

St Peter's Racton



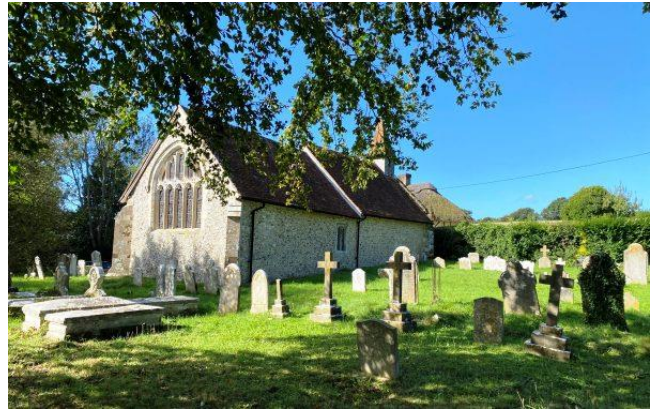
THE OCTAGON TRAIL



The Gunter family church was St Peter's Racton, and their family home was Racton Manor, which has since been demolished.

The timbered cottage to the left of St Peter's church is named King Charles Cottage.

Local legend says King Charles II spent a night there during his escape to France in 1651.



Despite a 2017 account of King Charles' escape showing he didn't sleep at the cottage, he did spend the night of 13th Oct 1651 in the home of the sister and brother-in-law of Colonel George Gunter of Racton, a house near Broad-Halfpenny Down in Hambledon about 15 miles away in Hampshire.

George Gunter was recognised as a staunch Royalist, as he had served as a Colonel in Charles II's army. George was also known personally to Lord Wilmot, who successfully guided the King's escape across England after the Battle of Worcester. Hiding near Salisbury, the Royal Party had failed to find a reliable passage for the King from the coast near Southampton. They decided their best alternative was to try to arrange his escape to the safety of France from the Sussex coast.

The Royal Party decided to see if Colonel George Gunter would be willing to help and, on 7th Oct 1651, Lord Wilmot was charged with riding the 50 miles from Salisbury to Racton. The fact that the two men met that evening was luck, as Gunter had recently been in London. In September, three weeks after the Battle of Worcester, Gunter had received an order to come to the Haberdashers Hall in the City of London to pay a £200 fine, the equivalent of £32,000 today. All Royalists were forced to pay significant fines, secured against the value of their estates, to finance Cromwell's initiatives like his Parliamentary New Model Army. If Gunter had failed to obey, then all his assets including Racton Estate, risked being seized by Cromwell's authorities.

Like other Royalist sympathisers, Gunter's freedom to travel was also limited to no more than five miles from his home, or he would face the fear of being arrested. So, the Colonel first had to gain permission from local authorities in Chichester to travel freely across the country. He went to London, where he succeeded in getting his fine halved to £100, but then had to negotiate with a local moneylender to raise the cash. This was obtained as a loan secured against Racton Estate. At the end of this negotiation, on October 7th 1651, Gunter returned home to Racton Manor.

He arrived home late in the evening and his wife Katherine said that a 'Gentleman from Devon', called Barlow, was waiting to talk with him about some urgent matter. Even though Gunter immediately recognised the 'Gentleman from Devon' as Lord Wilmot, with others in the house at the time it was only later that the two men were free to talk about plans for the Royal Party.

Gunter agreed to help and was tasked with trying to find them a boat to take the King to France from the Coast of Sussex. The following morning, on October 8th, he set to work. He rode with a trusted servant down through Westbourne to Emsworth to look for a suitable boat and skipper but was out of luck. The Colonel decided to return home to brief Wilmot about this setback but, on their way back, they met Wilmot riding out to see how they had got on! After the lack of success in Emsworth, Gunter and Wilmot decided to see if a suitable boat could be found in nearby Langstone Harbour but, again, no suitable vessels were available for the Royal Party.

After this disappointment, Gunter and Wilmot shared a plate of oysters, for which Langstone Harbour was famous, then decided to go their separate ways. Lord Wilmot returned to Salisbury, to brief the King, and Colonel Gunter continued seeking a suitable boat to take the King to France.

By Saturday 11th August a suitable boat was found through Francis Mancell, a French merchant in Chichester. Aptly named 'The Surprise', its captain Nicholas Tattersell had been granted a license to sail with a cargo of coal from Shoreham to Poole Harbour in Dorset. The plan was to pay Tattersell to break his legitimate voyage with a short diversion across the Channel to France, where he would deposit two 'secret passengers', before continuing to Poole. The captain naturally asked about the identities of his passengers and was told they were friends of Colonel Gunter, who had been involved in a duel and needed to escape secretly to France, to avoid being held to account.

On Monday 13th October, Colonel Gunter linked up with the Royal Party near Winchester. When they reached Broad Halfpenny Down near Hambledon, at the behest of the King, Gunter agreed to lead them to his sister and brother-in-law's home nearby, where they could safely spend the night. The following morning the Royal Party set off at break-of-day, heading East towards Shoreham.

Their precise route remains the subject of speculation, but it is likely that the Royal Party, which was short of time, took a direct easterly route. This would have taken them from Broad-Halfpenny-Down over Catherine Down, Charlton Down and Idsworth Down on the Hampshire border, towards Compton Down in Sussex, leaving the villages of Compton and Up-Marden to the south. Their route then took them north of Arundel to Houghton where they took a break at the George & Dragon Inn at Houghton, before crossing the Arun River and on to Bramber where they crossed the Adur River.

After nearly being caught on many occasions, the Royal Party eventually reached Brighton, where they linked up with Mancell and Tattersell to finalise the agreement to cross to France. After resting, Gunter led them to the creek near Shoreham, where 'The Surprise' sat on a mud berth waiting for the rising tide. The King and Lord Wilmot scaled a ladder to board the boat and hid in a small cabin while Gunter waited onshore with horses, in case anything went wrong.

Late morning on Wednesday 15th October 'The Surprise' set sail for the Isle of Wight, before changing course to head south to France, securing the escape of King Charles II. In gratitude for helping, whilst the King was in France, he made Lord Wilmot the 1st Earl of Rochester in 1652. After the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, many other people were also rewarded by King Charles II. This even included 'The Surprise' being renamed the 'Royal Escape' and commissioned as a vessel in the Navy of King Charles II Navy. Captain Nicholas Tattersell was also given a pension of £100, a porcelain miniature of the king and the rank of Captain in the Navy!



Sadly, Lord Wilmot and Colonel Gunter did not live to see the King restored, with Lord Wilmot dying in his late sixties in 1659, the year before the restoration.

It is not known where Colonel Gunter is buried, but Racton Manor remained his family home and St Peter's, Racton, his local family church. Sadly, there is no memorial to him or his wife Katherine in St Peter's.

An approximate version of the entire escape route taken by King Charles II across England in 1651 now forms The Monarch's Way, a 625-mile (1,006km) long distance walking trail created in 1994.