

The great British weekend: Oakham, Rutland



Rutland Water lures visitors to Rutland, England's smallest county (Getty Images)

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On our way to Oakham, pocket “capital” of England’s smallest county, there’s a puzzling roadside sign just before the tiny village of Whitwell (population about 40). “Whitwell — Twinned with Paris,” it says.

The story goes that, 30 or so years ago, in a spirit of fine East Midlands whimsy, villagers wrote to Jacques Chirac, then Mayor of Paris, suggesting a twinning agreement. They gave him a tight deadline to reply. If they didn’t hear back, they said, they would assume that it was OK to go ahead. He didn’t reply, so the signs went up — and have been there ever since.

“I don’t imagine that when you drive into Paris, the signs say ‘Twinned with Whitwell’,” says Paul Freeman, general manager of the Barnsdale Lodge Hotel, just along from the village and opposite Rutland Water, Europe’s biggest man-made lake.

The lake, with its fishing, birdwatching, sailing and other Lycra-clad sports, is probably the reason most visitors come to Rutland. But, as my wife and I discover, there are plenty of other, less energetic reasons.

The county — only 16 miles in every direction — is England at its most serene and unspoilt. It's officially the country's most rural county: small but perfectly farmed. This is Middle England, geographically and spiritually.

Apart from Oakham, there is one other town — Uppingham, a quiet little place dominated by its famous school, with good galleries and antique and second-hand bookshops. The rest of Rutland's gently rolling countryside is scattered with villages built in warm honey-coloured stone.

Medieval church spires punctuate the horizon like God's exclamation marks. Village greens with duck ponds are ringed by thatched cottages. We find high hedgerows, fertile fields, lazy rivers, pretty glades and a sort of effortless rurality suggested by the names on the map: Cuckoo Spinney, Prior's Coppice, Banky Meadow, Bee Hill, Burley Bushes.

John Clare, the 19th-century "peasant poet", knew the county well and some of his wistful love of the land is captured by Oakham Museum's unexpectedly fascinating displays of old farm wagons and machinery: brightly painted threshing machines, horse-drawn hay-rakes and a sterling tumbril muck cart that carried manure to the fields.

Ed Burrows, the chairman of Discover Rutland, the tourist authority, points out that tourism now employs more people here than agriculture. Part of the appeal is clearly Rutland's timelessness, its feeling of being England in miniature. "And," says Burrows, "this is probably the only county that doesn't have a McDonald's."

Oakham is an unpretentious town, a jumble of Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian and, round the back, supermarket-modern. It has a butter cross, stocks, a towering church topped by a golden weathercock, a Chinese takeaway called Wok This Way, a bandstand for Sunday afternoon concerts and plenty of estate agents and smart fashion and design shops. At its heart is the marketplace; 3 o'clock on a Saturday is a good time for vegetables at knock-down prices.

We take in the Norman castle hall, a church-like building with walls covered by the giant horseshoes that Oakham demands from visiting toffs. Monarchs who complied include Edward IV in 1470 and the present Queen (1967), with 220 other shoes from the 1st Lord Ashby St Ledgers, the 2nd Baron Aveland, the 3rd Earl of Gainsborough and so on through the pages of *Debrett*.

Next day, in the milky morning light, we drive over the Swooning Bridge, covered in early 19th-century graffiti (Simkin, 1834; Henry Valentine Grantham), and take an exhilarating ridge walk, through an avenue of gnarled hawthorns to the deserted medieval village of Martinthorpe. A hare bounds up the field; a heron flaps past; gulls mob a ploughing tractor in the distance. Little remains of the village apart from one farmhouse, its windows bricked up. Mansion, cottages, squire, peasants — all gone.

We buy a jar of parsnip and cardamom jam from a roadside stall and have lunch at a pub where one tweedy lady is telling another: “I go beating every weekend with my sister.” (Pheasants, since you ask).

It’s a hugely restorative weekend, in a place summed up for us by an Uppingham shopkeeper. “Rutland has the sort of atmosphere that people move to rural France for,” she says. “It’s like the Cotswolds without knobs on.”

Need to know

Where to stay

Barnsdale Lodge Hotel (01572 724678, barnsdalelodge.co.uk), is a classy, relaxing extended farmhouse near Rutland Water, three miles from Oakham. Furnished with antiques, it has a delightful garden courtyard, convivial bar and conservatory restaurant (mains about £16; superb roast hake). “Lodge” underplays its style. Doubles from £100, with breakfast.

Where to eat

The 17th-century Blue Ball at Braunston (01572 722135, theblueballbraunston.co.uk) is Rutland’s oldest inn. Long and thatched, it stretches back from cosy bars to dining rooms, with weathered beams and a lingering aroma of wood smoke. Mains cost £9 to £16. Light, inexpensive lunches are available at the Lodge Trust Country Café, Market Overton (01572 768073, lodgecountrypark.org.uk).

Further information

Discover Rutland (01572 720921, discover-rutland.co.uk)