

## ROUTE MASTERS

*Clare Lewis and Becky Jones, authors of the 'Adventure Walks Books' have devised three rambles through town and country, all with special links to textiles.*

**Charleston Farm House**, with its red tiled roof and rambling roses, is one of the most important surviving examples of the Bloomsbury decorative style in England. Looking for a country retreat from London, close to her sister Virginia Woolf, artist Vanessa Bell found the perfect home: a ramshackle farmhouse with overgrown gardens to rent at Charleston. She moved here in 1916 with her unconventional domestic household: the artist Duncan Grant, her children, Quentin and Julian Bell, and Duncan Grant's lover, David Garnett. Frequent visitors to the house were poet T.S. Eliot, novelist E.M. Forster, composer Benjamin Britten, writer Lytton Strachey, economist John Maynard Keynes and art critic Roger Fry. "It will be an odd life," wrote Vanessa Bell, "but... it ought to be a good one for painting."

The two artists set about transforming the house and obliterating its traditional Victorian décor with their own work. Almost every wooden panel, door, wall, fireplace and bedframe is painted in their decorative style, inspired by Italian frescoes and post-Impressionist art. Their painting was spontaneous and bold. The halls and passages were left untouched, but every open door reveals a beautifully decorated room. Wooden window embrasure panels are painted with garden flowers; fabric on the chairs include Duncan Grant's West Wind and Vanessa Bell's Abstract designs from 1931; Roger Fry's chairs furnish the dining room; wallpapers are stencilled and hand painted.

**Start the walk in the village of Firle, East Sussex, just below the South Downs. The nearest train station is at Glynde.**

**1** Turn left out of the car park onto the lane and walk

up through the village, past The Ram Inn. Follow the lane past a row of pretty terraced cottages. In 1919, Virginia and Leonard Woolf moved to Monk's House in Rodwell, a few miles away. Firle became the midway point where the sisters would meet for walks and picnics, buying their supplies at Firle Stores.

**2** Take the narrow path ahead of you to St Peter's Church. Vanessa Bell, her son Quentin and Duncan Grant are buried in the churchyard. Enter the church by the South Door to view John Piper's stained glass window depicting William Blake's poem, *The Tree of Life*. Take the gate opposite the church door onto the lane and turn right.

**3** Shortly afterwards at some barns, turn left onto a bridleway leaving the village behind. Firle Beacon is ahead. Keep walking with the flint wall on your left and follow the path as it curves to the left gradually climbing the hill.

**4** As the path reaches the top, you will see a line of trees rising towards the Downs. Turn right and follow the path along the edge of the field.

**5** Go through the gate and onto the foot of the Down. Climb up the steep path, all the way to the top of the ridge for some magnificent views of East Sussex both inland and out to sea.

**6** Head straight on, walking along the crest of the hill on the South Downs Way path. A gate up ahead marks the Firle Beacon, a high point on the Downs.

**7** Continue along the path as it heads slightly downhill and bends to the right. A fence line bounds the path to your right. After a few hundred metres, there is a large metal gate in the fence. Look to the left for a somewhat overgrown way marker in the bushes, pointing left to a grassy path. Turn left and follow the path as it curves

sharply to the left and down the hill.

**8** Continue down on the chalky path to a wooden gate. The path becomes a bridleway overhung by trees and bushes and heads gently downhill alongside fields.

**9** At the crossroads walk straight on onto the lane, soon passing a cottage and a farm. Follow the lane as it bends left.

**10** At the junction in the road, turn left, following the signs to Charleston Farm House. Explore the house and enjoy the beautiful gardens. The walled garden was created by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant to a design by Roger Fry. Mediterranean flowers grow alongside traditional English cottage planting, divided by gravel paths.

**11** Leaving Charleston, take a short cut on the path which runs by the shop, alongside the farm barns. Walk through the metal gate and follow the track.

**12** Turn right onto a country lane, known as the Old Coach Road.

**13** At the cottage and tea-room, turn left along the track.

**14** At the T-junction, turn right and follow the lane straight on until you reach a cottage across from Firle Place.

**15** Turn left through a gate into the Firle Estate and cut across the parkland in a more or less straight line. Marker posts in the grass show the way. The grand manor house appears shortly to your left, and is said to be the inspiration for Pointz Hall in Virginia Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*.

**16** Turn right on the driveway and walk a short distance to a cricket pitch and playground. Take a left through the gate and cut across the grass to the back entrance of the car park, alongside a tennis court. ▶

# The Bloomsbury Group at Charleston Adventure Walk



Angela Mackay