

Subterranean
George Robson

.....the hole into which I had crept was only the mouth of a passage which sloped gently down in the direction of the church.....

(*Moonfleet* chapter 3)

In 1883 twenty-three year-old JMF, no doubt with some trepidation, travelled to the north-east to become resident tutor to the sons of Andrew and Margery Noble at Jesmond Dene House (1) on the outskirts of Newcastle.



John Meade Falkner at
Jesmond Dene House c. 1883.

Lady Margery Noble is on the
right, with six of her children.

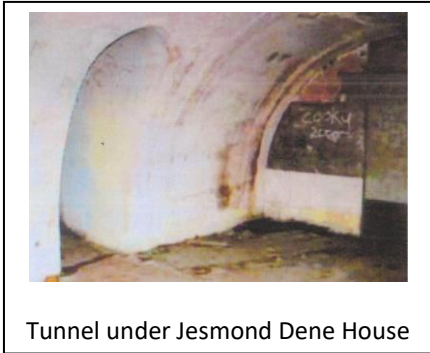
John Noble, whom Falkner was
tutoring, stands in the centre,
holding his dog.

The photograph gives a clear
indication of Falkner's height.

Noble had bought the House in 1871 on the advice of near-neighbour and business colleague Sir (later Lord) William Armstrong.

One little-known feature of Jesmond Dene House is the warren of subterranean tunnels that radiate from a still accessible entrance in the House to four exits in the Jesmond Dene, a spectacular ravine containing a woodland park with exotic trees and shrubs, rock gardens and a watercourse which Armstrong had landscaped and developed into a series

of charming weirs and waterfalls.(2) Other tunnels wind their way to exits at certain neighbouring properties.



The tunnels are believed to be contemporary with the House which was built in 1822 and most of them have arched ceilings and have leading off eight cellars which were designed for cold storage or as ice houses. It is believed that the tunnels also provided entrances and exits for the House's servants, giving them a 'short-cut' and obviating a lengthy and circuitous journey for those who lived to the north of the House. It also spared their comings and goings being seen by the family and their guests.

The complex was modified and put to good use as air-raid shelters for the people of Jesmond during World War 2 when Tyneside was the target of regular and heavy air-raids - on the night of December 29th 1941 several houses close to Jesmond Dene House were bombed with some loss of life.



The raid was one of the most severe raids on the city of Newcastle. Five people were killed in these houses on Matthew Bank . . .

The House itself became the headquarters of the Newcastle Home Guard for the duration and also the headquarters and control room for the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) network in Newcastle.(3)

One side of the House rests on the edge of a high quarry face. This is where the sandstone for the building of the House had been quarried and which afterwards left a picturesque addition to the Dene's rugged features and a pleasant backdrop to a grotto. At the base of the quarry face, which is close to cliffs once known as Blaeberry Craggs but which are now commonly called Blackberry Craggs, are three of the four tunnel exits found within the Dene, each marked by twin moss covered stone posts with cross decoration. However the exits are now blocked with soil infill and cemented stone blocks and bricks, this resulting from health and safety concerns and, alas, vandalism.

Half-way up the quarry face there has been hewn from the rock a viewing platform with its own exit from the tunnels behind, but here too the exit is blocked and vegetation has taken over. This balcony is reminiscent of a similar feature within the Joseph's Pit sea-cave in *Moonfleet's* chapter eleven - this ledge was carved out of something like a balcony - although in the story's case it was not used for viewing but for lowering blocks of stone to boats lying underneath.

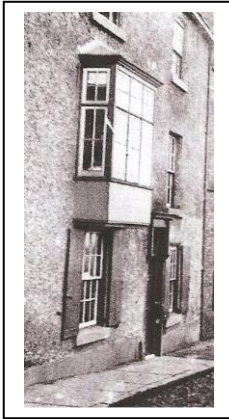
It would be reasonable to assume the Noble children found exhilaration not only in having at their disposal the free run of the eighty acres of the Dene which was private to their family, but also in exploring these tunnels, underground rooms and the viewing balcony, perhaps on occasions being accompanied by their tutor JMF.

It could be JMF was including himself when he wrote:

I believe there never was boy yet who saw a hole in the ground, or a cave or a hill, or much more an underground passage, but longed incontinently to be into it and discover whither it led. (Moonfleet chapter 3)

So when JMF penned his second and most famous novel *Moonfleet*, reaching the tunnel, vault and sea-cave episodes, he could well have been visited with and even inspired by fifteen-year old memories of those Jesmond tunnels, chambers and the quarry face balcony. Further, perhaps this speculation could be extended to the description of the subterranean

vault in *The Lost Stradivarius* wherein the corpse of Adrian Temple is discovered.



Moonfleet was written in 1897 and 1898 by bachelor JMF whilst he was resident at Mrs Samuel Dean's lodging house at 42, South Street - also known both then and now as Abbey View - Durham City, where even today, more than one hundred years later, the bedroom doors are numbered 1 to 6. These are metal plates which, although painted over a number of times since they were affixed, are still plainly visible. Which one of these spacious rooms was JMF's is not known but all give spectacular views eastwards over the River Wear to the west front of the iconic World Heritage Site Cathedral.

At the same address JMF had written his first novel, *The Lost Stradivarius*, in 1895 and its reception was so favourable that he was encouraged to take up the pen to write what was to be so lauded that *Moonfleet* has never been out of print.

A proportion of the novel was written on the train as JMF travelled to and from the Elswick Works at Newcastle and a further proportion was written in his office at Elswick. But the greatest proportion was created at his lodging house. JMF himself wrote that he found relaxation in writing within the congenial rooms at South Street after a hard day's work at Elswick.

In the entrance hall of Abbey View hangs an evocative print showing a beached nineteenth century fishing boat and people garbed in clothes of that period, the whole scene lit by a hazy moon. It is titled *Moonlight on the Beach* and has, apparently, long been handed down from one owner of the house to the next and so was possibly something JMF was familiar with and which could well have provided one of the inspirations for his novel in which chapter 19 is called *On the Beach*. (See back cover of this Journal.)

Moonfleet has many memorable scenes of which arguably the most atmospheric and exciting are John Trenchard's discovery and exploration of the tunnel and vault beneath Moonfleet church:

The passage was two paces broad, as high as a tall man, and cut through the soil, without bricks or any other lining. (chapter 3)

Now though I have spoken of this journey down the passage as though it were a mile long, and though it verily seemed so to me that night, yet I afterwards found it was no more than twenty yards or thereabouts. (chapter 3)

It was a large room, much larger, I think, than the schoolroom where Mr Glennie taught us, but not near so high, being only some nine feet from floor to roof. I say floor, but in reality there was none, but only a bottom of soft wet sand. (chapter 3)

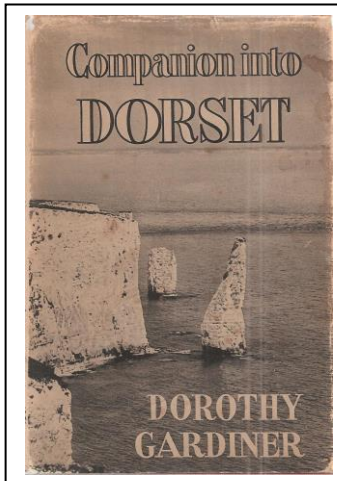
This is the novel, but is there really a tunnel and is there really a vault under Old Fleet Church and, if so, did JMF know of them when he penned his novel?

Rather like the mysteries of the Loch Ness Monster, the Beast of Dartmoor and the location of King Arthur's Camelot there are a number of questions to be asked and answers sought. But there are several pointers to the actuality which can be drawn together:

- Sir Humphrey Noble, grandson of Sir Andrew, wrote in his book *Life in Noble Houses* that in the 1930s he stayed at Fleet House which was then owned by his parents Saxton and Celia Noble. He reports:

One day some of us had the great excitement of going into the secret passage which led to the vault under the chancel, the burial place of the Mohuns. The stone was raised and we dropped down into the secret passage. The passage does indeed lead to the Mohun vault, but one cannot enter it as it is walled up.

*I wrote to tell Falkner of this, but he was very dull about it, and said he had never heard of this secret passage, and had invented it. (4)*The probable explanation therefore is that it was a drain, for there was water in the passage and we were told to wear gumboots.



Perhaps these events are the very same that Dorothy Gardner describes in her *Companion Into Dorset* (Methuen 1937) and which is referred to in the Society Newsletter No. 38. Here she recollects that all those at Fleet House felt exultation when some diggings in the old churchyard disclosed an unexpected passage or underground tunnel. Their exploration found the passage to be ankle deep in muddy water - along the walls there was a stone lining most neatly placed - overhead was stone-roofed. But alas the passage ended in a block of earth.

Sir Humphrey's daughter Liliás (5) is now in her eighties and is a living witness that there is indeed something below the surface at Old Fleet. She too stayed at Fleet House along with her newly-married husband Robin Sheepshanks in 1951. In an interview with Society member George Robson she recalls the excitement of the summer morning when she and Robin set off from the House to meet a guide and then together explore the tunnel beneath the churchyard. She recollects the moment when a large entrance stone was raised in the south-west corner of the churchyard. The three then lowered themselves one at a time into a passage and began to creep towards the church. The tunnel, she reports, was high enough for her to walk upright but her husband and the guide, being taller, had to stoop slightly. The tunnel led downwards towards the church in a north-easterly direction, traversing the churchyard. There was some water on the floor, but not sufficient to cause a problem. After some yards the darkness and the atmosphere got the better of Liliás and she turned back - just as *Moonfleet's* John Trenchard did as he progressed along the tunnel for the first time. She remembers the others in the party found the entrance to the vault to be blocked so they too turned back, disappointed at being unable to explore the vault itself.

- BBC Radio 4's *A Bag of Paradoxes*, first broadcast on 12th May 2005, outlines JMF's life and includes a recording of local historian Sam Fowler describing an occurrence he witnessed as a boy in the early 1950s:

We were coming back from fishing on the beach. There is a long walk around the shore to Butter Street. That's where the little old church is. There was a lady in a hat and there was an official-looking man and also a labourer type of fellow (6). They went in the gate and the labourer-type fellow kept prodding with a crow-bar and eventually it went hollow. So he got his shovel and opened up a hole six feet by four feet. I joined them and went down behind the labourer-type fellow. There's a long tunnel about twenty to thirty yards long with gravel on the floor. To the right of us there was a lead wall. This is where the Mohun family were in their tombs, I imagine. That's what they were looking for.

- *A Guide to the Village of Fleet* was written in 1989 by local historian Eric Ricketts and printed by Lithopress in Weymouth. Copies are sometimes available within Old Fleet Church for a small sum/donation. In this guide Ricketts writes: *Records of the old church before the disaster are fragmentary, but Mr Jack West traces the existence of a line drawing by the illustrator Grimm, dated 1790, in the Weymouth museum. George Atkins, who wrote the companion to Puffin's edition of Moonfleet, showed me the position of an underground passage to the north of the chancel.*



The Society's Newsletter Number 26 features an article from Christopher Hawtree which draws our attention to Fleet-related memories of Harry Patch, the last surviving Great War veteran who had seen action in the trenches. The article tells that Harry's brother George moved to Chickerell, close to Fleet, where they revisited childhood fascination with secret passages during a decade's search for the one used in the novel *Moonfleet*. Come the mid-fifties, George summoned Harry for another weekend: there was a difference in the grass behind a tombstone. With a spade they took the turf off. Underneath there were two big stones.

'We lifted them and there was a passage. George wanted to go down, but I insisted on testing the air first, and we put the candle down. It was all right and we went in. The tunnel was two feet two inches wide and less than four feet high. It was the right one, but it was not a smuggler's tunnel.

George, before he died, met a fellow from Charleston, well over ninety, who as a boy had seen the crypt opened in the 1870s, and told us what it was like. There were six coffins inside. The kegs bumping about under the floor had smashed all the coffins to pieces. The parson gathered up the bones and the brass plates and put them in a space in the vault and it was sealed again. We'd noticed that the tunnel we found led towards the vault but that it ended in solid masonry. The book tells you that there is an entrance: well there isn't.'

The Dorset County website for visitors to the county mentions Old Fleet Church and states:

In 1925 a channel was found underground. The tunnel has solid walls, cemented on the inside, about five feet high and two feet wide, and was traceable across the churchyard.

There is no information board nor leaflets nor any indication at all at Old Fleet concerning a possible tunnel and a possible vault. But it is quite easy to believe that there would be a vault as the Mohun family, with their brass memorials still in situ, would surely have ensured a place for family burials. No evidence of Mohun burials exists in any other location.

But why would a tunnel be created? Sir Humphrey Noble assumed a drainage channel, but would a drainage channel require a height of four to five feet? Surely no drainage channel would slope downwards towards the church as described by Liliash Sheepshanks in her recollections.

Is it reasonable to imagine that a tunnel of twenty to twenty-five yards length, about head height and ending at the foundations of the church, would be of benefit to the smugglers who are known to have once operated in significant numbers along the Dorset coast (7) and were faced with the problem of where to store their contraband prior to distribution?

In *Moonfleet* we read of a feature similar to the descriptions shown above - a tunnel of similar length and height, sloping downwards to give access to a vault beneath the church.

When one puts together the references and accounts drawn together in this article is it not plausible to suspect something is afoot?

JMF was very familiar with and knowledgeable of details of the Dorset coast which he had explored as a boy. Many of these Dorset coastline features appear in *Moonfleet* and it is surely unlikely JMF would know of Old Fleet, the Mohuns, the 1824 flooding that brought part-demolition of the church and yet remain ignorant of a possible vault and a possible tunnel.

There is atmosphere galore at Old Fleet and a deal of mystery.

There are some folk in the Fleet area today that prefer the mysteries of whether there exist a tunnel and a vault to remain exactly that - mysteries.

They would claim that sometimes mysteries are best left undisturbed.



Keats writes in *Lamia*:

*Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine,
Unweave a rainbow.*

And this view was later echoed by Edgar Allan Poe:

*Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree.*

I suspect the members of our Society follow Keats and Poe in being romantics and who therefore concur with these sentiments.

(1) Built in 1822 to the design of John Dobson, the House was originally called Black Dene House. It was first owned by Thomas Headlam, physician and twice Mayor of Newcastle. In 1871, on the advice of business colleague Sir William Armstrong who lived nearby, Andrew Noble bought the House and set about greatly extending it by having a new west wing, to accommodate his large and growing family, a great hall and a Gothic portico constructed. He also rented from Lord Armstrong then altered and extended the Gothic - styled Banqueting Hall that Armstrong had erected about quarter of a mile from the House between 1860 and 1862. With a complex of kitchens, storage rooms and ante-rooms for the guests, the Banqueting Hall was hugely impressive. In the banqueting room itself there were Greek statues ensconced in gold leaf covered alcoves and a remarkable organ which was powered by water from the Ouseburn below, the mechanisms of which Armstrong himself had meticulously designed. The Hall was linked to Armstrong's house by a tunnel to be used in inclement weather.

The House and Banqueting Hall were to become important aspects of Noble's business life as they provided an ideal base for visitors to be shown the Armstrong works at Elswick whilst being treated to country house hospitality. They would have impressed a succession of important guests amongst whom were Princes from Egypt and Japan, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Baden-Powell, Admiral Tojo and Admiral Lord Beatty.

JMF, who had quickly become accepted into the Noble household as a friend as well as an employee, would no doubt have met some of these and probably dined in the Banqueting Hall alongside them. To verify this familial acceptance we read in Margery, Lady Noble's diary *A Long Life*, privately printed by Andrew Reid and Co. of Newcastle in 1925, this entry for 26th March 1893 - Mr John Meade Falkner, who came into our lives about 1882, has been an intimate and dear friend ever since.

On the death of Lady Noble at the grand age of 102 in 1929 the house was disposed of, then to have a succession of uses - a college, the wartime civil defence

headquarters for Newcastle, a seminary and a residential school. Since 2005, following restoration and refurbishment, Jesmond Dene House has been a forty bedroom boutique hotel with a three-rosette restaurant. Some of the underground chambers are used to store their large range of wines and beers. The House is Grade 2 listed.

The frontage and reception rooms of the Banqueting Hall remain and are currently the base for an Arts group, but the roof of the kitchens and the banqueting area was blown off in the 1970s and these areas were turned into a controlled ruin as the City Council did not have the funds for restoration. This too is now Grade Two listed.

(2) Although Armstrong had moved to Craggside in 1871, he retained ownership of the Dene only to donate all eighty acres, which encompassed the Banqueting Hall, to the City of Newcastle in 1883. In the intervening twelve years he had permitted the Nobles free access of the Dene and use of the Banqueting Hall, but allowed any member of the public to enter the Dene for a small fee on Sundays. The money this raised he had donated to local hospitals.

The 1883 gift to the people of Newcastle was marked by *The London Illustrated News* carrying a well-illustrated article.

The Dene is a unique haven of peace and tranquillity and was described by Armstrong himself as an oasis of natural beauty within an urban setting. It stretches for three kilometres along the course of Ouseburn river, providing a wildlife corridor right into the heart of Newcastle. There is a network of paths and bridges throughout the Dene, a boating lake, play area and a visitor centre which provides facilities for school educational groups.

In the 1960s there opened a petting zoo known as Pets' Corner which has been recently redeveloped to remain an extremely popular attraction.

(3) Further details of the tunnels and of the military uses of Jesmond Dene House can be found by typing into Google Defence Sites Tyne Wear and opening the first of the choices. Scroll right down to page 54 where under entry 63 there is information and a photograph titled Jesmond Dene House ARP and Home Guard Headquarters (HER 1953)

(4) There are many examples of Falkner claiming to have done things he didn't do and denying things he did do. As an example, he claimed throughout his life that as a boy his eyesight was so good that he could make out the moons of Jupiter with the naked eye.

Wilfrid Cochrane was company secretary to Armstrong Whitworth at the time of JMF's death in 1932 and was charged with writing an obituary of his colleague and friend. Written expressly for the Armstrong Whitworth Record he describes JMF as having a most impish sense of humour. He quotes a number of examples demonstrating this trait, amongst them being the occasion JMF passed around his office staff at Elswick a jam-jar containing a small worm on a bed of leaves. He claimed it to be a very rare bookworm and there were very few that did not fall for the deception.

So, it would be entirely in keeping for JMF to reply this way to Humphrey Noble, denying what was actually the case.

(5) Lilius is the mother of David Sheepshanks who is joint-Chairman of the Football Association, Chairman of the National Football Stadium at Burton-on-Trent and past Chairman of Ipswich Football Club.

(6) We may speculate as to whether these three - the lady in the hat, the official-looking man and the labourer-type fellow - were in fact Lilius and Robin Sheepshanks and the guide. Were they one and the same happening?

(7) Pike And Shot Events (PASTE) offers a series of guided walks around the Fleet area to make the most of its rich, if at times brutal history. With guides dressed in tricorne hats etc. the facts behind the fiction of the Moonfleet tale are explained. Details can be found on the PASTE website.