

# The Coast & Countryside of England

Visit the British Towns that Appear in Countless Novels and History Books on an Exploration Through Southeastern England

[ WRITTEN BY LISSA HARNISH POIROT ]



*The Tower Bridge*



*The Tower of London*

**A** SELF-PROCLAIMED ANGLOPHILE and history buff, I had often longed to explore the British coastline. Countless novels in British Literature illustrated Brighton as a summer playground to Londoners in need of salt air to improve their health. History books are filled with the tales of Portsmouth as a shipping and naval home to some of Britain's most elite sailors. And, of course, the River Thames' coastline meanders through Hampton and London, where kings and queens ruled not only the country but the world. So after a weekend jaunt to London, my encyclopedia of British history friend and I traversed Southeastern England to discover its literary charms for ourselves.

## London Bridges

When in London, there is no end to the amount of historic places and museums to visit. But a trip to Londontown would be remiss without a walk along the Thames, where the city originated and grew around its fast-moving waters. One of my favorite sites in the world is that of the Tower Bridge, London's historical and towering blue-fringed drawbridge that features predominantly as a backdrop to the city. When I see the bridge, I always smile and feel I'm home, as I've visited London on a number of occasions. But my equally well-traveled friend and I had never been inside the bridge and decided this trip would put an end to that. We rode the

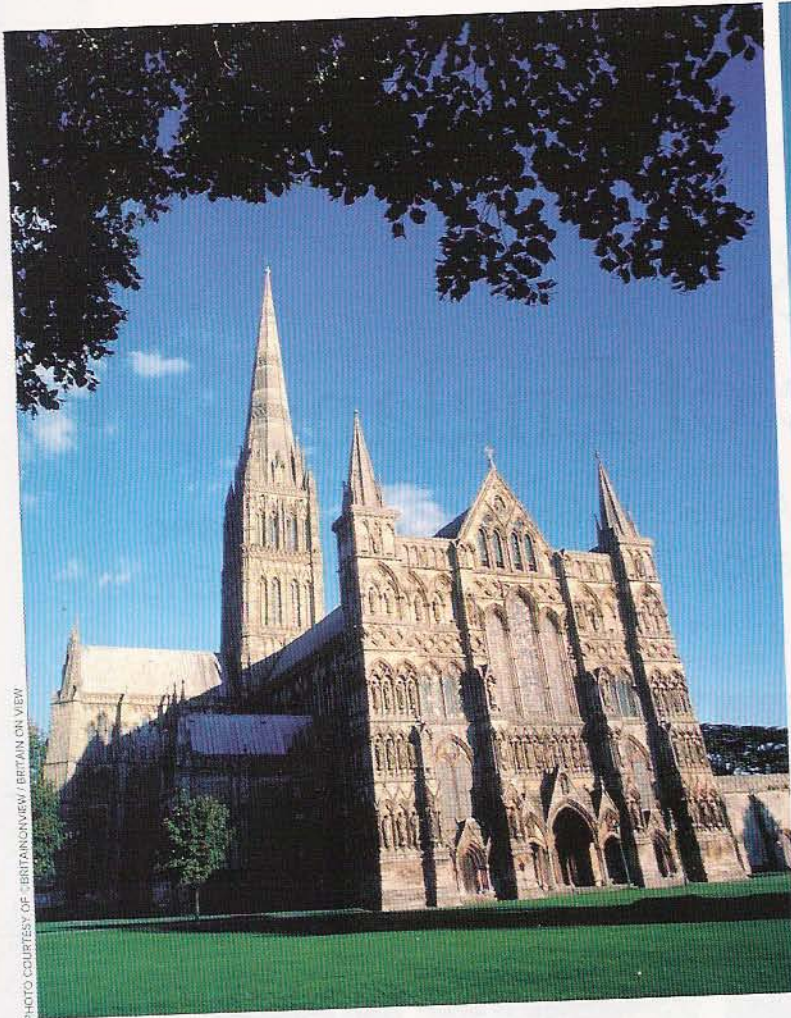


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**Above:** Salisbury Cathedral; **Top Right:** Stonehenge  
**Bottom Right:** Lord Nelson's warship, The HMS Victory located in Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard

lifts to the top, where the walkways with fantastic views of the city are now open for visitors, along with an interesting exhibit on how the massive drawbridge operates.

Just a flight of steps away stands the Tower of London's White Tower, once home to England's greatest kings and queens, including Richard II and III; Henry III, VI, VIII; Mary I; and Elizabeth I. It also served as a prison for 900 years. Traitors Gate, beneath the pedestrian walkway along the river, served as a quiet entrance to those brought in by the cloak of night to be held against their will for being traitors to the royal family, many of whom lost their heads and are thought to roam the grounds as spirits. The Crown Jewels also call the Tower home, and are on view, with displays of jewels and silver so enormous it's hard to imagine the wealth.

#### Countryside Drives

Taking the train to the airport, we rented a car and set out seeking countryside drives with sweeping views. With Stonehenge located less than two hours from the city en route

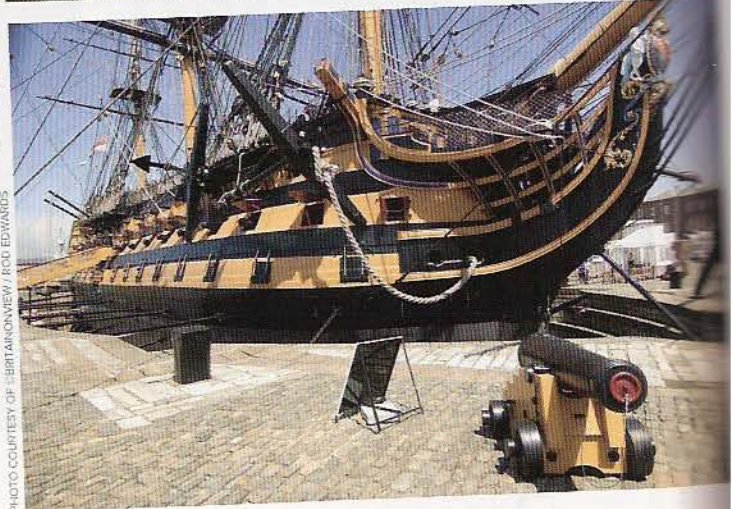
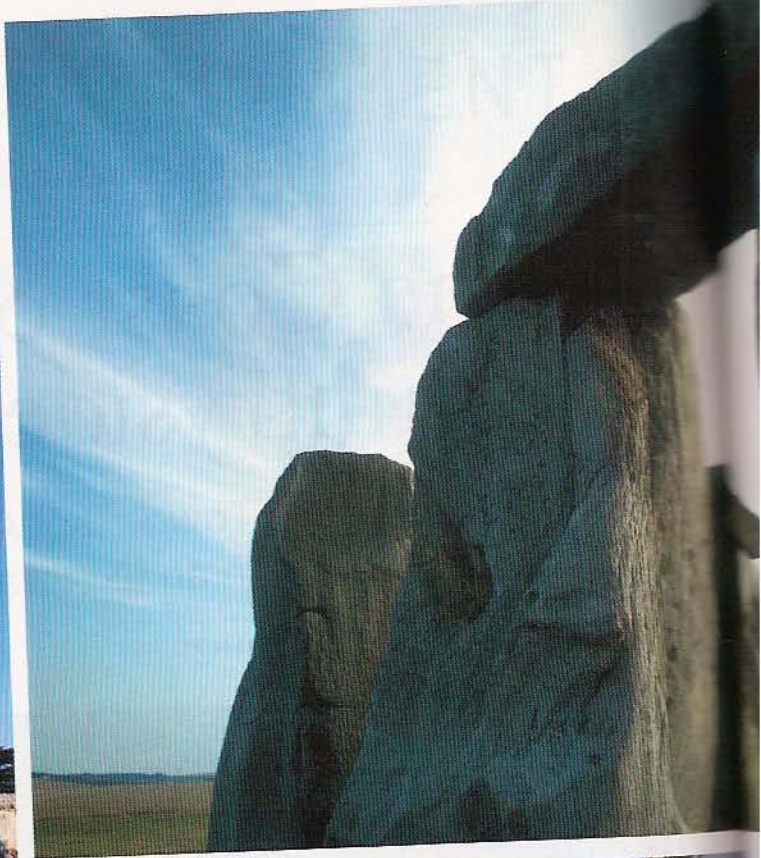


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to Portsmouth, we knew a visit to the mystic formation of stones was a must. The countryside is your typical countryside and we were hardly paying attention when out of nowhere — Stonehenge. These ancient rock formations oft-discussed by scientists, historians and people of faith who argue its origins and use, emerged right there on the side of the highway surrounded by fields dotted with sheep and cows. We were taken aback but quickly exited the highway and parked in a crowded parking lot. So many pedestrians used to block the roads that the lot and pedestrian walkway under the road were created, with a gift shop, of course. And, because so many people have visited, there was concern that erosion from millions of hands on the rocks would wear



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away the stones believed to be from 2500 BC. Now, a pathway has been created to encircle the formation, with ropes keeping visitors far from the rocks. Headset tours provide the story and history of the formation, and that's Stonehenge — a somewhat cattle-drive attraction and no opportunity to get close enough to examine or feel the immensity of the stones.

Surprisingly, a string of restaurants and attractions has yet to be built near Stonehenge; it remains alone in a field, but just 30 minutes down the road is Salisbury, home to the stunning Salisbury Cathedral, considered a World Heritage “must see.” Dating back to the 13th century, the cathedral’s highest spire, at 404 feet, is a beacon that drew us to it. Its Early English Gothic architecture was receiving a cleaning during our stop, after celebrating its 750th anniversary. The church has never received an expansion, and what you see is what has been standing sentinel to the countryside for 750 years. Another surprise waited inside the Cathedral’s Chapter House: the best-preserved original Magna Carta. Drafted in 1215, the document

proclaimed freedoms that led to constitutional law still practiced today. Outside the church grounds, a quaint town with shops and pubs located around the walls of the city give a glimpse into a medieval city. Cafes give an air of modern-day life, while tiny pubs that have been serving fish and chips to travelers for hundreds of

generations offer a peek at yesteryear.

Another hour from Salisbury and we arrived at our overnight destination of Portsmouth. Night and rain had fallen by then, and we awoke the next morning to even more rain, but there is something truly romantic about heading to the docks as the rain comes down: It feels more

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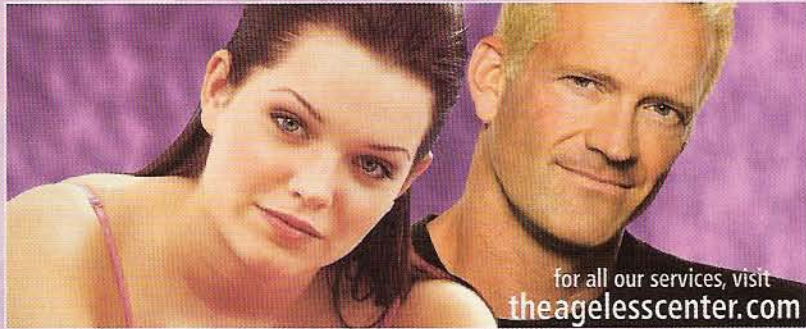
like a seafaring adventure, even without sailing out of port. At Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard awaits a graveyard to historic English vessels, most admirably Lord Admiral Nelson's HMS Victory, where he was mortally wounded and died while winning the Battle of Trafalgar over the French and Spanish fleets. The HMS Warrior, built in 1860, and the Mary Rose, King Henry VIII's favorite ship, which was constructed in the 1500s, are also on view. Having been sunk in 1545, Mary Rose was pulled out of the ocean but remains in a constant spray of salt water to keep her from drying out and crumbling. Both the Victory and Warrior are available for guided tours, giving insight into the life of a seaman who lived in very tight quarters for years at a time.

After a lunch in an intimate pub across the street from the dockyard, where we warmed by a fire and let thick stouts fill our bellies, we hopped back into the car for a coastal drive east to Brighton, along which we spotted Arundel Castle. Perched high above the highway, the imposing castle came at us through the mist and we rushed off the road to visit. The home to 400 generations of Dukes of Norfolk, the castle dates back to the 1100s before the Howard family (Anne Boleyn's family) took ownership and began their quest for the crown against the Tudors (Henry the VIII's family) through the 17th century. The 40 acres of land surrounding the castle felt like a rainforest in the downpour, and the gray skies made the castle even more of a dramatic vision as we descended upon it, though, much to our dismay, we arrived too late to enjoy a group tour of the castle, as the last admission time is 4 p.m.

**Brighton Beach Memoirs**

Arriving in Brighton just in time for the rains to lift, we witnessed a spectacular pink and purple sunset over the deep blue waters, coloring the grand hotels and homes that rest across the street from the

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*Built to resemble an Indian palace, [The Royal Pavilion] is unbelievably opulent in décor and its gardens provide a peaceful reprieve from the crowds lurking around the beaches and pier, just a block away.*

pebble beaches with sun-kissed light. Located approximately 50 miles from London, the beach town has and remains a popular destination for the city dwellers in need of a sun-filled weekend. Brighton Pier is the precursor to Coney Island and Santa Monica Pier, complete with arcade games. Jutting out from Brighton Beach, its pebble beach doesn't look comfortable for a barefoot walk, but the wide sidewalks flanking the main road are ideal for strolling hand-in-hand.

While areas can be touristy, the city welcomes so many cosmopolitan visitors that it offers a number of gourmet restaurants within walking distance of the main drag. The Lanes is an adorable area of brick-lined sidewalks winding in and around shops and restaurants. We popped into an intimate French brasserie-style restaurant with solid wood and pewter décor, soft lighting, and an authentic French menu with an extensive variety of cheeses and wines.

The next morning's sky matched the ocean as we explored the Lanes for daytime shopping and visited the so-over-the-top-it's-beautiful Royal Pavilion. Built to resemble an Indian palace, it is unbelievably opulent in décor and its

gardens provide a peaceful reprieve from the crowds lurking around the beaches and pier, just a block away.

By afternoon, it was time to hop back in the car and head back to London before our flight home. In just five days, we sampled a bit of England's history and uncovered hidden treasures we wished we had more time to enjoy. Next time, we'll skip London and just take in England's rich and storied countryside and coast: as exciting to visit as Londontown any day. **PN**

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

**Arundel Castle**  
[www.arundelcastle.org](http://www.arundelcastle.org)

**Brighton Pier**  
[www.brightonpier.co.uk](http://www.brightonpier.co.uk)

**Portsmouth Historic Dockyard**  
[www.historicdockyard.co.uk](http://www.historicdockyard.co.uk)

**Royal Pavilion**  
[www.royalpavilion.org.uk](http://www.royalpavilion.org.uk)

**Salisbury Cathedral**  
[www.salisburycathedral.org.uk/](http://www.salisburycathedral.org.uk/)

**Stonehenge & Salisbury**  
[www.visitwiltshire.co.uk/salisbury/home](http://www.visitwiltshire.co.uk/salisbury/home)

**Tower Bridge**  
[www.towerbridge.org.uk/](http://www.towerbridge.org.uk/)

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