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THE HOME AND HAUNTS OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

By DARBY STAFFORD

NO nature-lover's library is complete unless it contains every available line that Richard Jefferies wrote on "The Open Air" and "Wild Life"—to use, as descriptive of the subjects in dealing with which he was at his best, the titles of two of his most charming books. And it may further be asserted that the possessor and student of Jefferies' writings is not in the best position to understand and appreciate them at their true worth until he has paid a pilgrimage to the locality which inspired them all, and with which most of them actually deal. Thus feeling, the writer hailed with great de-

light an opportunity of visiting Richard Jefferies' native place, with note-book and camera. For this latter there were subjects in abundance; for the former scarcely any need at all; for Jefferies' descriptions of the locality are so accurate and graphic that his books themselves constitute the best guide to the neighbourhood—and read again afterwards, with

what has been seen in mind, they are the most effective refreshers of memory.

Many writers have drawn largely on the surroundings of their early days for material; Jefferies has done so more than any other. He grew to his environment until it became part and parcel of himself; and to know him through his writings, is

to know his birthplace and its neighbourhood. Jefferies left his native place comparatively early in life, and afterwards dwelt in several spots, some of them very unlike the quiet village in which his early life was spent. But though he afterwards inhabited houses many, of real homes he never

had but one—his birth place; to that his heart ever turned, and around it his fancy always played. In the truest sense he was born at Coate, lived at Coate, and died at Coate.

Among the essays in his latest volume there is one on "Hours of Spring," in which he speaks out the constant longing of his soul for the old sights and sounds.



COATE HOUSE: BIRTHPLACE OF RICHARD JEFFERIES.



COATE HOUSE FROM THE BACK; SHOWING THE OLDER PORTION OF THE HOMESTEAD

The initiated reader finds that essay most pathetic, for he realises that the things therein described are the things which had ever dwelt in the author's memory. It was of his beloved Wiltshire—of one particular corner of it—that he was thinking when he wrote: "The bloom of the gorse is shut like a book; but it is there—a few hours of warmth and the covers will fall open. The meadow is bare, but in a little while the heart-shaped celandine leaves will come in their accustomed place. On the pollard willows the long wands are ruddy-yellow in the passing gleam of sunshine, the first colour of spring appears in their bark. The delicious wind rushes among them and they bow and rise; it touches the top of the dark pine that looks in the sun the same now as in summer; it lifts and swings the arching trail of bramble; it dries and crumbles the earth in its fingers; the hedge-sparrow's feathers are fluttered as he sings on the bush." Any one who knows Richard Jefferies and Coate can read between the lines—can always read between the lines, especially of those last essays. There is the heart-break of futile longing in, "I wonder to

myself how they can all get on without me—how they manage, bird and flower, without me to keep the calendar for them.

. . . Every blade of grass was mine, as though I had planted it separately. They were all my pets, as the roses the lover of his garden tends so faithfully. All the grasses of the meadow were my pets; I loved them all; and perhaps that was why I never had a 'pet,' never cultivated a flower, never kept a caged bird.

. . . I cannot think how they manage without me." That was written concerning his earliest surroundings—when he knew he should never see them again—as he who visits Coate with that essay in mind fully realises.

It was early spring when the writer of this paper paid his first pilgrimage to Richard Jefferies' native place, and the sights and sounds were exactly those described with such loving accuracy of memory in the swan-song essay quoted from above. "To-day through the window-pane I see a lark high up against the grey cloud, and hear his song. . . . To sing high in the air, to chase his mate over the low stone wall of the ploughed

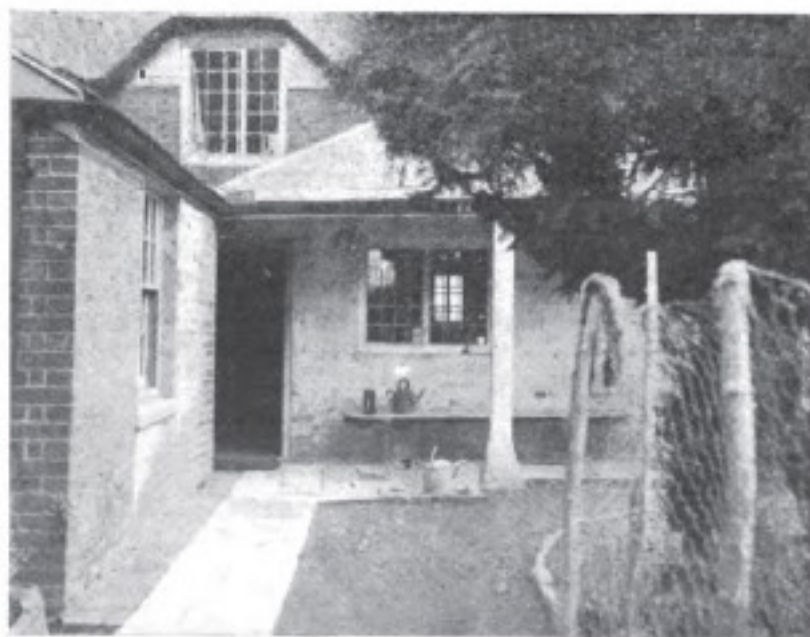


LABOURERS' COTTAGES AT COATE

field, to battle with his high-crested rival, to balance himself on his trembling wings a few yards above the earth, and utter that sweet little loving kiss, as it were, of song. Oh, happy, happy days! So beautiful to watch, as if he were my own, and I feel it all." That was not written of any lark seen through a window with the dimmer vision of closing years, but of the larks which sang and soared around the old home at Coate; for, says he, "It is years since I went out among them in the old fields, and saw them in the green corn; they must be dead, dear little things, by now." That essay—and many another utterance of its author—so full of the bitter-sweet memories of early days, was constantly in the writer's mind as he climbed the fences and roamed the fields of the farm that early spring day of his first visit. No guide was needed save that essay, and the rest of its kind. "The low stone wall of the ploughed field"; "the knot-hole of the pollard elm"—

in which the starlings were nesting as of yore; the "one row of pollards where they always began laying first"; "the ash-stole, open to every one's view, without a bough to conceal it, and not a leaf on the ash—nothing but the moss on the lower end of the branches," where the blackbird was building once more after all the years. They were all there, and easy to be found. In that pathetic essay the heart of Jefferies speaks out in plainest fashion; and the same tone of loving

memory of his earliest surroundings is discernible in nearly everything that he wrote. His nature-writings were either narrations of what he had actually seen at Coate, or were descriptions of other things—the seeing of which was the outgrowth of that early observation. Of flower, and bird, and living things generally, he might have said always, as he did say then, "Orchis flower and cowslip—I cannot number them all—I hear, as it were, the patter of their feet—flower



THE GARDEN DOOR OF COATE.

and bud, and the beautiful clouds that go over, with the sweet rush of rain and burst of sun-glory among the leafy trees. They go on, and I am no more than the least of the empty shells that strewed the sward of the hill. . . . High up against the grey sky I hear the lark singing, and each note falls into my heart like a knife." The lament was not for the things of spring merely, but for the things of spring as he had known them at Coate—as he had once known them there, as he always knew them there.

It was a wonderful experience to walk the fields and to come to understand how fully Jefferies had taken his tone from the place. And truly it is a fitting spot for the rearing of such a nature-lover as the world has seldom known; for Jefferies had both the eye to see and the tongue to describe, so that others might see also. It was not until one saw the house and the homestead, walked in the fields and woods, and wandered by the Mere, that it was possible

to realise how thoroughly Jefferies' writings had prepared their reader for all he found on the spot. There was a strange feeling of familiarity with what one saw as of things seen after an accurate dream of them.

Not only did the famous naturalist draw on his early observation for the narrative books which he wrote, but he was continually reverting to Coate in some way or other in all his writings—to how great an extent no reader of them can know until he has seen the locality for himself. Only some three miles removed from what is now a huge industrial centre, and from what even forty years ago was a considerable town, Coate might be buried in the wilds as far as bird and animal life are

concerned. Arable land and meadow; copse and ditch; lake and streamlet; plain, upland, and downs—the variety is as wonderful as it is charming—all clustering round the homestead.

The dwelling is a farmhouse still, though considerably altered, they say, since Richard Jefferies' childhood. The deep, heavy thatch is gone—not to any gain in picturesqueness; but a portion of the long sloping roof remaining at the front of the house enables the beholder to picture to himself what the whole must have looked like in the old days. The back premises must be much the same as when Jefferies wrote of them in "Wood Magic," "Bevis," and "The Amateur Poacher." The visitor instinctively glances

round for the shed in which the boat was built—and discovers it at once, and is glad to find that it is no illusion. The dismal place of the imprisonment of Bevis and his companion in transgression is also "spotted" with just a trifle of aid from the



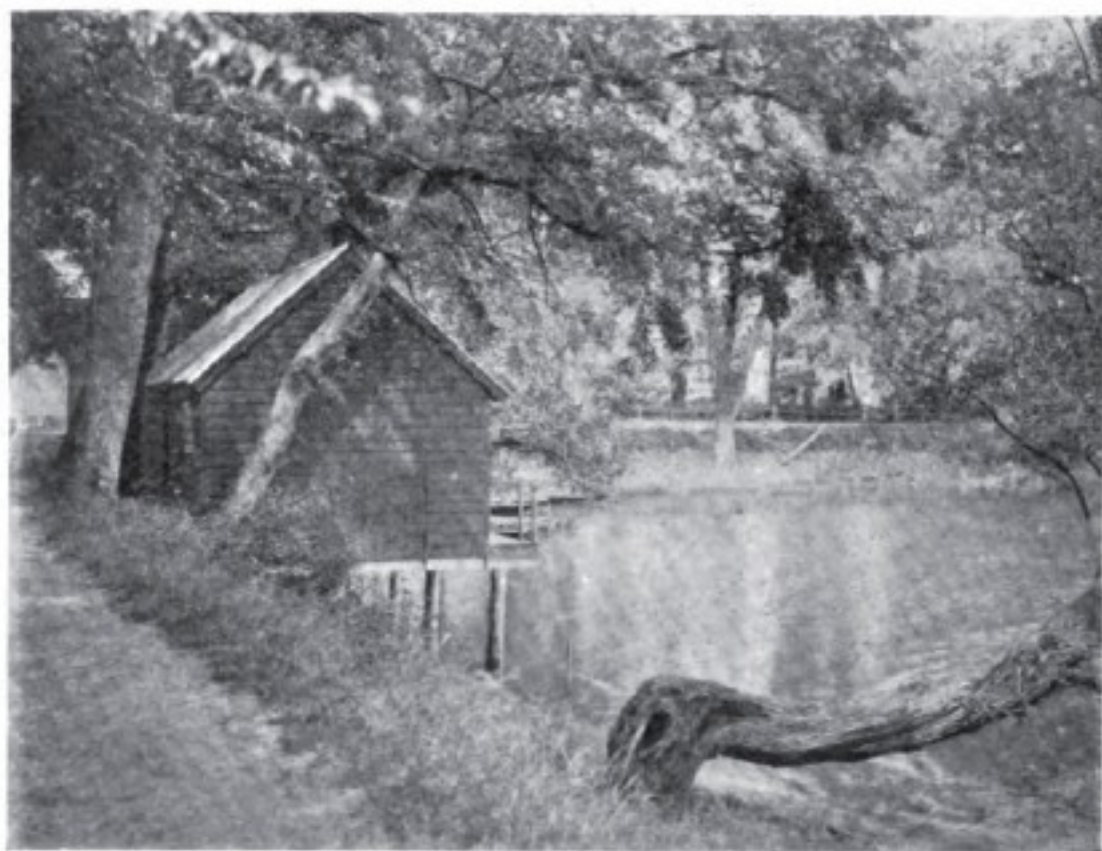
ENTRANCE TO FARMYARD, COATE

imagination. The hollow, "like a salad bowl, only all grass," in which Bevis, according to the tale, "began to dance and sing with delight at such a curious place," is not far to seek; and the meadow through which the brook runs, and in which the little boy was not allowed to stray without someone being put "to watch now and then," is but a short distance from the house; while the lake, or "Mere," as it is called in the books, is less than a quarter of a mile away—just beyond the tall trees on the high bank yonder. Of that wonderful sheet of water, where the boy learned to swim, to sail the "Pinto," and met with many an adventure—including shipwreck—more must be said later.

On reaching the village it was not neces-

sary to ask to be directed to the house, for the moment the visitor's eye rested on it he knew it at once. The high garden wall, over which some of the characters in one of the novels, it may be remembered, leaned to watch the passers-by on their way to the Fair, was identified at a glance. And the same may be said of almost everything about the farm. Usually one's pre-formed ideas of a place which has often been in thought are found to be out of harmony with actuality, but so insidiously clear are Jefferies' references to Coate that

and the most salient "bits" around the house had been secured. For the rest he was compelled to confine himself to the meadow and the lake. It was a bad day for photography—dull and windy, and every photographer knows what that direful combination means, especially where trees form part of the prospect. Moving objects and a necessarily rather long exposure form an awkward conjunction. However, a good lens and a patient watching of the chances will do wonders, and a few passable pictures were secured.



THE MERE AT COATE: BOATHOUSE CORNER.

a tolerably correct idea of it is formed, unconsciously, as it were.

Possibly no photographer ever carried quite sufficient plates anywhere with him to enable him to take quite all the pictures which he would fain have; and on that memorable visit, though more plates than usual—as well as a film-attachment and films—were carried, the stock was exhausted before the photographer really began to realise the wealth of subjects around him. Fortunately some repression had been exercised before he went far afield,

During the late summer the writer took in Coate on a cycle tour, and managed to get a few more photographs of the Mere.

These pictures will speak more eloquently concerning what Coate is like than any verbal description could, therefore the photographs are mainly left to tell their own tale. The writer has no intention of dealing exhaustively with Jefferies' references to his native place; that, indeed, would be perforce to quote from well nigh every other page of all his books, for his



THE ISLAND.

writings are so saturated with memories and affinities of Coate that it may be doubted if he himself had any idea how often the place was really in his mind when writing. The reader of this paper is strongly advised to make a study of Jefferies' books—and then to go to Coate for object-lessons. The place is not difficult of access, being only a mile or two from Swindon, and the visitor will meet with every courtesy from the occupants of the farm, permission to roam at large being readily accorded.

Jefferies was a great lover of water, that is to say, of lake and brook, river and sea; and many of his boyish adventures were bound up with the stream in the meadow and "the Mere," as he always called it, beyond the trees. A vivid imagination peopled these waters with all sorts of creatures, in addition to those actually inhabiting their depths or their shores; and it may readily be understood how such imaginings ministered to the adventurous enjoyment of "Bevis" and his bosom companion, "Mark." To walk by the brook or along the margin of the lake is to enter fully into the stories of adventure told in "Bevis" and "The

Amateur Poacher." Wild fowl still abound, though the Mere is now used as a boating resort for picnic parties from the neighbouring town.

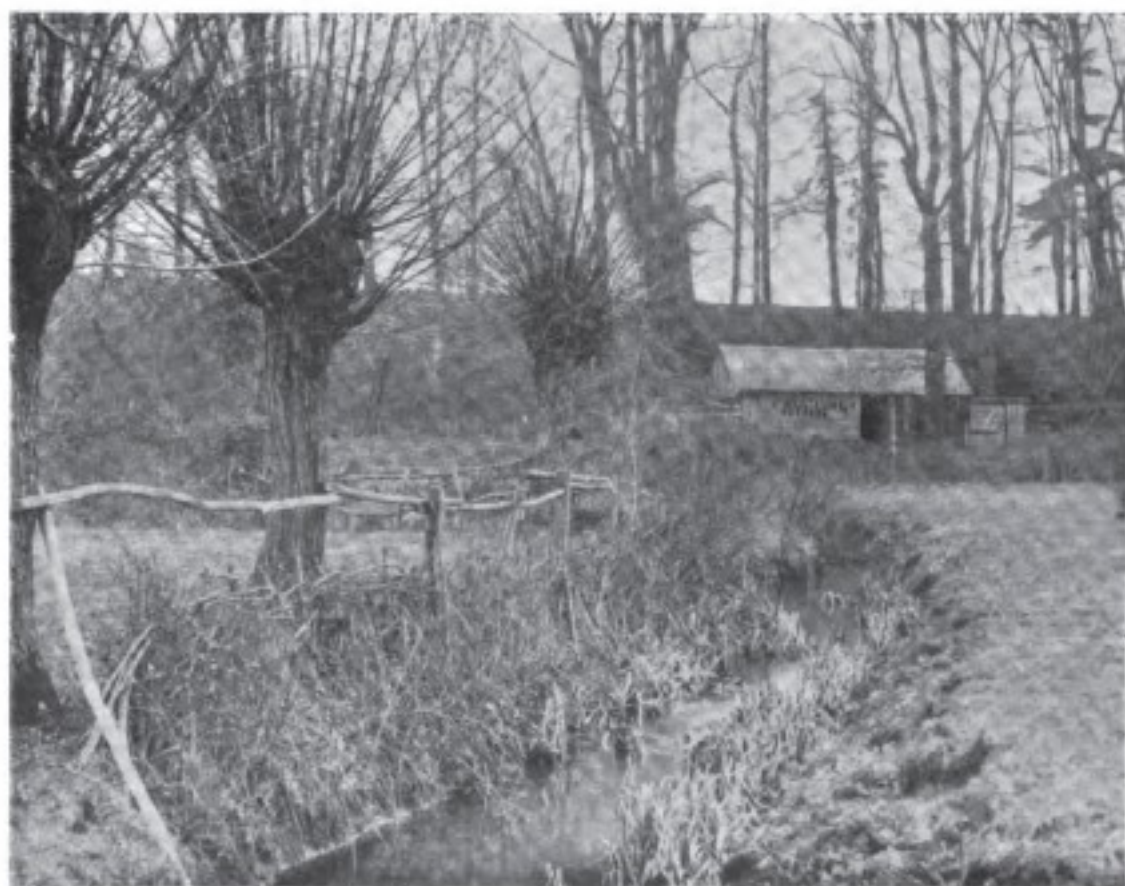
The only element of disappointment connected with the writer's visit to Coate was in connection with the lake. The charming—though, it must be confessed, somewhat ill-balanced—boys' story, "Bevis," leads one to form an exaggerated idea of "The Mere." It is an extensive sheet of water, it is true, but not quite all that Bevis's fancy paints it; especially is some disillusionment experienced in regard to "The Island," on which the two runaways of the story erected their hut and dwelt for awhile. However, something must be allowed to an author in the way of poetic license; and to boyish eyes the island would appear more imposing—and farther from the mainland—than it really is. All the other features of the tale are there, even to the sandy promontory, so well remembered, and the creek and its shallow estuary, with sandy bottom, where the comrades learned to swim. The boy who reads his "Bevis," as every healthy boy should, would love a ramble by the Mere—as, he is free to confess, the

older boy who photographed it for this article did, most thoroughly.

This is not the place to enter into an estimate of Richard Jefferies as a naturalist and writer. One scarcely cares to term him a "naturalist," though he was one, of the first water, for he was not a man of catalogues and lists and long names. He loved the creatures that he knew so intimately—as he often declares. No man ever had a keener eye or a more tender heart for all things that grow, and creep, and run, and swim, and fly in the open air. And though he had a strong sporting strain in him, he was no mere wanton taker of life at any time; least of all in his later years, when his love for all things living had grown into a passion. A keen observer, and painstaking recorder of what he saw, and the most lucid and graphic of descriptive writers, Richard Jefferies has placed all nature-lovers who read his books under a debt of gratitude which they will gladly acknowledge. All his nature books are invaluable, and almost invariably full of charm. Some of them, as previously intimated, are mainly autobiographical—

all of them, indeed, more or less unconsciously so. The man appears on every page, and Coate is always the setting; and that is even more markedly true, if it be possible, of his later writings than of the earlier.

Any one wishing to pay a pilgrimage to the place which was ever the shrine of Jefferies' own thoughts and affections may easily reach it from Swindon. A pleasant walk of less than an hour will take the visitor there; and he will find within small compass more of the subjects of Jefferies' pen than he would have supposed possible. Coate, moreover, is not more than a fair day's cycle run from London, by the main Bath road to Hungerford, thence by way of Aldbourne, and the Downs. For variety's sake, the return journey may be made via Swindon, Wantage, etc. Those who would become intelligent and sympathetic readers of Richard Jefferies' books are earnestly advised to make acquaintance for themselves with his birthplace and early surroundings—bearing in mind that these never ceased to constitute his real HOME.



THE MEADOW AND BROOK. THE MERE LIES BEYOND THE HIGH BANK IN THE BACKGROUND