

St Andrew's church, Halton Holegate

[Location: at the back of the church there is a huge door; it's the south side of the church and is the accessible entrance. The location is not the church itself, but the cemetery, facing the hillside. Look out at the hill]

## SPIRITED PLACE

I've come to the cemetery at St Andrew's Church in Halton Holegate, just outside Spilsby. The first time I found it was by chance. As you round the road north to Spilsby, boom, suddenly a great church tops the hill in front of you; and it's the way the church marks the hilltop that I love, making the hill grand and enormous: as if the church is here just to make you look closer at the land. This is the second time I've seen it this way, without warning, felt the leap in my stomach of something beautiful, enough to make me stop. It's something about both position *and* church, the way they align, everything coming together to make you park, get out the car, go to the view. In Paris, when I was 24, my boyfriend met me off the Eurostar with champagne. I'd just finished my MA in London, and I went to live with him in the suburbs of Paris for a few months. He met me, took my suitcase to left luggage, took me to Montmartre. We sat with the Sacre-Coeur behind us and the night-view in front, sipping champagne, a memory we both laughed at when I asked him about it on the phone a few days ago, something we hardly remember from a decade earlier. The memory would never have come of its own accord: it's a body-memory that took over as I walked up to the back of St Andrew's. When I see the hill this church stands on, it's that evening I think of: standing above a view with a monument behind me, toasting a cold night with champagne and anticipation.

I've always loved cemeteries. Perhaps especially English cemeteries in relatively rural areas – grass covered graves, old slabs of stone, great tree hunks making a desolate, dramatic backdrop. They're not frightening. They're not sacrosanct either. People talk about 'thin places', where the contact with spirits and souls seems particularly present, where place seems porous. But 'thin places' doesn't quite capture it, for me. It's simply peace, the quiet rurality of an old church cemetery, with gravestones it's difficult to read, worn down in wind. These church cemeteries seem like the most natural of places, old materials, made from the earth. So when I come here, it's to hunker down with my back to the church looking out over the countryside, gravestones pockmarked into the hillside, sightline drawn upward with trees.

One of the interesting things about England today is the way its old churches have come to mark places of quiet. It's not the buildings themselves, necessarily, but where they stand, the space they take up, the age of their material, and the fact they're often either slap-bang in the middle of a city or town, occupying pride of place where only the very few could now afford to buy, or out on the outskirts, standing like a bugle-call. As churches become less odes to a particular religiosity, and more spaces where people of all faiths and none find calm, simply because they stand as buildings so different to the functional ones we see on a daily basis, they also become more egalitarian, more accessible, spaces for opening ourselves up beyond immediate tasks, sorrowful heads, resentful voices. It's the landscapes around the churches that makes this possible. And it's the land churches mark that I find myself drawn to. Here, at St Andrew's, at the beginning of February, to my right, two saplings are growing. Some of the older trees look a little droopy, a little unwell. They've had a hard winter, the way so many of us have, body a little worse for wear. Still they stand with the fields behind them. One of the things I love about St Andrew's is that as you approach it from the road you're looking up at it, and on its north side the height is brazen, the hill standing high, and when you come round to the church's south side, here, you find the hill has flattened, the view is wide and horizontal, rather than dizzying. That's what makes the trees striking, the way they draw the eyeline tall when your sight is

spreading instinctively across the horizon. You come round the back expecting a drop-away view and find flat ground, as if the hill has disappeared, sheep in the next field.

The light is low across the grass now. It's windy, a little, and the cold is creeping enough to keep me from staying much longer. The light on the grass reminds me of home. Far from here. An RAF plane comes overhead and the sheep move off to the side, the same instinct I have: keep away from the rushing noise. Suddenly all I can hear are planes, though I can't see them. My ear says there are two, crossing the sky from different directions, invisibly. But then I look up and there are three in a circle, spiralling above. Marking the spot, the way the church is. And a bird in the bare winter branches of a greying tree, settling there, like a sentry. I'm sheltered here, at the back of the church, looking out on the hillside, the cemetery a part of the land, a part of this place. And the quiet returning as the planes fade from sight, first, then sound.