

# ENGEL'S ENGLAND

Thirty-nine counties, one capital and one man

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# ENGLAND

The thirty-nine counties and one capital



## 1. *I'll be with you in plum blossom time*



## WORCESTERSHIRE

The 'Springtime in the Vale' coach trip left the country park outside Evesham just after 10 a.m. This was the outing formerly known as the Blossom Trail tour. But blossom and bus timetables are uneasy bedfellows. 'It's a bit of a revamped blossom tour,' explained our guide, Angela from Wychavon District Council. 'Either the blossom was too early, or we were too late, or vice versa, so we've rebranded it.'

There was another uneasy party to this arrangement. I'm a train man: I don't like buses. And simply being here spoke to one of my deepest fears. Everyone has their own particular alarm about old age: pain, infirmity, mental decay. My own holy terror is of being so bored and lonely that I succumb to booking seven-day coach tours to 'Glorious Devon' or 'Loch Lomond and the Trossachs'. As it was, I found myself – as happens less and less often – some way below the average age of the thirty-strong company, although Fred the driver had trouble believing my protest that I was not entitled to the £1 pensioner discount.

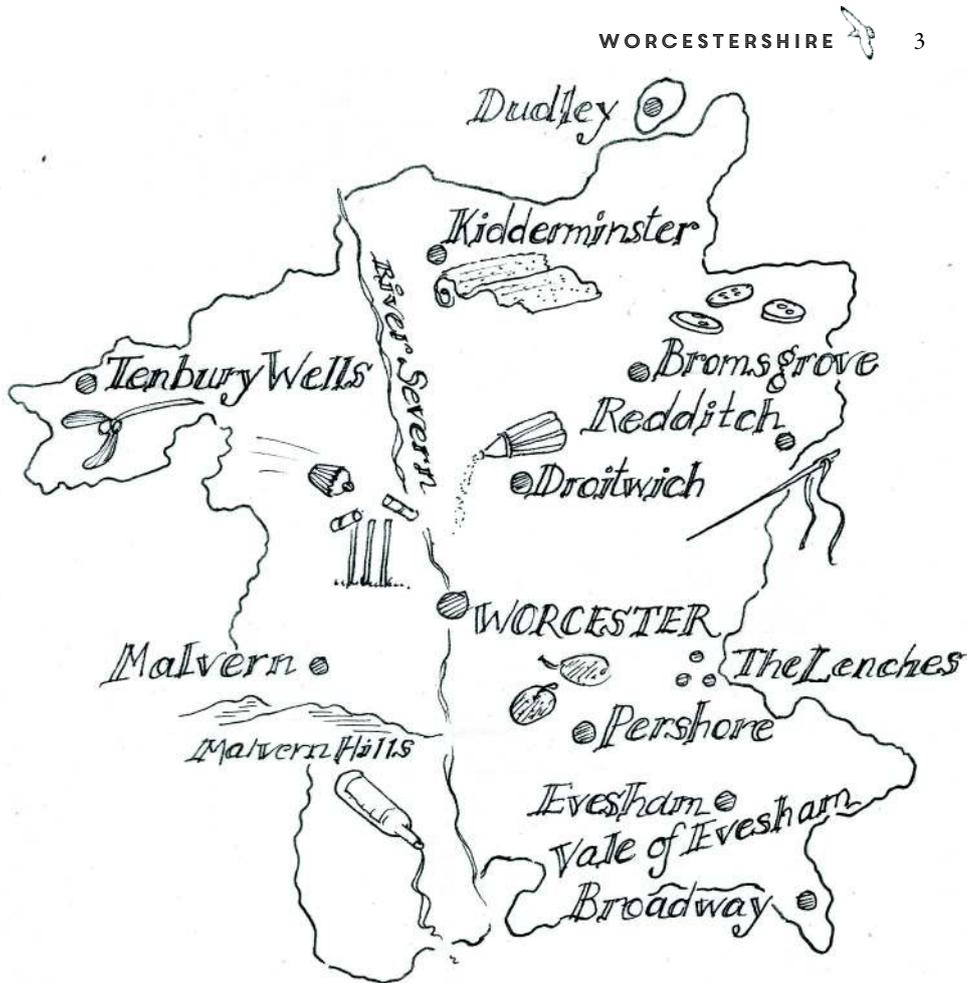
But it had seemed churlish to spurn the bus trip. Angela and Fred knew where Worcestershire's best blossom might be; I didn't. And for once everything was in sync. An infamously savage December had been succeeded by a bland January and February, and a kindly March. The upshot was that on this Wednesday, 6 April, the plum trees were in full cry. These are the traditional harbingers of the brief and glorious Midland spring; they are followed by riots of pear, cherry and apple blossom before the orchards calm down, stop showing off and get on with the serious business of producing fruit.

Furthermore, this was no ordinary 6 April. It was a fabulous 6 April: the sky deep blue, the sun blazing down, the air midsummer-warm.

The tour had definitely been given more of a revamp than a rebrand. Once we got going, we saw heaps of plum blossom, but only in the distance. Angela had other priorities. Within minutes, we stopped at a farm shop for plum-jam nibbles washed down with thimbles of local apple juice. That lasted half an hour. We went on to Croome Park, designed by Capability Brown, mucked up by the RAF and then by the M5, now being restored by the National Trust, which has had difficulty replanting some of the trees in their old places, since they are ill-suited to the southbound fast lane.

At Croome Park we were encouraged to visit the toilets, the coffee shop and the redundant Georgian church of Croome D'Abitot, once the quasi-private chapel of the Earls of Coventry. This was an hour-long stop, which was a bit leisurely for the toilet but not quite long enough to visit Croome Court, the Coventrys' ancestral home which fell on confused times after the tenth earl was killed during the Dunkirk retreat, and the estate was sold off. The house then had spells as a Catholic boys' school, a country house hotel, a base for the Hare Krishna movement, the home of a property developer or two, the offices of an insurance company and a police training centre. The motorway came through in the 1960s, perhaps the only decade in the past 250 years when such a thing would have been possible without either the Coventrys or public opinion screaming blue murder.

Which is, I think, all very interesting, but nothing to do with plum blossom. And then, when we reboarded Fred's coach, we were taken straight to the centre of Evesham and decanted for a *two-hour* stop, this time to have lunch. By now, I was hearing mutinous murmurs from the rows behind me. 'I came to see the countryside, not the town,' moaned a woman from Worcester.



Some of the party probably lived in Evesham and might have walked home for lunch. Evesham is a pretty town, especially on a day like this, though it is of an unfortunate size (pop.: 22,000) which means it has a good many chain stores of a not especially useful kind (Edinburgh Woolen Mill, Body Shop, Burton) but no Marks & Spencer. It does have a particularly hideous 24-hour Tesco on the edge of town. My friend Jane Mason, who was to give me board and lodging that evening, once complained to the manager: 'Can't you turn the sign off at night? This is a rural area and you can see it from everywhere, even the riverbank.' 'That's the point,' he replied.

Before the supermarket came, the last major event in Evesham was a kerfuffle in 1265 when rebel soldiers led by Simon de Montfort were

trapped by the bend in the River Avon. With no Tesco sign to suggest a line of retreat, they had the river on three sides and forces loyal to Henry III on the fourth; they were duly massacred. De Montfort was slain and cut in pieces, with body parts being awarded, in the manner of the *corrida*, to various loyalist generals. Roger, the first Baron Mortimer, was given the head and sent it home to his wife, as one of the most original and thoughtful of all love tokens. Perhaps it was stamped A SOUVENIR OF EVESHAM, or MY HUSBAND WENT TO EVESHAM AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY HEAD.

I would have retrieved my car and gone off on my own but for an assurance from Angela that we really were going to see blossom in the hour that would remain between us regrouping at 3 p.m. and saying goodbye at 4. The destination was The Lenches, a group of five villages and hamlets, Rous Lench, Church Lench, Ab Lench, Atch Lench and Sheriff's Lench, famous for their mistletoe-covered old orchards. I just wanted to lie on the warming ground and stare through the flowers at the perfect sky.

So, after 3, Angela pointed out the homes of a few minor celebrities and I sat back contentedly, savouring the prospect ahead and that lovely phrase: *plum blossom*. Perhaps only cherry blossom can match it for euphony, I was thinking, though that has become tainted by association with boot polish. The coach jogged gently along the lanes. The sun streamed through the window. I must have closed my eyes. And the next thing I knew we were back in the car park, being ushered off.

Very cross, I drove straight back to Atch Lench, where there is a large community orchard, saved from the bulldozers in 1999 by a consortium of concerned villagers. The gate was open and it was at last possible to bond with the springtime. England stretched down the hill and far beyond; a soft spring breeze ruffled the grass; the trees were stark white against the sky. Plum blossom is not just a pretty phrase. It is more beautiful in reality than its rivals, purer in its whiteness, more delicate, more vulnerable. It symbolises all the hope of the year. But the breeze was driving the first blooms to the ground: April not a week old – day one of the financial year – and already the first hint of melancholy. It felt like a scene that had been enacted in the Lenches for thousands of springtimes.

Actually not. The Vale of Evesham was originally famous for vegetables (including asparagus), cereals and sheep. Then came the great agrarian depression of the late nineteenth century. According to John Edgeley – the acknowledged local expert – the first big orchards near here were then planted just over the Gloucestershire border by Lord Sudeley.

Soon they spread into Worcestershire, and Evesham's neighbour Pershore became famous for two plums, the Pershore Yellow Egg and the Pershore Purple. Fresh plums, previously an upper-class delicacy, became widely available, and plum jam and tinned plums ubiquitous. However, this hey-day lasted barely half a century. By the 1950s cold storage was enabling the nascent supermarkets to bring in fresh plums from more trustworthy climes.

The vulnerability of plum blossom is very real. Because it comes so early, it is at risk from equinoctial gales and late frosts. Many gardeners believe plum trees fruit in alternate years, which is sort of, but not precisely, true. With plums, it is always famine or feast. My neighbour on the bus remembered her mother, in pre-war Birmingham, getting word that they were being sold off at a farthing a pound, one-tenth of a modern penny: 'She made a hundred pounds of plum jam that year.' In such seasons, the slender boughs often get snapped by the sheer weight of fruit.

My theory is that English soft fruit, unreliable though it is, always tastes best because it is on the edge of its range and so ripens more slowly. That's another argument that wouldn't go down well with a Tesco manager.

I realised only with hindsight what an appropriate place Worcestershire was for the start of this journey. Nowhere better represents the England of the imagination: the idealised, disembodied England of folk memory and fantasy.

Small towns, all of them close to each other, nestle in the lowlands, the hills never far from view. Each of them became famous for producing something now more likely to come from thousands of miles away: plums from Pershore; nails and buttons from Bromsgrove; carpets from Kidderminster; needles from Redditch; salt from Droitwich. They are separated by villages that are absurdly rich in thatch and half-timbering and ecclesiastical overstatement, rather less rich in natural vibrancy. Broadway is a theme park of bogus Englishness, maintained for tourists. But there are others just as nice and far less famous, like Elmley Castle, which appear to have been hijacked by commuters to Worcester and Brum.

Perhaps no county has been mucked around so much by boundary-fiddlers. Small-scale land swaps with neighbours have gone on for centuries. Until 1911 the south-western suburbs of Birmingham were part of Worcestershire. Long after that, the county included parts of the Black Country, including Dudley, retained as an island enclave in hostile territory.

(Dudley was built up by the seventeenth-century ironmaster Dud Dudley, who one might have assumed was an American blues musician.)

Most of the guidebook writers were so appalled by this aspect of Worcestershire they recoiled in horror: 'Hideous,' said Hutchinson's *Britain Beautiful*. In the late twentieth century, Worcestershire had a brief, discreditable reign as an occupying power when the absurd county of Hereford and Worcester was created, and little Herefordshire was crushed under the Worcester jackboot. (I may be overdramatising just a fraction.) Even now, Worcestershire has a pleasingly irrational shape, full of peninsulas and inlets, ensuring that Broadway and Tenbury Wells are in and Tewkesbury is out.

The imperial overlordship of Herefordshire was an uncharacteristic phase. The typical Worcestershire town has generally been dozy, inward-looking, entire of itself. Perhaps that's why, in the 1640s, Worcester was the Faithful City, the one that failed to get the message about the swing from the king: the first to declare for Charles I; the last to surrender – more Royalist even than Oxford. There was a sense at the time that Worcestershire could remain loyal and be self-sufficient if necessary, though the passage of armed convoys down the Severn to reach the sea might have got a little wearing after a while.

And now there cannot be a town in the kingdom that feels as removed from surrounding reality as Malvern. As I left Evesham for the forty-minute drive, Jane Mason's husband, Nick, said he couldn't understand why anyone retired to Malvern because everything was uphill. When I arrived, I went to see George Chesterton, a former Worcestershire cricketer and later deputy head of Malvern College, who explained that was the secret of its success: it keeps 'em fit. 'People come to Malvern to die,' he said, 'and then they don't.' At eighty-eight, thoroughly perky, having spent almost his entire life in the town, he was the evidence for his own case.

What a distinctive town this is. 'In my childhood,' wrote Jonathan Keates in the late 1970s, 'it always seemed full of old ladies and schoolgirls – the former have, alas, broken ranks, but the latter remain in force – four girls' boarding schools, the famous Malvern College for boys, and six prep schools.'

Since then, the balance of power has switched back again. The second-division schools have all closed (Chesterton recited them to me: 'Lawnside, The Abbey, Douglas House, Ellerslie ...') and the old ladies and gentlemen dominate the place. It is a town where men go out in jackets

and ties for no obvious purpose; and the menswear department of Brays may be the last in Britain to display pyjamas prominently in the window.

On the one hand, Malvern is the most English of towns. On the other, it feels curiously foreign, like an Indian hill station in the last years of the Raj – Simla or ‘Snooty Ooty’. In some ways, it seems dull as ditchwater: ‘Hey, let’s go and buy some pyjamas.’ Yet the setting is freaky, dreamlike. The hills, as Keates put it, are ‘triumphant in their suddenness’, and the town girdles them, the atmosphere changing street by street. Sometimes one seems to be in an Italian painting. Next moment the Rhondda.

And ditchwater you never get in Malvern. The place grew rich because of the purity of the water that permeates the rock and escapes through dozens of springs. It is not that Malvern Water contains any healthy minerals: its secret is an absence of anything *un*healthy. There was a local verse about the town’s eighteenth-century pioneer:

*Malvern Water  
Says Dr John Wall  
Is famed for containing  
Nothing at all.*

Which, in that pre-sanitary era, was in itself a benefit. Wall’s ideas mutated into the nineteenth-century pseudo-science of hydrotherapy, which was held to cure anything. *Everyone* came to Malvern: Florence Nightingale was a regular; Henry James was anxious to improve his bowel movements. Hydrotherapy can hardly have done anyone much harm, unlike the billions of plastic bottles which cater to the modern version of the obsession and then infest the oceans. On that basis, it sounded like good news that the works producing bottled Malvern Water were closed down in 2010 by its owners, Coca-Cola, even though the Queen, a great enthusiast, was said to be unamused.

Initiates use God’s benison more wisely. The most popular spring is Hay Slad, the great gusher that pours out of the hillside in West Malvern. Always a line of cars, I was told ... people from as far afield as America and Australia ... you’ll see it. It took some finding; and when I finally discovered Hay Slad – not signposted, just an open secret – there was no one around at all. So I wandered up the road to have lunch at the Brewers Arms, in a garden overlooking Herefordshire (‘Best Pub View in Britain 2005’). When I got back to the spring, one of the locals, Philippa Lee,

was filling two dozen bottles, all glass. 'Plastic leeches into the water,' she said.

Does everyone come here? 'People don't talk about it, they just do it. Tea tastes rubbish made with anything else.'

'So where does the water come from?'

'No one knows. It's not run-off from the hills, it's from somewhere deep in the earth. If it's ever been through anyone, it was hundreds or thousands of years ago. Since we've got this facility, we might as well use it, though I always feel guilty when I leave it running. I keep thinking I should turn the tap off.'

Finally, bottle no. 24 went into one of her bags-for-life. 'Right,' she said. 'I'll get home. If the neighbours hear the clink, they'll think I'm on the booze.'

The author James Lees-Milne, born in Wickhamford, wrote that Worcestershire was 'pre-eminently an autumnal county ... smells of the muddy river after rain, of hops and cider apples, of walnuts, blackberries, Michaelmas daisies and rotting sycamore leaves.' Nonsense: it's a springtime county.

Since 1899, Worcestershire has had first-class cricket, which has given the county a celebrity it would never have had otherwise. First and foremost, Worcester is renowned as the most beautiful of county grounds, with its encircling trees that do not quite obscure the view of the cathedral. It is in fact an ugly ground in a beautiful setting. The old pavilion was quite charming, but got demolished because it was regularly inundated, along with the playing area, whenever the Rivers Severn and Teme felt a bit full. The new pavilion, though believed to have Noah's Ark qualities, is in keeping with the Worcester tradition of repulsive modern architecture. 'Words fail me,' wrote Lees-Milne of the city centre.

What is wholly spring-like is the tradition (now more often breached than observed) that touring teams – especially Australian ones – begin their visits to England in Worcester. In the 1930s Donald Bradman came here three times and on every visit made a double-century. In 1948 he returned, and failed – out for 107, watched (judging by the number of people who have said they were there) by a crowd of at least half a million.

These famous matches all took place at the end of April, beginning of May, the customary start of the cricket season. However, the game's rulers have great faith in global warming and in 2011 the opening match,

Worcestershire v Yorkshire, was scheduled for 8 April. Their trust was rewarded. It was another peach of a day. Or a plum. And a surprisingly large crowd survived the horrendous one-way system and made their way into the ground to begin their pre-match rituals. They chatted with old acquaintances, poured tea from their Thermoses and read their *Daily Telegraphs*.

The first day of the season always has a special buzz of anticipation. The players, who usually look as though a day's cricket is a less enticing option than a shift in a call centre, certainly felt it. As the cathedral clock struck 11, Ryan Sidebottom of Yorkshire bowled the opening delivery; the Worcestershire captain, Daryl Mitchell, defended routinely to mid-off, and all the fielders fizzed with enthusiasm as though the bowler had taken a wicket at the first attempt. The spectators, however, chatted with old acquaintances, poured tea from their Thermoses, and read their *Daily Telegraphs*.

They weren't wrong, because the cricket soon settled into a gentle, pleasant rhythm. It seemed safe to nip out to visit the cathedral, something I had never done in decades of watching cricket here. The great architectural historian Alec Clifton-Taylor implied I was no bad judge, and that Worcester Cathedral was best observed from across the river – i.e. from the cricket ground. The local building stone was 'friable New Red sandstone' and the masonry had 'suffered cruelly at the hands of time'. He was also appalled by the Victorian restoration ('platitudinous ... very nasty ... horrible ... lamentable'). Luckily, he never saw the new cricket pavilion. Anyway, embarking on this book, I had set myself a subsidiary task: to light a candle for my late son, Laurie, in every Anglican cathedral in England, and I duly went across to start the list by ticking off Worcester.

The building is particularly long and thin and if – of the two struggling institutions – the Church should precede county cricket into oblivion, the cricketers could take it over and use the nave for net practice. They would comfortably fit in two wickets, one behind the other.

Not being wholly certain which bits Clifton-Taylor most wanted me to hate, I concentrated on finding Worcester's three most significant memorials. King John lies buried here, in accordance with his wishes – under a Purbeck marble effigy close to the altar. However, the accompanying notice to visitors refers to his reign as a 'tyranny', which is presumably not what he requested. Close by is the chantry dedicated to Arthur, Prince of Wales, elder brother of Henry VIII and first husband of Catherine of