

ROBERT CROUCH

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## The follies of Jack the Lad

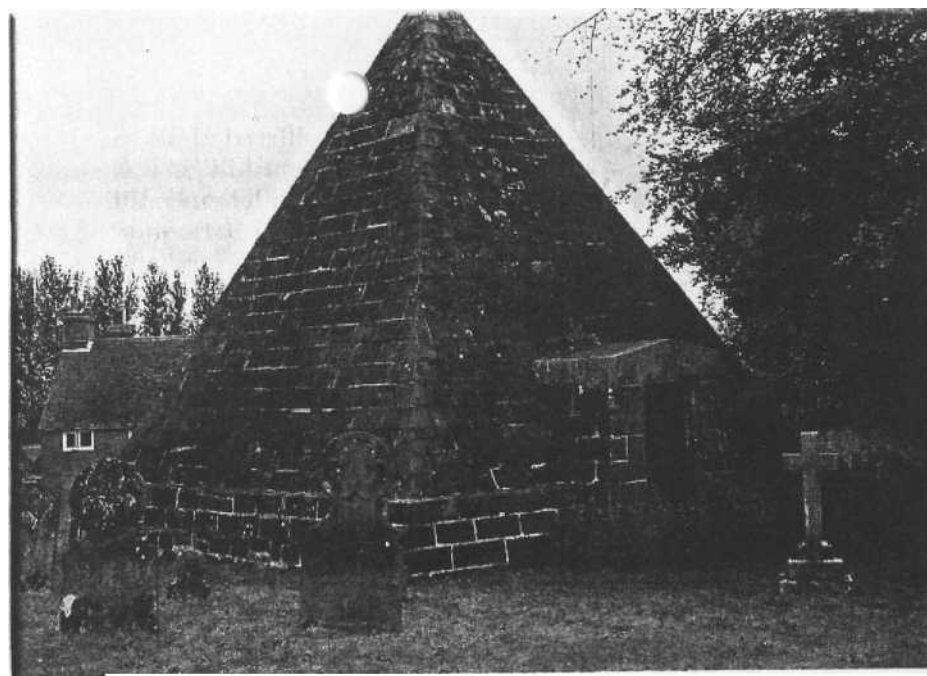
*Photographs by the author*

ONLY MAD JACK FULLER could have chosen a stone pyramid 25ft high as his final resting place. The memorial, which dominates the graveyard of St. Thomas's Church at Brightling in East Sussex, says much about the man.

Overblown and extravagant, Mad Jack was a man of contrasts. A country squire with wealth and position, he chose to be buried alongside the people of the village. The follies he built around Brightling may have been fanciful whims, but they provided employment in times of hardship.

Most of all, he wanted to be remembered. Known as 'The Hippopotamus', he weighed a portly 20 stones and his full, fleshy face betrayed his love of food and beer. It took four horses to pull his sturdy coach, which was filled with provisions on his frequent journeys to London. There he played the part of a country gentleman, throwing musical parties and squandering money on women and gambling.

At one party, his bragging got the better of him. He claimed that he could see the spire of Dallington church — a few miles away — from the lawn of his estate at Rose Hill. When a friend disputed the claim, a large wager was laid. Mad Jack was dismayed on returning home to discover that he was wrong. Determined to win the bet he summoned the local masons, who built a replica of the spire on the horizon in just a few hours. Known as the



*Not an Egyptian air-raid shelter, but the last resting place of a lesser Pharaoh, Jack Fuller, who is buried (legend has it, in full evening dress) under this pyramid in the churchyard of St. Thomas's, Brightling, East Sussex. His other follies are still to be seen nearby.*

Sugar Loaf, the replica was convincing enough to win the wager.

He never missed the opportunity to boast about his estate and the views over the wooded hills and valleys of the east Weald. During his time as MP for Lewes, he interrupted a dull debate in the House of Commons to extol the virtues of life in Sussex. He could not be silenced, his booming voice shouting down the protests from his fellow MPs. As soon as he finished his speech, he left his bewildered colleagues and returned home.

Perhaps the early loss of his parents contributed to his blunt and outspoken manner. When he inherited the family fortune on his twentieth birthday in 1777, he could afford to be self-indulgent. But wealth and position meant little to him. When the Prime Minister, Pitt the



*Jack Fuller's first notable folly was this replica (above) of the top of Dallington church spire, which he had built overnight on the skyline in order to win a bet.*

*Mad Jack bought and partially renovated Rodiam Castle, and built The Tower (right) near his home as a vantage point from which to watch the work.*

*The Needle which stands on Brightling Down (far right) was a pure folly with no apparent purpose; but Belle Tout lighthouse (above right) was a genuine beacon that did a valuable job in aiding mariners and was first lit in 1834, the year Mad Jack died.*

Younger, offered him a peerage, he said, 'I was born Jack Fuller and I'll die Jack Fuller'.

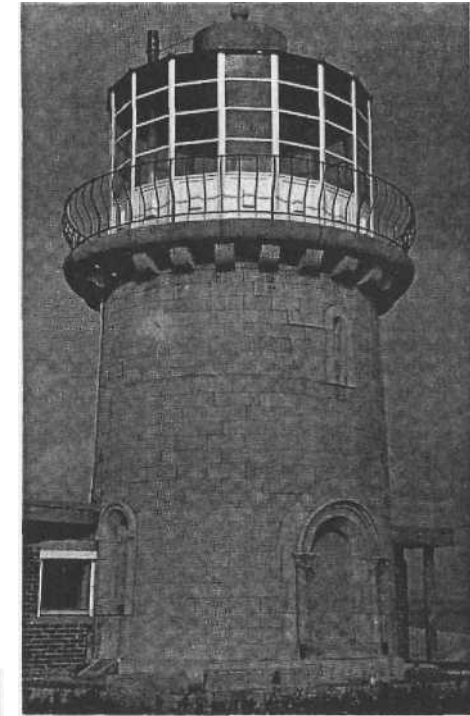
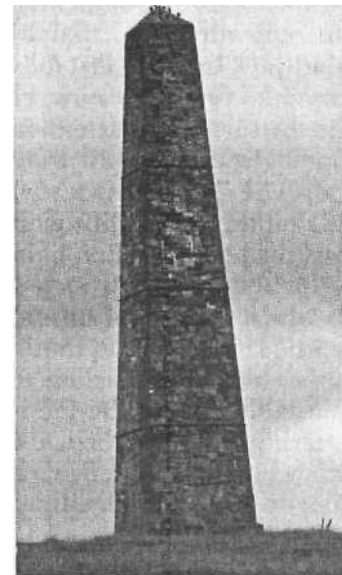
He was never comfortable as an MP. His contempt for tradition boiled over in 1810 during a stormy debate about a British defeat in the war with France. When his arguments failed to win support, he became abusive and had to be dragged from the House. He stood down at the next election, preferring to express himself through the building



of follies.

The Rotunda temple, a circular Grecian building supported by pillars, was built around 1810 in the gardens at Rose Hill. Sir Robert Smirke, the architect of the British Museum, designed the temple, which was ideally situated for taking tea after a stroll round the estate.

But Mad Jack also entertained ladies of ill repute in the temple, where he could chase the giggling women around the circular room. Though he enjoyed



the company of women, his antics were really an attempt to make an old flame jealous. When Susan Thrale turned down his proposal, it was the closest he ever came to marriage.

Smirke became a regular visitor at Rose Hill, helping Mad Jack to design the obelisk which stands on Brightling Beacon to the north-west of the village. Known as The Needle, this folly seems to have no purpose.

Another regular visitor

#### THE COUNTRYMAN

to Rose Hill between 1810 and 1818 was J. M. Turner, who was commissioned to paint scenes for Mad Jack's *A History of East Sussex*. Although the book never materialised, he derived immense pleasure from the paintings of his beloved county.

The money Mad Jack spent on pictures was matched by his contributions to St. Thomas's Church. He installed eight new bells and a barrel-organ which played 12 tunes. Next he bought new costumes for the men and women of the choir. One afternoon, while he was sitting in his study, he was so appalled by their singing that he went out and bought nine bassoons to accompany them.

He was troubled by the hardship caused to the villagers by the war with France. To ease local unemployment, he built a four-mile wall around his estate at a cost of £10,000. The project took almost seven years.

As he entered his seventies, his impulsive behaviour gave way to concern for the countryside he loved. When he learned that Bodiam Castle was about to be demolished, he bought and began to renovate it. So that he could watch the repair work, Mad Jack built his last folly to the east of Brightling.

In the last few years of his life, he turned his attention to those at sea. The Belle Tout lighthouse, built from Aberdeen granite in the style of The Tower, was anything but a folly. Started in 1831 on the chalk cliffs west of Beachy Head near Eastbourne, the lamp was first lit in 1834, shining miles out to sea.

It was the prospect of death which prompted him to build his most outrageous folly in 1810 — The Pyramid in the graveyard of St. Thomas's church. According to legend, Mad Jack sits at an iron table inside The Pyramid. In full dinner-dress and wearing a top hat, he has a meal before him and a glass of claret in one hand. Broken glass is scattered across the floor to keep the Devil out until Mad Jack is ready to enter his tomb.