

England's Ultimate Tranquil Retreat

In these stressful, strung-out times, where can frazzled city-dwellers find true respite?

Below are extracts from John Walsh's pilgrimage featured in The Independent newspaper in May 2009 which reveals that Church Stretton is the place to be.

Here John takes up his story

"I still hadn't found my stress-free Nirvana. I consulted more documents. I discovered that the least stressful outdoor activity is rambling. I checked out a ramblers' website and they named somewhere called Church Stretton as their ideal spot. Church Stretton? It's in Shropshire. I'd never been to Shropshire. But with this quality of recommendation I had to try it. And a walk around this pretty town (two pubs, handsome restaurant and wonderful 12th-century church) in the morning sunlight would put anyone in a good mood. ... I took a turn through the churchyard and into Rectory Wood, part-designed by Capability Brown in 1775. The day was fine, the sky was blue, the incline was gentle – and I found myself in a bluebell wood.

I don't want to come over all Fotherington-Thomas, but a deep and meaningful peace settled upon me like a benediction. The sun came dazzling, Tennysonianly, through the leaves of the tall trees. Blackbirds were singing fit to burst, nearby but out of sight. All trace of traffic had gone; only an invisible tractor chugged in the distance. I had an acute sense that the hurly-burly of everyday life was close at hand but temporarily held at bay; and it was in this sudden, delicious balance of involvement in the great howling beast of modern life, but also detachment from it, that the demon stress vanished from my system at last.

De-stress quotient - 10/10

By a series of twisty byways and capricious diagonals, I'd discovered the least stressful location in England: its name is Rectory Wood, Church Stretton.

** Although John refers to Church Stretton as a village, it is very definitely a town, but perhaps this is relative to living in London.*

