In search of The Shire

Tolkien and the Counties of England

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This paper was originally delivered to an American audience, *(Mythcon 27, 1996)* so it began with the observation that the counties into which the states of the U.S. are divided are mostly squarish-shaped arbitrary territories of little antiquity and no particular emotional interest, although William Faulkner did his best to add literary resonance to his imaginary Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. But the idea of dividing a state into administrative units of that size and calling them 'counties' was brought by the British colonists from England, which historically was divided into 40 counties of irregular shape, profound antiquity, and great interest.

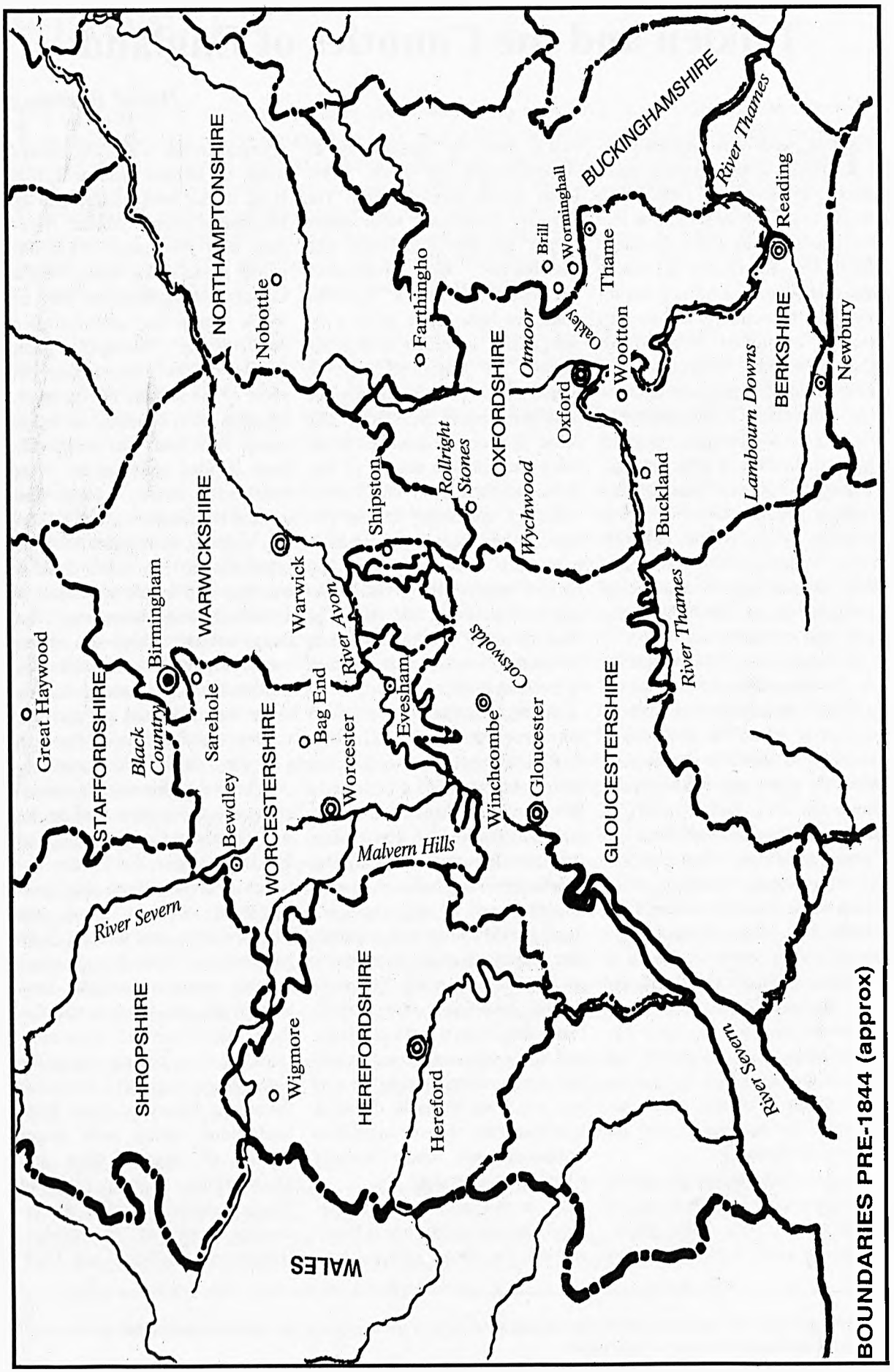
The word *county* was brought by the Normans from France, where a *conté* was the feudal domain of a *conte* or count. The divisions of England to which it was applied were far older than the Normans, however. They had a variety of origins. A few, such as Kent and Sussex (originally '[the kingdom of the] South Saxons') dated from earliest Anglo-Saxon times when they were separate kingdoms. Most, however, began as divisions of larger kingdoms, and the Anglo-Saxon term for such divisions was *scir*, in later English *shire,* a word which has immediate resonance for readers of Tolkien. (Tolkien, of course, intended the resonance to be the other way around.)

Because shires are so ubiquitous in England, for Tolkien to call his hobbits' territory '*The* Shire' gives it a kind of generic quality that's hard to capture by an American eye, for which 'Shire' is an exotic foreign word. The closest American equivalents might be the Smallville and Metropolis of Superman. Metropolis is not a fictitious name for New York, as in a *roman à clef,* as much as it is the essence of American city, in which New York is merely the principal element. Similarly, 'The Shire' is probably intended to remind the English reader of any shire, perhaps even one's own. Although appearing first in *The Lord of the Rings*, as a generic name it's more typical of *The Hobbit,* where Bilbo lives in *The* Hill by *The* Water, and visits *The* Carrock and *The* Mountain, than it is of the more developed names of the later book.

Tolkien identified himself with his mother's family, the Suffields, which originated around the town of Evesham in Worcestershire, and once wrote[1] that 'any corner of that county (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way "home" to me, as no other part of the world is.' Such identification with a particular county of origin is common in England, in much the same way as Americans often identify themselves with a particular state, and was even commoner in earlier times when people moved less and were closer to the land. It is therefore of great interest to Tolkienists to know exactly where Worcestershire lies.

This is not as easy as it may seem, though, unless one is familiar with the history of local government in the U.K. On current maps of Britain, you will find lying in the west middle part of England a county labeled *Hereford and Worcester*. This ungainly name is the legacy of the County Reorganization Act of 1973, which for administrative convenience wrought great change on the map, wiping out some of the smaller old counties, creating new counties in urban areas that had inconveniently been divided (such as the West Midlands county contructed around Birmingham), and tinkering with the boundaries in some other places.[A] A closer look at the map will locate the towns of Hereford and Worcester, the *burgs* around which the shires were originally constructed in pre-Norman times; and as the one is in the west part of the new county and the other in the east, you may fairly and accurately conclude that the old Worcestershire was the eastern half of the new county. Maps predating the 1973 Act show the border between Worcestershire and Herefordshire running along the Malvern Hills, just west of Great Malvern, and from there heading roughly northwest towards Tenbury Wells, the town in the farthest fair corner of Worcestershire. A close comparison of the old and new maps will show that the urban county of West Midlands took, along with larger chunks of Warwickshire and Staffordshire, a small piece of Worcestershire, including the industrial towns of Stourbridge, Halesowen, Oldbury, and Dud-

A. Subsequent further reorganizations have dismantled some of the unpopular new urban counties, but at this writing the West Midlands county is still intact.


Great Haywood
STAFFORDSHIRE
Black Country
Birmingham
Sarehole
Bewdley
River Severn
SHROPSHIRE
WARWICKSHIRE
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE
Nobottle
Warwick
WORCESTERSHIRE
Bag End
Worcester
River Avon
Evesham
Malvern Hills
Wigmore
HEREFORDSHIRE
Hereford
WALES
Shipston
Rollright Stones
Farthingho
Cotswolds
Winchcombe
Gloucester
OXFORDSHIRE
Otmoor
Wychwood
Brill
Worminghall
Oakley
Oxford
Thame
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
River Thames
Wootton
Buckland
GLOUCESTERSHIRE
River Thames
Lambourn Downs
BERKSHIRE
Reading
Newbury
River Severn
BOUNDARIES PRE-1844 (approx)

ley. In Tolkien's opinion this was undoubtably the more squalid corner.

So far so good. But the Act of 1973 was far from the first time the boundaries of Worcestershire had been tinkered with. When the shires were new, in fact, their boundaries were quite fluid. Each shire in Anglo-Saxon times was the joint domain of two officers, the *ealdorman* and *shire-reeve* or *sheriff* (very roughly the equivalent of Tolkien's Thain and Mayor, respectively), who presided at a judicial assembly called the Shire-moot (a term also used by Tolkien), *moot* being an old word for any public meeting (hence also *entmoot*, a meeting of Ents). The first shires were in the kingdom of Wessex, in the southwest of England, and after Wessex annexed Mercia, the west middle kingdom, shires were established there also in the early tenth century. The old Mercian division of Hwicce (originally a minor kingdom itself) was the basis for all or most of three shires set up around the burgs of Worcester, Winchcombe, and Gloucester, and part of a fourth based on Warwick. Originally the Mercian shires were entirely artificial and arbitrary creations, bearing no necessary relation to older tribal boundaries (thus Warwickshire was part in Hwicce and part out of it), and were created by cutting up swathes of territory of fairly even taxable value and grouping them around defensible burgs. However, this simple pattern did not remain simple for long. Anglo-Saxon politicians were no less self-aggrandizing than modern ones. The eleventh century Gloucestershire ealdorman Eadric Streona, of whom it was said that he 'tore up shires as if they were paper', annexed all of Winchcombeshire and as many pieces of land belonging to Worcestershire as he could get title to.[2]

As with any ambitious property acquisition project, the result of this and similar activities was that by the time the Normans fixed the county lines in the form they retained for some 800 years the boundaries of the Mercian shires were a patchwork quilt, and Worcestershire was one of the worst, with boundaries weaving erratically, and nearly a dozen detached pieces of itself floating around, especially in the southeast around Evesham. For instance, the town of Shipston-on-Stour, now in Warwickshire, was part of a large enclave of Worcestershire ten miles away from the main body of the county, and other villages now in Gloucestershire formed their own tiny enclaves (too small to appear on the attached small-scale map). The situation in the northeast, near Birmingham, was quite as complex.[3] Most importantly for the student of Tolkien, the entire southern half of what is now the city of Birmingham was part of Worcestershire. So Sarehole, King's Heath, Moseley, and all the adjacent suburb and countryside in which Tolkien grew up between 1895 and 1902, and which so richly fed his imagination, were in his beloved Worcestershire, not in Warwickshire as erroneously reported in many books on Tolkien (e.g. Carpenter[4], Pearce[5], Rosebury[6]). Rednal, where the Tolkiens spent the blissful summer of 1904 in a country cottage now just over the county line, was deep into the county. Only after they moved to the Edgbaston district of Birmingham in 1902 did they leave Worcestershire and enter Warwickshire.[B]

How, then, have scholars gained the false impression that Sarehole was in Warwickshire? Because in the 19th century the boundaries started to move again. Over the centuries between the Normans and the Victorians, the county borders had remained essentially unchanged, and thus the counties' antiquity was bolstered by their stability. With the Counties (Detached Parts) Act of 1844, the British government began to undo some of the administrative damage of the long-dead ealdermen, eliminating enclaves and straightening the boundaries in other places.[7] This process continued in later years. Urban expansion and the growth of city government began to play a role. Over the years the British government established what were called *corporate counties* or *county boroughs* in a number of the larger cities. For administrative purposes these were entirely separate from the counties from which they had been taken, but for census purposes and on small-scale maps they remained part of what was called the geographical county. If the city expanded across county lines, it took its original county designation with it.[C] This is what happened in Birmingham, a corporate county taken from Warwickshire. In 1911, the year that Tolkien went to Oxford University and left Birmingham for good, the city annexed over 30 square miles of

B. For the satisfaction of curious local residents - the exact original boundary between Warwickshire and Worcestershire in central Birmingham, from west to east, ran along the Bourn Brook just south of Birmingham University and the new site of King Edward's School, then along Highgate Street, Highgate Road, and Walford Road before passing down Spark Brook to the River Cole as far as Gressel Lane.

its Worcestershire suburbs, placing them nominally within the geographical county of Warwickshire, and then into the West Midlands urban county when it was created in 1973.[D] The city had good reason to take this step. Over twenty years later, on a visit home, Tolkien bemoaned the disappearance of his 'beloved lanes of childhood ... in the midst of a sea of new red-brick'[8], but the dismal suburbanization of the district had begun much earlier. The Worcestershire suburbs tripled in population from about 45,000 at the time of Tolkien's birth in 1892 to about 140,000 at the time of the annexation.[9] The visitor to Sarehole today need exercise less imagination to recall that it was in Worcestershire for a thousand years than to picture how bucolic its now-crowded lanes must have looked merely a hundred years ago.

Despite Tolkien's enthusiasm for Worcestershire, the other counties of England were hardly alien to him. When he first planned to create his epic *legendarium* of Middle-earth, he intended to dedicate it 'to England; to my country'[10] not merely to his county. The coastal scenery of Cornwall and Dorset, in the southwest, appealed strongly to his visual imagination[11]. And he bristled with annoyance at the suggestion that his years teaching at Leeds, in the northern county of Yorkshire, were some kind of expedition into a foreign land[12]. But some parts of England were more home to him than others. At a scale intermediate between the county and the country, the area he identified with was the West Midlands, a region not to be confused with the new urban county of the same name in its midst. This is the part of England essentially coterminous with the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia.[E]

The boundaries of Mercia changed often during the several centuries of its existence. At its height in the 8th century Mercia controlled pretty much all of England south of the Humber and Mersey Rivers; more properly it was the 16 or 17 counties between those rivers and the Thames and Avon to the south, and excluding the ones touching the North Sea coast to the east and one or two around London. At its narrowest, defined by the victorious kings of Wessex as the part of England where Mercian laws applied, it was nine shires: Gloucester, Oxford, Hereford, Worcester, Warwick, Stafford, Shropshire, Cheshire, and (southern) Lancashire[13]. This area was roughly the territory of the West Midland dialect of Middle English that became Tolkien's special province as a philologist. He expressed the connection between his scholarly and personal interests very clearly: 'I am a West-midlander by blood (and took to early west-midland Middle English as a known tongue as soon as I set eyes on it)'.[14] The most important text in this dialect is the *Ancrene Wisse*, a book of instruction for a group of anchorites or religious hermits, and to this work Tolkien devoted a great deal of scholarly attention. His last major philological publication was a scholarly edition of a text of this work, and perhaps his greatest work in this field (as opposed to his more famous but more literarily-oriented essays on *Beowulf* and 'On Fairy-Stories') was his 1929 article on *Ancrene Wisse* and the homily *Hali Meiðhad* In this he argued passionately that the language preserved in these works is a rare instance of a pure dialect unmixed by copyists' alterations or errors. He wrote[15] of this dialect in strikingly poetic terms unusual in technical philology: 'It is not a language long relegated to the "uplands" struggling once more for expression in apologetic emulation of its betters or out of com-

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C. The exception to this was in London, where a full-fledged new county was created in 1885 in lieu of extending the borders of the corporation of London. The City, as it's called for short, uniquely retains its original tiny Norman-era bounds, and is now little more than the financial district of London. It's rather as if New York City had retained its original northern border at Wall Street, and ignored the urban expansion that blossomed all around it.

D. Stephens, p 3 and pl. 2. Some sources, e.g. Reynolds, (1992, p 1) imply that the annexation did not take place until 1931, but this refers to a later annexation of other areas.

E. See Tolkien 1981, p 108. Here he informs his son Christopher that 'barring the Tolkien (which must long ago have become a pretty thin strand) you are a Mercian or Hwiccian (of Wychwood) on both sides.' Hwicce was the subkingdom of Mercia based on Worcester described above. Wychwood is, of several place names preserving the word 'Hwicce', the one nearest to Oxford, and was probably here cited by Tolkien for consequently being familiar to his family. Commentators have not taken him as meaning that his ancestors originated specifically in Wychwood. It was a forest on the edge of Hwiccian territory in the Evenlode vale of northwest Oxfordshire. Several villages there preserve 'under [i.e. in] Wychwood' in their names. A remnant of the forest still stands in the nearby hills.

F. Tolkien also had, of course, a professional interest in Anglo-Saxon or Old English, the ancestor of Middle English, and also had a special place in his heart for its West Midlands dialect, which he called Old Mercian (Tolkien 1981, p 65). Shippey notes that the Anglo-Saxon names of the Rohirrim are in Old Mercian, not in the standard Wessex dialect of the language (p 112n).

passion for the lewd, but rather one that has never fallen back into "lewdness", and has contrived in troublous times to maintain the air of a gentleman, if a country gentleman. It has traditions and some acquaintance with books and the pen, but it is also in close touch with a good living speech - a soil somewhere in England.'

Where in England? The manuscript Tolkien spoke of, and later edited, resides at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. But that says nothing of its origins. That the dialect showed that it came from the West Midlands was reasonably certain.[16,17] But in Tolkien's time its precise origin was unknown. Later scholarship has established the place: in Herefordshire, the county recently attached to Worcestershire by Act of Parliament. E.J. Dobson[18] in *The Origins of Ancrene Wisse* has compiled a detailed chain of evidence to connect it with two monastic establishments, both now in ruins, in far northwestern Herefordshire, near the village of Wigmore. This area, then, can be considered the heartland of the dialect of which Tolkien wrote so lovingly.[F]

When Tolkien was writing *The Book of Lost Tales*, he toyed with the idea of making his mythology, the one he was dedicating to England, actually a mythology *for* England, by hypothesizing that his elven isle Tol Eressëa was itself actually England at a remote period of prehistory. To this end he identified certain places in Tol Eressëa with certain places in England that were personally meaningful to him, and to an extent let the real places inspire the fictional ones. Thus the midmost region of Tol Eressëa, Alalminórë or 'The Land of Elms', was based on Warwickshire, and its chief town, Kortirion, was based on the city of Warwick, which was particularly dear to Tolkien as the place of his marriage and of his wife's residence during most of their engagement. Here was located the Cottage of Lost Play to which Eriol comes and where he is told the tales of the Elves. The poem 'Kortirion Among the Trees' preserves Tolkien's attempt to idealize and etherealize the primary-world place. Tavrobel, another place in Tol Eressëa where Eriol lives and which inspired Tolkien to verse, is similarly based on Great Haywood, a village in Staffordshire (like Warwick it is in Mercia not far from Birmingham) where Tolkien lived during his recuperation from trench fever in 1916-17, while writing much of *The Book of Lost Tales*. The House of a Hundred Chimneys at Tavrobel was based on a house where the Tolkiens lodged in 1918, on the Teddesley estate about five miles from Great Haywood. Another place in Tol Eressëa, Taruithorn, is identified with Oxford but no tales are told of it. In one of the inset tales, 'The Tale of Tinúviel', the key scene, in which Beren sees Tinúviel dancing in a hemlock glade, was inspired by a walk the Tolkiens took to such a glade in the Humberside region of Yorkshire while he was stationed there in 1917-18. It is interesting to note that in this romantic period of Tolkien's writing he attached no special importance to Worcestershire, basing his mythology on places meaningful to his romance rather than to his ancestry.[19,20,21]

In 1911 Tolkien left Birmingham and Worcestershire to go to Oxford, the city with which he is most associated, and where he spent most of the rest of his life. During early Anglo-Saxon times Oxford was in the midst of a debatable land between Wessex to the southwest, Mercia to the north, and the small Saxon kingdoms to the east. Only when Wessex became pre-eminent in England did the counties in this area settle down. The boundaries of Oxfordshire and the surrounding counties were somewhat less convoluted than those in Mercia: Oxfordshire had three outlying enclaves, all in Buckinghamshire, and contained four enclaves of surrounding counties.[22] Aside from eliminating these, virtually no changes were made in the area's county boundaries prior to the Reorganization Act of 1973, and only one major change in that Act: northwestern Berkshire between the Thames and the Lambourn Downs (including Faringdon, Abingdon, Wantage, Didcot, Wallingford, and the Vale of White Horse) was transferred to Oxfordshire, as it was directly adjacent to Oxford city and much farther from Berkshire's county town of Reading.

Tolkien settled happily in Oxford, and while he is most closely associated with the university, a setting he used to brilliant effect in *The Notion Club Papers*, he also explored the countryside, particularly during his student days and early years as a professor. (After that he preferred to dwell on his memories, for fear of finding the charming countryside spoiled by development.)[23,24,25] Two of his most colourful fictional characters were inspired directly by Oxford and the surrounding counties. Both were created in the 1930s, during the period he was most active in exploring the countryside. Tom Bombadil, though modelled in physical appearance after a Dutch doll, represented in his personality and his ties to a specific locality, 'the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside'.[26] Tom is as specific about

the borders as his creator was: 'Tom's country ends here: he will not pass the borders.'[27] The mock-scholarly foreword to *Farmer Giles of Ham* is coy about the exact extent of the Little Kingdom, but as the author noted, 'This is a definitely located story ... The places in it are largely named, or fairly plainly indicated.'[28] The definite location is Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. The three towns named in the story, Thame (alias Ham), Worminghall, and Oakley, are all on the border of those two counties immediately east of Oxford city. The Little Kingdom was evidently smaller than a modern county, as the Foreword notes that its northern edge was Otmoor, only six miles northeast of Oxford, but under Giles's son 'an outpost against the Middle Kingdom [i.e. Mercia] was maintained at Farthingho', considerably further north in southwestern Northamptonshire.[28] And the Standing Stones at which Garm first encountered the dragon are the Rollright Stones equally far to the northwest near the corner of Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, and Gloucestershire.[29] So as 'its eastern borders are dubious', we can take them for the eastern borders of Buckinghamshire, and consider the territory covered by *Farmer Giles*, with the exception of the expedition to seek the dragon in the Welsh mountains, as being the two counties named by the author.[G]

'The Shire was divided into four quarters, the Farthings ... North, South, East, and West; and these again each into a number of folklands, which still bore the names of some of the old leading families.'[30] The Farthings ('farthing' being an old formation meaning 'one-fourth', best known from pre-decimal British coinage) are directly equivalent to the Ridings (elided from 'thridings', ie thirdings) of the county of Yorkshire. Tolkien's folklands seem to bear no administrative relation to the small-scale divisions of the English counties, the medium-sized hundreds and the often very small parishes. However, the term 'folklands' does have resonance in England, as does the term Buckland: both were technical terms in land ownership and administration, and the latter also occurs as a placename[31]. The concept of folklands also appears in county names, as the kingdom of East Anglia was divided into two counties, those of the North Folk and South Folk, or Norfolk and Suffolk as they are spelled today.

The most striking difference between the hobbits' Shire and an English shire is that the former is very much larger. 'Forty leagues it stretched from the Far Downs to the Brandywine Bridge, and fifty from the northern moors to the marshes in the south.'[32] Even considering that Tolkien originally wrote 'nearly fifty',[33] that is much larger than any English county, even Yorkshire, which measures 90 by 120 miles. A smaller county, such as Worcestershire, measures 30 by 35 miles. Converting leagues to miles at the traditional rate of 1 to 3, the Shire measures 120 by 150 (or nearly 150) miles. Superimpose that on central England, and one finds that the Shire covers, almost exactly, the same territory as Mercia proper, as defined above. In area, then, the Shire is intended to evoke an English region rather than a county. Even the four Farthings are larger than most counties. From Hobbiton to Buckland is over 50 miles in a straight line. That's about the distance from London to Oxford, or from Oxford to Birmingham or Worcester city. Fifty miles west of Worcester, one has penetrated deep into Wales (here be dragons). It is hardly surprising, given these relatively vast distances in a rural culture, that hobbits of different Farthings are suspicious of each other's habits and customs. They're a queer breed in Buckland, agree Gaffer Gamgee and his cronies. Folk are queer up in Hobbiton, replies Farmer Maggot[34].

Administratively, however, the Shire evokes one county, not a region. There is a single Mayor (who is also First Shiriff), and a single Thain. Tolkien's phrasing[35], 'The Hobbits named it the Shire, *as* the region of the authority of their Thain, and a district of well-ordered business,' (italics mine) suggests that, as in England, a Shire is to the hobbits by definition a region with a single set of officials. Reference is made to the Shire's supplemental body of Shiriffs, the Bounders, who 'beat the bounds' of the Shire for security purposes[36]. This evokes an English administrative custom of an area even smaller than a county. A ritual 'beating of the bounds' was of old, before the days of the Ordnance Survey, an annual custom of the parish, a constituent region of which each county had dozens or even hun-

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G. For accurate maps and discussions of the locales in this story, see the forthcoming 50th anniversary edition of Farmer Giles of Ham *edited by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, with map by Pauline Baynes; also Shippey (p 88-89), Doughan, and Urrutia; the map and article by Walker are inaccurate and poorly researched.*
H. Parishes are also evoked in 'Leaf by Niggle', where at the end of the story the Porter gives the punning name Niggle's Parish to the land where Mr Niggle and Mr Parish dwell.

dreds. The purpose of the ritual was not to keep out Outsiders, but to preserve an institutional memory of where the boundaries went.[II.37]

'Tolkien took most of his Shire-names from his own near surroundings', writes Shippey,[31] and these give a sense of specific location within England to the Shire and Bree. Most of these placenames are from near Oxford. Bree-hill derives from Brill, a hilltop town in Buckinghamshire very close to Oakley and Worminghall of *Farmer Giles* fame. Newbury is in Berkshire, and Nobottle (which means the same thing) is in Northamptonshire. Buckland is a common placename throughout England; there's a town by that name in the section of Berkshire annexed to Oxfordshire in 1973, very near Kingston Bagpuize, a town-name Tolkien once used as a pseudonym. Bag End was the name of Tolkien's Aunt Jane's Worcestershire farm[38]. And so forth. A similar naming procedure pervades *Smith of Wootton Major*[39]. One odder and more sinister probable name referent: The Black Country is both a Common Speech name for Mordor and a name for the grimy industrial region which abuts Birmingham to the west, including the more squalid corners of Worcestershire. This shared name suggests that Tolkien was, as often claimed, thinking of the more unlovely scenes of his childhood when he created the realm of Sauron.

Less study has been given to the localizing effect of hobbit surnames. The connection of the families of Gamgee and Cotton is a joke derived from *gamgee*, in Tolkien's youth a local Birmingham name for cotton-wool, being derived from a type of wound-dressing invented by a local surgeon named Gamgee[40]. Perusal of British telephone directories reveals that some hobbit surnames, notably Boffin and Brockhouse, are particularly characteristic of humans of the West Midlands. Others, such as Puddifoot, which in the Shire is an Eastfarthing name[41], are found mostly in the far south-east of England. Tolkien's sojourn in Leeds also left its mark on the Shire, if only by way of contrast. The name Thistlewood (thus in the *LotR* index, III:428; apparently incorrectly Thistlewool on I:167), marked by the travelling hobbits as a 'rather odd' surname found among Men of Bree, is in England primarily a Yorkshire name. Gaukroger, a name highly localized in Halifax, near Leeds, appeared on early drafts of the Shire-hobbit family trees: perhaps significantly, it was later replaced by the southeast-England name Goodbody.[42,1]

The work of Tolkien's that contains more open references to British places than any other is *The Notion Club Papers*. But the geographical references are all focused dynamically outwards, towards lost Númenor, rather than ruminatively inwards as in the Shire. Oxford is depicted as a rock against which the storms of the West crash. Edwin Lowdham, the Amandil of the story, lived at an unidentified locale in Pembrokeshire, Wales, when not sailing about incessantly[43]. Tolkien is probably not expressing any interest in Pembrokeshire as a geographic entity here, the way he does for Worcestershire, Warwickshire, and Oxfordshire. The counties of Wales are of comparatively recent origin and have little resonance for the Welsh. Most of them, including Pembrokeshire, were created in 1536 as part of a law which eliminated the political entity of Wales and imposed the English language on its government. Recent reorganizations, beginning in the 1960s, have begun to undo those Anglicizing changes. Many of the alien counties have been entirely dismantled or their names re-translated back into Welsh.

Nor may Pembrokeshire be seen as a Celtic redoubt, as it was conquered by the Normans by 1100, nearly 200 years before the last native princes were subdued in the fastnesses of Snowdonia. Even today fewer people there speak Welsh than anywhere else in western Wales. Tolkien's use of it as a base for Edwin Lowdham probably derives from its situation at the tip of the western-most peninsula of Wales. The great harbour of Milford Haven makes Pembrokeshire an ideal starting point for an expedition to discover lost or sunken mythical lands. Such countries are common in Celtic mythology: the Irish mythical isles which Brendan finds in Frankley's poem[44] presumably lie somewhere west of Galway; Lyonesse is a legendary sunken land off Cornwall, the south-western tip of England; and Cantref Gwaelod lies in Cardigan Bay not far north of Pembrokeshire. There is surely room for Tolkien to add to their number. In any event, Jeremy and the younger Lowdham travel about the entire west coast of Britain, hunting for a scent of Númenor, and have their greatest

1. Following Allen Barnett (Davenport, p 337), some have concluded that the hobbits' names, not to mention their shoeless feet, come from Kentucky country folk. But even if it is true that they came to Tolkien in this manner, a perusal of Internet telephone directories shows that hobbit surnames are neither characteristic of nor distinctive to Kentucky.

success at Porlock, in Somerset near the base of the peninsula of which Cornwall forms the tip, on the coast facing South Wales.[45]

Having explored the English geography of Tolkien's works, we may conclude by saying a little about what home counties meant to him, and to some of his compatriots, by way of a few quotations. The scene in *The Lord of the Rings* most evocative of a sensitive feeling for landscape is perhaps the following:

> *For a short way they followed the lane westwards. Then leaving it they turned left and took quietly to the fields again. They went in single file along hedgerows and the borders of coppices, and night fell dark about them. ... After some time they crossed the Water, west of Hobbiton, by a narrow plank-bridge. The stream was there no more than a winding black ribbon, bordered with leaning alder-trees. A mile or two further south they hastily crossed the great road from the Brandywine Bridge; they were now in the Tookland and bending south-eastwards they made for the Green Hill Country. As they began to climb its first slopes they looked back and saw the lamps in Hobbiton far off twinkling in the gentle valley of the Water. Soon it disappeared in the folds of the darkened land, and was followed by Bywater beside its grey pool. When the light of the last farm was far behind, peeping among the trees, Frodo turned and waved a hand in farewell. 'I wonder if I shall ever look down into that valley again,' he said quietly.*[46]

Frodo is later ridiculed by Pippin for these melancholy thoughts[47], but scenes like this one play an important part in establishing in the reader's mind the love for the Shire which grounds the book, making the journeys into far lands and Frodo's unresolved homecoming the more poignant.

Stanley Baldwin, who was Prime Minister of Great Britain at the time that Tolkien completed *The Hobbit*, was like Tolkien a Worcestershire lad, hailing from Bewdley in the northwest of the county. Although a fourth-generation ironworks owner and a canny, formidable politician, Baldwin liked to picture himself as a simple country squire, and always maintained a spiritual connection with his home county and region. His biographer[48] put it like this:

> '[Baldwin's] feeling for the triangle bounded by the Black Country, the Cotswolds and the Welsh hills was intense. He loved wide landscape and changing light, and it is very good country for that. ... His agricultural knowledge was very limited. He could not have milked a cow, and he poked pigs much more often in cartoons than in the farmyard. But he was a genuine West Worcestershire man, and the City of Worcester with its tall cathedral tower, its county cricket ground beside the steep-banked Severn, and its chocolate and cream Great Western trains arriving at Shrub Hill Station from Paddington, was the centre of some substantial part of his life.'

For a last moving tribute to an English county, one which Tolkien visited and appreciated though he never lived near there, here is the testimony[49] of one of Tolkien's fellow Inklings, Lord David Cecil.

> 'Very few people respond to a particular landscape for purely aesthetic reasons; pleasure in its beauty is generally mixed with and intensified by associations. Myself I realize that the Cotswolds and the Yorkshire Dales are as beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful, than Dorset. But they do not move me so deeply. For I have known Dorset ever since I can remember and its downs and woods, its chalky sea-coast and dark stretches of heathland, its beech groves and clumps of immemorial yew trees are inextricably intertwined with memories of childhood, of youth, of middle age; and saturated with the sentiment awoken in me by these memories. Now in old age the sight of them stirs me as no other landscape does. It is lucky for me that Dorset has produced Thomas Hardy who, since he is one of the greatest of authors that ever lived, does it justice'.

Then follow several long quotes from Hardy's novels which present pictorial images of Dorset. Cecil's key point is that familiarity and association count for more in the eyes of a lover of landscape than does sheer beauty. What he says about Dorset applies even more to Worcestershire. Though nestled between two attractive ranges of hills, the Malverns and the Cotswolds, most of Worcestershire is flat and agricultural. The Vale of Evesham, the native area of the Suffields, is a particu-

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J. It was here that Tolkien's brother Hilary kept his plum orchard, and there is an oblique tribute to the region's agricultural produce in Roverandom: 'They say [Artaxerxes] is a nimble plum-gatherer for an old man ... and extremely fond of cider. But that's neither here nor there' (p 14).

larly rich fruit and vegetable district.[1] There is little about the region to attract a non-native eye. But the point is that Tolkien's eye was a native one, not just by upbringing but by heredity. 'To my mind,' he wrote, 'being what it is ... it is the things of racial and linguistic significance that attract me and stick in my memory.'[50] It is this combination of 'tastes, talents, and upbringing' that made Worcestershire 'in an indefinable way' "home" to him[51].

So in looking for a specific location for Tolkien, a local area of England that was particularly special and meaningful for him, we can fix definitely on seven adjoining counties in the West Midlands of England: Worcestershire, flanked by Herefordshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire (including the West Midlands urban county) for his ancestry and childhood, and Oxfordshire flanked by Berkshire and Buckinghamshire for his adulthood. This is an area roughly equivalent to, though not identical to, Mercia. He visited and even lived in other parts of Britain, and the whole country was his native land, but these counties were the ones to which his life's work was devoted.

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