

The philosopher's home from home

Ludwig Wittgenstein's Norwegian retreat no longer exists, but his presence among the fjords is still felt 60 years after his death

BY LESLEY CHAMBERLAIN

In 1913 the Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein abandoned the busy social scenes in Vienna, where he grew up, and Cambridge, where he had settled as a maverick academic, for Skjolden at the far end of the world's deepest and longest fjord. Some now think his subsequent Norway periods were among the most significant in a reflective life spent in several countries. Norwegian Wittgensteinians, let me call them that, want to encourage new interest in why this most influential, inevitably misunderstood 20th-century philosopher made a home in the cold north. They would like to see a steady flow of visitors to Skjolden, but their problem is that the "hut" a few high-end tourists might come to inspect is no longer there. Only the name of the man survives.

Skjolden in those days was a busy crossroads beneath a mountain pass dividing Norway's east and west, never the inaccessible outpost of Wittgenstein legend. A boat arrived daily from Bergen, Norway's second city. Access became more difficult with the decline of river transport during the last century, but this year big tourist cruise ships have started calling. So with the prospect of a thousand or so visitors landing daily for a few hours through the summer, Skjolden's prospects are improving again and the Wittgenstein question is topical.

The new landing stage and extra tourist beds have added urgency to the ongoing debate: should the hut be rebuilt with the original materials which are still to hand or should the empty space be left to count for itself? What would the man himself have wanted?

When, as a self-taught philosopher, Wittgenstein suddenly burst on to the Cambridge academic scene, Bertrand Russell hailed him as a genius. Yet Russell immediately perceived the difficulties facing a man who was fighting for self-perfection and rejecting the world in the process. I believe that whatever decision Skjolden takes will depend on an interpretation of Wittgenstein's whole work:

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stood.

(Philosophical Investigations [118])

Visit the site of the old hut today and you can kick that thought around, together with a couple of old bricks. The gist of it is that philosophy's job is not to build but to undo: not a popular job but a necessary one. Who knows, an empty space where a house once was might be just the way to get that message across.

Wittgenstein was a rich man when he

first arrived in Skjolden. He conceived the idea of the building in the winter of 1914 and local labourers built it for him on a craggy hillside overlooking a lake, just inland from the fjord. The Norwegian word "hutte" is misleading: it was a two-storey house with an upstairs balcony across the front facade. The style was Austrian and so the locals called it "Austria" and Wittgenstein himself "the Austrian". You can see the spot labelled like that on older maps. A flagpole was installed but never sported a flag in the philosopher's day. Later the pole was sawn up and made into a flower tub. Today, in order that visitors can pinpoint where the building once stood, local Wittgensteinians have erected a pole and Austrian pennant, just visible across the Eidsvatnet lake, where passing motorists can pause to take a look.

What drew him north was the landscape and the community. Rich and successful, Wittgenstein père had burdened his children with high expectations. Three of Wittgenstein's older brothers committed suicide. A fourth brother, Paul, lost his right arm in the war and became the celebrated left-handed pianist for whom Ravel and Richard Strauss wrote music. Biographers rightly stress the immense influence of Wittgenstein's family background, with its high culture, social importance and strain of psychological distress; an almost quintessential family of fin-de-siècle Vienna and the collapsing Habsburg Empire. He went to Skjolden, situated as it was in sublime and merciless nature, to escape that background.

The village consisted of a handful of farms and a factory, a few families who knew each other, and their employees. Wittgenstein kept his relationships simple. To avoid meeting the grocer he devised a tubular system to haul provisions up from the lake. He had a spectacular view of the village and the fjord. The people of Skjolden apparently in turn could see Wittgenstein pacing up and down on the balcony. Anyone who came too close got short shrift: "Go away! Now it will take me two weeks to get back to where I was when you interrupted me!" Pity the fool tempted to pass the time of day with him. But often enough even he got lonely and left his hideout to lodge instead with the postmaster, and later with a retired English teacher on a local farm. In truth he didn't use the house much.

Contrary to the myth, he never arrived in Skjolden on skis, but he was an adventurous man and liked physical challenges, so perhaps it was to demonstrate his prowess in this terrain, as well as to have company, that now and again he invited selected Cambridge

friends to join him. He would charter a boat or take a horse and carriage wherever public transport petered out.

Imagine a friend comes to find you in an out-of-the-way spot. You draw a map with an arrow and write something like "Here I am" or "This is me." But on the sketch he drew for fellow philosopher G.E. Moore, Wittgenstein labelled himself "Dr Wittgenstein". He

seems already to have been imagining Moore asking his way in the village. Intensely interested in language as a social game, Wittgenstein, perhaps first in Skjolden, began to consider whether anything could sensibly be called a private language. Several observations from his Norway years are written in a private but easy-to-decipher code, as if "privacy" were just a more complicated social game. In the last decade the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen have been translating those diaries, among other hitherto unpublished papers, waiting for scholars to make sense of them.

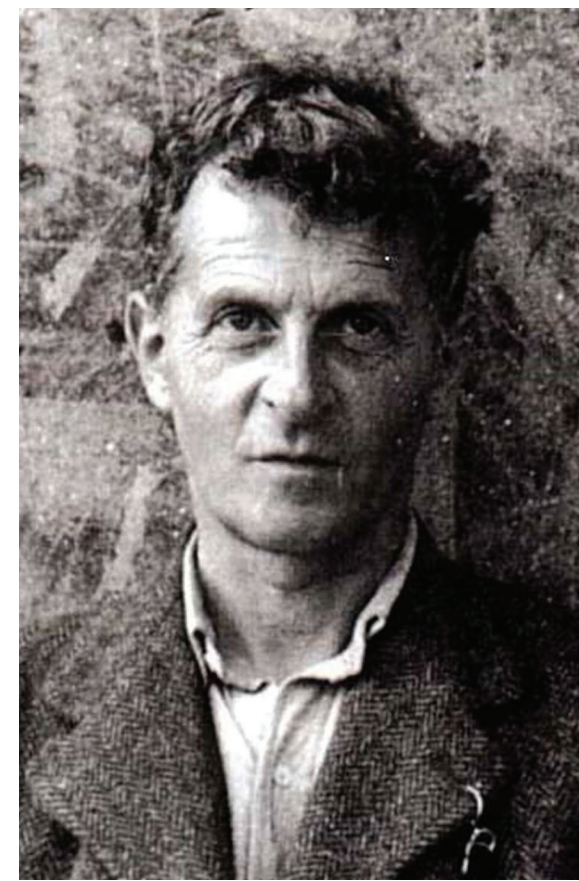
If you follow the lightly marked path to where Wittgenstein's retreat used to perch, you hike through damp fields and scramble over rocks to arrive at nothing more than rubble-strewn foundations. Yet it's a heart-stopping moment if you've done your reading and come to appreciate the man. Forested, this local "Austria" looks down on water the colour of a milky opal. Across the lake a sublimely terrifying waterfall hurls itself in perpetuity off the sheer cliff. To add to the drama, Wittgenstein would visit in winter to avoid the tourists, and perhaps to benefit from being able to walk across the ice without need of a boat.

It was as a volunteer officer in the Great War that Wittgenstein happened upon a copy of Tolstoy's *Confession*. As Kjell Johannessen of Bergen's Wittgenstein Archives sees it, the philosopher's whole Norwegian adventure can be interpreted in Tolstoyan terms as a flight first from Vienna, and later from Cambridge, a university he unflatteringly described as a mutual admiration society. The people of Skjolden were Wittgenstein's Russian peasants, who left him to live in his own silence. Even so, for reasons only he could explain, he spent no more than three years of his life in Norway.

In an intriguing recent book, *On the Trail to Wittgenstein's Hut* (2010), Norwegian-born Ivaar Oxaal found that Wittgenstein's interest in Norway first arose during the period following Scott's and Amundsen's explorations, and was further stimulated by the Titanic disaster in 1912.

In 1913 he paid a first visit with Cambridge friend David Pinsent, who recalled that playing dominoes was just enough to keep them occupied in the evening. Later that year Wittgenstein returned alone and lodged with the postmaster, where he worked on the mystical and elusive *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus*. While Russell saw that first short book as a breakthrough in mathematical logic, shadowing his own preoccupations, scholars since have compared it to the satirical aphorisms of Wittgenstein's Viennese contemporary Karl Kraus, another moralist pitted against the corruption of the world and especially of language.

Poor after voluntarily giving up his family inheritance, Ludwig worked for a while in Skjolden's fruit juice factory. There was a friendship with a local man, Arne Sojgren, and a conspicuous absence of women in his life, which generated some gossip. Happy hours were spent walking and talking to the local hotel owner about religious belief. Wittgenstein felt some things were true of human life that couldn't be sensibly said, but instead reveal themselves to us in the way we are.



Philosopher's retreat: Ludwig Wittgenstein and the remains of his home overlooking Skjolden

Through the 1920s he chose a different escape route, teaching in a school in rural Austria. By the time he revisited Cambridge in 1929, he needed his Norway again. During his longest ever stay between 1936 and 1937, where he wrote the much-admired *Philosophical Investigations*, retired English teacher Anna Rebni became his chief support. "The closest he came to being married," chuckles Johannessen. "They fought all the time."

When, in 1951, he fell ill with cancer at the age of 62, he would have returned to Skjolden for a last time to stay with her, but was already too weak to make the journey. It's one of the great regrets of scholars and historians working on the growing body of material relating to Wittgenstein and Norway that no one interviewed Rebni before she died in 1970.

In this sixtieth year since Wittgenstein's death, an anniversary that has only been marked by specialists, Alois Pichler of Bergen's Wittgenstein Archives told me how much remains to be understood about this unique philosopher who placed the whole burden of philosophy on language. Many would say that two succeeding generations of logic-chopping Ordinary Language philosophers from Britain and America got his legacy wrong and that the aim now should be to restore the logic to a natural and human setting.

The problem of what to do about the hut, which a local man Arne Bolstad inherited, remains. When Wittgenstein died Bolstad had it dismantled and reerected as a modest, comfortable home inside the village. Over the years his family have declined to move, or sell. Equally, the owners of the Wittgenstein plot on the rocks have wanted to hold on to their land. But this year, with the generations moving on, there seems a chance to change this. Local historian Harald Vatne, whose book on Wittgenstein and the people of Skjolden will appear in 2012, has been chivvying the local council to have the requisite permissions in place.

Should the hut be rebuilt out of the original materials? Vatne and Johannessen think so. British artist and Wittgenstein disciple David Connearn even insists so, because anything else "would create a ghost". More modest plans to turn the Bolstad house in its present position into a Wittgenstein centre are also being considered.

Will it become a shrine for scholars or could it have a wider significance? A fashion for wild places, and silence, is one stream of interest that Norway's local Wittgensteinians could, and probably should, tap into. In Skjolden's fine Wittgenstein-rich library and at the indoor pool adjacent to the fjord, I spent a few days reading and swimming, thinking that this part of Norway could become my refuge too.

Millions love silence but few know much about Wittgenstein. When Vatne asked a busload of 50 tourists if they had heard of him, only two said they had. True, the heritage industry might make an effort on behalf of the other 48, but tourism doesn't easily wrap itself around artists and intellectuals without smothering their strangeness. What is needed is of a different order: a stunningly fresh idea to link difficult philosophy, intransigent genius and one of the most beautiful places on earth. **S**