

Wiltshires winning ways

Stonehenge's visitor facilities have been given a refreshing facelift, but **Norman Wright** discovers there's much more to Wiltshire than just the celebrated stone circle

The charming riverside at
Bradford-on-Avon ▶



Will we ever know the real meaning of Stonehenge?

IT WAS a grey, overcast morning on Salisbury Plain and patchy rain drifted across the rolling landscape, but the moody day only heightened the mysterious shapes of Stonehenge.

I'd not been to see the stones for a few years and was keen to see the new visitor centre and visitor access to this true wonder of the world.

English Heritage has done a great job of re-presenting a monument that attracts 1.25 million visitors a year. Instead of being greeted by wooden buildings and a pedestrian tunnel under the road to get to the stones, there's a new visitor

centre with exhibitions, restaurant and shop away from the famous skyline. You are then taken up to Stonehenge in land trains towed by Land Rovers. There's a walking path, too.

A pathway allows you to circle around the prehistoric monument and get surprisingly close at points. Set on a high point of the plain within sight of several ancient burial mounds or barrows, it gives you a real sense of its lonely placement.

Only traffic on the nearby A303 reminds you of which century you occupy, and that may be gone soon if plans to divert it out of sight through a tunnel are completed. After taking my



Upstairs downstairs tableaux at Lydiard House on the outskirts of Swindon

time to stroll around the stones, it was back on board the land train to the visitor centre and a look around the exhibition. I should, of course, have done that first because it gives an insight into Stonehenge and the theories about why it exists and how it was constructed.

A new exhibition that runs until March reveals the story of the world's largest military training camp located on Salisbury Plains.

The exhibition explores the untold story of Stonehenge, the Salisbury Plains and the one million men who trained for war near this site between 1914 and 1918.

Stonehenge stood at the heart of the

STEAM and Swindon

Swindon once provided the heavy industry in an otherwise rural county. STEAM is a museum that marks that incredible era and celebrates the creation and heyday of the Great Western Railway. It's situated in the heart of what was once one of the largest railway engineering complexes in the world.

Swindon Railway Works opened in January 1843 as a repair and maintenance facility for the new Great Western Railway. At its peak in the Thirties, the works covered more than 300 acres and was capable of producing three locomotives a week.

The railway dominated the fortunes of Swindon until after the Second World War, when new industries moved to the area. The completion of the last steam locomotive for British Railways - *Evening Star* - at Swindon in 1960 marked a watershed in the history of the works, and in 1963 a large part of the old carriage and wagon works was sold. Despite a brief renaissance in the Seventies, the works finally closed in 1986.

The story of this railway town is fascinating, and the exhibits of locomotives and reproduction of platforms and other memorabilia of the golden age of steam is comfortingly nostalgic.



On the western outskirts of Swindon, Lydiard House and Park is a former stately home owned and restored by the local Swindon Borough Council. The house was in the St John family for more than 500 years until it was sold to the council in 1943.

Lydiard House is a Palladian mansion, with symmetrical details, a grand entrance and lots of details inspired by classical architecture.

Just behind the house is the beautiful little parish church of St Mary's, Lydiard Tregoze. After your tour of the house you can pick up the church key for a visit.

world's largest military training camp during the First World War, with 180,000 men stationed there at any one time, coming from across the Commonwealth to prepare for battle.

With personal stories, photographs and original objects drawn from a range of museums and private, local and national collections, some never on display before, the 'Soldiers at Stonehenge' exhibition shares with visitors what life was like for the men who trained on Salisbury Plain. It also reveals how reminders of their presence can still be seen across the wider Stonehenge landscape.

On display are the medals of Lieutenant Edmund Antrobus, the heir to Stonehenge, who was killed in action just 17 days after arriving at the front, and also of his father Sir Edmund, the owner of Stonehenge, who died less than four months later. Father and son were both professional soldiers.

The loss of both the owner of and heir to Stonehenge led in part to the monument being put up for sale at auction in 1915. Although there were calls for the nation to buy Stonehenge, it was Cecil Chubb, a locally born barrister,

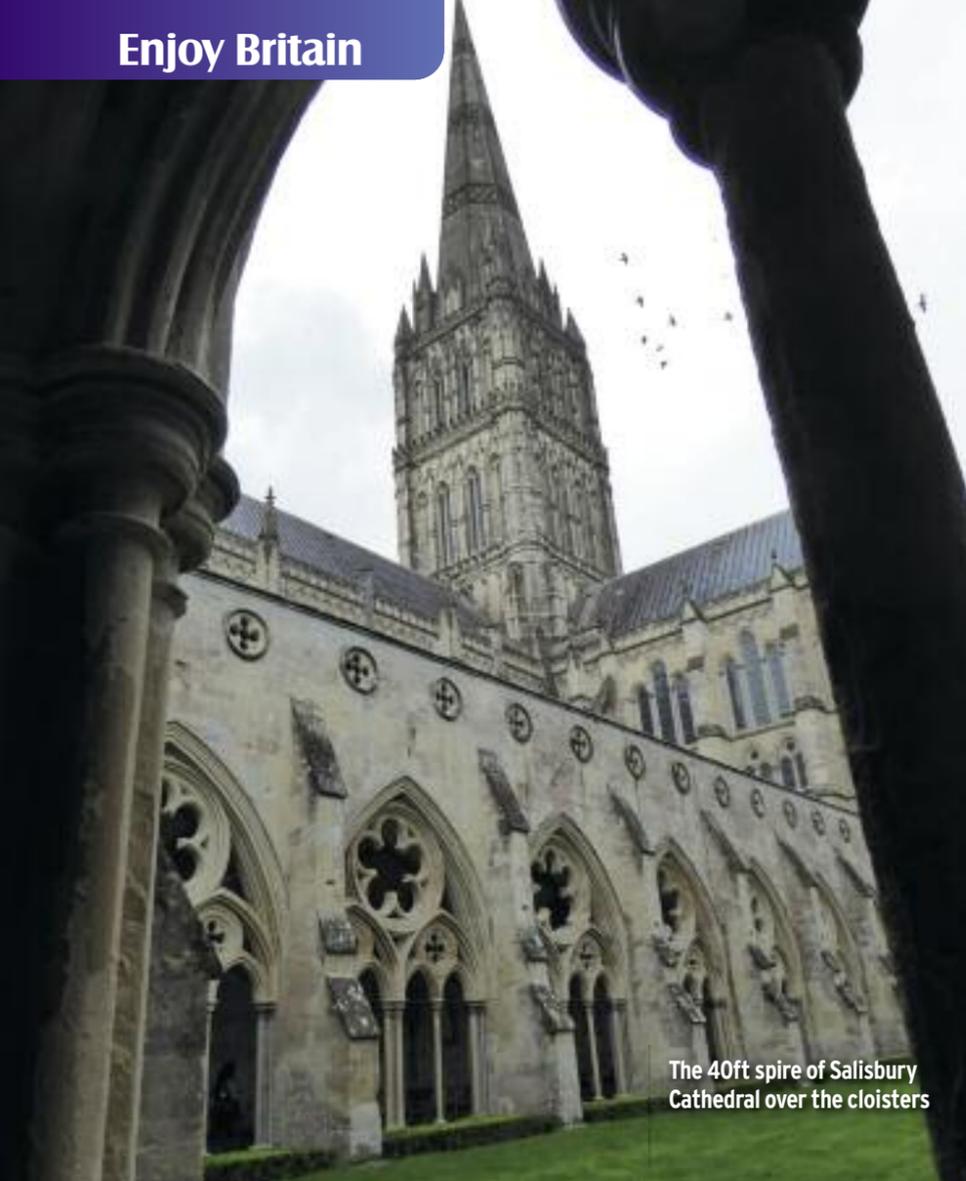


Isambard Kingdom Brunel at STEAM

who was the successful purchaser and it was he who was the last person to privately own Stonehenge.

English Heritage now looks after the monument, and the National Trust the land surrounding it.

As a site recognised all over the world - President Obama ticked it off his bucket list when he visited - Stonehenge is not



The 40ft spire of Salisbury Cathedral over the cloisters

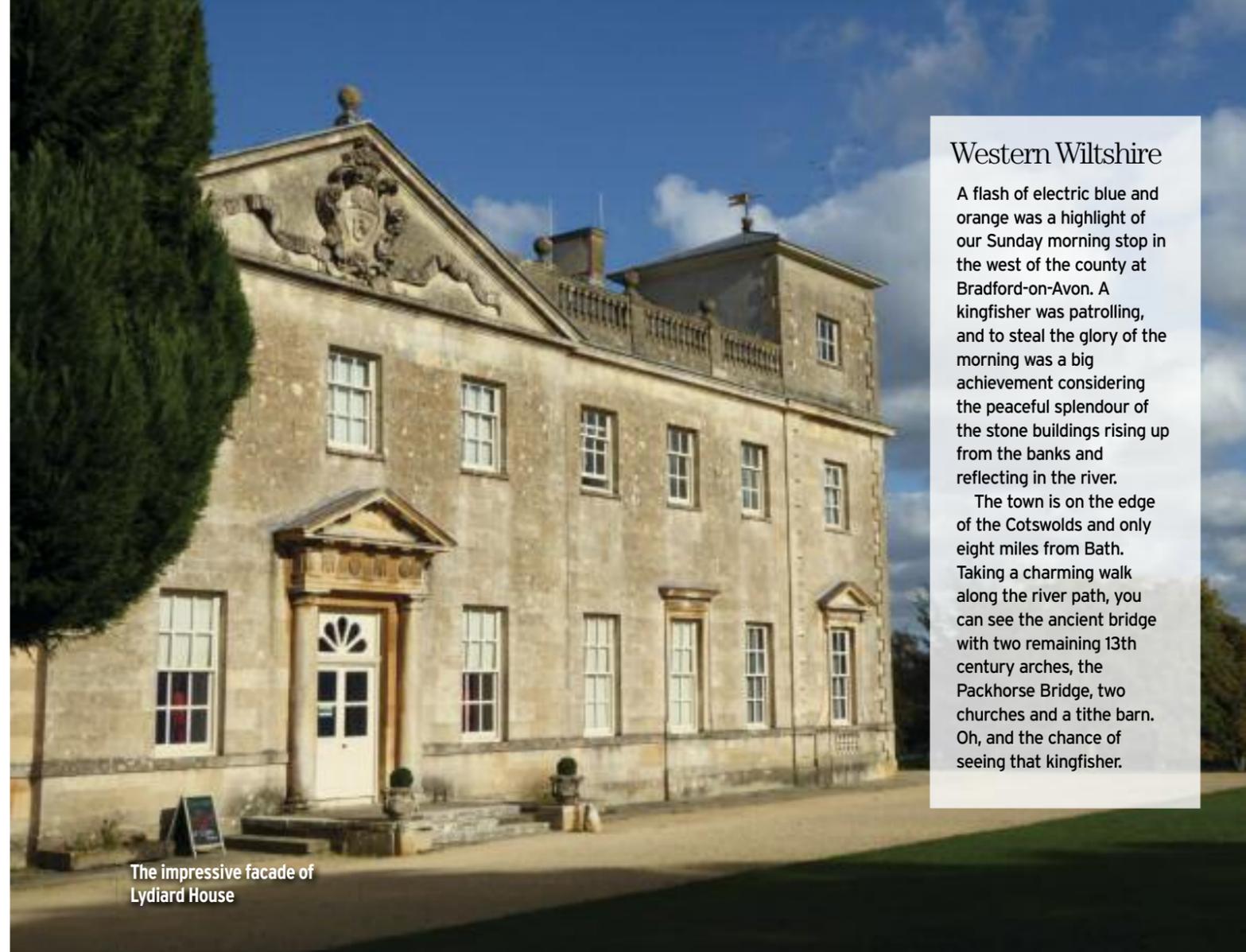
cathedral with the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. The cathedral has one of the four remaining original manuscripts of the charter. The others are at the British Museum and Lincoln Cathedral.

The charter is undergoing more restoration work before being the centrepiece of a special exhibition in the Chapter House which will be launched in early March.

The new Magna Carta Exhibition will present the world's best-preserved original 1215 Magna Carta document in its historical context. It will tell the story of the struggle between King John and his barons using displays, other media, artefacts, interactive stations and film that will help to shed light on how medieval documents like the Magna Carta were made. It is immaculately hand-scribed on vellum made from animal skin.

Some of the cathedral's other rare medieval documents, which reveal how and when the Magna Carta came to Salisbury, will also be put on public display. A selection of objects on loan from Salisbury Museum and other sources will tell other parts of the medieval story.

Magna Carta is often described as the foundation stone of English liberty as it established the principles of limiting authoritarian rule, independent justice



The impressive facade of Lydiard House

Western Wiltshire

A flash of electric blue and orange was a highlight of our Sunday morning stop in the west of the county at Bradford-on-Avon. A kingfisher was patrolling, and to steal the glory of the morning was a big achievement considering the peaceful splendour of the stone buildings rising up from the banks and reflecting in the river.

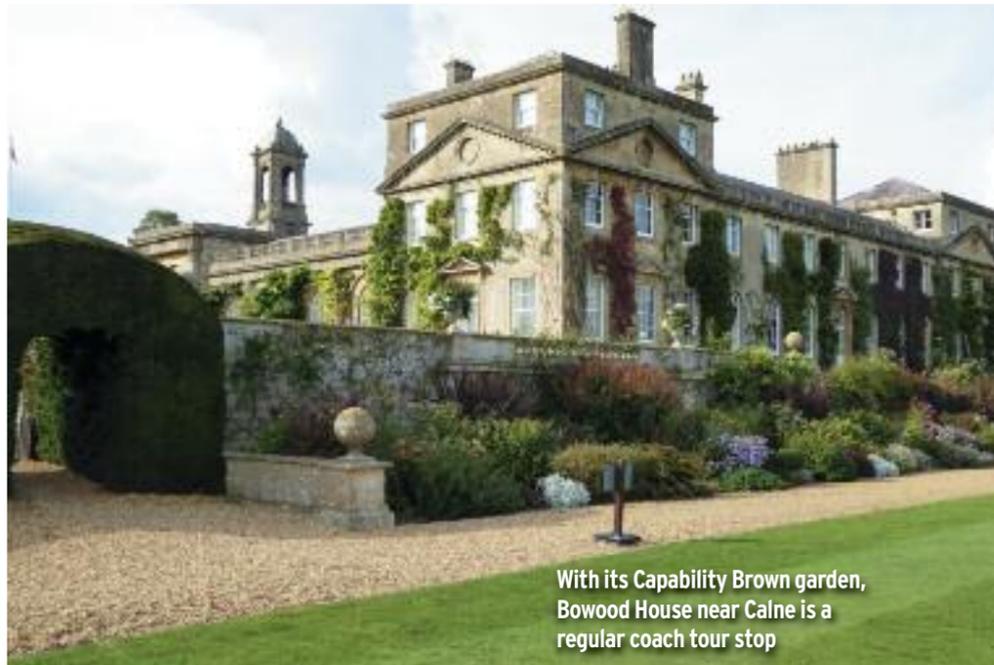
The town is on the edge of the Cotswolds and only eight miles from Bath. Taking a charming walk along the river path, you can see the ancient bridge with two remaining 13th century arches, the Packhorse Bridge, two churches and a tithe barn. Oh, and the chance of seeing that kingfisher.

the only wonder of Wiltshire. My coach tour of the county was not only an opportunity to really see and enjoy the airy landscape but also to wonder at the ingenuity of mankind through the ages in creating great political structures as well as great buildings and innovations.

Old Sarum, the Iron Age site of Salisbury, is a short drive from Stonehenge. From the earth and stone ramparts of the ruined fort you can see the outline of the first Salisbury Cathedral. In the other direction you have a magnificent panorama of Salisbury, two miles to the north, dominated by the new cathedral and its 404ft spire.

New is probably not the most accurate term as the cathedral was built in the 13th century and the spire itself more than 600 years old!

This is a big year for Salisbury and the



With its Capability Brown garden, Bowood House near Calne is a regular coach tour stop

“English Heritage has done a great job of re-presenting a monument that attracts 1.25 million visitors a year”

and trial by jury, as well as many other human rights.

Salisbury Cathedral and its beautiful setting of Cathedral Close was a highlight of my tour. Just as the Magna Carta exhibition gives a vivid insight into medieval politics, there's an unexpected glimpse into the real character of one of Britain's most misunderstood 20th century Prime Ministers – Sir Edward Heath.

Ted Heath, as he was universally known, was PM from 1970 to 1974 in some of the most turbulent of modern political times. It was the height of the Northern Ireland Troubles when the

Stormont Parliament was suspended. There were two highly disruptive miners' strikes, leading to the infamous 'three-day week'. Heath also successfully grappled with negotiations to take the UK into the European Union.

As leader of the Opposition and then Conservative premier, Heath's character as portrayed in public and on television was deemed rather stiff, formal and cold.

Heath lived at Arundells, a beautiful old home in Cathedral Close, from 1985 until his death in 2005. The house is now open to group visits and the tour reveals Heath's true character as charming, witty, warm and kind. Our guide, a former



A harvest display in Salisbury Cathedral

police protection officer who served at Arundells, revealed that Heath's lifestyle was modest. The home is full of mementoes of his political career and his years as a successful yacht racer. His

The view across the park from Bowood House



Passport to Wiltshire

Getting there

Most regional coach tour operators feature a variety of tours to Wiltshire. They include:

- From the West Midlands, Parrys International has a 'Wonders of Wiltshire' tour with 13 departures from March through to October in 2015 with prices from £139.50 for two nights' dinner, bed and breakfast, staying at the Hilton Swindon. The three-day tour includes visits to Lacock, Salisbury, the market town of Devizes, the World Heritage Site of Avebury, Bourton-on-the Water and Gloucester. Tel: 01922 414576, website: (www.parrys-international.co.uk)

- Johnsons Coaches has a five-day tour staying in Chippenham with visits to Bradford-on-Avon, Bath including the Roman Baths, and Bowood House and Gardens. Four nights' DBB from £499 with departures in April and October. Tel: 01564 797000, website: (www.johnsonskoaches.co.uk)

- From the East Midlands, Skills has a three-day tour departing in May, August and September and featuring Bristol and Bath as well as a day visit to Salisbury and Stonehenge. From £159pp for two nights staying in Bristol. Tel: 0845 666 5544, website: (www.skills.co.uk)

- National operator Shearings has five-day tours to Bournemouth running monthly from May through to September and including a day trip to see the Magna Carta and Salisbury Cathedral. From £329pp for four nights' half-board. Tel: 0844 822 6866, website: (www.shearings.com)

- The website of the Coach Tourism Council (www.findacoachholiday.com) will search for tours from all over Britain, including ones featuring Wiltshire

- Still in the west of Wiltshire is Lacock Abbey, a medieval nunnery turned into a family home and the birthplace of photography. Henry Fox Talbot's family owned the abbey and in 1839 a tiny image of one of its mullioned windows was the foundation of modern photography. The National Trust has the Fox Talbot Museum in its visitor centre.

Another beautiful old house and estate to visit in this part of Wiltshire is Bowood House, near Calne, home of the Marquis of Landsdowne. It is simply stunning - from the gardens and view across the lake to the art, furniture, décor and artefacts on show.

The restaurant serves up a pretty good Sunday lunch, too.

personal collection of art is displayed, as well as the tasteful décor.

Highlights for me were his first-floor study overlooking the immaculate garden that runs down to the banks of the River Avon, and the dining room where every other Sunday he hosted lunch for an eclectic mix of guests.

Heath was a popular resident. He raised close to £1m for the cathedral restoration and enjoyed and conducted musical events there.

Across the Choristers' Green is the National Trust's Mompesson House, another beautiful Queen Anne town house.

It boasts magnificent plasterwork, fine period furniture and a graceful oak staircase. In addition, the Turnbull collection of 18th century drinking glasses is of national importance. The walled garden has

a pergola and traditionally planted herbaceous borders.

It was used as a set for the 1995 film of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* starring Emma Thompson, Hugh Grant and Kate Winslet, and to mark the 20th anniversary of its release a new exhibition features costumes from the film, as well as historic Regency outfits and other items. The exhibition draws a connection between the Dashwood sisters from the novel and the Portman sisters who lived at Mompesson during Jane Austen's time.

Find out more

- Visit Wiltshire has information and latest news for visitors, including details of and specific websites for all the places mentioned in this feature. Website: (www.visitwiltshire.co.uk).

Royal Wootton Bassett

My tour had started a couple of days earlier at a town previously little known, which became famous for its compassion in honouring the returning fallen British servicemen and women who lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan - Royal Wootton Bassett.

The town was given its royal status by the Queen in recognition of its role in giving grieving families a focal point to see their loved ones reach home soil and be given their due respectful and solemn welcome.

The main street of the town is instantly recognisable from the TV news coverage. It was a sombre drive through, thinking of the significance of the place.