

TRAVEL: Winchester: In the footsteps of Alfred the Great

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Roger Wheeler visits the county town of Hampshire and former capital of the ancient Kingdom of Wessex.



MOST of us learnt about King Alfred at school and the mythical story of him burning the cakes, almost certainly he didn't burn any cakes, but it takes us to the fascinating history of Alfred and his capital, Winchester.

We had never visited this part of the country and so on an impulse we decided to take a look and were very pleasantly surprised.



Winchester Hotel and Spa

Once you have navigated the usual impenetrable one way system that most of our old towns now have had inflicted on them, we found the hotel. We stayed at the Winchester Hotel and Spa (they all have a spa these days), a very nice modern hotel about ten minutes walk from the centre. For £135 we got the best room in the hotel, all mirrors, sofa, huge bed, monsoon shower, an excellent dinner and a reasonable breakfast, bargain. This is very much a business and conference hotel but none the worse for that.

The city itself is quite small, a population of just over 40,000 with 7,000 students at the university and 700 at Winchester College, the oldest public school in the country, the city has quite a young feel. There has been people living in this area for thousands of years and the Anglo Saxons made it quite a centre. The architecture today is a fascinating mix of Roman, medieval and Tudor buildings many of which the Victorians' vandalised or 'remodelled' as they loved doing.



The cathedral built in 1079 is world famous and obviously well worth a visit. It has the longest Nave of any cathedral in Europe but when we were there, unfortunately it was closed thanks to the university graduation.

The famous Round Table hangs in the impressive Great Hall, the only remaining part of the castle. The table has nothing to do with the mythical King Arthur and his Knights but it is 13th Century and was painted in its present style by order of Henry VIII in 1522.

The helpful tourist office is next to the Guildhall in the High Street, it's an unremarkable Victorian building; there are hundreds like it throughout the UK. The High Street, itself which is likewise the same as many others, is full of the usual coffee shops and chain stores, but you need to look up to see some of the wonderful buildings that house WH Smith, Starbucks etc., Raymond Blanc does have one of his restaurants there though, in one of the many Tudor buildings that escaped the Victorians.



The Great Hall



It's off the main street that you find the most interesting and picturesque places, there are many little quiet corners with small green spaces with flowing streams, Winchester lies on the River Itchen which the Romans diverted through several channels through the City, one of them so close to the cathedral that it causes problems with the foundations.

There is a lot to see here and to fully appreciate the city you really need a guide, the tourist office recommended the wonderful Steve Heath. He is an ex military man an extremely knowledgeable expert and very witty guide. The city has a strong military connection, the famous Peninsular Barracks, once the home of the Green Jackets are now very desirable apartments. Property prices here rival some parts of London which is not surprising as its less than an hour from Waterloo.

Winchester is ideal for a trip through the ancient kingdom of Wessex; it was the capital and for some time the most important city in the country. Only a few miles from Stonehenge, it is on the edge of the South Downs National Park so given good weather it's a great place to visit. But even in the rain it has bags of charm as we discovered!



They told us that they have the best Christmas market in Europe and in late October when we visited they were starting to get ready for it. It attracts 350,000 visitors a year and runs from November 20 to December 21, from the list of attractions and events it looks worth a visit.

We really liked Winchester, it really is a very beautiful city. It's the thinking man's Lewes!

www.visitwinchester.co.uk

www.winchester-cathedral.org.uk/christmas/christmas-market/

www.thewinchesterhotel.co.uk