
BBC
EASTER WALKS Britain's 10 greatest pilgrimages
COUNTRYFILE
ISSUE 240 | APRIL 2026 | £5.99
TRAIL RUNNING SHOES RATED
The best for grip, comfort & parkrun
SPILLS, BILLS & BELLYACHES
Inside the battle for clean waterways
STEP INTO HISTORY
Neolithic wonders on Britain's oldest road
HIGHLAND HIKING
Walk on the rewild side in Scotland
Swallow
Dream islands
Pristine sands, subtropical gardens & tranquillity in the Isles of Scilly

healthspan

Joints slowing you down?

We got you

Opti-Turmeric®

Gets to work seven times faster than standard turmeric,[1] with advanced absorption and added vitamin C for joint comfort and mobility.[2]

So the miles don't stack up against you.

Less feeling it. More feeling free.

Trusted by millions since 1996.

healthspan.co.uk

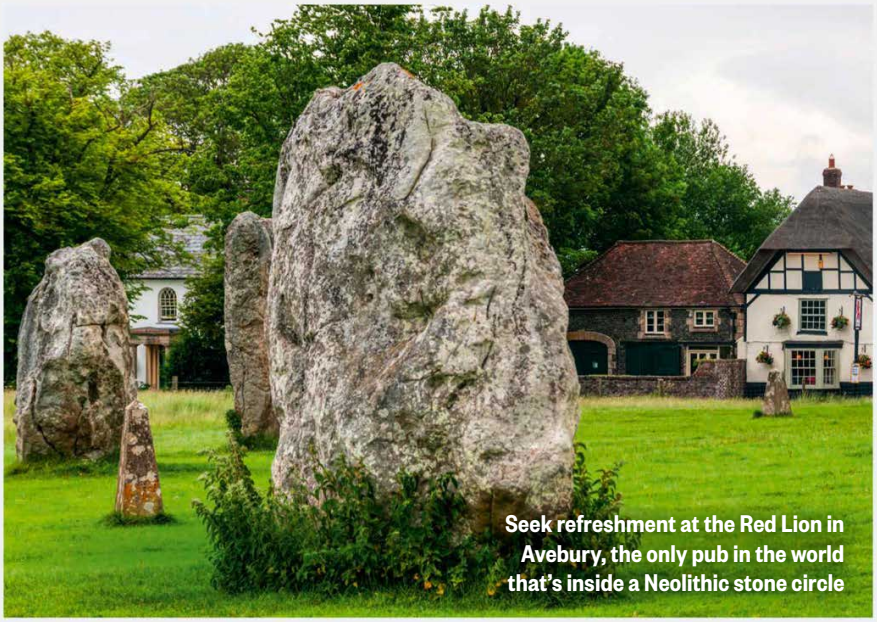
£5 off*

Use code: PA326CF

60 capsules | Was ~~£23.99~~

Now **£18.99**

[1] Each capsule contains 500 mg NovaSOL® Curcumin. This is a high potency, patented, water-soluble form of turmeric, which is the most bioavailable form of curcumin.
[2] Product contains vitamin C, which contributes to normal collagen formation for the normal function of cartilage and the normal function of the immune system.
*T&Cs apply: Get £5 off your first order worth £15 or over, use code PA326CF at checkout at Healthspan.co.uk or quote on freephone 0800 73 123 77. RRP £23.99. New customer only. Single use. Cannot be used in conjunction with another offer/subscription nor redeemed instore or at any other retailer. Offer valid until 26.05.26.



Seek refreshment at the Red Lion in Avebury, the only pub in the world that's inside a Neolithic stone circle

Step back in time

I remember visiting the caves at Pech Merle in southern France when I was a teenager. Discovered by some boys in the 1920s, these caves are home to extraordinarily well-preserved prehistoric cave paintings, including beautiful renditions of horses painted some 25,000 years ago. But what really blew me away were the human touches – handprints on the walls and, most exciting of all, footprints perfectly preserved on the cave floor. The idea I was now walking in the footsteps of people from thousands of years ago set my young mind all a flutter, and I became fascinated by our ancient ancestors.

And I still am, which is why I enjoyed Dixe Wills' feature about the Great Chalk Way so much (p22). Dixe's piece brought back memories of walks in and around Wiltshire: the wonder sitting atop the Uffington White Horse; sheltering from the rain in the entrance to West Kennett long barrow; and the gradual returning of sensation to my toes while tucking into a hot pie in the Red Lion in Avebury.

Walking in the footsteps of our ancestors is good for putting me in my place, and there's some comfort in that, I think. It's one of the reasons pilgrimage remains an enduring passion. So in our Top 10 feature this issue (p41), we hope there's more inspiration for walking with a bit of spirituality, regardless of creed. Happy Easter!

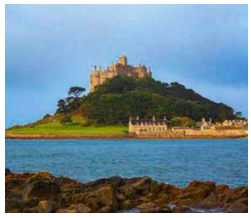
Paul McGuinness, editor

Don't miss our nature and countryside Plodcast, available on all podcast providers

COUNTRYFILE on TV

What to watch on *Countryfile* this month*

29 March



The winds of Storm Goretti stripped 80% of the tree cover from St Michael's Mount in Cornwall, radically altering this ancient tidal island. The team witnesses the Mount's recovery.

5 April

Countryfile visits Hampshire's Avon Valley where farmers and conservationists are working together to stem the steep decline of two icons of spring: hares and lapwings.

12 April

As the National Forest prepares to plant its 10 millionth tree, John Craven and Charlotte Smith head to the Midlands to explore how a bold post-industrial vision has transformed scarred mining land into thriving woodland, diverse habitats and community space.

19 April

Countryfile visits the Peak District National Park as it celebrates its 75th anniversary. The team discovers the significant threats to its wildlife, meets the people working to protect species such as the mountain hare and curlew, and learns about the region's unique story through the eyes of those entwined with its history.

BBC ONE BBC iPLAYER

OUR COLUMNISTS

John Craven, 'This shepherd's son helped shaped Britain', p18
"Thomas Telford transformed the face of rural Britain with his civil engineering masterpieces."

Adam Henson, 'Our quirkiest April traditions are very British', p17
"Hocktide was a rare day off for serfs who worked the land and was marked by a rustic battle of the sexes."

Nicola Chester, 'Learning to drive is a lifeline for rural youth', p98
"Obtaining a driving test has become a national crisis – and it especially affects those living in the countryside."

Photos: Alamy, Getty

*Exact content of programmes may vary

BBC
COUNTRYFILE

EDITORIAL
Group editor Paul McGuinness
Managing editor Matt Baird
Production editor Margaret Bartlett
Creative design lead Stacey Black
Creative designer Lauren Mulhearn
Picture editor James Cutmore
Picture researcher Lily Watts
Content and trends editor Daniel Graham
Nature Group digital lead Debbie Graham
Content creator Sophie Ellis

BRAND TEAM
Brand lead Robert Brock
CEO Andy Marshall

ADVERTISING AND MARKETING
Head of Market
Adrian Miles, 0117 300 8138,
Adrian.Miles@ourmedia.co.uk
Ad manager
Sophie Keenan, 0117 476 7436,
sophie.keenan@ourmedia.co.uk
Client partner
Amy Thacker, 0117 300 8858
amy.thacker@ourmedia.co.uk
Client partner
David D'Souza, 0117 476 7335
david.dsouza@ourmedia.co.uk
Brand sales executive
Antony Jago, 0117 300 8543,
Antony.Jago@ourmedia.co.uk
Inserts Laurence Robertson,
00353 876 902208,
Laurence.Robertson@ourmedia.co.uk

PRODUCTION
Production director Sarah Powell
Content operations coordinator
Katie Hood
Ad ops executive Charles Thurlow
Ad designer Parvin Sepehr

BBC STUDIOS/UK PUBLISHING
SVP global licensing Stephen Davies
Global director, magazines Mandy Thwaites
UK.Publishing@bbc.com www.bbcstudios.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND BACK ISSUES
Annual subscription rates (inc P&P):
UK/BFPO £61.75; Europe and Republic
of Ireland £72.50; rest of world £76.50

FRONT COVER IMAGE
Isaac Ogden, Isles of Scilly

HOW TO CONTACT US

To subscribe or for subs enquiries
Domestic telephone: 03330 162112
Overseas telephone: 01604 973720
Contact: www.ourmediashop.com/contactus
Post: *BBC Countryfile Magazine*,
PO BOX 3320, 3 Queensbridge, The Lakes,
Northampton NN4 7BF
To talk to the editorial team
Email: editor@countryfile.com
Telephone: 0117 300 8580 (answerphone;
please email rather than call)

Post: *BBC Countryfile Magazine*,
Eagle House, Bristol BS1 4ST
Advertising enquiries: 0117 300 8815

App support:
http://apps.immediate.co.uk/support

Syndication and licensing enquiries
(UK and international):
richard.bentley@immediate.co.uk
+44 (0)207 150 5168

@countryfilemag
@Countryfilemagazine
facebook.com/countryfilemagazine
countryfile.com

Download the official *BBC Countryfile Magazine* app from the Apple App Store, Amazon App Store or Google Play.

ourmedia
BBC Countryfile Magazine is published by Our Media Ltd under licence from BBC Worldwide.

MIX Supporting responsible forestry FSC® C015155
recycle
abc Jan–Dec 2025 33,770

The emerald-green Smeathman's furrow bee (*Lasioglossum smeathmanellum*) – this one's dusted in dandelion pollen – is one of four metallic sweat bees native to Britain. Like all sweat bees, this nesting species is attracted to the dissolved electrolytes of human sweat, but don't fear: they rarely sting. Smeathman's are essential pollinators across their range of Wales, southern England and Ireland.

Busy as a bee

Get active outdoors this spring with a subscription to *BBC Countryfile Magazine*

Check out this month's special subscription offer, page 20

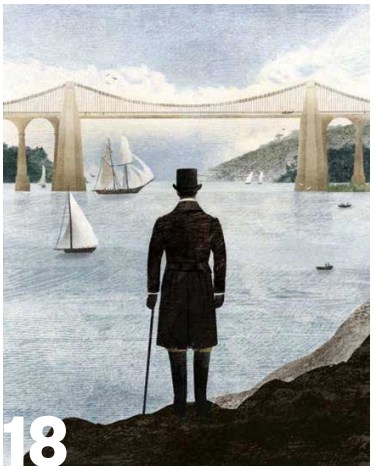
Photo: Phil Savoie/naturepl.com

APRIL 2026

Contents

CS Cover story

Grow plants from slices of tomato



Why Thomas Telford is a true hero

Explore stone circles, hillforts and ancient tracks in Wiltshire

Following a succession of scandals, just how clean is our water?

UP FRONT THIS MONTH

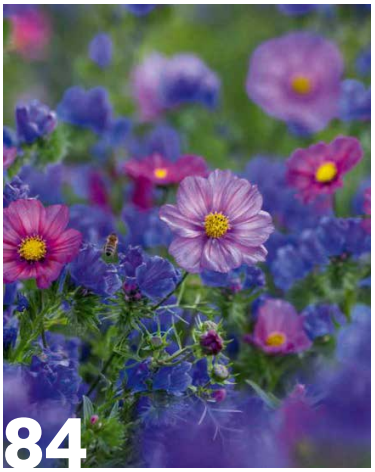
PAGES 8–16

- Celebrate 75 years of the Peak District National Park, the UK's first.
- Explore eerie abandoned buildings.
- Could the Dalmatian pelican make a comeback in Britain's wetlands?
- Woodland boost in the South Downs.
- What's coming up on the Plodcast.
- How to grow tomato plants at home from slices of shop-bought fruits.
- Meet the filmmaker revealing the hidden secrets of the underworld.

FEATURES

Feel the swell of optimism in the Cairngorms, where rewilding is reaping rewards

Wander the wonderful Isles of Scilly



Create your own cut-flower garden

REGULARS

ON THE COVER

Sailing between the Isles of Scilly is one of the great joys of a visit; find out how on p59


April
NATURE | TRAVEL | NEWS | VIEWS

The Monsal Valley basks in the glow of the Peak District National Park's 75th

The setting sun's golden rays bathe this idyllic vale in the heart of the Peak District National Park, created 75 years ago this April. Back in 1951, trains still chugged across the Headstone Viaduct en route between Buxton and Bakewell. Today, only walkers and cyclists traverse this triumph of Victorian engineering, following the glorious 8.5-mile Monsal Trail along the disused line. And walking is a focus of 75th anniversary celebrations, featuring ranger-guided outings, photo displays, talks, bell-ringing and more. **peakdistrict.gov.uk**

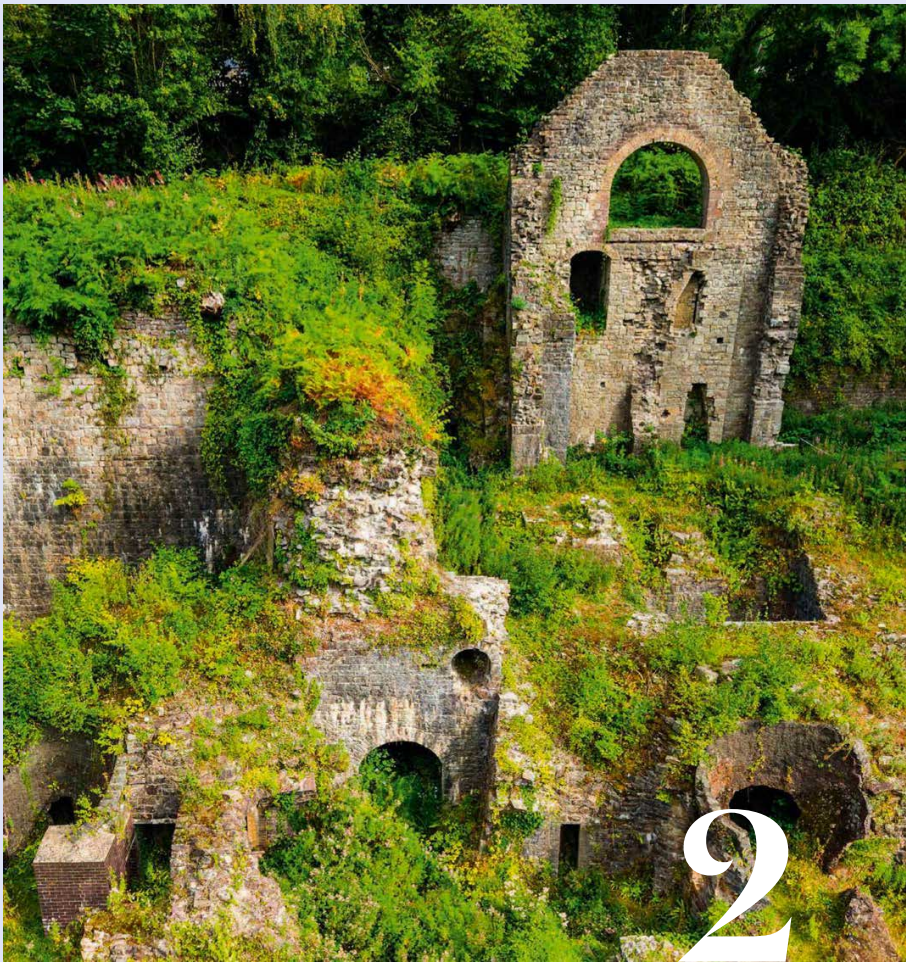
Photo: Francis Taylor

Abandoned buildings

From former asylums to tube stations and villages requisitioned by the army, Britain has an array of crumbling structures that have been left to nature. **Fergus Collins** picks his top seven

1 IMBER, WILTSHIRE

Lost in the rolling downs of Salisbury Plain lie the melancholy ruins of Imber. First recorded in Saxon times, the village reached a peak of 450 souls in the 19th century but dwindled. It was requisitioned by the army in 1943 to provide training for street fighting in preparation for war in Europe and was used to practice urban warfare for decades. Only the church of St Giles is preserved, and can be visited on special days. **imberchurch.org.uk**



2 CLYDACH IRONWORKS, MONMOUTHSHIRE

If you are lucky enough to be wandering the beechwoods of the spectacular Clydach Gorge in eastern Bannau Brycheiniog, you'll stumble across a great series of ruined arches, viaducts and buildings that once comprised Clydach Ironworks. Built in the 1740s but abandoned in the mid-19th century, they are in the process of being swallowed by vegetation. As the Clydach River crashes by, they have a feel of crumbling temples to forgotten gods.

3 THE STRAND STATION, LONDON

In bustling central London, among the layers of redevelopment and reinvention around Aldwych stands the small locked entrance to The Strand Underground station (later Aldwych Station). Once a branch of the Piccadilly Line, it opened in 1907 but was finally closed in 1994. Now, you can visit the abandoned ticket halls and platform on spooky guided tours via the London Transport Museum.

4 WITLEY COURT, WORCESTERSHIRE

This vast ruined Italianate mansion just north of Worcester was founded by the Foley family in the 17th century and expanded into a grand palace in the 19th century, latterly by the Earls of Dudley. Subsequent owners fell on hard times, then Witley Court was devastated by fire in 1937. Today it is a rather gaunt shell in the keeping of English Heritage, surrounded by magnificent formal gardens.

Photos: Alamy

3

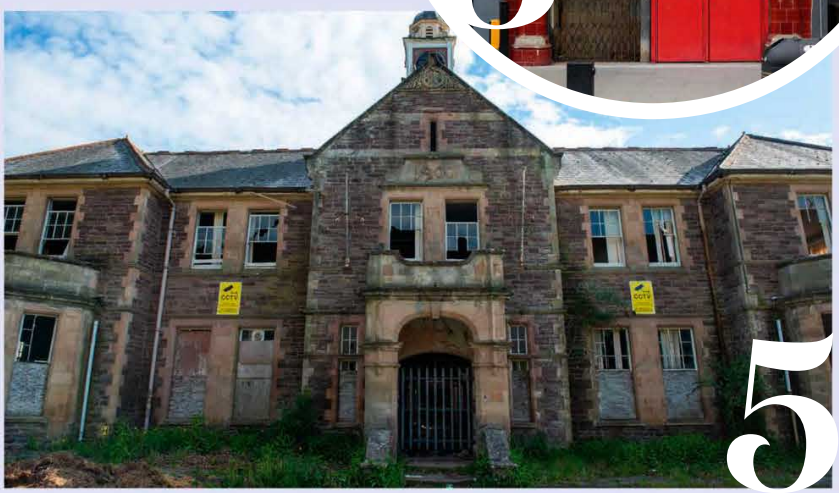
4

5 MID WALES HOSPITAL, POWYS

Police have had to warn ghost hunters away from this huge abandoned psychiatric hospital near the small town of Talgarth. Opened in 1903 as the Brecon and Radnor Joint Counties Lunatic Asylum, it made a welcome name change later in the 20th century but closed in 1999. Despite attempts to redevelop the site, it still lies desolate and brooding.

6 TURNER BROTHERS FACTORY

If there was one business to get out of in the 20th century, it was asbestos manufacture. A relic of this defunct industry survives as a vast, 30-hectare derelict factory beside the River Spodden in Rochdale. Long off-limits to the public due to the dangers of asbestos, most reports of it come from 'urban explorers', revealing eerily empty factory floors and mouldy ceilings.



5

7 CAIRNDHU HOUSE, NORTHERN IRELAND

Built in 1880 as a summer escape for a wealthy industrialist, Cairndhu House in County Antrim was sold to the government in 1947 and used as a convalescent home until its closure in 1986. Now, if paranormal investigators are to believed (that's a big if), it has become a convalescent home for ghosts and is regarded as Northern Ireland's most haunted location. The overgrown gardens have an eerie beauty to match. GF

6

7

THE ONCE-EXTINCT GIANT PELICAN COULD MAKE A UK COMEBACK

Studies investigate whether the largest bird to ever live in Britain could be reintroduced

To provide sufficient fish for a pelican population, experts say British wetland areas would need to be restored and protected

The largest bird to have ever lived in Britain might be reintroduced to British wetlands in sites across the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, Essex marshes and Somerset Levels. Nature restoration company Restore is conducting feasibility studies into bringing the awe-inspiring bird back to UK waters.

"Experts are of the view Britain is definitely worth exploring further [as to] whether the Dalmatian pelican could be reintroduced," says Benedict Macdonald from Restore.

The Dalmatian pelican is one of Europe's largest flying birds, with a wingspan of up to three metres. They require suitable nesting areas, abundant fish stocks and healthy, well-connected wetland habitats. The Dalmatian pelican was wiped out in Britain in medieval times due to wetland drainage, hunting and human disturbance. According to fossil records, they were particularly common in Somerset, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Gloucestershire and Yorkshire. Today, there are believed to be between 10,000 and 20,000 of them left in the world, with the largest colony found at Lake Mikri Prespa in Greece.

As the bird eats around 1.2kg of fish in a day, there has been opposition to this introduction from the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, warning that their reintroduction might harm fishing stocks.

But Rewilding Europe suggests the bird's return to our shores could encourage the large-scale restoration and protection of wetland habitats. "The Dalmatian pelican acts as an ambassador for a rich and interconnected wetland system in this part of Europe," says Laurien Holtjer, Rewilding Europe's head of communications. "As an iconic indicator species, supporting the comeback of the Dalmatian pelican can indirectly help to restore vast swathes of wetland, lake and marshy habitat that is likely to have a positive ripple effect on a multitude of other species." **Freya Parr**

Photo: Naturepl.com

The flower-strewn grassland of Seven Sisters Country Park hosts rare butterflies

WOODLAND BOOST PLANNED FOR NATIONAL PARK

South Downs NP aims to restore wildlife-rich habitats by 2031, including woodland equivalent to 4,200 football pitches

Visit Seven Sisters Country Park, in the east of South Downs National Park, in May and the abundance and diversity of insects is overwhelming, says park authority chief executive Siôn McGeever. You might spot butterflies including the rare Adonis blue plus various mining bees, reflecting effective habitat conservation work.

Now the national park authority has set out its five-year strategy for addressing nature loss, water shortages, river pollution, flooding and wildfires. Key goals include restoring or creating 3,300 hectares – more than 20 times the size of Hyde Park – of wildlife-rich habitat, and increasing woodland cover by 2,625 hectares (or 4,200 football pitches) by 2031.

To achieve this, says McGeevor, the park and partners will take advantage of government policies such as Biodiversity Net Gain, introduced via a law enacted two years ago requiring housebuilders and other developers to compensate for their impact on nature by restoring or creating habitats. Such companies may look to buy 'biodiversity units' from an external provider. The South Downs works with landowners in the park to help them prepare their land and sell these credits.

The authority is working with three large estates within its boundaries. "One of our largest nature restoration projects is at Halnaker Hill Farm," says McGeever. "Until two years ago it was very poor arable land, but we are working with them to convert it back to chalk grassland and dew ponds."

Another potential funding source is the Government's Environmental Land Management Scheme, which replaced subsidies previously distributed via the Common Agricultural Policy. Farmers are paid for the environmental benefits – such as restoring hedgerows, for example – they achieve on their land.

South Downs is the UK's newest national park, designated in 2010. Known for its chalk grasslands, it also has extensive woodland and lowland heaths. The authority is already working to increase access to the park for schoolchildren; the five-year plan additionally commits to engaging with 2,500 schools and delivering 500 nature-based activity sessions for young people.

With white-tailed eagles now breeding in the park, and species such as nightjars present in its northern heathlands, there is plenty of charismatic wildlife to excite residents and visitors alike. **James Fair**

Photos: Alamy, Lily Watts

The Plodcast

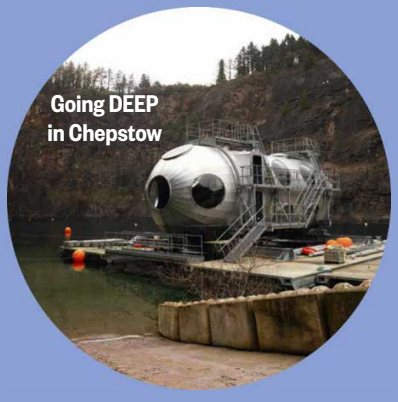
Tune your ears into our podcast this month*

7 April
Could humans become aquatic? The DEEP project, based at a flooded quarry on the Welsh borders, is creating habitats to enable people to live and work in the oceans.

14 April
Early spring is the best time to find basking adders – so the Plodcast heads to Herefordshire, exploring a stronghold of Britain's only venomous snake to learn its secrets.

21 April
Spend a day with detectorists Eleanor Bruce and Lucilla Gray looking for artefacts in a history-rich Essex landscape, and hear about their book *Things We Found in the Ground*.

28 April
Celebrated folk duo Will Pound and Delia Stevens join the Plodcast, sharing their music at Oldham's transformative Northern Roots urban farm.



Going DEEP in Chepstow

Our nature and countryside Plodcast is available on all podcast providers.
countryfile.com/podcast

*Episodes subject to change

Grow plants from slices of tomato

Grow new plants just from your weekly shop with tips from gardening expert Simon Akeroyd

Many of the ingredients you buy from the fresh fruit and vegetable aisles at the supermarket or grocery shop are bursting with potential energy, ready to grow and reward you with delicious edible crops if you provide them with the right conditions. All you need to do is bring your groceries home and give them the right environment and some TLC to enable them to grow.

Plants have three basic requirements in order for them to start growing. These are warmth, light and water. If you can provide plants (including many of your groceries) with these three conditions they should thrive.

The good news is you don't need a garden to grow many of the plants I've included in my book *Grow Your Own Groceries*. In many cases, all you need is access to a tap and a sunny windowsill. Some of the larger plants will need larger pots to allow them to get bigger, but that's basically it.

Nothing tastes better, in my opinion, than a tomato picked fresh from the vine that has been grown in your own soil and warmed by the sun, and they are so easy to grow. Enjoy the taste of the Mediterranean – starting with tomatoes from your local shops.

Tomatoes are usually either 'cordon' types or bush types. All the tomatoes I've grown from the supermarket have been the former. Each cordon plant will need a stake to support it as it grows.

Pinch out the tops when the plants get to about 2m high to encourage a bushier plant below (and more fruit). Your tomatoes will be ripe from midsummer onwards. If you're lucky enough to have a greenhouse or conservatory you can grow your tomatoes there and you'll have a far longer growing season than if they were outside.

Photos: **Jason Ingram**

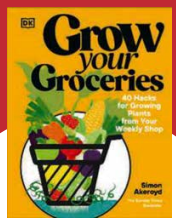
Simon Akeroyd is the author of over 30 gardening books and is a former garden manager for the Royal Horticultural Society. His next book *Way to Grow* (DK) is out on 9 April.

How to do it

Don't be put off if you think supermarket tomatoes don't taste that great; this is usually because they are picked too early and kept in storage for too long. The varieties themselves (of *Solanum lycopersicum*) are delicious. Getting tomato seeds to germinate is practically foolproof using this method. You might think it's a bit like adding tomato toppings to an earthy pizza – and the technique really is as simple as that.

YOU WILL NEED:
A tomato
Sharp knife
Old grape container or other vessel
Peat-free, general-purpose compost
Plant pots

1. Cut a few tomato slices about 3mm thick. If you look closely you will see all the tiny seeds contained within each slice.
2. Fill a container with peat-free compost to a depth of 3cm. I used old plastic grape containers. Whatever you use, make sure there are some drainage holes in the bottom.
3. Place a couple of tomato slices on the compost. Cover the slices with more compost to a depth of about 2cm.
4. Place on a warm sunny windowsill and water regularly. Soon you will see lots of seedlings poking up through the compost.
5. When the tomato plants have formed "true" leaves, they can be transplanted into individual pots. True leaves are different to the first pair of leaves you see when seedlings germinate. You'll notice that they look distinct from the first leaves.
6. Keep the tomatoes in a warm and sunny position until they are about 15cm high. Tomatoes are tender, so can be planted outside once the risk of frost is over. You can grow them in a container or two per growbag; I like to grow them directly in the soil.



From *Grow Your Groceries: 40 Hacks for Growing Plants from Your Weekly Shop* by Simon Akeroyd, with photography by Jason Ingram (DK, £16.99)

UNDERWORLD EXPLORERS

Director **Robert Petit** has created a breathtaking documentary inspired by the bestselling book *Underland*

In the company of explorers, cavers and scientists, *Underland* dives into subterranean spaces across the globe INSET Robert Petit also collaborated with Robert Macfarlane on *Upstream*, a 2019 film following a Scottish river to its source

On reading Robert Macfarlane's book *Underland*, what inspired you to suggest making this film?

I was only partway through the first chapter of the book when I was struck by the feeling that it should also be a film. It was all to do with Macfarlane's chosen direction of travel; with each turn of the page you travel deeper into strangeness. Even as a child I'd always been drawn to films that tell these kinds of stories – ones where people leave behind the world they know and venture into a place where the rules are different. I think that's an inherently cinematic idea.

The book spans continents. How did you distill this down for the film's narrative?

In making the adaptation I knew there would be some tough choices; turning 500 pages of masterful, lyrical prose into less than 90 minutes of screen time was always going to be a challenge. The solution was to find characters and storylines that embodied as many of the underlying themes in the book as possible, and dive into those as deeply as we could. We settled on three storylines – separate journeys in different spaces of the underworld that ultimately converge around this topic of 'deep time' and our place as a species within that.

How did you overcome the challenges of filming in total darkness?

We conducted a number of lighting and camera tests in underground spaces and concluded that in most cases the lights brought down by our protagonists (torches, head lamps etc.) would not be enough to convey the immensity of some of these subterranean locations. That said, we didn't want an overly 'lit' feel to the film either, so we opted to supplement those lights with a few carefully placed lamps of our own to create 'the dim glow of the inner Earth'.

How did you and the crew adjust to spending so much time underground?

Before we began filming we did a number of caving trips in order to get accustomed to working in dark, wet and claustrophobic spaces. Here we learned to move underground and work together as a team. We tried to get the mistakes out early, learning which camera moves worked and which didn't, how to light a cave correctly, and when to know that your priority is getting back to the surface rather than getting that final shot.

What was the strangest thing you found below the Earth's surface?

Rising from an underground lake in an abandoned mine we found a 10-storey mountain, only it wasn't a mountain made of rock, but of trash: the twisted wrecks of old cars, fridges and household goods cast into that slate pit over decades and stored in this cave as fossils in the making. This becomes a major part of what we explore in the film; what our buried secrets say about us as a species. CF

Underland, a film by Robert Petit with an original score by Hannah Peel, will be in cinemas from 27 March

Photo: Courtesy of Dogwoof

A VIEW FROM THE FARM

Our quirkiest April traditions are bonkers and very British

Welcome to April, the gateway to spring and the month of cherry blossom, daisies and sweet peas. It's famous for April Fool's Day and April showers but it's also when we mark St George's Day, Shakespeare's birthday and the arrival of the first cuckoo. This year Easter falls in April and, while millions of us will be thinking about family gatherings, church services, roast lamb and chocolate, there are a host of ancient Easter traditions that are less well-known.

If you like a game of marbles, take note that, historically, Good Friday is the end of the marbles season and playing after midday is thought to bring bad luck.

Hot cross buns are sold in supermarkets all year round these days but in London's East End there's a unique bun ceremony that's reserved for Good Friday. At the Widow's Son Tavern in Bromley-by-Bow there's a collection of old hot cross buns hanging above the bar and every year a sailor is lifted up by his shipmates to add a new one. The bizarre ritual comes from the sad story of a mother who waited for her sailor son to return from the Napoleonic Wars. He never appeared but she refused to believe he had been lost at sea and every year she would have a hot cross bun waiting for him on Good Friday. When she died, a collection of stale buns going back years was discovered in the wooden beams of her cottage.

If Easter eggs are more your thing, then several towns and villages in the north of England uphold the noble art of pace-egging. But these aren't chocolate eggs in fancy wrappers full of sweets. They are hens' eggs which are beautifully hand-painted and then rolled down a steep hill: the owner of the egg that travels the furthest without cracking is declared the winner. The last time *Countryfile* covered the competition we visited Avenham Park in Preston, which, having hosted the tradition every Easter since the 1860s, you could say is the Wembley Stadium of pace-egging.

Children enjoy the fun 165-year-old tradition of pace-egging at Preston's Avenham Park

"FIRST-TIME VISITORS ARE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN AND 'SHOD' BY THE BLACKSMITH"

However, don't confuse it with pace egg plays which are something entirely different. Held in places such as Heptonstall and Midgley, pace egg plays are medieval fancy-dress morality tales, very much in the style of mummers plays performed at Christmas, with good always triumphing over evil.

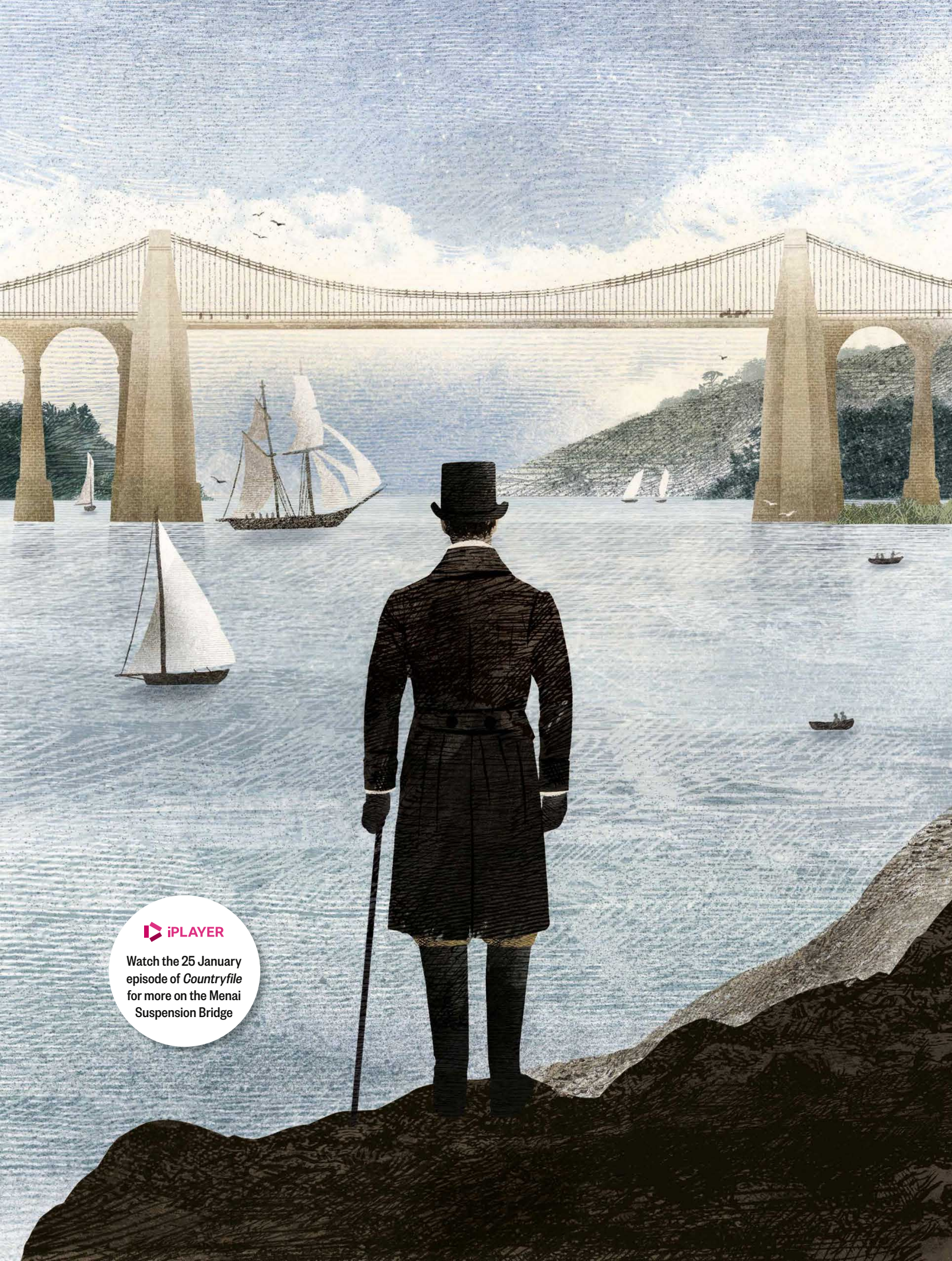
But my favourite springtime event is probably the medieval festival of Hocktide, which was an important day for paying rents and bills. It was also a rare day off for serfs who worked the land and it was marked by sport and games as well as a rustic battle of the sexes. For Free Mags Check Sanet .stThis involved the mock kidnapping of women, and the following day men, with demands made for money as ransom to buy food and drink for the revellers and raise funds for the parish church.

These high jinks took place on the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter but there's a fair bet that you've never heard of Hocktide. That's because the only place in the country that still celebrates it is the charming riverside town of Hungerford in Berkshire. And they really go for it! There's a Hocktide Court, tutti men (or tithing men) go around the town holding lavishly decorated poles to collect dues and have the ancient right to ask for a kiss from the lady of the house. Later, first-time visitors are turned upside down and 'shod' by the local blacksmith. It all sounds utterly mystifying, gloriously bonkers and typically British. Happy Easter!

Have your say What do you think about the issues raised here? Write to the address on page four or email **editor@countryfile.com**

BBC iPLAYER Catch up with Adam and the *Countryfile* team on BBC iPlayer.

Photo: Alamy



iPLAYER

Watch the 25 January episode of *Countryfile* for more on the Menai Suspension Bridge

This shepherd's son helped shape the Britain of today

Thomas Telford is high on my list of countryside heroes. Born into poverty in 1757 and raised in a one-room cottage in the Scottish Borders, this son of a shepherd went on to transform the face of rural Britain with his civil engineering masterpieces and is buried among the greats in Westminster Abbey.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of one of his finest achievements, the Menai Suspension Bridge that carries the A5 from the Welsh mainland across the strait to the Isle of Anglesey. At the time this beautiful bridge was being built some critics predicted it would never work, but it did – and still does, because Telford's pioneering projects were designed to last.

Today we still travel along Telford's roads, well over 1,000 miles of them (not for nothing was he nicknamed The Colossus of Roads). We still take boat trips along his canals and still cross his bridges and aqueducts. So how did a peasant boy who worked hard to pay for lessons in the Eskdale village school and later admitted he really wanted to be a poet, become one of the greatest engineers of all time?

I got to know about Telford back in my *Newsround* days when I made a TV series called *Breakthrough* about visionary men who, during the Industrial Revolution, completely changed the way people and goods travelled. The list included railway pioneers and bridge builders Robert Stephenson, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and, of course, Thomas Telford. They called themselves civil engineers – before then engineers had been military men who designed 'engines of war'. Telford was the father-figure of this new breed who thought outside the traditional box and created a whole new infrastructure across the country.

At the age of 14 Telford was apprenticed to a stone mason and in his mid-20s headed to London, where he worked by day on new buildings such as Somerset House and studied architecture at night. By the time he was 30 he was on his way up as county surveyor of Shropshire. But he always kept his mason's chisels sharp. "You never know what might happen next," he wrote to a friend.

"I WAS AMAZED BY TELFORD'S AUDACITY AND COURAGE"

Just about everything that happened next was mind-blowing. First was 'the stream in the sky' – his spectacular aqueduct which opened in 1805 and still transports the Llangollen canal in a 307-metre-long iron trough supported by 18 stone pillars, 39 metres above the valley of the River Dee at Pontcysyllte. When construction began, there were fears workmen would become "giddy with terror", but in the 10 years it took there was only one fatality. What some had dismissed as a crazy idea made Telford famous.

He was much in demand at the height of the canal-building frenzy. One major challenge was to build the Caledonian ship canal, which joins the lochs of the Great Glen and links the North Sea to the Atlantic. It took 3,000 men nearly 20 years to complete, bringing much needed employment and new skills to a deprived region. Throughout that time Telford kept a close eye on its progress while being hands-on with dozens of road and bridge building projects across Scotland. He never married and was so devoted to his work that he reportedly never took a holiday.

Telford was always confident but admitted that one of his later projects gave him many sleepless nights: the building of the Menai bridge. Until then the only connection between Anglesey and the mainland was by ferry, and island farmers had to swim their cattle across the dangerous, swirling waters of the strait on their way to market.

What Telford proposed was the first of its kind: a suspension bridge with a roadway 30 metres above the water so tall-masted ships could pass underneath. It was held in place by 16 huge iron chains, each weighing 121 tons. They were winched into position from a barge by 240 men heaving at two giant capstans – an incredible feat, and one Telford watched anxiously until it was safely completed. I filmed for *Countryfile* at the bridge to celebrate its bicentenary and standing by the water's edge I was amazed by his audacity and courage.

Telford once invited Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, to accompany him on one of his long inspection journeys. Southey concluded: "Telford's is a happy life: everywhere making roads, building bridges, forming canals and creating harbours – works of sure, solid, permanent usefulness. A man more heartily to be liked, to be admired, I have never met." That's why Telford is my hero. CF

BBC ONE Watch John Craven and the team on *Countryfile*, Sunday evenings on BBC One.

Illustration: Claire Harrup

Save 20% off the shop price

DISCOVER

Wiltshire

Megalithic stone circles, ancient tracks and hillforts. The Great Chalk Way has it all and more. **Dixe Wills** time-travels into antiquity on a two-day wander in Wiltshire

Images: **Joseph Branston**

Writer Dixe Wills walks between fields of wheat and gently rolling hills along the Great Chalk Way, an ancient 400-mile coast-to-coast route from Dorset to Norfolk

Wiltshire has been home to farming communities for thousands of years

A small group of metal detectorists is searching a huge windswept field near Charlbury Hill in Wiltshire. "What are you looking for?" I call out. Andy, Clive and Adam – all members of the Wyvern Historical & Detecting Society – stop sweeping the soil for a few moments and come over for a chat. "We find Roman coins occasionally," Andy tells me, "and there are lots of artefacts from the First World War."

The answer comes as something a jolt. That's because this particular field is on the Ridgeway, one of England's oldest known pathways, and I've been strolling along it all morning under a warm summer sun with my head in the Neolithic Era. It simply hadn't occurred to me that Romans would have been busy dropping their coins up here or that this slice of Wiltshire had had a role in the "war to end all wars".

Rather thrillingly, there are experts who believe the Ridgeway may even have formed a section of England's first ever coast-to-coast path. Fast-forward several millennia and that route has been given a name: the Great Chalk Way (greatchalkway.org.uk). Those who walk it find themselves following what may have been a dramatic prehistoric long-distance footpath.

Launched in 2024, the Great Chalk Way trail stretches for roughly 400 miles, heading through 11 counties on

Spot common spotted-orchids along the route

The Great Chalk Way route is well-marked and easy to follow

its way from Lyme Regis on the Dorset coast to Holme-next-the-Sea in Norfolk. From west to east, the path knits together the Wessex Ridgeway, the Ridgeway National Trail, the Icknield Way Path and the Peddars Way National Trail (an alternative route also incorporates the Cranborne Droves Way and the Sarsen Way). Walkers can follow those trails' waymarks the entire way, making it extremely simple to navigate. There's also a slightly modified route for cyclists and horseriders.

I stumbled across the trail courtesy of an intriguing video by YouTuber Paul Whitewick called "The Ridgeway Mystery: You NEVER knew". This led me to Doug Landman, development officer at the Icknield Way Association and a leading light in the creation of the Great Chalk Way, who filled in some details. "The ancient ridgeway would have been a ribbon of different routes,"

"I'm on the ridge, enjoying views of endless fields"

he told me. People may have used lowland paths in dry weather and climbed higher when the ground below turned marshy. The many Iron Age forts along the way could then have served as places to hole up in. "The B&Bs of their day," he observed with a laugh.

WHISTLESTOP TOUR

Keen to experience the trail for myself, I take a bus to Devizes in Wiltshire and head out along the Wessex Ridgeway, beginning with a gradual climb on an arrow-straight tree-lined path called Quakers' Walk. One rather stiffer ascent later and I'm up on the ridge, enjoying views of seemingly endless fields beneath me in various hues of green and a kestrel hovering skilfully in the stiff breeze, eyes locked on the waving grasses below.

As I walk, I contemplate the visit I had just made to the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes, where I had picked the

The massive henge monument of Avebury includes sarsen stones weighing over 100 tonnes

brains of its director David Dawson. He had taken me for a whistlestop tour through the museum's collection. It includes a fantastic reconstruction of the famous West Kennet long barrow near Avebury; a staggering two-thirds of all the early Bronze Age gold ever discovered in Britain; and the extensive archive of William Cunnington, "the father of archaeological excavation". Over 200 years ago, Cunnington investigated several hundred ancient barrows across Wiltshire, kicking off our modern understanding of the lives of the area's inhabitants.

So what did David think of the theory that our prehistoric forebears used the Ridgeway as part of a coast-to-coast path? "Well," he began, "the chalk top would have been open grassland and easy to walk on. The clay vale, by contrast, would have been harder going." But I could draw him no further than these echoes of Doug's words.

"The stone circle is regarded as a sacred site by modern Pagans, who perform rites here on important days"

MEGALITHIC MYSTERIES

The Wessex Ridgeway takes me roughly north-east, beside the site of the Civil War Battle of Roundway Down (the Royalists won that one) and briefly along a Roman Road. The path stays high the whole time, avoiding civilisation almost completely. And despite the fine weather, I barely see another human being until the way dropped at last into Avebury.

The largest megalithic stone circle in the world is both a mightily impressive sight and a rather peculiar one. Inside the imposing circular embankment and array of huge Sarsen stones, there's half a small village, pub and all.

There's a mystery at the heart of the circle too – no one can say exactly why it was built. The best guess is that it had some sort of ritual or ceremonial function. It certainly serves that purpose today; it's regarded as a sacred site by modern Pagans, who perform rites here on important days of their calendar.

After a refreshing pint at the Red Lion, in the midst of the silent stones, I set off with a slowly reddening sun at my back. Just beyond the village, safely back on higher ground again, I swap the wyvern symbols that mark the Wessex Ridgeway for the acorns denoting the Ridgeway National

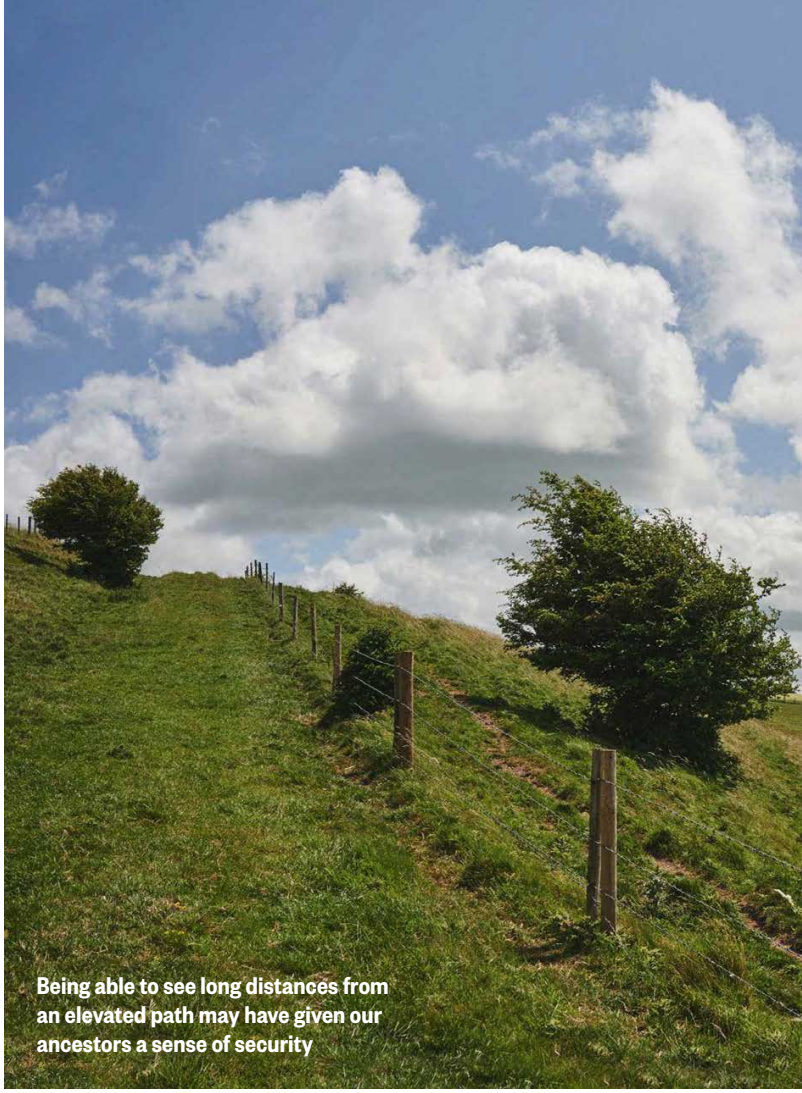
Wind sweeps through vast fields of wheat, for which Wiltshire is renowned

With thatched roofs and historic houses, the past feels present at every step

Watch red kites in the skies above the Ridgeway

Photo: Alamy

The Great Chalk Way knits together the Icknield Way, Peddars Way and the Ridgeway



Being able to see long distances from an elevated path may have given our ancestors a sense of security

In Saxon times, Wayland's Smithy, an Early Neolithic long barrow, became associated with the Norse god, Wayland the blacksmith

Trail, and the busy thronging of tourists for solitude and the melodic song of a blackcap.

SECURE CITADEL

On my second day, I'm surprised to find myself pushing, salmon-like, against a stream of perspiring and prodigiously fit runners. On enquiry, I discover that they are engaged in the annual Ridgeway Challenge, an 86-mile race along the entire National Trail from Ivinghoe Beacon to Avebury. As I applaud each one, I can't help wondering what ancient travellers on this path would have made of the idea that someday people would rush along it for the sheer fun of it.

I wonder, too, how much the views would have changed. Presumably there would have been more trees to look down upon thousands of years ago, and our ancestors would not have been afforded the night-time sight of Swindon's twinkling lights (quite artistic in its way), but the sense of commanding the landscape would, I suspect, have been very similar. This would doubtless have afforded our predecessors a welcome feeling of safety. It's not fantastical to imagine that, in Iron Age times, the frequent hillforts along the way would have heightened that feeling, assuming one was on friendly terms with the locals.

"This particular stretch is absolutely packed with prehistoric interest"

Uffington Castle (built 700–800 BCE), my final destination, certainly gives the appearance of a secure citadel. Its embankment and ditch, still entirely intact, lord it over a string of small villages below.

And perhaps the nearby Uffington White Horse – by far the oldest chalk horse in Britain – was a Bronze Age Angel of the North, watching over walkers on the Ridgeway rather than drivers on the A1.

This 30-mile section between Devizes and Uffington Castle has taken me two days. The joy of the Great Chalk Way is that any stretch you choose will almost certainly take you time-travelling back into antiquity. This particular one is absolutely packed with prehistoric interest: other highlights of my walk include two more Iron Age hillforts, Oliver's and Oldbury; numerous ancient earthworks and tumuli; Bronze Age hillfort Liddington Castle; and Wayland's Smithy long barrow.

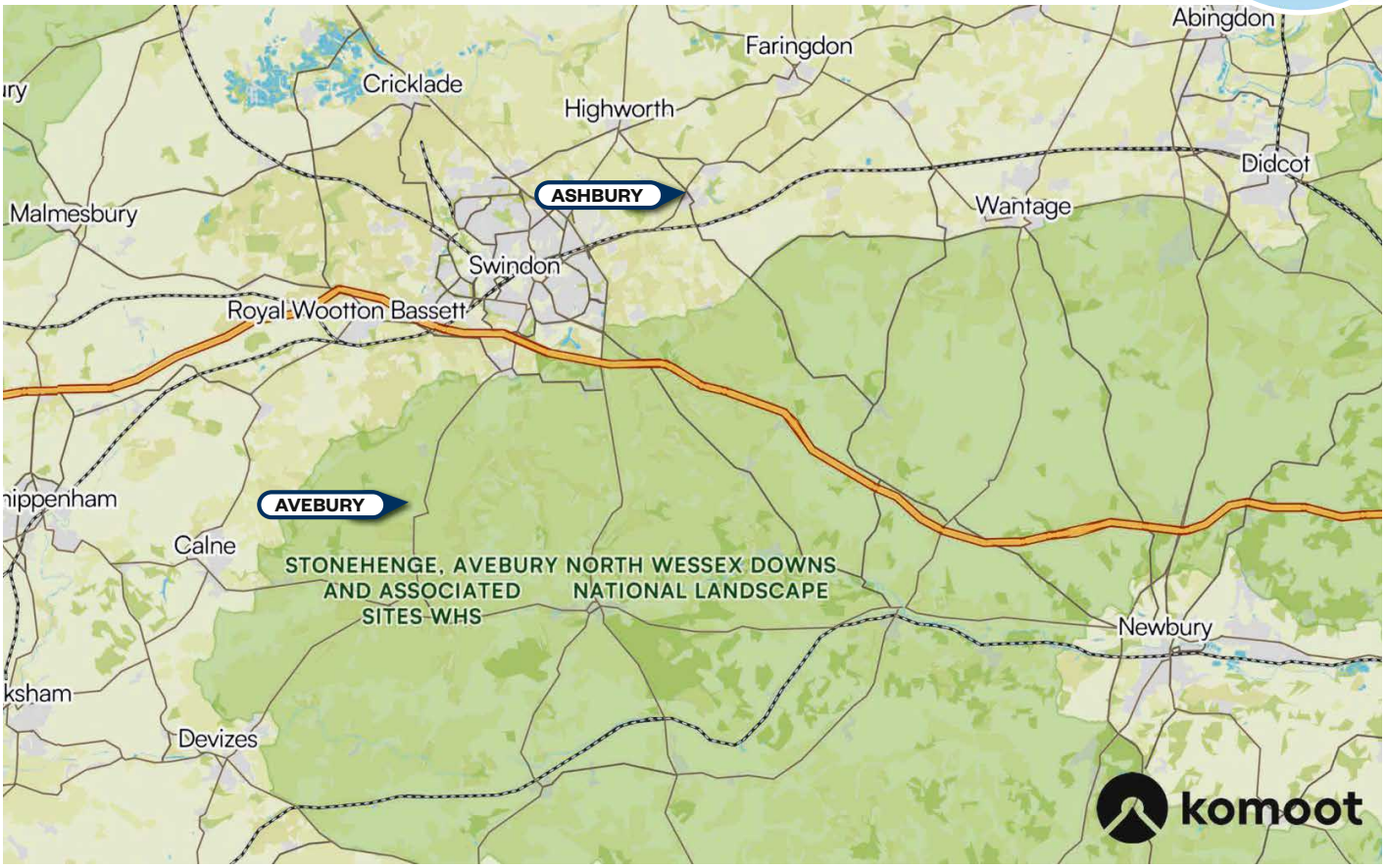
Doug's dream is for the Great Chalk Way to achieve National Trail status, which is now being actively sought. To that end, he laments the fact that no one has yet founded a Wessex Ridgeway society to press the case for that particular section. If my brief experience of the path is anything to go by, anyone who rose to that challenge would be richly rewarded. CF

Dixe Wills is an author and travel writer who writes for *The Guardian* on green travel. His books include *The Wisdom of Nature*, *Tiny Islands* and *Tiny Britain*.

Photos: Alamy; Joseph Branston

NOW GO THERE

Dixe Wills on where to stay, eat and what to do on the Great Chalk Way



GETTING THERE

Take a train to Swindon (**gwr.com**) and the twice-hourly number 49 (**stagecoachbus.com**) from the nearby bus station will drop you in Devizes an hour later. After the walk, head for Ashbury and the 47 bus (**westberks.gov.uk/transport**) back to Swindon (30 minutes).

KEY LANDMARKS

AVEBURY STONE CIRCLE AND MUSEUM

The Avebury stone circle ranks among the world's most extraordinary survivals from the Neolithic Age. Unsurprisingly, Avebury's Alexander Keiller Museum (named after the man who excavated the circle in the 1930s) has one of Britain's richest prehistoric collections. **nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wiltshire/avebury**

WAYLAND'S SMITHY

Sitting atop the Ridgeway in a sheltered glade a mile from Uffington Castle, Wayland's Smithy is an unusually well preserved Neolithic chambered long barrow. Named after the Saxon god of metalworking, it dates back to the dawn of agriculture in the British Isles (around 3400 BCE). **english-heritage.org.uk**

Avebury is the largest prehistoric stone circle in the world

ACCOMMODATION

THE BEAR HOTEL, DEVIZES

Believed to have opened in 1559, The Bear provides a venerable presence on the Market Place. Today it boasts 25 cosy ensuite bedrooms, two with four-poster beds. Both the bar and bistro dining room serve meals packed with seasonal ingredients from around the south-west. **thebearhoteldevizes.co.uk**

DORWYN MANOR B&B, AVEBURY

An easy walk from the standing stones, this highly rated bed and breakfast has six stylish rooms, a bar for snacks and drinks, a garden to stroll in and a handy mini-shop at reception. They'll even do you a packed lunch to keep you going the next day. **dorwynmanor.co.uk**

HELEN BROWNING'S ROYAL OAK, BISHOPSTONE

Styling itself as a "gently eccentric English pub and mini-hotel", the Royal Oak has a dozen rooms and lies just below the Ridgeway, surrounded by 607 hectares of organic farmland. You can also stay in a yurt in one of the farm's hay fields. **helenbrownings organic.co.uk/royal-oak**

The Uffington White Horse in Oxfordshire dates back to the late Bronze Age

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

TEA INC, DEVIZES

With nearly 100 loose leaf teas on the menu, the only problem you're likely to encounter in this off-beat café is choosing which one to sample. There's a pleasingly eclectic lunch menu, while crumpets, cake, sweet and savoury scones (and coffee) are served all day.
teainc.co.uk

UNHENGED AT THE CLUBHOUSE, AVEBURY

Did you see what they did there? Unhenged is a refreshing community venture based at Avebury's fancy sports and social club. Using local produce wherever possible, the café serves breakfasts, light lunches, sandwiches, hot beverages and a range of homemade cakes.
avebury-club.co.uk

RED LION, AVEBURY

It's not every pub that's an official part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but it's a boast that this 400-year-old thatched (and reputedly haunted) tavern can make. The Red Lion's beer garden offers views of the standing stones, or you can enjoy their classic pub dishes by the open fire inside.
chefandbrewer.com

THE WAGGON AND HORSES, BECKHAMPTON

This attractive 16th-century thatched inn once served as a welcome resting place and sanctuary for those making the two-day journey between Bristol and London by stagecoach or horse. Name-checked in Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, it offers footsore wayfarers a wide variety of hearty meals.
waggonandhorsesavebury.co.uk

Step into history in The Red Lion, Avebury

FOX AND HOUNDS, UFFINGTON

Relax and enjoy views of the Uffington White Horse and your route along the Ridgeway from the comfort of this oak-beamed pub. Once the local for Sir John Betjeman and Thomas Hughes (of *Tom Brown's School Days* fame), the Fox and Hounds offers drinks and 'gourmet snacks'.
foxandhounds-uffington.co.uk

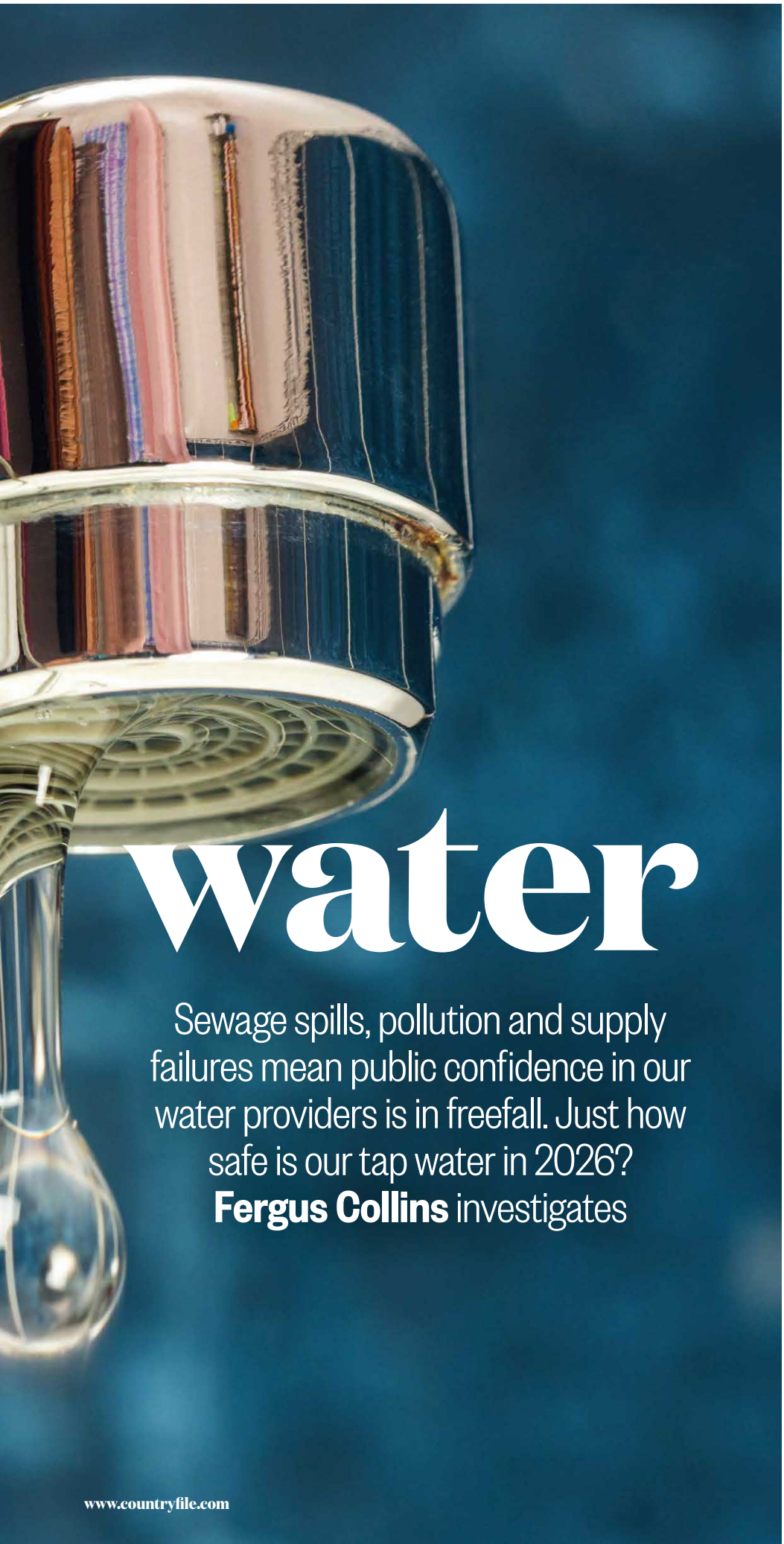
FURTHER INFO

Marking the eastern end of the Ridgeway, the Ivinghoe Beacon in Hertfordshire has become a star of the silver screen, appearing in several globally successful films. Look out for its distinctive peak in *The Dirty Dozen*, *Batman Begins* and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (and the television series *Killing Eve*).

Photos: Alamy, Joseph Branston

Troubled

According to the Water Matters survey, public satisfaction with water supply services has fallen to 58%, its lowest level in 13 years



water

Sewage spills, pollution and supply failures mean public confidence in our water providers is in freefall. Just how safe is our tap water in 2026? **Fergus Collins** investigates

Picture turning on your kitchen tap and nothing happens. Or standing under the shower covered in soap and waiting in vain for the water. In the UK, most of us take this fundamental resource for granted. When we turn on the tap, we expect clean, fresh water to gush out – and to use as much of it as we need.

So when supplies are disrupted, as has been the case in parts of Kent and Sussex over Christmas 2025 and into 2026, it is disturbing. In addition, for the past 20 years at least, there have been many high-profile news stories about sewage pollution in our rivers that have dented confidence in the ability of the UK's water companies to manage this precious resource.

In 2024, the Water Matters survey by watchdog Consumer Council for Water and Ofwat, the economic regulator of water in England and Wales, found that public satisfaction with water supply services had fallen to just 58% – its lowest level in 13 years. Worse still, only 23% trust their water provider to do what is right for the environment. A recent government white paper (more on this later) recognises these concerns and aims to reform the water industry. But just how safe is drinking water in Britain?

PRIVATE HANDS

First, we need to look at where our water comes from, how it is treated to make it safe, and how this is monitored – as well as who is doing the monitoring. England and Wales are unusual among developed nations in having fully privatised regional water monopolies. In virtually every other country, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, the government controls and manages water infrastructure and supply.

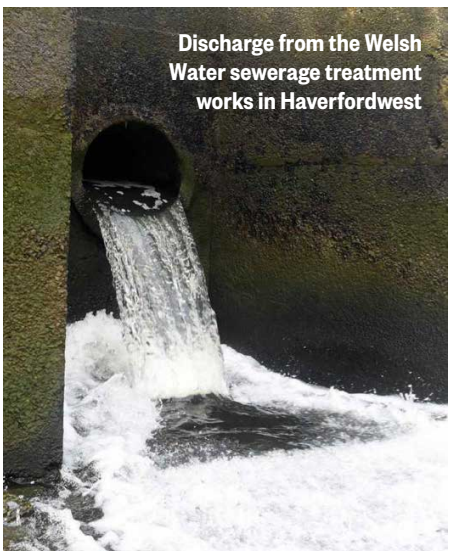
However, in 1989, under the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher, the publicly owned regional water authorities of England and Wales were sold to private water and sewage companies for £7.6 billion. There are now 10 major private companies that supply drinking water and deal with sewerage, with another

six companies that just supply drinking water. Most of these companies are owned by a complex web of financial bodies, such as pension schemes, with research by *The Guardian* revealing that around 70% are owned by foreign shareholders. Welsh Water is an exception. Though in private hands, it is run as a not-for-profit business, whereby all profits are reinvested.

Many critics of privatisation – and there are many, such as the campaign group We Own It – argue that because these companies must make a return for their shareholders, they are not committed to investing for the consumer. David Hall, visiting professor at the Public Services International Research Unit at the University of Greenwich, has claimed that water companies have invested "less than nothing of their own money" and are "treating their customers like a cash cow".

Ewan McGaughey, professor of law at Kings College London who specialises in issues around water privatisation and argues for renationalisation, agrees. "The water companies have paid over £85bn out to shareholders since privatisation and that means they haven't been able to put the money into infrastructure."

Ofwat and the water companies strongly refute this claim. "The facts are there has been huge investment in the sector of over £200bn," an Ofwat spokesperson told the BBC in 2024. It is undeniable, however, that household water bills in England and Wales are higher than those in Scotland and Northern Ireland and compare unfavourably with many European countries.



Discharge from the Welsh Water sewerage treatment works in Haverfordwest

Rural watercourses are often polluted by nitrate-rich run-off from farming

Has privatisation made our drinking water less safe? I spoke to my local water company Welsh Water (Dŵr Cymru) and the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI), a government department within the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) whose job it is to monitor water quality in England and Wales. Both strenuously made the point that our drinking water has never been safer and both expressed frustration that the negative press coverage masks a success story.

COMMON GOALS

In order to explore how our water is processed to make it safe, I begin by speaking to Philippa Pearson, head of water quality at Welsh Water. Pearson has been with the company for 20 years and her passion and commitment are clear to see. Welsh Water, she tells me, supplies "850 million litres of water a day to three million domestic and business customers. Pipelines alone would stretch to Australia and back if laid end to end".

Welsh Water's treatment process is similar to other water companies in the UK."For surface water, the initial treatment process is to add what we call a coagulant chemical, which attract particles together and remove silts and other impurities. Then, depending on the catchment and some of the challenges, we have an additional filtration process to remove other particles, and then we finish off with disinfection, so that deals with any bacteria, viruses that might be in the water such as Cryptosporidium. We usually chlorinate. We also use UV treatment as well."

One of the major issues Welsh Water faces, Pearson tells me, is pollution

"Household water bills in England and Wales are higher than those in Scotland and Northern Ireland"

Photos: Alamy

from agriculture, particularly silt, animal waste, oil, slurry and pesticides that run off the land into rivers, especially after rain. This is an extra burden on water treatment and, ultimately, on consumers in their water bills. To tackle this, Welsh Water is working with farmers and landowners in the catchments to find ways to reduce run-off by tackling the issue at source. The largest of these is the Bannau Brycheiniog Mega Catchment (BBMC), which supplies 50% of all Welsh Water's needs.

"A lot of it is about relationships," says Pearson. "When I started the catchment management team in 2010 working with the agricultural community initially, there was a lot of suspicion, as if we were accusing them of something. So we've worked hard at building trust, finding common ways to work and do what we need to do without impacting each other."

Pearson tells me of one example where the herbicide MCPA was being detected in water supplies. It was traced to farms in the uplands using boom sprayers to eradicate rushes in wet pasture. Rushes may harbour liver flukes, a parasite often deadly to livestock. Welsh Water convinced the farmers to use weed wipers instead of the sprayers, allowing more precise application of the herbicide so the chemical does not get into the wider environment. The trial, which was later adopted and expanded by the Welsh Government, cost just £15,000 instead of around £6 million for a new water treatment process.

POTENTIAL WEAKNESSES

Just how is water quality monitored so that consumers can trust what comes out of their taps? Pearson assures me that water quality has never been better. "We have strengthened the regulations continually based on what we know, things that have happened, and new scientific knowledge."

She continues: "We have a precautionary approach. It's a sophisticated operation with a lot of monitoring. We have 24-7 online monitoring as well as our accredited laboratory analysis. It's all alarmed, so if anything happens, alarms are raised and the water treatment works might be shut down if that is what is required."

Overseeing the water companies' monitoring efforts is the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI). It was formed a year after privatisation to "provide independent reassurance that water supplies in England and Wales are safe and drinking water quality is acceptable to consumers". As well as assessing the water

People relied on bottled water when Storm Goretti affected South East Water's ability to treat water in January 2026

WATER FILTERS

A trio of options to filter the drinking water in your kitchen.

Research into the comparative effectiveness of water filter systems is patchy, mostly due to the fact varying qualities of tap water give different results from region to region. However, a study conducted in North Carolina (published in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology Letters*, 2020) found that "All under-sink dual-stage and reverse osmosis filters tested showed near complete removal for all PFAS evaluated. In contrast, all other filters containing activated carbon exhibited variable PFAS removal."

ZEROWATER 2.4L WATER FILTER JUG, £43

This water jug is highly rated and uses activated carbon filter cartridges to remove pollutants. The unique Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) meter enables you to check the effectiveness of the filter cartridge. **zerowaterfilter.com**

WATERDROP UNDERSINK, £139.99

Waterdrop undersink filters are highly regarded and among the easiest to install. They use a combination of reverse osmosis and carbon filters. The three-stage, high capacity filter system has a lifespan of up to 18 months. **waterdropfilter.co.uk**

AQUATRU CLASSIC, £475

One of the best-rated water jug filters. It uses reverse osmosis to filter PFAs and other pollutants from tap water and the jug can hold 2.7 litres. **aquatru.co.uk**

HOW TO LIMIT PFAS

Domestic products that may expose you to PFAS, or 'forever chemicals'.

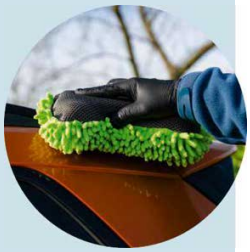
1. COOKING PANS

Use cast or spun iron pans that have been seasoned instead of non-stick pans coasted with PFAS. As non-stick pans degrade, the PFAS are released and could get into your food.

2. CLOTHING

PFAS offer water resistance so are commonly used in outdoor clothing, but they are best avoided. Look for manufacturers that state they do not use PFAS.

3. POLISH



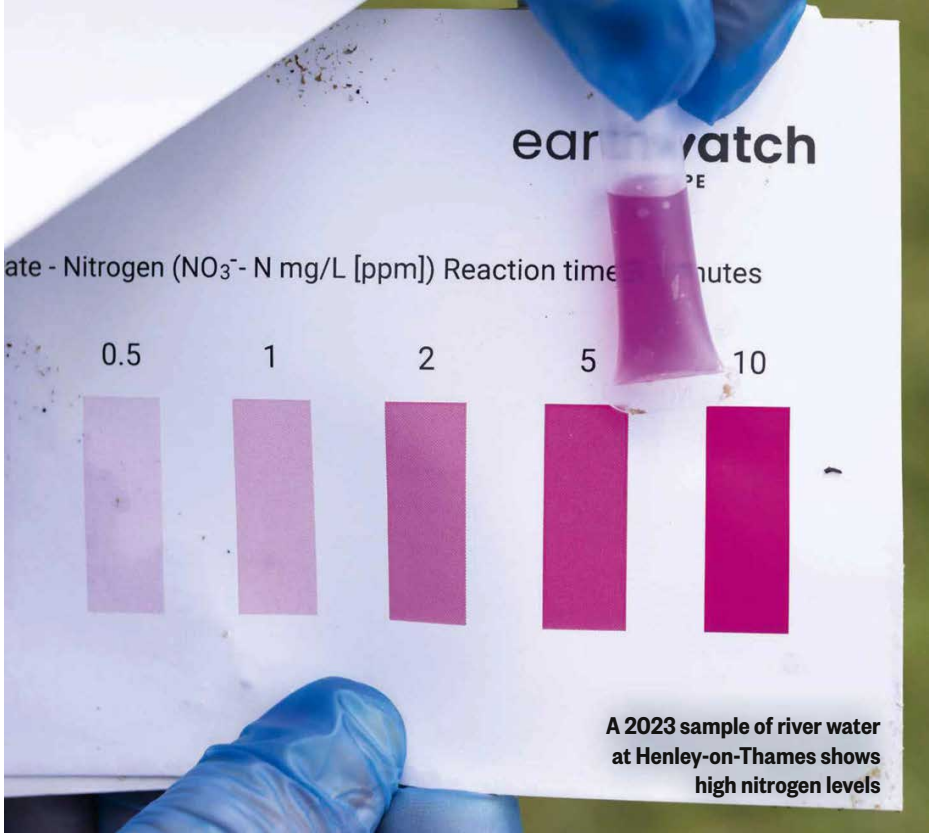
PFAS are used in polishes, especially car polish and wax, to create a glossy finish that protects from dirt and water. Instead, favour products based on natural soaps and waxes.

4. FURNITURE

Furniture makers may use PFAS in upholstery to reduce stains and water ingress. Labels such as 'stain-resistant' indicate this. Look for natural fibres when possible.

5. UTENSILS

Plastic and silicone kitchen utensils, especially spatulas, may have PFAS in their coating to provide non-stick properties. Try using utensils made from sustainable wood or bamboo.



A 2023 sample of river water at Henley-on-Thames shows high nitrogen levels

companies' sampling programmes and work to improve drinking water, it also investigates incidents affecting water supply to the public and deals with public complaints.

Having been fined £22m for supply failures between 2020 and 2023, South East Water is again under investigation over its role in the supply interruptions of winter 2025 that saw tens of thousands of people left without water due to burst pipes and storm damage in Kent and East Sussex. However, the DWI says "the investigation is ongoing and we cannot prejudice the outcome of these by discussing them."

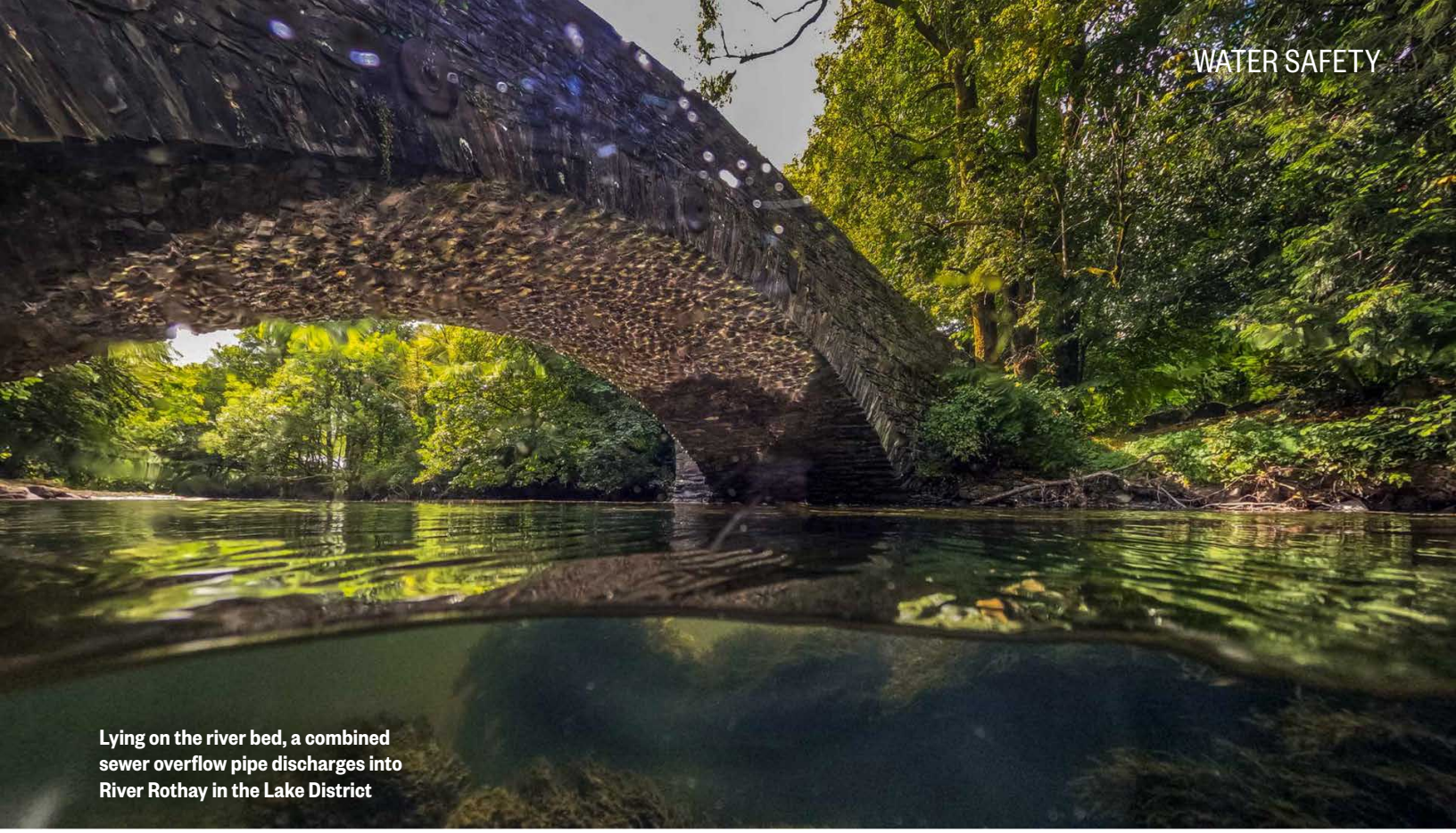
Ann Bunting, principal inspector for water at the DWI and Jo Herschan, a DWI inspector, tell me that they work very closely with the water companies in a preventative role – aiming to avoid problems by ensuring infrastructure and monitoring procedures are in place and regularly updated.

Both Bunting and Herschan are at pains to stress that consumers should be extremely confident that drinking water is safe, pointing me to a recent annual report by DWI chief inspector Marcus Rink, who said: "Drinking water quality in England remains excellent, with public supplies consistently meeting the stringent regulatory standards for drinking water. Compliance with the standards in 2024 was 99.97%." However, Rink's 2025 Interim Report highlights, among a handful of issues, "several significant operational and compliance issues across water companies in England and Wales. Multiple microbiological detections were reported at treatment works operated by Southern Water, South East Water and Bristol Water". The inspectorate generally concluded that "operational processes were satisfactory" but identified "potential weaknesses in sampling practices and infrastructure".

FOREVER CHEMICALS

Overall, the message from the industry is that our drinking water is safe and that monitoring is frequent and stringent. But is it up to tackling a modern pernicious pollutant that has grabbed headlines in recent years: PFAS? These per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances are a family of chemicals comprising many thousand individual materials that are prized for their water-resistant and non-stick properties and so are used in food packaging, floor polish, frying pans and bakeware, outdoor clothing and even dental floss.

But PFAS do not breakdown easily – it can take hundreds if not thousands of years for PFAS to degrade after the products containing them have been thrown away. This has led to PFAS being labelled 'forever chemicals' and it's feared they may leach into waterways



Lying on the river bed, a combined sewer overflow pipe discharges into River Rothay in the Lake District

and our drinking water. These fears have manifested in the USA, where a study testing beer found that samples contained PFAS from municipal water used in brewing. Potential adverse human health outcomes of the PFAS studied include reduced fertility, an increased risk of some cancers and compromised immunity.

Currently, there are no standards for PFAS in drinking water in the regulations for England and Wales. The DWI has published guidelines for the water companies based on the World Health Organisation's recommendations for PFAS in drinking water.

Both DWI and Welsh Water stress that the issue of PFAS has been blown out of proportion in the UK and that there is very little cause for concern. In Wales, Philippa Pearson says "there were no sources of PFAS in any catchment". Ann Bunting of the DWI says there is no need to filter drinking water for PFAS and that many of the companies selling PFAS filters are playing on unfounded fears.

In early February, the Government launched a new PFAS action plan, which was a "coordinated action... to understand where these chemicals are coming from, how they spread and how to reduce public and environmental exposure". Campaigners, including the Wildlife and Countryside Link, criticised it for not going far enough and failing to match the more stringent action taken in parts of Europe. Dr Francesca Ginley, policy and advocacy manager at the Marine Conservation Society, meanwhile, says: "We need a universal restriction on PFAS by 2030, starting with immediate bans on where there are known alternatives. Every day of delay leads to further harm across the entire ecosystem that both nature and people depend on."

> ***"There are no standards in the regulations for PFAS in drinking water in England and Wales"***

TAINTED REPUTATIONS

The DWI argues that Britain's water is among the highest quality and best-regulated in the world – and the available evidence backs this up. But where the water companies are still failing is in dealing with sewage and associated pollution, which is affecting public confidence. Environment Agency figures reveal that 2024 saw a 60% increase in serious pollution incidents compared to 2023.

While campaign groups call ever louder for the renationalisation of water, the Government's new water white paper, *A New Vision for Water* published in January this year, is focusing on improving infrastructure, amalgamating Ofwat and DWI into a single regulation body, and offering a new Water Ombudsman to deal with consumer complaints.

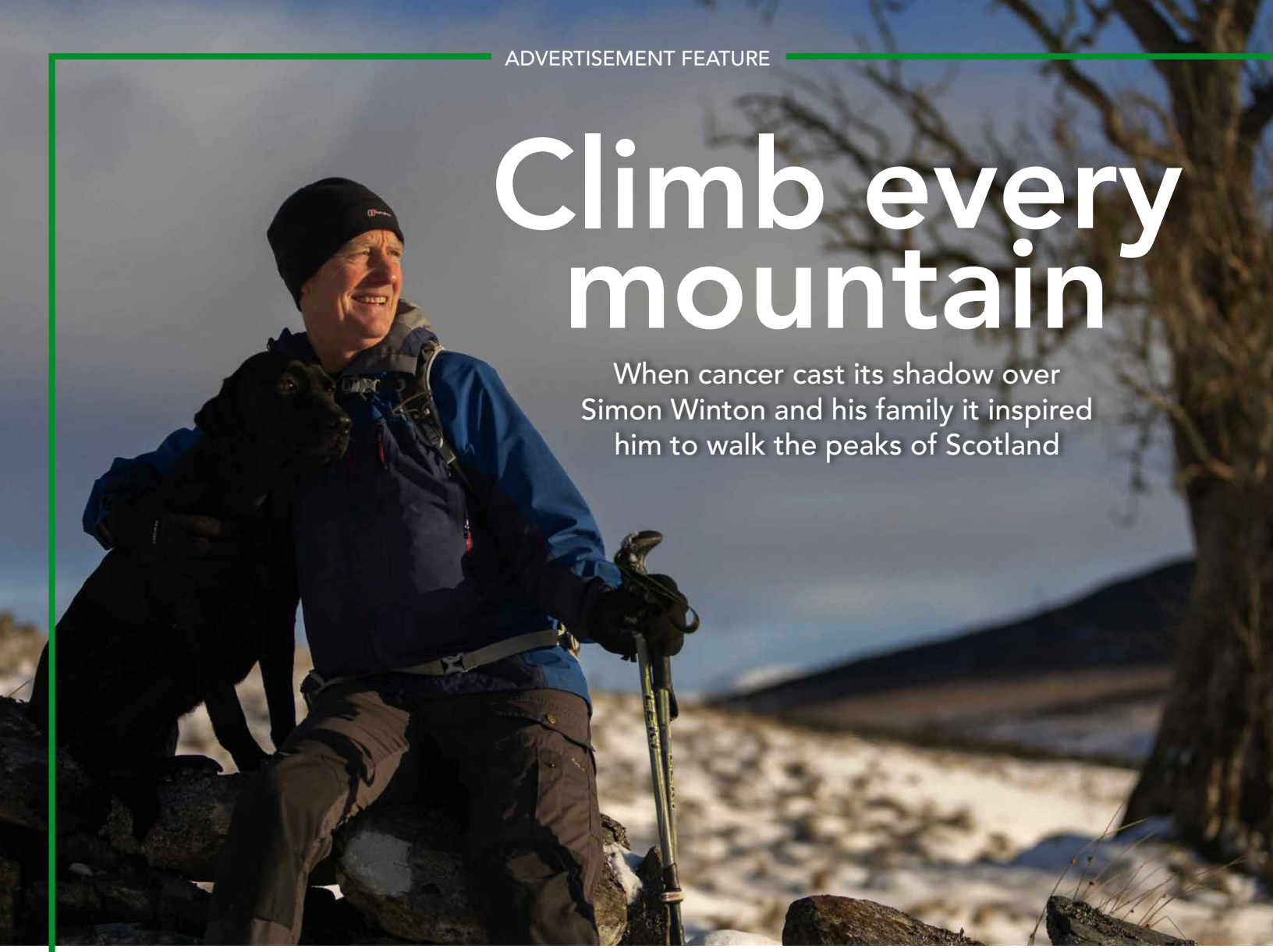
Many critics claim the white paper doesn't go far enough to protect our natural environments, so it will be crucial to see what impact the reforms have on cleaning up our rivers and the tainted image of the private water companies. Clean drinking water should be a given in Britain. Is it too much to ask that the water companies keep our rivers clean, too? CF

Fergus Collins is an author, editor and journalist, and the host of *BBC Countryfile Magazine*'s award-winning Plodcast.

Photos: Getty

Climb every mountain

When cancer cast its shadow over Simon Winton and his family it inspired him to walk the peaks of Scotland



Retired hotelier and estate manager Simon Winton lives in Enochdhu, 10 miles east of Pitlochry in Perthshire, with his wife Alex. This small hamlet is situated on the Cateran Trail hiking route, under the gaze of heather-covered hills and close to the Spittal of Glenshee – the perfect spot for Simon, who has committed to climbing all the hills of Scotland, with 3,487 already completed.

"It's an ideal base for heading north-west, south and even east to various mountains," says Simon, who developed his love of hillwalking and trail running as a child growing up in Glenshee. He and Alex later ran the family Highland estate and hotel there, during which time Simon met hundreds of people, many of whom have since been affected by cancer.

In 2023, cancer came closer to home when his sister Karen received a diagnosis and was given just a few months to live. Not long after this devastating news, Alex was also diagnosed with colon cancer. Happily, Alex is now cancer-free, and for Simon, the experience of losing his sister – and living through the fear of potentially losing Alex too – inspired him to complete climbing the Simms in Scotland (mountains of 600 metres and over, with at least a 30-metre prominence) to raise money for Macmillan Cancer Support.

Simon shares how Macmillan Cancer Support offered vital support to his family at a critical time, and why walking and hiking help him feel he is giving back.

OFFERING A LIFELINE

"The story goes way back to 1996," says Simon, "when Alex's dad was diagnosed with colon cancer." It was their first experience with a Macmillan nurse, who Alex says was "incredible. The nurse was so experienced. She came in, she shaved him, and she made him feel more human, because he was very unwell by that time. She was absolutely fantastic."

In 2023, Simon's sister Karen was told her breast cancer had returned after five years in remission. She was given three months to live and sadly passed away. At the same time, Alex received her own diagnosis. Thankfully, Alex's cancer was caught early and treated swiftly. Macmillan was there too, offering support. "Very quickly, a Macmillan nurse phoned me and they were so good – asking if I was financially okay, whether I needed lifts to the hospital or any help at home," says Alex, "I was staggered by how supportive they were."

Over one third of Macmillan's services are funded

Simon's inspirational hiking achievements have raised £13,000 for Macmillan so far. Visit **justgiving.com/page/simonwinton-mountainmadness** to donate

by gifts in wills. These gifts will help Macmillan ensure everyone can receive the same care and support, whoever and wherever they are.

THE MOST SUBLIME LANDSCAPE

Simon took on his first hiking challenge 18 years ago, when he was diagnosed with colitis. Wanting to do something for charity, and after reading *The Munros* by Cameron McNeish, he dedicated himself to climbing the Munros of Scotland, walking up to 57km a day with his dog Bena in tow through some of what he describes as "the remotest, darkest and wettest parts of Scotland".

Since losing his sister Karen and seeing the support Alex received from Macmillan, Simon has been raising money for Macmillan by completing the Simms in Scotland. A further ambition is to climb the full set of Scotland's classified mountains, including the Munros, Munro Tops, Corbetts, Grahams, Donalds, Donald Tops and Furths.

His sights are also set on completing the Marilyns – hills with a prominence of at least 150 metres. He has just three left out of 1,218, including the two sea stacks at St Kilda. "We've been trying to get there for years, but there have only been two trips in the past 10 years because of the weather and the birds. They're proving very difficult. We did make one trip, but we couldn't land because the swell was two metres high. There's no pier – they're literally rock stacks.

"I've got a map over there with 3,487 pins on it," he adds. "That's the number of hills I've climbed in Scotland. I thought I might as well raise money for charity – otherwise it felt like a wasted opportunity. We decided to do it with Macmillan after Karen died and Alex had been ill."

Simon's extraordinary journey to every summit in Scotland has already raised nearly £13,000 for Macmillan Cancer Support, helping people living with cancer receive the support they need. For Alex, Macmillan's support during her own cancer journey was invaluable. "It meant so much knowing there was someone out there who could help if I needed it," she says.

A gift in your will to Macmillan Cancer Support helps fund vital services, including the practical and emotional support Alex was offered. By leaving a gift, you can help ensure that everyone living with cancer across the UK has access to the same level of support.

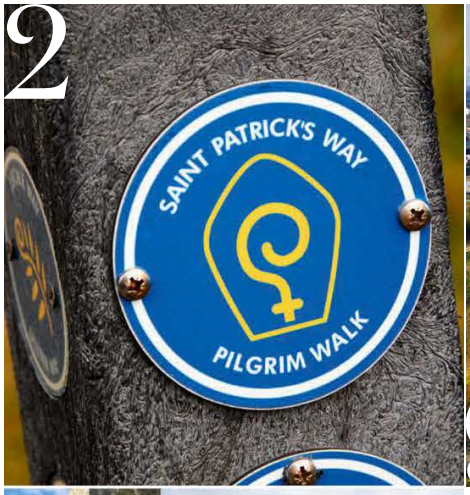
A GIFT IN YOUR WILL

Macmillan's support for Simon's family has inspired him to hike, cycle and climb every mountain in Scotland so that Macmillan Cancer Support can help provide services to others in the future.

A gift in your will also makes it possible for Macmillan Cancer Support to do whatever it takes to help more people with cancer get the best care the UK has to offer, whoever and wherever they are.

To find out more about how to leave a gift in your will to Macmillan Cancer Support, order your free Gifts in Wills guide from **www.macmillan.org.uk/overathird** or call **0800 542 0164**.

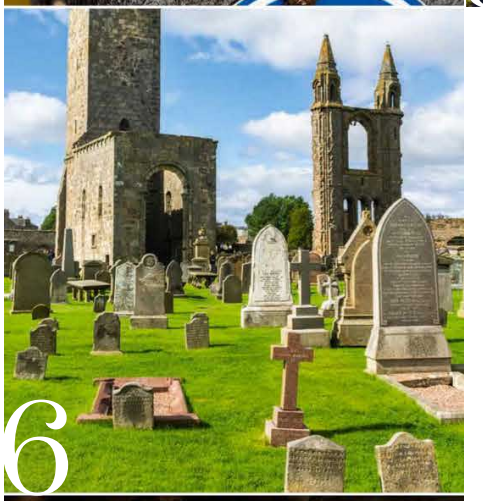
MACMILLAN CANCER SUPPORT



2

9

3

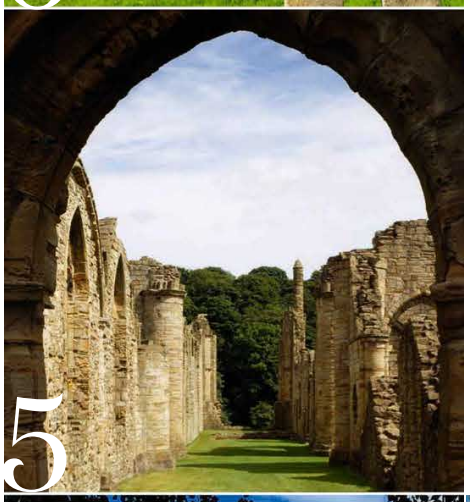


6

TOP 10 WALKING PILGRIMAGES

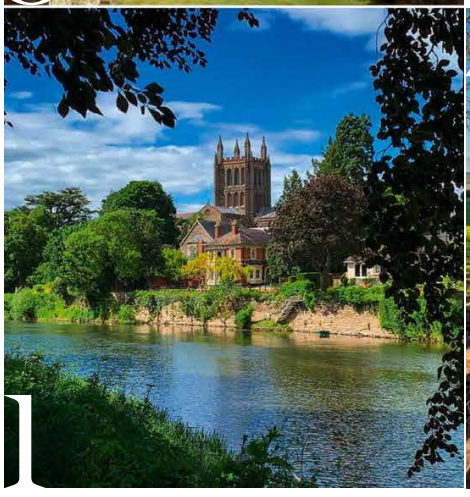
Embarking on a pilgrimage will both test the body and soothe the soul. **Dixe Wills** picks his favourite options in Britain and Ireland

10



5

8



1

4

7

Photos: Alamy; Getty

Golden Valley Pilgrim Way, Herefordshire

Unusually for a pilgrimage, this 60-mile route takes devotees around in a loop. It begins and ends at Hereford Cathedral (pictured), where weary pilgrims have a special treat in store: they can spend their final night in the cathedral's cloisters. It's believed this is the first time since the Middle Ages that pilgrims have been allowed to sleep in the precincts of an English cathedral.

Linking the Wye Valley with the Golden Valley and the flower meadows and foothills of the Black Mountains, the Golden Valley route is also unique in being the nation's only pilgrimage furnished with 'sanctuaries' for its entire length. Conceived to function in the same way as the famous 'albergues' that line the Spanish stretch of the Camino de Santiago, the sanctuaries offer basic cheap lodgings (£22–£25/night). There are no fewer than eight churches and two church halls in which the faithful can get their heads down for the night – ideal for those who enjoy the idea of an unhurried pilgrimage. There are camp beds provided at each venue, so pilgrims can travel a little bit lighter too.

Aside from some marvellous medieval churches and holy wells, the route takes in both the Golden and Wye valleys as well as the foothills of the Black Mountains. And if you would prefer to pedal rather than plod, there is an 82-mile cycle route too.

Visit the Abbey Dore Deanery website for details of the route.
abbeydoredeanery.org
For information about the sanctuaries in Herefordshire and around the country, visit the British Pilgrimage Trust.
britishpilgrimage.org

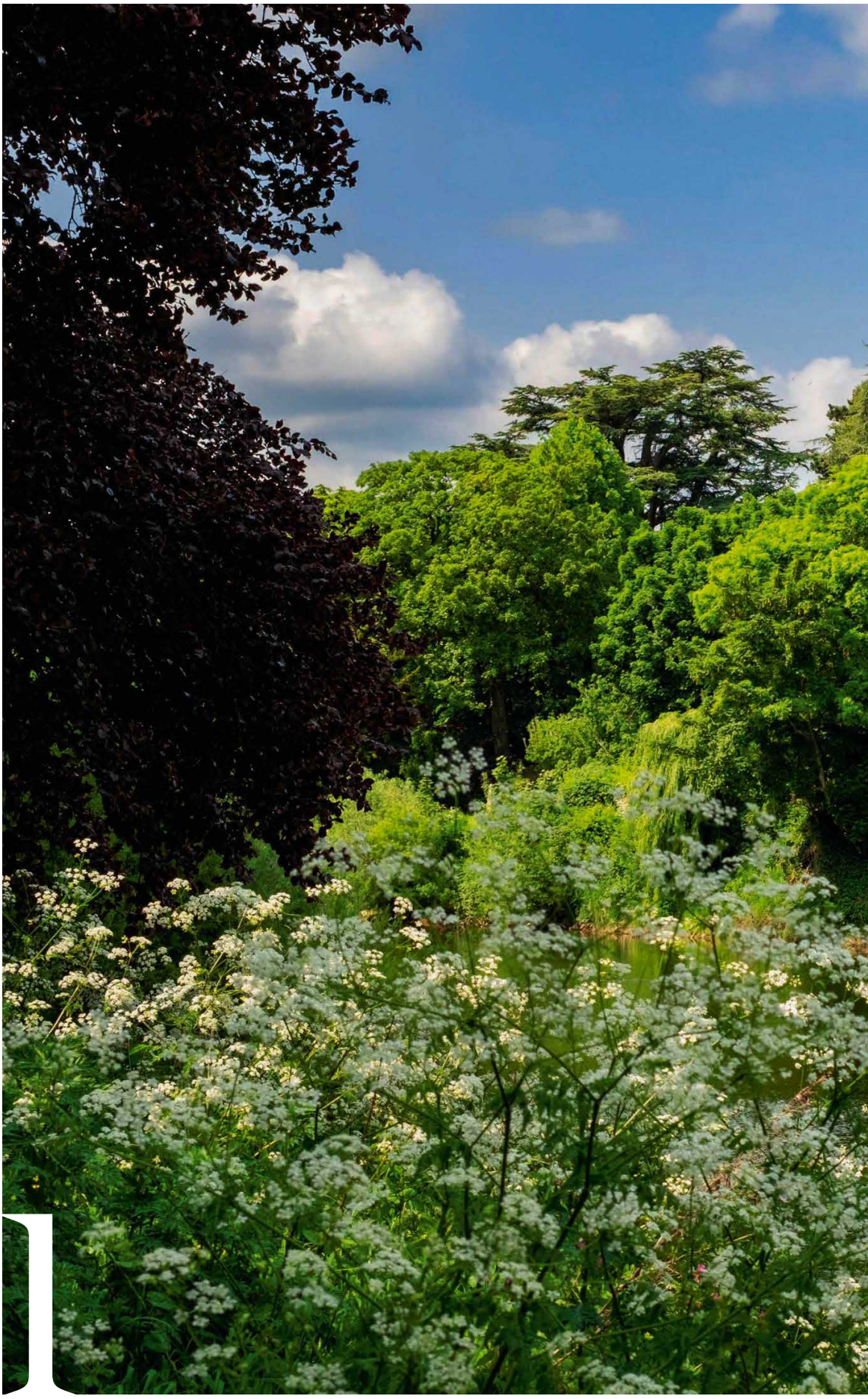


Photo: Alamy

2 St Patrick's Way, Northern Ireland

Ireland's patron saint, St Patrick, brought Christianity to the country in 432 CE. His life seems to have been quite an adventure. As a teenager, he was kidnapped and taken to Ireland as a slave but escaped six years later and returned to Britain, before becoming a bishop in France. Then he had a vision in which a man named Victoricus gave him a letter titled 'The Voice of the Irish' and he imagined Irish folk pleading with him to come to them.

Launched in 2015, St Patrick's Way was dreamed up by Irish artist Alan Graham after walking the Camino. Most pilgrims complete this 82-mile hike across the south-eastern corner of Northern Ireland in six to 10 days. On the way they cross large tracts of farmland, pass through the Mourne Mountains and take on two long stretches of Dundrum Bay before heading inland to their journey's end.

The route can be walked in either direction, though usually the faithful start at the western end, Navan Fort, a pre-Christian monument outside Armagh. St Patrick set up a church nearby, now the site of a Church of Ireland cathedral. The pilgrimage finishes at Downpatrick, thought to be Patrick's resting place and the location of his first church.

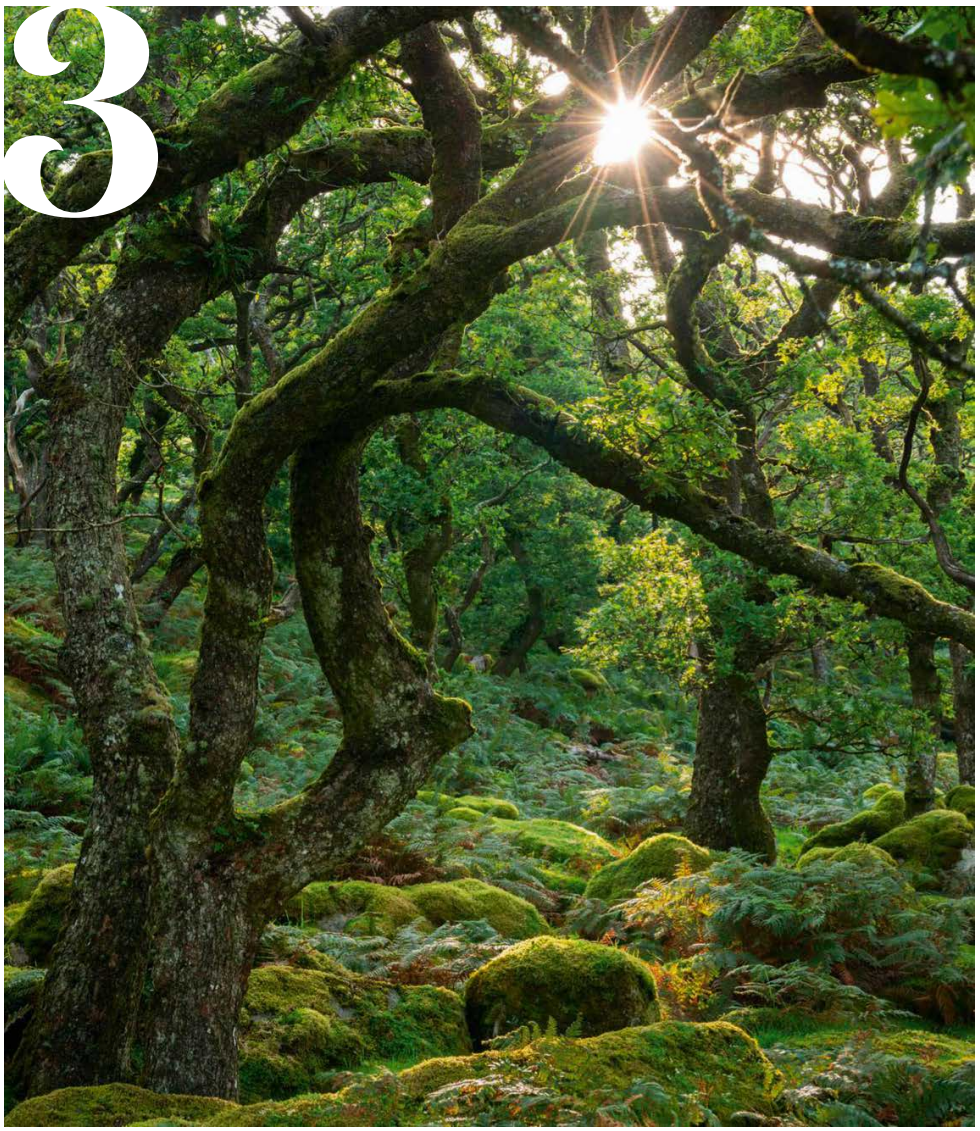
3 Mary and Michael Pilgrims' Way, England

One for the dedicated pilgrim, this 350-mile odyssey cuts a swathe through the south-west of England, heading from Carn Lês Boel fort in Cornwall to Avebury in Wiltshire.

"Intended to appeal to people of any faith or none," this pilgrim route is unusual in that it follows 'Earth energy currents' as identified by Hamish Miller and Paul Broadhurst in their book *The Sun and The Serpent*. It largely follows two parallel 'energy lines' – the 'Mary line' and the 'Michael line' – connecting up both Christian and pre-Christian sites along the way, including St Michael's Mount and Glastonbury.

The original idea behind the pilgrimage was to create a route from Cornwall to Hopton on the Norfolk coast and the organisers hope to complete the official eastern section at some point. In the meantime, free guides taking walkers from Cornwall to Wiltshire via Dartmoor (pictured) are available from the Mary and Michael Pilgrims' Way website. These give the distances between campsites en route, which will come in handy if you wish to stay true to the cheap-and-cheerful pilgrimage ideal. The site also has an introduction to 'Earth energies' for those to whom it's a new concept (**marymichaelpilgrimsway.org**).

If you prefer cycling to walking, you'll be pleased to learn that a cycle-friendly version has also been devised that goes the whole way from Cornwall to Norfolk. It weighs in at around 550 miles in length, so you may wish to set aside more than a weekend to tackle it.



4 **The Old Way,** South-East England

Intriguingly, this ancient pilgrimage route from Southampton to Canterbury was lost for centuries. Indeed it would have probably been lost forever had it not been for a single medieval map that was bequeathed by one Richard Gough to Oxford's Bodleian Library in 1809.

The so-called Gough Map, drawn by an unknown hand around 1360, was so accurate that no chart of Britain would surpass it for 200 years.

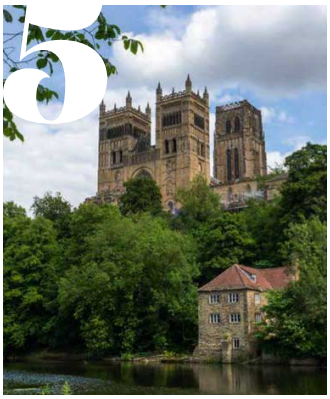
Among the map's red lines linking major towns and cities is one between Southampton and Canterbury that raised eyebrows. Rather than following the traditional and well-known Pilgrims Way along the North Downs, this route heads parallel to the south coast, only turning north towards St Thomas Becket's cathedral city of Canterbury at the last moment.

The British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT) decided to revive the 240-mile route, tweaking it here and there to avoid major roads and include devotional sites along the way. The result is a glorious pilgrimage that uses prehistoric paths across the South Downs, visits a clutch of medieval churches as well as Chichester Cathedral and Amberley Castle (pictured), and takes the faithful across Romney Marsh. A number of sanctuaries offer budget accommodation en route.

The BPT has helpfully devised itineraries for those wishing to walk eight, twelve or 20-plus miles a day, and added a shortened 62-mile guide from Battle to Canterbury.

britishpilgrimage.org

Photos: Alamy



5

Northern Saints Trails, North-East England

Why do one long pilgrimage when you can do six short ones? Launched in 2021, the Northern Saints Trails tell the stories of saints across the north-east of England.

The first five trails end in Durham and its breathtaking Norman cathedral (above). The 29-mile Way of Life starts in Gainford, County Durham and charts the deeds of St Cuthbert. The 38-mile Way of Learning pays homage to the Venerable Bede en route from Jarrow to Durham via Sunderland. The Way of Love celebrates three female saints, visiting churches dedicated to Saints Helena, Hilda and Mary Magdalene along 28 miles from Hartlepool.

The 30-mile Angel's Way starts at the coastal village of Seaton Sluice, visits Newcastle Cathedral and Antony Gormley's Angel of the North sculpture before finishing at St Mary and St Cuthbert's church in Chester-le-Street. The 45-mile Way of Light runs from the Heavenfield battleground, where St Oswald claimed a mighty victory.

The only trail not to finish in Durham, the coastal 38-mile Way of the Sea travels from Warkworth Castle to North Shields via Tynemouth Priory. **thisisdurham.com**

Fife Pilgrim Way, Scotland

Opened in 2019, this 64-mile pilgrimage crosses what was once one of the five Pictish kingdoms. It follows a route many thousands of souls would have taken in the Middle Ages, drawn to the cathedral that held the bones of St Andrew. Since the saint was a disciple of Jesus, this put him on an exalted plane and, in medieval times, his shrine became one of Europe's most important pilgrimage destinations.

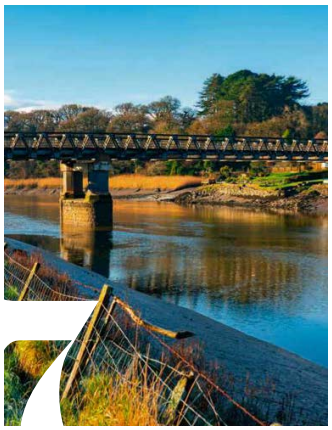
Unconventionally, there are two possible starting points for modern-day pilgrims: the villages of Culross and North Queensferry. The Queen's Ferry, from which North Queensferry takes its name, was established to convey pilgrims across the Firth of Forth, long before the famous Forth Bridge came into being there. Both starting points are the same distance from Dunfermline from where pilgrims make their way north-east towards St Andrews.

But not before they have stopped by Dunfermline Abbey, once home to the shrine of St Margaret, where many a miracle is said to have taken place.

The relatively flat, mostly rural walk passes churches, chapels and holy wells before ending on the North Sea coast at St Andrew's ruined church, the largest ever built in Scotland.

Unusually, the Fife Pilgrim Way has its own dedicated pastor. Church of Scotland minister Simon Hessett leads walks, encourages pilgrims on their journey and can stamp the passports of any he meets. His details and those of the route can be found at **fifecoastandcountrysidetrust.co.uk**.

6



North Wales Pilgrim's Way, Wales

Known as the Island of 20,000 Saints, Bardsey has been a place of pilgrimage since St Cadfan founded an abbey there in the early 6th century. Even before then, the island had hosted a small monastery that offered refuge to persecuted Christians. Given its long history as a holy place, it's little wonder that, by the Middle Ages, three pilgrimages to Bardsey were reckoned to equal one all the way to Rome.

Today's 134-mile waymarked route takes pilgrims across the top of North Wales from Basingwerk Abbey on the River Dee. After passing 13th-century St Asaph's cathedral, the path takes in a bucolic stretch of the Afon Aled and skirts the northern edge of Snowdonia before hugging the northern coast of the Llŷn Peninsula. The pilgrimage ends as it would have done for medieval pilgrims – with a voyage in a small boat from the mainland to Bardsey (**bardseyboattrips.com**).

It's believed that many pilgrims lost their lives in the quicksilver currents around the island. Happily, things are safer today. However, thanks to Henry VIII, all that is left of Bardsey's abbey are the ruins of the bell tower. **pilgrims-way-north-wales.org**

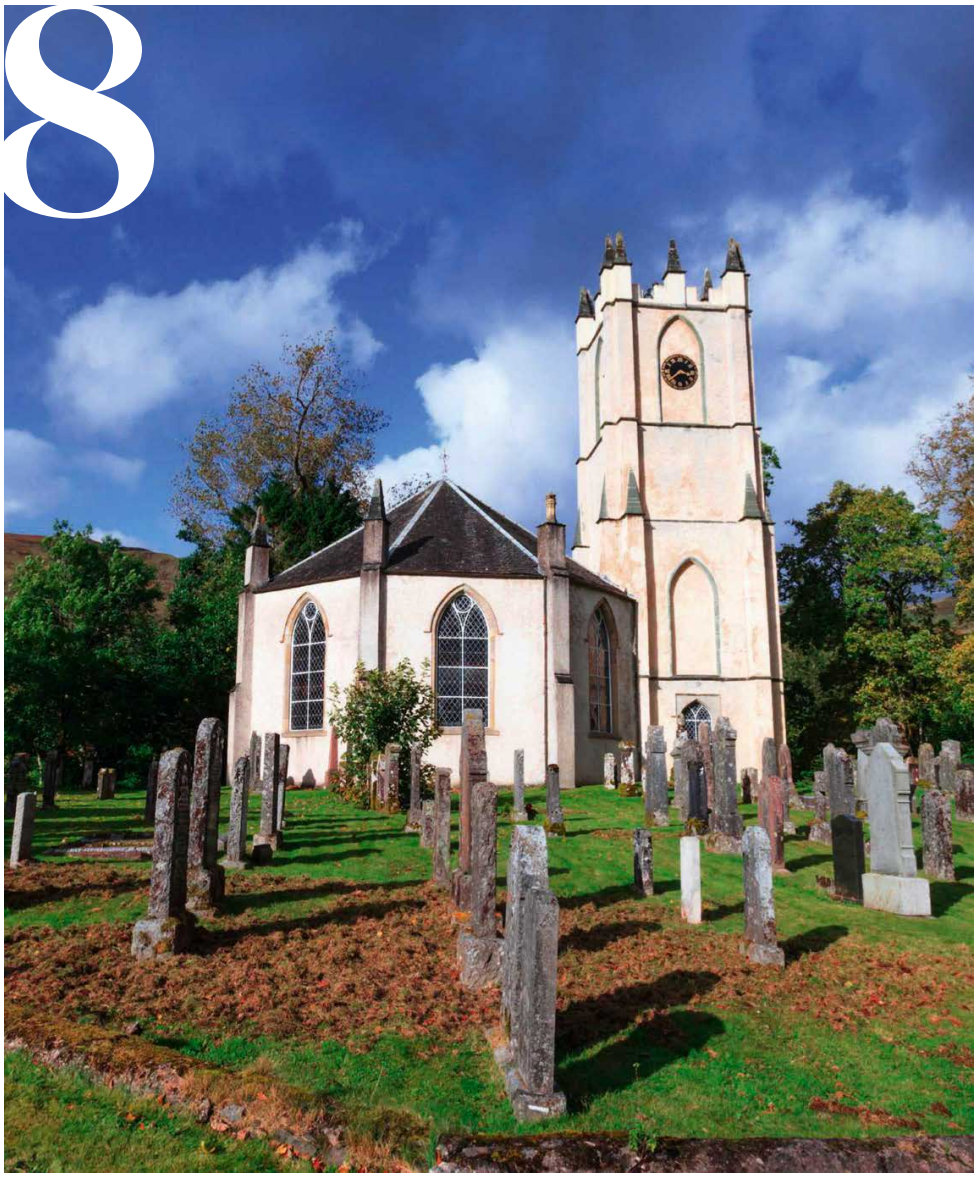
8 St Conan's Pilgrims Way, Western Scotland

If you enjoy a ferry crossing as part of your pilgrimage, this trail will be your cup of holy water since it contains two. The route can be walked either way, since there are significant pilgrimage sites at both ends. At the far western extremity sits Iona Abbey on its tiny island off the Isle of Mull, while 73 miles away to the east is Dalmally, where St Conan founded a community.

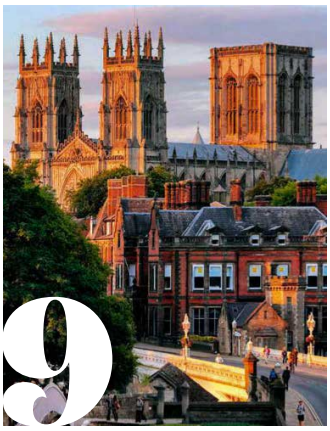
Iona Abbey was established by St Columba in the 6th century and became the centre of operations for missionaries taking Christianity into Scotland. Pilgrims heading out from here must first cross the Sound of Iona to Mull. The Inner Hebridean island is famed for its wildlife and offers the chance of spotting eagles, otters, seals, whales and dolphins. At Craignure, in the far east of Mull, a ferry sails to Oban on the mainland.

There are then moors, glens and a mountain pass to tackle before arriving at Dalmally. There you'll find St Conan's miraculous holy well and a fine octagonal parish church (below). The latter dates from the early 19th century but is believed to be on the site of a St Conan's cell. You can finish your walk there or carry on to the official end at the Craig Lodge House of Prayer.

Find maps and directions at **stconanspilgrimway.com**. For ferry crossings between Oban and Craignure, and Fionnphort and Iona, see **calmac.co.uk**.



Photos: Getty; Alamy



9

Paulinus Way, Yorkshire

Sent as a missionary from Rome in 601 CE, Paulinus found himself escorting a Christian princess called Ethelburga from Kent to Northumbria where she was to marry King Edwin. The young monk took to his mission of saving the souls of the pagan Northumbrians with no little zeal, starting with the king and then criss-crossing the kingdom for the next three decades until Edwin died in 633.

The Paulinus Way – starting in Todmorden and ending in York – celebrates the life of the man who became Bishop of the Northumbrians. It's the brainchild of Tina and Stuart Clayton, who stumbled across Paulinus while researching the roots of Christianity in Northern England. They offer pilgrims a choice of options to get from end to end, reflecting the different paths Paulinus may have taken. The shortest is 65 miles long, while the longest clocks in at 90 miles.

All the routes follow rivers, cross dales and visit ancient places of worship before arriving at the lofty Minster in York (pictured), where the newly converted King Edwin ordered the building of a stone church. This pilgrimage across the north country is marked today by the very stone crosses that Paulinus himself erected on his travels. **britishpilgrimage.org**

Photos: Alamy

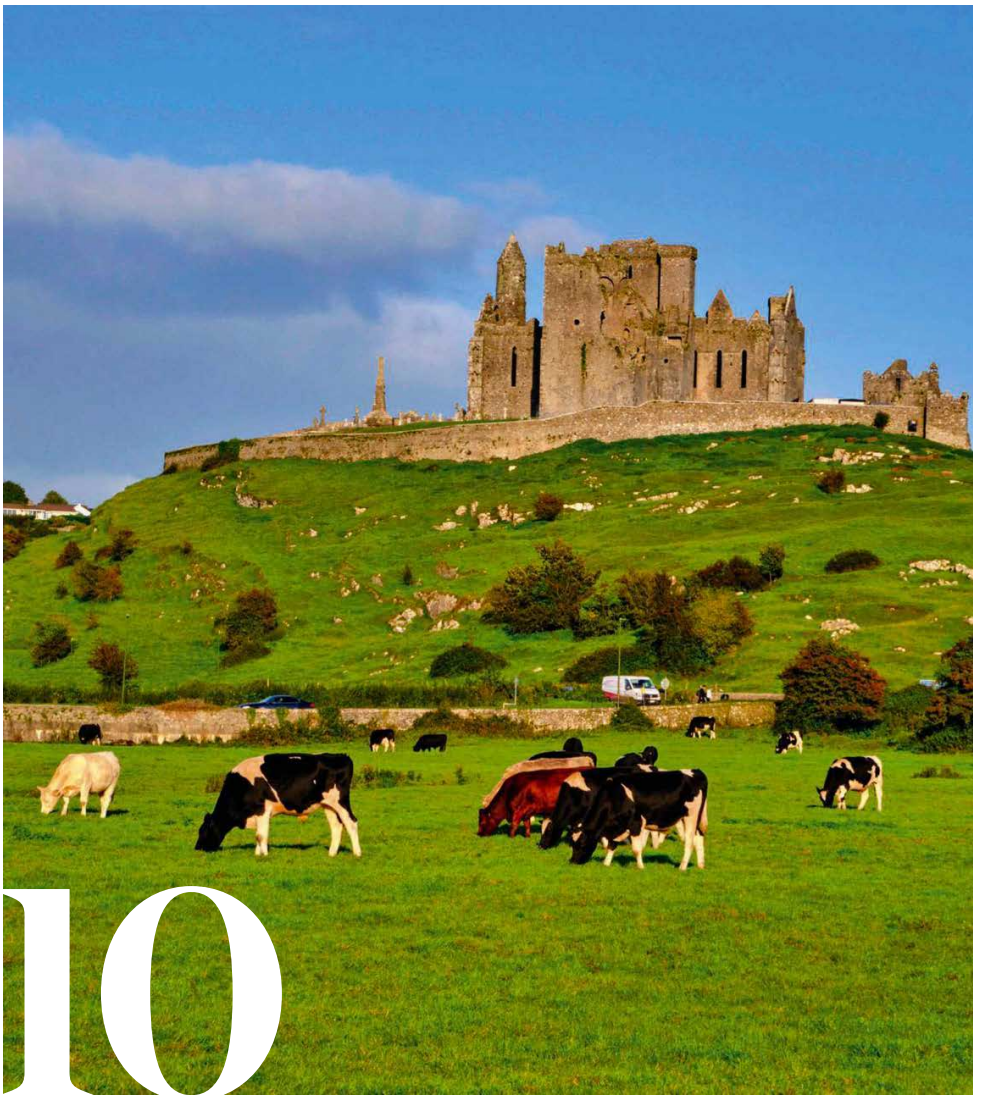
Celtic Camino, Ireland

There seems barely a corner of Ireland that isn't crossed by some sacred route or other, and many of them can be walked as part of the famous Camino de Santiago. The Camino Society Ireland has identified no fewer than nine Celtic Camino trails that can be combined with the 46.6-mile Camino Inglés from A Coruña to Santiago to achieve the minimum 62-mile distance required to receive a 'Compostela' certificate on reaching Santiago. **caminosociety.ie**

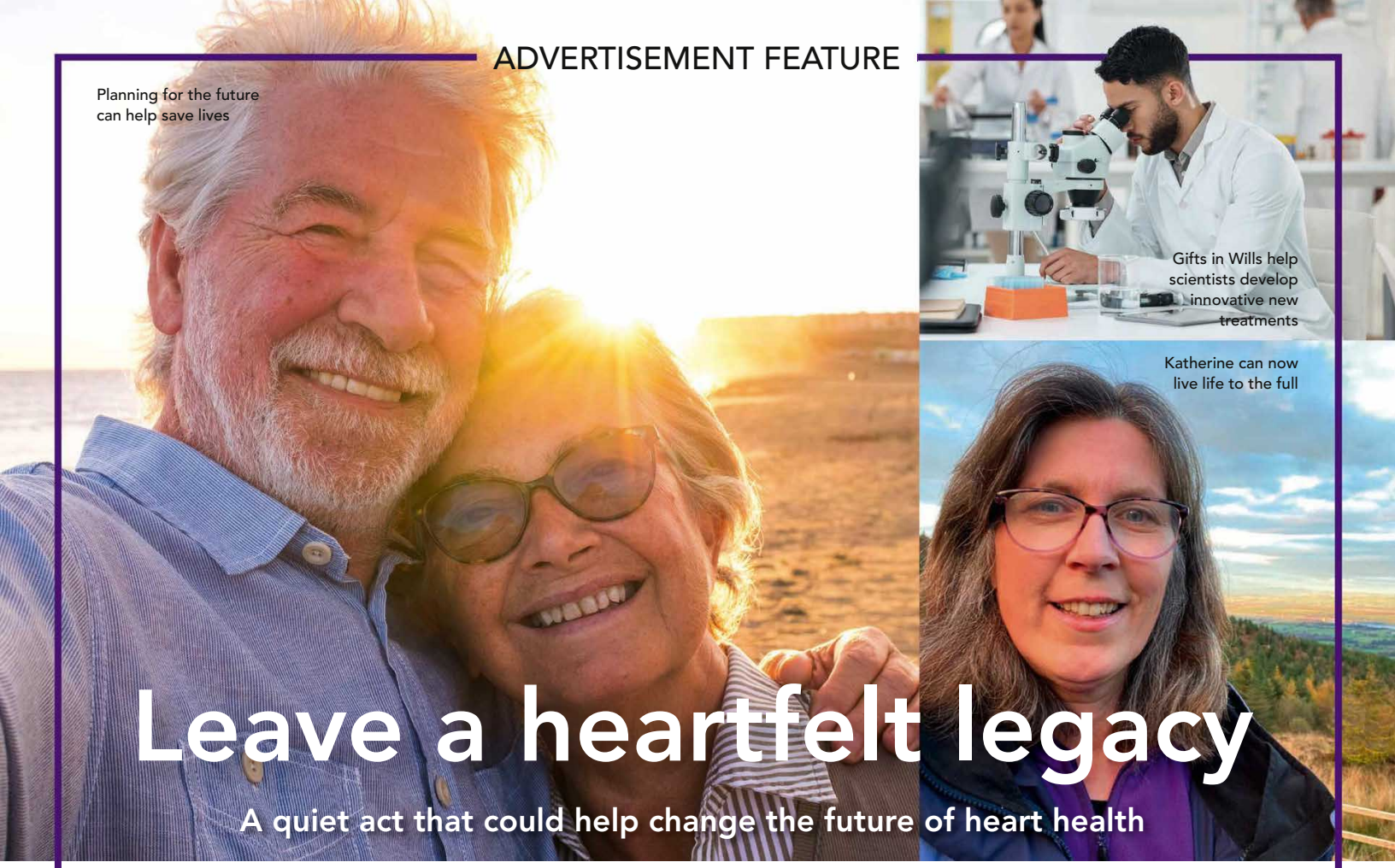
By far the longest of these is St Declan's Way, which runs for 69 miles from Ardmore on the Waterford coast over the Knockmealdown Mountains to Cashel in Tipperary (pictured). Fully waymarked, the route celebrates the fifth-century missionary St Declan, who came to the south of Ireland and established a monastery at Ardmore. **stdeclansway.ie**

Up in the north-west, pilgrims register at Ballintubber Abbey in Mayo before setting off on the 22-mile Tóchar Phádraig, travelling over Cruach Phádraig mountain and its summit chapel and on to Murrisk Friary. St Patrick is said to have fasted for 40 days on the 764m peak of Cruach Phádraig, but this extraordinarily ancient pilgrimage route is probably pagan in origin. **ballintubberabbey.ie**

The shortest of the nine Celtic Camino trails is the Boyne Valley Camino, which comes in at just 16 miles. The route describes a figure-of-eight along the valley of the River Boyne from Drogheda out to Mellifont Abbey and back and is often walked in a day. **boynevalleycamino.ie**



10



Planning for the future can help save lives

Gifts in Wills help scientists develop innovative new treatments

Katherine can now live life to the full

Leave a heartfelt legacy

A quiet act that could help change the future of heart health

Whether we're navigating a crisp winter woodland or pausing to take in a sweeping valley view, the British countryside offers a restorative power that keeps us grounded and, crucially, keeps us active. Just as we strive to preserve our landscapes and ensure footpaths remain open for the next generation, it's important to also consider the people who walk them.

THE REALITIES OF HEART HEALTH

Getting out into nature is one of the most accessible activities there is, with free trails to be explored across the country.

While many of us can escape to where we can reconnect with the outdoors and create lasting memories with those we love, for some these simple pleasures are overshadowed by a challenge that affects both rural and urban communities alike: heart diseases. It's a reality that touches millions of lives, with coronary heart disease remaining one of the UK's biggest killers.

Tragically, heart disease takes the life of a loved one every eight minutes, killing more than twice as many women as breast cancer. Perhaps more shockingly, the number of people living with cardiovascular disease now outnumbers those living with cancer and Alzheimer's combined.

Heart Research UK is a leading charity dedicated to helping people live healthier, happier and longer lives by funding innovative medical research, supporting groundbreaking treatments, raising awareness and championing prevention.

STRENGTH AFTER SURGERY

In the very landscapes that so many of us hold dear, hope is taking root. The work being done to tackle heart diseases is ongoing, thanks to support from those who leave gifts in their Wills – and it's having a tangible impact on people's lives.

Gifts in Wills help life continue for individuals like Katherine (pictured above right), who faced the daunting prospect of open-heart surgery in 2021 – a life-changing moment that could have defined her future. Today, she has lived to tell the tale. After her surgery, she embraced new adventures, even setting off on a remarkable 5,000-mile cycling challenge across Scotland. Sadly, many others won't get that chance. A gift in your Will can help protect the hearts of the future.

FUNDING THE PATH AHEAD

It's often the quietest of contributions that can help to ensure enduring change, and Heart Research UK relies on the generosity of donors who plan ahead, with gifts left in Wills funding around 70 per cent of their work. Each donation helps scientists and clinicians explore new ideas, develop innovative treatments and improve surgical care, and also supports vital community projects that help people understand their heart health, so they can reduce their risk before problems begin.

Planning for the future this way can be a financially sound decision, too, alongside being an effective way to help protect the people you love, as gifts left to charity are exempt from inheritance tax and can reduce the tax rate you pay on the remainder of your estate.

Choosing to protect the future of medical research is an act of kindness that mirrors the way we tend to the natural world around us. Not only can it be a meaningful way to reflect your values, but it can also serve as a gift to future generations.

Visit **heartresearch.org.uk** or call **0113 234 7474** to learn more.

Heart Research UK

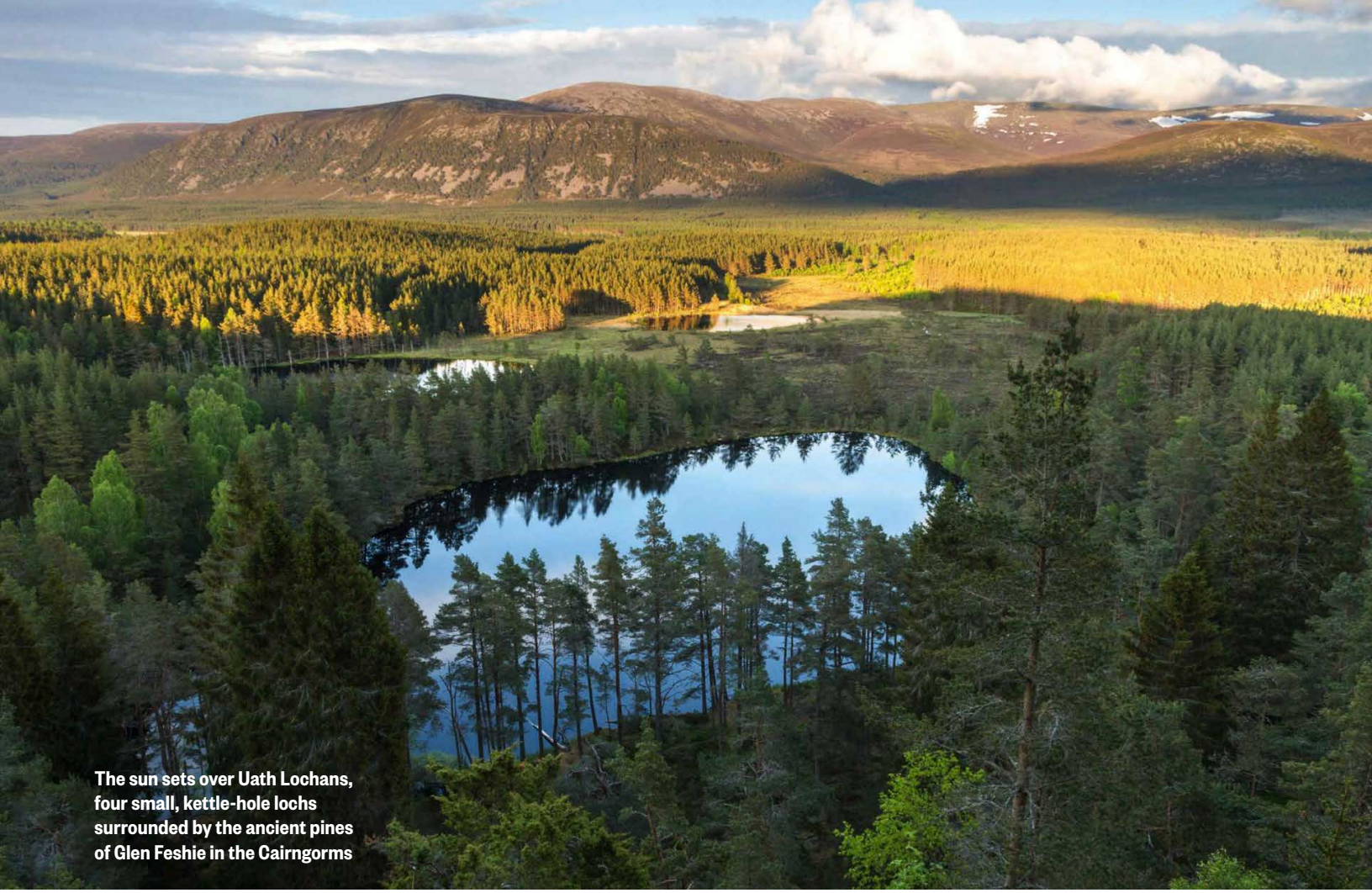
Charity number: 1044821

Free Will writing service provided by Octopus Legacy and paid for by Heart Research UK. Use code HRUKFREE. HRUK covers costs up to £150; additional costs may apply. Updates free for first year then £10/year. Terms apply: octopuslegacy.com/terms-and-conditions. Heart Research UK is a registered charity (E&W 1044821; Scotland SC053550). Company No. 3026813.

Lush vegetation and wildflowers, birdsong and beavers. **Sam Pyrah** joins a walk on the rewild side in a hugely ambitious regenerative project in the Scottish Cairngorms

Photo: **James Shooter/scotlandbigpicture.com**

Nature *in* recovery



The sun sets over Uath Lochans, four small, kettle-hole lochs surrounded by the ancient pines of Glen Feshie in the Cairngorms

Rionnach maoim is a Gaelic phrase describing "shadows of cumulus clouds moving across moorland on a sunny, windy day". It is just such a day today, as we leave the old ruins of Ruthven Barracks and climb south onto the moor-clad slopes of Beinn Bhuidhe. The vibrant purple flowers of bell heather throng with mountain bumblebees. The ling, a more muted shade of mauve, is just coming into bloom.

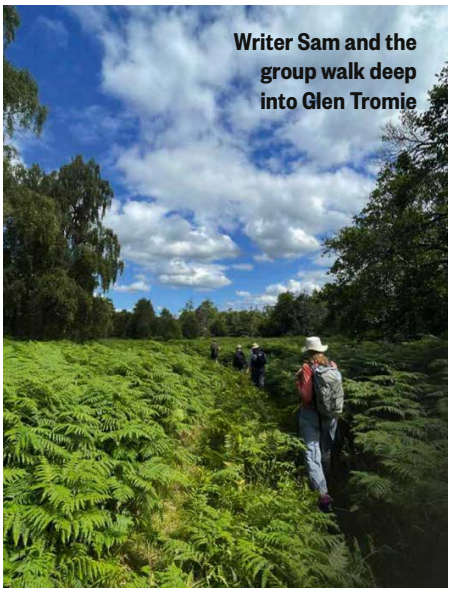
The sun is hot. We pause to catch our breath and look back across the broad strath of the Spey. The bare, rugged domes of Creag Mhòr and Creag Bheag rise up in the near ground, with the grey shapes of higher peaks beyond. There is a stark beauty to the scene – one that many regard as classically Scottish – craggy, cropped, treeless. But the landscape through which we are walking is altogether different.

It is still moorland, but here, young trees dot the slopes – mostly rowan and birch, along with a few Scots pine. There are open grassy patches amid the heather, where wildflowers and the tufty white heads of cottongrass nod in the breeze. A large toad hunkers down on the path. Then, thrillingly, a hen harrier, brown – so, either female or juvenile – flies into view, quartering the ground before landing on a rock.

This is nature in recovery. When WildLand, a company specialising in ecological restoration, took on this land in 2014, it mirrored the denuded hills across the strath. A strict deer management policy was introduced to bring numbers under control. This reduction in grazing pressure, along with planting where appropriate, has given the trees, shrubs and flowers a chance to regenerate, bringing the landscape back to life.

THE THREE RS

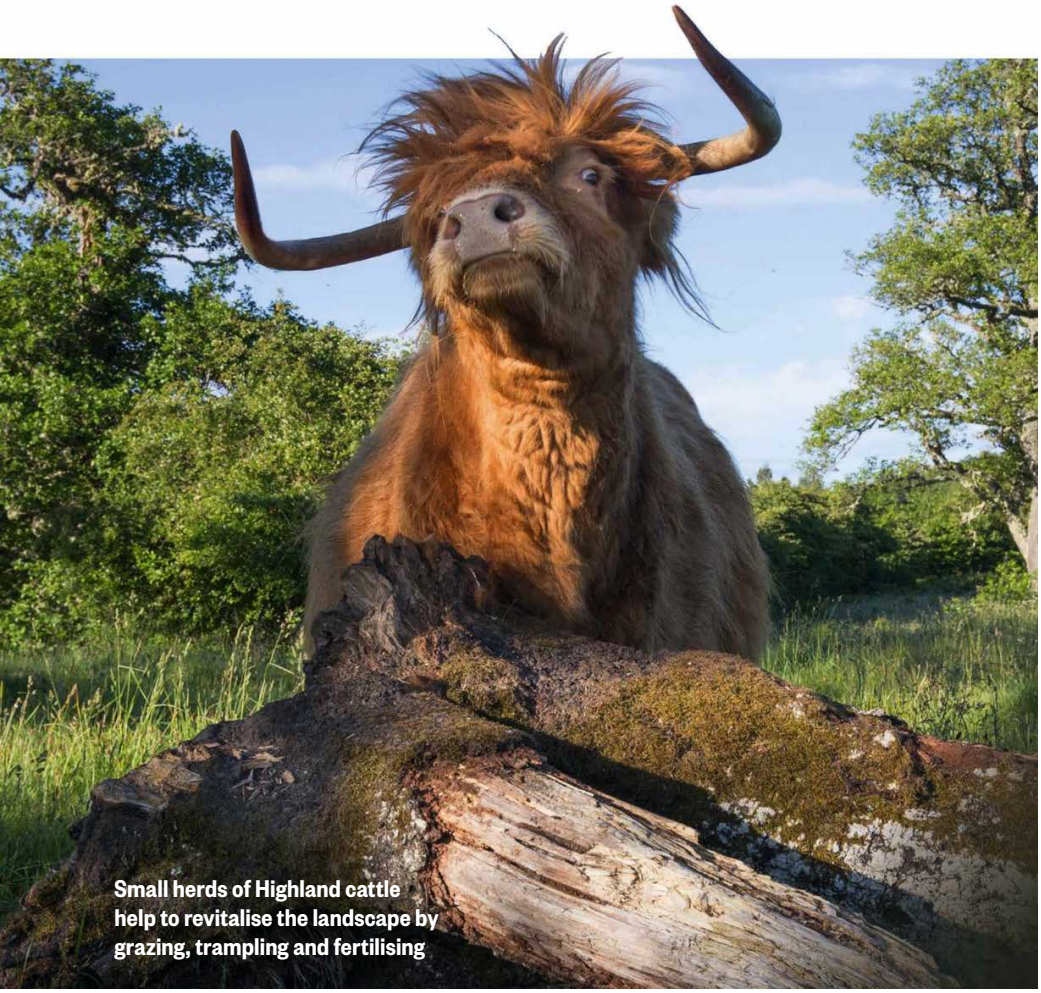
Regeneration, restoration, recovery – all good words – and words that skirt diplomatically around the original r-word that has become so mired in controversy in the past decade: rewilding. For some, rewilding simply means taking a step back to let nature recover. For others, it necessitates the reintroduction of missing species, such as lynx, wild boar or wolves. Whatever the differences in opinion (and there are many) regarding the right approach, the common goal is nature recovery "that leads to restored ecosystem health, function and completeness," as national rewilding charity Scotland: The Big Picture (SBP) puts it.



Writer Sam and the group walk deep into Glen Tromie

I'm taking part in one of SBP's Rewilding Journeys in the Cairngorms National Park. "We developed our Rewilding Journeys as a way for eco-conscious travellers to learn

Photos: James Shooter, Peter Cairns, Rewilding Coombeshead, Charlie Burrell, Mark Hamblin, Alamy



Small herds of Highland cattle help to revitalise the landscape by grazing, trampling and fertilising

first-hand about transformational rewilding initiatives, while experiencing landscapes of hope and enjoying fantastic Highland hospitality," explains SBP's Kathryn Morris. Two of my fellow participants can vouch for this; they have been before and are back for more.

This particular offering – Walking the Wild – takes place mostly on foot. Think walking holiday meets study tour, complete with packed lunches, wild swimming and comfy beds. Yesterday, our five-strong group visited two sites where beavers have been reintroduced and are busy reshaping the ecosystem, with dams and gnawed trees the telltale signs.

The day before, we explored Abernethy Forest, the largest remaining fragment of the ancient Caledonian pinewood that once covered swathes of Scotland. Some of the 'granny pines' there are 450 years old; their bark has thickened into rust-red plates, their trunks bulge and twist – a far cry from the uniform growth of a plantation forest.

Abernethy has been in the hands of the RSPB since the mid-1980s. A lauded conservation body in its own right, the RSPB is one of four partners – alongside WildLand, NatureScot, and Forestry and Land Scotland – that united in 2016 to form the visionary Cairngorms Connect project. Its aim is habitat restoration across a landscape that extends to 600 square kilometres – including native forest, wetland and rivers, peatland and montane ecosystems – over a timescale of 200 years.

MOVING THE DEER ALONG

Again, deer management lies at the heart of the project. When I'd heard the phrase before, I assumed it was a euphemism for culling. "Getting numbers down to a healthy level is a big part of management, but it's also about keeping the deer moving," says Jack Ward, our trip guide and one of 15 highly trained deer stalkers utilised by Cairngorms Connect. "When there are no predators to fear, deer tend to stay in one area for too long, completely stripping it of young trees," he explains. "If they are aware that there is potential danger, they'll keep on the move, browsing and pruning but not

REWILDING PROJECTS

Five regeneration initiatives to visit in the UK

REWILDING COOMBESHEAD, DEVON

Headed by renowned farmer-conservationist Derek Gow, this is home to the Species Recovery Centre, where lost and endangered UK species are bred for release.
rewildingcoombeshead.co.uk

KNEPP WILDLAND PROJECT, WEST SUSSEX

The poster child of the rewilding movement, Knepp was the subject of 2023 documentary *Wilding*. See this vast and vibrant landscape on a guided safari.
knepp.co.uk

COAST DISCOVERY CENTRE, ARRAN

This community-led project focuses on conserving wildlife in the seas around Arran. It established Scotland's first 'No Take Zone' off Lamlash Bay in 2008.
arrancoast.com

RSPB GELTSDALE, CUMBRIA

This former grouse moor and sheep farm in the north Pennines is managed by the RSPB for nature, with peat bog and wetlands being restored, woodland regenerated and hay meadows created.
rspb.org.uk

WILD KEN HILL, NORFOLK

This 1,618-hectare nature restoration project uses a mix of rewilding, regenerative farming and traditional conservation. Spot some of the 2,500 species on a tour.
wildkenhill.co.uk

Regenerating woodland beside the River Feshie, Glen Feshie in the Cairngorms

decimating vegetation." This allows the forest to regenerate.

Some people are uncomfortable with the idea of culling deer; red and roe deer are both native species. Aren't they part of the ecosystem? "They are, and we want them here," insists Ward. "A little bit of grazing pressure is good for the landscape." He shows us a deer-nibbled rowan sapling, pointing out how the bitten area has thickened in response to attack. "But it's about having the right numbers."

Scotland's deer population is widely regarded as problematic. It's grown too big for two main reasons: the absence of predators – animals that were once part of the Scottish landscape, such as lynx and wolves – and the preference of traditional sporting estates to favour high numbers of deer for shooting. A NatureScot report in 2020 estimated the population of red deer on open ground (as opposed to forest) in the Highlands to be 40% higher than in 1990, which in turn, is estimated to be five times higher than in the 1950s.

"Too many deer isn't just bad for the environment, it's bad for the deer themselves," explains Ward. "In harsh winters, when food is scarce, many starve to death in overpopulated areas."

Deer that are culled within the Cairngorms Connect partnership area benefit the local community through the Venison Project, which promotes venison as a sustainable, healthy meat and makes it available to local people at affordable rates. The 'gralloch' (the entrails) is left on the hill, where its nutrients benefit wildlife and soil.

REWILDING JOURNEY

The next Scotland: The Big Picture Cairngorms Rewilding Journey is scheduled for 25–30 April 2026 (there are further dates in May, Sept and Oct). The trip includes guided excursions each day, five nights' accommodation at Ballintean Mountain Lodge with breakfast and dinner on site and lunch on the move. The cost is £1,895 per person. scotlandbigpicture.com

REWIGGLE IT

Back on the hill, a second hen harrier joins the first. "Definitely juveniles," says Ward, from behind his binoculars. "That's brilliant, it means a pair have bred successfully." He notes down the grid reference to pass on to the WildLand team.

We pass over the shoulder of Beinn Bhuidhe and descend through chest-high bracken and dappled birchwood into Glen Tromie. Picking up the river (where another restoration project, involving 'rewiggling' a straightened channel and slowing the flow rate by laying trees on the riverbed, is underway) we follow a parallel course through the glen. The scene feels almost make-believe – lush green vegetation and wildflowers, alive with birdsong and butterflies. The feeling only grows when Ward diverts us along a heathery trod to a rocky outcrop overlooking the boulder-strewn river. I slide into the cold black water with a gasp and float on my back, grinning at my tour mates eating their sandwiches.

Ward regards the ecological restoration of these landscapes as a win-win – good for nature, good for us. But not everyone would agree. There is tangible opposition to rewilding – locally and nationally – particularly from some farmers, who see it as a threat to their traditional way of life and warn that it will negatively impact the UK's food security. For Robert MacDonald, chair of the Cairngorms

Sitting within a revitalised landscape, Ballintean Mountain Lodge serves as the base for the SBP Rewilding Journeys

"Rewilding is 20% ecological, 80% psychological"

Crofters and Farmers Community, species reintroductions, and other aspects of rewilding, such as the expansion of native woodland, risk driving people off the land.

While proponents of rewilding ponder keystone species and apex predators, the species that most concerns Peter Cairns, former CEO of SBP and host of *At The Edge*, a podcast examining our relationship with wild nature is... us. "Rewilding is 20% ecological, 80% psychological," he says.

It was 30 years ago when Cairns took on Ballintean, a 50-hectare former equestrian centre in stunning Glen Feshie that now serves as the base for SBP's rewilding journeys. "It had been grazed by 52 horses, not to mention herds of red deer," he tells us. "We sought advice about how best to rejuvenate the land, but everyone had a different theory, a different agenda. Although rewilding wasn't a 'thing' back then, our instinct was that nature knew best and we sat back to see what happened."

Three decades on, the results of this 'hands off' approach are clear to see. What had once been featureless, overgrazed fields is now reminiscent of a savannah, with scattered trees, scrub, grasses, mosses and wildflowers. A small herd of Highland cattle wander through, grazing, trampling and fertilising the land as they go.

MINDSET SHIFT

Ballintean sits within the floodplain of the River Feshie, an 18-mile tributary of the Spey. In the winter of 2024, a big storm transformed the Feshie into a raging torrent, undercutting its banks, sending trees tumbling into the water and creating new channels and islands. "Look how much land you've lost!" people remarked to Cairns, lamenting the 'mess' the storm had left in its wake.

He has a different perspective. "We have become so conditioned to seeing landscape as passive and controllable," he explains. "There's a great resistance to anything that threatens to change the way we think things 'should' be. But we are going to *have* to accept change if we are to reverse nature loss across Scotland. We need to stop trying to dominate."

Ballintean is part of the Northwoods Rewilding Network, SBP's 100+-strong chain of 40–404-hectare landholdings across Scotland, which are rewilding according to an agreed set of principles. Individually, some of the projects may be small, but collectively they are helping to heal and join up fragmented landscapes. And perhaps even more importantly, they help normalise rewilding and showcase what benefits it can bring.

That's important, because away from the regenerating landscapes we have been exploring these last few days, vast tracts of Scotland remain woefully nature depleted. In a 2023 report, Scotland was rated 212th out of 242 countries in terms of nature depletion, with 11% of its 7,508 species threatened by extinction.

On our final night at Ballintean, I walk down to the Feshie, take off my shoes and paddle in the cool, quiet water while the sunset drenches the sky orange and pink. I think back to Peter Cairns' words, spoken at this very spot a few days earlier; how so much more of the landscape could thrive like this if we would only loosen our grip. "It's our imaginations that need rewilding," he'd said. I walk back, carrying my shoes. CF

Sam Pyrah is a writer based in the Cairngorms with a passion for being active in the great outdoors.

Planting the future

Help the rare red squirrel thrive in Yorkshire's iconic Snaizeholme Valley

Britain's ancient woodlands have stood for centuries. Yews, oaks and hawthorns, their roots embedded in history, help secure a future in which both people and nature can thrive. The woodlands of Britain are diverse, ranging from ancient sites, such as Monks Wood in Cambridgeshire – a biodiverse refuge since the 1600s – to Heartwood Forest, a recent Woodland Trust project where thousands of hornbeam and field maple have been planted to create new native woodland.

The Woodland Trust is the UK's largest woodland conservation charity. It works to protect, restore and create British woodland, caring for more than 1,000 woods across the country that are all free to visit. "We've been fighting for the health of people and the planet with every tree since 1972," says chief executive Dr Darren Moorcroft, "but today our mission is more urgent than ever."

A THRIVING VALLEY

As part of its wide portfolio of work, the Woodland Trust purchases land to create healthy, new woodland. One of its most recent projects is the vast 561-hectare Snaizeholme Valley near Hawes, North Yorkshire. The charity has created 290 hectares of woodland capable of growing into a thriving habitat for wildlife. Since 2023, up to 1,000 trees a day have been planted to realise this ambition.

The valley is home to rare red squirrels, which have lived in this remote landscape since the 1970s, thriving within a grey-squirrel exclusion zone monitored by the Yorkshire Dales National Park. With the new woodland now planted, the squirrels can gradually expand into their growing habitat.

The Trust is also restoring the moorlands, much loved by black grouse, another endangered species. Barn owls, little owls and tawny owls inhabit the valley, alongside ground-nesting birds, such as curlew, while ravens can be seen soaring above the moorland and limestone pavement.

Snaizeholme contains 109 hectares of upland peat bog, where restoration work has now been completed. Efforts to restore connected waterways will further improve aquatic habitats, helping wildlife to thrive. Meanwhile, native Hereford cattle graze the estate; their grazing encourages rougher vegetation, improving water retention and supporting natural regeneration, in turn benefiting invertebrates and other wildlife.

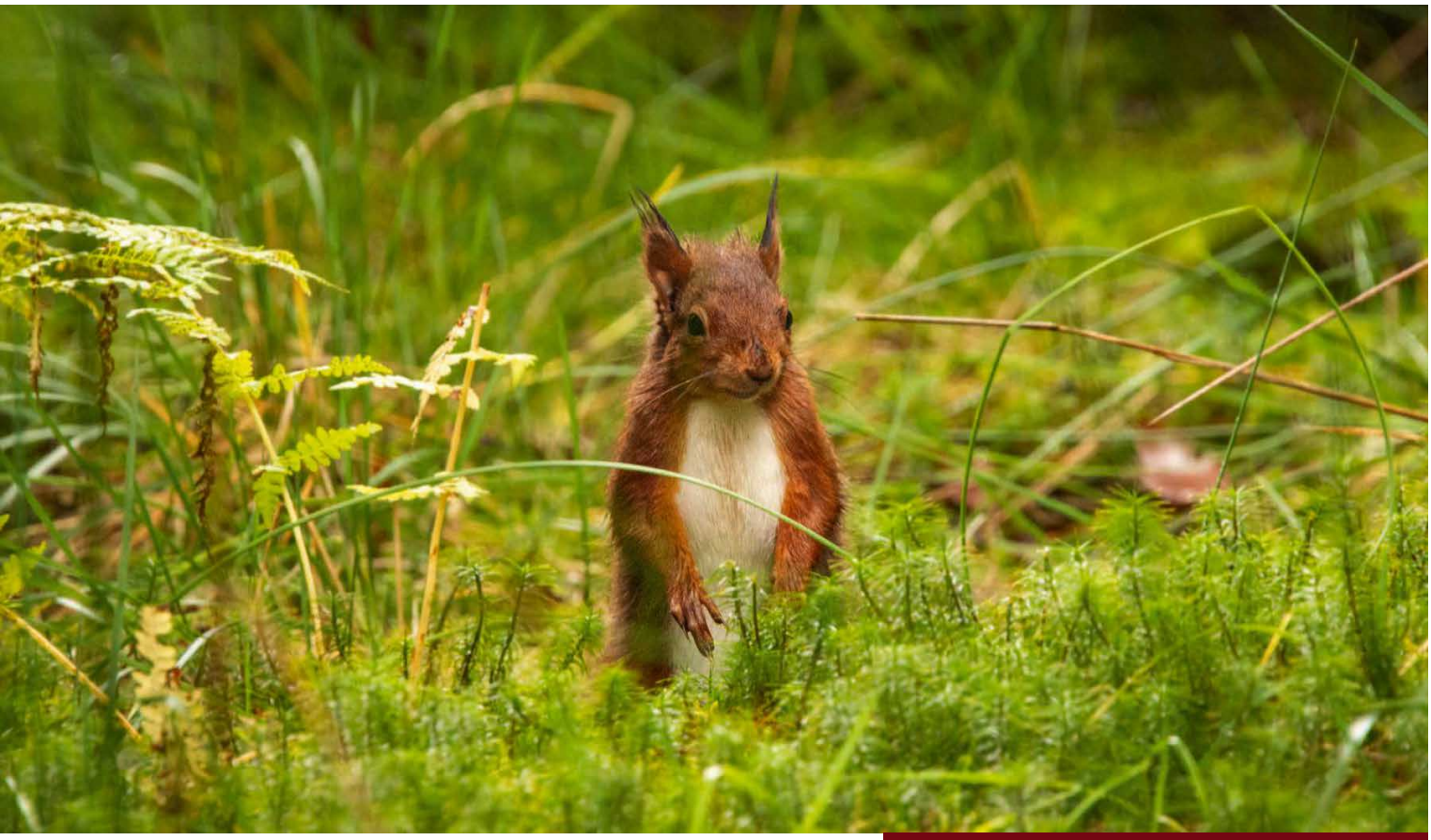
SUPPORTING A WILDER FUTURE

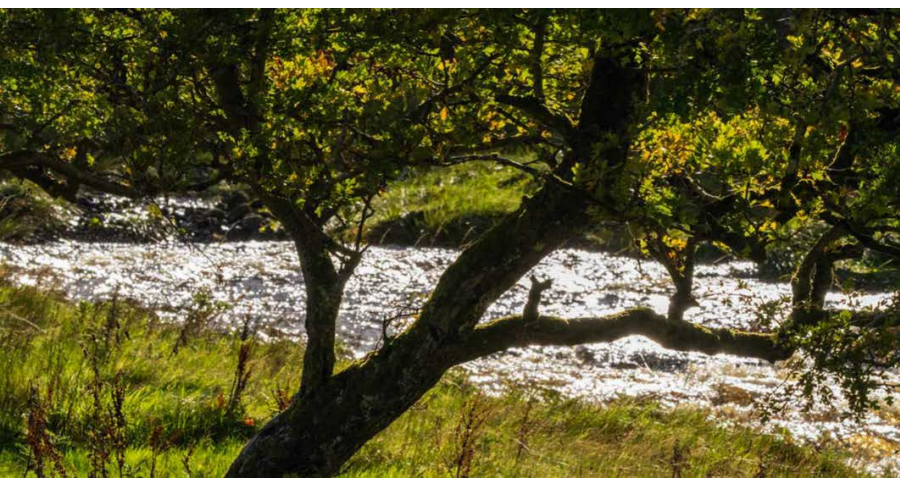
Snaizeholme's site manager Alec Pue says restoration work is "gradually rolling back time to how this primordial landscape would have looked 500 years ago. It's wild and fantastic, and it's coming back to life before our eyes." The charity has ambitions to acquire a further 141 hectares of critically

ABOVE AND BOTTOM RIGHT Views across the thriving Snaizeholme Valley

TOP RIGHT It's hoped red squirrels will expand their territory in the valley

Images: Jill Jennings, Philip Formby





strategic land, which would make Snaizeholme Valley its largest site in England. To secure these additional blocks and fund the estate's ongoing restoration work, it needs to raise £4.86 million. Time is running short, the Trust says, and it is appealing for donations to support its nature recovery work in the valley.

As well as helping to create a flagship model for nature recovery, donors may also benefit from tax incentives. These allow UK taxpayers to structure charitable giving in a tax-efficient way, potentially increasing the overall value of their support to the charity. Support this tax year could help accelerate nature recovery in one of England's most ambitious rewilding landscapes.

Help the Woodland Trust revive the Snaizeholme Valley for red squirrels and other rare species. Every donation makes a difference.

Visit **woodlandtrust.org.uk/snaizeholmeappeal** to support this urgent appeal.

A TAX BREAK FOR NATURE

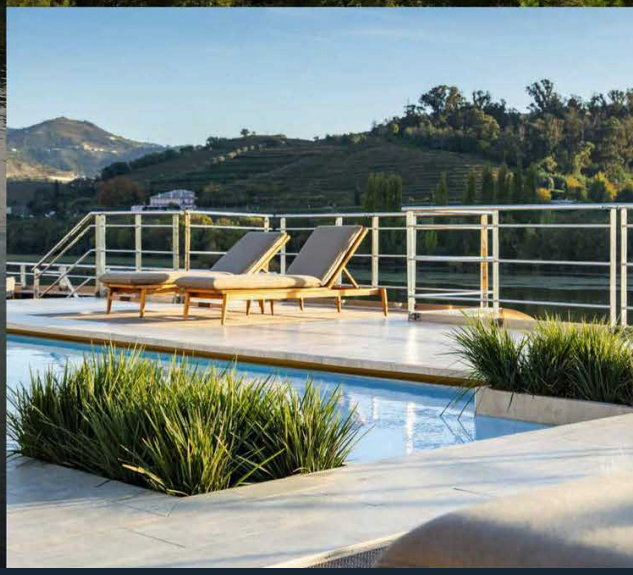
Tax relief is available to UK donors paying higher rates of income tax (40% or 45% for tax year 2025/26). This enables you to reclaim the difference between the basic rate and the highest rate of tax on the gross value of your gift via your self-assessment tax return. If you do not fill in a self-assessment tax return, you can obtain your tax relief by getting in touch with HMRC and having your tax code amended. You can then either keep any money reclaimed or donate it back to the charity. Please note that tax rates and regulations do change and this information is correct as of December 2025.

WOODLAND TRUST

The information provided is for general guidance only and does not constitute tax, legal, or financial advice. Tax treatment depends on individual circumstances and may change in the future. You should seek independent, professional advice from a qualified tax advisor before taking any action.

CRUISE COLLECTIVE

Member Exclusive
SAVE UP TO 10%*
Cruise Collective



Premium River and Yacht Cruise journeys with exceptional value built in

Cruise Collective partners with leading cruise lines to give members access to partner savings. Join once for free and use across multiple cruise lines

Travelmarvel, part of the award-winning APT Travel Group, creates expertly planned journeys across Europe, Egypt and Asia, including yacht cruises along Croatia's coastline.

With return UK flights, transfers, guided excursions, tipping and daily meals with drinks included, you can simply relax and enjoy premium travel at excellent value.

It's refined travel, shaped by experience, care and confidence.

Travelmarvel highlights

- Exceptional value included
- More choice, deeper discovery
- Relaxed expert-led cruising
- Comfortable, effortless travel
- Thoughtfully designed itineraries

Join Cruise Collective for free to receive...

- Invites to exclusive events
- Exclusive partner savings
- No points. No tiers. Just benefits.
- Book directly with the cruise lines
- Travel tips and inspiration
- Advice and editorial

HOW TO REDEEM YOUR SAVING

1. Join Cruise Collective for free
2. Receive your exclusive member code
3. Book directly with Travelmarvel using the code

CRUISE-COLLECTIVE.COM

travelmarvel
Premium Cruises & Tours

* Terms & Conditions apply. Visit www.cruise-collective.com/terms-and-conditions/travelmarvel-premium-cruises-terms-and-conditions to learn more.

Rated 'Excellent' on Trustpilot

Western promise

Twenty-eight miles west of Cornwall lies an untamed archipelago of footprint-free sands, crystalline waters and rare wildlife. And getting there is part of the adventure. Here's your guide to Scilly's inhabited islands

Photo: Alamy

St Mary's

Eelgrass sways beneath my feet and beams of sunlight catch my goggles. I'm swimming in my running shoes, but soon emerge onto the fine white sand and start to run in my wetsuit.

No, this isn't some weird sporting dream but the annual St Mary's Scilly Swimrun event: an amphibious 16km race around the perimeter of the archipelago's biggest island, involving seven runs and seven swims – with stretches of scrambling, rock climbing, orienteering and snorkelling thrown in for good measure.

Home to most of the archipelago's 2,366 inhabitants, pubs and ferry connections, the island of St Mary's is an ideal base for a Scilly trip. The Swimrun route takes entrants through the islands' largest settlement, bustling Hugh Town, and on to the 350-year-old walled fortification called the Garrison, where the 16th-century Star Castle (now a four-star hotel) lords over the headland and its cannons point west into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Isles of Scilly possess more archaeological sites per square mile than anywhere else in the UK – 238 of them, encompassing 900 individual protected and well-preserved features.

Gorgeous Pelistry Bay is on St Mary's eastern shore

Prehistoric sites and Bronze Age burial chambers abound, especially on St Mary's, along with relics from the civil, Napoleonic and world wars. The archipelago was also caught up in the Three Hundred and Thirty-Five Years' War with the Netherlands from 1651. This was a conflict that really existed only as a technicality, with no casualties nor shots fired – a diplomatic oversight remedied in 1986 when a peace treaty was signed.

St Mary's Swimrun continues around the headland and across the airfield, where I wait at traffic lights for a tiny plane to land. Further highlights include a sandy causeway at Pelistry Bay, the Innisidgen burial chambers and the mysterious Giant's Castle, a fort on an improbably rocky headland.

> ***"Prehistoric sites abound on St Mary's"***

"You've only got to look at these islands to know that they're built for swimming and running," says Scilly Swimrun organiser Wez Swain, who moved here from Plymouth in Devon a decade ago. "Swimrun is all about immersing yourself in amazing environments," he adds.

I reach the finish line on Portmellon Beach after over three hours of (sub) athletic toil and scenic highs. I've blisters on top of blisters and chafing where I didn't know chafing could exist. It matters little, however: I can think of few more rewarding ways to enjoy an eye-popping immersion into the landscapes of the largest of Scilly's 200 islands, islets and rocks. Now, where can I find some baby oil?

Matt Baird

Porthcressa Beach in Hugh Town is perfect for paddling

Bryher offers a beguiling mix of sheltered bays and weather-beaten outcrops

Bryher

More exposed than its neighbouring islands, Bryher is the smallest of the archipelago's five inhabited islands. In its north, steep granite cliffs are pummelled by the full force of the Atlantic. Head south and the landscape changes dramatically: sheltered bays fringed by golden sand and lapped by turquoise water feel more like the Mediterranean than Britain. It's a place of contrasts with an elemental appeal.

Arriving here involves stepping into a different way of seeing time. Bryher has a way of slowing everything down, inviting you to fully embrace the gentle pace of life. With little traffic aside from a handful of working vehicles, the island feels safe and self-contained. For our children, aged between eight and 12, it offers a first taste of real independence. They roam between campsite, beach and the island's small bakery box, spending pocket money on freshly baked treats. By the end of the week, they've grown noticeably more confident and free-spirited, similar to the children of *Swallows and Amazons* but with fewer baddies to battle.

Getting to Bryher requires commitment, with all gear ferried by boat and tractor, but that sense of effort adds to the experience. Nights are quiet, the skies dark and strewn with stars, and mornings awash with the sounds and smells of the sea.

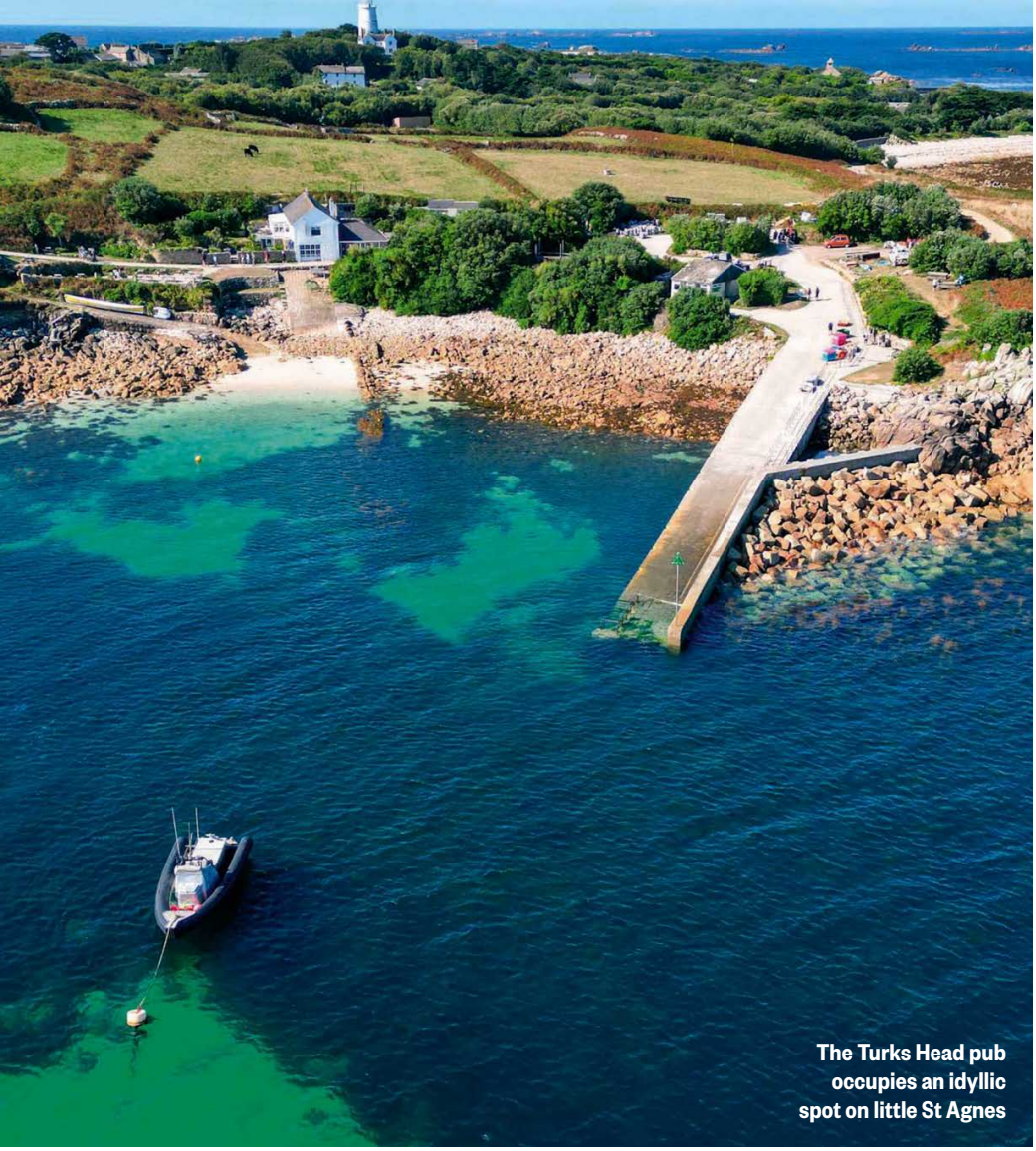
Rushy Bay on Bryher's southern shore

Despite its remoteness, Bryher has a strong community feel, with a café, shop and small gallery at its centre. The island's bar, Fraggle Rock, is an idyllic spot for a drink in the sunshine.

Though just over a mile long, Bryher offers plenty to do. Snorkelling in the sheltered bays between Bryher and Tresco brings close encounters with seals and more fish than I've ever seen before. Popplestones becomes our favourite beach: a long, quiet sweep of golden sand, scattered with colourful shells and sightings of gannets diving offshore. Shipman Head, meanwhile, is a rugged cliff-top promontory on the island's northern tip, with Iron Age earthworks, prehistoric cairns, seabird colonies, wildflowers and raw Atlantic winds.

One evening on Rushy Bay, on the island's southern shore, we cook fresh lobster from the local fish shop over a driftwood fire, watching the sun sink as the children play nearby. It's a moment of simplicity, wildness and utter beauty – very much like Bryher itself. **Georgie Duckworth**

Photo: Getty



The Turks Head pub occupies an idyllic spot on little St Agnes

Head west beyond Bishop Rock lighthouse and your next stop will be Canada

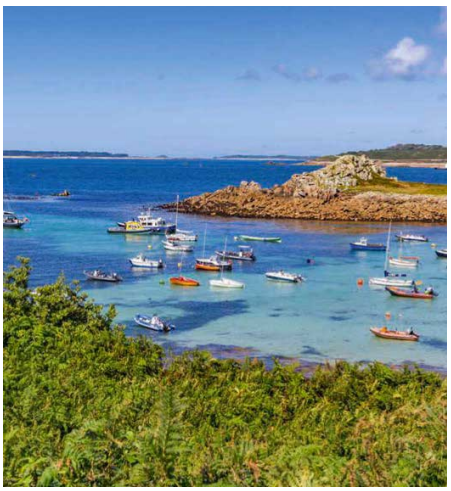
St Agnes

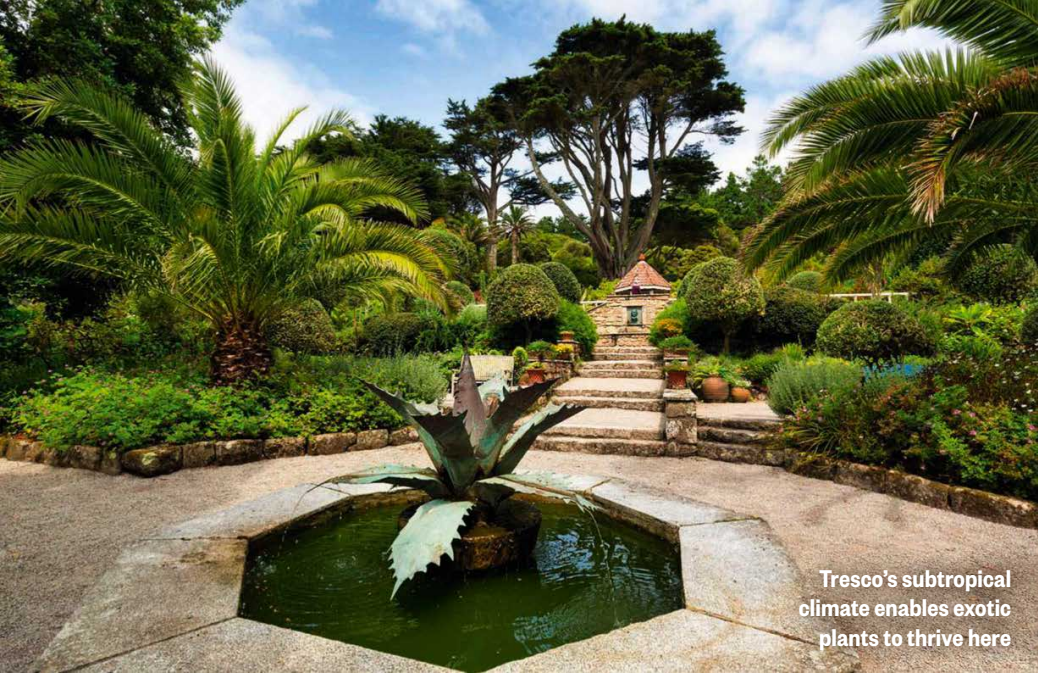
Measuring not much more than a mile across and with a population of around 80, St Agnes is Britain's south-westernmost inhabited island. It's a place of quiet farms, fields of flowers, heather moorland, piratical coves, sandy shell-strewn beaches, the odd holiday cottage and a sense that the 21st century is still a way off (mains electricity didn't arrive until the 1980s).

At low tide, visitors can cross one of Britain's few tombolos – naturally formed sandbars – to the smaller islet of Gugh, home to a colony of lesser black-backed gulls, a three-metre-tall Bronze Age standing stone called the Old Man, and a Neolithic burial chamber known as Obadiah's Barrow.

St Agnes' pub is the atmospheric Turks Head, which once served as the coastguard and customs boatshed, and sits in an idyllic spot above Porth Conger Quay (**turksheadscilly.co.uk**).

From St Agnes you might make out to the west the Bishop Rock and its lighthouse. The Guinness Book of Records lists this as the world's smallest island with a building on it – and the next landmass beyond is Newfoundland. With its own dedicated boat service (**stagnesboating.co.uk**), St Agnes is linked to the other main isles, making it easy to explore the rest of the archipelago. **Dixe Wills**





Tresco's subtropical climate enables exotic plants to thrive here

Tresco

"A perennial Kew without the glass" is how the folk at Tresco Abbey Garden (tresco.co.uk) describe their little horticultural paradise.

Encompassing seven hectares of Scilly's second largest isle – administered by the Duchy of Cornwall and leased to the Dorrien-Smith family – it has achieved world renown for its collection of over 2,000 species of subtropical flora. Tresco enjoys a very particular microclimate that has made it possible to grow plants from the Mediterranean and southern hemisphere countries, such as Brazil and New Zealand.

The eponymous priory was founded in the Middle Ages but fell victim to Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century. In the 1830s, Augustus Smith, a controversial Lord Proprietor of Scilly, built a house and established the gardens by the priory ruins. Since then, exotic plants such as leucadendrons, kangaroo ferns and Robinson Crusoe Island cabbage trees have been introduced, cared for by head gardener Andrew Lawson, who has tended to Tresco's flora for over 40 years.

There's some interesting fauna, too: colourful golden pheasants roam the grounds, red squirrels dart about the trees and pochards, sand martins and great northern divers can be seen on the lakes. On a more sombre note, the garden is home to the unique Valhalla Museum displaying figureheads, name boards and other carvings from ships that have been wrecked on the rocks around Scilly over the years.

The garden's café serves light lunches, cakes and cream teas. Come evening, visitors can dine at Tresco's New Inn (**tresco.co.uk/eating/new-inn**) and then stay the night there. And if you want to take a little bit of Tresco home with you, plants and seeds from the garden are on sale in the shop. **Dixe Wills**

St Martin's

Mention St Martin's to any Scilly regular and they'll likely become a touch misty-eyed about this captivating isle. It was the place we returned to most often during our stay– and in our post-visit memories – thanks to its pristine sands, Robinson Crusoe vibe and the pub garden to end all pub gardens.

Once the boat from St Mary's completes the 20-minute hop to St Martin's Lower Town Quay, passengers head off in every direction. My family ambles north along a chalky track, and soon we're almost alone among the gorse and heather – our only human encounter being with TV adventurer and naturalist Steve Backshall and his family. He is here for the annual Ocean Scilly Festival (we hear him call the islands his "happy place and the one constant in our changing lives" at a Q&A later that night). Backshall returns again and again to the Isles of Scilly, especially St Martin's, calling snorkelling with seals off this island "probably my best wildlife encounter in the British Isles".

The blackberry-lined path turns south, and before us spreads Great Bay, one of Scilly's most beloved beaches. The local population of oystercatchers aside, again we have it entirely to ourselves for an hour – and on a Saturday afternoon in August, too. "Even in the summer, you can arrive at the beach and there's not a footprint on it or another soul around," says Scilly resident Wez Swain. "You don't have to go far to see something truly special."

My boys run free and feral on the crystalline sands before we all submerge ourselves in the (admittedly chilly) sea, where the water's clarity makes snorkelling a joy. Even rain can't dampen our spirits in one of the most serene moments we've ever enjoyed on a beach.

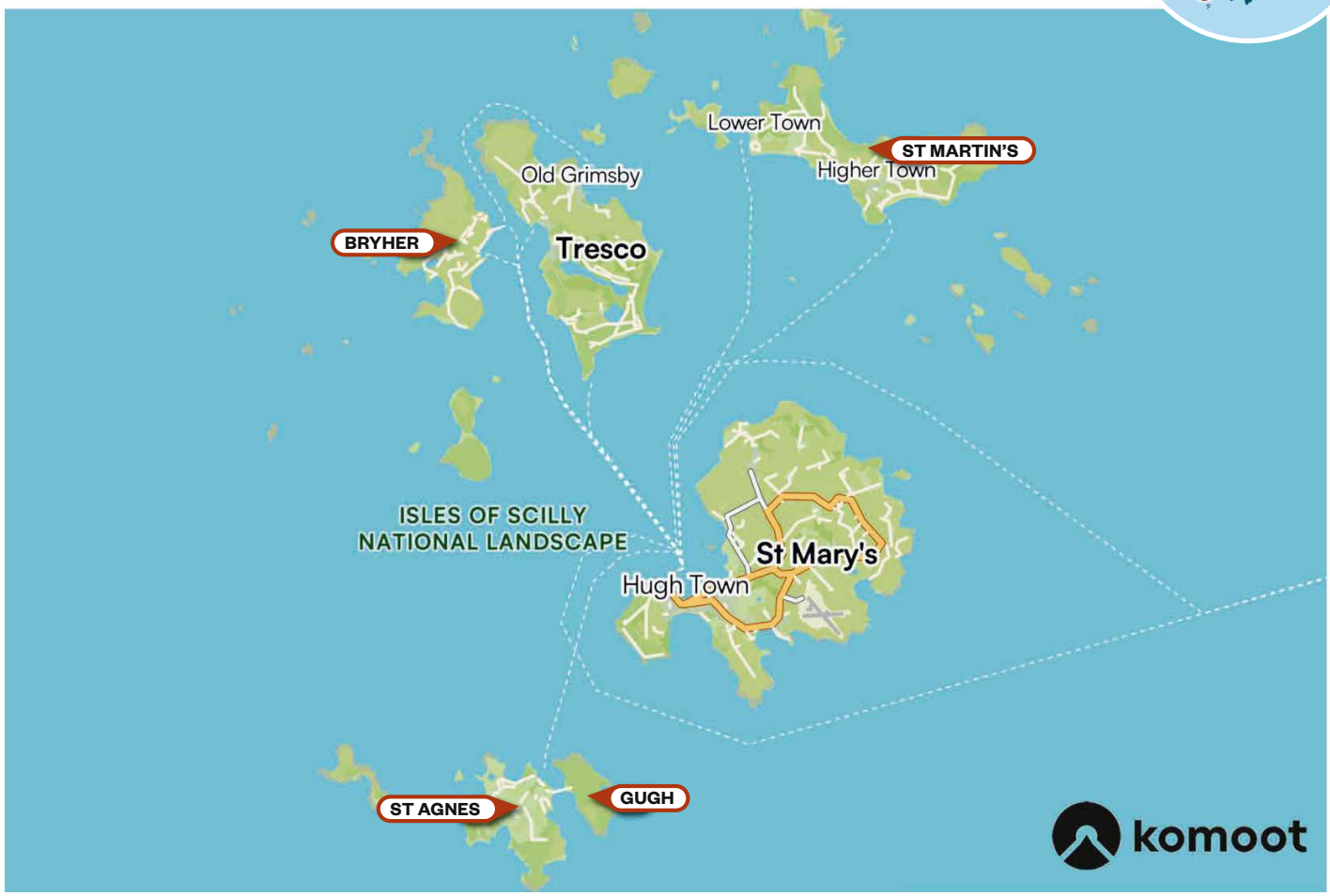
The gleaming sands of Great Bay

We retire, revitalised, to the garden of the Seven Stones Inn (**sevenstonesinn.com**), drinking in views of jagged isles, exotic shrubs and a sapphire sea: not the Azores or Greece but England's own island paradise. We're smitten. **Matt Baird**

Photo: Alamy, Getty

NOW GO THERE

Where to eat, stay and visit in the Isles of Scilly



GETTING THERE

Even getting to Scilly feels like an adventure. Most visitors sail to Hugh Town from Penzance aboard the historic *Scillonian III* ferry, spotting birdlife, dolphins, tuna and even whales from the deck. To combat seasickness, we took tablets (Kwells worked for us) before sailing and ventured to the Lower Saloon. The larger *Scillonian IV* is due to enter service in 2027. You can fly to St Mary's from Land's End, Penzance or Exeter (**islesofscilly-travel.co.uk**).

GETTING AROUND

The boats run by St Mary's Boatmen's Association (**scillyboating.co.uk**) depart from St Mary's quay for the islands of St Martin's, Tresco, St Agnes and Bryher daily. Ensure you arrive at the correct island quay in time for the boat back to St Mary's as these can vary with changing tidal conditions. St Agnes Boating, Tresco Boat Services, Endeavour Rib Services and Sea Quest Glass Bottom Boat also operate services.


Star Castle Hotel sits above Hugh Town

ACCOMMODATION

STAR CASTLE HOTEL, ST MARY'S

This striking star-shaped fortress was built on Garrison Hill in 1593. It's now a four-star hotel with rooms in the castle, garden suites, a heated indoor swimming pool, a tennis court, two restaurants and a bar. It also serves as a wedding venue. **star-castle.co.uk**

BRYHER CAMPSITE, BRYHER

One of the most remote campsites in the UK, this simple and well-run place boasts a spectacular position overlooking the sea. Bring your tent or hire a fully kitted-out bell tent. **bryhercampsite.co.uk**

TROYTOWN FARM, ST AGNES

Not only Britain's south-westernmost campsite but also one of its most picturesque. Three self-catering cottages are also available here, and the farm produces its own ice cream and yoghurt. **troytown.co.uk**

Oystercatchers are a year-round sight in Scilly

On the Quay at St Mary's harbour

Matt takes on the Scilly Swimrun

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

ON THE QUAY, ST MARY'S

Overlooking St Mary's harbour, On the Quay has a café downstairs and a stylish restaurant above for evening meals. Highlights include lobster and scallops. **onthequay.com**

OLD TOWN INN, ST MARY'S

Open every day, this friendly and atmospheric inn serves hearty pub grub and hosts music, live theatre events, darts tournaments and talks. **oldtowninn-scilly.co.uk**

THE CRAB SHACK, BRYHER

This simple, unpretentious place serves delicious local seafood. Whole crabs are served at communal tables in a rustic shed. **hellbay.co.uk**

JULIET'S GARDEN, ST MARY'S

Serving diners for over 40 years in its perch above Porthloo Beach just a little north-east of Hugh Town, this award-winning eatery has an outdoor terrace and a converted barn. **julietsgardenrestaurant.co.uk**

ACTIVITIES

ST MARTIN'S WATERSPORTS

Snorkels, masks, kayak and paddleboards are available to hire at this shop on Par Beach near Higher Town Quay on St Martin's. **stmartinswatersports.co.uk**

PEDALBOARDING, HUT 62

Pedal boating meets stand-up paddleboarding for an accessible adventure, enabling you to explore the calm bays of Bryher's east coast. You can also rent kayaks and SUPs here. **hut62.co.uk**

WILDLIFE SAFARIS

Regular tours take place around the islands with an Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust guide. Species to spot include seabirds – such as puffins, shearwaters, razorbills – plus seals, dolphins, porpoises and even fin, humpback and minke whales. **ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk**

SCILLY60 EVENTS

Swimrun returns to Scilly this summer with races on 9–12 July and 27–28 August, as well as standalone swimming, walking and running events at other times. **scilly60.co.uk**

OCEAN SCILLY

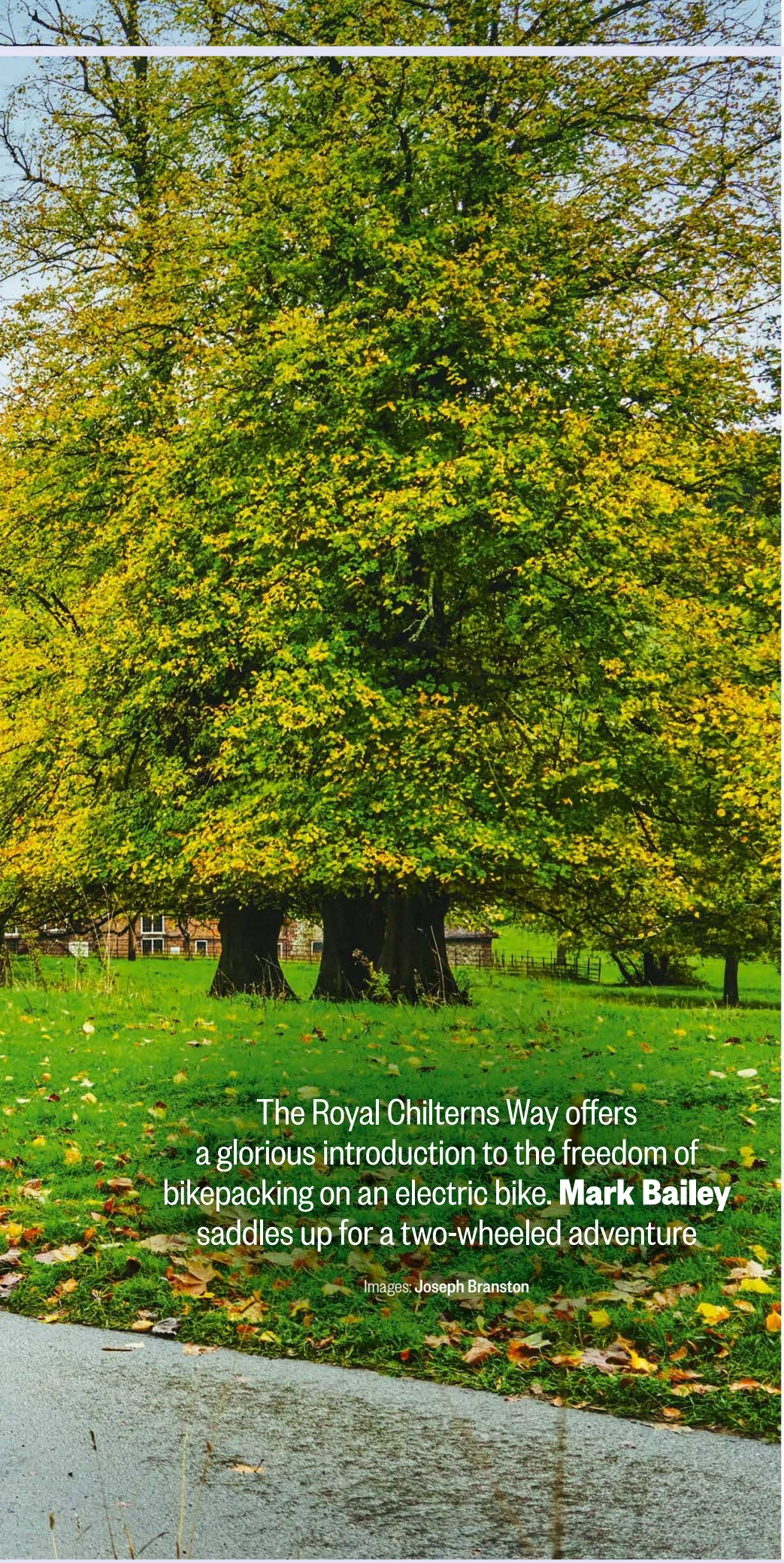
The Ocean Scilly Festival (22–30 Aug) features events happening on, in and above the water, including group kayaking, fishing trips, gig rowing and talks. **visitislesofscilly.com**

This feature is dedicated to the memory of Victoria Bond, who organised *Countryfile's* 2025 visit.

Our trip was hosted by Visit Isles of Scilly, the organisation responsible for promoting the islands. **visitislesofscilly.com**

Photos: Alamy, On The Quay

Royal appointment



The Royal Chilterns Way offers a glorious introduction to the freedom of bikepacking on an electric bike. **Mark Bailey** saddles up for a two-wheeled adventure

Images: **Joseph Branston**

I'm cycling along a country lane in the amber glow of late autumn sunlight. Beneath my wheels lies a gold, russet and bronze blanket of fallen leaves. Above me a red kite soars with regal calm. As I ride deeper into the Chilterns National Landscape, I can see rising waves of plump chalk hills ahead of me, and muddy trails which curl enticingly through dense forests of beech.

I'm less than 35 miles from central London, but for a moment in time it feels as though one of Britain's finest landscapes belongs just to me.

I've hiked in the Chilterns – a land of rolling hills, open grassland and glorious woodland across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire – many times. But today I'm bikepacking on a two-day cycling adventure, armed with ultra-light bike bags full of snacks and warm kit. This mobile approach means I can cover longer distances, unlock a wider range of landscapes and relax knowing I have a hotel booked tonight.

And there's another twist: I am riding a Sonder El Camino GRX1 gravel e-bike, which combines robust off-road capability with an electric motor to help turn the pedals, empowering any rider to travel further than their age or fitness might otherwise allow. As a result, I am banking some heart-pumping exercise whilst enjoying gravity-defying assistance on the short, steep Chiltern hills. This makes the ride much more relaxed, leaving me with less fatigue and more energy for exploration.

I'm sampling the Royal Chilterns Way, a new 174-mile route established by the cycling charity Cycling UK. The route is rich in historic sights, country estates, hillforts, tea rooms, village pubs and natural treasures. About 65% of the route is off-road, so riders spend most of the time in nature. For my two-day adventure, I've opted

Around 65% of the Royal Chilterns Way is on off-road tracks and bridleways

for the 65-mile Central Loop. It covers some of the best terrain and offers a mix of bridleways, woodland tracks, sharp climbs, fun descents and empty lanes. As I am on an e-bike, I can stop and wander around National Trust sites, linger at farm cafés or venture up intriguing paths, because I'm not feeling exhausted or racing against the clock. Bikepacking, I soon learn, is a great way to embrace adventure and discover new places on two wheels.

LIFE ON TOUR

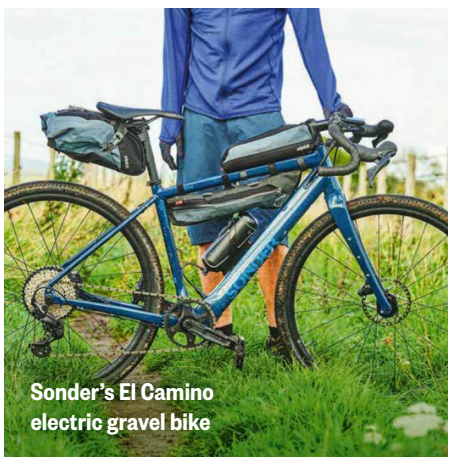
My adventure begins in the Buckinghamshire village of Great Missenden, where author Roald Dahl lived and wrote many books, and many scenes for *Midsomer Murders* were filmed. Tonight I'll be staying at the Greenlands Hotel near Henley-on Thames, around halfway through my two-day loop, so I have ultra-light Alpkit bags fitted to my bike containing supplies for the days and night ahead.

Bikepacking can be done with different levels of luxury: some riders pack a tent and stay at campsites,

"Bikepacking is a way to discover new places on two wheels"

while others prefer hotels. But the general idea is to travel light and remain free for exploration. Unlike cycle-touring, which primarily involves long distances on paved roads, bikepacking typically involves shorter distances in remote areas, fusing the distances of bike riding with the adventures of hiking.

E-bikes come in many forms, from mountain bikes to road bikes, but I am



Sonder's El Camino electric gravel bike

riding a gravel e-bike. A gravel bike combines the sleek aerodynamics of a road bike with the wider tyres and robust disc brakes of an off-road bike. The benefits of e-gravel for cycling are immediately obvious when I ride along the muddy lanes towards Prestwood village and Peterley Wood. My bike dashes along the paved roads at speed, but can also handle the rough, root-strewn forest paths.

I soon arrive at the elegant red-brick Hughenden Manor, the former home of Victorian prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, which is now a National Trust property. As a road cyclist, I am used to riding from A to B quickly, but it's lovely to stop, lock up the bike, look around and not worry about speeds and times. And because I'm wearing flat-soled shoes, not cleated bike shoes, I can walk around the gardens easily.

I continue along forest tracks to Downley Common and the Dashwood Mausoleum, which is built on the site of an Iron Age hillfort. The electric motor

assistance on my bike can be adjusted with a simple button on the handlebar, so when I ride along the flat I use only leg power, but on steeper hills I crank up the electric support. It's a wonderful feeling, as though an invisible hand is gently pushing me uphill.

There are many misconceptions about e-bikes. An e-bike is not a motorbike. Yes, it has a motor, but you still have to push the pedals to get around – the motor, meanwhile, stops providing assistance if you're going faster than 15.5mph. That is why regular e-biking is linked to a lower risk of heart attack, obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes and to improved cholesterol, according to research by Hannover Medical School. For most of the ride you use your own leg power, but the electric motor is there for when you need it.

After a short climb, I ride downhill over grasslands towards High Wycombe, with a view of the Wycombe Wanderers football stadium looming into view. I continue towards the Georgian market town of Marlow, with its flower-decorated cafés, before heading to my hotel.

The Royal Chilterns route is named after the many regal connections in the area. It was John Sheffield, the Duke of Buckingham, who built Buckingham House in 1703, which later became Buckingham Palace. And the Henley Royal Regatta rowing event was granted royal patronage by Prince Albert in 1851. After checking into my hotel, I travel to the royally beautiful Henley for a pie and a pint at the cosy Angel on the Bridge pub on the river.

HILLS AND HISTORY

When I wake up the next morning, I'm surprised to feel so fresh. I have done multi-day road cycling challenges before, and am used to the deep fatigue that accompanies day two. But thanks to the e-bike, I feel great.

The Dashwood Mausoleum on West Wycombe Hill was built around 1765

BIKEPACKING GEAR FROM ALPKIT

A quintet of cycling gear for off-road rides (alpkit.com)

ARGONAUT RAIN JACKET

£129.99

This jacket will keep you dry when the weather turns foul, but it is also packable so you can stash it in a bike bag. The relaxed fit makes it ideal for long rides.

STRADA SHORTS

£74.99

These shorts are designed for bikepacking, featuring quick-drying material, a four-way stretch for comfort and a tailored cut sleek enough for mid-ride pub stops.

GRIFFON MICROFLEECE JACKET

£59.99

On bikepacking trips, you want warmth without weight. This lightweight grid fleece jacket offers breathable comfort and windproof warmth in shifting weather.

DELUGE FRAME PACK

£49.99

This frame bag features waterproof zip closures protected by storm flaps. It enables you to pack heavier items into your bike's frame for a balanced ride. Available in 2.5-litre, 4-litre and 6-litre options.

DELUGE SADDLE PACK

£62.99

This lightweight 12-litre saddle pack extends back to give more storage than a standard saddle bag. It has a waterproof seam-welded build and a roll top closure.

"I'm amazed at the range of landscapes I've seen"

A noteworthy study by the University of Reading and Oxford Brookes University found that cyclists experience better cognitive and mental health from e-cycling than from normal cycling, perhaps because it doesn't drain riders' energy reserves as much.

Passing through Nettlebed, a historic brick-making village, I begin the 34-mile clockwise route to Great Missenden to complete my loop. I ride through woodlands and fields, and pass the National Trust property Nuffield Place, the former home of William Morris, founder of Morris Motors Limited. It is possible to navigate using signposts and the white arrows painted on trees, but it's easier to follow the digital map on my GPS device; I have a paper route guide stashed in my bike bag as back-up.

On the muddy bridleways and leaf-strewn tracks I am grateful for the bike's chunky tyres, which grip even in slippery conditions. And on giddy descents, the bike's geometry makes it agile, stable and confident. I'm not experienced at off-road riding, so it makes a huge difference.

I haven't trained specifically for this ride, but some long, slow endurance rides would have helped condition me for long days in the saddle. And, although the route isn't hugely technical, there are roots, stones and ridges on the trails, so some core strength exercises would've been good. On some climbs, I use only a light amount of electric help, so my heart is beating fast and my muscles are engaged, just with less strain than on a normal bike.

At Ewelme, I pause at the village shop before joining the chalk Ridgeway National Trail, the prehistoric track that offers glorious cycling opportunities. This ride has year-round appeal, with bluebell woods in spring, long days and sun-drenched landscapes in summer, and gorgeous colours and mild weather in autumn. Today, I switch between a hoodie and a rain jacket as the weather shifts and my bike bags make kit changes easy.

At the charming village of Bledlow I pass the Lions of Bledlow pub which has outdoor seating ideal for warmer summer days, and I join the traffic-free Phoenix Trail along a disused railway

Assisted riding helps you explore longer routes

THE BIKE

The **Sonder El Camino** is an electric version of Sonder's award-winning Camino gravel bike. The geometry of the bike makes it agile and comfortable for all-day rides and bikepacking adventures. The electric motor delivers smooth assistance when you need it, cleverly releasing energy to match your pedalling effort. The 250Wh battery is neatly integrated into the downtube and offers three power options to give a real-life range of up to 70km of assisted riding.

Every bike is built to order so you can choose your handlebars, saddle and pedals to create your perfect bikepacking companion. From £2,799 (**alpkit.com**).

Mark takes a breather on the banks of the River Thames in Henley

line. The steep climb up Whiteleaf Hill, for which I once again crank up the electric support, offers glorious panoramic views.

When I arrive back in Great Missenden, I'm amazed at the number of hills, forests, villages, historic buildings and landscapes I have seen in two days. I've learned that bikepacking with a gravel e-bike intensifies the depth and range of any ride. I've burned a lot of calories, but the buzz is mental as well as physical, with the e-bike helping me to visit places I would never have seen on a non-electric road or gravel bike.

Luckily, Cycling UK offers a range of other routes, including the King Alfred's Way in Southern England, the Rebellion Way in Norfolk and the West Kernow Way in Cornwall's far west, so the end of this adventure is inspiring me to begin a new one soon.

Mark Bailey is a freelance writer who has written for *The Observer*, *National Geographic* and *Cycling Plus*. **marksbailey.com**

THE ESSENTIALS

Mark Bailey on where to stay, eat and visit on the Royal Chilterns Way

ROUTE INFORMATION

The Royal Chilterns Way is a 174-mile multi-day bikepacking route from the cycling charity Cycling UK. It is divided into the 46-mile Southern Loop, the 65-mile Central loop and the 63-mile Northern loop. Around 65% of the route is off-road. You can download the route GPX on the Cycling UK website (**cyclinguk.org**) or buy a hard copy of the detailed route guide for £19.

TRANSPORT

The Chilterns is easily accessible by road and there are well-served train stations along the route, including Amersham and Henley-on-Thames.

ACCOMMODATION

Good options include the Greenlands Hotel just outside Henley (**hospitalityuor.co.uk**, pictured), set within the 12-hectare Henley Business School estate, and the Macdonald Compleat Angler in Marlow (**macdonald hotels.co.uk**), which overlooks the Thames.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The White Hart in Nettleham serves hearty beef strip salads and five bean chilli. The Barn Kitchen in Great Missenden offers epic English breakfasts and falafel burgers.

LOCAL LANDMARKS

Visit the 18th-century chalk and flint caverns known as the Hellfire Caves in West Wycombe. You can lock up your bike and explore miles of passages 400m underground. The country house of Stonor Park (**stonor.com**) has a deer enclosure and glorious gardens.

The Royal Chilterns Way route is rich in wildlife, from red kites to water voles, sparrowhawks and deer. You'll also pass Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve, full of rare plants, butterflies and birds. The route also features a dash along old earthworks known as Grim's Ditch. These ridges were possibly old boundary markers or defence systems in the Middle Bronze Age to Iron Age.

Photos: Joseph Branston, Greenlands Hotel

Q&A The big questions answered

Need an answer?
Send your questions to
editor@countryfile.com

Due to their widespread use in ultra-processed foods (UPFs), seed oils have gained a bad reputation – but is it fair?

Photos: Getty, Alamy

Are seed oils bad for you?

A staple in our kitchens, oils play an important role both in our day-to-day cooking and as part of a healthy, balanced diet. However, recent attention-grabbing headlines have declared seed oils 'toxic', raising concerns over the safety of store cupboard staples such as sunflower, rapeseed and corn oil.

Seed oils (aka vegetable oils) are plant-based cooking oils made from the seeds of the likes of sunflower, sesame and grapes – as opposed to oils made from fruit such as olive and avocado, or nuts such as walnut and almond. A sprinkle of seeds over your breakfast cereal or enjoyed as a snack can be a healthy addition to your diet, so you would think their oils would be too.

Critics argue that most of these oils are industrially refined. This may involve adding a chemical solvent such as hexane to extract the oil, followed by cleaning, bleaching and deodorising. It's these processes that potentially leave harmful residues in the oil. The oils may also be subjected to high temperatures that can alter and damage their delicate structure as well as compromise their nutritional value.

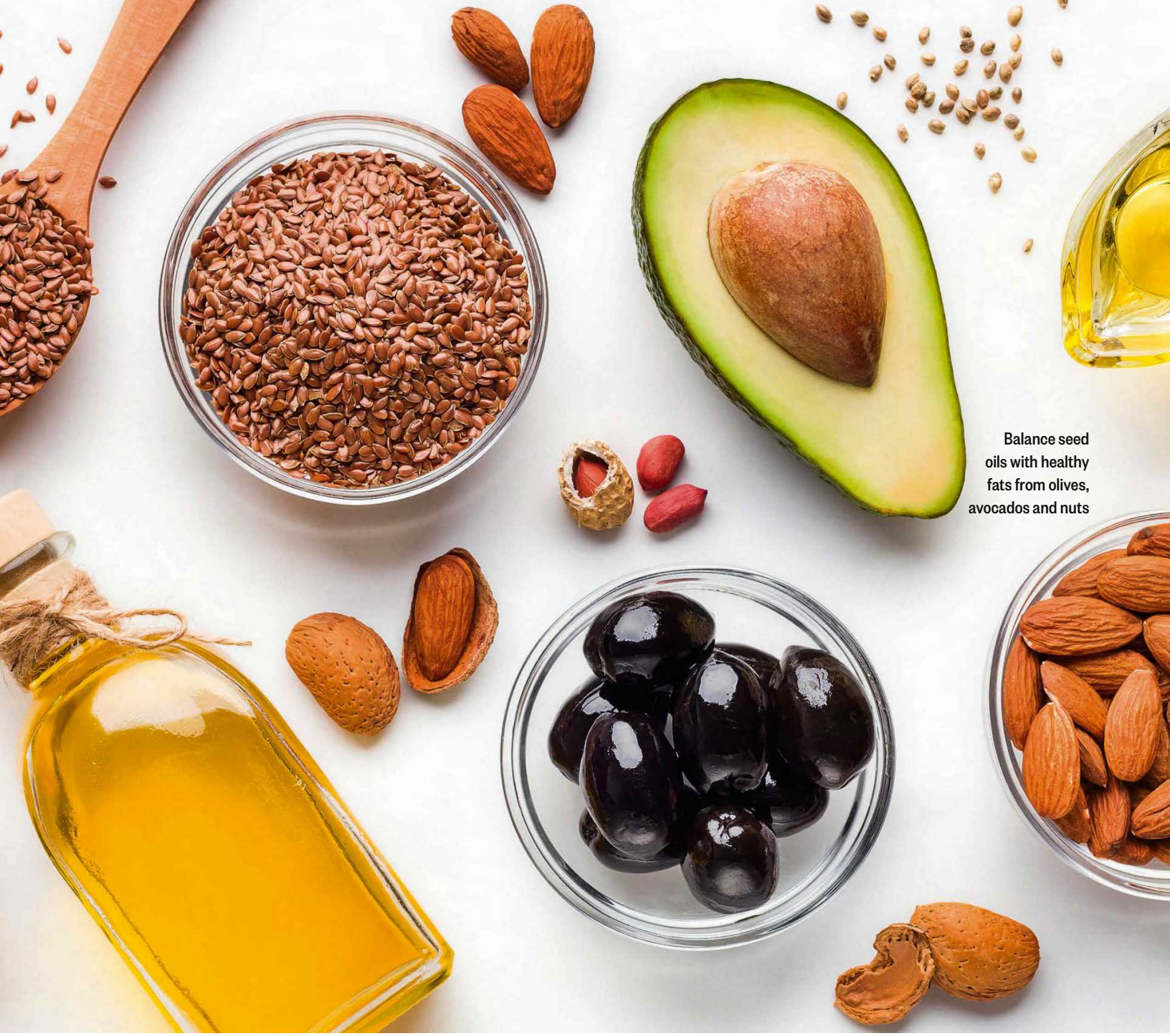
"Substituting butter with seed oils is associated with lower mortality"

Most of us use these oils in home cooking. They are often the oil of choice for commercial food outlets and they are used in a wide range of processed and ultra-processed products and even 'healthy' snack foods that are now commonplace in our diets. Thanks to the significant changes seen in food production over the past 50 years, combined with our time-poor lives, we include more of these processed and ultra-processed foods (UPFs) in our weekly shop. As a consequence, we are eating a lot more of them.

An increasing number of studies, including one from 2023 published in *Advances in Nutrition*, suggest an association with high intakes of UPFs and health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity. That said, there are many factors beyond their seed-oil content that may explain why UPFs are not good for our health. These may include their high sugar, salt and starch levels, the use of additives, the change in the food's natural structure and many more besides.

INFLAMMATION CONCERNS

Seed oils are high in linoleic acid, a type of omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acid. This is an essential fat because we need it in small amounts and have to obtain it from our diet. Our bodies use these fats for brain and heart health, as well as for our skin and hormones. When we eat too much omega-6, compared to another essential fat called omega-3, it can



Balance seed oils with healthy fats from olives, avocados and nuts

lead to imbalances in the body and promote inflammation. A 2022 World Health Organisation meta-analysis reported that a higher ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 was associated with a greater risk of cognitive decline, as well as gut issues such as colitis. Over time, the inflammation brought about by this imbalance can increase our risk of heart disease and cancer. We need both of these essential fats, but our Western diets are heavily skewed towards omega-6 at the expense of omega-3. This is where the problem lies.

Oil is central to many of our favourite recipes, from dressing a salad to sautéing, roasting and frying, so it may come as some comfort to know that a 2025 observational study of 200,000 people, reported in *JAMA Internal Medicine,* concluded that substituting butter with seed oils is associated with lower mortality and had other benefits, too. Moreover, although residues from processing may be detected in some oils, they are at levels far below the maximum residue levels set for food and considered safe.

The best advice is to use refined seed oils in moderation. For salad dressings and lower temperature cooking, opt for cold-pressed seed oils that are not subject to chemical processing. Where you do use seed oils, consider rapeseed because it's backed by more research, it contributes some omega-3 and it offers positive effects on cholesterol levels. In addition to seed oils, try to include a variety of healthy fats including olive, avocado and nut oils. Also include food sources of omega-3, the very best of which are oily varieties of fish, including mackerel and sardines.

Finally, limit how often you reheat oil. Repeatedly heating oil causes oxidation, which may lead to the build-up of harmful compounds and also makes the flavour and smell of the oil less appealing. **Kerry Torrens, registered nutritionist**

Wise buys

Buy oils in smaller quantities, preferably in dark glass rather than clear plastic bottles and store in a cool, dry place, out of direct sunlight.

It is now illegal to own an XL Bully without an exemption certificate

2 Is the XL Bully ban reducing dog attacks?

The *Dangerous Dogs Act 1991* hit headlines in September 2023, when PM Rishi Sunak announced XL Bullies would join the pit bull terrier, Japanese tosa, Dogo Argentino and Fila Brasiliero on the banned list, coming into force in February 2024 in Great Britain and Northern Ireland in January 2025. But is it working?

The act bans certain dog 'types', making owning them without a certificate illegal, and gives police powers to seize or restrict dogs deemed a public risk. But the idea of an XL Bully 'type' is contentious. Animal behaviourist and dangerous dog expert Jo-Rosie Haffenden says: "An XL Bully is not actually a breed. It is a legal 'type'. The law does not care about pedigree papers. It relies on physical characteristics, and if a dog meets around two-thirds of those criteria, they are considered 'of type'. The result is a system that casts an extremely wide net."

Due to their appearance, some individual dogs – from Staffordshire bull terriers to cane corsos and bull mastiff crosses – have been deemed illegal. Supporters say the wide net protects the public during a period when dog attacks are on the rise, with many of the dog-related deaths in the UK between 2021 and early 2024 being caused by XL Bully types.

Critics, however, say it creates problems. "The uncomfortable truth," Haffenden continues, "is that the law has grouped together dogs with very different genetics, histories and behavioural traits, then asked the public to believe they share the same behaviour. This simply isn't true."

Dog licences

In Northern Ireland, dog owners must have a licence, with licences lasting 12 months, or face a £1,000 fine. Dogs must be microchipped before a licence can be issued.

UNDER PRESSURE

The scale of enforcement has also proved greater than expected: the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) had estimated some 10,000 XL Bullies in the UK, but over 55,000 were registered by the ban's start, placing unanticipated pressure on police forces.

In January 2025, chief constable Mark Hobrough, the National Police

A police cordon at the site of an attack by an XL Bully type in West Bromwich, March 2025. Police and a specialist dog unit tasered the canine, which died from the shock

Photos: Alamy, Getty

All XL Bully dogs must be kept on a lead and muzzled when in public

"Over 55,000 XL Bullies were registered by the ban's start"

Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for dangerous dogs, confirmed that more than 4,500 XL Bully types had been seized, and outlined the financial impact: "Veterinary bills and the cost of kennelling... is expected to rise to as much as £25 million." That's a 525% increase from 2018, when the figure was £4 million.

An NPCC spokesperson says forces take the *Dangerous Dogs Act* seriously: "We have officers in all regions of the country focusing on dangerous dogs and dog attacks."

DO BANS WORK?

Whether the ban is reducing harm remains unclear. There were 32,568 recorded offences nationwide in 2024 according to figures obtained by the BBC – a 4% increase on 2023's total of 31,398. Some experts are not surprised. "Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) does not reduce dog attacks," Haffenden argues. "Hospital admissions for dog bites have risen steadily since 1991. Between 1990 and 2018, admissions increased by more than 50%. Dog-related deaths remain rare, and the dogs involved in serious incidents vary widely by breed and do not reliably match the banned types."

She points to a study in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, which examined global data on dog bites, injury severity and breed. "The conclusion was clear: BSL does not reduce the incidence of dog bites or the severity of injuries. Countries that repealed pit bull bans, including Italy, parts of Canada and the Netherlands, saw no subsequent increase in dog bites or fatalities."

The RSPCA shares this view. Its report *Breed Specific Legislation: A Dog's Dinner* calls for the Government "to launch an inquiry into the effectiveness of BSL, assess other options to improve human safety and dog welfare and ultimately repeal the breed specific part of the legislation."

Bully breed

The XL Bully is the largest variant of the American Bully rather than a separate breed officially recognised by the RSPCA or Kennel Club.

Both DEFRA and the Home Office declined to comment for this article. In November 2025, however, the secretary of state for DEFRA, Dame Angela Eagle, said: "DEFRA is continuing to engage closely with the Police, local authorities and rescue and rehoming organisations to monitor the impacts of the ban." She stated that responsible ownership across all breeds is a priority, and the Responsible Dog Ownership taskforce has been reconvened. The Government appears to have no plans to ban any further breeds.

If bans are not the answer, what are the alternatives? Many experts say the key is responsible ownership, proper training and public awareness – tackling behaviour, not just breed, is what keeps people and dogs safer.

Haffenden proposes Spain's PPP licensing model: "If you own a dog over a certain weight, you must demonstrate that you are physically and cognitively capable of handling a dog that could cause serious harm. Responsibility should sit with the handler, not the silhouette of the dog," she concludes. **Mel Sherwood**

The sea lamprey is a parasitic migratory fish that grows to over a metre long

Sharp teeth allow the lamprey to feed on its host

3 Just what is a lamprey?

This family of fish is so bizarre it might have swum straight out of a fairy tale. There are three species of lamprey in British waters and while they share similar characteristics, such as the jawless mouths and long eel-like form, each has a uniqueness unchanged for millions of years.

The largest of the three, the sea lamprey is over a metre long and 2kg in weight. It has a mottled appearance, with dark brown-green splotches on a paler, pastel background, which becomes orange as it readies for breeding. The skin has no scales but is covered in a cuticle that acts as a protective barrier. Lamprey lack paired fins, but the sea lamprey has two dorsal fins positioned towards the tail, edged with a small caudal fin.

Along each side of the head is a line of seven branchial openings, behind which are the gill filaments. Most fish draw water through the mouth and out through the gill flaps, but these holes enable the lamprey to receive oxygen without using its mouth, vital to the way in which the lamprey feeds, and a reason why it is sometimes called the 'vampire fish'.

The mouth is underslung, rounded and fearsome in look. Circles of small sharp teeth surround a funnel-like throat, enabling the lamprey to attach to another fish like a sucker as its teeth and tongue rasp at the flesh. During this, the lamprey secretes proteins from its buccal glands that act as anticoagulant, so the parasite can feed upon the blood of its host.

The host may die as a direct result of this parasitisation, or as inflicted wounds become infected. People, however, can rest easy. Should a lamprey latch on to an unsuspecting swimmer it will likely detach itself having detected the warm blood.

Despite their name, river lamprey spend a similar amount of time as the sea lamprey in a marine environment.

Brook lamprey

Despite their short lifespans as adults, brook lamprey are the species most likely to be encountered in British waters.

Both species are anadromous; they spend much of their adult life at sea but return to freshwater to breed. The larvae spend several years in the soft sediments where they hatch before maturing and migrating to the sea, where they remain for a further two or three years. At between 25cm and 40cm as adults, river lamprey are far smaller than the sea lamprey. In the freshwater of Loch Lomond, a group of river lamprey have evolved to maintain a life cycle; they are smaller than their migratory counterparts.

The smallest of the three species, the brook lamprey spends its entire life in freshwater and most of it in a larval state, only developing into adult form to breed. The adults, around 15cm long, do not feed but use their mouth parts to move small stones to create redds (gravel nests) into which thousands of eggs are deposited. They live for only a few months in this phase. **Kevin Parr**

Photos: Naturepl.com

HOMES &ANTIQUES

Celebrate timeless design, with *Homes & Antiques* magazine

SCAN ME
To subscribe to *Homes & Antiques* magazine

- **Your expert guide** to antiques & eclectic interiors
- **Save 20% when you subscribe** Pay just £27.99 every 6 issues by Direct Debit!
- Receive **FREE UK delivery** direct to your door

EASY WAYS TO ORDER

Visit **ourmediashop.com/HAHA26A**

or call **0333 0162117**† and quote **HAHA26A**

*20% offer is only available to new UK subscribers paying by Direct Debit. The Direct Debit Guarantee is available upon request. Your subscription will start with the next available issue. *Homes & Antiques* magazine is published 13 times a year. Offer ends 31st December 2026. †UK calls will cost the same as other standard fixed line numbers (starting 01 or 02) and are included as part of any inclusive or free minutes allowances (if offered by your phone tariff). Outside of free call packages, calls from mobile phones will cost between 3p and 55p per minute. Lines are open Mon to Fri 9-am-5pm.


Ready for an adventure

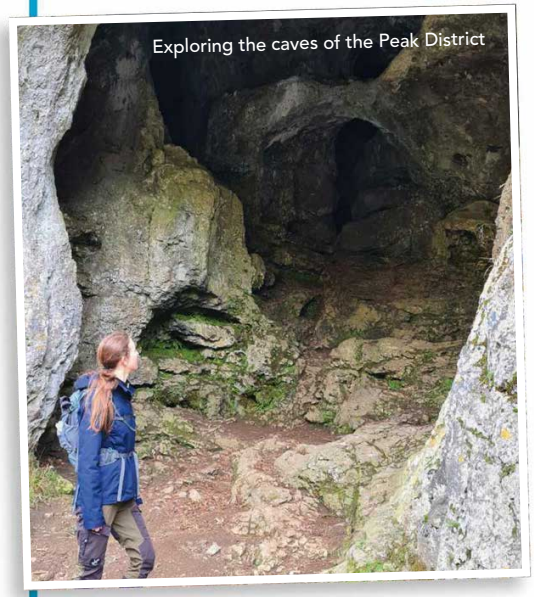
Walking the walk

Meet the team whose trail-tested expertise has created unforgettable adventures for 30 years


Always room for a four-legged friend

Whether you're on a self-guided trek across the rugged peaks of Eryri National Park or wandering the rolling hills of the Cotswolds, it's reassuring to know an expert has walked the path before you. Contours Holidays specialises in the British landscape, and this year celebrates its 30th anniversary.

To mark the milestone, Contours is inviting walkers to join the celebrations and enjoy anniversary discounts throughout the year – a thank you to the community that has shared its passion for the British countryside for three decades.


Exploring the caves of the Peak District

MEET THE ADVENTURE MAKERS

Behind every hiking itinerary is the collective expertise of the Contours Holidays team. Tour operations specialists consider every step of your journey – checking accommodation, crafting bespoke directions – and every route is shaped by first-hand knowledge and experience.

Holidays are divided into four regions: Wales, Scotland, the North of England and the South of England. There are hundreds of walking adventures to explore, including three new trails – the much-requested Pilgrims' Way, and two Contours-exclusive routes based in the Peak District and the Cotswolds created to celebrate the company's 30th anniversary.

Other popular routes include the historic tracks of the Rob Roy Way, where walkers can explore a series of charming glens and cross high passes with sweeping mountain views. In Wales, the coastline of Pembrokeshire Coast National Park offers some of the finest scenery in Britain, with dramatic cliffs, golden beaches, offshore stacks and wildlife-rich islands. The Limestone Way showcases some of the most spectacular landscapes in the White Peak area of the Peak District National Park, while The Ridgeway – Britain's oldest road – invites walkers to step back in time.

JOIN THE COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Every walk is tried and tested by the Contours team, who also regularly take part in emergency training to hone their 24/7 support skills. Whether you're exploring the North or South of England, Scotland or Wales, you can be sure you're benefiting from fellow walkers who know where the best views – and the best pubs – are hidden.

The Contours ethos extends beyond the trail, too. As passionate hikers themselves, the team is committed to protecting the paths they love. Their dedicated Eco Team leads the charge, organising local litter picks and transitioning to 100% recycled paper for the holiday packs that arrive on your doorstep.

The Contours Holidays office dogs not only provide endless entertainment but they have also inspired the company's dog-friendly walking breaks, so your four-legged family member can join your adventure.

Contours Holidays 30 YEARS OF ADVENTURE

Visit **www.contours.co.uk** or call **01629 821900**.

All photos: Contours Holidays


Simple exercises can rebuild grip strength

4 How do I improve my grip strength?

If you want a quick snapshot of your overall health, you don't need fancy technology. You just need to squeeze. That's because grip strength is now widely regarded as one of the most revealing measures of health and vitality as we age.

Research consistently shows that poor grip strength is linked to reduced mobility, slower walking speed, poorer balance, increased risk of falls, and even higher rates of chronic disease and death. In fact, some scientists describe grip strength as a biomarker of ageing because it reflects the health of your muscles, nerves and cardiovascular system all at once.

From your late 30s onward, muscle mass naturally declines. By 60, this loss can accelerate, affecting daily tasks such as opening jars, carrying shopping bags or gardening. Weak grip strength is often the first place to signal broader strength loss throughout the body. It also reflects the health of your nervous system. A strong grip requires fast, efficient communication between your brain and your muscles. When that connection weakens, it can indicate early functional decline.

Perhaps most importantly, though, grip strength predicts independence. Those with stronger grips in midlife and beyond tend to stay active, mobile and capable for longer.

THE GRIP TEST

While a device called a hand dynamometer gives the most accurate measurement, you can get a useful sense of your grip strength by doing these three tests.

- **The jar test** Can you open a jar without straining or asking for help?
- **The carry test** Can you carry two full shopping bags for 30 seconds without discomfort?
- **The hang test** If you feel safe doing so, can you hang from a sturdy bar for 30 seconds?

If any of these feel difficult, it's a gentle sign to improve grip strength now. The good news is that small daily habits can make a big difference and improvements can come quickly. Perform these three simple exercises regularly to increase your grip and core strength.

- **Farmer's carries** Hold a weight in each hand, e.g. dumbbells or even two heavy shopping bags, and walk for 20–30 seconds. Repeat three times. This is excellent for grip, shoulders and core stability.
- **Squeeze training** Use a tennis ball or stress ball. Squeeze firmly for five seconds, release and repeat 10–15 times per hand.
- **Dead hangs** Hold onto a pull-up bar if you have access to one (many parks have these) and hang for a few seconds. Start small and build up to 60 seconds or beyond.

What's more, grip improves fastest when overall muscle strength improves. Simple exercises such as bodyweight squats and wall push-ups (see box) all support stronger hands and forearms.

Grip strength isn't just about hand power, then – it's a window into your future health. The stronger your grip, the better your chances of staying active, capable and independent for many years to come.

Darren Morris *inochilongevity.com*

Wall push-ups

To help build stronger hands and forearms, at arm's length, put your hands on a wall at shoulder height. Keeping upright, bend your elbows to bring the chest to the wall, then push back.


Those with strong grip strength tend to stay mobile for longer in life

Photos: Alamy

5 What was the Chatterton Massacre?

The Peterloo Massacre of 1819 has been the subject of books, a film, songs, an overture and even a piece of organ music. Meanwhile, a very similar event that occurred just seven years later and a mere dozen miles to the north has been all but erased from history. A Lancashire charity is now trying to put that right. And certainly, the long-forgotten Chatterton Massacre has a good deal to teach us about protest, violence and the power of words.

The Industrial Revolution had made Britain's economy more productive but also threw a huge swathe of the population into penury, their plight made even worse by high food prices. In the Lancashire Pennines of 1826, thousands of already poor hand-loom weavers were being driven to starvation by an all-conquering rival: the power loom.

In desperation, the workers took matters into their own hands. On 24 and 25 April, several thousand weavers from Accrington, Blackburn, Oswaldtwistle, Darwen, Helmshore and Haslingden walked across the moors from mill to mill, putting as many power looms out of action as they could, while taking care to avoid physical violence and damage to other property. They hoped their actions would bring their extreme poverty to the attention of parliament, where they were unrepresented.

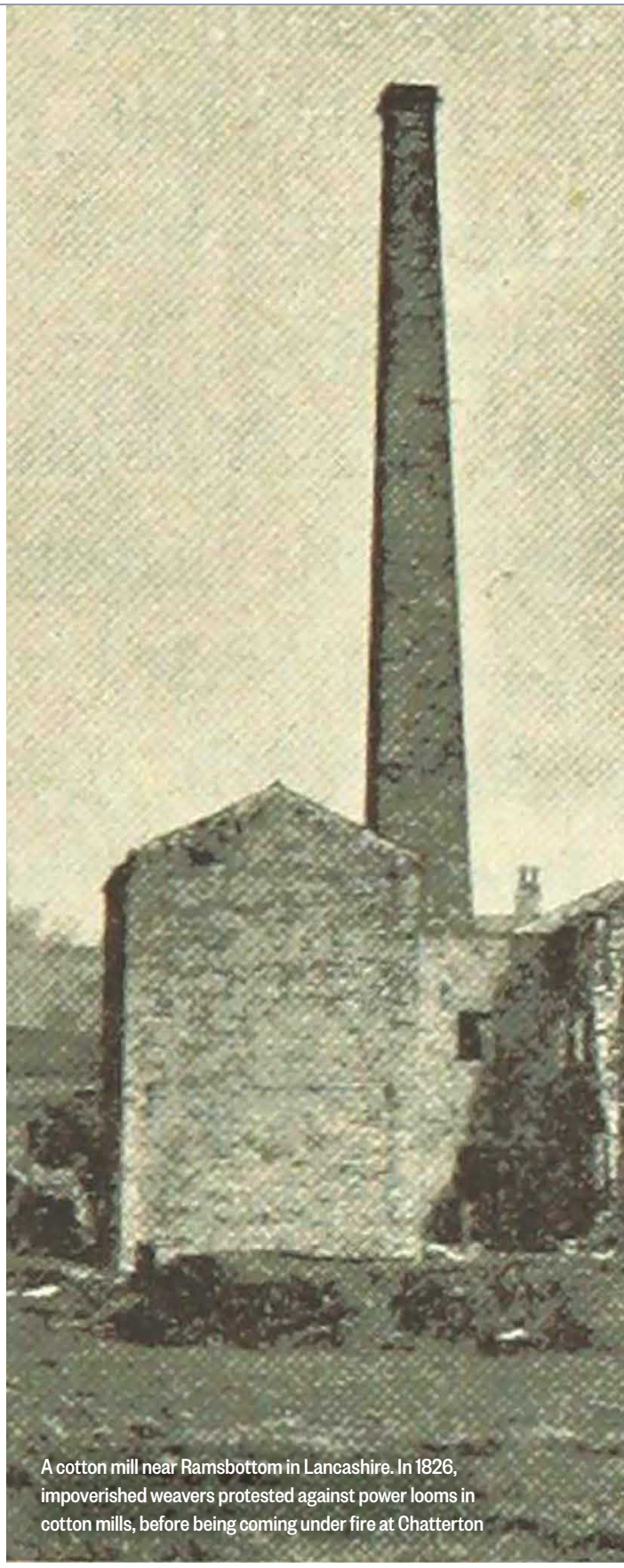
But the following day, when around 3–4,000 weavers converged on the Aitkens and Lords Mill at Chatterton in the Rossendale Valley, they were confronted by 20 riflemen from the 60th Duke of York's Own Rifles under the command of Colonel Kearney. A local magistrate read out the Riot Act, meaning the soldiers could shoot to kill with impunity. The protesters bravely stood their ground.

Over the following 15 minutes, the riflemen fired around 600 times. Though most of them aimed to miss the crowd, three men were killed: James Lord, John Ashworth and James Rothwell. Undeterred, the protesters broke into the mill and smashed up the looms inside. However, the killing hadn't finished. Richard Lund and James Whatacre were shot dead soon afterwards, as was Mary Simpson, a young bystander who was only there because she had missed her coach. Anecdotal evidence suggests that other protesters died of wounds in the following days. The uprising ended on 27 April, with further looms destroyed.

The government's response was to frame the event as a simple riot. They barred the press from the inquest into the killings. Tales were spread about the late Mary Simpson, claiming she had been involved. The Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, refused to acknowledge the weavers' destitute state and instead concentrated on punishing them: 41 were handed death sentences (later commuted to prison terms or transportation to Australia). The regiment involved was quietly relocated to Portugal.

The government's tactics worked: in contrast to Peterloo, the massacre was viewed as a mere riot and soon forgotten. Even the blue plaque installed at the site is misleadingly titled 'The Chatterton Fight'.

To set the record straight, the Weavers Uprising Bicentennial Committee (**weavers-uprising.org.uk**) is hosting a range of public events, organising a mobile exhibition and producing educational resources about the Chatterton Massacre. **Dixe Wills**



A cotton mill near Ramsbottom in Lancashire. In 1826, impoverished weavers protested against power looms in cotton mills, before being coming under fire at Chatterton

Photos: Alamy, Getty

6 Can goats and sheep breed?

A geep is the common name given to the offspring of a goat and a sheep. The youngster is usually described as having the body of a sheep and head of a goat, frequently with horns.

One geep was reported in the *Irish Farmers Journal* by County Kildare farmer Paddy Murphy in 2014, who said he'd seen a goat mating with his Cheviot ewes five months earlier but had dismissed the incident until the geep arrived on the scene. Two years later, the geep resembled a Cheviot but black and with large curled horns.

Despite hybrids born in Botswana, France, Germany and New Zealand, scientists are suspicious of alleged geeps. Professor Gary Anderson at the University of California studies goat-sheep hybridisation and says in *Modern Farmer* "there are very few legitimate documented cases" of geeps. While it isn't unusual for goats and sheep to mate if kept together, it's highly unusual for this to result in pregnancy. And if pregnancy occurs, a stillborn birth is likely, because the species are from different genera and genetically highly incompatible: sheep have 54 chromosomes while goats have 60. **Sheena Harvey**

This and That, a reported pair of extremely rare geeps from Claremorris in Ireland in 2018

Bovidae bond

Sheep and goats are both members of the Bovidae family, which includes cattle, buffalo and antelope.

7 What are ringing stones?

Ringing stones are naturally occurring musical rocks. They can be found all over the world, from the Lake District and Scottish Highlands to Western Australia and Pennsylvania, USA.

One such rock sits beside Old Military Road (A939) north of Gairnshiel Lodge in Scotland's Cairngorms National Park. Known as the Ringing Stone, this silica-rich granite slab sounds like a bell when you bash it with a rock or hammer. It is slightly raised and hollow underneath, which may add to its resonance, but the exact mechanism by which these stones become sonorous is not fully understood.

There is another ringing stone on the Isle of Tiree in the Hebrides and a lithophone or stone xylophone at the Keswick Museum & Art Gallery in the Lake District. **Dave Hamilton**

The famous ringing stone at Gairnshiel Lodge in the Cairngorms

RAILWAYS TO VISIT

Inspiration for historical journeys throughout the country

YORKSHIRE

1. WENSLEYDALE RAILWAY

Step back in time at Wensleydale Railway – a volunteer-led heritage railway in the Yorkshire Dales. Children travel for only £1! We operate heritage diesel trains between Scruton and Leyburn. Enjoy spectacular scenery, afternoon teas, special events, visit historic station museums and learn about 1900s railway life with guided tours by our living history interpreters.

wensleydale-railway.co.uk

2. THE WATERCRESS LINE

HAMPSHIRE

A heritage railway offering a scenic, family-friendly experience through the Hampshire countryside, showcasing historic locomotives and four restored period stations, running between Alresford and Alton, with a programme of year-round events and dining train experiences, as well as general admission.

watercressline.co.uk | 01962 733810

DERBYSHIRE

3. BARROW HILL ROUNDHOUSE

Immerse yourself in the unique atmosphere of the UK's only operational railway roundhouse. Wander around our historic steam, diesel and electric locomotives and other railway-related artefacts and displays. Discover the story of this 19th-century railway depot, now a popular family-friendly museum, and how it used to operate. Watch the turntable demonstrations, get hands-on in the signal box, grab a tasty bite and a drink in the Roundhouse café, and pick up a special railway-themed memento in the shop. Look out for our interactive wagon displays, the towering shear legs and the worn step, which tells its own story.

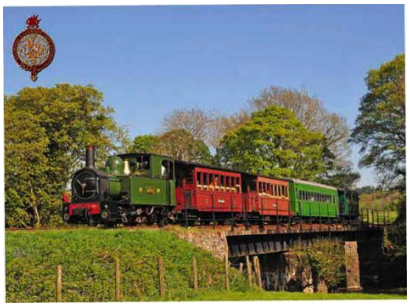
Open every weekend from March to December with train running days and other special events each month – visit our website for more information.

Plenty of free onsite parking. We are dog friendly.

barrowhill.org

4. WELSHPOOL & LLANFAIR LIGHT RAILWAY

POWYS



Experience narrow-gauge steam in the heart of Mid Wales. Journey through rural scenery with a range of experiences ideal for families. Within easy reach of Shrewsbury, the West Midlands and on the way to the Welsh Coast. Trains March–November, special events, afternoon tea and catering trains, family activities, driver experiences, heritage & model car museum, and lots more.

wllr.org.uk | info@wllr.org.uk

5. SEATON TRAMWAY

DEVON

Step aboard Seaton Tramway for a scenic journey through the beautiful Axe Valley, alongside the Seaton Wetlands. Our popular Birdwatching Trams depart throughout the year, where you can see up to 70 different species, guided by experts. Our standard trams depart daily March to October. Perfect for families and nature lovers. Plan your visit, check dates and book online.

tram.co.uk

6. VALE OF RHEIDOL RAILWAY

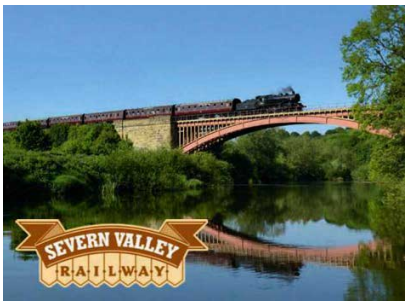
CEREDIGION

Nestled in the stunning Rheidol Valley and surrounded by the breathtaking Cambrian Mountains, a truly magical experience awaits at the Vale of Rheidol Railway. Journey 700 feet up from Aberystwyth to Devil's Bridge, winding through the valley's sharp curves and steep slopes, for the perfect view of the valley and its spectacular scenery.

vor.wales | 01970 625819

7. SEVERN VALLEY RAILWAY

WORCESTERSHIRE



Step back in time to the golden age of travel at the Severn Valley Railway. The railway runs through 16 miles of beautiful Worcestershire and Shropshire countryside. Along the line, discover beautifully restored original stations, plus fascinating towns and villages – a great day out. Open on selected dates – see website for details.

contact@svrlive.com | svr.co.uk

8. APEDALE VALLEY LIGHT RAILWAY

STAFFORDSHIRE

All the family will enjoy our short train ride beside the Apedale Country Park. Our steam and diesel trains operate from April to October, with a range of special events through the season to interest all tastes. During 2026, we expect to open our new railway museum – visit www.avlr.org.uk for full details.

avlr.org.uk

9. HORNBY

NATIONWIDE

Hornby model railways offer a mindful escape from busy modern life. In short, hobbies make us happy! From setting up your first train set to building a miniature world over time, the model rail hobby encourages focus, creativity and patience. Whether rediscovering a childhood passion or starting something new, Hornby makes it easy to enjoy time well spent.

uk.hornby.com

10. ROMNEY, HYTHE & DYMCHURCH RAILWAY

KENT

Since 1927, the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway has been an integral part of the unique landscape of the Romney Marsh in Kent. Their world famous, one-third full size steam & diesel locomotives power their way along the 13 ½ miles of track, from the Cinque Port town of Hythe to picturesque Dungeness, a National Nature Reserve.

rhdr.org.uk

11. LYNTON AND LYNMOUTH CLIFF RAILWAY

DEVON

Ride back in time. Visit this historic Victorian cliff railway, the UK's only fully water-powered railway, and the highest and steepest fully water-powered railway in the world. A superb example of Victorian engineering.

cliffrailwaylynton.co.uk | 01598 753486

Masterclass

Sarah Raven's magnificent cut-flower garden at Perch Hill, East Sussex

A Year of Cut Flowers: A life of growing and arranging for all seasons by Sarah Raven is out now (Bloomsbury Publishing, £30)

Grow your own

cut-flower garden

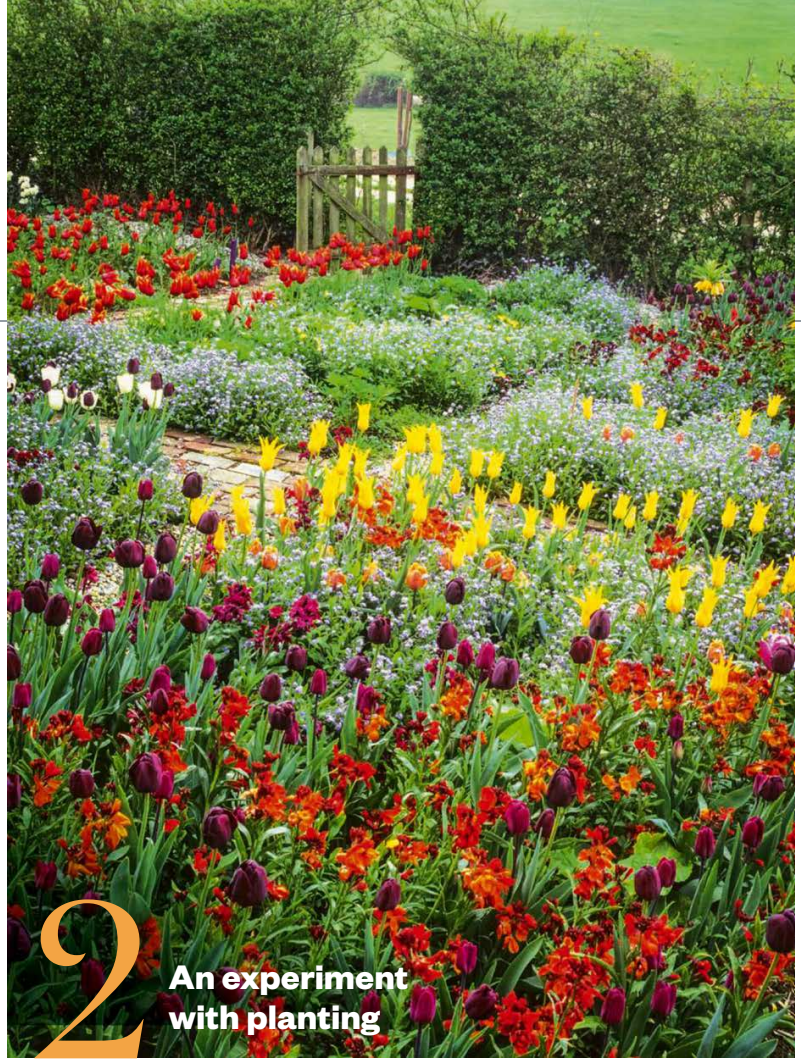
Bring a blaze of colour and joy to your garden and home, most months of the year, by nurturing your very own flower patch. Cut-flower queen **Sarah Raven** shows you how

Words: **Sarah Raven**

Sarah Raven is the bestselling author of many gardening and cooking books, a teacher, broadcaster and has a popular gardening podcast *Grow, Cook, Eat, Arrange*. Sarah also runs a mail order plant nursery.

1 Colour therapy

I've been growing cut flowers since 1994 when I moved with my family from a small London garden to an East Sussex farm. I started with a 6x6-metre patch and now grow half a hectare – learning year by year which are the best plants and flowers to grow for the vase. Choose the right varieties and your garden and house can be full of flowers, teeming with colour, scent and abundance – the greatest form of gardening as life enhancer.



2 An experiment with planting

My first cutting patch was divided into 1.5-metre squares. In each I planted one thing. I bought 'Duchesse de Nemours' peonies; helenium ('Moorheim Beauty'); a couple of euphorbias (*E. palustris* for spring acid-green and *E. sikkimensis* for summer); some sea hollies and a swathe of *Phlox paniculata* hybrids. I sowed five cut-and-come-again annuals (such as cosmos) too. I then noted what I was harvesting, once or twice a week. The perennials were disappointing, yet the annuals pumped out flowers to pick at least twice, often three times a week. Out went plans for swathes of perennials, in goes almost any annual and dahlia I can get hold of. And that's been my direction for the last 30 years.

3 The right location

The ideal cut-flower patch is 1.2 metres wide and 3.5 metres long in a sheltered place and in the sun (even stealing a bit of the lawn which is often right in the sunny, middle of a garden). At this size, you can easily pick from around the edge and will be able to reach the flowers even bang in the middle. I promise, picked once or twice a week, this part of the garden will be your pride and joy, so don't hide it away like you might a vegetable patch.

4 Choose cut-and-come-again plants

To get many flowers, you need to devote most of the soil to growing cut-and-come-again plants, which grow new blooms within days of picking. Best bets are annuals, such as cosmos (right), zinnias, biennials (e.g. Iceland poppies) and tender perennials, including dahlias and euphorbias. Harvest the top section of a stem, cutting above a pair of leaves – not to the ground – and axillary buds will form below the cut between the stem and leaves.

5 Plan for succession

Start the year with bulbs and hardy annuals (such as honeywort/Cerinthe) and early flowering biennials such as wallflowers. From the middle of May, move to later-flowering hardy annuals, such as sweet peas, and main season biennials – sweet Williams and sweet rocket. These will give you plenty until July when your half-hardy annuals – zinnias and cosmos – will be in full bloom. From late summer into autumn, supplement with dahlias and you'll have bunches to pick from mid-March to mid-October.

Photos: Jonathan Buckley

6 Design your colour palette

Divide your patch into two palettes: one pastel – with white, pinks, mauves and soft yellows – and the other with bright, rich colours including boiled-sweet tones of crimson and velvet purples. Then you can't go wrong as you pick.

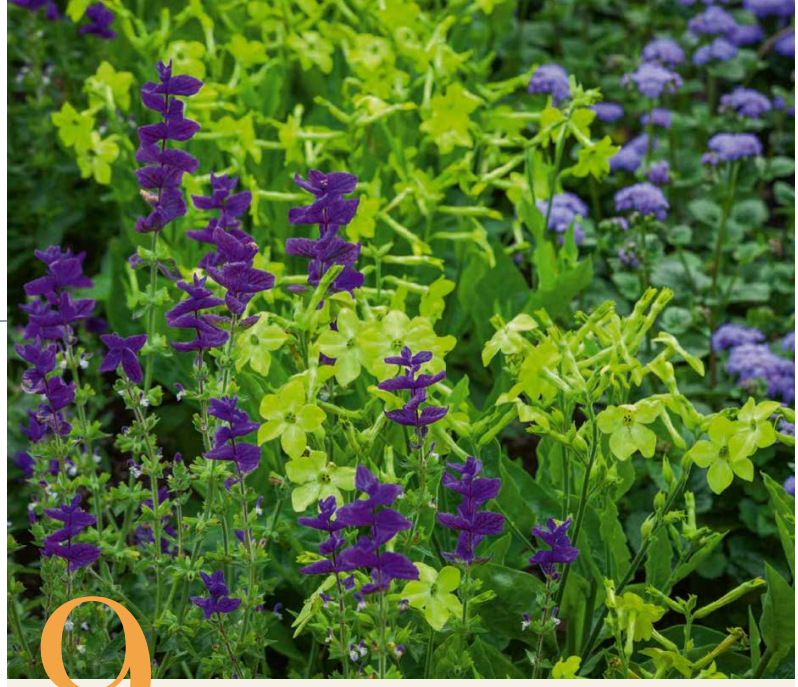
To create a show-stopping bouquet, select the largest, showiest flower in one colour (what I call the 'bride'), then a matching smaller 'bridesmaid' and finally a different coloured flower – what I call my 'gatecrasher' – to add a zap of contrast. If I'm picking white cosmos, I pick a white zinnia and then a purple dahlia, or if I harvest a crimson sweetpea, I pick a crimson scabious and then maybe an orange snapdragon.

7 Feed the soil

I now follow a no-dig method in my garden, adding mulch (green waste or leaf mould) when I clear the garden in autumn and again in early spring. However, before our soil was in such good condition we used to dig it over in autumn. Then in spring I'd rake it to a fine tilth, breaking up any large lumps of soil with the back of my rake, and add a mulch over the top at that stage.

8 Sow seeds under cover

Sow seed under cover from the middle of March. By sowing inside, on a windowledge or in a greenhouse, you gain several weeks compared to sowing direct into your patch once the frosts are over. I sow my seeds, well-spaced, into one-metre lengths of guttering. After two to three weeks, I thin what germinates to 4cm apart, leave them to grow for another fortnight, then slide the mini plants out into the garden, spacing them 30cm apart.



9 Supporting roles

To grow a beautiful bouquet, I grow two foliage and three flowers. My favourite foliage plant is *Euphorbia oblongata* (green flowers above) which is the best scaffolding to support other stems. Pick it with gloves on to avoid contact with the milky sap. Then I grow and pick a filler foliage, such as honeywort. Then I grow a variety of plants that will give me three flowers to pick: the bride, bridesmaid and gatecrasher (see point six).

10 How to make your flowers last

To make stems last as long as possible, pick, condition, rest and then arrange. Pick first thing in the morning or last thing at night so the stems you harvest are in a positive water balance. We sear 75% of the stems we pick in spring, but only 25% in autumn (by then, stems have more lignin or bark laid down in their outer layer). Searing is plunging the stem ends in boiling water, up to about 10% of the length of the stem. Soft stems need just a few seconds; woody stems more like 30. For example, sear bluebells for only 10 seconds and lilac for 30. Don't leave soft stems in too long or they'll cook and disintegrate.

FLOWER GARDENS TO VISIT IN SPRING

GLENARM CASTLE, COUNTY ANTRIM

Visitors are guaranteed colourful blooms from early spring in the walled garden, while the woodland offers camellias in bloom and carpets of wild garlic flowers. glenarmcastle.com

ATTADALE GARDENS, WESTER-ROSS

In spring, the blooms of over 100 varieties of rhododendrons paint the landscape a rainbow of colours at this hidden gem of the Scottish Highlands. attadale.com

CHATSWORTH KITCHEN GARDEN, DERBYSHIRE

A delightful variety of fruit, vegetables, salad and cut flowers flourish in the kitchen garden of this historic estate. You can snap up any surplus produce in the farm shop. chatsworth.org

Photos: Jonathan Buckley, Alamy

Kit Trail-running shoes

Read the full reviews on countryfile.com

Rated for grip, comfort and speed, these are all available in men's and women's sizes

Words: **Matt Baird**

ALTRA LONE PEAK 9+

£130, ALTRARUNNING.EU ★★★☆☆

Altra's dual USPs – the wide forefoot and zero-drop platform – will please any forefoot strikers wanting to splay their toes. Midsole cushioning is minimal, but experienced runners will appreciate the stripped-down feel. Oddly, they're not actually super light, with the serious (and superlative) Vibram Megagrip outsole adding to the 283g (UK7) weight.

BROOKS CASCADIA 19 GTX

£150, BROOKSRUNNING.COM ★★★★☆

The waterproof Gore-Tex layer of Cascadia 19 (297g) makes these the most versatile shoes on test, and I've used them for hiking, trail running and everyday wear. Breathability doesn't feel compromised, while the internal comfort and dependable grip add to the broad appeal. The firm midsole is a touch unresponsive for speedier runs, though.

KEEN SEEK

£160, KEENFOOTWEAR.CO.UK ★★★½☆

Celebrated for its hiking shoes and eco credentials, Keen has now turned its attention to trail running. Those with wider feet will appreciate the forefoot width, while the comfy and breathable upper and outsole are rugged and durable – grip is fine on dry tracks, less so on slippery trails. They're not the lightest (307g), fastest or most responsive, however.

ADIDAS TERREX AGRAVIC SPEED ULTRA 2

£200, ADIDAS.CO.UK ★★★★☆

Incredibly swift, light (258g) and expensive, the Agravic is a rare trail shoe that's also a joy to use on Tarmac, making it ideal for parkrun and multi-terrain races. Internal comfort is great yet the mesh upper offers little protection from muck. The outsole traction is less confident on slippery rocks, but on dry trails there are few shoes more thrilling, fast and fun.

HOTTER®

Your *everyday* go-to *trainer*

French Navy Nubuck/Suede

Black Croc Nubuck/Suede

SAVE **£30** WAS £99

Blue/Metallic Suede/Nubuck

LEANNE II

An everyday trainer offering breathable comfort, cushioned OrthoLite® insoles and fatigue-reducing tech, designed to keep you moving comfortably all season.

NOW £69

Shell Grey Multi Suede/Leather

3 FITS · HALF SIZES · LEATHER

ORDER TODAY AND SAVE £30 with code LN30BX

Call 01695 79 79 79 Mon - Sun (24hrs) or visit hotter.com

This offer entitles the customer to purchase selected colours of Leanne II at £69, a saving of £30 off RRP with code LN30BX, subject to availability. Offer valid until 25th May 2026. For full T&C's, visit hotter.com/terms

YOUR PHOTOS

Share your best photographs of the British countryside with us and you could see your image published in print or online.
Email your images to **photos@countryfile.com**

LORD OF THE RIVER
By: Curtis Cain
Where: Staffordshire Wildlife Hides, Teddesley Park
"On this particular day I was challenged by dull, grey weather and had to adjust my camera settings to a slow shutter speed. When the sun broke briefly through the clouds it created a stunning golden background from the bushes behind the bird. I'm especially proud of the sharp detail in the feathers, as not many people get the opportunity to see a kingfisher up close and personal."

FIRM FRIENDS

By: Andrew Fletcher
Where: Holkham National Nature Reserve, Norfolk

"We'd seen some cattle egrets in the reserve the previous day and never imagined we'd see them again. Luckily, they were just by the drive as we drove into the car park, so it wasn't a difficult shot to get."

SHIFTING SANDS

By: John Cuthbert
Where: Assynt, Scottish Highlands

"It was the day following a storm and the weather was incredible, with dramatic skies and beautifully soft, shifting light that really brought this coastal landscape to life."

Country puzzles

COUNTRYSIDE QUIZ

Answers at the bottom of page 96

Children love an Easter egg hunt, but when was the first hollow chocolate egg produced in the UK?

1. Which project designed by Thomas Telford celebrated its 200th anniversary in January this year?
☐ a. Pontcysyllte Aqueduct
☐ b. Menai Suspension Bridge
☐ c. St Katherine Docks
☐ d. Caledonian Canal

2. Where is the medieval festival of Hocktide still celebrated in April?
☐ a. Hungerford, Berkshire
☐ b. Midgely, West Yorkshire
☐ c. Chepstow, Wales
☐ d. Peebles, Scotland

3. How many balls of marzipan top a traditional Simnel cake?
☐ a. 6
☐ b. 9
☐ c. 11
☐ d. 12

4. Which of these species is NOT anadromous (hatch in freshwater, migrate to the sea, then return to freshwater to spawn)?
☐ a. Black grouper
☐ b. Lamprey
☐ c. Sturgeon
☐ d. Pacific salmon

5. What ceremony does King Charles III perform on Maundy Thursday (the day before Good Friday)?
☐ a. Washing feet of the poor
☐ b. Distributing commemorative money
☐ c. Easter egg rolling
☐ d. Placing crosses on buns

6. Border, long sword, rapper and Molly are all types of what?
☐ a. Folk song
☐ b. Ladybird
☐ c. Sewing stitch
☐ d. Morris dance

7. In what year did JS Fry & Sons produce the UK's first chocolate Easter egg?
☐ a. 1859
☐ b. 1873
☐ c. 1898
☐ d. 1905

8. 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen', is the opening line of which book?
☐ a. *1984* by George Orwell
☐ b. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë
☐ c. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus
☐ d. *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

9. The Lyrids meteor shower, due to peak on 22 April this year, comes from the trail of which comet?
☐ a. Halley
☐ b. Tempel-Tuttle
☐ c. Machholz 1
☐ d. Thatcher

10. Which famous British writer's birth is observed on the same day as Saint George's Day?
☐ a. Charles Dickens
☐ b. William Shakespeare
☐ c. Mary Shelley
☐ d. George Eliot

11. The Feshie is a tributary of which Scottish river?
☐ a. Tweed
☐ b. Tay
☐ c. Spey
☐ d. Dee

12. Which ancient pilgrimage route starts in Todmorden and ends in York?
☐ a. Golden Valley Pilgrim Way
☐ b. Northern Saints Trails
☐ c. The Old Way
☐ d. Paulinus Way

13. Which wildflower is NOT an officially protected species?
☐ a. Native bluebell
☐ b. Ghost orchid
☐ c. Red campion
☐ d. Wild gladiolus

14. Which species of tit is pictured below?
☐ a. Coal tit
☐ b. Blue tit
☐ c. Great tit
☐ d. Long-tailed tit

Photos: Alamy

The WALKING HOLIDAY specialist

Step into ADVENTURE

Orkney & Shetland Islands

Book your walking holiday now.
Visit **rambleworldwide.co.uk** or call

01707 861 749

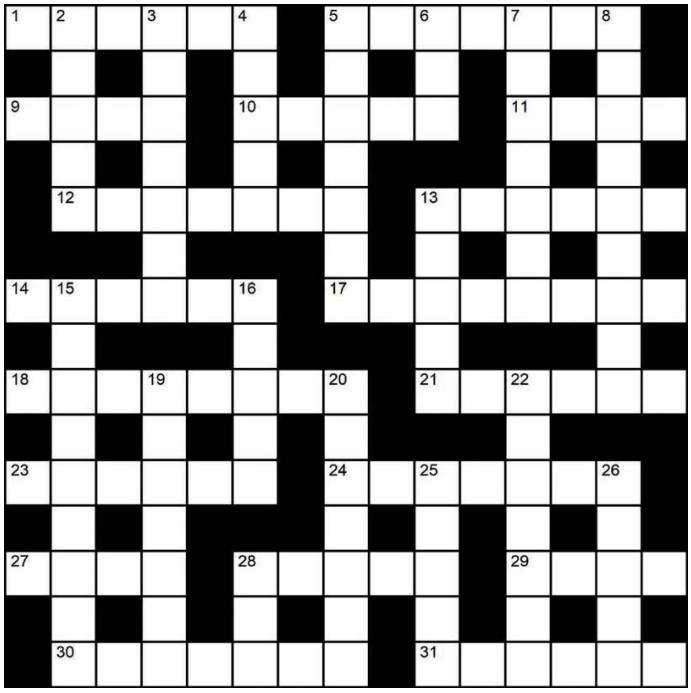
ramble worldwide
Est. 1946

Platinum Trusted Service Award 2026 feefo

ABTA

COUNTRYSIDE CROSSWORD

by Eddie James



ACROSS

1 Grasp it's a chicken brood? (6)
5 English port at end of Severn Way (7)
9 Tiny blood-sucking insect (4)
10 Sort of owl whose call is a hoot! (5)
11 It could be 'collared', 'rock', or 'turtle' (4)
12 _____ Valley in the Cheviot hills; educational institute (7)
13 Game birds... grumble! (6)
14 Garden tools – and suit (6)
17 A horse is not restrained in such a stall (5, 3)
18 Highly invasive plant from Japan – Kew noted changes (8)
21 To get a cutting to root, stop work! (6)
23 Plant that lasts only one blooming year! (6)
24 Deer's flesh as food (7)
27 Round, conical-topped tent popular on glampsites (4)
28 Peak District village – in red alert! (5)
29 Wading bird such as coot – run over by a train? (4)
30 Merseyside horse-racing venue upset trainee (7)
31 Breed of speckled chicken and its (former) county (6)

DOWN

2 Common name for a *Syringa* shrub (5)
3 Followed a scent and lagged behind (7)
4 Kent resort – a little marshy there (5)
5 Lake District peak – buzzard initially disturbed fellow (7)
6 Climbing plant... starts to increase vegetable yield (3)
7 Toad's larva (7)
8 Farm animals collectively (9)
13 Cultivates... sprouts? (5)
15 Strip of land like Somerset's Brean Down (9)
16 Dogs have a strong sense of this (5)
19 Somerset's county town (7)
20 Veer off planned route (7)
22 Holiday destinations (7)
25 Scottish swedes traditionally served with haggis (5)
26 Sound... in Llandudno is extraordinary! (5)
28 Part of cow, say, that's tagged for identification (3)

CROSSWORD SOLUTIONS

FEBRUARY

ACROSS: **1** Scales **5** Brambles **10** Aloes **11** Gall **12** Barn owl **14** Stern **15** Assynt **17** Rodentia **19** Snowdrop **22** Rushes **24** Shied **26** Alyssum **28** Hock **29** Frost **31** Adur **32** Deer park **33** Punter

DOWN: **2** Coomb **3** Lamprey **4/9** Sea foam **5** Broiler **6** Asses **7** Bogbean **8** Eglantine **13** Otter **16** Sandstone **18** Derby **20** Whisker **21** Peacok **23** Sustain **25** DEFRA **27** Mouse **30** Tup.

MARCH

ACROSS: **1** Scab **4** Forest Park **9** Pilgrim **10** Canary **11** Mayo **12** Roots **13** Ruby **14** Berwyns **15** Ash-key **16** Sorrel **18** Hogweed **20** Snag **21** Motte **22** Rush **24** Labour **25** Heather **27** Fertiliser **28** Puss

DOWN: **2** Copra **3** Belvoir **4** Fir **5** Ramsons **6** Sacks **7** Penarth **8** Rare breed **12** Royal **14** Brown hare **15** Algae **17** Ragwort **18** Hatches **19** Earth up **21** Morel **23** Sires **26** Air.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

The chocolate mining bee or hawthorn bee (*Andrena scotica*) can be seen on the wing from late March to June. The females tend their eggs and larvae in brood cells within communal burrows. Can you spot the five differences between these two photos? See page 97 for the answers.

Photo: Alamy

Your countryside

HAVE YOUR SAY ON RURAL ISSUES

Share your views and opinions by writing to us at:
Have your say: *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, Eagle House, Bristol BS1 4ST; or email **editor@countryfile.com**, tweet us **@CountryfileMag** or via Facebook **facebook.com/countryfilemagazine**

*We reserve the right to edit correspondence

Farmer's markets are an efficient way to sell produce locally, with minimum transport and packaging

SUPPORTING BRITISH FARMERS

I read Adam Henson's column on new methods of cultivation in your January issue with interest.

I agree that farmers get a rough deal, having to work all hours to barely make ends meet. I have watched *Clarkson's Farm* with interest and some laughter, however Jeremy Clarkson has hit the nail on the head when he says (and I am roughly paraphrasing), the farmers have a lot of rules and regulations inflicted on them by the government. His idea to form a co-operative of farmers, selling their produce locally, is a brilliant idea, whatever you may think of the man himself.

Cultivation needs to change; as a country we should be buying UK-sourced produce and depend less on imported goods, so the money ends up in farmers' pockets. The government has to intervene with strategies to help farmers and encourage local businesses to buy British foods and not foreign products that have clocked up more air miles than the current Prime Minister. This will depend on the British public to change their shopping habits. To put it a better way, everybody has to do their bit to make change happen.
Jonathan Beever, via email

DARK-SKY WONDER

I was fascinated by the article in your February issue 'Awe amongst the stars'. The list of Dark Sky destinations reminded me of a wonderful visit I made to the Spaceguard Centre near Knighton in Powys, with its telescope and planetarium.
K Poulton, via email

Photos: Alamy, Phil Sproson

ANSWERS QUIZ: 1b; 2a; 3c; 4a; 5b; 6d; 7b; 8a; 9d; 10b; 11c; 12d; 13c; 14a

FOCUS ON FOLKLORE

I've just received the March edition of your magazine and wonder why the folklore pages have been omitted. Is this just happening for the one edition? I find this section very interesting.
Marilyn L Roebuck, via email

Managing editor Matt Baird replies: *We'll still be covering Britain's folklore each issue, but we'll be doing this in our other pages, as seen in Adam's column this month.*

HARE COURSING ISSUE

I recently watched a *Countryfile* episode on the topic of hare coursing and believe they missed some vital issues on the subject. It may be a good topic to cover in the magazine to give a view of the facts?

You could interview people who course hares to see why the amount of damage caused by them is on the rise. I have spoken with hare coursers before, when I've seen them in fields. They blame police pressure as the reason they drive across fields.

They have concerns about their dog's welfare when in police care; it seems many dogs are taken in perfect health and returned like skeletons. They're more worried about their dogs than the punishment of the crime.
Mathew Roberts, via email

SEA EMPRESS CLEAN-UP

Regarding recent coverage of the Sea Empress oil spillage, I would like to know who paid for the clean-up?
Trish Foxwell, via email

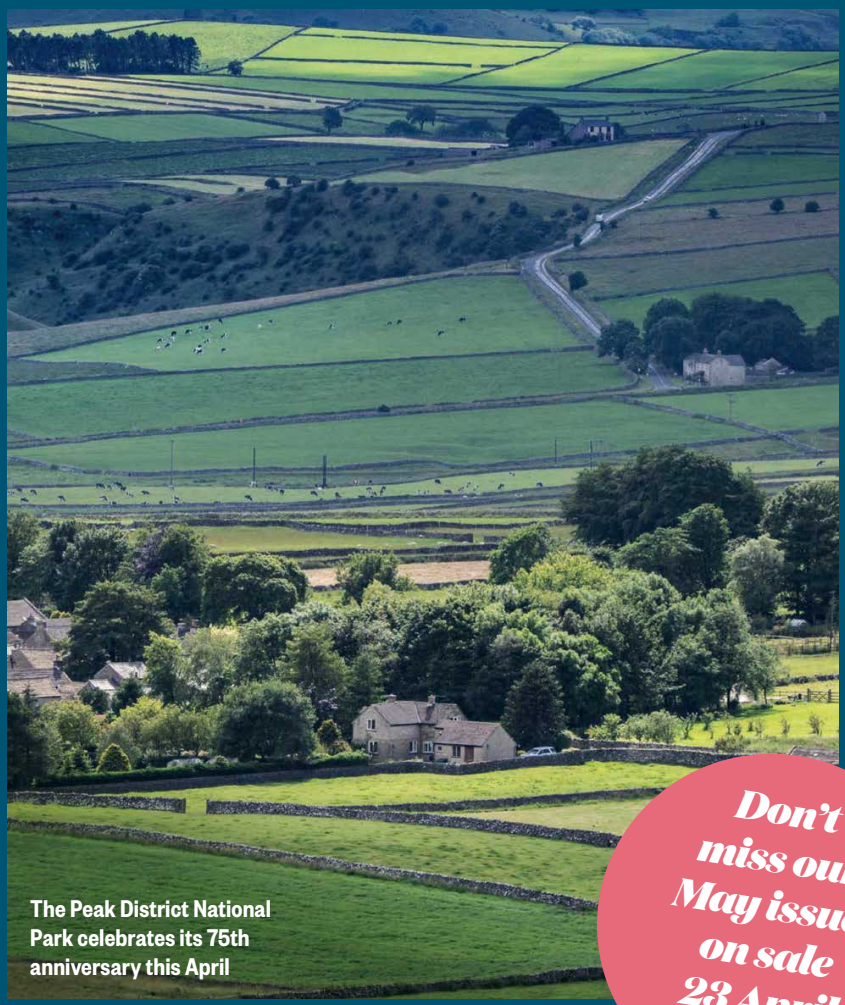
Managing editor Matt Baird replies: *It seems the clean-up was primarily funded by the vessel's insurers and the International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund.*

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE ANSWERS, FROM PAGE 95 Missing antenna; leaf colour has changed; wing is raised; leg is missing; abdomen is elongated.

Next month

Peak District past

Explore the timeless beauty of Derbyshire via a 1950s travel guide



The Peak District National Park celebrates its 75th anniversary this April

Don't miss our May issue, on sale 23 April

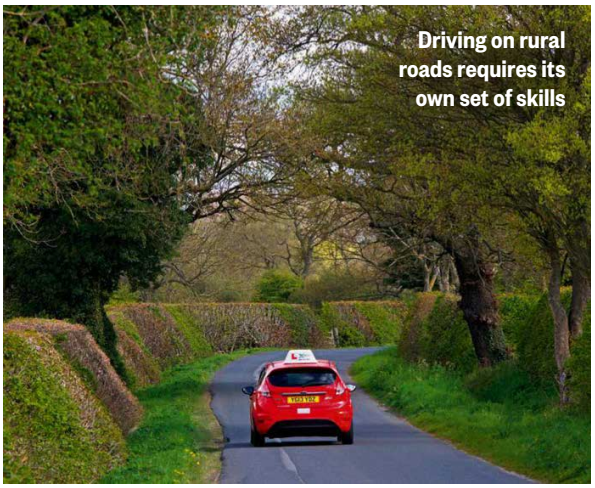
Plus...

- Top 10 Scottish islands to explore
- Simon Barnes on the miracle of flight
- The pros and cons of nuclear power

Learning to drive is a lifeline our rural youth are being denied

Since the lockdowns of Covid-19, booking and obtaining a driving test has become something of a national crisis – and it's one that especially affects those living in the countryside.

The reasons for the crisis are complex. It's no longer just a matter of backlogs, but a combination of a lack of driving instructors and centres, and a poor online booking system that can be tricky to negotiate and has allowed tests to be hoovered up and sold on by third parties exploiting demand.



Driving on rural roads requires its own set of skills

The system, that already puts rural dwellers at a disadvantage, has become deeply and damagingly inequitable. With rural public transport sparse, infrequent, poorly connected and often unreliable, learning to drive is a lifeline for many of Britain's rural young adults. It's that flexible ticket to freedom, independence and agency: to college and work opportunities, friends that live distances away and those social and cultural experiences that just can't be found there.

There is no doubt that learning to drive on rural roads, with their narrow squeezes, nonsensical bends, lack of signage and light, or pavements, which puts everyone – school children, prams, walkers – on the road, is a singular education. And that's without the unexpected hazards of potholes the size of cattle troughs, wild or loose animals, dairy cows swaying to milking sheds, sheep and farm machinery.

Good rural drivers learn to reverse a long way round bends, mentally note every slight passing point, and be rightly calm, patient and accepting when unable to safely overtake a peloton of cyclists or a string of skittish racehorses for long, winding miles. But at some point, driving in busy towns, where white lines separate you from the oncoming traffic and there are roundabouts, dual carriageways and box junctions to negotiate, is essential. Getting there is likely to double the cost and length of your lesson, from £45 for an hour, to £90 for two. It's something many families simply cannot afford.

My family is doing this for the third time. We're lucky to have found a great driving instructor, willing to do the hour-long round trip regularly, in between our own outings, for our daughter to get to the nearest urban centre. In over a year, it's been the only town near us to have any driving tests available (not a single one has come available in our smaller market town). It just happens to be Swindon. Home of the infamous and baffling 'Magic Roundabout' and, in 2024, the hardest place to pass a test in the whole country, with a mere 22% pass rate. Our daughter has failed twice, and only just. She's a good and careful driver who has been unlucky.

But what makes each fail devastating is that you must go to the bottom of the queue for a new test date (Monday mornings at 6am, where you'll be around 4,800th in the online queue) with all the hopes and dreams of independence, wider horizons and job prospects hopelessly delayed for another six months and another financially crippling round of lessons to find the money for. Not to mention the increased risk of your Theory Test expiring (after two years). Thankfully, if you work hard at it and are quick, there are Apps to join for cancellations. A Monday morning at 8.30 in Swindon again? We'll take it. It's all there is.

I hope things change. Particularly for our young rural folk, where cars often represent the only set of wings available, where, once you've passed your test, there is still yet the debilitating cost of buying and running a vehicle. I wish public transport would improve. I hope, by the time you read this, our daughter will have passed, can get a job, and I can dial down the taxi service and work more myself (though, of course, I'll worry). Her determination and resilience puts me in awe. The country shouldn't be missing out on what young people can offer, while so many of them are kept on hold. CF

Have your say What do you think about the themes raised here? Write to the address on page four or email **editor@countryfile.com**

Nicola Chester's new book *Ghosts of the Farm: Two Women's Journeys Through Land, Time and Community* is out now (Chelsea Green).

Photo: Alamy

HORNBY® TT:120

LIMITED TIME - SPECIAL OFFER
FROM THE HOME OF MODEL RAILWAYS

The Table Top Train Set

SAVE £100
USE CODE:
TREAT40

Offer ends 24/04/2026

Bring the charm of a classic railway to your dining table with this complete miniature train set.

TT1001AM The Scotsman Train Set

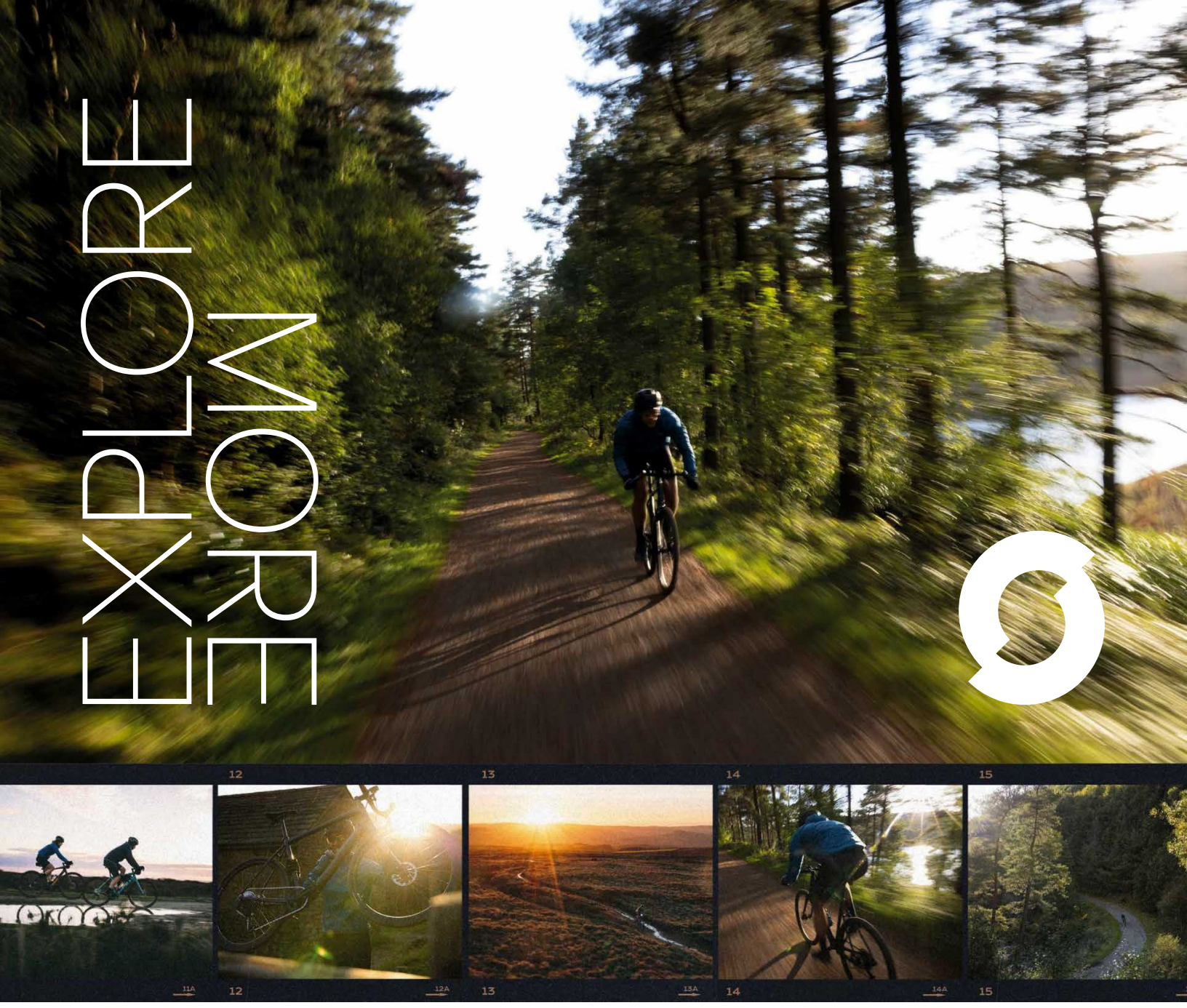
Space required:
125 x 84cm
49 x 33in

Highly detailed motorised steam locomotive

Pullman dining cars with individually lit table lamps

Claim your exclusive offer of **£100 OFF and FREE P&P***
Visit **uk.hornby.com/ttmaroffers** or scan this QR code.

ACTUAL SIZE



EL CAMINO ELECTRIC GRAVEL BIKE

El Camino takes the edge off long climbs and gives you the confidence to go further. Enough range to ride all day, light enough to lift easily. It feels like a regular bike - with extra wind in your sails. The same geometry as the award-winning Camino gravel bike, it's ideal for bikepacking, all-day excursions and still rolling into the pub looking mildly presentable.

- Real-life range of up to 70km of assisted riding
- 250W rear hub motor gives 38Nm of torque
- Lightweight at only 3kg more than the non-electric Camino
- Mounts for panniers and mudguards
- Clearance for up to 50mm tyres

El Camino is the electric version of our award-winning Camino gravel bike.
Builds from £2,799

sonderbikes.com

SONDER