

*Oxfordshire, Berks but not Bucks: John Meade Falkner's
correspondence with his publisher*
Michael Daniell

In early June 1890 John Meade Falkner wrote to the 84-year old John Murray (1)

Please forgive me for troubling you on the following matter. I am an Oxford man and most of my holidays I spend in Oxfordshire. I have often attempted to use the guide to the County in your most admirable red covered series, but it is unfortunately so inadequate as to be practically useless. (2)

John Murray III had entered family firm in 1829 and in his early career had pioneered the publishing of guide books. Later he was to publish the work of such authors as Charles Darwin, Samuel Smiles, and David Livingstone. One wonders what Murray made of this approach from the 32-year-old JMF. The letter continues:

People like “Murray’s” guides better than any other, and most deservedly so, but your guide to Oxfordshire is not even kept in stock by most of the Oxford Booksellers because it is so obsolete and so inadequate.

JMF concludes by offering to do a sample of a revision.

On 11 June he writes thanking Murray for his provisional approval, and in a follow up letter it becomes clear the specimen material is to be based on the route from Oxford west to Witney and Burford. There is mention of a week’s holiday to be spent in the county from 21 June.

All is then silent until on 4 August he writes from the Elswick Works:

I have been abroad lately or I sh^d have written to you before. I have now a specimen ‘route’ for the Oxfordshire guide ready. At present it is in a large folio exercise book. I do not know whether this shape would be too inconvenient for you to look at but if you would prefer it I would have it written in type on loose sheets.

Otherwise I will send the exercise book up to you just as it stands if it is not giving you too much trouble to read it. I have of course been carefully over the ground myself, and write from my own knowledge. I do not think the previous compiler could have been personally acquainted with the majority of the places described. The accounts are very jejune and seem as a rule little more than transcripts from Parker. (3)

And on 13 August he writes:

I am sending on to you by this post a very cumbrous exercise book in which I have written the Witney and Burford route.

Murray must have been impressed, or at least satisfied, for on 26 August JMF writes, '... it will be a great pleasure to me to try to make the work as perfect and complete as lies in my power' and he asks for the return of 'my tall copybook'. We also get an insight into JMF's methods for he explains that with Murray's permission he will have printed a letter of introduction. If you were the vicar of some Oxfordshire parish in autumn 1892, you might have received this letter:

Mr John Murray of Albermarle Street is revising and enlarging his Guide to Oxfordshire which will be republished in a separate form. I am at present working for him on this book and should be greatly indebted to you if you could inform me whether there are any particulars requiring correction in the description as it now stands in the present guide, a cutting of which I enclose. Any further details which you could supply of interest relative to the place would be much appreciated. I hope to visit in the course of

Your faithful servant

And then there is silence for two years. John Murray III died in April 1892 and the business was inherited by his sons John Murray IV who took five-eighths of the shares and Hallam Murray who took three-eighths. There must have been some further contact with the firm for on 21 June 1892 JMF is writing to Hallam Murray:

I am very sorry for having taken so long, but I understood from the late M^r John Murray that time was not pressing.

The book is very nearly ready - I have been personally to every place and hamlet in the county & I found that the book needed not revision but absolute rewriting so far as the country districts (as opposed to the city of Oxford) were concerned.

It is clear that publishing arrangements were still not definite as JMF argues for the need for a coloured map of the county and also begs that the new edition will just be for Oxfordshire. '... a separate book is much more complete and satisfactory & I am including in the guide the more immediate Berkshire environs of Oxford.' In a post script he even asks Hallam the costs of these two requirements, '.... as I have the county so much at heart that if they were not very heavy I should with your approval like to consider undertaking them myself'.

The battle for a standalone Oxfordshire book was still not won for on 25 June JMF is replying to Hallam explaining the work he has put into the revision:

But I can conscientiously say I have done my best. I have I think probably one of the largest private collections of Oxfordshire books and an enthusiasm for the county, which you will probably think blinds me to other considerations.

Hallam must also have asked him about the revision of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire:

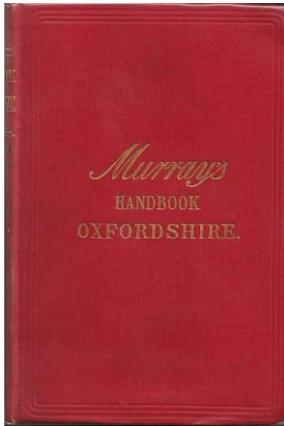
With regard to Bucks & Berks I sh^d very much like to do them; but I fear the time is a bar to me. You see I am Secretary here to the largest works, if not in the world, at any rate in England, and my holidays are necessarily limited - and too I am so far from the spot. It is very kind of you to offer it to me & once having touched this topographic work I am loath to give it up. I was going to ask, when Oxford was finished, if I might try Northants & the counties joined with it as being a little nearer me. May I call on you when next in London? That is if it does not

wear you to discuss these small things; and finally may I ask you most earnestly to reconsider if possible the question of separate publication.

And the letter concludes with a disarming postscript:

Some time ago I submitted to the late Mr Murray a specimen route for Oxfordshire which he did the honour of correcting in his own hand and as I have written the other routes at about the same length the book has swelled to a size that would not look at all puny if published separately. May I send you up a route or two for you to see?

So one wonders just how ‘nearly ready’ the revision was at this stage and whether there was a firm intention on Murray’s part to publish it. However work must have continued for on 20 February 1893 JMF writes from Rome to Hallam Murray, ‘I have been thinking over Berks and Bucks, and if you should see your way on consideration to offer me those counties I shd like to do them.’ He goes on, ‘About Oxfordshire I am sorry to have made it too long.’



Then from Paris on 7 April, ‘I have taken the liberty to send you from Siraudin’s (4) a small box of fondants which I hope will meet with your acceptance’. JMF knew how to treat a publisher.

Later that month there is correspondence about proofs sent from the Oxford University Press who were setting and printing the book for Murray. Then in December JMF is returning proofs of the index, saying what a pleasure it has been to work on the book. Hallam sent two advance copies to Elswick and JMF

writes on 2 February, ‘It looks very nice and I think the maps are capital.’ The published book had 242 pages and the price stamped in gold on the spine was 6/-. JMF was paid a fee of £52.10.0.

All then falls quiet (*The Lost Stradivarius* being written?) until 1895 when JMF writes, ‘I am sorry to hear the sale of the Handbook

has been disappointing.’ And there then follows another silence (*Moonfleet?*) until July 1898 when he is telling Hallam Murray, ‘I should very much like to edit Berkshire’. There follows an interesting comment:

Will you forgive my meddlesomeness if as a layman I make a suggestion to you who are an expert - and that is that there ought to be a modern Dorset. (5) Dorset is I fancy taking to some extent that place in popular fancy which Devon has so long monopolized - and the change is due partly to Hardy’s books having called attention to the beauties of the place. I dare say you are arranging for a Dorset, and if so please pardon my mentioning it - but I cannot help thinking that a good book is quite as much wanted there - if not more wanted than in Berkshire.

Later on if you had no one to do it, I sh^d be very pleased to try Dorset, for I know it very well - and think that after Somerset it is perhaps the most beautiful county in England.

There must have been uncertainty about the Berkshire deadline because there is a reply-paid telegram from Newcastle to Hallam Murray:

YOUR LETTER RECEIVED SHOULD BE VERY SORRY
INDEED TO MISS BERKSHIRE PLEASE TELEGRAPH
WHAT IS LONGEST TIME YOU COULD GIVE WOULD
EASTER NEXT DO
FALKNER

All must have been resolved; indeed on 25 July 1898 the correspondence passes on quickly to Bucks.

I should like to do Buckinghamshire, and am most sorry to say I cannot - but the time is I fear an impossibility, and so I must definitely decline it. I think I probably take these hand-books too seriously & put too much work into them, and so I do not like to hurry through Bucks, or just roughly correct what there is in already so as to apparently bring it up to date.

The end of this letter reverts to Berkshire with the comment:

I think it would be well with each village to give the population of the last census - and I sh^d also like to give length & breadth of the churches.

On the question of population JMF must have been overruled but on the subject of church dimensions the Berkshire guide broke new ground by including them. (6)

We know from JMF's notebooks (7) that he toured Berkshire in August-September 1898. On 27 August he wrote from the Blue Boar Hotel at Wantage:

I have been Berkshirizing for the last ten days ... We have had great fun down here - most delightful weather - and the only drawback being the heat at times. The charm of the county or at least of that part of it which we are in is undoubtedly the splendid downs with their views - and the rusticity of the small villages - in fact they are more rustic with the thatch & half timber houses than anything I have ever seen.

JMF's black notebook for 30-31 August is in the Dorset History Centre and a note inside the front cover has the 42 South Street, Durham address and '10/- reward to anyone returning this'. The burgundy notebook for 23-24 September (also at the Centre) has a note, 'Friday afternoon Sept 23 1898 met WRF (8) at Goring station 2.59 pm.'

On 27 September JMF, now back at Elswick, raises the interesting question with Hallam of whether the guidebook should be organized in 'routes' as before or in centres. 'Bicycling has so changed matters ...'.

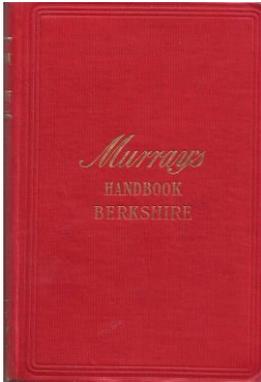
Then on 8 May 1899 he writes, 'Berkshire is practically done', but he pleads for a further fortnight, with the explanation:

Events have occurred which I did not anticipate, and I have just determined to change the bachelor for the married state: so I have found my hands fuller than I expected & beg you to indulge me as far as you are able.

A few months later on 30 June in a letter from Weymouth the focus has unexpectedly changed to Bucks:

I will do my best to get Bucks into some shape - but it is difficult to do much without personal inspection. I suppose there is no chance of letting it wait till October. We thought of archaeologizing for our honeymoon & could just as well be in Bucks as anywhere else.

He continues by disparaging what he has been sent to work on for Bucks. 'It seems to me a Murray of the 50s or 60s, with the addition of modern lych-gates, Jubilee clocks, and establishment of coach-building firms'. A year later, on 26 June 1900, JMF writes from The Divinity House saying of his work on the revision:



I spent a great amount of time and energy in trying to make it passable - principally by cutting out the new matter he [the reviser] had put in - but when all was done that could be done in that patching up way, it was thoroughly unsatisfactory. ... I would not publish it. (9)

In an agreement dated 30 April 1901 John Murray IV sold the Handbook series to Edward Stanford for £2,000. This must have included the work in progress for *Berkshire* was published in 1902 under the Stanford imprint. JMF put his name to the Preface. This includes a sad notice: 'A dear brother, who was my constant companion on all expeditions, and who devoted endless pains to the compilation of this book, passed away on the eve of its publication.' (10)

So there the story ends: guide book writing displaced by business ('We are all desperately busy reaping a harvest out of the war - and profiting, I fear to some extent from other people's misfortunes' (11)), *The Nebuly Coat*, and perhaps 'the married state'.

- (1) I acknowledge with thanks the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland. The letters I have quoted from are owned by the John Murray Archive in the NLS and I am grateful for help in using them and permission to reproduce extracts.
- (2) *A handbook for travellers in Berks, Bucks, and Oxfordshire* (sic) was first published by John Murray in 1860. Berks got 86 pages, Bucks 46 pages, and Oxfordshire 98 pages (of which 46 were for the city of Oxford). Authorship was anonymous but research by W.B.C.Lister shows that Augustus Hare (1834-1903) wrote the first edition, and helped W.E.Flaherty (1807-78) revise the second in 1872. Flaherty had been editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine* 1861-65 and then revised a number of the Murray guides in the 1870s. There was a further edition in 1882 by G.F.Rodwell (1843-1905), a pioneering science teacher at Eton, Clifton, and then Marlborough (1871-1883) where he could have, but probably didn't, teach JMF. See W.B.C.Lister, *A bibliography of Murray's Handbooks for Travellers* (1993): an excellent read and very much more than a bibliography.
- (3) John Henry Parker, *A Guide to the Architectural Antiquities in the Neighbourhood of Oxford* (1846).
- (4) Baedeker's *Paris* (1900) lists under *confiseurs*: 'Siraudin (L. Marquis), Place de l'Opera 3 and Boul. de Capucines 17'. Either would have been only a short walk from JMF's hotel.
- (5) Noted in pencil at the top of the letter by (?) Hallam: 'The current edition of Dorset is 1882. (Wilts, Dorset & Som)'. W.B.C.Lister shows that the 1882 fourth edition was written by Canon E.Venables (1819-95). In 1899 a further revision split the book into *Wilts and Dorset*, and *Somerset*, both by B.C.A. Windle. Sir Bertram Windle (1858-1929) was a medical doctor who later became Professor of Archaeology and then President of University College Cork.
- (6) This calls to mind the comment JMF made much later on 24 Sept 1918 in a letter to Canon Christopher Wordsworth while touring Somerset: 'I am down here with my wife two bicycles and a tape measure pottering about among these splendid Perpendicular churches and towers.' Bodleian MS. Eng. Lett.d.291.
- (7) Kenneth Warren, 'A Berkshire bicycling holiday', **John Meade Falkner Society Journal No 5** (2004) pp 13-18.
- (8) Presumably JMF's brother William Richardson Falkner.
- (9) When Buckinghamshire was eventually published in 1903, the revision was done by the Revd. P.H.Ditchfield (1854-1930), Rector of Barkham, near Wokingham, Berks. It is not clear whether his was the work JMF was objecting to.
- (10) See Note 8. William Richardson Falkner is commemorated in the west window of Burford church and on the side panel of the tomb that he shares with JMF in Burford churchyard.
- (11) JMF to Hallam Murray 26 June 1900.