

Rousseau in Staffordshire (2)

Had you been wandering the Weaver Hills in North Staffordshire in the summer of 1766, you might well have spotted a very strange figure sharing the fresh air with you. Eccentrically dressed in Armenian costume, complete with long striped cloak and fur hat, this was far from your average Staffordshire dog-walker.

Should you choose to engage the chap in conversation, you would find him to be French, not Armenian. He goes by the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, arguably the most famous (and infamous) man in Europe.

As we learnt last time, Rousseau was on the run in 1766, his radical thoughts on politics and religion having stirred up a hornet's nest back in France. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume, helpfully secured Rousseau a bolt-hole in England, first in London, then in Chiswick.

But London was not Rousseau's kind of town. He needed a less confined environment in which to muse, the escape to the nature he expounded in his writings. A mutual acquaintance found him the perfect retreat; Wootton Hall in the Peak District was vacant and would cost Rousseau just £30 a year in rent, and was perfectly located in the middle of nowhere.

And so Rousseau came to Staffordshire and tramped the moorlands with his pet dog, Sultan. He spent his days tracing the line of the River Dove, collecting botanical specimens, and brooding on his exclusion from the republic of letters.

The thoughts distilled on those walks became the basis for one of the great works of European literature, and arguably the first autobiography of the modern era, a no-holes-barred examination of his life he called *Confessions*.

"I have resolved on an enterprise," Rousseau modestly begins the work, "which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitation."

Rousseau was not completely bereft of company at Wootton, it must be said. He was too much of a celebrity for that. He had his long-term mistress, Madame Levasseur with him, for one, and others made the pilgrimage to see him. Erasmus Darwin was one visitor, ambushing Rousseau on one of his walks. There were also meetings perhaps with Richard Edgeworth (a fellow member of the Lunar Society) and certainly with Sir Brooke Boothby of Ashbourne Hall, who later published the first English translation of the *Confessions* in Lichfield.

Both Darwin and Boothby shared Rousseau's interest in plants. But even shared interests did not necessarily get them close to the man himself. Jean-Jacques remained aloof and inscrutable.

There are, however, limits to the length of time one wants to spend inside one's own head, and especially in Rousseau's head, which was not the most tranquil of places.

By the end of 1766 Rousseau was becoming noticeably unstable. He became

convinced that an assassination plot was being brewed in France, that his letters were being intercepted, and that agents were tracking him down. Only one man, he believed, could have passed on information on his whereabouts, and that was David Hume, the friend who had found him a home in Staffordshire in the first place. One of the mightiest spats in literary history was about to break out.

Rousseau turned on Hume with the ferocity only extreme paranoia could generate. "You brought me to England, not to give me refuge," he wrote to Hume, "but to dishonour me. And the plot you hatched was one only a man of your talents could devise." In response, David Hume railed at the "monstrous ingratitude, ferocity and frenzy of the man".

Hume refuted every accusation, and published his response, which only added to Rousseau's suspicions. To paraphrase Casablanca, it was the end of a beautiful friendship, and its ugly break-up was splashed across the newspapers of France and England.

Not surprisingly, then, in May 1767 Jean-Jacques was on the run once more. The three of them (man, woman and dog) fled first to Spalding in Lincolnshire, before heading back across the Channel. And thus Staffordshire's brush with genius ended, though Rousseau continued to correspond with the friends he had made in the county till the end of his life.

Rousseau died just a decade later in 1778. Sixteen years after that, with the French Revolution in full swing, his body was exhumed and interred in the Pantheon in Paris, a place reserved for the heroes of the Republic. Posthumously the French had finally begun to appreciate the talents of one of their greatest, albeit most wayward, of sons.

The Wootton Hal that Rousseau rented is no longer with us, having been demolished in the 1930s. Its impressive replacement, which to the untrained eye looks like a perfectly feasible 18th-century mansion, was built only ten years ago.

When Wootton Hall was stripped down and demolished in 1935, only one feature was deemed worth preserving, if only for its connection with the great French philosopher. Rousseau's grotto, in the shade of which he had reputedly composed much of the Confessions, remains on site, albeit without its roof and its ashlar facade.

The latter was snapped up as a trophy, and removed to nearby Consall Hall, where it can still be seen on a visit to the gardens. This must make it the longest grotto in the world, its entrance several miles from its exit.

The English sojourn of Jean-Jacques Rousseau had hardly been a happy one, but for that Rousseau must take the blame, not Staffordshire.