

ENGLAND'S
100
BEST VIEWS

SIMON JENKINS

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THE HUNDRED BEST

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ENGLAND'S TOP TEN VIEWS

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DEVON & CORNWALL

Botallack; Carrick Roads; Clovelly; Dartmoor;
Dartmouth; Hartland Quay; Kynance Cove; Minack Theatre;
Plymouth Sound; St Michael's Mount; Tintagel

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THE WEST COUNTRY

Bath, Royal Crescent; Bath, Prior Park; Bristol;
Castle Combe; Chesil Beach; Corfe Castle; Creech Hill;
Dunster; Exmoor, Barna Barrow; Exmoor, Dunkery;
Glastonbury Tor; Little Bredy; Lulworth Cove; Lyme Regis;
Salisbury; Shaftesbury; Stourhead Gardens

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THE SOUTH

Arundel; Ashford Hangers; Coombe Hill; The Chilterns;
Dover; The North Downs; Oxford, The High; Oxford, Radcliffe
Square; Seven Sisters; The Solent; Stowe; White Horse Hill;
Windsor Great Park

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EAST ANGLIA

Cambridge, Backs; Flatford Mill; Holkham; Lavenham;
Sheringham; Snape Marshes

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WEST MIDLANDS

Bibury; Broadway Tower; Chipping Campden; Clee Hills;
Clyro Hill; Hawkstone; Ironbridge Gorge; The Long Mynd;
Ludlow; The Malverns; Peckforton; The Stiperstones;
Symonds Yat; Tyndale Monument

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EAST MIDLANDS

Chatsworth; Dovedale; Kinder Scout;
Mam Tor; The Roaches

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YORKSHIRE

Bempton Cliffs; Gordale Scar; Hebden Bridge;
Ribblehead; Richmond; Rievaulx; Roseberry Topping;
Saltaire; Swaledale; Whitby Harbour

225

THE NORTH WEST

Borrowdale; Buttermere; Castlerigg; Derwentwater;
Gummer's How; Langdale; Ullswater; Wasdale Head; Wrynose
and Hardknott; Hartside Pass; High Cup Nick; Liverpool

255

THE NORTH EAST

Coquetdale; The Cheviots; Durham; Hadrian's Wall;
Lindisfarne; Newcastle

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LONDON

Greenwich; The City; Parliament Square;
Primrose Hill; Richmond Hill; Waterloo Bridge

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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

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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.