

## **The Old Vicarage**

Norton is half way between Ludlow (famous foodie market town) and Hay-on-Wye (the town of book shops). Nearby Presteigne, a delightful and quiet borders town nestling on the River Lugg, boasts the award winning Judge's Lodging Museum. Set in fabulous walking country, The Old Vicarage is a short walk from some of the best preserved and most beautiful stretches of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. The cathedral city of Hereford, Croft Castle & Berrington Hall (both National Trust properties), the Wye Valley, Brecon Beacons, the Cambrian Mountains and the spectacular Victorian dams in the Elan Valley are all a scenic drive away.

## **About the house**

### **Design & Decor**

While The Old Vicarage (probably designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, who restored the church) is Victorian and many of the furniture and fittings date from that, or the Edwardian period, the house is not a museum but our home. The décor is our 'take' on those aspects of Victorian design and taste that we like. The rooms are not therefore an authentic re-creation of a Victorian vicarage, but our own evocation of the period – bold colours, strong design and a promiscuous range of decorative styles that was the strength (and, let us admit, in some cases a weakness) of High Victorian taste.

**Hall, stairs and landing** - The heavy pitch pine front door opens into a grand, richly coloured hall. The room is dominated by, above the dado, a red wallpaper – Indian – a Morris & Co paper, according to the V&A probably designed by George Gilbert Scott in 1868-70. Beneath the dado rail is an Osborne & Little paper called Lanhydrock – a dramatic gothic pattern in black, red and gold. The black and gold theme is taken up in the curtains. The woodwork is painted with a Morris & Co colour called brinjal. The prints are 19th century Arundel Society chromolithographs.

The stairs, in the inner hall, are based on the earliest wooden staircases in late Tudor and Jacobean houses.

The coffered ceiling over the stair well was, when we moved in, austereley painted light grey. It called out for gothic blue and gold excess. A friend of ours, who then worked for Watts & Co of Westminster, carried out the medieval revival design, based on lettering found in Westminster Abbey cloisters that was often copied by Victorian church architects such as Bodley. The wording around the frieze is from The Confession of Saint Augustine, Book 8, Chapter 7 - “*Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo*”. It is often [mis-]translated as “O Lord give me chastity, but not yet”. In fact the phrase is part of a longer passage which reads:

*“But I wretched, most wretched, in the very commencement of my early youth had begged for chastity at your hands, and said, “Give me chastity and continency, but only not yet.” For I was afraid lest you would hear me too soon, and cure me of the disease of concupiscence, which I wished to have satisfied, rather than extinguished.”*

**Drawing Room** – The drawing room facing south, with a bay window in the west wall to capture the light of the setting sun, has another Morris & Co paper, Sunflower, in a gold colourway. The curtain material is Colefax & Fowler. The gas light fittings, above the marble fireplace and either side of the French mirror, are of very fine quality. The pictures in the room are early 20 century architectural prints by the Brewer brothers, mainly of the great gothic churches of Europe.

**Dining Room** – The wallpaper in the dining room is based on a classic French design from the collection of the Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris. This terracotta paper contrasts with the dark green silk curtains (Osborne & Little).

The black marble fire surround has a later Art Nouveau inset with brass hood and mauve lily tiles. Like the drawing room, this room is lit by excellent examples of early oil, gas and electric lights. The Egyptian style gas lights are particularly unusual, as is the early, four-way central ‘rise and fall’ electrolier over the dining table.

**Study** – during the health emergency this room is not open to guests, to reduce the amount of deep cleaning we have to undertake.

**Bedrooms** – The bedrooms are all individually decorated with Morris & Co and other heritage wallpapers; the paint work in contrasting colours. Two of the rooms have High Victorian brass half tester beds (made popular after Queen Victoria ordered one for Osborne House) and the third has a magnificent brass four poster. The bathrooms in the Green Price and Gilbert Scott Rooms have original Victorian/Edwardian fittings, which have all been renovated without, we hope, losing the lovely patina of age and use.

#### ***Arundel Society prints***

We have a large collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century Arundel Society chromolithographic prints. Amongst the most notable are the prints making up the 15<sup>th</sup> century van Eyck Ghent Altarpiece. The inner images are “exploded” on the wall over the stairs, with the outer images (on show when the polyptych altarpiece is closed) opposite on the landing wall. Other Arundel Society prints are in the inner hall, the dining room and the bedrooms.

#### ***The Gardens***

You are welcome to enjoy the gardens, re-designed in 2005 by Chelsea gold medal winner Paul Cooper.

Please take care as you negotiate the garden paths and steps, especially those by the grotto which may be wet and slippery, even in dry weather.

**Garden History.** When we bought The Old Vicarage in 1997, it had about two thirds of an acre of garden. Only later did we acquire Vicarage Cottage, adding another one third of an acre to the site. The original garden had been stocked with some interesting and rare shrubs but was, on our arrival, over grown with many tall trees around the boundary, blocking out light and obscuring the far-reaching views. We began major work on renovating the garden after we had completed work on the house and established the B&B business. To achieve this we brought in local garden designer Paul Cooper to help us achieve our vision.

**The Old Vicarage Gardens.** The house is set on a natural highpoint (used by the Normans for one of their many border castles) with beautiful views from both the front and back gardens. We wanted to use these “borrowed” vistas as the background to the garden & for the garden to fit in with and complement the surrounding Marches rural landscape.

We also wished the garden to have colour and structure at all times of the year, so there is an emphasis on shrubs and trees with good autumnal and winter colour. Paul Cooper did a major part of the re-planting and hard landscaping in 2005, but resource considerations meant that we could not carry out all our plans at once. Like all gardens it is a work in progress.

#### ***History of the site***

It is likely Norton castle was built around 1086, about 20 years after the Norman invasion. In its early days Norton castle probably comprised no more than an outer

ditch surrounding the bailey (a level area) within which was a defensive motte (mound). At first there would probably have been only timber buildings and earthwork fortifications topped by a timber wall. Vicarage Cottage is sited just below the bailey – probably in the ditch (now filled in) between two earth banks and the Old Vicarage is positioned on the bailey, on the site of a much older house.

The remains of the motte (7.5m or c 25' high) can still be seen on the opposite side of the road (which was cut through the bailey in the 1820s). Some time after it was first erected, a stone castle was built on the site – it may have been on the motte, the bailey or both. Records show the castle was destroyed in May 1215 by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, in a dispute between the ever-warring Marcher Lords and Welsh princes, who regularly made and broke treaties and alliances. The castle was rebuilt, only to be destroyed again in late December 1262 by Owain ab Madog, in support of the campaign of Llewelyn ab Gruffydd. This was during the 20 year Great Welsh War against the English crown from 1256 – 77. Norton castle was not re-built after that and it is likely that the stone and timber from the ruins were used in the erection of local houses, including Vicarage Cottage.

### ***Places of interest***

#### ***During the health emergency please check opening times before setting out***

**Norton**, 1½ miles from Presteigne, is in “English” Wales, i.e. that part of Wales on the English side of Offa’s Dyke, the boundary erected by the eighth century king of Mercia. It is a border village, less than a mile from Herefordshire and only a few miles from Shropshire. Radnorshire is archetypal, uncluttered, green hill country and the Old Vicarage is at 700 feet above sea level, commanding wonderful views across farms and cottages to distant hills.

**Presteigne** is called Llanandras in Welsh, although you it is unlikely you will hear much Welsh spoken in this part of Mid Wales. Radnorshire remains largely unknown and remarkably unspoilt. Presteigne is the old county and assize town of Radnorshire and, when he visited in 1867 (at the time The Old Vicarage was being built), George Borrow described the town as ‘Neither in Wales nor England, but simply in Radnorshire’. It is a small, thriving border town, which visitors note has more real’ shops: butchers, greengrocers, delicatessens, etc than many larger towns elsewhere. Much the same can be said of Knighton and Kington, both close by along the border.

Presteigne, although just over the River Lugg in Wales, has the look of a Herefordshire town. Its grandest building is the classical Judge’s Lodging, which now houses the award winning Judge’s Lodging Victorian Museum – an authentic recreation of life in the Victorian era. The Radnorshire Arms is a very fine black and white building dating back to 1616 with its original studded door. St Andrew’s Church, Presteigne is the finest church in Radnorshire and houses a wonderful early 16th century tapestry, which may once have hung, as part of a set, in Canterbury cathedral.

**Presteigne and the Arts** The world-renowned Presteigne Festival of Music and the Arts takes place every year over the August Bank holiday (subject to health rules). The festival has a wide variety of musical and non-musical events and mixes works from the classic repertoire with world premieres. Lord Berkeley, son of Sir Lennox Berkeley and founder of the Festival, lives nearby.

The Sidney Nolan Trust administers a collection of paintings, works on paper and prints by the late Sidney Nolan (eminent Australian painter, who retired to The Rodd, Presteigne). The Trust holds regular exhibitions of works by Sidney Nolan and other artists in a restored tithe barn at The Rodd.

Local activities - Just a few of the activity suggestions locally (*as with all our recommendations please check opening hours post lockdown restrictions*)

Riding - [www.underhillridingtables.co.uk/](http://www.underhillridingtables.co.uk/)  
Cycling - [www.wheelywonderfulcycling.co.uk/cyclehire.html](http://www.wheelywonderfulcycling.co.uk/cyclehire.html)  
Activities - [www.oakerwoodleisure.co.uk/](http://www.oakerwoodleisure.co.uk/)  
Canoeing on the Wye - [www.paddlesandpedals.co.uk/](http://www.paddlesandpedals.co.uk/)

**Antiques** – there are antique shops in Presteigne, Leominster, Ludlow, Hay and Ross on Wye.

Bird watchers love the wide range of species in the area. At all times of the year we never cease to enjoy watching the buzzards and occasional red kite hang in the sky above the valley. A real treat is to visit the Kite Feeding Station at Gigrin Farm, Rhadayer or the Small Breeds Farm Park & Owl Centre outside Kington.

**Clun** – north of Knighton and just across the border in Shropshire. Pretty town, with pubs, excellent gift shop (Caractacus) and a ruined castle. To get there you drive through the delightfully named hamlet of New Invention.

**Croft Castle & Berrington Hall** (both National Trust properties) are only a short drive away.

Driving and days out - Because there is so little traffic in the region, driving here is a joy – although don't expect to maintain fast speeds along our picturesque, winding roads. We measure distance in driving time not miles. The AA has described the journey from Presteigne to Aberystwyth as one of the great scenic drives of Europe, especially so if you take the detour up the Elan Valley to see the impressive Victorian dams set in fabulous scenery, just beyond Rhayader. Further away are Vyrnwy and Bala Lakes, which make a wonderful day's round trip through some of Wales' most lovely countryside.

**Gardens** – We are surrounded by lovely gardens. Just a few include Stockton Bury at Kimbolton, (just off the A49 beyond Leominster). The 10 acre gardens, alongside a working farm, are impressive and as full of colour in April as late September. Closer at Kington is Hergest Croft Gardens, one of the most beautiful gardens in the country, especially fine for azaleas and rhododendrons. Nearby Bryansground has just been sold and it is not known if the gardens will re-open. There is a fine walled garden at Croft Castle (National Trust) and Brobury Gardens are picturesquely sited on the banks of the River Wye at Bredwardine (off the A438 between Kington & Hereford).

**Golf** – Kington Golf Club (01544 230340) and Knighton Golf Club (01547 528646). Both clubs are very high and afford wonderful views.

**Hay-on-Wye** famous for its many bookshops, is a quaint town by the side of the broad River Wye. It's a wonderful drive (about 35 minutes) over the hills to Hay and our guests often spend hours happily browsing amongst the old tomes. Hay is also famous for the The Hay Festival which takes place each year around the second May bank holiday – online in 2021. From Hay you can explore Hay Bluff and the lovely Golden Valley.

**Heart of Wales line** – single carriage trains that wind through stunning scenery stopping at tiny halts. From Knighton four trains a day go south to Swansea across the narrow viaduct at Knucklas via Llandrindod and Builth Wells, and north to Shrewsbury, via Church Streeton (for the Long Mynd). A ride on the line is an adventure in itself. *Check current timetable.*

**Herefordshire** has much to offer the visitor - Kington, Leominster, Ledbury, Hereford. Norton is close to the Black and White Village Trail, which winds from Kington to Leominster, through the beautiful villages of Pembridge, Eardisland and Weobley.

**Kington** Delightful Herefordshire borders town (on the Welsh side of Offa's Dyke) with real shops, pubs and Hergest Croft close by. Don't confuse with.....

**Knighton** – Welsh gem, with narrow terraced streets clinging to the hillside above the Teme and a wealth of pubs. The steep High Street leads up to a clock tower and the Offa's Dyke Centre. Some think Knighton is a bit dour, but we love it for the

local shops lost in time, that unwittingly evoke the 1950s. The cheapest place to buy petrol locally is the Co-op.

**Leominster** Has a fine priory church, market square, good food and antique shops. It is not so smart and chic as Ludlow, and for that reason some visitors prefer its more 'earthy' feel.

**Llandrindod Wells** – the county town of Powys, which explains our LD postcode – is one of the many spa towns that began in the Georgian era and grew rapidly once the railways provided easier access. Pevsner describes it as "an oasis of redbrick in the greenest of landscapes".

**Ludlow** The Castle and church (almost the size of a cathedral) are interesting and the market, food shops, cafes and restaurants will encourage you to tarry a while.

**Walking** This corner of the Marches, where Radnorshire, Shropshire and Herefordshire meet, is wonderful walking country, with the most rewarding hill top views. Some of the best preserved and most beautiful section of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail pass close by. The Offa's Dyke Centre is in Knighton.

**The Wye Valley** offers some of the best river scenery in the country and a trip to the Brecon Beacons and the pretty towns of Brecon and Builth Wells makes an excellent day out.

**Tourist Information:-** Judge's Lodging, Shire Hall, Broad Street, Presteigne ~ 01544 260650 ~ and the Offa's Dyke Visitor Centre, West Street, Knighton ~ 01547 528753. Useful websites:

<http://www.visitpowys.co.uk/>

<https://www.visitherefordshire.co.uk/>

<https://www.visitshropshire.co.uk/>