*\_The Winter Diary of a Country Rat\_* (1981), by Peter Firmin

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*\_The Winter Diary of a Country Rat\_* (1981) is an enchanting book written and illustrated by Peter Firmin (1928-2018). Firmin was best known as co-creator, with Oliver Postgate, of such classic children’s television programmes as \_*Ivor the Engine\_*, \_*Clangers* and *Bagpuss\_*, all of which were made at his home in Blean. \_*The Winter Diary\_* is testament to his love and knowledge of the countryside around Canterbury. It follows the adventures of Branwell, the titular country rat, and a young wolf called Lukin, as they journey from Howletts, the wildlife park by Bekesbourne (referred to as ‘the Zoo’ in the book), via Patrixbourne and the North Downs Way, to [Canterbury](/canterbury/20c-canterbury-home).

Not the least of the delights of \_*The Winter Diary\_* are the maps which comprise the front and back endpapers, beautifully drawn by Firmin. These allow the reader to follow in the paw-steps of Branwell and Lukin. Should one do this, one will find oneself in a world transfigured by Firmin’s imagination. Here is the Well Chapel by the spring opposite Howlett’s, where Hannibal the Heron fishes; the little bridge over the Nailbourne in Old Palace Road, home to the madly skipping, cartwheeling and hopping frog; the oast house where the kindly lady artist allows our heroes to spend Christmas; the wood by the North Downs Way where they build an igloo and encounter Jill the Jackdaw; the allotments where Lukin finds himself arrested; the (former) prison where he is briefly held; and of course the cathedral.

A constant theme of \_*The Winter Diary\_* is the importance of stories in shaping our relationship to locality. When Hannibal the Heron tells the story of the Well Chapel, Lukin remarks ‘‘Who’d have thought that there was so much to be said about a heap of old stones?’’ To which Hannibal replies ‘‘You keep your eyes open. There are stories to be found in the most unlikely places!’’ [1] And so it turns out. The eccentric frog they encounter shortly afterwards tells them (and the reader) a version of the legends associated with the intermittently flowing River Nailbourne, which involve Thor, and St Augustine preaching at Barham. In [Canterbury](/canterbury/20c-canterbury-home) Jill the Jackdaw relates stories around St Martin’s Church, St Augustine’s Abbey and the martyrdom of St Alphege.

Firmin’s book is a further addition to these stories which narrate a place into life. It invites readers to join this enchantment and explore Old Palace Road, Patrixbourne and all the other spots through the eyes of Branwell and his pal Lukin. Believe me, you don’t have to be a child to immerse yourself in this transformed realm.

1. Peter Firmin, \_*The Winter Diary of a Country Rat\_* (Kingswood: Kaye and Ward, 1981) 41.