

Why? To travel in the wake of a seventeenth century female adventurer – albeit in a bit more comfort!



In the gardens of Erddig House. Inset: Memorial to Celia Fiennes in the village of No Man's Heath

GET AWAY...

For the Weekend!

TAKING IN TWO COUNTRIES ON A SHORT BREAK
TO NORTH WALES AND CHESHIRE

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After 10 years of motorhoming we've managed to get lost in some wonderful places. It's all part of the fun! I've been inspired by Celia Fiennes, a gutsy traveller in the seventeenth century who regularly went astray while riding side-saddle through the byways of England. Even with GPS, we don't always know where we are, yet unplanned meanderings often provide a chance to regain our get-up-and-go – as Celia put it: "By variety and change of aire and exercise."

We've only driven through the Welsh-English border area around Wrexham en route to other destinations and I thought it deserved further exploration. By following some of Celia's hoofprints we came in search of pleasant walks and, perhaps, just a little bit of the unexpected.

After a night wild camping, we stumbled

upon Alyn Waters Country Park, just north of Wrexham. The park is a reclaimed gravel quarry and has waymarked paths through attractive willow and birch woodland. Sculptures have been placed in grassy clearings, including one of a small-scale mine shaft, referencing the local industry.

We followed country lanes through lush parkland to the National Trust property of Erddig House. I was too busy watching the lambs in the fields to notice that the signage sent motorhomes straight on for parking, rather than to the main car park. My husband, Anthony, swung the 'van left and we found ourselves faced with a 2.1m-high brick archway. This was just the weekend's first reverse of shame.

Erddig House was the home of the Yorke family and its treasures include a remarkable archive of pictures and poems ►

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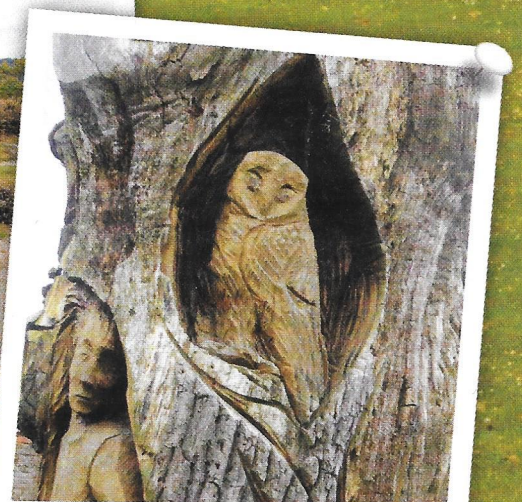
MAIN Erddig House

BELOW LEFT Kitty's stone memorial on Bickerton Hill

BELOW RIGHT Owl sculpture at The Plassey Holiday Park



© John Keates / Alamy Stock Photo



TOP TIPS

The paths at **Alyn Waters Country Park** are popular with cyclists, families with pushchairs and wheelchair users

wrexham.gov.uk/assets/pdfs/countryside/alyn_waters_walks.pdf

To find the memorial to **Celia Fiennes**

geograph.org.uk/photo/283773

about the servants. Two servants, Lucy and Ernest, worked at the house before WWI and fell in love.

Although relationships between servants were generally discouraged, there is evidence that at Erddig they were indulged. Lucy and Ernest's eventual marriage was celebrated by the Yorke family in a charming verse:

*"We trust the attachment here begun
May last while life its course shall run"*

It wasn't difficult for me to imagine that, on a lovely day, these two lovers might snatch time for a promenade. The National Trust has encouraged such daydreaming by creating a walking trail leaflet to celebrate their story, which takes in some of the highlights of Erddig. From the red-brick dovecote by the car park, we followed the road behind the tea garden to the Cup and Saucer, an unusual artificial pond (saucer) with a central cylindrical cascade (cup). The descending water powers a hydraulic ram pump, so called because it sounds like two fighting rams! We followed Black Brook through fields to a set of obstacles for

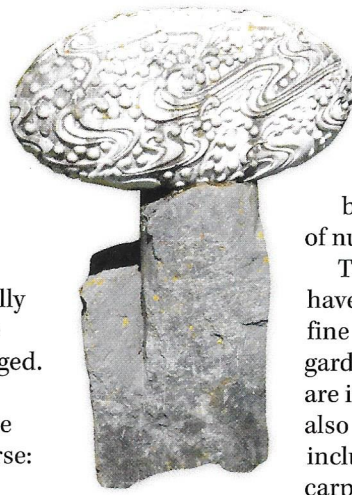
carriage driving and traced the path up the hill through beech trees, cracking hundreds of nuts underfoot.

The rooms of grand houses have little appeal to me on a fine day, but I do enjoy perusing gardens. Erddig's formal gardens are impressively restored. I also explored the outbuildings, including the atmospheric carpenter's workshop equipped with rows of meticulously arranged chisels, benches scored from years of use and air thick with wood smoke from the range. It felt as if the carpenter had just nipped out for a break.

In Wrexham we went to see one of the 'seven wonders of Wales' – the medieval St Giles' Church, with its richly-decorated tower with distinctive corner turrets, many pinnacles and carvings.

In the churchyard, we were intrigued by the tomb of Elihu Yale, whose epitaph began: 'Born in America, in Europe bred, In Africa travell'd, and in Asia wed' Wealthy Elihu retired to Wrexham and was generous with his money, including being a benefactor and namesake of Yale University.

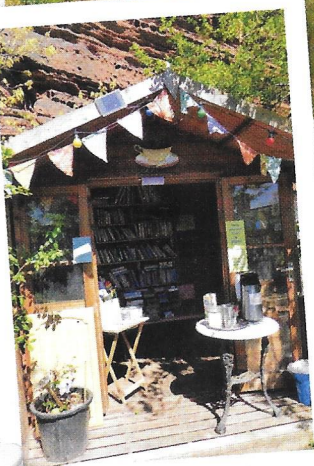
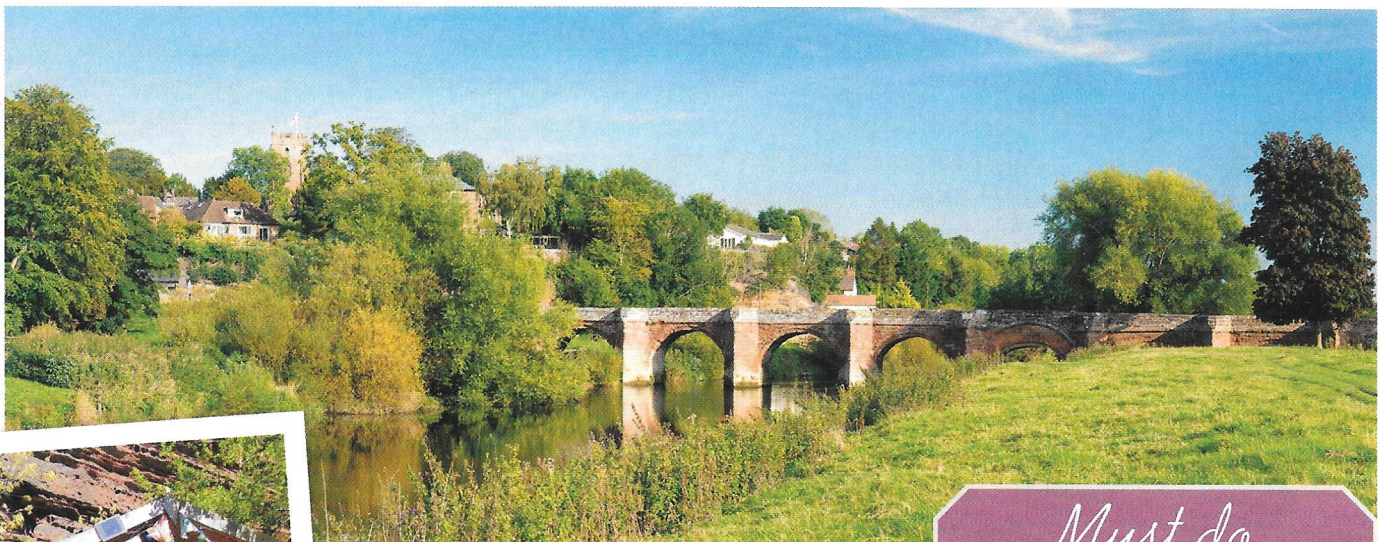
We were staying at The Plassey Holiday



ABOVE The Egg sculpture at Alyn Waters Country Park

BELOW CLOCKWISE Holt Bridge over the River Dee; black and white timber-framed Cheshire cottage; the Farndon Sandstone Cliff Tea Garden and bric-a-brac shop near Holt Bridge

© Iain Pritchard / Alamy Stock Photo



Must do
Walk from Wales over the fourteenth century Holt Bridge into England. The gently meandering River Dee is the border between the two countries

Park on the Welsh side of the River Dee. Using the handy booklet that The Plassey sells, we followed a walk to the village of Marchwiel. Strolling through woodland and along lanes we met only one other person.

We drove across the border into Cheshire next morning and to Bickerton Hill, northeast of Malpas, for more walking. I was navigating but dropped the leaflet out of reach into the cab footwell.

Without instructions, I led us along a series of successively-narrowing lanes before reaching a pocket-sized parking area near the charmingly named Duckington. This was near the right hill, but was the wrong car park for the start of the walk. I'd advise using the larger Bickerton car park.

Riding through this part of Cheshire, Celia had become lost and was pursued by two men 'trussed up in greatcoats', hiding what she was sure were pistols. Nowadays, I am rarely concerned about highwaymen and so was unsure about the intention of the man with a clipboard approaching our 'van. I feared we were going to be told that motorhomes weren't allowed here. Instead, he wanted to talk to us about the controversial tree clearance of Bickerton Hill by the National Trust.

I now attempted to follow the walk

instructions from the leaflet backwards and from a mid-point on the walk – a challenge that would have taxed many walkers.

We climbed up the steep and wooded hillside and easily found Maiden Castle Hill Fort, following the path around the edge of the remains of the fort ramparts. The top of the dramatic escarpment is attractive heathland of heather and bilberry with a few scattered birch trees and gives a panoramic view over the Welsh and English countryside. Passing the path from the larger car park we got lost, finding an unexpected tree-trunk memorial to a National Trust volunteer and then, at a craggy edge, a large stone placed in memory of Kitty Wheeldon.

Some of the land of Bickerton Hill was bought by the National Trust with money from Kitty's husband, Leslie. Leslie was a bit of a poet and Kitty's Stone is inscribed with some of his touching poems to his wife.

Back on the route, we walked down the escarpment onto muddier fields and paths to Brown Knowl with its fine methodist chapel. ▶

Essentials

HOW LONG

Two nights

WHEN Spring is good, to see the lambs in the fields;

we did in late February/early March

HOW MUCH

Fuel average 35mpg (160 miles)£24.50

Site fees£21

Entrance fees£7

Two adults, Erddig House, gardens only

TOTAL£52.50

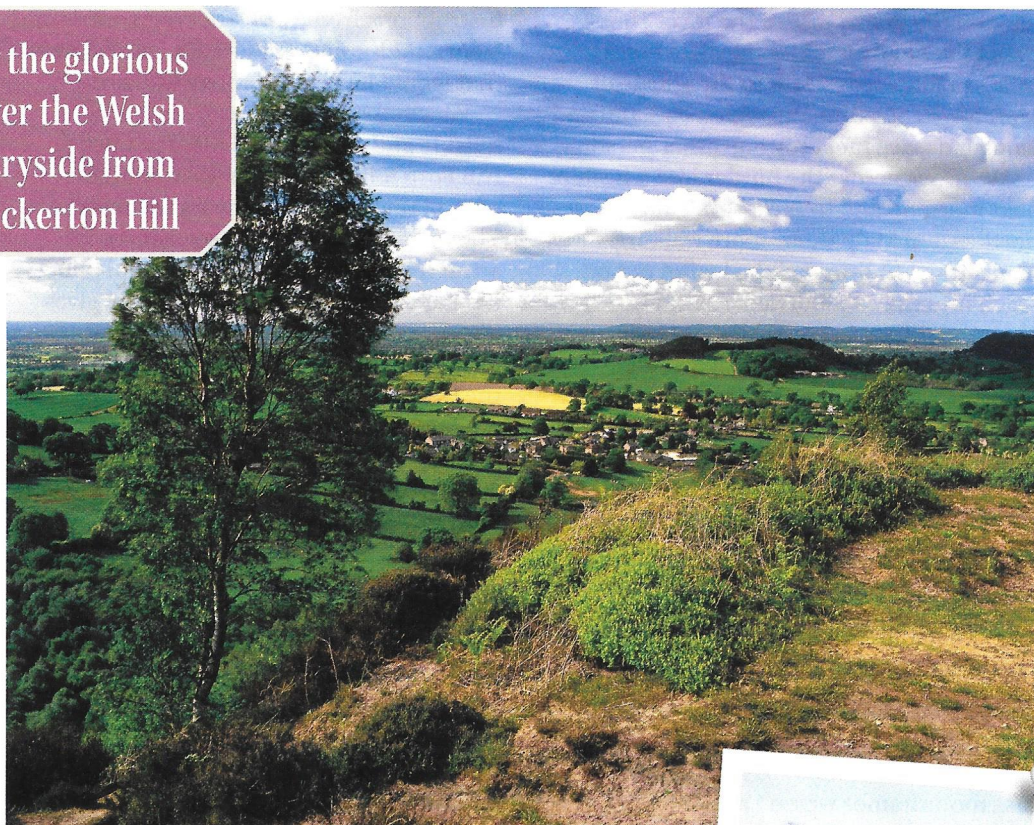


TOP A vintage National Trust van at Erddig House

LEFT St Giles' Church in Wrexham is one of the 'seven wonders of Wales'


ABOVE The sculpted wolf in the adventure play area at Erddig House


Must see Enjoy the glorious panoramic view over the Welsh and English countryside from Maiden Castle on Bickerton Hill




© Alan Novelli / Alamy Stock Photo

INFORMATION

 wrexham.gov.uk/english/tourism/index.cfm

 nationaltrust.org.uk/erddig

 nationaltrust.org.uk/alderley-edge-and-cheshire-countryside

As we followed lanes around Cuckoo Hill, I listened out for the distinctive call of the cuckoo, a certain sign of spring. Anthony was clearly thinking it was me that was cuckoo to imagine that spring was near as we dashed back to the van in a heavy shower and drove to the nearby black and white timber-framed Egerton Arms for a delightful lunch.

Who wouldn't have a hankering to stand with one foot in Wales and one in England? We headed for Holt Bridge between the twin villages of Farndon and Holt on either side of the River Dee, which marks the border.

We approached from Holt on the Welsh side. It was still showery and I wanted to get as close as possible to the bridge. Anthony spotted the 6ft 10in (2.1m) width restriction on the single-file bridge so turned left, taking us into a narrow lane that was closed within 100 yards due to roadworks. This meant another reverse of shame, as well as a tricky multi-point turn!

Fourteenth century Holt Bridge originally had 10 arches and an impressive gatehouse with a gilded statue of Jesus and Mary. With the return of sunshine, we crossed the handsome bridge and walked along the riverbank on the Farndon side and found, built into the sandstone cliffs, The Tea Garden. This pretty garden had a bric-a-brac and bookstall, flasks of tea and coffee and

an honesty box.

We came upon the Dee again at the end of a lane that used to go to a ferry crossing (now a dead end). We had driven through the pretty village of Eccleston, part of the Duke of Westminster's estate, and along the lane above the stately, walled paddocks to a small car park by the river. Here we watched canoeists hauling their boats out of the water.

We completed our haphazard tour by visiting the memorial to the woman whose footsteps we had been loosely following. A monument to Celia Fiennes was erected in 1998 in the wonderfully-named village of No Man's Heath, 300 years after she passed this way. The memorial has carvings of Celia, her horse and the highwaymen she was pursued by.

This tranquil part of Cheshire seems harmless enough now, but I thought about how different it would have been all those years ago. The daughter of a Parliamentary colonel who fought in the Civil War, Celia inherited his desire to discard the old and seize the new and had a non-conformist attitude. She was a female explorer who, on her many travels, got lost, fell off her horse and faced thieves. Our travels are far less eventful but, somehow, Celia feels like a kindred spirit. www




ABOVE MAIN View of the Cheshire Plain and the village of Brown Knoll from Bickerton Hill


ABOVE The River Dee near Eccleston and the ferry house


The campsite


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