

The Tolkien Society — the early days

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The Tolkien Society did not spring fully formed into the world, but went through quite an extended process of gestation before it achieved coherent shape and evolved into its present form. The purpose of this piece is to examine that process in some detail, as well as to recall a very different era in the appreciation of Tolkien and his works.

However, before beginning such an account, notice must be taken of what might be called the prehistory of Tolkien fandom (to shift the metaphor slightly). By the word ‘fandom,’ I specifically mean organized fandom. In the sense that people who like and admire the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien can (however loosely) be classified as ‘fans,’ then Tolkien-fans must surely go back to the publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937. But here I am considering the results of fans getting into communication and becoming organized.

Before entering into the particulars of early Tolkien fandom and the coming-into-being of the Tolkien Society, it would be best at this point to note two important factors in the formation of that fandom: local groups and science-fiction fandom. There seem to have been local groups of Tolkien fans, usually spontaneously generated in and centred on places of higher education both in the United Kingdom and in the United States, for at least as long as any of the more generalized groupings. However, because many of them were so localized, and because in many cases they may have existed only among a particular generation, and didn’t survive those individuals’ dispersal into the wider world, they tend to have something of an ephemeral quality to them. (Not all, of course: think of Taruithorn!) But they had a part to play in the establishment of the larger bodies. Some of these local groups called themselves ‘smials.’ It is not clear when this natural-enough term for a local Tolkien group first emerged, but it seems to have been used from very early on.

Science-fiction fandom goes back many decades, and I do not even propose to touch upon its history; but it is a fact that Tolkien for a long time has had a following among readers of science fiction, and several people who were involved with the formation of Tolkien fandom in general and of the Tolkien Society in particular had a background in science-fiction fandom. Tolkien himself, we might note, had a couple of brushes with this world: in early 1954, he accompanied C. S. Lewis in an informal debate at the Eastgate in Oxford on the merits or otherwise of space travel with renowned science-fiction author and fan Arthur C. Clarke and the British rocket engineer A. V. Cleaver; and

in 1957 he received the International Fantasy Award at the fifteenth World Science Fiction Convention, held in London. (It should be noted that Tolkien was given the award at a special meeting of the SF Luncheon Club held during the course of the convention. The presentation was not open to the convention’s general membership.)

Another point that might be worth making is simply that at this period Tolkien was not remotely as well-known to the public as he later became. Nowadays it is hard to avoid some sort of reference to Tolkien or the characters of his fiction in the media. But in the days that I shall here mainly be discussing, any sort of reference to be found beyond the review sections of newspapers and magazines was rare indeed.

The Fellowship meets

The earliest organized Tolkien fan grouping must be The Fellowship of the Ring, which was begun at a meeting held by American science-fiction fans Bruce Pelz and Ted Johnstone on 4 September 1960, at the eighteenth World Science Fiction Convention in Pittsburgh; the group of some 30 Los Angeles-based SF fans involved had been considering the idea of a ‘Tolkien-only club’ since the previous year. Ed Meškys recalled someone at it reporting that he had heard of several other already established groups, including one at Harvard; these, presumably, were some of the earliest local groupings, but of these particular ones, nothing further is known. (You might get some idea of the kind of fan Bruce Pelz was if I say that at his death in 2002, he willed his collection of fanzines to the University of California: there were some 200,000 of them.)

The Fellowship produced its own fanzine, *I Palantir* (edited by Ted Johnstone, published by Bruce Pelz), of which there were four issues, irregularly spaced, between August 1960 and August 1966. I don’t know that the Fellowship ever had a high membership: it cost \$1 to join but you needed the personal approval of Bruce Pelz, something

by no means easy to obtain, it seems.

Despite its exclusivity, there was an offshoot of sorts of the Fellowship in the United Kingdom: in Birmingham science-fiction fan Ken Cheslin early on became the Fellowship’s British agent and produced *Nazgul’s Bane* as a ‘newszine’ for its British members. There were at least four issues of this, from about 1961 (3 issues so dated) to 1963. (Sorry I can’t be more definitive: even Gary Hunnewell’s listing is vague on these dates.) It seems to have been a fairly sparse affair, as the number of pages in the first four issues were 2, 2, 4 and 1, respectively. I have not seen any of these, but

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obviously they have their place as the earliest specialist British Tolkien fan-publication. One of the people associated with *Nazgul's Bane*, as well as being himself a recipient of *I Palantir*, was veteran British science-fiction fan Archie Mercer, of whom we shall hear more anon. I note, from an anthology of extracts from Tolkien fanzines that Gary Hunnewell produced in 1987, that, even then, a certain book was awaited with not a little anticipation. Thus in no. 3 of *Nazgul's Bane*, Ken Cheslin wrote: "I heard a rumour that THE SIRAMILLION or THE SIMARILLION is it? is certain to be published in 1962. Nothing for certain yet tho." Even in those days, *Silmarillion* rumours were spread abroad.

For the decade following its first publication, *The Lord of the Rings* had been available only in hardcover. This changed with the three-volume American Ace paperback edition of mid-1965. Without delving into the complexities of the matter, this was a publication of questionable legality that, nevertheless, was the first mass-market edition of the work, making it much more readily available. This, together with the authorized Ballantine paperback edition later that year, had the effect of increasing its popularity generally, but especially on the campuses of American universities, and doubtless helped to stimulate the growth, though not, I think, the formation, of the Tolkien Society of America (or TSA). This was founded in the spring of 1965, initially as the New York Tolkien Society, by Richard Plotz. Plotz corresponded with Tolkien and visited him in 1966. The TSA brought out 15 issues of *The Tolkien Journal*. By number 2, dated "Winter-filth 1965", it already boasted of having British members. The third issue contained a listing of several local groups of the TSA, here called 'chapters' rather than 'smials', although a piece in the seventh issue, in 1967, referred to 'organized smials' as the most sensible way to organize the TSA. The ninth issue, of late summer 1968, named Archie Mercer as the TSA's British agent. Eventually, in 1972, it was absorbed into the Mythopoeic Society. This society (otherwise known as MythSoc) had been started in 1967 by Glen GoodKnight and was, and is, a serious concern, and concentrates not just on Tolkien but also on the other Inklings, and on writers such as Dorothy L. Sayers and George Macdonald. The Tolkien Society co-organized the Tolkien Centenary Conference in 1992 with MythSoc.

The Earthworm emerges

It would be an interesting study to see how quickly word spread in those pre-Internet days. Undoubtedly much news filtered through science-fiction circles on both sides of the Atlantic by the printed word in the various science-fiction fanzines of the time. It was thanks to Archie Mercer, now acting as the British agent for the TSA, that a significant event in the evolution of British Tolkien fandom occurred. This was the publication in October 1968 of the first issue of his personal 'zine', *The Middle Earthworm*, initially mainly intended for British members of the TSA. The emphasis was on Tolkien,

hence the title. This was a type of publication called a 'loczine', 'l-o-c' standing for letters of comment, the idea being that people would write to it, their letters would be printed on its stencilled pages, and its readers would write their own letters of comment on them for further publication. There was little editorial content beyond what Archie and his wife Beryl and their cats had been doing and what other magazines they had received. This, by the way, was no sort of official publication of any society: it was purely a personal publication of Archie's. Of course, starting such an enterprise must be slightly problematic, but Archie sent out the one-sheet first issue to British members of the Tolkien Society of America, and a few other people he thought might be interested. It should be realized that a good many of these people were science-fiction fans,

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hence the largely science-fictional context I have mentioned within which the Tolkien Society was conceived. Archie noted especially that "several recent applicants for T.S.A. membership have seen fit to enquire the whereabouts of their nearest smial". Although he knew of no British smials, he published the names and addresses of current British members of the TSA in that first issue. In the second issue, Archie noted that he had contacted Joy Hill, press officer at Tolkien's publishers, Allen & Unwin, who said that the professor was at present finishing off the notes for his translations of *Gawain and Pearl*, and then hoped to pick up on *The Silmarillion*; an optimistic forecast, as it turned out. Word spread, and succeeding issues of the magazine increased in size with the increasing correspondence.

As we have just seen, one of the people in that correspondence was Joy Hill, Allen & Unwin's press officer, but a good deal of whose time was actually spent helping Tolkien deal with his fan-mail. How much she may have discussed the contents of the *The Middle Earthworm* with him is a very moot point. A principal topic that emerged among the letters was, naturally enough, the idea of a purely British Tolkien Society. In number 3 of May 1969, Derek Slade and 'Fangorn' Sawyer asked if it was about time "there was a Tolkien Society of England (affiliated to T.S.A. of course)": *The Middle Earthworm* at this stage was still somewhat TSA-oriented. Archie thought a Tolkien Society was a good idea but had too much on his own plate to organize it himself. In number 4, in August, Hartley Patterson thought that an "English TS" was "plainly needed", and Catherine Goundry said that "there should be a Tolkien Society of England... After all... Prof. Tolkien is British". Plainly the idea of a domestic Tolkien Society was a welcome one, but, given the circumstances, one that was not simply an offshoot of a pre-existing, and foreign, body.

Something gets done

The general feeling was that Someone Should Do Something, and, finally, someone did. That someone was Vera Chapman. In *The Middle Earthworm* number 5 of October she volunteered "to help to organise the TOLKIEN SOCIETY OF BRITAIN", and offered her time and talents as

organizing secretary, assistant, or anything required to set the thing on its feet, expressing a hope that as soon as sufficient numbers were enrolled, a meeting would be held to place it all on a businesslike footing. In the same issue, Bob Borsley said that he “would like to see a British Tolkien Society” and that he would also like to see “some sort of Tolkien meeting perhaps like the T.S.A.’s annual meetings”.

Finally, the sixth issue, for November, of *The Middle Earthworm* led off with a letter from ‘Belladonna Took’ (the Tolkienian pseudonym adopted by Vera Chapman) in which she announced “if not quite the birth, at least the hopeful conception of a Tolkien Society of Britain” — “as soon as sufficient numbers are enrolled, a meeting will be held to place it on a businesslike footing”. This issue also contained a copy of her ‘pre-inaugural leaflet’ about the society. And in the personal column of the *New Statesman* for 7 November 1969, she announced “TOLKIEN SOCIETY of Britain — write Belladonna Took, c/o Chapman, 21 Harrington House, Stanhope St. London NW1”. I don’t know the exact date of publication of that *Middle Earthworm* so cannot tell which announcement has precedence, although I favour the *New Statesman* here. Since, as now, this magazine is dated to the Friday of the week, but actually hits the news-stands on the day before, we might therefore consider Thursday, 6 November 1969, as at least the informal beginning of the Tolkien Society. It should be explained that in those days members were encouraged to have a Tolkienian pseudonym. Although probably not really a good idea in general, Vera Chapman took the pseudonym of ‘Belladonna Took’, who was, as you may recall, Bilbo’s mother and “one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took”. It is by the name ‘Belladonna’ that those of us who knew her affectionately remember her.

Then in her early seventies, a retired civil servant, she had a particular motive in forming a British Tolkien Society: she was disturbed by Tolkien’s association, in certain parts of the public mind, with the drug-ridden writings of hippiedom. Remember, we were in the sixties, and Tolkien had developed something of a following in the counter-culture. Belladonna had expressed her concerns about the magazine *Gandalf’s Garden* in the third issue of *The Middle Earthworm* (her first published letter in that journal). (*Gandalf’s Garden*, by the way, was apparently to do with a shop-cum-café, I think, of the same name just off the King’s Road, in Chelsea. I’m not quite sure what kind of goods they sold...) She expressed similar sentiments in *Tolkien Journal* number 10, of November 1969. Although Tolkien indeed appealed to a wide range of people, the trouble was that it seemed to be a fairly narrow range that got publicized in the media. Her point of view, and, I think, a valid one, was that this kind of approach misrepresented both Tolkien himself and a great many, surely the great majority, of his readers. She wanted an organization that was truer to Tolkien’s own outlook and was more representative of the majority of his readership. I am not saying that this was an not an altogether unproblematic

stand to take, in that it may betray a tendency towards too prescriptive a view of Tolkien appreciation; but, as we shall see, hers was but one of the points of view that ultimately shaped the Tolkien Society. In the same issue of *The Middle Earthworm* Jim Leppard commented that “in view of the fact that Tolkien is British”, he “would prefer as a name simply ‘The Tolkien Society.’” And in response to Bob Borsley’s suggestion for something like the TSA’s ‘Yulemeet’, Hartley Patterson suggested that “EasterCon already exists to be used for that — if enough Tolkien followers attended, perhaps some programme time could be found for them”. I find surprising the idea that Eastercon would be an appropriate venue, but, as we have seen, early Tolkien fandom to a degree developed within the context of science-fiction fandom. Archie Mercer noted that since Derek Stokes (of the long-gone science-fiction and fantasy bookshop Dark They Were And Golden Eyed) was in touch with Belladonna at this time and was also on the committee of the forthcoming Eastercon, this would very likely happen anyway. In the end there was to be a meeting at the 1970 Eastercon, to which we shall return.

Slowly, slowly ...

And after these announcements, things started, albeit slowly, to happen. On 17 December, a ‘preliminary meeting’ of interested parties, a proto-committee meeting if you like, was held in Belladonna’s flat. And in the same month she issued the first *Belladonna’s Broadsheet*, in which the aims of the society were explored further. This stencilled A4 newsletter included the announcement “Here ... begins THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY OF BRITAIN — its exact name may call for some more decision”. They still hadn’t quite settled on a name. It was hoped that it would appear quarterly.

In *The Middle Earthworm* number 7 in January 1970, Belladonna announced that “the Tolkien Society of Britain will have its inaugural (or words to that effect) meeting at London University, Rigby Room, Central Collegiate Building, Gower St., London NW.1, on January 29th, Thursday, 7.30.

All welcome”.

And this was done. As noted in the report in *The Middle Earthworm* number 8, as well as in the third *Belladonna’s Broadsheet*, this inaugural meeting was held under the auspices of the Hobbit Society of University College London, otherwise known as ‘Hobbisoc’, some of whose members were already *Middle*

Earthworm correspondents. This was one of the college-based groups mentioned earlier. It’s unclear exactly when Hobbisoc started, but perhaps about 1966 or 1967. More than 30 people were present at the meeting. A good deal was discussed here and things were moved a little bit forward. As this was, strictly speaking, a meeting of Hobbisoc, it could not be considered an authoritative meeting of the Tolkien Society, but recommendations were passed, to be ratified at a subsequent society meeting. There was a good deal of discussion regarding the name of the proposed society, such as ‘British Tolkien Society’ or ‘Tolkien Society of Britain’. But it was also argued that ‘The

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Tolkien Society' would be fine, which the meeting approved. (After all, it would be surprising if one were to come across 'The American Mark Twain Society', or 'The French Jules Verne Society'. The nationality we may reasonably omit from a society name when it is established in the writer's own country.) A committee consisting of Belladonna Took as chairman and secretary "for the present", Sharyn Stead as treasurer, and other members Derek Slade, Steven Thomson, Derek Stokes, Keith Bridges, and Alex Holdschmidt of Hobbitsoc, was appointed pending proper elections at a subsequent Tolkien Society meeting. Membership was said to be already more than 60. (I shall take note of the membership as given in various reports at points throughout this essay. Some of these numbers may be approximate but they give some idea of how many people were prepared to subscribe at any given time.) The objects of the society were stated to be: (i) to encourage the appreciation of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, especially *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; (ii) to endeavour to maintain the image of 'Middle-earth' uncontaminated by anything contrary to the intention of the author; and (iii) to enjoy the fantasy of 'Middle-earth' and express it according to the individual tastes and talents of the members. The subscription was provisionally fixed at 10/- a year (50p in decimal currency). Sharyn Stead resigned as treasurer in March, to be replaced by Philip Ansley-Watson. *Belladonna's Broadsheet* number 2, for March, announced a further meeting for 5 March, to be held on premises at UCL provided by Hobbitsoc, but this seems never to have occurred, possibly partly through Belladonna being ill at about that time. As we shall see, such a meeting took a long time to bring about successfully. Also, there was a very interesting question raised: 'What do we do?' I hope the succeeding 40 years have given some sort of answer to that. However, it should be borne in mind that at that time there was a good deal of uncertainty about the extent of the society's interests — should it be solely about Tolkien, or other fantasy writers, too? What about overlap with organizations such as the British Science Fiction Association or the British Weird Fantasy Society (the 'Weird' later being dropped from the name)? I don't recall that these questions were ever directly addressed: the society simply ended up doing what it did, and defined its own agenda in the process.

Broadsheets, meetings and picnics

As noted, it was decided to have a special Tolkien Society meeting at the upcoming Eastercon ('Scicon '70') at the Royal Hotel in London, on Sunday 29 March, to be specific. This took place, although it turned out to be rather inconclusive, as well as being fairly informal, and was reported as having been jointly chaired by Derek Stokes and Keith Bridges, but was in fact largely conducted by science-fiction writer Kenneth Bulmer. SF fan Darroll Pardoe and his wife Rosemary (or just 'Ro') volunteered to edit the society's magazine, Darroll already having experience of producing fan magazine *Les Spinge*. Apparently the matter of the name of the society was

also raised again, with Arthur Cruttenden arguing for 'The Tolkien Society' pure and simple. One reason for the inconclusiveness might be the fact that this is generally rated as just about the worst Eastercon ever, one that had no mention of science fiction, in a dreadful hotel with surly staff and a bar that closed at 10 p.m. The hotel was shut down for demolition the week after. (Just a footnote, but the previous year's Eastercon, 'Galactic Fair', had been held at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford, although Tolkien was probably unaware of it as he was then living in Bournemouth.)

Other events, of a more social nature, also took place in those days. Hobbitsoc had a May Eve party round a fire in Epping Forest on 30 April.

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On 1 May, at Joy Hill's suggestion, Belladonna wrote a letter to Professor Tolkien, c/o Allen & Unwin, introducing the society and describing its aims, as well as enclosing a copy of the second *Belladonna's Broadsheet*. I am not aware that this ever got a response.

In the intervening months until a general meeting was held, publications continued to appear. *Belladonna's Broadsheet* number 3 came out in about mid-June. In the *Broadsheet*, apart from mention of the letter to Tolkien, Belladonna announced that this would be the last such, and that the society's organ would now be *The Mallorn*, to be edited by the Pardoes, with the first issue due some time in the autumn. A listing of members showed some 70 names. It was also announced that a constitution had been hammered out sufficient for the purpose of opening a bank account for the society. In *The Middle Earthworm* number 10, Ro and Darroll Pardoe confirmed that the society's magazine would be called *The Mallorn*, and in issue number 11 in September, they said they hoped to have the first *Mallorn* out by October, adding that they badly needed contributions (you will hardly be surprised to learn). Like the *Broadsheet*, this was initially conceived of as a quarterly publication. Things were starting to move. I will also note a letter from Derek Slade, describing himself as "Grand Master of University Smial, Oxford Farthing". I imagine this must have been a remote precursor to Taruithorn. I don't know if it had anything to do with the contemporary Oxford University Speculative Fiction Group.

More fun doings: there was a Hobbit Picnic on Hampstead Heath on 7 June, and, later that month, a picnic on Golders Hill.

September saw the arrival of another personal 'zine, *Gamma*, produced by Phil Spencer. He felt that there had been very little action in the first nine months of the society, there having been no publications since the last *Broadsheet*. He thought that the society should cover more than just Tolkien, and include Sword and Sorcery in general.

Gamma number 2, in October, raised the issue of a bulletin for the society, distinct from *Mallorn*. Phil Spencer said that he had offered to edit and distribute one. The treasurer thought that there would be enough cash to support both a quarterly *Mallorn* as well as a six-weekly bulletin. At a

committee meeting on 8 October, Phil's proposal regarding an 'Interim Bulletin' was discussed. This seems to have been quickly taken up, as *The Tolkien Society Bulletin*, as it was titled, was quickly prepared in time to go out with the first *Mallorn*. Given that both the first *Bulletin* and the first *Mallorn* were issued together, it is not altogether clear from the printed evidence in what sense the *Bulletin* was meant to be 'interim' — whether it was meant to fill in the time until the quarterly *Mallorn* was up and running, or was meant to emerge at intervals with and between *Mallorns*, although I think the latter. In any event, the necessity for a regular bulletin, of greater frequency than *Mallorn* (whether or not quarterly) soon became apparent, even though it took some time for *Amon Hen* to take on its current shape. In the same issue of *Gamma*, Rosemary Pardoe wrote to say that she would be happy to discuss other fantasy authors in *Mallorn*.

Mallorn takes root

Finally, at some time in October, the first issue of *The Mallorn*, as well as the first issue of the *Bulletin*, made their appearance in a joint mailing. (I have been unable to establish the precise date of publication. It may have been 4 October, but this is not quite certain.) In her editorial, Ro Pardoe said she agreed with the third 'aim' of the society — "to enjoy the fantasy of 'Middle-earth' and express it according to the individual talents and tastes of the members" — but not with the second — "to endeavour to maintain the image of 'Middle-earth' uncontaminated by anything contrary to the intention of the author". She felt, perhaps not unreasonably, that that was far too restrictive an outlook. Also enclosed with *The Mallorn* was a copy of the constitution as it then stood. The reason for what some felt was a fair delay — four months from *Belladonna's Broadsheet* number 3 to the first *Mallorn* — was, according to Darroll Pardoe, to do with problems in getting the society's finances organized.

They decided to step down from editing *Mallorn* at this point (Ro had her A-levels to concentrate on), and hand it over to the Laureindorenan Smial in Richmond, Surrey, headed by Steven Thomson. (This smial largely consisted of sixth-formers preparing for university, so far as I recall.) In a letter to a later *Middle Earthworm*, she added: "It isn't that the Society doesn't have enough money to bring the MAL-LORN out, as some people seem to think. It's just that up until now the money has been inaccessible." Evidently, cash flow and money management were problems. The *Bulletin* announced a general meeting to be held on 20 November, again at University College London.

The long-awaited and much-needed general meeting of the Tolkien Society was at last held at UCL on 20 November 1970, attended by about 20, where the constitution was considered. This had been hammered out over several committee meetings, mainly by Philip Ansley-Watson and Belladonna's son Denis Chapman, a 'legal wizard'. It was needed in order to open a bank account and for the society to operate as a legal entity. It was initially accepted on a pro tem basis but then,

after much discussion on proposed amendments, rejected. Michael Lightfoot, a law student, who was the proposer of the motion that the constitution be rejected, offered to draw one up himself, which offer was accepted by the committee. The rejection of the constitution was a setback, and it took a long time for it to be sorted out. There had been a lengthy discussion on the matter at the 8 October committee meeting at Belladonna's flat. Plainly, this matter was still problematic. At the general meeting, Keith Bridges was elected chairman, Philip Ansley-Watson, treasurer, and Vera Chapman, secretary, all posts considered as temporary, pending another general meeting with a ratified constitution. The Laureindorenan Smial took over *Mallorn*. All this wasn't the best advertisement for the society. Ro Pardoe said she had "expected a fiasco, but this was ridiculous". However, she enjoyed the party afterwards.

Meanwhile the society carried on in its own way. A mailing in December saw *The Tolkien Society Bulletin* number 2 and *Gamma* number 3. January 1971 saw *Mallorn* number 2 (from Laureindorenan, now definite article-less, except on the front cover), *The Tolkien Society Bulletin* number 3 and *Gamma* number 4. Membership was said now to be about 100. Some copies of the second and third *Mallorns* were distributed for sale to the public at large at a few outlets, including Dark They Were And Golden Eyed. *Mallorn* number 3, *The Tolkien Society Bulletin* number 4 and *Gamma* number 5 followed in about June. We might perhaps note here that although a quarterly schedule for *Mallorn* sounds extraordinarily ambitious, yet, with the first few, it was almost achieved: there were three months between the first and second issues, five between the third and fourth, and three between the fourth and fifth. After that the intervals grew more extended. In the fourth *Bulletin*,

A very interesting question was raised: 'What do we do?'

Keith Bridges mentioned the possibility of a 'Tolkien Society convention', an early stirring of what would eventually become Oxonmoot. There were occasional meetings, I am told, of interested parties to discuss relevant matters in The One Tun, a

pub in London where science-fiction fans would foregather on the first Thursday of the month.

The Laureindorenan Smial held a party in Richmond Park on 4 July. I'm not quite sure if I was at that (I had joined the society by then), although I think I was at a barbecue to celebrate Bilbo's birthday in the woods behind Keith Bridges' home in Welwyn Garden City on 18 September.

In search of a constitution

An important event in the society's development now took place. At a committee meeting on 13 May, a decision was taken to get the constitution sorted out once and for all. As advertised in the fourth *Tolkien Society Bulletin* of June 1971, an all-day meeting was to be held at Keith Bridges' home on 10 July: this was to be the 'Grand Constitution Meeting'. The absence of a ratified constitution had been a stumbling block for far too long. This meeting was meant to bring all the interested parties together to make something presentable and workable. This was done; if it hadn't succeeded I suspect there might not have been a society afterwards. Steven

Thomson subsequently prepared a draft of the constitution from notes he took at the meeting. All that was needed now was to assemble a general meeting to ratify it; but this still took some time. Also at this meeting, Phil Spencer resigned from editing the *Bulletin*, which meant that, for the time being, the society was without a bulletin.

In the meantime *Mallorn* number 4, the last from Laurelindorenan as it turned out, came out in about September. Membership was noted as about 65; plainly a good many people had become disaffected by the society's difficulties.

A general meeting for 23 October was decided upon by the committee but, to cut a long story short, notices weren't sent out in time and only one or two puzzled would-be attendees turned up at University College London round about the time appointed. Some people, including Keith Bridges and Howard Rosenblum, later turned up at Bel-ladonna's flat where they held an informal meeting so that the day wouldn't be completely wasted. It was noted that Philip Ansley-Watson had not been seen for some time and seemed to be incommunicado. A good deal was discussed and it was agreed that there should be a properly arranged and notified annual general meeting in January, in Welwyn Garden City. Before that there should be an audit of the

finances and someone persuaded to act as a new treasurer.

It was on 29 November of this year that Professor Tolkien's wife, Edith, died. I have a dim memory of Steven Thomson telling me that the committee intended to send a telegram of condolence to Tolkien. I recall that I was uncertain as to the propriety of this and urged caution. I don't know if the telegram was ever sent.

Possibly in part in response to the general feeling of things not getting anywhere, Hartley Patterson brought out, from November, his own personal 'zine, *News From Bree*, which, like *Gamma* (which was still going, but ceased with number 7), was meant to ginger things up in the society, especially in view of the absence of a regular bulletin since Phil Spencer's resignation. The initial issues were mainly Tolkien-based, but there was a gradual shift to other interests of Hartley's, and from number 16 it was exclusively about *Diplomacy* and war-gaming. Many issues went out with mailings of *Mallorn* and the society bulletin.

The society at this time was very much stuck in the doldrums. Things weren't happening, problems weren't being dealt with. Finally, the first committee meeting for about six months, since 13 May, in fact, was held on 4 December. About now John Martin agreed to serve as the new bulletin



From *The Hobbit* Colin Williams

editor. On 12 December, in preparation for the forthcoming general meeting, another committee meeting undertook an audit of the society's finances at Belladonna's flat.

Words from the author

Tolkien was awarded a CBE in the 1972 New Year's Honours, and for his 80th birthday on 3 January 1972, the society sent this telegram:

CONGRATULATIONS ON 80TH BIRTHDAY AND HONOUR. ANOTHER 50 YEARS TO BEAT THE OLD TOOK.

THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY (IN BRITAIN)

This was 'officially' encouraged, as notification of the birthday had been received from Allen & Unwin in October. There was a small congratulatory notice from the society in the 'BIRTHDAYS' column of *The Times* of 3 January, which ran: "TOLKIEN. Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, C.B.E. Congratulations on your 80th birthday. 'Elen sila lumenn' omentielmo.' The Tolkien Society." And the society sent Tolkien a present of tobacco (best Latakia Mixture) in a green china tobacco jar, with a design of huntsmen and deer in white, which was delivered to Allen & Unwin with the following note:

FROM all Hobbits, Elves, Elf-friends, Dwarves, Ents, Numenoreans, Rohirrim, etc. etc. etc. of the TOLKIEN SOCIETY (in Britain) with love and honour and hearty congratulations, to the creator of so much wonder. Although not to be compared with the true LONGBOTTOM LEAF, we hope that this will at least raise a few smoke-rings of happy recollection.

THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY
21, Harrington House
Stanhope Street
London N.W.1.

On the evening of 3 January Joy Hill rang Vera Chapman to say that the professor was delighted: "Of all the tributes he received, this was the one that gave the greatest pleasure. There was a chance that he might write personally." And a month later he did just that. In a letter to "Mrs. V. Chapman", dated 6 February 1972, and sent c/o Allen & Unwin, he wrote:

Dear Mrs. Chapman,
May I thank you and the Tolkien Society for your good wishes and kind gift on my 80th birthday. I appreciated your generosity very much indeed.
Best wishes,
Yours sincerely,
J.R.R. Tolkien [signed]

At last a general meeting was held at Keith Bridges' home in Welwyn Garden City on 15 January 1972 at 3 p.m., attended by about 13 members. The constitution was voted on and at last ratified, so establishing the Tolkien Society as a legal entity, and officers were elected: Keith Bridges as chairman, Belladonna

as secretary, Archie Mercer as treasurer, and Jonathan Simons as vice-chairman. Officers appointed were Janet Lee as assistant secretary, member without portfolio Hartley Patterson, *Bulletin* editor John Martin, and *Mallorn* editor Steven Thomson and the Laureindorenan Smial. This occasion might be held to be the formal beginning of the society, as opposed to its informal beginning with the *New Statesman* advert. Thus, with its first proper annual general meeting, was the society formed in the deeps of time. Philip Ansley-Watson's resignation was accepted. He had been having health problems, and had since left to go on an officer training course with the army. In order to place the finances of the society on a sound footing, it was decided to write off the loss in the accounts of £13 and officially terminate the Tolkien Society, the meeting then forming the Tolkien Society 1972. To quote: "It was ... proposed that 'THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY 1970' be wound up and all monies be transferred to 'THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY 1972' ... The meeting was resumed under the auspices of the above ['THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY 1972'], at 4 p.m.; Constitution accepted in toto." I cannot recall hearing before or since of the society's title having a numerical suffix. The annual subscription was fixed at £1.

The road goes ever on

The news about the annual general meeting was carried in the first issue, dated January 1972, of the society's new official bulletin, *Anduril*, edited by John Martin. However, this was number 0 of the magazine, not number 1. This was explained in the editorial: "Numbered 0, because this is more a flyer announcing the return of an officially approved T.S. Bulletin and asking, telling, BEGGING all of you out there to take up, in your nasty little handses, your pens, place to paper AND WRITE!!!!!!" Yes, even back then, bulletin editors were in want of contributions. However, for a flier, it was quite a sumptuous publication at 14 8" x 10" stencilled pages, with a 4-page membership list, which gave the names of some 80 paid-up members.

Mention should be made here of a small personal 'zine called *Nazgul*, produced by John Abbot in Yorkshire for Tolkien Society members, which made its first appearance in February this year, and which is too good to be forgotten. Consisting of John's observations on matters Tolkienian, with contributions from readers, its wonderfully dry sense of humour made a welcome contrast to the sometimes all-too-serious tone of the official publications. There were seven issues in all, up until 1977.

The next *Mallorn* was somewhat delayed. When Belladonna enquired about it, about a month after the annual general meeting, she was sent a pile of material, very little work on it having been done since the previous issue. Acting as a temporary 'pro-editor', with the assistance of Hartley Patterson and John Martin, she put together the new issue, which was sent out in about early April.

Published a little later was *Anduril* number 1. This carried a flier from Tolkien's publisher, George Allen & Unwin, advertising its range of Tolkien books; perhaps a sign, of sorts, of official recognition. Notably, on the front cover was

an illustration by John Martin portraying what I think is intended as a soldier of Gondor who has been celebrating the victory over Sauron: he is lying against a hayrick, an emptied flagon of ale in his hand, and a minimally clad young lady peering out from behind the hayrick. Flying from a pole is what is presumably her dress, with the words 'We won the war!' scrawled on it. I fear that Belladonna did not approve. On the back cover was the late Virgil Finlay's sample drawing for *The Hobbit*, which, as we know, Tolkien rather approved of. However, a Finlay-illustrated *Hobbit* never saw publication, which is a pity as Finlay was one of the most talented professional SF/fantasy artists ever.

On Tuesday 27 June 1972, Vera Chapman, representing the Tolkien Society, attended a sherry party held in Professor Tolkien's honour at Allen & Unwin's offices in Ruskin House, 40 Museum Street, in London, where she had the privilege of meeting Professor Tolkien himself. As noted in her account of the event, she managed to have a few words with him (bearing in mind that everyone else wanted to have a few words with him, too). After some remarks related to the belladonna plant (Tolkien may have misunderstood her reference to her society pseudonym of 'Belladonna Took'), she asked him if he would consent to be the society's honorary president, to which he replied, "Certainly". She gave him some short account of the Tolkien Society before other people made their claims on his attention. In a later, final word with her, the professor noted that he was glad to be in Oxford again, although it was full of crime and criminals: his CBE medal and some of his wife's jewellery had been stolen. Tolkien parted with the words. "If I can help your society in any way, I will," before the firm's head, Rayner Unwin, escorted him away.

Consolidation and Amon Hen

July saw the publication of *Anduril* number 2. Another sumptuous production, this was in fact the last *Anduril* to be the society's bulletin. John Martin had increasingly seen it as his own magazine of fantasy in a general sense. November saw the first issue of *Amon Hen* — except that it wasn't called that, but *Henneth Annûn* (although at least it was called Number 1). December saw a joint mailing of *Amon Hen* number 2 and *Anduril* number 3. No explanation was offered for the change of name (or, rather, reversion to the correct name), although, in a letter in *The Middle Earthworm* number 19, for February 1973, John Martin admitted that his mind "was wandering somewhat" when he was typing the first issue up. *Anduril* number 3 was the last distributed by the Tolkien Society, and had by now become an independent magazine. (It is a very moot point if number 3 in fact was a Tolkien-zine as such. Numbers 0–2 definitely were, and numbers 4–7 (the last) definitely weren't; number 3 is borderline, although completists would probably want it.) A listing gives about 115 names of members.

Mallorn number 6 came out in January 1973, now edited by Jon M. Harvey. It contained 'Belladonna Goes to a Party',

her account of the above mentioned meeting with Professor Tolkien. *Amon Hen* number 3 followed a little later. Membership was noted as 120.

The first annual general meeting to have a guest speaker took place on 17 February, at the Sherlock Holmes Hotel in Bloomsbury. This was Joy Chant, author of *Red Moon and Black Mountain*. Attended by about 30, officers elected were Hartley Patterson as chairman, Vera Chapman as secretary, Archie Mercer as treasurer, and Jonathan Simons as vice-chairman (although this seems to be the last time such a post existed). Officers appointed were Howard Rosenblum and

John Martin as members' representatives, John Martin as bulletin editor and Jonathan Simons as managing editor of *Mallorn*. The subscription was raised to £1.50 (now that we had decimal currency).

This was reported on somewhat unenthusiastically by John Martin in *Amon Hen* number 4 in April — he called it a "tiresome event"; plainly the shine was wearing thin for him. However, he did note that "The constitution, which finally made the scene; after being unavailable for a year; for which we thank Keith Bridges, was ratified as it stood" [*sic*]. John further complains about people "playing constitutions", and I retain a very vague memory of Jill Bridges, perhaps at this event, depositing a pile of literature in front of the committee, thereby curtailing her and Keith's appointments to the Tolkien Society. Plainly, the matter of constitutions hadn't quite been finished with by the time this AGM came round. (Possibly Keith Bridges had had the only copy, and he had by now started to move away from Tolkien fandom.)

Amon Hen number 5 emerged in June. It announced the holding of a special general meeting of the society to consider a small amendment to clause 14 of the constitution regarding the composition of the committee, scheduled to take place on 30 June at the London pub where the local group (the Northfarthing Smial) then met. It was followed by a picnic in Regent's Park.

Professor Tolkien died on 2 September 1973. Perhaps not unexpected at his advanced age, the news was still of great sadness. The funeral was held at St Anthony of Padua's in Headley Way, Oxford, on 6 September, attended by Vera Chapman representing the Tolkien Society; and there was a memorial service at Merton College Chapel on 17 November, attended by Mrs Chapman and Jessica Kemball-Cook for the society. It was at this latter occasion that the society established contact with Priscilla Tolkien, whose friendly and generous approach to the society, especially in regard to the Oxonmoots, has been of inestimable value to the society and its members.

Amon Hen number 6, in September, was a very much abbreviated issue due to the editor's other commitments, and was in any case his last issue. An extra sheet was added to the end to record Tolkien's death. Eighty names are listed in a membership list.

1974 opened with *Mallorn* number 7 and *Amon Hen* [number 7]. Those square brackets are deliberate: this issue

The rejection of the constitution was a setback, and it took a long time for it to be sorted out.

of the bulletin was, it has to be said, a decidedly scrappy affair, and the issue number was accidentally omitted. The sheet size was $8\frac{1}{4} \times 11\frac{3}{4}$ ", up slightly from the 8×10 " of preceding issues. It was edited by Keith Walker and Stuart Clark. Most of the issue was, appropriately, taken up with obituary material on Professor Tolkien, including an account of the funeral service by Belladonna. The new *Mallorn* was edited by the Numenorean Smial of Pinner, Middlesex, headed by Susan Adler, although Jonathan Simons was still 'editor-in-chief'.

A moot point

Also out in January was *Nazgul* number 4 (actually dated December 1973). John Abbot made the innocuous-sounding proposal: "What do you think of the idea of Oxford Moot this year? No, seriously. Whilst watching the re-run of the television 'Review' film about Professor Tolkien, it struck me that the Soc. might be interested in arranging an Official Visit dreaming spirewards ... Maybe some modest hotel could be selected as H.Q.; and perhaps a Grand Tour(s) organised to take in some of the Colleges, breweries and finer points of the City ..."

Amon Hen number 8 (numbered this time), now under the editorship solely of Keith Walker, complained about the lack of material from members. It was largely filled up by material from Jim Allen and an article on 'The Hidden People' by Rosemarie Green. The editor announced that this would be his penultimate issue.

The annual general meeting for 1974 took place at the Ivanhoe Hotel in London on 16 February. Jonathan Simons was elected as chairman, Vera Chapman as secretary, Janet Gibbs (née Lee) as treasurer, and Howard Rosenblum as ordinary member. Stuart Clark was appointed bulletin editor, and Jonathan Simons carried on as managing editor of *Mallorn*. The subscription stayed at £1.50. Membership "was reported last May as 115, but ... it was now nearer 150" (as reported in *Amon Hen* number 9). On the death of his father Christopher Tolkien had been offered the post of honorary president of the society, but he thought it best that the title should remain with his father in perpetuity. So the motion was proposed and enthusiastically carried that Professor Tolkien be the society's honorary president in perpetuo. The idea of holding a meeting in Oxford — an 'Oxonmoot' — was also approved. The society was especially fortunate in its guest speakers this year, given that they were Austin Olney, head of Tolkien's American publishers, Houghton Mifflin, and Rayner Unwin, director of Allen & Unwin. The general feeling was that the Tolkien Society had arrived. The society has always been grateful to Rayner Unwin for his considerate and helpful attitude to it. He was guest speaker three times in all, as well as attending some three Oxonmoots, including the 1992 centenary conference. Both their talks were highly interesting. Austin Olney remarked that a good publisher likes to publish good books, but any publisher has to publish books that sell. In publishing Tolkien he felt they were doing both. Rayner Unwin provoked (as may well be believed) a great deal of interest with news of the work that was being done on *The Silmarillion*. Also present were Joy Hill and Pauline Baynes. A report on the

foregoing was carried in *Amon Hen* number 9 in March.

Mallorn [number 8] (the number for some reason being omitted) came out in June. Edited by Jonathan Simons, it carried a write-up on the speeches at the AGM by your present author, as well as much else. *Amon Hen* number 10, now reverting to its 8×10 " format, and edited by Stuart Clark, came out at the end of June. It carried news of the forthcoming Oxonmoot, which was now to include visits to The Eagle and Child, and to the graves of Tolkien and of C. S. Lewis. *Amon Hen* number 11 revealed that it was intended to use the visit to lay a wreath at the professor's grave.

The very first Oxonmoot took place on the weekend of Friday to Sunday, 13–15 September 1974. The attendees gathered at The Welsh Pony (rechristened 'The Prancing Pony' for the occasion; now, alas, defunct). On the Saturday they visited the Bodleian Library to see Pauline Baynes's original map of Narnia, laid a wreath at Faith Tolkien's bust of Tolkien at the English Faculty Library (a photographer from the *Oxford Mail* turned up here), visited the churchyard of St Cross in Holywell to see Charles Williams' grave, lunched at The Eagle and Child (where a visiting American student who also happened to be a member of the Mythopoeic Society introduced himself and was invited to join the existing 16 to make the total tally for the first Oxonmoot up to 17), and visited Exeter and Merton Colleges later in the afternoon. In the evening they were received at Priscilla Tolkien's house, where Michael Tolkien and his wife Joan were also present. Many family anecdotes of the professor were told. Sunday saw a visit to Wolvercote Cemetery, where a wreath was laid on the grave of Tolkien and his wife, and 'A Elbereth Gilthoniel' recited. Lunch was taken at The Trout inn, where it was decided that Oxonmoot should henceforth be an annual event. From these small beginnings grew what without doubt has become by far the most popular single event in the society's year.

The next *Amon Hen*, number 12, for September, was prepared too early to have a report on Oxonmoot, but it had expanded to 17 printed pages, and Stuart Clark was now assisted by his wife, Rosie, in editing the magazine. There was, however, a detailed report on the proceedings in number 13, for October. This was a sumptuous production of 40 pages; 180 members of the society were listed.

Amon Hen number 14, for February 1975, was down to a mere 24 pages, followed in about a month by number 15, again with 24 pages, which carried a report on the annual general meeting, which had been held at the Bloomsbury Centre Hotel in London on 22 February. Jonathan Simons, Vera Chapman, Janet Gibbs and Howard Rosenblum were re-elected to their posts of chairman, secretary, treasurer and members' representative, respectively, while Stuart and Rosie Clark were appointed bulletin editors and Jonathan Simons carried on as managing editor of *Mallorn*. Also appointed was Vanessa Bryant as assistant secretary. The annual subscription to the society was increased to £2.50. (The report in *Amon Hen* said: "contrary to our belief, the subscription is fixed by the committee, and not by the AGM", which must have surprised some people.) Membership was stated to be 240. Guest speakers were Priscilla Tolkien and

Elizabeth Horrocks. The former needs no introduction; the latter was the winner of BBC TV's *Mastermind* in 1974, one of her specialist subjects being Tolkien.

June and July saw a visit to these shores by Glen and Bonnie GoodKnight of the Mythopoeic Society. They visited various points of Tolkienian interest, including a call on Christopher Tolkien, who was then preparing *The Silmarillion* for publication. The Northfarthing Smial in London held a special meeting for Glen and Bonnie on 26 July.

The ninth *Mallorn* came out in late June. Jonathan Simons announced it would be his last. Of particular interest was 'Tolkien's Walk (an unexpected personal link with Tolkien)' by Canon N. S. Power, as well as some of the society's correspondence with Michael Tolkien.

Amon Hen number 16 was another 24-pager from Stuart and Rosie Clark in May. However, the next issue, number 17, marked a change: this was the first issue in A5 format, as is used now. It was typed up on A4 sheets but then the image of each sheet was reduced to A5 size in reproduction. A peculiarity, however, of the first two issues in the new format was that they were not stapled but sewn in a continuous thread down the spine.


Belladonna bows out

The next AGM was held at Hampstead Town Hall in London on 21 February 1976. (The reader may have noticed at this point a certain trend in holding AGMs in London. This, I think, was because most of the then committee lived in or near London and it was simplest to arrange the meeting locally. However, in view of the fact that the Tolkien Society had many members who didn't live in the capital, there has been, at the time of writing, only one further AGM held in London since, all the rest at various other locations in Britain.) The guest speakers were Priscilla Tolkien and Humphrey Carpenter. By this time it was known that Carpenter had been chosen to write the authorized biography of Tolkien, and his most interesting talk gave the members a glimpse of the work-in-progress. Regarding society business, Stuart Clark announced that he hoped to put out one more issue of *Amon Hen*, although, as it turned out, he was unable to do so and the task passed to Jessica Kembell-Cook. The elected posts continued with the same persons in office as at the last general meeting, but with one notable exception. Vera Chapman — Belladonna Took — stepped down from the post of secretary to a well-earned retirement. She was presented with a 'mithril' goblet, inscribed with "To Belladonna Took, with grateful thanks from the Tolkien Society" (in English) and "*Elen síla lúmenn' omentielvo*" (in Elvish), as a token of recognition of her services in getting the society started and organized, sticking at what must have seemed a thankless task in the more difficult times. Her place as secretary was taken by Jessica Kembell-Cook. Janet Gibbs said that her job as treasurer was in process of division, and that a membership secretary would have the job of enrolling new members and sending out reminders. (At the 1977 AGM, Lester Simons was elected as the first membership secretary per se.)

In so far as the retirement of Belladonna marks, I feel, the

close of the opening phase of the Tolkien Society, I shall draw this account to a conclusion.

There were some further adjustments still to come with regard to the society's publications. *Amon Hen* number 19 was the first issue of that magazine to be stapled rather than sewn along its spine. *Mallorn* number 10, edited by Kevin Young, displayed for the first time on its front cover a magnificent drawing of a mallorn tree by Pauline Baynes, done especially for the magazine. This was kept as the standard front cover, in its original form, up until *Mallorn* number 36 in 1998. As with previous *Mallorns*, number 10 was stapled down the left-hand side to keep it together. Number 11, uniquely, had its pages perfect-bound within a wraparound cover. Number 12 went back to side-stapling. Only with number 13 did *Mallorn* achieve its final form, with a stapled spine. The first of the annual workshops, or seminars, took place in 1986, and Oxonmoot also began to have a stream of serious papers. There were several adjustments to the constitution to be made over the years, as well as the matter of the society's charitable status, established in late 1977. But all these later developments belong to another account.

In closing we might pause to reflect on what a different era it was then, when the society began. Then, it operated on a shoestring, hardly surprising given the limited budgets of its, largely, youthful membership. All communication was by post, exceptionally by telephone, and face-to-face when people were physically present in the same place. Tolkien was still alive and, so, potentially accessible, although, so far as I'm aware, Tolkien Society members weren't among those who phoned him in the middle of the night or waylaid him in the streets of Oxford. And some of us waited with baited breath for *The Silmarillion* — for it was by now public knowledge that Tolkien was working on it. And, of course, his publisher was still George Allen & Unwin, headed by Rayner Unwin, whose helpful and sympathetic attitude to the society did so much both to encourage us and, I think, to validate our endeavours. We have come a long way. Indeed, the Tolkien Society must be one of the longer-serving examples of organizations of its type. I hope, despite a much-changed media environment, we shall continue to serve as a means of coming together for those who find wonder and meaning in the works of Professor Tolkien. 

This essay is based mainly on my collection of the early magazines mentioned as well as, in some cases, my memories and notes. Mention must also be made of the research of Gary Hunnewell, which has been invaluable in discussing the 'prehistory' of Tolkien fandom. This is summarized in his listing of early Tolkien-related magazines, and in his detailed account of those published in 1960–64 (*Tolkien Fandom Review from its beginnings to 1964*, by Sumner Gary Hunnewell (Hildifons Took), The New England Tolkien Society, 2010); and I have already quoted from his delightful selection from the early fanzines, *Halfast Thinking* (1987). Rob Hansen's history of British science-fiction fandom from its beginnings to the mid-1980s, which gives some of the background of certain of the people mentioned here, is at <http://www.ansible.co.uk/Then>. I am grateful to Jonathan Simons for reading a draft of this account.