

FEELING AT HOME WITH A LITERARY BFG

GREAT MISSENDEN, THE TINY ENGLISH VILLAGE IN CHILTERN HILLS WHERE AUTHOR ROALD DAHL LIVED, IS EVERY BIT AS WHIMSICAL AS HIS INGENUOUS CREATIONS **BY STUTI AGARWAL**



The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre (top) includes curiosities like the golden ticket (bottom) from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

The London Rail is frightsome. This could well be me, but during my first week in the city, I couldn't step out of the house without detailed instructions about "what" "where" and "when" from my rather difficult aunt who had spent years tucked away in Wimbledon. You can imagine my plight then, when I realised I had to leave my cocooned world of the London Underground, a maze I had only begun to decode, to catch the Chiltern Railways out of the city and visit the village of my beloved idol, Roald Dahl. I was a nervous mess at the London Marylebone station, my anxiety heightened by the delay in assigning a platform number to my train. I scrambled from the stationmaster to the attendant at Pret a Manger with

questions every few minutes. In my final frantic run to board the train, I even knocked down an old lady's bag of house supplies. This, after I had purposefully clung to her all this while because she was to take the same train. Her pace, unfortunately, was too slow and I couldn't wait for her to catch up.

The 45-minute journey from London to Great Missenden, the quaint village tucked away in Buckinghamshire's Chiltern Hills—was just as nightmarish. As much as I wanted to pay attention to the landscape, shifting from

London's urban sprawl to bright grasslands, dotted with animals and placid lakes with waddling ducks, my eyes were fixed on the screen tracking upcoming stations.

It was only once I arrived in Great Missenden and breathed the misty early morning air, that my nerves finally calmed and I heaved a sigh of relief. Perhaps it was the BFG (Big Friendly Giant) blowing me happy dreams from behind the oak tree.

Lucy Dahl in an article for *Daily Mail* once wrote, "I am from a land of magic and witches, giants and Minpins,



PHOTO COURTESY: ROALD DAHL MUSEUM AND STORY CENTRE

woods and fields, four-leaf clovers and dandelion wishes—I am from the imagination of my father, Roald Dahl." For admirers of the *phizz-whizzing* (brilliant) writing of one of the world's greatest storytellers, a visit to the town he made his own for 36 years is a *gloriumptious* (glorious) step into his universe. For the uninitiated, Dahl's Gobblefunk dictionary comprises his unique inventions, phizz-whizzing, gloriumptious, and what not.

Walking down the kilometre-long High Street, the village's main centre, marked with buildings and landmarks that featured in Dahl's books, I thought of the BFG. I could imagine him leave his spot from behind the tree at the station and trot silently along, blowing dreams into the ears of children sleeping in the houses with brightly painted doors.

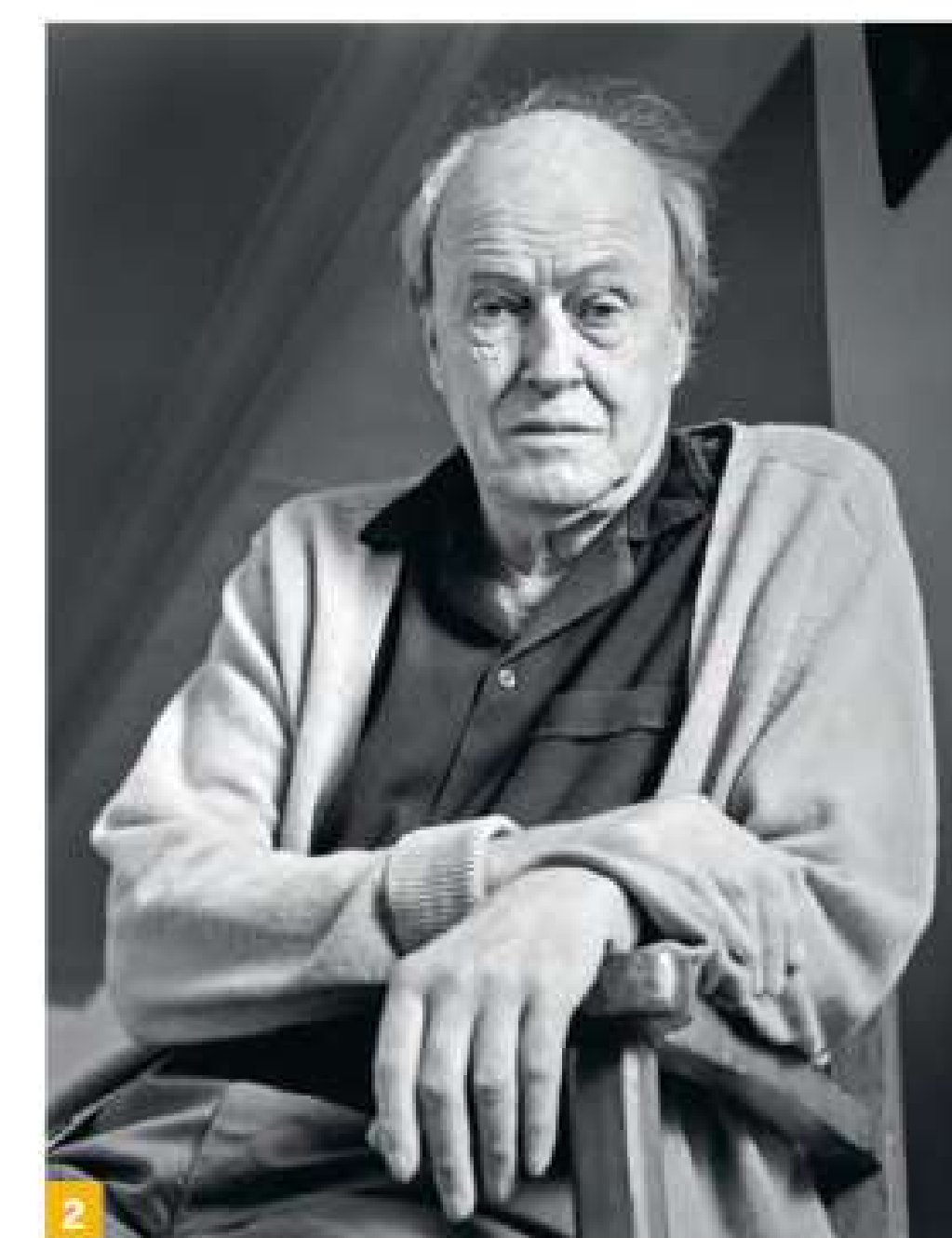
As a children's author who is yet to accept the challenges of my pursuit, I walked around taking everything in

It was here, in the serene setting of Great Missenden, with its cheery mix of spotless white facades with brickwork roofs, amidst the lush embrace of forest and farmland, where Dahl found his inspiration. At one end of the street, for instance, stands the Great Missenden Library, just as it was in the 1970s when it was built, where Matilda (from the eponymous book) spent all her time. At the other end is Crown House; an austere looking home with its wood panelled exteriors, which was

the inspiration for Sophie's unhappy orphanage in *The BFG*.

Popping out in the middle of the white canvas of High Street is the bright Red Pump Garage petrol station, which was the inspiration for the garage in *Danny, the Champion of the World*. To this date it remains its 1950s self, white Shell Oil sign and all.

"On a hill above a valley there was a wood. In the wood there was a huge tree. Under the tree there was a hole. In the hole live Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox and their four Small Foxes," said Roald Dahl of one of his most popular characters, Fantastic Mr. Fox. Ophelia Dahl remembers taking many nighttime strolls with her father in these very woods; and as I trudged along the Angling Spring wood, all alone, and stood next to the fallen beech tree where he'd wait, point at a



Although Dahl's (2) residence, Gipsy House, is not open to visitors, several of his possessions such as his writing desk (1) have been moved out to the museum. Great Missenden is steeped in Dahl lore, from the Red Pump Garage petrol station (3) on High Street to the footprints of BFG leading to Dahl's grave (4).



PHOTO COURTESY: ROALD DAHL MUSEUM AND STORY CENTRE (GIRL & GRAVE), PHIL CREAN ARCHIVAL/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (ROALD DAHL), MANDI KEIGHAN/SHUTTERSTOCK (PETROL PUMP)



Roald Dahl took many a walk in the woods (top) around Great Missenden, running after an imaginary Minpin or perhaps, seeking inspiration for the Fox family at the centre of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*; His character BFG was immortalised on a stamp (bottom) by the U.K. government.

big hole and say, “That’s where Mr. and Mrs. Fox live,” I could see Fantastic Mr. Fox sitting at the table with his family, enjoying a warm dinner.

But the Dahl experience isn’t complete without visiting the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre. Bearing a bright purple facade, inscribed with Gobblefunk in all colours, it is fitted with the writer’s creative oasis, his Writing Hut. It was moved from his home, Gipsy House, which now remains out of bounds for tourists. Luckily, all of Dahl’s accessories are there. Picture his hip ball socket, which was operated out after his injury in England’s Royal Air Force, eraser shavings, chocolate wrappers rolled up into a hard ball, among other peculiarities. It is here that he spent 30 years, writing only in pencil and yellow paper, adjusting the sofa and table as per his needs—he had carved out a hole in the lower end of the

cushioned sofa to help ease his back injury. As he sat for hours, he hung a tennis ball off a string on the lamp to hold its swinging neck in just the right place over his writing pad. A soft board on the back was filled with a collage of cards given to him by his children, newspaper clippings, and photographs of the family, all of which were part of his writing.

The whole town seems as if it were plucked out from a distant dream, with its higgledy-piggledy streets, pretty cottages, grazing sheep, and slow life.

As a children’s author, who is yet to accept the financial challenges of my pursuit, I walked around taking everything in. I finally sat down by Dahl’s grave behind the local church, talking to him endlessly about my dream of wanting to run away from the cities he so despised



and finding a home nestled in a green corner. One where Willy Wonka came to discover strange candies; Esio Trot chomped on a vegetable patch; and Minpins whistled by.

Because the chat went on for too long and I missed my lunch train back to London (darn the railways!), I waited for another one at Dahl’s pub of choice—The Nag’s Head—a 20-minute walk from the station, but worth its 15th-century interiors and special menu. As I sat there gobbling delicious pan-fried duck doused in jus and sipping a woody red wine, I missed two more trains. I was happy to, because I had begun penning my second children’s book. It was all that Great Missenden air that had catapulted me into dreaming more vividly of the day I’d be able to live half the life my Gobblefunk guru once led.

(Note: *The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre* is currently shut to visitors and expected to reopen in October 2018; the author visited the museum in January 2018.)

ROBERT STAINFORTH/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (WOODS); CHRIS DORNEY/SHUTTERSTOCK (STAMP)