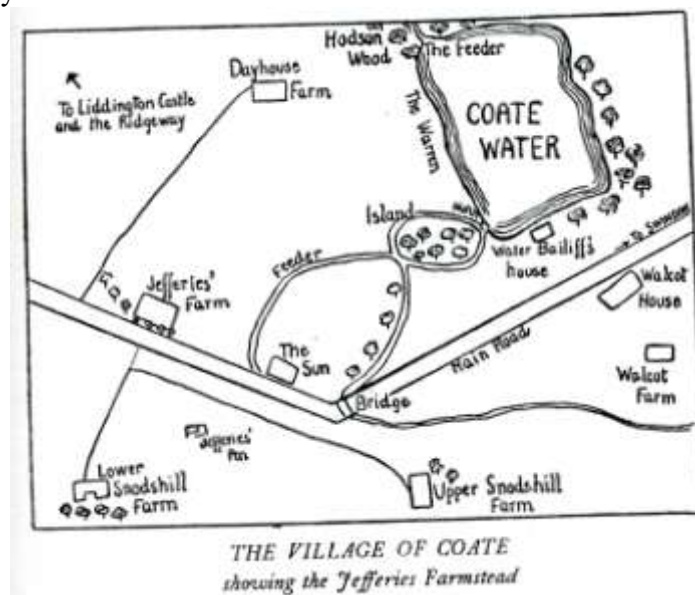


Reminiscences of Richard Jefferies

by *Audrey Horsell*

READERS of his books used to ask Richard Jefferies if there were such a place as Coate. The people who lived in Coate looked around them and said, 'Why, here are only a few farms, a few labourers' cottages, fields and a great pond, and nothing but bare downs beyond'. 'No one else', said Jefferies, 'seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries; when I try to describe these things to them they look at me with stolid incredulity.'



Both my grandfather, Henry Brunsdon, and my grandmother, Emma Freeman, who were contemporaries of Jefferies in Coate, said that he was without honour in the village. The cottagers called him a 'lazy loppet', and everybody was sorry for his parents.

All the farmers were intimate with each other - the Jefferies at Coate House, the Badens at Dayhouse Farm, the Coxes, the Freemans of Walcot. These families had lived on their farms for many generations. My grandmother remembers Coate House when it was thatched and how the musk smelt in summertime under the window in the keeping room.

Now that the thatch has gone the place has a mean look. The Jefferies no longer live there, and the house has been purchased by the Swindon Corporation as a memorial.

There is still in our family a little low baby-chair in which Richard sometimes rode pannier-wise upon a pony, with his sister balancing him in a fellow chair. In the 'fifties all the boys from the farms went to 'Daddy Hanks' school in Swindon, and all the girls went to the neighbouring village of Wanborough. Daddy Hanks was a terrible wielder of the cane, and Jefferies suffered as often and as sharply as the livelier boys for his own lack of liveliness. He was not a shining scholar, although he 'always had his head in a book'; it seems that he was put down as rather a dullard. It was a practice at the school to make a new boy run the gauntlet of two lines of boys armed with small stones tied in handkerchiefs, to initiate him into the life there with good hard blows about his back and head.

My grandfather and Harry Jefferies were a year or two younger than Richard, and were very devoted friends, calling each other 'Ally' and 'Sloper', from the name of a character in a comic weekly of the time. Harry was strong, energetic, and bubbling with high spirits. He and Richard had a profound contempt for each other's character, mixed up with an affection that sometimes made an

awkward appearance. They were all three good skaters, and they were all three very handy with a catapult. The brother and friend both appear in Jefferies' writing, in particular in *Bevis*. The swing is there too, and the summer-house where they kept their bows and arrows and wooden swords, and sometimes allowed the girls to do their dolls' washing. Richard would never join in the usual boys' sports, cricket and football - he left the others alone one spring, while he built a canoe.

He had a reputation for being a sullen, unsociable fellow, although the others were glad enough to play his adventurous and imaginative games when it suited him. He was always a domineering leader. Grandfather Brunnsden said, 'he was always ordering us about'. He told them blood-curdling stories of ghosts and murders, and sometimes persuaded them to join with him in scaring the village women at night. Two maiden ladies who lived at Coate told my mother that one night they were almost frightened out of their lives at the haunted James' Pen by supernatural manifestations afterwards traced to young Jefferies. The boys would often scare themselves worse than their victims.

The village had no church until the late 'sixties, when a little chapel of ease was built at the roadside. Sunday services were held in the afternoon in the parlour of Coate House. Richard Jefferies and Henry Brunnsden drove the vicar of Chiseldon to and from the house.

Richard's pride of spirit and self-sufficiency isolated him a great deal from the young people, and irritated the older folk. He was rarely asked to festivities and amusements. My grandmother, however, remembered a party at the Cox's house, when she wore a white dress with a blue sash. Richard was there, and the Baden girl whom he later married. Grandmother said that she could see him quite clearly in her mind's eye - a lanky, stooping boy, and 'not at all amusing'. But the white dress and the sash and the wearer with her heavy curls did not go unappreciated. Harry Jefferies and Tom Cox were both stricken and sent her valentines all roses and violets and elegant paper lace.

When Richard Jefferies was sixteen he had an adventure - the only outward adventure of his outwardly quiet life. He persuaded another boy to consider a walk through Europe as far as Moscow. They sought omens by reference to the wagging of a dog's tail. The dog's tail wagged and the two boys ran away to France for a week. Where did the money come from? My grandfather can account for the origin of some of it. Jefferies sold his watch.

At this time the Jefferies family began to respect Richard's talent a little. They gave him a room in the attic next to the cheese room, where he could be quiet and undisturbed. From this window he could see the Roman Camp of Liddington Castle and the long, quiet, satisfying curves of the Wiltshire downs. Grandmother says that there was a bird that used to come into his room and sit upon his bed rail. He sat a great deal in the summer-house and wrote. He also sat in contemplation at the foot of an oak tree in the Home Field, while the haymakers, in a torment of midges in the island field, said that such laziness did not ought to be allowed. The villagers often found him at the loneliest corner of the reservoir. The place is dark and cool and crowded with minnows. He would sit like a rock and study them for hours.

His few friends were mostly of the humbler sort. He was fond of an old cobbler in the village, and talked much with Job Lawrence, the water bailiff, and with William Brown, a labourer who worked for my great-grandfather Brunnsden. This man, who appears with the others in the books, earned the usual wage of six shillings a week, rising to eight shillings at the birth of his first child.

Jefferies went about with a gun under his arm. W. H. Hudson in 'Birds in a Village' is scandalized that a man who called himself a naturalist should shoot kingfishers. My grandfather expressed the feelings of the village when he said, 'In my opinion that man is an out-and-out atheist'.

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