



— A DOCUMENTARY GUIDE —

# LEAMINGTON SPA

*Timelessly English*



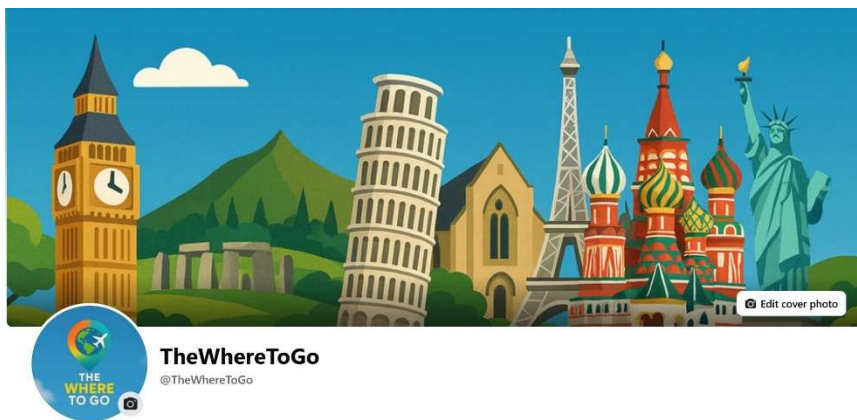
## The inside cover for your information.....



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# Leamington Spa – Timelessly English

## Introduction



Royal Leamington Spa is one of England's finest Regency towns, yet it remains surprisingly overlooked and undervalued. This is the town where I was brought up as a child and where I lived until I moved for my first job. My sisters and their families still live there, so I have plenty of reasons to return.... not just the opportunity of putting this guide together.

Historically, what began as the small village of Leamington Priors was transformed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries after the discovery and promotion of its mineral-rich saline springs. Visitors flocked to the town seeking the supposed health benefits of the waters, and Leamington rapidly developed into a fashionable spa resort frequented by aristocrats, military officers and wealthy travellers.

The prosperity generated an enduring legacy including elegant Regency terraces, grand civic buildings, beautiful parks and wide boulevards still define the town today, creating an architectural character that rivals many of Britain's better-known spa towns. Beyond its elegant appearance, Leamington possesses a fascinating history that is often overlooked.

Queen Victoria had previously visited the town as a young princess in 1830 when she stayed at the Regent Hotel. The visit left a favourable impression, and local leaders later successfully petitioned the new Queen to allow the town to adopt the royal title. Granting the 'Royal' prefix recognised the town's growing prestige and popularity as a spa resort, aided by Queen Victoria's earlier visit.

The town played a significant role in the development of Victorian leisure and public health, while nearby sites reveal connections to medieval Warwick, the Civil War and the industrial growth of the Midlands. Visitors are often surprised to discover that some of the town's most attractive gardens, churches and public spaces were created specifically to entertain spa guests more than two centuries ago.

Today, Royal Leamington Spa combines historic charm with a vibrant modern atmosphere. Its rich heritage, impressive architecture and unexpected stories make it one of Warwickshire's most rewarding places to explore.

***My thanks to Lesley for her encouragement and for showing me around Royal Leamington Spa.***

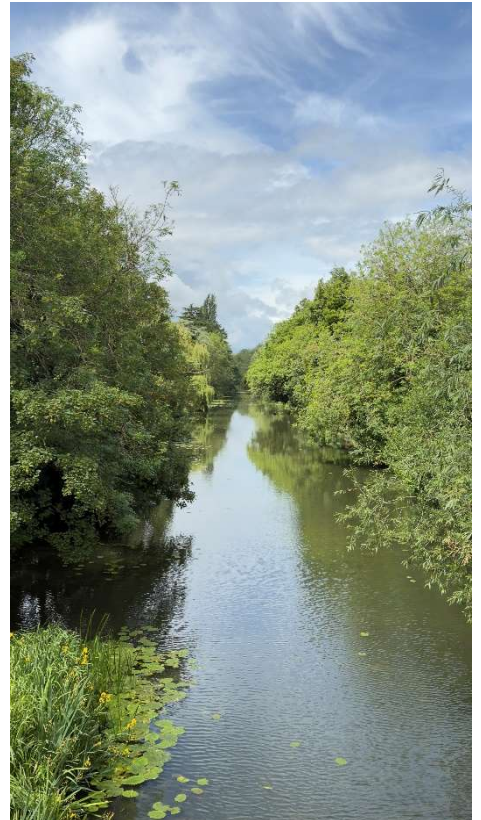
## Victoria Park

Victoria Park is one of Royal Leamington Spa's largest and most important public open spaces. Opened in 1899 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the park occupies more than 40 acres beside the River Leam and provides a valuable green space close to the town centre. Since its creation, it has served as a venue for recreation, sport and community events, becoming an integral part of local life.



The park is particularly renowned for its sporting facilities. It hosts football pitches, tennis courts, bowling greens and a skate park, while also gaining international recognition as a centre for croquet. Major national and international competitions are regularly held here including the lawn bowls events for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

Visitors can also enjoy riverside walks, mature trees, ornamental planting and open lawns. Throughout the year, Victoria Park hosts festivals, fairs and community celebrations that attract thousands of visitors. Combining sport, leisure and natural beauty, it remains one of Royal Leamington Spa's most treasured public spaces and a lasting reminder of the town's Victorian civic ambition.



### **St Peter's Roman Catholic Church**

St Peter's Roman Catholic Church stands on Dormer Place opposite the Pump Room Gardens and is one of Leamington's finest nineteenth-century churches. Designed by the distinguished architect Henry Clutton and completed in 1864, the church was built to serve the growing Roman Catholic population of the rapidly expanding spa town.

Constructed in the Gothic Revival style, St Peter's is notable for its elegant stonework, soaring interior and impressive stained-glass windows. The church's design reflects the renewed confidence of the Roman Catholic Church in Victorian Britain following Catholic Emancipation. St Peter's provides an important reminder of the town's cultural and architectural development during the nineteenth century.



## The Bandstand

The Bandstand is a Grade II listed Building in the Pump Room Gardens which stands between St Peter's Roman Catholic Church and the Royal Pump Rooms. Historical documents suggest that music was being performed in the gardens from at least the 1820s and a hexagonal bandstand appears on an 1851 map. The present cast-iron structure dates back to 1896 and was manufactured by Walter MacFarlane & Co. of Glasgow, a company renowned throughout Britain for its decorative ironwork.

The bandstand was removed for refurbishment in 2018 and returned the following year with a new colour scheme as part of a £1.4 million renovation of the gardens. Bandstands were a popular feature of Victorian parks and gardens, providing venues for military bands, orchestras and public performances. They reflected the belief that music, fresh air and attractive surroundings contributed to public health and wellbeing. Today, the Bandstand continues to host community events and seasonal celebrations.



## Leamington Spa Town Hall

Leamington Spa Town Hall is a Grade II listed building which stands prominently on The Parade and is one of the town's most important civic buildings. Completed in 1884 during the height of Leamington's prosperity, the building reflects the confidence and ambition of a town that had grown rapidly through the success of its spa industry. It was built to accommodate local government functions and civic administration as the population continued to expand throughout the Victorian period.

Designed in an impressive Renaissance Revival style, the Town Hall features a grand façade, decorative stonework and an imposing presence that reinforces its importance within the town centre. Today, the Town Hall remains a significant civic and community venue, standing at the heart of the town's commercial district. More than a century after its construction, it continues to symbolise local government, public service and the Victorian civic pride that helped shape modern Leamington.



The statue of Queen Victoria was erected shortly after her death in 1901. It was paid for by public subscription from the people of Leamington. The sculptor was the distinguished British artist Albert Toft and the project cost £1,500, a substantial sum at the time. On the night of 14 November 1940, during the same Luftwaffe raid that devastated nearby Coventry, a German bomb exploded close to the Town Hall. The blast was powerful enough to shift Queen Victoria's marble statue on its massive granite pedestal. According to the plaque attached to the monument:



## Royal Pump Rooms & Art Gallery



The Royal Pump Rooms is the building most closely associated with the origins of Royal Leamington Spa. Opened in 1814, it was created to enable visitors to drink and bathe in the mineral-rich waters that made the town famous. As the popularity of spa treatments grew, Leamington developed from a small village into one of Britain's leading health resorts.

During the nineteenth century, wealthy visitors travelled from across the country to experience the saline springs and participate in the fashionable social life that surrounded them. The Pump Rooms became a centre for both health and entertainment, attracting aristocrats, politicians and prominent figures of the day who came to Leamington to 'take the waters.'

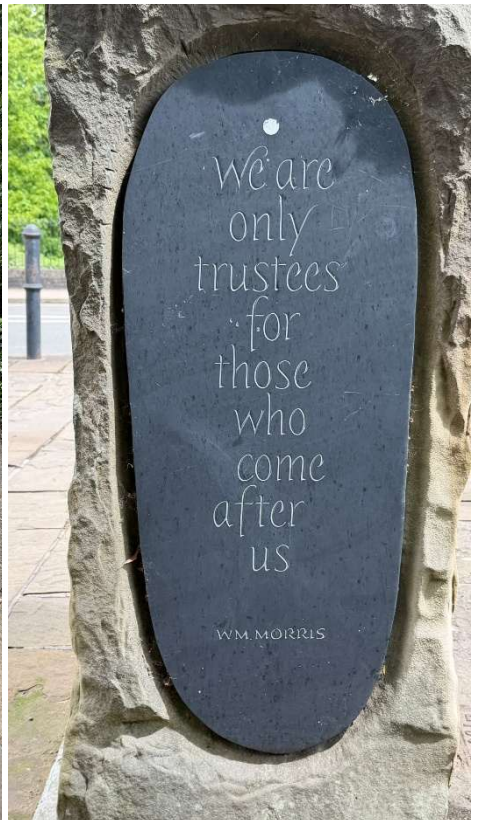
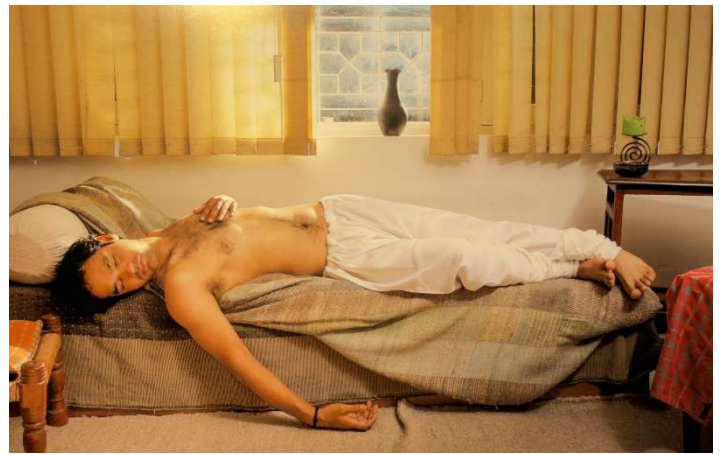
When the Pump Rooms opened, the centrepiece was the magnificent Pump Room (today's Assembly Room), where visitors drank the mineral water. Around it were twenty individual treatment baths offering hot, cold, tepid, vapour, plunging and shower baths. Men and women entered through separate wings and used different facilities.

In the 1860s the complex was modernised with a Turkish Bath and swimming pool. Further improvements followed in the 1880s when a much larger men's pool was built, designed by Borough Engineer William de Normanville. The women's pool remained in the older section of the building. During winter, the larger pool was boarded over and used as a hall for exhibitions, concerts and dances.

The building functioned as a working health facility (including hydrotherapy and physiotherapy treatments) from 1815 until 1990, making it effectively the last working spa facility in Britain still using its original premises. A major £5.5 million restoration took place between 1997 and 1999. Parts of the structure, floor levels and architectural layout still reveal where pools, treatment rooms and spa facilities once stood.

The present-day library and art gallery are housed in the old Pump Rooms occupying spaces that were once part of the spa and bathing complexes. The area now occupied by the library was largely the location of the larger men's swimming pool while the art gallery occupies the former spa and treatment facilities as well as part of the smaller pool which had been converted into a hydrotherapy pool for NHS patients.





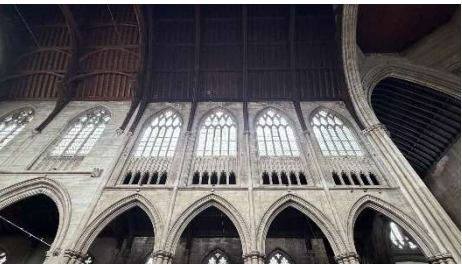
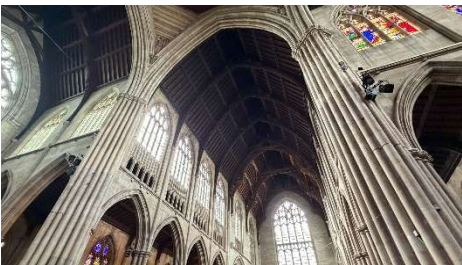


## All Saints Church

All Saints Church, at the lower end of the town, has dominated the town skyline since the Victorian era. Built as Leamington expanded during the nineteenth century, the church was constructed between 1843 and 1865 to serve the rapidly growing population attracted by the town's fashionable spa reputation. The spring traditionally regarded as the source of Leamington's spa waters lay just outside the entrance to the church.

Designed in the Gothic Revival style, the church is renowned for its magnificent spire, which rises to approximately 200 feet (60 metres) and can be seen from across the town. The exterior displays fine stonework and elegant proportions, while the interior features soaring arches, intricate carvings, colourful stained-glass windows and an impressive organ.

As the civic church of Royal Leamington Spa, All Saints remains an active place of worship and an important centre for music and cultural activities....the café inside is well worth a visit. The church reflects the prosperity, confidence and ambition of Victorian Leamington and is widely regarded as one of Warwickshire's finest examples of nineteenth-century ecclesiastical architecture.



## Jephson Gardens & Mill Bridge



Jephson Gardens is a grade II listed garden which is widely regarded as the jewel of Royal Leamington Spa's park system. Opened in 1834 as Newbold Gardens and later renamed after Dr Henry Jephson, the physician who helped popularise the town's spa waters, the gardens were created to provide an elegant setting for visitors seeking health and relaxation.

Today, the gardens feature formal flower displays, ornamental ponds, mature trees, sculptures, cafés and The Glasshouse containing tropical and temperate plants from around the world. Following a major restoration project completed in 2004, many of the gardens' Victorian features were carefully restored, returning much of their original character and splendour.

Adjacent to the gardens, Mill Bridge spans the River Leam and provides one of the most picturesque viewpoints in the town. This charming suspension footbridge was erected in 1903 offering views of the river, nearby weir, landscaped gardens and abundant wildlife. Together, Jephson Gardens and Mill Bridge showcase the Victorian commitment to public parks, beauty and wellbeing.





## Regency Leamington



The Parade and Regent Street form the commercial and architectural heart of Royal Leamington Spa. Developed during the early nineteenth century as the town expanded around its famous mineral springs, these elegant streets reflect the careful planning and prosperity that transformed Leamington from a small village into a fashionable spa resort.

The Parade was designed as a grand boulevard lined with shops, hotels, assembly rooms and public buildings catering to wealthy visitors. Its broad layout and impressive terraces remain among the finest examples of Regency town planning in the Midlands. Nearby Regent Street became another important destination for shopping, dining and social activity.

Today, both streets remain vibrant centres of town life, combining independent retailers with national businesses, cafés and restaurants. A little further out you will find Lansdown Crescent and Lansdown Circus retaining their original architectural features, including stucco façades, decorative balconies and classical detailing offering a sense of the elegance that attracted visitors during Leamington's golden age.



## Leamington College

Leamington College was one of the most significant educational institutions established during the Victorian growth of Leamington Spa. The building opened in 1848 as the Warwickshire Proprietary College, a public school for the sons of the professional and landed classes. In 1903 the building was purchased by the Society of the Sacred Heart and became a convent school and training establishment for girls and young women.



During the First World War, the nuns left and Dover College, relocating to Leamington during the war years, occupied the premises before returning to Kent. Warwickshire County Council purchased the site in 1920, and it reopened as Leamington College for Boys in 1922. The institution reflected the confidence and prosperity of Victorian Leamington, providing a broad academic education alongside moral and physical development.

One of the school's most distinguished former pupils was Sir Frank Whittle (1907–1996), the pioneering engineer who invented the jet engine and attended the college between 1918 and 1923.....which was a long time before I joined in 1966.....as a pupil I might add. Today, a commemorative plaque marks his association and the restaurant Whittle's, is named in his honour.....I didn't get a restaurant named after me.

The building became the sixth-form centre for North Leamington School in 1977 and, after closing in 2009, was redeveloped through an ambitious £20 million project to create a luxury retirement village. The centrepiece of the development is the historic Binswood Hall which is a Grade II listed Victorian Gothic building that has been meticulously restored and repurposed as a restaurant, bar/bistro and library while the chapel is repurposed as a fitness studio.





## Kenilworth Castle

A little further afield is Kenilworth Castle which is one of England's most spectacular historic sites and boasts a history spanning more than nine centuries. Founded around 1120 by Geoffrey de Clinton, chamberlain to King Henry I, the castle evolved from a Norman fortress into one of the country's grandest royal residences. The castle played a significant role in English history.

During the Second Barons' War in 1266, it endured the longest siege in English history, lasting around six months. Later, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, transformed Kenilworth into a magnificent palace in an attempt to impress Queen Elizabeth I, who accepted an invitation to visit in 1575 and stayed for 19 days during which many historians believe Dudley hoped to persuade Elizabeth to marry him.

Today, visitors can explore the Elizabethan gardens, Norman keep, medieval gatehouses, and extensive ruins that reveal centuries of architectural development. The site offers a fascinating insight into Tudor splendour, medieval warfare and royal politics. Standing among its dramatic remains, it is easy to understand why Kenilworth Castle as one of England's finest castle ruins.





### **Guy's Cliffe House**

Just a short distance from Leamington Spa, nestled on the banks of the River Avon, lie the haunting ruins of Guy's Cliffe House. The area is associated with Guy of Warwick, the legendary folk hero who, according to tradition, travelled the world fighting giants, dragons, wild beasts, and enemy warriors but became troubled by the violence of his earlier life.

He went on a holy pilgrimage and eventually returned to Warwick as a hermit, living in a cave overlooking the River Avon. He died there and was said to have been buried at St Mary's Church in Warwick, although historians regard this as legend rather than established fact. Nonetheless, Guy was regarded as a legendary figure and his story became enormously popular during the Middle Ages helping to put Warwick on the map.

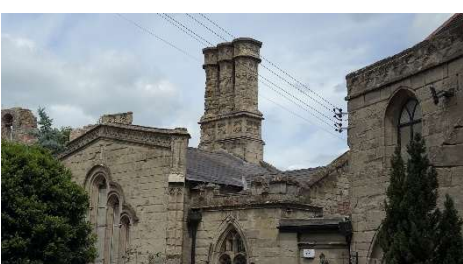
This legend directly led to the establishment of a religious endowment, and, in 1423, the Chapel of St. Mary Magdalene was founded on the site, marking the beginning of any recorded construction. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII, the site passed into private hands, and by the Tudor period, a fine country house had been built, though it would later be replaced.

The core of the ruined house we see today dates from 1751, when Samuel Greatheed started construction on a new Georgian mansion. Samuel Greatheed was a wealthy merchant, the Member of Parliament for Coventry, and a West India slave-owner. Following his death, his son inherited the estate and embarked on an ambitious program of improvement that would transform the property into a picturesque masterpiece.

The estate served as a hospital during World War I and a school for evacuated children during World War II, but its fate was sealed in 1947 when the estate was broken up and sold. The new owner's plans to convert the house into a hotel came to nothing, and in 1952 the mill became a pub while the house was stripped of its roof and fittings, leaving it exposed to the elements.

In 1955, the chapel was leased to the Freemasons, a connection that continues today, but by 1966 the main house's roof had collapsed entirely. The final blow came in 1992, when a fire scene during the filming of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* got out of control and caused catastrophic damage to the already crumbling structure.

Today, the main house remains a haunting ruin, while the chapel endures and the surrounding estate features (including the Saxon Mill, the stables, and the walled garden) have found new lives, preserving echoes of this once-magnificent estate. Tales of ghostly sightings and unexplained events have circulated for generations, earning it a reputation as one of Warwickshire's most intriguing historic sites.





## The Saxon Mill



The Saxon Mill is a beautifully restored former watermill that sits on the River Avon as part of the Guy's Cliffe estate, and it has a history stretching back nearly a thousand years. Originally known as Gibbeclive Mill in the 12th century, it was the property of St Mary's Abbey in Kenilworth and was operated by monks until the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in the 16th century.

For centuries, the mill was part of the greater Guy's Cliffe estate, serving as its working mill and providing essential services to the local community and the Guy's Cliffe estate, until it finally ceased working in 1938. When the Guy's Cliffe estate was broken up and sold after the Second World War, the mill was separated from the house.

In 1952 it was converted into a restaurant and public house and adopted the name "The Saxon Mill." Meanwhile the mansion gradually fell into ruin. The true transformation of the Saxon Mill came in 1952, when the stone buildings were converted into a restaurant and bar, a purpose which they still serve today. The Grade II listed building status, granted in 1951, helps preserve its historic character.



## Lord Leicester Hospital

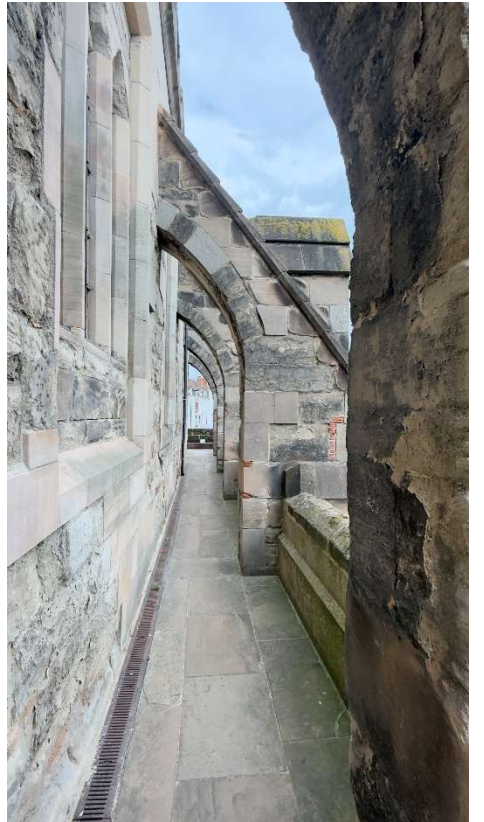


The Lord Leicester Hospital in Warwick is not a medical facility, but a preserved medieval almshouse founded in 1571 by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Despite the name, it has served for over 450 years as a charitable home for aged and injured ex-servicemen and their wives, a role it continues today. The site's history is even older.

The site's origins date back to 1126 with the construction of the Chapel of St. James the Great over Warwick's West Gate. In the late 14th century, the powerful Guild of St. George was given the chapel, and it later merged with other guilds to form the United Guilds of Warwick. To accommodate their operations, the Guilds built the surrounding buildings, including the Great Hall and the Guildhall as well as the peaceful Master's Garden, and the restored

The hospital is still home to a community of ex-servicemen known as the Brethren, who act as guides for visitors. The collection of half-timbered buildings, rich with heraldic symbols like the Bear and Ragged Staff of the Earls of Warwick, makes the Lord Leicester Hospital a living monument to Elizabethan charity and medieval craftsmanship, not a ruin to be observed, but a community that still thrives.



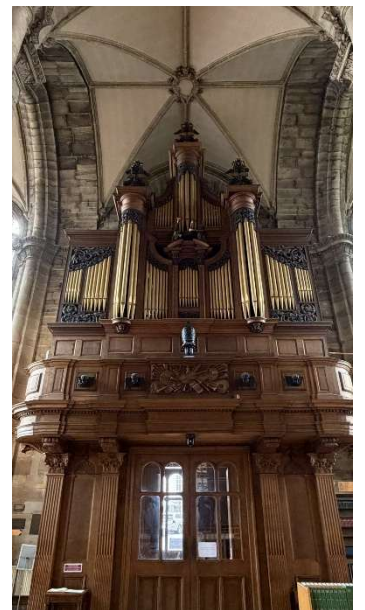




## St Mary's Church

St Mary's Church has stood at the heart of Warwick for over a thousand years and is widely regarded as one of England's finest parish churches. Although a church existed in the same place during the Saxon period, much of the present building dates from reconstruction following the Great Fire of Warwick in 1694, which destroyed large parts of the medieval town.

The church is particularly famous for its impressive tower, which survived the fire and rises approximately 130 feet (40 metres) above the town. You can climb the tower for spectacular views across Warwick, Warwick Castle and the surrounding countryside. Inside, the church contains magnificent stained glass, fine stonework and the celebrated Beauchamp Chapel.





## Chesterton Windmill

Chesterton Windmill stands atop a hill just off the Roman Fosse Way near Leamington Spa. Built around 1632-1633, this Grade I listed structure is thought to have been commissioned by Sir Edward Peyto, the Lord of Chesterton Manor, who was a noted mathematician and astrologer. Some architectural historians have speculated that the mill may have originally been designed as an observatory although estate accounts confirm it has always functioned as a corn mill.

The mill stands three storeys high, with the working floor located fifteen feet above ground level, accessible only by a staircase within the central space once enclosed by a wooden structure. The mill continued working until approximately 1910, when the winding gear failed and the miller was unable to turn the sails to face the wind. After decades of neglect and a partial collapse of one sail in the 1950s, Warwickshire County Council undertook a major restoration between 1966 and 1971.

Today, the windmill remains under the council's guardianship and is occasionally opened to the public, standing as an enduring and beloved symbol of the Warwickshire countryside.



## Reflection

Royal Leamington Spa has always occupied a special place in my heart. It is not simply another destination to visit and write about; it is the town where I grew up, where many of my earliest memories were formed, and where members of my family still live today. Returning to Leamington is therefore both a journey of discovery and a journey back in time.

What strikes me most on each visit is how remarkably well the town has preserved its Regency elegance. The broad avenues, graceful terraces and beautifully maintained parks remain much as they were when Leamington first flourished as one of Britain's leading spa resorts. Walking through Jephson Gardens, along The Parade or beside the River Leam, it is easy to understand why visitors were drawn here.

Yet beyond the attractive appearance lies a town rich in stories. During the preparation of this guide, I was reminded of how much history surrounds Leamington. From the Royal Pump Rooms that gave birth to the town's prosperity, to the soaring spire of All Saints Church, from nearby Kenilworth Castle to the haunting ruins of Guy's Cliffe House, there is far more to discover than many visitors realise.

Perhaps the most personal stop was Leamington College. Standing once again outside a building where I spent part of my own education brought back many memories. Knowing that Sir Frank Whittle once walked the same corridors adds another fascinating layer to its story.....but he got a restaurant named after him and I didn't.

Leamington may not possess the fame of Bath or Cheltenham but therein lies much of its charm. It remains a place of understated elegance, where Regency architecture, carefully landscaped gardens and a rich heritage combine to create a distinctive sense of place. Throughout this visit I was reminded that Leamington's greatest strength is not any single landmark, but the atmosphere created by the whole.

From the grandeur of the Pump Rooms and the tranquility of Jephson Gardens to the stories of inventors, aristocrats, soldiers and visitors, the town offers a remarkable blend of beauty and history. In an age when so many places have lost their individual character, Royal Leamington Spa has retained its own unique identity.....timelessly English.



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