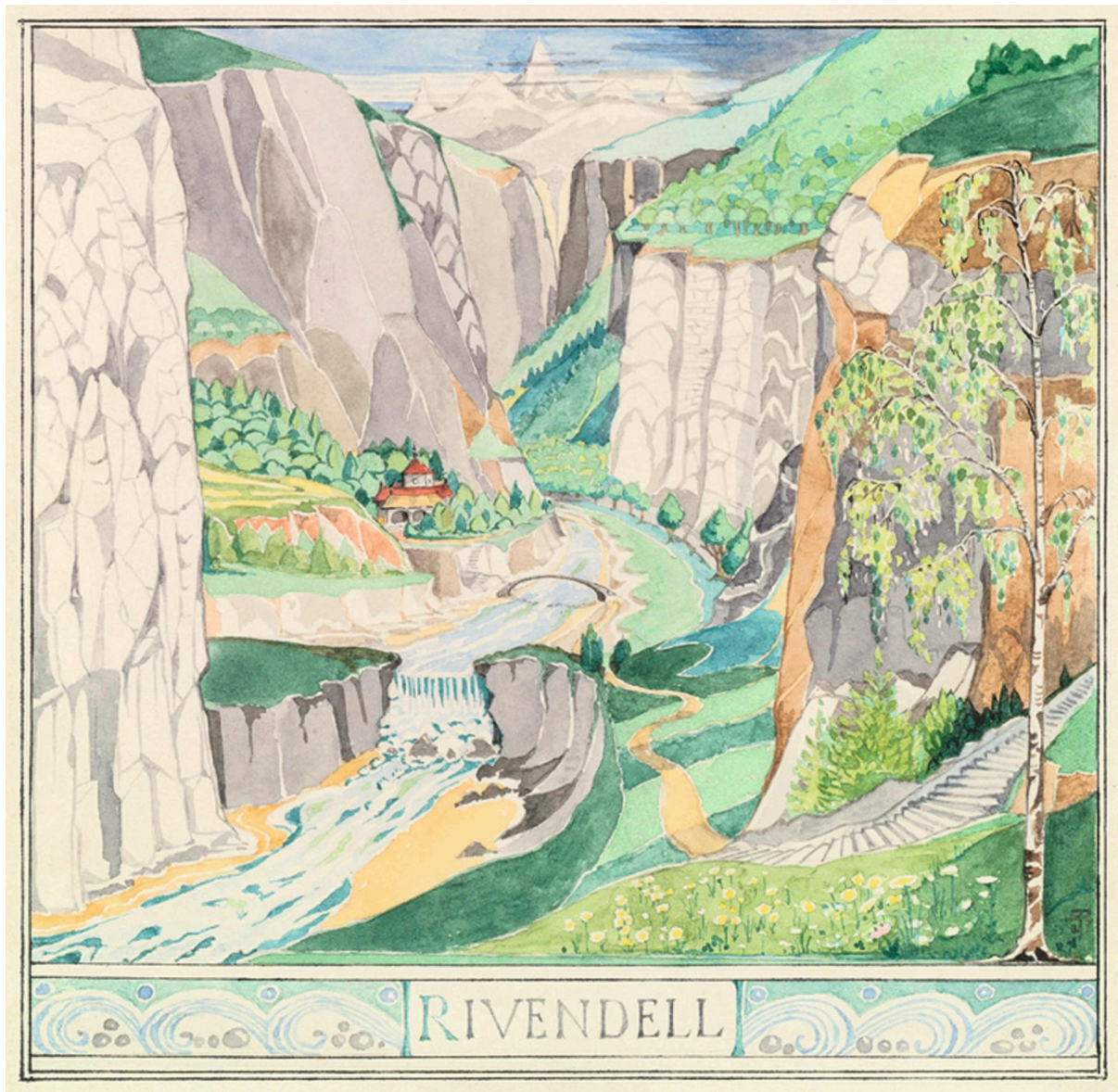


"They saw a valley far below. They could hear the voice of hurrying water in a rocky bed at the bottom; the scent of trees was in the air; and there was a light on the valley-side across the water..... Bilbo never forgot the way they slithered and slipped in the dusk down the steep zig-zag path into the secret valley of Rivendell." - *The Hobbit*, JRR Tolkien

"We went on foot carrying great packs practically all the way from Interlaken, mainly by mountain paths, to Lauterbrunnen and so to Mürren and eventually to the head of the Lauterbrunnenthal in a wilderness of morains." - Letter 306, JRR Tolkien

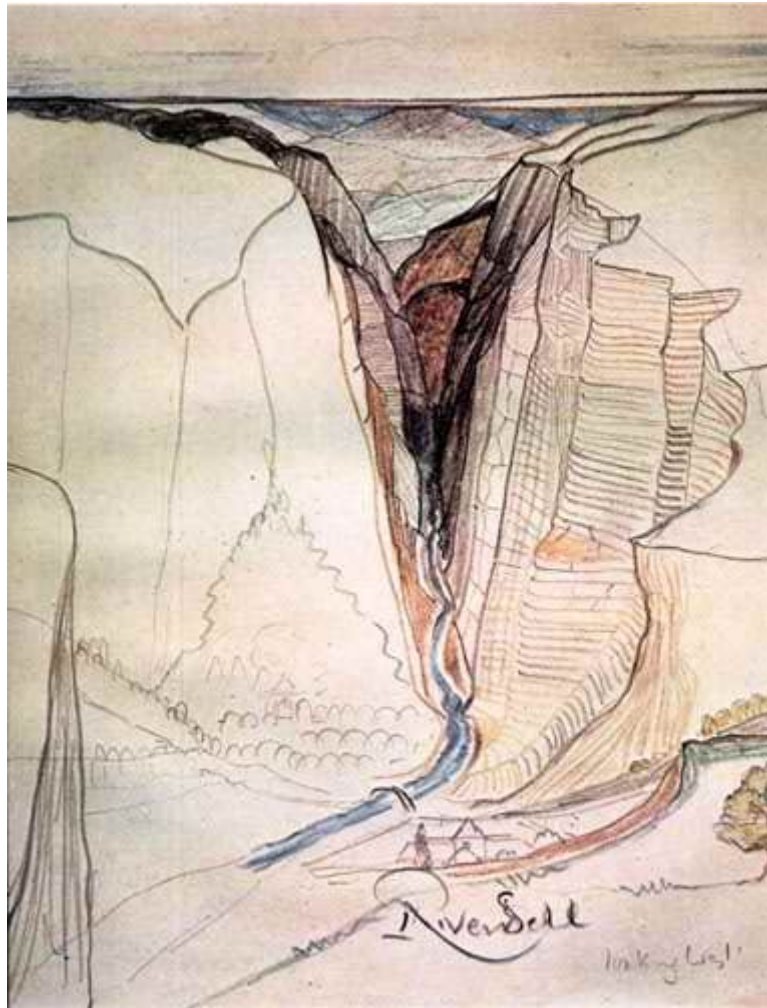


It seems highly likely to me ([and many others](#)) that the valley of Rivendell was strongly inspired by the Lauterbrunnen valley (Lauterbrunnental) in Switzerland. We know multiple other incidents from Tolkien's 1911 trip made it into *The Hobbit* - Letter 306 cites Bilbo's "glissade down the slithering stones into the pine woods", and names Silberhorn as Silvertine/Celebdil, while Letter 232 names a rockfall in the mountains and the "thunder-battle".



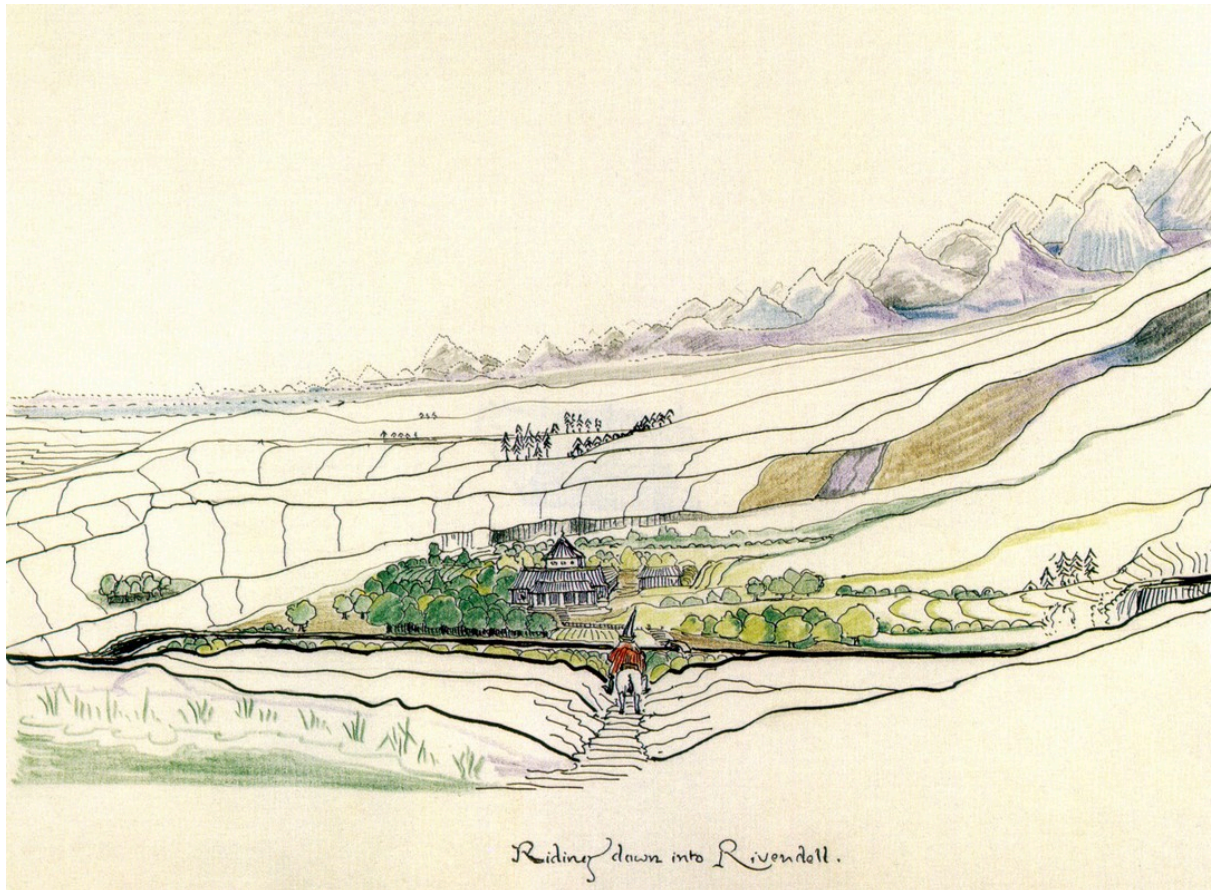
Tolkien's watercolour of Rivendell shows an approach from the side of the valley, with the river running right to left; the entry point is downstream of the Last Homely House. The Lüscherhorn river flows north out of Lauterbrunnental, so a match for Bilbo's route would mean coming in from the north-west - exactly the direction necessary for an approach over the mountains from Interlaken.

How far down the valley did Bilbo come in? Tolkien's drawing "Rivendell looking west" gives an easy answer:



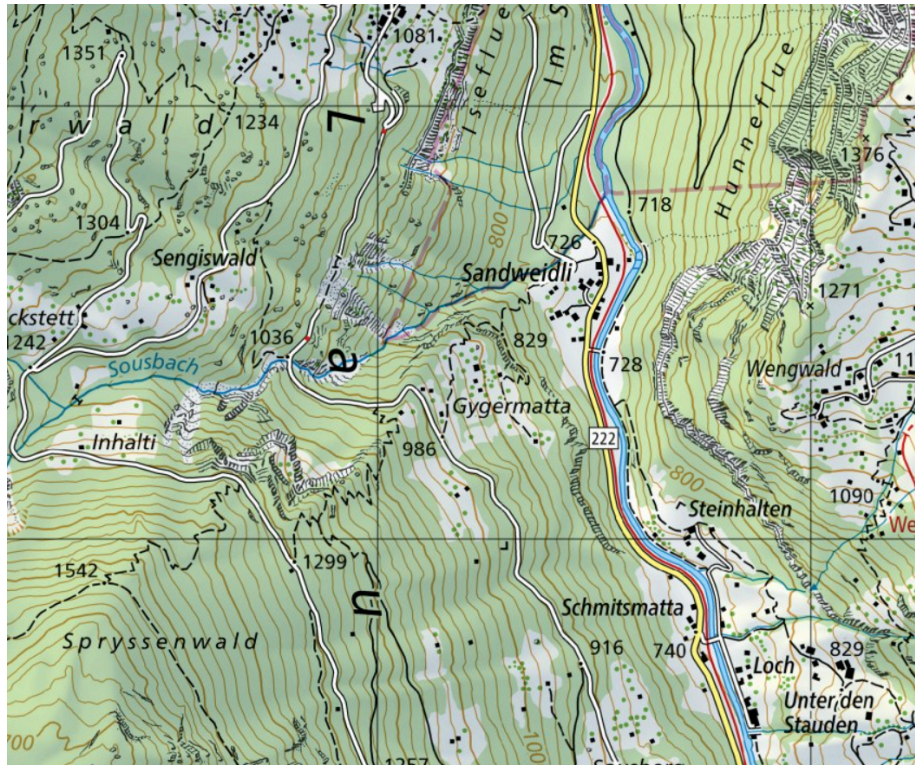
You can see the Last Homely House and the bridge; Bilbo must have entered the valley just at the point where it narrows/widens. The area of forest on the left bank seems to be where the path came down.

We can be even more specific by referring to Tolkien's drawing "Riding down into Rivendell":



This shows an approach from directly to the side; while it looks as though the path should head straight to the bridge, the stairs on the watercolour further up turn back upstream, so it seems like this path curves away to the left to zigzag down.

Zooming in on the map, roughly between the words "Isenfluh" and "Lauterbrunnen", where the valley widens:



There is a "steep zig-zag path" coming down into the Lauterbrunnental, starting directly west of Lauterbrunnen, but running north to come in where the valley widens. A quick visit to Street View provides [a view from the top of that path](#):



This is pretty much *exactly* the view Tolkien drew in "Riding down into Rivendell"; that's Lauterbrunnen far below, with multiple lines of forest between us and it.

But okay, a valley is a valley. Is there anything else to suggest that this particular path is the origin of Bilbo's steep zig-zag? Take a look at the zoomed-in map again; there are 3 blue lines across the river at Sandweidli. What do those represent?

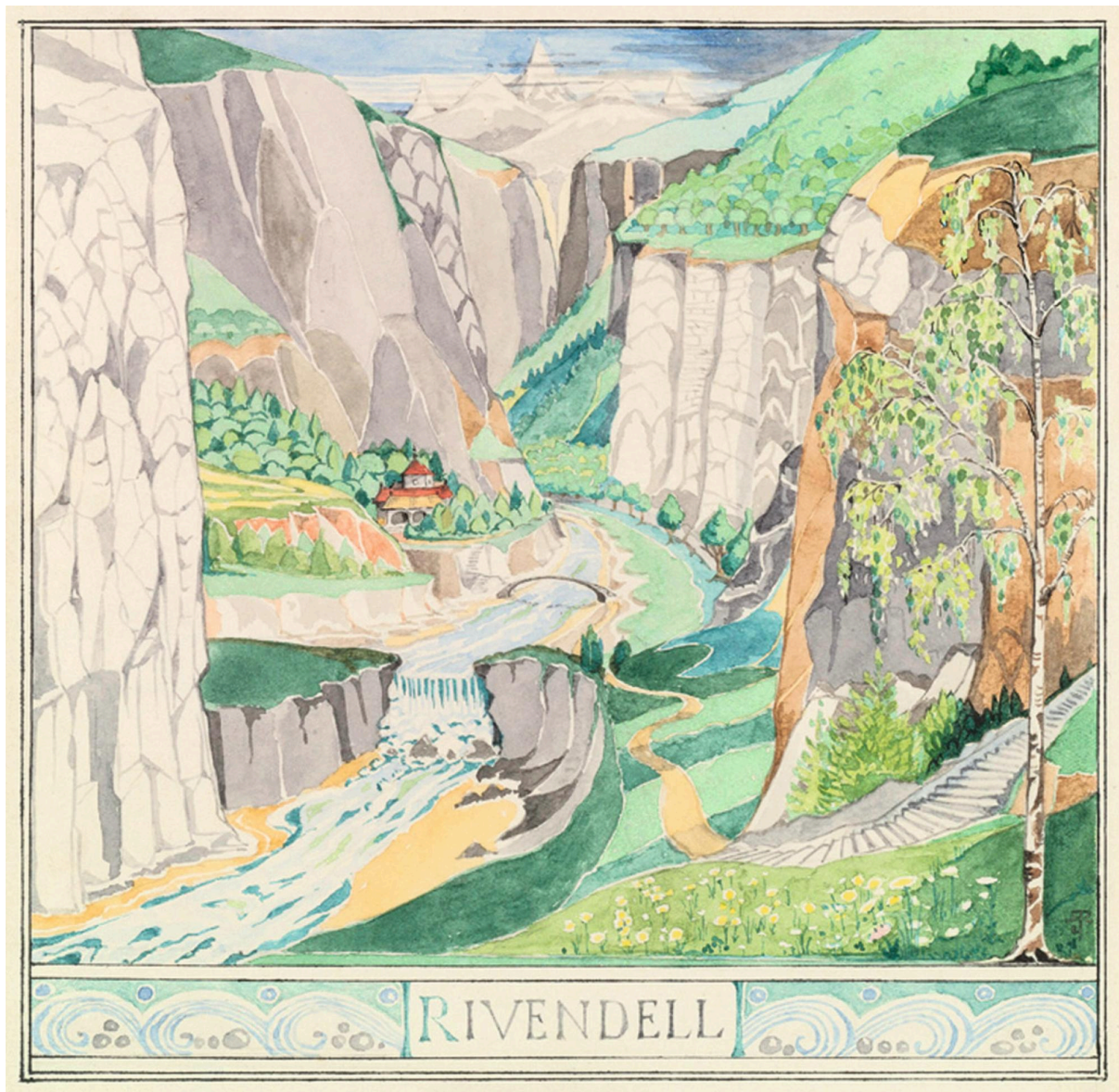


[A small waterfall](#) on the main course of the river, exactly as shown in the watercolour. As far as I can tell, this is the only such waterfall in the Lauterbrunnental (its other waterfalls all come down off the mountains).

I was also drawn to the prominent silver birch in the watercolour. We know that Tolkien paid a lot of attention to trees - [Luthien's hemlock-glade](#) can be identified by the trees described around it - and this tree being so front and centre feels like a real inspiration/memory. Are there birches in the area around the waterfall and the foot of the path?



I'm no Ent, but [those look like birch to me](#), and they are *right* at the foot of the path. Views from further down the valley don't really turn up anything similar, mostly conifers and big bushy trees of various kinds. You know, the sort of mixed woodland shown in the watercolour:



In fact, to come to the typical starting point for this discussion, the watercolour really does look like the classic tourist image of Lauterbrunnental:



The single mountain rising up in the background there is indeed probably the Silberhorn, which shows exactly the kind of spike seen in the watercolour:



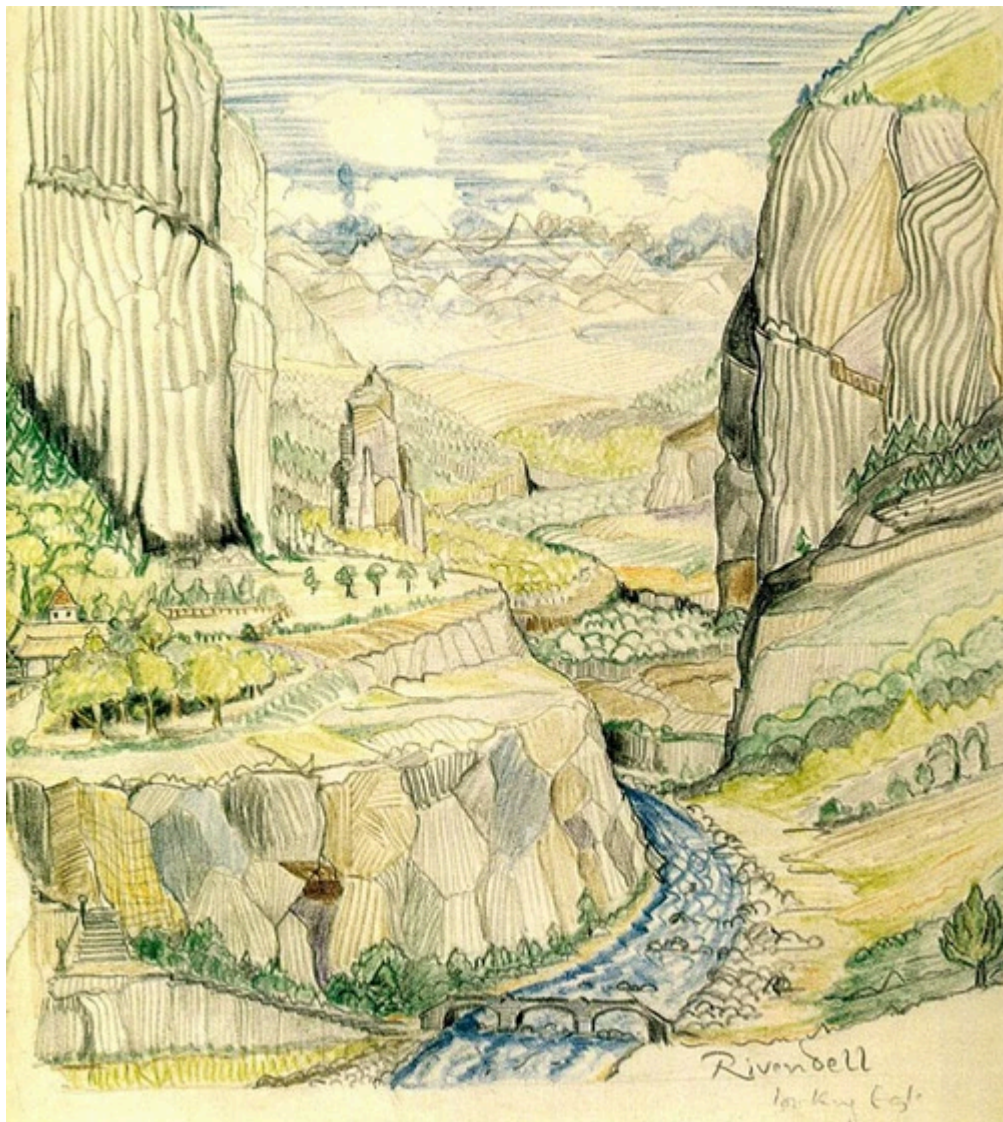
And yes, there is a beautiful arched bridge in Lauterbrunnen, located [at the far end of the town](#):



It is wooden and roofed, and I can't confirm its age, but it's a neat coincidence at least.

And that's where I have to stop. I'm unable to spot the original of the Last Homely House in Lauterbrunnental; it clearly *had* an original, because Tolkien was absolutely consistent in his depictions of it. The other two drawings of his that I've found match perfectly with those above when it comes to the house:





In the spirit of full disclosure, I should note that I have *not* found any views of Lauterbrunnental that match the pencil-drawn "Rivendell looking east" above: the valley doesn't open up that way, and there is no rock spire as prominently shown. Given that the bridge is also shown with three arches, I wonder whether Tolkien was working from a different inspiration for this image; perhaps the place where the house-with-tower of Elrond was actually situated.