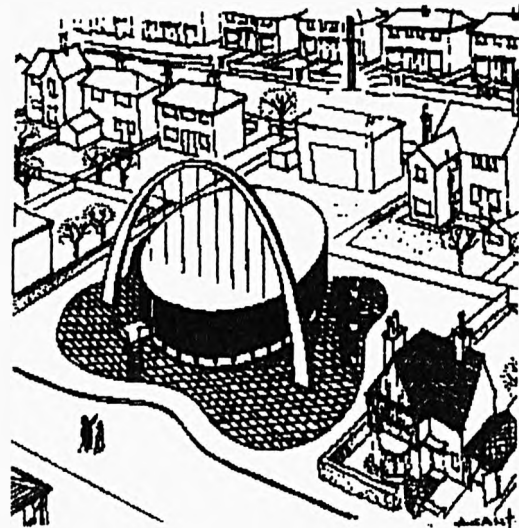


Sordid Suburbia

by Alex Lewis



In Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, there are two whole chapters devoted to trying to reconcile the ordinariness of the man with the great works he produced. In chapters 1 and 2 of Part 4, Carpenter described the places and dwellings that Tolkien lived in as unremarkable and middle class English. They were a "man-made suburbia" that seemed to clash with Tolkien's own deeply held sensibilities and love for unspoilt countryside. Carpenter rightly asks the question why, and then goes on to suggest that it was mainly that the inner man who was at work on the mythopoeic writings was essentially unaffected by his surroundings and also his own financial circumstances.

I am somewhat at odds with the emphasis in this approach, especially being from Oxford myself. I have lived for my formative teenage years (during which I discovered Tolkien) within a mile of where Tolkien spent a good part of his adult life and where he wrote *The Hobbit*, much of *The Silmarillion*, and most of *The Lord of the Rings* - 22 years, from 1925 to 1947 - and the descriptions furnished by Carpenter of the district made me wonder if he was seeing the same places as I had lived in and experienced.

There are some truly sordid parts of Oxford; the "sordid suburbia" of faceless, nameless little

houses that are only distinguished one from the other by their numbers, built for the workers in their tens of thousands who came from all over the Kingdom and beyond to work in the car factories to the east in Cowley. I could take a hypothetical visitor on a "tour" of such areas and expose the ugly underbelly of Oxford: Cowley, parts of the Abingdon Road, Jericho and what used to be the slums around Paradise Street (now long since demolished to make way for hideous concrete shopping precincts, car parks and magistrates' buildings! - do things never improve?) and the "new slums", such as parts of Kidlington and Blackbird Leys which were mostly developed / degraded in Tolkien's last years and after his death.

But there are also parts of the city which are far from sordid. And there is the passage of time that Carpenter's thesis does not allow for; if one was to tour the parts of Oxford he described *now*, one would probably come to the same conclusion as he did, but the Oxford I am speaking of is one that existed up until the last years of the 1960s. Up until those times, and most definitely in the times when Tolkien lived there, it was far from the "sordid suburbia" that Carpenter visualises for us.

I hold that the North of Oxford, with Northmoor Road and the "city end" of the Banbury and

Woodstock Roads, before South Parade, reaching in to North Parade and then to St. Giles, was a place where one's imagination could fly unfettered, and from where it was the matter of a very short journey to arrive in the midst of unspoilt countryside. It is of course not the same today, sadly.

My own belief is that circumstance alone dictated Tolkien's choices, but that within the restriction of his earnings and circumstances he chose as mentally stimulating and spiritually acceptable a place to live as he could find and that during the years he wrote his most important fictional works, his surroundings cannot be described as being entirely at odds with his inner spiritual yearnings.

If one examines his circumstances at that time, they can be put into four categories: in no order of importance, we have:

- 1) Work: he was an Oxford Professor. He had to live within striking distance of his workplace, or the city centre. He detested driving, and so that meant being within cycling range of the colleges. This alone would have limited Tolkien to within the city boundaries.
- 2) The children's schooling: here, there was the excellent preparatory school known (fortuitously) as the Dragon School a short walking distance from where he lived and down safe back streets so that the young children did not have to brave main road traffic. Of other preparatory schools in Oxford city, none would have given the degree of preparation - especially in Latin and French - that the Dragon School gave to its pupils. This was what it was rightly respected for.
- 3) A large family: with four children, himself and his wife, he needed a house with enough space for them all, plus a study he could work in with the undergraduates that he had to instruct. This limited the choice of area for housing still further, since much of the housing to the east of the city, which was cheaper to buy and pay services for, would have been the standard three bedroom variety and not large enough for his purposes. He might

however have lived in suitably large accommodation south of the city, and in a much less stimulating environment for far less cost, but he chose not to.

4) His means: the wages of a Professor were hardly substantial, and certainly not such that he might have considered going to the new upper class areas such as Boar's Hill and Shotover Hill, or some of the outlying villages. He had to take in examination papers to mark in the summer to earn himself more money in addition to his salary, so that indicates the circumstances he was in. Furthermore any of these alternative locations would have necessitated a car, which would have been an extra expense. In actual fact, North Oxford was the only logical choice, given his circumstances and his aversion to driving, if he wished live somewhere that combined the human needs of a family with as stimulating an environment as was possible within a city.

If I may divert for a moment, I shall examine where Tolkien chose to live - when he began to have any choice in the matter. Up until his marriage and then until the end of the First World War, he had no such choice. After that time, he and Edith lived at 1 Alfred Street, Oxford, in rented rooms with their child, while he worked at the Oxford English Dictionary. From 1921 to 1925 he lived in Leeds, in housing that was as reasonable as he might obtain in that city at that time. Indeed he changed house as soon as he was able to get out of a smoky industrial area into something a little more tolerable. By the time he returned to Oxford in 1925, he already had three children, aged 8, 5 and 1. He lived in Northmoor Road, and only moved once, when the next door house, No. 20, became available as Basil Blackwell was moving out. He lived in Northmoor Road from 1925 to 1947, and it was there that his creativity reached its peak. By this time, after the end of the Second World War, his children were 30, 27, 23 and 18 years of age.

The Victorian houses of North Oxford right up to

South Parade (otherwise known as Summertown) and even those in the side streets, were far from "sordid suburban dwellings". There were the palatial and unique dwellings with turrets and stained glass windows that Carpenter described them as being. In truth, *all* the houses in North Oxford had (and some still do) at least a quarter of an acre of gardens and the majority of them were detached. Tolkien had a tennis court in the back of No. 20 which he and the children dug up to put in more vegetables. How many people have a tennis court in their back gardens nowadays? It was no less a rarity in his time.

The streets were tranquil. I remember living on the main Banbury Road during the 1960s and cycling to school along that road from the age of 11 quite safely. I cycled to South Parks Road and out down Holywell (where traffic would pick up) and then down Longwall Street, onto the High and across Magdalen Bridge to my school on The Plain, and my parents and I were not in the least concerned about it, summer or winter. It is no exaggeration to say that even during the busiest times of the day traffic was by today's standards very light.

The streets were lined with old tall trees: horse chestnuts and poplars and oaks and planes; they were oddly meditative streets to either cycle along or walk down. Birds sang, squirrels could be seen on the main road, crossing unconcerned by what occasional traffic there was. The houses were all well set back from the road, so that, walking along the pavement, one did not see much except the old dark and well-worn red brick walls with great hedges and growths, large trees and the tiled roofs and hydra-headed chimneys poking up beyond the boughs of the trees. In autumn, the leaves from the trees drifted down the streets and piled up in the gutters; they were a constant nuisance in the old iron pipework gutters of the houses - high up and easily blocked, and a long shaky climb up a ladder to remedy. Even in Tolkien's time, a house like the one I lived in would have already

been 60 years old; these houses had character and age by the time he had come to Northmoor Road.

Countryside was within a short cycle ride or walk from Northmoor Road. The University Parks were just down a red-bricked alleyway (if I add "tree-shaded, dark" that would perhaps indicate the poetic effect the area had on me even in the 1960s and early 1970s) from Northmoor Road and once there, it was but a walk to the farm; land on the other side of the Cherwell River that led to the village of Old Marston. At Tolkien's time, Old Marston was only a village with thatched cottages, an old 12th century church of St. Nicholas, a couple of pubs, and little else. Now of course it is a sprawling mass of houses dating back about thirty years, and hardly planned with any thought to the preservation of the countryside. But apart from the University Parks, there was the punt station and Marston Ferry, from where Tolkien and his family would take punting trips up-stream to Water Eaton and Islip villages and into butterfly-inhabited countryside quite unspoilt by development (as it now sadly is). Then also, a cycle ride up the Woodstock Road would bring one to Port Meadow and yet more countryside.

By my definition, Tolkien's surroundings were far less "suburban" than one is led to believe, and far more stimulating to the imagination too.

His later move to Merton Road was dictated by circumstance - a large house at Northmoor Road and children growing up and moving away. In 1950 he made the disastrous move to Holywell Street; one may forgive a mistake of this sort. I imagine that Tolkien was unprepared for the shock of what Oxford traffic had become by then in that narrow little place. Much of the city's north-to-east traffic would be diverted along that narrow stretch of road and since all the houses were right on the pavement, there was no escaping the traffic noise and fumes. In the event, in 1953 he moved on to Sandfield Road,



Headlington. By this time Tolkien was 61, and no doubt following the raising of his family of four, there were not large sums of money left to choose any house he might wish to. Furthermore, there was in the 1950s a chronic housing shortage, especially in Oxford as more and more people came to work for the ever-expanding car factories in the peak of the "you-never-had-it-so-good" era. My parents recalled the difficulty of finding a property in Oxford itself, and being obliged to live in the nearby town of Didcot for a year until a house in Oxford finally became available within their price range to buy. It would seem to me that Tolkien was forced by circumstance once more to buy the Sandfield Road house. He could not have opted for a quiet village near Oxford because he could not drive, and taking country buses in and out of the city would have been very tiring for them both. At first Sandfield Road must have been a fairly quiet neighbourhood, for the football ground was not all that popular - crowds of less than 4,000 were routine up until the early 1960s. The proliferation of traffic and use of his road as an unofficial by-pass must have come about in his last years at Sandfield Road, and so also must the "Beatle Group" he amusingly described as practising in a house nearby, as the Beatles themselves were not climbing to the height of their popularity until, say,

1965.

Circumstances dictated Tolkien's move to Lakeside Road, Bournemouth in 1968 - there were reasons of age and the health of his wife. Prices of houses were much higher in Bournemouth than in Oxford - still a city outside the preferred scope of most London commuters in 1968. Tolkien himself mentioned his astonishment at the prices of properties in Bournemouth in one of his last letters. After Edith's death, Merton offered him a place to stay and be looked after, and once again circumstances of health and age dictated his acceptance of this accommodation.

So I shall conclude by observing that the term "suburban" can encompass a wide range of conditions, and if where Tolkien lived can be described as "suburban", then it was certainly not sordid by any definition, and was one of the more pleasant examples of that term that one could wish for. It was hardly an obstacle for letting the imagination rise and go to far distant places, and certainly no hindrance to Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth, as some might hold or ponder over with perplexity.

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