

A JOURNEY THROUGH
LINCOLNSHIRE

Discovering the places that
inspired Sir John Betjeman



ON THE TRAIL OF
SIR JOHN
BETJEMAN
POET LAUREATE

HISTORY MATTERS

SIR JOHN
BETJEMAN

ON THE TRAIL OF
A POET LAUREATE

John Betjeman was born in 1906 in north London and lived in Highgate for most of his childhood. He went to school in Highgate and later to Magdalen College, Oxford. His first book of poems *Mount Zion* was published in 1932. He wrote extensively for newspapers and journals, and became well-known as a television presenter. He was knighted in 1969 and appointed Poet Laureate in 1972. He died in 1984 and is buried in the churchyard of St Enodoc's, Trebetherick, Cornwall. His *Collected Poems* were published in 1958 and have since been re-issued in several editions including his verse-autobiography *Summoned by Bells*. John Betjeman was always concerned about the preservation of our heritage. Through his writing and TV programmes he showed us how to look at and appreciate townscape and landscape.

1

LINCOLNSHIRE
CONNECTIONS AND POEMS

Lincolnshire, after Cornwall, was John Betjeman's favourite maritime county. He was drawn to the county by friends, by his love of Tennyson, and by the fact that his mother's side of the family hailed from the Spalding area. He also loved Lincolnshire's churches and place names, interests that came together in the first of his Lincolnshire poems, *A Lincolnshire Tale*. It reflects a part of the wolds that he knew well from visits to his friend Noel Blakiston at his father's rectory at Kirkby-on-Bain near Horncastle. Kirkby is in fact the first word of the poem. All the other place names in the poem are fictitious, though they sound authentically Lincolnshire.

It is possible to speculate about which church fits Betjeman's description, but it is likely that it is a conflation of several, perhaps including Haltham and the fine Georgian church of St Peter and St Paul at Langton-by-Spilsby, both of which have three-decker pulpits.

Betjeman's second Lincolnshire poem, *A Lincolnshire Church*, is based on one specific church, St Margaret's, Huttoft. The poem reflects on the poor state of the churchyard; a local woman (regretting Americans); inadequate restoration of the church building; and the post-war drabness of England (telegraph poles and tin). But, he enters the church and all is light and beauty! And there he meets Rev. Theophilus Caleb (an Indian Christian Priest), vicar of Huttoft from 1943 until 1959 (he is buried in the churchyard).

The third Lincolnshire poem is *House of Rest*, set apparently in Woodhall Spa, although the location is unimportant: the subject is really about loss and loneliness in old age (Now all the world she knew is dead), and the struggle between faith and doubt.

2

A Lincolnshire Tale

Kirkby with Muckby-cum-Sparrowby-cum-Spinx
Is down a long lane in the county of Lincs.
And often on Wednesdays, well-harnessed and spruce,
I would drive into Wiss over Winderby Sluice.

A whacking great sunset bathed level and drain
From Kirkby with Muckby to Beckby-on-Bain,
And I saw, as I journeyed, my marketing done,
Old Caistorby tower take the last of the sun.

The night air grew nippy. An autumn mist roll'd
(In a scent of dead cabbages) down from the wold,
In the ocean of silence that flooded me round
The crunch of the wheels was a comforting sound.

The lane lengthened narrowly into the night
With the Bain on its left bank, the drain on its right,
And feebly the carriage-lamps glimmered ahead
When all of a sudden *the pony fell dead*.

The remoteness was awful, the stillness intense,
Of invisible fenland, around and immense;
And out on the dark, with a roar and a swell,
Swung, hollowly thundering, Speckleby bell.

Though myself the Archdeacon for many a year,
I had not summoned courage for visiting here;
Our incumbents were mostly eccentric or sad
But – *the Speckleby Rector was said to be mad*.

Oh cold was the ev'ning and tall was the tower
And strangely compelling the tenor bell's power!
As loud on the reed-beds and strong through the dark
It toll'd from the church in the tenantless park.

The mansion was ruined, the empty demesne
Was slowly reverting to marshland again
Marsh where the village was, grass in the Hall,
And the church and the rectory waiting to fall.

3

And even in springtime with kingcups about
And stumps of old oak-trees attempting to sprout,
'Twas a sinister place, neither fenland nor wold,
And doubly forbidding in darkness and cold.

As down swung the tenor, a beacon of sound,
Over listening acres of waterlogged ground
I stood by the tombs to see pass and repass
The gleam of a taper, through clear leaded glass.

And such lighting of lights in the thunderous roar
That heart summoned courage to hand at the door;
I grated it open on scent I knew well,
The dry smell of damp rot, the hassocky smell.

What a forest of woodwork in ochres and grains
Unevenly doubled in diamonded panes,
And over the plaster, so textured with time,
Sweet discolouration of umber and lime!

The candles ensconced on each high panelled pew
Brought the caverns of brass-studded baize into view,
But the roof and its rafters were lost to the sight
As they soared to the dark of the Lincolnshire night:

And high from the chancel arch paused to look down
A sign-painter's beasts in their fight for the Crown,
While massive, impressive, and still as the grave
A three-decker pulpit frowned over the nave.

Shall I ever forget what a stillness was there
When the bell ceased its tolling and thinned on the air?
Then an opening door showed a long pair of hands
And the Rector himself in his gown and his bands.



Such a fell Visitation I shall not forget,
Such a rush through the dark, that I rush through it yet,
And I pray, as the bells ring o'er fenland and hill,
That the Speckleby acres be tenantless still.

4

WHERE TO FIND
JOHN BETJEMAN &
LINCOLNSHIRE

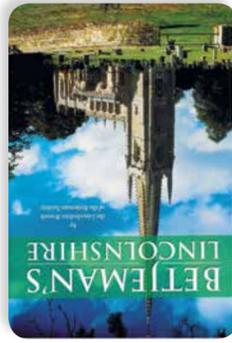
John Betjeman - The Biography
by Bevis Hillier (John Murray, 2006)

by A N Wilson (Hutchinson, 2006)

John Betjeman: Letters Vol 1 & Vol 2
edited by Candida Lycett Green (Methuen, 2006)

Coming Home: An Anthology of Prose
by John Betjeman

Betjeman's Lincolnshire
compiled by The Lincolnshire Branch of The Betjeman
Society (Marden Hill Press, 2006)



JOIN US TO CELEBRATE THE
LIFE AND WORK OF POET
LAUREATE JOHN BETJEMAN



www.betjemansociety.com

For details of the national Betjeman Society
please visit our web page:

For further information please send an email to:
stuart.crooks43@btinternet.com

The Betjeman Society exists to advance the appreciation
of Sir John Betjeman (1906-84) as poet, writer,
broadcaster and conservationist. We seek to inform and
inspire our members and the wider public through the
study and enjoyment of his life and work.
Membership of the Lincolnshire Branch is open to all.
We arrange a programme of events on topics such as
architecture, railways and poetry. We are relaxed and
friendly. No special knowledge is needed in order to
become a member.

LINCOLNSHIRE
BRANCH OF THE
BETJEMAN SOCIETY

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
ON THE AREA, VISIT -
loveincolnshireworlds.com

Love Lincolnshire Wolds

@LoveLincolnWolds

LoveLincolnWolds



loveincolnshireworlds.com

Acknowledgements
Compiled by Lincolnshire Branch
of The Betjeman Society
Photographs:
Lincolnshire Branch of the Betjeman Society
ELDJC

Permission to reproduce John Betjeman's poems:
John Murray Press, an imprint of
Hodder & Stoughton Limited

Produced by East Lindsey District Council © 2017



East Lindsey
DISTRICT COUNCIL

And the wide green marsh as well
Who sings in the sky with the skylark
Who calls in the evening bell,
Is God who prepared His coming
With fruit of the earth for his food
With stone for building His churches
And trees for making His road.
There where the white light flickers,
Our Creator is with us yet,
To be worshipped by you and the woman
Of the slacks and the cigarette.

The great door shuts, and lessens
That roar of churchyard trees
And the Presence of God Incarnate
Has brought me to my knees.
"I acknowledge my transgressions"
The well-known phrases rolled
With thunder sailing over
From the heavily clouded wold.
"And my sin is ever before me."
There in the lighted East
He stood in that lowering sunlight,
An Indian Christian priest.
And why he was here in Lincolnshire
I neither asked nor knew,
Nor whether his flock was many
Nor whether his flock was few
I thought of the heaving waters
That bore him from sun glare harsh
Of some Indian Anglican Mission
To this green enormous marsh.
There where the white light flickers,
Here, as the rains descend,
The same mysterious Godhead
Is welcoming His friend.

6

LOUTH

Louth is one of several market towns which lie at the foot of the Lincolnshire Wolds and is regarded as the capital of the Wolds. It has a market place and an intricate network of streets and fine Georgian and Victorian buildings. John Betjeman came here several times, often staying with his friend Jack Yates in Westgate. He describes one visit: *"My panelled bedroom with thick 1680-ish panes of glass, panelled rooms throughout, little garden opposite, walled garden behind. My room looked down the curve of Westgate, and I could see in that sharp winter morning sunlight the different browns and reds and pale biscuit of the brick which is such a feature of Lincs; dark red for the 17th century and rather brighter reds for later periods until you get the yellow brick of the Regency. And I saw the curve of these houses, each with its garden and a little bit of lawn and a shadowy cedar, arching round past the winter trees and that spire of Louth which was sharp in the winter sunlight, superbly proportioned."* His fondness for the town is illustrated elsewhere in his writings: *"Louth, in Lincolnshire"*, he wrote, *"is one of the less known, but most attractive towns that we possess. It stands at the foot of the chalk wolds, cluster of old red-brick houses with lighter red-tiled roofs gathered round the magnificent golden-grey spire of its parish church."*



HISTORY MATTERS

ON THE TRAIL OF SIR JOHN BETJEMAN

LINCOLN

Lincoln, with its cathedral, castle, Roman heritage and rich history is a major tourist destination. In his Collins Guide to English Parish Churches John Betjeman wrote *"The county town and cathedral city of Lincoln is ancient on the hill and industrial in the valley"*. Uphill Lincoln has great charm, and not all the lower levels are industrial by any means. Others have described the city as old, confused, long, uneven, steep and rugged. John Betjeman spoke at a conference in the City in 1963 when he said *"I have got a really comfortable feeling to think that I am in Lincoln, in the heart of Lincs..."*



WOODHALL SPA

In John Betjeman's poem *House of Rest* (see overleaf) the church at Woodhall Spa is mentioned, and elsewhere he describes the town as *"...something unexpected, that half-timbered Bournemouth-like settlement, among silver birches, beather and rhododendron."* With its tree-lined streets, the unique Kinema-in-the-Woods, and the headquarters of England Golf, Woodhall is a gem set in the heart of the Lincolnshire countryside.



KIRKBY-ON-BAIN

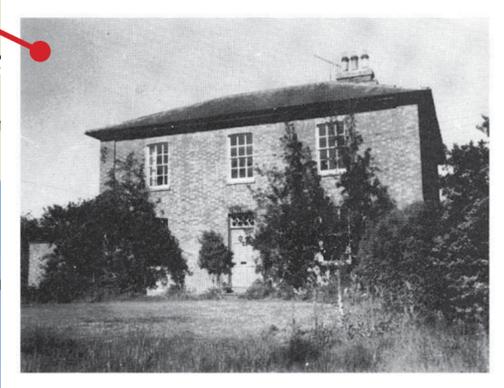
John Betjeman stayed with his friend Noel Blakiston at The Rectory in Kirkby-on-Bain. The village and the surrounding areas were the inspiration for his poem *A Lincolnshire Tale* (see overleaf).

HUTTOFT

Situated in the Lincolnshire Marsh not far from the coast, Huttoft is a small village with an impressive church. John Betjeman came here in the 1940s when he visited the church and was inspired to write *A Lincolnshire Church* (see overleaf), a poem not only about the church itself, but its setting, the local people and the Indian priest he met there.

LINCOLNSHIRE LANDSCAPE

John Betjeman had a keen appreciation of Lincolnshire and of east Lincolnshire in particular. Three of his poems are set in Lincolnshire, and he wrote extensively about the landscape and churches of the county. He introduced a 1959 BBC broadcast from Gunby Hall by saying: *"Lincolnshire is like a separate country. It is off most main roads, a wide rolling landscape of silvery church towers, villages of old red brick with groves of beech and ash and lime outlined against enormous skies"*. He thought that this, the second largest English county, was the least appreciated. In his introduction to his Collins Guide to English Parish Churches, first published in 1958, he recognised that despite some well known coastal resorts, most of the county's 90 miles of coast consist of dunes, sandy beaches and the great estuaries of the Humber and the Wash. *"The scenery runs from north to south down the whole length of the county in various bands."* He describes the limestone cliff, Ermine Street, the Lincolnshire Limestone, the Fens, and the *"balky hills known as the wolds, which are an unexplored variant of the Sussex Downs."*



SPALDING

John Betjeman's mother's family hailed from Spalding, and he spent some time there researching family history.



Map not drawn to scale