

MIDHURST

Not long after I meet Dave Rudwick he proudly informs me that Midhurst was considered by both the Sunday Times and Country Life to be the second-best place to live in Britain. He doesn't know what was first. As he escorts me around town it transpires to be just about the only question this lifelong resident of Midhurst and proud member of the Midhurst Society is unable to answer.

It's such a pretty place with so much going for it that it's hard to imagine anywhere better, so why didn't it come first? Having no railway station won't have helped. There used to be two but the last passenger train pulled out in 1955. And, perhaps crucially, there's no Waitrose either. But was there a castle on the top of St Ann's Hill? Dave is one of those who thinks there was a motte-and-bailey sitting on top of a strategic bluff overlooking a cross-roads and the River Rother. Something of a romantic, I believe him. There are certainly ruins there today but the doubters suggest they are just the remains of a manor house.

The other major property that's played a hugely significant role in the history of Midhurst is Cowdray House. Built at the bottom of the hill in the first half of the 16th century, it was the principal employer in the area. Although frequently improved, it retained its Tudor character and was regularly visited by royalty including Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth I. Queen Elizabeth allegedly shot a deer with a bow and arrow whilst staying there, an event which was once celebrated on the blazer badge of Midhurst Grammar School pupils.

The school has gone and only the ruins remain of the Cowdray House. Fortunately, nearly all the occupants were away when the house was being refurbished in preparation for the wedding of the 8th Viscount Montague. At around midnight on 24 September, 1793, a spark from a coal basket left burning by the decorators set fire to wood-shavings and pretty soon the wonderful old house was ablaze.

Meanwhile in Switzerland, unaware of the disaster back home, the Viscount and his future brother-in-law were unwisely taking a boat over falls on the River Rhine. Their craft overturned and both were drowned. As Dave and I look across from North Street at what can best be described as a romantic ruin, he recounts a rather spooky explanation of the double tragedy. A prioress of Easbourne Priory, not unreasonably miffed when evicted following Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, put a curse on the land so that those who occupied it would perish by "fire and water".

Walking back up the hill into town, you could easily be fooled into thinking that Midhurst is predominantly Georgian but it isn't, it's undoubtedly Tudor in character. Old buildings are everywhere but quite a few of them have taken pains to conceal their origins. The frontages may have been altered but the timber studding remains at the sides and rear. The uneven roof line is another clue that what lies beneath dates back further than you might think.

We pass three blue plaques all connected with H G Wells. His mother was anxious for him to learn a trade and so in 1881 he worked at a chemist's in what is now Church Hill. He struggled with the Latin used in prescriptions and so the headmaster of Midhurst Grammar School gave him Latin lessons in the evening.

Not unreasonably finding the workload intolerable, he moved on for a couple of years to the Southsea Drapery Emporium where his experiences subsequently formed the basis of 'The History of Mr Polly'. Thoroughly bored at the drapery, he returned to work as an assistant teacher at Midhurst Grammar School and lodged next door to the Angel Hotel in North Street before winning a scholarship to what is now Imperial College, London.

Midhurst appears in quite a few of his books and one of his finest novels 'Tono-Bungay' (the name of a patent medicine he probably came across when working in the chemist's), features a thinly-disguised 'Wimblehurst'.

Another significant figure who is rightly revered in Midhurst is the great reformer, statesman and idealist, Richard Cobden. Born on his grandfather's farm in nearby Dunford, he is perhaps most famous for getting the unjust Corn Laws repealed, which reduced the price of bread. A passionate free trader and believer in international cooperation and peace, one wonders what he would have made of Brexit. Dunsford House, his substantial family home, was given to the Cobden Memorial Association by one of his three very talented daughters. It was used for educational purposes before being transferred to the YMCA in 1952. Some local people would like to see the building provide a more fitting tribute to the man; a Cobden Museum perhaps.

We turn off North Street into Knockhundred Row and look in on an excellent little museum that already exists. Not only is it stuffed with fascinating exhibits but it's also free! In particular look out for the Midhurst White exhibit. No, it's not a butterfly but a calcium silicate brick which was manufactured here in the 20th century and has been used in the construction of such iconic buildings as Battersea Power Station and Sydney Opera House.

A little further along Knockhundred Row there's a rectangular lump of stone cemented into a wall and protected by a metal grill. Dave explains that skilled craftsmen from the countryside were attracted into towns by the offer of a burgage, a narrow plot of land onto which they could build a house. In one of the walls a large burgage stone would be set which carried with it the right to vote. A parliamentary seat could effectively be controlled by a wealthy patron who owned at least half of the burgage tenements and obliged his tenants to vote for him. This corrupt practice was ended by the Reform Act of 1832.

Right behind Knockhundred Row is a quarter of an acre of land that was given to the town very many years ago by a grateful traveller who was lost in fog high up on the Downs. The welcome sound of the church bell eventually guided him to safety. He was literally saved by

the bell! The income from the land he donated was earmarked to pay the bell-ringer in perpetuity..

The bell in question hangs atop the parish church of St. Mary Magdalene and St. Denis. A bench outside it was donated by grateful parishioners in memory of the hugely popular Reverend Frank Tatchel, who was the vicar from 1906 to 1935. A very generous and benevolent man, he would swap poor parishioners old boots for new ones as well as rent out cheap accommodation for a mere penny a week.

Apart from the church, the only other of the 90+ listed buildings in Midhurst to achieve Grade 2* status is the famous Spread Eagle Hotel. Believed to be the longest continuously functioning hostelry in the country, the former coaching inn dates back to the 15th century. Anya Seton, an enormously successful American author of historical romances (America's answer to Barbara Cartland?), stayed here while researching her popular novel 'Green Darkness', which was set in Tudor England and in which Cowdray House, St Ann's Hill and the Spread Eagle feature prominently.

Dave points to markings on a solid-looking hotel outbuilding. There are Latin numerals scratched into the timbers. He explains that, to make it easier to transport them through the mud, the heavy lengths were sawn at source and then assembled on site so that, for example, 'XXI' abuts 'XXI'.

In the middle of the South Downs National Park, Midhurst is less than 20 miles from Chichester, not all that far from the seaside, adjacent to the vast Cowdray Estate (golf and polo), close to Goodwood (motorsport and horseracing) and so what, I wonder as I stroll back to the car, would lift it to number one? Waitrose?

Clive Agran