

# Middle England landmarks that inspired Tolkien's Middle-earth

Book identifies sources for sites of key scenes from the hobbit sagas

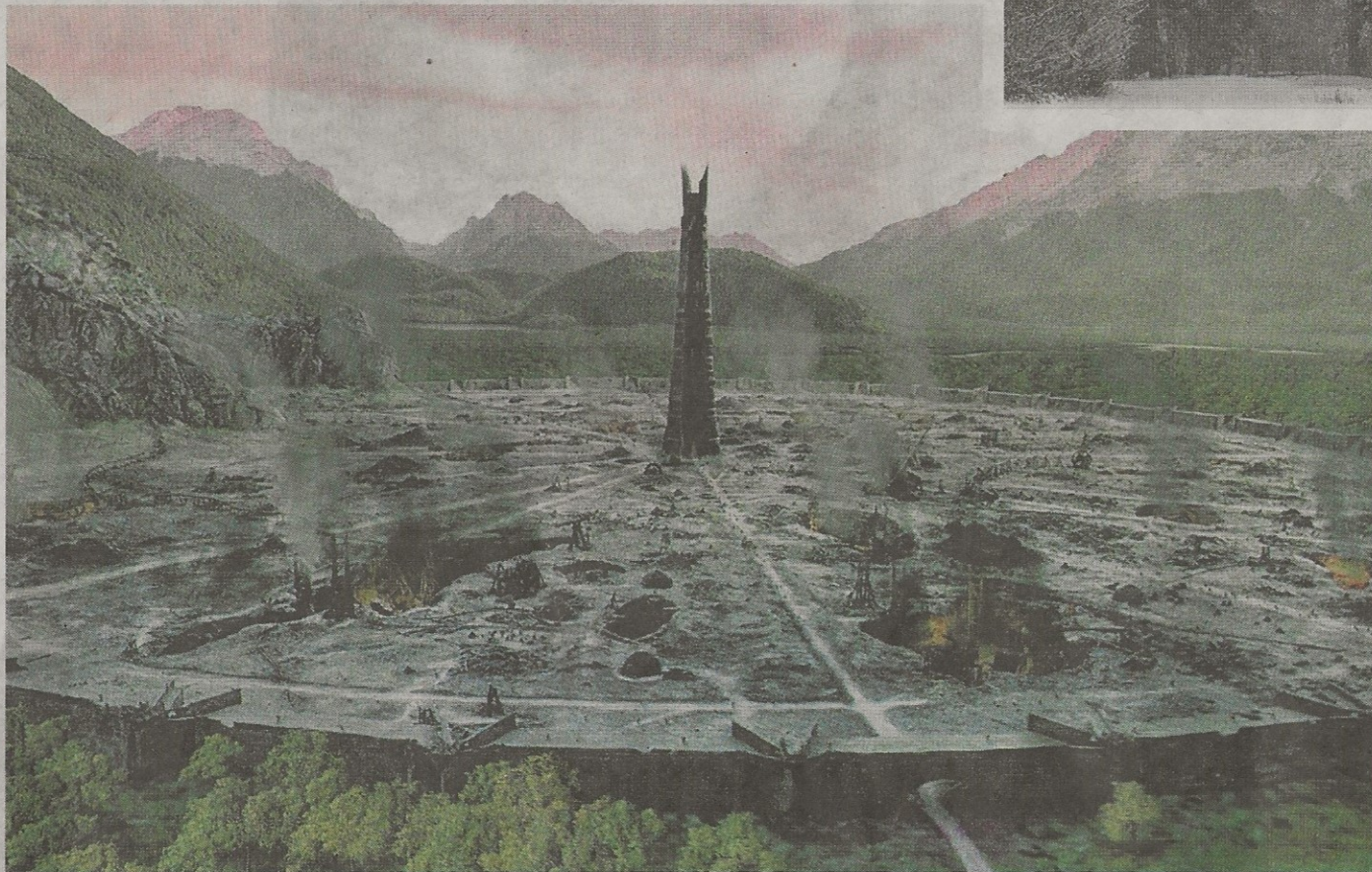
**Vanessa Thorpe**

*Arts and Media Correspondent*

Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* must surely imagine lifting their eyes in terror before Saruman's dark tower, known as Orthanc. Over the years, many admirers of the Middle-earth sagas have guessed at what might be the inspiration for this and other striking features of the landscapes created by JRR Tolkien.

Now an extensive new study of the author's work is to reveal the likely sources of key scenes. The idea for Saruman's nightmarish tower, argues leading Tolkien expert John Garth, was prompted by Faringdon Folly in Berkshire.

"I have concentrated on the places that inspired Tolkien, and though that may seem a trivial subject, I hope I have brought some rigour to it," said Garth this weekend. "I have a fascination for the workings of the creative process and in finding those moments of creative epiphany for a genius like Tolkien."



Left, Orthanc, at the centre of Saruman's Isengard stronghold, in the film *The Two Towers*, and above, Faringdon Folly in Berkshire. New Line Cinema

A close study of the author's life, travels and teaching papers has led Garth to a fresh understanding of an allegory that Tolkien regularly called upon while giving lectures in Old English poetry at Oxford in the 1930s.

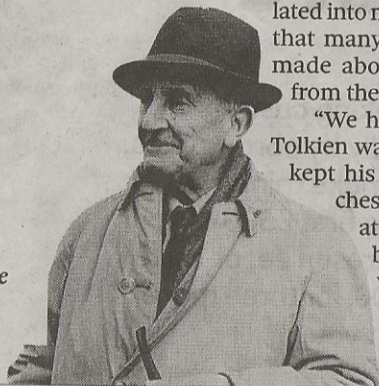
Comparing mysteries of bygone poetry to an ancient tower, the don would talk of the impossibility of understanding exactly why something was once built. "I have found an interesting connection in his work with the folly in Berkshire, a nonsensical tower that caused a big planning row," says Garth. While researching his book he realised the controversy raging outside the university city over the building would have been familiar to Tolkien.

Tolkien began to work this story into his developing Middle-earth fiction, finally planting rival edifices on the Tower Hills to the west of his imaginary "Shire" and also drawing on memories of other real towers that

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John Garth, author

*The Lord of the Rings* author JRR Tolkien.



stand in the Cotswolds and above Bath. "Faringdon Folly isn't a complete physical model for Orthanc," said Garth. "It's the controversy surrounding its building that filtered into Tolkien's writings and can be traced all the way to echoes in the scene where Gandalf is held captive in Saruman's tower."

Garth's book, *The Worlds of JRR Tolkien*, is published next month by Frances Lincoln and is to be translated into nine languages. It will argue that many assumptions previously made about the origins of scenes from the sagas are wrong.

"We have a good idea of when Tolkien was writing each bit, but he kept his cards pretty close to his chest when it comes to his creative process. I think it has been misleading just to visit places he went to and draw simple conclusions," said Garth. He is uncon-

vinced by a prior claim that *The Two Towers* in the title of the second book of *The Lord of the Rings* were influenced by buildings in Birmingham, including Perrotts Folly in Edgbaston.

One of Garth's key discoveries concerns an ancient battlescape – the atmospheric Barrow-downs – that appears in *The Lord of the Rings* and in other Tolkien writings. It has its basis, he now believes, in the large iron age earthworks at Maiden Castle in Dorset.

"It is a former place of a battle with tombs, dating from a 'deep time'. This is the place where the Barrow-wight captures the hobbits and they need to be released from his power," said Garth. "Tolkien does the scene beautifully. It is one of his real talents as a writer."

In the year before Tolkien wrote this passage, major excavations in Maiden Castle had been chronicled in a newspaper column of archaeolog-

ical highlights written by his friend REM Wheeler.

"Wheeler, who invented 'stratigraphy', the study of archaeological layers, was a great populariser," said Garth. "The excavations in Dorset were given an awful lot of space in the newspaper and I am pretty confident that Tolkien read it, especially as he knew Wheeler. At the time, though, Tolkien still didn't have a clue where he was going with his story. He was just grabbing at ideas and he ... liked the setting of a place of former battles."

The significance of Warwick and Warwick Castle in the genesis of the Middle-earth books has also become clearer to Garth. Tolkien travelled there on romantic breaks with Edith Bratt, his future wife, and his love of the trees of the area and of a particular hill can be closely linked now to the Elven forests that his fans later came to love.