



A weekend in...

Central Shropshire

Our industrial heritage may have been forged in Shropshire but today it's a treasure ground for antiques hunters, discovers **Rosanna Holmes**

In his 1896 poetry collection *A Shropshire Lad*, AE Housman described parts of the county as 'the quietest place under the sun'. Over a century later, the same can still be said for this hilly farming shire, which has no cities of its own but is well connected to Birmingham and Worcester. With the smelting factories at Ironbridge long closed, sightseeing and shopping can be enjoyed in the peaceful countryside and delightful market towns.

Shrewsbury

Lying in a loop of the River Severn, Shropshire's county town has over 660 listed buildings, many of them Tudor timber-framed properties overhanging narrow passageways. Naturalist Charles Darwin was born here and it is widely believed the surrounding countryside inspired him to study geology. Learn about his life and family at **Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery** (01743 281205; shrewsburymuseums.com), which is due to move from the historic Rowley's House to the newly refurbished Music Hall next year. The museum also celebrates the area's rich



Facing page **A view of Shrewsbury from Coleham Head** This page, clockwise from top left **Tins at Shrewsbury Antiques Centre; ceramics in the shop Vintage; the town is full of black-and-white timber buildings; the Bull Inn dates from the 17th century; some of Vintage's retro kitchenware; a statue of Charles Darwin outside Shrewsbury School (now a library), where he was educated**

NATIONAL TRUST PROPERTIES TO VISIT

National Trust properties are dotted throughout the Shropshire countryside and reveal more about the history of the area and the industrialists and entrepreneurs who made their fortunes here. Admire the blend of past and present at Dudmaston Hall (Quatt, 01746 780866), the former home of diplomat Sir George Labouchere, who amassed an impressive collection of modern art and whose wife Rachel founded the Ironbridge Gorge Museum. At Broseley, Benthall Hall (01952 882159), where members of the Benthall family still live today, has a carved oak staircase, oak panelling and a restored plantsman's garden. And in the small village of Atcham, a long drive leads to Attingham Park (01743 708123), an 18th-century mansion built for the 1st Lord Berwick.

ceramics history, with its collection of antique blue-and-white Caughley Porcelain, once made near Broseley, and colourful Coalport pieces decorated with flora and fauna. There is also an incredible collection of stuffed birds – clearly, Darwin wasn't the area's only keen naturalist.

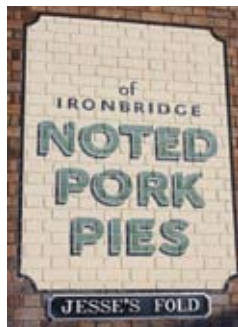
Most of Shrewsbury's streets lead to the main square, where the grade I-listed 16th-century **Old Market Hall** – which once had a pool for ducking nagging wives – now houses a film and digital media centre. Tucked just behind the square is the **Shrewsbury Antiques Centre** (15 Princess Street, 01743 247704), which has 85 dealers selling all manner of collectables. Across the street, creak around the five floors of rare bound books and first editions in **Candle Lane Books** (28-29 Princess Street, 01743 365301), where they still wrap your purchases in paper.

Visitors to Shrewsbury tend to fumble their way up the once aptly named Grope Lane, the town's red-light district of old, to find **Gallery SCA** (3 St Alkmund's Place, 01743 249687), where Jon Thompson sells contemporary ceramics and paintings with his cocker spaniel

Bomber. 'I love the old feel to the town and it's stuffed full of independent shops,' says Jon.

Back down on the main thoroughfare, Lulu Allman's shop **Vintage** (69a Wyle Cop, 01743 240076) is beautifully laid out with old leather bags, enamelware, cakestands and kitchenalia. Even if you're not embarking on a renovation project, it's still worth popping into **The Period House** (65 Wyle Cop, 01743 340250) a few doors down, which stocks door handles, hinges, light switches, bulb holders and loo seats 'made in the proper, old-fashioned way,' according to owner Libby Lord. 'Here, you can buy the things you thought had stopped being produced.'

To round off your time in Shrewsbury, seek out **Mansers'** large modern showroom just outside the centre, a business that has been in the town since 1944 (Coleham Head, 01743 351120). It's a flamboyant place, in which 1920s suites mix with 1840s tables, gilt mirrors and chandeliers, thanks to the eye of talented third-generation dealer Mark Manser. A furniture-maker by training, Mark is also the inventor of clever cabinets designed to hide flat-screen televisions. »



Ironbridge

Wandering around the cluster of quiet picturesque villages of Ironbridge Gorge today, it's hard to believe that this was once the clattering, smoke-belching heart of the Industrial Revolution. Instigated by Abraham Darby's development in 1709 of iron-making techniques, numerous factories sprang up in the area, manufacturing everything from steam-engine cylinders to porcelain made from local clay, distributed by the burgeoning railway and canal system. Aga cookers are still cast in molten iron here but many of the other factories have now become museums. If you only have time to visit a couple, make them **Coalport China Museum** (01952 433424, ironbridge.org.uk), which houses the national collections of Coalport and Caughley china, and **Jackfield Tile Museum** (01952 433424, ironbridge.org.uk) on the site of the factory that was at the centre of the tile industry in the late 19th century. **Blists Hill Victorian Town** (01952 433424, ironbridge.org.uk) is also worth a visit for a nostalgic shopping experience.

Back in the real world, you won't be able to resist stylish shop **Objects of Use** (6 Tontine Hill, 01952 432237), which looks out towards

the famous bridge. Its beguiling mix of items includes vintage odds and ends and general homeware – expect everything from vintage pie funnels to Duralex glassware (not to mention non-lethal mousetraps). 'We sell things that have been made the same way for a long time – classics,' says owner Alex Dexter. Further downstream is the home of **Merrythought Teddybears** (01952 433044), which has been making bears by hand for over 80 years. Pop into the factory shop to see the 1930s originals.

Much Wenlock

After the steep climb up Wenlock Edge, coaches making their way to London in the 16th century would stop at Much Wenlock to change horses. Today, it's worth pausing here to visit the galleries and antiques shops. Chairs holding crockery line the pavement outside **Memories Antiques & Collectables** (1 Wilmore Street, 07971 100812), a shop packed to the hilt with china, carpet beaters, Toby jugs and enough gravy boats to sink a ship. The town also boasts an exceptional craft gallery run by Mary Elliott. Her **Twenty-Twenty Gallery** (3-4 High Street, 01952 727952) has a different exhibition every month showcasing

‘The modern Olympics originated from the Wenlock Olympian Games,’



Facing page, clockwise from top left **Coalport China Museum** in Ironbridge; **Blists Hill Victorian Town**; old-fashioned advertising at Blists Hill; **Bridgnorth's Cliff Railway** This page, clockwise from top left **Iron Bridge** spans the River Severn; an antique bear at Merrythought; stylish **Ironbridge emporium Objects of Use**; chairs line the pavement outside **Much Wenlock's Memories Antiques & Collectables**; apothecary jars in **Blists Hill's chemist**

ceramics, jewellery and sculpture. For work by 20th-century British artists, including Jacob Epstein and Terry Frost, try **Wenlock Fine Art** (3 The Square, 01952 728232) around the corner.

Unlikely as it sounds, the town is also the place from which the modern Olympic Games originated, after local doctor William Penny Brookes founded Wenlock Olympian Games in 1850 to improve the fitness of locals. It led to the revival of the ancient Greek games in 1896. Find out more at the **Much Wenlock Museum** (2 The Square, 01952 727679). The town still holds the games every July.

Bridgnorth

Once one of the busiest river ports in Europe, Bridgnorth is a town of two halves, divided into High Town, perched on the top of a sandstone cliff, and Low Town, along the riverbanks. There are antiques shops to be found in both parts.

Start at the top, where **The Toy Emporium** (79 High Street, 01746 765134) has hundreds of models and collectable toys, including Dinky trains and Steiff bears. 'Customers travel from Australia, America and Europe to visit the shop,' says owner Michael Tipton. 'One woman from

Canada comes four times a year.' Further along the High Street, close to the Victorian New Market Building, you will find **Gin & Teacups** (29 High Street, 01746 766244). The shop stocks a mix of old and new, including painted furniture, vintage suitcases, and jewellery, and there's a cosy cafe out the back. For the dedicated collector, **Bridgnorth Antiques Centre** (Whitburn Street, 01746 768055) has 20 traders and owner Glennis Gibbons specialises in clocks.

There are several ways to venture down to the lower side of town. You could go via the Cartway or climb down one of the many sets of long, shallow 'donkey steps', as they're known locally. At the bottom by the river there is the **Old Mill Antiques Centre** (49 Mill Street, 01746 768778), which has four cavernous floors of antiques and reproduction furniture. Similarly, **Malthouse Antiques & Interiors** (6 Underhill Street; 01746 763054) has a mix of modern and antique pieces. Shopping done, hop on to the **Victorian Cliff Railway** (01746 762052, bridgnorthcliff railway.co.uk), built in 1892 and still ferrying weary travellers up and down the cliff today.



TRAVELLER'S NOTES

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

- ✿ **Grove Farm House Bed & Breakfast** (Conover, Shrewsbury, 01743 718544; grovefarmhouse.com). Liz Farrow runs this B&B in her immaculate Georgian home in the small village of Conover, a few miles outside Shrewsbury. Her blueberry muffins at breakfast are heavenly. Rooms range from £55 to £85 per night.
- ✿ **Golden Cross Hotel** (14 Princess Street, Shrewsbury, 01743 362507; goldencrosshotel.co.uk). The town's oldest public house, this has been an inn since 1428.

Next month
A long weekend in Barcelona