

# Deddington Library, opened by Tolkien in 1956, under threat from OCC

'Books besieged by a great many powerful embattled enemies':

J R R Tolkien at Deddington Library, December 1956



"Nowadays books are besieged by a great many powerful embattled enemies, some of whom have been strongly entrenched, and to be here at the opening of a strong point from which troops can be sent out against those enemies is a great honour." Any schoolboy who noticed a similarity between those words spoken by Prof. J.R.R. Tolkien at the opening of the Deddington Branch Library and an adventure story he had recently heard would not be far wrong. For Prof. Tolkien is the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, a remarkable fairy romance for which he invented 700,000 words, and which has in its three volumes been broadcast extensively on the BBC schools programme. Prof. Tolkien was speaking after the official opening by Mrs Lionel Hitchens, formerly the chairman of the Oxfordshire Education Committee.

## Mind without Food

Libraries, he said, were to blame for him, because of the fascination of finding fairy stories on the same shelves as primers of the Gothic language. "Out of these things have come my books," he said. "The wealth of books to be found here is food for the mind, and everyone knows that for the stomach to go without food for a long time is bad, but for the mind to go without food is even worse." He concluded with a verse from one of his volumes in the musical fairy-like language that he invented.

## Mobile Library

The library will also be the headquarters of a brand new Austin 3-ton library truck which will carry 2,000 books around the Deddington area, including villages

within a 10-mile radius. Arrangements for the visit of the mobile library to villages are not completed yet due to petrol rationing.'

Two aspects of the above extract (from the archives of the *Banbury Advertiser*, 19 December 1956) are striking: Mrs Lionel Hitchens appears to be a more important personage than Tolkien who clearly at this time hadn't achieved his cult status; and the petrol rationing was a temporary measure as fuel was in short supply following the Suez Crisis in November 1956. Even in times of national austerity, the opening of a branch library is significant enough to go ahead. How times have changed!

## Tolkien Letters

Two letters from Prof Tolkien relating to his visit are still in existence, one accepting the invitation to speak 'though I dislike talking (in this sense), lecturing, or addressing a gathering' and the second after the opening in which he speaks of being 'depressed at my wretched and inadequate performance. I do not think it could merit any fee and I should feel it much more suitable that I should present a volume to the Deddington Library in memory of a pleasant occasion ... a copy of my next work (if any), supposing that it seemed worthy of or suitable for inclusion?' Sadly no such volume has found its way to Deddington.

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See overleaf for transcripts of the letters.

76 Sandfield Road,  
Deddington,  
Oxford.  
TEL. 6189

Thursday, November 22nd.  
1956.

Dear Miss Stanley-Smith,

Fortunately I think I can manage Friday 14 ~~th~~ December. I say 'fortunately', because though I dislike talking (in this sense), lecturing, or addressing a gathering, I should have been sorry to refuse your invitation; you sugar the central pill so attractively. I should be delighted to visit Deddington and have lunch with you; and I fear that the fee will be more than ample for the performance. Short? Ten minutes? A quarter of an hour?

I will contact you later, if I may, on the sort of thing likely to be most appropriate.

As for my own writings: beside the two you name there is *Farmer Giles of Ham* (Allen & Unwin), specially appropriate, since it is localized in Oxfordshire. Other poems and stories are, I fear, either scattered in periodicals or a.p., and almost inaccessible. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Clarendon Press), since it is an edition of a medieval poem, would I imagine, be regarded as too technical, specially as I have not yet published the translation which has twice been broadcast.

It would be most kind if you could send a copy, as I have none of my own now; and have ...

Consequence seldom visited Deddington, and pastedown yours, though I said often to do so.

Yours sincerely  
J.R.R. Tolkien.

P.S. I wonder if Mrs Lionel Hitchens is the mother of Miss Phoebe Hitchens, whom I have met since my daughter knew her. She was, I think, the cousin (?) of the woman novelist of the same name (*Wraith & Cruise*, etc.).

J.R.R.

The original letters were lent to OCC Museum Service in 2000 for an exhibition in Oxford of the Inklings, a group of literary enthusiasts who encouraged the writing of fantasy. We thought they were lost but they have only just recently been returned

76 Sandfield Road,  
Deddington,  
Oxford.  
TEL. 6189

19 December 1956.

Dear Miss Stanley-Smith,

Even making allowances for your kindness and courtesy, your letter relieved me, as I was depressed at my wretched and inadequate performance. Even so, I do not think it could merit any fee, and I should feel it much more suitable that I should present a volume to the Deddington Library in memory of a pleasant occasion. However, possibly the best way of doing this would be to promise a copy of my next work (if any), supposing that it seemed worthy of or suitable for inclusion?

Thank you. Yours sincerely  
J.R.R. Tolkien.

76 Sandfield Road  
Headington  
Oxford.  
Tel. 61639

Thursday, November 22nd  
1956

Dear Miss Stanley-Smith

Fortunately I think I can manage Friday 14 December. I say 'fortunately', because though I dislike talking (in this sense), lecturing or addressing a gathering, I should have been sorry to refuse your invitation: you sugar the central pill so attractively. I should be delighted to visit Deddington and have lunch with you; and I fear that the fee will be more than ample for the performance. Short? Ten minutes? A quarter of an hour?

I will consult you later, if I may, on the sort of thing likely to be most appropriate.

As for my own writings: beside the two you name there is Farmer Giles of Ham (Allen & Unwin) specially appropriate, since it is localized in Oxfordshire. Other poems and stories are, I fear, either scattered in periodicals or o.p. and await collection. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Clarendon Press), since it is an edition of a mediaeval poem, would I imagine be regarded as too technical, specially as I have not yet published the translation which has twice been broadcast.

It would be most kind of you if you could send a car, as I have none of my own; and have as a consequence seldom visited Deddington in post-war years, though I used often to do so.

Yours sincerely

J.R.R. Tolkien

P.S. I wonder if Mrs Lionel Hitchens is the mother of Miss Phoebe Hitchens, whom I have met, since my daughter knows her. She was, I think, the cousin (?) of the woman novelist of the same name (Noughts & Crosses ... etc.).

J.R.R.T.

76 Sandfield Road  
Headington  
Oxford.  
Tel. 616397

19 December 1956

Dear Miss Stanley-Smith

Even making allowances for your kindness and courtesy, your letter relieved me, as I was depressed at my wretched and inadequate performance. Even so, I do not think it could merit any fee, and I should feel it much more suitable that I should present a volume to the Deddington Library in memory of a pleasant occasion. However, possibly the best way of doing this would be to promise a copy of my next work (if any), supposing that it seemed worthy of or suitable for inclusion?

Thank you

Yours sincerely

J.R.R. Tolkien