

Finding *Downton* in Kent

Downton Abbey is in Yorkshire, not South East England, but Kent offers a lot to bring the fictional Abbey and the lifestyle there to mind

By Wendy & Rob Lindsay

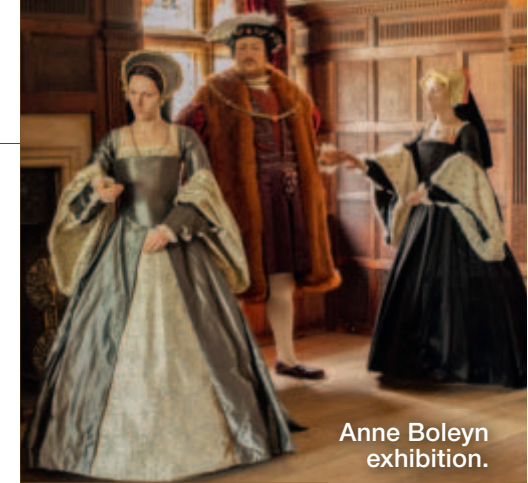
Hever Castle.



Chilton Park. Bottom: its impressive staircase.



Inner Hall, Hever Castle.



Anne Boleyn exhibition.



Hever Castle.



Dining room, Hever Castle.

The walls of the massive oak staircase were hung with immense oil portraits and the carpeted stairs creaked underfoot while the morning sunshine streamed in from the ornate cupola overhead. It felt as if we were walking onto the elaborate set of the *Downton Abbey* TV series—but we were simply going to breakfast.

On a self-driving tour of castles and gardens in the county of Kent in South East England, we were delighted to secure overnight stays at two classic British country-house hotels. Over the centuries, invitations to “a week in the country” at a noble’s country house were much sought-after, and between touring castles and their vast gardens in the daytime and returning to a stately country house in the evening, it felt very much as if we’d stepped back in time to the era of *Downton* elegance.

Our first hotel was Chilton Park, home to that impressive staircase.

Nestled amid 193 acres (78 hectares) of parkland near the village of Lenham, Chilton has a long and varied history

that dates back to the 12th century, with a succession of aristocrats, diplomats, and politicians calling it home. The building itself was begun in the late 15th century. Continuing a country-house tradition, the rooms and suites are known by name, not number: the Queen Anne Suite, the Regency Room, the Gilt Room. We stayed in the Orient Room, which boasted antique oriental furniture, walls decorated with original art, and windows overlooking the front garden.

That night at dinner, word rippled through the dining room that the new season of *Downton Abbey* would be aired at 9 p.m. It was great fun to catch a sneak preview of what wouldn’t be shown in North America until months later—all from the comfort of our luxurious room.

Reading through the history of Chilton Park, we found that, like fictional *Downton*, it had played its part in wartime. During the Second World War, the 4th (Territorial) Battalion of the Somerset Light Infantry was stationed under canvas in the parkland and used the grounds and lake for exer-

cises. Apparently this is how some of the female Chilton staff at the time met their future husbands. A highlight for staff and soldiers alike was when Field Marshal Montgomery took part in an inspection tour.

Hever Castle, the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, was our first destination. Hever has everything one expects in a medieval castle—moat and drawbridge, 13th-century gatehouse, stout stone walls, jousting in summer, and historic intrigue. Within the stone keep, the Boleyn family built a Tudor manor house with splendid wood-paneled rooms. The tumultuous events that changed English history forever began at Hever in 1525, when King Henry VIII, then 32, first met the 25-year-old Anne. Henry began frequent visits to Hever in his pursuit of the beguiling Anne, who eventually became his queen and the mother of the future Queen Elizabeth I.

Thanks to the restoration efforts of American-born British millionaire John Jacob Astor, the castle is still furnished with some of the original furniture and

family artifacts, such as Anne’s prayer book. The ornate bedroom furnished to host the King is one of many elaborate rooms open during tours. The long gallery also gives a glimpse into the period with an exhibition of costumed figures in 16th-century gowns designed for the filming of *The Other Boleyn Girl*. However, scenes in that movie were filmed not at Hever but at nearby Penshurst Place and Gardens, which was our next stop.

Penshurst Place is a massive medieval masterpiece, with towers and turrets set within an estate covering 2,500 acres (1,011 hectares). A guided tour of the stately home (tours available from March 30 to November 1) was a fascinating trip through a series of rooms filled with a remarkable collection of armour, tapestries, antique furniture, historic portraits, fine porcelain, and even brocade furnishings thought to have been used by Queen Elizabeth I during one of her visits.

At the heart of Penshurst Place is the impressive Baron’s Hall, built in 1341. It is considered by many historians to be one of the finest medieval halls in England, with a Spanish chestnut ceiling

Photos: Lindsey Editorial.

Photos: Hever Castle, Jarrolds (inner hall, Anne Boleyn exhibition, and dining room), Visit Britain (exterior).



Penshurst Place and Gardens.



Baron's Hall, Penshurst Place.



Eastwell Manor rear with fountain (above and right).



Heraldic garden, Penshurst.



Flowers in Penshurst Garden.



Penshurst stairs.

towering 60 feet (18.3 metres) overhead. This hall was hung with banners, filled with costumed actors, and used as the King's banquet hall during the filming

of *The Other Boleyn Girl*. This was rather fitting, as Henry VIII used Penshurst as a hunting lodge during the latter part of his reign. Movie scenes were also shot in the magnificent 11-acre (4.5-hectare) walled garden, which existed during the Tudor period portrayed in the film. It is a fascinating garden to walk, with one roomlike garden leading into another, providing a chain of colour and variety of vistas. It is considered one of the best castle gardens—and perhaps the oldest—in England.

The Sidney family has continuously lived at Penshurst since it was granted to them by King Edward VI in 1552. The Elizabethan poet and courtier Sir Philip Sidney was born there. Like the fictional Crawleys of *Downton Abbey*, the Sidney family has cared devotedly for their immense house and vast land for more than 460 years. It was a pleasure to meet Lady De L'Isle, the wife of present owner Philip Sidney, 2nd Viscount De L'Isle. She told us that one-third of the building is open to the public. However, unlike the owners of *Downton Abbey*, she

doesn't have a small army of servants. The housekeeping staff who keep up the public areas number only three, and the gardens are tended by only six gardeners, with seasonal staff added as needed. Additional staff coordinate public tours and the many lavish weddings, banquets, and special events held at Penshurst, however.

Driving from Penshurst Place towards our hotel near Ashford, we travelled winding country lanes, passing numerous charming villages, forests, orchards, and gardens. It was easy to see why this lush area is known as the Garden of England. Over the centuries, this lovely area has been popular with the aristocracy who built country estates easily accessible from London. Today it is a draw for tourists, as many of these estates are now unique, luxurious inns.

Eastwell Manor, our next hotel, was one such estate-turned-inn. Coming up the tree-lined drive, we approached an ivy-covered greystone mansion with turrets, tall chimneys, and arched leaded-glass windows. Apparently there's



Eastwell Manor entrance.

been a manor house on this spot since before the Norman Conquest—a period of history spanning almost 1,000 years. As we walked across the flagstone inner courtyard towards the main entrance, banners overhead blowing gently in the breeze, it was easy to imagine knights in armour mounting their horses here. Somehow we wouldn't have been surprised to see Carson and the *Downton Abbey* staff come streaming out the door to formally greet us in true *Downton Abbey* fashion. However, the massive baronial fireplace in the reception hall was impressive and most welcoming.

As he whisked our luggage to our room, Tony, the bellman, told us that there are 23 rooms at Eastwell, each named after a historic figure from the manor's past, with the relevant heraldic

crests emblazoned on the heavy wooden doors. We had the Sir Thomas Moyle suite, down the hall from the Earl of Northumberland suite. Our large room with four-poster bed looked out over beautifully manicured lawns and gardens that seemed to stretch for miles. However, Tony informed us that we could see only a fraction of the 3,000-acre estate (1,214 hectares) from the manor house.

Later, walking the length of the grand promenade was a great way to enjoy the sunny afternoon. It was al-

most one-third of a mile (0.5 kilometre) to the garden wall from which the manor house looked so impressive shining in the sun. Hidden away closer to the main house, we discovered the lovely little Walled Italian Maids Garden that is a popular spot for weddings.

Next we explored the modern side of the property. The former stables had been converted into 19 modern cottages, with a modern pavilion nearby housing a gym, swimming pool, day spa, and casual restaurant. Back on the manor

Photos: Courtesy of Penshurst Place and Gardens (aerial and Baron's Hall); Visit Britain (stairs and flowers); Lindsay Editorial (Heraldic garden).

Photos: Visit Britain (fountain); Lindsay Editorial (entrance and gardens).

