

## PREFACE

By Jonathan Meades

Acknowledged and  
Unacknowledged  
Masterpieces:

**below**

Castle Howard in North  
Yorkshire

**opposite**

Wartime corrugated-iron  
barns on the Gartree  
Road near Stonton Wyville  
in Leicestershire

Like, say, pastiche, nostalgia has become a dirty word. This is hardly surprising in a country that is publicly neophilic, restlessly progressive, obsessed by perpetual change, riddled with exciting initiatives. Yet privately nostalgia is an affect that all but the most brute sensibilities entertain. Without nostalgia – literally, the yearning for a lost home – the canon would be



vastly diminished. No Proust, no Chateaubriand, no Housman, no Hopkins. If we are true to ourselves we have to admit that in our imaginative longing we persistently turn back the clock, we recurrently ‘tompeep down the hedges of the years’. (Nor would there be Nabokov.)

Peter Ashley is a man of multitudinous madeleines. He is the gatekeeper to several generations’ memories. Anyone who had the good fortune to be alive in the England of the 1950s will discover in his work endless triggers which bring back that far from grim, far from grey decade. The received ideas are wrong. It was, actually, a time of multi-coloured content. This is not to say he makes us wish to crack open a bottle of Bovril or a tin of Bird’s Custard Powder. It is the sight of their packaging and jolly advertisements rather than the dubious taste of their contents which are such potent keys to mnemonic bliss. And one memory lights another with synaesthetic ease. The Spratt’s calligram smells of seed and sacks.

The douce past is not however just within our brain waiting to be released. It is on celluloid – which is probably the best place for the nightmare called Meccano that plays such a central part in Tim Preece’s *The Combination*, which Peter Ashley properly adjudges superb.

It is in the increasingly overpriced Rupert Bear annuals – which inevitably make me think of the former Rosicrucian church in Nutwood Street near Peckham Rye Common.

It is, most of all, in the overlooked and often bedraggled buildings which have miraculously survived the depredations of vandal councils and oik developers. Prefabs, Nissen huts, sheds built of corrugated iron which was once the material of the future, wonky cricket pavilions, deserted lodges, bedraggled shack colonies, beached boats, lean-tos, rolling stock that rolled its last long before Sir Nigel Gresley designed the A4 Pacific. Peter Ashley is our foremost chronicler of these structures. His is an earnest endeavour for they are constantly at risk, they receive no statutory protection and are worth less than the land they stand on. He values them and encourages us to value them.

The atypical – Broadway, Finchingfield, a Vanbrugh palace, a Pugin church – is seldom any longer in danger; we learnt a lesson the hard way, we rue the depredations of the post-war years. But it is the everyday and the humble which evidently constitute the most vital part of England’s texture, which lend it the flavour it still possesses if we bother to look and decline to feast our eyes on a diet of acknowledged

masterpieces. This book is, amongst much else, a hymn to unacknowledged masterpieces, to the quiet genius of the bodger, the bricoleur and the adept of the Birmingham screwdriver.

