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England's 100 Best Views

Written by Simon Jenkins

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ENGLAND'S 100 BEST VIEWS

SIMON JENKINS

In association with National Trust

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'With the exception of love, there is nothing else by which people of all kinds are more united than by their pleasure in a good view.'

Kenneth Clark

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a celebration of the hills, valleys, rivers, woods and settlements that are the landscape of England. I came to marvel at them while seeking out the best of England's churches and houses. I realised that a building's appeal is not intrinsic, but is a collage of the contexts from which it draws historical and topographical reference. They might be a churchyard, a garden, a stand of trees, an adjacent village or other buildings in an urban setting. Mostly it was just countryside. Such background became an ever more important component of my appreciation of a building, until background became foreground and I was captivated.

The English landscape is traditionally divided between town and country, the product of mankind's struggle to wrest a living from the earth over thousands of years. None of it remains truly 'wild', but a diminishing amount is what we call countryside, land between built-up areas that still answers to nature's moods and seasons. This is the England that English people profess to love. It is among the crown jewels of the national personality.

My intention is to examine not so much the landscape as our emotions in responding to it, the impact it makes on the eye and the imagination. I am not just presenting a picture of Buttermere's pines, Snape's marshes, Beachy Head or Tintagel, I am there on location, experiencing and trying to articulate the beauty of these places. This awareness is what distinguishes a picture from a view, which to me is an ever-changing blend of geology and climate,

Windermere from Gummer's How, Morecambe Bay in the distance

seasons of the year, time of day, even my own mood at the time. It is the soothing dance of sun across a Dorset pasture, the flicker of light on the Thames, the tricks of rain clouds over a Yorkshire dale.

A view is a window on our relationship to the natural and man-made environment. The experience can be uplifting, some say spiritual. It prompted William Hazlitt to tell his readers always to walk alone (though afterwards to dine in company). To him other people were a distraction from the presence of nature, almost a sacrilege. Much of the greatest poetry and painting emanates from the solitary experience of landscape. Yet it is an experience that can also enrich our relations with each other. The art historian Kenneth Clark wrote, 'With the exception of love, there is nothing else by which people of all kinds are more united than by their pleasure in a good view.'

The modern writer on landscape Robert Macfarlane likewise remarks, 'Every day, millions of people find themselves deepened and dignified by their encounters with particular places . . . brought to sudden states of awe by encounters . . . whose power to move us is beyond expression.' I understand this concept of awe 'beyond expression', but in my view we must struggle to express it. If we do not, what we love will be taken from us. Awe needs champions. The landscape is a garden of delights but one as vulnerable as any garden. England is among the most intensely developed of the world's leading countries. Yet it is a country whose landscape has for half a century been the most carefully protected against insensitive development. I regard that landscape as a treasure house no less in need of guardianship than the contents of the British Museum or the National Gallery. This book is a catalogue of its finest contents.

My approach is to list the best views in England. I accept that such a list is personal, and that there are hundreds of other equally glorious candidates. But I defend the concept of best, contesting the idea that beauty of any sort, especially of landscape, is subjective. The history of civilisation is of the search for a community of

terms, for definitions of beauty that have general meaning, leading to discussion and conclusion. If visual beauty were purely subjective, conversation about art would cease and custodianship and conservation would have no basis. We must find agreement on what is lovely in our surroundings if we are to know what we are trying to protect. That agreement must start with a common terminology.

The language of landscape begins in geology. The rocks and earth of the British Isles, of which England comprises roughly a half, are more varied within narrower confines than of any country in Europe. The planet's primal eruptions left England itself neatly divided by the long limestone spine of the Pennines and Cotswolds. To the west of this spine, volcanic rocks spewed up through sedimentary layers, mostly of old red sandstone, to produce the lumpy uplands of the West Country, the Welsh marches and the Lake District. The glaciation of subsequent ice ages eroded these mountains into the rounded hills and smooth-shaped combes we know today. To the east is a different geology, that of softer carboniferous limestone in the north and chalk and clay in the south. It yielded the gentler contours of the wolds and downs, the alluvial plains shaped by great rivers and the erosion of the coast by an invading sea.

England at the dawn of human settlement was mostly covered in woods. Pollen analysis shows post-glacial warming that pushed birch and pine northwards in favour of oak, elm, lime and ash. For all the claims of guidebooks, no truly wild woodland survives. The arriving Romans would have found an already managed landscape, cleared of much of its forest to meet the need for fuel, grazing animals and building materials. England's last wild woodland is believed to have been the old Forest of Dean, and it was gone by the early Middle Ages.

Beside or replacing the woods were the fields. Their origins and geometry can seem as mysterious as Stonehenge, shaped into oblongs, lozenges, ovals and triangles. Swaledale and Langdale are a crazy paving of walls, a possible legacy of some Saxon or Viking family settlement or dispute, or perhaps the wayward course of

a drunken ploughman or rebellious ox. To this day fields remain secrets that the English countryside keeps locked in its heart.

By the eighteenth century the balance between wood and field had drastically tipped towards the latter. Forests were devastated by the need for heating, iron smelting and ship timbers. Landowners enclosed open country for grazing and common land for agriculture. Uplands were torn apart for minerals and building stone. At the same time much of the countryside was viewed with a new eye, not just as a source of sustenance, whether farmed or hunted, but as a place that might be visited for recreation. The concept of landscape as beauty was born.

Such awareness was not wholly new. Horace and Virgil expressed a deep attachment to their rural homes. Petrarch famously climbed Mont Ventoux 'for pleasure'. Landscape appeared in the background of medieval altarpieces and tapestries, emerging as a subject in its own right in the Renaissance. Its presence in the paintings of Poussin and Claude was reflected in the gardens of kings and noblemen.

This appreciation came late to England. It was imported largely by the Grand Tour, an experience that educated the eye of the rich and informed the management of their country estates. It extended from enclosed gardens and parks to an awareness of the wider landscape. The poet Alexander Pope commanded the designers of the age, 'Let nature never be forgot . . . Consult the genius of the place.' Horace Walpole wrote of William Kent that he 'leapt the fence and saw that all nature was a garden'. If art could copy landscape, landscape could copy art. By the late eighteenth century English writers and painters moved beyond such fabrications to honour nature as such. In 1768 William Gilpin defined the picturesque, as he called it, as 'that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture'. He particularly championed the Wye Valley, where he advised travellers to carry an empty frame or a tinted mirror, through which to view his recommended views. The resulting craze was satirised by Rowlandson's Dr Syntax.



Apotheosis of the picturesque: Dr Syntax captures a view

Soon rural design became a profession in itself. Capability Brown and later Humphry Repton were wealthy entrepreneurs, much in demand. During the eighteenth century they prevailed upon their clients to move thousands of tons of earth, to upheave villages and plant forests. They were not borrowing from nature but creating facsimiles of it. The artificial had to 'look natural'. Vision became slave to fashion. The poet and landscapist William Shenstone advised his contemporaries 'to see directly, but then lose the object, and draw nigh obliquely . . . The foot should never travel by the same path which the eye has travelled over before.' The course of a footpath, the lie of a slope, the curve of a lake, became matters of obsessive attention. At Rievaulx Abbey in Yorkshire and at Stourhead, a view was reduced to a series of keyhole scenes observed from the terrace above.

What had begun as a leisure pursuit soon acquired a moral

dimension, that of the Romantic movement. As early as 1755 John Dalton wrote of Derwentwater,

> Horrors like these at first alarm,
> But soon with savage grandeur charm,
> And raise to noblest thoughts the mind.

Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful* concluded that the 'terror' of mountains should be that of 'exultation, awe and delight rather than dread and loathing'. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats saw nature as ethically superior. Beauty, said Keats, was truth. To Wordsworth on the Wye, nature was 'the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul of all my moral being'.

Thus enhanced by morality and truth, natural beauty was more than ready for the turbulence of the nineteenth century. The Napoleonic wars stalled continental travel and crowded the Lake District and the West Country with tourists. By the 1820s the English countryside was suffused with religious symbolism. To William Blake and Samuel Palmer it was a place fashioned by God, to be shielded from the hideous works of man. When criticised for including workaday scenes in his pictures, Constable declared loftily, 'I never saw an ugly thing in my life.'

This led in turn to the controversies of the Victorian age and the conflict between aestheticism and industrialisation. Enraged by the intrusion into the countryside of the railway, Ruskin followed the Romantics to the Lake District, to be joined by the Pre-Raphaelites. They were followed by Hardwicke Rawnsley and Beatrix Potter, who was to use her fortune to buy thousands of Lakeland acres and give them to the National Trust. There followed the promoters of rambling, bird-watching and climbing. The peaks and the lakes saw the birth of English mountaineering.

The twentieth century, especially its second half, brought a trauma to the landscape, urban and rural, that even the industrialising

Victorians could not have imagined. Slow evolution over centuries now erupted in brutal change. In cities war was the great destroyer, to be followed by a civic obsession with urban demolition and rebuilding, stronger in England than anywhere on the Continent. In the countryside, town and country planning after 1947 sought to delineate the boundary between urban and rural development. It 'listed' for protection urban historic buildings and in the countryside it gradually extended protection to some fifteen per cent of England's land area, designated as national parks, green belts and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Yet even planning could do little to halt the impact of modern agriculture on rural England, aggravated by public subsidy. The countryside was coated in prairie fields, silos, power stations and, at the turn of the twenty-first century, wind turbines. A landscape that had revelled in diversity became widely monocultural, taking its toll on flora and fauna alike. In half a century over a third of the hedgerows in England were grubbed out, and the area of deciduous woodland halved. As a result, whereas average woodland cover in continental Europe is forty-four per cent, in England it is less than ten per cent.

In the 1950s, the historian W. G. Hoskins set out to chart and record what he sensed was the result of this physical upheaval to the surface area of his nation. Mankind's use (and abuse) of rural England had lowered a membrane of obscurity between him and the natural environment. He wrote, 'I felt in my bones that the landscape was speaking to me in a language that I did not understand.' Hoskins dug deep and, in *The Making of the English Landscape*, revealed the history embedded in his surroundings. He ended appalled at the destruction he saw around him, mostly by twentieth-century development insensitive to beauty. It was rarely in any sense 'necessary'. I return to Hoskins and his alarm in my epilogue.

Yet we can still escape and find beauty in the countryside. From the right viewpoint we can look out over the Severn Vale, the Somerset Levels or the Weald of Kent and marvel at how much

that is rural remains varied, informal, unmistakably old. There are places where England looks as it has for centuries and where people in their thousands gather to find and declare it beautiful.

I have often wondered what lies at the root of this powerful response to natural landscape, however much it has been managed over the centuries. Evolutionists intriguingly claim that it harks back to the survival ethic of *Homo sapiens* in the savannahs of Africa. We instinctively welcome the sight of open grassland, with water holes for sustenance, vegetation to hide animals and high points from which to see enemies. In England that means fields, lakes, woods and hills: each feature has its evolutionary purpose.

This may explain why, for many people, a view is an exercise in nostalgia, a craving for a more ordered, secure and predictable past. Though reassuring, nostalgia has dangers. It can fuel resistance to a democratic wish, indeed a need, for wealth and progress. Equally it is a caution, a corrective to reckless change that in the countryside is by its nature irreversible. I do not regard an appreciation of landscape as nostalgic but rather on a par with a love of art or music. The difference is that it is constantly vulnerable, to seasons, to weather, to varying patterns of land use and to changing human needs and responses. I am acutely aware that what we find beautiful today, those in the past found terrifying, ugly or boring, and those in the future may do likewise. But I am encouraged by the manifest fact that public appreciation of environmental beauty seems to increase with time.

As Clark stated, the enjoyment of landscape is the most popular of shared delights. The *Michelin Green Guides* give as many stars to views as to buildings. The crowds that gather at viewpoints are voting for beauty with their feet. But we must beware of over-analysing their motives. I do not agree with the poet Wallace Stevens that we are puppets of culture, that 'we live in a description of a place and not in the place itself'. We are more instinctive in our likes and dislikes than that. We should also heed Wordsworth's warning not to over-analyse our appreciation, lest 'our meddling

intellect misshapes the beauteous forms of things'. People need only to be encouraged to open their eyes and see. As the seventeenth-century divine Thomas Traherne remarked, 'You never enjoy the world aright, till you so love the beauty of enjoying it that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it.'

A more immediate danger than nostalgia is cliché, and my listing the 'best of' risks such criticism. Beautiful places invite superlatives, but I have tried to avoid words such as idyllic, iconic, sensational, incomparable, stunning and picturesque (other than in its art-historical sense), though I refuse to abjure the word beautiful. I am equally on guard against personal likes and dislikes. However objectively we seek to champion the landscape, championship can evoke strong feelings, and when dealing with just a hundred views, favouritism is hard to avoid.

I also confess to biases. In gazing on a view I cannot rejoice at grim spruce plantations, intrusive warehouses, waving turbines or random city towers. They may have an inner loveliness, but they jar on a prospect, just as ill-planted trees can obscure it. I have a preference for bare mountains to forests, hedges to fences, winding roads to motorways. I delight in natural materials and the patina of age. I apologise to those who disagree and find these biases irritating. They will have theirs. What is crucial is that we concentrate on what matters. I have tried to find ground on which we can agree.

I am often asked to name my favourite view. This is hard, for as I said above, any view is conditioned by the experience of it. I shall never forget the sea storm I watched at Hartland, or Borrowdale bathed in sun, or the thrill I get every time I reach the top of Primrose Hill in London. But I confess that nothing quite matched a late-summer afternoon on Gummer's How in Cumbria. Windermere was glistening at my feet. The heights of the Lake District and the Pennines were spread on either side and the Lancashire plain lay as a foil to the south. It is surely the classic English view. It made me feel I never wanted to be anywhere else, in a landscape exhilarating, consoling, desperately precious and, above all, alive.



Salisbury: nature at peace with architecture