

Rousseau in Staffordshire

The little village of Wootton lies in the far north of Staffordshire, mid-way between the cities of Stoke-on-Trent and Derby. Many will have brushed excitedly past it on their way to and from Alton Towers, which is just four miles away.

Despite the charm of its setting and of its sturdy stone houses, there would not be a great deal to say about Wootton. But everywhere has its five minutes of fame at some point. For Wootton the moment came in 1766, when the Staffordshire village played host to one of Europe's greatest thinkers.

I'd like to bet that only one of the heroes of France interred at the Pantheon - Victor Hugo, Zola, Marie Curie, Voltaire and the rest - has ever been anywhere near Alton Towers. And that is Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

If you're not up on your French philosophers, let me briefly help you along. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was an essayist, political thinker, composer and novelist. Born in Geneva, he spent much of his life in Paris, mixing (and falling out) with the Encyclopedistes such as Diderot and Voltaire. To say that Rousseau was ahead of his time is to put it mildly; the Romantic movement of the early 19th Century, as well as the French Revolution itself, look to him as their prophet.

At the heart of Rousseau's philosophy was the simple notion that mankind was by nature good, but corrupted by institutional life, and that included the Church as well as the monarchy and the state. To live the perfect life, then, was to turn one's back on those negative forces.

From Rousseau's pen flowed a series of extraordinary works. His novel, *La Bette Heloise* was so popular that Parisian bookshops rented it out by the hour. Arguably the greatest of Rousseau's books was *The Social Contract*, published in 1762, which begins with the famous lines: "Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains." Later in the same work he threw in those three words which still define the French nation today: "Liberty, equality, fraternity". Just as radical was his novel, *Emile*, published in the same year, which argued that religion was best kept out of education.

But this was still the 1760s, not the 1790s. There was precious little fraternity in the response of the French to Jean-Jacques' ideas. His books were publicly burned, an arrest warrant was issued, and J-J was forced to flee for his life. When his retreat in Switzerland was attacked by a drunken mob, Rousseau seemed to have nowhere on Continental Europe left to go. "I was an infidel, an atheist," wrote Rousseau, "a lunatic, a madman, a wild beast, a wolf..."

Salvation came in the shape of another distinguished philosopher, David Hume, who had met Rousseau whilst he was working for the British ambassador in Paris. The two men had much in common. Both were high-priests of the Enlightenment, and Hume was more popular in France than in England, just as Rousseau was more appreciated in England than in France. A change of air would do them both good.

Hume, therefore, offered the great infidel sanctuary in England, at least until the

storms of protest had blown over. The whispers of Hume's friends - that he was nursing a viper in his bosom, and that he should not touch Rousseau with a barge-pole - Hume chose to ignore. "I find him mild, gentle, modest and good-humoured," retorted Hume.

And so, in January 1766, the two philosophers set forth, accompanied by Jean-Jacques' constant companion, his pet dog, Sultan. Rousseau's other companion - not quite so constant - his mistress, Madame Levasser, followed later, in the company of James Boswell.

It was an eventful crossing. "She seduced me 13 times between Paris and London," commented Boswell in exhaustion. "I had to drink to sustain my virility."

Rousseau made a habit of these ill-starred liaisons. He already had five children by another relationship with Therese le Vasseur. But Rousseau conveniently dumped them in an orphanage prior to departing France. This was how radical he was.

Rousseau's sojourn in London turned out to be brief. He was feted in the London salons, true enough, but he disliked the English, especially in the kind of quantities to be seen near his lodgings in The Strand. And he considered the capital full of "black vapours", not conducive to good health, let alone to philosophy.

Where to next, then ? Whilst Hume worked with his friends at court to secure Rousseau a state pension, he found Rousseau accommodation out of the smoke of London in the village of Chiswick. Here he stayed with "an honest grocer" by the name of James Pullein.

If Rousseau was attempting to "get back to nature", he was doing it by stages.

Then, in March 1766, came the offer that would bring Jean-Jacques Rousseau into our neck of the woods. A rich patron called Richard Davenport happened to have a large and empty stately home (as you do) up in Staffordshire. Perhaps this offered the solitude that Rousseau was seeking ?

Thus, after a couple of wrong turns, Rousseau set out, later that same month, for Wootton Hall in Staffordshire.

As for what happened when Jean-Jacques came Staffordshire, that will have to wait for next time.