FARINGDON FOCUS (probably from a local (Swindon?) Advertiser paper of the 1970s/80s)

How Berners won fight for folly

A recent **Down Memory Lane** *(1934)* revived Lord Berners' plan to build a tower on Folly Hill, Faringdon — so that he could look at the view, he said.

Poised delicately on the greensand escarpment which reaches out over the Thames Valley, his own Faringdon House had all the views a lesser mortal might require.

But Lord Berners, perhaps the last of this country's great eccentrics, was no mere mortal.

He was, enchantingly, titular Lord of the Manor, "descendant'' of all the unrelated predecessors in that role and who occupied this off-beat manorial home.

"Faringdon Folly is that odd hummock crowned with a clump of trees near where the hill rises out of the town," explains *Down Memory Lane's* 50-year-old *North Wilts Herald*.

The hill was, indeed, tree-topped at that time.
Old Berkshire clumps are still around. They originate, as elsewhere, from nature's habit of clustering seeds. But Faringdon's clump was something else.

Daily trip

Legend has it the eccentric Poet Laureate, Henry James Pye, traipsed up the hill every day with a sapling or seedling of Scots pine.

And from this activity, it became known as Pye's Folly and, in due course, Folly Hill.

What Pye had in mind — he died in 1813 — one can but guess.

Certainly to this day, the traditional Five Scots Pines, denoting allegiance and succour for those involved in the 1745 Jacobite uprising, stand tall at the edge of Faringdon House lawn.

Was Pye — or perhaps his father — broadcasting the word?

A similar planting of five (now reduced to four) stand on the Shrivenham/Watchfield outskirts, preserved in the earthworks involved in the new bypass.

Fifty years ago Lord Berners decided to embellish the hill with his own folly — the last (deliberate, at any rate) to be built in this eccentric country of ours which boasts follies far and wide.

Such follies are defined as "constructions of no significant social value other than a pleasantry, a whim, from which to view the surrounding countryside".

An aside, which mercifully has been overlooked during the past couple of centuries, is that such follies should not detract from the local environment.

That they are invariably on private land should surely be for the owner to decide.

Lord Berners barged right in with the cheerful aplomb he knew, instinctively, would cause local uproar. He did not wait long.

Faringdon RDC said he must not, as in their opinion, it would spoil the amenities of a local landmark," reports *Down Memory Lane*.

Lord Berners dug his heels in. And there did, indeed, ensue such an uproar.

It's a legacy "old" Faringdon treasures as it does the Folly itself. And a story the other, newer half of town, knows little of.

Battle stations commenced with front page coverage in national newspapers.

Locally, the attack came first from a woman so incensed, she wrote to her local paper claiming Lord Berners intended installing a revolving lighthouse beam and fog-horn in his folly tower "which would disturb the sick, and the dying for miles around".

She signed her letter "Vivian Lobb".
Miss Vivian Lobb was a familiar figure in Faringdon, striding around the Market Place in boots and breeches.

She lived in nearby Kelmscott with May Morris, daughter of William Morris.

Lord Berners stirred himself the following week to put pen to paper. "It would be better if Mr Lobb had ascertained the facts before writing his letter, which sounds as though it emanated from the brain of a crazy spinster," he wrote.

Telescope

The row ended up at Faringdon courthouse, with eminent counsel retained on all sides.

The RDC argument was supported by their vice-chairman, a local admiral (retired), then living at Stanford Place, a mile or so below the hill who complained the proposed tower would spoil his view.

And when Lord Berners' QC pointed out it could only be seen through a telescope from that distance, Vice-Admiral Francis Clifton-Brown replied that was exactly his habit to scan the local horizon each morning — with a telescope.

The tower was designed by Lord Gerald Wellesley — later the Duke of Wellington — a neighbour and friend of Lord Berners.

And work went ahead during the latter's absence.

On his return, Lord Berners found his Folly Tower near completion in the stark perpendicular style of architecture. He imposed his own preferred, Gothic styled turret before work finished.
And so it stands today, the Gothic coronet visible for miles around above a previous Lord of the Manor's tall trees.

Lord Berners sought only to mark the coming of age of his intended successor, Mr Robert Heber-Percy, now Faringdon's manorial lord.

The Folly Tower has long been in disrepair.

Restoration

But 50 years on restoration work, costing more than £8,000, is quietly taking place. Windows are reglazed; the cemented up entrance has been replaced with an equally stolid inches-thick metal door. Creeper has been stripped away outside while the interior wooden staircase is being made safe and reinforced. Only [Wayne" (graffiti) needs to be blasted from the brickwork.

And in due course, promises Mr Heber-Percy, who has put the work in hand, the Folly Tower will be open to the public.

Contrary to local belief, the tower has never been “public” before. It was only ever lent, on occasion, to local Guides and Scouts who charged pennies for the public at large to scale the winding staircase and enjoy the view for which Lord Berners had built it in the first place.

But during the war which followed its construction the tower was ‘’conscripted’’ by the local Home Guard as a look out point for enemy aircraft.

An image of the original article follows on the next page

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