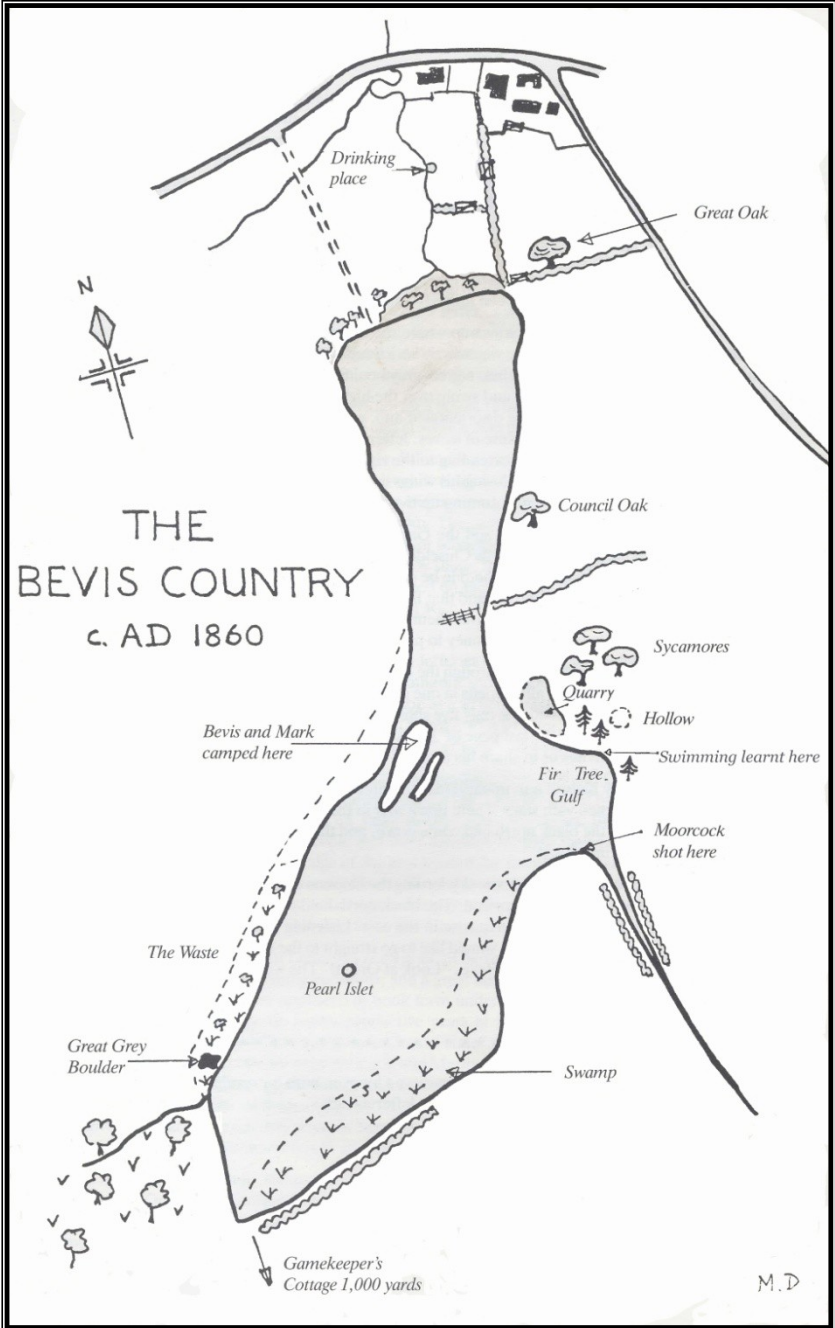
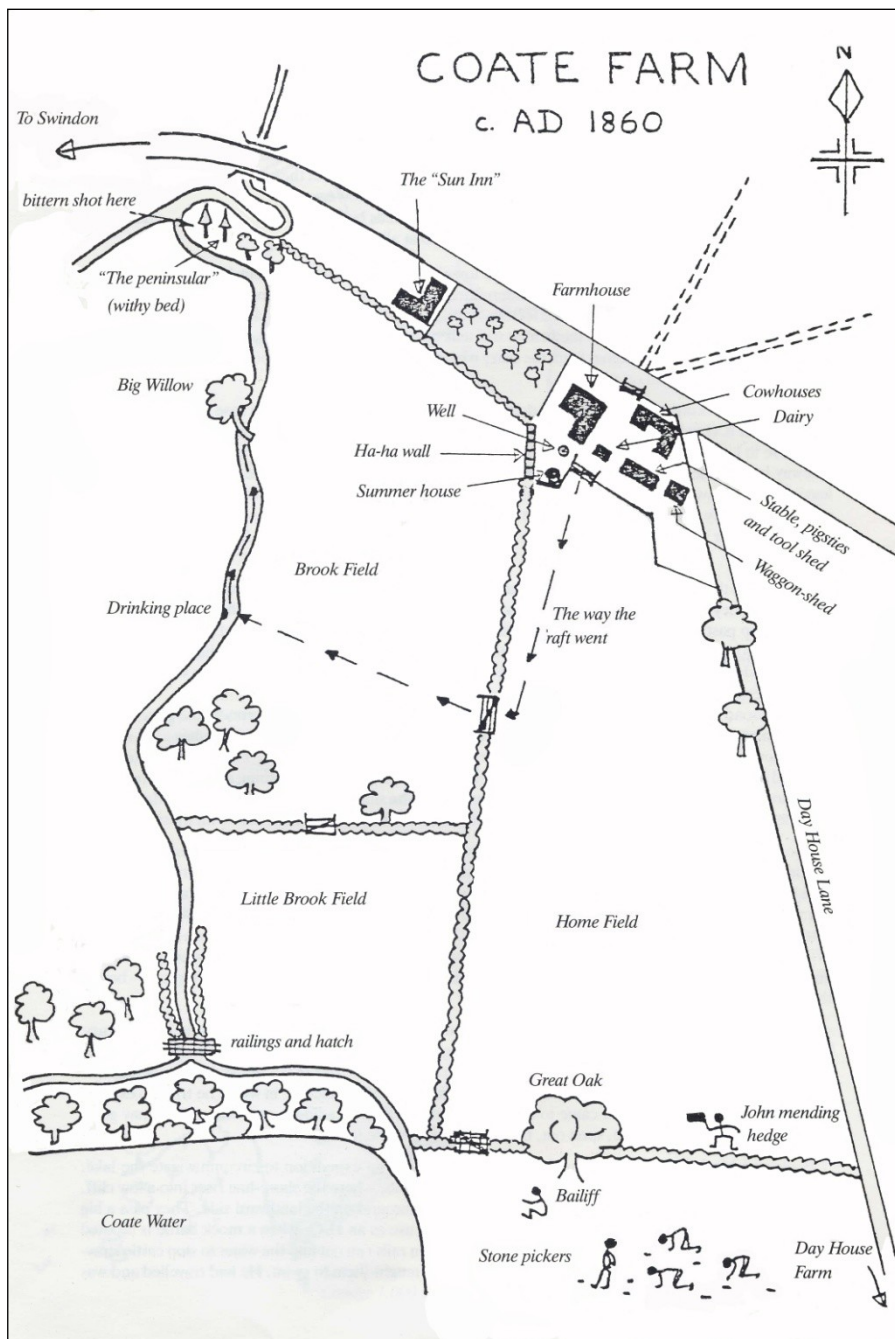


COATE FARM and the 'BEVIS COUNTRY'





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By Mark Daniel, Richard Jefferies Society (2006)

To many visitors, the first view of Coate Farm comes as something of a surprise. Whether approaching through the 10 square miles of suburban Swindon, or off the M4 link-road to the east, the little old buildings seem as incongruent as a group of ducklings waiting to cross a busy street. Looking at the motel and garage opposite and the mile upon mile of housing estates just beyond it, it is hard to imagine the tiny country hamlet which existed here within living memory. Yet, go through the gate into the garden, or stand by the stable looking south-east towards Liddington’s ancient hill-fort, and you are in a different age.

Jefferies lived here until he was 26 and afterwards drew on his impressions of Coate and its countryside for the main substance of his books. Despite failing health – or because of it – he lived and re-lived his days among these fields, streams and coppices, around Coate Water, with increasing vigour. Never was a place so well-documented, nor its features and creatures so faithfully described. In the astonishing labour of his last few years he left a detailed record of an agricultural society in the throes of dissolution – and of a natural environment he hoped would never change. He took the innumerable threads running through Wiltshire country life, and wove for us a fabric which must surely be unique.

Jefferies’ several works of ‘fiction’ are not, in fact, invention. Almost every scene and character were drawn from life, many of them from his boyhood days, and the same ones appear again and again. And here lies part of their charm – the visitor can still identify some of them himself.

Turning from the modern highway into the farm, a visitor might try to imagine himself taken back seven or eight score years to the time when Jefferies was a boy. Here great blue-painted double doors opened off a narrow lane, where hay-waggons brushed past the overhang from a row of pollard limes. Going over the cobbles their wheels almost touched the low cellar thatch as they rumbled past the cow-yard opposite. An open-fronted cow-house took up three sides of a square, its thatched roof supported by pillars set on stone to prevent rot. On past the cow-yard the waggon could either turn left into the rick-yard, passing a little stone cart-house on the corner, or continue through a gate into Home Field. In the rick-yard a twin-arched pigsty, small stable and hayloft, with a lean-to toolshed and a large, open-sided waggon-shed, stood along the northern side. On the east was a splendid row of elms, growing in the hedge by Day House Lane. To the south stood the hay-ricks and a great stack of faggots from the autumn hedge cutting.

To the right of the drive was an entrance to the garden and the well which served the whole village. The dairy opened out on to the veranda where the milk was churned. Richard Jefferies’ father, James, who had constructed the rick-yard buildings at his father’s behest, had set out the garden. Formal layouts of this sort were unusual on small farms, and the local people viewed with suspicion the copper beech, evergreen oaks, weeping ash and mulberry tree he had planted. Running along the west side of the lawn, beside Brook Field, James had built a stone ha-ha wall and replaced the old hedge with box bushes. On the wall were straw beehives and, nearby, a russet apple tree, one of the new varieties he had introduced in place of the more usual cider apples.

This had irritated the villagers, Jefferies tells us in *Amaryllis at the Fair* “Why wouldn’t thaay a’ done for he as well as for we?”, they had asked.

In line with the ha-ha wall was the great hedge which might have existed since Domesday. This separated Home Field on the east side and Brook Field and Little Brook Field on the west. There was a gateway a hundred yards or so, along. Ornamental iron railings ran along the south side of the lawn from the ha-ha wall, beneath the copper beech, to a round, blue-painted summer house in the southern-eastern corner. A wicket gate near the western end opened into Home Field beside the ancient hedge, where a dozen cows might be grazing.

How little this scene has changed today! Could young Jefferies step out of the pages of *Bevis*, that memorable account of his boyhood days, he could go straight to the ha-ha and look down to his beloved brook. Or jump into the meadow and peer up the crude, square opening in the wall where a rabbit once took cover. He could carve his name on the smooth bark of the beech or day-dream against the mulberry or the apple tree. Going back towards the rick-yard he would remember carving his initials, and those of his little brother Henry, scraped into the brickwork of the old house [the brick is now in the Museum]. Henry’s are the feeble effort of a young child, who grew bigger and stronger than his brother – and became a local skating and rowing champion – yet always remained loyal. In the book, Henry becomes ‘Mark’ and Richard becomes ‘Bevis’, (pronounced with a short ‘e’).



From a vantage point near the gate in Home Field, where the wood-pile used to be, and looking towards the road, the old house appears almost unaltered. Further away, and now outside the modern frontage, still stand pollard limes. To the right is the little cart-house and its tall chimney, then the twin pigsties and the steeply-pitched stable and hay-loft. The tool-shed is still there, but the big old open-sided thatched waggon-shed has gone along with the cow-sheds. All that remains of the cow-sheds are the stone bases for the wooden supports. The great elms fell victim of Dutch elm disease in 1975.

Let the visitor make himself comfortable and imagine again. The date is about 1859 and Richard, or ‘Bevis’ is ten. The little market town of Swindon, three miles away, is being extended around the new railway works, but Coate Hamlet is still unaffected. Nobody here has yet bought a ploughing engine, and the ring of hammer on anvil down by the bridge still tells of horse-shoes, gate hinges and fagging-hooks. A rhythmic “drubbing” sound comes from the dairy where Polly is working the wooden churn, a wooden barrel mounted end-over-end on a spindle.

A large flat packing-case has just been delivered to the farm. Bevis purloins the case and decides to use it as a raft. It is very heavy and he bribes the carter’s boy with the promise of sixpence (2½p) to hitch the carthorse to it, but the boy has been in trouble for pleasing Bevis before. They drag the case through the gateway into Home Field, through the next gate on the right and down the slope to the drinking-place, leaving a broad swathe in the mowing-grass all the way. Mark arrives and together they launch the raft which leaks badly. They bring clay from the reservoir mound and caulk the seams until, at last, it is water-tight. The carter’s boy has meanwhile been hauled away by the angry carter, but Mark and Bevis are too busy to notice.

Molly, from the ha-ha wall, tries in vain to summon the boys to dinner, fails and marches down to collect them. Later they take turn to float down the stream, while young pike and roach dash wildly up and down trying to slip past. They beach the raft after a few hours of this, and walk a hundred yards upstream, to where the wooden rails run across from bank to bank in the shade of the big hawthorn bushes. Just beyond is the hatch where water pours from beneath the mound. There is a deep pool here, beside which the boys relax. Jefferies recalled this place with pleasure:

“A broad, cool shadow from the trees had fallen over the hatch, for the afternoon had gone on, and the sun was declining behind them over the western hills. The thrushes sang in the ashes ... Afar in the mowing-grass the crane lifted his voice, for he talks more as the sun sinks. The swirling water went round under the fall with lines of white bubbles rising... The rushing and the coolness, and the song of the brook and the birds, and the sense of the sun sinking, stilled even Bevis and Mark a little while. They sat and listened and said nothing; the delicious brook filled their ears with music.”

Looking down at this spot today, it is difficult to visualise the old scene. The hatch has been replaced by a modern device, and a concrete flume covers the bank where the boys were sitting. The stream is a mere trickle nowadays. Below our feet, deep beneath the embankment and across the lake, still runs an old brick tunnel carrying the Cole brook along its ancient bed towards the Thames. This was devised to preserve cattle-drinking places down the valley when, in 1822, the reservoir was first filled as a top-up for the old Wilts and Berks Canal. But, down beside the concrete water-chutes, there are still one or two old willows and hawthorns which must have stood witness to Bevis' and Mark's reveries that summer afternoon – before they went to find the boy and pay him sixpence.

From here, Coate Farm looks like a tiny 19th century island, not yet swamped by a rising 20th century flood. And the ancient hedge running south from the garden suggests a link, a life-line almost, to the ageless security of the Downs. Young Bevis felt himself drawn to them, and to the sea and stars beyond. As Richard Jefferies he wrote an astonishing book, *The Story of my Heart*, in which he tried to explain his vision of nature and life as it came to him on Liddington Hill. Reading it, sensitive people may get a thrill of recognition as they see, spelt out, their own inexpressible feelings.

Bevis and Mark, driven to explore further afield, start on an expedition to circumnavigate the lake. Walking along the strand on the east side, they come to a place where the shore-line rises into a low cliff. The intrepid Bevis edges across its face while Mark walks around on the landward side. They pass a big tree near the shore, later called the Council Oak from its use as an H. Q. when a mock battle is mooted with the village lads.

Not far on is the old quarry with its thistle-clumps and piles of loose sand and the sheer cliff behind. They peck at it with pocket knives for a while. Just past the quarry a group of firs stands by a large bay, which they call *Fir Tree Gulf*. It was at the northern corner of this where Bevis's "Governor", or father, had taught them to swim. He had travelled and was the first, locally, to introduce the art. "Never seed nobody do thuck afore!", an old man had said, over and over again. It was in the Gulf, also, when teaching themselves to sail, that the boys discovered how to tack, and first managed to complete a circle. On the hill above stands a group of big old sycamores and, nearby a curious bowl-shaped depression in the ground. Here it was, during the wonderful battle, that Bevis' reserve forces waited and fought to victory with their backs to the

great trees. Here they shot a Moorcock with bow and arrow, skewering it to a tree-root on the south side of the gulf, and cooked it over a fire in the hollow.

And here, again. Little Charlie waved his cap every day to signal Bevis and Mark, who were living like savages on an island, that they had not been missed – having ostensibly gone off to stay with friends.

Round Fir Tree Gulf the boys reach a swamp where reed-grass rises twice their own height, and deep holes make progress difficult. Across the water from here lies the Waste, an area of green hummocks, ant-hills and scrub and, concealed in the bushes, a great grey boulder with curious markings – the biggest they had ever seen. They struggle out at last and swing over the high hedge bordering the swamp by Burderop Wood. Entering the wood they become disorientated and, emerging at last from a narrowcombe at the top of the wood, look down onto an expanse of leaves, Jefferies wrote:

The ash sprays touching each other formed a green surface beneath them – extending to the right and left – a green surface into which, every now and then a wood-pigeon plunged, closing his wings as the sea-birds dive into the sea. They sat in the shadow of the great beech and the wind, coming up over the wood, blew cool against their faces.

The boys get home at last via Hodson and the Gamekeeper's cottage, where an old lady gives them gooseberries and a girl escorts them towards Chiseldon. "There's the windmill", said the girl, pointing to the tower-like building. "You go tow-ward he. He be on the road. Then you go to the right still you comes to the hanging-post. Then you go to the left and that'll take ee straight whoam." Big Jack, the young farmer who appears in several of Jefferies books, gives them a lift back along the white, flint Marlborough road. It takes him three minutes to find enough money to pay the turn-pike on the way!

Bevis and Mark have many adventures through the original three volumes, growing in years, experience and feelings – although, it seems, it all happens in one glorious summer. Who can blame Jefferies if *Bevis* is a trifle long, when his own end was only five short years away. He returned here through his writing and lived the best parts again. In the last page of *Bevis* he tells us of his love for Coate, the countryside, the sea and the stars and invites us to share his feeling.

On their way home they paused a moment under the Great Oak at the top of Home Field, and looked back. The whole south burned with stars. There was a roar in the oak like the thunder of the sea. The sky was black, black as velvet, the black north had come down, and the stars shone and burned as if the wind reached and fanned them into flame.

Large Sirius flashed; vast Orion strode the sky, lording the heavens with his sword. A scintillation rushed across from the zenith to the southern horizon. The black north held down the buds, but there was a force in them that must push out in leaf as Arcturus rose in the east. Listening to the loud roar of the oak as the strength of the north wind filled them – "I should like to go straight to the real great sea like the wind", said Mark. "We must go to the great sea" said Bevis. "Look at Orion!" The wind went seawards, and the stars are always over the ocean.

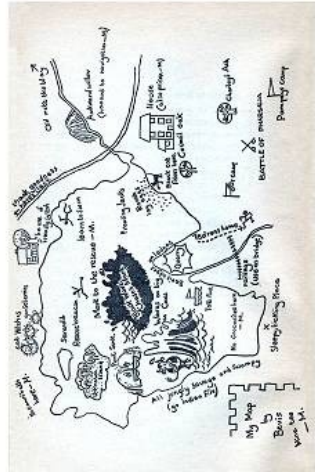
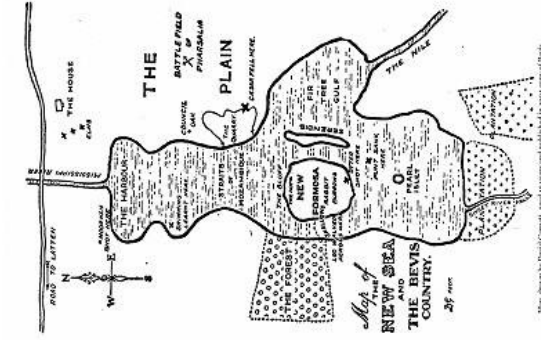
THE COUNCIL OAK

The 'Council Oak', is an ancient tree, growing next to Coate Water lake. The tree featured in the mock battle staged by local boys on the 'Battlefield' of Phaulstona' in Richard Jefferies' children's adventure story, *Bevis*.

Some stood by the edge of the waters, for the oak was within a few yards of the New Sea, and made ducks and drakes. Bevis had convened a council of all those who wanted to join the war ... The oak was chosen as it was known to everyone. It grew alone in the meadow, and far from any path ...

[*Bevis*, Ch 14]

The tree's position was marked on maps that were published in several editions of the book.



Around 1990, this magnificent tree suffered from a natural and rare condition known as 'limb drop' whereby it lost its crown. Swindon Borough Council considered that the tree posed a danger and reduced the height further. The photos show the tree just before the damage and at 2004.

The plaque, pictured to the right was replaced in 2006 thanks to Dorset Technical College.

