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Icons of England

Edited by Bill Bryson

Published by Black Swan

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ICONS OF ENGLAND

Edited by

Bill Bryson



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THE CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND
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FOREWORD

His Royal Highness
The Prince of Wales



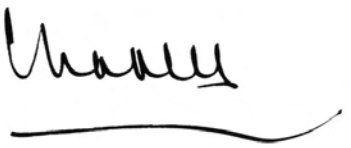
CLARENCE HOUSE

There is perhaps a rich irony in the fact that it takes an American, albeit one who has lived in these islands for many years, to recognize, celebrate and fight to preserve so much of what is precious about our country. There can be no-one who more deserves the title of "honorary Englishman" than Bill Bryson. Through his books, films and his campaigning as President of the Campaign to Protect Rural England he has done so much to help us appreciate the wonders and charms which surround us and to which, too often, we seem utterly blind. We all owe him the greatest possible debt, and so I could not be more pleased to write a foreword to this remarkable book, *Icons of England.*

And what greater icon could we have than our countryside, which I have always believed helps to define our identity as a nation? England is blessed with some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. The patchwork quilt of fields, moors, forests, villages, and market towns which spreads across this land is the product of a golden combination of Nature's gift to us and the toil and care of generations of farmers and their families who have managed the land. To me, it embodies England's very soul and is as precious as any Cathedral. The dry stone walls, the hedges, the thatched cottages, the village Churches, pubs, post offices and shops are at the heart of what it means to be English, as are the people whose skills and craftsmanship and commitment keep them alive.

For more than eighty years, the Campaign to Protect Rural England has been leading the fight to preserve the remaining delicate fabric of our countryside. The foresight of the founding fathers was extraordinary – in 1926 Clough Williams-Ellis, whom I remember well and admire greatly, published *England and the Octopus*, an anti-sprawl polemic, and in the same year Sir Patrick Abercrombie wrote his paper, *The Preservation of Rural England.* The fight has continued since then and great successes have been won. Indeed, the recent creation of the South Downs National Park, sixty years after it was first proposed, shows the importance of perseverance and is a huge cause for optimism. When we do all come together to work towards a goal, so much can be achieved. It gives me hope that we will not allow our traditions and heritage to be swept away, and that we will look once more to the land for nourishment, healing, wisdom and inspiration.

When asked what, for them, encapsulates the English countryside, the contributors to this book came up with a wide variety of personal icons, from a favourite landscape to a treasured monument, from a particular species of wildlife to a familiar rustic emblem or rural tradition. Together they have created an eclectic and richly varied celebration of England's countryside. I pray that this book will inspire us all to work tirelessly to preserve everything that is best in our magnificent countryside and to ensure that it remains at the very heart of our great island story.



INTRODUCTION

Bill Bryson
President, CPRE



YEARS AGO, WHEN I was brand new to Britain and everything was still a mystery to me, I went with an English friend to Brighton for the day, and there I saw my first seaside pier. The idea of constructing a runway to nowhere was one that would never have occurred to me. I asked her what it was for.

'Well, they let you walk out and see the sea,' she explained as if I were a little simple.

'But we can see the sea from here,' I pointed out.

'No, you don't understand. You walk out to the end and you are over the sea. It's lovely.'

'Can you see coral reefs and shipwrecks and things?' I asked hopefully.

'No, it's just murky water.'

'Can you see France?'

'Of course not. You just see the sea.' Her tone betrayed perhaps just a hint of exasperation. 'You take the air. It's very bracing.'

'And then what?'

'Then you walk back and have some whelks and stroll along the promenade and maybe ride a donkey on the beach – no, I don't know why; it's just something else we do – and then you have an ice cream and get on the train and go home.'

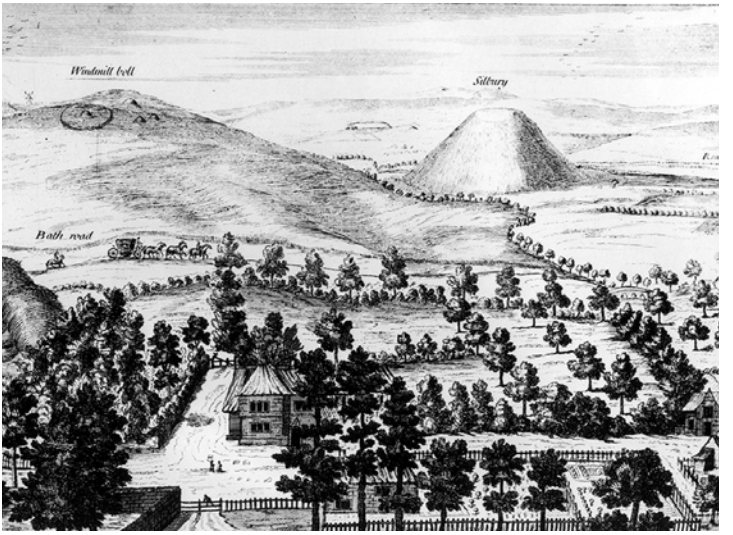
'And this is a fabulous day out?'

'Oh yes, it's lovely. Especially if it doesn't rain.'

I have since come to realize that she was right about everything but the whelks. (If you are reading this in another country and aren't familiar with that marine delicacy, you may get the same experience by finding an old golf ball, removing the cover and eating what remains. The only difference is that the golf ball has a little more flavour.) Indeed, after some thirty years of devoted observation, I have come to appreciate that the things that make England what it is – which is to say, like nowhere else on Earth – and however peculiar they may seem at first blush, are actually quite endearing and often deeply admirable. This is a book about those things.

Four qualities in particular, I think, set English icons apart and make them more memorable, more individual, vastly more noteworthy than icons elsewhere. Foremost among these is the ability – so gloriously evinced in the seaside pier – to be magnificent while having no evident purpose at all.

Consider one of my own favourite national glories, the wondrously artificial, profoundly inexplicable Silbury Hill in Wiltshire – the largest man-made mound in Europe. Built at about the same time as Stonehenge, it covers five acres and rises 130 feet above the surrounding landscape. It is positively immense, and involved an almost unimaginable commitment of labour. Yet Silbury Hill has no known purpose. It is not a burial chamber and holds no treasures. It consists of nothing but soil and rock carefully formed into a large pudding-shaped hill. All that can be said for certain is that some people at some time in the very distant past decided, for purposes we cannot guess, to make a large hill where previously there had been none.



There really is a kind of national instinct for putting up interesting things whether there is a need for them or not. You see it in chalk horses carved in hillsides and Scottish brochs and drystone walls climbing up and over preposterously steep and craggy slopes. (Who cares where the sheep go when they get up there?) I have always been convinced that the starting point for Stonehenge was some guy standing on Salisbury Plain and saying: 'You know, what this place needs is some really big rocks.'

Which brings us to the second distinctive quality of English icons – their ubiquity. Let us rush to London, to modern times, so I can show you what I mean. We are at Hyde Park Corner roundabout, surrounded by a ceaseless flow of vehicles, gazing up at the enormous arched monument that stands on the parklike green island in its centre. Atop

the monument is a large statue of a winged goddess on a chariot. The island is a surprisingly tranquil place, and in fact rather a lonely one, for few visitors find their way through the pedestrian tunnels that lead to it. Fewer still are aware that the arch contains a charming museum and a lift that takes you to a lookout terrace where you get one of the most splendid views in London. It is only way up here that you realize just what a large structure this is – and how startlingly outsized the statue on the roof is. It is the largest bronze sculpture in Europe. Only when you are up there does the scale of all this come into sudden focus. This is a monumental edifice indeed.

Now here is the really interesting thing about it. Ask anyone in London – any cab driver, any policeman, any citizen you care to collar – what the name of this arch is and hardly any of them can tell you. Although it is one of the most visible and driven-past monuments in London, on as prime a site as the city offers, it is utterly and enchantingly lost to consideration because it is just of one of hundreds and hundreds of historic, appreciable, glorious, iconic structures that exist in London. Almost anywhere else in the world this would be a celebrated monument. Here it is backdrop.

Part of the reason its name is not better known is that it has had several in the 180 years since it was built by the great Decimus Burton. At various times it has been known as Constitution Arch, Wellington Arch, Green Park Arch and now Wellington Arch again. You won't be surprised to hear that it is also quite useless and always has been. It was

designed originally as an outer entryway to Buckingham Palace, but was such an impediment to traffic, and so completely out of scale, that it was moved to the traffic island in 1882 just to get it out of the way.

It is your good fortune in this country to have so many iconic treasures, but it is a danger too. Having so many means that they are easily forgotten and even lost – which is the third and most tragic of the qualities that set English icons apart. In the thirty years I have known England, you have lost, or all but lost, an appreciable number of iconic features – milk bottles, corner shops, village post offices, red phone boxes, seaside holidays and even some seaside piers, including the one at Brighton that so bemused and transfixed me thirty years ago.

Happily, there is a fourth and more encouraging quality to icons, as this book so engagingly attests: people love them. They don't just appreciate them, the way you might appreciate a good book or an expensive dinner. They love them like a child. National icons really are the things that set countries apart and yet they are almost always taken completely for granted, which means they often aren't missed until they are gone for good. So it is wonderful to see them given the warmth and reverence they deserve in the pages that follow.

This book is also a timely reminder of how lucky we are to have a heroic outfit like the Campaign to Protect Rural England, to make sure that other iconic features – like Green Belts and hedgerows, long views over dreamy landscapes and a thousand things more – aren't lost as well.