



Cross Country

ENGLISH BUILDINGS AND LANDSCAPE
FROM COUNTRYSIDE TO COAST

PETER ASHLEY

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PETER ASHLEY



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Dark At the Back of An Antique Shop in Lechlade,
Gloucestershire.

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P 53 Illustration from *The Witch's Hat* © Tony Meeuwissen

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*Cross-country lane between Blaston and Horninghold,
Leicestershire*

Dedication

For Teresa, with love.

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Cross Country

Introduction

Pyramid selling, Holt, Norfolk



Roadside sign, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex



I only went abroad for the first time when I was 30 - to Paris on a British Midland Viscount with curtains at the windows - and, although I have indeed enjoyed occasional foreign forays, it has been England that has taken up so much of my time and attention. The trouble is I have, like my father before me, an insatiable appetite for interesting- looking things, particularly in the countryside, and rural England is stuffed to the gills with them. I also have a problem in that I like going on about it to anyone who'll listen, and so have made people fall off bar stools with the constant recounting of my travels, trying to keep their attention with the 'glittering eye' of a bucolic Ancient Mariner. If I lived abroad, like a dear friend of mine who sits on a mountainside in Piedmont staring at a Hornby coal truck, I'd be called an anglophile.

Anglophile. That's the word we use to describe someone who loves England, but it tends to be the label attached to those from other lands who find this remarkable, beautiful

country so absorbing, and perhaps somehow better than the one they were born in. What is it that they find so much suited to their taste and sensibilities? It could be social: 'Your policemen are so wonderful'; it could be political (although often that's difficult to understand); and, of course, it could be the roseate view that's somehow bound up with looking at exported English period television dramas. So it's also the sense of history, of which we have an awful lot by anybody's standards. It could be all of these things, but perhaps it's more likely to be topographical. If your view of life is the downtown shopping mall in Birmingham, Alabama, you may want to see the Bull Ring shopping centre in Birmingham, West Midlands. Those who hanker after a taste of the 'Old Country' may inevitably be drawn to the stereotypical whistle-stop tour: London, Bath, Stratford-upon-Avon, York and then off to Edinburgh, the passing countryside a blurred panorama outside an air-conditioned coach window. England reduced to a set of postcards or, more likely, files of images on a camera memory chip that will never be printed out. No, I think the true anglophile looks further than the next hotel stopover.

Leicestershire countryside near Medbourne



My Australian friend Bob landed at Heathrow in 1975 with a wife and three children, promptly bought a black London cab and, once he'd stopped total strangers jumping in the back, they headed out into the Great Unknown. On driving through the village of Tur Langton in Leicestershire, he spotted my old Riley under a row of trees, its resting place after I'd shot a piston through the cylinder block between Northampton and Market Harborough. He knocked on my door, made me a derisory offer, we went to the pub. I started to show Bob and his family England. Well, my England. I made them shiver by fenland dykes, showed them a priest's skull in a glass case in Crowland Abbey complete with stab wound (someone later nicked it, it's probably now a conversation piece ashtray in Spalding), and the various design styles of pub interiors. They all ended up living here, went back to Australia, but now can't keep away. Bob and Liz both fit my definition of true anglophiles, dear folk who don't just love England, but will always look beyond the obvious, will always check out the detail.

England for me started at my front gate. The unadopted road I was born on was an eclectic mix of Victorian and Edwardian houses, many with their sumptuous gardens infilled with interwar semis. At the bottom of the lane was an equally 1930s pub, where a yellow delivery dray delivered Hole's Newark Ales on Tuesdays, and opposite was a post office with a little toy-shop annexe. Beer and Dinky Toys, it was a good start. This was my world in microcosm, until I realised a large Midlands city was next door. From the front seat of a Leicester Corporation bus, I just stared out at the city. Shops, houses, pubs and factories, and the smaller things: the sun blinds and gilt lettering on shopfronts, the dark wooden floor in Woolworths, the white-sleeved policeman on point duty whom my mother once threatened to turn me over to.

Sumo wrestler clearing a hedge in North Norfolk



Bell rope, Old Romney, Kent



Gate lock, Bayfield Hall, North Norfolk





Drainpipe bracket, Ludlow, Shropshire



Norman Kerr's Cartmel bookshop, Cumbria



The other way was open countryside. A Georgian farmhouse in a fold of sheep pasture, a limestone grange at the end of an avenue of chestnuts, an orange brick bridge across a reed-swamped canal. I couldn't get enough, cycling furiously down lanes strewn with straw and cattle dung. An annual holiday was like going to Africa. My father would send off for town guides, a habit I picked up as a teenager, filling my bedroom shelves with what Bury St Edmunds or Truro had to offer. Trains took us to places I'd only seen in books on Beautiful Britain, I saw photographs and watercolours of unknown towns and villages framed under the string luggage racks. Being with my father, we also ended up in places that were decidedly not subjects for artists: white-painted concrete bungalows dangerously near

the edges of cliffs, caravans that tipped alarmingly when you sat on the Elsan. As soon as I got my first transport - a Ford Thames van with more rust than paint - I bought a *Bartholomew's Atlas* and set off, a trail of blue exhaust smoke drifting over the neighbouring counties, going further and further until breaking down in either Norfolk or the Cotswolds.

I had to read about the places I'd seen. Never one to take a guidebook around in a glove box, I avidly mugged up on them once I finally got home. First the Leicestershire and Rutland edition of Pevsner's indispensable *Buildings of England* series, and WG Hoskins' little paperback volumes on the same Midland counties. Two keys then turned in locks, finally opening doors into all the boundless possibilities that were waiting for me in England. Two films - first Tony Richardson's inimitable *Tom Jones* (1963), and then, a few years later, John Schlesinger's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967). Henry Fielding, Thomas Hardy, the landscapes of Dorset and beyond. For a suburban chap like me this was rocket fuel.

Six months after I'd seen Schlesinger's film at the Odeon Marble Arch, I walked into an eccentric Leicester bookshop and saw on a shelf *Dorset: Shell Guide*. As I picked it up, it fell open at John Piper's weather-soaked photograph of Waddon Manor, the location used in the film as William Boldwood's farm. I just had to find it, and the next Easter I stood in a windy Dorset field above Chesil Beach, seeing a handful of miles away the pale stone of Waddon intermittently lighting up in bright sunshine like some Holy Grail on the hillside of Corton Down. If this could be got from just one *Shell Guide*, I thought, I have to get the rest.

Beach life, Littlestone-on-Sea, Kent



Anyone who seriously collects books knows the symptoms. The sweaty palms at book fairs, the taking home of treasures in Marks & Spencer's carrier bags saying you've only been out buying vests. Macmillan's *Highways and Byways* series in blue cloth covers with gilt titles, Batsford books with Brian Cook's railway poster covers, eccentric *Vision of England* books from publisher Paul Elek, books with the whiff of petrol - *Shell and BP Shilling Guides*, National Benzole paperbacks, Esso Road Maps. My father introduced me to HV Morton; I couldn't resist SPB Mais. Edward Thomas and John Betjeman lit blue touch papers with poetry and prose, the latter inspiring me beyond reason with his 1970s television films *A Passion for Churches*, *Metroland* and *The Queen's Realm*. I discovered JJ Hissey, and although I gobbled up his books I found he does have his detractors, possibly because his prose is so drenched in his overwrought ivy-after-rain fantasies. Hissey made journeys around England in everything from dog carts to early Daimlers, but who else will go on about what the oak

panelling was like in a country inn in 1897? The trouble is it doesn't stop. Every time Professor Aubrey Manning comes on the television with his *Talking Landscapes* programmes I rush to find a blank videotape.

Field barn at Cranoe, Leicestershire



RAF war memorial, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex



Maybe now's the time, for whatever reason, to discover England again. Nowhere else on earth has such rich variety in so few square miles: descending from the lush green pastures of High Leicestershire and across Cambridgeshire fens to Norfolk flint-bound coasts in an hour and a half, or from the deeply wooded Kentish High Weald to willow-fringed Romney levels and bare Dungeness shingle in a matter of minutes. Landscape, culture, accents, it all changes as quickly as the vernacular architecture. This is what makes England so utterly unique: the thousand differences between counties, the look of buildings built from the underlying geology that changes every few miles, the sheer local flavours. Increasingly, I feel that it's this that should not only be enjoyed, but celebrated. The thing about

England is that we tend to stick with what we know in the narrowest sense - striding energetically up a Lakeland fell, downing a Cotswold cream tea, staring at a north Norfolk seal sunbathing on a sandbank. All of which is perfectly OK, it's just that we can miss the detail, forget to look round the corners or simply not take the time to see again what's really around us. There is so much satisfaction in looking beyond the name on an eighteenth-century slate gravestone and appreciating the stunning hand-cut lettering, or picking up a piece of orange sea-washed brick on the shore and wondering about the house it came from.

Afternoon delights, Winchcombe, Gloucestershire



Boat shed, Tollesbury, Essex



In a way, this is why I've directed my enthusiasms into *Cross Country*. For some time now, I've concentrated on either English buildings or on the nostalgic visual touchstones that created such a memorable past for many of us. For this, particularly the buildings, I travelled the length and breadth of England and scooted around the coast on mad frenzied itineraries. So I needed to sit down, pour myself a beer and take stock; to recall parts of the country that held particular appeal. With a lifetime of English journeys behind me I had, of course, a few but very distinct favourite areas in mind: the north Norfolk coast, even my own end of Leicestershire, but equally I wanted to find out about the less well-known, the places that for me had hitherto been photographs in books or snippets of film. Criticised for appearing never to go much further north than Nottingham, I spent a decent amount of time in southwest Cumbria. An unexpected lunchtime dealing with oysters in an estuarial shack excited me to the possibilities of the shredded Essex coast.

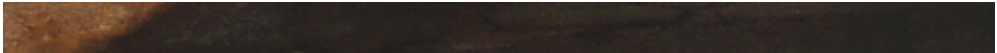
Abandoned stone quarry, Ford, Gloucestershire





Portland Garage, Weobley, Herefordshire





What *Cross Country* isn't, is a guidebook. Certainly not a gazeteer. This collection of essays and photographs are simply my accounts of certain places as I found them over a couple of years of new journeys around England (plus a brief but necessary crossing of the Welsh Border). My impressions, my discoveries. Conversations, remembrances, things I heard in pubs and jotted down and, of course, the unplanned and unexpected. You will find out far more about medieval churches and eighteenth-century houses in a Penguin (or Yale) *Buildings of England* guide; a fuller account of villages and towns in a Betjeman/Piper- edited *Shell County Guide*. Just think of me as the coach driver (a 1946 AEC Regal, obviously), sitting up front as we bowl along country lanes, steering round corners with one hand, pointing out things with the other.

What you will need, however, is a good, detailed map. I mainly used those orange Ordnance Survey *Explorers*, or my trusty torn and beer-stained magenta *Landrangers*. In each chapter, I have tried to keep to a coherent route that can be easily followed, but in the spirit of this book I wouldn't want it to be prescriptive. As you will see, there will be diversions. Which is part of the fun. I don't use a satnav, and I hope that if you embark on these journeys with one, you will turn it off when you get within range of the starting blocks. Assuming you're not driving a petrol tanker that's going to get wedged on a hump-backed bridge, one of the great benefits of driving unaided about England is that you can easily get lost. Don't worry, that's when you start to make discoveries for yourself: a forgotten church behind dark yews, an obsolete signpost in a hedge, an eccentric pub at a crossroads. That's what I've done, and my constant travels around England have been among the most revealing and fascinating experiences I could possibly have had. I do hope that you will find the places, buildings and