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CHAPTER ONE

FIFTEEN CENTURIES YOUNG

Townfolk know pleasures, country people joys.

MINNA ANTRIM (1861–1950)

Britain rushes around on its bypasses and motorways. Rapid roads and trains connect city to city, home to office, school-collection to shops. The traffic lights have gone green, the circle and slant of the derestricted sign allows the speedometer to flick to 70. Was that a field, some cows, a wood, a farm? Whatever, it's gone.

But then the cars and lorries jam, or autumn leaves block the line, and quietly and gently an older pattern of England steals back into its ancient and astonishingly little-altered place. What do those beguiling signs mean, inviting you to somewhere, something, maybe even someone called Huttons Ambo, The Alconburys or Mavis Enderby? Why go to the bog-standard motorway services when the satnav flashes up an icon for the Cottage of Content near Ross-on-Wye or the George at Stamford whose tag reads: 'Three kings have stayed here, as well as one of the fattest Englishmen ever – Daniel Lambert, who weighed 52 stone.' And didn't someone famous find that his train stopped unexpectedly at Adlestrop (alas, the station was closed in 1966)? Wasn't their curiosity just like yours?

Get off, branch off, turn off, and the greenery of village

THE ENGLISH VILLAGE

England enfolds you with the certainty and confidence of settlements which have survived for up to a millennium and a half, and in some cases more. Devastation has often visited them in the form of the Black Death, civil war, evictions and the collapse of harvests. But a spell seems to girdle their familiar template of church and manor house, green and mill stream, tavern, beacon, war memorial, pond and stocks. Even where a town or city has rolled outwards and engulfed the ancient buildings themselves, road signs keep the past alive: Southfield Square, Chapel Close, Sheep Lane.

They touch something equally certain in millions of visitors. We may not have been here before, but our grandparents or their grandparents or *their* grandparents almost certainly led a life circumscribed by the seasons, rotation of crops and the demands of living in a close-knit community. Perhaps this was in The Alconburys, a cluster of hamlets just off the A1M north of Huntingdon, or at Mavis Enderby in Lincolnshire, whose shared sign with a neighbouring village is often converted by wags to read: 'To Old Bolingbroke and Mavis Enderby – the gift of a son.' Or it may have been somewhere very different in geographical terms: a life in thatched rondavel huts along the coast of West Africa or in a mountain hamlet in the Punjab. But the essence is there in every case, because the village way of life was so simple and the way that almost all of humanity lived for so long.

It has a special resonance in England, even among the ghosts of the relatively few communities which failed. Between today's thriving villages which have adjusted successfully to

enormous economic and social change, you will occasionally find hummocky graveyards marking the sites of their lost counterparts; places where the plague, enclosures or even the whim of a powerful landlord who wanted an uncluttered view led to the abandonment of farms and homes. But here too, the essence of a village is so ingrained that the traditional features and patterns can still be seen. Only the larks and Marbled White butterflies now live at Wharram Percy in the Yorkshire Wolds, but a visitor can walk above the buried streets and work out where each of the familiar buildings stood. Drought conditions in the Lake District see the skeletal remains of Mardale Green emerge from the falling waters of Haweswater. Here was the church, there the pub, and behind them the grazing for the ponies which raced every summer at the Mardale fair.

The English countryside has also been fought over, brutalized and exploited from humanity's first arrival, and our means of changing things are today so devastating that the threat of irreversible damage to landscape, flora and fauna is a constant. But the scars of tragedy at battlefields such as Towton near Tadcaster, where in 1461 more Englishmen – 30,000 – died than at any other single place in the country, have long been engulfed by what the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell called 'a green thought in a green shade'. The red-and-white 'York and Lancaster' rose runs riot over the hedges leading down to the Cock beck. No one is out of walking distance of such greenery and who does not relish that? For all that the English cluster more closely in towns and conurbations than any other European nation apart from the space-starved Dutch, we have a dreamy

THE ENGLISH VILLAGE

love of the countryside implanted in our national character. And the idyll within that dream is the village.

‘Blood runs thicker than water and nothing is as thick as English village blood,’ says Sir Simon Jenkins, former chairman of the National Trust, contemplating the way in which we imagine these small communities to represent life at its best. ‘An English village is like a medieval monastery, a place apart yet blessed with an innate goodness that trickles down to all society.’ Is this a myth, or a partial truth? That is a question which has been asked for at least 1,600 years.

When did it all start? Were there villages in prehistoric Britain? We cannot be sure, but little evidence has yet been found of settled communities. Rather, there were transitory camps for nomadic herdsfolk, flimsy dwellings which a tribe or group of families were ready to leave in the face of plague or invasion, dangers which threatened them all year round. Alfred Wainwright’s Coast-to-Coast walking route threads through a slope of gentle dips and small mounds covered with rough grass which were once a typical example: the settlement at Severals above the valley of Smardale Gill and the Scandal Beck. Excitable archaeologists describe this lonely perch on the limestone plateau as the Manchester of the Bronze Age.

Then came the Romans, bringing civil order, roads and baths. But villages? No. Even in the imperial heartland of Italy the countryside was organized around large villas, the equivalent of the biggest of Europe’s later stately homes. Family, labourers and slaves lived together in a unitary complex, a sprawling mansion