

HIDE and SEEK

Be warned: this seemingly serene corner of England has more than a few surprises in store.

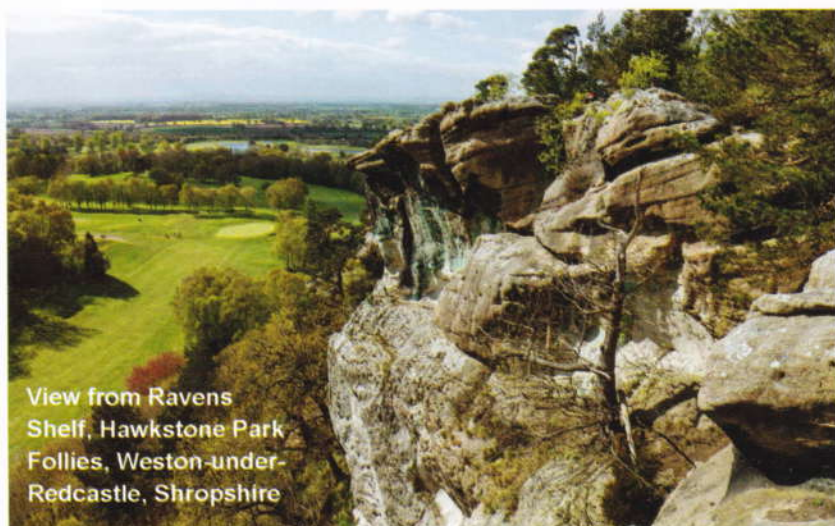
Words by Helen Werin; Photography by Robin Weaver

"Let Shropshire surprise you!" the tourist bump said. What we hadn't reckoned on was having chills sent down our spines at a Cold War exhibition by the knowledge that we were never more than four minutes away from annihilation. Or, for that matter, edging blindly through a pitch black tunnel and emerging in a narrow, slippery gorge beneath a fantasy land of grottoes, caves, towering bridges and monuments. This was all compounded by the sense that we were in a remote part of England, a feeling hit home by not being able to see a hamlet, village, indeed any development, from our 100ft viewpoint on a tower.

Samuel Johnson, with whom I have a fascination, reckoned Shropshire to be "abounding with striking scenes and terrific grandeur". With the thought of the rejuvenated mood I've always returned in on previous visits

to the county, you can perhaps appreciate that the lure of Shropshire was irresistible.

We eased into our itinerary wandering through gorgeous 'rooms' of blooms at one of the loveliest gardens we have ever visited. We certainly weren't surprised by BBC Gardeners' World presenter Chris Beardshaw's description of Wollerton Old Hall as "possibly the most beautiful personal garden created in the last 25 years". What came as a surprise to me was the appeal that each 'room' held for our teenage daughter, Sophie. Camera constantly clicking, she skipped enthusiastically from one dazzlingly bright display to the next, capturing the exuberance of the tulips and oriental poppies. There's so much inspiration and so many design ideas here to take home. Beyond an arch, behind a wall or at the end of a formal yew walk, we moved between



View from Ravens Shelf, Hawkstone Park Follies, Weston-under-Redcastle, Shropshire



The Monument, Hawkstone Park Follies, Weston-under-Redcastle, Shropshire

sundial and rose gardens, a well garden and a shade garden, past tinkling water features and summerhouses, surrounded by the most extraordinary colours and scents.

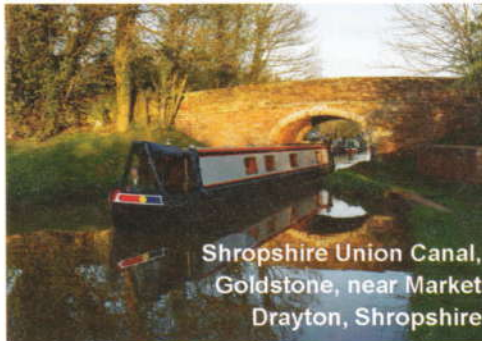
Our appreciation of another fabulous garden at Hodnet Hall was only slightly dampened by the onset of rain. As the heavens opened, the weather brought an added bonus; that gloriously heady smell of flowers and grass. Indeed, I'd been warned that the gorgeous scents hit you on leaving the parking area. I spent the entire afternoon with my nose in sodden bushes and soggy blooms, taking in their perfume, while Sophie leapt over stepping stones and bridges across the Paradise Pool and a pike pool and dodged drifts of falling petals along the magnolia walk. We skirted an early 17th century tithe barn and dovecote to reach a kitchen garden. This, as you'd expect, stirred up empty stomachs, so we beat a speedy retreat to the tearooms for some coffee and cakes. Had the weather been brighter we could have enjoyed them at a table on the lawn.

We based ourselves near Market Drayton, with its landmark buttercross (1824) and several fine black and white buildings including the Tudor House and the Abbott's House; though these you have to actively seek out among the usual high street scene. This otherwise modest town's claim to fame is as the 'home of gingerbread'. After breakfast,



Tudor House Hotel,
Market Drayton,
Shropshire

Wollerton Old Hall Garden,
Shropshire



Shropshire Union Canal,
Goldstone, near Market
Drayton, Shropshire

while still waiting for Sophie to emerge from her slumber, and early evenings were spent strolling the towpath of the Shroppy – the Shropshire Union Canal. We crept past dozens of tiny ducklings darting across the water; the only sound that of a heron's wings as it finally took notice of us stalking it.

Such unfamiliar peace (Sophie did not accompany us on these strolls) had lulled us in to a blissfully tranquil state, so it was quite a shock to hear an alarm shrieking ... "you have five minutes to take cover" as we nipped across the border into Cheshire to enter the Hack Green Nuclear Bunker through massive blast doors.

That unnerving experience billed as 'all the terror of a nuclear attack without the radiation' might sound just a bit 'cheesy', but the noisy warning – and ubiquitous yellow and black radiation warning signs – were more than enough to scare Sophie. "Am I going to get irradiated?" she kept asking, despite our repeated denials. Who could blame her? She'd read the tourist blurb which claimed that the only thing missing from the experience is the radiation sickness and a slow lingering death!

So, not entirely reassured, she balked at the idea of going inside an airless and dimly lit concrete room which shuddered and shook with the replicated sound of a nuclear attack. By the time she emerged from the vast underground complex she was full of enthusiasm, especially as she had homework on the subject of nuclear war. This visit would definitely give her essay the 'edge' as she read about the government's preparations for nuclear war, learned of the lives of those who worked here and explored a maze of eerie rooms filled with life support equipment, a decontamination unit and even a BBC studio.

The complex would have been an entirely self-contained centre of regional government had nuclear war broken out



The Swiss Bridge,
Hawkstone Park Follies, Weston-
under-Redcastle, Shropshire

The Secret Bunker,
Hack Green, near
Nantwich, Cheshire



and was built to survive a one megaton explosion. Members of the Royal Observer Corps worked from here; we studied a nuclear fallout display on a wall which would plot radioactive fallout. Among other intriguing displays is a telephone with a green handle which would have been used as a hotline to the Queen in the event of a nuclear emergency. The generators here could supply enough to light up a small town, yet all that is visible from the outside is an aerial mast for the transmitting and receiving equipment and a concrete blockhouse.

By now Sophie was intrigued, hence the success of our visit next day to RAF Museum Cosford (free entry), initially planned for her dad, Robin, to look at



Hodnet Hall Gardens,
Shropshire

the impressive displays of more than 75 aircraft.

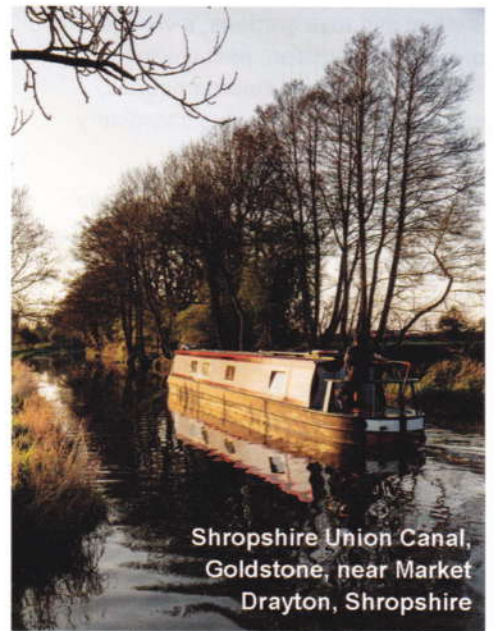
Beyond the vast halls housing, among others, flying 'legends' such as the world's oldest Spitfire, the massive Belfast transport craft, rockets, experimental jets and a Red Arrows' Gnat lay the National Cold War Exhibition.

What a fascinating and deeply disconcerting experience this was; a real eye-opener. The exhibition really hits home the tensions between the super powers.

In need of some uplifting, we took off to Hawkstone Park Follies. We'd last visited soon after it was reopened in 1993 and instantly regretted leaving our older children with grandparents, knowing that they would love all the hidey holes and tiny paths through the foliage leading to the spooky grottoes and lookouts.

Sophie, who likes to climb trees and rocks and explore caves, was in her element at Hawkstone. Despite not usually liking any landscape without so much as a bump or a hillock, I was intrigued by the view across to The Wrekin and the mountains of North Wales having climbed around 150 steps up the slender Monument (1795). I'm still puzzling over the claim that 12 counties can be seen from the top, though!

There are various routes around Hawkstone Park Follies, the shortest of which is one hour, the longest about three hours. I couldn't tell you which we took; there were so many distractions and enticing paths and steps leading this way and that I'm not even sure that we saw everything. One moment we'd be strolling the Terrace Walk laid out on top of a high natural cliff opposite Grotto Hill; the next we'd



Shropshire Union Canal,
Goldstone, near Market
Drayton, Shropshire

be creeping through a hermit's summer residence. Names like The Squeeze, The Awful Precipice, Ship's Beak and Rustic Sofa lured us onwards. At one point, negotiating some rather slippery steps into a chasm, we lost sight of Sophie and then heard her voice coming from high above us. There she was, perched on the narrowest of footbridges known as the Swiss Bridge. I could only be thankful that the bridge was rebuilt three years ago; before that, it had only one handrail.

As we approached the grotto we could hear squeals of laughter coming from inside. The grotto is thought to have been a fifth century copper mine. Now it is a delightfully confusing myriad of passageways and pillars. Eventually we found a tunnel which led down and down to what is called The Serpentine, the gloomy gorge with moss clinging to its dripping sides. Sophie, once we'd caught up with her at last, raved: "I love it here!"

INFORMATION

www.shropshiretourism.co.uk

www.hawkstoneparkfollies.co.uk

www.hodnethallgardens.org

www.wollertonoldhallgarden.com

www.hackgreen.co.uk

www.rafmuseum.org

<https://www.flickr.com/gp/robin-weaver/Wu824f/>