

Herefordshire Pevsner

Nikolaus Pevsner's Buildings of England is undoubtedly one of the great publishing achievements of our age, to set alongside the Victorian County History. Over the course of 23 years (1961-74) Sir Nikolaus published architectural studies of every significant building in every English county. It was a lifetime's work, crammed into less than a third of one, and covering a thousand years or more of brick and stone and wood and concrete.

If VCH is the bible of local history, then Pevsner is its prayer-book. The name of the author alone came to represent the series. If you want to understand the architectural history of a building, all you need to say is: What does it say in Pevsner?

And this is what it says: "St Swithin. W tower C14 with bell openings still Dec, but a W window entirely Perp." The terse economy of Pevsner's style might not appeal to the casual reader, but was honed to meet the encyclopaedic nature of the undertaking.

I know people who have the whole set, a large section of their shelving that is forever the Buildings of England.

What began in 1961 as a single project, however, has become, like the Forth Bridge, in need of continuous repainting. We now look for a little more context, perhaps, more historical background, colour illustrations, and a slightly more discursive style. There are newer buildings to consider too, and older ones to reconsider.

In a larger format, then, with more text and many colour pictures, the original volumes are steadily being reworked. In our region a new edition of the Gloucestershire Cotswolds appeared in 2002; Shropshire was expanded in 2006 and Worcestershire in 2007. Our other West Midlands counties will arrive in due course. Yale University Press has taken over from Penguin Books, and the funding for research now comes courtesy of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

Most recent of the books to be reworked is Herefordshire, May 2012, Yale UP, xvii + 750 pp., £35.00. The revised and expanded text is by Alan Brooks, who previously masterminded the two Gloucestershire volumes, as well as Worcestershire. Herefordshire has grown from its compact and original 360 pages to double that length.

In this, one of the least developed and least urbanized of English counties, there is little in the way of new architecture for Brooks to consider. In 1963 Pevsner said of the county town that it had "no industrial suburbs"; half a century later Brooks can say it has "little in the way of industrial suburbs".

What modern sprawl the city of Hereford possesses does not detain the new editor long. The Travelodge west of the ring road, which I confess to having stayed at only recently, is, in Brooks' words "tasteless", and a veil is drawn entirely over the Sainsbury's next to it.

Nevertheless, there is much in the city of Hereford to revisit. Pevsner's enterprise was conducted principally with his eyes; he relied on his instincts and background research was limited. The new editor can afford to be more painstaking. Take the Catholic church of St Francis Xavier in Broad Street, for example. Pevsner describes the frontage as "bewildering; and would have driven Pugin frantic had he known it."

Augustus Pugin did see it, in fact, as Alan Brooks reveals, but his predecessor's gut feelings were, as usual, correct. Pugin dismissively called the church "a pagan temple" and "a Catholic concert hall".

Alan Brooks' slower pace can reveal hidden treasures too, overlooked by the master. When Sir Nikolaus sped down another Broad Street - the one in Leominster - he saw at No. 15 a Victorian factory called the "Lion Works", built into a Regency shell. Having inspected the "heavily victorianized" ground floor, he saw little reason to stay any longer.

Had Pevsner gone around the back, he would have found the magnificent Assembly Rooms of 1843, today restored, both to the guidebook and to the town.

In general, however, it is not in its Regency architecture, its factories or its neo-classicism that Herefordshire stands out. It is the richness and profusion of its timber-framed buildings that the county reigns supreme. There is more timber framing in a single street in the "black-and-white villages" of Weobley and Pembridge and Eardisland than in the whole of Birmingham.

Here Alan Brooks has no reason to dissent from Pevsner's earlier judgements. Eardisland remains "uncommonly pretty" and Weobley "delightful" and "uncommonly rich in medieval timber-framed houses". Both men's opinions are perfectly true, of course, except that in this neck of the county uncommon prettiness comes as standard.

What Brooks can begin to do is to put historical flesh on these bare timbers, if that's not a metaphorical leap too far. Delightful Weobley is not a black-and-white village, but a planned medieval town of the 13th Century, complete with market square and yet another Broad Street to provide its axis: church at one end, castle at the other.

By replacing the buildings in their historical context, as Alan Brooks seeks to do, we can begin to get a sense of a whole community, and not simply a conglomerate of unrelated dwellings.

Only the churches remain separated from their surroundings, as they always were in the original volumes. To change this would, perhaps, be to break the mould completely.

And then they would cease to be Pevsners.