

East of Eden

Climb into your own 'fine four-fendered friend' and 'glide on a motor trip' through a land of literary inspiration

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

As I climbed the cobbled streets of Rye, each of the weatherboard and red brick houses packed with character, I was excited to finally explore the town that had captured my imagination years ago through the children's novels of Malcolm Saville. At Rye Castle I looked over Romney Marsh towards the distant sea that shimmered in the sunshine, almost disappointed there was no fog for criminals to lurk in and be thwarted by dastardly kids!

Before I grew up and could travel I escaped to new places with my head in a book and Malcolm Saville's stories were packed with vivid descriptions of the landscape. *The Gay Dolphin Adventure*, based around Rye's fictitious Gay Dolphin Inn, includes lyrical portrayals of Rye and Romney Marsh where land has been reclaimed from the sea and ports are marooned on small hills. Add to this a hunt for hidden treasure and a gang of crooks and you have a great book. A visit to Rye has long been on my wish list...

It is quite a trek to East Sussex from Salford so we broke our journey in Henley-on-Thames, a place I knew from *Three Men*

in a Boat by Jerome K Jerome and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*.

My weather expectations were low, but the sun was promising to emerge from a misty morning and gift us a perfect day to explore the Thames.

Taking the train the short distance to Shiplake we picked up the Thames path back towards Henley. Spotting swans I remembered that, in *Three Men and a Boat*, Shiplake is where Harris told his friends he had taken on a flock of ferocious swans and got the better of them!

We also saw Canada and Egyptian geese, red kites overhead and colourful parakeets in the trees. I pointed out a Thames skiff with a canvas cover that was straight out of Jerome's book and swift rowing boats slid through the still water.

Spring felt a possibility as we climbed through woodland with woodpeckers hammering and red kites nest building.

In Hambleden, a picture-postcard hamlet that has featured in many films including *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, we had a local beer in the pub before heading back to Henley.

Not far from the eye-catching temple ➤

720 miles



MAIN The sheer white chalk cliffs of Beachy Head

RIGHT The Fat Tuesday Festival in Hastings is five days of music and fun

THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Salford to East Sussex via the M6 and M40 to Henley and the M4, M25, M23 to Eastbourne, then returned via Chichester and the M27, A34, M40, M6. We spent 10 days touring in February and March

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg	£124
Site fees	£180.50
Attractions Two adults: Anne of Cleves House, Rye Museum, Rye church tower, Bateman's	£51.60
Parking Rye and Bateman's	£6
Public transport Two adults: buses and trains: Henley-Shiplake, Stone Cross-Eastbourne return, Hastings day ticket, Bexhill-Hastings train return	£34.80
Total costs	£396.90

INFORMATION

A beautiful riverside town
 visit-henley.com

How the Tudors and
 Elizabethans lived at Anne of
 Cleves House
 sussexpast.co.uk

Bateman's and Lamb House
 are National Trust properties
 nationaltrust.org.uk

A rich heritage that includes
 King Henry VIII and Winnie-
 the-Pooh
 ashdownforest.com

Drink in the history of Rye
 and its inhabitants
 ryemuseum.co.uk

A place of creativity
 and escape
 visit1066country.com

The UK's largest Mardi Gras
 celebrations
 hastingsfattuesday.co.uk

BELOW Eighteenth century
 Hambleden Mill was in use
 until the 1970s

that marks the start of the regatta course I caught a glimpse of Fawley Court, which may have been the inspiration for Toad Hall in *The Wind in the Willows*.

Reaching Sussex, Lewes is a town packed with personality: narrow streets with quirky buildings leading up to the castle. It is also home to the medieval house that Anne of Cleves, the fourth wife of Henry VIII, was given as part of her divorce settlement. Henry VIII's story isn't fiction – but it reads like a bestseller.

I travelled back to the fifteenth century as I entered the bedroom at Anne of Cleves House. Subdued light filtered through leaded windows, the wooden floor creaked and the roof joists jostled for position above the four-poster bed.

The Tudor kitchen is also evocative of the era, dominated by a wood-fired range with rustic bowls and green bottles lining deep window sills. We had parked next to the enchanting Southover Grange Gardens, which gave us chance to relax in this well-kept and popular walled park before having a look at the ruins of Lewes Priory.

We stocked up on local cheeses and beer at an excellent farm shop next to our Eastbourne campsite before taking the bus into town. I had some preconceived ideas about Eastbourne (none of them positive)

but, in the continuing sunshine, we strolled along the pleasant seafront as waves lapped the shingle beach and the pier clock chimed; all refreshingly lovely.

The horror of watching Chitty Chitty Bang Bang plummet from Beachy Head in the film has stayed with me and anyone with an active imagination will steer clear of the edge of the 530ft-high cliffs.

Having our picnic at a suitable distance from Beachy Head's sheer chalk crags I was mesmerised by the striped lighthouse in the waves below.

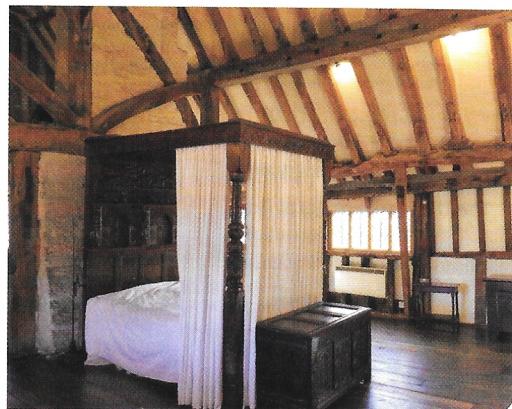
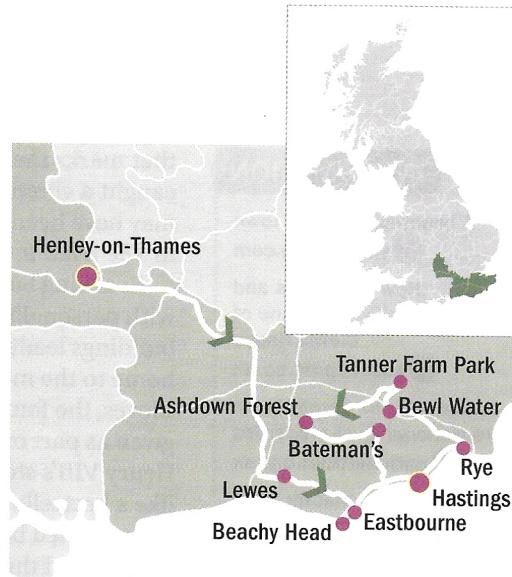
We returned on grassy paths lined with flint walls and yellow-flowering gorse and didn't meet another soul.

We finished our delightful day with ice creams as we headed back to our own 'fine four-fendered friend' (as Chitty Chitty Bang Bang was) as the sun was setting.

Rye's small castle tells a first-rate story about sinister smugglers, changing coastline and sickening sanctions. It is no wonder Rye has inspired so many writers.

Malcolm Saville wasn't the only author to share this special place with readers. Monica Edwards, fondly remembered for her *Romney Marsh* children's stories and John Ryan, who created the *Captain Pugwash* comic strips and cartoons packed with 'Jumping Jellyfish' and 'Shuddering ▶





Sharks', both called this home.

We climbed the church tower to look over red-tiled rooftops to Romney Marsh, land-locked Camber Castle and with Dungeness nuclear power station just visible in the haze.

Exploring the streets, I found Lamb House where the writer, Henry James, lived and, later, EF Benson (writer of the 1920s and 1930s Mapp and Lucia novels).

Rye's prettiest spot is Mermaid Street, a steep cobbled street with the attractive timber-framed fifteenth century Mermaid Inn. Houses display unusual workaday names like The House Opposite and The House with Two Doors.

Packed with interesting independent shops and charming buildings Rye is impossible not to like.

Nearby Winchelsea was once walled and two gates survive on its gridiron of streets. We searched out blue plaques remembering former residents and found the grave of the comedian and writer, Spike Milligan, with its well-known inscription in Irish Gaelic of 'I told you I was ill', making us smile even after his death.

We had reached deepest East Sussex as portrayed in Stella Gibbon's hilarious *Cold Comfort Farm*; the agricultural landscape dotted with hamlets and distinctive oast houses. Part of the fun of having a 'van is the

TOP TIPS

The car park by the railway station in Rye has plenty of room and no height barrier. It is around a 30-minute walk from Kloofs Caravan Park to the bus stop in Little Common, where there are shops and a small supermarket. Buses to Bexhill, Hastings and Eastbourne run every 15 minutes from Little Common

freedom to park and enjoy a lovely spot.

Wanting to make the most of a sunny February evening we stopped at Bewl Water, a reservoir tucked into the High Weald, to enjoy a brew with a view.

The open grassland, heather and tall pine trees of Ashdown Forest are straight out of a Winnie-the-Pooh story for a reason. This is the landscape that inspired AA Milne's charming stories.

We followed in the footsteps of Christopher Robin, Pooh and friends, enchanted by the views and birdsong, to the memorial to AA Milne and his illustrator, EH Shepard. Here we came across two enthusiastic fans from Brazil with a collection of Winnie-the-Pooh toys. They took hundreds of photographs of the animals and each other, their excitement so infectious we joined in. "Winnie-the-Pooh is well known in Brazil," they told us.

We found 'Owl's house' high in the trees and collected sticks for the climax of our day, playing Poohsticks at the place it was invented! And, since you ask, I won!

As a child it was the library in the Staffordshire village of Rudyard that fed my passion for reading. Growing up there I knew that Mr and Mrs Kipling named their son after the village where they met and courted and visiting Rudyard Kipling's home, Bateman's, was on my list.

ABOVE LEFT The impressive gatehouse at Lewes Castle

ABOVE RIGHT Bedroom in Anne of Cleves House, Lewes

"We heard Irish *fiddle* music, acapella and *excellent* cover bands.

It is impossible not to *love* a place that has music in its heart"

My partner, Anthony, had a less cultured upbringing and was expecting a baking demonstration and exceedingly good cakes!

Kipling was already famous when he found this Jacobean house down a "rabbit hole of a lane", choosing it for its seclusion from pestering fans. Today, the wood-panelled rooms retain the family's furniture and photographs.

Our guides painted a sympathetic picture of a hard-working man who liked children and would visit the local school to read stories aloud. Despite seeking seclusion for his writing, the family was sociable and the guest book is packed with illustrious names, many with the letters FIP next to them. This, we learnt, means 'Fell In Pond'!

Back at the coast we strolled along Bexhill-on-Sea's tidy promenade. Bexhill is

believed to be the Walmington-on-Sea of *Dad's Army* fame and, as we walked, we tried to remember the characters and their catchphrases in this much-loved sitcom.

The pride of Bexhill is the De La Warr Pavilion, a somewhat faded – but still striking – 1930s modernist building. It was a perfect place to shelter from the breeze and enjoy coffee and cake with a sea view.

While Bexhill feels sedate and reserved, its neighbour, Hastings, is remodelling itself as creative and even trendy. In the early twentieth century, Robert Tressell colourfully renamed Hastings 'Mugsborough' in his witty and intellectual novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.

Tressell wrote about poverty among men in the building trade and Owen, a journeyman, with a vision of a just society ➤

BELOW CLOCKWISE Wooden net sheds, The Stade at Hastings; The open grassland, heather and tall pine trees of Ashdown Forest are straight out of a Winnie-the-Pooh story; Eastbourne Pier was completed in 1872

US AND OUR 'VAN



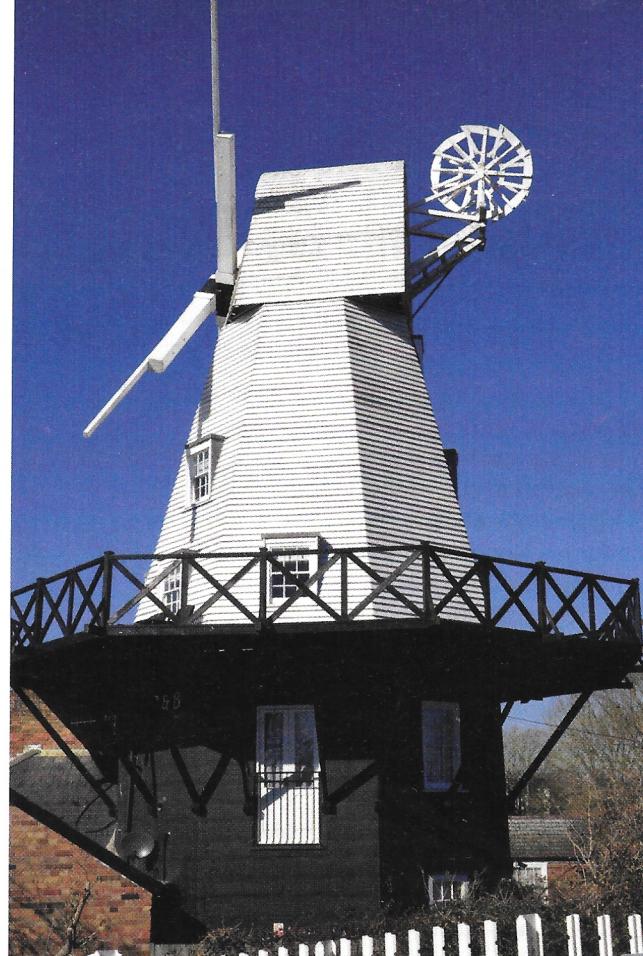
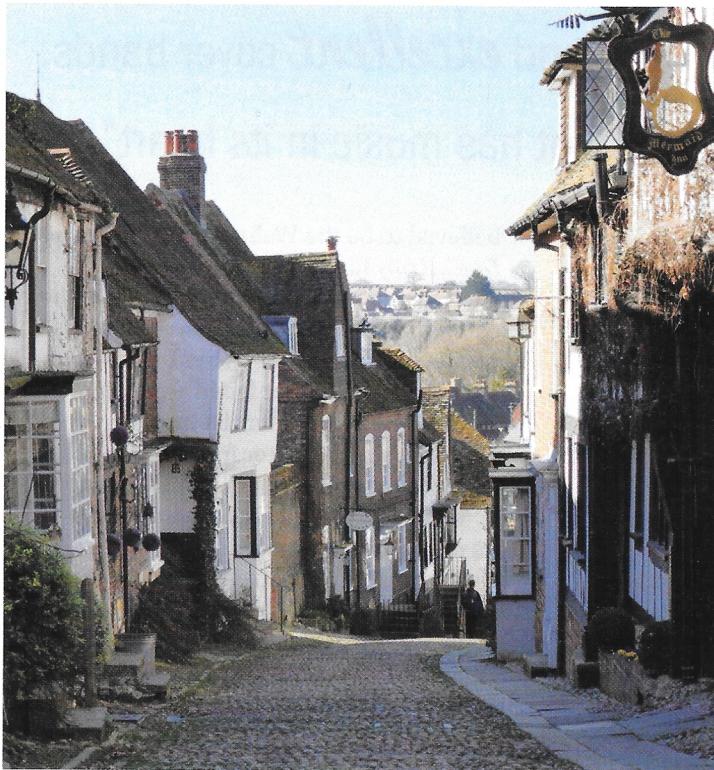
Carol Kubicki...

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB. This is our second Devon Conversions 'van. At 5.3m we think it's enormous and, with a washroom, also luxurious





who talked passionately about capitalist greed and dishonesty. A single parent who experienced hardship first-hand, Tressell worked in Hastings as a signwriter and painter. I thought about this inspirational novel as we watched three fishermen painstakingly bringing a boat up the shingle beach by Hastings' old town. Hastings has the UK's largest beach-launched fishing fleet at The Stade, a Saxon name for a landing place.

The progress of the fishing boat being pulled up the shelving shingle was slow, sometimes the movement was almost imperceptible. The guys worked tirelessly, moving runners under side skids and the keel while cable took the strain.

We explored the tall wooden net sheds crowded around The Stade, built to store fishing gear. Stalls were selling fish as fresh as it gets and the miniature railway tooted cheerfully. We climbed the steps up to the castle for the view over the colourful houses of the old town, the wooden weatherboard mirroring the construction of the old boats.

Serendipitously, Hastings had arranged a festival for our visit: the Hastings Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras) music festival lasts for five days. On the Saturday 40 bands across a myriad of genres play 15-minute sets in 20 different venues across the town.

Punters can choose to either stay in one place or move around different pubs through streets that buzz with buskers, visitors and musicians carrying their

ABOVE LEFT Mermaid Street in Rye is packed with quirky houses

ABOVE RIGHT The smock mill in Rye is now a B&B

instruments to their next gig.

We visited a few venues among the winding narrow streets of Hastings' old town that have a vintage vibe. Over a glass of local ale we heard Irish fiddle music, acapella and excellent cover bands. It is impossible not to love a place that has music in its heart.

The pubs were lively and laid-back, with lots of people dressed in period costumes or colourful carnival clothes. Beyond the pubs the normal seaside business went on in the amusement arcades, on the miniature train and across crazy golf courses.

It was writers who had brought me to Sussex, but I certainly left this captivating county with a song in my heart and rhythm in my toes. **mmm**

WE STAYED AT

Henley Four Oaks Caravan and Motorhome Club Site, Marlow Road, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire RG9 2HY
01491 572312 caravanclub.co.uk
All year
£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20.70 (members only)

Sharnfold Farm CL, Hailsham Road, Stone Cross, Pevensey, East Sussex BN24 5BU
01323 460079 caravanclub.co.uk
1 January – 1 November
£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £16 (members only)

Tanner Farm, Goudhurst Road, Marden, Tonbridge, Kent TN12 9ND
01622 832399
tannerfarmpark.co.uk
All year
£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £18.15

Kloofs Caravan Park, Sandhurst Lane, Whydown, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex TN39 4RG
01424 842839 kloofs.com
All year
£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £21