

RUTLAND, motto 'Much in Little', punches way above its weight as a place to visit. **GARETH HUW DAVIES** took a trip to the smallest English county, just 18 miles by 17, and found a scenic slice of Middle England bursting with things to see and do. His list includes stone-built villages as pretty as the Cotswolds, a man-made lake as big as Windermere, specialist shops and fine-dine pubs.

1... CALL OF THE COUNTRY

THE poster at St Pancras Station was irresistible. 'Perfect for a short break ... a world away from London ... relaxing rural paradise with countryside activities and watersports.'

The train from the capital takes a recently reopened old route. My train trundled into Rutland over the three-quarter-mile Seaton Viaduct (built in 1878) across the Welland Valley. A seven-minute taxi drive from Oakham later and I was at Hambleton Hall (www.hambletonhall.com). This Victorian House from the county's foxhunting boom years has been converted into the very model of a countryside hotel. They have a simple vision. No spa, gym or golf course. Instead, old-fashioned luxury, a fine garden, views over Rutland Water reservoir, much cossetting and Michelin-star food.

2... FISHER KING

RUTLAND used to be the fox-hunting capital of England. The chase may be over, but the distinctive tally-ho landscape remains – wide grassy fields criss-crossed with hedges, with woods specially planted for cover.

The 21st Century alternative is osprey-watching. The great fish-hunter is back and breeding on Rutland Water. Two of the best places to watch it, and much other birdlife, are the Egletton and Lyndon Hill visitor centres ([\[water.org.uk\]\(http://water.org.uk\)\). But the closest encounters are from the lake cruiser Rutland Belle, which sails between April and October \(\[www.rutnet.co.uk\]\(http://www.rutnet.co.uk\)\).](http://www.rutland</p>
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3... SMALL WONDER

RUTLAND won back its 'independence' from neighbouring Leicestershire in 1997 when it became, once again, England's smallest county.

In Oakham, the county town, visit the Great Hall of Oakham Castle, a fine example of domestic Norman architecture. Built in 1190, this is one of the UK's oldest stone

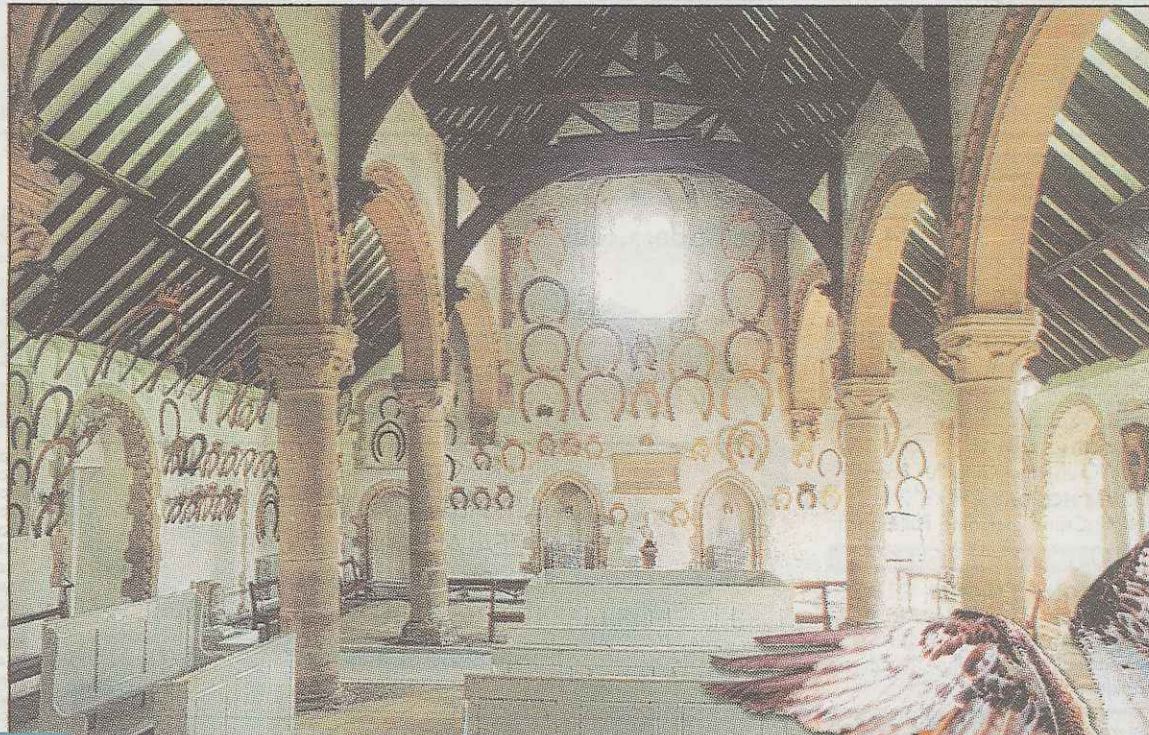
halls. The 240 ornamental horse-shoes hanging on the walls were given by royalty and peers on their first visit. It's the rule – Prince Charles handed over his horse-shoe recently.

Rutland is also famous for what isn't there – a McDonald's. Instead there is a fine defender of traditional bread-making. Hambleton Bakery in Oakham aims to reunite the public with 'proper bread'. Try its honey and nut bread, white crusty bloomer and Hambleton sourdough (www.hambletonbakery.co.uk; www.discover-rutland.co.uk).

4... SELECT SHOPPING

THE internet is one reason Rutland has so many thriving specialist stores. You can 'window-shop' online for antique French beds and hand-painted furniture from Swans of Oakham. Places such as this have a brighter future now they're connected to the world. But nothing beats walking through the door and pinging the bell.

In the Goldmark Gallery in Uppingham, for example, there are original prints, paintings, drawings, sculpture and ceramics to suit even a modest chequebook. The town is



IRON AND AWE: The horseshoes in Oakham Castle hall and, right, an osprey

ALAMY

the unlikely home of one of the UK's leading Harley-Davidson motorcycle dealerships, Sycamore Harley-Davidson. Live the two-wheel dream, if only for a one-day rental (www.sycamoreharleydavidson.co.uk).

5... PEWS AND VIEWS

RUTLAND has an outstanding crop of little stone-built villages. Add these names to any tribute to the English countryside – Ayston, Lyddington, Tickencote and Exton. Take a copy of Pevsner, the great church authority, and tick off intriguing churches. The one in Brooke, a tiny village around a triangular green, has rare old box pews. Ridlington Church has musical instruments like those used by Hardy's characters in *Under The Greenwood Tree*.

The biggest horticultural draw is Barnsdale – Britain's largest collection of individually designed gardens – created by the late Geoff Hamilton for his BBC series *Gardeners' World* (www.barnsdalegardens.co.uk).

6... GASTROPUB GRUB

SERVING good food is one of the best ways to preserve a village pub. One example of how far pub food has come is the terrific King's Arms at Wing. It qualifies as a gastropub but still looks every inch the country inn, with a bar dating from 1649, flagstone floors, low-beamed ceilings and open fires. My starter was grilled figs, goat's cheese, pistachio nuts and local honey, followed by wood-pigeon breast, foie gras, roast black pudding and rosti potatoes. It would be a wallet-breaker in London. Here, the bill was around £30 (www.thekingsarms-wing.co.uk; www.discover-rutland.co.uk).

THINGS
YOU
MUST
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RUTLAND

