



# Heritage weekend... STRATFORD

The cultural heart of Shakespeare country, this charming Tudor town on the River Avon offers much for a short break steeped in history

Feature Emily Hawkes

Above: Take in the breathtaking blooms at Anne Hathaway's cottage, the farmhouse where a young William Shakespeare courted his future wife

Set in picturesque rural Warwickshire, Stratford-upon-Avon is a quintessentially English yet unassuming town, the medieval half-timbered buildings that line the bustling streets an ever-present homage to its most famous son – and the world's most famous playwright – William Shakespeare.

Rich in scenic beauty, Stratford is in good company. With the Cotswolds to the south, the Malverns to the west, and Warwick Castle and Henley-in-Arden to the north, a taste of Olde England is apparent throughout this historic setting – a market town since before Shakespeare's day – where the River Avon runs through its heart, and boat rides and riverside views can be enjoyed.

There is much to marvel at for fans of the Bard, from the beautifully preserved Tudor homes and gardens directly linked with Shakespeare and his family, to The Royal Shakespeare Company, one of the most prestigious ensemble acting companies in the world, providing a showcase for his plays as well as a broader repertoire of contemporary pieces.

Walk a mile from the town centre to the hamlet of Shottery where the pretty thatched home of Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway's Cottage, has one of the most romantic views in England, thanks to its fragrant gardens and heritage orchards. In nearby Wilmcote, discover the childhood home of his mother, Mary Arden, where a working Tudor farm hosts a plethora of seasonal activities.

The largest exhibition of butterflies and insects in Europe can be found at the Butterfly Farm, a riot of colour in an exotic, rainforest environment. And for those simply wanting to meander and soak up the atmosphere, follow the river to the lovely Holy Trinity Church where Shakespeare is buried, take a guided tour on the Stratford Town Walk (or a ghost walk by night), and make sure to sample the local produce and crafts on offer at Stratford's Waterside Sunday market along the way.

From unique attractions, theatres and historic buildings, to the idyllic surrounding villages and countryside, this part of the world has a poetic ambience perfect for a delightful weekend away.



*Clockwise, from left:* The Townhouse hotel on Church Street (left of shot); find colourful insects at the Butterfly Farm; The Bell's Garland room; visit the Bard's schoolroom and Guildhall; afternoon tea at Hathaway Tea Rooms; stop for a pint at The One Elm; the contemporary landscape of Shakespeare's New Place; stay at The Arden Hotel; views of the RSC Theatres from the River Avon

## Where to stay

Offering a contemporary spin on a traditional inn, **The Townhouse** on Church Street is a 400-year-old, Grade-II listed gem opposite Shakespeare's Schoolroom and Guildhall. Each of the 12 boutique rooms is characterfully furnished, with a small decanter of port a lovely touch. Enjoy classic bistro cuisine in the restaurant, and a bespoke gin list while listening to students from King Edward VI School play piano in the bar. From £130 per night, B&B. 01789 262222; stratfordtownhouse.co.uk.

Find stylish en-suite accommodation and one of the most delicious afternoon teas around within the elegant façade of **The Arden Hotel**, perfectly situated overlooking the Royal Shakespeare Company Theatres and River Avon. From £160 per night, B&B, with complimentary parking. 01789 298682; theardenhotelstratford.com.

A former 18th-century coaching inn, **The Bell** in pretty Alderminster village retains its distinctive exposed beams and country charm, while offering nine beautifully appointed en-suite bedrooms where handmade biscuits from The Bell's own kitchen await. Complete your stay by sampling the award-winning food in the restaurant. From £100 per night, B&B. 01789 450414; thebellald.co.uk.

## Where to eat

Whether enjoying fish and chips or a picnic by the river, a pint in a historic landmark like **The Old Thatch Tavern**, the oldest pub in town, or tea and cake in vintage-themed **The Fourteas** café, Stratford has an eclectic mix to whet the appetite. With a cosy yet quirky interior, **Loxley's** Restaurant and Wine Bar on Sheep Street offers a warm welcome from breakfast through to dinner. Don't miss their Sunday roasts next to the open log fire, or grab a pre-theatre bite with a cocktail or two. 01789 292128; loxleysrestaurant.co.uk. Experience High Tea in one of Stratford's most historic properties at **Hathaway Tea Rooms**. The Grade II\* listed building retains all the atmosphere of a quintessential Tudor establishment, and the menu brims with sweet treats and English classics. 01789 264022; hathawaytearooms.com. And for a friendly neighbourhood pub with a modern Mediterranean vibe, swing by **The One Elm**, a stone's throw from Henley Street, for its bottomless brunch or a mean burger in the courtyard. 01789 404919; oneelmstratford.co.uk. ➤



Clockwise, from above left: Find fine cheese at Paxton & Whitfield; get a beautifully wrapped gift at Daisy Chain; visit Bonds for antiques and reclaimed finds. Below: Discover Shakespeare's Birthplace on Henley Street

## Where to shop

With a particular emphasis on locally sourced products, **Paxton & Whitfield** is a must for cheese lovers. From gruyère to giant wheels of gorgonzola, sample a mouth-watering selection of artisan cheeses and choose a chutney and some crackers to accompany it from this quaint store on Wood Street. 01789 415544; paxtonandwhitfield.co.uk.

For a contemporary gift or greeting card from its extensive range, **Daisy Chain Gift Company** on Chapel Street, or 'Shakespeare's Spine', offers everything from limited-edition prints, vintage postcards and stationery to candles and teatowels, as well as a bespoke gift-wrapping service. 01789 266688; daisychaingiftcompany.com.

And for a unique antiques, interiors and lifestyle destination just out of town, **Bonds** is home to 40 individual concessions who source, restore and reinvent everything from decorative antiques to vintage, retro and upcycled industrial pieces, as well as handcrafted bespoke sofas. Stop to admire the reclaimed garden statuary on the terrace with excellent Italian coffee from the café before you leave. 01789 297729; bondslifestyle.co.uk.

## Shakespeare's Birthplace

House manager Hannah Jones explains the historic significance of this humble 16th-century half-timbered house, Shakespeare's childhood home.

### Can you give a brief history of the property?

Shakespeare's parents were wealthy enough to own the largest house on Henley Street, where William was born and grew up, and spent the first five years of his marriage with Anne Hathaway. John Shakespeare lived and worked in the house for 50 years; he and wife Mary Arden had eight children, and the family home doubled as a glover's shop for John, with a barn and workshops in the backyard where he made fine leather. John died in 1601 and as the eldest surviving child, William inherited the house. He extended it and leased part of it, which became an inn called the Maidenhead. When Shakespeare died, he left the house to his eldest daughter Susanna, who left it to her only child, Elizabeth. Although married twice, Elizabeth had no children, so the house fell to a descendant of Joan Hart, one of Shakespeare's sisters. Owned by the Hart family until the late 18th century, the house was bought in 1847 for £3,000.

### How is the house presented today?

Costumed guides provide visitors with a true sense of Tudor life and today, the parlour, hall, workshop and bed chambers are furnished and decorated as the Shakespeares' home would have been back in 1574, when William was 11 years old. Rare items of middle class 16th-century furniture are set in the context of the replica textiles and other domestic items throughout the house, and the garden dating



to the mid-19th century is full of beautiful plants, many of which are mentioned in Shakespeare's plays.

### Why visit Shakespeare's Birthplace?

Exhibitions including *Famous Beyond Words* allow visitors to view rare artefacts and archives that explore Shakespeare's extraordinary story, and live performances by resident actors 'Shakespeare Aloud!' bring Shakespearian characters to life with daily live performances. From 16 September to 29 December, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is celebrating the 170th anniversary of the saving of the property with a new exhibition, telling the story of how notable literary and public figures of the day, including Prince Albert, Charles Dickens and Sir Robert Peel, campaigned to help save the house and raise the funds to bid for it at auction. 🍷

*Shakespeare's Birthplace is open daily, except Christmas Day. The Town Houses Pass (including Shakespeare's New Place and Hall's Croft) is valid for 12 months' unlimited entry; adult £18.50, concession £17.50, child £12, family £49. Visit [shakespeare.org.uk](http://shakespeare.org.uk).*