

## RICHARD JEFFERIES IN CROWBOROUGH

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\* Except for six photographs.

Whilst walking along London Road a few years ago my attention was arrested by a plaque over an attractive stone cottage called The Downs, bearing the inscription "Richard Jefferies Lived Here 1885-86". I have been an admirer of this writer for many years and it was a great joy to come across the house in which he had lived, even for such a short time. As I continued my walk I reflected on Richard Jefferies and his reference to Crowborough and almost immediately came to the ancient oak tree with the hollow trunk at Cooks Corner. I remembered reading that he was said to know this tree well for he often lingered there to admire the view of the hills of Kent. That was over ninety years ago and the old tree still stands there, and so does the lovely view from the adjacent five-barred gate -the view from Crowborough immortalised in the nearby 'Pleasant View Road'.

For those not acquainted with this chronicler of country matters in late Victorian England I give a brief account of his life. He was born at Coate Farm near Swindon in November 1848 and spent his boyhood in the open countryside of Wiltshire. He was not drawn to farming as a career, although as his books later showed, he had a deep knowledge of farming and of those who worked on the land. During his early life he often stayed with an aunt and uncle at Sydenham; they appear to have had a great influence on his development and he acquired a great love of reading both from then and from his father and grandfather. As a result he decided at an early age that he wanted to become a writer.

At the age of seventeen he became a reporter for the North Wilts Herald in Swindon and later for the Wilts and Gloucester Standard. During this time he also did much free lance work and wrote a number of unsuccessful novels. His real breakthrough as a writer came at the age of 24 with a widely acclaimed letter to the Times, followed by two others on the conditions of the agricultural labourer. These letters provoked much comment and a leading article in the Times itself, which led to his being recognised as an authority on country matters; from then on editors of magazines and journals were glad to print his articles.

After his marriage in 1874 he and his wife lived in Swindon but he wanted to be nearer to London in order to be in closer touch with Fleet Street editors and as a result the couple moved to Surbiton in Surrey in 1877. During the remaining ten years of his life he moved several times, to Goring-on-Sea, where he died on the 14th August, 1887.

He was a prolific writer in spite of much ill health during the last few years of his life. He endured his illness with great fortitude and many believe that his last five years were his most creative period; his autobiography "The Story of my Heart" is a most moving book and is regarded as his greatest work. There is a list of his works at the conclusion of this article.

The move to Crowborough in 1885 was on the advice of his doctor for his health was failing rapidly and indeed the "fine invigorating air" of Crowborough produced a marked improvement, to such an extent that he was able to enjoy many rambles through this lovely countryside. His first home in Crowborough was at Rehoboth Villa (now Brook View House) Jarvis Brook, but after a short time he moved with his family to 'The Downs'.

His son, the late Richard Harold Jefferies, has written:

The Crowborough district was ideal for a wanderer like my father - a rather wild rolling hilly country, well wooded and with small streams. Ferns were very plentiful and father loved bracken with its peculiar odour when crushed".

Alas, the improvement in his health was only temporary and he continued to deteriorate. Once again he moved, this time to Sea View (now Jefferies House), Sea Lane, Goring, where he died at the early age of 38. He was buried in Broadwater Cemetery, where his simple memorial is inscribed: "Richard Jefferies, Prose Poet of England's Fields and Woodlands".

One of my favourite books is *Field and Hedgerow*, a series of some essays collected by his widow and published posthumously by Longmans in 1889. The reader who knows Crowborough and the Ashdown Forest will be able to identify many of the places he mentions. I have not sufficient space to discuss all the essays in this book but will just mention those that have local connections.

The first essay 'Hours of Spring' is said to be the last actually written in his own hand, his increasing weakness causing him to dictate the rest to his wife. This essay was composed in his room at the Downs, overlooking London Road and is, in my opinion, most moving and passionate, particularly where he laments his imprisonment behind the window. I quote:

But today I have to listen to the lark's song - not out of doors with him, but through the windowpane - and the bullfinch carried the rootlet fibre to his nest without me. They manage without me very well; they know their times and seasons - not only the civilised rooks, with their libraries of knowledge in their old nests of reference, but the stray things of the hedge and the chiffchaff from over sea in the ash wood. They go on

without me. Orchis flower and cowslip - I cannot number them all - I hear, as it were; the patter of their feet - flower 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. Nature sets no value upon life, neither of mine nor of the larks that sang years ago. The earth is all in all to me, but I am nothing to the earth: it is bitter to know this before you are dead. These delicious violets are sweet for themselves; they were not shaped and coloured and gifted with that exquisite proportion and adjustment of odour and hue for me. High up against the grey cloud I hear the lark through the window singing, and each note falls into my heart like a knife".

In the same essay he describes the severe winter of 1885-6:

"At a height of seven hundred feet the air was sharp as a scythe -a rude barbarian giant wind knocking at the walls of the house with a vast club, so that we crept sideways even to the windows to look out upon the world. There was every thing to repel - the cold, the frost, the hardness, the snow, dark sky and grand, leaflessness; the very furze chilled and all benumbed. Yet the forest was still beautiful. There was no day that we did not, all of us, glance out at it and admire it, and say something about it. Harder and harder grew the frost, yet still the forest-clad hills possessed a something that drew the mind open to their largeness and grandeur. Earth is always beautiful - always."

This says much for the sturdy stone built house built by Mr. Field-Buss some one hundred years ago.

The Country Sunday has local connections and is a marvellous evocation of the stillness and serenity of nature, so moving that he found even the sound of church bells an intrusion. He also describes a chapel which stood by a fir copse, from which in the morning there was a most exquisite fragrance of pine. I am afraid he did not find the chapel the most beautiful of buildings compared to the grace of the surrounding trees.

The essay on Buckhurst Park is self-explanatory and there are many identifying passages which enable one to follow Jefferies' course, including the description of the beautiful fifteenth century timber framed house "Duckings" at Withyham. Other essays containing references to this area are *Countryside Sussex*, *Among the Nuts*, *Winds of Heaven*, whilst in *Locality and nature* he compares Exmoor to the Ashdown Forest.

This is not intended to be a definitive study of Jefferies' work but is written in the hope of arousing

interest in a great writer, on country matters and country lore, who came to Crowborough in the sadly vain hope of restoring his failing health. His writings have brought joy and understanding to many and I feel Crowborough can be justly proud of having been portrayed so vividly in the work of such a man who came here to live.

References:

*Richard Jefferies, his life and works.* Edward Thomas.  
*The Notebook of Richard Jefferies*, edited by Samuel Looker.  
*Jefferies England.* Samuel Looker.  
Richard Jefferies and Sussex. Bill Anderson. Sussex County Magazine.  
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*A Tribute.*

Further

*The Story of my Heart,*  
*Amaryllis at the Fair,*  
*The Dewy Morn*  
*Hodge and his Masters*  
*Round about a Great Estate*  
*Wildlife in a Southern County*  
*Field and Hedgerow*  
*Nature near London*  
*The Life of the Fields*  
*Bevis: the Story of a boy*  
*Wood Magic*  
*The Open Air*  
and others