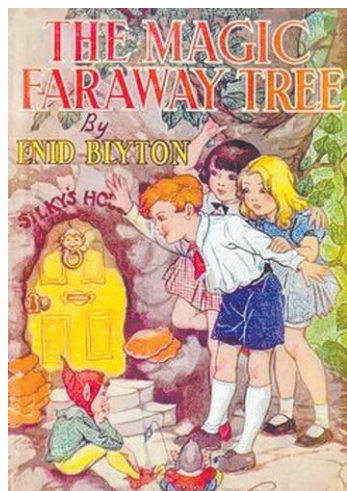




Norman Conquest and was a Royalist stronghold until Parliamentary forces destroyed it in 1646. In her Famous Five debut, 1942's *Five Go to Treasure Island*, Blyton repurposed it as Kirrin Castle, set on an islet in the sea: "Broken archways, tumbledown towers, ruined walls. Now jackdaws nested in it and gulls sat in the top-most stones." Our first sight of the crumbling edifice is from the little village below, also called Corfe Castle, its charming houses built from the castle's leftover stone but somewhat marred by a row of scaffolding along one soaring wall. Collecting our tickets, we're told the maintenance work is crucial for removing highly acquisitive ivy; further up the hill, near a set of wooden stocks and a giant catapult of the kind once used to lob rocks over battlements, volunteer stonemasons chisel patterns.

In the window of the village antique shop sits a first edition of Blyton's *The Secret Seven*, which we eye while sucking on sour cherry "Black Death" gobstoppers from the sweetshop opposite. Up the road, past the Bankes Arms Hotel and the Model Village ("See the castle and village before its destruction by Cromwell's troops!") is Mortons Manor, a Grade 2-listed Elizabethan manor house with a herb garden, airy bedrooms offering castle and countryside views, antique rocking horses and fireplaces, and a secret passage so well hidden we really need the *Secret Seven* to guide us there.

We take a quick taxi ride to Studland Bay, our driver slowing to point out Knoll House, a hotel set amid pines where Blyton stayed with husband Kenneth in the 1960s. They occupied Room 40, which overlooks the sea and the white cliffs marking the start of the fossil-rich Jurassic Coast. It's the same sweeping views enjoyed by guests at *The Pig on the Beach*, a boutique hotel-restaurant with gargoyles, turrets and wonky floorboards that feels delightfully *Faraway Tree*-esque. Named for its local sourcing, the *Pig's 25-Mile Menu* is served on pretty plates in a conservatory decorated with flowers, herbs and curios. We tuck into line-caught sea bass fillets, oyster mushroom pappardelle and salad



GETTY IMAGES

Mortons Manor, top left; Swanage Railway carriage top right; first edition of *The Magic Faraway Tree* and author Enid Blyton, above

(with seeds), picked from the kitchen garden. Our sommelier, Connor, pours glasses of local Pinot Blanc and extols the rise of the English wine industry.

After considering a cheese trio that includes a Blyton brie, we opt instead for *Piggy Fours* sweet treats served with coffee.

The next morning, after breakfast (Mortons Manor does a great full English), we catch a bus from outside a daffodil-strewn church graveyard and head for the seaside town of Swanage. Blyton and Kenneth used to regularly swim around its two Victorian piers before supper, and the town's annual summer carnival once had Blyton as its president.

Only one pier remains today. Restored in 2019, it's accessible for a small entry fee. We stroll along a timber boardwalk lined with ornamental cast-iron railings and 19 Victorian-look lampposts, pausing to read some of the 1100 memorial brass plaques inset under our feet. "I told you I was ill," states one.

It's nearly time for our morning heritage ride on the

Swanage Railway, so we hurry back across a section of paved seafront where horses once pulled narrow-gauge trams. At the station, painted cream and forest green and decorated with hanging flower baskets, a great black locomotive hunches at the platform, impatiently puffing steam.

A whistle from the stationmaster, and we settle into our vintage compartment for a 19km return trip through the Purbeck countryside, tooting through tunnels and stopping at postcard-cute stations where you'd half expect Dick, Julian, Ann, George and Timmy the dog to climb aboard.

Committed to the sense of adventure and discovery Blyton loved best, we take a bus from Swanage to Shell Bay Beach, alighting where the Sandbanks chain ferry crosses the entrance to Poole Harbour. The beach forms part of a 6.5km stretch of white sand that makes up Studland Bay, now owned by the National Trust like many Purbeck attractions. Sailing boats skim its small waves, walkways weave through grass-tufted dunes. Its gently shelving waters are clear, and popular with summer day-trippers, some of whom frequent the naturist beach a 20-minute walk from the carpark.

We adjourn to Shell Bay Restaurant and Bistro, where the menu leans toward fish and seafood (charred marinated prawns and chips do us nicely) and its glass frontage faces Brownsea Island, a nature reserve that inspired "Whispering Island" in *The Famous Five* books. In Blyton's time it was owned by an eccentric Englishwoman who shooed away wannabe visitors. Today it's open to all and is one of the few places in England where red squirrels thrive. Our next bus takes us off the Blyton Trail, on to the ferry and toward the seaside hub of Bournemouth for our train back to London. Purbeck recedes into a haze of crumbling castles, chalky coastal cliffs and green enchanted woods, all slipping quietly back into the pages of Blyton's books.

Jane Cornwell was a guest of the Dorset Tourist Board.



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