



Stratford-upon-Avon rewards in its own right

The medieval English market town of Stratford-upon-Avon has its place in history as the birthplace, and indeed death place, of William Shakespeare (1582–1616).

While the 'greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist' produced the bulk of his creative work in London, this has never inhibited the town from laying claim to the Bard.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust manages four houses linked to his life and times.

And the RSC performs his plays in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and adjacent Swan Theatre on the banks of the River Avon.

That said, If Shakespeare had been born in Stockport rather than Stratford-upon-Avon, this Warwickshire town, with the Avon flowing through it, would still make for a really rewarding short break.

www.visitstratforduponavon.co.uk

Ashley Gibbins
Commissioning Editor
AllWays traveller





A visit well worthy without that playwright

By Ashley Gibbins

Ann and I have been fortunate enough to visit Stratford-upon-Avon on a couple of occasions.

As such we knew the dominance that William Shakespeare exerts on the town nearly 440 years after he was born there.

That is in no way a criticism.

Visiting the five houses linked to Shakespeare's life, and so admirably looked after by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, offer a truly fascinating insight into the Bard's life and times.

Every production by the internationally acclaimed Royal Shakespeare Company will be premiered at one of its theatres in Stratford before touring.

So taking in a production here adds an extra layer of occasion.

During normal times, the town will throng with UK and international visitors wanting to do (and take selfies of) everything Shakespeare.

But while it is the Bard's lure that draws most visitors to Stratford-upon-Avon, this does not really do justice to the town itself.

This would be a fine place to visit had Will failed as a playwright.

What is now Stratford was used as a crossing point of the Avon since Roman times and was first settled by the Anglo-Saxons in the 7th Century.



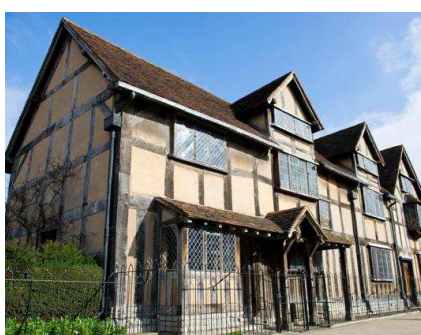
Stratford thrives

By the 12th Century it was a thriving town granted its charter King Richard I in 1196, which allowed it to hold a weekly market.

Stratford grew slowly but steadily through the centuries with a boom in the late 18th century.

In 1769, the actor David Garrick staged a major Shakespeare Jubilee in the town, which attracted many visitors and sowed the seeds for the Shakespeare tourism phenomenon.

And leisurely stroll around the town is the epitome of 'living history', with so many historic buildings wonderfully preserved.





A short break in Stratford-upon-Avon during the Covid pandemic enforced the closure of the town's Shakespearian attractions, gave us the chance to appreciate the town *sans Bard!*

The River Avon

In doing so we were inevitably drawn to River Avon, one of England's major rivers.

The Avon starts in Leicestershire and flows through Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire before joining the Severn in Gloucestershire.

The Warwickshire stretch passes through the centre of Stratford.

Being on or beside water has long been believed to generate a feeling of overall wellbeing, with real scientific justification.

Apparently, the nearness the water apparently triggers a brain response that induces a flood of neurochemicals that, in turn, increases blood flow to the brain and heart.

This is what makes us feel good.

The old neurochemicals were certainly playing their part while Ann and I sat on a riverside bench basking in late autumn sunshine.

Looking across the river was the Holy Trinity Church, edged riverside by willow trees, and where Shakespeare is buried.

Scullers from the nearby Stratford Rowing Club glided by on a practice row.

And three stunning white mute swans were pruning with intent just a couple of feet away.

They paid little heed to my awkward crouching to catch the moment on my iPhone.

A spaniel pup, full of youthful swagger and vigorous tail wagging, bounded up intent on playful mischief.

The swans stood their ground and young dog, knowing it had met its match, scampered off.

Chasing pigeons would offer more rewarding sport.

Along this stretch of the Avon many of the benches carry inscriptions commemorating those who had also taken comfort here in days and times gone by.

The riverside walk

Taking the Stratford Riverside Walk is a really good way to spend an hour or so besides the river.

We began the 1.5 mile clearly marked trail at Clopton bridge, where the infamous flocks of swans, ducks and geese gather knowing likelihood of a feed.

Then walking through the park on the east side of the river one gets fine views of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and then Holy Trinity Church.

It route then heads into very pleasant countryside before crossing the river by the town's racecourse and heading back into the town centre.

www.stratford-upon-avon.co.uk/static_1122.htm

We adopted this riverside routine on both mornings of our stay in Stratford and felt the better for it.

The canal

The Stratford-upon-Avon Canal, which is another waterway to explore, meanders some 25 miles from the Bancroft Basin in the centre of Stratford to Birmingham.

Managed by the Canal & River Trust, it passes through very attractive countryside and offers the chance to view the barrel-roof lock cottages and split bridges that were designed with a gap so tow ropes could pass through.

www.canalrivertrust.org.uk



On the water

During normal times, popular river and canal sightseeing tours and dinner cruises and boat hire are available.

www.canalandrivertours.com

www.avon-boating.co.uk

www.bancroftcruisers.co.uk

www.countessofevesham.co.uk



The butterfly farm soothes in stressful times

By Ashley Gibbins

If strolling along the banks of the Avon was relaxing, our visit to the Stratford Butterfly Farm was positively cathartic.

On previous visits to town there had been too much crammed into the itinerary to fit in the butterfly farm.

And it was easy to think, OK its just butterflies.

But it's not.

It is the lifelong passion of international lepidopterist, Clive Farrell, who has established the UK's largest and most successful butterfly breeding and display attraction.

Walking through the farms tropical greenhouses that look to create the feel of the rainforest, one is surrounded by hundreds of free flying, multi-coloured butterflies.

Epic Tech Media have captured the butterflies in all their majestic glory in slow-motion : <https://vimeo.com/224663348>

There are over 250 tropical species of butterfly sourced from 20 different countries.

And the back story is equally as rewarding.

While some of the butterflies breed within the Butterfly Farm and distributed throughout the UK, the rest are imported from butterfly farmers in the tropics through conservation or village projects.



This breeding enables communities to earn a good living without causing damage to the environment and wildlife around them.

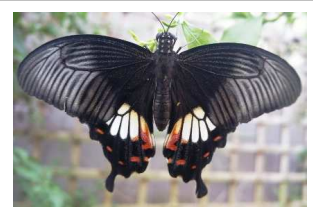
Ann and I were so enchanted that we took the walkthrough very slowly – and three times.

In doing so we were also transfixed by the Mexican leaf cutting ants passing on ropes above our heads.

These amazing little creatures work tirelessly and as a team to carry their leaves several times their size back to the nest where they rot cultivating the fungus the ants feed on.

The Stratford Butterfly Farm has shot to the top of our to-do list for future Stratford visits.

www.butterflyfarm.co.uk





Taking centuries of hosting into today's world

By Ann Mealor

The Hotel Indigo is the latest incarnation of an historic building, in the heart of the Stratford-upon-Avon that began life as a private dwelling in the 16th century.

It remained so for some 150 years before becoming a hostelry named the Falcon.

The original black and white, half-timber and slanted windows of its Tudor period have been maintained and merged into an excellent boutique hotel.

Brim full of history, character, charm and Shakespeare, the Hotel Indigo reflects all the good things Stratford has to offer.

We stayed in the Tudor part of the building, which is a stylish mix of medieval and modern.

Thick, black timbers, low ceilings, whitewashed walls, leather studded Queen Anne chairs, smooth, age-old stone floors, narrow, well-lit corridors, colourful furnishings, cosy corners, thick drapes and a hunting lodge feel.

After being offered a soft drink on arrival, we made our way to our room, and there was much that caught my eye.

Stag antlers dominated above log burning fireplaces.



Wall paper designed as individual theatre boxes and quirky prints with a Shakespeare theme joined line drawn portraits of the Bard's friends and foes and lovers and losers.

Our room

Our room was stylishly furnished in grey tones with a wonderfully comfortable Hypnos bed and white Egyptian cotton linen.

Large wooden beams and latticed lead windows gave real character.

There was a small kettle with selection of teas, a nespresso machine and a welcome bottle of fresh milk in the fridge along with complimentary water.



Fresh milk is so much better in tea than the long life sort!

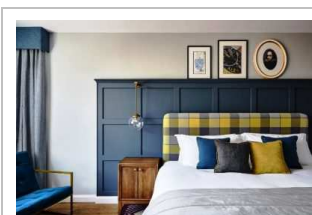
Another high point was the toiletries, with full sized bottles of luxurious Bramley hand wash, body lotion, shampoo and conditioner and shower gel, so no running out of beautifully fragranced essentials.

Breakfast

Breakfast at Hotel Indigo will certainly set you up for the day.

Due to Covid, there was no help yourself buffet, but the obliging staff were always on hand to serve you what you wanted.

There was fresh melon, pineapple, kiwi, strawberries, blueberries, yoghurt, cheese, smoked salmon, cold meats, pastries and cereals.



As well as a fruit plate, I ordered the full English breakfast, which I always look forward to, that brought together bacon, Old Spot sausage, large field mushroom, tomato, egg and beans.

Although I smacked my lips at every mouthful, the highlight was the poached egg, which oozed golden yolk over my toast when my knife gently pierced the outer white.

Perfection!

Ashley also had the poached eggs but with avocado on ciabata and mushrooms on the side.

He said it tasted as good as it looked.

www.stratford.hotelindigo.com



Dining that deserves its surroundings

By Ann Mealar

As befits its name, *The Woodsman* restaurant has a rustic, uncluttered décor with a large wood-fired oven and charcoal grill at its heart.

Although part of the hotel, the Woodsman restaurant and bar are independently run and owned by restaurateur Mike Robinson, who is passionate about British produce and sustainable wild food.

A dining experience

Diners can watch chefs as they prepare the finest British deer, wild boar, beef and Hebridean lamb, all raised on farms with the highest standards of husbandry.

All carcasses come in whole and are aged in the butchery.

Venison is a particular favourite with a professional huntsman carefully managing the wild deer over large areas of private land before delivering the prime venison to the restaurant.

The focus is firmly placed on provenance, humane practice and the full use of every part of the animal.

As a pescatarian, Ashley was keen to hear that fish are sourced from the leading Cornish fisheries, and the very best Evesham vegetables and wild herbs from the kitchen garden compliments all dishes.

Finally, with great local ales and fantastic wine, *The Woodsman* the finest place to eat and drink in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Large wooden tables with very comfortable leather chairs make for a very relaxing dining experience.

Our menu

For starters, I went for the Black Treacle cured sea trout with crab mayonnaise, avocado and bronze fennel.

It all made a colourful picture on the plate, was beautifully presented and a delightful mix of flavours.

Ashley chose the Grilled Cornish sardines on toast with pickled vegetables and paprika mayonnaise.

It was a substantial portion and nothing was left on the plate.

For mains I had the eight hour slow cooked Wood-fired Berkshire pork chop, strips of crisp crackling, Bramley apple, chicory and honey.

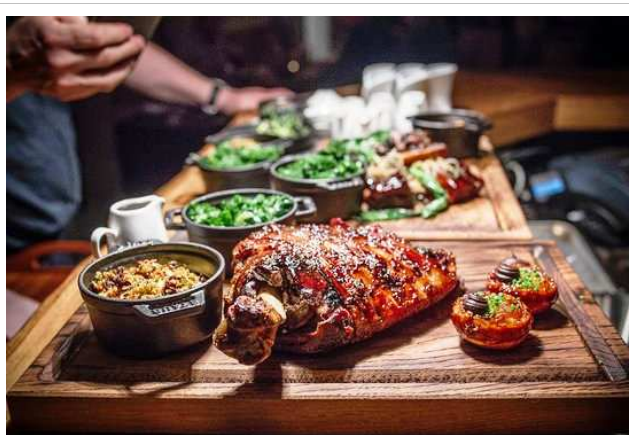
The chop was succulent, juicy and huge and the crackling crispy without being teeth breakingly chewy or hard.

I also had a portion of 'dirty' mash – creamy mashed potato with venison juice topped with crispy venison pieces.

Ashley decided on the woodfired whole Brixham plaice with capers, lemon, mussels and brown butter.

The fish was light, sweet and slid easily off the bone.

It was accompanied by small copper pan of hot, smooth, buttery mash sans venison.



Between us we ate everything, and although full, we still managed to squeeze in a dessert each.

I had the Quince and apple soufflé with cinnamon ice cream and oat crumble. Ashley enjoyed the pear tarte tatin with walnut ice cream.

Both worked a treat and we couldn't decide which we liked best.

The service was excellent throughout.

The staff were friendly, knowledgeable about the menu and could answer all my questions.

The restaurant was covid compliant in an unobtrusive way, with the tables well spaced apart, the serving team all wore masks and there was plenty of hand gel about the restaurant.

We finished the evening sipping the last of our wine and local ale in the cosy lounge.

Our stay



Our short break at the Hotel Indigo was the first after 'lockdown' and we were wondering just how much we would enjoy it.

I knew the Indigo would be as safe as anywhere could be during the pandemic.

But would we be able to forget what we are all struggling with and just relax.

It was clear from the moment we arrived that this was not going to be a problem and we enjoyed a wonderful couple of days.

www.stratford.hotelindigo.com
www.thewoodsmanrestaurant.com

A snapshot of the Stratford-upon-Avon



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www.allwaystraveller.com



The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

www.itwalliance.com



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