

# RACTON TOWER AND SOME OTHER SIMILAR STRUCTURES IN WEST SUSSEX.

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IN Western Sussex there are several lofty erections denominated Towers, Monuments, Gazebos, or Follies, all situated on eminences, and all of more or less interest. Monuments, strictly speaking, they are not; for they were not raised to the memory of distinguished persons or on the site of notable actions of the past. Gazebos they were in the first place properly called, for commanding views could be had from their summits; the means of ascent, however, are now sometimes decayed and gone. "Follies" they are usually denominated by the country folk of the district in which they are situated, for so they have heard of them from their forefathers, who, having little regard for the æsthetic or the beauties of the scenery amongst which they lived, remember only the large sums spent in building them, and deemed that none but persons devoid of sense would have thus lavishly squandered their money. Towers they always were and continue to be. I shall therefore speak of the structure which crowns the height on the Sussex Hills, from which the first western bonfire on them blazed on the occasion of the Jubilee, as Racton Tower. To buildings of this kind rambles may always be made with advantage, because of their high and breezy situation, where the air exhilarates; delightful prospects are to be gained, and their quiet rural environments can be enjoyed. In such visits, too, always prevail on a friend or friends to accompany you; if of a scientific turn of mind, something of ornithological, conchological, entomological, or botanical interest will be sure to present itself.

*Racton Tower* is best known as a landmark from the Channel for vessels entering the harbour of Chichester and Langstone. It has been thus well described recently by a local poet:—

“ Far on the seas the sailor’s eye,  
 Above the horizon’s brim,  
 Sees, towering ’gainst the cloudless sky,  
 A pile well known to him.  
 Round it the jackdaw wheels at noon,  
 There rears its noisy brood ;  
 And the lone owl beneath the moon  
 There hoots to solitude.  
 The aged ivy’s tendrils clasp  
 About those ruins grey ;  
 Where Time has laid his iron grasp  
 And doomed them to decay.”

I have never myself been by the Tower by moonlight to listen to the shriek of the white owl which inhabits it, or to the hooting of the wood owl which is so often to be heard close by, and am therefore more fortunate than a friend who was once walking leisurely in the avenue approaching it. Musing on divers things he suddenly ran his head against one of these birds of wisdom asleep on a bough, and which was most startled, the feathered or unfeathered biped, it would be difficult to say. Racton Tower is usually visited by day, and as it is then to be seen I would now speak of it. Its history is as follows:—

It was erected about the middle of the last century, at a cost of £10,000, by George Montague Dunk, third and last Baron Halifax, who died in 1772. Lord Halifax was the owner of the Stansted estate, and patron of the Rectory of Westbourne. As another instance of his lavish expenditure on buildings it may be noted that, with great liberality, he made a gift to the parish of Westbourne of the spire, formed of Stansted oak, which now crowns the tower of Westbourne Church. The precise date of his building Racton Tower I have been unable to ascertain. At one time Lord Halifax was Secretary of State, and Halifax in Nova Scotia was so called after his name. A story is current that his

political adversaries circulated a rumour that a reason for his erecting it was, that it might be a guide to the French, in case of an invasion.<sup>1</sup> It was, however, built as a pleasure house, and to enjoy from thence, as Mr. Longcroft has observed, the beautiful southern view. The edifice itself is faced with flints, and is triangular, with a central circular tower of several stories, surrounded by three smaller circular towers, each surmounted by a turret. These are gradually diminishing in height from the effects of storms. It is much weather-beaten towards the south and south-west. A traveller in 1784 speaks of a flagstaff at the top and leads on the upper story, to which there was an ascent by a staircase, at the difficulty of ascending which he grumbles greatly. This staircase has long since been removed, as well as the windows, some of which were taken to Woodmancote. In the Tower were several rooms, the largest, with three doorways and three windows, having a circumference of about 122 ft. The ceiling seems to have been decorated. There was once a house near, the residence of the caretakers, and a family resided there, of whom the descendants of late inherited considerable property, their names being identified from entries in the Racton register. Not far from the Tower is a well, said to be 180 feet deep; this has been closed in, and probably effectually; but the excursionist has need of caution, for these things are apt to be carelessly done, and a more miserable fate than that of falling into such a place it is scarcely possible to conceive. There are vestiges of the old garden, and the avenue approaching it contains some very large evergreen oaks. Of the views to be had from the vicinity of Racton Tower, a fine one is that to the east, in which the spire of Chichester Cathedral appears, that which takes in the Valley of the Ems, with Walderton Down, and Old

<sup>1</sup> Another unfounded charge of a like nature was made by one Jonathan Britain, who asserted that Lord Halifax and other persons of rank had been bribed by the court of France "to encourage the setting fire to the dockyard at Portsmouth," in the "Rope Walk" of which a conflagration had occurred. This story he circulated by letters, and in the newspapers, and, absurd as it was, it for a time gained some credence. Britain was tried for forgery and executed.

Lordington House; another which includes Stansted House, and the most comprehensive which overlooks the Channel, with its estuaries, Bosham, Thorney, and Hayling, with the Isle of Wight in the distance. Around its base grow luxuriantly the traveller's joy, the purple flowers of the large knapweed, the deep blue blossoms of the hairy violet, with its leaves on long footstalks, curiously developed in the autumn. But for a ramble to Racton Tower I would choose a bright spring day, when the woods are aglow with primroses and anemones, when the bluebells, with occasionally a white one among them, deck the glades, and amid the moss peer out the tiny green petals of the fragrant moschatel, and those of the delicate little pink-veined wood sorrel.

A short account of some similar buildings in the same division of the county may appropriately be added. There is, for example, a very elegant and picturesque erection at Harting, called the *Uppark Tower*, originally the Dædalian Tower, of which Mr. Weaver tells us that it was built in commemoration of the purchase by Sir Matthew Fetherstonhaugh of a large tract of land in the valley of Ohio, fancifully styled Dædalia. This purchase, however, turned out to be a barren acquisition to Sir Matthew, who lost the whole of it during the American War of Independence, so that the Tower became eventually a memento of an unfortunate speculation. For many years afterwards it was the favourite resort of picnic parties who visited the Park, and the sounds of revelry often issued from its interior when tenanted by a lively company. It was a pretty little structure, crowned with a coronet of elegantly ornamented pinnacles; the basement was carefully fitted with every requisite for culinary purposes, and the upper apartment, with its neatly decorated ceiling, was principally lighted by three large windows, partially filled with stained glass. In 1842 it was reduced to a ruinous state by a deliberate act of incendiarism, not unreasonably attributed to a notorious gang of poachers from an adjoining parish, whose frequent raids in the Harting

covers had more than once brought them under the unfavourable notice of the magistrates.<sup>2</sup> "Since then," observed the late Mr. Weaver, in 1877, "a few fragments have been dislodged from the battlements by the heavy gales that have swept over them; but the whole structure was so substantially built that many years may yet elapse before it becomes a heap of crumbling ruins." I would next refer to "*Hiorne's Tower*," which stands on the brow of a hill at a short distance from one of the entrances to Arundel Park. It is, like Racton Tower, a triangular building, about fifty feet high, with a turret at each of the angles, and takes its name after F. Hiorne, a distinguished architect of Birmingham, from whose design and under whose superintendence it was built. Tierney speaks of it as affording the most perfect specimen of Gothic architecture of which Arundel can boast, and his description of the view from its summit is so graphic that it well deserves quotation. "The real beauty and magnificence of the park scenery may be hence discerned. On one side the bold projections of the Downs, the long valley of Pugh Dean winding its way among the hills or losing itself in the wooded morass below, and the hanging beech woods that clothe the steep acclivities on each side of Swanbourne lake—on the other the undulating surface of wood and hill which marks the eastern boundary of the ancient park and the numerous windings of the Arun lingering on its course; these with the grand feature of Sussex scenery, the English Channel rolling in the distance, and bounding the horizon from west to east, form an assemblage of beauties on which the eye and the heart can alike rest with delight."<sup>3</sup> The smooth short turf which clothes the ascent is decked with one of the loveliest of our wild flowers, the deep-blue roundheaded rampion, locally known as the Pride of Sussex, and amongst the grass is to be found the tiny blossoms, not readily discernible, of the rare and curious bastard toadflax. To him, however, who after climbing the hill reclines to rest for a while,

<sup>2</sup> Rev. H. D. Gordon, "History of Harting."

<sup>3</sup> Tierney's "History of Arundel," Vol. I., page 98.

may be submitted a word of caution. From little causes sometimes arise considerable discomfort, and the attacks of the small creatures known as "deer ticks" are apt to be unpleasantly remembered on the following day. Another edifice of this kind is the ivy-covered Tower in Petworth Park, usually spoken of in that neighbourhood as "*The Monument*." It stands near the road skirting Upperton Common, is ascended by a flight of stairs, and is often visited by parties "on pleasure bent." From its summit is a splendid view of Blackdown and of the lovely scenery there, amidst which Tennyson's house is situated. The clump of fir and the beech grove adjacent, the nesting-place of the raven, have been excellently described by Knox, and depicted in his "*Ornithological Rambles in Sussex*." At Woollavington, again, a lofty wooden structure was erected by the late Bishop Wilberforce, on the highest point of his property. This was generally known as "*The Gazebo*." It was originally eighty feet high, but afterwards reduced to forty. As the views from the edifices previously mentioned have been alluded to, that from this point of the hills ought not to be omitted. "Beachy Head, forty-two miles distant to the eastward; Reigate chalk pit, thirty-five miles to the north; to the south and east Spithead, with the whole Isle of Wight, from Dunnose to the Needles."<sup>4</sup> The bishop, we are told, used to ascend this building, glasses in hand, on a fine clear afternoon to enjoy the prospect with his friends, and afterwards to repair to the open down, where on a Sunday a portion of the *Christian Year* was read, and a bottle containing the names of those present was buried under a small cairn of stones. Great part of this structure was blown down in a terrible storm some years ago. Having at various times paid visits to each of the pleasant spots, on our western Downs, described in the foregoing observations, I venture to commend them without exception to all admirers of our lovely Sussex scenery.

<sup>4</sup> "Life of Bishop Wilberforce."