



THE ARTS

The market town of *Ampt Hill*



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A few weeks ago I had cause to be in Ampt Hill, a charming town, with an MK post-code but of which I realised I knew next to nothing. Time to put that right, so I recently went back to have a closer look. This month's theme explores the creative offer of our near neighbour Ampt Hill.



Imposing Houghton House
ctsy Ampt Hill Town Council



Hannah Mowle, Libby Bastiani and Tom Blindell



Ampt Hill comes alive on Gala Day
ctsy Becky Kerr photography

History

Ampt Hill's royal connections go back centuries, starting with Henry III's charter in 1219 for a market every Thursday. The town's 200 listed buildings are testament to the extraordinary heritage remaining today. The former castle was built using ransoms from the battle of Agincourt (1415), was favoured by Henry VIII for hunting parties, and was where Katherine of Aragon lived when the king severed his ties. The castle was allowed to decay in the 17th century and in 1615 was usurped by the imposing Houghton House, believed to be the model for 'House Beautiful' in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Possibly the most important son of Ampt Hill, Colonel Richard Nicholls, in 1664 led a battleship force that took New Amsterdam from the Dutch, renamed it New York before becoming its first governor. Nicholls subsequently perished in a naval engagement with the Dutch in 1672, but New York had been born. The ruins of Houghton House, stripped of roof and all valuables by an exasperated owner in 1794, still represent the most striking symbol of the town's history.

First impressions

What you notice depends on when you visit and only on my third visit was it sunny. A quick rummage on-line revealed a current population of around seven thousand, and a better range of local facilities than you'd expect in a place that size. The first resident I spoke to was someone who a few months ago had made the transition from a modern MK neighbourhood, to this historical gem. Lee Whitton of Park Street felt it meets all his needs, citing the Great Park, the pubs and the shops as the town's key assets. In fact the place is so personal that several of the people I spoke to referred to it as 'the village'. And Lee doesn't miss Milton Keynes.

Cool places to meet

A good way to assess a place is through its coffee (or tea) offer. I passed by the Coffee Pot, The Olde Coffee Shop, The Cottage Bakery, The Cooks Collection, The Hide, the large new Costa and probably a few more... and found myself in Kings Arms Yard at Eve Petrusic's Cakestand and Crumb. It was positively bubbling with young mums taking tea in a thoroughly creative vintage ambiance. Hannah Mowle, Libby Bastiani and Tom Blindell, three very capable young people from Redborne School who work there, were keen to show the vintage crockery. I'd also like to have shown the cakes, the menu and the 1960s' gramophone playing vintage tunes. Great ambiance, clearly unphased by corporate Costa, great ambassadors and a great start to a visit.

Homely Hearts gift shop

Four years ago Sharon McMellon left behind a lifetime in tax advice and followed her dream... to run the sort of shop you look for when you're on holiday, offering arty and crafty things you wouldn't normally find anywhere else, presented with vibrant feel and aesthetic coherence. The fact that she's not changed the format suggests she's getting it right. We discussed her choice of Ampt Hill – mainly



Sharon McMellon oversees tasteful displays at Homely Hearts

for the personal feel of the place and its people, and the strength of the small independent sector. Just as we were discussing the pros and cons of charity shops, Charlotte Hodgson from Luton came into the Dunstable Street shop, visiting Ampt Hill for its boutiques, hair salon and... its charity shops – clearly an important part of the mix.

Bedroom Acoustic Music

John Treby opened his first Ampt Hill music shop 17 years ago, after an exhaustive search for towns that didn't already have one. Before he set up in Ampt Hill he had toured the world as a multi-instrumentalist, and settled down to offer instrument sales and music tuition. At the peak he had three Ampt Hill showrooms, presenting over 300 guitars, with internet sales on www.musicalbits.co.uk comprising 90% of his business. I couldn't resist the warm shop-window of what has to be the smallest, most perfectly-formed music shop I've ever been in, drawing youth and grey trade from near and far. Use it or lose it. And while we're on music, no account of Ampt Hill would be complete without a reference to the Ampt Hill Band, still turning out great performances (including Ampt Hill Proms) after 170 years. And there's the Ampt Hill Choral Society, going for almost 70 years, and the Ampt Hill Concert Orchestra, formed in 2005. They're all doing it.

Art in Ampt Hill

Ampt Hill was pushed into the arty limelight in 1979 when Gloucestershire artist, Kit Williams published *Masquerade*. This children's book launched a new genre of treasure hunt books and was the precursor of geocaching in the 21st century. He set out to create a book of 16 paintings that readers would study carefully rather than flip through and discard. To make sure that happened he crafted a hare pendant from 18-carat gold and jewels and buried it in a secret location. Two million copies of



the book were sold world wide and for two years the artist was inundated by people wanting to unlock the puzzle. Eventually the pendant was found near Katherine of Aragon's Cross in Ampthill's Great Park. The finder later sent it to auction where it was bought by an anonymous south-east Asian buyer (who, for years, had no idea the pendant had such an exotic history).

Another local connection for Kit Williams is that in 2000, he was commissioned to create the Time Machine frog clock in what is now intu Milton Keynes, giving years of pleasure to very small shoppers there.

Golden Hare Gallery

Kit Williams' legacy is to be found by name in the Golden Hare Gallery at the bottom of Woburn Street. Laura White moved into the area in 2014, choosing Ampthill as 'a lovely Market Town' with, she figured, unmet need for art and handmade goods. The gallery shows work from 70 artists across the country, including several from West Beds, and works closely with Artist Network Bedfordshire. They, when this edition hits the streets, will have just held their pre-Christmas exhibition on the last weekend in November.

Ricky Keech glass art

Among the most spectacular of Ampthill artists has to be glass-blower Ricky Keech, operating from Creative Vibe at Ampthill Workshop on Rectory Lane. After studying in Luton, he took a degree in Fine Art Ceramics and Glass at Buckinghamshire University college, discovered the world of glass blowing and has never looked back. Earlier this year exhibited in Central MK, and runs a frenetic programme of glass-blowing workshops at Creative Vibe.

Ampthill Festival

The cultural highpoint of the year has to be the Ampthill Festival, now in its 35th year. Every July Ampthill comes alive with an ambitious programme of artistic celebration. Run by a dedicated panel of volunteers and sponsored by an impressive roster of local businesses, it's an object lesson in how a small town can embrace a wide cultural agenda. In reality it's four festivals in one: AmpRocks in the Great Park gives a platform to popular youth culture; Ampthill Park Proms offer a gentle classical and jazz menu; Ampthill Literary Festival provides a smorgasbord of activity in and around the Connolly Hall at Redborne school, including local artists, tea and cake, beer and hogroast, as well as talks and signings from leading and local authors. Paid events and sponsorship allow the whole town to celebrate Ampthill Gala Day for free. Charles Wells is the leading sponsor of the Festival, with ten other local businesses and many sponsoring Friends.



Hospitality in Ampthill

Ampthill has a good range of pubs and a handful of eateries. Fratelli's in Dunstable Street was favourite among the people I spoke to. Established in 2007 it's owned and managed by three brothers Carmelo, Mario and Antonino Di Giorgi, who have a sister restaurant in Woburn. They won Bedfordshire restaurant of the year in 2015, the same year that The Hide in Woburn Street won best Newcomer category. The White Hart in Dunstable Street, with a pedigree stretching through the centuries, dominates the centre of town. I explored the stable yard at the side of the hotel and found myself in conversation with staff members Mirko Cabras, Mauricio Gizzi and Andrei Carp. They enthused about their newly refurbished function room for up to a hundred, their 80-seat restaurant and the prospect of opening eight new hotel rooms at the end of November.

Antiques Emporium

One of the regional draws to Ampthill is the Ampthill Antiques Emporium in what once was Rushbrooke's department store in early Victorian times, eventually closing, as Pecks, in 1979. Since then Marc Legg has rescued and restored the building to being an emporium of antiques, framing and restoration, artefacts, and cherished objects. People come from some distance to browse, explore, deal, restore and admire.

Ampthill Brewhouse

No town is complete without its micro-brewery. The Ampthill Brewhouse in The Sidings launched just over a year ago with three different ales, has already added a fourth and, imminently, a fifth for Christmas. It was the dream of Lee Schopp and a group of friends including Peter and Mary Jeffrey and Rainer Schopp who, wanting to save the former brewing operation from closure, pooled their resources of money, time and expertise to make it happen. They're committed to being part of the local community, actively supporting Gala Day and offering a community membership scheme for enthusiasts. It's happening.

Conclusion

I'm delighted to have discovered Ampthill and am only sorry I haven't been wise enough to enjoy it before. Steeped in history, the place has a lot going for it and, for now, is holding onto the charming personal, independent quality so easily lost in bigger places like Milton Keynes, Bedford or Northampton. The traffic tends to be pretty dominant in the centre and I suspect the atmosphere's at its best on warm sunny days and evenings. Put me down for next July's Ampthill Festival and I'm already telling my friends... ■



NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

We're coming towards the end of 2016 and next month I'll offer a review of the year. For those keen to wish us well, we hold our *Annual Public Meeting* at Norfolk House on 15th December, followed by our quarterly *Networking Showcase*. Doors open from 6pm.

Our Book Group run by AC residents *Ariel Pimentel* and *Scott Dorland* has been shifted to the first Thursday of each month, to avoid a clash with another MK book group, and next meets on 1st December, 7.30pm at Norfolk House. There's also an emerging discussion about a Literature Festival for MK.

Class Art by Julia Roach
ctsy Julia Roach



AC at the *Cornerstone Gallery* is showing *Class Art* a stunning collection of miniature canvases by artist *Julia Roach* and her students. And the current exhibition at *Arts Central Gallery* at Norfolk House is by watercolourist and AC resident *Louise Thomas*.

We are creating a new studio space at *Norfolk House* so we have desks and studio space for visual artists at *Clyde House* and *Norfolk House*, CMK and at *Horncastle Barn*, just beyond Newport Pagnell.

AND, DON'T FORGET... For those who would like to get involved in any of these projects, either in MK or Northampton, you can sign up on our website at www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office on **01908 241122**. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.