

‘THE OLD HOUSE AT HOME AT COATE’: A PICTORIAL VIEW¹

Richard Jefferies’ father, James Lockett (born 8.12.1816), included the following information in a letter to Dr. Alfred Theodore Rake dated 26 November 1896:

My old house was originally thatch. Thatched roofs was preferred for the Cheese Rooms. I have not seen it since Blue Slates as been put on—the House was built—the whole of the Dwelling House—when I was a Boy about seven, and remained empty for years. I was the first that lived in it, after leaving school at 14—my Eldest Sister as Housekeeper and Dairy Maid managed it for Father who had a large business in Swindon as Miller and Baker.

In reminiscences of the old house at Coate Fanny Catherine Hall—Richard Jefferies’ first cousin, born almost exactly two years after Richard—then aged eighty-seven, wrote:

Until the thatch was replaced by slate roofing, it was picturesque—I have a dim recollection of going over one summer afternoon with an Aunt, and finding the living-room still in the workmen’s hands—and with a lovely big window-place, where afterwards I spent many happy hours over the *Arabian Nights*. That must have been in 1853 or 4, as I can visualise the second son, Harry, as a wee baby! The musk was a delight! Now, not a trace of the former, sweet-smelling flower.

The earliest known, but undated, illustration of the front of the dwelling house is titled ‘The Old House at Home at Coate’. It was sketched (see below) by Richard’s uncle, Fred Gyde—a professional engraver, seven years younger than Richard’s mother. This view shows the house before the living-room window on the ground floor was replaced. ‘Wee baby’ Harry was born on 14 June 1852—so Fanny’s recollection suggests the sketch is pre-1852. Perhaps Fred visited his sister Betsy soon after she married James Lockett in September 1844. The front door is a simple design and might have been painted blue to match the main gates into the farm described by Richard.² Apart from the window, door and thatch there is very little change to the front of the house since it was adapted by Richard’s grandfather. He inherited the farm from his father in 1825 who had bought the farm in 1800 as well as the bakery in Swindon.



Etching of ‘The old House at Home at Coate’ by Frederick Gyde

¹ Compiled by Jean Saunders with research by Colin Benford, August 2026.

² See Richard Jefferies’ essay ‘The Blue Doors’, *The Old House at Coate* (1948).

The next illustration reveals the new bay window and was drawn in pencil by another of Richard's uncles—John Luckett Jefferies. Richard and his younger brother Harry are included in the front garden. Harry's clothing might put the date around 1855. John Luckett died of tuberculosis soon after on 3 August 1856. The thatched catslide roof (pictured to the left of the dwelling house) is part of the original farm cottage, possibly mid-18th century, that still stands today along with its thatched roof.



It is interesting to note that, in both sketches, there is a pipe running down from the thatch close to the front door. Guttering is not a normal feature of thatched roofs but, no doubt, a short length was needed to keep the doorway entrance dry from dripping thatch.

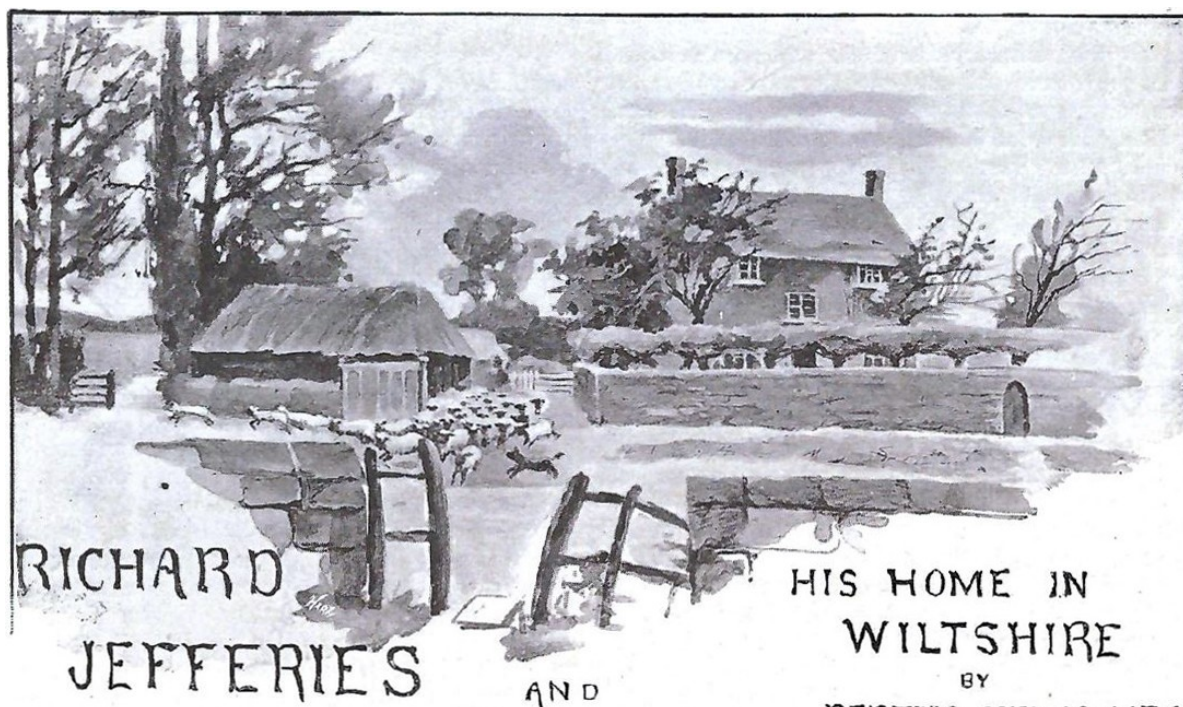
The year that the farmhouse roof was changed from thatch to blue slates might be narrowed down to between 1879 and 1888. Walter Besant records in *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (Chatto and Windus, 1888, p.3):

It has now lost its old picturesqueness, because the great heavy thatch which formerly served for roof has been removed and replaced by slates.

James Luckett Jefferies was not responsible for the slates, and by all accounts³ he might not have moved from Coate until 21 June 1879 when the farm was in the possession of Jonathan and William Gosling.

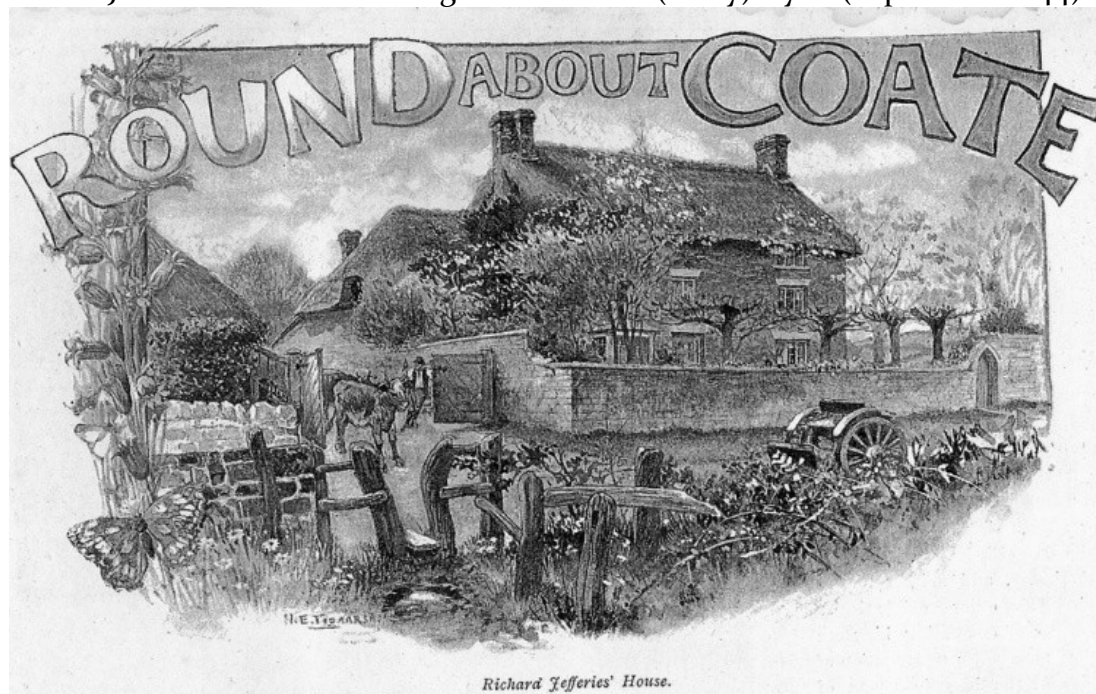
Some published illustrations of the farmhouse after 1888 depict the roof as thatch but this is, no doubt, artistic licence to make the pictures more aesthetically pleasing. For example, this sketch, by Bertha Newcombe, was drawn in 1893 and published in 1894:

³ See Hugoe Matthews and Phyllis Treitel's *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies* (Oxford: Petton Books, 1994) for September 1878 and 21 June 1879.



Published in *Sylvia's Journal*, 1894. Note the thatched cowshed to the left of the farm gates with the cart-shed behind, the gated entrance to Dayhouse Lane (far left) and the squeeze-belly stile across the road.

and this more detailed illustration by H.E. Tidmarsh (article dated 1893) that shows the big 'blue doors' (the farm gates), part of the old thatched cottage, a different front door on the dwelling house, perhaps replaced by the Goslings, and the magnificent garden wall built by James Luckett Jefferies after his marriage to Elizabeth (Betsy) Gyde (September 1844)⁴:



Article by P. Anderson Graham, published in the *Art Journal*, January 1893.

⁴ In the 1934 Hall / Bott letter (see p.7) they state: 'Originally a hedge surrounded the house, but when Mr. James Jefferies brought home his London-born bride, she so objected to the publicity that, at great expense, and against the wishes of an autocratic father, he built this fine stone wall.'

The earliest known photograph of the front of the dwelling house was discovered in August 2026 by Colin Benford in a previously undocumented article published in *The Amateur Photographer*, dated 23 June 1899. A photograph by W.F.E. Seymour shows the tiled roof in place. The article was written by G.E. Brown F.C.S., F.I.C. and titled 'A Man and some Books for Photographers: Richard Jefferies':



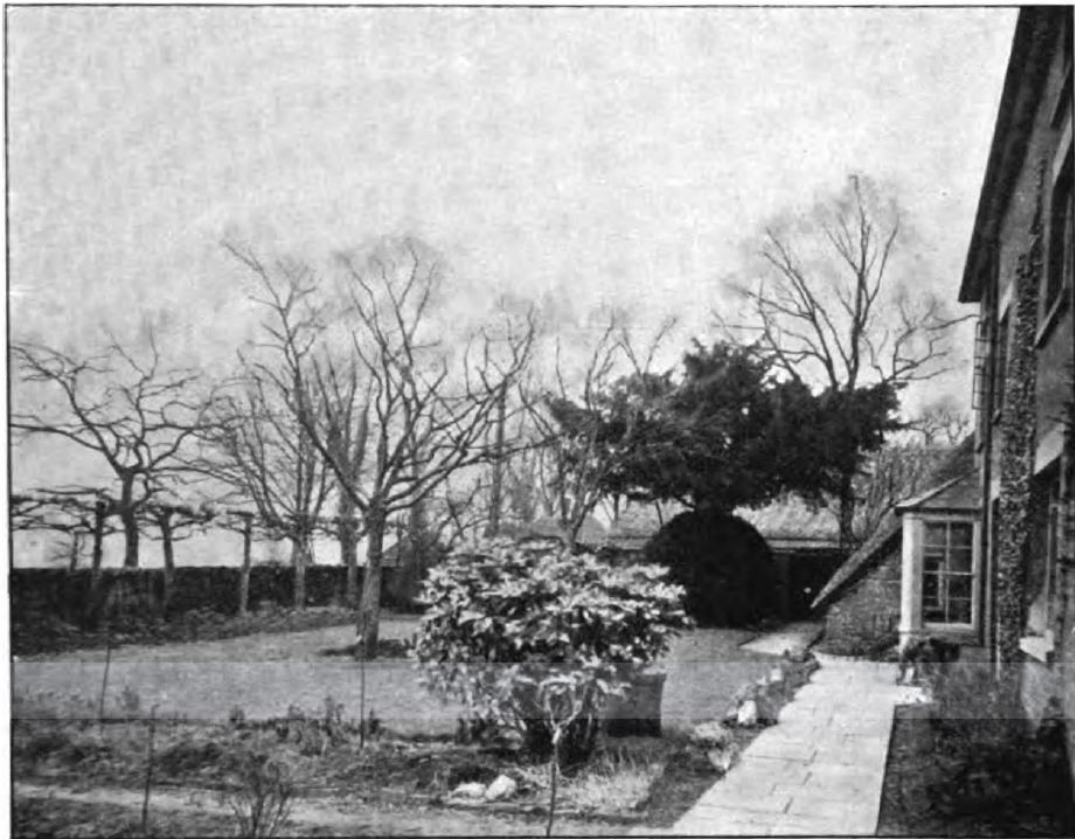
G.E. Brown commented:

the difference between a photograph and a picture produced by photography lies in this: that the latter betrays some intention on the part of the worker to reproduce his own feelings, whilst the former is the rigid reproduction of whatever chanced to be in the field of the lens.

The next two photographs are from an article titled 'Richard Jefferies at Home' by Darby Stafford, published in *The Badminton Magazine* of sports and pastimes, September 1901.



Note the tiled roof, ivy creeping up the front wall, a panelled front door and the espalier pear-tree (on the gable-end wall) that 'rustled against the window' of Richard Jefferies' attic room (*The Amateur Poacher*).



Note the foliage in the front garden, including the row of lime trees inside the garden wall.

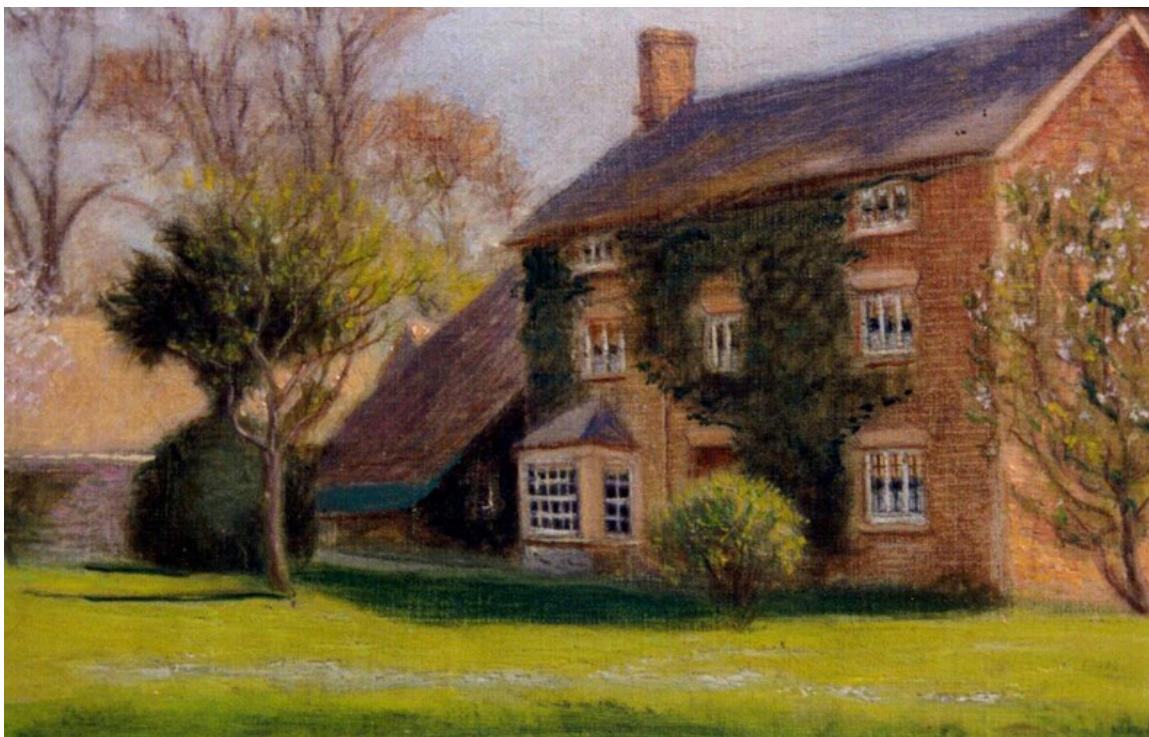
The next photograph was used on a postcard circa 1905 that shows the popular alderman Reuben George (a devoted Jefferies' supporter) standing by the squeeze-belly stile, the row of lime trees within the magnificent garden wall with its gothic gate. This wall was moved by Swindon Corporation in 1935 as part of a road widening scheme (see p.7).



There are several images of the farmhouse for 1911 that include a photograph and an oil painting.



Edward Ferris (auctioneer) with his children Francis David (10), Edward Hollis (8) and Doris Margaret (7) according to the 1911 census records. Ferris rented the farmhouse from Jonathan Gosling from 1903–1915.



An oil painting by Kate Tryon (an American artist) who painted views of Jefferies' Land over a period of 28 years (1910-1938) and six visits to England.

The first memorial plaque to be added at Coate read 'Birthplace of Richard Jefferies born November 6th 1848' and was set into the garden wall next to the gothic gate. Thanks to the North Wilts Field and Camera Club the plaque, made of Aberdeen granite, was unveiled on 6 June 1903. This tablet was also moved when the wall was rebuilt in 1935.



Swindon Corporation bought the farm in 1926 largely thanks to the support of councillor Reuben George. The council's plans to move the garden wall for road widening were not welcomed. In a letter, dated 27 July 1934 to the editor of the *North Wilts Herald*, Fanny Hall and her sister Florence Bott (Richard's first cousins) voiced their objection and added 'should the trees, and the wall with its little green gate be removed the value of the house as the home of Richard Jefferies will be destroyed irretrievably'. The *Swindon Advertiser* published the following snippet in January 1935:



RICHARD JEFFERIES' WALL – A photograph of the work in progress on the setting back of the wall at Richard Jefferies' house at Coate, Swindon. The beginning of the new wall is seen on the right; its original position is marked by the line of trees, which were inside the fence. Its removal is due to a road widening scheme at this point, sentiment having had to give way to safety.



Circa 1950s. Lime trees in full leaf, ivy still on the house wall, the espalier pear-tree covering the gable end wall, plus two men examining the plaque that was unveiled in 1903.

Swindon council (later Thamesdown Borough Council and then Swindon Borough Council) made very few changes to the front of the dwelling house. In 1960 one room (ground floor right—the parlour) was opened to the public to celebrate the writings of Richard Jefferies and Alfred Williams. It read 'Museum' on the front door lintel. Over the years more rooms were used as part of the Museum thanks to the hard work of volunteers. The gothic door in the wall was replaced three times but was always painted a shade of blue—never green.



Borough of Swindon's sign next to the granite plaque, 1960



'Museum' 1968 with the Hawkes' marker stone near the front door (painted duck-egg blue)



Hawkes stone, 2006

In 1968 an old weathered marker stone with the inscription 'R.H. 1837' was moved near the front door. The stone was a landmark denoting ownership of R. Hawkes' fields—'Great Axe' and 'Little Axe'—part of the Jefferies' farm at one stage. On 14 April 2010, the stone was brought indoors to spare further erosion of the inscription and it was placed in the parlour.

Swindon Council removed all the ivy from the walls and the espalier pear-tree on the gable-end wall that stretched up to Richard Jefferies' attic window. Its loss was a great blow. The guttering was altered. An outside lamp was placed next to the front door along with a museum sign.

The front garden changed over the years—bushes added, others removed—whilst new fruit trees were planted by the Richard Jefferies Society around 2007 to resemble the look in the John Lockett Jefferies drawing.



Photograph taken 2 October 2006 courtesy of Brian R. Marshall

A blue plaque was placed above the front door on 2 June 2019 by Historic England.



Blue plaque added above the front door on 2 June 2019

This ends an illustrated glimpse of the front of the dwelling house. Many more images could have been added along with hundreds of pictures of the rest of the house and farm. Richard Jefferies would still recognise his birthplace today but the setting, next to a busy dual-carriageway road and the suffocating growth of Swindon, is something that he has not had to witness and suffer.