

West Wycombe: Overground Walks, Underground Caves

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West Wycombe, three miles west of High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, is a historic village with cottages and inns of architectural interest dating from the 16th century. The village centre, despite being on a main road (the A40), retains much of its historical charm, and being National Trust-owned for the main part, has resisted modernisation. The High Street has a number of «old-fashioned» shops (in appearance at least), including a traditional sweet shop. Just off the High Street is a traditional garden centre.

A pleasant walk from Saunderton via West Wycombe can combine a fairly easy stroll in the Chilterns through a mixture of woodland and sloping meadows, with a visit to Hughenden Manor and West Wycombe Caves. After a brisk climb from the caves up to Dashwood Mausoleum, it is an easy level stroll back into Saunderton. The hexagonal flint and stone mausoleum was inspired by the Colosseum in Rome.

The 18th century church of St Lawrence with its golden ball on the top of the hill, is a well-known landmark visible for many miles due its hilltop location, visually dominating the village. The ball can seat up to eight people and gives a panoramic view of the area. The church was remodelled by Sir Francis inside and out. The hill is known as «West Wycombe Hill» and was an Iron Age hill fort. Sir Francis Dashwood, (1708-1781), later Lord Le Despencer,



Sir Francis
Dashwood



was one of West Wycombe's most famous residents whose legacy has left the village with magnificent and mysterious tourist attractions.

He was the founder of the best known Hell-Fire Club of Britain. But the club never called itself Hell-Fire. Its members were known as Knights of St. Francis (after Francis Dashwood), The Order of Knights of West Wycombe or Monks of Medmenham. Many

members of the club were from famous families and it was a who is who of 18th century British society. One still famous member was Lord Sandwich, who gave the name to the snack. It is said, that he was too busy playing cards, so he instructed his servants to slap some meat between two hunks of bread instead of eating a proper meal.

Sir Francis Dashwood used the former chalk quarries of West

Wycombe for meetings of his club. He enlarged them, which gave work to numerous men and produced enough chalk to build a road.

Before entering the caves visitors can enjoy delicious home-made scones and cream in the cosy cafe with outdoor seating. There is also a souvenir shop with delightful memorabilia. A unique feature of this caves is a multi-channelled tape recorder, connected to speakers at various points. Guides are dispensed with, and visitors

are free to wander around the cave at will, and listen to the commentary at each vantage point.

Throughout the cave life-sized waxwork figures dressed in period costume depict some facet of cave life in the eighteenth century. This gives one the impression of having returned to the time of Sir Francis Dashwood and the Hell Fire Club. At one point, in the Banqueting Hall, Sir Francis as the Abbot, is standing, making a speech. Just before the end of the cave is the subterranean river Styx, a natural





stream which flows through the series of caves. The show cave terminates in the Inner Temple.

Dashwood was very influenced by a Grand Tour of Europe which he undertook in 1726. He travelled widely during his life and spent much time in Italy where he acquired a passionate interest in the art and culture of classical antiquity. His country house, West Wycombe House, now owned by the National Trust is among the most theatrical and Italianate in

England. Lavishly decorated, it has featured in films and television series, including, *Little Dorrit* and *The Duchess*.

Improvements to the park and house at West Wycombe continued throughout his life. In 1774 a statue of William Penn was placed on the roof of the Sawmill. It is possible this was in part inspired by the regular visits of Benjamin Franklin, who was a good friend of Sir Francis and enjoyed the intelligent

conversation of his well-travelled and worldly-wise host.

Between 1740 and 1781 the earlier house was transformed. John Donowell designed the south front and Thomas Cook laid out the grounds in about 1760. The exterior of the house is neo-classical with a double colonnade along the south front. There are porticoes at both the east and west sides of the building. The interior continues the classical theme and is richly decorated.

In 1770 an additional west wing was built - a replica of the "Temple

of Bacchus at Telos", near Smyrna taken from drawings made by Nicholas Revett for the Dilettante Society. It was opened in 1771 and Sir Francis, who invited many of his friends, staged a grand celebration. An eyewitness account of the celebration is contained in Thomas Langley's "The History of Antiquities of the Hundred of Desborough (1797). He describes how: «The delightful gardens of West Wycombe were opened to the public and a novel exhibition took place in one of the rural walks. A fine portico at the

Entrance to the caves





west end of the house has been lately erected.

The principal reception rooms are on the ground floor with large sash windows opening immediately into the porticos and the colonnades, and therefore onto the gardens. The mansion contains a series of 18th century salons decorated and furnished in the style of that period, with polychrome marble floors, and painted ceilings depicting classical

scenes of Greek and Roman mythology. Of particular note is the entrance hall, which resembles a Roman atrium with marbled columns and a painted ceiling copied from Robert Wood's Ruins of Palmyra.

Sir Francis devoted much time to public service. He was an MP for some years and held the post of joint-Postmaster General from 1766 until his death in 1781 at the age of 73. He was buried in the

Mausoleum next to the Church of St Lawrence on West Wycombe Hill.

Today the caves he extended, his mausoleum and his country house have placed West Wycombe on the historic tourist route. West Wycombe Park serves a combined role of public museum family home, and film set. During the summer months, the paying public

can tour the ground floor room to view the architecture and the antique contents of the house still owned by the Dashwoods, many of which have been re-purchased and restored to the house by Sir Francis Dashwood, 11th Baronet, in the late 20th century, following their dispersal during the various sales of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Golden ball on top of the church

