



Across the Rolling Hills

By A/Prof Cuthbert Teo, Editorial Board Member

Introduction

"The Cotswolds" refers to a roughly quadrilateral area in England, between and including Stratford-upon-Avon to the north, Bath to the south, Oxford to the east, and Cheltenham to the west. The word is thought to have been derived from the Old English words *cot*, meaning "a simple rural home", and *wolds*, meaning "rolling hills" – but there are other versions of how it came about.

The area initially became wealthy because it produced textiles made from the wool of the local sheep with a shaggy mane – the Cotswold Lion. Yes, sheep have manes – it is the hair or fur on the throat, chest, back of the neck and withers (interscapular region). The wealth began to grow in the 17th century and funded the building of the grand churches (wool churches) and manor houses, all the typical Jacobean style that the area is famous for. The Jacobean style is a type of English Renaissance architecture associated with King James I of England (James IV of Scotland), who reigned from 1603 to 1625, built using yellow limestone from the area. The wealth in the Cotswolds now comes from tourism, as evidenced by the extremely

high property prices offered by wealthy foreigners for a piece of seemingly ageless Cotswolds serenity.

The Cotswolds is one of the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), one of more than 30 areas of outstanding countryside landscapes in England. Due to its beauty and tranquillity, the Cotswolds is crowded with tourists, but one can evade the predictable paths by visiting farmers' markets in addition to the manors and castles, staying at bed and breakfasts (B&Bs) in villages instead of towns, and touring on foot and bicycle instead of car. You can book almost all Cotswolds B&Bs by email or online. Summer is the peak season. In autumn and more so in winter, accommodation prices fall – but more importantly, the colours of fall and the golden lights of winter are truly breathtakingly beautiful.

Even though you may resolve to stay in villages, do include Oxford and Bath – and if you really have to, Stratford-upon-Avon, which is Shakespeare's home town situated in the district of Stratford-on-Avon.

Oxford

Oxford is easily reached from Heathrow. You can bypass London by taking a National Express coach from the central bus station, a short walk from terminals 1 and 3 (there is also a bus stop at terminal 5). It takes about one to one and a half hours to reach Oxford, and costs £23 (approximately S\$43) for a single trip ticket and £29 for a return ticket. You pay the driver, who can give you change.

Stop at the last bus stop at Gloucester Green in the town centre, where you can take a metered taxi



A panoramic view from the tower of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin



to your B&B. The best way to get around Oxford's city centre is to walk. If you stay at a B&B outside the city centre, there are local buses that are easy to get.

For example, I stayed at a B&B called the Gables Guest House (<http://www.gables-guesthouse.co.uk/>) along the Botley Road approaching Oxford, and used buses X30, 4, 4A, 4B and 4C for a short ride to the Oxford city centre. You buy bus tickets from the bus driver, who can give you change for small notes. Gables is owned by Sally Tompkins, who obviously loves being a landlady. She was extremely helpful with local knowledge, and makes a very good full English breakfast.



While in Oxford, I visited the local sights. I am going to spend more of this piece concentrating on the Cotswolds as there are already a lot of good travel guides on Oxford. But I do want to highlight two things about Oxford. Firstly, do not miss the spectacular views of Oxford from the top of the tower of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin. Secondly, there is a great Lebanese restaurant in the Jericho area of Oxford, called Al-Shami (<http://www.al-shami.co.uk/>), owned by the friendly Mahfouz family. The Lebanese *mezze*, small dishes eaten before a main course or as a complete meal, are a must try. Each meal comes with a generous salad. Complement your food with the Lebanese alcoholic beverage, arak, a clear strong drink distilled from grapes and flavoured with aniseed.

One tip: you might want to organise your trip to Oxford around the time of the Oxford Open Doors (<http://www.oxfordopendoors.org.uk/>) in September, when the colleges open their grounds free to the public.

West of Oxford – Blenheim Palace and Minster Lovell

From Oxford, when you head west, you begin knocking on the Cotswolds' door 'proper'. Along the way to the Cotswolds from Oxford, it is worth to make a stop at the stunning Blenheim Palace, the historical home of the Duke of Marlborough. Spend one day touring the palace, park

and gardens – for a fee (£21). Oxford travel guidebooks give a very good account of Blenheim Palace. During your visit, check to see if their scheme to convert your one-day ticket to an annual pass for free is still available. There are also lovely easy walks near the palace.

Some 20 kilometres west of Oxford, you can stop by the breathtaking tiny village of Minster Lovell, officially considered part of the Cotswolds and named in honour of the main landowning Lovell family. There are many beautiful thatched houses around. The local St Kenelm's Church is beautiful, and immediately behind the church, are the ruins of a 15th century manor house (Minster Lovell Hall) built by William Lovell beside the River Windrush. It is free to visit, and the ruins are truly picture-perfect.

The Cotswold Way

The Cotswold Way is part of the National Trails (<http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/>) – the long distance routes in England and Wales for walking, cycling and horse riding. It is a 164-kilometre trail from Bath Abbey in the south of the Cotswolds, to the town hall of Chipping Campden in the north of the Cotswolds, with its highest point at Cleeve Common (325 metres above sea level). You can venture alone on the Cotswold Way (<http://www.escapetothecotswolds.org.uk/>) with a map and compass; on average, it takes about seven days to walk the Cotswold Way. Guided walks are available through the Cotswold Volunteer Wardens and commercial companies. There is also a baggage moving service, The Sherpa Van Ltd, so you can choose where you want to stay each night in between the walks each day, and the movers will pick your bags up and send them to your destination. Another way to see the Cotswolds is to travel around by car and tackle shorter circular stretches at a time. You can even see the Cotswolds using public transport. Many other footpaths criss-cross, including the Warden's Way and Windrush Way, which connects Burton-on-the-Water to Winchcombe.

Bath

I began my trip to the Cotswolds in Bath. Bath is a city designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The must-sees are the Roman Baths, Bath Abbey, and the Royal Crescent park. You can take the Mayor's Guide Free Walking Tours, which lasts two hours, to get an overview of the city. I want to highlight a delightful Nepalese restaurant in Bath, called Yak Yeti Yak (<http://www.yakyetiyak.co.uk/>) on Pierrepont Street. The restaurant is located in a basement and you might miss it if you just walk past the street level sign. But once you get past the odd-sounding name, you will realise this basement restaurant serves typical good meaty Nepalese food, but you won't notice the heaviness so much because of the generous use of herbs. The staff are very friendly and will explain how to order.

Stroud

Once out of Bath, and if you have time, you can slip into Stroud, about 40 kilometres north of Bath. If you are not driving and want to save some time, you can take the train from Bath to Stroud. The best day to get into Stroud, if you can manage to do so, is on a Saturday between 9 am and 2 pm, as there is also a farmer's market with 40 to 50 stalls there every Saturday. The farmer's market, much larger than Bath's, is a really good visit. Also, every

Friday and Saturday (8 am to 4 pm), there is a market at the Shambles, an arcaded lane in Stroud. The Shambles Market has a larger outdoor market that sells mainly fruits, vegetables and cheese, as well as an indoor one which sells collectibles.

Minchinhampton

Near Stroud is the small village of Minchinhampton, where not many tourists go. In the village is the 17th century Minchinhampton Market House, built on raised pillars. Beside it is an organic dairy, delightfully called Woeful Dane, which sells award-winning artisan cheeses. A few doors away is Sophie's Restaurant (<http://sophiesrestaurant.co.uk/>), which is locally respected for its French cooking, but it has strange opening hours, so check their website before heading over. The local church, Holy Trinity, has a half spire, because the original spire became unsafe and was pulled down in 1863. If you take Windmill Road north out of Minchinhampton, to Butterrow Hill towards Rodborough Common, and turn off to Green Acres, you will reach Winstones (<http://www.winstonesicecream.co.uk/>), a Cotswolds company that has been making ice cream since 1925. You will find their ice cream all over the Cotswolds, but they sell directly from the shop counter at Winstones.

Cheltenham

The next step from the southern part of the Cotswolds is the western part. Most tourists would be based in Cheltenham, but I actually based myself in Alderton (see page 54), which I think is a better base for scenery. If you are not driving or want to save some walking time, there is a regular bus 46 from Painswick or Stroud.

Cheltenham is a town with a posh feel and was a famous spa town in the 18th century. There is nothing much to do here, but there are many good restaurants and



the town is famous for its Regency-style architecture of the early 19th century. The town can be thought of as the town centre and the areas north and south of the town centre. The Promenade, the focus of the town centre, has grand houses and expensive designer shops. To the north of the main High Street is the Pittville district, which is mostly park land, with the classical-style, domed Pump Room, from which the spa waters were pumped. The building is now a concert hall, but you can taste the pungent, free spa water from a fountain in the auditorium. To the south of the High Street, you can head for Imperial Square with its grand Regency-style terrace houses, Montpellier Walk with its shops sporting caryatids, Montpellier Street with its upmarket cafes and bars, and Suffolk Square with very good restaurants. There are two buildings in the Suffolk area which have really beautiful Regency architecture – the St James Church (which now houses a pizza restaurant), and the Daffodil Restaurant (which was the old cinema or picture palace, and is now renovated with a 1920s cinema art deco feel).

A nice walk near Cheltenham is the Leckhampton loop (seven kilometres, about three hours), a relatively easy-going circular route along woodland path, with an initial steep section. From Cheltenham, take bus 51 towards Swindon, to the nearby Seven Springs pub (there is a car park on the opposite side of the road). Along the path, you can see Devil's Chimney, a tall limestone rock stack, leftover from Cheltenham's previous quarrying industry.

Winchcombe

Winchcombe is about 15 kilometres northeast of Cheltenham. If you are not driving or want to save some walking time, you can take bus 606, but this bus does not run on Sundays. Being near Sudeley Castle, and some beautiful walking paths, Winchcombe is a good base to

explore other villages and attractions around the area, like Hailes Abbey, Belas Knap and Cleeve Hill.

Winchcombe is a historical town. In the 8th century, it was the capital of Mercia, one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which formed the Heptarchy in Britain during the Dark Ages. As it was the capital, it had an abbey, which was destroyed during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in the 1530s. The current building that stands there is St Peter's Church built in the 15th century. One of the highlights of the church is the 40 gargoyles that ring the exterior of the building. One of the gargoyles on the east of the building is a figure with a hat, said to be the inspiration for the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*. The west wall has pockmarks – actually musket ball holes made during the English Civil War in the mid-17th century. Inside the Church is the famous altar cloth dated from the late 14th century, apparently stitched by Queen Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife. There are many other historical artefacts in the striking church that you should read about, if you plan to visit.

Cleeve Hill

Cleeve Hill is a windswept village 900 metres above sea level, along the main road B4632 between Winchcombe and Cheltenham. You can park at a car park near the Cleeve Hill Golf Club to begin your walk. The circular route is about six kilometres, and will take about four hours. The rolling expanse of wild flowers and butterflies is called Cleeve Common. The true summit at 330 metres is at the southern edge of the common, marked by a triangulation point. Because the surrounding area is relatively flat, the views here are not wide. There are more spectacular views at the north of the route (nearer the car park, after a steep climb of 315 metres above sea level), at a secondary peak called Cleeve Cloud, marked by a toposcope.



A/Prof Teo with the owners of Gantier, John and Sue Parry

Alderton

About 25 kilometres north of Cheltenham is the beautiful village of Alderton. The village has picturesque buildings, and a 14th century church dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch (a Roman Catholic saint who lived at around the end of the 4th century).

At Alderton, I stayed at the Gantier (<http://www.gantier.co.uk/>), owned by John and Sue Parry, who are very generous with sharing local knowledge. I decided to base myself in Alderton to explore the central-northern area of the Cotswolds, as Alderton was so beautiful and had so many walks, but mainly because of John and Sue's wonderful hospitality.

The local pub called the Gardener's Arm (<http://www.gardenersarms.biz/walks.asp>) is also a good place to meet the villagers, and to get information about the walking paths around Alderton. A nine-kilometre circular walk takes you around the Dumbleton Woods, while a seven-and-a-half-kilometre circular walk takes you through woodlands and the villages of Alstone and Dixon.

Chipping Campden

This is a small picturesque market village is about 16 kilometres east of Alderton, and about 20 kilometres

south of Stratford-upon-Avon (generally considered the most northern part of the Cotswolds). Its name is derived from the Old English word *caepen*, meaning "market", and the Saxon *campadene*, meaning "village". It was originally a prosperous wool town.

An interesting B&B is Bramley House (<http://www.bramleyhouse.co.uk>), which was built in 1921. It is a short walk from the High Street, and has three rooms. The owners have lived mostly in the Cotswolds, and they are happy to share information about the village. If you are staying at Chipping Campden, an excellent garden to visit for a day would be the nearby Hidecote Manor Garden, about six kilometres from the village. It was created in the early 20th century as a series of gardens called "rooms".

At the centre of Chipping Campden is the 17th century Market Hall, a simple open building with five arches and a very uneven floor of stones. It was a gift to the town from Sir Baptist Hicks, a textile merchant who was knighted by James I and became the local lord. Beside the Market Hall is the Town Hall, which has a plaque that officially marks the start (or end) of the Cotswold Way. The High Street has beautiful buildings with Tudor (15th century) and Jacobean (17th century) facades. Towards the northern end of the High Street is St James Church, built in the late 15th century on the site where an old Norman church stood in the 12th century, and holds memorial to the Hicks family. The landmark church's west tower stands at about 35 metres.

Towards the south end of the High Street is St Catherine's Roman Catholic Church, built in the late 19th century. Near St Catherine's, you can take a good circular seven-kilometre long walk along the steep Hoo Lane to the Lynches Wood, to Dover's Hill and back to Chipping Campden. To enjoy the views, give yourself at least half a day for this walk.



A plaque in Chipping Campden

Dover's Hill

If you persevere and get up to Dover's Hill (230 metres above sea level), you will be rewarded with a breathtaking view of the Malvern Hills, a range of hills straddling three counties (Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire). The name "Malvern" comes from the Celtic term *moel bryn*, which means "bare hill". Dover's Hill was named after Robert Dover, a local lawyer, who in 1612, organised competitions on the hilltop, which was known as the "Olimpicks". Currently, the games take place on Thursdays and Fridays between early May and late June, and the competitions included tug of war and shin-kicking (a combat sport where two opponents attempt to kick each other in the shins, naturally enough). You can actually drive up to Dover's Hill, but that would be cheating. The top of the hill is marked by a topograph, and all around, sheep walk and lay around, while you take in the views.

Stow-on-the-Wold

This is a historic Cotswolds market town, about 15 kilometres southwest of Chipping Campden. The old market square was the scene of the last battle of the English Civil War, which was a war between parliamentarians and royalists from 1642 to 1651, resulting in the execution of Charles I and the formation of the Commonwealth of England under Oliver Cromwell. Legend has it that so many people died here that the ducks were swimming in blood. Thus, one of the streets leading out of the square, Digbeth Street, is also called Duck Bath. The square is dominated by a Victorian-style hall, with a medieval cross on one side of the hall, and a set of replicas on the other side. Near the square

is St Edward's Church, with a 27-metre tall Perpendicular Gothic tower. The north porch of the church is a good place to take a photo, because here, two yew trees flanking the wooden door have grown into the stonework.

There are two easy walks from Stow-on-the-Wold to Bourton-on-the-Water. The longer walk called Wold to Water (ten kilometres, three hours one way) takes you through the towns of Icomb and Wyck Rissington, and through meadows across the Rivers Dikler and Eye, where you can photograph rare flowers and insects. The shorter walk called Meadows and Mills (six-and-a-half kilometres, three hours one way) takes you across meadows with mills through Lower Slaughter and joins up with Warden's Way (see page 62).

Bourton-on-the-Water

This is a lovely village about six kilometres southwest from Stow-on-the-Wold, but it is always packed with local tourists. If you want to get away from the madding crowd, this is not the place to go or stay. Running through the village is the narrow River Windrush, with beautiful overhanging trees along which is arched by bridges. The river is very shallow, and you can sometimes see dogs playing in the water while on their walks. There are a few *touristy* attractions to visit, like the Birdland, Dragonfly Maze, Motor and Toy Museum and Model Village. If you skip these, you won't miss very much. There is a nice Cotswold Pottery (<http://www.cotswoldpottery.co.uk/>) shop in the village, with beautiful handmade wares and sculptural pieces, but the staff in charge there did not seem to be very interested in talking to visitors.



Sheep grazing on top of Dover Hill



Warden's Way, Windrush Way, and the Slaughters

Between Bourton-on the-Water and Winchcombe, a distance of about 22 kilometres, there are two easy and beautiful walks, which you can take as a circular route. One path is called Warden's Way, along the River Eye. This path passes through some of the most celebrated village sceneries of the Cotswolds. The path passes through the Lower Slaughter and Upper Slaughter villages (from the Old English word "slohtre", meaning "marshy place"). The other path is called Windrush Way, which will take you through Sudeley castle near Winchcombe. If you only want to take a shorter scenic walk, then take Warden's Way from Bourton-on-the-Water to the Slaughters, and then double back. Lower Slaughter is about one-and-a-half kilometres from Bourton-on-the-Water. It is a small village with an old water mill (which houses a quaint museum) and undershot waterwheel, and you can walk through the village in a few minutes. If you want to stay a little longer, you could visit the Victorian St Mary's Church. Upper Slaughter is about another one-and-a-half kilometres from Lower Slaughter. Upper Slaughter has St Peter's Church, parts of which date back to the 12th century. The manor house dating back to the mid-17th century at Upper Slaughter has been turned into a luxurious hotel, called Lords of the Manor, with which is a one Michelin-starred restaurant.

An old water mill at Lower Slaughter



Broadway

Broadway is about eight kilometres west of Chipping Campden. The main High Street is broad, and has honeystone cottages, tea rooms, galleries, antique shops, and souvenir shops, and these attract quite a few local tourists. The Broadway Deli on the High Street is a nice place to have lunch. Behind the deli, on Russell Square, there is a Cotswolds-only chain supermarket, Warner's Budgens, which stocks a wide range of local produce.

There are many good walks around Broadway. There is a fine three to four hours circular route (about six-and-a-half kilometres), which can be moderately difficult because there are a few steep segments. About halfway through the walk, you will reach Broadway Tower, on top of Fish Hill, which at about 310 metres above sea level, is the second highest point in Cotswolds. The Tower was built in 1798, and is 17 metres tall. The extra climb up the tower is well worth the effort on a clear day, because from the top, you can see get wonderful views. The tower is privately owned and you have to pay £4.50 to climb it.

Conclusion

It's not possible to see everything the Cotswolds has to offer in one trip, so don't try. I have tried to mention some of the top attractions and highlight what I consider to be some hidden gems. The Cotswolds is also a great place to do a church crawl, if you are into that, visiting churches from village to village. There are also other AONBs in England and Wales, which you can walk, like the Mendip Hills at the south of Bath. Whatever you decide to visit in the Cotswolds is going to be great – because what else can you expect from a great walking holiday, but great exercise, great food, and great views? **SMA**



A/Prof Cuthbert Teo is trained as a forensic pathologist. The views expressed in the above article are his personal opinions, and do not represent those of his employer. A/Prof Teo paid for this trip himself. He did not receive any payment in cash or kind for writing this article.