

# On the TUDOR TRAIL in Tewkesbury

**SARA WALKER follows in the footsteps of Henry VIII in beautiful Tewkesbury.**

**F**ollowing the success of the BBC's powerful historical drama *Wolf Hall*, depicting the career of Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to Henry VIII, interest in Britain's turbulent Tudor period is at a peak. I paid a visit to the pretty Gloucestershire town of Tewkesbury, which boasts many Tudor buildings, to find out more.

We're kicking off the Tudor tour at Ellenborough Park Hotel just outside Cheltenham. Built in the early 1500s by local farmer Thomas Goodman, it's well in keeping with the Tudor theme. A maze of buildings in beautiful honey-coloured Cotswolds stone, the original house has been added to over the centuries but

Dating back to the early 1500s The Ellenborough Park Hotel's maze of buildings are joined together by the same honey-coloured stone.



The beautifully-appointed rooms are decorated by designer Nina Campbell.

remains remarkably consistent, a result of the same two quarries having been used for building stone throughout its history.

That history includes almost 300 years in the ownership of the de la Bere family, and a visit from George III in 1788 when the house was known as Southam Manor. In 1833, the estate was sold to Edward Law, later First Earl of Ellenborough, best remembered locally for his colourful private life. This included marriage to the lively and much younger Jane Digby, who had numerous affairs and marriages before settling down with a Bedouin chief and spending six months of the year in Damascus, and the other six months as a Bedouin. On the death of the Earl's son, Edward, the house became a girls' school before finding a permanent niche as the five star Ellenborough Park Hotel.

With all that history behind it, the hotel is packed with charm, character and original features. Extensively refurbished in 2011, it now boasts



decor by designer Nina Campbell, but remains a perfect balance of modern comfort and period style.

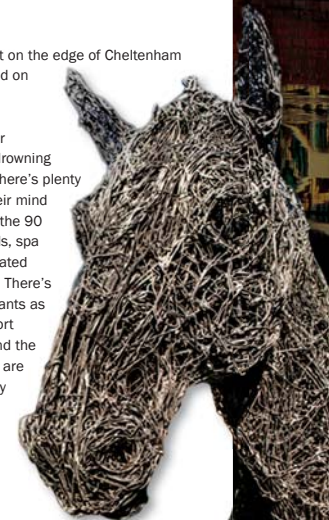
Sales and Marketing Director Ruth Owen-Overton shows me round the public rooms in the hotel, clearly taking great pride in her environment. Our chat takes place on the minstrels' gallery overlooking the Great Hall, one of the oldest parts of the original building, and much in demand for afternoon tea thanks to its huge fireplace, stained glass windows and half panelling.

"Of course, there's been a lot of alterations over the years," explains Ruth. "You can see where there used to be doors and floors and the levels look a bit strange, but you can still imagine them feasting here 500 years ago, can't you?"

I can indeed.

The hotel's right on the edge of Cheltenham Racecourse, and on racing days it's crammed with racegoers either celebrating or drowning their sorrows. There's plenty here to take their mind off things, with the 90 acres of grounds, spa and outdoor heated swimming pool. There's the two restaurants as well, the Beaufort Dining Room and the Brasserie. Both are presided over by award-winning chef David Kelman, who

**Right:**  
A life-size sculpture of a horse reminds visitors of the hotel's equestrian connections.





Cheltenham Racecourse is only half a mile from the hotel.



The outside of the 15th century building at 66 Church Street has been renovated in traditional limewash.



The town holds an annual medieval festival in the summer, which includes an enactment of the 1471 Battle of Tewkesbury.

specialises in using food from local producers, and our evening meal in the Brasserie is simple, delicious and beautifully cooked.

As well as the racecourse, there's also a strong equestrian link - there's great horse riding country and a polo club in the area, and the hotel celebrates its affiliation with a life-size horse sculpture on the front lawn.

"We're a very popular destination for Americans, because they love the history," says Ruth. "If I had to sum up what we do here in three words, I'd say your experience should be expressive, flexible and friendly. Our staff are fantastic and we always do our absolute best to cater for the individual."

That's emphasised in the attention to detail that's evident everywhere. Our dog, Monty, is also a welcome guest and he's been provided with every amenity in the spacious room, from bedding to bowls to poop scoops. The bathroom boasts underfloor heating, there's a top-of-the-range sound system and in addition to the

normal vanity set and potions there's also a pair of racing binoculars.

If it's raining on raceday and you've forgotten your boots, that's no problem either - the hotel has a dedicated boot room filled with pairs of Hunters and Dubarrys in different sizes, plus waxed jackets for guests. There's even a gun room, with lockers available for eight guests' guns.

With all that modern comfort, I must admit I'm not feeling very Tudor as we pack our bags the next morning - but after a huge breakfast I'm definitely feeling a bit Henry VIII-ish around the stomach area. We decide to start the day with a brisk walk up the hill behind the hotel, which takes us out onto the Cotwolds Way, running for 100 miles through the region. That's a little more than we've got the energy for this morning, so once Monty's burnt off some energy splashing through the mud we load the car and set off for Tewkesbury, a twenty-minute drive away.

The town is an ancient settlement at the junction of the Avon and Severn Rivers, and is famous for its historic buildings, narrow alleyways and beautiful abbey. The easy access by river made it a bustling market town, and in Henry VIII's time the main industries were mustard making, brewing and malting, pin making and stockings.

Leaving Monty in the car to snooze, we head to Heritage Centre. Housed in a quirky, pretty, restored 17th century building, the building's called 'Out of the Hat' to celebrate its history as a hat shop, and now doubles as tourist office and exhibition centre. Manager Rachel Thatcher puts

Old Baptist Chapel

Museums

Rivers & Severn Ham

Abbey



together the day's itinerary for us, taking in the alleys and byways of the town, the abbey, numerous historic buildings and a riverside walk for Monty. First stop is the abbey, where, it appears, well-behaved dogs are welcome, so after a quick detour to retrieve our dozing pooch we head back to this beautiful building.

Consecrated in 1121, this Norman abbey is beautifully maintained and features medieval stained glass, decorative roof bosses, tombs, chantry chapels and the 17th century Milton organ, reputedly played by the poet John Milton and still in daily use.

Although it was already hundreds of years old in his time, Henry VIII was nearly the undoing of this historic building, with the Dissolution of the Monasteries, which took place between 1536 and 1541. All the monasteries were disbanded, and their assets seized by the Crown. In 1539, the townsfolk of Tewkesbury managed to save their abbey from destruction by insisting it was their parish church. They bought it from the king for the sum of £453, which was the price of the lead and the bells, and it remains today as the spiritual centre of the town, a beautiful and imposing building.

Once outside again, it's time to hit the town. The footprint has hardly altered since the Middle Ages,

Tewkesbury Abbey dates back to Norman times and was saved by the town from the Dissolution of the Monasteries.



The Elizabethan Cross House is believed to have once been the Court House of the Lords of Tewkesbury.





**Above:**  
The 16th century timber framed cottages at the corner of Abbey Mill were once Abbey property.

**Below:**  
The town stands at the junction of the Severn and Avon rivers (top), and from the Ham (bottom), there's a view back over the river towards the town.

as the surrounding rivers and flood plain have stopped the town from spreading too far. One of the more noteworthy features of the town is the number of alleys, which crisscross the streets at right angles.

These date back to the late 17th century, when increased demand for housing led to sites being infilled. Of the original 90 alleyways boasted by the town, around 30 remain and it's still easy to imagine life hundreds of years ago when these narrow corridors were cramped, noisy, dark, smelly and bustling with life.

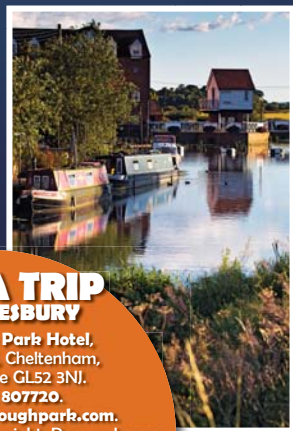
As we stroll up and down the high street, almost every step reveals a spectacular timbered building. There's the Royal Hop Pole (now a Wetherspoon's pub), which was one of Tewkesbury's foremost coaching inns. One of my favourite Charles Dickens characters, Mr. Pickwick of The Pickwick Papers fame, stopped to dine here and drank so much 'bottled ale, Madeira and port' that he fell asleep for the next thirty miles of his journey. Much as I'd love to follow in Mr. Pickwick's (rather wavering) footsteps, that seems like a bit of bender for 2pm so we walk on a bit further to the Olde Black Bear, a black and white building dating back to the early 16th century that was certainly here in Henry's time. This building has its own literary connection, as well - Shakespeare is said to have performed here, with a dancing bear making up a member of the troupe. Other parts of the town that would have been familiar to a Tudor gentleman out

for a stroll are No. 66 Church Street, a recently and beautifully restored timber-framed building dating back to 1475, and Abbey Lawn Cottages, built in the late 15th century as shops.

Tucked away here and there in the narrow streets are numerous antique shops, selling the valuable and the vintage all piled together in a glorious profusion, ideal if you're the sort of person who likes to spend a couple of hours pottering and browsing. Monty, though, who's been waiting patiently on the lead while I peer at Tudor architecture and mutter over blue plaques, has decided it's time to put his paw down and starts fidgeting for a run.

We head across to Abbey Mill and the iron footbridge that takes us over to the Ham, a water meadow between the rivers. It's a site of special scientific interest, and is rich in different grass species and birdlife. From here, there's a nice view of the roofline of the old town and the pretty 16th century cottages that once belonged to the abbey.

We walk along the river bank drinking in the quiet river scenery until eventually, the sinking sun reminds us it's time to hit the road. Leaving Tewkesbury to dream of its history, we head for home.



## TAKE A TRIP TO TEWKESBURY

**Ellenborough Park Hotel,**  
Southam Road, Cheltenham,  
Gloucestershire GL52 3NJ.  
Tel: 01242 807720.

Website: [ellenboroughpark.com](http://ellenboroughpark.com).  
Prices start at £230 per night. Dogs welcome at a charge of £25 per night.

For more information about events and what to see and do in Tewkesbury, visit [tewkesbury.gov.uk](http://tewkesbury.gov.uk) or [cotswolds.com](http://cotswolds.com).

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