

An indispensable guide

HARRY MOUNT
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It is 60 years since Nikolaus Pevsner published Middlesex, the first in 'The Buildings of England' series. The small, southern county was chosen for the prosaic reason that it didn't need much rationed fuel for research.

His achievement still looks unlikely to be matched: 46 volumes in 23 years, most of them involving 2,000-mile road trips. It isn't just Pevsner's architectural scholarship that impresses in this meticulously researched biography, but his physical stamina, at a time when roadside hospitality was at its bleakest. Penguin paid for petrol, but contributed little towards food and accommodation. Camembert sandwiches, bought in London, lasted a week, poisoning the air of Pevsner's Wolseley Hornet. After an eight-hour day on the road, he smuggled fish and chips into his cheap hotel, occasionally allowing himself a half-pint of Bass or an ice lolly; the 1968 Bedfordshire volume was dedicated to the ice lolly's inventor.

He also had to deal with ritual humiliation by homeowners. In the early 1960s, when he visited Narford Hall, Suffolk, with his wife, the son of the house bellowed, 'They've come to read the meter, Ma.' Only this month, the Telegraph obituary of a Berkshire landowner, Alan Godsall, recorded how he wouldn't let Pevsner into his Jacobean house, Haines Hill.

These days, to be in Pevsner is an accolade; Country Life property adverts regularly say a house is 'Mentioned in Pevsner'. But, still, a little anti-Pevsner feeling lingers on. As recently as 2003, Simon Bradley and John Schofield, who wrote the updated volume on Westminster, weren't allowed inside White's.

In Susie Harries's convincing account, Pevsner was a victim of anti-German, anti-academic and anti-Semitic feelings for much of his life. He may have ended his days as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, showered with international academic honours, but, for the first half of his existence, it was as if 20th-century history had singled him out for misfortune.

Born to a prosperous Russian-Jewish furrier in Leipzig in 1902, he converted to Lutheranism in 1921; not that that saved him from Hitler's Jewish employment restrictions in 1933, when he was sacked from his lecturing job in Gottingen. He found work instead in England, teaching Italian to girls at the Courtauld Institute, where he wasn't allowed to teach during Ascot week — a change from his rigorous academic teenage years in Leipzig, where he devoted himself to Strindberg, Cicero, Dickens, Cervantes and Shakespeare.

It was several years before his half-Jewish wife, Lola, and his two sons joined him in England, years when the threat to German Jews' lives escalated. Pevsner's mother killed herself in Leipzig rather than face a concentration camp. Throughout the war, Pevsner's daughter, Uta, was stranded in Germany, disguised as a Protestant maid, increasingly at risk of identification and death.

Pevsner's torment — described in his Heftchen, the secret diaries he kept for 60 years from the age of 14 — was deepened by his own far Right views. Before the full horrors of Nazism emerged, he referred scathingly to 'foreign influences' and 'international types', using the terms 'degeneracy' and 'health' in a cultural context, just as the Nazis did. He described his own nose as 'impossible . . . big, crooked, Jewish'. Even in England, he said, 'What is good so far is that I am treated here entirely as a German and not as a Jew.'

He then suffered double miseries through the war, terrified when either Britain or Germany were bombed. His immediate family — and the buildings he loved — were at risk in both countries. In December 1943, Leipzig was practically obliterated by the RAF.

Because of his German background, he was interned in 1940, becoming a 'rubble-shoveller' in Kentish Town during the Blitz. But, even as he was confined to internal exile in his newly adopted country, he read and wrote incessantly. In 1942 *An Outline of European Architecture* was published, an immediate hit which sold a quarter of a million copies by 1961.

In the summer of 1945 came the moment that changed his life. Allen Lane, the Penguin visionary, casually asked Pevsner what kind of books he would like to write. Pevsner pointed to two gaps in English scholarship — a detailed survey of European art, and a catalogue of significant English buildings. 'The Buildings of England' series was born.

Pevsner had embarked on the road to national treasure status. But, while his reputation grew — as did the band of Pevsner obsessives, who never left the house without one of his black-jacketed guides in the glove compartment — so did the number of his critics. John Betjeman was the best-known, attacking Pevsner as one of the bloodless, list-obsessed, Herr-Professor-Doktor types. Others joined in, including Osbert Lancaster and Alec Clifton-Taylor, the building materials expert, who complained that Pevsner rarely said whether churches were any good.

Harries gives plenty of instances where Pevsner did in fact criticise or praise buildings (as well as getting a few things wrong). But, at Pevsner's own admission, he had a different aim in mind: formal analysis — what Germans call anonymous art history, something that hadn't been done in England before.

It took a German sensibility to collate English buildings for the English. Amateur readers were, and are, grateful, that someone filled the gap; his professional rivals were either jealous or thought his cool, emotionless, fact-based scholarship wasn't entertaining, moving or English enough.

Harries is on Pevsner's side, but that doesn't mean she's blinded by loyalty. She describes how deeply his unconsummated infatuations with several younger women humiliated his wife. On occasion, Lola Pevsner — lonely, missing Germany — hit and scratched her husband, running out onto Hampstead Heath in her nightdress, and threatening to kill herself.

This is not just a fair-minded biography, but also an impressive and comprehensive one. An enormous one, too: Harries has taken a methodical, Pevsnerian approach to her subject, helped by access to previously unexamined family papers. It is perhaps for 'Buildings of England' fans only, but even the obsessives will discover new things — which was, after all, Pevsner's original intention in his stupendous feat of scholarship