

# We're not only here for the beer!

Staffordshire works wonders on these motorhomers who find some real treasures as they meander down Memory Lane

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## 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 2.3-litre. This is our third blue campervan. We have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

**G**rowing up in north Staffordshire there were a few things I knew for certain. I had learnt that the beautiful county I lived in was the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia (but the Staffordshire Hoard had yet to be found) and was where big yellow JCBs started life; Stoke-on-Trent was the home of pottery, Staffordshire oatcakes were delicious and the finest beer was brewed in Burton-upon-Trent.

Staffordshire's varied landscape stretches from the Peak District to the edges of the West Midlands. Near the Derbyshire border sits Burton and here the mineral content of the hard water forged a brewing town made in heaven. William Bass opened his first brewery here in 1777 making India Pale Ale, a refreshing beer for colonial climates.

By the nineteenth century Burton was the brewing capital of the world with over 30 breweries and Bass was the McDonald's of its day. Today a visit to Burton's National Brewery Centre will uncover the history of British beer.

Our guide was a raconteur, involving the whole group in his anecdotes. We heard about the 'Norkies,' Norfolk men working through the winter in Burton, malting and drying the barley. His vivid real-life stories brought brewing history to life and I felt as if we were standing among the workers on a malting floor as he described the back-breaking work, the industrious brewing town and the pervasive smell of yeast in the

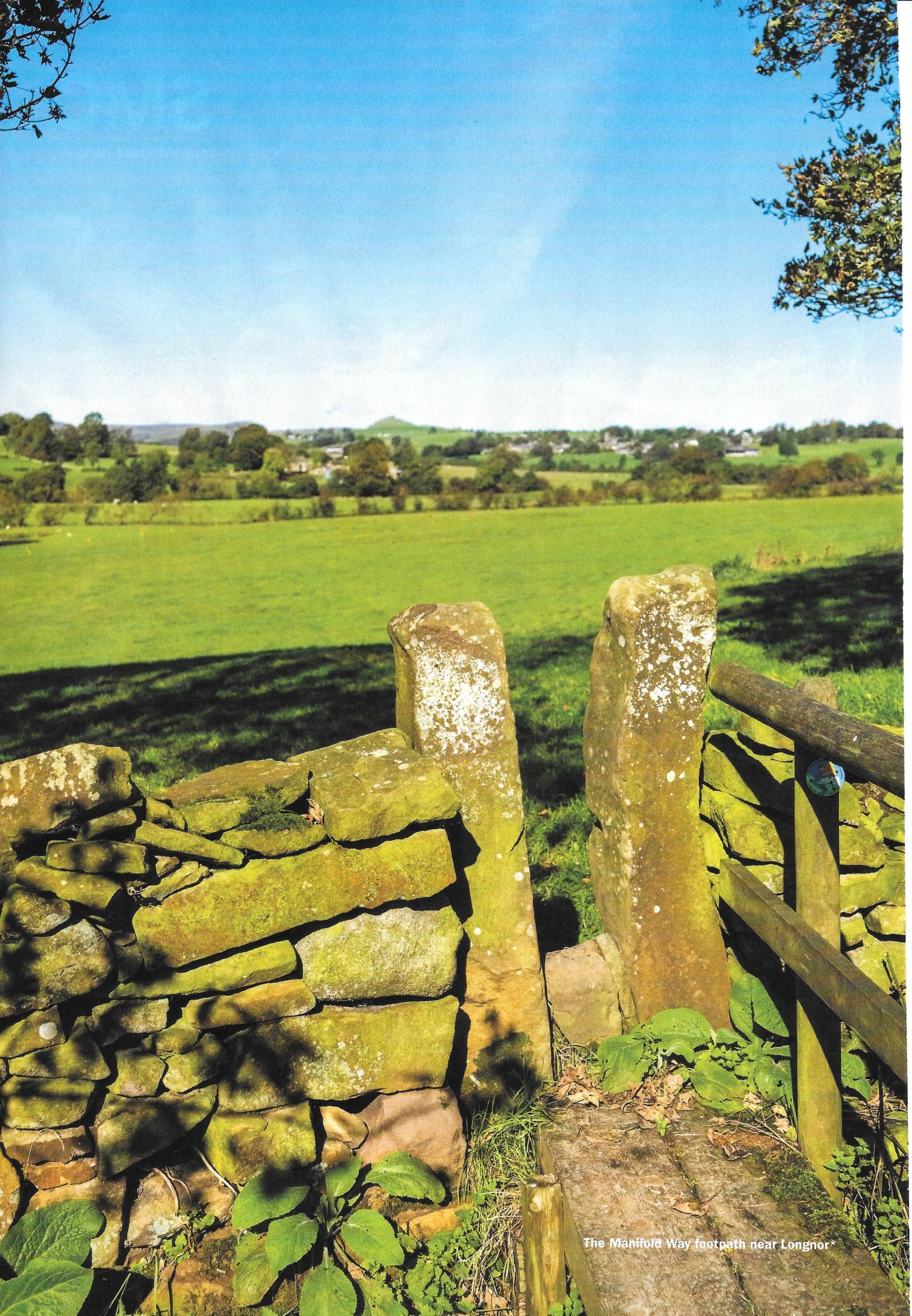
air. My first 'local' was a Bass pub and I licked my lips remembering pints packed with hops and malt.

Mostly indoors, we rushed between buildings in the rain. In the stables there are still heavy horses and outside stand vintage vehicles. On the top floor of the tall brewhouse, the scale model of Burton from 1921 is an intricate masterpiece with trains running through the town. Burton's brewing diminished as the British turned to lager and multi-nationals moved in, but Bass is still made here, there is a micro-brewery and Marston's Brewery continues to make beers 'From Burton with love'.

Anyone who has ever sipped a pint should consider visiting this impressive museum. Your visit may be different as the guides have no script, but everyone finishes up at the bar for tastings. Afterwards we returned to the mock-up Edwardian bar and relived our youth with a game of bar skittles that lived on in our north Staffordshire hometown long after the world wars.

The staple diet of labourers, bread and cheese, has been eaten with beer for centuries. My appetite whetted, we left Burton in search of good quality ploughman's lunch ingredients. If you like fine food the family-run Denstone Hall Farm shop near Uttoxeter will appeal. Here I found Staffordshire cheeses, local fresh bread, pickled onions, Cottage Delight relish made in Leek and chose some beers from ▶

*"A lovely steep wooded valley with a wonderful walking trail where we spotted six colourful species of butterfly"*



The Manifold Way footpath near Longnor\*

## TOP TIPS

If you are interested in the brewing industry, this document is a great read

 [historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/brewing-industry/bhs-brewing-ind-shire](https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/brewing-industry/bhs-brewing-ind-shire)

As well as the National Brewery Centre in Burton, you can book on a guided tour around the Marston's Brewery

 [nationalbrewerycentre.co.uk](http://nationalbrewerycentre.co.uk)

 [marstonsbrewery.co.uk/](http://marstonsbrewery.co.uk/)  
JCB has regular weekday-only factory tours (£20 each). If you want to walk around the JCB lakes there is a layby on Station Road

Motorhomes can park in the Jolly Sailor Coach Park, Bonehill Road, Tamworth, for £1.50. From here there are level paths to the park around the castle

 [tamworthcastle.co.uk](http://tamworthcastle.co.uk)

Dogs are not allowed in the RSPB Coombes Valley reserve

 [rspb.org.uk](http://rspb.org.uk)

Ford Green Hall suggests that motorhomers ring before they arrive and they will open the height barrier for you

 [fordgreenhall.org.uk](http://fordgreenhall.org.uk) 01782 537696

**BELOW** Staffordshire is a green agricultural county

the Staffordshire Brewery.

We drove to the campsite at Uttoxeter Racecourse with a 'van packed full of provisions. After heavy rain, the track into the site was a muddy swamp that we approached with trepidation. The 'van emerged, its blue paintwork speckled with sludge and we were relieved there was a remaining hard-standing pitch.

The next morning the sun came out, but the going was decidedly soft as we walked into Uttoxeter to visit Redfern's Cottage Museum. In this charming building we heard tales covering Uttoxeter's life and history from the Civil War to the present. My favourite by far was the film of a local man with a cheeky laugh who revealed all about the streakers of Uttoxeter!

The campsite's muddy track was drying out and we drove south through green agricultural land and pretty villages to Tamworth. Overlooked by a castle, Tamworth's riverside park was packed with colourful flower beds. People carrying chairs and picnic blankets were settling down around the bandstand for a free concert. We joined them with our ploughman's lunch as a blues band played some foot-tapping tunes.

Tamworth's stone castle dates back to the twelfth century and was later transformed into a grand home. Visitors are taken through a maze of rooms with plenty of hands-on fun. The tour finishes at the medieval great hall, which was being prepared for a wedding. In this atmospheric room a harpist was practising his repertoire and guests began to arrive dressed as

medieval lords and ladies.

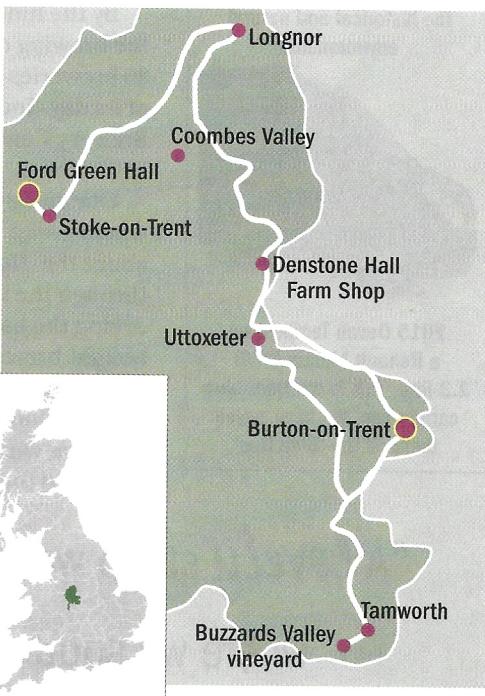
Staffordshire might be the home of beer but you can also find wine. Buzzards Valley Vineyard, near Tamworth, was a real find, although when I directed us down the narrow road, Anthony gave me a look that said, 'Really?' We were both pleased there was a large car park at the end.

"We had a bit of an accident yesterday," the cheerful owner and vintner told us while we tasted a couple of excellent wines, deciding which to buy. Apparently, almost 200 litres of red wine had ended up on the floor. What a waste! In the bistro they serve hearty local food and we sat on outside benches with tasty Staffordshire Needwood ice cream cornets before walking around the vineyard to see the grapes.

There are plenty of walks around Uttoxeter. We fitted in an evening stroll to Denstone College and ambled around the landscaped lakes at the JCB World Headquarters, a great example of how industry can sit harmoniously in the countryside. The parkland has occasional sculptures and the impressive glass-fronted JCB factory dramatically reflects the water and trees.

Cut open anyone from north Staffordshire and their heart will be made of oatcakes. Versions of this oatmeal pancake do exist in nearby counties but, when you're a Staffordshire girl, the substantial local oatcake with cheese is the real deal.

On a Uttoxeter wall we found Arthur Berry's *Ode to the Oatcake* in which he lovingly describes oatcakes as 'More of a Potteries Papadum, a sort of Tunstall



290 miles



## THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Greater Manchester to Burton via Uttoxeter and on to Longnor via Leek, then returned via Stoke-on-Trent. We spent six days touring with five nights on sites in August.

## THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg	£51
Site fees	£111.20
Attractions Two adults: National Brewery Centre, Redfern's Cottage Museum, Tamworth Castle, Ford Green Hall (we had reduced entry fees to Tamworth Castle and Ford Green Hall because of restrictions/activity)	£46.90
Parking Tamworth, Waterhouses, RSPB Coombes Valley	£9.50
<b>Total costs</b>	<b>£218.60</b>



### Tortilla, a Clay Suzette'.

In search of nostalgia, oatcakes and beer, we parked in Waterhouses, between Ashbourne and Leek, and walked to the Yew Tree Inn at Cauldon. It was still five minutes to opening time when we arrived but, in the shade of the yew tree, we received a friendly welcome from the licensee and even identified some shared local acquaintances. "We used to come here 40 years ago when the beer came up from the cellar in jugs," I said. "We still do that for the mild," he told me – and made my day.

The Yew Tree has been in the same hands since the 1960s and the owner sat in the bar telling stories while we enjoyed a half. Many pubs try to emulate the quirky look, but The Yew Tree is as authentic as it gets. The cosy rooms are packed with curios and antiques.

We sat on a timeworn sofa from Alton Towers in an Antiques Roadshow-meets-The Woolpack scene. There are pianolas,

beer memorabilia, motorbikes, a penny farthing and more. I smiled, noticing the ornate till and bar skittles were identical to the ones in the National Brewery Centre.

Our order of oatcakes and cheese prompted a typical Staffordshire conversation about the best oatcakes and what a disappointment Scottish oatcakes are. Feeling in a time warp, a *Brigadoon* moment wasn't at all surprising. A couple from Stone arrived and cheerfully exclaimed, "We came here 30 years ago and have been searching for it ever since!"

Nearby is the RSPB's Coombes Valley reserve, a lovely steep wooded valley with a wonderful walking trail where we spotted six colourful species of butterfly and I bravely tackled the canopy walkway, a bouncing netted path between the trees. You might be forgiven for thinking you are in Derbyshire when you reach the Staffordshire village of Longnor, particularly ▶

**ABOVE LEFT** The riverside gardens around Tamworth Castle are colourful

**ABOVE** Playing bar skittles in the National Brewery Centre; Building up the intricate colours on the pottery at the Emma Bridgewater Factory



## INFORMATION

8,000 vines are grown across seven varieties of German and French grapes

 [buzzards-valley.co.uk](http://buzzards-valley.co.uk)

From gate to plate: sourcing local produce from across Staffordshire and Derbyshire

 [denstonehall.co.uk](http://denstonehall.co.uk)

What has shaped Uttoxeter's past, present and future

 [redfernscottage.org](http://redfernscottage.org)

Meet the jigger, jollier, fettlers, casters and decorators

 [emmabridgewater.co.uk](http://emmabridgewater.co.uk)

To see some of the Staffordshire Hoard

 [stokemuseums.org.uk](http://stokemuseums.org.uk)

if you watched the long-running ITV series *Peak Practice*, parts of which were filmed here. This sleepy village, nestling under rounded green hills, will surprise you with its smart buildings and market hall.

Once an important stop on trading routes to Stoke-on-Trent, Longnor had numerous hosteries and, even in my youth, it was possible to enjoy a pub crawl without leaving the village. On our evening walk only The Cheshire Cheese was open and, of course, we called in for a beer.

The next morning I had a pub walk planned, but it turned out I couldn't organise a proverbial in a brewery. In truth it was too early for beer when we reached Longnor, so we had coffee in the café.

The Pack Horse in Crowdecote was shut. "No problem," I said, confidently. "I checked the website and The Staffordshire Knot in Sheen will definitely be open."

Sneaking into Derbyshire, we followed the young River Dove to the impressive limestone knoll that was the site of Pilsbury Castle. From here panoramic views take in the Manifold Valley and the magnificent hills at Earl Sterndale, near Buxton.

We ate our picnic looking over the rolling landscape, sheltered in an orchard during a shower and were ready for a beer when we

reached Sheen – but the pub was closed! There was nothing for it but to add a couple of miles to our walk. The Manifold Inn, a Marston's watering hole, was (thankfully!) open to weary travellers and we enjoyed a glass of Pedigree, which had travelled the few miles from Burton-on-Trent.

My feet were tired as we followed The Manifold Trail back towards the campsite. Passing a farm, we stopped to chat to the farmer who was trying his hand as a metal detectorist. "I'm hoping to find another Staffordshire Hoard," he quipped and we wished him luck.

I think The Hollybush Inn alongside the Caldon Canal near Leek is one of Staffordshire's prettiest hosteries. We walked along the towpath in this idyllic corner of the county, following the canal that was built to move limestone from the quarries near The Yew Tree to the Potteries. The bar of The Hollybush is homely and the friendly landlord welcomes overnight motorhome parking when there is room. Sitting in the sunshine with a pint, watching the barges gently putter by is blissful.

The once prolific potbanks of Stoke-on-Trent, or The Potteries, declined after WWII but, in the 1980s, the Emma Bridgewater Factory bucked the trend, bringing fresh

**ABOVE** The Caldon Canal near The Hollybush Inn is an idyllic corner of England



ideas to the city. Here bright modern pottery is produced and visitors are welcome on factory tours and workshops. It felt a privilege to be able to walk through the whole process from mould-making to firing and painting the complex patterns.

Our guide once worked here and returned as a tour guide after retiring for one week. Her pride in the factory shone through and she knew all the pottery lingo, explaining jolleying and jiggering (making flatware), biscuit (pots that have been fired but not glazed) and slip (clay particles in water the consistency of melted chocolate).

A short walk away is The Potteries

**ABOVE CLOCKWISE** The seventeenth century Ford Green Hall; A replica of an Anglo-Saxon helmet modelled from fragments found in the Staffordshire Hoard; The market place in Uttoxeter

Museum and Art Gallery (free), where some pieces from the Staffordshire Hoard are on display. These 4,000 items of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver with garnets were discovered in 2009. Seeing the intricate and beautiful pieces of swords and helmets it is clear that what we call the Dark Ages were more sophisticated than the name suggests.

We ended our trip to Staffordshire with an old house that was new to me. The seventeenth century timber-framed farmhouse, Ford Green Hall in Stoke-on-Trent, is truly a hidden gem. We almost didn't get to explore the delightful house as we turned off the main road into the car park and were faced with a height barrier. As Anthony drove back up the M6, I compiled my email of complaint to Stoke-on-Trent's parking department.

So, we weren't here only for the beer and our trip had turned up new and surprising places. We had walked through Staffordshire's varied landscape, enjoyed delicious food and drink and explored its history and culture. Thanks to our camper I now know my home county that little bit better. **mmm**

#### WE STAYED AT

Uttoxeter Racecourse Caravan and Motorhome Club Site, Wood Lane, Uttoxeter, Staffordshire ST14 8BD

01889 564172

camc.com

13 March - 30 November

Two adults, pitch and electric:  
From £21.10



**Longnor Wood Holiday Park**, Longnor, near Buxton, Derbyshire SK17 0NG (for sat-navs use SK17 0QN)  
01298 83648 [longnorwood.co.uk](http://longnorwood.co.uk)  
1 March - 10 January  
Two adults, pitch and electric:  
From £25.50

This feature was written prior to the coronavirus pandemic. We are publishing it for your enjoyment and to help you plan future trips. Readers must follow the latest government advice before leaving their homes [gov.uk/coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)