

Lord Berners' Folly

The Folly Tower was built in 1935 by the diplomat, composer, artist, poet and author Gerald Tyrwhitt Wilson, who became the 14th Baron Berners, (1883-1950) in 1919. The year after inheriting his title, he bought Faringdon House, which his mother had leased since 1910, taking permanent residence on her death in 1931. Berners is described by his biographer as the 'last eccentric' and he was certainly possessed of a dry, but surreal sense of humour.

In 1919, a timber merchant wanted to buy the trees on top of Folly Hill, but Berners outbid him. It is reported that when Berners and his life long friend, Robert Heber Percy, were inspecting his purchase he was overheard to say that it would be "nice to have a tower here". This raised locals' hackles, but it is typical of Berners that a 'nice idea' became a cause célèbre with which to tease his objectors. Unfortunately, the battle to get the necessary planning permission was hard and long. Although Berners agreed to reduce the height of the proposed tower to 100 feet, planning permission was refused because Faringdon Rural District Council "failed to see the object or benefit of the Tower if erected". Berners replied "that the great point of the Tower is that it will be entirely useless" which is, of course, the very definition of a folly.

A seemingly not-quite-local resident, Vice-Admiral F. Clifton Brown, objected on the grounds that the tower would spoil his view. When the tower's architect and Berners' friend, Lord Gerald Wellesley, replied that Vice-Admiral Clifton Brown could not possibly see the tower from his back garden without a telescope, the former seadog replied that such was indeed his habit. Not to be outdone Wellesley pointed out to the critical observer the fine views that would be had from the top of the tower. His prompt riposte was: "How will you get there?" to which Wellesley replied: "By the stairs!" Whether so intended, the Folly now had a use as a fine vantage point.

Planning permission was eventually granted in late 1934 with the proviso that the tower would only be higher than the surrounding trees by three feet.

Berners wanted the tower built in the Gothic style, which Wellesley hated. Berners went on holiday to Rome leaving Wellesley to start the building: on his return, however, he found that Wellesley had built all but the last ten feet in a classical style. The irate Berners insisted that the remainder be built in Gothic, hence, the rather incongruous change in style at the top.

The tower opened on November 5th 1935 with a grand bonfire party, at which Berners' guests were allowed to burn up to six effigies of their enemies: this was deemed to be "most inadequate". Fifteen months after the opening, the following poem by 'P.B. of Challow' was printed in the North Wiltshire Herald. It is perhaps no coincidence that Penelope and John Betjeman, friends of Berners, lived in Challow at the time.

Berners' Folly

We came upon it, you and I,
Set on a hill near Faringdon Town,
We came upon it suddenly.
Clouds were drifting across the sky,
Just before the sun went down,
The trees were rustling lazily ...P.B.



Berners' Self Penned Epitaph

Here lies Lord Berners
One of the learners
His great love of learning
May earn him a burning
But praise to the lord
He seldom was bored

The Folly is said to be last folly tower built in the UK. After a long period of disuse it was restored in 1983 by Robert Heber Percy who left it in trust to the people of Faringdon.