

BRIGHTLING AND THE FULLERS



A favourite hobby of authors is to write accounts of English eccentrics. Their books are many and they can be very entertaining.

It is rarely that they do not include among their examples one 'Mad Jack' Fuller of Brightling Park. It may be as difficult to define *eccentric* as psychiatrists have found it in respect of *abnormal*, and clearly Jack was not mad – at least not compared with his contemporary John Mytton of Shropshire (whose extraordinary behaviour is not to be explored here). He was not really eccentric, either: he was just so independent of mind that he tended to veer from the conventional picture of the wealthy landowner.



Locally John Fuller (1757-1834) is now known mainly for his extensions to Brightling Park (which he and his father called Rose Hill after his grandmother's family name) and nationally for his benevolence to scientific researchers, but the 'eccentrics' authors can find out much more. A story goes that in London he argued with a friend that he could see Dallington church from his house; on his return home he found that he could not, so he built the forty-foot Sugar Loaf Folly in the right direction to give the impression that he was right. One hopes that he told his friend the truth. And on his death he declined to be buried. Along the lines of the traditional song *On Ilkley*

John Fuller, by Henry Singleton. From <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/18791>

Moor baht 'at he took the view that worms would eat him; ducks would eat the worms; his family would eat the ducks. And he had no wish to be eaten by his family, or indeed by anyone else. So in 1810 he built a pyramidal mausoleum in Brightling churchyard in which his body could be placed, seated at a table with a bottle of claret. Awaiting the arrival of the devil to claim him, he ordered broken glass to be scattered around the floor so that Satan might at least cut his feet. We know from the only recorded later opening of the pyramid that he was buried conventionally, or so those responsible reported.

Unlike some of Mytton's exploits, Fuller harmed no-one: his acts were minor and often charming. But he was different. It is said that he declined Pitt's offer of a peerage with the words, "I was born Jack Fuller and Jack Fuller I will die".

Brightling Park had its origins in a house named Sheperdes, built in 1540-61 by Michael Martin. In 1582 Thomas Isted bought it, then John Baker in 1608 and Edward English in 1652. English extended the estate and in 1684 sold it to William Peake. He died shortly thereafter and his sister sold it to Thomas Fuller in 1697. It was to stay in the family until the late nineteenth century.

The Fuller family's wealth was built on the Wealden iron industry. By 1703 their estates in Sussex generated £1,200 in rents and they had investments and iron furnaces at Collins Forge on the Burwash/Brightling border and Heathfield, the principal product being guns. Thomas Fuller extended the Brightling estate to 95ha and commenced a scheme of improvement, rebuilding the house c1699. In 1703 he gave the property to his nephew John Fuller (1680-1745 who in that year married Elizabeth Rose, a Jamaican heiress who brought a considerable fortune to the family along with estates in the West Indies of over 1215ha. Fuller renamed the house Rosehill in her honour. At this stage the grounds were relatively compact despite Fuller's acquisition of a further 59ha.¹

The marriage above explains the later use of the Rose name in the family, oddly enough (according to present taste) only for males.

John Fuller's Jamaican interests were the Knollis estate in St Thomas-in-the-Vale and Grange Pen in St Catherine, both on the south-east side of the island. The former was devoted solely to the production of sugar and rum and was the larger: at the height of its slave-ownership in 1816 and 1817 there were 245 slaves there. Grange Pen was much smaller, and devoted mainly to livestock after 1780; its maximum recorded slave numbers reached 58 in 1820.² The Fuller surname is common in Jamaica, though its origins are unclear.

John's first son, also John, inherited in 1745, himself dying in 1755. He was briefly MP for Sussex, and he was a Fellow of the Royal Society, though we know nothing of the reasons for the latter being so.

John inherited further estates from a cousin in 1752 and

spent a considerable fortune between 1745-55 on the Brightling estate. During this period he rebuilt the house, adding the west and the office wings. He extended his land ownership, purchasing 372ha until the estate reached 526ha, and laid out a deer park around the remodelled house, the park being bounded on its east, south and west sides by a tributary of the River Darwell. He diverted a road leading directly past the north front of the house and acquired a long lease of land on Brightling Hill, as sheep grazing. He started planting up the park with clumps of trees and built a Chinese temple and a keep in the grounds.³

John's work on the estate included five ponds and anticipated the style of Capability Brown, then not begun on his notable career, particularly in the naturalistic use of water. John began the family's parliamentary career by being elected for a Yorkshire borough shortly before his death.

He left the second son Rose to take over. Rose had managed the Jamaican estates, winning a fierce reputation for discipline before being dismissed as Chief Justice of the colony,⁴ and became an MP successively for two Kent boroughs and then for Rye up to his death. When he died in 1777 the rents from the Sussex property alone came to £2,226 p.a.

Jack was the next in line, son of Rose's brother Henry, who had already died. Henry had been vicar of North Stoneham near Southampton, where Jack was born.

When Jack came of age he had all the opportunities of a rich and landed gentleman. He was elected MP for Southampton at the age of 22, a seat he held for four years; his uncle by marriage, Hans Sloane, was the other member. He was appointed High Sheriff of Sussex (a one-year post) in 1796 and shortly became Captain in the Sussex Yeomanry Cavalry. He was an engaging young man:

Captain Fuller ... has an estate of £4000 or £5000 a year, is but just of age, has figure, understanding, education, vivacity, and independence, and yet voluntarily devotes almost all his time, and almost all his attention to a company of light infantry.

Mrs. Thrale described him in *Thraliana* (29 Jan. 1781) as 'wild, gay, rich, loud'; and wrote in a letter to Fanny Burney, 7 Feb. 1781: 'Captain Fuller flashes away among us. How that boy loves rough merriment! the people all seem to keep out of his way for fear.'⁵

It is known that Jack proposed marriage to the daughter of Mrs Thrale, who was a brewery heiress and friend of Samuel Johnson, but she refused him. In the end he married no-one. Nor are there any known children.

In 1801 he was elected MP for Sussex, and from then on he began to attract notice. He spoke frequently, and by today's standards he was notably reactionary if in some limited ways less selfish than some other members. He vigorously opposed softening the penal code and any mitigation of the legislation against Roman Catholics; he had no time for the Irish. He must have disliked many fellow-members, who, he believed, were there for their own benefit and not for that of the country and he supported the abolition of the many posts, often given to MPs, that paid well but involved no duties. Most of all he looked after his own interests: protecting the sugar trade and vigorously opposing the abolition of the slave trade. He even opposed the founding of the Sierra Leone colony which was destined to contain freed slaves brought over from north America.

He was a blunt speaker and apt to give offence. In 1810 he went so far as to use seriously unparliamentary language and was ordered to withdraw; he refused and had to be removed by force. But he apologised and was soon back on his feet in the chamber. He retired in 1812.⁶

The above sounds a little unpleasant to the modern ear, as much of it would have done at the time. But Jack had a positive and beneficial side. He strongly supported the Royal Institution in London, founded in 1799 and, having already given it substantial funds, in 1828 he established the Fuller Medal there and in 1833 founded the Fullerian Professorship of Chemistry, the first appointment to which was Michael Faraday. He also founded the Fullerian Professorship of Physiology. Both appointments continue today. In 1834 it was estimated that his support for the Institution by then had reached some £10,000, a very large sum for the day.

As to Rose Hill, Jack redesigned the estate. There remains a book of plans by Humphrey Repton from 1806-07, but very little of his advice was taken. Brightling Park house is listed Grade II*, originally from about 1700. It was extended in the 1720s and again in about 1745. The architect Robert Smirke, whose works adorn inner London – the frontage of the British Museum is his, among other works – added the west and office wings in about 1810-12 but these were demolished in 1955. The eighteenth-century stables (Grade II) survive.

Mad Jack' was a man of considerable energy and enthusiasm, befriending the artist Turner, who made four watercolours of the area.



A sketch of the Observatory by Turner.

Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported). The watercolour is in the USA.

Smirke built the temple, the needle (obelisk), the sugar loaf and the observatory, the last in 1818. (It was a working observatory, and by no means a folly: it had an up-to-date telescope made by Sir William Herschel, the discoverer of Uranus.) The buildings are all listed Grade II* and they can still be seen.



As well as building on his estate and surrounding most of it with a wall (costing some £10,000), Jack funded the building of the Belle Tout lighthouse on Beachy Head to succeed that on the shore below, as well as the first of Sussex's lifeboats, at Eastbourne.

The Needle (far left) and the Sugar Loaf (left)

The Needle

http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM43NK_Brightling_Needle_Sussex_UK

The Sugar Loaf

Origins of photograph unknown

In 1828 he bought Bodiam Castle and saved it from destruction, though its full safeguarding was not assured until well after his death. He was also a benefactor of his local church, donating money for improvements and the purchase of an organ; his bust is there today.

Jack's contacts, if any, with Capability Brown are unknown, but we do know that his cousin Frances married Brown's son. The Repton book of 1806-07 was commissioned by a Mr Brown on Jack's behalf, and this may well have been the same person.

Jack died in April 1834 and was buried in the 25 feet tall pyramid in Brightling churchyard.



Origins of photograph unknown

As Jack had had no children, Rose Hill descended to a cousin, General Sir Augustus Elliot Fuller. His maternal grandfather had been the first Lord Heathfield, notable as the British commander of Gibraltar who resisted the great siege there in 1779-83. Fuller was a typical country gentleman and MP for Eastern Sussex from 1841 until just before his death in 1857; he had the good fortune to receive Jack's substantial compensation payment for the abandonment of slavery under the 1833 Act.⁷ This came to £3895 7s 6d for Knollis and £762 16s 10d for Grange Pen – the lowest 2019 estimate of its value in 2019 is about £417,000 but the range above is very high.⁸ He was succeeded in his Sussex estates by his son Owen Meyrick-Fuller, who sold the stock of the estate in 1858 but appears to have kept possession until 1879. Various sources say that it was then bought by Percy Tew (1840-1921), but he was not resident there in the censuses of 1871 (William Gates, a barrister) or 1881, 1891 or 1901 (in all three only servants lived there) or 1911. However, he was to die at Brightling. Nor was his son Thomas Percy resident until after 1911.

The Tew money came from banking: Leatham, Tew and Co of Wakefield, Pontefract and Doncaster, which in 1906 was bought by two banks, ultimately descending separately to the Royal Bank of Scotland and Barclays. After Percy died the head of the family was Thomas Percy Tew (1876-1953), who had married well – to a daughter of the Greenall brewery family of south Lancashire. Their son and heir Thomas Martin Percy Tew (1915-40) was killed in action in the German invasion of France and there is a plaque in his memory in Brightling parish church. He had only just married when he went out to France, to Rosemary Hope Heale of Guildford (1914-96), born in India. She later married into the Grissell family, into whose hands Brightling Park passed after the death of Tew's father in December 1953.

The Grissells are still there. Due to death duties they sold some land and reduced the size of the house in 1955. They have run a racehorse training facility there since 1976 and international horse trials are held there annually. Various areas of the Park are hired out for weddings, parties and corporate events. An annual music festival has been held in the walled garden since 2015.⁹

George Kiloh

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¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001261>

² <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/-1047169191>

³ <http://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list-/list-entry/1001261>

⁴ 1755-76: family and business correspondence and papers at ESRO

⁵ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/fuller-john-1756-1834>

⁶ As 4

⁷ As 2

⁸ <http://johnmadjackfuller.homestead.com/Fuller-Family-s-Jamaican-Plantations.html>

⁹ <https://brightling.community/history/>