



Blessed with luscious landscape and ravenous forest Staffordshire is a county cloaked in culture and history. But unknown to many are it's links with author J.R.R Tolkien. Having penned Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit, this infamous icon was once rumored to have lived in the Shire. Claire Gill ventures deep into Cannock Chase on the trail of Tolkien...

ON THE Tolkien Trail

SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE DEPTHS OF THE FOREST LIES A FAINT SPIRIT OF THE LITERATURE LEGEND J.R.R TOLKIEN. AS THE OAK TREES WHISPER THROUGH THE WIND AND THE WOODLAND CASTS SHADOWS ACROSS THE FLOOR, A MYTHICAL FEELING OF ENCHANTMENT AND WONDER OF ANOTHER WORLD IS CREATED. MANY PARALLELS HAVE BEEN DRAWN BY HISTORIANS AND WRITERS BETWEEN THE PLACES THAT TOLKIEN LIVED AND HIS IMAGINARY MYTHOLOGICAL WORLD, WITH MOSELY BOG INSPIRING THE OLD FOREST AND FANGORN. YET NONE HAVE BEEN DIRECTLY LINKED TO STAFFORDSHIRE, EVEN THOUGH HISTORICALLY WE KNOW HE LIVED THERE. SO WITH BAFFLED LOCAL HISTORIANS ON HAND, IT WAS TIME TO SORT OUT THE FACT FROM THE FICTION.

Early Scribbles in Staffordshire

It was through the army that Tolkien first set eyes on Cannock Chase when he trained with the Lancashire fusiliers in 1915. Undeniably, the Chase would have presented Tolkien with some inspiration for his writing and although infamous for the epic Lord of the Rings and the Hobbit, Tolkien started writing his earliest works in Staffordshire.

A well traveled man, J.R.R Tolkien was born in South Africa in 1892 and subsequently grew up in Sarehill, Birmingham. After a time studying in Oxford for a degree in English

Language and Literature, he was commissioned to the Lancashire Fusiliers and was posted to Staffordshire in 1915 for warfare training. Edith, his wife took up residence nearby in Great Haywood.

Tolkien's Staffordshire Stops

Although his visit to Staffordshire was brief it seems that the County's natural beauty would have provided some inspiration for his great literary works. Could it be that The Chase resembled the Forest of Mirkwood, the largest and darkest forest of the Middle Earth? Or maybe The Shire was green, rich and pleasant like Great Haywood?



The magnificent landscapes and worlds created by Tolkien have been conjured up from the evocative visits in the heart of our country. We are very proud that some of them have come from Staffordshire.

Shire Stop 1 - Great Haywood

Tolkien's first point of call in Staffordshire was Cannock Chase's training camps and in particular Great Haywood. It was this small village, set in the scenic English countryside that proved significant for Tolkien and his impressionable early years as a writer. After getting married in a Catholic Church, Warwick, Tolkien was posted to a camp on the Chase. His wife Edith came to live with her cousin Jennie in Great Haywood, near to the camp in the Spring of 1916.

After some months fighting in the Somme, Tolkien fell ill and was granted given sick leave. He returned to Edith in Great Haywood and it

was this peace and tranquility that proved to be a haven for Tolkien during his reconvelense from Trench Fever. In fact it was during this time that gave Tolkien his first real chance to realise his dream of writing. He started work on 'The Book of Lost Tales' which later became known as The Silmarillion - the first story he wrote down on paper. Full of mythical elves and battles of warfare and corruption over 3 jewels, it arguably sets the tone for things to come.

These days, the link between the Literature Legend and Great Haywood remain of great importance. "Literary connections are very important," says Amyas Stafford-Northcote, ►

CANNOCK CHASE INSPIRATIONS

IF YOU FANCY LETTING CANNOCK CHASE INSPIRE YOU THEN CHECK OUT OUR TOP TREE-TASTIC WAYS TO ENJOY THE CHASE.

1) Take in the sights and the sounds of the forest, with Staffordshire Wildlife Trust. It organises many workshops and talks, including wildlife walks through a network of local and specialist groups. With its motto 'Protecting wildlife for the future' you can be sure in the knowledge that your weekends are truly eco-friendly. Based at The Wolseley Centre in Stafford, you can contact them through www.staffs-wildlife.org.uk or on 01889 880100. Listings of events can be found in leaflets distributed to local libraries.

2) If you want to enjoy the forest at a faster pace then how about cycling through the rolling hills of Cannock Chase? Swinerton Cycles offer great hire rates at Birches Valley and the Forestry Commission have even produced a cycling map of all the routes across the Chase. Choose from leisurely green runs to intermediate red or even high skill black courses for those with nerves of steel! Call Birches Valley on 01889 596593 for more details. Staffordshire County Council also produce a great leaflet entitled 'Cycling in Stafford Borough' with two useful maps and top hints. Leaflets can be found at local libraries.

3) Saddle up and see the Chase from a new perspective, on horseback. With no better way to see the forest, Chase Trekking centre offer treks for both beginners, intermediate and experienced riders and children. For more experienced riders there is the chance to take the day long pub trek which is very popular over the Summer months. Telephone 01785 711177 for information and bookings.

4) Take some inspiration from the Chase and indulge in a breath of cultured air by hitting the Community Arts Trail. With a wide range of community projects, 'The Route to Health' takes you on a personal journey of discovery and development. Whilst walking around the trail, you will come into contact with some inspiring works of art and their poignant meanings. Not only will you be getting fit, you will take away some important health messages as well as a bit of arty culture to boot. Contact 01543 586593 for more information.

5) Follow in Tolkien's footsteps by taking a look at the 80 Chimneys on the Shugborough Estate or walk across the Exeter Bridge. Find a whole list of seasonal activities on www.shugborough.org.uk or telephone 01889 881 388.

6) Let the children get to grips with the forest first hand with the adventure playground at Birches Valley Centre. It's part of the Active Woods forestry commission campaign to get people active in Britain's woods and forests. Let them monkey bar across the wood chips and swivel across the timber logs. Log on to www.forestry.gov.uk/active or call 01543 586593 for more information.

7) Refuel at the centrally placed 3 Star Swan Hotel in Stafford. Perfect for a bite to eat in authentically restored 18th Century surroundings. The brasserie serves up excellent food and the outside terrace garden offers a chance to catch some rays. Log on to www.theswanstafford.co.uk for more details and directions.

8) Finally if after all that fresh air you need to relax in comfort, to take in the mysterious world of Tolkien, or to pen your own masterpiece, then why not stop off at the Moat House for a scrumptious dinner cooked with local ingredients by their award winning chef. Let your thoughts run away with you as you stay over in one of their brand new modern suites. Sweet dreams of imaginary worlds!



Chairperson of Great Haywood Council. "It is thought that Tolkien used to walk in Shugborough park, crossing over the Essex Bridge from Great Haywood into the Estate. It provided inspiration, rather like Lewis Carroll and the river in Oxford. It's nice to know that such lovely work could have been inspired by walking in our locality," says Amyas.

Shire Stop 2 - Shugborough

The grand grounds of the Shugborough estate are the second point of call on the Tolkien trail. Steeped in a wealth of history, on the edge of the Chase, the estate has seen many historical figures come and go. Living only 3 or four minutes away from the estate, Shugborough's Press Officer, Corinne Caddy believes Tolkien was undoubtedly familiar with Shugborough. "He lived within a stone's throw of the estate and most of the villagers at that time would have either been in the employ of the estate or worked for businesses supplying the estate, such as barrel makers. The bridal path running straight through the centre of the estate would have been a major through route at that time and Tolkien probably used it daily - particularly to the Cannock Chase camp as it was the most direct route."

It is easy to see why it is thought the Estate would be inspiration for his work when you consider the rich, misty landscape and the 80 chimneys thought to reflect his writing of the House of 100 chimneys. "The estate is a mix of dark woods, rivers, bridges and streams, open parkland and bleak heathland interspersed with strange and mystical monuments," says Corinne. "It was a source of huge inspiration for some of the country's major free-thinkers during the 18th century and still is today - I'm sure Tolkien would have been swept up in the atmosphere too."

Other links can also be made to Shugborough in the Tale of the Sun and the Moon. Tolkien talks of the village of Tavrobel and the Bridge of Tavrobel, which connect the village across two rivers, Afros and Guir.

Many believe that these places were inspired by the Shugborough estate, which ironically has the Essex Bridge connecting the estate to Great Haywood over the rivers Trent and Sow. In fact Christopher Tolkien, JRR Tolkien's youngest son confirmed the links with Shugborough.



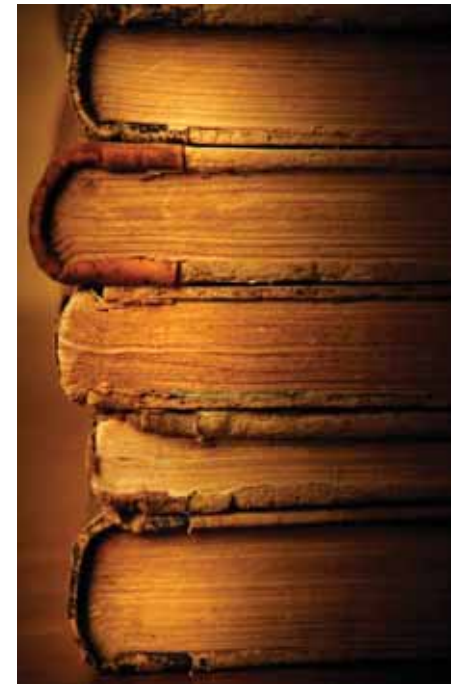
LOCAL TOLKIEN TIMELINE

- 1915 J.R.R Tolkien first posted to Staffordshire with his battalion
- 1915 Edith moved to Great Haywood with her cousin Jennie because it was near to the camp where Tolkien was posted.
- 1916 J.R.R. Tolkien married Edith in a Catholic Church in Warwick
- June 1916 - J.R.R. Tolkien received his embarkation orders
- October to Dec 1916 – Tolkien suffers from Trench fever and is brought back to the England
- December 1916 – Tolkien returns to Great Haywood to recover in the cottage with Edith.
- January and February 1917 - Starts work on 'The Book of Lost Tales' which becomes the Silmarillion
- 1918 – Posted to Penkrige for a short time before being moved to Hull

"The former General Manager Geoff Elkin wrote to Christopher to ask what he thought of the rumoured connections. Christopher wrote back to confirm that Tavrobel was certainly Great Haywood and said: "my father was impressed by the grand house in the vicinity and it is extremely likely the property is Shugborough," says Corinne.

Shire Stop 3 - Penkrige

The final and most probably the shortest stop on the trail was Tolkien's stay in Penkrige. In 1918 Tolkien was posted to a camp in Penkrige. By this time, Edith had given



birth to their first son baby John. The family moved to Penkrige and Edith remained there until the war ended later that year. The family then all moved on to Oxford.

Rumour has it that Edith rented a cottage on the Teddersley estate although local historians are still unsure about its accuracy. Local historian Margaret George was tipped off and went to investigate. "In 2004 several cottages forming part of the Teddesley Park Estate, near Penkrige, Staffs., were being sold for auction," says Margaret. "One which drew particular interest was no. 1 Gipsy Green, which researchers claim to have been occupied by Tolkien c 1918. Like any self-respecting historian and devotee of Tolkien I had to visit the cottage and take some pictures before it was sold. Unfortunately, I couldn't afford to buy it at the time!"

Tolkien Today

Today, Tolkien remains a literature legend, with 2007, marking the release of the previously unpublished, 'The Children of Hurin' (due to be published worldwide on the 17th April 2007 by Harper Collins priced £18.99 for the hardback edition and £60 for the deluxe one). Yet, while some of Tolkien's time in Staffordshire still remains a mystery, one thing is sure, The Chase provided a wealth of inspiration for his first outings with a pen. Today the places that Tolkien visited and the landscapes he viewed remain a constant reminder his time here. For local historian Margaret George, the best history is often right under our noses, just waiting to be discovered. "As a historian I find that most people have a fascination with their local history, but are not always aware of some of the famous characters that have touched their county," says Margaret. "J.R.R. Tolkien was one of our most famous personalities, who not only lived in Staffordshire, but began his writing career here." Corinne, Shugborough agrees that we are very lucky to share a little bit of Tolkien history. "It is important that we remember Tolkien spent some time in Staffordshire and must have been inspired by our terrifically unique landscapes," says Corinne. "The magnificent landscapes and worlds created by Tolkien have been conjured up from the evocative visits in the heart of our country. We are very proud that some of them have come from Staffordshire." ■

