



Get away for... **THE WEEKEND!**

You, too, will be grinning like the Cheshire Cat when you disappear into delightful Delamere Forest

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

We 'asked' our Blue Bus to take us somewhere peaceful, with good local cycling, walking and maybe a colourful garden and a castle to visit. Our campervan is spoilt for choice around our Lancashire home, but chose to head south down the M6 to a long-time favourite destination – Delamere Forest.

Set among the green fields of Cheshire, Delamere Forest is the remnant of an extensive Norman hunting forest known as the Forest of Mara, where the gentry once hunted deer and wild boar. We were almost there when Blue Bus turned off for Arley Hall and Gardens, giving us the chance to stretch our legs while enjoying the floral displays.

The gardens, a pleasing mixture of traditional planting schemes with modern flourishes, are entered from the courtyard, where there is a shop and café. Visitors are

free to wander, finding their own way through different formal gardens (everyone spreads out so the gardens never feel crowded).

The herb garden and scented garden are fragrant spots and vegetable growers will love the vast kitchen garden that has a cornucopia of produce, mixed with flowers. In the glasshouse, figs and tomatoes grow alongside cacti and pelargoniums. The walled garden is spacious and decorative with an attractive fountain at its centre.

Turning a corner I was faced with the garden's best feature: a double herbaceous border, packed with colour. Bees and butterflies were flitting between the array of plants and we wandered between the rows admiring the variety.

"We have a season ticket and have been coming since winter, watching it grow from nothing," a couple told me. It's certainly ►

Why?... To enjoy the wildlife,
walking and cycling among the trees
and pools in Delamere Forest

MAIN Tall trees stand above bright green bracken

FAR LEFT Arley Hall overlooks swathes of parkland

BELOW LEFT Walking through a field of barley

BELOW RIGHT A carving on a tree trunk in Delamere Forest



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 and we have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

worth coming to see in summer.

An avenue of trimmed ilex columns took us to the Furlong Walk (named for its length) and we followed this to the hall with views over the parkland beyond the ha-ha. There has been a house here for over 500 years and the present-day elaborate red-brick building has Elizabethan architectural features, although it was built in the nineteenth century.

There are plenty of campsites around Delamere Forest, but we find the Camping and Caravanning Club site is the best placed. From our pitch we watch rabbits and grey squirrels and walk or cycle straight into the forest. One of our strolls took us around Blakemere Moss and on paths under a high-rope course. During the day this is often lively with the screams of excited children but, as we neared the shores of Blakemere Moss, it was the raucous calls of nesting black-headed gulls that filled the air.

Delamere means 'forest of the meres' and is dotted with such pools, remnants of the glacial era. Today the shallow waters of Blakemere Moss are broken up by islets and submerged tree stumps, relics of woodland planted here in the nineteenth century to relieve the national timber crisis. What was later to become the Forestry Commission drained Blakemere and planted conifers and

broadleaf trees. In recent years, the drainage work has been reversed and the beauty and wildlife diversity of the mere restored. The black-headed gulls were soaring, squabbling and bobbing on the water. Get downwind of their nesting site and the smell will make your eyes water!

Over the next couple of days we explored the forest, cycling along well-drained, wide gravel trails and walking on narrow paths of humus-rich soft soil threaded with roots. Runners, hikers, cyclists and horse riders all use the 2,400 acres of woodland as a playground, gym and nature trail, but there are lesser-used paths if you want a quiet corner of your own.

At a pretty pool shaded by a birch tree we stopped to look for dragonflies. We found a damp clearing, where insects and butterflies buzzed around fragrant meadowsweet flowers. A narrow path through lush green ferns and tall foxgloves took us to a child-size rustic den, one of many dotted around the forest. Along the path edges I used my plant ID app to identify red campion and bright yellow ragwort.

On a drizzly afternoon, not wanting to get our feet wet, we chose the wide and drier paths under the natural umbrellas of the trees. The woodland was full of joyous birdsong, along with the noisy squawks of



Must do... Walk around Blakemere Moss and watch the antics of the black-headed gulls

the black-headed gulls. Among so many trees it is easy to become disorientated. At the furthest edge of the forest we met a mum with two youngsters who asked if they were heading the right way for the café and information centre. We broke it to them that it was actually in the opposite direction!

On our second morning we took the bikes along the forest tracks and quiet lanes towards Cuddington, stopping at The Forest View Inn to have morning coffee al fresco. At Cuddington we joined the Whitegate Way, six miles of traffic-free cycling along a disused railway line.

For 100 years freight trains travelled this line transporting salt to the Manchester-Chester line from Winsford and the River Weaver. Rock salt continues to be mined in Winsford and is used to deice winter roads.

The old mines have left an underground space the size of 700 football pitches that has consistent temperature and humidity. Nowadays it is used to store treasured paintings and historical records. If you want to know more about Cheshire's salt industrial heritage, the Lion Salt Works (near Northwich), a restored salt-making site and museum, is well worth a visit.

We cycled through shaded cuttings and along embankments until we reached the old station and café. Here we left the

Whitegate Way to ride along gently undulating lanes to The Hollies Farm Shop. This well-stocked farm shop has fresh fruit and vegetables and much more and we left with a chunk of good Cheshire cheese and a bottle of wine.

If, unlike us, you eventually tire of walking and cycling in the forest, there is a railway station just outside the Delamere campsite. Trains travel to the historic city of Chester or to Northwich, Knutsford and even Manchester in the other direction.

Beeston Castle certainly deserves the description 'dramatic ruin'. This cragtop castle sits high over the fields defended by an impressive rock-cut ditch.

On a clear day the views across the Cheshire countryside to Liverpool and Wales are renowned. Unfortunately, it wasn't a clear day when Blue Bus pulled into the car park; it was steadily mizzling. Nevertheless, Beeston Castle was a perfect stop before heading home.

Built in the thirteenth century, Beeston Castle used banks and ditches of an Iron Age hill fort. The natural defences mean the castle doesn't have a keep, just an outer and inner bailey and strong gatehouses.

In the seventeenth century Civil War it withstood a year-long siege after which Cromwell ordered it to be partly ►

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG
Three nights

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

HOW MUCH
Fuel Average 34mpg
(236 miles).....£22.72
Site fees.....£69.55
Parking Arley Hall and
Beeston Castle.....£5
Entrance fees Two adults:
Arley Hall and Beeston
Castle.....£36
TOTAL.....£133.27




BELOW FAR LEFT The colours of Blakemere Moss change with the light


BELOW Cycling on the wide, well-drained tracks in Delamere Forest

INFORMATION


A shady oasis in the midst of the agricultural landscape of the Cheshire Plain

 forestryengland.uk/delamere-forest

An impressive family home, with equally impressive grounds (dogs on leads are allowed in the gardens)


 arleyhallandgardens.com

Info on Chester, Cheshire and beyond

 visitcheshire.com



The paths and steps up to Beeston Castle are probably too steep for wheelchairs but young families seem to manage it with buggies

 english-heritage.org.uk





Must see... The stunningly colourful double herbaceous border at Arley Hall and Gardens in the summer

demolished. By the nineteenth century the ruin had become valued as a romantically inspirational scene by artists and tourists; trees were planted and kangaroos kept in the grounds to attract visitors.

From the lower gatehouse we climbed steeply, skirting around the curtain wall to the inner bailey. A steeply arched modern bridge crosses the impressive moat where, in summer, wild flowers flourish below the vertical craggy sides.

What brings everyone to Beeston Castle are the panoramic views from this high vantage point. The mizzle began to fade and the light mist rolled away to reveal the green fields and tiny farmhouses below us and the nearby nineteenth century Peckforton Castle, built to have a view of the picturesque ruins of Beeston Castle.

Archaeological remains of Bronze Age roundhouses were found at Beeston Castle and, in the woodland, a hut has been reconstructed. In truth I had expected to be disappointed by this attraction, but the large and thoughtfully constructed hut gave me a genuine insight into Bronze Age living.

The steeply angled thatched roof is

practical and elegant and sits on a web of slender wooden poles, held up by walls of tightly woven wattle covered in waterproofing daub. The central fire was lit, demonstrating how cosy the hut could be thanks to the skilfully designed thatch that lets smoke filter through, yet keeps rain out.

A couple of members of staff tended the fire and happily answered our questions as if we were the first people to ask them. They described the Bronze Age hand tools and local materials they had used to build the hut. "We have to light the fire at least once a week as it cleverly disinfects the thatch and keeps it clear of vermin," we were told. Spotting a modern fire extinguisher behind them, I was pleased that they didn't take authenticity too far!

Although we have visited Delamere Forest many times it was good to return and find new corners of this wonderful woodland and visit a couple of Cheshire's many attractions. As we drove back home we thanked Blue Bus for once again giving us a fantastic break. In return, we would gratefully polish her inside and out – to be ready for another adventure. [mmm](http://www.mmm)

ABOVE Arley Hall's best facility, the double herbaceous border

THE CAMPSITE

Delamere Forest Camping and Caravanning Club Site,
Station Road, Delamere,
Cheshire CW8 2HZ

☎ 01606 889231

📍 campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

📅 8 March – 31 December

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £21.30 (members)/£26.80 (non-members)

This feature was written in July 2020 when sites reopened. 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](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)