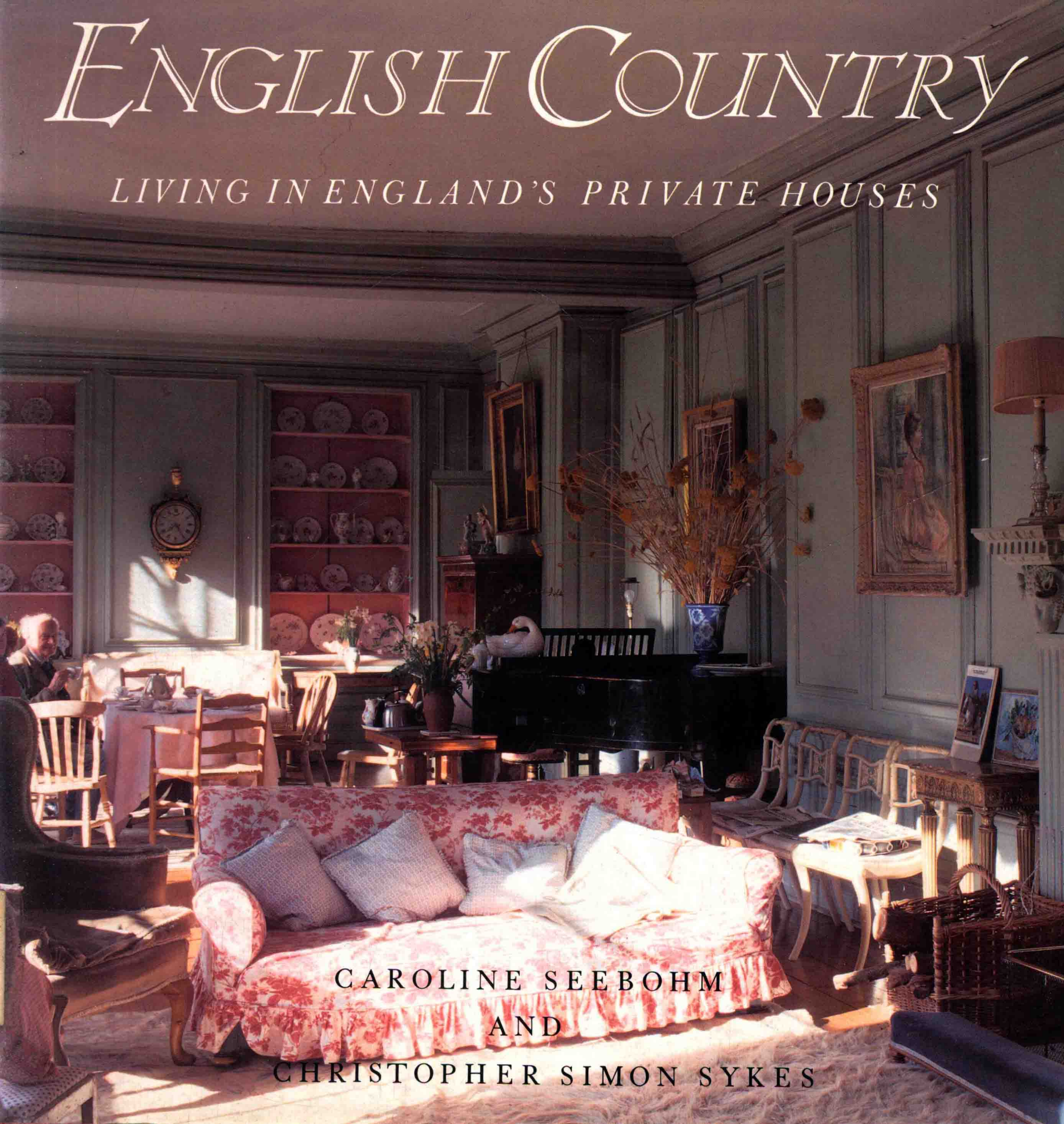


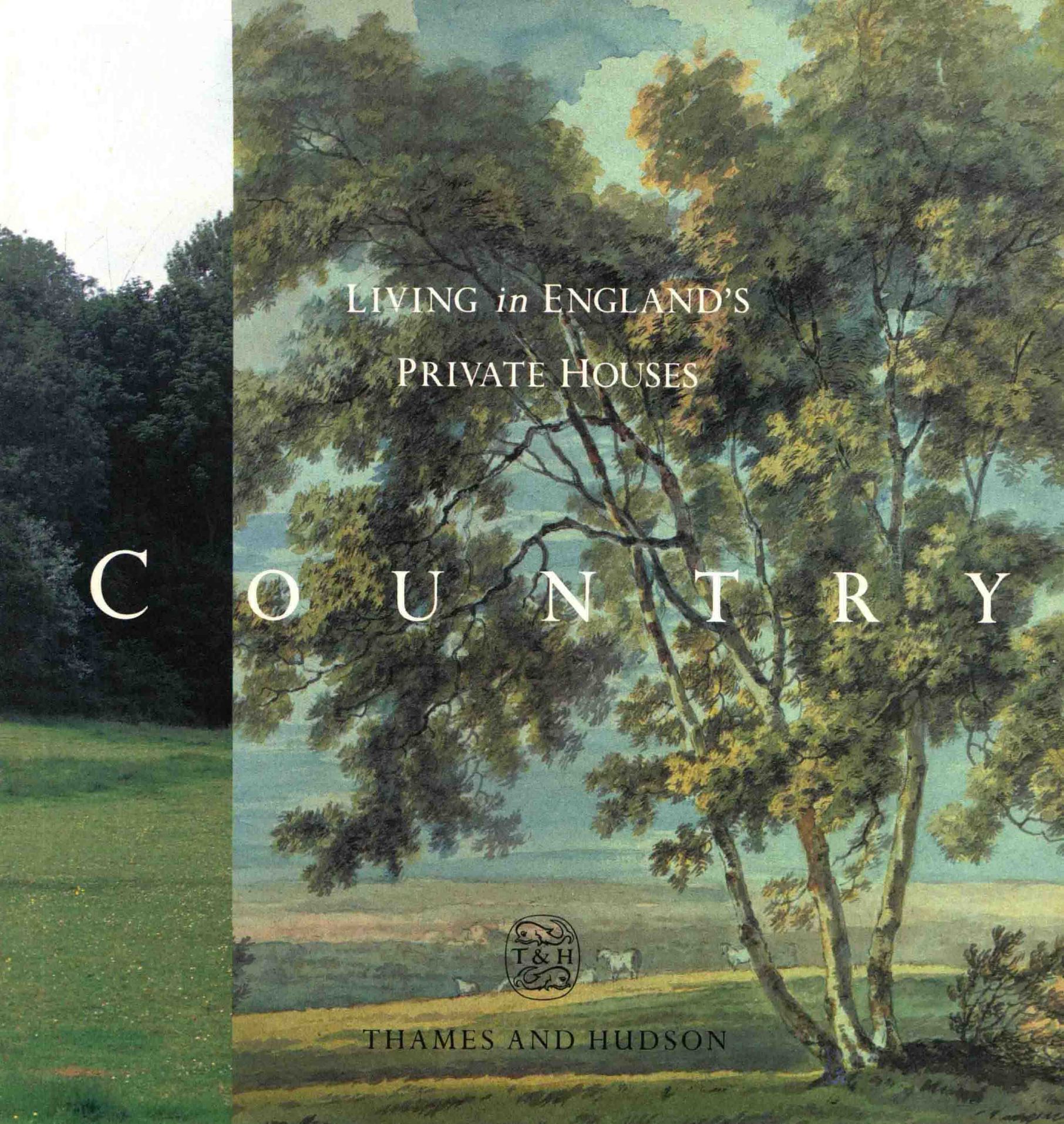
# ENGLISH COUNTRY

LIVING IN ENGLAND'S PRIVATE HOUSES



CAROLINE SEEBOHM  
AND  
CHRISTOPHER SIMON SYKES



The background of the book cover is a classical landscape painting. It depicts a lush green field in the foreground, with several large, mature trees on the right side. In the distance, a river or lake is visible, with a few small figures of people and animals on the bank. The sky is a soft, hazy blue. The overall style is reminiscent of 18th or 19th-century English landscape art.

LIVING *in* ENGLAND'S  
PRIVATE HOUSES

C O U N T R Y



THAMES AND HUDSON



ENDPAPER: *Taken from a fragment of wallpaper dated between 1765 and 1770.*

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Horses graze in a park in Wiltshire and detail from Park Landscape with Sheep, ca. 1778, watercolor by George Barret, Sr.*

*Chintz, Bird and Basket, RIGHT, designed by Geoffrey Bennison.*

*Nineteenth-century block-printed wallpaper showing the influence of Italian landscape painters and detail of a stone staircase in Kent, with decorative urns, OVERLEAF.*

Directory compiled by Jan Cumming

Publisher's Note: The author's acknowledgments for permission to use materials from other sources in this book may be found on page 286.

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# ENGLISH COUNTRY

OF ALL THE GREAT THINGS THAT  
THE ENGLISH HAVE INVENTED AND MADE PART OF  
THE CREDIT OF THE NATIONAL CHARACTER,  
THE MOST PERFECT, THE MOST CHARACTERISTIC,  
THE ONLY ONE THEY HAVE MASTERED  
COMPLETELY IN ALL ITS DETAILS SO THAT IT  
BECOMES A COMPENDIOUS ILLUSTRATION  
OF THEIR SOCIAL GENIUS AND THEIR MANNERS,  
IS THE WELL-APPOINTED, WELL-ADMINISTERED,  
WELL-FILLED COUNTRY HOUSE.

 HENRY JAMES



A full-page photograph of a lush green field with four horses. A large, spreading tree stands in the center-right. In the background, a dense forest of tall trees rises against a pale sky. The word 'ENGLISH' is printed in large, white, serif capital letters across the middle of the image, partially overlapping the tree and the forest.

# ENGLISH

by CAROLINE SEEBOHM  
*and* CHRISTOPHER SIMON SYKES





## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S



**FIRST OF ALL**, we should like to thank all the owners of the houses and gardens that appear in this book. Without their cooperation, quite simply, there would have been no book. Their generosity, interest, and hospitality were the fundamental inspiration behind these pages.

Our thanks also go to the many people on both sides of the Atlantic who helped us with information, contacts, and support, especially Gillian Saunders at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Lawrence Banks, Susan Bodo, George R. Clark, The Dowager Countess of Cranbrook, George Freeston, Victoria Glendinning, Henry Greenfield, Derek Hill, Peter Jay, Elizabeth Macfarlane, Mrs. Hilary Magnus, Michael Parkin, Tony Pell, Richard Seddon, Maggie Simmons, The Lady Trevelyan, The Hon. Kate Trevelyan.

Finally, we should like to thank our publishers, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., especially editor-in-chief Carol Southern, who took an extraordinarily personal interest in the book and suggested many of the best ideas. We were also lucky in ensnaring Gael Towey as our art director; her exceptional talents have greatly enriched the book. We would also like to thank Ann Cahn, Judy Jacoby, and Teresa Nicholas for their skillful editorial and production work, and Amy Schuler, who took care of all the last details. As for Ann Miller, who had to coordinate endless piles of text and transparencies, as well as wrinkle out vital statistics from sources 3,000 miles apart, she deserves a medal.



# P R E F A C E

 CAROLINE SEEBOHM

**I GREW UP**, not in one country house, but in four, as my father's career took him from the north to the south of England. Unlike many of the houses in this book, which have vivid, detailed histories, peopled by personalities as colorful as the times they represented, none of the four I lived in was of the slightest historical or architectural importance. It did not matter. In my recollection, they all merge into one locus of childhood, which is where we all grow up.

All my houses had roughly the same interior layout typical of every small family house. Each had a drawing room, a dining room, corridors lined with bedrooms, and, most important of all, a nursery. The nursery was our nanny's domain, and it was where we played and ate. (Like many children of the time, we were required to eat our meals with our nanny until we were 11 years old, the age presumably considered sophisticated enough to handle dining with one's parents.)

As for life indoors, it never changed. Our rooms always looked the same, even if the house was different. My parents' taste for chintz upholstery, Georgian furniture, Persian carpets, and watercolor paintings done by our relatives was to me as timeless as the grandfather clock in the hall that struck so melodiously and resolutely every hour of my childhood. Many objects and pieces of furniture my parents owned had belonged to their parents. Others they collected, and became part of the scenery. Copper luster dogs, to be searched out

in every antiques shop we visited, stared at us balefully from mantelpieces and the tops of bookshelves. Later, jugs replaced the dogs in the pottery popularity stakes, thus putting the dogs farther out of countenance. I preferred our live version, a large and very unstable black labrador, whose basket was kept under the piano. In my nightie I would huddle there beside him, hiding from my nanny who insisted that my own bed was more suitable than this canine heaven.

All our houses were attached to a particularly English landscape, whether in Yorkshire, Warwickshire, or Hertfordshire. Every Sunday after lunch my brother, my sister, and I were forced to "beat the bounds," i.e. take a brisk walk, even in the coldest weather, around our modest acres, to what end we could not imagine. It had something to do with the Victorian notion of health and, perhaps more subtly, with the idea of our making some connection to the land, however remote from the grand parks and gardens belonging to our neighbors at Castle Howard or Charlecote. I learned little about the names of flowers or trees, but I shall never forget the muddy paths along the fields, carved into trenches by tractor wheels, into which our Wellington boots happily sank, or running for the gate with an overweight bull snorting behind us, or burying dead mice caught by the local farmer's tomcat. Romantic? Hardly. Not all English country life belongs in picture books.

My first pony was a beautiful glossy creature called Flash. Every time I rode her I came home, sobbing, on foot. She threw me under trees, into ditches, over hedges. Ruthless, unsparing, Flash would find the perfect low-hanging branch and charge for it, knocking me unceremoniously into the





muddy undergrowth. My poor unversed father, so proud of this purchase for his daughter, later learned that the animal was known as The Bolter in three counties. It doesn't do to be too innocent in the country.

All this is by way of saying that while the English countryside has always evoked pictures of pastoral serenity, and given poets an endless source of inspiration ("this precious stone set in the silver sea"), yet much of English country life, like any rural existence, is a matter of making do and accepting the immutability of natural laws. One of Nancy Mitford's heroines, Linda, used to keep dead rabbits under the sofa cushions to train her hunting dog. This down-to-earth approach, while offensive to the squeamish, recognizes the relationship between society and nature, and promotes a sense of perspective. What is perhaps unique about England is its assumption of stability—hence my enduring images of home.

*Detail of A Summer Day, ca. 1832, watercolor by John Sell Cotman.*

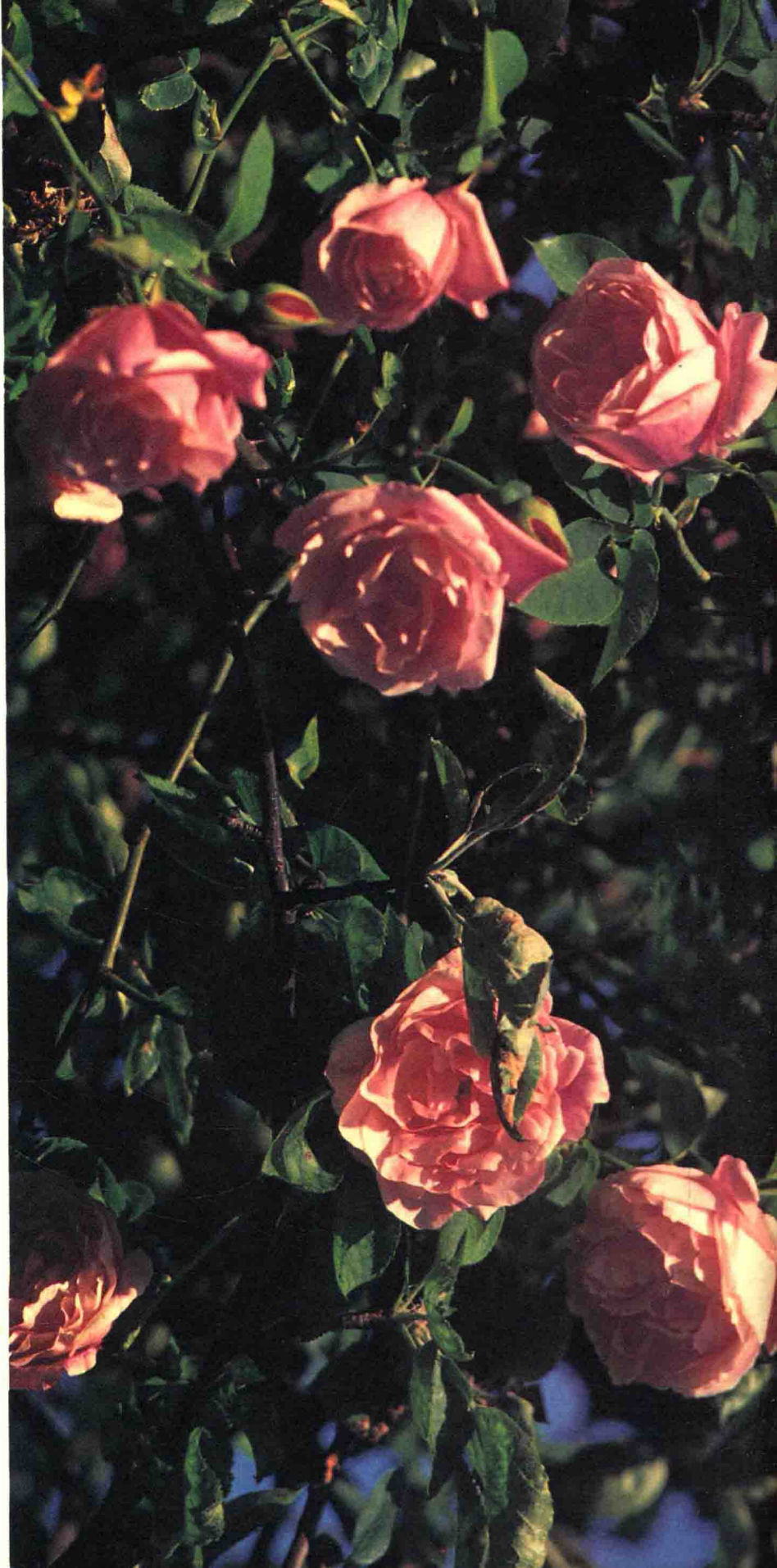


# P R E F A C E

—CHRISTOPHER SIMON SYKES

**THE STRONGEST MEMORY** I hold of Sledmere, the Yorkshire house in which I was brought up, is that it was always full of people. To begin with the family, including our parents, numbered eight. Then there was a large household staff, all of whom lived in, consisting of the butler, two footmen, a pantryboy, a pantrymaid, the cook, a scullery-boy, the housekeeper, the nanny, a nursemaid, the secretary, and a French governess, as well as an army of dailies; all this before the arrival of the, literally, hundreds of friends who came to visit my parents throughout the year to indulge in what appeared to be an endless round of country pursuits. They came for the races at York and Doncaster, for the shooting and the hunting, the tennis and the croquet, for Christmas and Easter, high days and holidays, filling the house with their chatter and laughter, the distant hum of which would float up nightly to our bedrooms on the nursery floor. No matter how many guests were staying, the kitchens could always cope, for the estate was completely self-sufficient. Each morning the dairyman would bring fresh milk and butter, the gardeners would deliver fruit and vegetables, and one of the gamekeepers or the butcher would arrive with game or meat. Never for a moment did this frenetic existence cease, and Sledmere was perfectly suited for it, having been built in 1760 to support an 18th-century way of life.

The house was a children's paradise, and when our parents were away we ran wild in it. There were long corridors to run up and down, stone







floors to tricycle and bicycle upon, acres of polished wood across which to slide, countless rooms for games of hide-and-seek, and spooky attics and cellars to explore. We would await our parents' return with some trepidation, for there was invariably some mischief to be accounted for, such as the breakage of yet another valuable vase (they seemed to be everywhere, acting as doorstops, walking-stick holders, water bowls for the dogs, etc.) or an attempt to set fire to a hayloft on the farm. Their arrival also meant banishment back up to the top floor of the house, where the nursery, night nursery, and schoolroom were. This was where we slept, did our lessons, took our meals, and generally lived out our lives. Only at teatime were we allowed a foray into that hallowed adult world, when we were dressed up in our best little shorts, shirts, and frocks, brought down to see our parents, and shown off to whatever visitor happened to be present. It was an incredibly ordered, secure, and privileged existence, so far removed from my life today that it might have taken place in another century.

My eldest brother now lives at Sledmere in quite a different way from that of our parents, looked after by a cook and butler and one or two dailies. Like many other country house owners, financial necessity has obliged him to open Sledmere to the public and he has moved into a sitting room and library converted out of two bedrooms. Fresh produce still arrives each morning, though in smaller quantities, but at times such as Christmas, or for a big shoot, when twenty people sit down for lunch, Sledmere still experiences echoes of its past.

*Pink roses, FAR LEFT, on a summer day.*

*Blue roses, chintz, LEFT, designed by Geoffrey Bennison.*

*Engraving of Biddesden House by R. Stone, OVERLEAF.*



# INTRODUCTION

**ASK A CHILD** to draw a house, and what do we see? A square or rectangular box, with a hipped roof, chimney, symmetrical doors and windows, and maybe a path with flowers and a surrounding fence. This innocent picture is an almost exact prototype of the English country house. In its developed form—a freestanding house with classical proportions set in a country landscape—it expresses our most fundamental idea of home.

This image should not be confused with the great English stately homes—Hardwick, Blenheim, Wilton, Knole, Longleat—which continue to summon up visions of splendor in the tourist's mind. These grand buildings are no more houses in the domestic sense of the word than is the White House in Washington. They are museums, amusement parks, obsolete political symbols, monuments to the past. Filled with treasures acquired during Britain's long imperial history, their gift to the present is only nostalgia, a whiff of champagne-laden dust.

But the observant traveler along the country roads of England cannot fail to observe indications of the existence of a number of splendid houses without National Trust signs, public markers indicating "House Open Today," or other such institutional directions. A fine pair of gates here, a handsome park there, a long low wall—these are clues that, if pursued, reveal a different view of English country life. Smaller, perhaps, and more practical than the ornate mansions dedicated to personal glory, these houses are as exquisite in design, proportion, and geographical situation as any to be found in the guidebooks. It is to these houses that we hope to divert the attention until now devoted

exclusively to their richer and more public cousins.

The houses celebrated in this book belong to the land in the way that English country houses have always belonged to the land, with horses, dogs, cows, sheep, and hens as essential accessories to the landscape. They have been handed down in many cases through several generations of the same family, and their interiors demonstrate the kind of warmth and mellowness that springs from generational care.

"The house stamps its own character on all ways of living: I am ruled by a continuity that I cannot see," wrote Elizabeth Bowen about her beloved Bowen's Court. Built occasionally in hopes of royal favors or for public approbation, but always for personal satisfaction, such houses are today sometimes working farms, sometimes the focal point of a village, sometimes the last remnant of a feudal society. But in all cases they have a beauty and timelessness that have come to represent an ideal to architects and designers all over the world.

We want to take the reader, like a benign voyeur, through those discreet gates and into those graceful parks, behind the protective walls of these manors, rectories, and farmhouses. (Cottages are excluded. Defined by the dictionary as a "small, humble dwelling"—though many, of course, are not—the cottage represents a different aspect of country life, both in its more modest social context and in its modern role as suburban escape.) Of the houses whose interiors are represented here, none is a National Trust property; all are privately owned. Only three—Doddington Hall, Deene Park, and Sledmere House—are open to the public. The rest are private, secluded from the curious outsider, little pockets of civilization in an increasingly wild world—living examples of the English country ideal.



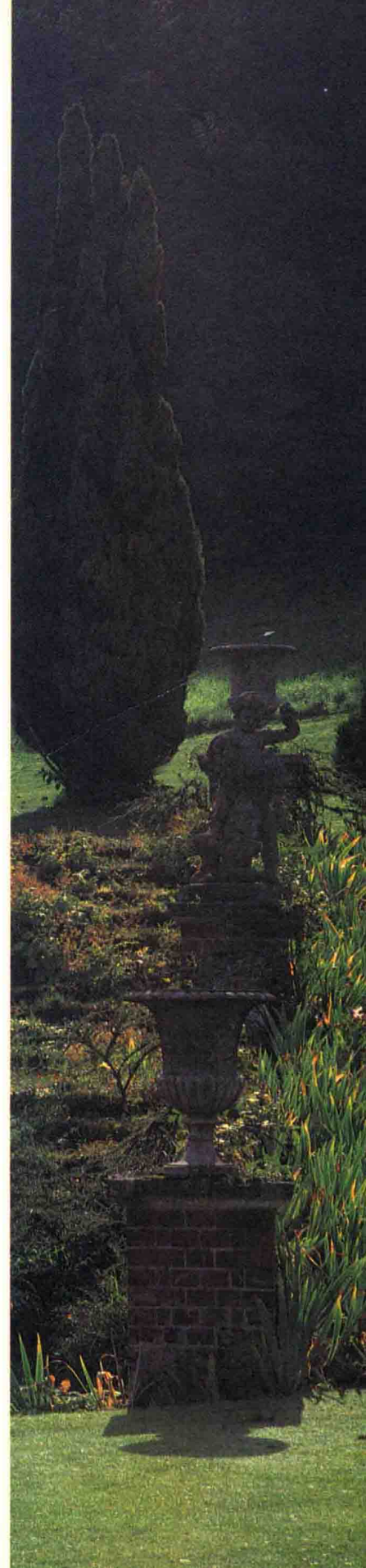
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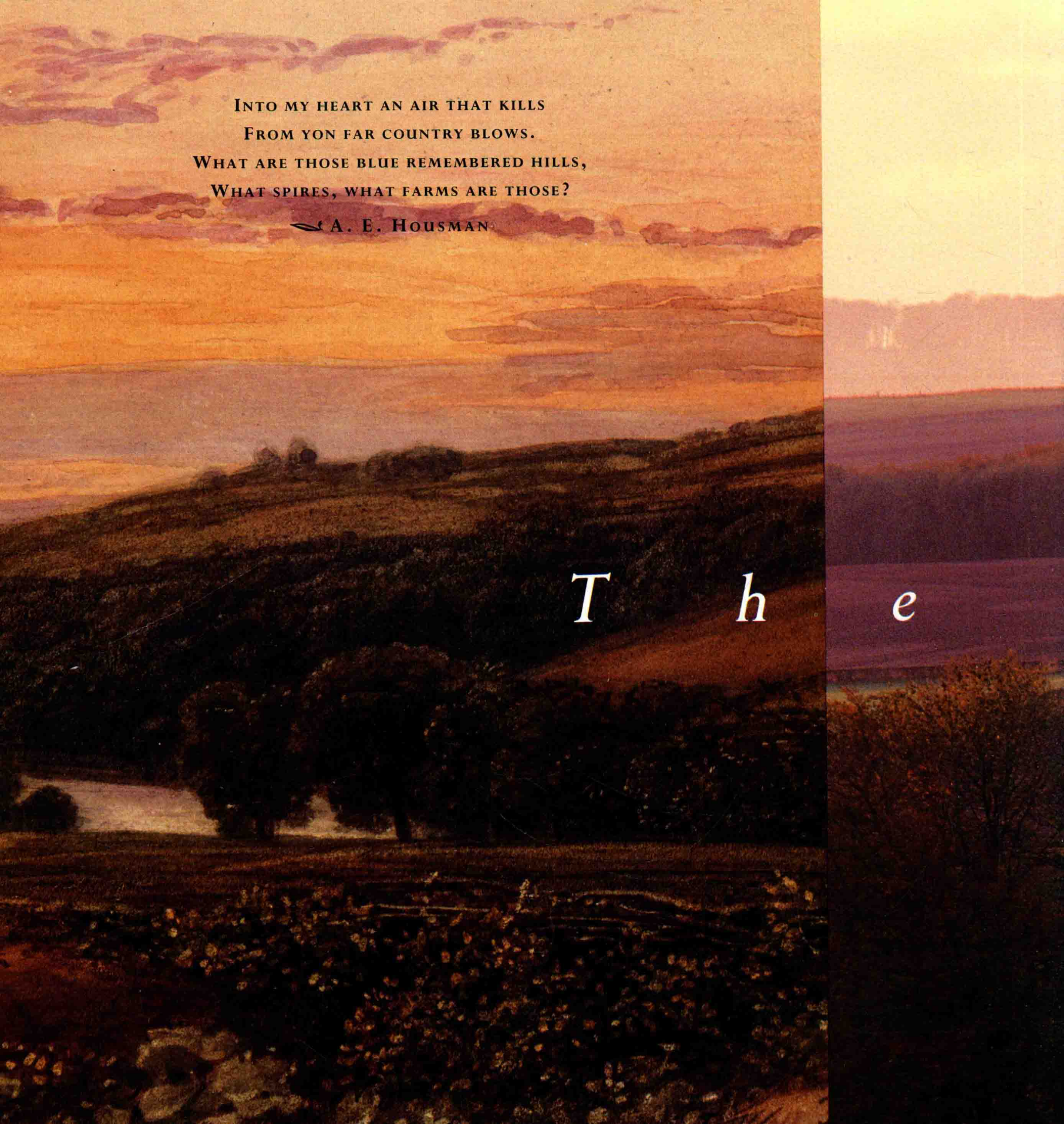
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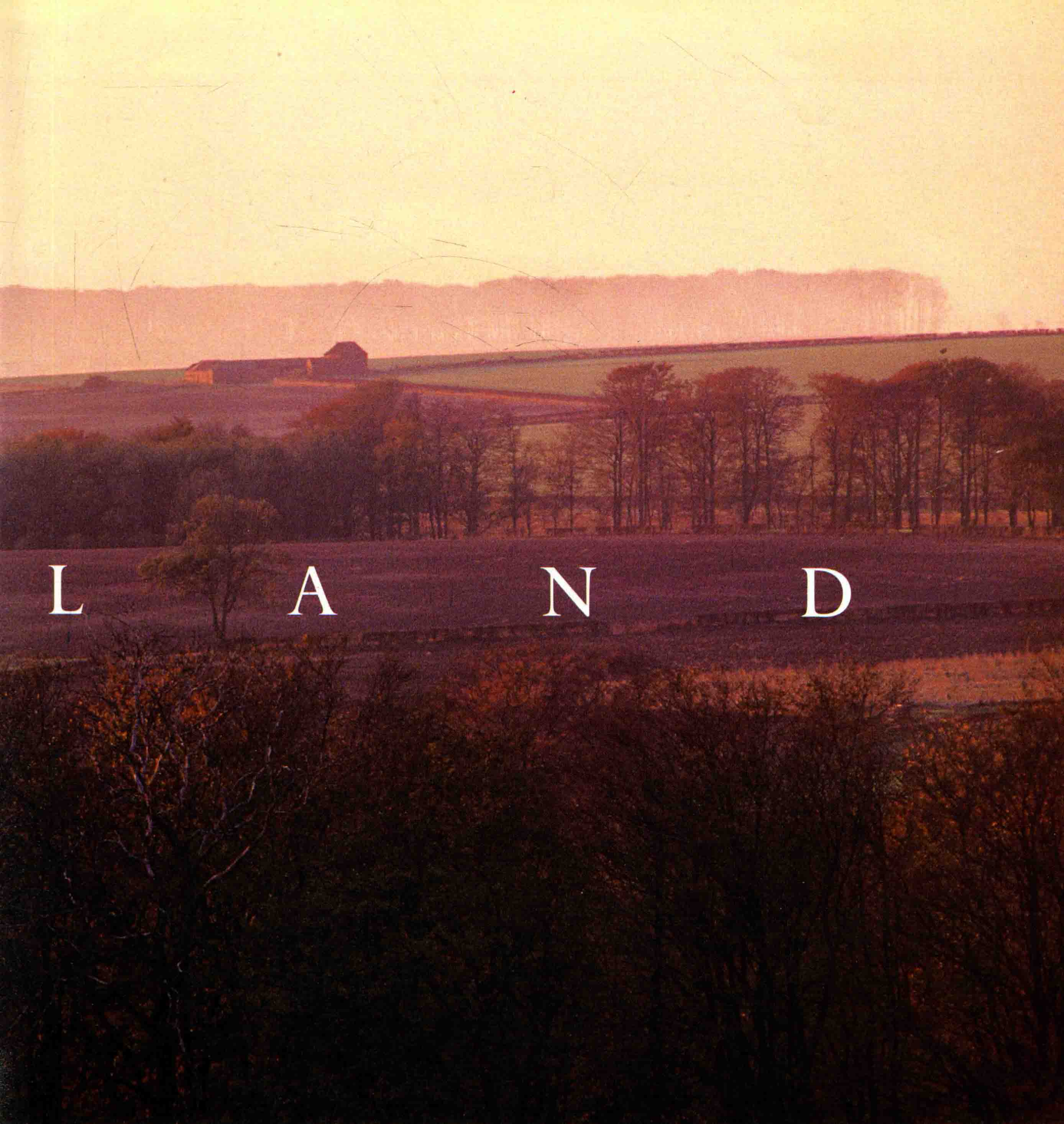


INTO MY HEART AN AIR THAT KILLS  
FROM YON FAR COUNTRY BLOWS.  
WHAT ARE THOSE BLUE REMEMBERED HILLS,  
WHAT SPIRES, WHAT FARMS ARE THOSE?

— A. E. HOUSMAN —

*T h e*





L A N D





IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND, as in much of Europe after the Dark Ages, most land belonged to the king, who, in return for allegiance and practical support, granted parcels of it to his nobles. (The titles came later.) These estates, never large enough to threaten the king's power, were then subdivided or rented to bailiffs and vassals, creating small communities of peasants, livestock, and equipment—the hub of the feudal manor.

The word *manor* comes from the Latin *maneo*, meaning “I remain” or “I dwell.” The manor was the estate of the landowning noble, or lord, on whom the community depended for its livelihood. (*Lord* is an abbreviation of the Anglo-Saxon word *hlaford*, which means one who provides *hlaf*, or a loaf of bread.) One of the first tasks every English schoolchild must undertake is a drawing of a feudal manor, with its hall (house), church, mill, village, fields, barns, and boundaries. For 500 years, the relationship between a house and its land has been reinforced in the English consciousness alongside the letters of the alphabet. (In current cockney slang, “Get off my manor” means “Get off my turf.”)

When William the Conqueror, with the help of his Norman armies, acquired England in 1066, he brought with him certain innovations. One was that from then on, all land belonged to the king—the first act of nationalization in England's history. To this end, he ordered the compilation of the *Domesday Book* in 1086.

“The King had muckle thought and deep speech with his wise-men about this land, how it was set, and with what men. Then he sent his men all over England into each shire and let them find out how many hundred hides were in that shire, and what the King had himself of land or cattle in those lands. . . .”

An autumn landscape,  
PREVIOUS PAGE—the  
flat, rolling countryside of  
Yorkshire, one of England's  
northernmost counties. Detail  
of *The Shepherd: Evening*,  
Buckinghamshire, 1845,  
watercolor by Francis Oliver  
Finch (1802–1862).

Cows grazing, RIGHT, in a  
Yorkshire pasture.

