

Tales and Churches and Tales of Churches

The first leg of the legendary 18-miler ended with Shetland ponies in the village of Firle. The waist-high animals were unendingly friendly in their welcome, ambling over from their grazing spots to willingly be petted. Needless to say, they were an instant hit.

“Can we ride them?” I had half-jokingly asked when first told that we would be encountering these cute-tastic creatures. My question had been met with chuckling doubt as to the animals’ ability to hold us, but there is an even more compelling reason not to saddle up one of these little beasts.

Shetland folklore, naturally obligated to make mention of the distinctive animals, brings us the *njuggle*. A folkloric waterhorse inclined to potentially malevolent pranks, the njuggle is a nuisance primarily to millers in its harmlessly playful incarnation, hiding under the mill and interfering with its operation but easily banished with a lump of burning peat. Its more sinister side resembles its Celtic analog, the kelpie. In the form of a splendid Shetland pony, the njuggle wanders about until some unwary weary traveler, perhaps lured by the ill-intent of the creature or perhaps just by unlucky circumstance, mounts its back. With this, the njuggle gallops headlong into the nearest loch, often drowning the hapless traveler who ought to have known better than to accept a ride from a Shetland pony.

There were no lochs nearby, only the river Ouse. Either way, it was a less fanciful instinct that kept me off the ponies’ backs; but their deep eyes and calm acquiescence to human overtures of friendship seemed to me a perfect lure. Sure enough, when I at last tore away it was to find that my party had vanished away down the road. There was but one road to follow and so I hurried down it to meet my companions at Firle’s central pub, The Ram Inn.

Firle’s website describes it as “a quintessentially English village in the heart of a National Park.” It’s an apt description of the little town nestled deep in the South Downs, flanked on one side by the daunting height and sheer slope of Firle Beacon. The name, Firle, derives from an Old English word meaning oak tree. A pub, a church, and a manor house – it has all the

ingredients of a right English country village and it wears its history like all of these towns seem to – scattered loosely and unobtrusively and easy to unintentionally trip into. For a perfect example of this, we followed up our bodily refreshment with a visit to St. Peter's Church.

The church is itself a patchwork of history, ostensibly first built somewhere around the end of the 12th century and with changes, additions, and renovations dating all the way up to the 17th century. A 13th century tower with 16th century renovations. Aisles remade in the 14th century and 15th century square-headed windows. And through a doorway to the left of the altar, what is called the North Chapel, built in the late 16th century by Sir John Gage the younger to hold the Gage family memorial.

Tucked oddly in a corner of the North Chapel, and looking too big for the room, the memorial resembles a tomb: Sir John Gage (the elder) and his wife Philippa in alabaster atop a Latin-inscribed coffin-box that we tried diligently to decipher, armed with a limited understanding of Latin and an infinite capacity for guesswork. It is the sleeping alabaster forms of the two Gages that are the focus of the memorial though, and it was on these that I fixed a wondering gaze.

The Gages are a legendarily old Sussex family belonging to Firle. The elder Sir John Gage (the one memorialized) was a Tudor politician of not very great surviving renown, though in his time he was close enough to Henry VIII to be given a position as a Councillor to the young Edward after Henry VIII's death. Oddly, for so trusted a courtier of Henry VIII, Sir John Gage was Roman Catholic. He served Queen Mary during her reign and received both Lady Jane Grey and the Princess Elizabeth to the Tower of London in his time as Constable thereof. His son, Sir Edward Gage, was the Sheriff during Queen Mary's reign who was tasked with overseeing the burning of 17 Protestant "martyrs" in nearby Lewes – an event which is seared into the town's memory and which is commemorated, along with the failure of the Guy Fawkes Gunpowder Plot, in the Lewes bonfire celebrations of November.

It was Sir John Gage the elder, in whose restful white features I was busily finding nothing noteworthy, that had first built Firle Place, the well-obscured manor house of Firle and the Gage family seat until very recently. I had tried to seek out Firle Place, determined to see

some part of the great manor house, but all I could see in the appropriate direction were the trees for which the village was named.

The North Chapel, where we stood, was the work of the younger Sir John Gage, whose name appears in a singularly odd folktale that supposedly is true. Sir John Gage, it seems, was a suitor to a lady by name of Penelope Darcy. In this pursuit he was joined by two other suitors: Sir George Trenchard and Sir William Hervey. The three had almost come to the point of dueling over her when, as the story goes, the lady herself intervened. The first to turn violent would earn her disdain, she told them, but if they should all be patient she would have all of them by turns. Lewd as this proposition sounds, here's what happened: the lady Penelope married Sir George. When he died, she married Sir John Gage, with whom she had many children. And after he too passed away, Sir William Hervey became her third and last husband. The truth of her marriages might suggest that the little tale of the lady's prophecy was nothing but a folktale dreamed up to match later facts. Whether it is or whether it is true, it is an engrossing story nevertheless.

In later years, the descendants of these variously strange Gages would come to be remotely mixed up with an arguably pleasanter set than their ancestors. In 1911, Virginia Woolf (then Virginia Stephen), having been quite taken with Sussex, rented her first little place therein at Firle, a cottage she named Little Talland House. She lived there only a year before moving away and eventually settling with her husband Leonard Woolf at Monk's House in Rodmell about 8 miles away, but her association with Firle did not end there.

The farmhouse of Charleston is located on part of the Firle Estate, not far from Firle Place itself. Today it is a living museum, a livable work of art. At the time, it was a working farmhouse, leased out to tenants until 1916, when it caught the attention of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who recommended it to Virginia's sister, Vanessa Bell. Once taken on lease from the contemporary members of the Gage family, the house took on a new life. It now housed, on either a permanent or fluctuating basis, the members of the Bloomsbury group, a group of post-impressionist artists, writers, and like-minded friends, the most prominent members of which included such names as Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey, among others. Charleston farmhouse – which today belongs to the Charleston

Trust and is home to numerous artistic and literary events – became a work of art in itself at the mercy of the group's constant need to paint, to beautify. It was more than decorated – rather, it was changed and enlivened by its residents. Virginia herself often made the 8-mile trek to contribute to the vivaciousness there on the grounds of the Firle Estate. In fact, I reflected, I too would nearly make the trek on this walk. Very approximately perhaps, but in the course of the day I was to walk from here in Firle to a point rather near along to Rodmell.

With thoughts of walking back in mind, the time had come to face the looming challenge of Firle Beacon. Refreshed with a ploughman's lunch and historic church stop, we began the climb up. It was every bit as exacting as it looked. The bright green of the grass and the stark white path glared at me as I climbed, taunting in their apparently infinite length. The winding of the path relieved some of the burden, but by the time I reached the top I had gone from trying to name the few flowers I saw and knew along the way to barely being able to distinguish flower from grass from path. The view could wait – I collapsed. Shortly revived by my lie-down and a caramel wafer, I finally sat up to see the breathtaking view from the highest point of the Downs that ever I set foot on.

From here one could see, if not everything, then quite close enough to it. There was Mount Caburn in the distance with its hilltop fort that was little more than a groove where a moat had been. There was the village we had just ascended from, the manor house of Firle Place still tauntingly invisible even from this height. There in the distance was Lewes, our origin and destination. Somewhere out there, though whether I saw it or imagined it I can't be sure, was the white windmill that was the day's landmark for "almost home." There was an unknown castle of some sort up a neighboring hill. Way across on the other side could be seen Newhaven, and what was either the English Channel or a fuzzy foggiess that resembled it enough to fool the eye.

A group of unexpectedly friendly sheep welcomed me to their sky-high abode, taking their cues, it seemed, from the otherworldly ponies that had come before. Never having met a sheep that would willingly be approached and petted, I wondered what mischief these were up to, but pet them regardless before hurrying away. This leg of the walk, the most difficult part

having been early taken care of, turned out to be a fairly relaxing stretch, level enough to afford the legs some comfort and vaguely reminiscent of the very first walk upon the Downs with its great fields of rapeseed. Before I knew it we were descending, making our way half-stumbling down the steep, yellow-dotted slope into Southease.

Our host for the afternoon's tea met us on the path into town and directed our footsteps toward this particular village's little church. We'd make churchgoers out of us yet – if two in a day didn't do it, there were churches enough to take on the task. Another Church of St. Peter for the day, this one with no alabaster sleepers but with another unique quality to recommend it: the round tower on the south end. The Church of St. Peter in Southease is one of three such round-tower churches in Sussex, along with St. John the Evangelist in Piddinghoe and one that I had been in before, St. Michael in Lewes.

Though only three are in Sussex (all tucked away in the Ouse Valley at that), there are something like 180 other round-tower churches in England. Nearly all of them are in East Anglia, and the lot of them are the domain of the Round-Tower Churches Society. This Society, far from the fascinating secretive society the name seems to suggest, simply provides for the maintenance of the churches and studies their history.

As with anything from animals to buildings in a land with history that reaches back far beyond memory, fantastical stories have sprung up around the round towers of these churches that date back to Saxon, Norman, and Medieval times. The most outlandish of these speculations remark on the circular shape having connection to pre-Christian places of spirituality. The circles of Stonehenge, for instance. The circle, it seems, has always had a certain mystical pagan quality to it – the circular nature of time, or life, of divinity captured by the simplest depiction of infinity that man is capable of. Even Dante arranged his otherworlds in circles: the concentric circles of Hell, the concentric spheres of Heaven. And yet nothing about the towers aside from their shape gives even the remotest credence to this theory.

The most sensible reason for the towers' round shape, as advanced by the Society itself, appears to be a question of material. Without native inexpensive stone to work with, building angled structures was costly. Stones would have had to be imported from outside (like, as a

matter of fact, the Welsh blue stones of Stonehenge). As the tower was most often a bell tower, housing the bells to be rung for services and little else, flint was as good a material as any for building, and more abundant than most. Given the small size and irregular shape of flint, the easiest shape to build in with it was round. And thus, proclaims the Society, round towers!

We could not enter the famed round tower, despite it being the principle attraction of the building. Fragments of painting left on the wall occupied my eye for some time, and thoughts of bell-ringing and towers occupied my mind. Like with the Gages, like with the ponies, the round tower left vague lingering questions, but the concession that I had to make was the same: there is a lot that I don't know. But so it is with all people. The folklore of these towers and the folklore of the ponies are of a kind – speculation on something present but unexplained, an attempt to fill in the gaps of what people do not know. Everything had been folktales along this way, real or fantastical, or simply silly. But as much as I love folktales and guesswork and answers, resting my legs had become a bigger priority. Tea awaited; we followed its call.