

Spoons *at the ready!*

Dip into the sweet border county of Herefordshire
for some extremely n-ice surprises

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



The views across the lake of Eastnor Castle are stunning

In Herefordshire I suffered for my favourite dessert. We had been touring the county in search of its best ice cream and, setting off for a walk from the Welsh border town of Kington, I was distracted by an ice cream sign, missed the kerb and fell.

I was overcome by waves of dizziness and Anthony helped me onto the pavement to examine the bleeding grazes on my leg and a kind gentleman came to see if he could help. "We're supposed to be going up Hergest Ridge," I stuttered as the world spun around. "It's actually pronounced to rhyme with hardest," he told me, clearly imagining that at that moment I would care!

Herefordshire is one of those counties we have neglected on our travels, previously only flying through on the way to somewhere else. One of England's most rural areas, the River Wye snakes across the county from the hilly Welsh borders to the rich pastoral fields of eastern Herefordshire. It was time to explore this small county and a week hopping between ice cream producers in this agricultural corner of England seemed an excellent excuse.

In the picturesque market town of Ledbury, I noticed the locals were keen to show off their lovely town – everyone we met gave us a recommendation for another local attraction. We had found the pretty black and white timber-framed Market House ringed with flowers on our own.

At the nearby bus stop a resident directed us along the cobbles of Church Lane to the charming Butcher Row House Museum. After viewing the boot bath that was shared among the poor, apparently not always changing the water, we chatted to the volunteer who sent us to the nearby Painted Room, upstairs in one of Ledbury's oldest timber-framed buildings.

The dazzling sixteenth century wall paintings were revealed by builders and our guide explained the images are based on an Elizabethan knot garden design. She, in turn, steered us to The Master's House, a medieval house with a striking great hall that now houses the library.

None of these helpful people recommended the Just Rachel ice cream parlour – the reason we were here. Inside the House on Stilts, a quirky seventeenth century black and white building supported by pillars on one side, is a bright, modern, ice cream parlour. Feeling bold, I chose the Pimm's ice cream, which had a fresh-tasting zing that combined perfectly with the creaminess, while Anthony opted for rich and tasty hazelnut praline and coffee liqueur.

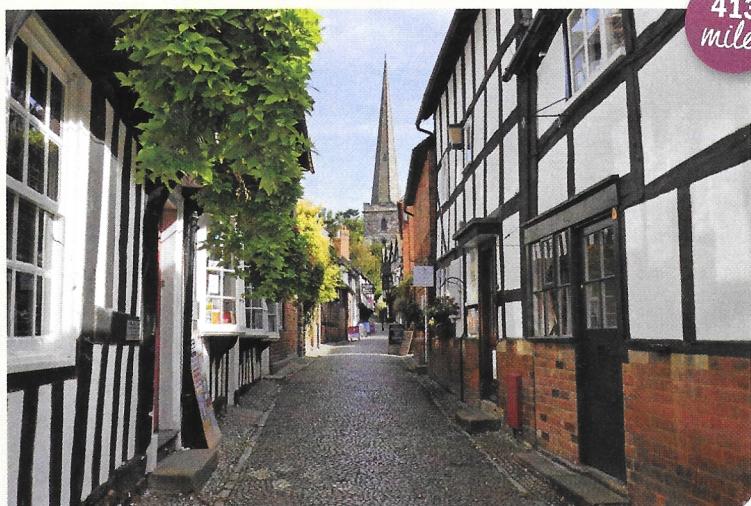
At nearby Eastnor Castle, families were laden with baskets and rugs heading for a ▶

THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Salford to Herefordshire via the M6 and M5, returning via country roads through Worcestershire and Shropshire. We spent seven days touring with six nights on sites in September

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg.....	£72
Site fees	£120.35
Attractions Two adults: Weston Cider Mill, Hampton Court Castle gardens, Kentchurch Court Gardens, Eastnor Castle gardens, Black and White House Museum, Mappa Mundi, Museum of Cider	£87.50
Parking Ledbury, Kington, Newent Onion Fayre, Hay-on-Wye.....	£11.60
Public transport Two adults: return bus to Hereford.....	£10.10
Total costs.....	£301.55



ABOVE Exploring Ledbury's narrow cobbled streets

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'

sunny spot and a picnic in the grounds. We felt somewhat empty-handed as we strolled around the pretty lake with views back to the fairytale nineteenth century 'mock' castle with turrets on every corner. We joined the families racing around Eastnor Castle's confounding maze, cheating by asking directions each time we got confused.

Travelling in Herefordshire in the 1720s, Daniel Defoe wrote, 'We could get no beer or ale in their publick houses, only cyder and that so very good'. It is claimed that the county produces over half the UK's cider and it is home to both large household names and small producers; you can follow a Cider Trail to visit many of them.

Using only apples grown within a 50-mile radius, Westons Cider Mill has been in the same family for generations. This is a big operation that mixes tradition with technology. Westons' cider is still matured in oak casks and Hereford cattle graze in the orchards. Come in January and you might encounter the annual wassailing ceremony and bonfire to bless the orchard for a bountiful harvest.

On the cider mill tour we walked among the huge wooden casks, each given a name: Popeye, Wembley and Edith. "They are too heavy to move and the site has grown around these casks," our guide told us. Harvest was just getting underway and pressing continues until December. The air was full of the smell of apples and, in the bar, I was keen to try some ciders and perry.

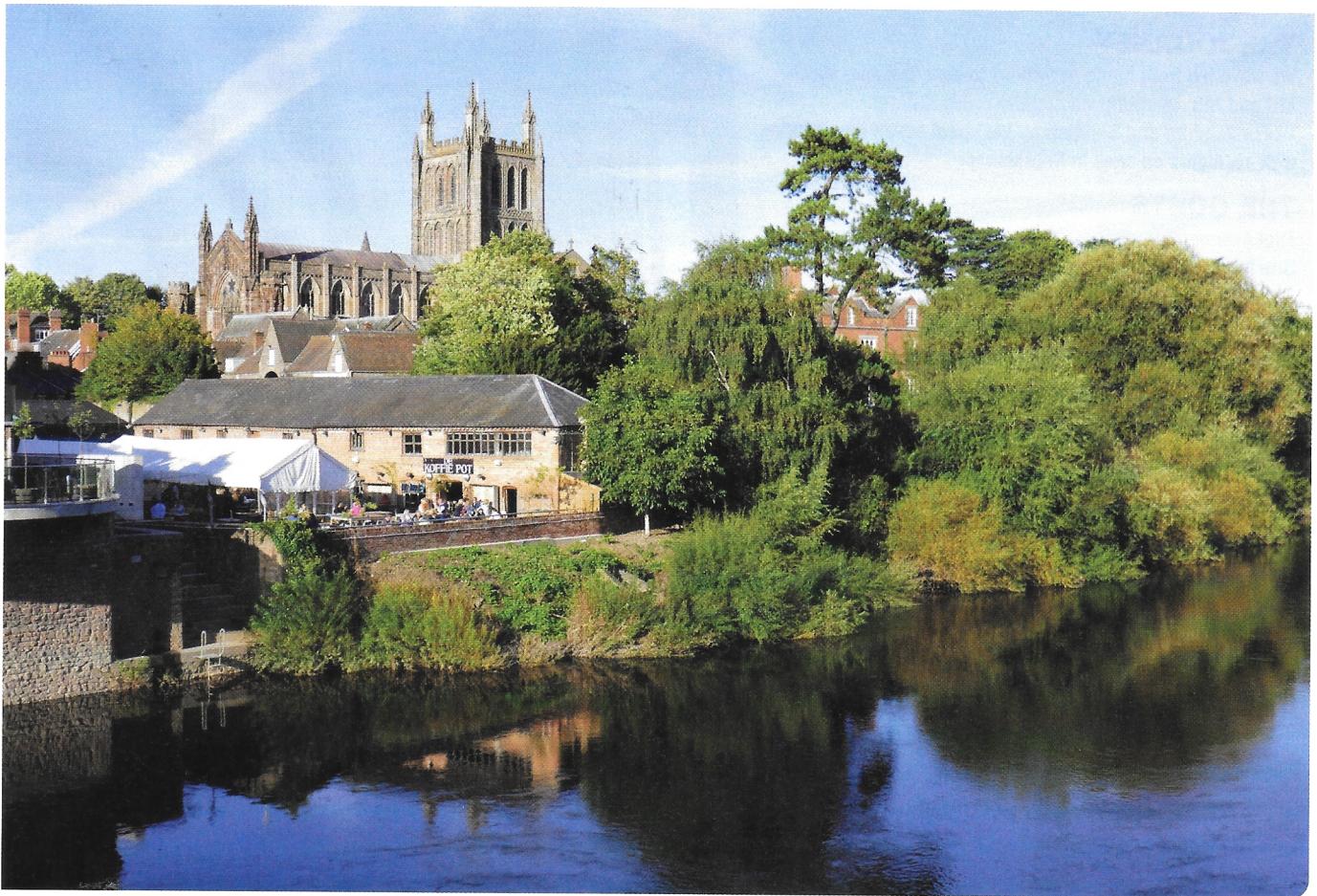
From our riverside campsite at Lucksall we caught the bus to Hereford. It was the Herefordshire Art Week and there were plenty of opportunities to see exhibitions and artists at work. In the Museum and Art Gallery we learnt about the history of the county and browsed the special exhibition of landscapes of the local countryside.

A guide introduced us to Hereford's Black and White House and painted a vivid picture of how it would have looked in the seventeenth century when it was a butcher's shop with a straw-covered earth floor and carcasses hanging from the joists. Exploring on our own we climbed the steep staircases, crossed the creaky floorboards and admired the beautiful embroidered bedding on the Jacobean four-poster bed.

A 15-minute walk from the city centre is the Museum of Cider, where we learnt more about the process of traditional cider making. A model showed how horses pulled a stone wheel to crush apples to a pulp before being pressed between layered cloths to squeeze out the juice. The museum is in the original nineteenth century Bulmers factory, the home of Woodpecker cider, the world's oldest cider brand. In the museum's musty cellar, production of a sparkling variety using the champagne method is described before visitors return to reception to taste three local ciders.

After seeing the treasured Mappa Mundi (a 700-year-old map drawn to impress rather than find your way) in Hereford's ▶

"This enchanting and historic rural landscape is a haven of tranquillity and was idyllic below wall-to-wall blue sky"



magnificent cathedral, we walked around the park surrounding the cathedral in glorious sunshine. Passing the statue of Elgar leaning on a bicycle, we followed paths through Castle Green to the ornamental Victoria Bridge over the River Wye for the stunning views back to the cathedral. Sightseeing finished, we sat in the sunshine with cornets loaded with Bennetts tasty pistachio ice cream from neighbouring Worcestershire.

The ruralness of Herefordshire was brought home to me as we followed a tractor through Hereford's streets the next morning. In late summer sunshine we drove through hedged fields of crops and livestock, orchards heavy with apples and wooded knolls on every horizon. We spotted hops in some fields as well as oast houses, or hop kilns as they are known here.

Our visit to stately Hampton Court Castle and gardens near Leominster proved to be loads of fun. "I can complete the maze in three minutes," the member of staff had told us as we paid, setting a challenge we would never match.

We had the thick yew-hedged maze to ourselves, so no one witnessed our constant doubling back from dead ends trying to reach the central Gothic tower. Confusingly,

TOP TIPS

Use one of the long stay car parks in Ledbury as the short stay car park is tight for motorhomes

herefordshire.gov.uk/parking-1/council-car-parks/3#motorhomes

For Hereford, the 453 bus service runs from Mordiford (about 20 minutes' walk through woods and fields from Lucksall campsite) and on some days and times from the campsite gate

Eastnor Castle has a good network of wheelchair and pushchair-accessible paths and dogs on leads are allowed

eastnorcastle.com

Hampton Court Castle's garden is mostly wheelchair and pushchair-accessible and does not allow dogs

hamptoncourtcastle.co.uk

Herefordshire Art Week is in September every year

h-art.org.uk

this has a door on all four faces but only one is open and we arrived at two firmly locked doors before we completed the maze and were able to climb the steps to enjoy the view over the impressive Victorian walled gardens. Return down the steps and you enter a dark underground tunnel, scrabbling for the torch on your phone. You emerge into the sunken garden where a rocky path takes you behind a waterfall.

In future, if we are within 50 miles of Hereford, we will be calling into Oakchurch Farm Shop. It only started making ice cream recently, but has quickly learnt the trade and the enthusiasm for the new venture is infectious. Using its own milk and some home-grown soft fruits, the staff enjoy experimenting with flavours.

Dither over what you want and the staff will offer a taste. I tried the raspberry sorbet, something I would normally avoid as it isn't ice cream, but Oakchurch freezes in all the fruity flavours, producing something outstanding. On my cornet, I had a huge portion of apple pie ice cream, an exceptional combination of sharp and creamy flavours. Anthony had something packed with chocolate and caramel that he proclaimed the best he'd ever had. It's just a pity this shop isn't nearer to home!

INFORMATION

Discover the black and white villages of Herefordshire
blackandwhitetrail.org

What they thought the world looked like in 1300
themappamundi.co.uk

The cider mill shop is open but check the website for tours availability outside of lockdowns

westons-cider.co.uk

Learn how apples were milled and pressed and how the resulting juice was fermented to produce cider

cidermuseum.co.uk

A private estate, the gardens and house are now open to the public on specific days during the year

kentchurchcourt.co.uk

Luxury ice creams, fruit sorbets and delicious desserts

justrachel.com

Where to buy Bennetts ice cream

bennettsicecream.co.uk

Go for the ice cream

oakchurch.net

Herefordshire's Black and White Trail snakes towards the Welsh border and between Hay-on-Wye and Kington we drove through a succession of attractive villages. In Kington, my leg cleaned and well-bandaged after the ice cream-related fall, we followed the steep Offa's Dyke path up Hergest Ridge.

Immortalised in the 1974 Mike Oldfield album, the hill has panoramic views, is home to sheep and wild ponies and has the remains of an old racecourse on its flanks. Near the summit is an incongruous copse of monkey puzzle trees that offer some shelter on this exposed hill. Apparently these were planted in the mid-twentieth century by a gardener who noticed the climate was similar to its native Patagonia.

We were camping near Hay-on-Wye and called into the popular town full of bookshops for some unusual sheep's milk ice cream from Shepherds Parlour. This Herefordshire ice cream is lower in fat, thanks to the consistency of sheep's milk and, although it can't compete with the creaminess of Oakchurch's ones, both my ginger cornet and Anthony's peanut butter and chocolate were packed with flavour.

Between the Wye Valley and the Welsh border is the pastoral Golden Valley following the River Dore (thought to be a corruption of d'or, French for gold). This enchanting and historic rural landscape is a

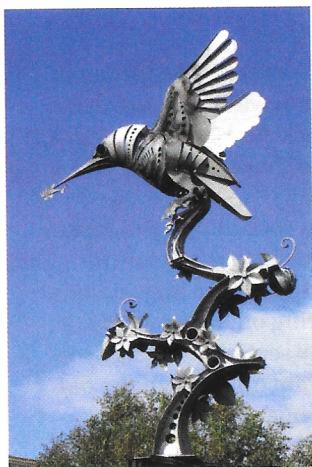
haven of tranquillity and was idyllic below wall-to-wall blue sky as we negotiated narrow lanes lined with high hedges to Snodhill Castle.

Dismantled, ignored and left to deteriorate, this extensive Norman castle is now being rescued. Built by William FitzOsbern, who fought at the Battle of Hastings and was a major castle builder in this area, Snodhill has a steep motte and a series of radiating baileys, like a giant, off-centre, wedding cake.

'Hidden gem' might be an overused phrase but at Kentchurch Court I certainly felt as if we had discovered our own secret garden. We drove through the ornamental gates, parked the Blue Bus in the courtyard and put the kettle on in the unstaffed tea room, popping money in the honesty box for drinks and a slice of home-made cake.

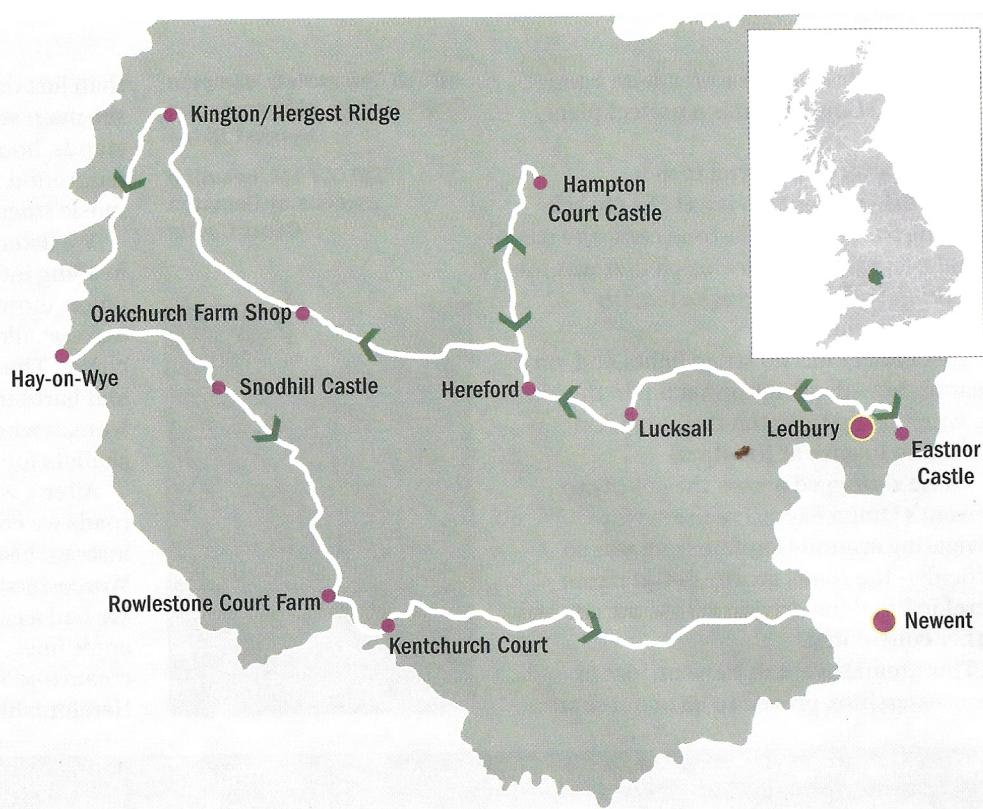
Later we wandered through the peaceful, colourful and natural walled gardens, with mixed planting of vegetables, fruits and flowers making it a haven for butterflies and insects.

An ice cream maker with a café and a campsite, Rowlestone Court Farm was somewhere I couldn't miss. Using its own milk and local fruit, Rowlestone Court promises its milk goes from field to freezer in one day. We both chose elderberry and ginger, which had a nice kick under the rich ice cream. With great facilities, peace and ▶



ABOVE FAR LEFT Hereford Cathedral across the River Wye

ABOVE Kingfisher with minnow sculpture by Walenty Pytel near Hereford's Museum of Cider





quiet, open views and ice cream on hand, Rowlestone Court Farm is a perfect place to relax.

Almost everywhere you turn in Herefordshire there is a jewel of a church. Strolling from the Rowlestone campsite we found a simple Norman church that was no exception and with exquisite twelfth century carvings.

This hamlet has no street lights and, on a clear night with an autumnal nip in the air, we wrapped up to watch the harvest moon rising and to gaze at the stars.

As we zigzagged across the county to Newent's Onion Fayre, I realised why navigating around Herefordshire was so difficult – the roads mostly radiate from Hereford, making driving across the county rather convoluted.

This annual event in Newent, just in Gloucestershire, proved to be about more

ABOVE The stately Hampton Court Castle; **Wild ponies on Hergest Ridge**

BETWEEN The beautiful gardens at Hampton Court Castle



WE STAYED AT

Lucksall Caravan and Camping Park, Mordiford, Hereford HR1 4LP

01432 870213

lucksallpark.co.uk

1 March – 30 November

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £24

Ashbrook Caravan and Camping, Pen-y-maes, Hay-on-Wye HR3 5PP

01497 820583

ashbrook-caravans.co.uk

1 April – 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20

Rowlestone Court Farm CS, Rowlestone HR2 0DW

01981 240322

rowlestoneicecream.co.uk

1 April – September

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20

Hereford Camping and Caravanning Club Site, The Millpond, Little Tarrington HR1 4JA

01432 890243

campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

12 March – 7 November

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £22.45

ALTERNATIVE SITE

Townsend Touring Park, Pembridge, Leominster, Herefordshire HR6 9HB

01544 388527

Townsend-farm.co.uk

1 February – January

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £19

than just onions. We joined the throng in the main street lined with food and drink stands, hook-a-duck stalls, tombolas and fairground rides, all book-ended by two music stages.

We listened to a rockabilly band, before heading into the memorial hall for the onion show. Here there were huge onions, leeks, shallots, spring onions and pots of chives. The novelty section had tortoises and hares made from onions and the old woman who lived in a shoe, with tiny shallots for her children.

After a week meandering along rural roads we couldn't face a motorway and, instead, headed home through the Worcestershire and Shropshire countryside. We had a campervan laden with cider and apple juice, memories of some heavenly ice cream and now felt that we knew Herefordshire just that little bit better. 

This feature was written between pandemic lockdowns. We are publishing it for your enjoyment and to help you plan future trips. Readers should follow the latest government advice before leaving their homes  gov.uk/coronavirus