

History of Folly Hill, Faringdon

The little hill on the outskirts of Faringdon was named Folly Hill long before the erection of Lord Berners' "utterly useless" tower in 1336. The name probably shares its origin with "foliage" and certainly the area is a leafy spot, a point well noted by Henry Pye, the Poet Laureate, in the 18th century. Various ingenious theories of the name's origin have evolved over the years. It is said that Sir Henry Unton, seeking to improve his surroundings, planted trees in the hill's unsuitable soil. They perished and this failure was reflected in the title "Unton's Folly". Years later, Henry Pye trudged up the hill each day bearing saplings of Scots Pine thus giving the name of Pye's Folly. Before any of these, though, because of certain events in the Civil War and the arrival of Cromwell to the area, the side of the hill facing the town was named "Cromwell's Battery" for reasons which will be touched upon later. Firstly, though, the facts and the fiction concerning Folly Hill should be explored.

In the years preceding the Roman Conquest of 43 AD, the Ridgeway linked a network of hill-forts, one of which was on Faringdon Hill. It had a perfect defensive position commanding the view over the Ridgeway and its approaches from all directions. Unfortunately, by the time of the Roman advance inland, the defences were in a state of disrepair and were over-run with ease. The arrival of the Saxons brought an influx of farmer-settlers, some of whom remained beneath Faringdon Hill. In the later wars against the Vikings, Alfred the Great fortified Faringdon and built a royal residence there. It is unlikely that the Hill would not have been included in the defensive scheme. By the time of the Norman invasion in 1066, Faringdon, because of its strategic position, had become one of the foremost towns in Wessex.

John Stone, writing of Faringdon in 1798 mentions "the base of one of the buttresses of the Castle is still to be seen in a part of the Town called Back Street". This is now Ferndale Street and the exact location would seem to be the site of the old Workhouse. When this castle was built and exactly where it was must now be examined.

It was a skeleton that started speculation. When the building of Lord Berners' Folly Tower was started, skeletons were unearthed. They lay 4 feet under the topsoil. This called for further investigation and this revealed trenches and a pit of clay which would have been used to reinforce the foundations. These, it was deduced, were from the castle built in 1144 by the Earl of Gloucester in support of the Empress Matilda. This strong-point was stormed by Stephen in 1145, an attack fully described by Matthew Paris in his History of England. Clearly a more thorough investigation was required and this came with an element of luck. The Principal of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, A.B. Emden, was looking out for work suitable for members of the University Camp for the Unemployed. Digging trenches across Folly Hill was deemed suitable for both the unemployed and undergraduates enjoying the Long Vacation, so Lord Berners, whose land it was, gave permission for the project.

Without going into excessive detail, work was started, and the clay-filled trenches were exposed, showing how these could support the weight of a castle on the sandy soil. It was also deduced that the castle was razed after capture although there is no real historical reference to this. It was Henry II's policy to destroy all unlicensed or adulterine castles when he came to the throne and Faringdon would have been no exception. This view is supported by King John's action in 1202 when he granted the site of the Castle to the monks of St. Mary of Citeaux and provided timber for building, but as they moved to Beaulieu., it is unlikely that any building actually took place.

Other discoveries which assisted the dating process were made in 1936 when similar teams of labourers unearthed more of the foundations and looked into the position of the bodies whose skeletons had been found. Ground beyond the trenches was found to have been removed and speculation was that this was for the burial of the bodies. Other finds included the small fragments of pottery, but it was found impossible to join them. Nevertheless, this did help to date the castle. A bronze buckle and a flint scraper also came to light, but it really was very little and serves to explain why the memory of the castle rapidly faded. As Leland commented in his account of Faringdon, "I asked for the Castle.....that the Favorers of Matilde Emperes erected at this place, and King Stephen after pullid down; but they could tell me naught of it".

Moving well on to the Civil War, it was noted that Charles I dined in Faringdon on August 1st. 1643. The town was being held for the King who later passed through on his way to Newbury where a battle was fought in September. Returning to Oxford, Charles halted at Faringdon and decided to make the town his Headquarters even though it was only lightly fortified and under-provisioned. These fortifications do not appear to have included Folly Hill, or if they did, it was still taken by Parliament. Cromwell established a battery to bombard the town, which only surrendered when Oxford itself capitulated. Old stories of the damage inflicted by Cromwell have themselves been targets for criticism and doubt. The guns fired from Folly Hill at Faringdon House, the Royalist HQ, seems unlikely as the range would exceed the capabilities of the small artillery pieces of the time. It could have been done, though, from a point where Church Street ends. What is certain is that Parliamentary cannon could never have destroyed the church steeple in spite of the discovery of small cannon balls in the walls. It is possible, though, that the Cavaliers firing from the grounds of Faringdon House might have been responsible, poor shots, though, they would have been. Even more likely is the idea that Parliament was responsible in the renewed attacks of 1646 when the town suffered excessive damage in the Spring. By this time the Hill played little part in the conflict, but gazed down detachedly at the gradual demolition of the old market town.

Enough of war and destruction and forward to the 18th.century, when little enough happened to the Folly apart from the Poet Laureate's descriptive interest in it. Heavily criticised over the years, Henry Pye, although his heart was in the right place, remained the master of pedestrian verse. Taken from "Faringdon Hill" of 1774, we have"Here lofty mountains lift their azure heads,

There in green lap the grassy meadows spread;
Enclosures here the sylvan scene divide,
There plains extended spread their harvests wide".

Take a walk up to the Folly and you will see that Pye was not far wrong.

The Folly did not appear to influence the 19th.century too much, so it was not until the 1930s that it came into its own again. Lord Berners, wishing to give a birthday present to his friend, Robert Heber-Percy, commissioned a folly to go on top of Folly Hill. This had to be "utterly useless" in true folly manner, and though its recipient would, by all accounts, have preferred a horse, there the tower stands, offering excellent views in all directions to those who might wish to climb 154 steps to a height of 100 feet.

During the World War II, the Folly came into its patriotic own, giving a vantage point for the military and being the spot where a German spy was detected surveying the Vale. After that incident, the Tower was locked up and the public were only readmitted many years later when RobertHeber-Percy allowed visitors once again to enjoy the view admired by so many over the centuries.

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