

It's a long way from warehouses to chic bedrooms

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

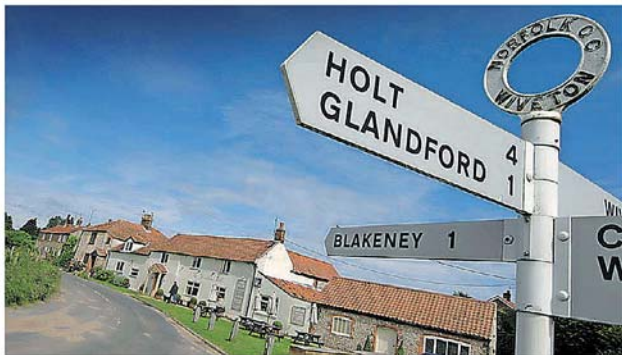
My grandfather was born in Wiveton in the 1880s. I think he might have been rather puzzled to see that the Wiveton Bell, the excellent village pub there, is now advertising "boutique bedrooms".

I'm rather sure that he wouldn't have known what boutique meant – I never encountered the word myself until I started studying French at school at the age of 11. Then I learnt that boutique was the French word for shop.

But now we can all be puzzled. What have French shops got to do with bedrooms in village inns?

It doesn't help to learn that boutique meaning "shop" came into English from French in the late 1700s. But it may help a little to know, as we shall see shortly, that it most usually referred to small shops. The word had originally come into French from Provençal, the language of southern France, in the form of botica. The equivalent word in Italian was bottega, also meaning "shop". Botica and bottega both descended from Latin, the parent language of French and Italian. The Latin form was apotheca, which meant storehouse.

The Latin word itself had been borrowed from Ancient Greek. The Modern Greek



■ The Wiveton Bell pub is advertising boutique bedrooms.

Picture: ANTONY KELLY

word for warehouse is still apothiki, which relates to the verb apo-theto, where apo means "from" and theto means "to place" – so "to put away, to place in storage".

Greek apothiki was also the source of the archaic English apothecary, a word which meant, as you may well know, pharmacist. Originally an apothecary was someone who ran an apothec, which was a store – but particularly a store for medicines. In 1950s America, the English word boutique started acquiring the more specialised meaning of a shop – especially a clothes shop – which was not just small but also specialised, trend-setting and fashionable. Then in the 1960s

it also began to be used as an adjective referring to items which were offered for sale by such small, exclusive businesses – boutique shoes, for example. And since the 1980s it's been increasingly employed to describe small businesses – especially hotels – which provide services for a small, exclusive, sophisticated clientele.

My grandfather knew perfectly well what a warehouse was. But many things have happened during the two and a half thousand year journey in which apothiki has travelled from Athens to Wiveton. We can be sure that the rooms in The Bell are not labelled boutique because they resemble warehouses – not even ancient Greek warehouses.