

## John Meade Falkner's 'Wessex' and *The Lost Stradivarius* Peter Davey

The concept of 'Wessex', not surprisingly, has rather become the property of Thomas Hardy. He constructed this landscape of the imagination through his novels, generally insisting that the places he wrote about were inspired by places in the real world but not to be mistaken for them. This was to some extent a literary conceit. And it has not prevented those who take a delight in trying to identify the mill in *The Trumpet Major* or the site of Talbothays dairy in *Tess* from indulging their passion.

John Meade Falkner, a friend and admirer of Hardy, created his own Wessex, principally in *Moonfleet* where it stretched from Fleet in the west to the Tilly Whim caves in the east, and even beyond to the Isle of Wight. As a literary landscape it is not as vast nor as complex as Hardy's, but with its characters in place, it has its own distinctive quality. For one thing, it is set in an earlier time than Hardy wrote about. This enduringly popular story has been filmed twice, first by Hollywood in 1955 with Stewart Granger and George Sanders, and again for TV in 1983 when filming took place along the Dorset coast. Yet *Moonfleet* was not the beginning. To a lesser extent Falkner had already begun to draw on the resources of his native Dorset for his first novel *The Lost Stradivarius*, published in 1895.

Thomas Alexander Falkner, known to his children affectionately as 'Pa', came to Dorchester in 1859 as Assistant Curate at Holy Trinity Church when John was only one year old. During the next few years the family regularly spent their holidays at Swanage at a house "within a hundred yards of the sea". The father's enthusiasm for the fauna and flora as well as the geology of the Purbecks could not fail to rub off on John and his sister Mary as they explored the hills behind the seaside town. The author later recalled this time as the 'halcyon days' of his childhood.

Later he was sent to Marlborough school and from there to Oxford where he read history, and it was during this time that he developed a lifelong preference for cycling. This form of transport was perfect for indulging another life long interest, the study of old churches and abbeys, church restoration, and church music. These experiences all came together to reinforce the theme of *The Lost Stradivarius* and lend authenticity to Falkner's 'Wessex'.

This complex tale of the supernatural takes place in Oxford, Derbyshire, and Italy, but it begins at Worth Matravers in Purbeck. Falkner said that he had been born out of his time and was more at home in the Middle Ages, so it is not surprising that he resurrects the Mautravers, or Maltravers, family, descended from Norman barons who came over with William I, and who gave their name to Lytchett, Worth and Langton Matravers. The story, set in the first half of the 19th century, deals with



the physical and moral decline of Sir John Maltravers who becomes the victim of mysterious supernatural forces after the discovery of a Stradivarius violin.

It has to be said that the physical descriptions of Worth are rather sparse, but that is what makes it so tantalizing. Sir John and his sister, Sophia, are first found in the family home which is described as a large establishment with a fine library. There are stables for horses, and an agent looks after the estate. During the summer they keep a yacht in their "little harbour of Encombe" which they use to sail to Weymouth and Lyme Regis. The harbour is more likely to be Chapman's Pool since later they "walked on to the old boat summer house" and such boat houses exist there. And the Maltravers home cannot be the real Encombe since on another occasion "We stepped out of the dining-room windows on to the little terrace looking down towards Smedmore and Encombe". From that terrace "the sun went down behind Portland in a fiery glow" so the house in the story is situated high up on a hillside.

What Falkner has probably done is to move Maltravers Manor to Worth from its true site beside the church at Lytchett Matravers. The Barons Maltravers were only absentee landlords for the Worth and Langton manorial lands. Furthermore, the Manor itself passed out of their hands in 1587 when it was bought by the Trenchard family.

This idea is supported by the fact that Falkner clearly gives St Nicholas's Church at Worth some features of the Church of St Mary the Virgin at Lytchett. In the novel Sir John has always regarded his own religious observance as a duty, setting an example to the tenantry. But his decline reaches a point where he refuses to attend church, even on Christmas Day. There is a reference to the Maltravers Chapel. At the church at Worth a 14th century South Chapel did once exist, but was demolished in 1774. On the other hand, also in the 14th century, the church at Lytchett was enlarged with the addition of a north aisle which was probably for the exclusive use of the Maltravers family.

Sir John's absence from church on Christmas Day, while shocking his new young wife, Constance, and her mother Mrs Temple, represents a crisis for Sophia. A family tradition was shattered: "Ever since we had been confirmed John and I had always taken the Sacrament on that happy morning, and after service he had distributed the Maltravers dole in our chapel. There are given on that day to each of twelve old men £5 and a green coat, and a like sum of money with a blue cloth dress to as many old women. These articles of dress are placed on the altar-tomb of Sir Esmoun de Maltravers, and have been thence distributed from days immemorial by the head of our house".

Falkner would certainly have known of the custom of giving away Christmas dole in the County of Dorset, and perhaps adapted it for the story. Though an ancient custom, it was still observed certainly until the middle of the 19th century, and apparently took place on old Christmas Day, 6th January. In some



parishes the rector gave away a pound of bread, a pint of ale and a mince pie to every poor person. Sometimes the pastry and bread were baked in an oven built especially for the purpose at the rectory. It was known for blankets to be distributed though this was not popular. Another custom which apparently was continued into the twentieth century was for children from Sherborne and neighbouring villages to visit the Castle Lodge on Christmas morning where they were each presented with two new pennies.

The crisis over Sir John's mental state deepens when later on Christmas Day he declines to drink from the three-handled Maltravers loving cup, another family custom. This may have been inspired by a silver chalice dated 1574 which is held at Worth, but it lacks three handles. The author also specifies that the church has two bells. Worth had three, but when the story takes place only two may have been in use, as the third had to be recast in 1869.

As the novel draws to a close, Mr Gaskell, Sir John's friend from Oxford days, visits the Maltravers Chapel at Worth in the company of Sophia. His reference to being surrounded by effigies of Crusaders connected with "that splendid family" seems to be pure fiction. However, the thought must have been inspired by the fact that there was a Sir Walter Mautravers who had been on the Crusades to the Holy Land with Richard the Lionheart.

Mr Gaskell points out that "At our feet was the great brass of one Sir Roger de Maltravers". There certainly was a Roger de Maltravers who died in 1352. But if we want to find a tomb inlaid with brass we need to look again at the church at Lytchett. In the north aisle of the supposed Maltravers Chapel is buried Roger's nephew, Sir John, who died in 1365, and who, according to legend, was buried in full armour. The tomb stone is of French marble and the brass inlay is the heraldic symbol of the Maltravers family (also to be found on the font). Around the edge of the stone is an inscription in Norman French. This particular Sir John (there were many of them) had a chequered history. He was accused of having murdered King Edward II for which he fled the country, but years later he was reinstated by Edward III because it was politically expedient to do so.

*The Lost Stradivarius* was a modest success when it first appeared and was kindly treated by critics. It reappeared as a Penguin in 1946 (copies can still be found in second-hand bookshops), and was reprinted again in 1972. Fortunately, it is available through the excellent Dorset Library Service. As a story of the supernatural, it could claim to be a small masterpiece, deserving to be more famous than it is. There is none of the shock horror of modern fiction, but instead an intricate and skilful plot complete with ghost and murder. The panoramic landscapes of Hardy's Wessex - Egdon Heath and all that - may be absent. Instead Falkner has used his knowledge of the history of Dorset to create a Wessex which is his own.

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