

An Illustrated  
CULTURAL  
HISTORY  
OF

# ENGLAND

F. E. HALLIDAY



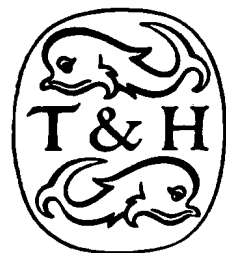
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F. E. HALLIDAY

*with 374 plates*



THAMES AND HUDSON

TO PRIAULX RAINIER

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Anybody who attempts to write even a short account of such a vast subject as a Cultural History of England must be indebted to innumerable books. Among those that I have found most helpful are: *The Pelican History of Art*; *The Oxford History of English Art*; Eric Blom, *Music in England*, 1947; William Gaunt, *A Concise History of English Painting*, 1964; Peter Kidson and Peter Murray, *A History of English Architecture*, 1962; Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture*, 1964; Stuart Piggott and Glyn E. Daniel, *A Picture Book of Ancient British Art*, 1951; O. E. Saunders, *English Art in the Middle Ages*, 1932; Percy A. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 1947; J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans*, 1964; G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, 1942.

## Preface

Culture is a concept too elusive to be pinned down by the lexicographer, and has never been, perhaps never can be, definitively defined. For Matthew Arnold it was 'The acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world', a characteristically English literary interpretation that ignores, apparently, the world of music and the visual arts. Arnold was an Oxford man, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* echoes him: 'The intellectual side of civilization.' My copy of the American *Webster* is more catholic: 'The characteristic attainments of a people', which suggests that a cultural history of England should include Parliamentary democracy, cricket, and fish and chips: that cultural history is much the same thing as social history.

There are three main branches of history. Best known, because the only one normally taught in schools, is political history, largely a record of man's destructive activities, or, as Gibbon put it, 'little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind'. Then, there is economic history, an account of man's constructive activities, his discoveries and inventions, and organization for the production of useful commodities. Social history is also much concerned with these things, and the constructive use of material goods, for social conditions are mainly determined by economic conditions.

In the Introduction to his *English Social History*, G. M. Trevelyan defined the scope of social history as 'the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages: this includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man to nature'. All these, but in addition, 'the culture of each age as it arose out of these general conditions of life, and took ever changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought'. Here are other and higher activities of man, more than merely constructive, the truly creative: for these are the self-begotten issue of his spirit, serving little or no material purpose, but ministering to his spiritual needs.

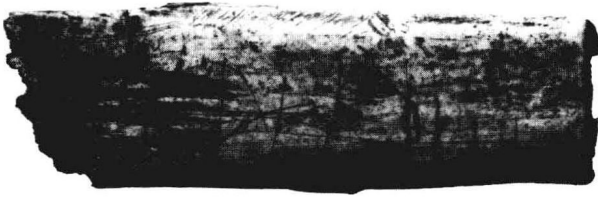
It is in this sense that I understand culture: as the most creative achievements of man, and the cultural history of a people is their social history with a difference, a quite different emphasis; for it is little concerned with their 'general conditions of life', but is almost a spiritual odyssey, a history of their art and thought, with some account of the forces, political, religious, economic, and social, that have determined or modified them.



This book, therefore, is both a variation on the theme of my *Five Arts*, and the complement of my *Concise History of England*, a political history in which I tried to emphasize the creative activities of man, and in the Preface wrote: ' . . . man is essentially creative, or he would not be here, and his destructive follies are merely aberrations in the grand design of his evolution. His highest activities . . . are all a creation of order, and . . . by giving a proper emphasis to man's creative achievements and potentialities, history can help to hasten the process.' In this age of anxiety, violence, disorder, and threatened destruction, a history devoted to England's creative achievements, as opposed to its crimes and follies, is not irrelevant.

*St Ives*  
*Cornwall*  
1966

F. E. H.



## 1 *Prehistoric Beginnings*

Some three-quarters of a million years ago primitive man reached north-west Europe, and for nearly three-quarters of a million years countless generations of these slow-witted, shambling creatures spent their lives, like the lower animals, gathering food and hunting, their greatest creative achievement being the stone tools and weapons that they made to help them in their struggle for existence. Then, about forty thousand years ago, during the last phase of the Ice Age, a new stock appeared, men not unlike ourselves, the big-brained nimble hunters of the final period of the Old Stone Age.

It is with these new men of Aurignacian and Magdalenian times that the history of art begins. The cold winds blowing off the ice-cap drove them to seek shelter in caves, and on their walls the hunters of southern France and northern Spain splendidly portrayed the animals they hoped to kill: the mammoth, bison, deer, and horses that roamed the steppeland to which Europe had been reduced. The primary purpose of their paintings was magical, as was that of the small figures that they carved and modelled, or engraved on stone and bone, but many of them are also records of an artist's spiritual experience.

Southern France was a favoured region in comparison with Britain, and it may be that the struggle for existence in its arctic climate exhausted the energies of these northern hunters and withered their artistic impulse. Although for innumerable centuries they inhabited caves, from Kent's Cavern in Devon to the north of Yorkshire, they left no graphic records on their walls, and the only remains of their art are a few engravings on bone, such as those of a horse's head and a masked man engaged in some magic ritual, found at Creswell Crags in Derbyshire. They are poor things compared to the work of the artists of Lascaux and Altamira, yet the line is sure and precise, and they are among the first works of art to be produced in Britain, some fifteen thousand years ago.

The story of man's early evolution as an artist is of necessity confined to the graphic arts and sculpture, for these were the only enduring forms of self-expression within his capacity. Moreover, they are basically the simplest, and the complexities of the other arts were beyond him. Dance and song of a sort there must have been, but it would be noise rather than music; he must have invented a mythology, but his tales of another world of gods and spirits, even if he had been able to record them, would be scarcely literature; so too, he must have had buildings of a sort, rude huts and shelters, but nothing that could be



Carving from the tomb at  
New Grange, Ireland, c. 1800 B.C.

called architecture. And even this great age of painting, which for vigour and economy of execution has never been surpassed, came to an end twelve thousand years ago.

There followed the long barren centuries of Mesolithic times until, shortly before 2000 B.C., men of the New Stone Age, bringing a Mediterranean tradition, arrived in Britain, and with them begins the real history of art in these islands. They were the builders of the great stone tombs which they covered with a mound of earth, long since washed away to reveal the huge uprights that form the walls of the chamber, and the great capstone that covers it. These tombs have some pretence to architecture, and some of the rather later chambered tombs in Ireland, of which the best known is New Grange, have elaborate designs carved on their stones, notably spirals and circles. But the noblest monument of the Neolithic and succeeding Early Bronze Age is Stonehenge.

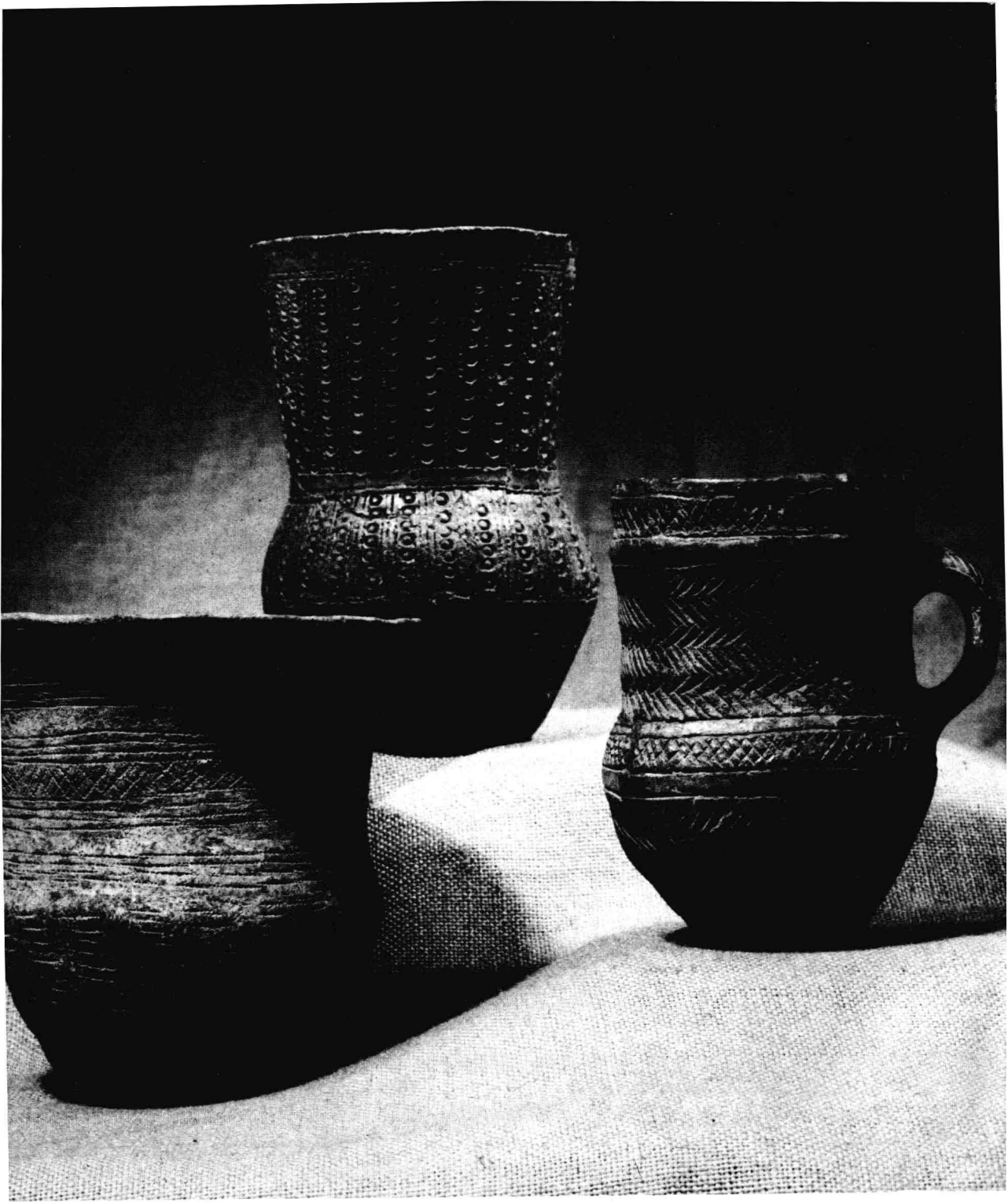
Its construction covered four centuries, approximately 1800–1400 B.C., for it was constantly altered and added to, and nowhere else is there anything like it: an outer circle of stones nearly fourteen feet high, pillars that support a continuous lintel, and within it a horseshoe of ten even huger stones, set in pairs, each pair with its separate lintel. An inner circle and inner horseshoe of smaller free-standing bluestones repeat the pattern of the major members. These great blocks of sandstone, or sarsens, some of them weighing fifty tons, were dragged more than twenty miles from the chalk downs, and the bluestones were somehow transported from the mountains of West Wales. They are not merely natural blocks of approximately the right size and shape, but each was carefully dressed to fit it for its function, and the ripples of the tooling, where they remain, are the most delicate detail of the building. Then, the uprights taper and curve towards the top, where tenons fit into the mortices of the lintels, which are carved to form an arc of the great circle. Moreover, the sides of the lintels of the horseshoe trilithons slope slightly outwards to correct the illusion of recession, the kind of refinement that makes the perfection of the Parthenon. These

subtleties, indeed, suggest the influence of Greece of Mycenaean times, as do the recently discovered carvings of bronze axeheads and a dagger on one of the stones.

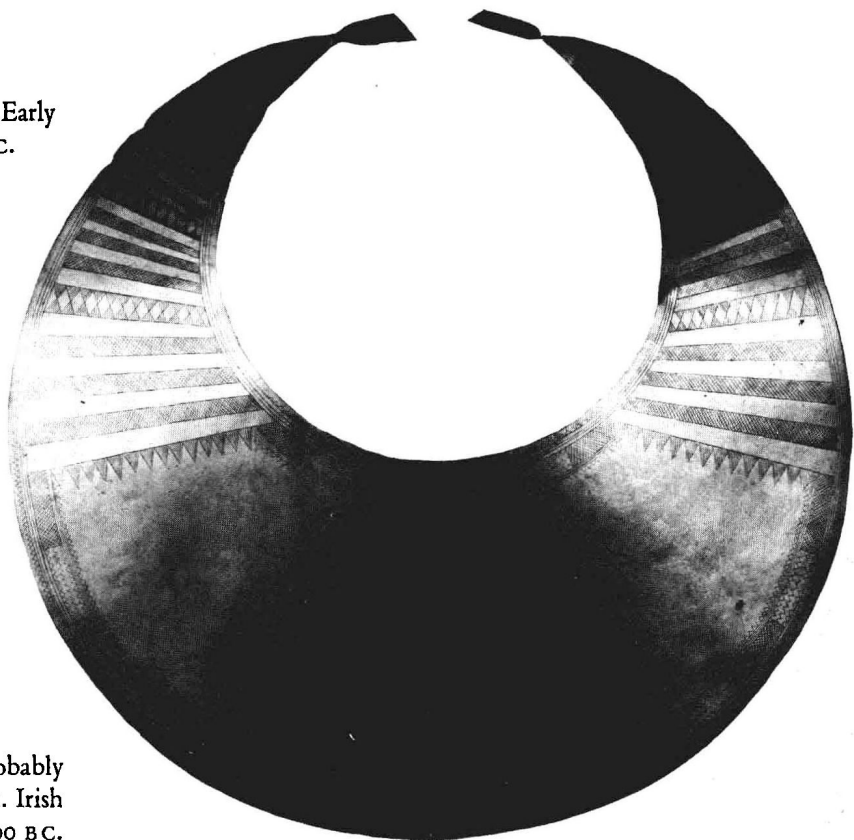
Before it fell into ruin Stonehenge must have had much of the grandeur of an Egyptian temple, which, despite its circular shape, in some ways it resembles, and that it was a temple there can be little doubt. Surrounded by a ditch and bank, it stood, as it were, upon a plinth, complete, classical in its isolation, and Neolithic worshippers on its perimeter would watch the procession of priests about the ambulatory, and the celebration of mysteries within the sanctuary of the great trilithons. It would be not unlike watching the performance of a play, and perhaps Stonehenge is the prototype of the 'rounds' in which medieval miracle plays were presented, and ultimately of the 'wooden O' for which Shakespeare wrote.

Stonehenge, on Salisbury Plain. A unique temple of c. 1800–1400 B.C. Unlike a fort, a 'henge' had a ditch inside, not outside, its surrounding bank.





◀ (Left) The first British pottery. Early Bronze Age beakers, c. 1700 B.C.



Gold lunula, probably worn round the neck. Irish Bronze Age, c. 1500 B.C.

The Neolithic immigration involved a momentous agricultural and industrial revolution, for these new men were not nomadic hunters like the natives, but farmers who settled in villages and practised the crafts of pottery and metalworking. The period of the building of Stonehenge, therefore, is that of the making of the first British pots: bowls, drinking mugs, beakers, the last characteristically decorated with bands of lozenges and chevrons. A similar design was engraved on the jet bead necklaces of the period, and on the delicate gold *lunulae*, or neck ornaments, beaten almost paper-fine to spread the precious metal into the same crescent-like shape, for gold was scarce and its source virtually confined to Ireland and Scotland. This rectilinear ornament seems to have come from Central Europe with the Beaker Folk, and is in strong contrast to the spiral designs brought from the Mediterranean by the megalith builders. A combination of the two traditions is found on the strange little chalk cylinders from Yorkshire, one of which has a concentric horseshoe pattern that resembles the round eyes and face of an owl. A few wooden figures of men, some of them four or five feet high and probably of the sixth century B.C., have survived, but the art of the Bronze Age people was essentially abstract and ornamental, unlike the naturalistic painting and sculpture of their remote ancestors, the Palaeolithic hunters.

Top of small chalk cylinder, possibly an idol, c. 1500 B.C.



A new era began when the La Tène Celts invaded Britain in the fifth century B C and, armed with iron swords against which the soft bronze weapons of the natives were useless, established themselves as a feudal aristocracy. Iron, however, although it revolutionized warfare and industry, is less beautiful than gold and bronze, and for ornaments these were the metals they mainly demanded of their craftsmen. It was an age of domestic squalor and barbaric splendour, for these Celtic warriors cared little for their homes and lavished their wealth on personal adornment: bronze scabbards, helmets, and shields, necklaces of twisted gold, bronze mirrors for their women, bronze masks and trappings for their horses. They enriched the geometric design of the Bronze Age with new motifs derived from Italy, in particular the tendril and anthemion, the formalized honeysuckle ornament of classical Greece, and developed a flowing curvilinear form that has the coiled energy of a spring.

There were two main schools of Celtic craftsmen. In north-east England their work was generally repoussé bronze, as in the splendid horse-masks with intricate design of plant-like forms, and more stylized and symmetrical shields, a fashion that was carried into Ireland, where it was magnificently applied to gold ornaments. The characteristic work of the south-west is best seen in the engraving of their bronze mirrors, the finest of which are those found at Desborough and Birdlip. Both are variations on the theme of three, a favourite motif, and the circular back of the Birdlip mirror is a series of circles within circles, three within one, and again three within one, each flowing into the others as the labyrinthine line expands into floral scrolls of hatched basket-work design.



Engraved back of Celtic bronze mirror, from Birdlip in the Cotswolds. The front was polished bronze. First century A.D.



Repoussé bronze from northern Britain:

(Above) Celtic horse mask, c. 200 B.C., found at Torrs in southern Scotland.

(Right) Stylized horse's head from north Yorkshire. First century A.D.



These Celtic craftsmen were not interested in realism. Their art, like that of the Bronze Age, was essentially an abstract one, dependent on the beauty of its line, but with the Roman occupation of France in the first century B.C., and the peaceful penetration of England by Roman merchants, classical naturalism inevitably had its effect, particularly on the newly arrived Belgic tribes of the south-east. Yet, although the Britons began to make small figures of animals, these were characteristically stylized to form a pattern: a horse's head was simplified into little more than a flowing linear design in repoussé bronze, while on a vastly larger scale the White Horse cut in the turf of the chalk downs at Uffington is an attenuated figure reduced to a few light springing lines. The human heads on their coins are more realistic, but even here the hair becomes a wave-like pattern that bears little resemblance to the naturalism of its Roman original.

Celtic gold coin.  
First century B.C.





Julius Caesar described the Britons as long-haired, woad-stained, blue-bodied barbarians, and this unflattering picture is still the popularly accepted one. But Caesar was in Britain for only a few days, and even if he saw any of its art probably dismissed it as equally barbaric, so very different from the realism and grandeur to which he was accustomed in Rome.

The White Horse of Uffington, Berkshire: possibly a British tribal emblem of the first century B.C.

