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AERIAL VILLAGES

Trefor and Froncysyllte, Wales

This is a tale of two villages connected by Britain's tallest aqueduct. They're effectively suspended in mid-air. One of them does rather nicely out of it. The other feels the draught. Pontcysyllte Aqueduct carries the Llangollen Canal over the River Dee and still captures the imagination more than two centuries after it was built. The brochure challenges visitors: 'Are you brave enough to cross it? If so, are you brave enough to look down?' A group of Wolverhampton pensioners were apprehensive as they boarded their narrowboat. As one of them said:

'How do you live up to that? We'll be twenty women with their eyes shut!'

Wales leapt for joy when Pontcysyllte was declared a World Heritage site in 2009 – an accolade which puts it on a par with the Pyramids. Such elevated status, however, doesn't wash with Gethin Morris. He lives alongside the canal at Froncysyllte but can't find room to park his car. Two busloads of tourists rocked up from Scunthorpe when I was there. The coaches occupied all the limited space between the towpath and Gethin's cottage. He was spitting fire:

'They're a bloody nuisance. The traffic's spoiling our village. It used to be nice and quiet. They have no right to park here.'

Gethin rewinds to the 1980s when Anneka Rice helicoptered into the Dee Valley and her TV programme *Treasure Hunt* first drew people's attention to Thomas Telford's extraordinary bridge. He claims Pontcysyllte has never been the same since. I guess that he wouldn't mind quite so much if Froncysyllte had grown fat on the proceeds. Sadly, it's not the case. It has to put up with visitors who contribute very little to the village economy. Despite being close to the water's edge, The Fron Café looked worryingly under-subscribed. That's because Froncysyllte isn't a destination village. It's a turning point for narrowboats heading back over the aqueduct.

Left: Sail between these two villages on Britain's tallest aqueduct, and you think you're flying.



A DOUBLY-THANKFUL VILLAGE

Upper Slaughter, Gloucestershire

I spent Remembrance Day in an enchanted village. It was a curious experience. The streets were deserted. Smoke staggered from a couple of chimneys; a small group of geese paddled in the ford.

Sundays in Upper Slaughter are like that – and this particular Sunday was no different. Elsewhere in Britain, congregations would be placing poppy wreaths on war memorials and singing lustily in honour of those who perished. Not in Upper Slaughter. St Peter's Church was closed. Workmen were installing central heating. Come the full force of winter, they'd need it. The wind can hit you like flint in the Cotswolds.

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UPPER SLAUGHTER

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In contrast, Lower Slaughter was ready to remember. Parking places were at a premium around St. Mary's Church. It would soon be full. Like most communities, Lower Slaughter suffered in the Great War and lost more of its sons and fathers in the Second World War. Remembrance Day, for all its dark echoes, was a major social event. The last big get-together before midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

At 11.00 on November 11th, 1918, when the howitzers were silenced on the Somme, almost every parish in Britain began to count the cost. To Upper Slaughter's surprise and relief, there was nothing to count. And this in a village whose very name suggested appalling tragedy. Every male who fought in the trenches came back to this Gloucestershire farming community alive and well. It might have been renamed *Upper Survival*. For the record, Slaughter has no macabre connections. It derives from the old English word, 'siohtre', meaning 'muddy place' – quite appropriate since both Upper and Lower are bisected by the fast-flowing river Eye.

For this recondite information, we're indebted to Nottingham journalist and author, the late Arthur Mee. In 1936, after the most painstaking research, he produced a book called *The Enchanted Land*. It detailed 32 villages which came through the First World War unscathed. Arthur christened them 'Thankful Villages'. Then came the Second World War. Remarkably, 14 of those lucky 32 villages *also* went through the 1939-45 campaign without losing any servicemen. To paraphrase journalist Brian Hanrahan, they counted them all out and they counted them all back – twice!

Upper Slaughter was one of those villages. It joined communities such as Allington in Lincolnshire and Coyton in Yorkshire in an exclusive group now known as 'Doubly Thankful' villages. It's one of those extraordinary historical facts which has no explanation.

Consequently you will search in vain for a war memorial in Upper Slaughter. There's nowhere to lay a wreath even if you wanted to. Remembrance Day is unobserved because there are no dead to remember. Instead, on a plaque in the village hall, you can read the 44 names of those 'inhabitants of Upper Slaughter who served in a theatre of war' and lived to tell the tale. It almost demands a service of its own.

A poster on St. Peter's notice board announced that the Service of Remembrance would be at St. Mary's in Lower Slaughter. Anyone wishing to pay his or her respects to soldiers, sailors and airmen who were less fortunate, could do so a mile down the road. On the day I was there, six worshippers from Upper Slaughter took the trouble. Understandably, the small coterie didn't include leading aircraftman, Percy Howse, the only war veteran from Upper Slaughter who was still alive. He was 95 and had moved to a nursing home in Bourton-on-the-Water.

I paid him a visit. He still felt guilty for returning from a war which claimed so many young victims.



SOME CORNER OF AN ENGLISH FIELD THAT IS FOREVER HELMAND

Brecklands, Norfolk

The smell of goat curry drifts across the square. Villagers scurry to the mosque as the call to prayer crackles through the microphone. It's good to be in Norfolk.

This isn't a joke. It concerns 25,000 acres of England coloured white on the Ordnance Survey map. The map shows no roads, no villages and no markings of any sort. Odd. If there'd been such a map in the 1930s, it would have shown villages like Buckenham Tofts, Langford, Stanford, Tottington and West Tofts. Countryfolk scratched a living from a large, sandy heath called Brecklands. Most of them were tenants of Lord Walsingham at Walsingham Hall. None of them, including the local squire, had any idea what was in store for them.

Above: Since when was war declared on Norfolk? It's littered with decaying armoured vehicles at Brecklands.