Foll-e

The e-Bulletin of The Folly Fellowship

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Events calendar:

- ***26 May—North Devon Miscellany:*** *A day exploring the follies around Barnstaple. Details from pfgodfrey@gmail.com*
- ***29 June—Windsor Great Park:*** *A chance to visit some of the restricted areas at Frogmore that are not normally open to the public, including a grotto and ruined dairy. Details from ptodd@ptcs.eu*
- ***4 August—Boughton Park, Northampton:*** *A guided tour of this evocative Gothic landscape and its follies. Details from simon6964@talktalk.net*
- ***22-23 September—Sintra Gardens (Lisbon, Portugal):*** *A visit to three extraordinary gardens and their follies. Details from pfgodfrey@gmail.com*

The Folly Fellowship

Articles, pictures, comments and feedback for the e-Bulletin should be sent to andrew@follies.fsnet.co.uk. All other correspondence should be sent to membership@follies.org.uk.

L'Art Brut en Français

How do you define a folly? It is the question that we are most asked and the one where we most disagree. For me it must first be a building, which sounds obvious enough, except that there has been growing pressure of late to include a number of structures that in my opinion should properly be labelled as 'art' or 'sculpture'. Again for me a folly must involve the process of building, making it a piece of architecture rather than something formed from stacks of empty wine bottles or coated with broken crockery! Beyond this I do

The Palais Idéal at Hauterives. *Photo:* **Wikimedia**

not believe in imposing strict rules because I know that there is a folly somewhere that defies them.

Most people instinctively know what a folly is without having to check a definition, mainly because they have a *je ne sais quoi* that distinguishes them from the rest of architecture. Academics, however, like to pigeon-hole everything and shudder at the idea that anything can be decided by amateurs. The closest that we Founders went towards answering this question was Gwyn Headley's description of 'buildings erected for pleasure before purpose', but I am prepared to accept that this is a little vague and that by ignoring this issue we may have unwittingly devalued the currency.

The definition question puzzled the French Cultural Minister André Malraux when he gave Cultural Monument status to the **Palais Idéal** (Hauterives) in 1969. In an attempt to justify his decision he coined the term 'naive architecture' to describe all do-it-yourself buildings, but especially those epitomised by Ferdinand Cheval's masterpiece.

Cheval was born in 1836 in Charmes-sur-l'Herbasse (Drôme). He grew up in a poor environment with little formal education and no travel beyond his immediate area. During his childhood he often complained of nightmare visions of a dazzling palace filled with animals, but these were dismissed by his doctor. Eventually the nightmares stopped until one day in 1879 when he stumbled upon an odd-looking stone during his 32km round as the local postman. It retriggered his visions. Returning to the same spot on the following day he picked up other strange stones and was soon filling his pockets and later baskets with them. It is said that during the height of his building work he would collect the stones at night with the aid of his wheelbarrow, often adding a further 20km to his daily walk.

In 1912, after 33 years of toil, Cheval completed his vision and gave us one of the most breathtaking pieces of architecture in the World. His hope of using it as his final resting place was denied him by the Catholic Church, so at the age of 76 he started again and built his family mausoleum in the local burial ground.

The term 'folly' is assumed to derive from the French word *'folie'*

Ferdinand Cheval and his wheelbarrow. Postcard c.1900

The Cheval Mausoleum. *Photo:* **Wikilug on Wikimedia**

meaning foolishness, so the title would have been rejected by Cheval. This is common among folly builders, or at least those who build for pleasure rather than the notoriety that it brings. Likewise, it is often assumed that follies are built by eccentrics and madmen, which Cheval would also have rejected. So the fact that he suffered from nightmare visions is interesting, especially as it seems to have been a common trait among folly builders of the day. In Cheval's time visions would have been regarded as an early sign of madness, and probably led to sufferers being carted off to the local asylum. Of course we now know that there is a fine line separating genius from madness, and madness from eccentricity, but it is this close proximity that makes follies and folly builders so fascinating.

To the French artist Jean Dubuffet, Ferdinand Cheval was an exponent of what he called *Art Brut*, which translates as 'rough art' or 'raw art'. It was later renamed 'outsider art' by the critic Roger Cardinal because he felt that its exponents were working outside the boundaries of official culture. Dubuffet's concept developed in 1945 during a trip to Switzerland where he discovered Dr Prinzhorn's book *'Art of the Insane'* (1920) looking at the artwork created by the mentally ill.

We now appreciate that many of these men were not insane at all but suffering from a range of medical disorders like bipolar and schizophrenia. Most of them had disturbing visions in their sleep, and for many of them this was enough to condemn them to a life in a sanatorium.

A contemporary of Cheval was the artist Augustus Bourgoin, who built an equally extraordinary collection of **Ruins at Troyes**, north-east of Paris (see front cover). His work has not survived in the same way as Cheval's, but it is documented in Louis Morin's book *"Les Ruines de Vacherie"* (1901).

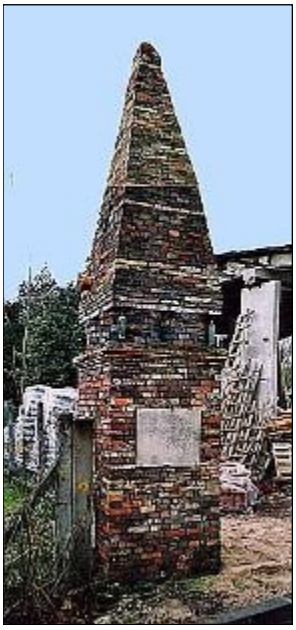
The book is important because it is a contemporary account. It tells us that Bourgoin was one of five sons to a quarry owner in the Vacherie district of Troyes and that he grew up during a period when the old town was being torn down and extensively remodelled. It meant that as Bourgoin dreamed of the follies that he was about to build, he had the luxury of knowing that his building materials were being stored as architectural salvage in his family's quarry.

Bourgoin started work in 1896 with what Morin said were "plans so precise that every element of form and colour are clearly depicted..." Five years later he had completed eight pyramids and begun work on a ninth—in the end

The Ruins at Troyes. Postcard c.1906

he built sixteen. They were all photographed by Emile Guyot and many show the artist at his work, allowing us to scale his pyramids at more than 10-metres in height.

Like Cheval, Bourgoin was initially taunted by onlookers who failed to understand what he was doing. He often referred to his buildings as "remnants of the end of the century public ruins", and populated their niches with busts of Mars and Minerva (the God and Goddess of Peace and War), small statues and even a depiction of Garibaldi.



The Bourgoin Pyramids today. *Photo:* **Francis Cahuzacon**, CFPPHR

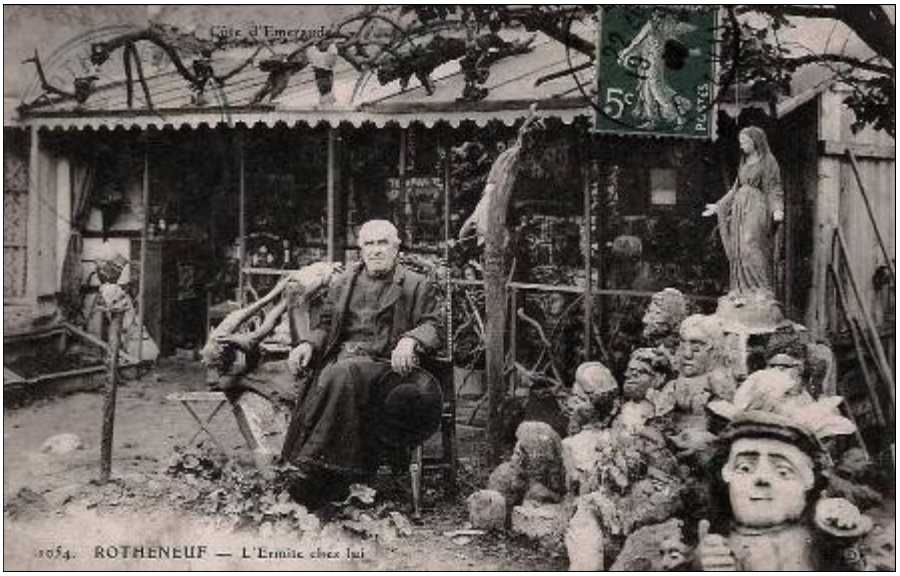
On 21 November 1899, as the building work approached completion, he hosted a banquet among the pyramids and invited the poets Aristide Estienne and Lucien Morel to recite two of their works.

Only two of the pyramids have survived and even they appear to be at risk.

The last of the three known Art Brut pioneers was Father Adolphe Fouéré, whose sculptural work at **Rothéneuf** (Ille-et-Villaine in France) returns us to the question of whether its products can/should be called 'folly'. His work is also included to answer a promise that I made to Brian Mountain after he first brought the site to my attention.

Fouré (he changed the spelling of his name when he joined the priesthood) was Rector to the Parish of Langouët, near Rennes, until a stroke at the age of 30 forced him to retire from the priesthood in 1870. It left him paralysed down one side of his body and almost completely deaf and dumb. His solution was to move to the sea and live as a hermit in the cliffs outside of Rothéneuf. To his credit he named the shack that was his home *Haute Folie*, although it was also called the Rothéneuf Hermitage.

Instead of watching the sea and letting time slip by, Fouré used his time productively by carving a number of grotesque faces, animals, mermaids and bizarre shapes in the face of the granite rocks. Over the next 25 years, with the help of an elderly companion, he completed nearly 300 carvings



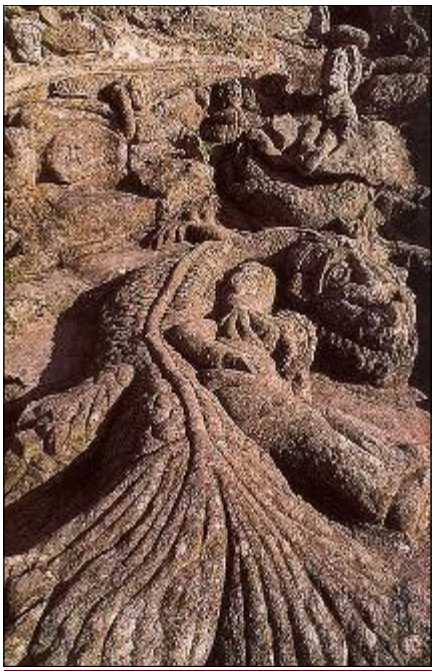
Father Fouré outside Haute Folie. Postcard c. 1900

along the Brittany shoreline all inspired by tales of fisherman, smugglers, pirates and monsters who frequented the area during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.

In 1907, almost completely paralysed and devoid of the power of speech, he finally stopped work, and for the next three years he sat outside his home watching the sea. He died there on 10 February 1910.

These days 'Art Brut' is a term that is applied to paintings rather than works of architecture, with its main exponents creating abstract figures and shapes painted with bold and brightly coloured patterns. Few use that energy to build proper follies, alas!

Above and below: **The Rothéneuf sculptures.** *Photos:* **Papier K** & **Fanoflesage** on Wikipedia



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