The road goes ever on and on down from the door where it began ...

The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst, in Lancashire’s beautiful Ribble Valley, is a treasure trove of artefacts and memorabilia associated with so many chapters of Britain’s rich Christian story.

It is home to over 60,000 objects and 50,000 books, including a Shakespeare folio and the Bible; the Bard’s relative, the Jesuit poet, St Robert Southwell; and Mark Thompson – a former Director General of the BBC, now editor of the New York Times – who has contributed to the creation of the Christian Heritage Centre, says that the restored historic libraries were a major source of inspiration for his choice to go into journalism: “You read something like Francis of Assisi or Mother of God. It feeds the will, and it gives you a special, unspoken place. It’s amazing.”

In the Victorian era another young man, Arthur Conan Doyle, honed his writing skills in this same environment while the current Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst is promoting a special exhibition with two of the Catholic world’s most influential writers – the author J.R.R Tolkien and the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

To help visitors get close to these two men and to understand their Catholic faith, the CHC is making available two wonderful walking trails – guaranteed to inspire.

The Legend of the Rings – one of the world’s top ten best-selling books – was a regular visitor to this beautiful part of Lancashire, the sacred county, when one of his sons, Michael, was a teacher at the college, and another, Joly, trained there for the priesthood. (While the English College in Rome was closed during the Second World War, Tolkien’s name appears in the college visitors’ book many times, along with that of his wife, daughter and sons.) Since 1894, 150 million copies of Lord of the Rings have influenced vast numbers of readers. Less well known was the contribution he made in 1898 to the Jerusalem Bible – translating the little book of Isaiah.

With his friend, C.S. Lewis, and the other ‘Inklings’ Tolkien used his amazing skills as a storyteller to open visitors’ eyes to the only story that really matters.

Tolkien was the son of a widowed Catholic convert – Mabel – whose family rejected her when she became a Catholic convert. On Mabel’s death in 1904, at the age of 34, a death “hastened by the persecution of her faith”, as Tolkien said that he taught him the story of his Faith ‘piercing even the ‘liberal’ charity and forgiveness from him’ and darkness out of which I came, knowing no more about ‘Bloody Mary’ than the Mother of Jesus – who was never mentioned except as an object of worship by the Romanists.

In a letter to Fr. Robert Murray SJ, Tolkien said of the Virgin Mary ‘Our Lady, upon which all my own small perceptions of beauty, both in majesty and simplicity is founded.’ Elsewhere he had said ‘I attribute whatever there is of beauty and goodness in my work to the Holy Mother of God’.

Tolkien saw Mary as the closest of all beings to Christ, as literally ‘full of grace’ as described her as ‘unstained’ and that ‘she had committed no evil deeds.’ He saw her as the Christ bearer who paves the way for the Incarnation: about which he said that the Incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write.’

He would have particularly loved the Lady Statue, erected in 1882, that commands the entry to the Avenue and which locates the walker from the village of Hurst Green into the college grounds. Tolkien attended Mass in the new, beautifully restored church of St Peter, and cultivated his great love of the Blessed Sacrament and nurtured his belief in its regularly receiving Holy Communion: ‘I fell in love with the Blessed Sacrament from the beginning and by the mercy of God have never fallen out again.’

He told his son, Michael, that “The only care for sagging or fainting faith is to come to Mass, frequent confession and the Blessed Sacrament you will find romance, glory, beauty, grace in it, and you know the way of all your lives, on earth, and more than that... eternal endurance which every man’s heart desires.”

The Blessed Sacrament appears in Lord of the Rings as the lembas, the mystical bread - the bread of angels - which both nourishes and heals. Tolkien writes: ‘I am a Christian, and indeed a Catholic. The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work, unconsciously at first, but consciously and sim plely at last, and indeed what sometimes seems its inimitable uniqueness for the purpose.

Tolkien tells us that “The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work, unconsciously at first, but consciously and simply at last, and indeed what sometimes seems its inimitable uniqueness for the purpose.”

And let the clouds go sailing by’

Sacred Treasures: Christian heritage centre, Stonyhurst

For extra news go to www.thecatholicuniverse.com

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The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst is home to unique Catholic collections – items which draw on this country’s Christian story. This registered charity is currently creating accommodation for scholars, retreatants and those wishing to deepen their Christian Faith. Therefore House will be followed by a Visitors’ Centre which will enable parishioners, schools and the general public to have even greater access to these amazing collections.

If you wish to learn more and to support please visit www.christianheritagecentre.com or contact info@christianheritagecentre.com

Stonyhurst Christian Heritage Centre has created two walking trails, including the Tolkien Trail, below right, inspired by the work of Catholic author of The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings JRR Tolkien, below left.