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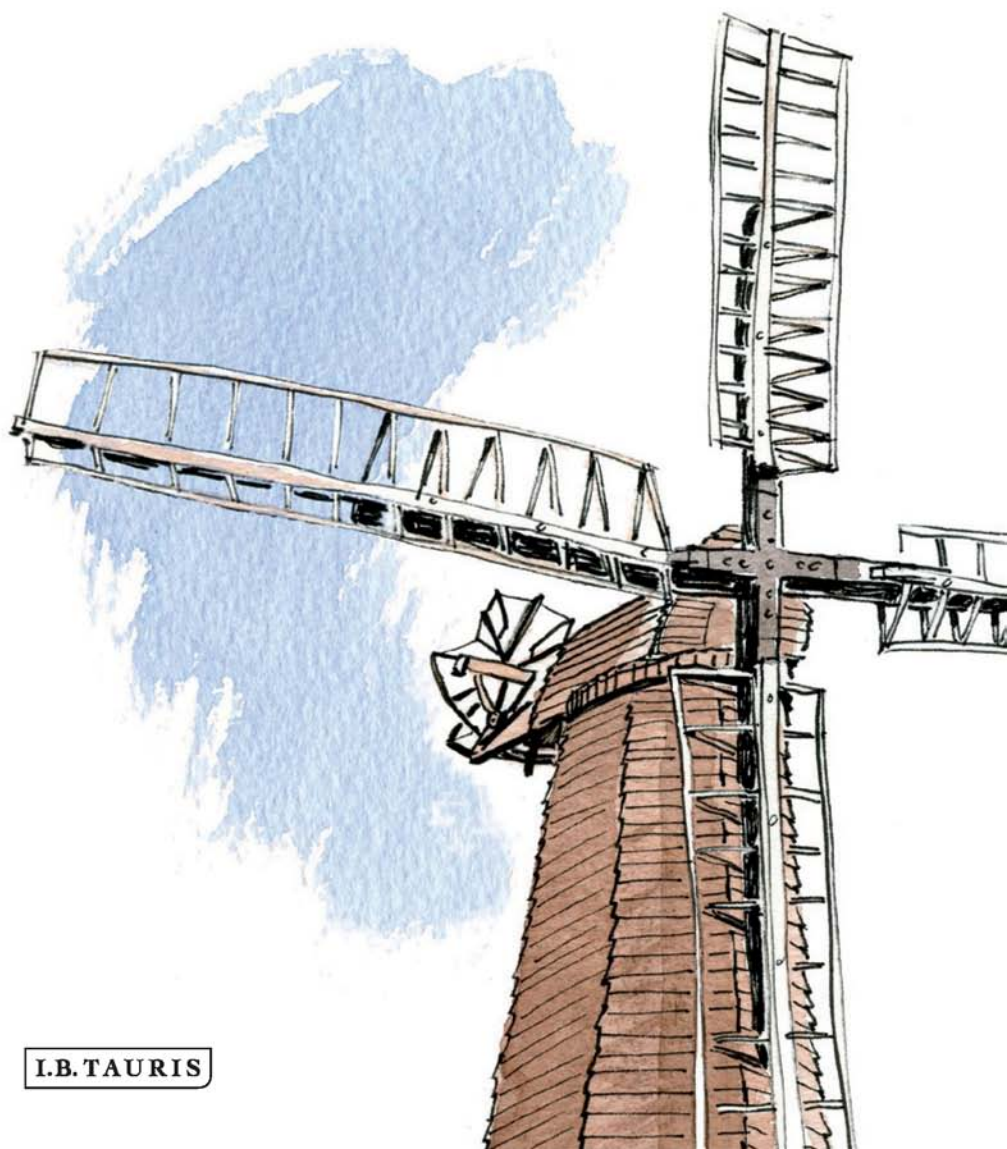
Traditional Buildings of the English Countryside

An Illustrated Guide

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide those travelling around the English countryside with a better understanding of the variations in buildings in the different regions and the reasons why they occur. It is also an exposition on the diversity of old buildings in rural areas and the way people lived and worked in them. The range and complexity of the subject has imposed constraints on coverage, and with this in mind the text has been directed towards a clear and precise interpretation on the more fundamental aspects of rural building and living in earlier times. The appendices at the back list a wide selection of places to visit that have been chosen as being of particular appeal to anyone interested in the past.

1 *The Landscape and How it Developed*

Whilst much of the rural scenery in Britain is the outcome of evolution and the natural world, considerable changes have also occurred through human intervention. In reality some landscapes derive from the work of earlier generations whose activities have materially altered the appearance of the landscape.

The Early Forests

Much of England was at one time covered with dense forest, though by 1600 the wooded areas had been denuded to a point where good timber was becoming scarce. Up to that stage, timber had been used extravagantly for a variety of purposes, which included shipbuilding, pottery, iron and charcoal-making without proper regard to conserving resources. Afforestation started when the last Ice Age receded; and as the land became warmer and fertile, trees started to grow, the more successful species being birch, poplar, rowan, willow and fir. Later, a period of rising temperatures encouraged species such as oak, elm and hazel to take a firm hold. Oak in particular became prolific and can still be seen in large numbers in the south of England.

The Roman Legacy

The parts of Britain occupied by the Romans underwent changes that had a lasting impact on the natural landscape. A large number of historic towns in England have Roman origins, and many roads continue to follow the routes originally selected by Roman engineers. Before this, road communications had been by means of tracks running mostly along higher ground to overcome the problem of flooding in the winter months. The Romans, with improved knowledge and engineering skills, were able to

build highways in lowland areas, and this had the effect of opening up new direct routes and created opportunities for increased trade, especially at the ports.

The Arrival of the Saxons and Vikings

The Saxon and Viking invasions between AD 400 and 1066 are also significant for they started the coming together of communities to form the village way of life familiar in the present day. The traditional village green, now the scene of cricket matches and local events, had defensive origins and was the place where cattle could be driven for protection against wolves and rustlers.

The Norman Conquest

The Norman Conquest in AD 1066 marked the start of an important phase in British history, with fundamental changes being made to the rule of law and the cultural development of the people. The Normans not only dispossessed the Saxon overlords of their lands but also built a range of fortifications to consolidate territorial gains made against a fickle and unreliable populace. Castles appeared in strategic places in the countryside and in existing towns, with the intention of subjugating inhabitants through an atmosphere of awe and fear. It is important to differentiate between a castle and a fort. Whilst fortifications may predominate over domestic features, a castle is in essence a protected residence, whereas a fort has purely a military purpose.

As the new rule became consolidated, the Normans found additional uses for their castles and used them as strongholds for the treasury. The castles also made convenient prisons and centres of administration, and were ideal for holding courts, meetings and hearings. The face of the countryside started to alter as well, with many marshland areas being drained and reclaimed, with neglected woodlands that had been denuded and allowed to grow wild being cleared and used for cultivation. The period between 1150 and 1500 was also a time of extensive building in both the towns and the countryside.

The Reform of Agriculture
Between 1750 and 1845, some areas in England underwent fundamental changes following the passing of the Enclosure Acts. Up to this time the pattern of farming in many parts varied little from medieval practices, and land was worked under a system of open fields divided into strips. The effect of this new legislation was to break up and remodel the landscape into a network of fields surrounded by hedgerows. The new field boundaries were mainly defined either by timber fencing or hedging – mostly of whitethorn or hawthorn. In areas where stone was freely available, fields were mostly enclosed with dry-stone walling. This is a technique whereby stones of various sizes are put together in a way that enables them to be assembled without the use of mortar. This change also saw the cutting of a system of shallow ditches for improved field drainage, which enhanced the fertility of the land.

The Industrial Revolution
After the Industrial Revolution the growing pace of change altered large areas of the countryside in both function and appearance, and networks of roads, canals and railways encroached into hitherto unspoilt farmland. The worst effects were to be felt from mining, which scarred and polluted the surrounding landscape. Today, many manmade features in the form of viaducts, aqueducts, cuttings, bridges, locks and roadways blend into the landscape and have become part of history.

2 *The Origins of Place Names*

English Place Names and How They Can Relate to Buildings and People

The Latin Origins

A host of curious and strange-sounding place names can be found around the regions of England, many of them having very early origins. Some are derived from the influence of either the Saxon or Norman occupations whilst others have been Anglicized from Latin and may even be a direct throwback to Roman times. Examples are *Londinium*, the Roman name for London, and *portus* (a harbour), from which comes Portsmouth. Local dialects and customs have also produced some odd names – sometimes for rather peculiar or unpredictable reasons. Moreover, the spoken English of today differs considerably from many of the terms, meanings and pronunciations used in the past. Some of the more perplexing names are frequently found to be hybrid and come from elements of two or more languages.

Saxon and Celtic Links

Names that stem from the Saxons can often be traced back to a local leader or dignitary. Hastings is believed to relate to *Haesta*, the name of the man who controlled a settlement in that area. Where *stead* features in a place name, historians believe that it is linked to a Saxon farmstead and has resulted in names such as Ashamstead or Oakhamstead, which are likely to have been associated with a farm located near a notable tree. If a name terminates in *ley* the meaning refers to a forest clearing or meadow, and well-known towns such as Camberley and Henley can be identified with this interpretation. Those places which end in *bury* have connections with a fortification or stronghold, and many are now large urbanizations

or cities such as Shrewsbury, Newbury, Sudbury, Norbury, Salisbury and Bloomsbury. The Saxon influence also perpetuates in the much-used term 'borough', which comes from *beorg*, meaning a mound. Many towns – including Farnborough, Middlesbrough, Peterborough and Scarborough – have a relationship with this term. In the north of England the Celtic influence is clearly detectable. *Kirk* is Gaelic and has connections with Christianity, more notably an established church. This explains names such as Kirkbride and those with a similar connotation. Any name beginning with *bal* has Celtic origins, with *bally* being the Gaelic for village. Baldersly in North Yorkshire is one such example. *Ouse* is Celtic for water, which gives rise to names such as Ousefleet and Ouseburn.

The Norse Connections

The Norsemen who invaded England in the ninth century also left a legacy in place names, especially those that end with the attachment *by* which refers to a township or settlement. Names such as Selby, Derby, Kirby and Crosby all come within this category. In particular *kirby* refers to a village with a church and *crosby* a village with a cross. *Thorp* means settlement, which explains names such as Bishopthorpe, Althorpe and others. A further indication of an old Norse settlement is the term *thwaite*, which denotes a clearing in a forest or woodland or even thick overgrowth. Towns linked to this include Hawthornthwaite and Brackenthwaite. *Mor* refers to barren upland. *Tun* is more associated with a person; for example, someone with the name of Beorhthelm may well have been the origin of the place name Brighton.

The French Influence

The French influence arising from the Norman invasion was more in the use of particular words and expressions rather than in word terminations or adjuncts. Town names such as Theydon Bois in Essex, Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Belvoir in Leicestershire are examples of an obvious French connection. Some Old French names have, however, become Anglicized – such as Sandygate, which started as Sangatte. *Beau* means attractive, hence the name Beaulieu; *mal* refers to a difficult terrain or access. Herstmonceux in Sussex was the seat of the Monceaux family who were Norman.

The Legacy of Old English

Many of the Old English terms are self-explanatory, such as Swinford, which describes a ford – a place in a river or stream where it is shallow enough to be crossed by foot or vehicle – where swine were kept. *Stan* means stone, and Stanford refers to a place where a stone wall meets a ford. Sometimes place names are linked either to a religious establishment, such as a monastery, or to a lord of the manor. Names like Monks Risborough and Weston Favell are good examples. *Tring* is Old English for a tree-covered slope, and *weald* means a woodland. *Chart* is an old description for rough ground, and places such as Chartwell and Chart Sutton relate to this. *Stoke* is an old term for 'place' and Stoke Abbot for example, describes a place where land was once held by the Abbot of Sherborne. In the past, partitions known as *penns* were sometimes built within the waters of a river so that fish could be kept captive and alive until ready for consumption, so the name *penn* attached to any historical place name may have a direct connection with this practice, although the term was also used for an animal enclosure. *Den* is Old English for animal pastureland, giving substance to names like Crittenden and Hughenden. In the present day some names may not stand the test of logic or reason, but there are likely to be hidden answers.

Dereliction

Many early settlements, villages or hamlets (small villages) were destroyed by either invasion, conflict or economic decline, even though the place name may have survived. The plague known as the Black Death decimated many communities to the point of non-existence, and in some cases wealthy landowners relocated settlements to improve the amenities around a grand home, which sometimes entailed remodelling the local landscape. There are many areas around England where the remains of deserted villages can be found; most have a story to tell. Some place names have also fallen victim to the use of slipshod language and they cannot now be readily identified with the original spelling and interpretation.

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Other Names with Interesting Origins

Ac relates to oak, which has resulted in names such as Acton and Ackworth.

Addle is Old English for a dung heap or latrine pit. This links with the place names such as Addlestone or Eddelston.

Ald is early English for old, hence names such as Aldwick and Aldborough.

Ax and *ec* link a place with water, hence Axminster and Exeter.

Bec refers to a brook and has resulted in names such as Beckenham, Beckley and Beckhampton.

Castra is an ancient term for a camp – hence names such as Lancaster.

Col refers to a colony, Lincoln being a good example.

Combe means a hollow and relates to places names such as Ilfracombe and Boscombe.

Dal is an early term for a dale, hence names such as Arundel.

Ham refers to a manor estate and has produced names like Hambrook and Holkham. Hamstead describes a farmstead that had been attached to a manor estate.

Hurst means a wood: Lyndhurst and Midhurst.

Strata means a street, hence Stratford and Stratton.

Wick describes a town, which fits with Warwick.

Wich is the old name for a creek, which gives meaning to place names such as Harwich, Ipswich and Greenwich.

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1. Aisled barn

3 *Farm Buildings and Farming*

Old farm buildings can reveal much about an area and the method and type of farming undertaken, either now or in the past. The nucleus of any farm is the farmhouse around which a group of buildings have been formed to create a farmstead. They are usually close to a village, town or hamlet, but some are found well away from communities, often as the result of an original settlement having been relocated or deserted, leaving the farmstead in isolation. Buildings will not always be found in group form, and some may be located in other parts of a holding for a particular convenience or reason, such as the need to avoid a difficult terrain for carting or unnecessary journeying in the care of cattle. The essence of efficiency in a farmyard is compactness and an arrangement that is energy saving.

Farmstead Layouts
As a result, four standard layouts evolved that were found to meet these requirements, namely: the L shape, the U form, the E form and the enclosed square or compound. The size and number of buildings were influenced by the amount of land attached to the farm and the type of farming being practised. Adaptations of the basic design occur where there is a need to take advantage of a sloping site to drain effluent away from a cowshed or stable, and in locations that enable gains to be made from natural features or the prevailing wind. Also, there are some notable regional differences, such as the bastle houses, the longhouses and the laithe houses, which will be described later.

The Effect of Mechanization

As farming became more mechanized, all available forms of motive power were harnessed for threshing. Use of the flail was overtaken by either wind, water or horse power, and in some cases the steam engine – prompting a different form of barn design. Buildings that used machinery powered by horses (known as a horse engine) can be easily spotted by an addition which has a distinctive rounded or polygonal end (Fig. 2), with any other forms of machinery being housed in a plain rectangular structure set at right angles to the barn.

~ Barns ~

The Threshing Barn

Until comparatively recent times barns were used jointly for the threshing of wheat, barley, oats or rye and for the storage of hay and threshed straw. Most can be readily identified externally by their shape and proportions, and the majority have been designed to a more or less standard layout, but regional variations are apparent. The basic design is rectangular with a centrally located threshing floor and two equally proportioned bays either side. Many of the larger barns are aisled and have sweeping roofs going down to low-level eaves (Fig. 1). The large tall entrance doors in the middle are a clear distinguishing feature, opening on to the threshing area, with double or single doors at the opposite side. Not only did this enable deliveries to be made at the source of the threshing operation but it also provided a draught and good light for winnowing the husks from the grain. In some districts the main doors will be found set in projecting porches that gave the threshing process added protection during spells of bad weather.

To prevent grain from being blown away and to stop animals from straying into the area of operation, loose boards that slotted into grooves were sometimes used as a temporary barrier during work. In order to minimize damage to a crop from damp and mould, extra ventilation was introduced by way of air vents around the walls. An original barn will have an abundance of these holes, worked to a pattern of small square or triangular openings or narrow vertical slits. In some parts of the country, barns built at first-floor level were favoured, in an effort to reduce the risk of infestations from vermin, with the ground floor being utilized for some other purpose.

2. Horse engine

The Tithe Barn

Many of the remaining old barns were originally tithe barns. A tithe was a tax levied on one-tenth of the annual produce from the land, imposed to support the parish priest and to enable him to maintain the fabric of church property and to provide relief for the poor. Produce raised for this purpose was stored in a nearby barn, usually being of modest proportions, but those serving the monasteries were often massive. In 1891 an Act of Parliament restricted the payment of tithes and the 1925 Tithe Act transferred tithe rent charges to Queen Anne's Bounty Fund, which had been established in 1704 for the benefit of the poorer clergy. Tithes were eventually extinguished by the 1936 Tithe Act.

The Granary

A granary is a building used for the storage of grain after it has been threshed and winnowed. A typical granary is a free-standing square or rectangular timber structure resting on a series of small piers. Granaries are mostly weatherboarded externally, but slate and tile cladding and brick nogging were also used. In order to help keep out rats and mice the flooring was always covered with tongue-and-groove boarding, and occasionally this