July 29th 1888 Hoefields Farm, Thurlaston

4 days until my birthday! 17 years old and I'll be old enough to leave this place. I want to go to the sea. I want to walk across mountains. I want to skim my hand along the backs of books in libraries and bookshops and debate their meanings in teahouses with poets and journalists.

I don't want to be forever swaddling my younger siblings or singing to the sheep or mucking out barns or running errands to the village. And I don't want any of these idiot boys who can't read or write. They all think a book is for feeding to starving pigs or propping up beds. I don't want them and I don't want their babies.

We had choir practise today. I will sing the solo part this Sunday in 'Abide by Me'. Sarah Boyle was jealous once again! Serves her right for sounding like a drowning goose when she pushes for the higher notes.

I also borrowed a new book called 'Secret Writing and the Art of Deciphering' from great uncle Mudford. He fancies himself a lofty gentleman with a growing library of beautifully bound books. I bet he's never read a word of any of them!

July 30th 1888 Hoefields Farm, Thurlaston

Three days until my birthday.

I was telling Ma my plan to start writing my memoirs today whilst we were unloading cattle feed into the barn. I was detailing

how I need to bring a more poetic tone to my diary entries, when I dropped a bag and swore. Ma was so mad she threw one of the bags at me, right in the guts. I couldn't breathe for about half an hour! And my stomach still hurts.

She hates it when I swear. I forget how strong she is for such a tiny woman. She has always said she's a gentlemen's daughter, but how can a gentleman's daughter have arms so strong they can clout the likes of old Harry Fox when he's being a foul blockhead? He is twice her size and looks like a wall made from overcooked bread-dough and week-old cow dung. And yet - Ma floored him when he accused us of stealing the best ewe from Newhall's farmland. Their ewes are dead mutton walking. Why would we want them? Harry Fox deserved it. He probably just lost the ewe himself, sat on his dung-dough backside.

I know better than to swear in front of Ma. "For all your ambition to be some classy lady-writer, you have the mouth of a pig-born quarryman!" she said to me.

"I'm going to be a classy famous diarist Ma," I said. "Maybe I'll also write novels, like Austen. People will read my commentaries for years to come and probably make a statue of me."

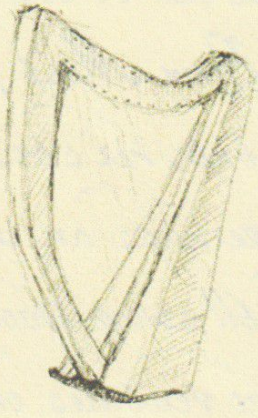
"I'll make a statue out of you if you don't get this feed loaded," she said. "And I want Bessie moved back into field before you disappear to the Elephant."

I was late to go to the Elephant and Castle Public House because of my chores. Sometimes I really hate Ma! If she really

was a gentleman's daughter, why did she marry a Farmer's nephew? If she had married better, I wouldn't be stuck in this mud filled farm. I would have a real chance of being a famous writer.

July 31st 1888 Hoefields Farm, Thulaston

Two days until my birthday.
Ma hates it when I go to read the newspaper aloud at the Elephant and Castle. Only one or two copies of the Leicester Chronicle is delivered to the Elephant, but most of the older men can't really read. Jo Hancock has been begging me to go read aloud at the Dog and Gun instead, bribing me with his wife's fresh bread, but I always say no. When I read at the Elephant, Mr Spencer the Landlord lets me sing every Saturday when Old Tom brings his Irish harp.
The harp is beautiful, small and curved like an angel's wing. It sounds so light, it's like something from another world! It's looks something like this;



The harp sounds lovely with the regular songs they like to hear, like 'Ah may the red rose live always' and 'When the Heart is Young'. But I still like to sing my own songs. Tom likes to improvise with me too. I have an idea for a new song I shall start writing soon.

1st August 1888

Aunt Mage's House,
Thurlaston

One day until my birthday!
I'm writing a new song. It'll be about a mystical creature that has built its giant nest in a field to the north of the Newhall estate. I imagine it would be in that place where the ground dips in a curious circle with an earthy boundary around it.
Aunt Mage thinks it is a faery circle. I love Aunt Mage dearly, but she's a strange and terrifying creature. She considers herself to be a fierce guardian and collator of local history and myth, although she cannot write and so cannot record these tales herself. This is why she makes me write out her local legends. I have to write them out over and over again as small pamphlets so she can hand them out to the neighbours or leave a few in the new village Reading Room. Most people think she's mad.
I like to turn her stories into songs. My new song will be about a dragon or perhaps an enormous bird with talons the size of scythes. I think it'll swoop through the village at dusk, clasping and killing anyone who ventures out into the night alone. It will eat their eyeballs and nip off fingers, one by one! I might make the melody quite sinister, like some of the sea shanties the Blacksmith sings. The Elephant regulars will love it. They always crave a touch of drama.

August 2nd 1888 Hoefields Farm, Thurlaston

Ma woke me up with her bread pudding and Aunt Mage made me a new skirt from the London fabrics she ordered last month. Pa seemed to forget it was my birthday and sent me into the village to take a piece from our delivery wagon's wheel to the blacksmith for mending again. Everything is in a constant state of falling apart on this farm. I don't think the Newhall Park workers ever have things fall apart as much as us, or Glebe Farm. Before I went, Ma bullied me again about finding a husband now that I'm seventeen. I asked her "Who would you choose out of the blockhead boys in our village?". She told me that if I didn't stop being a prim little madame, I would be fated to take Aunt Mage's place as the village's cooky old maid.

So, on my walk, across the sheep fields, past the pig farm and into the village past the Dog and Gun, I kept a look out for potential husbands.

First was Jim Plant and his little brother William, walking one of their new plough horses to test a shoe. Jim has no front teeth after getting in a rock fight with one of the Leek-Bennett boys. Then there was Tom Leek-Bennet himself, hanging on a fence, saying he'd help me hitch up my skirt if we went behind the hawthorns together. He's been after me for years now, but I can't ever forget seeing him torture a farm cat to death when we were small. He's a

cruel thing. I told him I'd rather live with the pigs than go with him.
Then I passed the youngest brother from the Sawmill on Hollies Close. I like the look of him, but he can't read and thinks farm folk are untrustworthy thieves who stink of manure. At least that's what he yelled at me when he caught me stealing a few oak logs three years ago.
But there was also a new boy today. I swiftly ran to see Neal Cobley our Blacksmith, as I was keen to finish my errand as fast as possible and go for a walk down by Yennards Farm. However, when I arrived I saw no sign of Neal, only a gangly young stranger loitering about by the furnace, fingering some of the tools and looking altogether suspicious. I hate thieves, so I picked up some kind of long metal tool and demanded he state his business! The boy looked terrified! He started spluttering and stuttering about keeping an eye on the furnace whilst his uncle attended some business elsewhere, but I said "Neal has no nephew in this village and I know a local Groundskeeper who loves to shoot thieves".
I think the poor boy was about to faint, when Neal himself turned up, took the metal pole from my hands and confirmed that the stranger was indeed his nephew. Although, it seemed to me that Neal doesn't much approve of his hapless charge. The boy is staying with his uncle for the summer before moving on elsewhere to seek work as a clerk of some kind. That means he can read and write. I shall see what he reads, perhaps, on my next visit to the Blacksmith, which no doubt will be soon when yet another thing breaks.