

he thought he would make him more money-conscious; in fact, the debt was to remain a millstone around his neck until his ruin nine years later.

Meanwhile, all was not well with the family. Elizabeth, daughter of middle-class parents in the printing industry, was oppressed with the labour of farm life and the shame of debt. Her eldest son, Richard, was the least satisfactory of the whole brood (Richard, Henry, Charlie and Sarah), showing no practical interest in farming or any other useful occupation. Little wonder that disputes and recriminations, arising from unwonted poverty, drove the father more and more into the garden or farmyard, and the son on to the Downs. James made the farm beautiful. Richard gained the knowledge and inspiration which, in the few years left to him, he was to pack with such phenomenal energy and courage into his 16 or so books.

James grubbed out the old sour apples, replacing them with russets and pippins, set a mulberry tree on the lawn and a copper beech and weeping ash by the south fence. But the debts mounted, and mortgage after mortgage was laid upon the farm.

With all his troubles James still allowed Richard the freedom to roam as he pleased and absorb the essence of the Wiltshire countryside. (He generally took a gun with him to give "face" to his meanderings. He was, in fact, an excellent shot.) Put to a trade he may well have helped to pay more bills, but the world would have been the poorer. In fact young Richard eventually hired himself to the local newspaper, attempted some formal novels (which totally and rightly failed), but finally discovered his theme in the country writing which led to rapid success.



4—THE OLDEST PART OF THE FARMHOUSE (c. 1700)

The publication of his 4,000-word letter to *The Times*, 102 years ago, on the condition of the Wiltshire labourer, got him started. Had he not contracted tuberculosis and died a long and painful death, still a young man,

how much more would he have accomplished? Or did the urgency of life slipping through his fingers give the quality which later writers have sought to define and failed to equal.

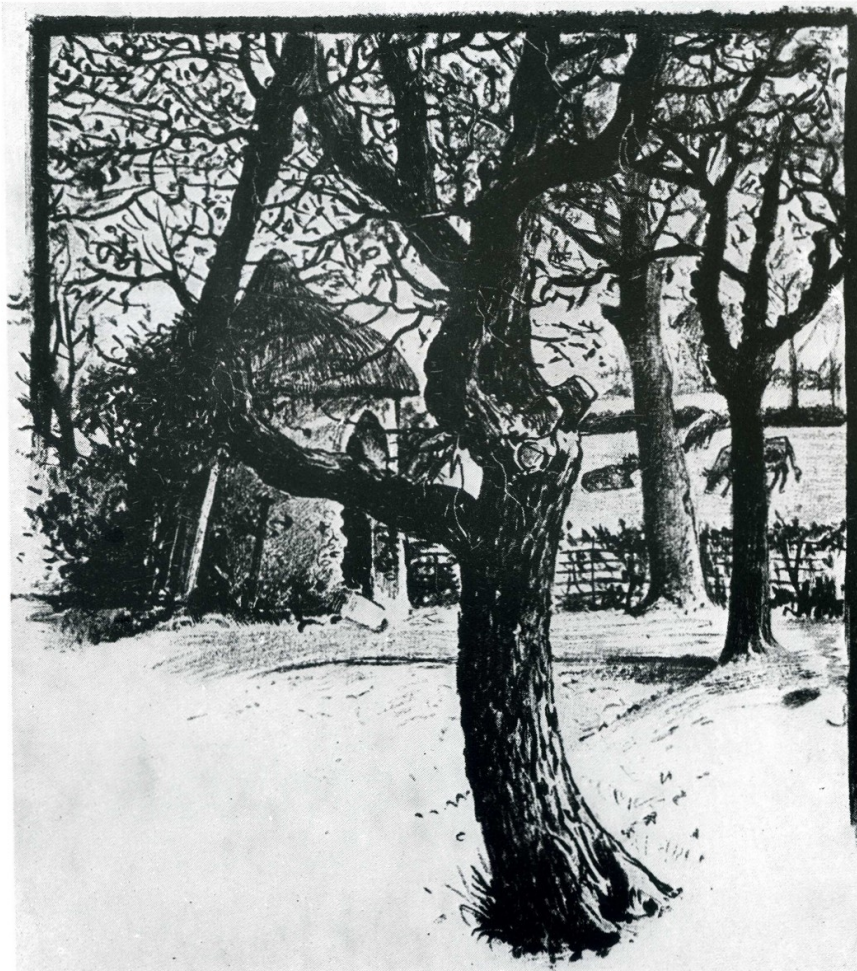
At last the mortgagors foreclosed, and James Jefferies was sold up. He moved to Bath, took a humble job as a gardener and lived to be 80. In 1878 the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, who already had the adjoining land, bought the farm for £4,306, kept some 26 acres and sold the remainder for £1,600. (Showing that the land itself was, even then, worth about £100 an acre.) The place changed ownership twice more. Then, in 1926, through the efforts of Mr Reuben George, a former Mayor of Swindon, and a Jefferies enthusiast, the Corporation was persuaded to buy the farm which has remained in public ownership. (Most of the house is tenanted, but Jefferies' attic room is now a tiny museum commemorating Jefferies and Alfred Williams, Swindon's blacksmith poet.)

Now, as several different threats hang over the little farm, the Richard Jefferies Society is trying to preserve what it can for posterity. The meadow where young *Bevis*, (Jefferies' autobiographical boyhood self) used to play is deep beneath an artificial hill: car parks, miniature railway, childrens' zoo and a museum of rural life are mooted. But there seems no reason why these new, imaginative plans should not be related to the old farm buildings. Something (or somebody) might turn up and these unique structures might be saved. The Museum in particular, probably to be sited very close by, on James Jefferies' orchard, would be the better for them.

In the garden, efforts have been made by the Society, with the University of Reading, to propagate from and preserve the strains of old fruit trees. The mulberry and russet apple, mute companions of Jefferies' youth and affectionately described in several books, still survive. But the most poignant reminder of his brief sojourn must be the childish emblems scraped into the masonry of an old wall, "HJ RJ". Richard and brother Harry were here, a hundred and something years ago.

The assistance of the following is gratefully acknowledged: the late Mrs Frances Gay, Vice-President, the Richard Jefferies Society; Mr Denys Hodson, Director, Arts & Recreation; Mr B. Rogers and Mr D. Baish of the Legal Department, Thamesdown Borough Council.

Illustrations: 1, 3 and 5, Thamesdown Borough Council; 2, the author; 4, Wiltshire Newspapers, Swindon.



5—THE MULBERRY TREE, WHICH FIGURES IN SEVERAL OF JEFFERIES BOOKS, AS IT WAS AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH

RETURN TO JEFFERIES' COUNTRY

THE MAKING OF A RUSTIC PHILOSOPHER ◊ By MARK DANIEL



1—RICHARD JEFFERIES (1848-87). Coate Farm, just outside Swindon, the birthplace of this 19th-century nature-writer, is now threatened by development

A MILE outside Swindon on the Marlborough road stands an old farmhouse and some quaint, steeply gabled outbuildings. Two hundred yards away across the fields lies Coate Water, three-quarters of a mile long, and, beyond, two miles of hawthorn-fringed meadows extend to the Downs. Liddington Castle, a prehistoric hill-fort, breaks the horizon to the south east, and further along is Whitehorse Hill. An idyllic scene perhaps. But look the other way. A multi-highway intersection, a spanking-new petrol station and the bulldozed heaps of impending development, almost on the doorstep, mark the tide of progress in this corner of Wiltshire. One is reminded of Canute.

But there is a difference. This was the birthplace of Richard Jefferies, the 19th-century journalist, nature writer, mystic, whose fans include many of today's well-known authors. Any move to destroy this house would bring down the fury of thousands.

The Richard Jefferies Society spearheads the growing army of devotees and defenders of the local scene. Under its President, author Henry Williamson, and founder and Chairman Harold Adams, its enthusiasm and optimism are boundless. People all over the world look to Coate as the seat of, what is for them, profound inspiration.

Kenneth Allsop, on a visit to the house shortly before his death, found the scene depressing. As a young man he had gone to Swindon just to work on the provincial newspaper which had launched Jefferies as a writer. "It seems impossible", he wrote, "that the already faint print of poor Jefferies' footsteps on that landscape will not be trampled under into obliteration by a Swindon, and a Britain, which will not comprehend a word he wrote!"

To the Society the idea is unthinkable. His chronicles, his exhilaration with life and unique expression of his relationship to nature, have won Jefferies a secure place in the hearts of imaginative people. And an immortality which would be envied by many writers of

today's best-sellers. But future visitors to Jefferies' countryside will hope to find more than just an old house in a brand-new setting, and already the outbuildings may be doomed. Decay is far-advanced and collapse or demolition seems imminent unless the owners, the new Thamesdown Borough Council, find the £1,000 or £2,000 probably needed for repair, or at least commit themselves on plans for preservation. But, as Denys Hodson, Director of Arts and Recreation and himself sympathetic, has pointed out, the modern fast-growing Swindon has more pressing problems.

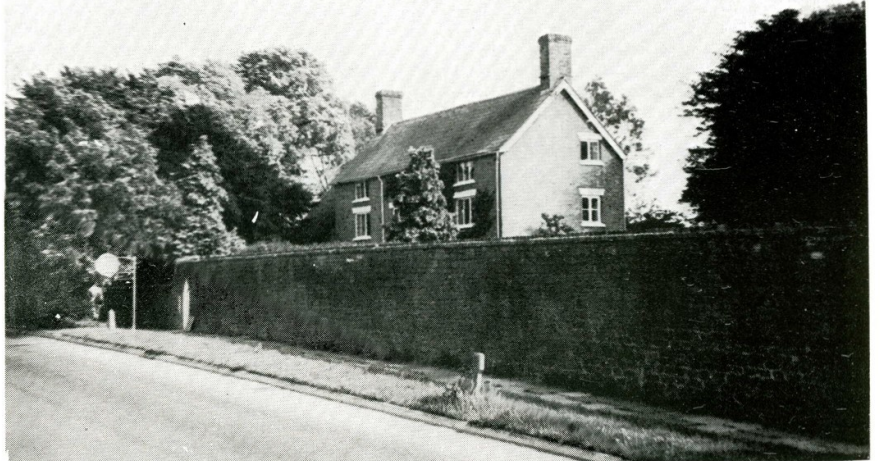
Dating from the early 18th century, Coate farmhouse, originally a low, thatched cottage with its 36 acres, was bought for £1,100 by the author's great grandfather, (also named Richard), a successful Swindon baker and corn-mill owner. It was 1800 and property prices were low and returns high. Many farmers improved their property around this time and left legacies of small mansions up and down the country.

In 1825 his son John inherited the farm, and also hoards of gold coins found hidden around the old man's house in Swindon. With this unexpected bonus he built what is

now the main house adjoining the old cottage. From glimpses of him as Grandfather Iden in Jefferies' *Amaryllis at the Fair*, he seems to have been an educated, yet vain and hard man, pitiless to those who displeased him. Such a one was his only son, James Luckett Jefferies, father of the author and really the hero of this story.

James combined an independent turn of mind with a love of travel and natural things. He went to America for a time, probably in defiance of his father, made no money at all, returned, and on his marriage was settled in the farm and told to run it. But the agricultural world was changing. Increasing trade with America meant prosperity to factory owners but a terrible decline to the age-old farming community in Britain. With a strange irony, boatloads of cheap foreign food brought starvation to many farm labourers and their families who chose to stay put. James and his town-bred wife, Elizabeth, fed many a poor family, or retained men they could ill afford.

James's father left him the farm in 1868, but put upon it a charge of £1,300 to be paid as a legacy to his two sisters. Perhaps, through forcing him to mortgage the property,



2—COATE FARMHOUSE. This shows the main construction which was built about 1825. (Below) 3—THE SAME SCENE 80 YEARS AGO. From a painting by Miss B. Newcombe

