



Hidden Britain Centres in South East England

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By David Long

Hidden Britain Centres, inspired within the Arthur Rank Centre aims to see regeneration and development take place in rural areas through encouraging local communities to be more welcoming to visitors, recognising that many visitors would like to engage more with local people and their culture and traditions. HBC's encourage visitors to learn more about the forgotten history and culture of rural areas.

Following a successful pilot project in Cumbria the initiative is now opening up in many regions of the country. In the South East of England a new project has been established which is being funded by Defra through the Rural Enterprise Scheme and managed by South East Rural Community Councils, Tourism South East and Natural Discovery. James Turner has been appointed the Project Development Officer. James knows the area well as he was born in Brighton and has grown up in the region completing his BSc (Hons) in Physical Geography at The University of Sussex. Apart from being an inveterate traveller, he has a background in tourism with over five years in the travel industry. For more information go to www.hiddenbritainse.com

James is hoping to establish at least ten Hidden Britain Centres in the region in the next two years and he seems well on his way to achieving this. Here are just a few.

Dorchester, Cyneglis and St Birinius

The known history of Dorchester goes back to Neolithic times. Iron Age people occupied the site and later Celtic people enclosed their settlement by building the Dyke Hills, now a rare example of a pre Roman town, half a mile from the present village. The Romans and later the Saxons settled at Dorchester. Famously, Dorchester is where Cyneglis the King of the West Saxons was baptised in the River Thames by St Birinius in 635 and Dorchester became the Episcopal centre for Wessex. Later the notable Abbey was saved for posterity at the Dissolution by its purchase by a benefactor who bequeathed it to the village. After this excitement history has been quiet for Dorchester since. Situated on the banks of the Thames, there is still much to discover about Dorchester. The new HBC is planning and designing an interactive presentation for visitors which will provide a sense of the history and lifestyle of the village. This will be available both at the Abbey and the Museum. Information maps about the village will be available along with details of accommodation, food and drink, attractions, travel, walks and cycling.

Romney Marsh: sheep and storms

The great storms of 1287 diverted the river and landlocked New Romney which first came to notice in Roman times. Thereafter, the economy reverted to agriculture and brought with it new wealth and the building of some fine churches. The area was also made famous for smuggling following the imposition of export duties. There was the famous battle of Brookland between revenue officers and a smuggling gang and the activities of Dr Syn (the aptly named!) vicar turned smuggler. Visitors will soon be able to enjoy a DVD exhibition and presentation on the sheep farming heritage in the area. This will be located in the existing Romney Marsh Visitor Centre with outreach to care and retirement homes on the Marsh. Another visitor attraction will be a recipe book of traditional and contemporary local recipes.

Edenbridge: bridges, coaches and charcoal

The town stands on one of the major crossing points of the river Medway, even in Roman times it was a major river crossing. Edenbridge's growth and importance lay in its development as a major stopping place on the route to London. This is illustrated by the large number of surviving coaching inns. The town can also be traced back to an Iron age camp on the crown of Dry Hill close by. Charcoal and farming were major features in its history but even by the seventeenth century this was in decline. The town's later good fortunes reflect the growth and importance of London to the Medway area. A visitor dedicated website is being planned for Edenbridge to ensure a 'one stop shop' for visitor information. Maps and guides will be available and visitors will even be able to take special beer mats away with them having first frequented one of the public houses!

Winchelsea: writers, artists and Edward I

By comparison with the other three places Winchelsea is relatively young, only having been established in 1292 by Edward I after the old town had been washed away by the sea. But Winchelsea prospered (mainly through the wine trade) going on to become a Cinque port. As the port began to silt up so trade declined and the town sank into relative obscurity. It became popular with artists and writers in the nineteenth century who valued it for what it is today: a quiet and picturesque Sussex village. Plans are under way to provide visitors with handheld guides to take them through a walk around the town. The guide is being designed for a variety of groups and it is hoped that this innovative product will be popular with visitors. The guides will be supported with information boards around the town, and leaflets in shops and businesses.

For more information: www.hiddenbritainse.com or www.hidden-britain.co.uk