

RICHARD JEFFERIES' GRAVE



Richard Jefferies' Grave, July 2016. Photograph by Michael Parrott.

The following article was published in the *Richard Jefferies Society Newsletter*, Spring 2017, pp.11–16. Further research by Colin Benford in August 2026 has uncovered new information found in newspaper reports.

In response to the letters of March/April 1903 to the *Spectator* by Rev. Cornish and Charles Osborne (see p.5) regarding the condition of the grave, another dated 11 April 1903, signed 'A.T.C.', took up the cudgel. A.T.C. (as yet unidentified) wrote:

In the month of July, 1893, I made a pilgrimage to the grave of Richard Jefferies, and in each succeeding year until 1902 I have paid one or two visits to Broadwater Cemetery (on the last occasion in the company of Richard Jefferies's only son¹). Some five or six years back I arranged with one of the attendants for the grass to be cut and the cross raised, it being slightly out of the perpendicular. Having paid for these services in advance, I was much mortified a fortnight later to find nothing had been done! Since then I and a friend have been to the grave every spring and cleaned the cross and tidied up the mound. Circumstances prevented my visiting the cemetery last year, so I presume the grave has been neglected since 1901.

¹ Harold Jefferies was born on 3 May 1875 and was a proof reader for the printers Billing and Son of Guildford, a family owned printing business run by Harold's uncle Robert T Billing and Joseph Harild Billing (Robert's brother).

Rev. J.G. Cornish then set about raising funds and arranging for work to be carried out in two parts. By 29 April 1903 the cross had been cleaned and raised on a 'landing' whilst the grave was returned.² By 15 July 1903,³ the marble kerbing ('in accordance with the wishes of Mrs. Jefferies'⁴) was in place around the grave along with the inscription 'To the honoured memory of the Prose Poet of Englands Fields and woodlands'.



The total amount reported to have been raised was £11 1s.7d. Robert Thomas Billing, brother-in-law of Richard Jefferies, 'promised to undertake all the expenses connected with the future cleaning of the tombstone'⁵.

Also, in August 2026, an interesting question was raised by Rev. Robin Stapleford about who might have been the first person to coin the description of Jefferies as a 'Prose Poet'. No use of the phrase could be found prior to his death on 14 August 1887. Immediately following his death many articles appeared—a couple of short unsigned ones included the phrases 'Prose poet of rural life' and 'Prose poet of the southern copses and woodlands'.

However, the first use of the phrase by a named individual that Mr. Benford could find was by the Bishop of Salisbury (John Wordsworth, who was a great-nephew of the poet William Wordsworth) within days of Jefferies' death. Charles Churchill Osborne was fund-raising to assist the financial plight of Mrs. Jefferies and her children. In a letter by Osborne, dated 29 August 1887 and published in *The St James's Budget* for 3 September 1887, he writes:

You will be glad to learn that up to the present I have received about £200, and that every post brings me additional contributions and letters of sympathy with the appeal. In promising his aid to the fund, the Bishop of Salisbury, in a letter addressed to me, says: 'Mr. Jefferies was a prose-poet, to whose observant eye those who move about our country owe a real debt of gratitude.' Those words echo the feelings expressed by a very large number of correspondents.

² Short report in the *Worthing Gazette*, 29 April 1903, p.5.

³ Report in the *Worthing Gazette*, 15 July 1903.

⁴ Letter from J.G. Cornish in the *Worthing Gazette*, 6 May 2026.

⁵ *Worthing Gazette*, 2 September 1903.

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Jean Saunders



Henry Williamson visiting Jefferies' grave, August 1936.

Richard Jefferies wrote:

Could I have my own way after death I would be burned on a pyre of pine-wood, open to the air, and placed on the summit of the hills. Then let my ashes be scattered abroad – not collected in an urn – freely sown wide and broadcast. That is the natural interment of man – of man whose Thought at least has been among the immortals; interment in the elements. Burial is not enough, it does not give sufficient solution into the elements speedily; a furnace is confined. The high open air of the topmost hill, there let the tawny flame lick up the fragment called the body; there cast the ashes into the space it longed for while living. Such a luxury of interment is only for the wealthy; I fear I shall not be able to afford it. Else the smoke of my resolution into the elements should certainly arise in time on the hill-top.

The Story of My Heart (Ch. 3)

But Jefferies did not get his own way and on Saturday, 20 August 1887 he was buried at Broadwater Cemetery in Worthing.¹ According to W.H. Hudson, in a

¹ Broadwater Cemetery was opened in 1863. The *Sussex Advertiser*, 17 Jan. 1854, reports that the Secretary of State issued orders to 'discontinue interments in the old ground belonging to the parish church of Broadwater, the fulness of which, has long been known to require such interference. The order contains

letter to Morley Roberts, Jefferies' grave was in the 'loveliest spot with the old stone pines and a wealth of flowers and wild plants.'² Jefferies' son, Harold, recounted that his 'father very much disliked' the sombre St. Mary's church in Goring³ with its equally gloomy churchyard. So Jefferies chose his spot in the middle of Broadwater cemetery and had a Christian burial, perhaps, as a mark of thanks to his wife, Jessie, who would have wanted nothing less.

Here follows some information gathered about Jefferies' grave taken from old newspaper cuttings and Society newsletters. Too many pilgrimages were reported to include them all.



Kathleen Sewell (daughter of Jefferies' cousin) laying the wreath;
Frances Gay (Chair of the RJS 1950-71) reading, circa 1960.

The earliest newspaper report about the grave appeared in the *Edinburgh Evening News*, Friday, 23 September 1887, when a Mr. W.D. Wright, of Upper Norwood (William Wright was a divinity student around that time, born in 1867 in Damascus) wrote: 'A few days ago I was in Broadwater Cemetery. I was shown a little stoneless mound, with a faded flower wreath, and a few ferns at head and foot. The curate of Broadwater kindly told me it was the grave of Richard Jefferies.'

There are no reports about the laying of the marble memorial stones but by September 1895, Herbert Sturmer reported that 'the large marble cross [was] no longer white and staring' and 'a great overgrown shrub' was next to the grave.⁴

regulations for future interments in the enlarged ground at Broadwater.'

² Hudson wanted to be buried next to Jefferies in a grave of similar design. Unfortunately, the plot was not available. In August 1922 Hudson was buried about 50 yards away (see photograph on p. 16).

³ 'Memories of Richard Jefferies,' by Harold Jefferies, *Richard Jefferies: My Father*, The Worthing Cavalcade (Worthing Art Development Scheme, 1944), p.24.

⁴ Herbert Sturmer's visit was reported in the *Westminster Gazette* and the article was reproduced in the

On 21 March 1903, a letter to the editor of the *Spectator* reveals that Jefferies' grave had been neglected. Rev. J.G. Cornish of Lockinge, near Wantage, described the appearance and appealed for help to get it restored:

The tombstone is a simple and well-proportioned white marble cross, at the foot of which are the words: 'In loving memory of John Richard Jefferies, who died at Goring, August 14, 1887, aged 38. Also in memory of Richard Oliver Launcelot, his beloved youngest child, who died March 16, 1885, aged 1 year and 8 months, and was interred at Eltham.' On the side of the cross are the words: 'W. Hide, Goring.' The sexton said that the tombstone had been put up by Mr. Hide, at whose house Jefferies was lodging when his fatal illness seized him. The marble is in need of cleaning, the grave mound ought to be returfed, and the cross a little raised so that the lower part of the inscription may be more visible. 'About six years ago a gentleman, he had long hair and looked very delicate ... said he could not bear to see it like that, so he paid to have the stone cleaned and the grave done up; but no one has troubled about it since.'

Hence we learn that, at that time, there was no kerb, nor was it common knowledge that a local builder, known to Jefferies, was responsible for making the cross.⁵ Hide's inscription is no longer to be found.

Rev. Cornish's appeal, prompted more letters to the *Spectator* including one dated 4 April 1903 from Charles C. Osborne of 16 St. Edmund's Terrace, Regent's Park. Osborne wrote: 'As a lover of Jefferies's works, and the honorary secretary of the Wiltshire fund which was raised at his death for the benefit of his family, I shall be glad to contribute my share to the fund.' He went further and suggested: 'Has not the time come when we should found a national "In Memoriam" Society for the reverent care of the graves of our great men?'

It is clear that action was taken and an article about Jefferies published in *The Burnley News* on 8 Aug. 1917 by 'The Lone Tramp' of Burnley recounts a visit made to Jefferies' grave some years previously (no date is mentioned). However, by that time the marble kerb-stones had been added along with the 'prose-poet' inscription. The Lone Tramp wrote:

There was some little difficulty, I remember, in finding the grave, for it lay apart across the cemetery from the entrance, by the edge of a side walk and beneath a bush of bay trees. The cool, green grasses lay about, and the solemn yew trees, a place after his own choice. Indeed, he did choose the spot instead of the bleaker

Swindon Advertiser, 28 Sep. 1895.

⁵ William Hide was a builder/carpenter (b.1829) as was his father. The Jefferies' family lodged at William and Elizabeth's home – Peacock Hall, Goring which is now the site of 'The Mulberry' pub – before moving to their newly-built home at 'Sea View'. William and Elizabeth's son, also William, used to play with young Harold Jefferies, whilst Elizabeth Hide was present at the time of Jefferies' death. Ref: 'Jefferies at Goring', anonymous, *Richard Jefferies: A Tribute by Various Writers*, The Worthing Cavalcade (Worthing Art Development Scheme, 1946), pp.143-4.

graveyard nearer the sea. A small white marble cross, quite devoid of monumental effort, just name and date upon the base, and a thin, railless edgestone marking out its length and breadth, and this inscribed with the words: 'To the honoured memory of the prose-poet of England's fields and woodlands'.

It has not always had this tidiness of appearance, I was told. The year before, some admirer from London had set about reducing things to order, and that by adding stone-work and planting shrubs. That admirer deserves well of all those who treasure the memory of Richard Jefferies. I lifted my cap too, when I thought of the solitary two or three close friends who knew and who stood alone by his open grave thirty years ago. Jefferies was little known then, and much less understood. Now his books are widely and lovingly read, and scores, no doubt, have paid their pilgrimage to that spot since drawn, as I was, by the debt they owed to Richard Jefferies.

It is more than likely that Osborne was the 'admirer from London' responsible for the restoration work and for adding the kerbs. Many people have made pilgrimages to the grave, including Henry Williamson in 1936, Frances Gay and Kathleen Sewell (grand-daughter of Jefferies' Aunt Martha Hall).

Inscriptions were added to the plinth on the death of Jessie and their children, presumably at the request of family members. On the north side of the plinth it reads: ALSO OF JESSIE/ HIS BELOVED WIFE/ WHO PASSED AWAY JULY 12TH 1926/ BURIED AT PERRANPORTH, CORNWALL. On the south side: ALSO OF RICHARD HAROLD/THEIR ELDEST SON WHO PASSED AWAY NOV. 3RD 1942/ BURIED AT LACHINE, CANADA. On the west side: ALSO OF THEIR DAUGHTER/ JESSIE PHYLLIS HARGRAVE/ DIED NOV. 28TH 1958/ BURIED AT SEAFORD.

In 1979, the grave was Grade II listed.

The Richard Jefferies Society will be eternally grateful to Mark Daniel (sadly deceased) who moved to Brighton and took it upon himself to look after Jefferies' grave. In March 1984 Mark planted a Portland Rose within the kerb – the variety dated back to 1809 and bore large scarlet flowers throughout the summer and autumn. He regularly cleaned the marble and sheared up the kerbing when it was out of alignment. It must have been a tearful moment when Mark visited the grave in May 1994, after news that vandals had knocked the cross off its plinth and smashed it into three pieces. Many graves had been similarly attacked. Worthing Cemeteries Department and the Society shared the cost of restoring the cross.

Vandalism continued to be a major head-ache for the authorities and in August 2000, the cross was pushed off the plinth a second time. Worthing Council wanted to remove the cross completely but this proposal was discussed at the Society's AGM in October 2000, and rejected by members. Subject to agreement by the Jefferies' family and the authorities, it was proposed that the cross should be repaired but laid flat on the turf within the marble kerb. Once

again, the Society shared the cost of the repair with Worthing Council. At the same time a marble cap was added to the 'wedding cake' plinth by Mr. Daniel along with the inscription 'RICHARD JEFFERIES 1848-1887.' The rose bush was removed. The grave had always been difficult to find, and without the standing cross, it was even more so.

Vandalism continued to be a problem for several years until Worthing Council stepped up security measures and locked the cemetery at night. Fortunately, Jefferies' grave was spared further attacks.

Despite his best efforts, by 2009, Mark Daniel remarked that the grave needed a complete overhaul – the lead from the lettering had worn away and some of the wording was unreadable. The stone had perished and was beyond cleaning by conventional means. This time the Richard Jefferies Society organised the restoration employing Paul Binstead, a local stone mason, who made the marble look like new. He refaced and cleaned the stone-work, incised the inscriptions, added lead to all lettering and repaired the cross. The bill came to £1350 but half the cost was borne by individual members of the Society (Mark alone gave £450) and the Eltham Society donated £200.



Mark Daniel inspects the damage to the cross, May 1994.



Second attack in Aug 2000.

By this time, Michael Parrott, another of our members who lives in Sussex, offered to help look after the grave and still does so today. At the Society's visit to Broadwater in May 2010, to inspect the restoration work, we admired the handiwork of Mr. Binstead. Mr. Parrott has kept up a magnificent display of wild flowers and spring bulbs, particularly daffodils – Amarylly's favourite – see cover photographs. He does his best to persuade the managers of the cemetery to let the grasses and wild flowers grow. Jefferies would have taken delight to know that he was lying in the mowing grass. At one time, Michael remarked that often the only place in the grave-yard where bees, butterflies and insects could be found was at Jefferies' grave.



May 2010 – the Richard Jefferies Society visit the grave. Left to right: Michael Parrott, Jean Saunders, Gillian Bromhead, John and Angela Price, Duncan Pepper, John Webb, Phyllis Treitel, Rebecca Welshman, Mark Daniel, Andrew Rossabi, Stan Hickerton and Simon Coleman. Photograph taken by Don Bromhead.

We are grateful to Mr. Parrott and the Friends of Broadwater and Worthing Cemetery for their part in looking after and promoting the cemetery to visitors. Perhaps the W.H. Hudson grave might be similarly adopted for restoration and care some time. His epitaph reads: 'HE LOVED BIRDS AND GREEN PLACES AND THE WIND ON THE HEATH, AND SAW BRIGHTNESS OF THE SKIRTS OF GOD' and is written on a broken foot-stone. Perhaps the Richard Jefferies Society might contribute towards the work?



Grave of W.H. Hudson, May 2010.



Richard Jefferies' Grave, March 2014.
Photograph by Michael Parrott.