

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



I Never Knew That About England

Christopher Winn

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About the Book

Discover hundreds of facts you never knew about England in this fascinating miscellany.

Every county in England is a treasure trove of riveting tales, waiting to be discovered. The waiting is over: *I Never Knew That About England* is crammed with legends, firsts, supremes, unusuals, gossip, inventions, birthplaces and resting places - all the best facts and adventures from throughout the country, from the Middle Ages to today.

Visit each county in turn and discover where history and legends happened; where people, ideas and inventions were born, and now rest from their labours. A pentheon of writers and artists, thinkers and inventors, and heroes and villains have lived and toiled in this small country.

Remarkable events, noble (and dastardly) deeds and exciting adventures have all taken place with England as their backdrop. This book seeks out their heritage, their monuments, their memories and their secrets.

About the Author

Christopher Winn is a writer, quiz master and producer for theatre and television. He has written for the *Field*, *Country Life*, the *Sunday Express* and the *Daily Mail*. He worked for eight years on Terry Wogan's TV chat show, contributes questions for a number of TV quizzes, and has toured the length and breadth of the country researching this book. He lives in London with his wife, Mai, the illustrator of *I Never Knew That About England*.

www.i-never-knew-that.com

Christopher Winn

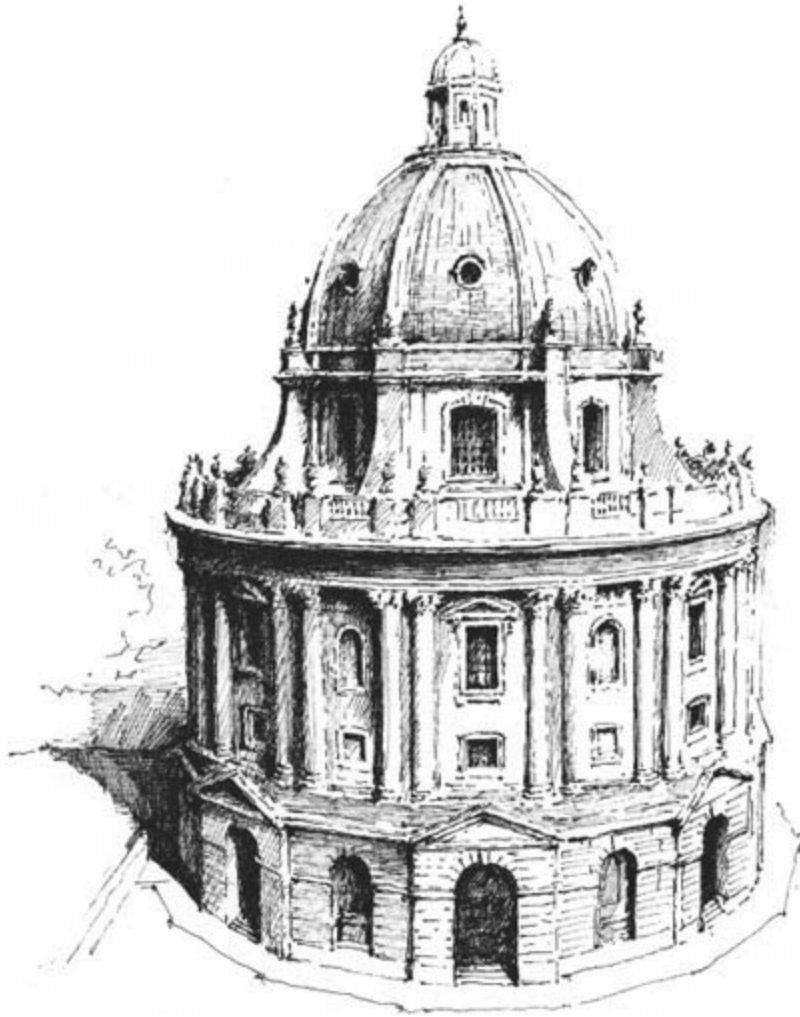
I Never Knew That
ABOUT
ENGLAND




EBURY
PRESS

This book is dedicated to HUGH MONTGOMERY MASSINGBERD,
without whose advice, encouragement and inspiration it
would never have been written.

Also to my wife, MAI, who never lost her patience, grace
and good humour during the process. Her exquisite
illustrations lift this book beyond mere words.



Radcliffe Camera, Oxford

Preface

AS DR JOHNSON MIGHT HAVE said, 'If I had no duties, and no reference to futurity, I would spend my life in driving briskly through England in a post-chaise with a copy of *I Never Knew That About England*.'

He, like me, considered 'exploring England' and a 'good story' to be two of the greatest pleasures in life, and this book is designed neatly to combine the two. I am never happier than when browsing through England. I have read the books, seen the films and done the tours, and yet still I find, down every lane, round every corner, in every town and village, new stories to surprise and inspire me.

The only criteria I have used for including stories in *I Never Knew That About England* are that they have England as their backdrop and that they have left me intrigued. I have endeavoured to ensure that there is something here for everyone, with a true miscellany of love stories, ghost stories, anecdotes, achievements, triumphs and disasters, inventions, mistakes and adventures, plus a smattering of fascinating facts and figures.

England packs an astonishing diversity of scenery and heritage into a tiny but ravishingly beautiful space and so, I hope, does this book. My aim is to enliven conversation, to enrich any journey, however mundane, to make anywhere you happen to find yourself a little more interesting. This book can be read on the train, in the bath, with a glass of wine, alone or in company, in a stolen moment. It can be used to impress your friends, to help you shine in the pub quiz or just to put a smile on your face. With *I Never Knew That About England* in your possession, time and time

again you will experience the pleasure of hearing your friends exclaim 'Well, I never knew that!'

ALTHOUGH I HAVE made every effort to get the facts right, many of these stories are not eternal truths but have been handed down through time, sometimes by word of mouth only. Details can vary according to different sources, but the essential substance and essence remains.



The 39 Counties of ENGLAND

I NEVER KNEW That About England is organised by counties, as these are the most natural, recognisable and manageable way of describing localities. Furthermore, I have chosen the 39 traditional English counties that have defined the map of England for many hundreds of years, since these are based on natural boundaries, such as rivers and hills, and still inspire loyalty and a sense of identity. Most of the stories in this book took place with these traditional counties as their background, and would lose something of their flavour if relocated to within more modern, yet meaningless, bureaucratic entities. Hence you will find no Avon, Humberside or Cleveland while Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmorland, Huntingdonshire, Middlesex and Rutland are all restored to their rightful place on the map. Major conurbations such as London, Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle and Manchester are broken up into their original county identities. The Vale of the White Horse is covered at the end of the Berkshire chapter. The only omission is Central London, which would make a book in itself.

BEDFORDSHIRE

COUNTY TOWN: BEDFORD

'a brickworks in the middle of a cabbage patch'

ANONYMOUS



Elstow Moot Hall, standing on the green where John Bunyan set his Vanity Fair from 'The Pilgrim's Progress'

Cockayne Hatley

Long John Silver and Peter Pan's Wendy

TURN EAST OFF the A1 near Sandy and you find yourself in an empty landscape of big skies and open hills. Down a lonely lane, on the crest of a rise, embowered in trees, is the church of St John, Cockayne Hatley, slumbering at the gates of an ancient hall. Step inside the church and gaze at the startling interior, which is a feast of medieval wood-

work, carvings and stained glass, all imported from the Continent by a 19th-century rector, a display unrivalled by any country church in England.

But what really turns this remote and lovely spot into a special place of pilgrimage is the simple, grey tomb of WILLIAM HENLEY (1849–1903) and his family, which stands beneath an ash tree in the churchyard. William Henley was a Victorian poet. As a boy, he suffered from tuberculosis, which led to the amputation of one leg. While recuperating in Edinburgh, he befriended another young writer who suffered from ill health, ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON. When Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island*, he drew inspiration for his peg-leg villain, LONG JOHN SILVER, from the redoubtable Henley.

William Henley wrote these famous lines in his poem 'Invictus':

*Under the bludgeonings of fate
My head is bloody but unbowed*

and

*I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul*

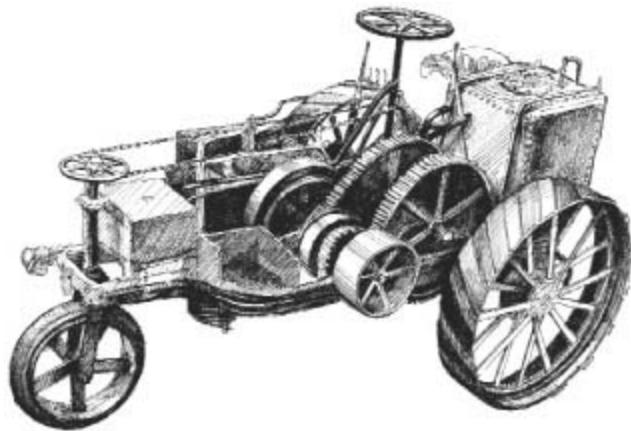
MARGARET HENLEY, William's much-loved daughter, was known to everyone as the 'golden child'. With her flaxen hair, merry laugh and bright eyes, she captivated all who met her. William, by now editor of the *National Observer*, was mentor and confidant to many of the prominent writers of the age, including J.M. BARRIE, who quickly fell under Margaret's spell. She noticed how her father would call Barrie 'my friend' and, whenever he visited, she would fling herself into his arms crying 'Fwendy, Fwendy!' It was thus that Peter Pan's Wendy came by her name.



Biggleswade

Birthplace of the Tractor

FEW MOTORISTS SPEEDING past Biggleswade on the A1 realise that this quiet market town can proudly claim a place amongst the pantheon of world heritage sites. For it was here, in 1902, 82 years before Band Aid, an invention was unveiled that truly did help to 'feed the world' - the WORLD'S FIRST PRACTICAL TRACTOR.



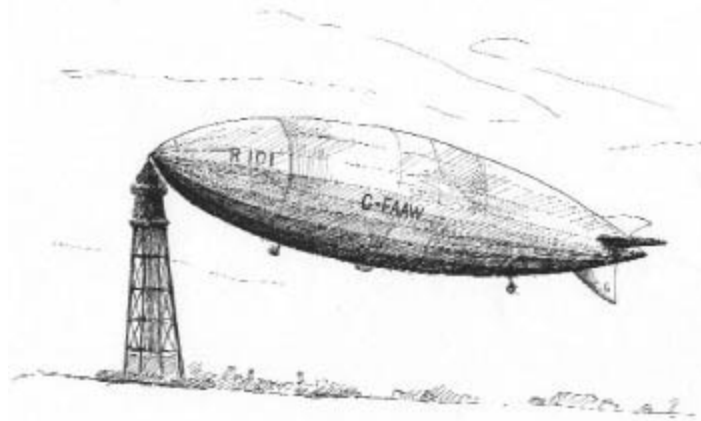
The IVEL AGRICULTURAL MOTOR was the brainchild of inventor 'GENIAL DAN' ALBONE, who was born in Biggleswade in 1860. In his workshop beside the River Ivel, the site of which is marked by a plaque, he produced championship-winning Ivel bicycles, motor bicycles and motor cars, as well as a host of other ingenious devices, but the tractor was his crowning achievement. Work on adapting traction

engines to pull farm machinery had already been going on in America, but these proved too heavy and unwieldy for the light soil around Biggleswade. Dan's vision was for a light but powerful machine that could replace the horse for ploughing and harvesting, and could also be used to operate a whole range of other agricultural implements. After five years of experiment and research, he astonished the world by successfully demonstrating his tractor's abilities, on fields 3 miles (4.8 km) away near Old Warden. These fields are still there, just past the Jordans cereal mill, and are the FIRST FIELDS IN THE WORLD TO BE PLOUGHED BY TRACTOR.

Daniel Albone died, tragically young, in 1906. So brilliant was his design that modern tractors of today are still largely based on his blueprint. He was also responsible for inventing:



- the first ladies' safety bicycle
- the first practical tandem
- an early version of the motor bicycle (created by attaching a simple motor to one of his bicycles)
- and, for his Ivel motor car, independent spring suspension and electric ignition



Cardington

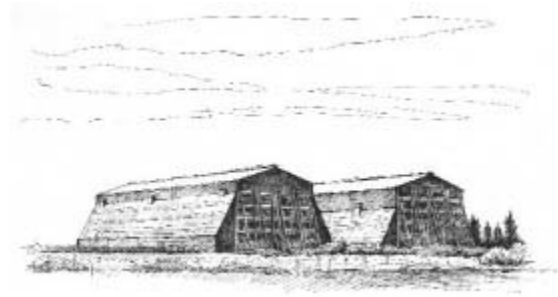
The World's First Air Disaster

TWO VAST GREEN sheds, looming over the fields of Cardington village, stand as an eerie memorial to the WORLD'S FIRST AIR DISASTER. From this spot, the mighty R101 departed, on a blustery October morning in 1930, to meet a fiery end on a hillside in France.

In the 1920s, airships were considered to be the transport of the future. Comfortable, safe and twice as fast as steamships, they appeared to offer a new and efficient way of linking the Mother Country to her far-flung Empire - India in six days, Canada in three, Australia in ten. The technology was still experimental, but the project was rushed along. LORD THOMSON, the Air Minister, was keen to make a grand arrival on the R101 at the first Imperial Conference, to be held in India in October 1930.

At 6.30 am on 4 October 1930, the R101 slipped her moorings and set off for India. Three thousand people watched her leave from Cardington, with thousands more waving their encouragement as she passed over southern England. On board there were 54 passengers, including Lord Thomson. At 1.45 am the next day, from just north of

Beauvais, and with the weather suddenly deteriorating, she sent out a call enquiring as to her whereabouts – the last thing ever heard from the doomed ship. The storm brought her down and she hit the hillside in a sheet of flame. There were only eight survivors, two of whom died shortly afterwards.



When it was built, the R101 was the biggest vessel in the world and the shed in which it was built the largest building in Britain. That same shed is now the largest enclosed laboratory in the world. The other shed is used to build small airships used by the police and in film work.

No one really knows why the R101 crashed. The weather became far worse than expected, the payload was heavier than recommended, and neither the crew nor the ship had been tested in adverse conditions. Somehow, the pride of the Empire had ended up as a pile of twisted and scorched girders in a French field. The country was stunned. The 48 dead lay in state at Westminster Hall and there was a memorial service held in St Paul's Cathedral attended by the Prince of Wales. All the victims were buried together in one grave, beneath a fine monument in the churchyard across the road from St Mary's church. In the church hangs the flag that flew proudly from the R101 and was recovered from the flames.

Twinwood

End of the line for the Chattanooga Choo Choo?

WAS THIS EERIE, barren airfield, on windswept flats above Bedford, the last place on earth that America's greatest band leader ever saw?

On 15 December 1944, GLENN MILLER (1904-44) boarded a Norseman transport plane at Twinwood airfield to fly to Paris, where his band was booked to perform for American troops. He flew off into the mist and was never seen again. No wreckage was ever found, nor was his body. Official records show that no planes took off that day, due to the foggy conditions. But Miller, who was a nervous flyer, apparently did take off, unofficially, uncharted and in appalling weather. Why? Was he on a secret mission? No-one knows.



However he died, Glenn Miller left a legacy of great music and the long-abandoned control tower at Twinwood has been restored to its original wartime appearance and turned into a museum dedicated to his memory. It is a haunting place and, just occasionally, a melancholy saxophone can be heard and the muffled beat of an old plane rising painfully into the sky ...

Dunstable

Well Spring of the English Theatre

STANDING AT THE crossroads of the Ickniel Way and Watling Street, the ancient town of Dunstable is the unlikely BIRTHPLACE OF ENGLISH THEATRE. Here, in the 12th century, GEOFFREY DE GORHAM wrote and directed the FIRST PLAY EVER SEEN IN ENGLAND.

While he was waiting to become Prior of St Albans, de Gorham established a school in Dunstable, where he was living. The town possessed a large colony of weavers and he decided to compose a play as a way of teaching his pupils about St Catherine, the patron saint of weavers. For costumes, he used the robes of the choristers of St Albans Abbey and, for a stage, he used the cloisters of Dunstable Priory.



Dunstable Priory was also the scene of the trial and divorce of Catherine of Aragon. It was here that Archbishop Thomas Cranmer pronounced the Queen's marriage to Henry VIII illegal and the

*document he issued to record this was the last ever
to describe the Primate of England as an official of
the Church of Rome.*

The play proved such a success that others copied his example and put on the first MYSTERY PLAYS, which tell stories from the Bible, and are still performed today in places such as Chester. Originally staged in churches, they became so popular that they spilled out on to the streets and, eventually, non-religious themes were introduced. Thus was sown the seeds of a tradition that grew into arguably the greatest theatre in the world - the theatre of Shakespeare and Dryden, Coward, Pinter, Stoppard and Ayckbourn.

Well, I never knew this

ABOUT

BEDFORDSHIRE

SIR JOSEPH PAXTON (1801-65), designer of the CRYSTAL PALACE, was born in MILTON BRYAN near Woburn. His first job was as gardener at the next door estate of BATTLEDEN PARK. The lake he created there can still be seen, as can the avenue of trees he planted to mark his walk to work.

MARGARET BEAUFORT (1443-1509), matriarch of all European royalty, was born in BLETSOE, north of Bedford. As mother to Henry VII, she was the forebear of every monarch in Europe, and direct ancestor of our own Prince William. Educated and self-confident, she was perhaps the first modern English woman.



JOHN BUNYAN (1628-88), author of the religious best-seller *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1678, was born in the quaint village of ELSTOW, a tiny gem set amongst the industrial litter south of Bedford. Bunyan used many Bedfordshire landmarks in his novel, including a wonderfully boggy patch of weeds by the church at STEVINGTON - the SLOUGH OF DESPOND.

BERKSHIRE

COUNTY TOWN: READING

'Berkshire is like a tattered old shoe, kicking out eastwards'



Newbury Cloth Hall, a fine legacy from the days when Newbury was at the centre of England's wool trade.

Reading

Hidden Depths

READING BECAME THE county town of Berkshire in 1867, displacing the former capital, Abingdon. On the surface this might have appeared a bad move for Berkshire as Abingdon

is a town of ancient beauty while Reading is not. But there is more to Reading than meets the eye.

KING HENRY I founded Reading Abbey in 1121 and presented it with the Hand of St James, which ensured the abbey grew rich as a centre of pilgrimage. Henry is buried before the High Altar, reputedly in a silver coffin, the site marked with a plaque. Nearby lies his daughter, the EMPRESS MAUD. And JOHN OF GAUNT was married here in 1359, setting off 14 days of celebrations.

In 1240, a monk from Reading Abbey, JOHN OF FORNSETE, who originally came from Norfolk, wrote down the music for a song called 'Sumer is icumen in'. This is the EARLIEST RECORDED ENGLISH SONG and there is a memorial plaque on the wall of the Chapter House which records the tune. The original manuscript is in the British Library.

It is possible to wander among the ruins of this once powerful abbey, although only the inner gateway remains intact. JANE AUSTEN attended the Abbey School here. In FORBURY GARDENS next door, stands the WORLD'S LARGEST LION, a memorial to the Afghan Wars of the 19th century.



In the 18th century, HUNTLEY & PALMERS set up what became the BIGGEST BISCUIT FACTORY IN THE WORLD, making biscuits that were sent across the globe. Tins of Huntley & Palmers Reading biscuits were found in Scott of the Antarctic's hut on Ross Island, where they still await his return. In 1975, just before the factory was closed, the bar scenes in *Bugsy Malone*, starring Jodie Foster, were filmed there. There is nothing left now, except for the recreation block beside the canal.

In 1892, OSCAR WILDE, a friend of the Palmers, visited the factory and, three years later, returned to serve two years in the prison next door, which was known to the inmates as the 'biscuit factory' because of its proximity to the real thing. This experience inspired *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

Bear Wood House

Sign of The Times

BEAR WOOD HOUSE, near Wokingham, was built in 1865 by the WALTER family, founders and owners of *The Times* newspaper. *The Times* was started by JOHN WALTER, a coal merchant and Lloyds underwriter, who began with a daily advertising sheet called the *Daily Universal Register*, which was first published on 1 January 1785. Walter was happy to negotiate secret deals to publish stories favourable to the government and this helped increase profits so that, in 1788, he was able to expand the paper to appeal to a larger audience. He renamed it *The Times*, began to publish gossip about members of London society, and was sent to prison for two years for writing about the Prince of Wales.



He handed over a flourishing paper to his son, JOHN WALTER II, in 1803. This Walter introduced steam-powered printing and was soon selling 7,000 copies a day. He wanted to produce a paper free from government influence and, as a result, began to employ independent reporters who gathered their own stories. *The Times* was hugely influential in its support of the GREAT REFORM ACT of 1832, the first major shift of power away from the land-owning aristocracy.

In 1816, John Walter II bought 3,000 acres at BEAR WOOD, and laid out the grounds and a fishing lake. In 1822,

he built a small classical villa in the park, with a village at the gates, adding a church across the road in 1846.

JOHN WALTER III further enhanced the reputation of *The Times* when he took it over in 1847 by employing the finest writers and reporters of the day, such as W.H. RUSSELL, whose dispatches from the CRIMEAN WAR were instrumental in getting FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE sent out to the front. He also invented the WALTER PRESS, the first machine to print newspapers at high speed from a continuous roll.

Bear Wood House was rebuilt by John Walter III in 1865 and his extravagance in constructing the monstrous Victorian pile almost drained the profits of *The Times*, even though it was now selling 65,000 copies a day, the LARGEST NEWSPAPER CIRCULATION IN THE WORLD. Walter III also rebuilt *The Times* offices in Printing House Square at Blackfriars, with bricks and wood from the Bear Wood estate.

In 1870, JOHN WALTER IV drowned in the lake at Bear Wood while trying in vain to rescue his brother and a cousin, who had fallen through the ice while skating. This tragedy, allied to falling profits, forced the sale of *The Times* to LORD NORTHCLIFFE.

The family still live in the grounds, although the house itself is now a boarding school, which can be visited during school holidays or by appointment. The lake is still there, and the Walters are buried beneath four great trees outside the church. One famous descendant is the actress, HARRIET WALTER.



The Sounding Arch

The Widest, Flattest Brick Arch in the World

BUILT IN 1838 by ISAMBARD KINGDOM BRUNEL, this bridge, constructed for the GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY over the River Thames at MAIDENHEAD, has the WIDEST AND FLATTEST BRICK ARCH IN THE WORLD, with a span of 128 ft (39 m) that rises by only 24 ft (7.3 m). Few believed it would take the weight of a locomotive, but it proved so strong that an exact copy was built when the bridge was extended westwards. The original is known as the Sounding Arch because of the perfect echo that can be experienced when standing on the pathway beneath. The bridge was the subject of a painting by J.M.W. TURNER.

The pop group Jethro Tull (the first act on the Chrysalis record label) got their name when their manager, Terry Ellis, spotted a copy of Horse Hoeing Husbandry in someone's office.

Basildon

The Father of Mechanised Farming

JETHRO TULL WAS born in 1674 in the Thames-side village of Basildon, now called Lower Basildon (not to be confused with Basildon in Essex). The son of a Berkshire farmer, Tull studied law, but was forced to help out on his father's farm, HOWBERRY FARM, at Crowmarsh, near Wallingford, because of financial difficulties. Crops were sown by hand in those days, which was slow and inefficient, and Jethro Tull hated doing manual work. He also disliked paying wages, so he set about devising a machine that would do the work instead.

In 1701, using pieces of an old pipe organ that he had dismantled, Tull invented the FIRST KNOWN SEED DRILL, a rotating cylinder with grooves cut into it to allow seed to fall from the hopper into a funnel. This directed the seed into a furrow cut by a plough in front of the machine, which was then covered over with soil by a harrow fixed to the back. The whole thing was pulled by a horse and could sow up to three rows at once. The fields where he experimented with this are unfortunately now built over.

In 1709, Jethro Tull moved to PROSPEROUS FARM near Hungerford, where he continued to perfect his design. He also came up with a horse-drawn hoe for clearing weeds and loosening the roots of the crops, which enabled them to absorb water more efficiently. In 1731, he published his theories on farming and plant nutrition in *The New Horse Hoeing Husbandry* or *An Essay on the Principles of Tillage and Vegetation*.