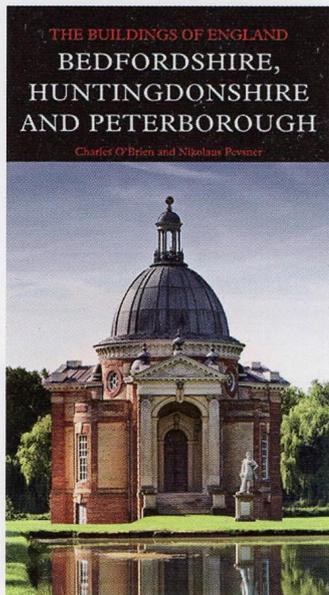


Book Reviews



The Buildings of England:
Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Peterborough
Charles O'Brien and Nikolaus Pevnser
800 pp, Yale University Press, 2014

The *Buildings of England* series was originally marketed in a pocket-sized format, but at nearly one kilogram, the new edition of *Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Peterborough* will only fit in the most generously proportioned of anoraks. The unwieldy title is due to the peculiar historical situation of the superseded 1968 edition, which while respecting the newly made county of Huntingdon, combined it with Peterborough and then this entity with the similarly proportioned Bedfordshire to its south. In 1974, after only nine years, the county of Huntingdon was abolished: Peterborough became an independent unitary authority and Huntingdonshire subsumed into Cambridgeshire. Rather than leave the ancient Soke of Peterborough in limbo by including Huntingdonshire in the third edition of *Cambridgeshire* (also 2014), the wise choice has been made to retain the historic geography. As in the original edition, there are two separate gazetteers, but in an unprecedented move for the series, the illustrative plates have also been split.

The most remarkable monuments date from the years around the Norman Conquest: the famous church tower of Barnack, the uniquely ambitious arcades at Great Paxton, and the 'cyclopean crudity' of the chancel arch at Wittering. There are also some extremely fine examples of mature 'Early English' Gothic of the thirteenth century, the most important being the façade of the abbey at Peterborough (the account here based on Priscilla Metcalf's revision from the 1985 *Cathedrals of England*) spared from destruction during the by its upgrade Henry VIII after its upgrade to the status of a cathedral. In parish churches the stiff-leaf capitals at Eaton Bray and the harmonious west front at Felmersham are noteworthy. Yet on the whole, church architecture is overshadowed by a profusion of fifteenth-century Perpendicular, the delicate open-work canopies of the stone font enclosure (c.1330) at Luton a rare surviving example of top-drawer fourteenth-century work. Seventeenth-century

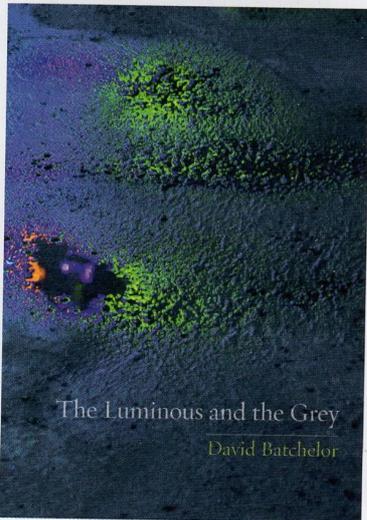
church architecture and furnishings are unusually prominent in Huntingdonshire, due to villages Leighton Bromswold and Little Gidding, known for their associations with the poet George Herbert and the mystic Nicholas Ferrer. For secular piles, there is the sprawling Elizabethan Burghley House, and fine examples of Georgian Palladianism at Southill Park and Woburn Abbey. Outstanding Victorian and twentieth-century contributions to the built environment are thin on the ground.

The editor Charles O'Brien has been involved with the series for a number of years now, collaborating with Bridget Cherry and Elizabeth Williamson on the splendid *London 5: East* (2004). The East End, however, is an area that is, in large part, unrecognisable since Pevsner's 1952 publication, but the same cannot be said for the cities within the scope of this book. Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough have not experienced particularly seismic post-war redevelopment, the shortcomings of the Greater Peterborough Master Plan all too apparent in that city's introduction. O'Brien, unlike others (Alan Brooks' *Worcestershire*, 2007), chooses not to interfere with the descriptions of the buildings that feature most numerous in the Guides: medieval parish churches. There is a tendency to view Pevsner's idiosyncratic descriptions of these buildings as sacrosanct, suspending the author's acerbic tongue in aspic. This is a pity, since many of his descriptions betray the fact that they are little more than notes scribbled on a jotting pad during flying visits taken in the space of a few brief summer weeks, some no doubt affected by a hankering after an ice lolly (the inventor of which was the volume's dedicatee). The main revisions are confined to clarifications of the text - an originally misleading reference for the location of the prominent fourteenth-century gabled sedilia in Maxey church is happily rectified - and a refinement of terms following developments in scholarship (particularly the use of 'Anglo-Danish' to describe pre-Conquest work). Broader coverage is given to architectural features previously ignored due to time and space constraints, such as Victorian stained glass. The organ-cum-choir screen of 1893-4 by the young Ninian Comper at St Ives is given a full account that recognises its significance in the early career of an important artist of whom Pevsner was not particularly fond. This is due to Pevsner's general distaste for historicism; urban Victorian and twentieth-century churches also frequently received short shrift for this reason. It is obvious that Pevsner did not even gain access to the interiors of the buildings; therefore the O'Brien edition has much to do here. Seely and Paget's St Luke, Legrave in Luton of 1955-6 is all but dismissed by Pevsner as 'startlingly out of touch with the age', a remark O'Brien quotes for its historiographical interest, but expands upon by

including architectural nomenclature that a reader might find of use. When addressing country houses, O'Brien is more confident inserting new passages and playing with Pevsner's already lengthy accounts. At Southill Park the characterisation of the entrance as initially – that is, before one considers the interior – seemingly 'incomprehensible', is clearly a criticism of the original text in which Pevsner used the word to assess the façade without considering its practical implications.

Not that we should be too critical of O'Brien's conservatism with Pevsner's prose: these are, after all, the *Pevsner Architectural Guides*. One looks forward greatly to the re-issue of the last two remaining volumes in pocket-format, *North Yorkshire and Warwickshire*. But what of the elusive character of the architecture of the region? It seems a shame that the façade of Little Gidding, the church that inspired the final one of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and that graced the dust jacket of their first edition, is not illustrated in this new edition. Its simplistic yet brooding form has a curiously timeless appearance; a fitting metaphor for the obscurity of this architectural *terra incognita*: England and nowhere.

JAMES ALEXANDER CAMERON



The Luminous and the Grey

David Batchelor

111 pp. Reaktion Books, 2014

This is a little book about a big subject: colour.

After a short preface, in which Batchelor charts the genesis of his own burgeoning interest in colour while at art school in the mid-1970s, there follow three distinct but intertwined sections; a 'but' that will emerge as something of a leitmotif.

In the first ('The Beginning and the End of Colour'), Batchelor deploys an easy, unburdened narrative of limpid prose interspersed with scholarly citations to trace the origins of colour. Batchelor draws on sources as varied as the Mexican revolutionary Subcomandante Marcos, Italo Calvino and, most interestingly, Yves Klein, whose assertion from 1954 that, 'colour is [and has become] enslaved by line that becomes writing. Man is [and has become] exiled from his coloured soul' marks the real beginning of Batchelor's essay and its dialogue with the reader. As Batchelor turns the discussion to Aldous Huxley's contemporaneous experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, the discourse leads to Wittgenstein's postulation, also of the mid-fifties that: 'Whatever