



THE RIGHT TIME, THE RIGHT PLACE



SWINDON A pioneering railway town with a hallowed history of reinvention. By Harry Coen

Throughout its history, Swindon has had the happy knack of being in the right place at the right time. Luckily for the tourist, exploring the stunning Wiltshire countryside all around, each stage of its development has left a rich and fascinating heritage which refuses to be overlooked.

Originally a small market town, since 1840, when Isambard Kingdom Brunel chose it as the location for his railway works, Swindon has drawn attention as a pioneering railway town and is still a huge magnet for railway fans the world over.

To this day, you can still wander through its quiet courtyards and alleyways, enjoying a vibrant mix of traditional shops and pubs, alongside modern outlets and stylish cafes. It's a great place to enjoy the regular farmers' markets and see for yourself the quality of the local produce.

The clever thing that happened with the arrival of the Great Western Railway was the creation of a new town – between the site of the new railway works and Swindon Hill – leaving the Old Town for us to enjoy today.

When the age of steam passed, Swindon's engineering heyday went with it. Nowadays, Swindon's town centre is pedestrianised and

thoroughly modern. But the best of the past has been magnificently preserved by the STEAM – Museum of the Great Western Railway, where top-notch technology is employed to tell the story of the company and its people.

Often referred to as God's Wonderful Railway, thanks to the pioneering vision and sheer genius of Brunel, the scale of the GWR operation was staggering. At its height, the Swindon Works was producing three locomotives each week, and the sweat, grime and noise is all captured here as well as the undeniable glory – embodied in the magnificent engines on display.

This year is the 175th anniversary of the incorporation of the GWR. Steam buffs will flock to Swindon even more than ever, if only to fulfil a childhood ambition to know what it's like to drive a steam engine – strange to think that this was once the height of modernity.

But then Swindon continues to reinvent itself. With a reputation for quirkiness as well as innovation, a new initiative is to provide free broadband in the town. It has adopted the Magic Roundabout as a symbol and will soon "twin" with Disney World in Florida. It also plays host to an annual literary festival.

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Wiltshire wonders: clockwise from top left, Wootton Bassett Town Hall; the STEAM Museum; a denizen of Butterfly World; and the ornamental lake at Lydiard House

Swindon's determination to boost high-end facilities in pursuit of business tourism and the conference market is something of a boon for the leisure tourist: you can now choose your ideal base for a short break from the abundance of good-quality hotels.

The town is also an ultra-modern shopping heaven. As well as the town centre's big-name brands, the Swindon Designer Outlet beckons, its stores offering discounts of up to 60 per cent on more than 100 designer and high street names, including Calvin Klein, Denby, Hobbs, Jaeger, John Lewis, Levi's and Ted Baker.

What makes this place – the largest covered designer outlet in Europe – extra special is that it rubs shoulders with STEAM, the National Trust's Heelis central office and the National Monuments Record Office in the restored Railway Works, effectively creating a cultural campus and a focus of fascination for the visitor.

At Wroughton, just outside the town centre, there's more in store. A former airfield houses the Science Museum's Library and Archives, as well as objects too large for the main museum in Kensington.

Other treasures on a tiny scale – butterflies by the hundred – are nearby.

Studley Grange Butterfly World houses a definitive collection of rare and beautiful specimens. An added bonus is its on-site cafe – fantastic for Sunday lunch – where you can watch these amazing flying jewels as you tuck in. There's also a craft village.

Further afield, the Marlborough Downs, the ancient Savernake Forest and the southern Cotswolds are areas of outstanding natural beauty, while Wiltshire villages and towns fit harmoniously into their natural surroundings, glowing with honey-coloured stone. Wootton Bassett, Malmesbury, Marlborough and Chippenham are towns to make the heart rejoice, while villages such as Castle Combe and Lacock are utterly charming and timeless in a quintessentially English way.

Speaking of time, Swindon is your gateway to the far past, too. Avebury is not only a glorious traditional village, but is also the site of a globally renowned Neolithic monument, its sensational megalithic stones rivalled only by Stonehenge. And it is so close to Swindon that one is tempted to say: "It's just a stone's throw away."

Swindon is continuing its tradition of being the right place; all you have to do is find the time that is right for you.