



BILL BRYSON
At Home

ILLUSTRATED

About the Book

We devote a lot more time to studying the battles and wars of history than to considering what history really consists of: centuries of people quietly going about their daily business – eating, sleeping, having sex and endeavouring to get comfortable. And where do all these normal activities take place? At home.

This was the thought that inspired Bill Bryson to start a journey around the rooms of his own house, an 1851 Norfolk rectory, to consider how the ordinary things in life came to be. And what he discovered are surprising connections to anything from the Crystal Palace to the Eiffel Tower, from scurvy to body-snatching, from bedbugs to the Industrial Revolution, and just about everything else that has ever happened. The result is one of the most entertaining and illuminating books ever written about the history of how we live.

This is a stunning new illustrated edition of *At Home*, which became one of the most lauded and bestselling history books of the last few years. Here Bill Bryson's irrepressible curiosity, irresistible wit, stylish prose and masterful storytelling are complemented by over four hundred photographs and illustrations to bring his entertaining history even more vividly to life.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Ground Plan
Chamber Plan
Title Page
Dedication
Introduction

Chapter one
THE YEAR

Chapter two
THE SETTING

Chapter three
THE HALL

Chapter four
THE KITCHEN

Chapter five
THE SCULLERY AND LARDER

Chapter six
THE FUSEBOX

Chapter seven
THE DRAWING ROOM

Chapter eight
THE DINING ROOM

Chapter nine
THE CELLAR

Chapter ten
THE PASSAGE

Chapter eleven
THE STUDY

Chapter twelve
THE GARDEN

Chapter thirteen
THE PLUM ROOM

Chapter fourteen
THE STAIRS

Chapter fifteen
THE BEDROOM

Chapter sixteen
THE BATHROOM

Chapter seventeen
THE DRESSING ROOM

Chapter eighteen
THE NURSERY

Chapter nineteen
THE ATTIC

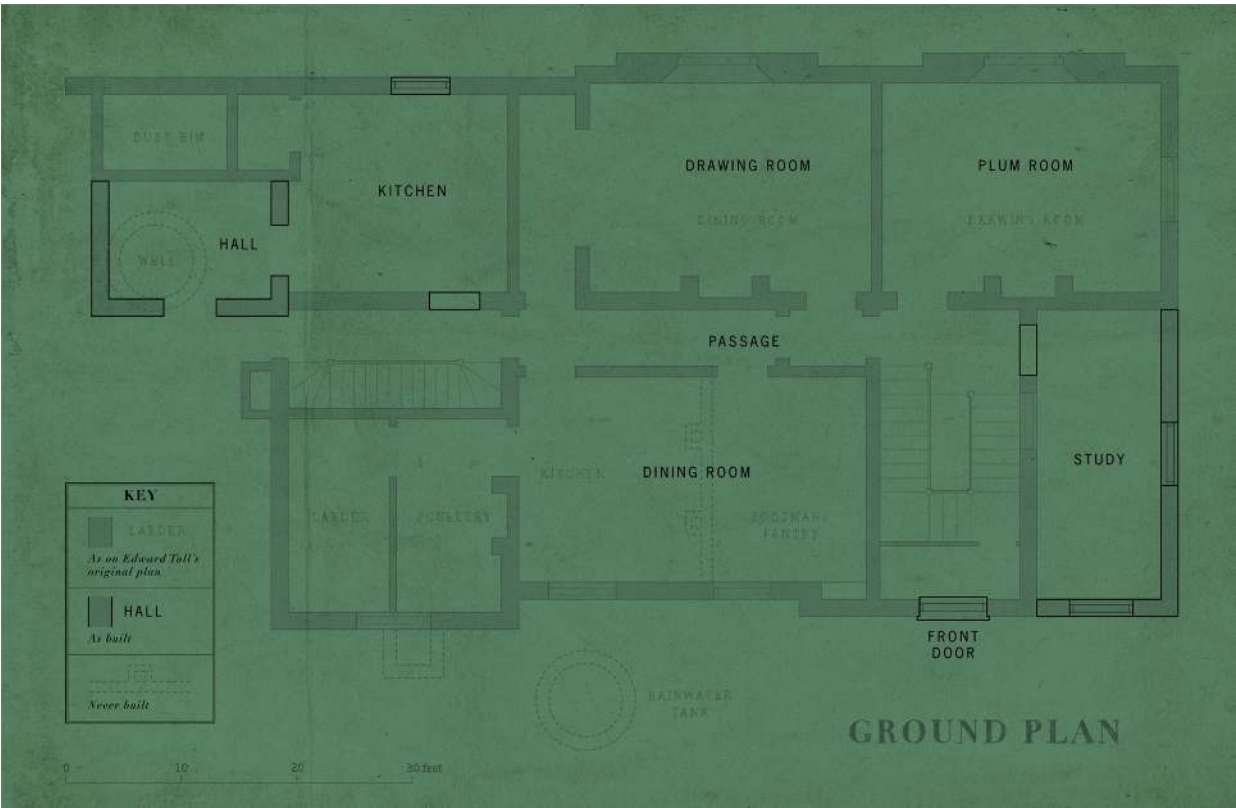
Acknowledgements

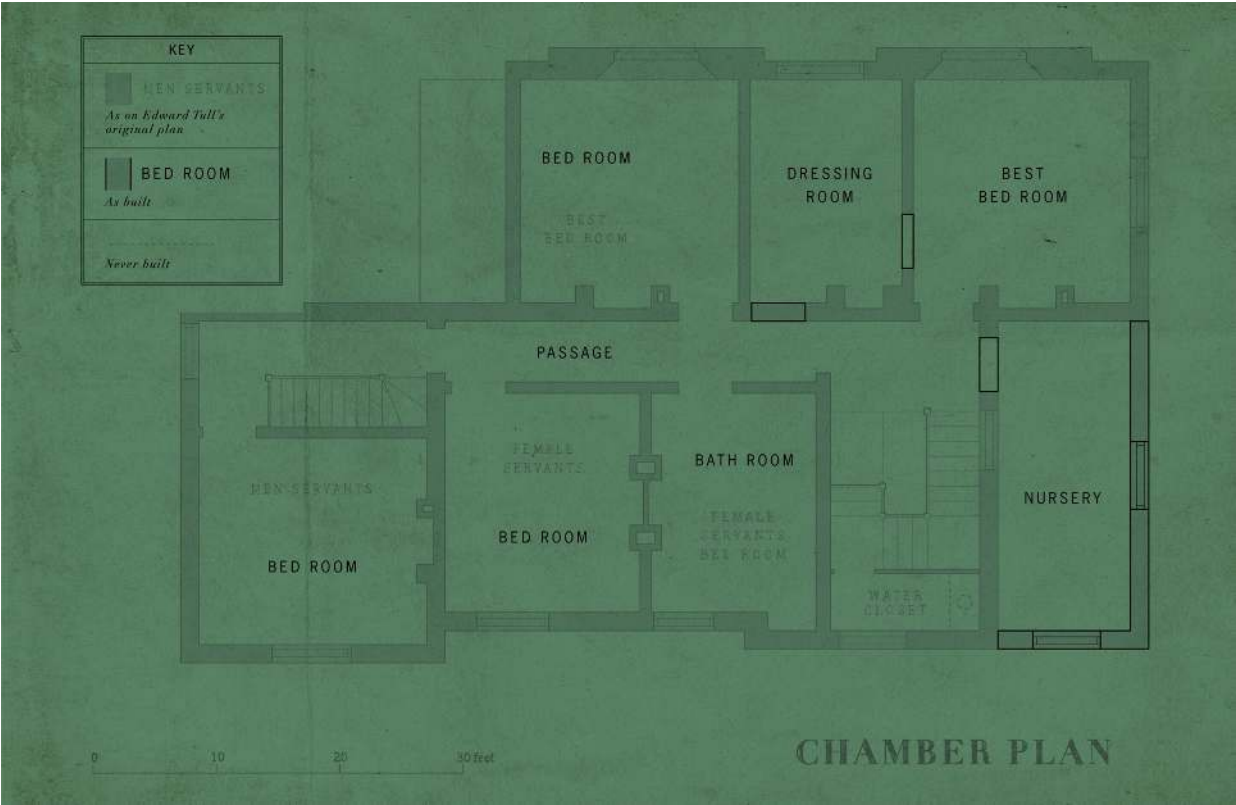
Picture acknowledgements

Index

About the Author

Copyright





AT HOME

www.transworldbooks.co.uk

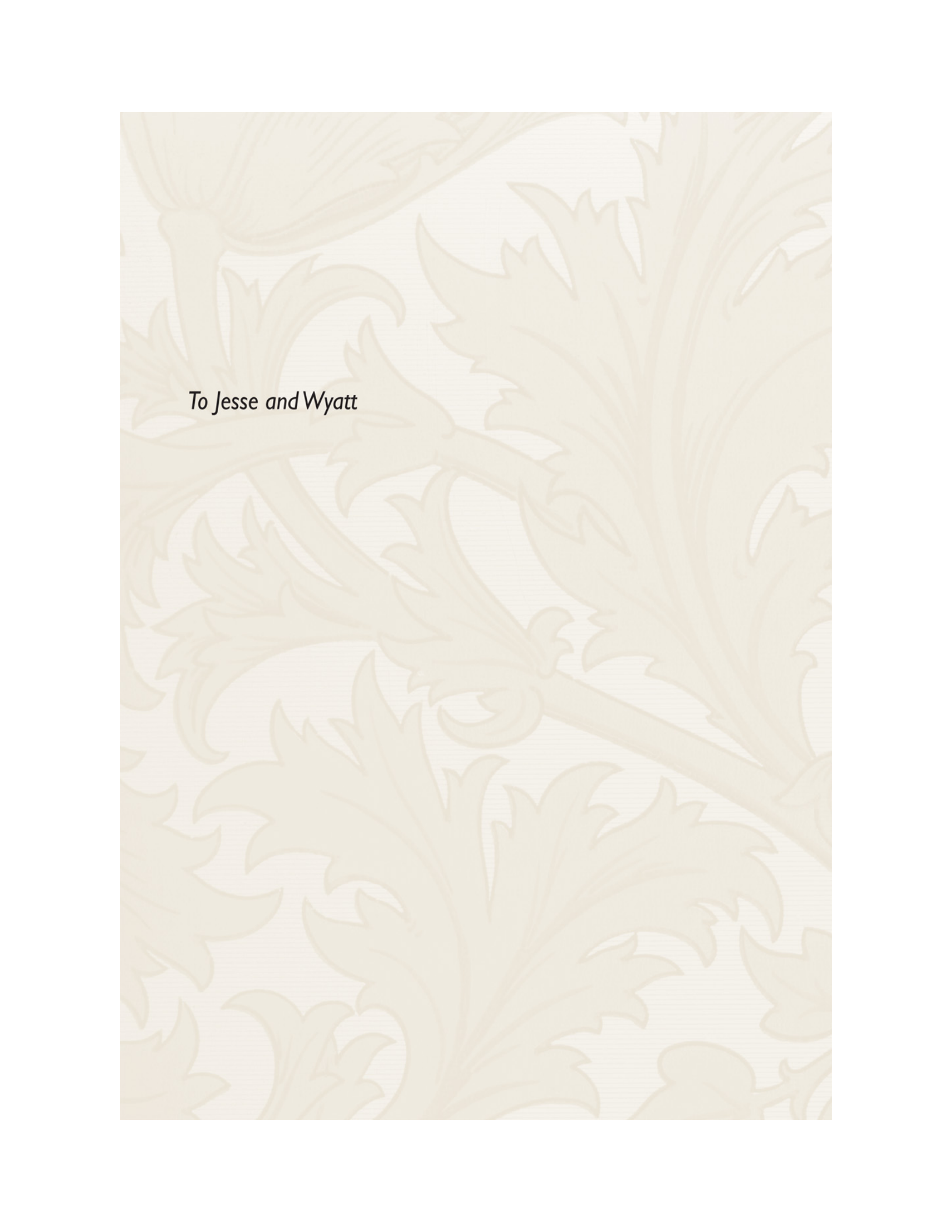


Bill Bryson

AT HOME

A SHORT HISTORY OF PRIVATE LIFE

ILLUSTRATED EDITION



To Jesse and Wyatt



The peaceful rural landscape of north Norfolk – a county which, with 659 churches in some 2,000 square miles, is home to a greater number of venerable places of worship than any comparable area in the world.

Introduction

SOME TIME AFTER we moved into a former Church of England rectory in a village of tranquil anonymity in Norfolk, I had occasion to go up into the attic to look for the source of a slow but mysterious drip. As there are no stairs to the attic in our house, the process involved a tall stepladder and much unseemly wriggling through a ceiling hatch, which was why I had not been up there before (and have not returned with any enthusiasm since).

When I did finally flop into the dusty gloom and clambered to my feet, I was surprised to find a secret door, not visible from anywhere outside the house, in an external wall. The door opened easily and led out on to a tiny rooftop space, not much larger than a tabletop, between the front and back gables of the house. Victorian houses are often a collection of architectural bewilderments, but this one was starkly unfathomable: why an architect had troubled to put in a door to a space so lacking in evident need or purpose was beyond explanation, but it did have the magical and unexpected effect of providing the most wonderful view.

It is always quietly thrilling to find yourself looking at a world you know well but have never seen from such an angle before. I was perhaps fifty feet above the ground, which in mid-Norfolk more or less guarantees a panorama. Immediately in front of me was the ancient flint church to which our house was once an adjunct. Beyond, down a slight incline and slightly separate from church and rectory, was the village to which both belonged. In the distance in the other direction was Wymondham Abbey, a heap of medieval splendour commanding the southern skyline. In a field in the middle

distance a tractor rumbled and drew straight lines in the soil. All else in every direction was quiet, agreeable, timeless English countryside.

What gave all this a certain immediacy was that just the day before I had walked across a good part of this view with a friend named Brian Ayers. Brian had just retired as the county archaeologist, and may know more about the history and landscape of Norfolk than anyone alive. He had never been to our village church, and was eager to have a look. It is a handsome and ancient building, older than Notre Dame in Paris and about the same vintage as Chartres and Salisbury cathedrals. But Norfolk is full of medieval churches – it has 659 of them, more per square mile than anywhere else in the world – so any one is easily overlooked.

‘Have you ever noticed,’ Brian asked as we stepped into the churchyard, ‘how country churches nearly always seem to be sinking into the ground?’ He pointed out how this one stood in a slight depression, like a weight placed on a cushion. The church foundations were about three feet below the churchyard around it. ‘Do you know why that is?’

I allowed, as I often do when following Brian around, that I had no idea.

‘Well, it isn’t because the church is sinking,’ Brian said, smiling. ‘It’s because the churchyard has risen. How many people do you suppose are buried here?’

I glanced appraisingly at the gravestones and said, ‘I don’t know. Eighty? A hundred?’

‘I think that’s probably a *bit* of an underestimate,’ Brian replied with an air of kindly equanimity. ‘Think about it. A country parish like this has an average of 250 people in it, which translates into roughly a thousand adult deaths per century, plus a few thousand more poor souls that didn’t make it to maturity. Multiply that by the number of centuries that the church has been there and you can see that what you have here is not eighty or a hundred burials, but probably something more in the order of, say, twenty thousand.’

This was, bear in mind, just steps from my front door. 'Twenty thousand?' I said.

He nodded matter-of-factly. 'That's a lot of mass, needless to say. It's why the ground has risen three feet.' He gave me a moment to absorb this, then went on: 'There are a thousand parishes in Norfolk. Multiply all the centuries of human activity by a thousand parishes and you can see that you are looking at a lot of material culture.' He considered the several steeples that featured in the view. 'From here you can see into perhaps ten or twelve other parishes, so you are probably looking at roughly a quarter of a million burials right here in the immediate landscape – all in a place that has never been anything but quiet and rural, where nothing much has ever happened.'

All this was Brian's way of explaining how a bucolic, lightly populated county like Norfolk could produce 27,000 archaeological finds a year, more than any other county in England. 'People have been dropping things here for a long time – since long before England was England.' He showed me a map of all the known archaeological finds in our parish. Nearly every field had yielded something – Neolithic tools, Roman coins and pottery, Saxon brooches, Bronze Age graves, Viking farmsteads. Just beyond the edge of our property, in 1985 a farmer crossing a field found a rare, impossible-to-misconstrue Roman phallic pendant.



A typical Norfolk rectory, built at North Creake in 1845 for the Reverend Thomas Keppel.

To me that was, and remains, an amazement: the idea of a man in a toga, standing on what is now the edge of my land, patting himself all over and realizing with consternation that he has lost his treasured keepsake, which then lay in the soil for seventeen or eighteen centuries, through endless generations of human activity, through the comings and goings of Saxons, Vikings and Normans, through the rise of the English language, the birth of the English nation, the development of continuous monarchy and all the rest,

before finally being picked up by a late-twentieth-century farmer, presumably with a look of consternation of his own.



The Roman phallic pendant unearthed in a Norfolk field in 1985.

Now as I stood on the roof of my house, taking in this unexpected view, it struck me how rather glorious it was that in two thousand years of human activity the only thing that had stirred the notice of the outside world even briefly was the finding of a Roman phallic pendant. The rest was just centuries and centuries of people quietly going about their daily business – eating, sleeping, having sex, endeavouring to be amused – and it occurred to me, with the forcefulness of a thought experienced in 360 degrees, that that's really what history mostly is: masses of people doing ordinary

things. Even Einstein will have spent large parts of his life thinking about his holidays or new hammock or how dainty was the ankle on the young lady alighting from the tram across the street. These are the sorts of things that fill our lives and thoughts, and yet we treat them as incidental and hardly worthy of serious consideration. I don't know how many hours of my school years were spent studying the Missouri Compromise or the War of the Roses, but it was vastly more than I was ever encouraged or allowed to give to the history of eating, sleeping, having sex or endeavouring to be amused.

So I thought it might be interesting, for the length of a book, to consider the ordinary things in life, to notice them for once and treat them as if they were important, too. Looking around my house, I was startled and a little appalled to realize how little I knew about the domestic world around me. Sitting at the kitchen table one afternoon, playing idly with the salt and pepper shakers, it occurred to me that I had absolutely no idea why, out of all the spices in the world, we have such an abiding attachment to those two. Why not pepper and cardamom, say, or salt and cinnamon? And why do forks have four tines and not three or five? There must be reasons for these things.

Dressing, I wondered why all my suit jackets have a row of pointless buttons on every sleeve. I heard a reference on the radio to someone paying for room and board, and realized that when people talk about room and board, I have no idea what the board is that they are talking about. Suddenly the house seemed a place of mystery to me.



Many country churches, like this one at Little Snoring, look as if they have sunk: on the contrary, it is the surrounding churchyards that have risen as centuries' worth of parishioners have taken to their last resting places.

So I formed the idea to make a journey around it, to wander from room to room and consider how each has featured in the evolution of private life. The bathroom would be a history of hygiene, the kitchen of cooking, the bedroom of sex and death and sleeping, and so on. I would write a history of the world without leaving home.

The idea had a certain appeal, I must say. I had recently done a book in which I tried to understand the universe and how it is put together, which was a bit of an undertaking, as you will appreciate. So the idea of dealing with something as neatly bounded and cosily finite as an old rectory in an English village had obvious attractions. Here was a book I could do in carpet slippers.

In fact it was nothing like that. Houses are amazingly complex repositories. What I found, to my great surprise, is that whatever happens in the world – whatever is discovered or created or bitterly fought over – eventually ends up, in one way or another, in your house. Wars, famines, the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment – they are all there in your sofas and chests of drawers, tucked into the folds of your curtains, in the downy softness of your pillows, in the paint on your walls and the water in your pipes. So the history of

household life isn't just a history of beds and sofas and kitchen stoves, as I had vaguely supposed it would be, but of scurvy and guano and the Eiffel Tower and bedbugs and body-snatching and just about everything else that has ever happened. Houses aren't refuges from history. They are where history ends up.

I hardly need point out that history of any kind tends to sprawl. In order to fit the story of private life into a single volume, it was obvious from the outset that I would have to be painfully selective. So, although I do venture into the distant past from time to time (you can't talk about baths without talking about Romans, for one thing), what follows mostly concentrates on events of the last 150 years or so, when the modern world was really born – coincidentally just the period that the house we are about to wander through has existed.

We are so used to having a lot of comfort in our lives – to being clean, warm and well fed – that we forget how recent most of that is. In fact, it took us for ever to achieve these things, and then they mostly came in a rush. How that happened when it did, and why it took so long to get it, is what the following pages are all about.

Though I have not identified the village in which the Old Rectory stands, I should note that the house is real, as are (or were) the people mentioned in relation to it. I should also note that the passage referring to the Reverend Thomas Bayes in Chapter One appeared in slightly different form in an introduction I wrote for *Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society*.

