

Owners of Jefferies' Farm

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*'Jefferies Farm Situate at Coate in the Parish of Chisledon
in the County of Wiltshire'*

So runs the description in the legal documents of 'THE BIRTHPLACE OF RICHARD JEFFERIES' bought by Swindon in 1926 for £2,100. The house is listed in the Ministry of Works Schedule of Historic and Other Buildings. At the time of writing it is unoccupied. Swindon's purchase, however, was only about one third of the property of 36 acres bought in 1800 from a Thomas Herring for £1,100 by Richard Jefferies, baker of Swindon and a man of substance, great-grandfather of Richard Jefferies the writer. The name of Herring is closely connected with the early history of Swindon and the villages round, and boys and girls of the Stratton Schools still benefit from a Charity founded in 1725 by the Will of a John Herring. The Coate estate was in the hands of the Herring family for several generations and it would seem that the farmhouse, originally a rambling thatched cottage, was built not later than the early 18th Century. Thomas Herring had mortgaged the property with a yeoman farmer of Badbury, Young Choules, connections of whose family bearing the name, live now in Swindon. One of these possesses a narrow, leather-bound pocket ready-reckoner for measuring timber, stone and glass, inscribed in faded old-time writing:

YOUNG CHOULS
his book April 20 of 1768.

This would appear to be the Young Choules of the mortgage, and if so, 'yesterday becomes today', for the hand that thumbed its yellowed pages nearly two hundred years ago was the same that took from Jefferies' great-grandfather £723-13s. and signed the document discharging the mortgage on the Freehold Estate at Coate, part of which now belongs to the people of Swindon. When the purchase was completed by the payment to Thomas Herring of the balance, £376-7s., the estate became the property of Richard Jefferies, Baker of Swindon, 'for his quiet enjoyment.' (Unexpectedly refreshing words, these, to find in a legal document!)

This Richard Jefferies died in 1825 leaving all his property to his three children Fanny, James and John. The first two died unmarried and intestate. John, grandfather of the writer, who lived at the bakery in The Square, Old Swindon, took out letters of administration and, since there was a restrictive clause in the Will, became sole heir. His father did not believe in banks and he found hoards of golden spade guineas hidden in the house, some of which he used to enlarge the thatched cottage at Coate. Other alterations and refinements were later added by his eldest and only surviving son, James Lockett Jefferies, father of the writer; at a still later date much of the thatch was removed. James Lockett and his father did not get on well together, but when the son married in 1844 the young people were settled by the father in the farmhouse, though it does not appear that the property was actually given to James Lockett outright. In *Amaryllis at the Fair*, which is generally considered to give in many respects a fair picture of the Jefferies' home-life at the farm the heroine, Amaryllis, prays for her father :

Do make my grandfather kinder to him and not so harsh for the rent, let him give the place to my father now. Please let him have this place for his very own, for I do so fear lest those who set my grandfather against him should have a Will made so that my father should not have this house and land as he ought to do as the son. He has made it so beautiful with trees, and brought the fresh spring water up to the house and done so many clever things, and his heart is here, and it is home to him, and no other place could be like it.

This idea is given substance by the fact that in the Will of John Jefferies the Estate at Coate was left to his son subject to a charge upon and out of the property, of legacies totalling £1,300 with interest in addition, to his two sisters. The Will was proved on 12th July 1868; the next day the son paid the money to his sisters and the following day took up a mortgage on the property for £1,500. Thus did James Lockett Jefferies take the first step to financial ruin. In Jefferies' books and in reminiscences of the family there is evidence that James Lockett Jefferies delighted in the house and surroundings but that his interests lay more in beautifying the place than in working it for profit. One of his nieces wrote:

Anyone who ever lived or even visited at the old home would know how every individual inch of the ground, every sapling tree, every flowering shrub or nest hiding hedgerow was loved and treasured by its owner.

And again in *Amaryllis at the Fair* the son said of his father:

The neighbourhood round about could never understand Iden, never could see why he had gone to such great trouble to render the homestead beautiful with trees, why he had replanted the orchard with pleasant eating apples in the place of the old cider apples, hard and sour. 'Why

wouldn't thaay a' done for he as well as for we?' All the acts of Iden seemed to the neighbourhood to be the acts of a 'vool'. When he cut a hedge for instance, Iden used to have the great bushes that bore unusually fine May bloom saved from the billhook that they might flower in the spring. So, too, with the crab-apple for the sake of the white blossom, so, too, with the hazel—for the nuts. But what caused the most 'wonderment' was the planting of the horse-chestnuts in the corner of the meadow. Whatever did he want with horse-chestnuts? No other horse-chestnuts grew about there. You couldn't eat horse-chestnuts when they dropped in the autumn.'

This place, then, so beloved by James Luckett Jefferies was mortgaged in 1868 for £1,500. By 1871 he had paid the interest but nothing off the principal and had taken up another £100. Two years later the mortgage was called in and he was faced with a claim for £1,660-14s. which included outstanding interest. A Swindon solicitor, J. E. Goddard Bradford, paid this and lent him a further £339-6s., making the mortgage £2,000. In 1875 Bradford lent him a further £500 and a year later another £40 so that by 1877 the mortgage had grown to £2,540 with £150 arrears of interest which Bradford agreed to add to the principal, loaning the unfortunate man at the same time another £60, making a total mortgage of £2,750. In *Amaryllis at the Fair*, Jefferies described a dreadful occasion when a bailiff was in the house and his father (Farmer Iden) dressed in his best, trudged into town to borrow from his solicitor to pay the debt. Just so did the mortgage grow snow-ball fashion. Finally, worried with household bills and crippled by the mortgage, James Luckett Jefferies gave up the struggle, Bradford foreclosed, the place was put up for sale by public auction and the family left the district. In a pencilled note found among Jefferies' effects after his death, there is a poignant comment on this period: 'The melancholy chord of the work, work, work all life, yet the mortgage.' A tattered document still exists containing the plan and conditions of sale of the property to be held ON FRIDAY the FIRST day of JUNE 1877. A footnote to the statement is of interest today: 'The Dwelling-House, with a slight outlay, might be converted into a genteel Family Residence.' Apparently no sale was effected and the place remained untenanted until September of the next year when it was bought by Messrs. John & Charles Thynne and Charles St. Clare Bedford on behalf of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster who already owned part of the adjoining land. They paid £4,306, out of which Bradford claimed £2,810. Richard Jefferies, then living near London, must have visited the place at this time, for another pencilled note reads: 'The old house deserted. Wall scribblings. The swallows building inside the broken window, attaching their nests to the

ceiling.¹ James Lockett Jefferies took a job as a gardener in Bath, working, it is pleasant to reflect amongst trees and flowers till his death at eighty in 1896.

The rest of the tale is soon told. The day after the purchase Messrs. Thynne and Bedford sold the portion of the property which Swindon now holds to Jonathan and William Gosling brothers of South Marston and Coate for £1,600. The latter died in 1881 and Jonathan took over the place. He let it to a farmer, Thomas Large, who lived there thirteen years. John Maskelyne, Auctioneer, is said to have lived in the house during this period also, and later Jonathan Gosling himself, who is remembered as having bred greyhounds there for which he went often to Swindon to buy beef steak. In 1903 the house was let at a rent of £60 a year to Edward Ferris, Auctioneer, who occupied it till the death of Gosling, when it was sold to Job Lawrence in 1915 for £1,250. Older generations of Swindonians will remember the Lawrence family who managed Coate Reservoir and its boats, when the charge to go in was one penny and there were no 'buses. Then family parties walked over the fields to enjoy the delights of Coate, never wanting more than they found in those simple days. On the death of Job Lawrence in 1922, Mr. Percy George Herring, now of Upper Stratton Farm, bought the place for £2,000 and lived in it four years. Then yielding to the repeated persuasions of Reuben George, former Mayor of the Borough and a Jefferies enthusiast, he sold it to Swindon Corporation who, he understood, wished by its use to honour the memory of the writer. Mr. Herring speaks with affection of the house, saying it made a beautiful home, and remembers with pleasure entertaining people who came because of its associations, one of whom, an American woman, painted a picture of the house with his daughter looking over the garden wall like Amaryllis did on Fair-day. Other visitors spent much time in the attics made famous as the refuge of the writer in his youth. Happily these are still much as they were in Jefferies' day.

'A house needs to be loved', said the Marquis of Lansdowne performing the opening ceremony of Swindon's mansion at Lydiard Park in May of this year. The Jefferies' House was much loved in the past. May it be so in the future!

¹ It is believed now that this does not relate to Jefferies' birthplace but to an old house at the nearby village of Bishopstone.