

Walking in workers' WARWICKSHIRE

An owners' rally makes for an interesting weekend of exploring and history in the middle of England

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



Carol Kubicki...

... and her partner, Anthony, use their Devon Sundowner to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments

It was a meet organised by the Devon Conversions Owners' Group that encouraged my partner, Anthony, and I to travel south. Harbury Fields is a small Caravan Club affiliated site about four miles southeast of Royal Leamington Spa and set among farmland close to the pleasant Warwickshire village of Harbury.

The site is just off the Roman road, the Fosse Way. As we arrived I was imagining what Roman legions marching on this classically straight route around 2,000 years ago would make of the speed of today's traffic. It was slightly more recent history that I was planning to seek out, though. A few days in this area revealed that farming and tourism are not the only industries to offer employment to the workers living in the Warwickshire countryside.

We arrived in glorious sunshine and were pleased to see so many Devon 'vans already there. As part of the meet's activities I had planned a nine-mile walk around the countryside.

A regular bus service to Royal Leamington Spa, Daventry and Banbury leaves from the stop by the farm track

to Harbury Fields. We hopped onto the Daventry bus as far as the small market town of Southam. The monthly farmers' market was in full swing and we stopped to admire the beautiful half-timbered former manor house that is now a pharmacy and the fourteenth century parish church.

On the edges of Southam is the Holy Well. Used for over 1,000 years, the waters are very cold and were thought to be beneficial for eye complaints. In the nineteenth century, an eye and ear infirmary was built in Southam to make use of these waters. The stonework around the well has been restored and the footpath improved, making access easy. From the Holy Well we followed the stream, taking footpaths through sheep-grazed fields.

Geologically, Southam sits on the line of blue lias that stretches from Dorset to Cleveland (lias is quarryman's slang for layers). The limestone has been quarried near Southam for around 200 years, as well as near Harbury, initially by hand. It's used to make cement and, until recently, there was a cement works north of Southam. After recent heavy rain, the blue lias clay ➤

RIGHT Harbury Windmill



Our trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

Devon Sundowner on VW T5 2.5TDI 130bhp. Our two-berth is called the Blue Bus. The great design makes good use of the small space that suits an active couple



2007 Devon Sundowner

THE JOURNEY We journeyed south from our home in **Greater Manchester** to the meet at Harbury Fields, **Warwickshire** and spent two nights on site. We used the 'van to get to **Leamington Spa**; otherwise we walked or used the bus

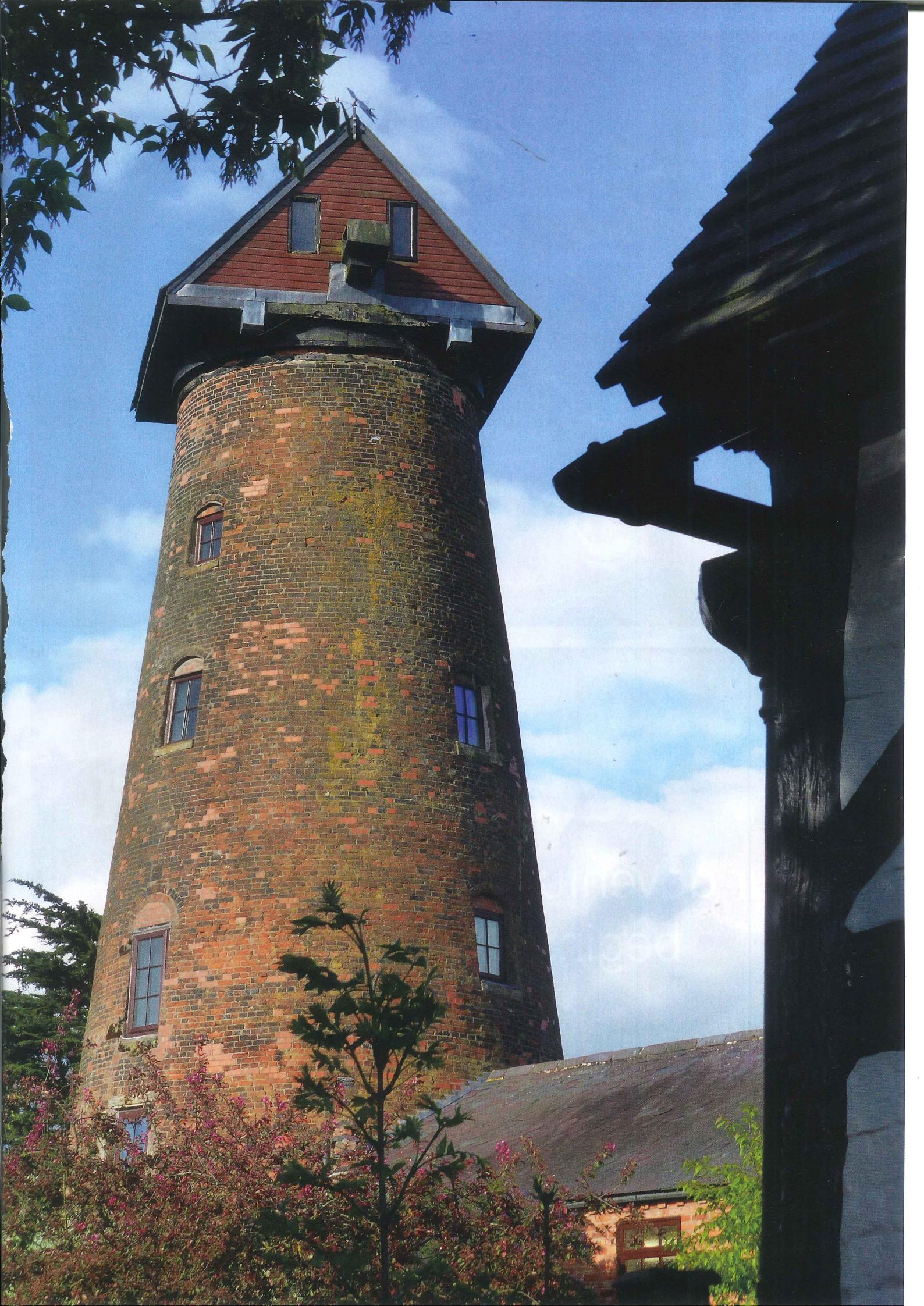
THE COSTS

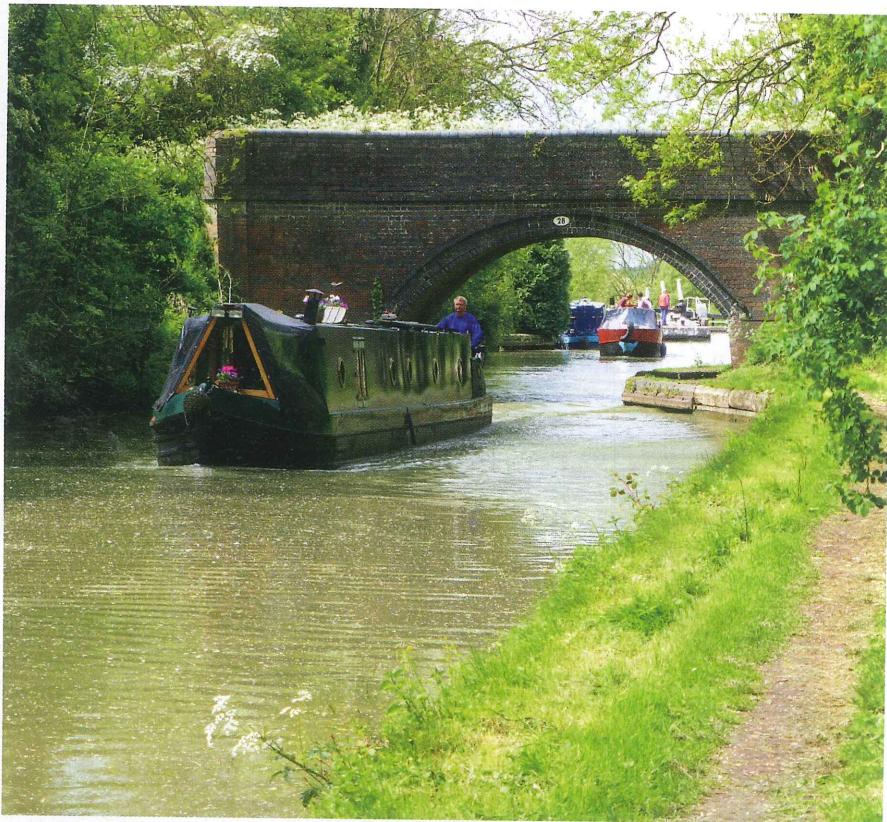
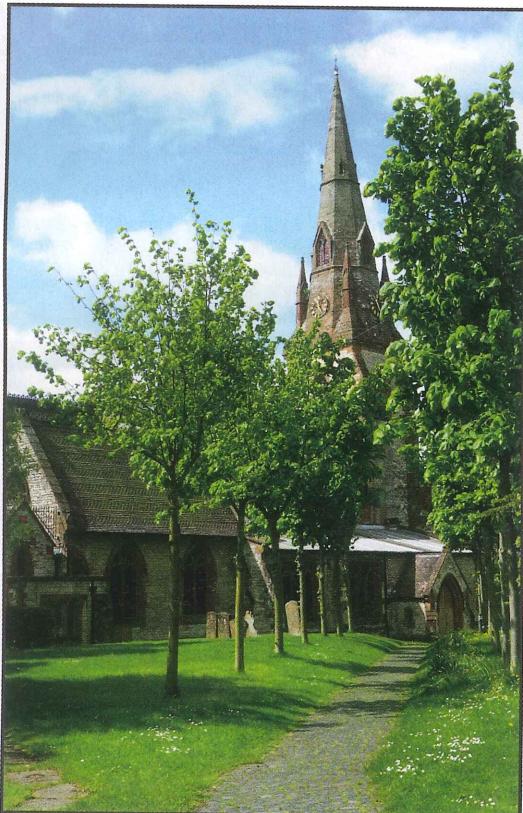
Fuel average 32mpg £51

Site fees £36.60

260 miles

Total £87.60





TOP TIP

Southam town council produces nine walk leaflets covering the Southam, Harbury and Ufton areas that are available to download, as well as a Town Trail, a Holy Well Walk and a Heritage Trail

 www.southamcouncil-warks.gov.uk/southam.htm

stuck stubbornly to our walking shoes.

We followed lanes through Bascote to the Grand Union Canal towpath. The Warwick and Napton canal – which later became part of the Grand Union Canal – was opened in 1800. It used to serve the Southam Cement Works; now it's just used by leisure craft. Our route took us by the four locks at Bascote, and we passed time admiring the narrowboats and chatting to their owners.

Our time alongside the canal was short and we soon joined the Centenary Way towards Ufton. This trail was created to celebrate 100 years of Warwickshire County Council in 1989 and is marked by the bear and ragged staff symbol from the county's coat of arms.

Legend has it that the first Earl of Warwick strangled a bear and the second killed a giant with a ragged staff. You are not very likely to spot either bears or giants on the Centenary Way, but this section goes through some lovely countryside and there is plenty of harmless wildlife to look out for.

The first thing you notice on arriving in the village of Ufton is the colourful hillside garden and pond beside The White Hart pub that someone has clearly worked hard on. The White Hart is cosy and serves very good food and local ales; just what weary walkers need.

As the pub does not allow dogs inside,

we sat in the beer garden enjoying the extensive views. On a good day it is reputed that you can see as far as the Malvern Hills. It would certainly be worth showing up for a spectacular sunset.

The path to Ufton Fields Nature Reserve skirts the edge of the former white lias quarry. It's now a verdant and tranquil spot with pools, many unusual plants, dragonflies and butterflies.

Before Harbury, the route crosses the Harbury Cutting on the Banbury to Wolverhampton Great North Western railway line, built in the mid-nineteenth century. The Harbury cutting was an engineering feat of its day. Working with only picks and shovels, the workers dug a cutting over 100ft deep and half-a-mile long.

In Harbury, we stocked up on supplies at the Cana Import shop on the High Street, which specialises in products from small, independent producers. We also admired the old windmill, now converted into living accommodation, before completing our walk along the road to the campsite.

Windmills were pre-Industrial Revolution mechanism built to grind grain for a growing population and economy in areas not suitable for waterwheels. From the campsite, the Chesterton Windmill (1632) can be seen on the hillside. Frustratingly, there is no direct footpath from the site; ▶

ABOVE LEFT Southam Church

ABOVE RIGHT The Grand Union Canal busy with narrow boats

INFORMATION

ATTRACTIOnS

Ufton Fields Nature Reserve
 warwickshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/ufton-fields

Chesterton Windmill
 nationalmillsweekend.co.uk/pages_wind/chesterton.htm

Royal Pump Rooms
 www.warwickdc.gov.uk/royalpumprooms

BUS

Harbury Fields is served by Stagecoach services, bus numbers 65 and 66
 www.warwickshire.gov.uk/publictransport

ABOVE Southam Holy Well

BELOW LEFT The memorial to the Free Czechoslovak Forces in Royal Leamington Spa

BELOW RIGHT Tudor house in Long Itchington; it is claimed that Queen Elizabeth I stayed here

this would otherwise make a pleasant stroll. However, there is parking and a good, grassy, path leads up to the windmill.

The design of the Chesterton Windmill is attributed to Inigo Jones and is unique both structurally and mechanically, with open archways and wooden gearing. It was last used in 1910 and has now been restored. Its hilltop position gives a panoramic view over the countryside.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries villages were not necessarily peaceful places. Just imagine living with windmills creaking, the clatter from the wheelwright, a farrier clanking metal horseshoes, the rattling of horses and carts along the turnpikes and, on Sundays, the church bells pealing.

Long Itchington, a few miles northeast of Harbury, has remnants of the pre-industrial village and visitors can get a sense of this hubbub. The first thing you notice when you arrive, though, is the fine timber-framed sixteenth century Tudor house that has had some famous occupants, including Elizabeth I and the Sitwell family.

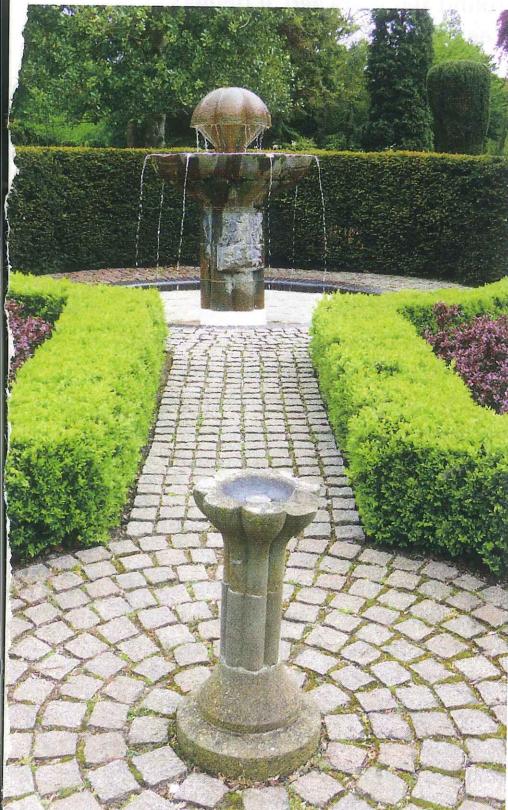
The village walk will take you past the old bakery, a plumber and glazier and a wheelwright shop. The village still has six pubs and a new local industry has been developed as it now has its own micro-brewery producing Long Itch beer.

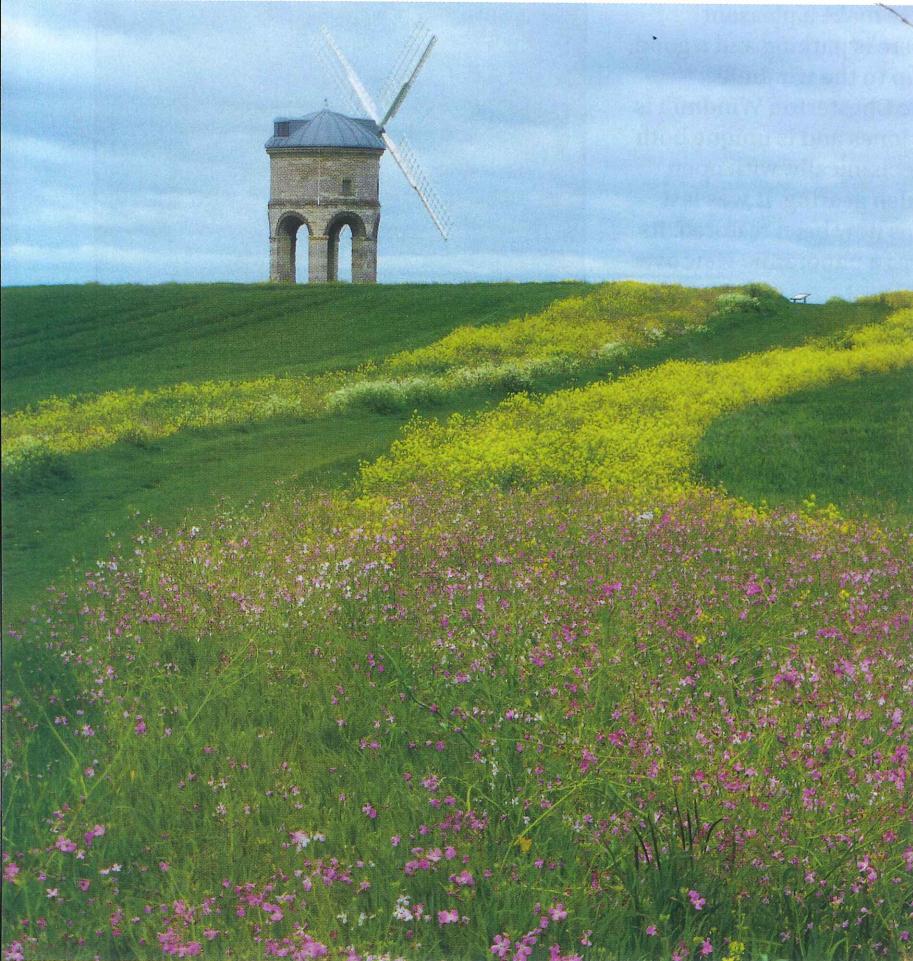


On our previous visit to Harbury Fields we had walked from the campsite along the Centenary Way to Ufton, turned left at the Grand Union Canal and followed the towpath to Royal Leamington Spa. This easy-to-navigate and pleasant walk is around nine miles. This year we drove to Royal Leamington Spa so that we'd have the time – and energy – to explore the town.

If you walk into Leamington Spa along the canal, you will notice a plaque as you leave the towpath giving some of the history of the town. It includes industrial history, which interests me, as it is a town that I had thought of as only being associated with the tourist industry.

It seems that, with the coming of the canal, factories producing parts for the ➤





ABOVE Chesterton Windmill

ABOVE RIGHT Bascote locks on the Grand Union Canal

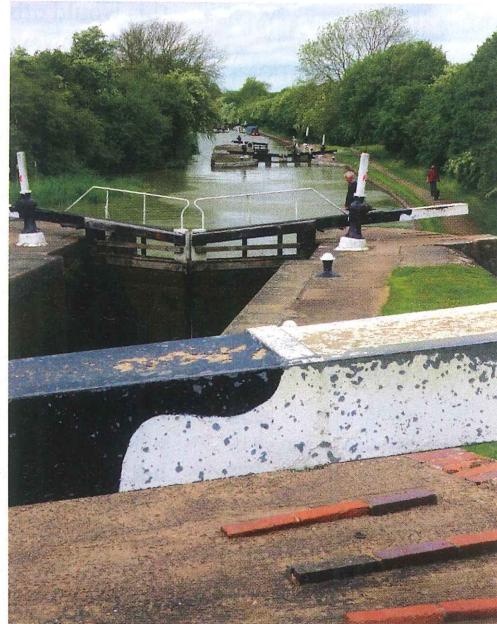
BETWEEN The Royal Pump Rooms café, Royal Leamington Spa

local car industry developed and, at Eagle Foundry, the Rangemaster cookers were first built in the 1830s. These very desirable cookers are still made in Leamington today.

I particularly enjoy a bustling and lively town park; they are great for people-watching and for lifting the spirits. Jephson Gardens had people reading, meditating and feeding the ducks. The park also has fountains, works of art and memorials to marvel at. It ticked all my boxes.

One beautiful and moving memorial is to the Free Czechoslovak Forces and their fight for freedom. During WWII, Leamington was home to the Free Czechoslovak Army and the memorial commemorates the bravery of their parachutists who, in 1941, were flown into occupied Czechoslovakia with the job of assassinating SS General Heydrich. In 1942, they shot and bombed Heydrich, wounding him; he died several days later. But, the Nazis retaliated by killing over 1,000 Czechs suspected of being involved in his death, including the parachutists.

I was also interested in the sculpture made from the tree base of a large copper beech, one of the first planted in the



WE STAYED AT

Harbury Fields Farm Caravan Park, Harbury, Warwickshire CV33 9JN

01926 612457 harburyfields.co.uk

12 February – 29 November, 2015

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £16.50 (non-Caravan Club members £1 extra).

gardens around 160 years ago. It depicts key events in Leamington during the tree's life.

The image of an elephant represents the three elephants of Sam Lockhart, a famous elephant trainer and circus owner. The elephants were housed in the town, the last one dying in 1960. Sam would bring the beasts to bathe in the river as a way to promote the circus. The slipway by the suspension bridge over the River Leam is known as Elephant Walk.

As the development of the railways made it easier for people to travel around the country, interest in spa waters and their cures grew. Leamington's waters became established and the Royal Pump Rooms were opened in 1814. These have now been renovated as a cultural centre, with a library, art gallery and café and it is a stimulating place to have a coffee and a bite to eat. There's also a tap near the café where anyone can drink the local water for free.

There's plenty of evidence of industrial Warwickshire stretching back over 1,000 years, which made me see it not just as the Warwickshire of playwrights and castles but also as the Warwickshire of the workers. **mmm**