

# Clarissa's England



# Clarissa's England

CLARISSA DICKSON WRIGHT



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To Mark and Delia Merison whose  
hospitality inspired this book.



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## *Introduction*

The idea for this book came when I was sitting on the veranda of the house belonging to some friends just outside Devizes, with the Kennet and Avon Canal at my back and a side of Roundway Hill, the site of Oliver Cromwell's gun battery in that part of the world, which I had never seen before, watching the sun set. It was very beautiful and I suddenly thought that I wanted to write a book about my England. This is not an exhaustive book; some counties are longer than others because I have spent time there or I am very fond of them and some are shorter because I haven't had the experience of them. It is a personal book, although it contains history and references to food and all the things that you would expect from any book by me, but it is really my love affair with my country. I had been to almost every country in the world by the time I was forty when I got sober and those that I haven't been to I have no particular desire to visit; moreover I have seen the destruction that mass tourism can bring in its wake in places like the Costa del Sol and the Costa Blanca and even parts of Italy. But until then I hadn't really started looking at my own country. Since that date I've spent hours driving thousands of miles around England for filming or for pleasure or for field sports or to support field sports. I've been to rural shows and I've been to great conurbations.

Some of the counties reach right back into my childhood and some of them I only discovered as an adult. I hope you will enjoy travelling them with me, either in the comfort of your own armchair by your own fire, or perhaps as some sort of guide

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for holidaying at home and not going abroad. Many of you, having read your county, will turn round and say why didn't she mention this or why did she leave out that. The answer is probably because I haven't been there or because there wasn't room or because, as with some places, there's not a lot to say however beautiful they may be. So enjoy this and don't be too unkind to me when you see me at one of the shows because I've left out your bit. Indeed I have left out both Surrey and Middlesex because to me they form part of Greater London and I may one day write that book.

Clarissa Dickson Wright  
Inveresk  
March 2012

## *Kent*

Historically, it seems, everybody comes from Kent. One of the many Roman invasions came through Dover; Hengist and Horsa, those two Jutes of unforgettable names, came to Kent. It is in Kent that they were offered a piece of land that could be covered by an ox hide, and by cutting the hide into infinitesimally thin strips they consequently managed to enclose a fairly sizeable area of land.

Christianity, in the form of St Augustine of Canterbury, came through Kent inspired to convert its people. Indeed rather entertainingly, St Augustine came to Ebbsfleet, which is one of those places that you have probably never heard of, where he landed and was welcomed by King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha. Queen Bertha was the first person in Britain to be baptised by Augustine, who was sent to this country by Pope Gregory I, because he had seen fair little Saxon children in the slave markets in Rome and had made the comment, '*Non angli, sed angeli*': not Angles but angels. Augustine went on to Canterbury and to glory.

William the Conqueror missed Kent by a hair's breadth, landing at Pevensey Bay near Hastings in East Sussex, of which more later, but people continued make landfall in Kent. In 1216 there was a landing by a French fleet to support the rebellious barons against King John. In 1457 the Marquis de Brézé sacked the town of Sandwich in order to support Margaret of Anjou, the wife of poor, mad Henry VI. It is said that Margaret actually gave de Brézé, who was a personal friend of hers, the plans of the Bay of Sandwich in order to help him. The Mayor of

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Sandwich to this day still wears a black robe to commemorate the murder, by the de Brézé landing force, of John Drury the then mayor. In 1255 the first elephant in captivity in England landed at Sandwich as a gift from the King of France, Louis IX, to Henry III. To this day most of the immigrants coming into England still arrive in Kent on the ferries, some of them attempting to enter illegally by hanging on to the undercarriages of lorries, or indeed hiding inside the lorries themselves, where they run the risk of suffocating. The Eurostar travels through Kent and I understand that one of the simplest ways for illegal immigrants from those parts of Europe not in the EU to enter the UK is to get on the Eurostar, buying a ticket from Lyon to Paris, and just stay on board. Kent may be the gateway to England but it is rather an insecure one.

People worry about Kent. In the 1930s there was a great deal of anxiety that Kent would become the 'Black Country' of the south due to its extensive coal mining and the subsequent industries that arose around it. In the 1960s people worried that the Channel Tunnel would turn Kent into a suburb of little houses. People also worried because imports of Golden Delicious apples from France and apples from the Antipodes were leading to the grubbing up of the Kent orchards. Kent, which since Tudor times had been known as the Garden of England, was home to a great many apple and pear orchards, along with plums and cherries and of course the Kentish cobnut.

But Kent seems to survive everybody's worries. The oast houses that were built for drying the hops have now been converted into homes for the professional classes and, far from the county becoming a suburb of little affordable houses, those houses that remain fetch extremely good prices due to the easy commuting time to London. The growth of interest in home-grown food produce is seeing the replanting of the fruit orchards. New methods of storage – chillers and the application of gas – are increasing the length of time for which pears can be kept and

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they are beginning to come back into fashion. Previously the problem with pears, probably our native fruit rather than the apple, was that their shelf-life was very short, and they went off after only a couple of days of perfect ripeness. Perry, the pear equivalent of cider, once one of our very common national drinks, is likewise coming back into fashion. In the second series of *The Great British Food Revival* on TV, in which I took part in 2011, Michel Roux Jr was championing the pear and was filmed in Kent, while Yotam Ottolenghi, another chef, was talking about the revival of the Kentish cobnut. This is eaten when it is green and soft and you can just peel off the skin with your fingers, but then as it matures a nutcracker is needed to reach the kernel. Now even nut oil is being produced from it, which gives an interesting flavour to salads and suchlike dishes. Nobody, as far as I know, is as yet producing milk from it. Nut milk in the Middle Ages and Tudor times was a popular alternative to milk from ruminants and I would have thought could be particularly good for people who are allergic to dairy products; perhaps it will come one day.

Since the Middle Ages, hops were an essential ingredient in the production of beer, which had replaced ale as the nation's drink, and the Kentish hop fruit had to be picked by hand. Charabancs of cockneys would pour out of London for the hop picking, staying in the same huts that their parents and grandparents had used for generations. The children would play about and generally have a splendid time in the fresh air. Food would be provided by the hop farmer, and when the day's work was done there would be singing round campfires and no doubt the sampling of some of the previous year's produce in the form of beer. A nice time was had by all and it was probably a lot healthier than flogging off to the Costa del Sol and risking horrendous stomach upsets and sunstroke, to say nothing of skin cancer. Most of the hop fields have now gone and most of those that remain are picked by machinery,

but looking at those old pictures and listening to the stories of the hop pickers one cannot help but regret the passing of a different age. The side shoots of hops are pruned off in the spring to help the fruit to grow more intensely, but can be eaten as a vegetable. I was sent some hop shoots few years ago to try – and very good they were too. Chefs who are forever seeking new delicacies to adorn their menus might well look to hop shoots, which nowadays are mostly just burned.

Oddly enough, Kent is also a county that has produced a great number of rebels. Whether this is because of the continual changes in population with the different waves of immigrants, or its proximity to London, or a combination of both, I don't know. Although the revolts of 1381 started in Essex, Wat Tyler's Kentish revolt began shortly after with the sacking of Rochester Castle. The rioters, led by Wat and his colleague John Ball – a failed priest who was responsible for their theme tune 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?' – marched for London where they encamped at Blackheath. They broke into the Tower of London and killed Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury of the day. The revolt came to an end when the young King Richard II rode out with the Lord Mayor of London and others to placate the rioters and he promised them a better world. The Lord Mayor, a fishmonger, stabbed Wat Tyler who he thought was attacking the King. His dagger can be seen to this day in Fishmongers' Hall in London. The rioters believed the King and, cast down by the loss of their leader, returned to their homes where they were heavily persecuted.

The second rebellion, in 1450, was an outburst against Henry VI and his unpopular Queen, Margaret of Anjou, and was led by another man from Kent, Jack Cade. The rebels set off for London, which they looted, but were defeated in a battle on London Bridge. The King had fled to Warwickshire, but issued pardons for the rebels. Jack Cade also called himself Mortimer

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and received his pardon in that name, which particular untruth allowed him to be hunted down and killed as Jack Cade. Margaret was so angry with Kent that she said that she would turn the county into a deer park so that no people could live there.

The gentry of Kent were fairly rebellious too. One family in particular, the Wyatts of Allington, were deemed treasonous for three consecutive generations, the first of which was Sir Henry Wyatt's. In the reign of Richard III he protected the treatment of the little Princes in the Tower, quite rightly, so it would seem with the benefit of hindsight, and was thrown into the Tower where it was decreed that he should starve to death. Sir Henry was particularly fond of cats and he befriended a cat that was walking the lead roof outside his room of incarceration. The cat would bring him, so the story goes, pigeons, which he would pluck and cook over the fire that he was allowed, and he and the cat would share the birds. This was what kept him alive until Richard or perhaps Henry Tudor released him. His son, Thomas the poet, was imprisoned for his supposed involvement in the shenanigans with Anne Boleyn; he was reputed to be one of her lovers and certainly was one of her familiars. Finally Sir Henry's grandson, Thomas Wyatt the Younger, was also imprisoned in the Tower for treason and executed. After that the Wyatts went into soldiery and carried on their campaigns abroad. It is possibly the same rebellious streak that had led to the appointment of the Dutch scholar Erasmus as the incumbent vicar of Allington. This may have caused some difficulties, as Erasmus spoke very few words of English and, while he could conduct his services, I doubt he was much of a pastor to his parishioners.

One of the other great families in Kent was, of course, the Boleyns who lived at Hever Castle, now carefully restored with American money in the twentieth century. Anne Boleyn is one of those examples of how even in our historic times, when men totally dominated, a woman could still alter the course of history. Had she been allowed by Wolsey to go off and marry the future

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Earl of Northumberland, she would probably have ended her days quite happily lording it over the north, but as it was the steel entered her soul. We might never have had the transference from Rome to the Anglican Church without Henry's determination that he would have the one person who refused him. We certainly wouldn't have had the greatest Queen that England has ever known and arguably one of its greatest monarchs. The curious outcome of the whole Boleyn story is that her sister Mary, set aside by Henry VIII after having delivered him two living children, a boy and a girl, was then allowed to marry for love and retired to be the wife of an Essex squire. As we know, Anne and her brother George both went to the block and the Boleyn fortune went to the only remaining sibling, Mary. I don't know why I love that story but I do.

If we travel north to the Thames-side towns that were once such an important site for the shipbuilding industry and for tending to the vessels that traded in and out of the Thames, we come to another story of a strong woman whose life ended tragically. Buried at Gravesend, so called because it was the last place where you could put people ashore to bury them if you were on the outward journey and they died suddenly, or you buried them on the inward journey, is Pocahontas, the daughter of the Red Indian chief Powhatan, who fell in love with the early English settler John Smith. According to the story, he was due to be clubbed to death at Powhatan's order by the braves of the tribe when Powhatan yielded to his daughter's entreaties and saved his life. Twice more Pocahontas saved the lives of colonists: once when they were starving and she persuaded the tribe to give them food, and once when she ran through the woods at night to warn them that there was going to be an attack and this allowed them to prepare and fight it off. John Smith returned to England having suffered injuries as a result of an explosion, and the settlers, not wanting to lose the support of Pocahontas who was probably their only advocate, told her that he had died.



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In her grief and despair she was persuaded to marry another of the settlers, just to keep her onside, one suspects.

Eventually James I said he would like to meet her, so she was brought to England. She arrived at court to discover John Smith alive and well and burst into floods of hysterical tears: 'They told me you were dead.' History doesn't relate what happened between John Smith and Pocahontas during her visit but when she was being shipped back to America she died before the ship had left English waters. I often think that this was as a result of a broken heart, and I always think that it is one of the saddest stories. I remember my father taking me down the river and explaining to me the former importance of the various towns along that stretch of the river and finally coming to Gravesend and showing me Pocahontas's grave. Those towns on the river are rather uninspiring, it has to be said. Chatham, once the site of the mighty naval dockyard, with the remains of the biggest rope walk – that is a building in which you twisted your ropes for the hawsers for the ships and for other rigging and so forth – was destroyed by fire in the eighteenth century, and it is now mostly a rather depressing suburb.

What does Kent mean to me, personally? One of the parts of it that I love very much is the Romney Marsh. I knew nothing of the Romney Marsh until towards the end of my drinking career in the 1980s, when I was working for an agency that sent people out for one or two weeks at a time to act as cook/housekeeper to clients whose cook was perhaps on holiday or for some reason needed extra help. In this case it was an elderly gentleman whose wife had been taken into hospital and he really couldn't cook and look after himself, for no other reason than that he was a man of his generation. He lived just down the road from Sissinghurst Castle. Every day for a fortnight we would go in the morning for him to visit his wife in hospital, and while he was there I would do some provision shopping for the evening; afterwards we would set forth into the Romney Marsh. It was

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an area in which he had spent most of his life and loved very much and he took me to various places which I could share through the eyes of someone who was not only knowledgeable but caring. I remember going to New Romney, which I thought would be something like Harlow New Town so I wasn't particularly keen, and was astonished to discover that the church was Norman and that the town was very old. On the pillars of the church you could see the rope marks from ships that had tied up in medieval times during periods of flood and very high water.

The Romney Marsh is the home of the Romney Marsh sheep, a breed supposed to have been brought to England by the Romans and which has the advantage of not getting foot rot when living in wet and marshy areas. These sheep taste delicious as they graze on the marsh herbs, which give them a distinct and unique flavour. With the coming of the railways the sheep, which would have been shipped to the London markets or sold locally, suddenly became a much more valuable asset and could be put on the train and sent up to Smithfield much more quickly and were much sought after in Victorian times for the quality of their mutton. Today we eat lamb rather than mutton and very often we eat hogget which is a beast that is between one and two years old and to my mind doesn't have an awful lot of flavour, not even the sweetness of lamb. Good quality mutton properly cooked is a delicious thing. Prince Charles has tried hard to promote it and bring it back, but in order to cook mutton properly it requires long, slow cooking, which is really an anathema to the chefs who pervade our food scene today. Mutton is only appreciated and bought by the West Indian, Indian and Pakistani communities. So the Romney Marsh sheep crop out their days happily waiting for a revival of mutton.

The other great food associated with the Kent marshes was wildfowl. In the spring and autumn the marshes are alive with migrating ducks and geese of all different varieties and the wild-fowlers would go out and build decoys and lay nets and gather

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them up. They would be shipped mainly to Leadenhall market, where they would be hung in their hundreds for people to buy. To this day great swathes of the Kent marshes are owned by the various Kent wildfowling groups who look out for the birds, ensure that their habitat is secure and protected and take what is now a very small percentage of the huge number of wild birds that come in and out. It is quite fascinating when you go shooting on the marshes on the north Kent coast because on the other side of the Thames is the huge oil refinery at Thamesport and you see the birds coming in against its lights which makes for very good night-time shooting. There is a large heronry in the north Kent marshes which is the only bit that is owned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Heron is not now, of course, part of our diet, although it was a popular feature on medieval and Tudor tables, and as the RSPB refuses to control the birds, they are proving to be something of a nuisance, taking the rare wild carp that have lived in the streams of the marshes since time immemorial. There is also a new migrant, the strange frog from the Camargue region of France, which trills like a night bird and is busy populating the marshes, probably, as is so often the case, to the detriment of our native newts and frogs.

There is an area of the north Kent marshes called the Isle of Grain where it is believed that the Romans grew substantial amounts of grain to feed their troops. When, after the Second World War, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) tried to reintroduce grain crops to the area, two problems were discovered. The first was that the area was riddled with ergot. This is a fungal parasite which you will sometimes see if you look in the hedgerows; it looks rather like mouse droppings attached to the stalks of grain, and is a dangerous hallucinogenic. St Vitus's dance, that odd disease that led people to dance themselves to death, is supposed to be ergotism, and the reason for the strange case of the *Mary Celeste* is reputed to be because ergot got into the flour used for making the bread

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and the crew just went mad and leapt over the side. The second problem was that generations of flooding had affected the flocculation, the process whereby the molecules of earth are held together, so that when they took heavy machinery on to the marsh the ground just gave way and the tractors and harvesters sank up to their engines.

The marsh also contains the remains of gunpowder works which were in active service until the second half of the nineteenth century. But most famous of all in the area are the fever graves that appear so poignantly in Dickens's *Great Expectations*. These are where whole families of tiny children are buried with their parents in these curious little graves, marked by small gravestones beside the parents' larger one. Marsh fever was malaria and it is a curious thing that Johnny Scott and I helped save the Isle of Grain from becoming the third London airport quite by accident. When we were filming *Clarissa and the Countryman* there we came across a man in a barn collecting something, and being nosy we went and asked him what he was doing. He told us he was looking for the larva of the anopheles mosquito which historically had caused the marsh fever. The mosquitoes were still in evidence but due to the fact that there was no malarial blood available for them to transfer the malaria virus from one person to another, there was no longer any malaria. We filmed this because we found it interesting. The people who were campaigning to stop John Prescott putting the third London airport there recognised at once that having people coming in from countries where there was malaria would have started the whole cycle all over again, and they built a successful case against the presence of the airport. It felt good to have helped in some small way to protect this unique part of England.

On the landward side of Romney Marsh stands the Lympne Escarpment. The sea would have reached this point and the marsh would have been submerged. Where once you would have looked over the rolling waves, today you look over the

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beauty of the Romney Marsh, a strange, wild place where in Edwardian times people came to appreciate Port Lympne House, built by the dilettante and very rich Sir Philip Sassoon, a relation of mine by marriage. In an age where it wasn't acceptable he was openly gay and hosted lavish and extremely elegant parties at the house, which was designed by Sir Herbert Baker. A little to the north, near Canterbury, is another house which I believe was also commissioned by Philip Sassoon called Howletts. Howletts is now a zoo which respectably fronts the children's television series *Roar*. In its heyday it was the home of the well-known gambler John Aspinall, who kept a private zoo there and was leader of a debauched, extremely rich, set of friends such as Mark Birley, who founded Annabel's and various other night-clubs, and Lord Lucan, 'Lucky' Lucan. There are rumours suggesting that the reason Lucan has never been found was that he died there, possibly of a heart attack, and the lions devoured him. Also part of the set was Jimmy Goldsmith, the millionaire entrepreneur and founder of the Referendum Party. Aspinall made his money from his ownership of the Claremont Club, a celebrated and very select gambling club where huge amounts of money changed hands. In my youth an aura of sinister glamour hovered over the whole group. The animals were not as well controlled as they might have been, however. Mark Birley's son, Robin, nearly lost his life and certainly was badly injured from a contretemps with a tiger when he was a young boy, and there were various reports of models being injured by some of the primates. Today, as I said, an aura of respectability envelops the entire zoo, but it is not the Howletts I remember.

Much of the historic wealth of Kent came from the fact that four of the five Cinque ports were located in the county. The Kentish Cinque ports are New Romney, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich, with Hastings being the one in the adjoining county of Sussex. In return for maintaining ships for the use of the crown should they be required, they were allowed to levy tolls

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for themselves, and were exempt from paying various Saxon taxes to the crown, a dispensation that continued into Norman times. Their levies had wonderful names such as infangtheof and outfangtheof, pillory, soc, tol and team, blodwit and fledwit. These allowed the ports to levy heavy fines on criminals caught within their boundaries, as in infangtheoth, or who had committed crimes within their boundaries but were apprehended beyond them, as in outfangtheof. It proved a lucrative way of raising money because anyone who could afford to chose to pay off their fines, rather than suffer imprisonment or the death penalty, both of which probably resulted in the same outcome.

The post of Warden of the Cinque Ports was a prestigious appointment that brought a lot of wealth, together with the residence of Dover Castle. Sandwich received its original charter from King Canute and it is supposed to be on the beach here that King Canute made his abortive attempt to turn back the tide to convince his courtiers that he was not more powerful than God or the sea.

Kent is a county rich in history and beautiful buildings, such as Leeds Castle and Sissinghurst Castle, the home of diplomat Harold Nicolson, husband of the author Vita Sackville-West. I once went to Leeds Castle with a party of American fundamentalist Christians who spent the entire journey not talking to me because I had made the improper suggestion that Jesus Christ was Jewish. Even their bad temper didn't ruin the beauties of Leeds. My only visit to Sissinghurst was when I stayed the night with Adam Nicolson and Sarah Raven prior to doing a demonstration at Sarah's cookery school, where just wandering around the gardens, which were influenced by the work of Gertrude Jekyll, was a joy and a delight. Another joy and delight is the tomb of William the baker at Rochester, who was murdered by his adopted son. William was a pilgrim who came from Perth and, as described on his tomb, used to give away one in ten loaves he had made to the poor and needy. He is the patron saint of pilgrims and, of course, of bakers.

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To me, however, the very special reason I have for visiting Kent is that this is the place where, in 1987, I got sober. I was a morally, physically and spiritually destitute drunk when I attended Robert Le Fevre's Promis Recovery Centre at Nonington, not far from Canterbury. We used to be bussed into AA and Narcotics Anonymous meetings in Canterbury itself and I rather liked the fact that I was trying to re-start my life and look for some sort of miracle in that great centre of Christian faith in England. I'm not particularly fond of places of pilgrimage, they tend to be overcrowded and full of shops selling tat, but even I could not fail to be moved by the centuries of faith that the town represented and, of course, the spot where Thomas Becket was martyred on the instructions of an irascible king. It does place a slightly different context on the 'Will nobody rid me of this turbulent priest?' line when you realise that William de Tracy, who was one of the four assassins, came from a long line of royal hitmen who continued on that particular road until after the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801. Becket's killers were clearly professionals, as all but one of them died in their beds. But Becket's death established the independence of the Christian Church in England and so it remained until at least Henry VIII.

