

“MAD JACK,” THE HONEST SUSSEX SQUIRE

By ARTHUR BECKETT

A FEW years ago the London evening newspapers developed a journalistic “stunt” which had a close relation to Sussex. It appeared that a certain mechanic of Tonbridge, named Peter Fuller, declared that he was about to formulate a claim to the estate of old John Fuller, the Brightling squire who died in 1833 at the end of a career of so many eccentricities that he earned for himself the title of “Mad Jack.”

It was in the nature of things that the Tonbridge claimant was a man of straw, and that a large sum of money must therefore be raised if he was to prosecute his claim. From the information published in the Press I gathered that a syndicate was to be formed to provide the money that, it was hoped, would bring Mr. Peter Fuller estates of the estimated value of several millions, or, at least, a



share of them, for it was understood that there were other claimants in the field. One newspaper report declared that a meeting was held at Tunbridge Wells for the purpose of forming a company to prosecute the claim. At that meeting it was decided that the share capital was to be £10,000, though it was said that a much smaller sum would suffice to make the claim complete. Outlining the history of that claim, counsel stated that Peter Fuller alleged a wrongful devolution of the estate after the death, in 1833, of John Fuller, M.P., of Brightling.

Another newspaper interviewed the claimant, who stated that he was born at Waldron, Sussex, and was 67 years of age. He informed the reporter that for many years he had been prosecuting inquiries to discover proofs necessary to the claim he was making, based on what he alleged was the wrongful devolution aforesaid. The estate which he claimed comprised some 6,000 acres in Sussex, and there were also extensive sugar plantations and rum distilleries in Jamaica. At the time of the interview with the reporter, Mr. Peter Fuller declared that he had just discovered a document necessary to his claim, for which he had been searching eighteen years, and that other documents he had collected for that purpose would fill a wheelbarrow. He was also in the position to prove his clear descent from the original owner through a period of 286 years. Finally, he declared that he estimated the estates to be worth ten millions, and he added: “I am going to give it away to very poor people—poor orphans and others to whom it will do good!” It will thus be seen that at that moment Mr. Peter Fuller was a generous man!

Squire John Fuller, of Brightling, was a big man in the county in the days of William IV. Indeed, the people of that part of Sussex thought so well of him that they sent him to Parliament to represent

them in the House of Commons. He was worthy of this honour both by birth, estate and personal attainments; for though he came of the stock of John Fuller, citizen of London in the sixteenth century, the family had lived in the county for many generations, both at Uckfield and Waldron. At the last-named place they built themselves a fine mansion which they called "Tanners," and there they owned the Waldron iron furnace, by which they added to their riches. John Fuller married Miss Elizabeth Rose, the daughter of Mr. Fulke Rose, of Jamaica, and so acquired estates in that island. When he bought property at Brightling he built a mansion there which he called Rose Hill, in memory of his wife's maiden name.

John Fuller was what we in Sussex call an "upstanding downsitting sort of man," and, when angry, he bellowed like a farmer shouting in a ten-acre field. In other words, he was a man of no uncertain opinions, and was accustomed to have his own way. If blunt of speech he was kind of heart; and he was noted for many acts of kindness to children and the poor.

When the emancipation of the slaves was talked of, John Fuller was exceedingly indignant, for the matter affected the labour on his Jamaica estates. He called out the huge family coach, to which were harnessed four great horses, filled it with provisions, and, arming the coachman and footmen with swords and pistols against the perils of the journey, set out for the House of Commons. There he made a great uproar, swore at the Speaker, whom he called "the insignificant little fellow in the wig," and was publicly reprimanded for his offence. This did not disturb the equanimity of "Honest Jack." He marched out of the House in charge of the Sergeant-at-Arms, got into his coach and returned to Sussex as he had come.

He showed as little respect for rank as he did for office. Once when the Duke of Somerset and his daughter, Lady Seymour, together with the learned Dr. Faraday and other members of the Royal Institution, had dined with him at his London house, the Duke rose to go to another party. Of course, John Fuller, as host, should have risen to bid his noble guest farewell. Instead, he remained seated, merely observing: "What! is your Grace off? Then perhaps you will just ring the bell for yourself."

"Honest Jack" courted the learned and supported both science and art in liberal fashion. He gave ten thousand pounds to the Royal Institution of Great Britain, and founded two "Fullerian" professorships, which he was in the habit of describing as his "two children."

"Honest Jack" was returned to Parliament, as a member for the county at the General Elections of 1801, 1802 and 1806. In 1807 his opponent was Colonel Sergison, of Cuckfield Park, and on that occasion the most furious contest for the county ever known took place, Fuller standing in the Tory and Sergison in the Whig interest. The election was held at Chichester, the hustings being kept open for fifteen days. As many of the voters had to travel thither from the extreme east of the county, a distance of about 70 miles, the expenses of the election were enormous; the cost to Fuller being £20,000 plus £30,000 subscribed by the county. After the election Jekyl, the lawyer, said to Fuller: "Is it true that you spent eleven hundred pounds on ribbons at the election?" "Too true, I am sorry to say," answered Fuller. "No doubt you are sorry," was Jekyl's rejoinder; "why, I was returned five times to Parliament, and it only cost me five shillings to pay the gate. Let alone the money, where was your honesty—where your philosophy? Eleven hundred pounds on ribbons!" Honest Jack's equanimity was upset by this taunt (says Lower, who tells the story), and his response was more energetic than polite. When, later on, Pitt offered him a peerage he declined, saying: "I was born

Jack Fuller, and Jack Fuller I'll die.”

Fuller was called “Mad Jack” on account of his eccentricities. When an orchestra was introduced into Brightling Church to provide instrumental accompaniments for the choir, he presented the musicians with nine bassoons!

Another story related about “Mad Jack” is to the effect that when he built the pyramidal mausoleum in Brightling Churchyard, he sought for a hermit to occupy it. The conditions were that the applicant was to occupy the structure for one year, and was not, during that time, to shave, to cut his hair, or wash himself; nor was he to hold any sort of intercourse with the outer world. There is no record of Jack Fuller finding a hermit on these terms, even though, according to the rustic story, any such applicant was to be made “a gentleman for life.” That curious pile known as the “Brightling Needle,” which was erected on the site of the old beacon, was also built by Fuller.

Squire Fuller died on April 11, 1833, at the age of 68, and was buried in the pyramidal mausoleum in Brightling Churchyard, which had been erected after a design by Sir Robert Smirke. (Smirke, by the way, also designed the Brightling Observatory.) He was a kind-hearted man, a generous landlord, a good master; eccentric, blunt of speech and a hard swearer. Some time after his death a portrait medallion was cast. This does not show him wearing a pigtail which he affected during at least a part of his life.

The present generation has good reason to remember honest Squire Fuller. In addition to his endowments to the Royal Society, he saved Bodiam Castle by purchasing it when its demolition was threatened by a firm of Hastings builders who wished to buy it for the sake of the materials; and he commissioned Turner to paint pictures of the Rape of Hastings, five of which were afterwards engraved, as it related on another page of the Sussex County Magazine.