

## ***Jefferies' Land: A history of Swindon and its Environs***

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### **Teachers' Notes**

Richard Jefferies was born in Coate, Swindon in 1848. He began his writing career as a journalist on the *North Wiltshire Herald*, and contributed to the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* and the *Swindon Advertiser*. He went on to be a frequent contributor to *The Pall Mall Gazette* and became known for his books of nature writings and depictions of rural England. Although much was published in his lifetime, there was a large volume of work which was only published after his premature death, aged 38, in 1887.

Although Jefferies became known for writing about rural England one of his earliest books – written when he was just 19 – is a description of rapid urbanisation, focusing on the history of Swindon and its growth following the arrival of the Great Western Railway. He wrote it in 1867 but the book was not published until 1896. The chapter titled *Swindon in 1867* was unaltered by the editor of the day, Grace Toplis, and we are left with a vivid, contemporary account of the birth and development of Swindon New Town, including the importance of the Mechanics' Institution. Jefferies also highlights the differences between the aspirations of factory workers – the mechanics – of New Town and the agricultural labourers Old Town.

The following extracts are all taken from *Swindon in 1867*, chapter 3 of *Jefferies' Land*. The young Richard Jefferies did not seem keen on paragraph breaks, and all spellings and punctuation are as they appear in the book.

The extracts are suited to upper primary, AG&T pupils, and KS3. They are a good introduction to more arcane language, new vocabulary and are a good example of Victorian descriptive writing.

**Extract 1** focuses on the appearance, as if by magic, of Swindon New Town – the Railway Village. Jefferies also describes the different needs and wants of the newly arrived factory workers in contrast to the agricultural labourers of Old Town and surrounding villages.

This extract could be used in **History / Geography / PSHE** to show the changes brought about by industrialisation, urbanisation and migration; the advantages and disadvantages of such rapid urban/industrial growth; pros and cons of planned new towns; the changing economic & social aspirations of different generations / communities and how these might influence migration, nationally and internationally.

**Extract 2** is a short paragraph highlighting how important Daniel Gooch was to both the creation of the GWR workshops and the founding of the Railway Village and Mechanics' Institution. The last sentence shows that Jefferies considered the Institute a great social and cultural asset for the GWR workers, while the factory itself provided well paid employment.

Use this extract to support **SMSC learning** – the value of lifelong learning; of people working together to improve their communities; what are people in Swindon doing today to encourage social, cultural wellbeing; what are they doing to preserve their heritage.

In **History / Geography / Economics /Politics** consider the links between the Mechanics' Institute movement and adult education e.g. the London Mechanics' Institute became Birkbeck College, part of the University of London; the GWR Medical Fund Society and the modern NHS. In the primary curriculum, if you study Brunel make sure you also study Daniel Gooch as he was the driving force behind the development of Swindon.

**Extract 3** is a vivid description of the GWR Works, a popular visitor attraction in its day. We think of tourism as a modern phenomenon, but the advent of the railway allowed more people to travel, and to travel further afield. (Think Thomas Cook in the 1840s.) The great British public in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was fascinated by technology and industrial progress; the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851 attracted six million visitors, a third of the country's population! The exhibition's full title was The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. Whether any GWR workers and their families visited the Great Exhibition or not, they soon benefited from the greater mobility train travel offered and in 1849 the Swindon Mechanics Institution organised its first works' outing to Oxford.

**History** – use Swindon as an example of industrialisation & urbanisation; of innovation and technology; of great lives Brunel and Gooch; of workers organising themselves through the Mechanics' Institution and Medical Fund.

In **English / Literacy** this extract could be the stimulus for descriptive writing or you could link with novels and poetry from the late 18<sup>th</sup> / 19<sup>th</sup> century e.g. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Dickens.

**Art / Design / Design Technology** – what would you put in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Great Exhibition; study architecture and engineering of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Brunel's stations, bridges and ships; the Crystal Palace itself); make a piece of art inspired by the description; study 19<sup>th</sup> century artists – Turner or the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and sisterhood Effie Millais, Georgiana Burne-Jones; caricaturists such as Cruikshank.

**[Extract 1]**

**New Swindon**

Houses have sprung up as if by enchantment, trade has increased; places of worship seem constantly building to accommodate the ever growing population; as for public houses, they seem without number. A whole town has sprung into existence. The expression New Town is literally true. It is new in every sense of the word. New in itself, new in the description of its inhabitants.

...

At length it was announced that a factory was to be built for the manufacture of engines, and other requisites of a railroad. This was a good time for landed proprietors at New Swindon... One or two persons made fortunes. Up rose the factory, and workmen began to pour in from all quarters. Houses were built at a rate which astonished the country, and a new class of men, hitherto unknown in the neighbourhood, appeared, men who worked hard, earned high wages, and were determined to live upon the best they could afford. The agricultural labourer was content with bread and beer; the mechanic must have meat, groceries and other comforts. The farm labourer bought a smock twice in his lifetime, and used his grandfather's gaiters; the mechanic dressed smartly. Tradesmen found New Swindon a profitable place – a Wiltshire California. ... To accommodate the increasing number of workmen it employed, the company built a place, since known as the Barracks, upon the plan of French lodging-houses, to have a common kitchen and common entrance, with a day and night porter... and there stands the Barracks to this day [1867], a great pile of buildings with broken windows, the few inhabitants of which were so dirty in their habits, that a year ago it was thought to threaten a visitation of cholera, and underwent a thorough clearing under the supervision of the police. Streets sprang up in all directions. The situation was flat and damp, and there was a deficiency of good water – it did not matter; the mechanic must have a house, and a house he had. The company built a church and a Mechanics' Institute. ... and chapels of almost every denomination may be found. Persons of middle age describe the change which has taken place since they can remember as something almost incredible. Streets stand where were formerly meadows and hedgerows.

New Swindon is the Chicago of the western counties.

**[Extract 2]**

**Daniel Gooch and the Mechanics Institution**

The factory and the place generally will always be connected with the name of Sir Daniel Gooch, who was for so long a period intimately associated with it. A vast audience in the hall of the Mechanics' Institute was held in spellbound silence scarce twelvemonth since, when that celebrated man gave a short account of his career: how when but a youth he had stood upon a bridge in Newcastle all but despairing, when he chanced to observe a motto cut upon it in large letters: "*Nil desperandum*" – "*Never Despair*" – which from that moment he adopted as his own. New Swindon will never forget Sir Daniel Gooch, whilst the Mechanics' Institute affords the mechanic a chance of becoming acquainted with literature, and the factory of earning a decent livelihood.

**[Extract 3]**

**The GWR Factory – a 19<sup>th</sup> century tourist attraction**

This factory is perhaps the largest in the West of England. Here are employed as many as seventeen hundred hands – an army of workmen – drawn from the villages round about. Here are made the engines used upon the Great Western Railway. It is open to visitors every Wednesday afternoon, and is a sight worth seeing.

Seven tall chimneys belch forth volumes of smoke. The first thing shown to visitors is an engine room near the entrance. Here are two beams... working with a smooth, oily motion, almost without noise. The northern shops are devoted to noise, and the voice of the guide is inaudible. ...forges glaring with blue flames, the men all standing by leaning upon their hammers, waiting until you pass, while far ahead sparks fly in showers... The first glimpse of the factory affords a view of sparks, sweat and smoke. Smoke, sweat and sparks is the last thing that is seen.

Passing between a row of fiery furnaces seven times heated, the visitors enter the rail mill, where the rails are manufactured. This place is a perfect pandemonium. Vast boilers built up in brick close in every side, with the steam hissing like serpents in its efforts to escape. Enormous flywheels spin round and round at a velocity which renders the spokes invisible. Steam hammers shake the ground, where once perhaps crouched the timid hare, and stun the ear. Gazing upon these wonderful hammers the visitor is suddenly scorched upon one side, and turning, finds that a wheel-barrow load of red-hot iron had been thrown down beside him, upon which a jet of water plays, fizzing off into steam. The workmen wear shoes shod with broad headed iron nails from heel to toe. Their legs are defended by greaves – like an iron cricketing pad; their faces by a gauze metal mask. The clang, the rattle, the roar are indescribable...

Yonder, a glare almost too strong for the eyes shows an open furnace door. Out comes a mass of white-hot metal, it is placed on a truck, and wheeled forward to the revolving rollers, and placed between them. Sparks spurt out like a fountain of fire – slowly it passes through, much thinned and lengthened in the process which is repeated until at length it emerges in the form of a rail. ... In the dark winter nights the glare from this place can be seen for miles around; lighting up the clouds with a lurid glow like that from some vast conflagration.