

THE SHIRE: ITS BOUNDS, FOOD AND FARMING

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The hobbits are a people loving 'peace and quiet and good tilled earth,' their favourite haunt 'a well-ordered and well farmed countryside' (I, p. 11). In this paper, I shall endeavour to consider their habitation and the good food that caused them to be 'inclined to be fat' (idem).

Chronicler J.R.R. Tolkien tells us, in the reconstruction of early hobbit history presented as preamble to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, that they dwelt originally in the upper vales of the great River Anduin. This region gains little mention in the chronicles but, on Christopher Tolkien's authoritative map, it is named Hithaiglin. It lies between the northern Misty Mountains and the forest that was originally Greenwood the Great, later Mirkwood (I, p. 13). The progressive darkening of the forest, and the multiplying of men in that region, seem to have been the causes for the hobbits' westward migration over the Misty Mountains into Eriador. Of the three breeds of hobbits, it was the Harfoots 'the most normal and representative type of hobbit' (I, p. 13) - who moved westward earliest. They had lived in the Mountains' eastern foothills. They seem to have crossed the Mountains south of Rivendell and had travelled as far as Weathertop before the others made that perilous crossing. We may infer that the third group of hobbits, the Stoors, lived formerly in the most southerly regions of Hithaiglin, their ancestors being a 'cleverhanded and quiet footed little people' who resided just north of the Gladden Fields, loved the Great River and made reed boats from which to catch fish (I, p. 62). When the Stoors also moved west, they followed the path of the Harfoots but lingered longer in Wilderland 'between Tharbad and the borders of Dunland' (idem) - the region later called Eregion or Hollin. It was probably the increase of men

in that region also which caused both these groups of hobbits to move on westwards.

The third and most adventurous breed, the Fallohides, had lived farthest north in Hithaiglin. They made an independent crossing of the mountains, north of Rivendell, and travelled southward down the River Hoarwell to join up with the Harfoots and Stoors in a region surely erroneously named as 'the Westlands of Eriador' (I, p. 14). It should have been the Eastlands, for Eriador extended to the Ered Luin, the Blue Mountains, close to the ocean, while these lands lay far from the ocean. They centred on Bree-hill, 'tall and brown' (I, p. 193), an isolated hill east of The Greenway that then linked Tharbad with Fornost. Bree-land was 'a small inhabited region, like an island in the empty lands round about' (I, p. 160); it was comprised of Bree itself and the nearby villages of Staddle, Combe and Archet, with the Chetwood to the east. Here men still lived, 'the descendants of the first Men that ever wandered into the West of the Middle-world' (idem). Fortunately the Men of Bree welcomed the hobbits; Bree-land became the one region of Middle-earth where men and hobbits learned happily to co-exist. However, it seems Bree-land became rather too crowded for comfort. Consequently, from Bree 'in the one thousand six hundred and first year of the Third Age' the brothers Marcho and Blanco Fallohide set out 'with a great following of hobbits' (idem) to find a fresh place to dwell. This was done with the permission of Argeleb II, twentieth of the Kings of the fading realm of Eriador - a lineage destined to end three hundred years later. King Argeleb had allocated to that peaceful people an extensive, but by then unoccupied, tract of land west of the 'brown River

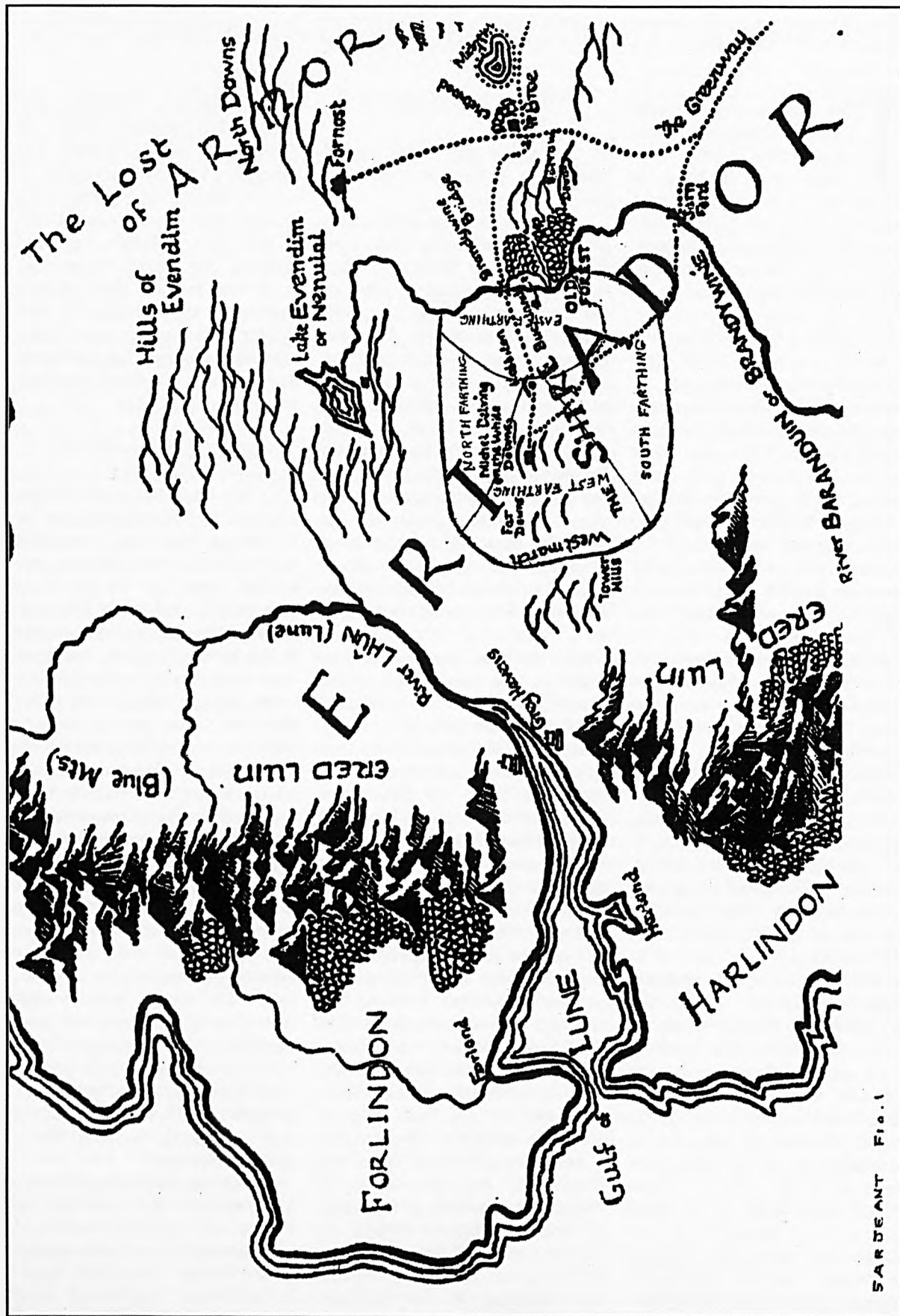
Baranduin' (idem). To reach it, they crossed the ancient Bridge of Stonebows, whose repair was thereafter placed in their charge.

The hobbits who followed the brothers must have consisted only of their own Fallohide breed and Harfoots. The Stoors, we are told, came 'later into the Shire up from southaway' and, because of their longer lingering elsewhere, retained 'many peculiar names and strange words not found elsewhere in the Shire' (I, p. 16).

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE SHIRE

The land allocated to the hobbits extended 'for fifty leagues, from the Westmarch under the Tower Hills to the Brandywine Bridge' - the hobbits' name for the Bridge of Stonebows - 'and nearly fifty from the northern moors to the marshes in the south' (I, p. 15). Its limits were never shown on the Tolkiens' maps; the one detailed map of the Shire which we have (I, facing p. 24) does not purport to show it all. The length of a league is usually taken as equal to roughly three miles, but it varies. I have striven to plot The Shire on the map of Middle-earth (Fig. 1), but the distance from the Westmarch to the Brandywine has forced me to adjudge that an Eriadorian league was longer than three miles. My extending of the boundaries of the four Farthings echoes the separation of the North and South Farthings by westward and eastward extensions of the two other Farthings close to Bywater, as shown on Christopher Tolkien's map (I, facing p. 24), but is otherwise arbitrary.

When the hobbits arrived they found a land that 'was rich and kindly. and, though it had been long deserted when they entered it, it had before been well tilled.' Indeed, there had been many 'farms, cornlands, vineyards and woods' (I, p. 15). It was 'a pleasant corner of the world,' where they



SARDEANT FIG. 1

FIGURE 1. Suggested boundaries of The Shire and its four Farthings, superimposed upon Christopher Tolkien's map of Eriador.

The Shire: its bounds, food and farming

could ply their 'well-ordered business of living' (*idem*).

Topographically, it embraced three highland regions. East of the Tower Hills that lay beyond the limits of the Shire, there were what the hobbits, in their parochial fashion, called the Far Downs. Eastward of these were the White Downs, with the village of Michel Delving. An unnamed extension of those downs, of lesser altitude, lay north of Scary. Southeastward from the White Downs was a further range of lower hills - the Green Hill Country, with Tuckborough embowered amid the western uplands and the eastern end so cloaked with trees that it was named Woody End.

Between the Green Hill Country and the White Downs, there meandered a tributary of the Brandywine which the hobbits named simply The Water. South of the Green Hill Country, a second stream, the Shirebourn, flowed eastward to join the Brandywine just north of the Overbourn Marshes. The low-lying lands north of these marshes were named the Marish and populated mostly by Stoors.

The bounds of the Shire were widened when, at an unspecified date, Gorchendad Oldbuck of the Marish crossed the Brandywine to found Buckland, 'a thickly inhabited strip between the river and the Old Forest, a sort of colony of the Shire' (I, p. 108). Since this seems to have been done without any seeking for royal permission, it probably took place around the two thousandth year of the Third Age, after the fall of King Argeleb's house. Buckland was centred on Bucklebury and protected on its eastern side by a thick, twenty mile long hedge, the High Hay (I, p. 109).

ITS GEOLOGY

In an earlier paper (1995), I endeavoured to reconstruct the geology of Middle-earth. On my reconstruction, the Shire lies between two great faultlines, the Evendim Fault to the north and the Minhiriath Fault to the south. The

separation of the Far and White Downs, and the upper course of the Brandywine, surely reflect the lines of lesser normal faults: these are shown, and named, on Fig. 2, along with other lesser faults.

Concerning the strata cropping out in the Shire, we have little information. The White Downs were surely of chalk and there was - at least, under Sharkey's malign regime - a sandpit close to Hobbiton (III, 302). Moreover, as I have shown earlier (1992), there was coal to be mined somewhere in the Shire, perhaps in quarries in those unnamed hills north of Scary (III, 302). The paintings of Tolkien depict a topography very like that of the southern English Midlands - so like, indeed, that I am, tempted to think that the greater part of the Shire was likewise made up of Jurassic and Cretaceous strata, such as nowadays crop out widely in northwest Europe. These strata vary from clays, through brown or green sandstones and sandy limestones, to limestones of higher purity, culminating in the chalk itself.

Such a variety of strata would sustain the whole range of wild plants, and permit the variety of crops, that we know the Shire supported. It would account for the low hills and broad vales, for the marshes and the woodlands. As for the coals - well, though there are no Mesozoic bituminous coals, brown coals (lignites) are widely present in Jurassic strata (for example, in Alberta). They would be cleaner-burning, less likely to pollute the pleasant airs of the Shire.

ITS PLANTS

We are told that 'growing food and eating it' occupied most of the time of the hobbits (I, p. 19) and that 'they laughed, ate and drank often and heartily' (I, p. 12). Indeed, the rich Shire soils and the variety of slopes, some sunny, some shaded, allowed the hobbits to enjoy a wide range of fruits and vegetables. Root crops flourished - was not Gaffer Gamgee especially knowledgeable about their nurture? We have mention of potatoes (I, p. 30) and

of turnips and carrots (II, p. 262). Then there were cabbages (I, p. 32), tomatoes (H, p. 21) and a variety of herbs (I, p. 135); from the list of those recognized by Sam Gamgee in fragrant Ithilien, we know that these included thyme, sage, parsley and marjoram (II, p. 258). Of grain crops, there was wheat to be ground in Ted Sandyman's original mill (I, p. 15) and, in the North Farthing at least, barley for beermaking (III, p. 304). In the South Farthing around Longbottom, there were vines (I, p. 46; III, p. 304) and, in warm, sheltered places, there grew sweet galenas, the pipeweed that was the hobbits' particular contribution to the wellbeing of humanity at large (I, p. 18, III, p. 304).

The hobbits planted, tended and harvested apple, plum and chestnut trees (I, p. 92; II, p. 83; III, pp. 303, 296). Hazel nuts also were available from 'hazel thickets' (III, p. 308). The various berries they ate - blackberries, raspberries and strawberries (I, pp. 98, 166; H, p. 21, III, p. 303) - were seemingly both harvested in the wild and grown in their gardens. This is implicit in Pippin's reaction to elf-fare, where he savours 'fruit sweet as wildberries and richer than the tended fruit of gardens' (I, p. 91). Some of these fruits were dried, for consumption while travelling or during the long months of winter (II, p. 285). Mushrooms, of course, were cultivated in the Marish and elsewhere, being a particular passion, not just of Frodo and his companions but of all hobbits - a passion 'surpassing even the greediest likings of the Big Folk' (I, pp. 101, 105, 112).

All these gain direct mention, but we may infer three further crops. Since Bilbo made seedcake (albeit unwittingly) for the dwarves to eat (H, p. 18), there must have been caraways. The fact that some hobbits were ropers (I, p. 16) suggests the growing of hemp; but, of course, some other material might have been employed for rope-making. Bilbo's and Frodo's library (I, p. 46) implies paper-making, perhaps from wood pulp,

Mallorn XXXVIII

more likely from reeds - and maybe Bilbo's waste-paper basket (I, p. 46) was also woven from reeds.

Though vegetables and fruits were the hobbits prime concerns, they grew flowers also in their gardens. We learn of lilies, snapdragons, nasturtiums, sunflowers and daffodils (H, p. 5; I, p. 33; II, p. 288) while the names of certain hobbits - Primula Brandybuck (I, p. 31), Rosie Cotton and the egregious Lobelia Sackville-Baggins - tell us obliquely of three others.

Flowering shrubs were present (I, p. 45); these are not named, but the Shire's shrubs likely included tamarisks, 'pungent terebinth', junipers, myrtles and bays, since these seem to have been recognized in Ithilien by Frodo and Sam (II, p.

258). We do not know which shrub made the hedge at Bag End, so assiduously trimmed by Sam (I, p. 45), but its lawns were certainly of grass (I, pp. 56, 72).

The trees of the Shire were important to the hobbits; did not Sam, following the return from Mordor, concern himself with forestry? They included a variety of deciduous trees - willow, elm, ash, chestnut, rowan, linden, alder, birch and that flowering tree anciently called the auburn, nowadays the laburnum (H, p. 15; I, pp. 52, 80; II, pp. 83, 84, 86), along with conifers such as the fir (I, p. 81) and, at least in the uplands of the North Farthing, the pine (II, p. 257). Rather surprisingly, the party tree (I, p. 34), so soon to fall victim to Saruman's wickedness, is

not identified; and, of courses the mallorn came much later.

ITS PASTORAL FARMING

Concerning pastoral farming in the Shire, we have remarkably little information. We learn a little about the ponies ridden by the hobbits - their own particular breed, small and sturdy, slow but enduring (I, p. 84). However, the ponies ridden by Bilbo and the dwarves and by Frodo and his companions fared ill, being either taken by goblins (H) or driven away by Sauruman's minions (I). Perhaps Sam's pony, Bill, was also of hobbit breed but, since he was bought in Bree from one of the Big Folk - the unsavoury Bill Ferny - that is not certain. Horses, it seems, were brought into the Shire rarely and only by

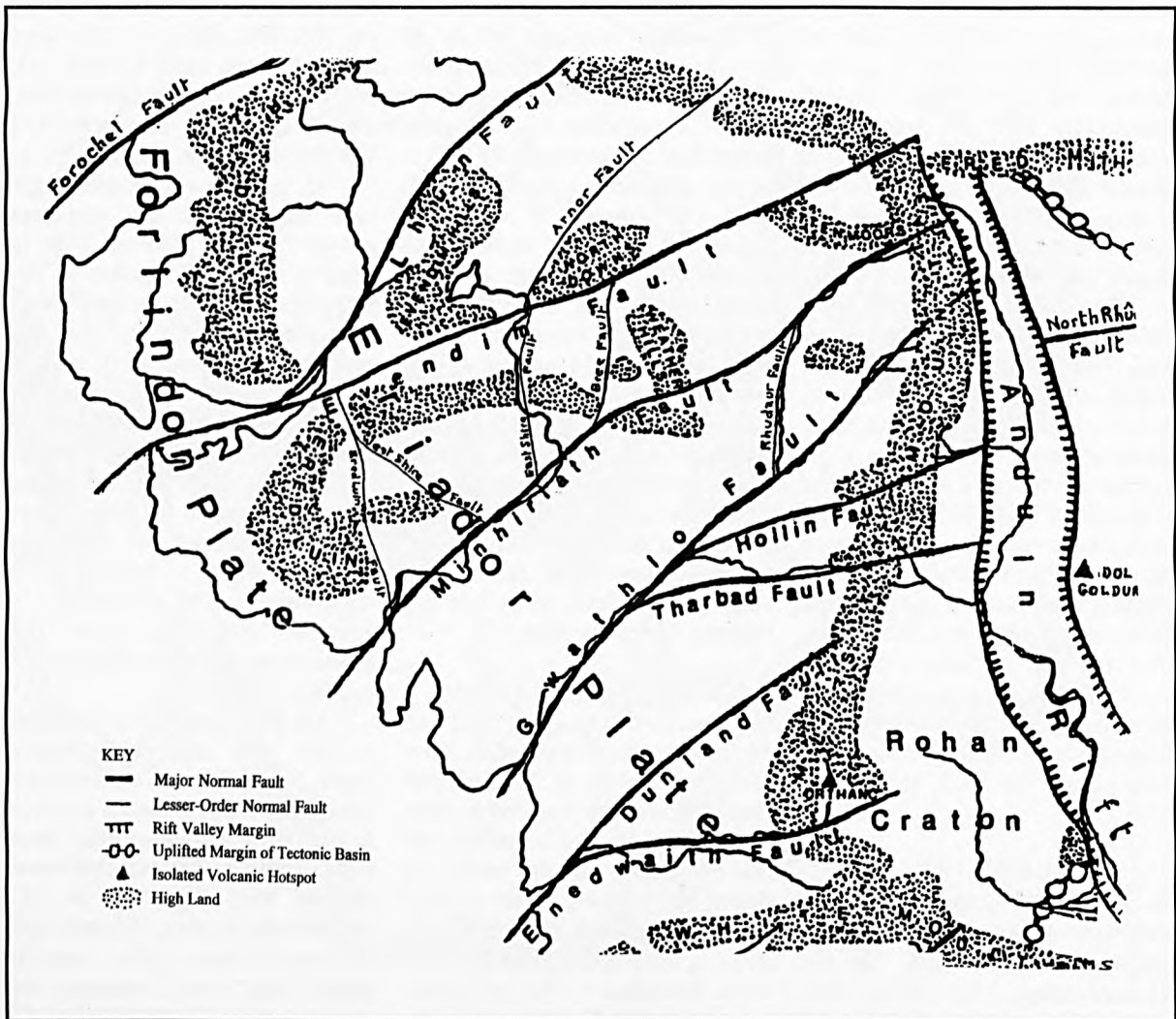


FIGURE 2. Tectonic elements of the geology of The Shire, based upon the reconstruction by Sarjeant (1995).

The Shire: its bounds, food and farming

strangers. There is no mention of donkeys or mules anywhere in Middle-earth.

The hobbits kept bees and happily ate honey and honeycombs (I, p. 135), while the Stoors, at least, had large, fierce dogs (I, p. 101). After that, it is hard to know what creatures the hobbits domesticated. Were there cattle? Well, since the hobbits consumed yellow cream, milk, butter and cheese (I, pp. 58, 135; III, p. 303), this may seem likely. That the hobbits knew of cattle is certain; did not Frodo's cheerful, if unfortunate, party-piece at the Prancing Pony concern itself with a cow that jumped over the moon (I, pp. 170, 172) and was not Pippin able mentally to contrast 'an old cow sitting and thoughtfully chewing' with 'a bull charging'? (II, p. 85). One might imagine such cattle to be of a small breed, like the Shire's ponies. However, their presence in the Shire is by no means certain; all those products could have been made from the milk of goats or even sheep. Equally, though the hobbits ate bacon (I, p. 105), we cannot be sure that there were pigs; bacon can be made from mutton also. Yet pigs do seem likely, perhaps finding pannage in Bradbole Wood in the North Farthing or in the woods

near Woody End.

Evidently rabbits were eaten at home in the Shire, as well as in the wilds of Ithilien, for Sam Gamgee was skilled in their skinning and preparation (II, p.261). In all probability, though, the Shire rabbits ran wild and were snared at need, not kept. Eggs? Yes, the hobbits - and the dwarves! - ate them in quantity (H, p.21). The mention of 'fowls chattering in a yard' at Crickhollow (I, p. 120) could refer to any domesticated egg laying bird; it is highly unlikely that the hobbits kept hens, since those birds were confined to distant tropical lands until relatively modern times. Instead the hobbits might have eaten eggs of quails, plovers or some other bird, harvested in the wild, or conceivably of ducks, wild or tame. There were geese in Bree (I, p. 180), but the small hobbits would surely have found such large and aggressive birds too difficult to handle.

We know that the hobbit-like ancestors of the Stoors fished in the River Anduin (I, p. 62). It is surely likely that the hobbits - the Stoors, at least - fished in the Brandywine quite regularly and that all the hobbits enjoyed eating fish: was not the inn at Stock, with its excellent beer, called the Golden

Perch? (I, p. 97).

The hobbits wore warm clothing, in part of leather but surely mostly made from wool. That again suggests, possibly, goats, more probably, sheep. It is tempting to imagine sheep being pastured on the short grasses of the White Downs around Michel Delving, furnishing the hobbits not only with wool, but perhaps also milk and meat. Certainly, when Bilbo crept up to the feasting trolls, he found the odour of the roasting mutton 'a fine toothsome smell!' (H, p. 44). However, with the trolls turned to stone it is not clear whether Gandalf, the dwarves and he ate any of that mutton. So, once again, we cannot be sure. As for goats, the only oblique reference is in the name of one of the Big Folk of Bree, Goatleaf (I, p. 167); perhaps they were kept in Breeland but not in the Shire.

When Bilbo travelled eastward with the dwarves, in quest of the Lonely Mountain's treasure, and when Frodo and Sam, Merry and Pippin travelled southeastwards and eastwards through the Green Hill Country to the Marish, they saw no domesticated animals - or so it seems, from the published records. The extent of pastoral farming, then, in the Shire must remain an unresolved question.

Acknowledgments

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REFERENCES

Tolkien's own chronicles are here distinguished by letters or Latin numerals; *The Hobbit* (H), *The Fellowship of the Ring* (I) *The Two Towers* (II) and *The Return of the King* (III). I found no additional relevant information, either in *The Silmarillion* or in the splendid series of volumes edited by Christopher Tolkien. Other references are:

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