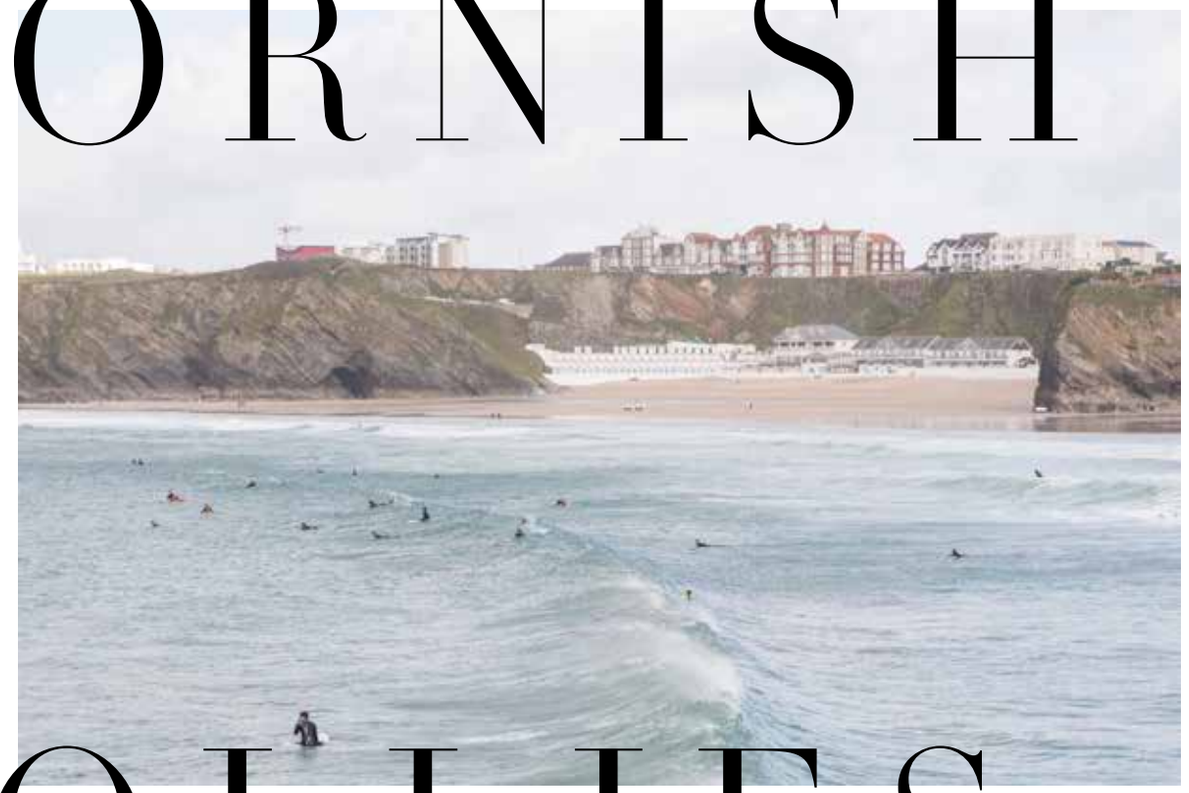
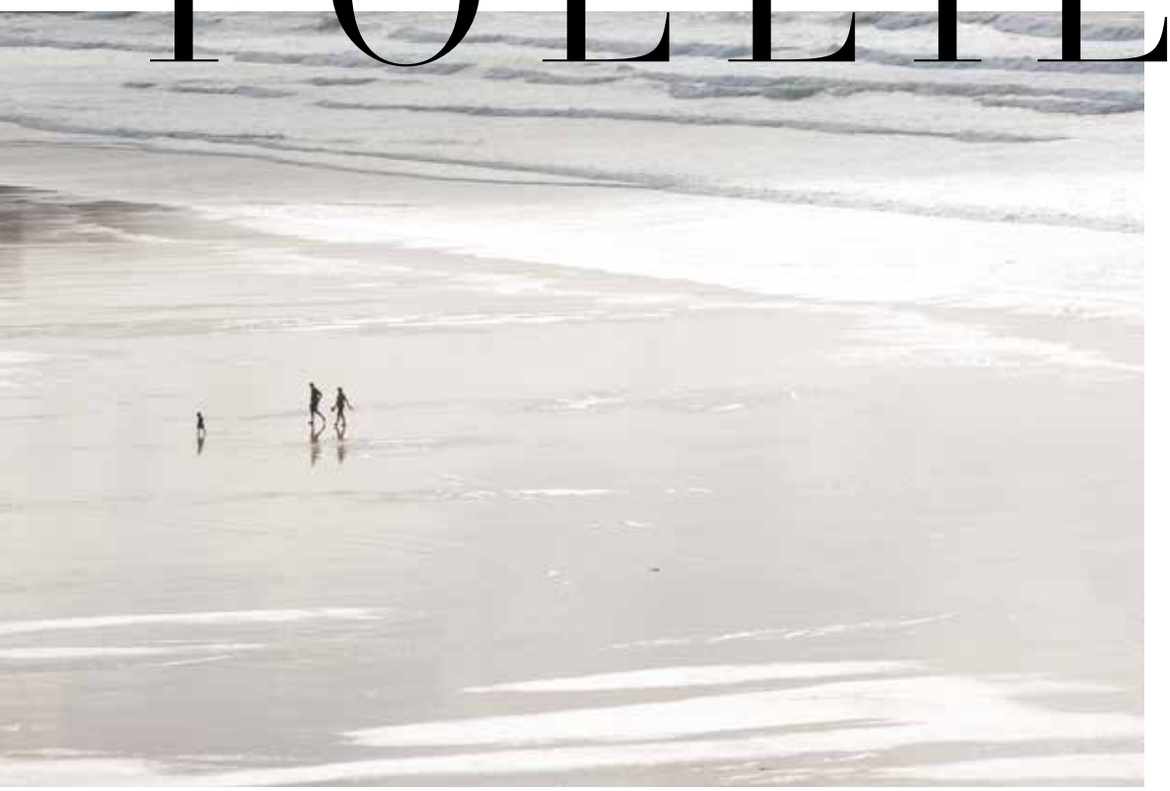
CORNISH FOLLIES





Legend, legacy and more than a little whimsy converge in Cornwall where the lanes that intersect the green fields invariably lead to something magical, writes MAX ANDERSON.

Photography **HELEN CATHCART**

Fowey Hall sits over the small harbour town of Fowey, on display like a trophy. Built in 1899 by Charles Hanson, who had returned from Canada after making his fortune in timber, it features square corner towers, imperious arches and a lead-domed bellcote designed so none should doubt that here was a local boy made good.

The imposing, slightly batty edifice is now a hotel. While I'm checking in, I take a stab at pronouncing the name and, figuring I've got a 50-50 chance of getting it right, plump for "Foh-ee" over "Fow-ee".

"It's pronounced Foy," says the receptionist kindly in her luscious Cornish lilt. "It rhymes with joy."

This eccentric turn of phonemes isn't the only thing to leave me wrong-footed.

While much of Fowey Hall is intact – including marble fireplaces, parquet floors and Baroque plasterwork – the hotel dedicates itself to "family luxury". So the manicured lawns are set with miniature soccer goals. The coach house, once a garage for Hanson's splendid 1904 Rolls-Royce, is a kids' den. And along a wood-panelled corridor lined with ancestral portraits, a small boy bursts from behind a potted palm and cries, "Cheese, cheese, cheese!"

Perhaps it's the jet lag, but I feel my face adopting the expression perfected by Martin Clunes as the crabby Cornish GP in the TV series *Doc Martin*.

The receptionist smiles. "School holidays," she says. "Nearly over."

In summer, Cornwall's population of 500,000 is swollen by four million visitors. Most are from other English counties, many come with children, and all are hoping for sun and sand. By early September, however, there's change in the air: the swarms of children are dissipating, the Whac-a-Mole arcade machines fall silent, and a different Cornwall begins to suggest itself. That Cornwall is Kernow, one of the seven Celtic nations. It's very old, very beautiful and very distinctive.

After a restorative night's sleep, I drive to Tintagel where I'm greeted by sunshine and views of the village's 13th-century castle ruins, a vista that has long inspired writers and artists, JMW Turner, Alfred Lord Tennyson and John Steinbeck among them. Atop a dramatic headland, its broken battlements sit ragged against the sky. On the same site are the grass-covered foundations of a fifth-century trading port that did business with the Greeks. The Romans never got to grips with Cornwall so the mysterious-sounding Dumnonians flourished in their absence, speaking what would become modern Cornish.

I want to know more about the Dumnonians, but in the neighbouring stone village of Tintagel only one name seems to have any currency.

PREVIOUS PAGES
Left: Fistral Beach, Newquay. Right: Mousehole. Above: Fowey Hall and (right) the sitting room at Fowey Hall. Left: where Fowey town and river meet.

At the entrance to King Arthur's Great Halls, it's 50p to have your photo taken beside an anvil with a sword welded vertically into place. The exterior of the building is late-Victorian Gothic and perfectly anachronous to things Arthurian – both the sixth-century king who defended Britain against the Saxons, and the 12th-century chronicles of his legend. Moreover, Arthur's connection to the ruins of Tintagel is at best tenuous; it's said he was conceived at the site thanks to a bout of infidelity and a dash of Merlin's magic. And that's about it.

So I enter the building to see what all the fuss is about.

"Take a look at the Great Hall of Chivalry!" enthuses the halls' custodian, John Moore. "I promise you'll be surprised!" He urges me towards a heavy drape; even after years of welcoming tourists, it seems he can't believe what's behind it.

The Great Hall of Chivalry is vast. As meticulously crafted as a cathedral, the room is bolstered with pillars of Cornish stone and hung with swathes of red velvet. Seventy-two stained-glass windows depicting chivalrous acts cast a hallowed light onto a round table and Arthur's throne.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" exclaims Moore when I return.

"It is!" I say, equally wide-eyed. "Who built it?"

"His name was Frederick Glasscock. He finished it in 1933 and died in 1934. Would have cost him a fortune."

"Where'd he get his money?"

"You won't believe it," says Moore gleefully. "Custard powder! He also invented hundreds and thousands. Y'know – sprinkles."

I blink at the eccentricity. It's rather beautiful.

Legend and lunacy, mythology and madness – in Cornwall they're bedfellows of sorts, fostered by a people who seem rather un-English. They frequently call out, "Take care, m'lovely!" as a farewell. Occasionally the word "dreckly" is used, a shortening of "I'll get to it directly", which implies "maybe in a minute, maybe in a month". A curious occurrence might prompt a wry shrug and the question "P'raps it's the faerie folk?"

While driving my little hire car through the green fields that sheath the Cornish leg of south-west England, my GPS frequently takes me on detours along lanes that survive from a time when milkmaids and pilgrims had to breathe in so they might pass each other. I drive these one-vehicle roads with white knuckles, praying to the patron saint of nothing coming. Yet invariably they lead to something magical.

The Minack Theatre near Penzance is an amphitheatre carved in a granite cliffside. It's reminiscent of Ancient Greece, but it was built in ➤

1932 by the landowner, Rowena Cade, and her gardener because local players had nowhere to perform Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Performances are still staged against a backdrop of becalmed seas or waves whipped to fury. Only electrical storms warrant a cancellation.

The beachfront at Bude, about 34 kilometres north of Tintagel, has a castle atop the dunes dating to the 1830s. It was the home of an obscure inventor named Sir Goldsworthy Gurney, who advanced patents for steam carriages and mine-safety equipment; he also discovered that lime burns fiercely enough to provide excellent indoor and outdoor illumination. None of his inventions was commercially successful, though they furthered the careers of George Stephenson (the "father of railways"), Humphrey Davy (inventor of the Davy miner's safety lamp) and Thomas Drummond (who illuminated theatres and, quite literally, stole the limelight).

Strictly speaking, The Lost Gardens of Heligan is a Cornish legend of modern invention, and it grows even as I watch. In 1766, Heligan was a Georgian-era estate near Saint Austell on the south coast owned by a wealthy squire named Henry Hawkins Tremayne. Kitchen gardens, greenhouses and orchards were added over the decades, and a gully planted with exotics collected from exploration ships.

In 1914, the estate's 13 gardeners went to the Great War; only four came back. Consumed by brambles and rot, the gardens fell into decay. ➤

Top left: cucumber, heritage tomato, and poppy seed salad with zucchini and garden peas at the Heligan Kitchen & Bakery, and (below) pineapples from the Melon Yard at The Lost Gardens of Heligan. Left: chef Emily Scott and partner Mark Hellyar of St Tudy Inn, St Tudy, and (opposite) their scallops with hazelut butter.


United Kingdom
Birmingham
Oxford
Bristol Channel
Bude
Penzance
Fowey
Cornwall
English Channel

Nearly 80 years later a Dutch music producer, Tim Smit, "found" the gardens and began a slow restoration. Now some 345,000 people visit the 80-hectare estate each year, admiring the gorge of exotics from a Burmese rope bridge, gathering in hides for sightings of badgers, goldfinches and blue tits, and wandering among forests filled with sculptures.

Five tonnes of mainly heritage fruit and vegetables are grown annually in its gardens and served in the Heligan Kitchen & Bakery. "Lost" varieties that were popular before the First World War are being revived, such as scorzonera and medlar.

"We stay faithful to the techniques and tools that were used in the original gardens," says Katie Kingett, supervisor of Heligan's Victorian Productive Gardens. Within the old brick walls of the kitchen gardens, Kingett shows me beds turned by traditional long-handled Cornish shovels. "The majority of what we do is by hand," she says. "So we hand-barrow manure into the beds, and we still use seaweed collected from the local beach for our leeks, onions and asparagus."

The story of how the fishing village of Padstow became famous for seafood dining started with Rick Stein, a name uttered in these parts with the same reverence as Sir Lancelot. But this story, too, has evolved.

Stein's The Seafood Restaurant has been in business for more than 40 years, but travellers can dine at 18 restaurants in and around Padstow with Michelin stars, bibs or plates. This includes the two-starred Restaurant Nathan Outlaw in Port Isaac and Paul Ainsworth at No 6 in Padstow.

Around 25 kilometres north-east of Padstow is St Tudy Inn, in the village of St Tudy. It has a Michelin bib, denoting budget-priced excellence, and while there has been talk of a star, chef-owner Emily Scott isn't sure she'd want one. "I wouldn't want the pressure!" she says. "I just want to keep doing what we're doing, which is serving simple, seasonal food with great wine and style. It's really about the provenance of the ingredients – it's about the farmers and the fishermen."

The light, white dining room in the 17th-century inn has tables fashioned from French window shutters, etchings of farm animals on the walls and a huge hearth. Scott's menu offers full-flavoured Cornish produce prepared with finesse, such as figs baked with thyme and honey and topped with Helford White cheese, and fish stew brimming with locally caught haddock, bream, mussels and tiger prawns. One of the most popular bottles in the cellar, meanwhile, is Camel Valley sparkling rosé. Served to the Queen and the crew of the Bond film *Spectre*, it has garnered global recognition – and it's produced just 11 kilometres down the road.

Right: The Old Coastguard guesthouse, Mousehole. Opposite: winemaker Sam Lindo of Camel Valley Vineyard.

"I think it's the halo effect of Padstow," says Camel Valley winemaker Sam Lindo, "but we're now one of the busiest wineries in the world. We get 35,000 visitors through in a year."

Lindo's father, Bob, planted the first vines in 1989 when the notion of a UK wine industry was just that. But the Goldilocks climate for chardonnay and pinot noir has moved north as the climate has changed. "Hard to believe, but we have one of the longest growing seasons in the world," he says. "Meanwhile, it's getting harder for Champagne producers to do what they do because they're getting too warm." A new legend rises on the back of the old.

I raise a glass of Lindo's brut in the fishing village of Mousehole, near Penzance. Pronounced "Mowzel", it's a place so lovely you'd think it was a parody, with its tiny harbour and stone cottages packed into a rocky cove. I'm staying at The Old Coastguard, a guesthouse that offers colour and comfort in equal measure. I take supper in the bar and dining room; it's rather like a ship's lower deck with its low ceiling, old timbers and tallow-coloured light, and so hearty I expect a shanty to break out by eight bells.

I order Porthilly oysters, and plaice fillets topped with crisp seaweed. But I hanker for a dish the waitress says I can't have. Stargazy pie is served only on Christmas Eve to mark the legend of Tom Bawcock, a 16th-century fisherman who braved storms to relieve the starving villagers of Mousehole. His catch – seven sorts o' fish – was baked in a pie with the heads poking through the crust to prove that there really were fish inside. Once a year, the villagers tuck in and sing their traditional song of celebration:

Merry place you may believe,
Tiz Mouzel 'pon Tom Bawcock's eve,
To be there then who wouldn't wesh,
To sup o' sibm soorts o' fish.

The town of Fowey proves to be a stargazy-pie sort of place, with rich Cornish pleasures under its crust and wild-eyed stories poking out. On a morning kayak tour of Fowey Estuary, I spot seals and kingfishers and hear tales of Phoenician traders and pirates. We pass a ship's figurehead mounted beneath the eaves of a handsome timber house; my guide, Karen Wells-West, says the carving is modelled on the ship's owner, Jane Slade. Daphne du Maurier rescued the figurehead from a creek and had it hung on her family home. Slade inspired du Maurier's first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, published in 1931.

At lunchtime I hole up in Pintxo, a Catalan restaurant tucked away in an alley where the light bounces off whitewashed walls. I order a plate of Manchego drizzled with orange-blossom honey, and a glass of sherry. And later, in a dusk that's still long in the summer solstice, I lose myself in steep, fractured lanes lined by cottages with names such as Littlesteps, ➤

Above: tidal pool at Mousehole. Above right: the sitting room at Artist Residence, Penzance.

Longsteps, and Whistlefish. The alleys lead to the harbour, where gulls cry remorselessly, where ale has been served since 1570 at The Ship Inn – and here I come across a curious one-room museum packed to the gunnels with Fowey memorabilia.

Fowey Museum is curated by Helen Luther, whose lilt is typically languorous but who talks like time is running out. "I knew Daphne du Maurier," she says. "She was godmother to my brother and she based a character on my father in *The House on the Strand*."

A display includes a checked shirt belonging to the author, and original editions of her best-known works, including *Jamaica Inn*. A stuffed crow (actually a Cornish chough) is a tribute to a novelette that arguably became even more famous. "I didn't realise du Maurier wrote *The Birds*," I admit.

"They were originally seagulls in her book, following behind the plough," Luther explains. "Hitchcock turned them into crows. She also wrote *Don't Look Now*, which was a film with Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie. She hated it. Thought it was too focused on sex."

There are displays devoted to other Fowey residents: children's illustrator Mabel Lucie Attwell, essayist Sir Arthur "Q" Quiller-Couch and Kenneth Grahame, author of *The Wind in the Willows*. Luther is certain that Grahame, who convalesced in Fowey in 1899, based his main characters on local friends. She shows me photos of three men to make her case: one has mutton-chop whiskers (Badger), another is a keen boatman (Ratty). "As for Mole, that was likely Grahame himself... and this is Sir Charles Hanson, who was *clearly* Toad."

I look at a heavy man in a business suit.

"Does he not look like a toad?" urges Luther. "And of course he had his big Rolls-Royce and his huge hall up on the hill, which Grahame used as the basis of..."

I return to Fowey Hall, tickled pink at the idea that I'm staying in Toad Hall. In the twilight, I stand between the miniature soccer goals and look with new eyes at the building's eccentric façade – the towers, the arches and even a few bats emerging from its belfry. It's another story of legacy and lunacy, a happy and very Cornish form of folly where even a word spelled Fowey can be rhymed with joy.

Greatly warmed to the hotel, I also resolve to be more gracious towards its young spirits – after all, if you can't be a kid in Toad Hall, where can you?

And should another child jump from the potted palms to cry, "Cheese, cheese, cheese!" well, I shall enter into the spirit of Grahame himself. "Onion sauce! Onion sauce!" I shall remark jeeringly – and be gone before he can think of a thoroughly satisfactory reply. ●

Clockwise from above: Surf Sanctuary instructor Dom Moore on Fistral Beach, Newquay; fried anchovies, pickled chillies and sherry at Pintxo, Fowey; The Headland Hotel and Spa, Newquay.

Trip notes

Getting there

The main Cornish town of Truro is a five-hour drive from London. For a seamless (and rather lovely) transfer, take the overnight *Riviera Express* sleeper train from London Paddington to Truro, departing just before midnight and arriving about 7am.

Stay

Artist Residence A Bohemian vibe attracts a cool crowd to this 23-room hotel on historic Chapel Street in Penzance. It faces the Admiral Benbow pub – possibly *that* Admiral Benbow, but definitely old and yo-ho-ho. 20 Chapel St, Penzance, +44 1736 365 664, artistresidencecornwall.co.uk

The Beach The sunset deck of this stylish retreat overlooking Summerleaze Beach in Bude is filled with weekend surfers from London kicking back with Cornish Mules. Summerleaze Cres, Bude, +44 1288 389 800, thebeachatbude.co.uk

Fowey Hall Hanson Dr, Fowey, +44 1726 833 866, foweyhallhotel.co.uk

The Headland Hotel and Spa This 19th-century institution in Newquay has clifftop views over Fistral Beach, a fine-diner, plush pavilion bar and a resident surf instructor in Dom Moore. Fistral Beach, Newquay, +44 1637 872 211, theheadland.co.uk

The Old Coastguard Most of the 14 bedrooms have water views. The Parade, Mousehole, Penzance, +44 1736 731 222, oldcoastguardhotel.co.uk

Eat

The Beach Restaurant Chef Joe Simmons is making waves by amping up Cornish ingredients. His charred mackerel with aniseed shallots and wasabi is a standout. Summerleaze Cres, Bude, +44 1288 389 800, thebeachatbude.co.uk

Fowey Hall Restaurant The hotel's fine-diner champions Cornish produce and dishes. Hanson Dr, Fowey, +44 1726 833 866, foweyhallhotel.co.uk

The Lost Gardens of Heligan Kitchen & Bakery Boasting food yards rather than food miles, Heligan's seasonal produce is a feature in dishes such as a frittata of chard and yarg, the latter a Cornish cow's milk cheese traditionally wrapped in nettles. Pentewan, Saint Austell, +44 1726 845 100, heligan.com

The Old Coastguard The Parade, Mousehole, Penzance, +44 1736 731 222, oldcoastguardhotel.co.uk

Pintxo 38 Esplanade, Fowey, +44 1726 337 450, pintxo.co.uk

St Tudy Inn St Tudy, Bodmin, +44 1208 850 656, sttudyinn.com

Do

Camel Valley Vineyard Nanstallon, Bodmin, +44 1208 77 959, camelvalley.com

Encounter Cornwall Three-hour guided kayak tours along the Fowey River. The Boatshed, Golant, Fowey, +44 7976 466 123, encountercornwall.com

Fowey Museum Trafalgar Sq, Fowey, +44 1726 833 513, museumsincornwall.org.uk

King Arthur's Great Halls Fore St, Tintagel, +44 1840 770 526, kingarthursgreathalls.co.uk

The Lost Gardens of Heligan Pentewan, Saint Austell, +44 1726 845 100, heligan.com

Minack Theatre Porthcurno, Penzance, +44 1736 810 181, minack.com

Surf Sanctuary Cornwall's popularity as a surfing destination took off in the 1990s, and it continues to ride that wave. It's centred on Fistral Beach in Newquay, a huge swoop of sand served by board-hiring spots, bars and cafés. Surf instructor Dom Moore runs a school from his Surf Sanctuary in The Headland Hotel and Spa. He starts his lessons on the headland, showing students how the waves below form and move. "It helps demystify it if they can see it from above," he explains. Headland Rd, Newquay, +44 7540 155 123, surfsanctuary.co.uk