

The height of folly!

A brilliant focal point for a walk, a sure sign of Britain's fabled eccentricity, a testament to man's... what's the word?

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IF YOU'RE EVER called on to provide an encapsulation of Britishness in the simplest form possible, here's just the thing. Sometimes magnificent, often silly; curious, earnest, yet at a deep-seated level truly daft, follies are the combined result of wealth, whimsy, skill, fashion and not enough people saying 'no'. An ardent exercise in pointlessness that forces you to confront the question of human achievement as a whole, given even our most serious achievements won't last forever: is it by our seriousness or our silliness humanity would best be remembered?

There are more than 1700 follies, evenly spread across the country in settings private and public, from the eerie drum of Brough Lodge Folly (1840) on Fetlar, in the furthest reaches of the Shetland Isles, to the sandcastle-made-stone of Rogers Tower in Cornwall (see p72), looking out over distant St Michael's Mount since 1798. Between these two stretches a galaxy of architectural oddballs, encompassing miniature castles, soaring columns, uninhabitable cottages, bombastic dovecotes, crenellated gazebos, spurious hermitages, thatched icehouses, tree-root parlours, vertiginous

Faringdon Folly



WHAT FOLLY IS THIS?
It's Faringdon Folly, a totally pointless, controversial, inspiring 104ft tower – and a hell of a birthday gift.



‘Whichever way you look at it, a tower doing an absolutely 10/10 redundant job, Faringdon Folly is a corker.’

▲ PEEK-A-BOO
Planning permission was granted on condition the tower only just poked above the treetops on (what had always been called) Folly Hill.

▼ EXTREMES OF FOLLY-KIND
965 miles separate Brough Lodge Folly in the Shetland Isles (left) and Rogers Tower in Cornwall (right) – between the two lie more than 1700 other follies.



prospect towers, camp rotundas, uncanny pyramids, sham ruins, summerhouses, temples and tortoiseries – paragons of purposelessness all; expensive, enchanting wastes of time.

One of the most impressive of all was among the last to be built, and its story – one of high camp and high dudgeon, bridging as it does worlds of literary fantasy and tipsy tomfoolery – is an example for all folly-kind. From some angles forbidding, to a world-famous author powerfully inspiring, whichever way you look at it, a tower doing an absolutely 10/10 redundant job, Faringdon Folly is a corker.

It stands atop a modest tree-topped hill 502ft high, which sits cheek by jowl with the town of Faringdon 18 miles south-west of Oxford in the Vale of White Horse. You begin the gentle climb to the tower without fanfare up a narrow walled path leading out of the town and signed Folly Hill.

It soon becomes tree-covered, almost a holloway – a borehole to another time and type of world. Called Folly Hill long before it actually had a folly, probably from the Norman French word for leafy, *feuille*, it would prove a signal case of nominative determinism.

When local landowner Lord Berners was walking here in the early 1930s he remarked idly to a friend “This hill needs a tower”. And an idle remark it might have remained had not Berners been overheard, and the very notion provoked outrage among po-faced locals. (It wasn’t, after all, the first time the hill had proved a nuisance to the town: in 1644 Oliver Cromwell had used it as a battery from which to take potshots aimed at downing the Royal-held town’s church steeple – one it’s still missing today.) But Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt-Wilson, 14th Baron Berners, was a man whose impishness you piqued at your peril.

Composer, novelist, painter, aesthete, party-thrower extraordinaire; friend to stars including Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Igor Stravinsky, Salvador Dalí, H. G. Wells, the Betjemans and the Mitford Sisters, Berners was, above all, archly playful. He dyed his pigeons in pastel shades, drove a piano-equipped Rolls Royce wearing a pig’s-head mask; once painted a live-sitting horse’s portrait in the drawing room of his home, Faringdon House, and adorned it with notices informing guests:

‘Mangling done here’; ‘Prepare to meet thy God’ and ‘Delicious ham-fed peaches’. Berners emerged from the subsequent planning row triumphant, the only caveat being that his tower couldn’t stand more than three feet above the treeline; his response to the planning board’s solemn enquiry regarding its purpose resonating down the folly-building ages: “The great point of the Tower is that it will be entirely pointless”.

Publicly pointless perhaps, but privately expedient. It made an excellent 24th birthday gift for Berners’ partner Robert Heber-Percy – even if when presented it, to an accompaniment of fireworks on the night of 5 November 1935, Heber-Percy rather deflatingly remarked he’d rather have had a horse. Designed by Lord Gerald Wellesley, and constructed entirely by Berners’ estate workers using bricks baked in their own kiln, it cost £7000. About half a million in today’s money to lift an elegant room 100ft into the sky – creating a splendid, striking dinner party venue, albeit one with no running water and 150 stairs to negotiate every time someone needed to pop out for the loo. The tower’s clean sides emphasise the ornateness of its belvedere and octagonal final crown. It was

a flamboyant flourish that Berners, holidaying in Europe during much of the tower’s construction, insisted on after finding his architect had imposed a more austere classical style on its lower portion in his absence. The finishing touch: a sign reading *‘Members of the Public committing suicide from this tower do so at their own risk’.*

It was always a great view from the top of Folly Hill – described in Pigot’s Directory of 1824 as ‘The finest circular view in the kingdom’. But with the additional leg-up of the tower it’s simply sensational. Encompassing five counties, 27 churches, yawning vales, chalky downs, rolling Cotswolds, an infinitely receding tile-work of fields and hedgerows and a million mature trees, it’s a panopticon of rural English perfection.

But thrilling as the tower is to climb (and you can, for £3, on the first and third Sundays from April through October) a folly is a thing chiefly to be looked at, and to do that you’ve got to put some distance between you and it. And that’s a brilliant thing to do, because it not



▲ MONUMENT TO MISCHIEF

The tower has hosted dinner parties and even a beer festival, and bears the sign, almost too high to read, ‘Please don’t feed the giraffes’.



▲ BERNER ACCOUNT

Above: Friend to many of the leading writers and artists of the era, and prolific creator himself, Berners wrote his own epitaph: ‘Here lies Lord Berners/ One of the learners/ His great love of learning/May earn him a burning/But, Praise the Lord!/He seldom was bored.’

Above centre: Penelope Betjeman’s Arab stallion ‘sits’ for his portrait by Lord Berners in 1935.



▲ UP IN ARMS

Left and right: Tolkien drew inspiration from the tower for Saruman’s Orthanc, and its crown of ‘gaping horns’, pinnacles sharp as spears’.





only means following part of the lovely 27-mile Vale Way, but also falling in step with a Mr Tolkien – and in a very real sense entering the great man's Shire.

Swallows dart in the pastures immediately fringing Folly Hill as I drop from its wooded cap. It's as if they're patrolling borders beyond which they dare not fly, the tower exerting a weird authority – a strange defensive citadel poking above the trees. It's a scene to stir the imagination, and there was no imagination like that of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. In the early 1930s he was an unpublished professor of Anglo-Saxon in Oxford, a wide-ranging rambler drawing deeply on his surroundings. And as the path leads towards the village of Hatford, where Tolkien kept a weekend bothy, it's impossible to escape the gathering atmosphere of the Shire.

Ahead, wooded Frogmore Brook (surely familiar to Bilbo as Frogmorton), burbling and hobbit, and guarded by old man willows with ivy-cabled trunks, suggestive of a similar fate awaiting legs that pause too long. Behind, as the folly emerges from the trees high on what Frodo would recognise as Hobbiton Hill, the impression it gives is liturgical – the stronghold of a stern religion, its finials a forbidding crown. Hard to resist the conclusion that this was the model for Saruman's impenetrable tower, Orthanc, which loomed over the plain of Isengard. Just as likely to have fed into his imagination, say Tolkien scholars, were the controversy surrounding its erection, and the felling of

▲ ROOM AT THE TOP

Above left: Sjoerd Vogt, town crier and trustee of the Faringdon Folly Tower Trust gives us a tour.

Top right: The folly enjoys a commanding position in the Vale of White Horse.



▲ IN THE PINK
Lord Berners was known to die his pigeons pink.

▼ BIRD'S EYE VIEW

From the top you can see five counties, 27 churches and into some of JRR Tolkien's inspiration for both Isengard and the Shire.

trees in nearby Buckland Warren (a relative of Middle-earth's Buckland and Buckland Marish) – for Tolkien, sources of environmental and social angst that fed into the *Lord of the Rings*' scouring of the Shire.

My figure-of-eight walk (see Route 8 in this issue) takes me past the lane in Hatford where Tolkien's bothy used to be. A quick detour reveals a modern bungalow named 'Rivendell' on the site where, it's said, Tolkien-style drawings were discovered beneath 80 years' of wallpaper in 2014. Then it's on to Buckland Warren, at first appearing an impenetrably bosky grove, but threaded with a stony, sandy track through a thicket of names that by now feel ripe to leap straight into stories – Rabbit Hill, Lower Ash Bed, Peat Bottom Wood. By the time I pass Tagdown Barn, Hartford Gorse and Ewedown Copse I'm practically a children's author myself, the glorious reapproach to Faringdon Folly my story's climax.

It's every foot the fitting object of a quest – to return a ring or confront some evil, or maybe to attend an outrageous party (you can hire the Folly for an event of your own, by the way; there's even been a beer festival at 104ft, but the toileting arrangements don't bear thinking about). There are a dozen and more sculptures to find in the woods – toadstools, a door in a tree, a giraffe's neck craning from a trunk – heirs to Berners' whimsical spirit, joyfully curated by the Friends of Faringdon Folly who've cared for the tower

since Robert Heber-Percy re-gifted it to the town in 1985. Today there's not a word to be heard against it, nor its colourful instigator. Lord Berners died at Faringdon House in 1950 aged 66, but not before successfully grafting his puckish spirit permanently onto the town. A place pigeons are still dyed pink and you'll find stern signs reading among other things 'Children left unattended will be sold to the circus', 'Please do not throw stones at this notice' and 'Please return the ladder or further steps will be taken'. There are also 24 plaques bearing anagrams of the town's name ('Rind of nag', 'Groan Find', 'A fond grin' and the incomparable 'Dong far in') placed at dogs' eye level, once infused by Berners with fox scent in an effort to stymie the hunt.

Berners' motto, jumbledly commemorated in Faringdon alongside the statue of a deep-sea diving suit he once hired for Salvador Dali and which nearly killed the great surrealist after he tried to give a lecture in it (you know, normal stuff) was this: 'Mistrust a man who never has an occasional flash of silliness'. And though you may not find every joke funny, nor every folly beautiful or admirable, it's refreshing to see the spirit of playfulness so openly and formally acknowledged. The silliness which, privately at least, is such a large and important part of all our lives, and in Faringdon, as in all follies, writ wonderfully large. **CW**

WALK HERE: Turn to Walk 8 in this issue.



▲ HOBBIT FORMING

The bosky depths of Buckland Warren are another obvious source of hobbitish inspiration.

MORE LUDICROUS FOLLIES

PONTYPOOL TOWER, SOUTH WALES

Grid reference SO295025
Built in 1765 to help a local hill reach 1000ft, but demolished in 1940 for fear of it acting as a landmark for German planes. It was rebuilt and reopened in 1994, and is now one of many highlights of the Cambrian Way.



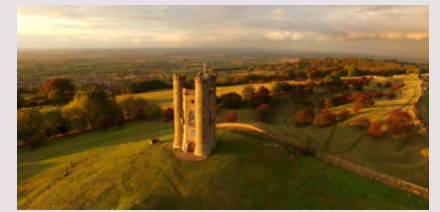
NORE FOLLY, WEST SUSSEX

Grid reference SU955095
A gateway to nowhere in the midst of the South Downs near Slindon, it was built in 1814 as a pretty backdrop for Countess Newburgh's picnic parties – a function it can still perform admirably for you to this day.



BROADWAY TOWER, WORCESTERSHIRE

Grid reference SP113362
Lady Coventry wondered whether a beacon on the hill where this mega-folly now stands could be seen from her house in Worcester about 22 miles, and paid for it to be built to see. It could! Top follying, and an excellent zenith for a walk out of Broadway in the north Cotswolds.



LACY'S CAVES, EDEN VALLEY

Grid reference NY564383
Lieutenant-Colonel Samuel Lacy of Salkeld in the Eden Valley, who once tried to blow up the stone circle Long Meg and Her Daughters, created this five-chambered curio out of sandstone caves. You can see both on a lovely circular walk out of Little Salkeld.



CLAVELL TOWER, DORSET

Grid reference SY909786
Just east of Kimmeridge Bay, this Tuscan-style tower complete with parapet commands splendid views of the Jurassic Coast and has four floors. You'd never know it was moved 25m inland away from a crumbling clifftop in 2006!



TATTINGSTONE WONDER, SUFFOLK

Grid reference TM139363
It's 1790 and you don't like the view of semi-detached cottages from your manor house. What do you do? Add a fake tower and hokey side wall and turn them into a pretend church! A highlight of a walk round Alton Water, south of Ipswich.



▶ See 1700 follies mapped: follies.org.uk/index.php/map/

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK/STEVEN; SHUTTERSTOCK/WAYLEBIRD; SHUTTERSTOCK/CAUTRON LIVE; TRAIL/BAUER UK; SHUTTERSTOCK/LUKASZ PAJOR; TRAIL/BAUER UK