

The Anglophile

May 2025



The Home Counties

The heartland of England's affluent South East



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the May 2025 issue of The Anglophile.

The home counties surround London on all sides, but they're more than just the commuter belt for the thriving capital city. This month, we explore this affluent, busy, historic and hugely varied region.

Of all the home counties, Berkshire, to the west of London, has earned a special title, being home to the monarch's residence of Windsor Castle. So we've spent a little more time in historic and beautiful 'Royal' Berkshire.

Our gallery, as always, includes some particularly lovely scenes of the home counties, before we meet Sir John Betjeman – Poet Laureate, chronicler of life in the home counties, and this month's Great Figure from British history.

And as ever, we have a quiz – just to see how much you know!

Enjoy the issue.

Chris



THE HOME COUNTIES

The Home Counties – Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent, and Surrey – surround London on all sides and form the larger part of the South East of England. It’s an affluent, attractive part of the country which probably took its name from its proximity to the capital – where merchants, civil servants and politicians were able to have a country home, while still being able to travel easily to the city. Visitors today will find a mix of historic landmarks, traditional market towns, mile upon mile of suburban housing, and some glorious countryside – all within an hour or so of London.

BERKSHIRE

Berkshire is perhaps most famously home to Windsor Castle, and the lovely town of Windsor itself. But there is much more to the county than its royal connections. A journey along the River Thames leads to small riverside towns such as Henley-on-Thames, known for its annual regatta – a highlight of British rowing culture. A river cruise will lead past many of the county’s rolling hills and you’ll see some incredible riverside homes as you pass by.

The large town of Reading offers a lively mix of shopping and cultural venues, including a thriving music and arts scene. Neighbouring Newbury, an ancient market town with a famous racecourse, is full of traditional charm making it popular with city commuters.

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Buckinghamshire’s open fields and woodlands have inspired many writers and artists. Aylesbury, the county town, has



medieval roots and is home to several cultural attractions, including small galleries and museums.

High Wycombe and Beaconsfield offer busy town centres filled with boutiques, historic inns, and inviting parks. The Chiltern Hills, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, runs through Buckinghamshire, offering some spectacular scenery and ancient history. Hughenden Manor, near High Wycombe, is a National Trust property, once home to Victorian Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, which also served as a secret military base during the second world war.

HERTFORDSHIRE

Hertfordshire's close proximity to the capital makes it a popular choice for day trips or weekend breaks. The historic town of St Albans is known for its splendid cathedral (this month's cover star) and remnants of Roman history. There are lively markets and a plenty of good places to eat.

Hertford, the county's historic capital, offers an attractive mix of Georgian and medieval architecture while Letchworth Garden City was designed to combine urban living with the benefits of nature. Wide avenues and plenty of green spaces create a relaxed environment that makes this prime commuter belt.

ESSEX

Essex stretches from its increasingly blurred boundary with London to the east coast, where Southend-on-Sea, with its amusement parks and long sandy beaches, provides a lively seaside break. And Colchester, one of Britain's oldest recorded towns, boasts Roman ruins and a vibrant arts scene.

Despite Essex's slightly brash image there are many quiet corners waiting to be discovered. Saffron Walden, with its timber-framed buildings and narrow streets, is great for exploring its charming market square and independent shops that retain an old-fashioned vibe. And Epping Forest is a huge ancient woodland with plenty of opportunities to explore nature on foot or by bicycle.

Low tide at Southend-on-Sea



Kent is famous for its Oast Houses

KENT

The 'Garden of England', Kent lives up to its bucolic reputation with its orchards, vineyards, and gardens. The county is dotted with historic sites, stately homes and its unique Oast Houses, with their distinctive roof structures that enable the drying of hops for brewing. Of its historic castles, Leeds Castle, in particular, is one of the loveliest in the country, surrounded by well-kept gardens and quiet lakes.

Canterbury, with its magnificent cathedral and winding medieval streets, offers a blend of religious history and modern life. The coastal town of Margate has transformed



Military tradition at Windsor Castle, Berkshire



Guildford's bustling cobbled High Street

into a hub of arts and creativity, with galleries, vintage markets, and a vibrant seaside atmosphere. And on the south coast, the white cliffs of Dover, symbol of British military resilience, offer sweeping views over the Channel.

SURREY

Surrey, to the west of London, offers both a connection to the city and its own countryside escapes. It's home to market towns including Guildford and Farnham, where modern shopping streets meet historic sites. In Guildford, the remains of the old castle and the flow of the River Wey add historical interest to a vibrant town centre, including

The Chiltern Hills in Buckinghamshire



Farnham's historic William Cobbett pub

a steep, cobbled high street. And nearby Farnham, an affluent town with a thriving arts scene and some excellent old pubs, provides a charming setting for visitors seeking a mix of culture and town life.

Surrey is also known for its parks and nature reserves. The Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty attract walkers, cyclists, and those who simply wish to relax in nature.



Silbury Hill, Berkshire

THE ANGLOPHILE QUIZ

Let's see how much you know about the home counties! Answers on p16.

1. Which Home County is home to Windsor Castle, one of the official residences of the monarch?
2. What is the traditional name for the area of Kent south of the River Medway?
3. Which comedian and actor, born in Reading, Berkshire, co-created The Office?
4. In which Home County would you find the town of Guildford?
5. The historic cathedral city of Canterbury is located in which Home County?
6. What famous children's author lived in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire?
7. Which large forest in Essex was once a royal hunting ground and is now popular with walkers and cyclists.
8. Which Home County has a major airport located in the town of Luton?
9. Watford Football Club plays in which Home County?
10. Which Bond actor was born in Chester but currently lives in a countryside home in Oxfordshire?
11. The famous Epsom Derby takes place in which Home County?
12. The De La Warr Pavilion, an iconic piece of modernist architecture, is in which coastal Home County town?
13. Which singer, known for hits like Wuthering Heights, grew up in Welling, Kent?
14. The county of Surrey shares a boundary with how many other Home Counties?
15. Which historic town in Buckinghamshire was once the capital of the Kingdom of Mercia?
16. Which world-famous author of The Lord of the Rings series worked at Oxford University?
17. Where in the Home Counties would you find the Warner Bros. Studio Tour: The Making of Harry Potter?
18. Southend-on-Sea, known for having the longest pleasure pier in the world, is in which Home County?
19. Theresa May, former Prime Minister, was MP for which Home County constituency?
20. In which Home County would you find the RHS Garden Wisley?

A photograph of a white cliff face meeting a dark pebble beach and the sea under a clear blue sky. The cliff is on the left, showing some vegetation at the top. The beach is in the foreground, and the sea is on the right. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

Under the White Cliffs of Dover

GALLERY:
THE HOME COUNTIES

The Curfew Tower, Windsor Castle



Albury in the Surrey Hills





Springtime in Epping Forest



A summer heatwave in Margate



Remains of the Roman city wall, St Albans

Sunshine at Leeds Castle in Kent





ROYAL BERKSHIRE

A COUNTY RICH IN HISTORY, CULTURE AND GREEN SPACE

A few places in England are granted the title 'Royal', owing to their connection to the monarchy, and it's the epic working residence of Windsor Castle that led to the creation of the county of 'Royal' Berkshire. With Ascot Racecourse, and its proximity to the Thames, the county has long been a favoured destination for both visitors, residents and the royal family, seeking a quieter pace within easy reach of the capital.

Whether visiting Windsor, exploring the riverside trails near Pangbourne or enjoying lunch in one of Bray's award-winning restaurants, Berkshire has plenty to offer.

A HISTORIC CENTREPIECE

Windsor remains one of the UK's most recognisable historic towns. Its castle, originally founded by William the Conqueror, is still used by the Royal Family and is open to the public throughout much of the year. The State Apartments, St George's Chapel and gardens make for one of England's most popular destination.

The town itself is compact and walkable, with independent shops and familiar high street names interspersed along its cobbled streets. A short walk across the bridge leads to Eton, home of the famous college. Its distinctive architecture



Above: The Thames at Pangbourne. Below: Cookham high street

and smart shopfronts make for a pleasant afternoon's wander, with guided tours of the college available on selected dates.

BERKSHIRE'S VILLAGES

Beyond the larger towns, Berkshire's villages offer a slower pace of life. Cookham, once home to artist Stanley Spencer, retains much of its original charm, with its timber-framed cottages and riverside walks. Pangbourne, bordered by water meadows and wooded hills, offers similar appeal for walkers and day-trippers.

Bray, however, has earned a reputation far beyond its size. This



Quiz Answers: 1. Berkshire; 2. The Weald; 3. Ricky Gervais; 4. Surrey; 5. Kent; 6. Roald Dahl; 7. Epping Forest; 8. Bedfordshire; 9. Hertfordshire; 10. Daniel Craig; 11. Surrey; 12. Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex; 13. Kate Bush; 14. Five – Berkshire, Hampshire, Kent, East Sussex, West Sussex; 15. Aylesbury; 16. J.R.R. Tolkien; 17. Hertfordshire (Leavesden); 18. Essex; 19. Maidenhead (Berkshire); 20. Surrey



Clivedon House

small riverside village is home to two internationally famous restaurants with three Michelin stars apiece: Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck, and the Waterside Inn, opened by Michel Roux in the 1970s. Dining here requires advance booking and a generous budget, but for many, the experience justifies both.

More relaxed dining is available at the Hind's Head, also in Bray, where traditional British dishes are served in a smart, pub-style setting. Elsewhere in the county, country inns and bistros cater to a mix of locals and weekend visitors, wh seasonal menus making the most of local produce.

COUNTRY HOUSES AND GARDENS

Berkshire's countryside is ideal for short breaks or day trips, with a number of National Trust properties, and green open spaces. Windsor Great Park is one of the most notable, with over 4800 acres to explore. The Long Walk, which runs from the castle gates to the Copper Horse statue on Snow Hill, is particularly popular with walkers and joggers.

Clivedon House, a country estate on the banks of the Thames near Taplow, offers a mix of formal gardens and wooded walks. The main house now operates as a hotel, but the

surrounding gardens are open to the public and are managed by the National Trust. The views from the terrace, in particular, are some of the finest in the region.

And Basildon Park near Pangbourne, centrepiece of a huge 400-acre estate, is an 18th Century mansion, fully restored in the 1950s and now open to the public.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES AND RIVER LIFE

Running through the heart of the county is the River Thames. The stretch from Henley to Windsor is



Basildon Park

especially scenic, and boat hire is available at various points along the route. Options range from self-drive cruisers to guided river trips, with picnics and afternoon teas often available on board.

Those preferring dry land will find well-marked walking routes along the riverbanks and into the surrounding hills. The Thames Path, a national trail, passes through the county and connects with a wider network of footpaths and bridleways.

For racing fans, Ascot remains one of the UK's best-known racecourses. Its flagship event, Royal Ascot, takes place in June and draws large crowds, though racing continues at various points throughout the year. For those visiting outside race days, the town offers shops, cafes and green spaces in a tidy, accessible layout.



Putting the 'royal' into Royal Ascot

A WELL-CONNECTED ESCAPE

Royal Berkshire is well worthy of a journey, but part of its added appeal lies in its accessibility. Trains from London Paddington and Waterloo

reach towns such as Reading, Windsor and Ascot in under an hour, and the county is well connected by major motorways. This makes it a convenient option for weekend breaks or short stays without the need for complex planning.

GREAT FIGURES FROM BRITISH HISTORY

JOHN BETJEMAN

LAUREATE OF THE HOME COUNTIES

No poet has more affectionately – or more precisely – captured the essence of the Home Counties than Sir John Betjeman. Eccentric and endearing, Betjeman wrote of lawnmowers and lunchtimes, of red-brick houses and commuter railway stations. To him, the suburban commuter belt of the south-east was a landscape of quiet drama and gentle comedy.

POET OF PLACE AND PROTEST

Born in London's Highgate in 1906, Betjeman was, in many ways, the product of the Home Counties himself. Though a Londoner by birth, his heart and his poetry found their home in the metroland fringes – those in-between spaces, neither city nor countryside, where he found his poetic voice.

And his feelings were similarly mixed. He celebrated churches and garden suburbs, but he was never blind to the creeping tide of soulless development. Nowhere is this more powerfully – or wittily – expressed than in his poem, *Slough* with its famous opening line:

**'Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough!
It isn't fit for humans now...'**

Written in 1937 as a lament for what he saw as the desecration of once-rural Berkshire, the poem was a scathing protest against industrial sprawl and the homogenisation of place. Betjeman saw the town of Slough, just beyond the outskirts of West London, as the embodiment of a blander Britain, stripped of its character and covered in concrete. It's



Upstairs at The Royal Exchange
Carraccio's

Find in the s...
1861
Who...
Station.
Deep blue above us
Ded glare

an image that Slough has never shaken off, and it's thanks in part to Betjeman's mournful caricaturing of the town that Ricky Gervais's comedy series, *The Office*, was set on a Slough trading estate.

FINDING THE SACRED IN SUBURBIA

Though often read as cruel, the poem was rooted in real dismay. Betjeman, for all his humour, was a conservationist at heart. He had a tender belief that towns and landscapes held a collective memory. In the Home Counties, he found his battleground where progress collided with preservation, and he took up arms with verse rather than vitriol.



However, much of his poetry reads like a love letter to the region's understated charms and hidden quaintness. The commuter train trundling past cricket greens, the bicycle leaning against a privet hedge, the vicar's wife pouring tea. In Harrow-on-the-Hill, he wrote of a view so beautiful that 'a world invisible we view', while Middlesex conjures a lost pastoral charm now lost beneath tarmac and housing estates.

BROADCASTER AND BUILDER'S FRIEND

Where others saw dullness, the creeping grey of concrete and mass production, he found dignity and humanity in everyday life. His fondly remembered Metroland broadcasts on the BBC celebrated not only the built environment of the Home Counties but the rituals of their residents – the bingo halls, the model railway clubs, the parish fêtes. He gave voice to a quietly lived Englishness that many commentators dismissed as dreary.

This affection was never naive and he was by no means blind to the risks of sentimentality. His verse is peppered with loss and longing, with the knowledge that the England he adored was, even as he wrote, slipping away. Appointed Poet Laureate in 1972, Betjeman brought to the post a populist touch, writing with joy about everything from royal occasions



to Cornish coastlines – but always, somehow, returning to the Home Counties.

He asked England to look again at the things it took for granted: the mock-Tudor houses of suburban Pinner, the railway arches of Reading, the Norman spires of village churches. He saw what developers and planners missed – the beauty and identity found in the modest and the mundane.

A SUBURBAN LEGACY

Betjeman's interests extended far beyond poetry. His campaigning for architectural conservation led to the saving of countless buildings, including London's epic St Pancras Station. It is no accident that a statue of the poet now greets travellers at the station he helped rescue.

In his final years – spent largely in



Cornwall until his death, aged 77, in 1984 – Betjeman never forgot his beloved Home Counties and he continued to write of Sunday roasts and sash windows, the Anglican liturgies and slightly dusty drawing rooms.

Betjeman's vision was of an England that is not quite gone, but somehow always going. He saw a purpose in nostalgia, reminding us of the value of heritage, of ordinary life, and of a sense of place rooted in memory.





The Anglophile

published by englandexplore.com