



The Compleat Smialler

A Guide to Forming a Smial

Smial, noun

- 1** Burrow, underground dwelling of hobbits; esp. of a large complex of tunnels inhabited by the well-off (e.g. Great Smials). From OE *smygel*, burrow (cf. Sméagol) being author's translation of Hobbitish *trân* (cf. Rohirric *trahan*).
- 2** Local group or branch of the Tolkien Society (by association with 1) with a minimum of two TS members.

This guide is produced to aid members of The Tolkien Society in establishing, advertising and organising their own local groups. It is motivated by the belief that your enjoyment of Professor Tolkien's works is much increased by sharing it with others, whether your common interest be academic, artistic, theatrical or whatever. Setting up a smial can take considerable energy and dedication (especially if you have to go it alone) but we believe that if you succeed you will find it a very worthwhile addition to your enjoyment of Tolkien. Membership of a smial is also open to non-TS members, it just means that they miss out on *Amon Hen*, etc. and would have to pay more for Oxonmoot. So it is always worth politely encouraging them to join.

We must emphasise that these notes are tips rather than "rules" for the formation of smials, nor are they meant to imply that you have to try to develop a large smial if you are happy with two or three friends meeting once every three months. Some smials are postal smials, where individuals have met at TS events and decided to keep in touch and set up a postal group for others to join. While some may have a special interest, such as the foods of Middle-earth, others are groups of likeminded individuals who can't for various reasons meet on a regular basis (i.e. distance). The whole business is absolutely optional and this guide is produced for assistance only, so that you can get a good start with running a smial.

Founding a smial

Let's assume you're a keen but solitary TS member wishing to start a smial in your area. The first thing to do is try and find out if there is any interest amongst TS members or others in your area. The easiest way of setting up a smial is to use the Mathom Editor(s) to advertise you in *Mathom* (the Smials' Newsletter within *Amon Hen*), or you can contact the Membership Secretary in order to make a more personal invitation to other members living near you. We'll deal with *Mathom* later, if you wish to contact members in your region directly you should inform the Membership Secretary of this. You will then be asked to send the appropriate number of unsealed stamped letters to the Membership Secretary, who will check and distribute them. This may seem long-winded but is in accordance with the society's responsibilities to its members. Don't expect that just because someone is a TS member that they will necessarily be interested in joining or starting a smial; many people are quite content just to read our maga- zines and don't want (or don't have the time) to get involved with anything else. Even if you find only one or two members willing to meet every so often, you have got a smial and the nucleus of something bigger if you choose to expand.

As we mentioned earlier, the other thing to do is to write/email to the editor of *Mathom* for a plug in the Smials' Newsletter. This can either be of the "anyone interested?" variety, or one that announces that a smial has been formed and invites others to get in touch. You can also announce the dates and venues of meetings in *Mathom*, but remember that *Amon Hen* only comes out every two months.

If you should hear from any members in your area, expressing interest in setting up a smial, organise an initial meeting somewhere that's easy to get to and fairly public – in a pub or café. Of course this also depends on the ages of the members involved, (the TS does not condone any illegal activities) depending on how things go you can also change things to suit perhaps meeting in someone's home or in somewhere that doesn't mind under 18s. Common sense is usually a very useful tool in deciding where to moot. Either at this stage, or once you have got something started, you can fix on a name for your smial. It is well to check with the *Mathom* Editor(s) that no-one has already adopted a particular name. If some of you then wish to take on individual aliases, these can reflect the "theme" of your smial (e.g. Arnor, Rivendell).

Publicity

For the moment we'll assume that you've found there are no interested members in your area, or that two or three of you have got together and you've decided to try to attract further support from your area by public advertising of your smial. There are several things you can do here and how many of them you attempt depends on how much time, money and effort you are able or prepared to put into it (and once again your age).

Firstly, you can distribute posters and leaflets around the place. You can design your own posters, or write to the TS Secretary or Publicity Officer for a supply of official ones. These have a space for your own name and address and the date and venue of your meeting. It is as well to have a definite occasion to mention on your posters, as people who would never be bothered to write or 'phone might just turn up on the day. On the subject of names and addresses on posters, you must of course get the owner's permission to put on the address (if applicable) of any meeting place you plan to use (landlord or bar manager if a pub). You may get a response, both in *Mathom* and in posters, if you put on a telephone number as well, but there may be a problem with crank calls which would be annoying to your family or the people you live and work with. Appropriate sites for posters are matter of local knowledge, but the main places to consider are: Central and branch libraries; friendly bookshops (especially SF/fantasy or games shops); civic or cultural centres; anywhere with a local events notice board; tourist and other information bureaux; theatre and museum foyers; school and college notice boards etc. (It is especially useful if you have a local university or college. Notice boards are to be found in bars, faculty buildings, union premises, halls of residence etc.) Use some discretion and courtesy in ascertaining whether permission is necessary to put up a poster on a particular site. Shop managers will usually say yes to a polite enquiry, especially if the poster isn't more than A4 in size. Some universities have rules about postering and will remove unauthorised posters, authorisation can be obtained from the Student Union or a member of staff depending on the institution.

Secondly you can take full advantage of your local media. Find out if there is a regular events guide, published maybe by the local tourist office or library. There will be something of the sort put out by the Students' Union at any local college or university. It could also be worthwhile checking with the Students' Union to discover whether there is already an SF/Fantasy society

active there. There may also be a Diary programme (or similar) on local or university radio. Apart from heralding your forthcoming events by the above means (and you could also try the Personal Columns of the local paper, which are often scanned by journalists on the news hunt) you could make an attempt to get yourself or your smial properly written up by the local news – press, radio, TV. This requires a certain amount of confidence and caution. If they do not approach you, you can always write to them saying you are proposing to start up a group of The Tolkien Society, or that one exists and wants to expand. Remember they will probably want a bit of “colour”, although local interest (if you can think of any) or charitable activity is almost as good. Beware, when interviewed, of questions designed to make you look silly, similarly with photographers who just want costumes and heroic poses. You have to meet them half way, but it is as well to have some idea beforehand of what you are not going to say or do for them.

Thirdly, you should not neglect to enter yourself on the Register of Local Societies which is often maintained by main libraries or information bureaux. One smial found they could register themselves as a leisure organisation with the County Council, which gave them access to equipment and facilities. Other arts or community based groups may be worth investigating for assistance.

Finally. Still on publicity, once you do have a few extrovert people as a core group, you can make your presence felt at local events such as parades, fairs and festivals. Costumes and banner may be needed here, once again that’s up to individuals, and the rule of common sense applies again as far as becoming or being lead into looking foolish, and bringing the TS into disrepute.

Getting it going

Returning to the position where there was only a few of you and you are trying to decide on the first meeting to which you hope to attract more people by way of public advertising of the sort described above. There are several different types of venue to choose from.

First, the time hallowed Pub or Inn (hence Innmoot). So long as you and the people you wish to attract are old enough, this is probably the best bet for getting strangers to come along, on the simple basis that even if they aren’t struck by your group they can always have a drink or two. Most people of age will feel more relaxed in a pub, since all the minor rituals of drink buying help to break the ice a little and you won’t suffer deafening silences – indeed, problems may occur in the other extreme. You may think it worthwhile getting hold of a separate room at a pub, which is certainly better from the point of view of privacy and freedom of activity – a bit embarrassing if nobody comes along though. However, if you’re planning to use a pub for your inaugural moot (even if you only plan to sit in the corner of the lounge bar and it’s a large pub) do get the landlord’s permission in advance, preferably by a personal visit and before you start plastering his pub’s name all over town. Nothing will irritate bar staff more than to have early arrivals asking “Where’s The Tolkien Society, then?” when they know nothing about your meeting. Needless to say The Tolkien Society does not want to be linked with under-age drinking or any form of trouble or loud behaviour in pubs. Second, for those smial organisers not of drinking age or inclination, there are such venues as coffee bars or hired rooms at colleges, community centres, etc. Or if you wish to start a school based group, you can meet at lunchtime or in after school hours in a suitable room there – this will be easier to arrange if you have member of the Staff interested as well. Or with parental permission (if needed) you could just meet at your home. The provision of food and drink will be welcome but it is up to you. It is as well to have some ideas of what you are going to do, especially if you are having a first time meeting of

people who have never encountered each other. Quiet ones have to be brought into discussion. Apart from looking at your various books, pictures etc. you can set up debates, games and quizzes, depending what sort of meeting it is. If you find conversation drifting away from Tolkien to Star Wars, holidays or Hitch-Hiker's Guide, don't worry – the main thing is to create a relaxed atmosphere and a bond of friendship which will bring people back to your next meeting. Don't forget to note names and addresses of those attending an initial meeting so that you can send out letters for your next one. Access to a free photocopier is a great help in this sort of circulation of mail – if you aren't an office worker, cultivate someone who is. Email and the internet have probably taken over from photocopying and posters, so make the best use of modern technology. Many smials now have their own websites. If you have a successful inaugural meeting, first let *Mathom* know and drop a line to the local press. If nobody turned up – well, don't necessarily despair at once – try and think why; was the date, time or venue wrong? Of course it could just be bad luck. It's up to you to decide whether to have another go. As we mentioned earlier some smials are postal smials, so there are other options open if you're keen to contact other TS members outside of TS organised events, you may find it easier to run your smial as a postal one until you get sufficient local interest to make a moot worthwhile.

If you have got a smial going, the frequency of meetings is up to you and your members – one smial may meet once a fortnight and another one only once every few months when the organiser gets around to doing letters and posters, while university based groups may moot every week, but only in term-time. If you have sufficient support, you can fix on a regular date, e.g. the first Saturday of each month, which removes the need to send out letters for each meeting.

There is little point in going into any further detail about how to succeed with your early meetings – the circumstances of each will be individual and much may depend on one person's ability to keep a group together. If there are a few from the outset it is much easier.

Further suggestions

This section is meant to follow on chronologically, being directed to the situation where you have a healthy smial of (say) half a dozen or more regular attendees. If you have got to that stage you probably do not need any more help or advice, as several keen imaginations should be working on your activities and a scanning of *Mathom* the Smials' page in *Amon Hen* will indicate what sort of things you could be thinking about. However, one or two points: You may wish to design or adopt a badge, emblem, membership card, letterhead etc. In any group of Tolkien fans there is likely to be someone of artistic talent and often this can lurk undiscovered; the bringing out of hidden talents (in art, music, poetry, dressmaking, organisation etc.) is one of the great triumphs and pleasures of running a successful smial. A real richness of talent will probably need to find expression in smial newsletter or fanzine and this is where "contacts" are useful, for access to typewriters, word processors, photocopiers, printing etc. There is only one rule as far as Smial magazines are concerned, due to the wide range of interests and attitudes within Tolkien fandom it is possible for artwork or an article to unwittingly cause a problem. To avoid this all smial publications should carry a disclaimer to the effect that the opinions of the individual contributors do not reflect the opinions of the smial or The Tolkien Society.

Apart from that do remember to send a copy to the TS Archivist (for the Archives) and let Gary Hunnewell know it exists so that he can arrange to obtain copies and review it in *Amon Hen*. Don't forget to let the Editor(s) of *Mathom* know, so that it will get a mention and so that it will

count towards their write up of your activities. You can also think about exchanging publications with other smials and even other Tolkien Societies abroad or with other fantasy groups. If you have a couple of car owners in your ranks, or are otherwise mobile, you might well consider staging a formal visit to another sizeable smial (i.e.. one that's accessible but was too far away for you to join initially). On these visits you may wish to exchange gifts and vows of friendship or just natter, either way the interactions of ideas and projects, will bind you all together in true Middle-earthly companionship. Similarly you should consider ways of making an impact on national TS meetings (e.g. Oxonmoot, the Seminar and AGM) – but do find out at an early stage who is organising the meeting and co-ordinate with them. We considered including here advanced organisation – matters of structure, Committees, bank accounts, club law etc. – but if you are big enough to need to think about that sort of thing, you can either cope with it yourself or can write to the TS Committee for advice. Indeed, if at any stage in setting up or running a smial, you encounter problems or uncertainties, do not hesitate to contact the Secretary, Editor(s) of *Mathom*, or Chairman. At all times please keep *Mathom*, at least informed of your activities. The more times you write in, the more mentions you can have.

It remains only to wish you good luck in your ventures. If anyone has comments or suggestions on the contents of this guide, based on their own experience, please let one of us know, as it is necessarily derived from the ideas of only a few people. Compiled by Brin Dunsire January 1981, with the assistance of Jessica Yates, Gary Hiley and Lester Simons. With small amendments and additions by Colin Davey January 1986, Chris Crawshaw February 1997, Ian Collier April 1998 & August 2000, and Matthew Vernon October 2004 and Anne Forbes, March 2005.

Postscript

Mathom, the Smials' Newsletter, was originally an independent publication for the smials of The Tolkien Society, founded by Jenny and Tony Curtis in Summer 1982. It is now a regular item in *Amon Hen*. It carries news and views from around the Society's smials and is designed to keep the smials in touch with each other and with the TS. If you have any queries or problems about starting or running a smial, the Editor(s) of *Mathom* will be pleased to help.