

A fiftieth anniversary walk (or There and Back Again, an academics day out)

Alex Lewis

When Ted Nasmith came to visit and attend Oxonmoot in September 1997, he had a great idea for something to do after Oxonmoot was over, as he was staying on for another week. How about recreating one of the walks that Tolkien went on?

Intrigued by the idea, I looked into this, and found that places mentioned were Worminghall, Brill, Charlton on Otmoor, Water Eaton, Wood Eaton and Islip. Tolkien went to these – which are all around Oxford – with his children on walks. However, and more interestingly, Tolkien and the Lewises went on two walking tours – one was to the West Country, walking around the Quantocks in 1937, and on the second they went to Malvern in 1947 according to *The Inklings*.

‘Great idea, Ted!’ I replied. ‘But must we smoke pipes too???!’

Then we came down to the practicalities of these various destinations for our purposes: Worminghall to Charlton on Otmoor would be quite a trek via Brill (or Bree-hill, as it is somewhere expanded – even though Brill is worth a visit in itself – being very hobbitish countryside, eminently suitable for constructing smials). My guess was that these places were walked around on separate visits, not on a one-day trip. Islip and Woodeaton (there was no sign of Water Eaton on my modern map) are along what is now a very fast and busy ‘A’ road with little or no protection for pedestrians – I knew it quite well, as I used to drive it often as a short cut to avoid the Oxford ring road when I lived in Yarnton – so that would not be enjoyable for a walk in this day and age. Then the Quantocks: They are a bit off the beaten track from where I live – they look fabulous, but are way away from North Shropshire, and without stopovers in a B&B for a couple of nights it would be difficult to get to them. But what *did* prove to be well within striking distance were the Malvern Hills, which lie south-west of Worcester. I rang the Great Malvern Tourist Information Centre, and they suggested we come in and look at their maps to get a good idea of where we wished to walk. At Oxonmoot, Priscilla was able to add that her father and the Lewises had stayed with George Sayer in Great Malvern; this proved to be extremely helpful to us in finding where to plan our walk. So after

Oxonmoot we set out early one morning by car and came to Great Malvern where a most helpful person in the Information Centre helped us plan a decent walk. It turned out that there was really only one place that you could easily get to, knowing what we knew about the preferences of the Lewises and Tolkien, and the conditions at the time in 1947.

So, we went on what turned out to be a wonderful walk which Jack (C.S. Lewis) and Tollers (J.R.R.T.) did with Warnie (Lewis’s brother) and George Sayers in 1947 in the Malvern Hills. It was, if you like, the “Jack and Tollers Show” – and we took fresh apples and pears from my garden and other refreshments, and drove down for a good day’s walking around the hills. The surprising thing was that it hadn’t changed much since the time the Lewises and Tolkien walked it from what I could tell. Nothing could be built on the top of the ridge of hills, due to steepness, and also thank God, it is a beauty spot so I guess it would be forbidden to spoil it by development. If you have never been there, it is a bit like the top of Shotover Hill in Oxford where my old school used to run the annual cross country runs for the whole school.

The villages and towns surrounding the hills on the plain below are many hundreds of feet beneath you, and it seems as if you are in a balloon looking down at them, so tiny do they appear. The villages may be larger nowadays, but they are ancient ones, and would have been there in 1947. The pasturelands and meadows may contain different crops now to then, but they still retain the old irregular Saxon boundaries that have been there over a thousand years, not bulldozed by modern Euro-farmers, chasing hand outs from Brussels. There are only two inns on the walking route, which runs about 3 miles end to end, with meandering pathways through the hills and trees and gorse covered slopes. The first inn, at one end, and near the Beacon Hill that we went to was the Malvern Hills Hotel. This is an old hotel, dating from perhaps 1800 or so, no doubt modernised since Tolkien’s time, but it must have been there, and the bar would have been very much as in his day judging from the decor and furnishings. The second, at the other end of the walk, at a great cleft in the rocks that the hills are made of, was the Wyche Inn – again, an old pub, perhaps mid 1800s, but difficult to

tell – it looked as if it hadn't changed since 1947 from the outside. Most unfortunately, we were unable to look inside as it was closed for the afternoon up to 7 p.m., and we had to drive home before then. We could just imagine Tollers and Jack sitting there in the Wyche Inn, maybe discussing the etymology of the word 'Wyche' – would it have anything to do with wicaian, perhaps? Or 'wike', pliable, weak... A concentration of pipe-puffing, wreathing everyone around in a haze of smoke. Then, maybe one of the others might have come up with some other connection, the association with the elm, maybe.

The reason we know for sure that we walked where the "Inklings Ramblers Society" had gone before us, was that George Sayers, who invited them up, lived in Great Malvern, as Priscilla had explained to us. In 1947, neither Tolkien nor C.S. Lewis had a car, and so, since Great Malvern is on the train line from Worcester, they would have taken a train from Oxford to Worcester, and then to Great Malvern. They stayed with George Sayers during the trip, and went out for walks – so they would most likely not have driven off into the countryside first and walked from some remote spot, but experienced the famous walks around Great Malvern itself. It would be the most obvious thing to do, especially in post-war Britain with austerity, rationing and so on – petrol was a rare and expensive commodity, and so they would have gone on foot. The actual walk across the ridge and the five hills including the Beacon Hill at the far end may be just over three miles, but from Great Malvern one would have to walk up to where it starts – we drove to the starting point, and that drive alone is three miles each way, making a walk that would maybe extend from 12 to 15 miles (24 km) – a respectable distance for a day's walking. It may even have been done in two separate walks, one to each drinking hole, using the ridge as a main walk.

On the day we chose to do it the weather was bright, warm and sunny, if a bit breezy – but that brought out a small band of hang-gliders and paragliders and a small fixed-wing-glider too and although they might have been somewhat alien to our predecessors tastes, if one imagined they were perhaps kites being flown by children, they formed a part of a backdrop that was quite acceptable. The pathways were excellent, for you could lose yourself along one and not see other walkers for quite long spells at a time. Sensible shoes were quite sufficient at that time of the year, though if it had been raining and the ground were wet, I would recommend

walking boots. In some places the trees surrounded everything and their branches extended overhead as an unbroken canopy. In other places, you were waist high in a sea of bracken and gorse. A very unspoilt place. You can stand there on the ridges of the five hills, as we did, and imagine Tollers complaining to Jack that they really ought to slow down for a moment and come and look at this particular type of fern or flower, or whatever had caught his interest, and Jack turning round and saying something like; "This isn't a biology school field trip, Tollers – it's a walk". The response, perhaps, being; "Yes Jack, exactly! Walk, as in progress at leisure – not a forced march."

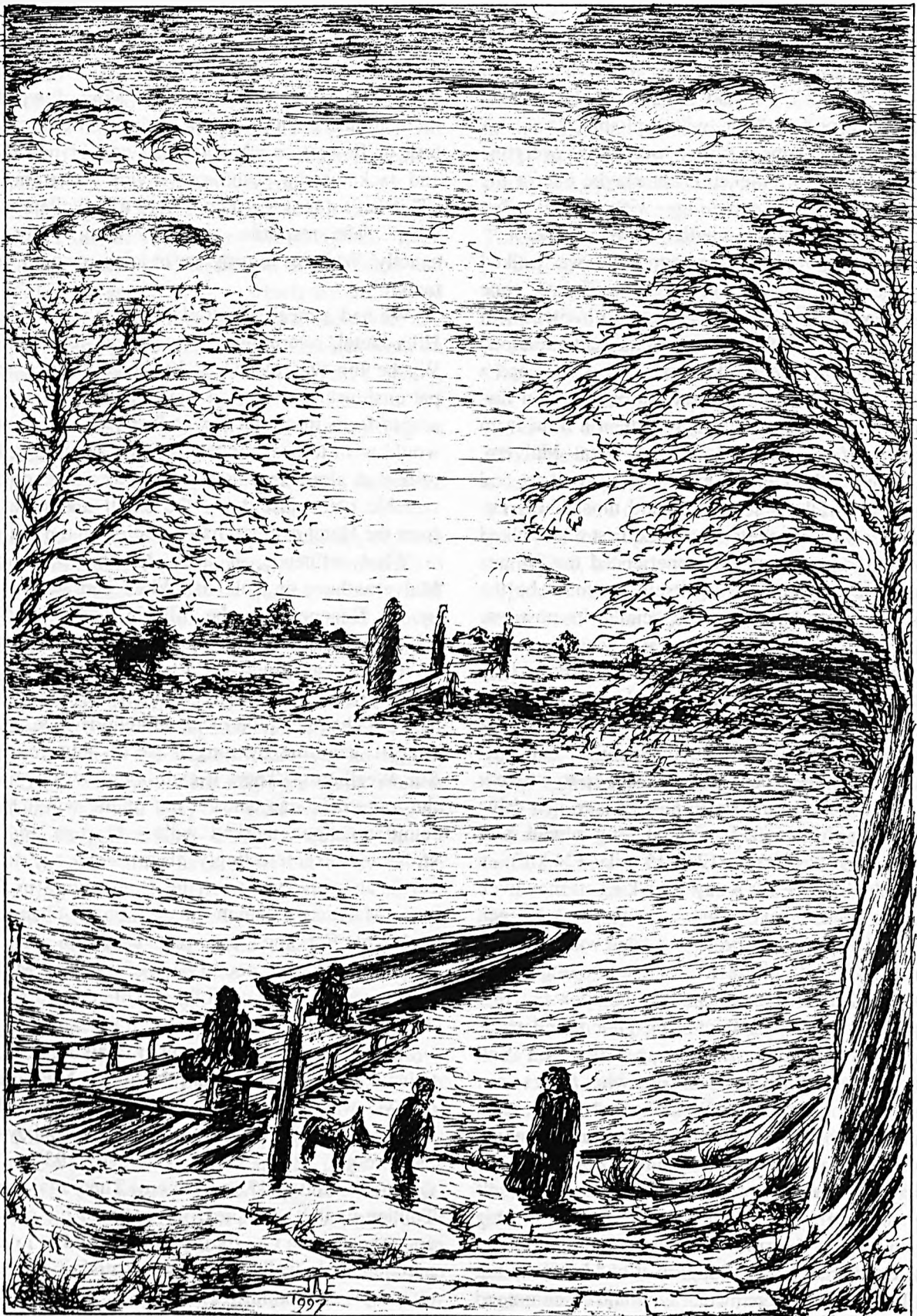
We had a meal and drinks (twice) at the Malvern Hills Hotel, returning to it when we found that the Wyche Inn was closed. It has a good car park for patrons' use. There is a pay and display car park across from the hotel for walkers, but why anyone would wish to use it is beyond me, as parking is not restricted along the approach road, and choosing a sensible place just down the small and quiet road from the Hotel is more than sufficient and quite safe.

What influence, if any, did the walk in the Malverns have on Tolkien? When Ted and I walked up the Beacon Hill, the hillside was riddled with rabbit burrows. We thought it would be easy enough to see these as smials (in a hole in the ground there lived a rabbit??) – such as perhaps at Brandy Hall. The hill above is quite bleak and windswept, and as a beacon, gave me a strong sense of being on Amon Sûl, Weathertop. There is even a hollow just beneath the top where one can get out of the wind! But we found no stone marked with a G rune and three strokes. Also interestingly, from *Peoples of Middle-earth*, an early name for the Brandywine in Elvish was Malevarn, which the hobbits changed to Malvern! For the rest, one soaks in the sheer atmosphere and the countryside of the West Midlands that was such a part of Tolkien's life embodied in the descriptions of the Shire.

Tolkien went on a summer walking tour only twice with the Lewises, and this to the Malvern Hills in 1947 was the last they went on together. Maybe, had it not been for the Second World War, they might have done other walks between 1937 in the Quantocks and 1947 in Malvern. Then again, maybe Tolkien would have preferred to go at his own pace and experience the things he especially loved on more leisurely walks. It was very satisfying to be able to sample something of the magic of one of these

places, and perhaps we might get to visit the Quantocks in due time – hopefully in less than ten

years! It is to be highly recommended to all Tolkien and Lewis lovers everywhere.



THE RIDER BY THE FERRY

THE FELLOWSHIP I-V