

Why? To explore local myths and histories and trace Alan Garner's inspiration for his books



The beautiful medieval Old Medicine House was saved from demolition

GET AWAY...

For the Weekend!

NOVEL IDEAS FOR AN INSPIRING SHORT BREAK AROUND
THE CHESHIRE AND STAFFORDSHIRE BORDERLANDS

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I enjoy reading novels set in places I travel to, particularly when the writer shares local histories, myths and stories with readers, as these enrich my visits.

Alan Garner is a master of this art; his books are rooted in the Cheshire and Staffordshire countryside, imaginatively weaving past and present. One of my favourites is *Red Shift*. My battered copy has Mow Cop on the cover, a small ruined castle that sits on a lofty gritstone crag on the border of the two counties.

Alan Garner was, apparently, inspired to write the book by the legend that Spanish slaves escaped from their Roman captors and settled in Mow Cop, a Civil War massacre at a Cheshire church and a chance observation of a poignant line of graffiti under two lovers' names that read: 'not really now not anymore'.

In *Red Shift*, Garner uses these to spin a tale around Mow Cop from Roman Britain to the present day.

Mow Cop is worthy of a visit without any literary associations. The outlook west is across the Cheshire plain, with the distinctive huge white bowl of the Lovell radio telescope at Jodrell Bank Observatory always visible.

On a clear day the views extend to the Welsh mountains and Manchester. Behind is the rough moorland pasture of Biddulph Moor and the five towns of the Potteries.

We had stopped at Rode Hall on the Cheshire plain on our way to Mow Cop as the story of the cragtop folly starts here.

Rode Hall has been the Wilbraham family home for over 300 years and, in 1754, they built Mow Cop Castle. Local people were granted access (except on Sundays) ►

MAIN Mow Cop Castle is surrounded by craggy outcrops of gritstone

BELOW LEFT Colourful archways in the well-kept gardens of Rode Hall

BELOW RIGHT A busker livening up the shoppers at the Biddulph Artisan Market



TOP TIPS

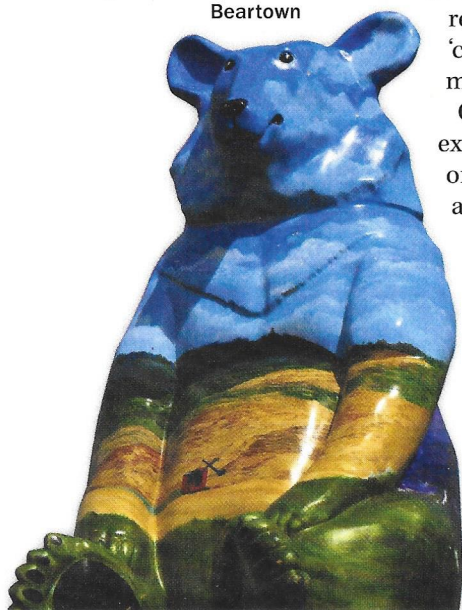
To find more of the locations in Alan Garner's novels, these blogs give useful directions:

mancky.co.uk/?p=11656

worldofwolfson.co.uk/tag/the-weirdstone-of-brisingamen

walk2read.com/places/alderley_edge.html

BELOW The bear artwork at Astbury Mere remembers Congleton's nickname of Beartown



until 1923, when the hilltop was sold for quarrying. This motivated the formation of a preservation society and the legal wrangle ended in 1937 when the land and folly were given to the National Trust.

At Rode Hall we explored the colourful and well-kept gardens and followed winding woodland paths in the sunshine to the lake, where we watched a pair of great crested grebes diving and herons landing clumsily on their island nests.

We walked around the handsome family home, the informal atmosphere refreshing and in contrast to the 'corporate visitor experience' of many country houses.

Castle Camping at Mow Cop has exceptional views looking down on Biddulph. We had time for an afternoon walk down the hill towards Little Moreton Hall, the iconic Cheshire black and white Tudor hall that has a 'wow' factor like no other.

The South Cheshire Way from Mow Cop takes you through Roe Park woodland and follows the Macclesfield Canal, before turning across the fields to Little Moreton

Hall (NT). It makes a perfect six-mile return walk. The timber-framed Little Moreton Hall has a moat and a wonky, 'DIY-disaster' appearance and is protected from malevolence by rows of black and white decorative quatrefoils like a four-leaf clover.

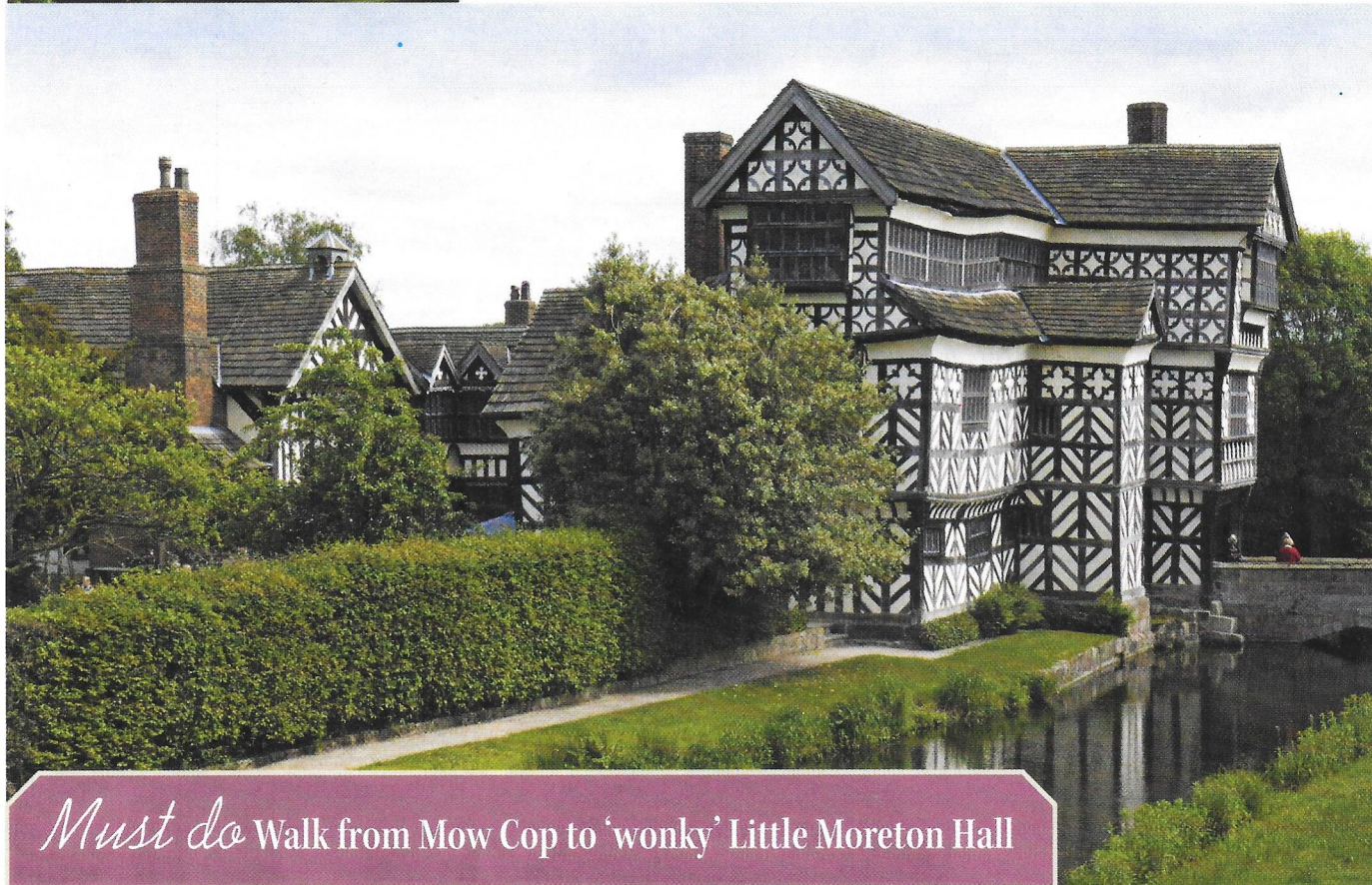
Cuttleford Farm Shop is just across the road from Little Moreton Hall and here we bought seasonal vegetables from its fields as well as local bread, eggs and preserves.

That evening we toasted the joy of motorhoming and walked the 10 minutes to Mow Cop Castle, where we were lucky to catch a spectacular sunset with the folly bathed in radiant orange light.

Biddulph Grange used to be a hospital and, when I was a Girl Guide, we were taken there to sing Christmas carols to the patients – who you might think had suffered enough without being subjected to us!

Since the National Trust restored and opened the gardens in 1991 I have intended to visit and see the transformation. So, long overdue, we followed the Staffordshire Way next day, walking along the ridge from Mow Cop before joining the lanes down to Biddulph Grange Gardens.

These amazing gardens are a Victorian creation designed by James Bateman, an enthusiastic plant collector. Bateman



Must do Walk from Mow Cop to 'wonky' Little Moreton Hall

cultivated an eclectic garden and we explored the world via delightful Italian, Egyptian and Oriental gardens. As well as admiring the dahlia collection, I also added the word 'stumpery' to my vocabulary.

The stumpery – meandering paths of bone-like buried tree stumps planted with ferns – felt gothically gruesome.

Leaving Mow Cop next morning, we drove the short distance to Astbury Mere on the edge of Congleton, a former textile town that was Alan Garner's birthplace and has a pleasant narrow main street and some Tudor houses.

The one-mile long pushchair and wheelchair-accessible trail around Astbury Mere has pretty views across the water and we watched a pair of coots shepherding five chicks and aggressively seeing off any potential predators.

I was surprised to find a colourful statue of a bear on the lakeside meadow; this bear is one of 65 displayed in Congleton in 2011 to remember the gruesome history behind Congleton's nickname 'Beartown'.

In the Middle Ages bear baiting was popular here and generated considerable income, so the town was distraught when its bear died just before the Wakes holiday.

The Wakes organisers borrowed the

money set aside to buy a bible to purchase a new bear, paying it back with the receipts after the holiday.

Over centuries this story transformed in to the legend that Congleton sold its precious town bible to raise the money to buy the bear!

Close by is Alcumlow Hall Farm, where there is a play area, gift shops and a working blacksmith and, of most interest to us, a Snugburys ice cream parlour.

We sat on a bench in the sunshine enjoying our locally made treat and looking back to the distinctive shape of Mow Cop on the horizon.

We had an afternoon date at Alan Garner's current home near Goostrey. He has lived in the medieval, timber-framed Toad Hall (from the Cheshire dialect for The Old Hall, T'old Hall), since the 1950s.

The house sits in a field behind which looms the massive dish of the Lovell radio telescope, creating an incongruous juxtaposition that is fitting for a writer whose books challenge the linear progress of time. Following the television series of *The Owl Service* the family was in a financial position to extend the house.

Not wishing to build a modern extension onto the medieval house, the Garners ►

Essentials

HOW LONG

Two nights/three days

WHEN

We visited in July, but the campsite is open all year

HOW MUCH


Fuel average 34mpg (86 miles)	£15
Site fees	£27
Attractions two adults: Biddulph Grange Gardens, The Blackden Trust and Rode Hall Gardens	£47.26
Parking Alderley Edge	£4
TOTAL	£93.26



BELOW LEFT The pretty gardener's cottage in the immaculate kitchen garden at Rode Hall

BELOW RIGHT Looking across the crags from Mow Cop Castle to the Cheshire Plain


INFORMATION


 mowcop.info

 rodehall.co.uk


Biddulph Grange and Little Moreton Hall

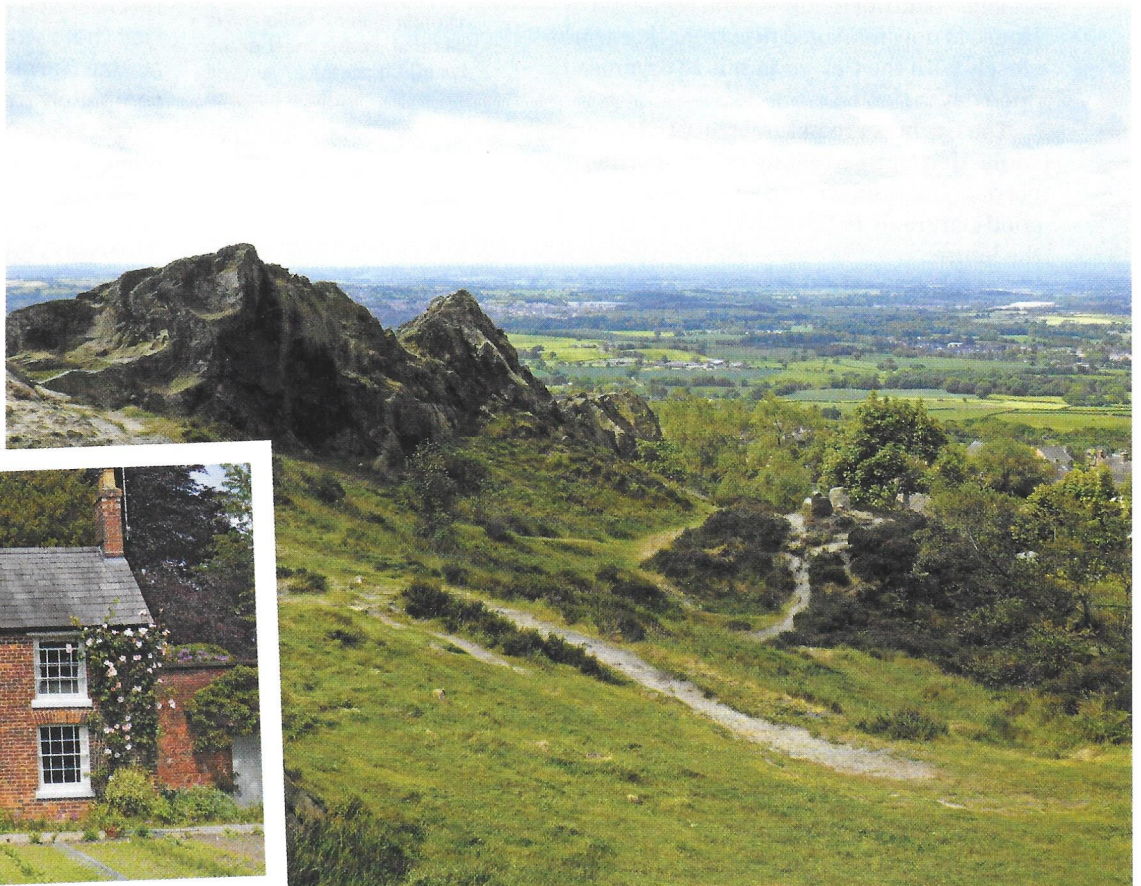
 nationaltrust.org.uk

 alcumlowhallfarm.co.uk

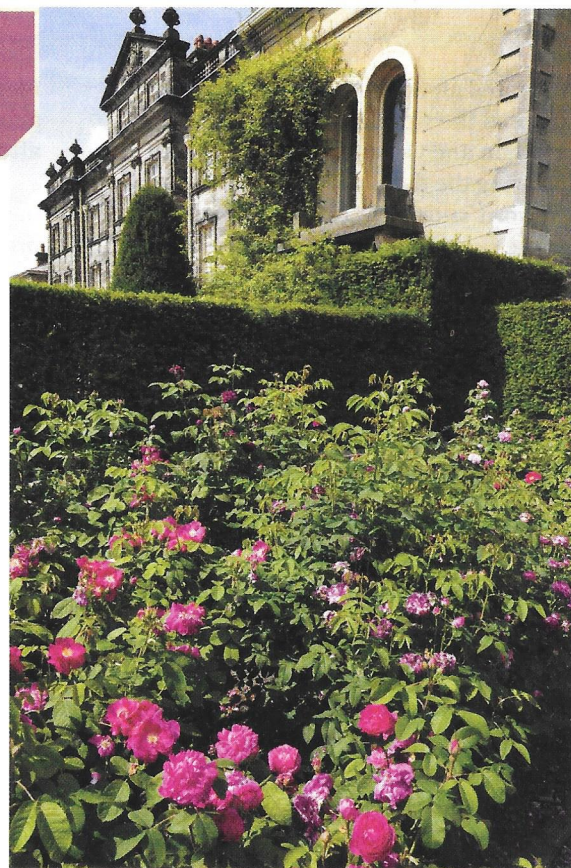
 astburymerecountrypark.uk

The Old Medicine House

 theblackdentrust.org.uk



Must see Visit the wonderfully landscaped and eclectic Biddulph Grange Gardens



bought and dismantled a sixteenth century timber-framed apothecary called The Medicine House, which was due for demolition and rebuilt it next to Toad Hall.

This beautiful medieval Old Medicine House is now managed by a trust that works closely with the Garner family to organise open days.

The Garners are natural story tellers and, while Alan Garner quietly sat in a corner, his daughter and wife often competed good-naturedly to tell stories about life in the house.

On this intimate and relaxed tour, I was fascinated to hear that a whole wing is attached to the Old Medicine House by just two six-inch nails and about the sack found in the chimney when the house was dismantled. Inside this hidden bundle were shoes, commonly used to protect a house from evil spirits.

Our small tour group gazed up the enormous timber-framed chimney, banned after the fire of London for obvious reasons. We ducked under low beams, marvelling at builders' marks and the apotropaic marks made to protect the house against evil.

As a local archaeologist described how this land has been settled for thousands of years, I sensed how the Garners have created a place genuinely in harmony with its environment.

With Jodrell Bank Observatory in the

ABOVE LEFT The ornamental gardens of Biddulph Grange have been beautifully restored by the National Trust

ABOVE RIGHT Biddulph Grange is in an Italian-style villa and, during most of the twentieth century, was used as a hospital

next field and Neolithic artefacts displayed in a case in a medieval pharmacy, this is a place that is both of now and the past.

The phrase 'not really now not anymore' reverberated in my head. I knew after my visit that I would approach future reading of Alan Garner's marvellous novels with completely fresh eyes.

Our route home took us near Alderley Edge, the outcrop of sandstone and woodland near Alan Garner's childhood home that initially sparked his imagination.

Alderley Edge brims with legends, one of which tells of a farmer with a milk-white horse who met a wizard hereabouts.

The wizard was keen to buy the horse to join the army of 140 knights and 139 white horses that sleep in a cavern waiting to fight the last battle of the world.

I'm not sure whether he eventually got his white steed but the story does explain the name of the pub – The Wizard Inn – where we parked so we could head through the cool woodland to the rocky viewpoint of Stormy Point.

Lovers of Alan Garner's novels can spend hours exploring these rocks and finding the settings he uses.

And, as we stood and looked out over the Cheshire countryside, we also shared our memories of when we had each first read one of Alan Garner's mysterious novels and the places they inspired us to visit. www.outandaboutlive.co.uk

The campsite

Castle Camping C&CC CS, Congleton Road, Mow Cop, Staffordshire ST7 3PL

☎ 07539 682202/

01782 522604

🌐 castlecampingltd.co.uk

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: £15 (members only, but you may join the C&CC on site)