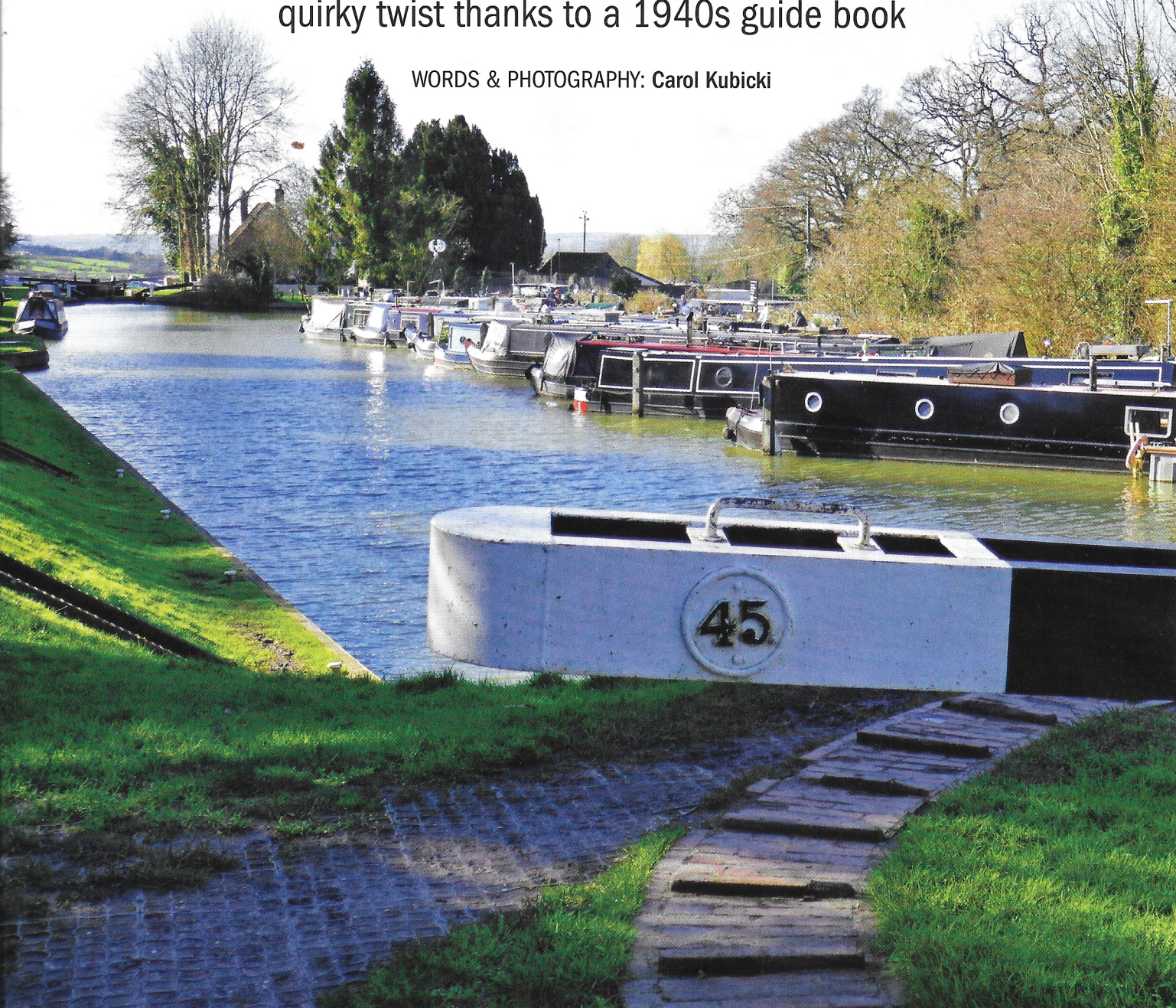


Set your sights on **Wiltshire**

A tour of ancient sites and historical towns takes on a quirky twist thanks to a 1940s guide book

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki





The notions that Stonehenge was the work of 'some cleverer (sic) elephants' or 'gyratory marine action' were the strangest ideas in the shabby 1940s *Wilts and Dorset* (*The Penguin Guides*) that my friend had given to me. "I thought you might like these," she said, handing over several distinctive orange-covered books. Delighted, I began browsing the yellowed pages of these early travel guides with an idea germinating for a tour in our 'van.

Aimed at the emerging motorists who wished to explore the British countryside, with maps and chapters on architecture and history, the guidebook is divided into driving tours. Reading how even then the authors recommended avoiding the 'uninspiring streets of Swindon', I thought what fun following a 70-year-old Penguin guide would be and seeing where it took us.

The chalky county of Wiltshire, with its ancient sites, stone circles, notable abbeys and historical towns, seemed the perfect place to explore with a 1949 guide.

Nesta Howard and Spencer Underwood, the book's authors, accompanied us as we picked up the route to Stonehenge, 'the most elaborate...of the stone circles of England'. With no visitor's centre or coach tours, they remark that the circle is lost in the vastness of Salisbury Plain.

We arrived at the bustle of today's huge Stonehenge car park just as the clouds parted and the day brightened. Taking the shuttle bus towards the stones, we opted to disembark at the midpoint and walk across the pastures. As a skylark sang overhead I imagined we were Neolithic guests arriving for a ceremony.

On our last visit, 15 years ago, we had walked among the stones as the sun set, just as you could in the 1940s. Nowadays, Stonehenge visitors remain outside the ring and numbers are controlled, allowing you to find your own space and enjoy ►

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'

LEFT There are 29 locks in the flight at Caen Hill Locks

BELOW The cloisters at Lacock Abbey

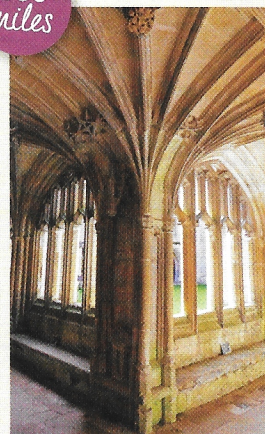
THE JOURNEY

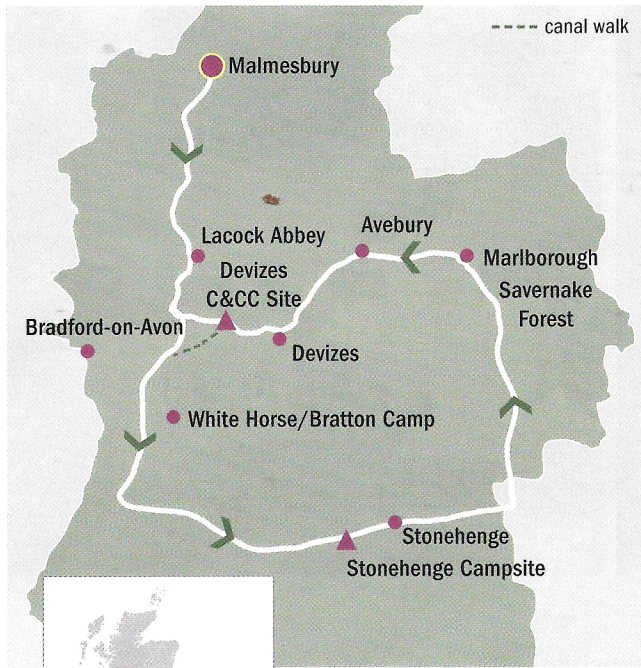
We travelled from home in Lancashire to Wiltshire via the M6 and M5, returning the same way. We spent seven days touring, with six nights on sites, in February

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg.....	£110
Site fees	£121.45
Attractions Two adults: Stonehenge, Lacock Abbey, Wiltshire Museum	£78.40
Parking Two adults: Stonehenge, Lacock Abbey, Wiltshire Museum	£14.80
Public Transport Two adults: buses and trains to Bradford-on-Avon and Devizes	£21.60
Total costs.....	£346.25

630 miles





uninterrupted vistas of the huge stones.

We crossed the expanse of Salisbury Plain, described by the guidebook as like a 'shell-backed creature'. On its northern edge above Westbury, we sought out Bratton Camp and the White Horse. The large car park sits at over 700 feet above sea level and the February wind whistled around the 'van.

Walking to the viewpoint I braced my body against the gusts. The light changed every second as the clouds scuttled across the big sky. Gazing over the Avon Valley and buffeted by the strong wind, I felt as if I was riding on that shell-backed creature.

Nesta and Spencer slam the 'deadening effect' of the eighteenth century restoration of Westbury's White Horse. Goodness knows what they would make of its 1950s

concrete overcoat.

My partner, Anthony, feels at home in Wiltshire as he lived in the garrison town of Tidworth for two years as a child. Anthony's dad was in a tank regiment and tank crossings are still a regular feature over Salisbury Plain.

We drove into the housing estate where he lived and Anthony reminisced about dens and pranks. In nearby Marlborough he remembered the attractive broad High Street, apparently the UK's second widest. Our guidebook romantically suggests that Merlin was buried under Castle Mound in Marlborough, now inaccessible in the college grounds, and enthuses about its host of restaurants, still true today.

The Penguin book recommends walks along with motoring routes and I was keen to follow one through Savernake Forest. Savernake is stunning. Criss-crossed by paths and tracks, large fallen trees lie like sleeping dinosaurs. Beech trees and holly added winter colour.

The guidebook told us this was a royal hunting forest and Henry VIII met Jane Seymour here. It makes no mention of the aged oak trees that have names. We found the Saddle, Cathedral and Old Paunchy, all huge gnarled oaks draped in vibrant moss, full of character and their bark ridged and wrinkled with age.

The campsite near Devizes made a great base for exploring northern Wiltshire with regular passing buses and the canal alongside for easy walks. Open and peaceful, snowdrops and celandine flowered on the adjoining lane, a woodpecker drummed in ➤

ABOVE The White Horse at Westbury

BELOW Britain's largest stone circle is at Avebury





TOP TIPS

Entrance to Stonehenge is with timed tickets and limited numbers are available each day so it is worth booking in advance. Stonehenge is free for National Trust and English Heritage members. There is dedicated motorhome parking in the coach car park. The car park at Lacock Abbey has some larger parking spaces specifically for motorhomes.

Some of the paths and tracks from the car park at Savernake Forest, although undulating, are surfaced and manageable with wheelchairs and pushchairs in dry weather.

the trees behind our pitch and geese noisily flew over. On stormy evenings, the sunsets were vibrant.

Although they did exist in 1949, Nesta and Spencer ignore road numbers, instead directing travellers with compass points. With fewer visitor attractions in the 1940s, the focus is on churches and their architectural features with occasional references to properties owned by the National Trust that had recently celebrated its fiftieth birthday.

Heading west, we reached Bradford-on-Avon, described by the guide as 'one of the most interesting towns in the county'. On a steep hillside by the River Avon, the town's honey-coloured stone buildings are warm and elegant and the cobbled streets charming. This was a cloth-making district

and we looked out for the rows of high windows on old weavers' cottages as we wandered from our starting point at the Town Bridge that has an unusual old lock-up on the site of a pilgrim's chapel.

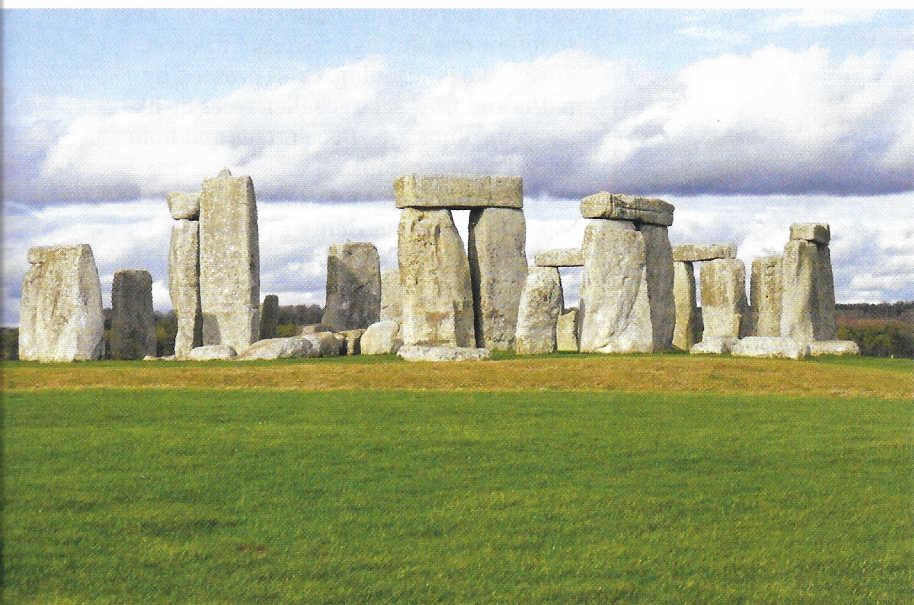
A day of bright sunshine and showers meant that we alternated between cafés and sightseeing. We found the Saxon Church of St Laurence enchanting. St Aldhelm, a contemporary of Bede, established a church here in the eighth century. The tall building you see isn't quite that old but, with elaborate narrow doors and windows, it is one of the most complete Saxon churches in the country.

The relics of Edward the Martyr were here and the guidebook mentions a stone with a 'diaper and cable pattern', that may have been part of the shrine. Trying to research diaper and cable pattern, my internet searches bought up images of beautifully knitted nappies, rather than the geometric motifs!

Winding narrow walled lanes took us to the fourteenth century Tithe Barn, a monumental and solid building. Among an attractive collection of buildings, including a medieval granary, sunlight filtered through the slit windows, lighting up the impressive timber roof.

We climbed steep alleys and steps to the highest buildings in the town. These weavers' cottages have views across the Avon to Salisbury Plain and Westbury's White Horse.

At a dead end, perched on the hillside, we found an intimate chapel, once a pilgrimage site, with a splendid modern stained glass window. Enjoying afternoon tea during another shower, we agreed that Bradford-on-Avon was excellent for a mixed weather day.



The Penguin guide led us to expect Devizes to be a busy town with 'dairy and bacon industries, brewery, tobacco factory and brickworks'. It was market day and traders called out bargains. Devizes has an indoor market too, which, one trader told us, used to be solely for cheese. Nowadays, it has an eclectic array of goods from cakes to handmade wooden bowls.

The Wiltshire Museum in Devizes was here in 1949 and still does a great job of making sense of the timeline of Wiltshire's ancient sites through an outstanding collection of artefacts. There are axe heads from as far afield as the Italian Alps and the Lake District, cases of beautiful pots and ornate Saxon jewellery.


With the sun shining, we ditched our plan to visit the Victorian Wadworth Brewery to take Nesta and Spencer's advice by walking the four miles along the Kennet and Avon Canal to our campsite. This passes Caen Hill Locks, opened in 1810, a flight of 29 locks rising 237 feet in two miles.

It typically takes five to six hours to navigate Caen Locks. One bargee told us that he was relieved to be at the last lock, having spent the best part of the day descending the flight!


Of course, we didn't forgo our pint of

INFORMATION


For a list of all the Penguin guides

 penguinchecklist.wordpress.com

There are many EH sites in Wiltshire... how many have you ticked off?

 english-heritage.org.uk


For gardens, villages, ancient landscapes and more

 nationaltrust.org.uk

A twelfth century place of worship

 malmesburyabbey.com

For Caen Hill Locks

 canalrivertrust.org.uk

ABOVE FAR LEFT The Wadworth Brewery in Devizes offers tours; The Tudor courtyard at Lacock Abbey

BELOW FAR LEFT Stonehenge is part of a World Heritage Site

BELOW The buildings of Bradford-on-Avon climb up from the river

Wadworth's as we called into The Three Magpies by the campsite before heading back to the comfort of our Blue Bus.

Around 25 miles north of Stonehenge is another wonder of Wiltshire.

In the village of Avebury you fall over ancient sites, all broadly contemporaneous, including a Neolithic henge, Britain's largest stone circle, Silbury Hill and West Kennet Long Barrow.

Our guidebook describes it as a 'gigantic prehistoric sanctuary' that is best seen on foot. Part of the village of Avebury sits within the henge. In 1949 the archaeologist, Alexander Keiller, lived in Avebury Manor (now National Trust). In our guidebook Nesta and Spencer convey the excitement of ongoing excavations and new discoveries.

Our walk took us by West Kennet Avenue, a row of around 100 pairs of stones and also to Silbury Hill, which our guidebook describes as: '130 feet high and artificial throughout, (it) has yielded so little evidence of its purpose or date; with disarming pride the archaeologists produce proof of the only self-evident fact that it is pre-Roman – because the Roman road is diverted to pass it'. Little more is known 70 years on, despite several investigations.

The chalky hill scattered with flints up ➤

