

WALK AROUND THE



RICHARD JEFFERIES was born at Coate Farm in 1848 and spent much of his boyhood roaming the fields and woodlands around Coate Water. During a tragically short life he wrote many books about the local people and natural history, particularly fascinating for their chronicles of the last days of a rustic community before mechanisation drove workers off the land. *BEVIS*, one of his last books, follows the adventures of young Jefferies in an almost magical place of unspoilt nature and boyish imagination. Despite development, many of the scenes of his countryside still exist and can be relived today.



This walk to Coate Farm and around Coate Water identifies some of the features mentioned by Jefferies with extracts from the original texts.



The walk takes approximately 2 hours.

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Begin at the car park in Coate Water Country Park. Head towards the main road, following the stream on the right. Turn right along main road and go 50 metres to the bridge where two streams meet. These have been straightened since Jefferies' time. Also note the nearby Sun Inn twice rebuilt (in the 1890s and 1937).

[1] Once, some five and twenty years ago, a sportsman startled a great bird out of the spot where the streams join, and shot it ... It was the last visit of bitterns to the place, even then they were rare. (*Wildlife in a Southern County*, Ch 12)

... on the Overboro' road ... was a pleasant roadside inn, where, under the sign of The Sun, very good ale was sold (*Round About a Great Estate*, Ch 4)

Walk on 80 metres to Coate Farm House, part of which is now the Richard Jefferies Museum:

[2] Wick farmhouse is thatched, and has many gables hidden with ivy. In these broad expanses of thatch, on the great 'chimney tuns', as country folk call them, and in the ivy, tribes of birds have taken up their residence.

... The window of a room in which I used to sleep overlooked the orchard, and there was a pear tree ... some boughs of which came up to the window-sill. (*Wild Life in a Southern County*, Ch 8)



Many other descriptions of the house occur in:

The Old House at Coate, Bevis: The Story of a Boy, Wood Magic, The Amateur Poacher, Amaryllys at the Fair, Wild Life in a Southern County, The Life of the



Fields.

++++ Optional detour of 1kilometre along Coate Lane behind the Spotted Cow to the milestone featured in *Meadow Thoughts*:



[3] The old house stood by the silent country road, secluded by many a long, long mile, and yet again secluded within the great walls of the garden. Often and often I rambled up to the milestone which stood under an oak, to look at the chipped inscription low down--'To London, 79 Miles.' So far away, you see, that the very inscription was cut at the foot of the stone, since no one would be likely to want that information. It was half hidden by docks and nettles, despised and unnoticed (*The Life of the Fields, Meadow Thoughts*).

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Retrace steps back to the Sun Inn and through the field behind the pub car-park. This is Brook Field. Along the eastern edge of the field is an ancient hedge mentioned in several of Jefferies' books. The hedge has been greatly thinned out, but an old ash tree from his time remains:

[4] In the meadow ... is a thick hedge, the end of which comes right up to the apple trees, being only separated by the ha-ha wall and a ditch. This hedge, dividing two meadows is about two hundred yards long, and well-grown with a variety of underwood, hazel, willow, maple, hawthorn, blackthorn, elder etc., and studded with some elms and ashes and a fine horse-chestnut. [*Wild Life in a Southern County*, Ch.9]

Cross Brook Field to a bridge just beyond the old wooden barn [formerly, an agricultural museum] and through the car park to a modern sluice in the stream.

This is the site of the old wooden hatch known to Jefferies. An ancient willow still stands nearby:

[5] A broad cool shadow from the trees had fallen over the hatch ... Afar in the mowing-grass the crake lifted his voice ... The rushing and the coolness, and the songs of the brook and the birds, and the sense of the sun sinking, stilled even Bevis and Mark ... They sat and listened, and said nothing; the delicious brook filled their ears with music. [*Bevis*, Ch 3]

Climb the embankment up to Coate Water lake. See Burderop Wood in the south-west, and Liddington Castle [an iron age hill fort] 4 kilometres to the south-east. (Described in *Wild Life in a Southern County* and a favourite haunt; also in *The Story of my Heart*). The roof of the farmhouse visible in the next field to the east is Day House Farm where Jessie Baden [Richard Jefferies' wife] was born. Bevis exclaims:

'we will find a new sea where no one has ever been before. Look! There it is, is it not wonderful?' [*Bevis* Ch 4]

Walk to the left to the corner of the lake:

[6] They dashed open the gate and ran down to the beach. It was a rough descent over large stones ... Mark fell on his knees ... and drew out two roach, one of which slipped from his fingers ... There were crowds upon crowds of fish... [*Bevis*, Ch 4]

Follow the path leading south next to the lake. After a short distance the edge of the water becomes a low cliff:

[7] Bevis, leading the way, came to a place where the strand, till then so low and shelving, suddenly became steep ... The water came to the bottom of the cliff, and there did not seem any way past it except by going away from the edge into the field, and so round it ... Bevis, with a frown on his forehead, stood looking at the cliff, having determined that he would not go round ... [*Bevis*, Ch 4]

Continue south through a children's play area. Near the water's edge reach an ancient tree, drastically reduced in height. This is 'The Council Oak', the tree featured in a mock battle staged by Bevis and local boys on the 'Battlefield of Pharsalia':

[8] Some stood by the edge of the water, 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 ... This oak was chosen as it was known to everyone. It grew alone in the meadow, and far from any path ... (*Bevis*, Ch 14)

Walk on a further 200 metres and reach the site of an old sand quarry. This is marked by a shallow depression backed by a low sandstone cliff. The quarry was described in *Bevis*, where it featured in several adventures.



[9] They left the shore awhile, and went into the quarry, and winding in and out the beds of nettles and thistles climbed up a slope, where they sank at every step ankle deep in sand. It led to a broad platform of sand, above which the precipice rose straight to the roots of the grass above. (*Bevis*, Ch 5)



A short walk further along the path leads to the place where Jefferies' father taught him to swim.

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[10] He took them to a place near the old quarry ... in one corner of Fir-Tree Gulf, where the bottom was of sand, and shelved gently for a long way out; a line of posts and rails running into the water, to prevent cattle straying ... (*Bevis*, Ch 9)

Turn left up the path to the steel railings. About 10m over the fence, there is a bowl-like depression in the ground. The hollow featured in the mock war and it is also where Bevis cooked a moorcock that he shot by the feeder stream [Ch 12]. The stream entered at the point now occupied by the southern end of the modern bridge. Its course can still be seen among the trees

[11] Off ran Mark, Fred, Bill, and the rest, and making a little circuit, got into the bowl-like hollow. The crowd with Scipio Cecil was still thrusting Pompey and his men before them, but Ted had worked himself free by main force, and he and Val Crassus, side by side, were fighting as they were forced backwards. Step by step they went backwards, but disputing every inch, straight back for the hollow where Mark and his party were crouching. In half a minute Ted would certainly be taken. (*Bevis*, Ch 17)



Retrace steps and cross the concrete bridge. The stretch of water to the left is a nature reserve created in the 1970s and not open to the public. There is a large heronry and a wide variety of water fowl. At the south end of the bridge turn left, following the signs for Hodson. The trees on the right side of the path stand along the course of the old canal feeder stream, drained dry by new excavation. 50 metres along see large oaks contemporary with Jefferies. About 260 metres from the concrete bridge reach an opening in the trees, and the old brick bridge across the dry stream bed known as Cicely's Bridge after a character in Jefferies' *Round About a Great Estate*. [The footpath/cyclepath continues over the motorway to Chiseldon where Jefferies married Jessie Baden.]

[12] But on entering a gateway in it you will find a bridge over a brook, which for some distance flows with a hedge on either side. The low parapet of the bridge affords a seat ... whence in spring it is pleasant to look up the brook; for the banks sloping down from the bushes to the water are yellow with primroses, and hung over with willow boughs. As the brook is straight, the eye can see under these a long way up; and presently a kingfisher, bright with azure and ruddy hues, comes down the brook, flying just above the surface ... (*Round About a Great Estate*, Ch 2)

Go back to the concrete bridge. Continue following the path adjacent to the lakeside. After a short distance the path enters a low-lying area which in Jefferies' days was an almost impenetrable swamp:

[13] They travelled on some way and found the ground almost level and so thick with sedges and grass and rushes that they walked in a forest of green up to their waists. The water was a long way off beyond the weeds. They tried to go down to it, but the ground got very soft and their feet sank into it, it was covered with horsetails there, acres and acres of them, and after these shallow water hidden among floating weeds. (*Bevis*, Ch 5)



Continue along the footpath that crosses a wooden bridge and reaches Broome Manor Lane. [Broome Manor Lane leads across the motorway to Hodson and the Gamekeeper's cottage.] The woodland across the road is another nature reserve. Coate Water and the distant quarry can be glimpsed through the gaps in the trees to the right. The path crosses another small wooden bridge across a rivulet:

[14] The raft glided out of the channel into a small open bay, free from weeds, and with woods each side. Where it narrowed a little stream fell down in two short leaps, having worn its way through the sandstone ... The sides of the worn channel were green with moss and, beneath, but just above the surface of the water, long cool hart's-tongue fern grew ... 'How sweet and clear it looks!' said Bevis, 'Shall we call it Sweet River?' (*Bevis*, Ch 41)

Follow the main path round to the right. After 30 metres turn right along a very narrow, and sometimes muddy track through the woodland, that after about 40 metres opens out to a small bay by the lake. At the southern end of this area visit a large sarsen boulder in the nettles by a goat willow bush:

[15] Bevis wanted to explore the Waste, and especially to look at the great grey boulder, and so they went on and landed among the sedges ... The ponderous stone was smooth, as if it had been ground with emery, and there were little circular basins or cups drilled in it. With a stick Bevis felt all round and came to a place where the stick could be pushed in two or three feet under the stone ... 'This is where the treasure is', 'And the serpent and the magic lamp that has been burning ages and ages ...' (*Bevis*, Ch 42)

Go back to the path and continue north, passing the golf course on the left that was cornfields in Jefferies' time. There are some huge ash trees on the right that Jefferies would have known. The path enters an avenue of young limes. At the end of the limes there is a narrow track to the lake through brambles and nettles. A low, overgrown island near here may have been the more prominent island described in *Bevis*, where the boys camped for several days, though it bears little resemblance, and was almost certainly invention.

The main path continues past the pitch and crazy golf – the island in the lake is a new construction. At the north end of the lake there is a paddling pool,

café and toilets. The old concrete diving stand, much loved by the ducks, is a listed building.



For the fit there is a fine view from the top of the artificial hill just north-west of the main car park. A large slab of Swindon stone, bearing a bronze direction marker, indicates various features of the landscape important to Richard Jefferies, and a dedication to Mrs Frances Gay, a long-time secretary of the Richard Jefferies Society.



Coate Farm is owned by Swindon Council. It now houses the Richard Jefferies Museum that is managed by volunteers from the Richard Jefferies Museum Trust. Go to their website for more information:

<https://richardjefferies.org/>

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Published by The Richard Jefferies Society, 2007 (updated 2025).



