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# At Home

A Short History of Private Life

Written by Bill Bryson

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# At Home

A SHORT HISTORY OF PRIVATE LIFE

Bill Bryson



Doubleday

LONDON • NEW YORK • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS  
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA  
A Random House Group Company  
[www.rbooks.co.uk](http://www.rbooks.co.uk)

First published in Great Britain  
in 2010 by Doubleday  
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

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A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780385608275

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Typeset in 11.5/16pt Minion by  
Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1



**Mixed Sources**

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# 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 (or have 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.

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.



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.

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*.



*Interior view of Joseph Paxton's ethereal Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The gates are still standing in Kensington Gardens.*

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Year

### I

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1850, in Hyde Park in London, there arose a most extraordinary structure: a giant iron and glass greenhouse covering nineteen acres of ground and containing within its airy vastness enough room for four St Paul's Cathedrals. For the short time of its existence, it was the biggest building on earth. Known formally as the Palace of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, it was incontestably magnificent, but all the more so for being so sudden, so startlingly glassy, so gloriously and unexpectedly *there*. Douglas Jerrold, a columnist for the weekly magazine *Punch*, dubbed it the Crystal Palace, and the name stuck.

It had taken just five months to build. It was a miracle that it was built at all. Less than a year earlier it had not even existed as an idea. The exhibition for which it was conceived was the dream of a civil servant named Henry Cole, whose other principal claim to history's attention is as the inventor of the Christmas card (as a way of encouraging people to use the new penny post). In 1849 Cole visited the Paris Exhibition – a comparatively parochial affair, limited to French manufacturers – and became keen to try something similar in England, but grander. He persuaded many worthies, including Prince Albert, to get excited about

the idea of a Great Exhibition, and on 11 January 1850 they held their first meeting with a view to opening on 1 May of the following year. This gave them slightly less than sixteen months to design and erect the largest building ever envisioned, attract and install tens of thousands of displays from every quarter of the globe, fit out restaurants and rest-rooms, employ staff, arrange insurance and police protection, print up handbills, and a million other things, in a country that wasn't at all convinced it wanted such a costly and disruptive production in the first place. It was a patently unachievable ambition, and for the next several months they patently failed to achieve it. In an open competition, 245 designs for the exhibition hall were submitted. All were rejected as unworkable.

Facing disaster, the committee did what committees in desperate circumstances sometimes do: it commissioned another committee with a better title. The Building Committee of the Royal Commission for the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations consisted of four men – Matthew Digby Wyatt, Owen Jones, Charles Wild, and the great engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel – and a single instruction, to come up with a design worthy of the greatest exhibition in history, to begin in ten months, within a constrained and shrunken budget. Of the four committee members, only the youthful Wyatt was a trained architect, and he had not yet actually built anything; at this stage of his career he made his living as a writer. Wild was an engineer whose experience was almost exclusively with boats and bridges. Jones was an interior decorator. Only Brunel had experience of large-scale projects. He was indubitably a genius, but an unnerving one as it nearly always took epic infusions of time and cash to find a point of intersection between his soaring visions and an achievable reality.

The structure the four men came up with now was a thing of unhappy wonder. A vast, low, dark shed of a building, pregnant with gloom, with all the spirit and playfulness of an abattoir, it looked like something designed in a hurry by four people working separately. The cost could scarcely be calculated, but it was almost certainly unbuildable anyway. Construction would require thirty million bricks and there was

no guarantee that such a number could be acquired, much less laid, in time. The whole was to be capped off by Brunel's contribution: an iron dome two hundred feet across – a striking feature, without question, but rather an odd one on a one-storey building. No one had ever built such a massive thing of iron before, and Brunel couldn't of course begin to tinker and hoist until there was a building beneath it – and all of this to be undertaken and completed in ten months, for a project intended to stand for less than half a year. Who would take it all down afterwards and what would become of its mighty dome and millions of bricks were questions too uncomfortable to consider.

Into this unfolding crisis stepped the calm figure of Joseph Paxton, head gardener of Chatsworth House, principal seat of the Duke of Devonshire (but located in that peculiar English way in Derbyshire). Paxton was a wonder. Born into a poor farming family in Bedfordshire in 1803, he was sent out to work as an apprentice gardener at the age of fourteen, but so distinguished himself that within six years he was running an experimental arboretum for the new and prestigious Horticultural Society (soon to become the Royal Horticultural Society) in west London – a startlingly responsible job for someone who was really still just a boy. There one day he fell into conversation with the Duke of Devonshire, who owned neighbouring Chiswick House and rather a lot of the rest of the British Isles – some two hundred thousand acres of productive countryside spread beneath seven great stately homes. The duke took an instant shine to Paxton, not so much, it appears, because Paxton showed any particular genius as because he spoke in a strong, clear voice. The duke was hard of hearing and appreciated clarity of speech. Impulsively, he invited Paxton to be head gardener at Chatsworth. Paxton accepted. He was twenty-two years old.

It was the most improbably wise move any aristocrat has ever made. Paxton leapt into the job with levels of energy and application that simply dazzled. He designed and installed the famous Emperor Fountain, which could send a jet of water 290 feet into the air – a feat of hydraulic engineering that has still been exceeded only once in Europe; built the largest rockery in the country; designed a new estate village;

became the world's leading expert on the dahlia; won prizes for producing the country's finest melons, figs, peaches and nectarines; and created an enormous tropical hothouse, known as the Great Stove, which covered an acre of ground and was so roomy within that Queen Victoria, on a visit in 1843, was able to tour it in a horse-drawn carriage. Through improved estate management, he eliminated £1 million from the duke's debts. With the duke's blessing, he launched and ran two gardening magazines and a national daily newspaper, the *Daily News*, which was briefly edited by Charles Dickens. He wrote books on gardening, invested so wisely in the shares of railway companies that he was invited on to the boards of three of them, and at Birkenhead, near Liverpool, designed and built the world's first municipal park. This so captivated the American Frederick Law Olmsted that he modelled Central Park in New York on it. In 1849, the head botanist at Kew sent Paxton a rare and ailing lily, wondering if he could save it. Paxton designed a special hothouse and – you won't be surprised to hear – within three months had it flowering.

When he learned that the commissioners of the Great Exhibition were struggling to find a design for their hall, it occurred to him that something like his hothouses might work. While chairing a meeting of a committee of the Midland Railway, he doodled a rough design on a piece of blotting paper and had completed drawings ready for review in two weeks. The design actually broke all the competition rules. It was submitted after the closing date and, for all its glass and iron, it incorporated many combustible materials – acres of wooden flooring, for one thing – which were strictly forbidden. The architectural consultants pointed out, not unreasonably, that Paxton was not a trained architect and had never attempted anything on this scale before. But then, of course, no one had. For that reason, nobody could declare with complete confidence that the scheme would work. Many worried that the building would grow insupportably warm when filled with baking sunshine and jostling crowds. Others feared that the lofty glazing bars would expand in the summer's heat and that giant panes of glass would silently fall out and crash on to the throngs below. The profoundest worry was that the whole frail-looking edifice would simply blow away in a storm.



So the risks were considerable and keenly felt, yet after only a few days of fretful hesitation the commissioners approved Paxton's plan. Nothing – really, absolutely nothing – says more about Victorian Britain and its capacity for brilliance than that the century's most daring and iconic building was entrusted to a gardener. Paxton's Crystal Palace required no bricks at all – indeed, no mortar, no cement, no foundations. It was just bolted together and sat on the ground like a tent. This was not merely an ingenious solution to a monumental challenge, but a radical departure from anything that had ever been tried before.

The central virtue of Paxton's airy palace was that it could be prefabricated from standard parts. At its heart was a single component – a cast-iron truss 3 feet wide and 23 feet 3 inches long – which could be fitted together with matching trusses to make a frame on which to hang the building's glass – nearly a million square feet of it, or a third of all the glass normally produced in Britain in a year. A special mobile platform was designed that moved along the roof supports enabling workmen to install 18,000 panes of glass a week – a rate of productivity that was, and is, a wonder of efficiency. To deal with the enormous amount of guttering required – some twenty miles in all – Paxton designed a machine, manned by a small team, that could attach two thousand feet of guttering a day – a quantity that would previously have represented a day's work for three hundred men. In every sense the project was a marvel.

Paxton was very lucky in his timing, for just at the moment of the Great Exhibition glass suddenly became available in a way it never had before. Glass had always been a tricky material. It was really hard to make well, and not particularly easy to make at all, which is why for so much of its history it was a luxury item. Happily, two recent technological breakthroughs had changed that. First, the French invented plate glass – so called because the molten glass was spread across tables known as plates. This allowed for the first time the creation of really large panes of glass, which made shop windows possible. Plate glass, however, had to be cooled for ten days after being rolled out, which meant that each table was out of action most of the time, and then each sheet required a lot of

grinding and polishing. This naturally made it expensive. In 1838, a cheaper refinement was developed – sheet glass. This had most of the virtues of plate glass, but cooled faster and needed less polishing, so could be made much more cheaply. Suddenly glass of a good size could be produced economically in limitless volumes.

Allied with this was the timely abolition of two longstanding taxes: the window tax and glass tax (which, strictly speaking, was an excise duty). The window tax dated from 1696 and was sufficiently punishing that people really did avoid putting windows in buildings where they could. The bricked-up window openings that are such a feature of many period buildings in Britain today were once usually painted to look like windows. (It is sometimes rather a shame that they aren't still.) The tax was sorely resented as 'a tax on air and light', and meant that many servants and others of constrained means were condemned to live in airless rooms.

The second duty, introduced in 1746, was based not on the number of windows but on the weight of the glass within them, so glass was made thin and weak throughout the Georgian period, and window frames had to be compensatingly sturdy. The well-known bull's-eye panes also became a feature at this time. They are a consequence of the type of glass-making that produced what was known as crown glass (so called because it is slightly convex, or crown-shaped). The bull's-eye marked the place on a sheet of glass where the blower's pontil – the blowing tool – had been attached. Because that part of the glass was flawed, it escaped the tax and so developed a certain appeal among the frugal. Bull's-eye panes became popular in cheap inns and businesses and at the backs of private homes where quality was not an issue. The glass levy was abolished in 1845, just shy of its hundredth anniversary, and the abolition of the window tax followed, conveniently and fortuitously, in 1851. Just at the moment when Paxton wanted more glass than anyone ever had before, the price was reduced by more than half. This, along with the technological changes that independently boosted production, was the impetus that made the Crystal Palace possible.

The finished building was precisely 1,851 feet long (in celebration

of the year), 408 feet across and almost 110 feet high along its central spine – spacious enough to enclose a much admired avenue of elms that would otherwise have had to be felled. Because of its size, the structure required a lot of inputs: 293,655 panes of glass, 33,000 iron trusses and tens of thousands of feet of wooden flooring, yet thanks to Paxton's methods the final cost came in at an exceedingly agreeable £80,000. From start to finish, the work took just under thirty-five weeks. St Paul's Cathedral had taken thirty-five years.

Two miles away the new Houses of Parliament had been under construction for a decade and still weren't anywhere near complete. A writer for *Punch* suggested, only half in jest, that the government should commission Paxton to design a Crystal Parliament. A catchphrase arose for any problem that proved intractable: 'Ask Paxton.'

The Crystal Palace was at once the world's largest building and its lightest, most ethereal one. Today we are used to encountering glass in volume, but to someone living in 1851 the idea of strolling through cubic acres of airy light *inside* a building was dazzling – indeed, giddy-ing. The arriving visitor's first sight of the Exhibition Hall from afar, glinting and transparent, is really beyond our imagining. It would have seemed as delicate and evanescent, as miraculously improbable, as a soap bubble. To anyone arriving at Hyde Park, the first sight of the Crystal Palace, floating above the trees, sparkling in sunshine, would have been a moment of knee-weakening splendour.