

Lord Berners' Folly

CHRISTOPHER
HAYHURST-FRANCE

ON THE EDGE OF THE SMALL COUNTRY town of Faringdon, Oxfordshire, stands a low hill surmounted by a clump of trees. The clump covers some 4 acres and is surrounded by a circular footpath. In the centre of the clump stands a tall brick tower, the top of which just shows above the highest trees. This is the tower now commonly known as Faringdon Folly but which used to be termed Lord Berners' Folly.

Gerald Tyrwhitt-Wilson, 14th Baron Berners, owned the Faringdon House Estate from 1921 until his death in 1950. In 1935 he organised the construction of the Folly Tower despite strong local opposition led by Admiral Clifton-Browne. Lord Gerald Wellesley, later the 7th Duke of Wellington, is reputed to have been the architect and the building work was carried out by the estate staff. The Folly was christened on November 5th 1935 with a splendid party and John Betjeman, then living six miles away at Uffington, is reputed to have written a poem but no record of this verse, or of his opinion of the building, has been traced. The town of Faringdon, with its Folly standing among the trees, featured prominently in the poster drawn and published by Lord Berners in 1936 as an advertisement for the Shell Petrol Company.

During the remaining pre-war years Lord Berners used to allow members of the public to climb the Folly Tower, the cost of admission being retained by the scouts or girl guides who might be stewarding the event for the day. During the 1939-1945 war, soldiers from the Royal Artillery camp at Shrivenham (now the Royal Military College of Science) made use of the Folly for exercises with wireless sets. Shortly after the war the Folly Tower fell into disrepair and the entrance door was bricked up to prevent people gaining entrance. It remained in this condition until 1983 by which time Folly Hill had become an overgrown wilderness. In 1983 the late Robert Heber-Percy, who had inherited the Faringdon House Estate from Lord Berners, carried out a complete renovation of the Folly Tower accompanied by clearance of the weeds and a certain degree of tree planting. In the same year Mr. Heber-Percy donated the Tower and surrounding clump of trees to The Faringdon Folly Tower Trust for the benefit of the people of Faringdon and surrounding district. The three Trustees are Mr. A. C. Oakes, FCA, the Lord of the Manor and the Mayor of Faringdon.

The Folly Tower is built of brick, square in section, and has a wooden staircase that rises to a most attractive square belvedere room, having three arched windows on each side. Above this room is a further room in the shape of an octagonal lantern with elongated oblong windows. Above this again is the viewing platform surrounded by a stone pinnacled parapet. From the viewing platform extensive views can be obtained of the surrounding countryside for distances of about 25 miles. It is quite probable that views could be obtained from the belvedere room 50 years ago but now one looks out into the soft green canopy of the surrounding trees. Following the renovation the main entrance door is formed of sheet steel and was formerly the door to a security vault in Abingdon.



Why was the Folly built? Suggestions include the commemoration of Robert Heber-Percy's 21st birthday (but this took place in 1932) while another was the desire to provide employment for local men during the depression. However, Lord Berners is quoted as stating "the great point of the Tower is that it will be entirely useless". Lord Berners was a man who enjoyed a joke. Faringdon House being renowned for its coloured doves, the out of doors chandelier and other eccentricities. A notice above the entrance to the Tower warned "MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC COMMITTING SUICIDE FROM THIS TOWER DO SO AT THEIR OWN RISK".

During the 54 years that have elapsed since the Tower was opened a number of myths concerning the Folly have become firmly established. These include the incorrect statements that the Tower is 140 feet tall and that the viewer can see six counties as well as the Bristol Channel on a clear day. In fact the Tower is just over 100 feet tall and gives views over four counties for certain, possibly five when the air is very clear. The Western edge of the Cotswold hills prevents anyone from seeing the Bristol Channel.

Mr. Robert Heber-Percy died in October 1987. In June this year the Environmental Trust for Faringdon placed a plaque on the Tower to commemorate its construction in 1935 by Lord Berners and its renovation by Mr. Heber-Percy in 1983. A group of volunteers has been formed to assist the Trustees and to ensure that the Folly Tower is open as often as possible. At present

the Tower is open each year on Easter Saturday and Easter Sunday, when the gardens of Faringdon House are open, and also on the first Sunday of each month from April to September, usually from 2-5 p.m. Special arrangements can be made for groups or parties to visit the Folly and anyone wishing to have further information on this point is invited to contact me by telephoning Faringdon 20133.

The spirit of eccentricity which surrounds the Faringdon Folly is still alive. Last year certain regular customers of The Folly Inn celebrated the dawn on May 1st from the top of the Tower while this spring saw a birthday party being marked by a luncheon for eccentrics in the belvedere room, although this was little more than sandwiches and drinks for a small party. The volunteers who now help to steward the opening at the Tower are finding it a thoroughly enjoyable experience as the visitors ply them with questions. A modest charge of 50p is made for admission in order to raise funds for future maintenance and a leaflet has been printed describing the history of the Folly Hill and Tower as well as the views of the surrounding countryside. Thought is being given to the establishment of a small exhibition in the belvedere room.

If the Folly Tower was built in 1935 to provide pleasure for one man, the work of Robert Heber-Percy in 1983 has ensured that the Folly Trust is still alive and will continue to provide pleasure for a great number of people for many years to come.