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HISTORIC RUGBY A Victorian Utopia in Rural Tennessee

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"Wanna stop an' have a look?" asked my hostess in her soft Tennessee twang. Did I ever!

We had been driving through the rural countryside northwest of Knoxville on our way to Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, when we came upon an assortment of Victorian buildings dotting the fields and woods on either side of the road.

"This is the historic town of Rugby," she said, as she parked the car in front of what appeared to be a general store and led me back down the road.

Rugby was founded in 1880 by British author and social reformer Thomas Hughes as a Utopian community, where colonists could work in an agricultural cooperative, while maintaining a cultured Christian lifestyle free of the rigid class structure that prevailed in Britain. Hughes was especially concerned for the younger sons of Britain's landed gentry, who were left with limited options after the oldest brother inherited the family fortune.

Key to Hughes selecting northeastern Tennessee for the town site was the Cincinnati-Southern Railroad, which had just completed a line to Chattanooga, opening up this part of the Cumberland Plateau. And as news of the Utopian concept spread, the train soon was bringing not just newcomers from Britain but also settlers from other parts of America. In addition, the railroad provided an ongoing link to necessary goods and services.

By 1884, the population of Rugby topped 300, with residents involved in a literary society, drama club, horseback riding, lawn tennis and croquet. They had built 70 structures, including boarding houses, a church, library, dairy, butcher shop, commissary, sawmill and stable. The community even published its own newspaper. Unfortunately, life in Rugby was not as idyllic as its founder had hoped. Although Hughes contributed more than \$75,000 of his own money toward establishing the town, Rugby was plagued by financial difficulties, land title problems, and unusually severe winters.

By the time Hughes died in 1896, Rugby was well into decline. And by 1900, many original colonists had left. But some people never deserted the community, with children of original colonists and other individuals struggling for decades to maintain what they could of the land and the buildings.

In 1966, a movement began in earnest to restore and preserve the 20 surviving original structures and to interpret Rugby's history to the public. By 1972, the 1,000-acre district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Our tour of Rugby began at the Schoolhouse Visitor Center, built in 1907 to replace a 25-year-old building that had burned the year before. Classes continued in the structure until 1950. Today, the building mounts exhibits depicting the community's history, including an award winning documentary film.

We next visited the nearby Hughes Free Public Library, which looks much as it did when it opened in 1882. It contains 7,000 volumes representing the full range of Victorian reading tastes.

Then we crossed the road to view Christ Church Episcopal, a carpenter gothic style structure built of local pine, poplar and walnut. Used continuously for public worship since 1887, the church holds services at 11 a.m. Sundays. The building features early light fixtures and furnishings, including a rosewood organ.

We walked the winding streets of Rugby, where many of today's 85 residents have lovingly restored their heritage houses. Kingstone Lisle, the English rural style cottage that was home to Thomas Hughes, also has been restored, and work has begun on the 1881 Uffington House, home of the founder's mother and niece. For visitors who want to stay within the enclave, there is Newbury House Bed and Breakfast, the community's first boarding house dating from 1880, with five upstairs guest rooms and a downstairs suite. Several Victorian cottages also are available.

When we returned to the general store, we found we still had time to do some shopping. The accurate reconstruction of Rugby's original commissary serves as a gift shop, specializing in locally made traditional crafts and products from the British Isles. The clerk told us about craft making demonstrations and special events that take place in the community throughout the year.

Coming up is the Thanksgiving Marketplace, scheduled for Friday, November 28, 2008. In addition to participating in tours and craft demonstrations, visitors can get a jump start on their holiday gift shopping at the commissary and enjoy a Victorian cream tea at Newbury House.

Special oil lamp and candlelight tours are scheduled for Saturday, December 6, 2008, and Saturday, December

Special brunch and candlelight tours are scheduled for Saturday, December 6, 2008, and Saturday, December 13, 2008, when Rugby's historic buildings will be decorated for the holiday season. Costumed actors will portray early colonists, while classical music and carol singing will add to the spirit of the season. A four-course Victorian dinner will be available at the Harrow Road Café, a reconstruction of an eatery opened by several young Englishmen in 1882.

I knew that I wouldn't return to the area in time for the holiday celebrations, but I saw my hostess tuck the information into her purse as we climbed back in the car and once again headed for Big South Fork.

INFO TO GO:

Historic Rugby (1-888-214-3400) is located an hour's drive from Knoxville, Tennessee, on Highway 52, west of Highway 27. It may be visited seven days a week year-round. Tours cost \$7 for adults, \$6 for seniors aged 60 and over.

Grey Gables Bed and Breakfast Inn (1-423-628-5252, www.rugbytn.com) is located on the outskirts of Rugby. It offers 10 guest rooms decorated in Victorian antiques, including an assisted handicapped bedroom and bath.

East Fork Stables (1-800-978-7245 or 1-931-879-1176, www.eastforkstables.com), based in Jamestown, offers organized trail rides for all levels of riders through 12,000 acres of scenic privately owned land.

Highland Manor Winery (1-931-879-9519, www.highlandmanorwinery.net) is situated in an English Tudor style building in nearby Jamestown. Tennessee's oldest winery, it has been producing fine handcrafted wines for more than two decades.

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area (1-423-286-7575, www.nps.gov/biso) is a 110,000-acre wilderness area straddling the Tennessee/Kentucky border. It offers possibilities for hiking, bicycling, paddling, fishing, rock climbing, bird watching and more.