

# A VESTIGE OF THE SHIRE

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Those who try to search for Tolkienian names in a gazetteer of Great Britain will have some success in the Oxford area, where Tolkien lived while writing 'Lord of the Rings', and made his walking tours like Bilbo Baggins. There is a Wootton, but no Wootton Major, north of Oxford; and Thame and nearby Worminghall are explicitly identified with Farmer Giles' Ham and his Great Hall. On the road from Wycombe to Oxford one passes signposts to Loudwater, a village on the A40 (cf. 'Loudwater, the Bruinen of Rivendell' - Fellowship of the Ring page 212), to Windrush (cf. the Rushlights of Bree) and Evenlode (cf. 'Silverlode, that Elves call Celebrant' - Fellowship of the Ring page 355) Windrush and Evenlode, besides being names of villages, are also names of rivers which rise in Gloucestershire and flow to the Thames. Further north, Wetwang and Fangfoss are both villages in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

However, the true origin of the Shire did not lie near Oxford, but in the village of Sarehole, near Birmingham, where Tolkien spent his boyhood, as described in the Philip Norman interview in the Sunday Times Colour magazine of 15/1/67; "Sarehole has long since been eaten by buildings, but it was rather beautiful then....Tolkien modelled his hobbits on the Sarehole people." (Extracts from this interview are also quoted, without acknowledgement, in Ready's 'Understanding Tolkien' - that frightful perpetration.) Here, at Sarehole, one might not just have visited a place with a Tolkienian name, one might have seen the countryside which inspired him. But now Sarehole has become so engulfed in Birmingham that it is not even marked as a suburb on the One inch Ordnance Survey map. (One can, however, locate Buckland Edge to the north west ref-SP 1489-sheet 131)

As I thought that there would be nothing left of Tolkien's Sarehole and that it would be hard to find, I let the matter rest, until one day I planned to visit Birmingham. I had forgotten about its Tolkienian connections, and was checking the opening times of the Art Gallery in the Museums and Galleries Yearbook (available in any decent public library). Suddenly I saw under the heading "Branch Museums" the Following:

SAREHOLE MILL: An 18th century water powered corn mill restored to working order and re-opened as a museum illustrating various aspects of milling and English rural pursuits.. Sarehole Mill is situated at the junction of Wake Green and Cole Bank Roads and can be reached by bus as follows: No.91 from the city centre. No.11 Outer Circle Route which stops in Cole Bank Road opposite the Mill. Open: March 25 to Nov.26. 2 to 7 o'clock. O.S.ref.SP 1079. (the Mill is actually marked on earlier O.S.editions of sheet 131 but not on more recent ones.)

At once all thought of the Art Gallery was abandoned! Not only did I have the precise location of Sarehole, I had come across a true vestige of the Shire, as those of you who have the Revised Foreward at your fingertips will have realised. There Tolkien says:

"It has been supposed by some that 'The Scouring of the Shire' reflects the situation in England at the time when I was finishing my tale. It does not... It has indeed some basis in experience,

though slender, (for the economic situation was entirely different) and much further back. The country in which I lived as a boy was being shabbily destroyed before I was ten.....Recently I saw in a paper a picture of the last decrepitude of the once thriving cornmill beside its pool that long ago seemed to me so important. I never liked the looks of the Young Miller, but his father, the Old Miller had a black beard, and he was not named Sandyman."

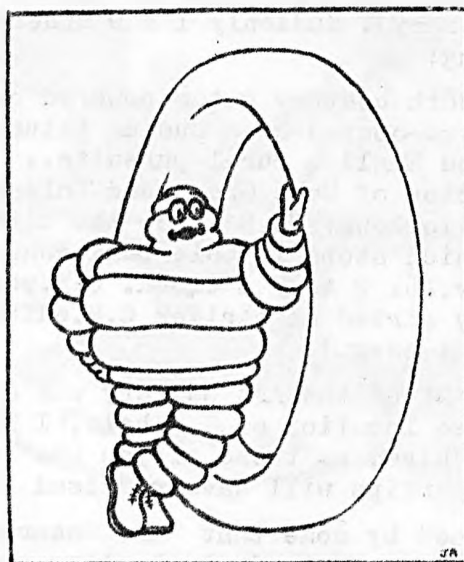
These words, written in late 1965, must refer to Sarchole Mill and as an appeal to preserve the mill was launched in October 1965 Tolkien would have seen a picture of the mill in a newspaper to publicise it.

There are not many references to the mill in 'The Lord of the Rings' most are in the last chapters (that is, after it was knocked down) For example, 'Return of the King' page 292: "Take Sandyman's mill now. Pimble knocked it down almost as soon as he came to Bag End..." and, page 296 "They saw the new mill in all its frowning and dirty ugliness..."

When I finally arrived at Sarchole Mill, I was very Impressed. The water system still works, there is a bakery and a blade grinding workshop, and the interesting museum includes bee-keeping and man-trapping among its rural pursuits. The illustrated guide has plenty of diagrams to show how the mill-wheels work, and also relates the history of the mill. (Without mention of Tolkien). The high spot of my tour of the mill was the view of the mill-pond behind. It was beautifully secluded, and reminded me unmistakably of Tom Bombadil's willowpond. No wonder Tolkien said the pool seemed so important to him!

I wrote to the Assistant Keeper, Mr. Langhorne, after my visit, and he replied very courteously to say that he knew and loved 'The Lord of the Rings', and was aware of the mill's Tolkienian connections. He wished all members of the Tolkien Society a pleasant trip around the Mill.

As I do to You!



The Lord of the Rings?