

Perfectly formed

Often called the ‘quintessence of England’, Rutland is famously its smallest county, concentrating all that is idyllic about England into 152 square miles. *Sarah Stirling* takes a tour of this exquisite area. Photography by *Lee Beel*.



Above **Si veteres ita miratur laudatque poetas, ut nihil anteferat, nihil illis comparet, errat quaedam nimis antiquesapit et mecum facit et lova iudicat aequo.**

Right **A quidem veteres inter ponetur lorem honeste, qui vel mense brevi vel toto est iunior anno. Utor permissio, caudaeque pilos ut equinae paulatim vello unum.**

RUTLAND'S POSITION in the pulsing heart of the Midlands emphasizes its unique charm. On a map, the county is a tiny oasis, almost overgrown by the urban veins of bigger counties that tangle around its perimeters.

The sense of entering somewhere extraordinary touches everyone who passes Rutland's county signs. From any direction, a droning monotony of major roads culminates, suddenly, and breathtakingly, in a landscape cloaked in countryside colours. Ribbons of green lanes wind around rich pastures, bright dashes of wild flowers and ancient farmhouses. Further into the shire, densely twining forests and rushing streams recall Tolkein's Middle Earth. Everywhere, Rutland spills over with villages and hamlets built of yellow ironstone, Collyweston slate and thatch.

Rutland has always relied on the land for a living, so much of the landscape hasn't changed for centuries. Partly this is what makes Rutland so beautiful. Partly, also, Rutland's small scope has allowed its people a perfectionist attention to detail. Over its 900-year history Rutland has evolved incredibly gracefully. Its heritage has been as carefully cultivated, generation by generation, as the land.





Top left *Si veteres ita miratur laudatque poetas, ut nihil anteferat, nihil illis comparet, errat quaedam nimis antique.*

Bottom left *Livi esse reor, memini quae lorem plagosum mihi videri pulchraque et exactis minimum distantia miror.*

Bottom right *A quidem veteres inter ponetur lorem honeste, qui vel mense brevi vel toto est iunior anno.*

Right *Si peraque dure dicere credit eos, ignave multa fatetur, et sapit et mecum facit et lova iudicat aequo.*

Take Oakham, Rutland's county town and its heart and hub. Down the centuries, contemporary English culture has refined and complemented what went before, rather than replaced it. The townscape undulates with a compact range of architectural styles that would make many cities envious. Contemporary establishments fit within old buildings like Russian dolls, gazing at each other across picturesque streets and the cobbled Market Place. A farmer's market has been held in the Market Place since Medieval times. Over the centuries, like the townscape, the market has evolved. Nowadays people come from far and wide to buy Rutland's seasonal, chemical-free, home-made and organic meat and produce.

Behind the Market Place lies Oakham Castle. Fittingly, it's surely the smallest, neatest castle in England. Only the Great Hall survives but the



building has been beautifully restored and is one of England's finest examples of 12th-century domestic architecture. Inside, Oakham Castle's walls are covered with horseshoes: ancient local custom dictates that peers visiting Rutland's county town must leave one as a toll. Rutlanders are renowned for having a pride far bigger than their county's borders and the amusing horseshoe tradition traces that pride back to the shire's earliest days.

Imagine the horror of these proud Rutlanders in the 1970s, when their county was tagged onto the sprawling, neighbouring county of Leicestershire. Several times the 'Leicestershire' signs were quietly changed back to 'Rutland' ones. In 1997, after much campaigning, Rutland finally regained its independence. Tellingly, during the period of Leicestershire rule Rutland insisted on maintaining administration of its schools, which it considered far superior to those of Leicestershire. Both Oakham and Rutland's only other town, Uppingham, have highly regarded traditional public boarding schools, boasting plenty of famous ex-pupils. Rutlanders are as proud of their villages as they are of their towns, as the story of Whitwell village's twinning illustrates. Some years ago, Whitwell's residents wrote to Jacques Chirac proposing a twinning with Paris and demanding a rapid response. No reply came, so the 19-house town declared itself twinned and duly erected signs to that effect. In defence of Whitwell's villagers, Rutland's villages deserve boasting about. There are just over 50 beautiful, traditional villages and hamlets in Rutland and each has its delightful individual quirks. Lyddington, for example, is famous for its restored Medieval bishop's palace and its proximity to picturesque walks around Eyebrook Reservoir.



Farming in Rutland

In the wake of farming crises such as BSE and foot and mouth, independent farms died out in many areas of Britain. Rutland's stronghold of small farms survives through hard-work, pride and a willingness to evolve.

Northfield Farm is an extraordinary mini-empire of a small Rutland farm. Jan McCourt has cultivated the modern niche for naturally-produced, ethically-farmed food. Several farm buildings house Jan's farm shop and restaurant; others are leased to local businesses. A children's area houses pens of small animals and Jan talks of mapping a mountain bike trail around his land.

'Northfield Farm is a very demanding lifestyle,' says Jan. I don't have to ask Jan whether it is worth it. We are standing by his meadow of traditional Gloucester Old Spot pigs, gazing at the magnificent view of Rutland beyond.





Clipsham, on the other hand, is renowned for its Yew Tree Avenue, which has been regularly pruned into chess pieces for over 200 years. The village is also home to the Michelin Pub of the Year, 2008. The Olive Branch Inn is renowned for its English country cottage ambience, innovative cuisine and exacting Rutland standards.

While exploring Rutland's villages, visitors might be surprised to see the sea, rippling across the heart of the county. It's not a mirage. In the 1970s two Rutland villages were flooded to create the largest reservoir in Britain. With classic Rutland perfectionism, the modern water supply has been

Above *Si veteres ita miratur laudatque poetas, ut nihil anteferat, nihil illis comparet, errat quaedam nimis aequo. mense brevi vel toto est iunior anno. Utor permisso,*

Right *Livi esse reor, memini quae lorem plagosum mihi pulchraque et exactis minimum distantia miror.*

Below *A quidem veteres inter ponetur lorem honeste, qui vel mense brevi vel toto est iunior anno. Utor permisso, mense brevi vel toto est iunior anno. Utor permisso,*

artfully blended into 3,100 acres of surrounding ancient Rutland landscape.

Ranks of bright sailing boats bob in sheltered estuaries and hordes of cyclists dart around picturesque shingled shores. Ospreys, with their piercing yellow eyes, might be glimpsed diving for fish. These massive



birds, with their 5-foot wingspan, have been recently reintroduced to Rutland and now thrive in its bountiful landscape.

Rutland's county motto is 'multum in parvo': 'much in little'. The county certainly lives up to its banner, proving that size does matter, and sometimes small is best. **BB**

