



# ALL Rather Rother

**A compilation of short stories, memoir and poetry from emerging and amateur writers in the Rother District**

‘All Rather Rother’ was a competition set up in partnership with East Sussex Arts Partnership and Rother District Council as a Word County project. The entries awarded prizes, judged by Catherine Smith and Charlotte Moore, have been collated in this booklet.



# All Rather Rother

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Author: Kay MacMullan  
Category: Prose Fiction  
Placing: 1<sup>st</sup>

## **Battlements**

'Did princesses live here?' asked Emily.

'No, silly. Knights with swords and horses,' scoffed James.

Laura smiled at her children's reaction to the castle.

'There's a gift shop!'

'They sell ice creams!'

'We're not here to buy ice cream,' said Laura, directing Mark to the end of the car park.

'Get your outfits on,' said Mark, already out of the car. 'We're going to storm the castle. I'll buy you ice creams on the way back.'

Laura noticed how he ignored her and as he raced off in the carefree manner that she'd once found so appealing, she helped James into plastic chain mail and tried to disentangle the ribbons on Emily's princess headdress.

As her children followed their dad down the grassy bank, Laura turned to lock the car. The mist was lifting from the plain, revealing regular lines of tall trees emerging from their wintry skeletal state. The tilted white tips of oast houses and the dark silhouette of a solid Norman church punctuated the blurred sky. The view exuded an unfamiliar calm.

Blinking, Laura followed her family across the spongy grass to the incongruous pill box in front of the castle. James was striking knight poses on its concrete roof and poking Emily with the crumpled tip of his sword. Having noticed the long drop from one side of the roof, Laura hurried to move Emily from danger.

'This isn't a castle,' Emily complained, lacing her fingers between Laura's.

'No, it's a pill box. It was built during the war when they thought the Germans would invade.'

Laura put her hand over Emily's headdress to lower it as they stooped their way inside. It smelt like a subway and muddy water puddled the floor. The only light was from postcard-shaped windows that framed snippets of the surroundings.

'I don't like it here,' Emily's voice echoed round the mud-plastered walls and they crept out again.

James had been tempted down from the roof by the promise of ducks to chase. He was imitating their comical gait, rolling from side to side at speed, his feet pointing inwards. At the bank of the moat, the ducks escaped, stumbling clumsily into the water.

'Look at the huge fish,' called Mark. Laura and Emily caught up and peered down at the occasional shadows creating ripples in the watery reflection of the castle.

'Do they tickle the ducks' feet?' asked Emily, as Laura led her away from the crumbling edge.

They walked around the grand square of yellow grey stone and into the castle where pristine green lawns were protected by miniature fences. Laura pointed out to James that the sign read 'Do not climb on the walls' and promised to wait for them to reach the summit of their spiral ascents. Looking at the walls, she imagined the floors growing out of them, the rough stone smoothing to pristine condition, rich upholstery framing the windows and fireplaces filling with flames. Touching the stone, she felt the softened edges of initials scored into its surface by graffiti artists whose use of serifs somehow lent them an air of respectability.

She looked up to the waving hands and glints of cameras among the crenellations, struggling to distinguish her children among those who had squeezed their way up the claustrophobic stairwell. She picked out the ribbons

fluttering around Emily's head and the brandishing of James' sword. Where was Mark? She'd known he wouldn't keep a close enough eye. She could see James prodding Emily with his sword, pushing her closer to the battlements.

'No!'

Her cry rang out as the shape fell from the turret. Laura saw Emily falling from the pill box roof, James falling into the moat, and then the sword hitting the ground.

Laura felt the heat of everyone's gaze and, shaking, made for the closest doorway. She stepped from the light into welcome darkness and leant against the wall, grateful for its solid support and damp cold. She eventually focused on the screen in front of her, and the story of the man who had built the castle, then left to fight in France. She wondered if he'd had children and whether they'd known him at all.

Walking through the gatehouse, Laura could smell the warmth of spring in her nostrils. The regular white sticks of the vineyard behind the castle reminded her of crosses in a graveyard in northern France and she thought of the men's lives lost, and the children left without fathers.

Turning, she saw Mark, a knight on one side, a princess on the other.

'Look, Emily, a unicorn on that shield!'

'Hey, James, watch out for boiling tar being poured through those holes!'

She stepped onto the bridge. 'Come on, you three, I'll buy you all an ice cream.'

Kay MacMullan

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Author: Jules Hammond  
Category: Prose Fiction  
Placing: 2<sup>nd</sup>

### **Bonfire Night Butterfly**

Sharon waited all year for Bonfire Night. Shy and lacking the social skills she needed to be described as a “social butterfly”, she spent the rest of the year in the pupal stage, biding her time. Only on Bonfire Night did she find the courage to spread her wings and fly. Of course she “joined in”, as her mother put it, with the build up. She helped at the many fundraising events held throughout the year, but she preferred to spend these social occasions in the safety of the village hall kitchen rather than mingling with her neighbours. The fetes, the jumble sales and race nights were a means to an end; they raised money for the big night and that was all.

For as long as she could remember, Bonfire Night had been the most exciting event of the year. Better than Christmas, for what fun that was when all Father Christmas brought her was her feuding family together for a day of bickering, climaxing in the inevitable row at the point when someone had indulged in too much Christmas Cheer and the old resentments could no longer be contained? Better too than her birthday – she had no friends to join her in a birthday drink at the Seven Stars. Since she had turned thirty, birthdays had become events to dread rather than celebrate. Her mother would swig too much cheap wine and eat too much of her sickly shop-bought cake and then, fuelled with alcohol and sugar, would badger her about it being high time that she snared herself a man and moved out. Happy Birthday to Sha-ron, Happy Birthday to You.

But Bonfire Night was different. Once a year she did without the drab jeans and grey sweatshirts that she habitually wore and instead donned her parading outfit. Her monk’s garb could hardly be described as attractive, and not by any stretch was it flattering, but she thought it looked great. Who knew what folds of flab lay

hidden under her habit? She brushed her hair, fighting with the knots and tangles that had lurked in her mane undisturbed for far too long, and, if it wasn't raining, she would dare to wear a touch of make-up that she kept hidden in a dusty shoebox under her bed. Thus attired she felt in character, no longer invisible, not the useless blob that stacked shelves in the shop, she was a fully-fledged Member of the Bonfire Society.

From the moment the maroon announced the start of the parade until the last firework lit her upturned face with its sparkling magic, her body pulsed with adrenaline, the heady stench of paraffin and cordite fuelling her excitement to the point where she forgot all her fears and felt free of the shroud of her usual self. Heart beating to the rhythm of the drums, eyes glowing in the torchlight, this was her night. As she marched, her flame torch borne proudly over her shoulder, she did not feel too afraid to meet the eyes of those who came to watch, instead she found she actually enjoyed their attention, for the crowds had not come to see Sharon, they had come to indulge in a fire-frenzied pagan fantasy. As she passed, their faces wore expressions of wonder rather than the mask of indifference that she usually met.

And the noise! Tonight her neighbours did not mind about peace and quiet; the noisier the better was the idea on Bonfire Night. The blazing bathtubs of fire shaking her to the marrow as they thundered along the tarmac, the marching band moving her to step in time in her own private dance, tits jiggling under her habit. Tonight the black and white high street glowed red in the torchlight, an artery flowing with hundreds of revellers come together to add to the din, shrieking at the ear-splitting firecrackers - they triggered explosions of pure joy in her grey matter.

Parade over; the crowds fell to an unbidden hush of anticipation as the yellow-suited figure lit the blue touch paper on the first rocket. Then she would lose herself as the fireworks danced on the canvas of the night's dark, awestruck by

their myriad colours and glittering patterns hurled high into the heavens. This was what it was all about – this was living.

Then she would revel in the searing heat of the bonfire as it consumed the skilfully built mountain of palettes, sharing jokes with other fancy-dressed paraders and small talk with strangers until it was late and time to go home. In the morning she would return, back in the safety of her camouflage, armed this time with a bin liner, to help clear away the aftermath of the evening's excesses. Back to being Sharon for another year.

Jules Hammond

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Author: Chris Cox  
Category: Prose Non Fiction & Memoir  
Placing: 1<sup>st</sup>

### **The Top of the Hill**

Today I have reached the top of the hill – Bexhill. It has taken me sixty years and today is my retirement day. I sit at the top and look back the way I have come. The years roll back and I see the landmarks that have shaped my life. Look, there I am as a child at Barrack Road School, part of a group by the railings saying, “We want a new school”. And, yes, there it is, Buckhurst Road Junior School, built for us. I can see us walking in a crocodile down to Egerton Park to have our swimming lessons in the open-air pool; the playground with its beautiful antique rocking horses, and the boating lake with its paddle boats await us at the weekends and school holidays.

On the breeze, a tantalising smell wafts up to me. The smell of grain coming up from Warburtons in Belle Hill. The grain, smooth and shiny, falling into the sacks from the hopper, always finding its own level, just like water. I can feel it running through my fingers.

There’s a cloud-trail of smoke and that wonderful smell of steam train in my nostrils – it’s the little train that runs from Bexhill West via Sidley to Crowhurst. “Be this the train to Crowhurst? “oh arr!” – I hear again the Sussex burr. Dear little train. I see the track greening over as the years rush on, no rails, no sleepers left, just a peaceful part of the countryside with, here and there, an odd gradient post in the long grass to awaken the memories.

Let me look for Bexhill Central Station – the length of the platforms is shorter now but the layout hasn’t changed. That’s a sign of the times, that shorter platform, and of course, that’s why I can no longer see all the private school whose pupils would throng the platform amongst all their school trunks at the beginnings and

ends of the school terms. I see the back wall to the platform marked off for the individual schools' trunks and paraphernalia; Charters Towers, Effingham House, Ancaster House, Winceby House, Pendragon – oh, that beautiful royal blue uniform colour, not faded with time in my mind's eye.

Of course, Bexhill Grammar School stands no longer. I see hundreds of people living on their new estate. I wonder how many know that their houses stand on athletics track, science lab, classrooms, quad, gym and tennis courts. I can smell again the gassy smell of the science lab and the aroma of powder paint, and see the teachers as they work to give us a good education. I feel the mental agony of awaiting examination results as teachers read out marks from bottom to top, and the physical agony of knowing that – somehow – I must struggle all the way around the track on the games field. It must be at least five miles long!

The gas works at Glyne Gap are now an out-of-town shopping centre – an ants' nest of cars and shoppers. I see myself enthralled by the gas-holders (will they be up or down today?) and conveyor belts of who-knows-what rising skywards to deposit their contents in large containers. Everything moving and working and grubby and fascinating. And now it's called "Ravenside". I've pondered that name many times. Why not "Glyne Gap" or at least "Seagullside"? Oh well, who am I to query the marketing minds of the powers-that-be?!

I'm glad that outwardly the De La Warr Pavilion hasn't changed. It's still as white and shining as ever. What times we used to have there – the summer shows "Starlight Rendezvous", The Penguin Players, the dancing displays, town club meetings, beat raves, local art exhibitions, the popular bar, and the huge never-empty ground floor restaurant and cafeteria. Here comes my mug of Bovril accompanied by a cream cracker! I can feel my hands warm around the mug and smell the savouriness of the curling steam. And now.....? ?

The past is catching up with me and I know I must turn and face the future, for the rest of my life in Bexhill is spread before me. I see new roads of opportunity

and feel a fresh frisson of excitement. I see my beloved town of Bexhill surging forward on the waves of regeneration, and, collecting my thoughts, set off on the next step of my journey.

Chris Cox

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Author: Olive Monkcom  
Category: Prose Non Fiction & Memoir  
Placing: 2<sup>nd</sup>

### **A Good Deed in a Naughty World**

I was on my usual daily walk to the town centre to do a bit of shopping. It was a dull and damp morning matching my mood. As a widowed and elderly pensioner, severely disabled and profoundly deaf, I lived alone in a retirement flat at the east end of the town.

I had spent a restless night; a lot of niggling little worries had reared up to haunt me during the time I lay wide-eyed and sleepless, staring into the blackness of the wee small hours. Finally I had fallen into an exhausted doze for an hour which did nothing to refresh me for the day ahead.

Thus it was I was limping painfully along the pavement at about 10 o'clock, assisted by my walking frame without which I cannot venture outside at all.

Halfway along the road a Mini car driven by a young lady came around the corner, swept past me for a few yards, then stopped and began to reverse.

"Oh no!" I thought to myself, "She obviously wants to talk to me. Well, I don't want to talk to her – I'll never hear what she says anyway." So I kept my head down and studiously avoided eye contact. But she would not be ignored. Edging slowly along to keep pace she flapped her hand out of the car window to flag me down. I still refused to acknowledge her, exaggerating my limp to indicate that it would not be convenient for me to stop for any chit-chat because of my disablement.

I was well aware that I was behaving like a miserable old hag but I did not care. Finally she called out, "Excuse me!" I stopped walking and turned to face her. "What do you want?" I asked with obvious irritation.

She flashed me a charming smile, and said, "I thought I'd better let you know that your skirt is tucked up in your knickers at the back. You would never know unless someone put you wise, would you!"

All my bad temper melted away in a rush of guilt and embarrassment that left me feeling lower than a snake's belly for the rest of the day.

Olive Monkcom

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Author: Olive Monkcom  
Category: Poetry  
Placing: 1<sup>st</sup>

### **When Snow Fell In Bexhill**

*In the morning.....*

I looked from my east window and I saw  
The pale gold sunlight cast a creamy glow  
On milk-white roofs. Sharp points of pad and claw  
Made asterisks on fresh-laid virgin snow.

*At noon.....*

I looked from my north window and was chilled  
To see blue shadows stretched on snow-robed lawn  
Daubed with a giant brush. My mind was filled  
With melancholic thoughts, remote, withdrawn.

*In the evening.....*

I looked from my west window. Setting sun,  
A ball of scarlet splendour, riding low,  
Submerged. The velvet cloak of dusk undone  
Spread folds of silk, pearl-grey, across the snow.

*At night.....*

I stood to listen by my open door.  
Still there the silent snow. A falling star  
Shone through the veil that trailed from Heaven's floor.  
Lambent, mysterious, a light from afar.

Olive Monkcom

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Author: Olive Monkcom  
Category: Poetry  
Placing: 2<sup>nd</sup>

### New Year's Day

I walked along the Bexhill shore  
    When New Year's Eve was ending,  
And pondered with a troubled mind  
    Just what the future held for me  
At 90 years of age.  
    Profoundly conscious of the end  
Of yet another passing year  
    Unhappily aware of failing energy and health  
I limped along the promenade.  
    Depression stalked and dogged my footsteps  
As memories swept in and swamped my mind  
    Some sweet, some sad, and some just best forgotten.  
Fears for my future loomed ahead  
    The ache of loneliness was there  
So clear the empty days ahead  
    With no one left to know or care.  
I paused to look out at  
    The lazy wavelets rippling on the shore.  
The tide was ebbing; clean-washed pebbles  
    Glistened in the aftermath  
Of evanescent bubbles in the foam.  
    For countless years the rolling sea  
Had surged, receded, surged again  
    To translocate the unclean waste  
Produced by man and dumped  
    Into the wide receptive sea.

A sudden shaft of dying sunlight  
Split the leaden clouds apart  
And splashed the surface  
Of the dark blue sullen sea with golden hues  
Illuminating sombre sea and sky.  
With spirits raised I turned and headed home  
I banished all my woes and useless fear  
To face the dawn of yet another Brand New year.

Olive Monkcom

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