

The History MAN

Norfolk historian ADAM LONGCROFT asks: Was Your Village Once a Town?



Although you may not realise it, the village you live in may once have been a town.

The number of towns which existed in the Middle Ages was far greater than today, many having declined so dramatically that they seem to be 'typical' English villages. There are literally hundreds of 'lost towns' scattered across the English countryside. Is your village one of them? How can you find out for sure? Are there clues that you can look for?

During the late Saxon period, between AD 850 and AD 1100, towns were a relative rarity in England and Wales. In Suffolk, for example, there were only 11 towns before 1100 and all, with the exception of Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds, were small affairs containing only a few hundred souls. However, this all changed between 1100 and 1350, when hundreds of new towns and urban market centres were created across the country. In Norfolk, towns like Castle Acre, King's Lynn, Gt Yarmouth and Castle Rising appeared in this period. Planned urban developments like New Buckenham were a curious 12th century mix of Milton-Keynes-like regimentation and 'Wild-west boom town'.

The disruption in European trade which followed the Black Death resulted in a major reversal of fortunes for many towns in England. Some managed to weather the storm. Many hundreds, however, went into a prolonged and terminal decline, withering on the branch until they were unrecognisable as towns - impoverished, shrunken and stripped of their fairs and markets. To any visitor, no more than a village.

In Norfolk - the county with the highest density of towns in the Middle Ages with no fewer than 150 in total - less than 21pc survived into the 17th century. Was your village one of them? If your village has an open space of some kind fairly centrally located, this may once have served as a market place. Many market places were 'infilled' by later encroachments, however, so you may have to look at an early map to see if the 'outline' of the former market (they were normally very large triangular or rectangular spaces) can be traced. Jettied buildings (with over-sailing upper floors) were normally associated with towns so if you find one or more in your village this may indicate former 'urban' status. Guildhalls served urban guilds, so if your village has one, it was almost certainly a town. Constricted building plots, 'terrace' rows of adjoining properties, field names (like 'Town Field'), road names (like 'Market Lane' or 'Shambles') a friary (friaries were only established in towns) or an overly large or ornate parish church may also provide important clues. Medieval shop units, with their distinctive closely-spaced shop windows, narrow access doors and hinged wooden counters, were almost always restricted to towns. Finally, look for other 'classic' indicators of urban status: earthen or stone town defences (including gatehouses), a market cross, a 'Fairstead' (for medieval fairs), or properties in which access to the rear yard is provided by a floored-over cart entrance (a classic sign of the constraints imposed by tightly-packed urban property (burgage) plots. Happy hunting!

■ Dr Adam Longcroft is a lecturer in Local and Regional Studies in the School of Education & Lifelong Learning at UEA. Email address: a.longcroft@uea.ac.uk

A year ago she was wondering what to do with her life. Today Sheridan Winn hopes she is on the threshold of success, with her first novel about to be launched. She told ANGI KENNEDY about her magical year.

Magical book debut

SHERIDAN WINN CAN'T QUITE BELIEVE HOW LIFE HAS changed for her in just 12 months.

"This time last year I was sitting here wondering what the hell to do with my life," says the Norwich author. Divorced from illustrator and cartoonist Chris Winn, she had built up a busy working life as a freelance writer and journalist.

"Freelance journalism was getting more difficult," she explains. "And all the time I knew that there was this need inside of me to write stories.

"Journalism had taught me to write, research and craft words together to a deadline - and to handle it when my words were chopped around by others. It was a very good way of getting into writing.

"Becoming a storyteller would be even more precarious, but at the same time I knew that this is what I had to do. And that if I didn't do it now, when would I ever do it?"

And so now, a year after deciding to follow her dream, she finds herself just weeks away from the launch of *The Sprite Sisters: The Circle of Power*, her first book in what she hopes will be a six or seven-book series especially for the "tween" market of seven to 11-year-olds.

The sequel is already half-written and due for publication in the summer, and she has had an offer for the film and TV rights. It has been a remarkable journey - and a fast one.

"I feel excited but amused by it too - what a year! Everything has happened so quickly," says Sheridan. "But my sister reminded me that it has been a long time in coming. I was 23 when I decided I wanted to be a writer."

That was 30 years ago, but Sheridan sought inspiration from even further back in her life to write *The Sprite Sisters*. She plundered her own childhood which was spent, as the eldest of four sisters, at Littlewood House in Drayton, on the outskirts of Norwich.

"My father, Alan Ebbage, was an estate agent in the city and bought the house with 20 acres in 1960. It was completely overgrown when we moved in," she recalls. "I was just coming up to seven and it was an amazing place to grow up in.

"I spent most of my childhood outside and we were very free in a way kids are not nowadays. We had ponies and many animals - 65 guinea pigs at one point and rabbits, ducks, chickens and even a pig.

"My father was one of five children and my mother one of three, so we had numerous aunts and uncles. And because we had the biggest house in the family, everything seemed to happen there, from birthday parties to weddings, golden wedding anniversaries and so on. There were always lots of people coming in and out."

The house was originally an 18th century cottage but grew in importance and size. In 1919, says Sheridan, the then editor of the Financial Times lived there



HIGH HOPES: Sheridan Winn hopes that her first book, *The Sprite Sisters*, will be the first of a series.

and the pink paper that was used to print his newspaper was made at nearby Taverham Mill.

"Everywhere in the book relates to somewhere real," she explains. "The map of *Sprite Towers* is based on the grounds of my childhood home. The look and scale of the house is largely based on Taverham Hall, near Norwich, where my children were at school, but it also has elements of Littlewood. And the landscape is Norfolk, ever dear to my heart."

The family finally sold Littlewood House in 2000 - although Sheridan's parents and two of her sisters still live locally - but, sadly, the house burned down shortly after.

It is not just the location of Sheridan's book that reflects her childhood: the story also centres on four sisters.

Described as "Little Women meets Buffy", it follows the fate of the *Sprite Sisters*, aged between nine and 13, who each has a magical power related to one of the four elements - earth, water, fire

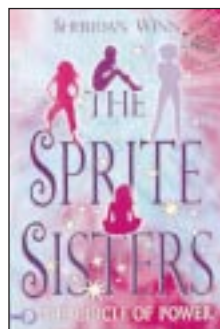
and air.

When Ariel discovers her power on her ninth birthday, their circle is complete. The girls' magic must be kept secret and used only for good; if not, the consequences could be dire. But everything the girls hold dear is about to be shattered by the arrival of someone who is intent on destroying their power.

Although writing the book involved plenty of hard graft - 70-hour weeks in which mother-of-two Sheridan juggled her creative writing with her freelance journalism - the story itself quickly fell together.

"I had just started writing an adult book when completely out of the blue I got this idea for a book about four girls with magical powers," she says. "Now when I write I feel I am in *Sprite Towers*, like I am part of them and they are my family."

■ *The Sprite Sisters: The Circle of Power*, by Sheridan Winn is published by Piccadilly Press on February 28, priced £5.99.



"Just think what it's like to be president. They play a song every time you walk in the room, 'Hail to the Chief'. I was completely lost for three weeks after I left the White House. Nobody ever played a song any more" - Bill Clinton, campaigning for his wife, Hillary, on the White House trail.



"He isn't the best-looking cook in Britain. In fact, he looks like he's been pulled through a hedge backwards. When he comes to my house, my son Jack wants to know which birds are nesting in his hair" - Gordon Ramsay on fellow celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall.

"I like the Prince of Wales. Now he has Camilla, his new girl. She's not very attractive, is she?" - Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan leader.

"It is unbelievable foolishness for Kenyans to destroy their economy, their homes and their entire way of life in the name of politics" - Daily Nation, a Kenyan newspaper.

"For someone so intelligent, why were you so stupid?" - What Christine Langham said to her husband, actor Chris Langham, who was jailed for downloading child pornography.

"Ed Balls, schools minister, wants

QUOTES OF THE DAY

children to read fairy stories. The Hutton Report or a First Great Western timetable perhaps" - Geoff Gorge, of Llanelli, Carmarthen, in a letter to the Daily Mail.

"Allow me to reassure everybody that 2008 finds me in extremely rude health, well up for a 12-mile walk, 50 press-ups and as much bodice-ripping as you like" - Andrew Davies, 71, adapter of classic novels for TV who has been described as "rather frail".