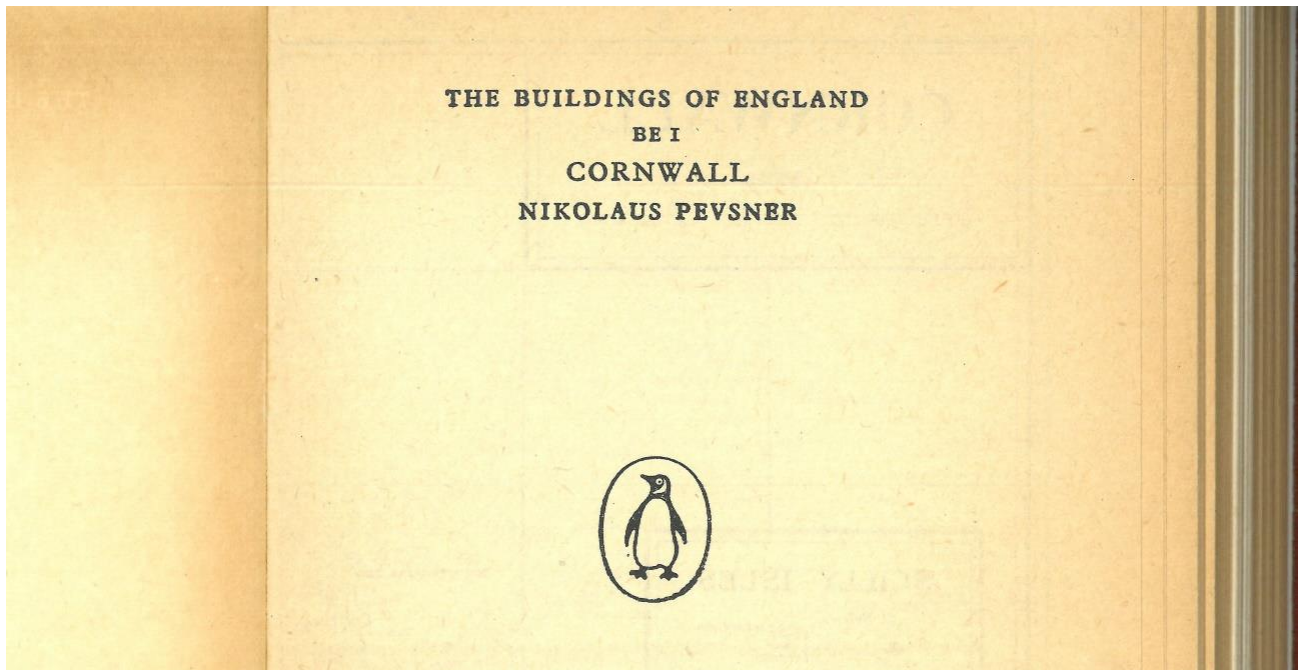


## 26. Buildings of England

*In this response, Adam Lines—Reading Room Supervisor and Collections Academic Liaison Officer here at the University of Reading—shares with us his love of art and architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner and of a life spent rambling and pondering about the built environment of parochial England. Adam takes us on a winding trip into Pevsner's past and the origins of his series The Buildings of England, the first of which were released in 1951.*

### Nikolaus Pevsner, Cornwall (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951)

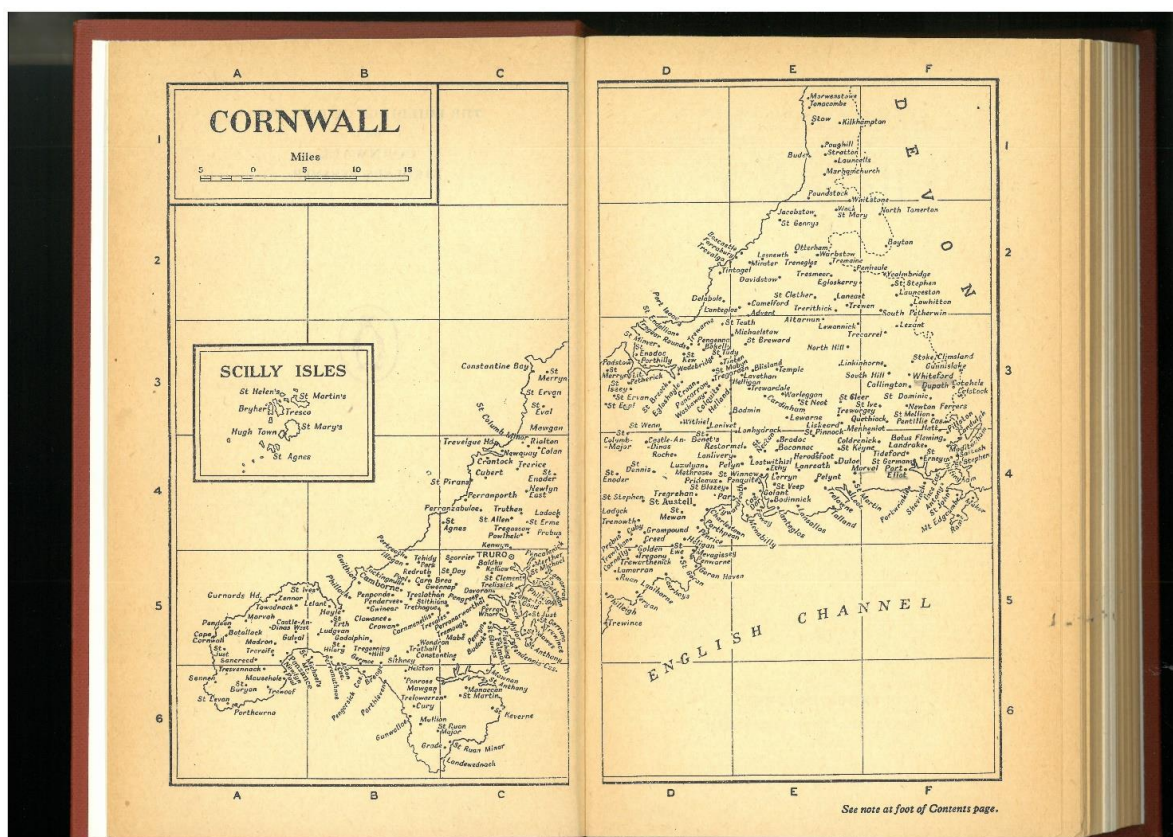


Detail from a University of Reading first edition of Pevsner's Cornwall (University Library 720.942-PEV/NOT).

Every time I open my rather well-loved edition of Nikolaus Pevsner's Cornwall, I smile. Not only because it usually means I'm in the county, but because the opening sentence captures so much of Pevsner's attitude to the architecture of England:

'Cornwall possesses little of the highest aesthetic quality though much that is lovable and much that is moving.'

As well as being the opening to Cornwall, it is the opening to the first volume of *The Buildings of England* series, released in 1951. Right from this opening sentence, Pevsner presented readers with his partial, informed, sometimes celebratory but often critical analysis of the buildings of England. The series continued for another 23 years, capturing the English counties one by one across 46 volumes. Such a monumental achievement had never been attempted and is still considered as a foundation of our understanding of the built landscape of this country.



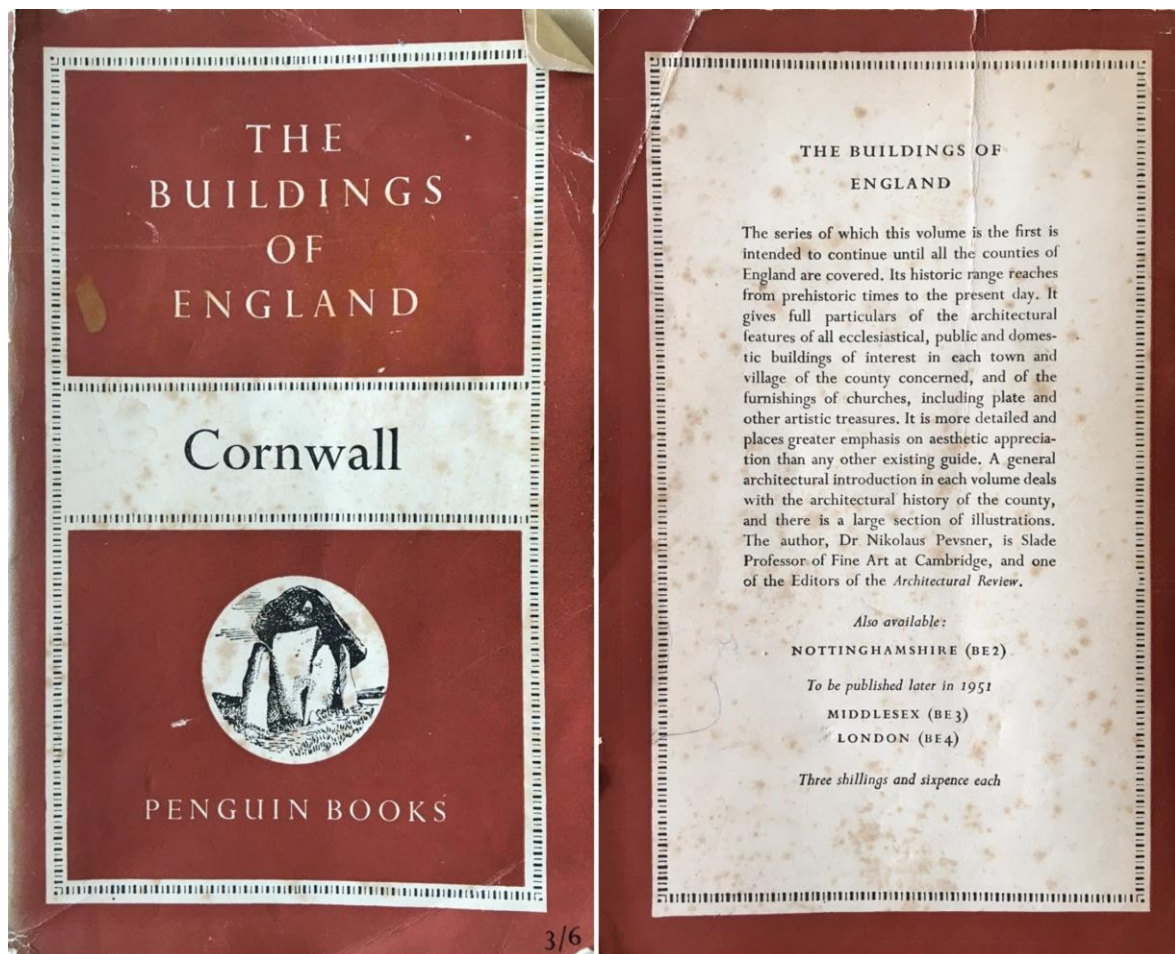
Map of Cornwall from the first edition of Pevsner's Cornwall (University Library 720.942-PEV/NOT).

The interested reader parting with the 3 shillings and sixpence for the paperback edition of Cornwall 70 years ago (approximately £5.50 today) was equipped with a wealth of architectural detail encompassing all corners of the county. An introductory architectural history of the county sets the scene, before an alphabetical list of places under which each building of note takes its place.

The 1930s saw an increase in people touring the English countryside by car, resulting in volumes such as H.V. Morton's hugely successful *In Search of England*. Morton's approach, like many other travel writers of the time, was to chronicle his tour which, at times, saw him make last minute decisions about visiting places simply because of their names—'I took the map and one name curled itself around my heart.' This kind of record is more about the experience of place rather than a detailed, place-by-place architectural record. This gap in the publishing market is where Pevsner made his mark.

Nikolaus Pevsner was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1902 into a Jewish family. He studied at a variety of German universities before teaching at Gottingen University from 1929-1933. There he developed a course on English art and architecture, beginning a lifelong passion for teaching and sharing his knowledge on the topic. In 1933, he was forced to resign from his teaching post due to Nazi race laws and escaped to England which would be his home for the rest of his life. He became a British citizen in 1946 and was knighted in 1969 for services to art and architecture. His contribution to the study of English architectural history is unsurpassed.





The front and back cover of the dust jacket from Adam's own first edition of Pevsner's *Cornwall* volume.

On the back cover of the original paperback edition of *Cornwall*, the advertisement boldly claims that 'the series...is intended to continue until all the counties of England are covered.' Both author and publisher showed great ambition. The publishers, Penguin, committed a huge amount when commissioning the series. The co-founder of Penguin, Allan Lane, invited Pevsner to his house for Sunday lunch in 1945 and asked him what he would write if he had his way. He replied with his pitch for *The Buildings of England* and the rest is history. Penguin published the series at a loss and Pevsner did not receive royalties from the series. In fact, Pevsner suffered the frequent anxiety of trying to seek external funding for the project. It is worth noting that this was not Pevsner's sole occupation too: he was also Head of History of Art at Birkbeck College, editor of the 55 volume *Penguin History of Art*, executive editor of *Architectural Review*, and a British Council lecturer abroad.

Even someone as dedicated as Pevsner could not undertake such a feat alone. For each volume he had two assistants who undertook preliminary research before the fieldtrips took place. This research could take around a year and the resulting notes were organised by districts, towns and villages. He would use these and Ministry of Housing building lists to plan his visits. The trips took place twice a year and lasted around five weeks each. His wife, Lola, accompanied him on these trips until her death in 1963.

Pevsner dedicated Cornwall ‘to Lola who drove the car’ but this does little justice to the contribution she made to each trip. She had a comprehensive knowledge of architectural history and would often highlight details that her husband had missed. Reflecting on his notes, she would often ask ‘What’s this? It doesn’t seem to fit.’ As such, he relied on her much more than to plan the day’s itinerary and drive the car.



Place House (1840) on the Roseland Peninsular described by Pevsner as ‘symmetrical Neo-Gothic at its least attractive’ (photo courtesy and copyright Adam Lines).

They averaged around 2000 miles by car for each volume and this took its toll. A pre-war Austin 10 was loaned to them by Penguin to complete the trip of Cornwall and Allen Lane received several letters from Pevsner informing him of the numerous trips to garages to have it fixed. This ate into a tight schedule.

On the road, their days began at 7am and ended at midnight. They breakfasted at 8am and were out on the road at 8.30am. A picnic of sandwiches, box of research notes, OS maps, torches and binoculars accompanied them. At some point late in the afternoon, Pevsner would light up a cigarette which indicated that the site visits were complete for the day. At 7pm they had dinner and half an hour later were in their room where Pevsner wrote up his notes from the day’s visits that would become his fair copy. Reflections and edits would continue until midnight. Following the trip, Pevsner would shut himself away for a week to condense his writing. Then came the process of sending letters to a variety of owners and custodians of buildings to check details. In true Pevsner style, these exchanges were short and to the point. He soon took to sending gallery proofs of the volume instead of typescripts as the latter would lead correspondents to edit and add their own



contributions to the text. Vicars were especially guilty of this: *'they would upset the whole text to put in all their pet remarks,'* Pevsner once complained.

Pevsner's determination was one of the key reasons he pulled off the series. He dreaded distractions and was not shy. He became known for his persistent knocking. Because of the narrow window of time for trips, visits to houses could not be booked in advance so a *'turn up and see'* approach was adopted. Announcing the couple to his parents, one son of a private house reported *'they've come to read the meter, ma.'* The couple experienced all manner of escapades during the trips they made together. They were questioned by the police when their car was discovered near to a murder scene, and they were often threatened with being thrown off private property. These, reflected Pevsner, were merely *'occupational risks.'* Lola declared that she became a *'hardened woman'* after several trips when she was initially nervous about trespassing. At the other extreme, Pevsner sometimes had to refuse hospitality due to time constraints. This led to several homeowners thinking him decidedly rude. Despite this, Pevsner was complimentary of the general welcome he received: *'Only in England would you find churches open all the time and people allowing you into their homes.'*



St. Anthony Church – *'The church lies apart from the village with only a few houses around, quite close to the little creek of Gillian harbour'* (photo courtesy and copyright Adam Lines).

The twentieth century saw a flood of new guidebooks published in England to appeal to the growing number of car owners. When beginning work on *The Buildings of England*, *The Shell Guides* were seen as the main competition. These also covered a county per volume but were aimed at a more casual tourist. The series was originally conceived by the poet John Betjeman in the 1930s with the desire to appeal to the *'weekender who cannot tell a sham Tudor roadhouse from a Cotswold manor.'* The resulting

volumes were short, beautifully illustrated guides with brief but atmospheric accounts of the key places to see in each county. Betjeman was a passionate advocate of the feeling of a place—‘It is the eye and the heart that are the surest guides’—and that the feeling of the author of a guidebook is key to the success of the volume in communicating this. This is the key difference between *The Shell Guides* and *The Buildings of England*, but also between the two writers. The architectural historian Jonathan Meades said that ‘the two men enjoyed a less than cordial relationship.’ Betjeman thought that Pevsner’s writing could be cold and that his descriptions of buildings too scientific. Equally, Pevsner thought that Betjeman was unable to separate the aesthetic from the religious and romantic when describing buildings. Ultimately, Pevsner rarely evoked the atmosphere of a place because it was outside his capabilities and his intentions. He also lacked precious space to elaborate on more than just buildings in his volumes.

I have experienced the buildings of Cornwall through Pevsner’s eyes. I have admired Trelissick, ‘the severest Neo-Greek mansion in Cornwall,’ and seen Place House which Pevsner deemed ‘symmetrical Neo-Gothic at its least attractive.’ I have taken in Lanhydrock House, ‘one of the grandest in Cornwall and certainly the grandest of its century,’ and enjoyed the tranquillity of the church at St. Anthony-in-Roseland which ‘can still be regarded as the best example in the county of what a parish church was like in the C12 and C13.’ Each trip I wonder how on earth an Austin 10 found its way to some of the remotest spots down some of the county’s more challenging gradients. But most of all I cannot fail to be impressed by the scale and the ambition of *The Buildings of England*.

## Further Information (online):

For more information about the University Library’s first edition see: [University Library 720.942-PEV/NOT](#)

For more about Pevsner and his research process see: [‘A day with Nikolaus Pevsner’ article from The Guardian Archive, 1960](#)

For one of many examples of people who have followed in Pevsner’s footsteps see: [Meades, Travels with Pevsner, 1998](#) (Jonathon Meades has also produced other work about Pevsner, including *The Man and his Reputation*)

Follow the author of this piece on Twitter: [@AdamCLines](#)

## Further Reading (not online):

Harries, Susie. *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life* (London: Pimlico, 2013)