

# Nearby voyages of discovery

The mission is to take a long weekend away without adding substantially to our personal carbon footprint (not that I've got any idea what our environmental shoe size happens to be). Inspiration comes from the Culture-All campaign launched by Hampshire County Council to promote attractions which might be taken for granted or maybe aren't widely known. But could it pass the ultimate test....

Pack your bags, I said to the family, we're going to Basingstoke for the weekend. Actually that's a cheap shot. The town has reinvented itself with an orchestral season which is the best in the south outside of London, as well as developing a brand new town centre shopping mall. But the children aren't aware of that. They just know it's not Centre Parcs.

We start by taking a turn on the Basingstoke Canal, although ironically, the canal doesn't quite stretch to Basingstoke anymore. There's a tunnel leading to the final stretch which needs restoring, but now it's home to a colony of rare bats who can't be disturbed.

There are a number of companies offering the hire of a canal boat for a 'perfect relaxing break', but with twenty-nine locks to get through (at twenty minutes a go) that seemed like two days of hard labour to cover the thirty-two miles from Odiham to where the 'Basingstoke' connects up with the Wey Navigational south of London. Better to take a 'public' trip on the John Pinkerton (named after the chap who was given the contract to build the canal in the first place some 200 years ago). The 67ft narrowboat is operated by the commercial offshoot of the Surrey & Hampshire Canal Society,

and in twenty years has taken some 100,000 visitors for a two-hour cruise in the summer months.

Interestingly, Hampshire and Surrey county councils, not British Waterways, jointly own the canal, which was restored after it dawned on everyone that filling it in would probably be a costlier option. It's static water - there's no flow like in a river - and at 2ft 6ins deep, falling overboard would be embarrassing rather than life threatening. At one point, a trout stream runs under the canal.



Odiham Castle

The boat is fully licensed, and it's quite amusing to hear the skipper announce from the galley that "the kettle has boiled". At a walking pace, with the gentle thrum of the engine, this is a very relaxing experience, the idyll broken only briefly when young son spotted a fish in the clear waters and at the top of his voice shouted 'Shark'.

We turned around at Odiham Castle, which is a ruin but not without historical interest. King John spent his last night here before travelling to Runnymede to sign the Magna Carta. The French later laid seige to the castle for two weeks and were amazed to find that it was defended by just a handful of soldiers. Henry the Third commissioned repairs (which required twenty cartloads of lead at 27/6d a time). In 1236 he gave the castle to his young widowed sister Eleanor, who then married the French nobleman Simon de Montfort. King David the Second of Scotland was imprisoned here for three years before a ransom was paid in 1349, but by the mid 15th century it was a ruin. The canal was subsequently cut through its outer bailey.

Already then, Culture-all had proved a point. I must have driven through and around



Milestones

Odiham a hundred times, but I never realised before that there was a castle here.

The short car journey to the Hampshire Court Hotel in Basingstoke itself was something of a shocking return to the twenty-first century, although it's not a complete surprise that traffic on the M3 should match the pace of a canal boat. The Hampshire Court describes itself as contemporary, which thankfully means the use of light coloured wood rather than the dark, colour clashing style which passes for modernity.

They really mean it when they use the description 'suite'. We're talking two substantial rooms - one was furnished with a dining table and eight chairs, but there was still space for an armchair and two single beds plus side cabinets, without it being cluttered. Bedrooms have LCD television with satellite stations, a walk-in shower with a head the size of a dinner plate, and a fridge, which saves emptying out the minibar to make space for your own purchases. The beds are fine, if from head to toe the occupant doesn't extend to more than six feet.

Stunning is the word I'd use to portray the size and scope of the gym, as big as most stand-alone facilities, with more televisions than the average branch of Curry's, and completely up-to-date equipment. Then there are the two indoor pools, one for families, the other for adults. And the five indoor tennis courts and three outdoor proper clay courts complete with sweeper to use between sets; add £8 an hour to your bill for the latter.

The brasserie is the informal dining area (we didn't want to be child-unfriendly in the restaurant

with flagging fledglings). The menu includes: Roast chicken club sandwich of American proportions (£9.95); 'Home-made' beer battered cod in real ale from the local Itchen Valley brewery, with 'home-made' chips and mushy peas (£13.95); Stilton and watercress tortellini with roasted red pepper pesto (£12.50). The ice cream is also made locally, from a pedigree herd grazing just up the road from the hotel.

Next morning we're at Milestones, best described as an open-air museum of replica shops and factories, including a railway station, but with everything actually inside a building the size of an aircraft hanger.

Miss Speakwell is taking a class in the schoolroom after handing out slate pencils and boards (the sound made by this combination makes chalk on blackboard mellifluous by comparison). After telling the assembled pupils that 'corporate punishment are two of my favourite words', she quickly runs through what a lesson in Victorian times was like (albeit without indulging that passion for the cane).

It isn't the only interaction twixt visitor and museum. There's a dressing up area, complete with full-length mirrors so children can try on the garb of their predecessors, while outside the greengrocer's, they can weigh up the produce from the baskets in the window display.

In the Portsea Island Mutual Co-operative Society shop across the cobbled street there's an advertisement for a position - Boy for Grocery Work. 74 hours a week. Wages 8/- a week. Back in Edwardian times, the shop in real life,

we learn, would have been open from eight in the morning to nine at night most days.

On the Thornycroft bus parked up round the corner, the sign warns passengers that ‘smoking and spitting is strictly forbidden - 40/- penalty’. The company originally made steam-powered trucks and moved production from Chiswick to Basingstoke in 1898 where it occupied a twenty-acre site. The company’s shipbuilding activities were transferred from west London to Southampton six years later. Elsewhere there’s a fork-truck from that other nearby industrial leviathan Lansing Bagnall. And the opportunity to muse that the contemporary manifestation of that company, Linde, should have recently decided to cease manufacturing in the town.

Much is made here of what could be described as industrial heritage. Two of the country’s leading manufacturers of traction engines were located in the south - Wallis & Stevens at Basingstoke, and W Tasker & Sons of Andover - and Milestones has examples of their endeavours.

In the toy shop there’s another insight into our manufacturing past in the display of Minibrix, the all-rubber interlocking and unbreakable building blocks produced by the Premo Rubber company of Petersfield. At the gift shop (real rather than replica), old penny pieces can be purchased to exchange for traditional confectionery at the sweet shop (replica but also real).

And then it’s a short drive to Whitchurch Silk Mill, which sounds like just the kind of museum that a child would fake illness to avoid visiting. Couldn’t be more wrong of course, which kind of proves just what an important initiative Culture-all is proving to be. For a start, this is a working museum - during the week you can see the old machinery clicking and clacking to produce silks for interior designers as well as for television and film costume drama. Secondly, there are plenty of opportunities for the kids to use the hand looms and do some weaving of their own. Which really is living history, because in the 1830s, thirty-nine of the mill’s hundred employees were under thirteen years of age.

By the cafe area there’s a model watermill

where children have to put in place gears and belts to enable a bell to ring when the wheel is turned. There is also a box of Victorian costumes for them to try on, and a display of labourer’s smocks which look rather comfortable compared to the ‘starchy’ garb of today.

Although it’s too cold for silk worms to do their stuff in north Hampshire, the mill has been weaving silk since 1817. The silk linings for Burberry raincoats were made here (Thomas Burberry, whose own factory was in Basingstoke, had married into the Hide family which owned the mill). James Hide continued to manage the mill until his death in 1955 at the age of ninety-two. Eventually the mill was owned by Ede and Ravenscroft of Chancery Lane, makers of legal and academic gowns. But by 1985 it was facing closure. Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust acquired building and contents and leased it to the Whitchurch Silk Mill Trust.



Whitchurch Silk Mill

So does a Culture-all weekend away hit the right buttons? The difficulty is getting over the psychological hurdle of arranging to stay overnight when it’s barely an hour’s drive

home. But when we got back, the kids gave us the answer. When can we go again, they asked.

A Culture-all passport allows unlimited access to all Hampshire County Council paid-for entry museums, attractions, country parks, plus free parking @ £69 a year for the family. [www3.hants.gov.uk/culture-all](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/culture-all)

Hampshire Court Hotel - weekend break including breakfast about £168 per room for two-nights. [www.qhotels.co.uk](http://www.qhotels.co.uk)

Basingstoke Canal - family ticket on the John Pinkerton cruise, £15. [www.basingstoke-canal.co.uk](http://www.basingstoke-canal.co.uk)  
[www.basingstoke-canal.org.uk](http://www.basingstoke-canal.org.uk)

Milestones Living History Museum - family ticket £22. [www3.hants.gov.uk/milestones](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/milestones)

Whitchurch Silk Mill - family ticket £9.25. [www.whitchurchsilkmill.org.uk](http://www.whitchurchsilkmill.org.uk)

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