

'England on Horseback' is a beautifully illustrated book, featuring 12 rides through the English countryside. It was written by Zara Colchester and Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice, both keen horsewomen who met when Zara was trying to buy one of Charlotte's horses. The two became firm friends, and started to take visitors on rides around the magnificent stately manors and beautiful beech woods of the Cotswolds. They say...

The book is about discovering the romance of the English countryside through the relationship between man, his environment and his horse. It is also about the astonishing beauty and diversity of the countryside, the network of bridleways and byways that are a unique heritage of this country.

Over the last two years, we have ridden all over England, from the south coast of Dorset to the Yorkshire Moors. Our journey has taken us along ancient drovers routes, green lanes and bridleways, whose origins date back a thousand years. We have ridden on tracks that are carefully catalogued in 'The Domesday Book'. Our rides have taken us past Thomas Hardy's cottage and great stately houses, through Cotswolds villages and along beaches. We have taken

Authors Zara Colchester and Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice take you on a journey through the English countryside...

the bridlepaths Anne Boleyn followed on her way to the Tower, crossed beech woods where Henry V hunted and stopped at cottages where Elizabeth I spent the night.

Awareness

The countryside of landscape painter Samuel Palmer and poet John Keats is as alive today as it was 200 years ago. Farmers work the land; cottagers tend their gardens. Life continues as it always has. But the English countryside is not a museum. It has changed in the 21st century and is under threat. Across the country, people have been and are campaigning vigorously to recognise and maintain our

incomparable network of rights of way.

Farmers are now being encouraged to become more environmentally aware, and the needs of the soil, promotion of natural habitats, public access and preservation of wild life are all now considered when grants are allocated. These policies are beginning to bring results: on our rides, we now see newly planted glades, pollen and nectar strips, wildlife verges, coppicing and fresh-laid hedges.

Experiencing these positive changes not only serves to rekindle our deep connection with the landscape, but reinforces the relationship between man and horse which is as old as the hills and as romantic as the countryside

itself. The partnership with the horse is not about domination or power, but about trust. The elation of charging through fresh air, with the sensation of being at one with an animal who will never be totally subordinate to your will, justifies all one's passion.

Acre upon acre...

There are more than a million acres of common land in England and Wales.

No other country in the world has this extraordinary feature. The land has remained largely undisturbed since medieval times, when people relied on the commons for their survival. These acres and the bridleways and footpaths are a wonderful expression of a truly liberal society, putting the common rights of way above the interests of wealthy landowners or corporations.

The landscape of England gives

one a deep message of hope. Each day, we may be reminded of the degradations of the human race on our environment and images of collapsing burning trees and polluted rivers fill our screens and our hearts with despair. The woods and fields and little streams through which we ride are here to remind the world not only how it is, but how it might always be.



The driveway to Foxcote House

England on horseback

The heart of England

Rural Warwickshire offers a combination of woodland pasture, rolling green fields and prosperous market towns. Quintessentially English, much of the area's wealth was built on wool, and this is reflected in the country houses and beautiful villages that are so characteristic and unique to our countryside.



We had decided to do this ride in early February, but unfortunately the weather had turned. Snow was predicted for the two days we had chosen, but even though it was icy cold, we were determined to go ahead.

Our first night was spent in a magnificent Jacobean house, Admington Hall, owned by Mark and Antonia Davis and whose bedrooms have real fires and huge four-poster beds. After dinner, we

walked to the stone stable block to check on the horses. A dozen or so hunters stood contentedly munching on haynets. A profound sense of peace and calm emanated from the horses as we stood savouring the moment. Later, snuggling happily under the thick layer of blankets between the crisp linen sheets, I could not help but think that Jilly Cooper would be impressed by this set-up.

Day 1 Admington Hall to Norton Hall (14 miles)

After breakfast, we headed north east across the fields of the Admington estate. Above our heads, hawks hovered high in the sky, hungrily searching for their prey. The morning ride took us towards Foxcote, an imposing Georgian house set halfway up a three-mile drive. Amazingly, the bridleway took us right past the front

of the house. Surrounded by perfectly manicured green pasture, it gives one a feeling of tranquillity and peace that makes it quite exceptional. All the shutters, though, were closed and with no one around, there was stillness to the place that felt just a little sad. Perhaps such a beautiful place should not be left empty.

Passing by a yew hedge that wrapped itself around the house, we rode through a gate and down the drive until we emerged out of the park and back into the real world. Continuing along a series of bridleways, we soon reached the beautiful market town of Chipping Campden, one of the treasures of Gloucestershire. Its fine stone buildings, its uncommonly pretty

streets and its terraced houses are a legacy to the prosperity of the medieval sheep trade. The fact that it has not been ruined is also a testament to its successful preservation. Today it is a popular Cotswold tourist destination. People flock from all over the world to stay in the old inns and hotels. But despite the visitors, Chipping Campden retains much of its old-world charm.

Lunch was at The Lygon Arms, one of the most authentic pubs in the centre of the town. It has traditionally hosted the opening hunt meet, and the landlord is especially friendly and welcoming to riders. He has even gone so far as to put rails up at the back of the pub, so that horses can be tied safely.

Horse friendly

After lunch, we rode out through the archway of the hotel front and into the high street, riding on past the famous Woolstaplers' Hall which dates from 1340. Under its arches, merchants from as far away as Florence bargained for the famous Cotswold wool.

When on horseback, you get a quite different perspective of a town than from a car or on foot. Peering through windows and over walls, everything looks quite new although this is, of course, exactly the way our forbears would have seen the town.

A short distance from Chipping Campden, we turned off to Dover's Hill. Owned by The National Trust, it has magnificent views northwards and

Rural Warwickshire offers a combination of woodland pasture and rolling green fields



Jacobean treasure, Admington Hall



Chipping Campden is a popular tourist destination



The bridleway goes past the front of Foxcote House



Up the hill to early-Victorian Norton Hall



A warm welcome awaits at The Howard Arms, Illmington



Heading home as the sun begins to set on a memorable day in the saddle

Romantic

We rode down off Dover's Hill and into the parklands of Burnt Norton, another historic Cotswold house from the Victorian period, before crossing the railway line and entering the beautiful park of Norton Hall, where we were to be spending our second night. Home to the Pollen family, Norton Hall is an impressive early-Victorian house. Twenty-five years ago, Marcus Pollen's father began planting rare and exotic trees all over the park – the result today is an amazing arboretum.

Norton Hall is romantic. Everything is faded and slightly falling apart. Toys are scattered along the landings and piles of clothes heaped up on the kitchen table. But the atmosphere is fun and relaxed, and dinner that night was a delicious oxtail soup cooked by Marcus and served in the kitchen.

Day 2

*Norton Hall to Admington
(13 miles)*

The bright sunshine streamed in through the enormous sash windows of the bedroom, waking us up. Outside was a winter wonderland with the countryside shrouded in a delicate white frost. After breakfast, we headed off past the stables down the back drive and the long track towards Mickleton village. We crossed over the busy village street and passing the church, headed into a deep-sided

valley until Kiftsgate House came into view. Kiftsgate is home to the famous rose, a climbing vigorous white variety planted in 1938, that is supposed to be the largest in Britain, some 90ft across and 50ft high.

Gardener's delight

From the valley, we emerged through some stone pillars onto a small lane and then straight across the road to Hidcote. Amazingly, two great gardens are within a stone's throw of one another. Unfortunately, however, it was winter and both were closed for the season. Hidcote, though, is considered to be one of the most important gardens in the country.

Designed by Major Lawrence Johnston in the early part of the century, it was the first garden to be taken on by The National Trust. A self-taught gardener, Johnston was clearly a genius and his creation is an inspiration for garden designers all over the world. Having transformed all the fields around his house, by 1920 Johnston had 12 full-time gardeners working for him. After years of careful selection, Johnston eventually came up with the narrow-leaved lavender, *Lavandula angustifolia*, or Hidcote as it came to be known.

Gourmet grub

The next part of our journey took us on down some lanes and a coppice wood until eventually we emerged on Stoke Hill, once again overlooking Foxcote House. The bridleway took us down the hill towards the house and at the end of the long driveway, we turned left, heading down the small lane towards The Howard Arms at Illmington for lunch.

This is an exceptional gourmet pub that caters to riders by allowing them to tie up their horses to some railings at the back. The food is delicious, and the atmosphere friendly and warm. There is always a good fire, which was especially welcome on this freezing February day.

After lunch, we left the village and turned right up Pig Lane. At the top, the road forked and we cantered over the fields and back to Admington. Riding back into the cobbled stable block, we were met by Antonia's groom, Elias. Leaving the horses with him, we went into the house where there was a pot of China tea and a plate of brown toast with Gentleman's Relish waiting for us on a silver platter! How English, we thought, and what a fitting end to our ride through the Heart of England.

Want to know more?

'England on Horseback' was written by Zara Colchester and Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice, with photography by Charlie Sainsbury-Plaice. It is published by Clearview Books, price £25.

If you would like to know more about the private homes Zara and Charlotte stayed in – or ride with them on this or any other ride featured in their book – contact them at Stately Rides on ☎ 07590 456714 or visit www.statelyrides.co.uk

