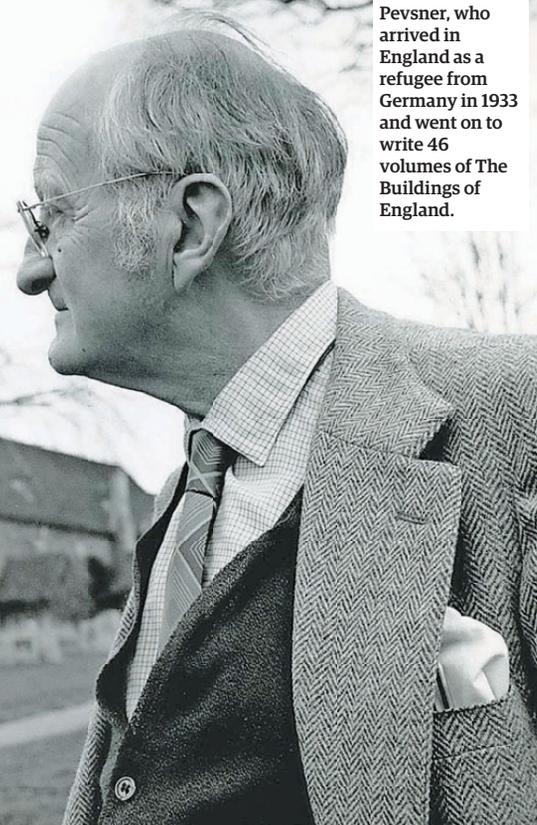


FEATURE

An investment in the good life: Suffolk's best buildings in new 'Pevsner'

■ Art historian Nikolaus Pevsner, who arrived in England as a refugee from Germany in 1933 and went on to write 46 volumes of The Buildings of England.



Touring Suffolk from dawn until dusk in a Wolsey Hornet in the 1950s for his now iconic 'Buildings of England' series, Nikolaus Pevsner sometimes found it tough.

"The journeys are just not human," he is quoted as saying, even though it was his wife Lola who did the driving. "To bed 11.00, 11.30, too tired even to read the paper. Up this morning to scribble, scribble, scribble. If only one could be proud of the result."

This did not deter architectural historian James Bettley of north Essex who has produced the outstanding new revision of Suffolk launched this week at UCS, Ipswich. Six years in the making, the two volumes cover the significant buildings of every town and village in Suffolk - more than 500 entries in a detailed gazetteer with a

The long-awaited Suffolk 'Pevsner' guide to our county's best buildings has been launched this week. **MARION WELHAM** talks to local author James Bettley on the mammoth task of revisiting and revising the great man's work

compelling introduction and lavish illustrations.

Dr Bettley, who lives near Maldon, is modest about this extraordinary single-handed achievement, which of course all depended on Pevsner's ground-breaking work. "It works out at about 100 places a year. It doesn't sound much... Then another year doing introductions and pictures, bringing us up to 2015.

"I don't do it full-time", he adds, almost by way of apology that these two major works - each of over 600 pages with every building visited, every fact checked - should have taken this long. Yet, among numerous other commitments, he is Librarian of Chevening

House in Kent, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and a member of the Church Buildings Council. His revision of the Pevsner Architectural Guide to Essex was published in 2007.

Whereas Pevsner had assistants to prepare all the preliminary notes from sources such as Kelly's Directories, H. Munro Cautley,

and Arthur Mee, Bettley went through all the standard works of reference himself, visited libraries and record offices, and waded through all the cuttings and letters from the previous Pevsner.

"Preliminary research took six months and I have a database I chuck everything into. Then I was ready to start visiting. There's always the possibility of seeing things you weren't expecting to see. I take lots of photos and write up as soon as I can."

Again, unlike Pevsner, Bettley did not expect his wife Lucy to drive him around the county as Pevsner's wife did. "She has better things to do!"

The Pevsners borrowed their Wolsey Hornet from his publisher Penguin and, when it came to tackling Essex, they joined the Caravan Club so they could rely on somewhere to stay for the night.

James Bettley was born in Middlesex Hospital, London, where his father was a doctor. The family lived in Kent when he was a boy but he has early memories of staying at a friend's house in Southwold around 1970 where he won five races at the Model Yacht Regatta. In 2012 he was elected a member of the council of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History.

Clearly the point of a revision is not an extensive re-write, but Pevsner wrote at speed with

responded by saying it was for the reader to decide for themselves, having the facts in front of them.

"When praising or criticising, Pevsner was very sparing so when he does make a judgement it has more impact," says Bettley.

The entry for Stoven St Margaret, near Beccles, with its mock Norman façade, splendidly bears this out.

"A depressing neo-Norman job of 1849...", writes Pevsner. "The south doorway alone is original and no doubt responsible for this ignorant progeny." He was far more comfortable with the genuine article at Little Saxham with "the most spectacular Norman round tower in Suffolk".

St Andrew's Felixstowe, a dramatic statement in reinforced concrete, was not yet complete when Pevsner wrote his notes in the late 1950s. Here Bettley was able to complete the story to include the rather tantalising detail about architects Hilda Mason and Raymond Erith resigning over the choice of the east window. "It's easy to see why they resigned," he says, revealing a rare glimpse of his own personal preferences.

When Pevsner himself did the rounds, St Edmundsbury Cathedral was "without a tower" though he was quite scathing about the "strange enrichment" architect Stephen Dykes Bower had planned for the top of it. Bettley treats us to the full description of Dykes Bower's project at Bury and how a "more traditional Suffolk-style" top was chosen for the tower with decorated balustrades and pinnacles.

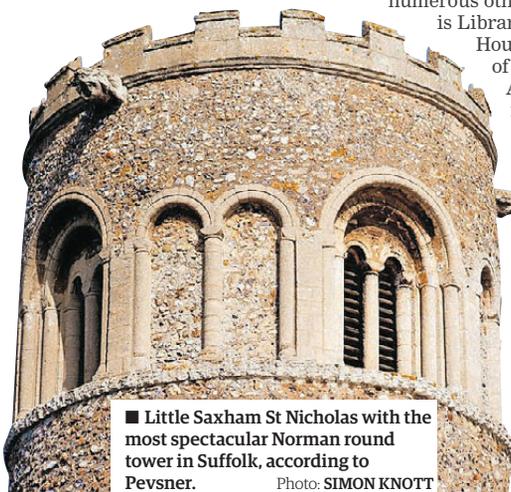
When I ask him about his favourite places and buildings,



■ Stoven Church - St Margaret's Stoven described by Pevsner as 'a depressing neo-Norman job'.

inevitable errors and omissions and Bettley admits: "There are lots of occasions where I've changed what Pevsner wrote and I also may not agree with what some of his sources have published."

But the revision is faithful to Pevsner's even and scholarly tone that apparently elicited a few side snipes from church enthusiast John Betjeman who was recorded as saying: "It is the eye and heart that are the surest guides." There were similar remarks from Betjeman's circle to which Pevsner apparently



■ Little Saxham St Nicholas with the most spectacular Norman round tower in Suffolk, according to Pevsner. Photo: SIMON KNOTT

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FEATURE



■ Burgate War memorial. The First World War memorial with its ornaments made from shell cases by hospitalised soldiers in the winter of 1917 - included in the revised Pevsner.



■ A stained glass window in the porch at Blaxhall St Peter, attributed to Ellen Rope, a sculptor, but more likely to have been done by the next generation of Ropes - Margaret Edith Aldrich Rope or her cousin Margaret Agnes Rope.

there's a bit of soul searching. Seeing so many buildings, they must surely now have merged into a blur?

"A blur yes, but there is usually something that brings it back," he says. "The other day I was looking at a map and, with a bit of thought, managed to conjure some of them up." One is Burgate church which underwent alterations in the 1920s. "I particularly enjoyed that."

Pevsner wrote that it had been "disastrously altered" but Bettley diplomatically changed this to an "idiosyncratic reordering". He also included what many now regard as one of the church's treasures - the First World War memorial with its ornaments made from shell cases by hospitalised soldiers in the winter of 1917 - something Pevsner had ignored.

Bettley has to resist any temptation to delve into the lives of the numerous individuals who are commemorated or have contributed to our buildings. He makes the odd exception, one being the talented Rope family who lived at Blaxhall with some half a dozen artists among their descendants. Many historians have been confused when it comes to attributing their work - including the stained glass in Blaxhall and other churches but Bettley has been dogged.

"It took me a long time to get that

“When praising or criticising, Pevsner was very sparing so when he does make a judgement it has more impact

sorted out and I thought it would be helpful to the reader. The process isn't so much discoveries. I see it more as putting things together and making connections which I find very satisfying."

Churches predominate in Pevsner since they tend to be the oldest and most interesting buildings in communities but, in Suffolk, something else occurred to Bettley. "One thing that really did strike me about places like Long Melford, Lavenham

and Sudbury is that people tend simply to regard them as pretty little towns and villages with quaint houses, but they were industrial towns - both in middle ages and in the 19th Century as well. Glemsford has this huge Victorian school - why has it got this? It's because Glemsford had all these mills weaving horsehair matting."

Warming to his theme, he highlights the Lavenham Press building in Water Street.

"Here is a medieval timber-frame house with a utilitarian factory built on to it. That epitomizes the history of Lavenham!"

The 'Suffolk: East' volume is dedicated to the memory of a weekend in Wissett in 1982 and here comes another dose of realism.

"My abiding memory is of how everything in those days was shabby and run down, not

just Wissett but many of the villages." Those who recall that time will agree with him but thankfully things have improved.

"The churches have smartened up in last 20 or 30 years - most churches in better condition than they ever have been. If you go in one in poor condition, it's really quite shocking."

Revising Suffolk in two volumes - East and West - was decided at an early stage but readers who are expecting the pre-1974 boundaries will need to get used to a different split which is along the line of the A12 where it crosses the River Stour at Stratford St Mary, continuing along the A14 to the west of Ipswich, then following the A140 to the Norfolk border. The revision of Pevsner's Suffolk has been a magnificent enterprise but Bettley is keen to stress it certainly wasn't all slog. "It was enormous fun going to a new place and not being sure what you going to find or who you will meet."

Even if you have lived in Suffolk all your life, I challenge you not to find something of interest and fascination in these books. Buy them, put them in the car, and they will give you an extra dimension to everything you see as you explore Suffolk's remarkable built architecture. They are an investment in the good life.



■ Author James Bettley

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