

The John Meade Falkner Society

Founded 8th May 1999



Newsletter No. 82

22nd July 2026

2026 SUBSCRIPTIONS

I'm afraid it's my usual plea for the few (**now just 4**) to renew their Subscription to the Society. A reminder that it is still **£10** for UK members; **€20** for those in Europe; and **USA \$20** for the Rest of the World. I am only able to keep it at these official levels thanks to the generosity of some of you. Thank you all.

THE CHURCHES OF FLEET – OLD AND NEW

I thought members would like to know that, as from this week, the **New Fleet Church** has closed until further notice. Some serious health and safety issues had been identified some while ago but the vicar and the PCC did hold some services there but only with a very small congregation.



Parts of the roof and internal ceiling are in a state of collapse and external metal spires are in danger of falling off. Consequent, the churchyard is also closed and no parking is allowed.

There had been some attempts at fundraising but the amount required was too much to even make it safe.

The fate of the **Old Church** is also in the balance – it too needs some maintenance especially to the roof. However, it remains open to the public for the time being.

UPDATE (24th May 2026)

I just thought you would like to know that, as from this week, the New Fleet church has closed until further notice. Some serious health and safety issues had been identified some while ago but the vicar and the PCC did hold some services there but only with a very small congregation. Parts of the roof and internal ceiling are in a state of collapse and external metal spires are in danger of falling off. Consequently, the churchyard is also closed and no parking is allowed. There had been some attempts at fundraising but the amount required was too much to even make it safe.

The fate of the **Old Church** is also in the balance – it too needs some maintenance, especially to the roof. However, it remains open to the public for the time being.

I will keep you up to date with developments, just in case any JMF society members were thinking of visiting.

Dianne Gardner

JMF'S 'THIN PLACE'

The Celts called special places in their lives THIN PLACES – places where earth and heaven are close. They spoke of waterfalls, rivers, lakes or seashores – places that give complete relaxation, peace, quiet and solitude, and where it feels heaven and earth are almost touching. Discovering such a place usually entails returning time and time again to experience restorative power.



For JMF he discovered his particular thin place was less than five miles from his home at The Divinity House – Finchale Abbey. He went to this favourite haunt frequently, usually alone but occasionally in the company of a friend. He was photographed at Finchale in 1920 with his good friend Edward Stocks and his wife.

Sited by the River Wear and now a Grade 1 listed building, Finchale is managed by English Heritage. It had been a 13th century Benedictine priory founded by Godric, who had been born in 1070 and, whilst working as a doorkeeper at the hospital of St. Giles in Durham City, was befriended by the Bishop of Durham, Ranulf Flambard, who granted him a place to live as a hermit at Finchale. Thus began the centuries-long story of what began as a hermitage but developed into abbey and in time became dubbed a priory.

George Robson

(Ed. I hope to write an article for the **2027 Journal** on Finchale Priory)

LORBOTTLE REVISITED



Journal 12 {2011} featured an article named 'HOME OF HOME HAPPIEST' which resulted from a visit to Lorbottle Hall during a Society get-together in the North-east. The group had been joined by members of the Noble family from Edinburgh. What drew us to the Hall was that during the 1880s JMF, as resident tutor to the two youngest Nobles, had accompanied Sir Andrew Noble and his family for a summer break at Lorbottle in pursuit of recreational activities such as shooting, fishing, riding on the surrounding moorland and in particular cricket for which JMF took on the wicket-keeping. At the conclusion of our few days together visiting JMF-related sites, the group generally agreed that Lorbottle Hall had been the highlight of the whole weekend. (see the Journal 2011 article).

At the time of our visit the owners of the Hall were Harry and Jean Leuckert who had bought the Hall and surrounding parkland in the 1950s. Jean had died in 1995 and Harry, of German extraction, then moved back to the land of his birth. Following this the Hall was bought by the part owner of Crystal Palace football club and member of a consortium known as CPFC 2010, Jeremy Hoskin. After using the Hall as a holiday let for a short period it reverted to being a private home.

On June 13th 2026 there was held a Dog Show to raise funds for the North Northumberland Hospice. Long-term Society member George Robson and a friend decided to attend the event, not so much because of an interest in dogs but for him to reacquaint with the Hall and report to the Society on any developments of note. Big care and effort had been made in preparation for the Dog Show but I was struck immediately with the significant development and improvements to the gardens and immediate surrounds to the Hall. The walled garden has been much developed with the addition of glasshouses and carefully planned floral displays. Pathways have been relayed with attractively coloured gravel and attention given to the trees. The courtyard at the rear entrance to the Hall and open for visitors to peruse has a variety of potted ferns which have between them large models of interesting locomotives each of which has a plaque with explanatory notes. The garden's deep pond has warning notices well displayed and attention given to make the Hall's main entrance which makes it look even more inviting than on the day of our Society visit. This was of course the site of JMF and the Noble ladies being photographed together in 1883, a photograph much admired and prized by our Society.

Lorbottle's famous Ladysmith bell is still in working order but, sadly, wasn't rung that day which was a shame for the visitors. The bell had been used during



the siege of Ladysmith during the Boer War to warn of incoming enemy fire and was presented to the Hall by Baden Powell at the end of a stay he had made to Lorbottle. However, I took some snaps of the bell which hangs in a specially built tower.

It was unfortunate that the Hall itself was not open to visitors (but a number of loos had been hired for the day!) However, there are a number of photographs of the interior which can be downloaded on Wikipedia, I must end by saying Lorbottle Hall is a 'must' for Society members to visit. Is it too much to hope we can as a group return to this HOME OF HOMES HAPPIEST?

*Well, it's over, my masters, we're nearing our tether,
We must go where luck leads us, no brave heart repines.
So, we'll pluck the last sprig of Lorbottle heather,
And watch the last moon come up over the pines.*

George Robson

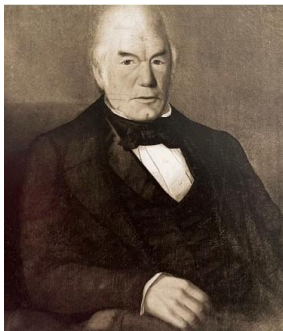
MORE MOONFLEET MUSINGS

Diamond Heist

Last year thieves disguised as construction workers stole eight pieces of the French Crown Jewels valued at approximately £76 million from the Apollo Gallery at the Louvre in Paris (and initially escaped) mirroring John and Elzevir's 'theft' from the well at Carisbrooke Castle. But the Paris thieves strangely left behind the world-famous Regent Diamond which Diamond I believe was JMF's basis for his book since it embodied all of its features, including of course the curse. Whilst fleeing the Paris robbers dropped the Crown of Empress Eugenie which had once incorporated the Regent Diamond. Was some strange force at work I wonder either by their own volition or by the intervention of some higher power which meant the thieves were prevented from going any further down the same path of hardship and self-destruction as John and Elzevir once had? One of JMF's most memorable lines in *Moonfleet* came from the final chapter when Rev. Mr. Glennie related the circumstances of Aldobrand's death to John Trenchard 'he made a good end John and I pray that our end may be in as good cause when it comes. For with the best of us the hour of death is an awful hour and we may well pray, as every Sunday to be delivered in it'. He continued 'and bade us pray to be delivered in all time of our wealth... and remember that there are other treasures besides this and that a good woman's love is worth far more than all the gold and jewels of the world...as I once knew'. Readers may empathise with Glennie's revelation here or even be slightly shocked. Abstinence/forgoing of human love and relationships in favour of devotion to God is a sacrifice which for most people is an idea so radical and extreme it evokes feelings of great pity and sadness. Was JMF in writing those lines actually reflecting on his own lost love and his own future mortality? He was described as a natural celibate who viewed marriage and romance with emotional detachment, his relationships with women being formal and distant. When his end came, he bequeathed most of his estate and his collection to the Bodleian, Hertford College, Durham Cathedral and the Vatican, but little to his wife except for their house. Had he been alive last year I wonder what he would have made of King Charles historic visit to Rome in October,

praying with Pope Leo in the Sistine chapel at the Vatican.

Although we are not told by JMF in the closing chapter of *Moonfleet* to whom the Diamond was eventually sold by Aldobrand and 'converted into money', as proof of Glennie's above theology, we do know his health and his fortune immediately thereafter declined. Whether leaving in his will all his remaining wealth 'back' to John was proof of true contrition/repentance is a point of debate. Does a leopard change its spots...I doubt it! Apropos my 2023's Journal article, I recently discovered a member of the Twining Tea family, Lord Edward Twining, (whose relative was the Vicar of Fleet in 1892), who published in 1960 a great tome called '*The History of the Crown Jewels of Europe*'. It would be interesting to know whether he covered the Regent diamond within it. Regarding some still 'unidentified' *Moonfleet* subjects, I wondered if any members or readers know from whom JMF took the name 'Old Chauvelais' in chapter 12? He was owner of the Eperon D'Or. There is a titled family of this name, as well as the name of a wine and also a racehorse, all of which are located inland of Saint Malo which fits JMF's book description, but none seemed to be an exact match. Perhaps he was just aware of this name being common in Brittany and chose it at random.



Ratsey

In 1790 **George Rogers Ratsey** founded in Cowes, Isle of Wight what is now the world's oldest sailmaking company Ratsey & Laphorn which still operates to this day. In 1800 he made the sails for HMS Victory prior to its

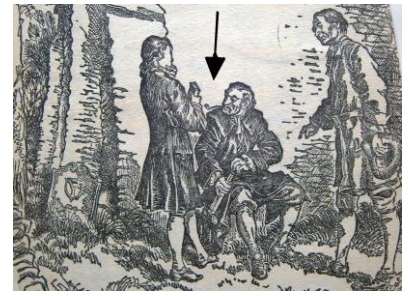
participation at Trafalgar, the foresail of which is now on display in the Naval Museum in Portsmouth. He was a very close cousin of Thomas Ratsey Maskew, JMF's one time Grammar school master and the father of Grace Maskew who he was thought once to have fallen in love with. For those who like to visualise his characters in some detail the attached picture of George Rogers Ratsey is to my mind akin to

how I imagined his namesake cousin in the story, the unnamed Sexton of St. Sebastian's church in *Moonfleet* known to us in the book only as 'Mr' or 'Master Ratsey'. In view of the Cowes location and the story's nautical theme it seems inconceivable that JMF wasn't aware of this famous company of sailmakers especially in view of the major part Cowes played in both channel escapades pertaining to the Bonaventure and the Gouden Droom. Ratsey was a fairly common name on the Island and many of their family's graves can still be seen in the graveyard at Cowes. George Rogers Ratsey's brother Thomas Day Ratsey was a naval lieutenant and may have been known by members of JMF's naval connected family.

Pipes

The small image, plucked from my old Puffin version of *Moonfleet*, shows Elzevir by the church smoking his long pipe, talking with John and Ratsey. In 1758 smoking was

an extremely popular pastime, mainly due to the large amount of tobacco being smuggled into Britain from France, and its associated large profit margin, the



result of exceptionally high British tax duties. It was a repeated theme amongst the drinkers of the '*Why Not*' Inn. JMF himself was a smoker with an apparent preference for puffing on a pipe while working. Elzevir during his escape with John on the Zigzag said 'no room to dance hornpipes here' (the name of the dance performed by sailors which mimics rope hauling and climbing rigging) and Ratsey's 'the skipper should have piped the reefing-hands', a metaphor for lowering/reducing (piping) the area of sail on a mast, alluding to the threat to John posed by Elzevir after he instructed the former to stay behind with him at Hoare Head to witness Maskew's final death throws. Literary similarities aside, JMF's use of these old adages may add insight as to what was going on in his mind (or mouth) at the time!

River Jordan

I wonder if any readers had ever been curious like me about the name origin of Dorset's 'holy' River Jordan, which exits into the Channel at Bowleaze Bay in Weymouth and is personified by the adjacent Jordan Hill with its Roman Villa, which most likely interested JMF as a boy and is worth a visit (its free) - and of course *Moonfleet*'s 'Lander Jordan' (ch.10,12) "the only person known to have climbed the Zigzag". It was most likely named after the locally prominent Jordan family (alt. Jordon/Jordain or Jourdan as spelt by the actor Louis) whose family had links to the Trenchards and Mohuns at Wolfeton, rather than being named directly after Israel's famous River. Either way, it is something of a biblical coup and hopefully the locals enjoy a warm feeling at the thought that, whatever its name's origin, they are slightly closer to God than the rest of us. Before leaving town after a short holiday some years ago I did once take the opportunity of having a quick paddle in it whilst trying to dodge the sewage from the adjacent Caravan Park!

A.G. Gaydon

THE SOCIETY JOURNAL

I have posted this **year's Journal** to all fully paid-up members; I do hope you enjoy reading the articles therein. As always, a plea for contributions for the **2027 Journal** AND, shorter pieces, for the **three Newsletters** I manage to produce each year. Regular, or first-time, contributors very welcome.

Kenneth Hillier

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