

## TRAVEL

## Ye olde Rutland



## Crows caw,

pheasants scuttle into hedgerows, a hare bounds across a field, and for three hours, as I take a winter walk through Top-Secret England, I meet not a soul. My day in this quiet corner of an already quiet county — Rutland, in the East Midlands — would have brought a contented smile to the face of the great landscape historian WG Hoskins.

Back in the 1960s, in his *Shell Guide to Rutland*, Hoskins perfectly summed up the country's smallest county as "a picture of a human, peaceful, slow-moving, pre-industrial England." All over the country, he pointed out, nature reserves were protecting rare animals, birds and plants. Here in Rutland, he reckoned there was scope for something new: a reserve dedicated to protecting human beings against "incessant noise, speed and all the other acids of modernity."

Then he went all whimsical: "One would like to think that one day soon at each entrance to this little county, beside a glancing willow-fringed stream, there will stand a notice saying 'Human Conservancy: Abandon the Rat-Race at This Point.'" No notices so far but, give or take the odd supermarket, Rutland is still largely free of the rat-racing "acids of modernity." It has quietly rolling countryside, two characterful market towns (Oakham and Uppingham) and charming villages. One of these,

Braunston, is the focal point of my walk, a glimpse of a timeless rural England.

I discovered this gentle 9.6km circuit last summer, thanks to a series of leaflets promoting Rutland. It offered the intriguing prospect of some 52km<sup>2</sup> of open country with no roads, just a network of tracks, bridle paths, green ways and footpaths. I set off on a blisteringly hot July morning and it was glorious: no villages, apart from long-deserted ones, just the odd isolated farmhouse and distant church spire and views across to Robin-a-Tiptoe Hill. It was an Arcadian vision: sheep, birds, buttercup meadows and hawthorn hedges, with low hills checkered by hedges and dotted with copses, spinneys and coppices, the relics of a medieval royal hunting forest.

In a tourism world where anywhere even slightly off the beaten track is branded "secret," "hidden" or "unexplored," this was a genuine discovery: a pocket of England apparently unchanged for 200 years. If it were open moorland or heathland it would be understandable, but this is central England, just 19km from the city of Leicester. In Spain, these tracks would be exploited as drovers' paths; garrulous guides would lead tourists along them. But this is the English Midlands, so no one makes much of a fuss.

That July day was so hot that I abandoned the last leg of the walk and took a short cut near a road called the Wisp to the finishing point, the Old Plough, one of Braunston's two pubs, for a leisurely lunch. The full walk had to wait for a bright, chilly, winter Saturday morning.

Before I set off, I meet up with Braunston's local historians, John Beadman and Les Lickman. Beadman, a retired poultryman, is the fifth generation of his family to live in the village, a handsome place built mainly in honey-colored stone. The Braunston he grew up in was a farming community; practically everyone worked in or around the village. Now many residents are newcomers, some commuting daily to London.

Not everything has changed, however. Lickman, a retired upholsterer, spreads out a tablecloth-sized parish map from 1807 and we study the area. "There's hardly any alteration to it since then, except a few hedges have been removed," he says.

The map, showing how the land was divided up between local families (including Beadman's ancestors) during enclosure, the reorganization of land management at the

end of the 18th century, was drawn up 10 years before the peasant poet John Clare came to work as a lime-burner a few kilometers away. Clare condemned enclosure, which left the land, he wrote: "In little parcels little minds to please." In more positive mood, he declared:

*How pleasant are the fields to roam and think  
Whole Sabbaths through unnoticed and alone ...*

Which, even on a Saturday rather than a Sabbath, is the perfect cue to start walking. A silver crescent moon lingers in the sky as I walk down through Braunston, past the village green and the village hall. Inside the 12th-century church, the red-backed *Books of Common Prayer* are neatly stacked and fragments of medieval wall paintings show angels with eagle-like wings. A plaque records the 1825 bequest of John and Ann Robinson for the sum of £20 (US\$28) to be used for the poor of the parish: "To be distributed annually in bread on Christmas Day forever." The Bequest Committee still meets twice a year, though bread has given way to £5 notes.

I pass a stone carving of a busty woman, possibly a pagan fertility symbol, and climb a stile into a broad meadow, where the low sun catches the undulating furrows of a medieval field system. The only sound is birdsong.

The grass has a crisp cushion of dead leaves. A winter stillness has settled on the landscape. I cross trickles of rivers and wade through marshy ground where the water almost reaches the top of my Wellingtons. I follow the yellow way-marking arrows, past Bushy Wood and Haydock Spinney, and, with my Ordnance Survey map flapping like a sheet in the keen wind, completely miss the double-trunked ash tree which will show me where to climb a hill. It doesn't matter. It's a marvelous morning.

Down a broad oak-lined avenue, through a bridle gate, and finally into a tunnel through dense bushes onto the road leading to the Blue Ball, Braunston's other pub: smart and friendly.

To round off the day, I tackle part of the leaflet's other Braunston-based walk, to nearby Brooke, a tiny village in a hollow. It has what many consider Rutland's prettiest church: squat-towered with Elizabethan furnishings and the gravestones of the four wives of Henry Raullins who were buried between 1713 and 1722; his fifth wife buried him in 1742. On one of the choir stalls, someone has carved the outline of a church and added the initials IM and the date: 16 March, 1664.

Finally, to Oakham, a reassuringly old-fashioned town whose main street still has locally owned shops, including two jewelers: Mr Breeze and Mr Diggle. Over a gent's outfitters is a 1920s sign, "Smiths Grand Teas, imported direct from the finest tea gardens of India and Ceylon." A blue and gold sundial proclaims: "*Tempus fugit*." Time flies. Here in Rutland, it seems to fly that bit more slowly.

On the Net: [www.discover-rutland.co.uk](http://www.discover-rutland.co.uk) and [www.discovereastmidlands.com](http://www.discovereastmidlands.com)

*A map from 1807 guides Stephen McClarence through the tranquil villages and fields of a corner of England barely changed in 200 years*

BY STEPHEN MCCLARENCE  
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

The towns of Uppingham, above, and Oakham, below, ooze quaintness and present visitors with chocolate box views of England.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DISCOVER RUTLAND

