



Get away for... THE WEEKEND!

Be surprised by brilliant Birmingham, which inspired Tolkein and *Black Sabbath*

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

It might surprise you to hear that JRR Tolkien's epic fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, has its roots in Birmingham. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's childhood years were spent in its green suburbs around the turn of the twentieth century. In interviews, Tolkien referred to himself as a Birmingham man, revealing that the city's landscapes inspired him.

The four members of the heavy metal band *Black Sabbath* also called this metropolis home, spending their formative years playing among the 1960s terraced streets and bomb sites of industrial working-class Aston, northeast of Birmingham's city centre. Those experiences echo in the sound of their early music.

There has been a Tolkien Trail for some time and, more recently, Birmingham has celebrated *Black Sabbath* by renaming a

bridge and erecting a bench; I could feel a pilgrimage coming together. My partner, Anthony, needed some persuading, having worked in the area in the 1980s and recalled a dreary city. I reeled him in with tales of futuristic buildings, Middle Earth and the chance to celebrate *Black Sabbath*.

Having played heavy rock down the M6, we arrived at Winterbourne House in leafy Edgbaston. Neither drab nor futuristic, this 1903 Arts and Crafts house is elegant and stylish, with attention paid to craftsmanship and traditional materials. Inspired by William Morris, the house was designed by town planning pioneer, John Nettlefold, who was involved in clearing the city's slums.

It is worth looking closely at the plasterwork: I found charming squirrels, rabbits and birds among the fruit and large windows bring in light, connecting the ▶



Why?... To explore Birmingham's varied and fascinating culture and history

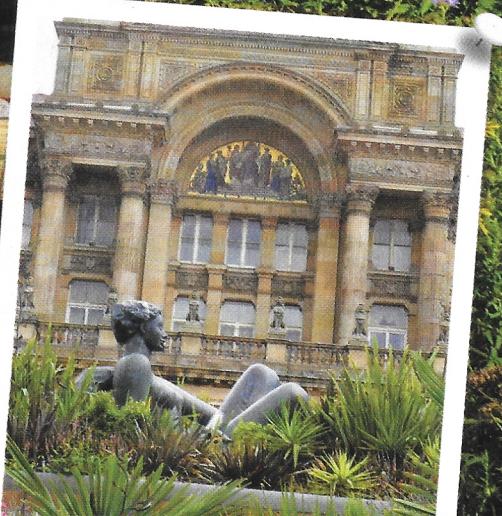
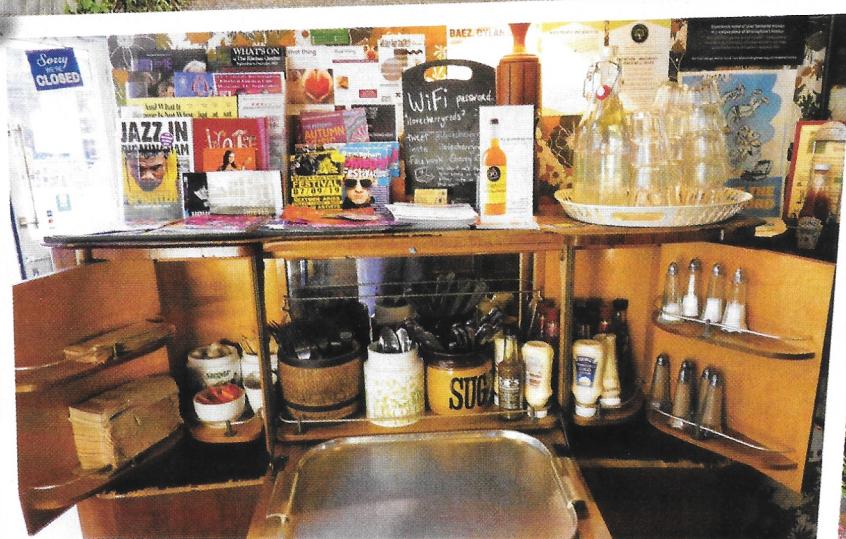


MAIN Sarehole Mill is a charming working mill with Tolkien connections

FAR LEFT Birmingham combines old and new to create spectacular views

BELOW LEFT Cherry Reds near New Street Station is a great independent cafe

BELOW RIGHT Birmingham's 'Floozie in the Jacuzzi' used to be surrounded by water



US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...

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



2015 Devon Tempest on a 2.3i Renault Master – our third campervan called the Blue Bus

house and garden. In the hall is a link to Tolkien; the Nettlefold family bought a piano from Tolkien's grandfather.

The garden was the work of John's wife, Margaret, and is packed with colour and interest, featuring a pergola walk, woodland corners, pools and expansive lawns. The scents in the walled garden were heady; we could have been in a Cotswold village.

Our campsite, near the village of Wythall, was also peacefully rural. A 30-minute walk took us to the railway station, with regular trains to Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon. Next door to the campsite is the Transport Museum and I wandered over in the evening to peek at some of the old buses and miniature railway.

From Snow Hill Station, we set off to explore the vibrant city, walking through the Victorian splendour of Great Western Arcade to New Street Station. I had recently worked near here and watched the classy transformation of this station, but the airy and gleaming building was almost unrecognisable to Anthony.

On the walkway alongside the vertical gardens we played with our reflections in the huge polished steel band that wraps around the structure. My top tip is to look for a spot where you can see two of yourself!

John Bright Street retains an off-the-

beaten-track vibe and I was pleased to see that my favourite cafe, Cherry Reds, is still here. Cherry Reds is a gem, with mismatched tables, home-made food, a relaxed and friendly atmosphere and good coffee. A music venue in the evenings, I smiled upon noticing that the café had a 'Black Sabbath Special' on the blackboard.

Victoria Square was built to impress; Queen Victoria's statue and the monumental Town Hall, surrounded by columns, are here. Up the sweep of steps sits the nineteenth century museum and art gallery where we explored some of the galleries, finding the captivating Pre-Raphaelite collection. Central to the square is a statue of a reclining woman that used to sit above an impressive water feature. Known locally as 'Floozie in the Jacuzzi', she now lounges among flowers.

We moved on to Centenary Square, a large modern piazza with fountains and a shallow pool that beautifully reflects the surrounding buildings. Here is the stunning library, a golden and clear-glass building covered with delicate rings, referencing the metropolis' jewellery industries.

Three other iconic buildings flank the library: the Symphony Hall – with its acoustically amazing concert hall – the unusual Hall of Memory and Baskerville

INFORMATION

Check the website for current opening times and restrictions to this Edwardian house and garden

 winterbourne.org.uk

Forward-thinking architecture, majestic waterways and more

 visitbirmingham.com

A collection of organisations concerned with collections, historic sites, museums, galleries, churches, gardens and visitor services within the Birmingham area

 [birmingham heritage.org.uk](http://birminghamheritage.org.uk)

Information about Sarehole Mill

 birminghammuseums.org.uk

Be transported back in time

 wythall.org.uk

RIGHT Birmingham's impressive Victoria Square



House, a 1930s Art Deco building.

With a vast network of canals, Birmingham does like to compare itself to Venice. Gas Street Basin certainly has a relaxed atmosphere – friends sat outside canalside pubs, families were visiting Legoland Discovery Centre and even a water taxi chugged by.

We sought out the Black Sabbath Bridge and steel bench with images of the four band members and the inscription, 'Made in Birmingham'. Later we found the floating market: lines of barges where roving traders sell handmade art and crafts and curiosities.

Rock music memories made me long for beer and chips and a nearby pub delivered both, with a canal view.

Re-energised, we set off in search of Tolkien's two towers and, a mile away, we reached the 96ft tall, crenellated Perrott's Folly. Built in 1758, when the city sprawled less, this unusual hunting lodge was used as a weather station by the time Tolkien moved to the area in 1904. This – and the nearby Edgbaston Waterworks Tower – would have been part of his local landscape. Tolkien fans think that these towers influenced the title of the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Two Towers*.

We walked back by the Plough and Harrow Hotel, where Tolkien stayed with his

wife, Edith, before he left to fight in WWI. Tolkien and Edith met as Birmingham teenagers and their romantic story is as good as any fairytale. Their love was forbidden by Tolkien's guardian and they were apart until Tolkien's twenty-first birthday when he contacted Edith, who broke off her engagement to another man and they married. Her beauty was the inspiration for Lúthien, a fine-looking elf in *The Lord of the Rings*.

As the sun started to sink, we rested in the churchyard around the elegant, eighteenth century cathedral, now a green and leafy square. Like a village green, this is another popular outdoor space for relaxing in. For a big city, Birmingham had felt manageable and exploring had been pleasurable, with plenty of opportunities to put our feet up and take in the cityscape.

In truth, there is so much to see that we could have spent another day in this remarkable, rejuvenated city's centre. We would have to save the National Trust's Back to Backs houses, the Coffin Works, the Jewellery Quarter, the creative spaces in the former Bird's Custard Factory and even the Pen Museum for another visit. We had a pilgrimage to 'Middle Earth' to complete.

Hobbits like to eat six meals a day and say that, *'If more of us valued food and* ▶

TOP TIPS

Trains run from Wythall to Snow Hill in the city centre (hourly). Journey time is about 25 minutes. The alternative to walking to Wythall Station is to drive to the park and ride at Whitlocks End, the next station



If you drive to Winterbourne House, there is a car park but motorhomes up to 19ft 8in (6m) long might find the spaces in front of the house easier to access. Larger motorhomes could ring ahead to discuss options

ABOVE The walled garden at Winterbourne House feels like it is a million miles away from the city

BETWEEN We walked along the River Cole, looking at the landscape through the eyes of a child

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG
Three nights



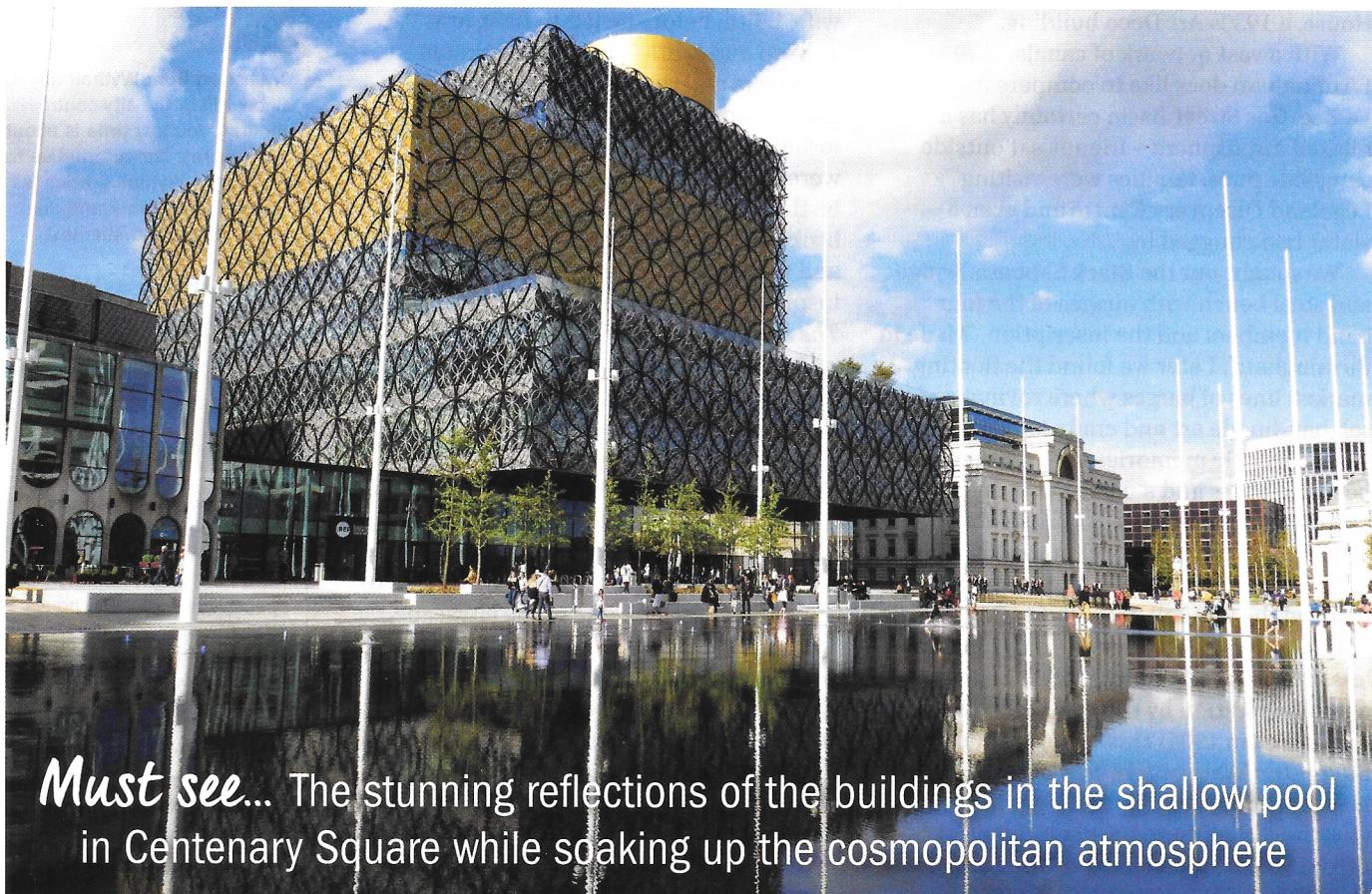
WHEN
October, but Birmingham's a great place to visit at any time of year; there's always something going on!

HOW MUCH

Fuel Average 34mpg (222 miles).....	£39
Site fees.....	£75.60
Entrance fees Two adults: Winterbourne House and garden and also Sarehole Mill.....	£26.40
Public transport Two adults: trains to Birmingham and to Yardley Wood.....	£15.60
TOTAL	£156.60



Must do... Walk to picturesque Sarehole Mill along the River Cole, trying to see the landscape through the eyes of an eight-year-old boy with a vivid imagination



Must see... The stunning reflections of the buildings in the shallow pool in Centenary Square while soaking up the cosmopolitan atmosphere

cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world'. In this spirit we had a substantial breakfast at Becketts Farm Shop, a family business near the campsite and a great place to eat and buy local food.

Tolkien's happiest days in Birmingham were spent with his mother and brother in the hamlet of Sarehole south of the city centre, nowadays surrounded by suburbia. Taking the train a short hop to Yardley Wood, we went in search of Tolkien's inspiration.

We followed the leafy River Cole looking at the landscape through a child's eyes, imagining how thrilling the shallow river, the stepping stones, the ford and the lush woodland would be. *Black Sabbath's 'Wheels of Confusion' lyrics* came back to me. They could have been singing about the young Tolkien, ... *In the land of fairytales and stories, lost in happiness I knew no fears, innocence and love was all I knew.*

Here was Tolkien's model of The Shire, the home of the hobbits in a corner of Middle Earth. Tolkien and his brother played around Sarehole Mill and this still-working red-brick mill retains an old-world charm, the millpond ringed with willow trees muffling the traffic. There is an informative exhibition about Tolkien, but you certainly don't have to be a fan to enjoy this enchanting place.

We found Tolkien's home and followed the River Cole beyond the mill to nearby Moseley Bog, spurned by urban sprawl. These dark woods with a trickling stream inspired the forest in *The Lord of the Rings* and I was pleased to see children still play here and exercise their imagination.

The traffic noise had gone and we were in Tolkien's world with a buzzard overhead, squirrels and birds singing. We gazed up at an old tree, wondering if Tolkien stood in the same place as a boy, remembering his words, *'The quiet was so deep that their feet seemed to thump along while all the trees leaned over them and listened.'*

Back at Yardley Wood we were flung back into the twenty-first century and *Black Sabbath*, *'They say that life's a carousel, spinning fast, you've got to ride it well'*. A fair was in town, high-energy pop music filled the air and we bought soft ice cream with a flake, sprinkles and raspberry sauce and ate them overlooking the Trittiford Mill Park that Tolkien would have known.

I'm glad that I persuaded Anthony to return to Birmingham and update his memories of the city.

There is, without doubt, more to this bold and evolving metropolis than heavy metal or *The Lord of the Rings*. Plan your own trip and surprise yourself. **WWW**

ABOVE Beautiful reflections in stylish Centenary Square

B BELOW Chapel Lane Caravan and Motorhome Club site

THE CAMP SITE

Chapel Lane Caravan and Motorhome Club Site,
Wythall, Birmingham B47 6JX
 01564 826483
camc.com
 All year
 Two adults, pitch and electric: From £22.30

