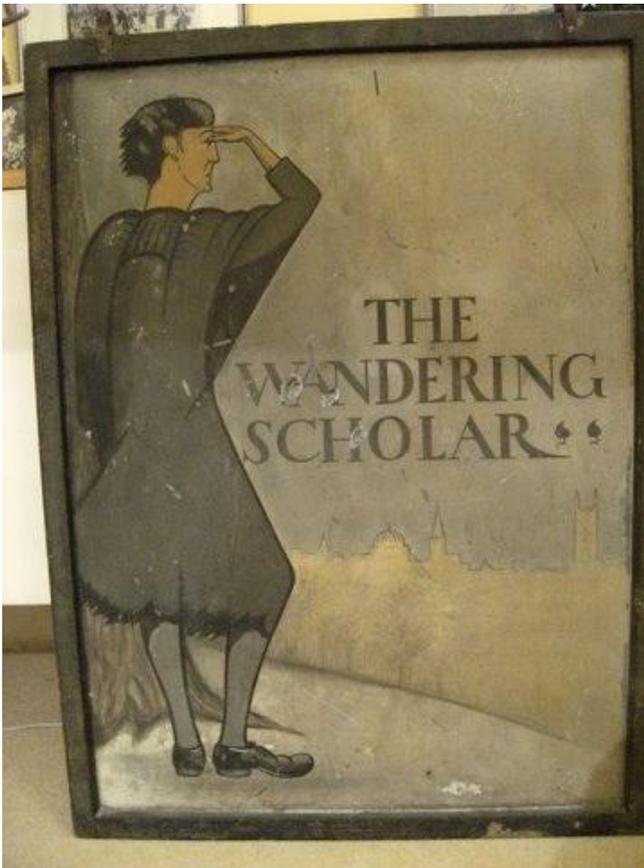


Graves and the Grocery

Philip Stewart

Robert Graves and his wife Nancy Nicholson lived on Boars Hill from late in 1919 to June 1921, in what is now called Dingle Cottage, at the bottom of John Masfield's garden. In October 1920, Nancy opened a grocer's shop in partnership with the Hon. Mrs Michael Howard. Graves often helped out behind the counter,



The shop signboard, almost certainly painted by Nancy Nicholson. The Wandering Scholar is looking across fields to the 'dreaming spires' – All

Saints spire, St Mary's, the Radcliffe Camera, Magdalen Tower. It was found in woodland near Dingle Cottage, and had apparently been made into part of a children's playhouse. The image is painted on two metal sheets mounted back-to-back in a wooden frame; on the top are two stout eyes from which to suspend it. Expertise must have gone into the choice of paints, which survived exposure to the elements for some years. One side is brighter but has three small craters, as if hit by air-gun pellets; the other side is more scratched and pitted. (Photo: Philip Stewart.)

but it was not his enterprise. It occupied a wooden shed, which soon had to be expanded to make room for more stock. At first the grocery did very well, thanks largely to curious visitors, who came up from Oxford in the hope of buying cheese from the hands of the poet. However, business soon slackened and they began to lose money. They tried to get the shop taken over by an Oxford firm, but Mrs Masefield persuaded the owner of the land not to agree, as she felt it would lower the tone of the neighbourhood. In April 1921 the building was destroyed, as it had not been designed with a view to being dismantled and re-erected elsewhere. They ended up with a huge debt, which was partly paid by the Nicholson parents and partly by the sale of four chapters of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, generously donated by T. E. Lawrence. The Graveses left Boars Hill in disgust.

I have often wondered where the shop stood. Even in the 1970s no one seemed to remember. After all, more than fifty years had already passed, and it had lasted only six months. All I had to go on was Graves's statement in *Goodbye to All That* that 'a neighbour rented us a corner of his field close to the road'. That, together with the statement that Mrs Masefield persuaded the owner not to let it to an Oxford firm, ruled out John Masefield's 'three-cornered field' (now the Oxford Preservation Trust wood south of the Ridgeway). I have followed various false trails, among others a vain search for the front page of the *Daily Mirror* which, according to Graves, carried the headline 'SHOP-KEEPING ON PARNASSUS'.

Recently, the poet's son William sent me copies of an article in the *Daily Mail* of 8 October 1920 and of photos in the previous

day's *Mirror*. Mrs Howard is quoted as telling the *Mail* reporter that she and Nancy 'conceived this idea in my garden opposite'.

Page 2

POETS' SHOP.

SPELLS BEHIND THE COUNTER.

There is a little shop at Boar's Hill, near Oxford, where you can not only buy everything from a collar-stud to a saucepan, but—if you happen to be passing just at the right time—you may receive your purchase from the hands of a distinguished poet.

For this is the shop opened by the Hon. Mrs. Michael Howard and Miss Nancy Nicholson for the benefit of the colony of poets and scientists that has grown up at Boar's Hill, and the fashion seems to be to take turns behind the counter. Here is a list (without prejudice) of some of the people who live there:

Dr. Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate.
Mr. John Masefield,
Mr. John Galsworthy,
Professor Gilbert Murray,
Sir Walter Raleigh, and
Miss Lillah McCarthy.

"You see we are nearly four miles from the nearest stores in Oxford," Mrs. Howard told a *Daily Mail* representative yesterday, "and poets as well as peasants want to buy candles and cheese, paraffin and sweets, at a handy place. Miss Nicholson and I conceived this idea together in my garden opposite, and in less than a month we got the ground, built the shop, and found out what to get and where to get it.

"Next week we shall send round from house to house to see if we can supply them with groceries. Several women have offered to come and take a hand in serving behind the counter."

BUSY DAYS IN POETS' VILLAGE.

Famous Residents Go to a Pretty Wedding.

VISIT TO THE STORE.

Hon. Mrs. Howard and Charm of Commercial Travellers.

From Our Special Correspondent.

BOAR'S HILL, Thursday.

When you have been twenty-four hours in Poets' and Peasants' Land you begin to realise what an extraordinary "live" place it is for a baby village sitting atop a wind-blown Oxfordshire hill.

I discovered yesterday the quaintest all-sort shop just opened by the Hon. Mrs. Michael Howard and Miss Nicholson, daughter of the well-known artist.

This morning a motor-car and a motor-cyclist came into collision, and no one was hurt. This afternoon a fashionable wedding took place at Sunningwell, a couple of miles away.

PEASANT'S DILEMMA.

Nevertheless, I began to notice a certain emptiness about Boar's Hill at half-past one.

Not a poet loitered in the lane, and the only peasant in the vicinity was in the Poets' and Peasants' shop wondering whether to buy a pennyworth of brandy balls or a ten-and-sixpenny patent clothes washer.

"I suppose you know that Charles Petrie and Ursula Dowdall are being married at Sunningwell this afternoon?" asked Mrs. Howard, wrapping up the sweets. "Everybody's going except poor shopkeepers like me."

The bridegroom is the younger son of the late Sir Charles Petrie, and the bride the eldest daughter of the Hon. Mrs. Dowdall.

And at Sunningwell I found the prettiest wedding taking place in a prettier church than ever was painted in a picture.

CONGREGATION OF GENIUS.

A bride in fawn chamoisee, trimmed with Limerick lace, crowned with a Gainsborough picture hat of fawn and gold, adorned with a sweeping plume, was attended by bridesmaids in tunic dresses of Chinese yellow silk, trimmed with fur, and hats of autumn leaves.

And in every pew and corner of the church a far-famed poet or a scientist whose learning has set the world agape.

Not being a guest, I returned with the peasants, and had a further conversation with Mrs. Howard and Miss Nicholson.

The Hon. Mrs. Howard believes that her little store full of soap and cheese and kettles and saucepans and potato peelers and whatnots will one day grow into a great big store, full of carpets and mangles.

COMMERCIAL TRAVELLERS.

Some time or another, she observed, this part of the world might develop—into a garden suburb, perhaps. Then there would be telephones and electric light, and even a policeman!

"Then great poets will not sell your baking powder or buy your toffee!" I suggested.

"You leave the poets alone," cried Miss Nicholson. "A distinguished poet certainly bought some toffee here the other day, but we want to tell you about the commercial travellers."

"I'd never met one before I opened the shop," said Mrs. Howard, "and I had no idea they were so nice. Even when I criticised the stuff he brought, he was still nice."

"So we had to buy it," said Miss Nicholson. "Of course," said I. "Such are commercial travellers."

SAILOR KNIGHT 'POETS AND PEASANTS' SHOP



Captain Sir F. W. Young on board *Vindictive*, after successfully refloating her at Ostend. He has been made a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire in recognition of this work.



Mrs. Michael Howard serving behind the counter of the Poets' and Peasants' Shop at Boar's Hill, Oxfordshire. Business is quite brisk.



Lucan the famous dispatch.



Miss Nicholson ready to execute an order for any article not in stock. The business is most go-ahead, and no effort is spared to give satisfaction.



How that customer smiles. Heere want is



Illustrations in the Daily Mirror, 7 October 1920

With the help of the staff at the City Library, I have found where

she lived: in Elcot Lodge, now Hunter's Chase. The field opposite her garden would have been what is now the garden of Hilcote House, which is shown as a field in the 1920s Ordnance Survey



The site of the shop is behind the close-board fence. Masefield's house is on the right. (Photo: Philip Stewart.)

25-inch map. The southernmost corner of the site matches up with the pictures in the *Daily Mirror*, which show a makeshift bridge to take shoppers up across a still-existing ditch to the door of the shop. The photos are clearly taken facing into bright sunlight, with sharp shadows falling slightly to the left, as they would at that place early on an October afternoon.

If I am right, the shop was just next to the Masefields' house, which would explain why Mrs Masefield was so agitated about it. The two properties were separated only by Matthew Arnold's 'track by Childworth Farm', which reaches the Ridgeway at this point. The lives of three poets meet at this historic junction. Perhaps it should be commemorated in some way.

Philip Stewart took Oxford degrees in Arabic and in Forestry. After translating an Egyptian novel and working for seven years as a forester in Algeria he returned to the University and taught in various faculties. He has lived on Boars Hill since 1975, and one of his hobbies is studying the poets connected with it.