

On J.R.R. Tolkien at the Butts, near Newcastle-under-Lyme, in
September 1915.

In late July 2016 I encountered a press-release for a forthcoming local history exhibition, set to open in the town of Stafford as *J.R.R. Tolkien & Staffordshire 1915-1918: A Literary Landscape*.¹ I live in the North Staffordshire city of Stoke-on-Trent, and I was especially interested to read in the press-release that Tolkien had completed a key part of his military training a few miles away at Newcastle-under-Lyme. I had previously been aware of Tolkien's several associations with places in the middle part of Staffordshire during the First World War, and later with Stoke-on-Trent during his retirement years in the 1960s.² This meant I was delighted to learn that he had also briefly encountered our 'Potteries'³ district in the late summer of 1915.

¹ This medium-sized touring show would have its premiere at the county's main Shire Hall Gallery in the centre of the county-town of Stafford, from 25th October – 16th November 2016. Organised by the Haywood Society, with organisational support by the Staffordshire Libraries & Arts Service and the Museum of Cannock Chase, and funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This show has since continued to tour widely to local libraries and town museums. At summer 2018 it continues to tour.

² From 1960 through to the early 1970s Tolkien spent many holidays with his son, who lived at 104 Hartshill Road, at the top end of Stoke town in the city of Stoke-on-Trent. His son had lived there from 1957, arriving just a few years before his father retired as a university lecturer in 1959. We know, from Tolkien's surviving published letters, that the senior Tolkien spent the summer of 1960 in Stoke with his son, and many summer holidays thereafter. We also know from his letters that he spent winter holidays here, in the early 1970s. Today Northcote House, 104 Hartshill Road, Stoke-on-Trent, has become a young children's day-nursery. The senior Tolkien knew the war poet Major Alan Rook, a former student who then lived nearby in Sir Oswald Mosley's former house at Wootton near Ellastone, in the moorlands of North Staffordshire. One then has to wonder if the 'Major' at 'Wootton' may have lent their names to the late Tolkien story "Smith of Wootton Major" (written 1965, published 1967), a tale which is set in a very similar country house.

³ This town is one that, together with its abutting neighbour Stoke-on-Trent, forms a district commonly referred to as 'The Potteries' or 'The Staffordshire Potteries'. The

I then located a good online picture of a large pictorial map made for this new *J.R.R. Tolkien & Staffordshire* exhibition.⁴ Each of its twelve sections depicted a place in Staffordshire associated with Tolkien, and on one of these I could make out the words: “Musketry Camp, Newcastle-under-Lyme, 27th-30th September 1915”, below a pen drawing of the town’s Barracks. Yet I doubted that this building could have been the actual site of a “Musketry Camp” — because my previous research in local history had led me to look at the Barracks,⁵ in relation to a now-disused shooting-range a few miles to the north at Ravenscliffe.⁶ I also knew the modern Barracks via personal visits. With these doubts in my mind, I set out to discover any clues to

name refers to the well-known manufacture of pottery in the district. Despite widespread misconceptions, North Staffordshire is not and never has been in ‘the North’ of England. It is part of the West Midlands.

⁴ Hannah Reynolds, map titled “J.R.R. Tolkien’s Staffordshire 1915-1918”, made for the touring exhibition *J.R.R. Tolkien & Staffordshire 1915-1918: A Literary Landscape*, which opened at the county gallery on 25th October 2016. Her map covers all the known Staffordshire locations for Tolkien, with sketches and dates, with these centred around an outline map of wartime Cannock Chase in mid Staffordshire. I presume that the Newcastle-under-Lyme dates on the map must come from unpublished local research by David Robbie, a key organiser for the exhibition. My thanks to Robbie for making this information available via the exhibition.

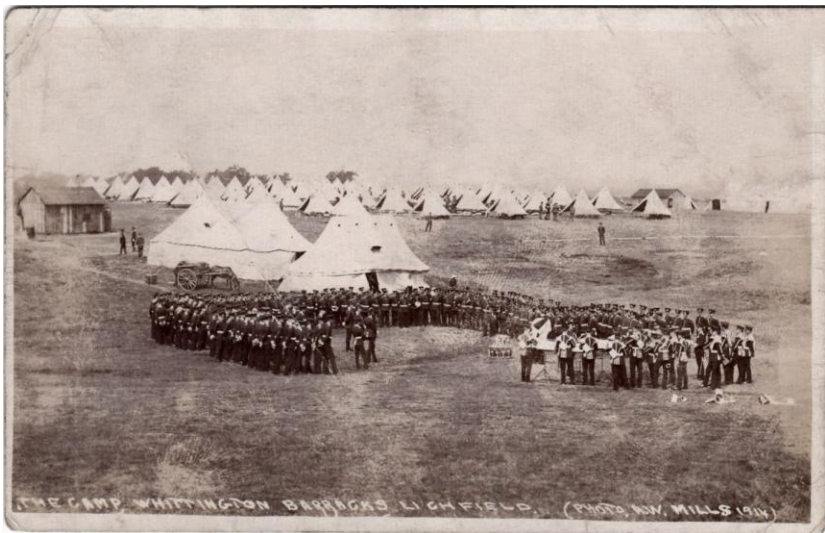
⁵ A full account of the history of the local volunteer forces can be found in: Andrew Thornton, *The Territorial Force in Staffordshire, 1908-1915*, University of Birmingham PhD thesis, Centre for First World War Studies, 2004. This offers one vivid insight into the supportive mood in the town of Lichfield, which Tolkien would have encountered when on local leave from Whittington Heath in 1915. One young soldier in training wrote: “I think Tamworth people are a miserable lot. Since we have been in this country [mid Staffordshire] have not received a single thing, not even a *Herald* [newspaper from them]. I don’t know what we should have done if it wasn’t for the Lichfield people. They are sending something almost every week from Lichfield towns-folk. They send books and papers and footballs, mouth organs etc.” — from Corporal S. Norton, letter dated 11th April 1915, quoted by Thornton on page 134 of his PhD.

⁶ The earthworks of that range are located near the foot of Ravenscliffe, just over the northern border of the city of Stoke-on-Trent. They are now hidden away in a small dark and pathless wood that has grown up above them, at the south end of Bathpool Park. If anyone wishes to experience or film in a ‘Mirkwood’, that is the place!

exactly where Tolkien's "musketry camp" might *actually* have been held. I began by determining the exact Tolkien timeline for the time period and consulted various maps and local documents.



1920s postcard of 'Hut Barracks, Lichfield M' lines, Whittington Heath near Lichfield. Second Lieutenant Tolkien, having completed initial training at Bedford, and arrived at Whittington in August to join his battalion of 2,000 men, 13th Battallion, Lancashire Fusiliers. Whittington was a basic training camp and Tolkien found superior officers there were well-matched to dealing with raw recruits.



'Church Parade' at Whittington Heath, 1914.

I found that Tolkien was then stationed at Whittington Heath camp in mid Staffordshire, in the West Midlands of England. This was a lowland gorse heath long used by the military and scouting groups around Birmingham, and it is similar in terrain to Cannock Chase where he would be encamped during his later training. Whittington would not have offered Tolkien much of a view, but the memoir book *Brothers in War* (2006) by Michael Walsh evokes the place in 1915, and remembers that beyond the hut-roofs a soldier would often glimpse the three soaring pinnacle-towers of Lichfield Cathedral.⁷ Tolkien was at Whittington to undertake the usual basic military training, which included learning to command and drill his platoon and adopt the correct procedures for handling and operating a rifle and small arms.⁸ Tolkien later recalled that this time was filled with many dreary and hot weeks of summer training, but a moment came when his platoon's rifle training needed to be tested. This was to be done at Newcastle-under-Lyme, and for the first time with live ammunition. Having spent a weekend's leave saying goodbye to his close friends in the TCBS at a hotel in nearby Lichfield,⁹ it must have been early on Monday 27th September 1915¹⁰ that Tolkien set off into North

⁷ Michael Walsh, *Brothers in War*, Ebury Press, 2006, page 109.

⁸ Basic training also included the making of trenches and their drill, and map-reading.

⁹ I refer to what Tolkien biographers refer to as the 'Council of Lichfield', in which the TCBS met up at Dr. Johnson's house in Lichfield and then repaired to the George Hotel, Lichfield, Saturday 25th to Sunday 26th September 1915. For more details see: John Garth, *Tolkien and The Great War: The Threshold Of Middle-earth*, 2005.

¹⁰ I must take it as read that the dates for Newcastle-under-Lyme on the 2016 map for J.R.R. Tolkien & Staffordshire 1915-1918: *A Literary Landscape* are correct.

Staffordshire from his Whittington camp. His method of travel is unknown, but it seems reasonable to assume that Tolkien led a route march with his detachment of uniformed men, the distance being around twenty miles across a rural country on fairly direct lanes and roads. The size of his detachment is unknown, but presumably he was at the head of his full platoon from the 13th Reserve Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers. A platoon then consisted of about 50 men, under the command of a Second-Lieutenant — in this case J.R.R. Tolkien, assisted by a Sergeant and possibly his batman (an officer's personal *valet*).¹¹ Garth suggests “some sixty men” for Tolkien's platoon,¹² which if correct might indicate either 1915's increased need for throughput of recruits or a slight lack of suitable supervising officers for the Battalion.

What type of men did Tolkien command? In a 1941 letter Tolkien recalled having “a deep sympathy and feeling for ‘the tommy’, especially the plain soldier from the agricultural counties”.¹³ This comment might suggest many men in his platoon were from rural districts, and as such they probably especially glad to be out in the late-summer countryside for a day.

¹¹ Jonathan Boff, “Military structures and ranks. The British army in 1914”, 29th Jan 2014, British Library website ‘The War Machine’, at <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/military-structures-and-ranks>

¹² John Garth, *Tolkien and The Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*, 2005, page 94.

¹³ Humphrey Carpenter (Ed.), *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 2014, Page 54.



eBay picture card, posted to France from Penkridge. The soldiers are practice-digging trenches, in preparation for the front-lines. Indicative of the type of soldiers Tolkien would have been in command of.

If Tolkien and his men marched away from camp rather than took a train — as seems very likely since they were still doing basic physical training — then their logical half-way halt would have been near the most suitable crossing of the River Trent. For those unfamiliar with this district I should point out that the Trent is here still fairly near its source in the Staffordshire Moorlands, and is not the vast leviathan of a river that it later becomes. At this river crossing Tolkien no doubt kept an eye out, on his O.S. map and from the road, for the imposing early Mercian hill-fort of King Wulfhere (657-674 A.D.).¹⁴ The young Tolkien was fascinated by early Mercia, and the fort's hill is

¹⁴ For the documentary Latin evidence that the hill-fort was indeed Wulfhere's — probably serving as a fortified summer hunting palace which also usefully deterred any summer raiding-bands from slipping across the nearby Welsh border, see: "A few jottings on some Staffordshire Camps, *North Staffordshire Naturalists' Field Club, Annual Report and Transactions*, 1892.

difficult to miss since it dominates the ancient river-crossing at Darlaston, a few miles north of the small market town of Stone. Incidentally, the Venerable Bede tells us that Wulfhere's chief priest and Bishop was named Jaruman, a name which may interest some readers since it is so similar to Tolkien's Saruman.¹⁵ One wonders if Tolkien gave some of his more interested soldiers a few minutes of impromptu 'history lesson' on Wulfhere, Jaruman and Mercia in general, while they had their half-way rest?

Having gone on across the Trent, Tolkien and his men would then have marched northward through the increasingly impressive wooded estate landscape around the great hall and lake at Trentham. A few miles further on they would have stuck north-west on the road in order to approach the town of Newcastle-under-Lyme. In 1915 the detachment would have been able to use the lanes and roads without much fear of speeding motor traffic. They were also lucky to travel on the 27th, as weather records show that the 28th was very wet across the whole of England and they would have been soaked. If this march was Tolkien's first real experience of 'live' long-distance route-finding and command — without oversight by superior ranks — then he was especially lucky with the weather.

But where *exactly* did his detachment arrive for their "Musketry Camp"? I previously mentioned the 2016 exhibition map made by

¹⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of England*. I believe I may be the first to suggest this, and have not found it noted elsewhere.

Hannah Reynolds. Her excellent map represents Newcastle-under-Lyme with a drawing of the front elevation of the town centre's Territorial Force Barracks. I already knew that this Barracks served a local militia, one specialising in rifles.¹⁶ Yet it was my initial feeling that the town-centre Barracks could not have been where the firing of the “musketry training” was held. I have visited the town-centre Barracks a number of times, and I knew that there was no space there, or at the sides, for a long rifle range either indoor or outdoor. To have had young men fire their first ever live rounds of ammunition in the nearby town parks, or up on the nearby High School grounds, would have been a hazard to public safety.

Where then was Tolkien's musketry camp? I found the answer given in the book *Gooch of Spalding, Memoirs of Edward Henry Gooch 1885-1962*. Gooch had been a military man and his memoirs were kindly formatted and published by his grandson in 2010. Gooch gives the exact details of the Newcastle-under-Lyme range and its relationship to the camp at Lichfield in 1915...

“Towards the end of the interview, the adjutant remarked, “Well now, I have got to punish you [Gooch] in some way. How would you like to

¹⁶ The association with rifles had been of long-standing. In Newcastle-under-Lyme the Rifle Volunteers were replaced by the Territorial Force in 1907. By 1908 the Barracks was home to G Company of the 5th North Staffordshire Regiment, and remained so at the outbreak of the war in 1914. For a wider study of the rifle volunteers movement see: Ian F. W. Beckett, *Riflemen Form: A Study of the Rifle Volunteer Movement 1859-1908*, Pen & Sword Military, 2007. As the very real threat of socialism grew, by 1914 there were also many less-official rifle clubs in England, such as those of the Empire League of Freedom.

command the Butts at Newcastle-under-Lyme?” giving a knowing wink as he said it. [...] “There was no [rifle] range at [Whittington Heath, near] Lichfield and officers and men of the division went to Newcastle to fire their course [i.e.: to test their training course by using live ammunition] before proceeding overseas. Officers came with detachments for a week’s musketry, then returned to their battalion, another lot taking their place. There was a competent sergeant-major [stationed at the Butts] to arrange everything, which relieved the officer of much to worry about.”¹⁷

Such was Gooch’s memory of the camp in early 1915. Further reading of the book showed that Gooch was in command of the Butts from the spring until July of that year, when he was sent to France. Tolkien would thus have met Gooch’s replacement in late September 1915, but I have been unable to discover this subsequent commander’s name or character. However I think we can safely assume that the Butts remained much the same as it had been earlier that same year — brisk, loud and bustling with alert young men on their way to war. Though it would have been rather dampened, during Tolkien’s week there, by the heavy downpours of rain which had occurred on the day after his arrival. In terms of the exact amount of time spent there, Gooch’s memory of “a week’s musketry” is probably correct, but some short settling-in time at either end of the week must have been devoted to setting up and then striking the men’s camp. Other than Gooch’s

¹⁷ Bruce Watson (Ed.), *Gooch of Spalding, Memoirs of Edward Henry Gooch 1885-1962: Presented by His Grandson, Bruce Watson*, 2010, Kindle ebook edition. Unpaginated. Also available in paperback from iUniverse, at 2018.

book, there is no wartime record or photograph of the Butts camp that I can discover.¹⁸

The site of Tolkien's musketry camp is thus called "the Butts", and is located about two miles south-west of Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre. My further research showed that the site had first become a musketry range in 1877 when the Sneyd family estate had given...

"land for the Butts, a rifle-range near or on Westlands farm, Newcastle-under-Lyme"¹⁹

Knowing the exact location, it then seems quite possible that Tolkien never saw the Barracks building in Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre, since wartime bell-tents and mess-tents were the likely accommodation in late September 1915. On the other hand, perhaps there were a few mornings when the camp's junior officers went over to the Barracks for some specialist indoor instruction in handling advanced weapons? It seems unlikely that such untested young officers would have been invited over for anything more, such as a welcoming regimental dinner. Most of the holders of the Barracks, then G Company of the 5th North Staffordshire Regiment, had been sent to France in early 1915²⁰ and by late summer of that year they were

¹⁸ There is a circa 1909 picture of a Staffordshire Yeomanry Camp on the adjacent Keele Park, but that is probably not the Butts.

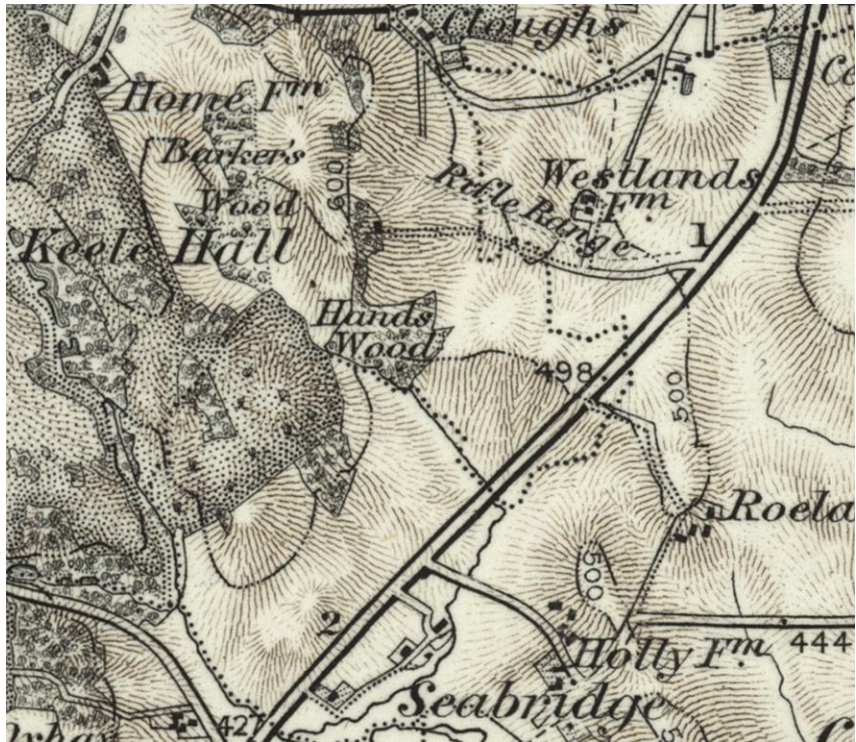
¹⁹ The nearby Keele University Special Collections and Archives holds the 'Sneyds of Keele Hall collection' (Ref code: GB 172 S). This includes a "1877 Plan, land at the Butts, a rifle-range near or on Westlands farm, Newcastle-under-Lyme."

²⁰ Alan MacDonald, *"A Lack of Offensive Spirit?": The 46th (North Midland) Division at Gommecourt*, 1st July 1916, Iona Books, 2008, page 9.

engaged in the heaviest sort of fighting.²¹ Thus the idea of giving regimental dinners to visiting junior officers must have been far from the minds of local people in late September 1915. The question of ‘was Tolkien at the Barracks?’ may seem an important one to local town-centre tourism promoters, but we shall probably never know if he saw the Barracks or not — unless perhaps some dusty daily log-book from 1915 is one day be discovered in an archive.

Gooch’s memoirs seem to wryly imply that his new command at the Butts was not very demanding work, which might imply the camp was small in numbers. If so, one then imagines perhaps 500 men, or 10 platoons, rotating around various tests on the two ranges. But the camp may well have been larger. For instance, Tolkien’s Battalion alone had 2,000 men, and to “fire their course” at the rate of just 500 men a week would have taken a month. Thus 1,000 men or 20 platoons per week might have been nearer the mark in late summer 1915, meaning the whole Battalion could “fire” and thus complete the musketry course in two weeks. Whatever the throughput, we can assume that by late 1914 the camp had added several large turfed bunkers to hold the vast amount of ammunition needed for such continual firing.

²¹ Richard Ault, “‘Potters forever’ the cry on North Staffs’ bloodiest day”, *The Sentinel* newspaper, 10th October 2017.



'O.S. One-inch, 1885-1903 – Hills'. The lines of the Rifle Range seen as dashed lines just below the label Westlands Farm. The road running into the top-right of the map goes on into Newcastle-under-Lyme.

There is a good O.S. map to be found in the public domain (see above), showing the basic alignments of the Butts in their landscape context. By carefully laying the above map over a modern satellite image²² one can show that the firing lines of the rifle and pistol ranges now sit under a sedate 1920s housing estate, although some of the line of the longer rifle range currently runs through and along the southern edge of the grounds of the local Westlands Primary school. The school is off-limits to the public today, but those who wish to visit

²² The side-by-side tracking at maps.nls.uk is obviously slightly “off”.

surviving Tolkien sites in Birmingham and Staffordshire²³ may be interested to know that there is still an adjacent sloped area at the Butts, too steep to build on, which today abuts the western edge of the housing estate. This sloped park-like area is still known by local people as the Butts or Butts Walks. A contemporary description of it by a local says that...

“The Butts is a lovely steep hillside of green open space and large woodland overlooking a large residential area. It can be seen from around the Borough, is an excellent viewpoint over most of the urban area and [has views] to the Peak District [foot]hills 15 miles away.”²⁴

“Hills” here means views of Mow Cop near to the Staffordshire / Cheshire border. This striking and time-haunted²⁵ Weathertop-like outlier was likely to have been Tolkien’s first glimpse of the start of the *hautdesert*, the high craggy moorland country through which Sir Gawain progresses to seek his final encounter with the mysterious Green Knight.²⁶ A decade later *Garwain and the Green Knight* would be Tolkien’s first major academic publication, seeing print in 1925,²⁷ and he would continue to work on *Garwain* for the rest of his working life. It would thus be gloriously romantic to imagine the young

²³ An excellent scholarly accompaniment to such a trip would be: Tom Shippey, “Tolkien and the West Midlands: The Roots of Romance”, in *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien*, Walking Tree, 2007.

²⁴ Newcastle-under-Lyme Lib Dems, “Protect Thistleberry’s Green Spaces”, 2015.

²⁵ For millennia Mow Cop’s ancient hilltop quarry produced the best grit millstones in Europe, some of which have been found by archaeologists to date back to the Iron Age.

²⁶ I have a chapter which tracks the route in my book *Strange Country: Sir Gawain in the moorlands of North Staffordshire*, Burslem Books, 2018.

²⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Oxford University Press, 1925.

Tolkien standing in his uniform on a sunset hillside at the Butts in 1915, the smell of the day's fresh gun-cordite in his sun-flashed hair, surrounded by a murmur of Lancastrian and north-west Midlands voices, sweeping his eyes across the far *Gawain*-landscape for the first time, and pledging his career to it should he ever return from war. However, we must leave that vision to the bio-pic movie-makers, since any idea of a straightforward inspirational influence from such a view must prove unlikely, when judged in terms of the state of the scholarship in 1915. Tolkien first knew *Gawain* in his school-days,²⁸ but when war broke out its dialects and settings were still being debated and investigated. The 'North of the Midlands' was then deemed a reasonably sure bet for the manuscript, among the historians of dialect. But which *side* of the Midlands was then a key question, west or east? Scholars could be led astray by confusing the dialect of the text's Lancashire copyist, his need to write so as to be understandable to his patron, and the likely dialect of the poem's original writer. In 1891 Sir Israel Gollancz had stated "conclusively ... some West-Midlands shire" for the dialect of the *Pearl* text, but a few pages later his specific suggestion for the birthplace of the author of *Gawain* was as far astray as the wild coasts of Lancashire.²⁹ The

²⁸ Carpenter, page 35. 1907 was the likely date of the encounter.

²⁹ Sir Israel Gollancz, *Pearl, an English poem of the 14th century*, David Nutt, 1891, pages xlv - xlvi. In Tolkien's edition of *Gawain* of 1925 he commented on the dialect, and subtly corrected this suggestion from Gollancz. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon leaned toward Lancashire rather than Cheshire as the home of the copyist, thus: "on the whole the evidence points to south Lancashire rather than Cheshire as the home of the dialect. [...] written at Hales in south-west Lancashire, not many years earlier than 1413. This

question of ‘east or west Midlands’ was still being hotly and deeply debated into the early 1920s.³⁰ As for the topography of the poem’s story, the ‘wilderness of Wirral’ was certainly a sure starting point for Gawain’s entry into England. But where then did his long journey then take the hero, after he left the Cheshire Plain, to reach the wild upland settings that serve as the climax of the story? I intensively investigated this point in a chapter for my 2018 book on *Garwain*, and could find only one very early suggestion, in 1864, that the *Garwain*-poet was from Staffordshire.³¹ Other than that there is no pre-1938 suggestion that the climax of *Garwain* occurs in the high moorlands of North Staffordshire. In 1915 the best-known suggestions could still be as far astray as Cumberland³² and it was not until September 1938

resemblance, however, only goes to show that the dialect of the copyist was of Hales in south-west Lancashire.”

³⁰ See, for example: R. J. Menner, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the West Midland”, *PMLA*, Vol. 37, No. 3, September 1922, pages 503-526. This is a lengthy and sustained attack on the suggestion of the East Midlands. Note that for scholars ‘Midlands’ did not then have the same borders as today, and in the minds of the dialect scholars could include places as far apart as Northumbria and Flintshire.

³¹ Robert Morris had suggested “Cheshire or Staffordshire as the probable locality” for the writing of *The Pearl*, in his *Early English Alliterative Poems in the West-Midland Dialect of the Fourteenth Century* (1864), but a few lines later quickly discounted it in favour of Lancashire. His reasoning was that Lancashire had more Norse terms in it, but this was decisively shown to be spurious by 1912. On this last point see: Hartley Bateson, *Patience*, Manchester University Press, 1912, page 38.

³² The Cumberland suggestion was from Sir Frederic Madden, who published the first modern edition of the poem in 1839. *The Place Names of Cumberland* later firmly discounted his theory in 1951: “[in this new edition] misconceptions have been cleared up: thus *Grune Ho* and *Point* (the *chapell of Grune* in a document of 1664) contains a form of the word *groyne*, and consequently cannot be identified (as it was by Madden) with the Green Chapel in the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” — K.R. Brooks in *The Modern Language Review*, 1951, Vol. 46, No. 3/4 (July-October 1951), page 471. Reviewing Armstrong et al, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, Cambridge University Press, 1950 edition.

that Bertram Colgrave made the first modern suggestion of North Staffordshire.³³

Thus it appears that Tolkien would not have known he was looking towards the *Garwain* landscape when he was surveying Mow Cop and its North Staffordshire background from the Butts hillside in September 1915. But he *would* have been looking at it, although ‘he knew it not’.

What then of Tolkien’s own journey, on returning from his musketry camp? We have to assume that he returned to his Lichfield camp from the Butts in much the same fashion as he had arrived, but there are several possibilities to consider here. One is that perhaps weekend-leave passes were given out on the Thursday evening, to reward the men for successful completion of a nerve-wracking musketry course. In which case most men would have departed, probably on the Friday after striking camp in the morning, for a weekend amid the famously lively pubs and entertainments of the adjacent Stoke-on-Trent. Officers and the more homesick men might have been more inclined to head to the mainline inter-city train station in Stoke, for a fast train home or to loved ones. Some who liked walking may have wound their way back in a relaxed manner, via the rural pubs they had skipped on the march out, back toward Lichfield and their camp. On the other hand, war was ominously ‘settling in’,

³³ Bertram Colgrave, letter in *Antiquity*, September 1938.

and the very first really large-scale offensives such as Loos were going very badly.³⁴ In that context one has to wonder if the military might instead have made a useful training exercise from the return journey on foot to camp. Such as tasking the men with a way-finding exercise, to try to approach and enter their camp undetected by observers. There is no evidence I know of that this was the case, except perhaps for the setting of a Tolkien poem “A Song of Aryador”³⁵ which was written at Whittington camp a few weeks earlier on 12th September. In tone this is a wistful early *faery* poem, enriched and deepened with a *Gawain*-like evocation of an upland landscape, one fairly obviously rooted in a topography akin to that where the Staffordshire Moorlands shades up into the Peak District. But the secure dating of the poem means that it cannot have been inspired by Tolkien’s view from the hillside at the Butts. It is slightly earlier than that. It is then my feeling that the poem’s ‘thought-seed’ was perhaps in his night-training exercises. Possibly involving soldiers being dropped off as much as 40 miles north of camp in the Peak, and then having to find their way back to

³⁴ The disaster at Loos (25th Sept – 8th Oct 1915) was not then known on the Home Front. News of Loos only reached the Home Front in a despatch from Sir John French’s headquarters, which was published in *The Times* on 2nd November 1915. Historians state this was the first really bad news heard on the Home Front, about a large offensive.

³⁵ To be found in print in *The Book of Lost Tales 1*, at the end of “V. The Coming of the Elves”. Christopher Tolkien states there that: “according to notes on these it was written in an army camp near Lichfield on September 12th, 1915. It was never, to my knowledge, printed.” David Giraudeau’s *A New Q(u)enya Lexicon* (Parma Eldalamberon 12) refers the word *Aryador* to both *Areandor* and *Areanóre* and states... “a mountainous district, the abode of the Shadow Folk.”

camp through the rugged upland countryside at night.³⁶ One obvious choice of drop-off location would then be the First World War practice trenches, constructed by the Royal Engineers in 1915, on Burbage Edge near Buxton. These full-scale front-line fire trenches were rediscovered in 2015, and are the only ones in the Peak.³⁷ They are around 40 miles by road from Whittington Heath.

Such a night march is suggested by lines in the “A Song of Aryador” poem such as: “a march of shadow-people o’er the height” while “Men are kindling tiny gleams | Far below by mountain-streams” and other topographic details. The precise dating of the poem suggests its origins in an overnight way-finding exercise and night-march undertaken at the half-way point in the basic training programme, which would have been in the first days of September. This raises the interesting possibility that Tolkien may not just have seen the *Gawain* country from afar from the hillside at the Butts, but actually been in it at least once in the summer of 1915. One further small piece of evidence serves to support the notion of night-marches back to camp from the Peak. According to J.S. Ryan, Tolkien later recalled in a

³⁶ As well as musketry and drill (marching, fitness, bearing and discipline), the two other key skills involved in basic training for new recruits in 1914-15 were map-reading and entrenching (making trenches within the regulation time of three hours, and making fox-holes). Learning map-reading must necessarily have meant practical field exercises which moved beyond the camp itself, and which forced men to learn to use and consult their compass and other skills. A search of first-hand memories of First World War training finds examples of night-marches used in basic training in: Norfolk in 1914; near Brighton in 1914; and on the moors near Sheffield in early 1915.

³⁷ John Barnatt, “Digging for victory at Burbage”, *ACID: Archaeology and Conservation and Derbyshire*, No. 13, January 2016, pages 20-12.

lecture that, while at camp on Cannock Chase, he came close to the post-hunt experience detailed in *Sir Gawain*. While at camp Tolkien...

“attended his troops cutting up of a poached deer from the Pennine Uplands — an event referred to in a lecture in Oxford on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Hilary Term, 1955. The present writer was in the student body then present”.³⁸

How would the closely-policed young men of the camp have obtained this bulky and valuable item, if not on a night-march from the Peak back to camp, through the Staffordshire Moorlands?

³⁸ J.S. Ryan, “The Origin of the Name *Wetwang*”, *Amon Hen* No. 63, August 1983, page 13.

ends