

There and Back Again? Tolkien's Brief Visit to Sussex in 1904

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It has been well documented that the 12-year-old Tolkien came to stay in Hove, East Sussex in 1904, though there has been some confusion over Edwin Neave, the person with whom he was staying, and Edwin's relationship to the Tolkien family at the time. What also hasn't been established is the address where Neave and Tolkien lived in Hove.

Edwin Neave, who would the next year marry Tolkien's aunt, Emily Jane Suffield, had come to know the Tolkien family when they were boarders with Emily's parents in Kings Norton, Worcestershire. The 1901 census shows John and Emily Suffield, Emily Jane's parents, living at 7 Ashfield Road. Edwin Neave is described as an insurance inspector, aged 29, and Emily Jane, his soon to be wife, as a school-teacher, aged 28.

In 1901 the Tolkien family was also living in Kings Norton at 86 Westfield Road, just a short distance from the Neaves in Ashfield Road. A year later the Tolkien family moved to 26 Oliver Road in Edgbaston, a suburb of Birmingham.

While living together, Edwin and the young Tolkien formed a close relationship. Edwin was an entertaining fellow who enjoyed drinking and music hall songs. Tolkien's Aunt Emily was also quite taken by the sandy-haired insurance clerk who played 'Polly-Wolly-Doodle' on his banjo on the stairs at Ashfield Road.

In the spring of 1904 Tolkien's mother became seriously ill with diabetes and could no longer look after her two sons. The Oliver Road house where they lived was closed, the furniture stored, and the boys sent away, Hilary to his Suffield grandparents and Ronald to stay with Edwin Neave in Hove.

Edwin had moved down to Sussex the year before and had been promoted to secretary of the Guardian Life & Fire Assurance Company. His position at that workplace is verified by the listing in the 1904 Towner's Directory for that year.

Some of the evidence for Tolkien's 1904 visit to Hove are the drawings he made on postcards that he sent back to his mother in her Birmingham hospital. One of the drawings, 'They slept in beauty side by side', postmarked 27th April 1904, shows Edwin and Tolkien sharing a bed in a room where they were staying. Another picture of the same dwelling, titled 'What is home without a mother or a wife', shows the front room of the same property.

Yet another postcard drawing, 'For men must work as seen daily at 9.00 am', shows Edwin and Tolkien arriving at Neave's workplace at the offices of the Guardian Life & Fire Assurance Company in East Street in Brighton.

I found three photographs of the same building on the corner of East Street. The Guardian Assurance building is evident by its bold letters.

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A fourth picture, which Scull and Hammond describe but which has not been previously published, (Hammond & Scull, 6) entitled ‘Working over time S.P.Q.R.’, shows the young Tolkien seated at a tall desk with the Guardian Fire Insurance calendar on the wall behind him. We can presume that he stayed with Edwin at his workplace, maybe somewhere out of the way in Edwin’s office, quietly working.



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We have established where Tolkien and Neave were during the day, but we still do not know the address where they were living. However, a closer inspection of the drawing, ‘For men must work as seen daily at 9.00am’, reveals a faint embossed address, 20 Catherine’s Terrace, Hove, on the top right. This drawing is reproduced on page 134 of the Tolkien, *Maker of Middle Earth* catalogue. (McIlwain, 133-34)

I cannot claim to be the first to notice that the drawing has a place written on it, as Scull and Hammond mention the address, but I think I am the first to publish it. Today it remains an impressive building looking out on the Hove seafront. At the corner of Seafeld Road and St Catherine’s Terrace, with the entrance in Seafeld Road, the house is currently divided into seven flats. The walk from the house to Edwin Neave’s workplace would have taken around an

hour, though Tolkien and Neave could have caught a bus.

There can be no doubt that Edwin Neave had a transformative effect on the young Tolkien, at a time when the death of his mother on 14th November 1904 must also have affected him greatly. Sadly, just five years later, Tolkien was also to lose his friend Edwin, who after his marriage had moved to The Cottage in Gedling, Nottingham. He died of pneumonia and heart failure on 8th May 1909, aged just 37, never knowing what the young child he had loved and cared for was to become.

I am indebted to Hammond and Scull for the sheer rigour and accuracy in their documenting of Tolkien’s life, to the Tolkien Estate for allowing me to reproduce one of Tolkien’s early drawings, and to the Tolkien Society for their support and love.

Works Cited

The Regency Society, Brighton, Sussex.

Hammond, Wayne G. and Christina Scull, *The J. R. R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Volume 1: Chronology* (UK: Harper Collins. 2018).

Tolkien, J.R.R., *Working over time S.P.Q.R.* © Tolkien Estate. (Postcard held at the Bodleian Library Oxford).

McIlwain, Catherine, *Tolkien, Maker of Middle Earth* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2018).