

1. *Farmer Giles of Ham*, J.R.R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, Reset New Format, 1976. [Hereafter cited as *FGH*]. I shall refer to this only once, for a knowledge of the text of the story is implicitly assumed for this article.
2. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A biography*, Humphrey Carpenter. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977 [Hereafter cited as *Biography*] p.165.
3. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter (ed.). London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981 [Hereafter cited as *Letters*] p.113.
4. *Letters* pp.321, 419-20.
5. *The Road to Middle-Earth*, T.A. Shippey. London, George Allen & Unwin, 1982 [I-Hereafter cited as *Road*] pp.75-6.
6. *The Victoria History of the County of Oxford*, Vol. IV. Oxford University Press, 1979 [Hereafter cited as *Victoria*]
7. *Biography* p.125.
8. *Letters* p.235 and note 2.
9. *Report of Oxford Roads Enquiry*. Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1961 p.12.
10. *The Transport Debate*. Oxfordshire County Planning Department, March 1978 [Hereafter cited as *Transport*] p.53
11. *Biography* p.160.
12. *Transport Policy Programme 1985-6*. Oxfordshire County Council (various maps and tables throughout this report).
13. *Oxford Replanned*, Thomas Sharp. Architectural Press, 1948 [Hereafter cited as *Ox. Rep.*] p.19.
14. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 2nd Ed., 1968 reprint p.168.
15. Tolkien had reached the Inn at Bree in *The Fellowship of the Ring* before the shadow of the Second World War, but sometime after 1937 (see *Letters* p.303).
16. By this I am certainly not accusing Tolkien of parochialism. It is to be remembered that he grew to love the 'dull stodges' who were his students at Leeds (see *Biography* p.104), and his love for language precludes any such narrow-mindedness. It is the dilution of the essential character of a place that he would mourn as a linguist and scholar of matters historical.
17. *Biography* pp.124-5.
18. Census Reports 1921, 1931, 1951. HMSO.
19. Map based upon one taken from *Victoria*, p.207.
20. *Biography* p.113.
21. *Biography* p.155.
22. *Victoria* p.206.
23. *Letters* p.111.
24. *Action Stations 6: Military Airfields of the Cotswolds and Central Midlands*, M.J.F. Bowyer. Cambridge: Patrick Stephens, 1979.
25. *Encyclopedia of Oxford*, C. Hibbert (ed.). London: Macmillan, 1988 p.459.
26. *Ox. Rep.* pp.19, 31.
27. *Ox. Rep.* p.92.
28. *Letters* pp.344-5.
29. *Biography* p.124 30. *Biography* pp.159, 163.
31. *Biography* p.163.
32. *Cherwell Area Rural Transport Study: Report of Survey Findings, Working Paper 105*, P.A. Stanley; and *Transport* pp.16-17.
33. Leading article, 'Alan Osborn in Strasbourg: Euro-MP's vote for US-style exhaust controls', *The Daily Telegraph*, No. 41,617, 13.4.89.
34. *Letters* p.118.
35. *Letters* p.133.
36. *Letters* pp.136-7, 139.
37. The planned sequel to *Farmer Giles*.
38. *Letters* p.43.
39. *Biography* p.166.
40. *Road* p.211.
41. The similarities are more subtle than just the names; there are sub-plot echoes of the one in the other. *Farmer Giles* has a Royal Cook who bakes a Mock Dragon Tail - a superb confection – for eating each Christmas Eve (see *FGH* pp.20-21, 25). *Smith of Wootton Major* has the Master Cook, who makes at a winter festivity, the Feast of Good Children on each twenty-fourth year, a Great Cake for the Twenty-four feast (see *Smith of Wootton Major*, J.R.R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 2nd. Ed., 1975 p.8). It is perhaps not merely fortuitous that the one night children are told to be on their best behaviour by their parents is Christmas Eve, lest Father Christmas leave them no presents; and so a thematic link is forged between the Feast of Good Children and Christmas Eve.