



The Sourwood Morris Dancers, from Knoxville and the surrounding area, perform during Historic Rugby's October pilgrimage on the lawn of Newbury House. The restored 1880s boarding house, now a bed-and-breakfast, is open for lodging year-round.

Reviving the Rugby Dream

Modern-day Tennesseans are moving to Rugby to give this century-old community a rich, new life.



Rugby is about to embark on a new chapter in its storied history with contemporary pioneers following an 1880s vision.

From the start, Rugby was a quixotic dream, one that meshed backbreaking, sweaty labor with philosophical query and genteel hallmarks of British civilization—tea, tennis, and cricket. “The original local people must have thought the Englishmen who quit work at four o’clock and dressed for afternoon tea were a bit weird,” one present-day Rugbeian jokes.

One of the first towns on the Cumberland Plateau, the Victorian

John Gilliat, Rugby descendant and properties director, and his wife, Barbara Stagg, executive director, breathed new life into the dream of Rugby founder Thomas Hughes.

village was founded in 1880 by Thomas Hughes. The British author and social reformer wanted a haven for England’s “second sons”—upper echelon children who were not in line for the family fortune, which, by tradition, went to the eldest son. Unable to find work in England, sons of the gentry flocked to Hughes’s land.

When the tenderfoots arrived, they envisioned soft green farm fields, merely awaiting a plow. Instead, they found dense woods of uncleared land. Soon, hardened callouses replaced soft fleshy palms. But not even great toil could overcome both a drought and a harsh winter meted out to the struggling pioneers. Then a deadly typhoid epidemic took the lives of many. All seemed lost when a fire destroyed the Tabard



(LEFT and ABOVE) Novice contractors Eric Wilson and his wife, Vi Biehl, built their historically accurate Beacon Hill home using materials Eric collected for decades. **(TOP, RIGHT)** They transformed ravaged doors, trim, and a staircase into this lustrous, honeyed passageway. **(BOTTOM, RIGHT)** Long hours of sanding and varnishing have created this gleaming sanctuary for the contemporary Rugbeians.

Inn, the backbone of the settlers' fledgling tourism industry.

Just before his death, Hughes wrote, "I can't help feeling and believing that good seed was sown when Rugby was founded and that someday the reapers . . . will come along with joy, bearing heavy sheaves with them."

His faith in Rugby was well-founded. In the 1960s, the siren song of Rugby called again to another practical dreamer. A 16-year-old boy named Brian Stagg from nearby Deer Lodge stumbled upon the sparsely populated village. Brian worked tirelessly to see the village restored until his untimely death in 1976. His sister, Barbara Stagg, then became executive director of Historic Rugby.

"Certainly, the Staggs have been the two who have walked in Hughes's footsteps," says Tennessee histo-

rian Wilma Dykeman. "Rugby is one of the most interesting of our historic sites because it grew out of Hughes's book, *Tom Brown's School Days*."

Today's chapter from that literary beginning is Beacon Hill, the 40-acre site that Hughes long ago planned for Rugbeian homes.

"I'm probably the world's strangest real estate agent," Barbara laughs. "We have not trumpeted Beacon Hill very strongly. We have tried to attract people who were interested in Rugby."

In the two years that the 28 lots have been on the market, 25 have sold. Who wouldn't want to live amid the beautiful Victorian buildings restored to their original splendor?

The Beacon Hill homes will mirror the original architecture. "What we're about here is an ongoing sort of second founding of Rugby," Bar-

bara explains. "The primary purpose of Beacon Hill is to ensure the continued architectural integrity of the village."

At the top of Beacon Hill, new Rugby settlers enjoy a Victorian bandstand, recently built from plans of the early settlers, as well as original sites with quaint names such as "Gentlemen's Swimming Hole" and "Meeting of the Waters." Hiking paths lead to Rugby's gigantic neighbor, the 123,000-acre Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.

To mitigate the park's impact, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers commissioned the "Master Plan for the Development, Management and Protection of the Rugby Colony Historic Area."

This award-winning blueprint guides the Rugby work in a gentle brand of tourism known as "heritage tourism." Essentially, it means amenities offered for tourists must also service area residents. Rugby doesn't exist for tourism, tourism exists for Rugby.

"America is in danger of losing

PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORIC RUGBY ARCHIVES



Thomas Hughes, the founder of Rugby



all of its truly special historic places to uncontrolled development," Barbara says with passion. "People *need* to be able to look back to simpler times."

The National Trust for Historic Preservation helped with that goal when it awarded an unprecedented low-interest, short-term loan for a 150-acre greenbelt surrounding Rugby.

Much of the restoration work and Beacon Hill development has been carried out by John Gilliat, Barbara's husband and Historic Rugby's properties director. "The last thing I had done in Ohio was to be sort of a self-employed jack-of-all-trades," says soft-spoken John, whose ancestors were Rugby colonists.

The only commonality among the people moving to Beacon Hill seems to be a love for Rugby. "Rugby has *drawn* them," confirms Pearl Nester, who runs the 1880 restored Newbury House Bed & Breakfast, the 1880 Pioneer Cottage, and several other visitor lodgings. Pearl gleefully tells about the young woman who came over just that morning to share her joy over buying a Beacon

Unchanged since it opened in 1882, the Thomas Hughes Free Public Library holds a bibliophile's fantasy—7,000 Victorian volumes. On October 5, the library hosts a celebration for the state's bicentennial.

Hill lot. "She brought a bottle of champagne and a notepad to sketch out plans," the innkeeper says. The new owner's enthusiasm rubbed off on another visiting couple. After a thoughtful look at Beacon Hill, they promptly decided to buy a lot too.

Rebecca and Charles Russell were the first to move into the new development, buying the model home at Beacon Hill. The wooded silence was a welcomed relief from the heavy traffic outside their former home in downtown St. Petersburg, Florida.

"The only sounds here at night are usually the humming of the insects," says Rebecca. "Sometimes, we walk up to the bandstand, right behind our house, with a lantern and a CD player so we can dance."

"I like the isolation," Charles agrees. "On the other hand, I will feel more comfortable from an investment standpoint once another house is built."

Not that there aren't already Rugbeians living nearby. About 80 people live in Rugby, among them Ohio mathematics professor Eric Wilson. A hiker, canoeist, and spelunker, Eric has



Rugby offers the distinct architectural style of Victorian times in its old and new structures. The Adena Cottage, home of early colonists Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Wellman, today looks much as it did in this 1887 photograph.

VISITING RUGBY

Historic Rugby, P.O. Box 8, Rugby, TN 37733; (423) 628-2441. Located on State 52 about 2½ hours northeast of Nashville and 1½ hours northwest of Knoxville, Historic Rugby offers guided tours of five historic museum buildings plus crafts workshops and special events year-round, except for some holidays. Lodging for two in historic buildings ranges \$60-\$70 a night, with the money used to help preserve Rugby. The 31st Annual Rugby Pilgrimage is October 5-6, with 15 buildings open, music and dance, and costumed actors as colonists.

been coming to Rugby for its outdoor offerings for about 35 years. Now on the verge of retirement, he and his wife, Vi Biehl, built their home during the past 10 summers. For the first three, they worked dawn to dusk, seven days a week.

"It was an adventure, because this is the first thing we've ever built," Eric says. The finely detailed Victorian home stops contemporary contractors in their tracks. And in the Rugby tradition, Eric relied on help from his neighbors. "If you need advice, you just go over to the cafe at 2:30 in the afternoon for a coffee break, and you draw some pictures on some napkins," he says.

Vi recalls one such occasion. "We were scared of the 45-degree angle on the roof, so Eric went to the cafe, moaning and groaning," she remembers. A while later, a group of people led by John showed up to help put up the steep roof. "Eric says, 'How much do I owe you?'" Vi recalls. "They said, 'When we need help, just come over.'"

Vi adds proudly, "Nothing in our house is reproduction; it's all original." She points to one door she restored. "This door was crotchety and wretched and had about a thousand coats of paint on it," she remembers. After she readied the door, Vi repaired a hole, using a different type of wood than the wood she was patching. "In restoration, you don't want it to look like it has not been patched," she explains.

The same could be said for Historic Rugby and Beacon Hill. The original dream may have been mended by some modern-day pioneers, but the vibrant vision from a century ago still shines through.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

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