

PEAK TIMES

In the beautiful Peak District, the medieval town of Leek has a rich creative history, plus a famous vintage market and antique stores that are integral to the town's fascinating story

WORDS AND MAIN IMAGES **NORMAN MILLER**



Fine period timbered houses are evidence of Leek's affluent past, built on textiles and weaving



The town reinvented itself as a vintage mecca, through a regular weekly antiques market

love looking at interesting vintage things (obviously) – but it’s not often they stare back at you. However, the Victorian glass eyes at Odeon Antiques in Leek have a distinctive appeal – as does the charmingly named Staffordshire vintage hotspot around them. Sitting at the southwest edge of the Peak District National Park, Leek has medieval roots dating back to the granting of its market town charter back in 1207. That historic DNA

lingers with reminders of ancient markets – Sheep Market, Cattle Market and the still-trading Butter Market – dotting the beautiful fabric of a town replete with cobbled streets, handsome Georgian red-brick houses and repurposed Victorian textile mills. Traditional silk weavers’ cottages remain on King Street, designed so their third storey caught optimum daylight to enable women workers to stay at their looms longer.

But it is Leek’s links to the Arts & Crafts movement founded by William Morris that stand out most. Morris lived here between 1875 and 1878, as well as visiting frequently to collaborate with pioneering mill owners like Joshua Nicholson and Thomas Wardle on bold new ways with silk and natural dyes. Their efforts were gloriously augmented by Wardle’s wife Elizabeth, founder of the Leek School of Embroidery that produced some of the most dazzling works

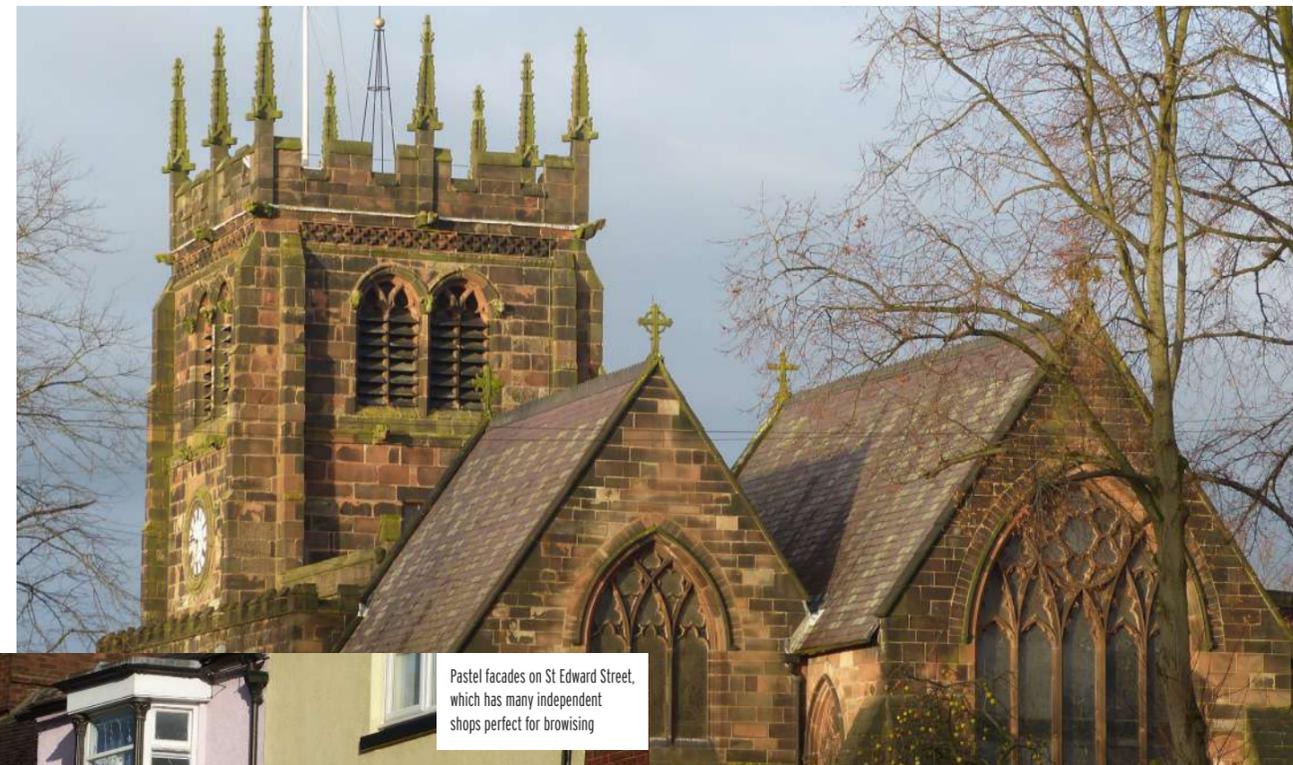
in fabric you’ll ever see. As well as adorning Leek with Arts & Crafts mementoes – some displayed at the Grade II-listed Nicholson Institute, others brightening the medieval Church of St Edward the Confessor (see Must-see) – Morris and his followers helped protect the town’s delightful streetscape, most famously saving the 17th-century house Greystones in front of the Nicholson Institute. You decide whether its garden gate is the most beautiful in Britain...

And it was a later appreciation of heritage that rejuvenated today’s town when it found itself in a state of ramshackle dereliction in the 1980s. The forward-thinking town council decided a good way to bring a spark back to the town was to call in someone used to running antiques fairs all over England. ‘I always knew of Leek, but didn’t really know it,’ admits Kevin Harper, before explaining how the weekly Saturday vintage market he was asked to set up on Leek’s Market Place nearly 30 years ago provided the seeds of change. Profits from the market’s early years funded further regeneration, including re-cobbling the square. ‘The town came to life – and as people came, other antiques shops sprang up,’ he recalls.

Today, stalls fill the pretty central square every Saturday, where I bag several vintage tourist photo booklets for just £1 each, while eyeing up characterful old industrial bits and



‘William Morris and his Arts & Crafts followers helped protect the town’s delightful streetscape’



Pastel facades on St Edward Street, which has many independent shops perfect for browsing

The Church of St Edward is filled with Arts & Crafts stained-glass windows and embroidery



Must-see

Nicholson Institute and Church of St Edward

An 1880s homage to Queen Anne style, the Nicholson Institute chronicles the interplay of Leek’s textile industry with Arts & Crafts, including Indian links plus copying the Bayeux Tapestry! At the nearby Church of St Edward there are stained-glass windows designed by Edward Burne-Jones, plus panels and altar frontals from the Leek School of Embroidery.

- 31 Stockwell Street; see Facebook
- 6 Church Street; leekparish.org.uk/churches/st-edwards-church

The Roaches

Ranged around its Pennines backbone, the long-view wilderness of the Peak District National Park reaches out to almost touch Leek. Just four miles from the town, The Roaches are an iconic gritstone ridge whose almost sculpted forms provide a dramatic platform to gaze across Staffordshire and Shropshire toward the Welsh mountains.

○ 4 miles east of Leek; visitpeakdistrict.com

Odeon Antiques is a warren of quirky finds, specialising in vintage and antique lighting



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'Antique stalls fill the pretty central square every Saturday, where I eye up some classic Moorcroft vases'



The beautiful ornate gate at the entrance to William Morris's house in Leek

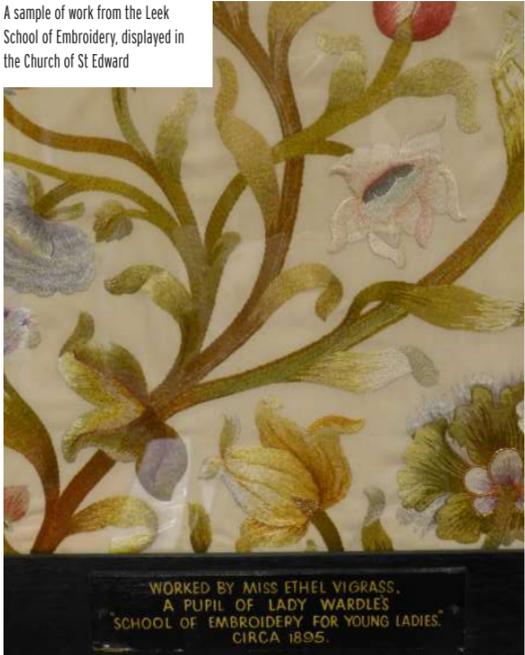


Relive your childhood at Classic Collectables, from Dinky Toys and Action Man to Popeye (right)

An Arts & Crafts relief celebrating 'Literature' at the Nicholson Institute



A sample of work from the Leek School of Embroidery, displayed in the Church of St Edward



bobs, plus some classic Moorcroft vases made in the famous pottery just off the A53 Leek road in nearby Stoke-on-Trent. Away from the market, Odeon Antiques stars among today's retinue of vintage dealers. Started 30 years ago, it's home to everything from mid-century to the macabre (those glass eyes have some even stranger company), in a warren of rooms spread through a centuries-old building. 'People travel here from all over,' says dealer Nicky Hancock. 'And we've been on *Antiques Road Trip*.'

On the opposite corner, Leek Antique Centre focuses more on traditional Victorian and Edwardian style with the odd modern piece, such as a lovely child's art deco armchair. Further up St Edward Street, I check out chic, rustic French objets at Old Whyte Interiors, go misty-eyed flipping through old vinyl and pop memorabilia at Variety, and wonder whether I can carry any of the big vintage signs at recently opened Old Barn Antiques. I do manage to acquire some 1950s Warner Bros cartoon memorabilia from nearby vintage toy mecca Classic Collectables – a shrine to playful pleasure from rare early 1900s models to 1960s/70s film mementoes. Owner Richard Heath explains how it all began with his own childhood hoard of Dinky toys and Action Man stuff. 'We get a lot of older collectors – but also younger folk keen on things like Star Wars,' he says.

There's real pleasure just wandering through Leek's compact centre, its streets lined with appealing independent shops – some tucked away in places like the lovely Victorian arcade Getliffe's Yard. There are plenty of great watering holes too, including a Belgian beer bar (Den Engel on Stanley Street), the Cock Inn brewpub on Derby Street, and hip craft beer spot Beer Dock on the Market Place.

The Leek trend of hawking vintage goodies from fine historic buildings continues, meanwhile, at Little Vintage clothes boutique, set into the 16th-century Parker House

VISIT

- Classic Collectables**
93 Haywood Street;
classic-collectables.co.uk
- Leek Antique Centre**
4-6 Brook Street;
leekantiquecentre.co.uk
- Little Vintage** Church Street; see Facebook
- Odeon Antiques**
76-78 St Edward Street;
odeonantiques.co.uk
- Old Barn Antiques**
57 St Edward Street;
see Facebook
- Old Whyte Interiors**
63 St Edward Street;
see Instagram
- Variety** 65 St Edward Street; tel 01538 388455

centre. For nearly 120 years, it was the convent to Leek's Catholic church before being converted to a six-bedroom B&B oozing period panache. Dinners majoring on local produce are available Fridays and Saturdays.
○ 21 King Street; peakweavers.co.uk

Britannia Chambers
A trio of spacious two-bedroom apartments offering well-priced modernity and good central location, with the flexibility of self-catering and your own lounge to relax in.
○ West Street; diamond-britannia-chambers-gb.book.direct/en-gb

EAT

Leek Bar & Grill
Contemporary Turkish cuisine with nods to Greece, served in a modern dining space inside a lovely Victorian arcade. There's a good choice of salads and small plate options too.
○ 22-24 Getliffe's Yard, Derby Street; leekbarandgrill.co.uk

Old Mill Smokehouse
Fashioned from a Victorian mill, the old chimney ties with a menu focused on barbecued food, slow-cooked over hickory and applewood. Meats are locally sourced, while dishes like smoked butternut squash cater for non-carnivores.
○ Shoobridge Mill, Haywood Street; theoldmillsmokehouse.co.uk

STAY

Peak Weavers
Built in 1828 for a local mill owner, the Peak Weavers stands in its own grounds on the edge of the town



TRAVEL

Stoke-on-Trent and Macclesfield are the nearest mainline train stations, around 12 miles from Leek. Local buses run from both towns (allow an hour to get to Leek), or take a taxi (25-30 minutes, around £20). The A53 is the main road into Leek, linked to the M6 motorway.





The Butter Market mosaic celebrates the 800th anniversary of the town receiving its charter



An amusing find at Odeon Antiques, reclaimed golf clubs have been made into a boot stand



There are plenty of small items to rummage through at the weekly antiques market

Tips for the first-time visitor

- Pick up the excellent free Architectural Trail leaflet at various spots around Leek - including the Nicholson Institute - as the basis for an enjoyable and informative walking route around the town.
- Brindley's Mill is an impressive working, three-storey water-powered corn mill built in 1752, just half a mile from Leek town centre, open Easter to September (brindleymill.co.uk.)
- Just three miles from Leek, the miniature Leek & Rudyard Railway is a charming vintage steam line built in the early 1900s to enjoy a 3-mile return trip alongside Rudyard Lake (rlsr.org).
- Moorlands Connect is a brilliant bookable door-to-door bus service that takes visitors through the Peak District National Park to places including the pretty spa town of Buxton. Return fare is £5 (bookings: tel 01335 342951, 2 hours in advance of travel; or email bookings@moorlandsconnect.co.uk, 24 hours in advance).



William Morris's 17th-century house Greystones, with the Nicholson Institute behind

on Church Street – couture lovers will enjoy browsing some particularly hip 1950s and 60s dresses. Elsewhere, repurposed buildings include old Victorian mills turned into diners or, in the case of Foxlowe on Stockwell Street, a stately Georgian building morphed into an art centre incorporating exhibition spaces, a cinema, theatre company and a lovely period-feel café.

Though it's a great place to come to browse for vintage amid period architecture, Leek has a live-for-now vitality too – just check the programme of weekly markets alongside

Saturday's antiques effort. There's a general market on Wednesdays, crafts in the Butter Market every Friday, plus an award-winning food market every third Saturday of the month. Every first Sunday each month, meanwhile, Leek hosts a 'Totally Locally' market celebrating both local artists and food suppliers.

These all speak of a town proud of its heritage, independent spirit and good looks. Those Victorian eyeballs seem appropriate for a place inspired by people of bold vision. Come look at Leek. 📍