

HARDY TRAVELLING BRITAIN
WEEK 10 (E. ANGLIA)
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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Land of the North Folk. I enter Norwich, prowl the sad sea marshes, and walk along a dead road. Describes the Isle of Ely and men who chip flint

§ 1

I WAS lost in a Norfolk lane, so I stopped a man and I said to him:

'Good morning!'

He looked at me.

'Good morning,' I cried. 'Can you tell me if I am right for Norwich?'

He continued to look at me. Then, in an uneasy, suspicious way, he said:

'What d'ye want to know for?'

I might have been annoyed, but leaning out of the car and putting on an affable expression which I usually keep for tea-parties, I said:

'My dear old 'bor, I want to know because I want to get to Norwich.'

The ghost of a smile flitted over his rustic face, and he replied after some deep thought, rather reluctantly, and looking away from me:

'Well; you're right!'

I don't expect any one to believe this unless he knows Norfolk.

Norfolk is the most suspicious county in England. In Devon and Somerset men hit you on the back cordially; in Norfolk they look as though they would like to hit you over the head—till they size you up. You see, for centuries the north folk of East Anglia were accustomed to meet stray Vikings on lonely roads who had just waded ashore from the long boats.

'Good morning, 'bor!' said the Vikings. 'Which is the way to the church?'

'What d'ye want to know for?' was the Norfolk retort.

'Well, we thought about setting fire to it!'

You will gather that Norfolk's suspicion of strangers, which is an ancient complex bitten into the East Anglian through centuries of bitter experience, is well grounded, and should never annoy the traveller. They mean well. Once they bring themselves to call you 'bor' (which, I conclude, is the short for 'neighbour' or, perhaps, 'boy'), you can consider yourself highly complimented. In East Anglia men are either neighbours or Vikings. If they promote you to 'beldom they will do any mortal thing for you except, perhaps, lend you money, for one Norfolk farmer could beat any three Yorkshiremen at driving a bargain.

The word 'bor' is the most popular one in Norfolk dialect, except, perhaps 'mauther', which means girl. Norfolk is full of sturdy, good-looking mauthers with magnificent necks and arms. Some wear flaxen hair in plaits round their ears and look like young Brünnhildes, reminding you that sometimes the Vikings settled down in Norfolk. Boadicea was a typical Norfolk 'mauther' before she took up politics.

I went on between hedges through a country mellow with the harvest. Is there a more magnificent sight in England than a large field of wheat ripe for the reaping? Such rich gold; such tall, majestic stalks like legions of gold arrows. I love the way you can trace the dips and falls of a field on the top of the tall wheat, and I love also the little stray winds that dust the corn stalks in small gusts, blowing them aside and passing on.

The churches of Norfolk are unique. The art of using flint for building is here developed as I have seen it in no other county. Hundreds of thousands of flints a few inches square are embedded in the mortar, forming a polished grey wall hard as steel and indestructible. The effect is most unusual, and if you have ever tried to chip flint—which is the most difficult, unreasonable, capricious stone in the world—you look at these churches with added reverence.

I must tell you that it was in these lanes that I met my first pig. I have encountered the cows of every county in England from Somerset to Cumberland, but this was, as I say, my first pig. She seemed, as I turned the corner rather quickly and headed right for her, to be reading her fortune in the middle of the road. She was a big, shrimp-coloured *prima donna*, with bloodshot eyes, and she wore her tail in a small, neat knot. Awakened to realities by my swift arrival, for I had to jam on the brakes hard, she did a little leap and came running towards me under the impression, apparently, that she was going in the opposite direction. That was where I misread her. She had strong home instincts, and she knew that she had to get back past me. She gave this up, shook a couple of Bath chaps at me, and uttering a series of shrill feminine squeals, ran right ahead, calling on all her gods. As I observed her short, inadequate legs carrying all this bacon down the lane, I knew that in her disturbed mind she believed that she was doing about fifty miles an hour.

I tried kindly to edge past her, but she advanced a ham at an inappropriate moment and recoiled in horror from the bonnet. A ton of bacon in a narrow lane can be more stupid than the hen which belongs to the local suicide club. I hate to frighten animals so I stopped and dismounted, full of good intentions, with the idea of driving her back past the car. However, uttering reproaches in a most unreasonable manner, she dived into the hedge where—serve her right—she stuck fast.

§ 2

I was sitting on a gate studying the map of Norfolk when there came towards me the first tramps I have seen—or rather the first obvious tramps I have seen—since Cheshire. The man was pushing a wooden box on perambulator wheels; the woman was walking a few paces behind him, carrying a small cardboard tray, and wearing the remains of a once fashionable long-waisted tailor-made costume.

She came up to me, pulling the collar of the costume to her throat, which made me realize that she had nothing on beneath it, and asked me to buy a packet of lavender. Much to her surprise I bought twelve.

The man was surprised; so was the mongrel pup who had one sharp ear cocked on the hedge and a rabbit look about his jaw. So we all stood smiling in a group.

'Well,' I said, 'It's an awful life, isn't it? But, thank goodness—catch—we have tobacco!'

Tramps sum you up quicker than a dog or a child. They decide in one second whether you are dangerous or harmless. So we got talking. . . .

'Steady job!' said the woman. 'You wouldn't be in no steady job long, Joe, would you?'

Joe narrowed his eyes and looked down the road. He was a born tramp, a born walker, a born wanderer, half-countryman, half townsman, quite young, but one of those people civilization will never break in. He had served during the war.

'Well,' he said in a tired drawl, 'well, you don't pay no rent and you don't pay no rates, and no income tax, and you can get all you want to eat most times, and I like the country and I don't get on in towns.'

He told me that his 'people' were well-to-do village folk somewhere who wanted him to settle down. (He spat.)

'I won't 'ave no truck with them,' he said. 'They can keep their blinkin' money. I don't want it!'

'And you,' I said to the woman, 'how do you like it?'

She smiled. She also was a vagrant, I think; a much rarer type in a woman. Or she may have been just slipshod and lazy.

'I've seen better days,' she said, putting on a miserable face and drawing her coat collar up.

'Go on with you!' I laughed. 'Admit you'd hate to know where you'd sleep next week!'

She laughed.

'Perhaps I would . . . tho' it's cold sometimes and me stockings dry on me legs which gives me rheumatism some-think cruel at times.'

'I wonder how long either of you would stay in a house?'

'Not long,' said the man definitely. 'Here, boy, come away there! He's a sharp dog, sir, I've been offered quids for him. No, he's never caught a rabbit. . . .'

At this untruthful moment a stoat ran across the road, and the dog was on it like a dart. We tactfully changed the subject.

They told me far more than they realized. The fun it is to tramp from town to town as members of a lazy, irresponsible brotherhood, meeting friends in doss-houses every night, swopping news, hearing how old So-and-so did such and such a thing; putting out all the eatables on the table and holding an auction, then wandering on and on again, listless, without ambition, unenvious of other men, just drifters. . . .

He whistled the dog, nodded to me; she smiled and showed teeth and they went off down the road; the man pushing the truck that held all their worldly goods; the woman a step or two behind; the mongrel questing ahead. You could not feel sorry for them. I believe they were happier than any millionaire; happier in fact, than most of us.

I struck the main road and made for Norwich.

§ 3

The most surprising thing about Norwich is that it contains the only Norman cathedral in England unknown to Americans. Norwich is not on the pilgrimage map, and the reason is geographical. The tourist stream flows due south from Lincoln to Peterborough—Ely—Cambridge, leaving Norwich in the great eastward bulge of Norfolk fifty miles to the left. Some day, of course, the people who map tours

will discover Norwich (and the fourteenth-century hotel which has hot and cold water laid on to the bedrooms), some day, maybe, Norwich may even discover itself.

Norwich is a confusing, characteristic city. It was tied up into hasty knots centuries ago and has never been unwound. It is characteristic of Norfolk. It is a monument to the north folk and it bears the marks of all their peculiarities—it has flint walls and is difficult to know at a glance! Norwich in Somerset would be unthinkable; it is an expression of sturdy East Anglia. I came here knowing nothing about the city except that it has always made money, that it once was the third city in England, that when its weaving trade went north after the coalfields, Norwich just put on a flinty face and learned how to make women's shoes. Trust Norwich to survive!

I saw a red-roofed city dominated by two landmarks: a slim cathedral spire second only to Salisbury and a great square Norman castle on a hill in the heart of which—so George Borrow said confidently—sits an old heathen king 'with his sword in his hand and his gold and silver treasures about him'. I went through queer medieval streets, many paved with cobble-stones, all distinguished by a picturesque dowdiness; some Flemish in appearance, full of houses with the big inverted V on the top story where the hand-looms were housed; and at night beside the river I might have been in the England or the Netherlands of the fourteenth century with the moon falling on huddled roofs, the lamp-light moving in slow waters, the dark figures of men and women going through dark alley-ways between the leaning eaves.

Norwich has been called the 'city of churches'. It struck me also as a city of public-houses and canaries. In hundreds of little homes the shoemakers of Norwich breed prize canaries and discuss points as keenly as Newmarket discusses a horse. If you wanted to stop the traffic in Norwich, the quickest way would be to walk through the city with a first-class Norwich Plain Head on your finger.

'Those are the boys that pay the rent!' said a shoemaker's wife to me nodding to a cage full of little gold birds.

I met a man who keeps, in the season, more than five thousand canaries. He exports them to Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand.

'The ship's butcher, being used to live-stock, looks after them on the voyage,' he told me.

I was offered a Plain Head cock for five pounds and a Crested hen for four pounds; but I managed to get away alone.

There comes a time in the life of all old cities when the city fathers should form a coalition government to decide whether their city is to preserve its ancient beauty or to become a second Leicester or a little Birmingham. Norwich it seems to me, has reached this point.

In fifty years' time Norwich will either not be worth looking at, or it will be one of the most beautiful old cities in England. Few cities possess so many complete streets of half-timbered houses, some medieval, some Tudor—most are disguised by ugly Georgian plaster, which, if scraped off, would reveal the old red-brick and oak. Under intelligent treatment Norwich would emerge like a restored oil painting. The local authorities—should spend a weekend in Shrewsbury in order to realize the remarkable chance that lies immediately before them. Then, on their return, they might catch the architects responsible for putting up new banks like Georgian cinemas—if you can imagine that—and hang them in the iron cage which they will find ready in their castle dungeon; a cage obviously designed to hold a bank architect.

It is, of course, rather difficult to forecast the future of a city which pays hundreds of pounds for the work of a Norwich artist, yet allows water to drip on his grave in a Norwich church. I refer to John Crome, who is buried in St. George-at-Colegate.

Strangers' Hall, which stands in a small courtyard in a busy street, is one of the most beautiful small medieval

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houses you will see in England. Norwich is packed with these unexpected places.

The cathedral is full of splendid Norman work, notably the nave. I imagine that this is the least-known cathedral in England. The clerestory, set back within a wall-passage, has Norman lights; the aisles also are Norman. There is a curious opening in the roof through which the monks used to let down a swinging censer. Norwich Cathedral has not the situation or the west front of Lincoln, but to me it was vastly more interesting than the more famous church. In a little plot of ground outside the cathedral rises a white cross:

TO THE PURE AND HOLY MEMORY OF
EDITH GAVELL
WHO GAVE HER LIFE FOR ENGLAND
OCTOBER 12TH, 1915

Every Saturday morning the City of Norwich becomes Norfolk. The whole county pours into town, the narrow streets fill . . . the squire and his good-looking daughters, the farmer and his buxom wife, scores of strong-limbed 'mauthers', drovers chewing straws and plodding along with their eyes on the back view of cows.

The cattle market, which Cobbett said was the 'best and most attractive' market in England, fills, pen by pen, with sheep and oxen and pigs. Flocks of sheep move in dust, the air is full of lowing and bleating, and hoarse cries, and the crack of sticks and the ring of hobnailed boots on the cobbles. Cheap-jacks who have tramped the roads open ancient Gladstone bags, and display strange goods to a ring of stolid Norfolk faces; faces not dull or simple but simply padlocked with caution and the determination not to be 'done'. It must be hard work to sell things in Norwich market.

'This solid-silver cigarette-case was left in a train. I'm a-tellin' you the truth! Surprising what people leave in

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trains, ain't it? It belonged to a lord. Look! There's what they call his monogram. Lord Blank! Come on now, who says . . .'

But no one says anything! It isn't done in Norfolk. You let the other fellow say it all first!

A man drives up in a mysterious motor-van. The sides fall down to reveal a little stage set with two chairs and a table, on which is an electric battery. The walls are plastered with tributes to an electric-current rheumatism cure and rather inconsequent X-ray photographs. Slowly, timidly, an old country woman mounts the platform and holds the terminals, white-lipped. Her relatives stand below waiting to see her killed or cured. The current is switched on, her eyes pop out of her head; she steps down.

'Do you feel better, ma?'

'I believe a' do!'

In the public bars the Norfolk farmers split farthings all day. Is there such acute bargaining anywhere else in England? A pig and fourpence will keep two Norfolk farmers busy all day long.

'A cigar,' said a fine, red farmer who came into a shop in which I happened to be buying tobacco. 'An' doan't yew give me none ov yur muck neither, 'bor. . . .'

(No one goes word-mincing in Norfolk!)

'Ninepence!' said the tobacconist, showing him some.

'Sevenpence . . .' said the farmer.

'No, ninepence is the price.'

'Well, yow can keep 'um! . . .'

'Eightpence,' said the tobacconist. 'Will you take it?'

'Ah, 'bor, that I'll dew, tho' it ain't worth it!'

When he had gone the tobacconist said:

'It was an eightpenny cigar, but it would never do to admit it.'

In moonlight Norwich from the castle walls lies with shining roofs, the green light rippling the length of the thin spire of the cathedral and falling into the dark, narrow

streets. A drover behind his sheep crosses the empty market square in a pool of lamplight; and it seems that centuries have slipped back; that the Norwich looms are clacking once again; that along the deserted riverside are the ghosts of Flemish masts.

§ 4

Beyond Cromer, from Cley-next-the-Sea—which Norfolk men pronounce Cley—the level salt marshes run for miles towards a thin ridge of yellow sand, beyond which is the ocean. The tide goes out for miles and returns at a canter. It is desolate. The wind whispers. The sea birds cry. No men but naturalists disturb the solitude of the salt marshes.

The wind blows through miles of sea lavender, great lakes of pink and purple, and the gold clouds pile up over the edge of the sea and roll landwards like great galleons. The light, falling on this flat land squarely, intensifies colour so that you cry out at sudden glories in the painful knowledge that nothing but water-colour can tell the story truly. The sea marshes are full of life. A blue-grey heron lifts noiselessly above the green reeds and sails away with a slow beat of great wings, his long legs held stiff behind him. He settles. With keen eyes you can see his head lifted to the level of the reeds watching you. White gulls sit in rows on the shells of wrecked fishing boats.

There is a sudden flurry of white and a great screaming. Up they go in the air, orange feet tucked into soft white undersides, wheeling, turning, poised in the air motionless, then down, down like white darts with a sudden outflinging of orange feet; for the tide is coming in, rushing in, swirling in up creeks and the twisty channels. One minute the oozy banks are dry; the next they are alive with a brown snake of water that writhes and bubbles, lapping the bright fringe of samphire at the edges.

And it is lonely, with the water lapping and the birds crying and the wind pressing the blue thrift backwards from

the sea, for this is a strange No Man's Land: it is not land and it is not water, but a queer beautiful region half land, half water; and it seems to you that the sea fights for it daily and the grass defends it. When you turn your back to the salt marshes you see, far away, flat meadows and green land and villages, clear-etched, and grey flint church towers rising above the trees. To the left and to the right a thin line of woodland is the colour of the bloom on a purple grape.

All along the coast at the edge of the great salt marsh are curious little villages which were once seaports. Huge flint churches in desolate meadows tell you that yesterday this coast was alive with men and commerce. There is Blakeney, whose church has an extra tower, once a lighthouse, now eloquently ruined; there is Cley; there is Salthouse; there is Weybourne, in whose ancient bay the wild-fowl nest; there is Wells-next-the-Sea—all old seaports which the sea has deserted.

In a cosy vale is the village of Stiffkey. It is a curious little village noted for its cockle women. I went down to the long sea marsh. I crossed rotting timbers flung across creeks, and I went on for miles through mud and marsh till I came at length to the distant ridge of sand which has wrecked more ships than the Needles, and the incredible expanse of shore. Dotted about this gold plain were bent black figures raking up the famous 'Stewkey blues', as the cockles are called.

One cockle gatherer came towards me bent beneath the weight of an enormous sack. It was impossible to tell whether this strange figure was that of man or woman. She was wearing a black divided skirt. Thick worsted stockings, wet through with salt water, clung to her legs. She wore a black shawl over her shoulders and a sou'-wester that buttoned like a Kate Greenaway bonnet beneath her chin. When I stopped her she lifted her face, and I saw that she was an ancient dame of at least seventy. Her toothless little mouth was pressed primly in below a smooth

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apple face etched with a million fine lines, and her eyes were blue and childish.

Like many people in this part of England, she was frightened of questions. I asked her if she was strong enough to do such hard work, and she said that she had been doing it since she was a young woman.

A few years ago some one wrote up Stiffkey and its cockle women in a cruel light. It was alleged that intermarriage had so affected the inhabitants that the men did no work while the women slaved to keep things going.

'That's a pack of nonsense,' said the ancient cockle gatherer. 'Our men work on the land, and we women have long before living memory gone down to the sea to get the cockles. I started when I was married, when I wanted extra money to bring up the children; and that's why most of us do it.'

She turned towards the sea and said:

'Those are the last cockle gatherers you'll see in Stiffkey. Girls to-day want to be ladies. They don't like to get themselves up in such ugly clothes and go down to the sea as their mothers and their grandmothers and—yes—and their great-grandmothers did; and they don't like hard work, either. . . . Yes, we're the last cockle women, we old ones. . . .'

A look of absolute horror came into the face of this old woman when I asked her if I might take a photograph of her. She put her hands to her eyes as I have seen Arabs do when faced by a camera.

'No, no,' she said, and looked round for cover. I soothed her with great difficulty.

It was not modesty, I think, or the thought of being photographed in such queer garments. Here and there in remote parts of England there exists still a curious belief that to be photographed brings bad luck.

There are few stranger sights in England than the return of these cockle women before the galloping tide. Slowly, heavily, they come with dripping sacks of 'Stewkey blues'

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on their backs. Most of them are old women, who belong to a tougher generation. Some are middle-aged. Now and again a girl goes down 'for fun', to see how her mother earned extra money to bring her up. The salt spray drenches their short skirts, the wind lashes their bare legs, as they come plodding in over the salt marshes.

This is a curious part of the world. A region barely touched by tourists. A region rich in history and packed full of atmosphere. You can stand on the salt marshes towards the end of the day, with the sun mellow over the windy fields of sea lavender, and it takes little to imagine the Viking ships beaching on the distant strand—the big, red, bearded men wading to the shore, dragging their great double-bladed swords through the purple marshes, shading their eyes to the distant land.

There is a melancholy over the sea marshes quite impossible to describe. You feel that it is good to be alone here, good to wander over the featureless land, listening to the shrill crying of the birds and to the sound of the wind in the grass.

§ 5

The silence of death lies over the Peddars Way

A man can walk for many a mile in solitude on this ghost of a mighty road. From Thetford it runs six miles to Hockham, then, straight as an arrow, it lies for thirty miles, sometimes hidden beneath the fields, through Castle Acre and Great Bircham to the coast at Brancaster. Long before men knew the name of England they knew the Peddars Way. How old it is no man can say. When the Romans came it was an antiquity, trodden hard by countless generations and the Romans were glad, because it was straight and to the point, and saved them trouble. In the Middle Ages the Peddars Way served a new England, and led to one of the saintliest spots in the land—to Our Lady of Walsingham. . . .

Now the Peddars Way is dead.

The little cottontail plays upon it; the weasel and the blackbird own it; for the feet of the men who made the Peddars Way went into silence many centuries ago along the road to Eternity.

I am writing this beside the old road. Where I sit I can see the ghost of it under the grass, broad and embanked, slipping into the distance over the fields. Here it is drenched in green gloom. The thick trees which hedge it arch themselves above it, and in the hush of this still afternoon I fancy that the leaves have just stopped whispering together of the things that once went by along the Peddars Way.

I am conscious that this is a ghostly spot. Every time a leaf falls, every time there is a sudden rustle in the undergrowth I look up, half-expecting to see a figure not of this age coming towards me along the dead road. Once I looked quickly behind me . . . there was nothing but an unnatural stillness. Even the birds seem hushed along the Peddars Way. They say that Black Shuck haunts this road, as he haunts the coast near Cromer. He is a jet-black hound, big as a calf. Between ourselves, he is the Hound of Thor. He still haunts Norfolk on nights as black as himself.

An empty house can be ghostly, but ghostlier far is an empty road which no men use. The beauty and the magic of a road are something this age does not know; our roads are too good and too many, and we never notice them except when they are bad or in the hands of the road mender. But there was a time—and the Peddars Way belongs to it—when a road, like fire and a roof, was one of the primitive blessings of life; and, more than that, a sign that men could combine in a common task and follow the same track to a journey's end.

The Peddars Way was planned long before history began. It has seen men use the flint mace-head; it has seen the stone weapon give way to metal; it has nursed the dawning civilization, century after century leading such traffic and

such commerce as there was away from the wilderness: first a savage trail, then a road.

The legions came, perhaps straightened out a corner here and there; and it led them from Camulodunum (which we call Colchester) to Branodunum on the Wash (which we call Brancaster).

So far the Peddars Way knew war and commerce; centuries were to pass, and it was to know religion.

In that remarkable collection of old houses called Walsingham, north of Fakenham, stands the scanty ruin of the mighty abbey which from the time of Henry III to the Dissolution drew king, queen, and commoner to the shrine of the Virgin. At first the shrine was a modest wooden chapel, but when Nazareth fell into the hands of the infidel the monks of Walsingham, by one of those perhaps not accidental strokes of fancy, for the fortunes of Glastonbury were once firmly financed by another such inspiration, said that the Mother of God, driven out of Palestine, had taken up her abode in Norfolk. They said subsequently that their shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham was actually the Sancta Casa from Nazareth.

Then the Peddars Way became the pilgrims' way. It heard the tapping of the pilgrim staff. It saw men and women from every part of Europe making their way to Walsingham. It saw pilgrim cavalcades like that which Chaucer took so gloriously to Canterbury, it saw the poor man hobbling by the roadside, it saw the King in all his majesty riding a tall charger surrounded by his Court. Henry III, Edward I, Edward II, Bruce of Scotland, Henry VII, and, before the religious revolution, Henry VIII, all took the pilgrims' way to Walsingham. When they reached little Houghton-in-the-Dale they removed their shoes (there is still a house here named Shoe House) and continued the rest of the way barefoot.

Unless you have seen a pilgrimage, it is difficult to imagine this scene. I have watched the pilgrims start for Mecca, and I have seen Syrian Christians on their knees in Bethlehem

and in Jerusalem, tears rolling down their faces as they kissed the end of sticks which the priests push through marble pillars to touch some sacred relic. . . .

In the famous shrine stood the statue of the Virgin, and Erasmus, who visited it in 1511, said of it: 'There is little or no light in it but what proceeds from wax-tapers yielding a most pleasant and odoriferous smell, but if you look up you will say that it is the seat of the gods, so bright and shining as it is all over with jewels, gold and silver.'

Strange relics were kept in the shrine, including a flask of the Virgin's milk and a joint of one of St. Peter's fingers.

There came a day when the last pilgrim abased himself before the shrine, and soon the Peddars Way saw men come riding, and in the midst of them Our Lady of Walsingham, plucked from her candlelight, going on her way to be burned at Smithfield. Then the Peddars Way knew that some strange thing had happened to England; and the grass began to grow.

The sunlight slants down through the leaves on the old broad track. In moonlight it must look wonderful. Some day I will come back and walk the Peddars Way by moonlight, and it will not surprise me then to be spoken to in the stillness, perhaps in a tongue no man knows, perhaps in Latin, perhaps in Norman French, perhaps in Tudor English.

For all these tongues have wagged along the Peddars Way, but what they have said only the road knows and it is dead, or in a sleep like death, with the grass above it and only the song of birds to remind it that the world goes on.

§ 6

For the last ten days I have been miserable. I have been prostrate in bed with a red-hot throat and a foul temper which turned into a fine pathos, and the dismal belief that I was about to commit the supreme sin against good

manners and die in an hotel. You may do almost anything in an hotel but die there.

One night, under the influence of a cocaine pill and a raw egg, I sat up and wrote the most miserable essay that has ever been written about the country graveyards of England, the fine old yew-trees, and the lichened head-stones. The doctor read it and took away my pen, and so, quite helpless, I sank into fever, my only pleasure the poor one of watching my hand open and close against the light from the window, wondering why it was my hand and who on earth I was. (Perhaps if you have had millions of streptococci in the throat you will understand!)

However, the evil dream is over, the germs are slain, the boots, who has neuralgia, has the cocaine pills, the chambermaid has the gargle, and I, at last, have the open road, and an occasional glimpse of the sun.

Now in England there are many magic 'islands', the only islands which refute the geography primers because they are entirely surrounded by dry land. Centuries ago these 'islands,' which to-day are merely hills rising from green fields, were surrounded by marshy waters that have at various dates been drained away in the interests of agriculture. These isles are: the Isle of Avalon in Somerset to which, says legend, the hooded queens took the dying King Arthur; the Isle of Athelney, also in Somerset, where King Alfred gathered his forces before he smashed the Danes; and the Isle of Ely in Cambridgeshire, from whose fastness Hereward the Wake defied the Conqueror. There is the Thorney Isle, on which Westminster Abbey stands, and the Isle of Thanet, and I am sure, several others.

I travelled towards Ely in the early morning long before the first harvester was awake. At this time of year a veil of white mist lies over the Cambridgeshire fenlands, a pearl pale thing, thin and chill; and as I went on through it I felt as though I were sailing on the ghost of a sea. The dimly seen hedges of this flat chessboard land were like the edges of poised breakers. Suddenly I saw before me, like a frozen

ship, upon a frozen ocean, the Isle of Ely rising in spectral beauty above the morning mist. This sudden high hill crowned with its towered cathedral seen above the white mist of late summer is one of the most beautiful things in the whole of England. It is a spellbound hill: the creation it seems, of a wizard's wand: a floating Camelot spun by the fairies from the mushroom mists and ready to dissolve into the cold air even as a man looks in wonder at it.

As the sun rises and the mists melt, the Isle of Ely—the Isle of Eels is the real name—grows to reality, becomes a little town on a hill clustered round its old cathedral; but even in full sunlight it never quite loses its air of having been built by magic.

There is nothing in Ely but the cathedral; and the cathedral is a lady. W. D. Howells said that Wells Cathedral in Somerset is the feminine cathedral of England, and guide-books have copied this remark to such an extent that most people believe it to be true. I cannot. Wells Cathedral is, to my mind, distinctly masculine. In its strong, decorated, ornate way it seemed to me almost as masculine as Durham. Ely Cathedral, is, to my eye, the only feminine cathedral in England. In fanciful mood one might think of Ely as the wife of Durham: Durham the grim Norman knight; Ely the lovely Norman lady. Ely is delicate, tinted, full of gracious beauty. Her unique octagonal tower helps the argument: no other cathedral wears so remarkable a hat!

Ely Cathedral, I must remind you, was founded by a woman. It was to this windy island that the saintly Etheldreda in the age of saints took refuge one thousand three hundred and fifty-three years ago. After twelve years of unhappy married life as Queen of Northumbria she fled to her native fens and founded a church, living there in great humility and godliness. Memory of her is preserved—how many people know?—in the word 'tawdry'. Her popular name was St. Audrey, and the famous Pilgrims' Fair at Ely known as St. Audrey's Fair, gathered together a number

of cheap-jacks and hucksters who sold neckcloths of silk nicknamed St. Audrey's Chains, or vulgarly, 'tawdries'. Another word, by the way, supposed to have come from Ely is 'Billycock'. Centuries later the monks of Ely wore by special licence from the Pope head coverings named 'wilkoks' to protect them from the winds that whipped their little island in the winter.

I must mention the monk, Alan of Walsingham, who built the octagonal tower and many other parts of this lovely church. He was one of the greatest architects of the Middle Ages. On February 22nd, 1322, just as the monks were retiring to their cells, the old Norman tower of Ely fell down into the choir 'with such a shock', says the old chronicler, 'that it was thought an earthquake had taken place'. Alan of Walsingham 'rose up by night and came and stood over the heap of ruins not knowing whither to turn. But recovering his courage, and confident in the help of God and of His kind Mother Mary, and in the merits of the holy virgin Etheldreda, he set his hand to the work.'

How magnificently he did so can be seen to-day. I suppose no one but an architect can truly appreciate the genius of this monk.

Ely, to me as to most people, means Hereward the Wake. I might say that it means Hereward the Wake to me more than to most people, because about twenty-five years ago I was Hereward the Wake on Saturday afternoons (and with luck, on Sundays), while another boy with wild red hair was William the Conqueror, a role that never appealed to me. A fine, upstanding manure heap in a paddock was our Isle of Ely, and I can see in great detail to this day the bony, freckled, furious William the Conqueror (who is now a missionary in West Africa) charging me with a clothes prop! Ely is in general conformation exactly like our old Ely of the paddock; and as I stood on a high spot and looked down over the green sea of the fens I knew from personal experience that Hereward was never seriously

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worried about the Norman cavalry which blundered unhappily about in the marshes.

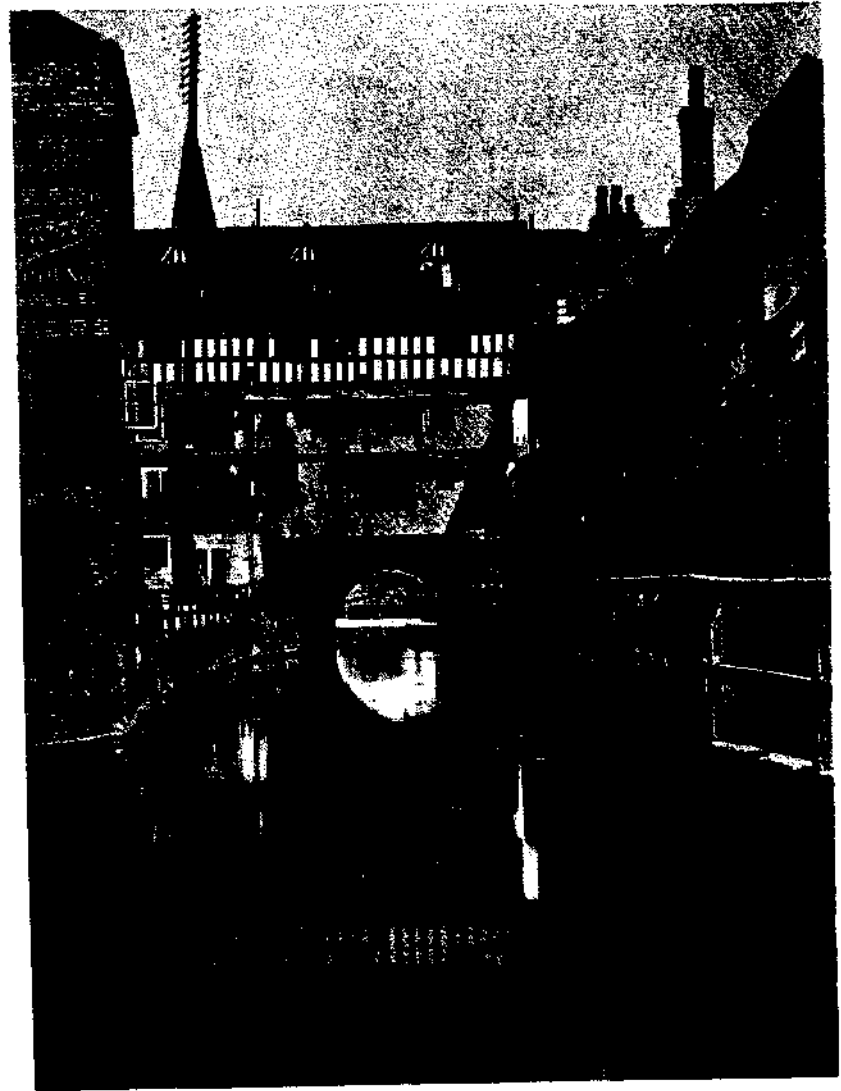
But what a great story is that of the Conqueror, who, when Hereward had been betrayed by the monks on the condition that their possessions should be spared, came secretly to Ely when the monks were at dinner. He knew that they expected a gift from him as a reward for their treachery to Hereward. The Conqueror stood in silence and alone before the high altar. He flung down on it a single gold mark (worth about one hundred and fifty pounds of modern money) and walked quietly out to his horse.

In a few moments the monks were surprised by a knight who rushed in to them, crying: 'You wretched drivellers! Can you choose no better time for guzzling than this when the King is here in your very church?' The brethren made a rush for the church, but it was empty! They ran out after the King and caught him three miles off at Witchford. They apologized. He accepted the apology and fined them seven hundred silver marks (about fourteen thousand pounds). They melted down the church ornaments to pay the fine, but the Norman officials reported that the ingots were deficient in weight, which made William fine the monks a further three hundred marks, so that this silent reverie before the high altar cost Ely twenty thousand pounds.

I turned, and from the fens looked back at the hill of good St. Audrey, which through centuries has ridden the rough sea of English history as it rides above the biting winds of Cambridgeshire; and about it in these September mornings is the phantom calm of a ship that has left old storms behind it.

§ 7

I stopped at the 'White Hart' in Brandon to drink beer. Brandon is in Suffolk, but Brandon Railway Station is in Norfolk. Now while I was sitting taking stock of the argumentative little groups round the bar there trickled in from



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outside a curious, insistent tapping—a queer, tinkly, metallic sound for which I could find no name. It was not the sound of a shoeing forge—it was too thin.

‘Oh, that!’ replied a labourer, ‘that is young Mr. Edwards knapping gun-flints in the shed at the back. . . .’

Whereon I put down my tankard and went out to find young Mr. Edwards.

I suppose thousands of travellers pass through this apparently uninteresting little town every week without the slightest suspicion that it contains the oldest commercial firm on earth. It is that of Fred Snare, who states that his business was established in the tenth century. Before history began men chipped flints at Brandon. They made those beautiful and efficient little arrow-heads which we find buried in the earth; they made flint knives and flint scrapers; they mined Grimes Graves, nearby, for flint; they dug long galleries in the chalk and took out the flint with picks made of red deer antlers.

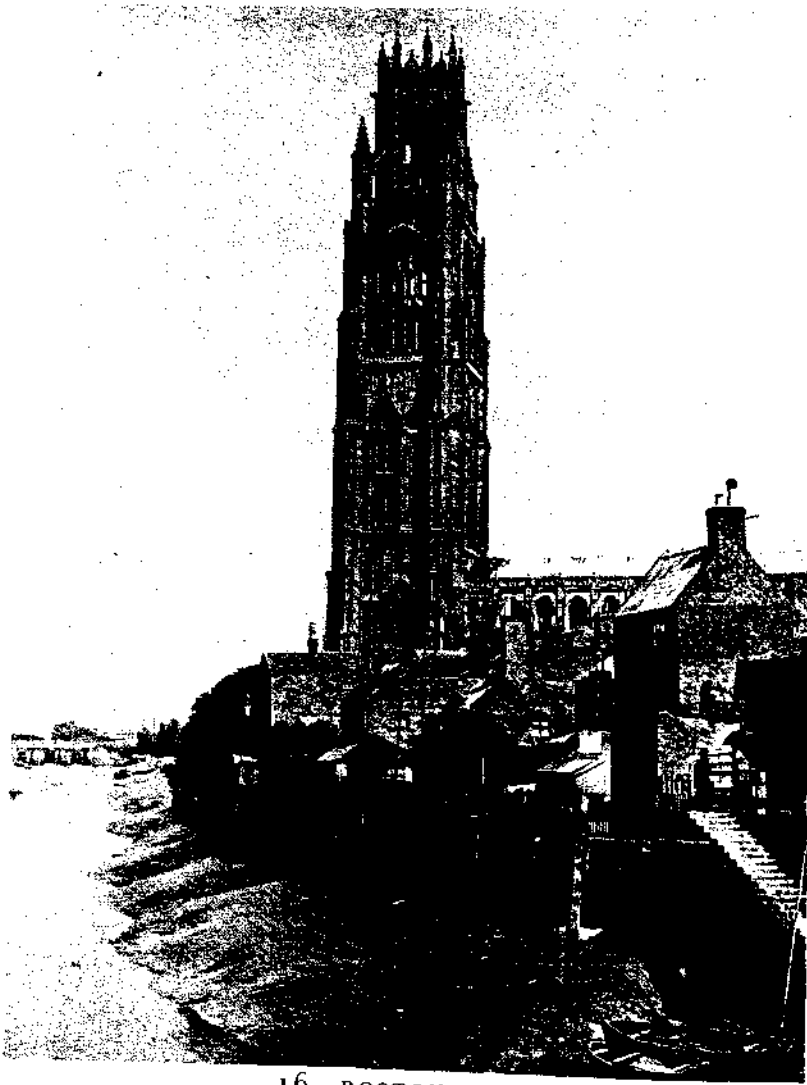
The lost art of chipping flint has been kept alive in this Suffolk village for tens of thousands of years. Nowhere else is the difficult art of knocking this stubborn stone into shape practised as in Brandon. . . .

The door of the shed was open. A young man was sitting on a low stool with a stout leather guard strapped above the knee of his left leg. On this guard he held a great nodule of flint which he hit sharply with a short-necked hammer, making in the process the peculiar, glassy hard tinkle I had heard. On one side of him lay a great mound of newly mined flint with the chalk still clinging to it, and on the other was a tin tub half full of little square smoky-blue gun-flints—the finished article.

He smiled an invitation, so I went in and sat on an upturned tub watching him.

Have you ever tried to make an arrow-head of flint?

I have, and I have never succeeded. It has always been to me a mystery how our Stone Age ancestors worked this brittle stone; how they made it into small razor-edged



16 BOSTON STUMP

arrow-heads and long, thin spear-heads, all neatly chipped as if the steel-hard stone had been nibbled into shape by a mouse.

As I watched young Mr. Edwards knap his flints, I realized that flint behaves well if you know exactly where to hit it. Mr. Edwards took up a lump of the stone, hit it gently, and seemed to listen to the sound. When satisfied by the sound he hit harder, and the flint broke crisply, along the lines of cleavage. He now had a nice flat piece of flint to work on. He struck it near the edges. It flaked, and he proceeded to fashion a little square gun-flint with a series of quick expert blows; and the astonishing thing to me was that the disobedient stone obeyed him. In a few seconds another gun-flint fell into the tin tub and another flake was on his knee.

'You have to learn this trick when you're young,' said Mr. Edwards, 'and some can't even learn it then. It's a kind of gift.'

'Handed down from the Stone Age?' I asked.

'Well,' he smiled, 'I have been told so.'

'What happens to all these gun-flints?'

'There's a great trade for them in Africa and places where the natives use the old flint-lock. All the gun-flints used to-day come from Brandon. They sell 'em in bags of fifty.'

I gather that the flint-knapping trade, like so many ancient trades, may die out with this generation. Young boys do not take kindly to the art; it is too poorly paid and too difficult, and the flint dust is supposed to eat into the lungs. The flint-knappers of Brandon have dwindled to about half a dozen, and most of them regard the job as a spare-time one.

I watched Mr. Edwards make without one flaw gun-flint after gun-flint. He worked with astonishing speed, and the glassy hard tinkle of his little metal hammer on the flint was one of the most fascinating sounds I have heard—a sound, I thought, to which the human race won its battle for mastery over the beasts thousands of centuries ago. . . .

'Make me an arrow-head,' I asked.

'That's one thing I can't do,' said Mr. Edwards. 'There's only one man here who can, and he probably wouldn't. He lives down the street. He can make arrow-heads and mace-heads, but he won't tell how he does it! We get Sir Arthur This and Sir John That down here trying to get him to tell how he chips his flint implements, but he won't say. For instance, he made this last week.'

He handed me an axe-head of stone. I know little about prehistoric antiquities and I would unhesitatingly have bought this as genuine.

I found this old flint arrow-head maker in his cottage, and I asked him how he learned this lost art.

'When I was a boy,' he said, 'I used to hear the professors and such like who came up to the flint-workings say that they could not think how these old Stone Age men made their weapons. So I started to practise. And the idea came to me. It came suddenly! I thought to myself: "This is how these people worked flint and stone!" and I began to make arrow-heads and axe-heads and some of them, I'm afraid, got into museums!'

Mr. Spalding looked stubborn.

'It's my secret,' he said. 'I thought it out myself, and I don't see why I should give it away. . . .'

He opened a drawer in which lay a little collection of Neolithic arrow-heads beautifully chipped; in a second drawer lay an identical collection. Mr. Spalding pointed to this second drawer and said simply:

'I made those in my spare time.'

No man looking at these two collections, separated by who knows how many thousands of years, could doubt that ancient and modern have been made by the same method, whatever that may be. The strange thing is that while Mr. Spalding can manufacture Stone Age weapons that puzzle the antiquary, he cannot fashion a gun-flint! He is not really one of Brandon's flint-knappers: he is, even to the men who daily master this brittle stone, a mystery.

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They know the difficulties he has overcome in the higher branches of flint-working, an art which, until he remembered it, had been lost these thousands of years.

I left him standing at his cottage door holding a Stone Age axe to which he had fixed a stout handle bound to the stone with rough strands of untanned ox-hide. He swung the axe and said how perfect the balance was; and it occurred to me that he looked rather like a caveman standing there in the darkness of his cottage door, ready to defy any inquisitive professor, ready to defend his discovery with flint-like tenacity. And I thought that had I been one of those people who cannot disguise a belief in reincarnation he would not have got off so easily.

Neither, perhaps, considering the perfect balance of the prehistoric axe, might I!