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# The New Forest

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Designated a National Park in 2004, the New Forest, as is the way with many English place-names, is neither New nor a Forest, although much of it is attractively wooded. Some historians believe that 'Forest' is a corruption of an ancient British word, *gores* or *gorest*, meaning waste or open ground. 'Gorse' comes from the same root word. The term 'New Forest' came into use after William the Conqueror proclaimed the area a royal hunting ground, seized some 15,000 acres that Saxon farmers had laboriously reclaimed from the heathland, and began a programme of planting thousands of trees. To preserve wildlife for his sport, (the deer especially), William adopted all the rigorous venery laws of his Saxon royal predecessors and added some harsh measures of his own. Anyone who killed a deer would himself be killed. If someone shot at a beast and missed, his hands were cut off. And, perhaps most ruthless of all, anyone who disturbed a deer during the breeding season had his eyes put out.

There are still plenty of wild deer roaming the 145 square miles of the Forest Park, confined within its boundaries by cattle grids,

(known to Americans as Texas Gates). You are much more likely though to see the famous New Forest ponies, free-wandering creatures which nevertheless are all privately owned. They are also something of a hazard for drivers, so do take care, especially at night.

The largest wild area in lowland Britain, the forest is ideal walking country with vast tracts virtually unpopulated but criss-crossed by a cat's cradle of footpaths and bridle-ways. The Forestry Commission has also established a network of waymarked cycle routes which make the most of the scenic attractions and are also designed to help protect the special nature of the forest. A map detailing the cycle network is available, along with a vast amount of other information about the area, from the **New Forest Museum and Visitor Centre** in Lyndhurst. Visitors can watch an audio visual show, see life-sized models of forest characters, make use of its Resource Centre and Library, and explore a gift shop specialising in locally made forest crafts. The only town of any size within the New Forest, Lyndhurst is generally regarded as its 'capital', a good place then to begin a tour of the area.

## 1 UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE



### Lyndhurst

This quaint café in Lyndhurst is the perfect spot for lunch during an activity packed day in the New Forest.


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## 2 CAFÉ PARISIAN



### Lyndhurst

The quality food and drink, great service and warm welcome all create a wonderful place to escape the daily race.

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# LYNDHURST

The most striking building in this compact little town is the **Church of St Michael**, rebuilt in mid-Victorian times in what John Betjeman described as “the most fanciful, fantastic Gothic style that I ever have seen”. The rebuilding coincided with the heyday of the Pre-Raphaelite movement so the church contains some fine stained glass by Burne-Jones, produced by the firm of William Morris, as well as a splendidly lush painting by Lord Leighton of *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*.

In St Michael’s churchyard is the **Grave of Alice Liddell** who, as a young girl, was the inspiration for Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. As Mrs Reginald Hargreaves, Alice lived all her married life in Lyndhurst and was very active in local affairs.

Next to the church is the **Queen’s House** which rather confusingly is re-named the King’s House whenever the reigning sovereign is male. Originally built as a royal hunting lodge, its medieval and Tudor elements are still visible. Many kings and queens have lodged here and the last monarch to stay, George III, graciously allowed loyal villagers to watch through the window as he ate dinner. Queen’s House is now the headquarters of the Forestry Commission and is also home to the **Verderer’s Court**, an institution dating back to Norman times which still deals with matters concerning the forest’s ancient

commoning rights. The verderers (forest officials) still sit in public ten times a year and work closely with the Commission in managing the forest. They also appoint agisters, or stockmen, who are responsible for the day-to-day supervision of the 5000 ponies and cattle roaming the forest.

At the **New Forest Museum and Visitor Centre**, in the heart of the town, visitors can learn about the history and the wide variety of plants and animal life that the forest supports. Interactive displays, activities and quizzes add to the appeal for younger visitors. There’s also an exhibit exploring the mysterious death in 1100 of William Rufus, son of William the Conqueror, who was killed by an arrow whilst out hunting. It was officially described as an accident but some believe that it was murder.

This little town is noted for its variety of small shops where you can find “anything from fresh food to Ferraris!” Many are located in the High Street, an attractive thoroughfare of mostly Edwardian buildings, which gently slopes down the hill to **Bolton’s Bench**, a tree-crowned knoll where grazing ponies can usually be found. The spot enjoys excellent views over Lyndhurst and the surrounding forest. At the other end of the town, **Swan Green**, surrounded by picturesque thatched cottages, provides a much-photographed setting where cricket matches are held in summer.

## AROUND LYNDHURST

### MINSTEAD

*2 miles NW of Lyndhurst off the A337*

The village of Minstead offers two interesting attractions, one of which is the unusual seating arrangement in the **Church of All Saints**. During the 18th century, the gentry and squirearchy of Minstead seem to have regarded church attendance as a necessary duty which, nevertheless, should be made as agreeable as possible. Three of the village's most affluent residents paid to have the church fabric altered so that they could each have their own entrance door leading to a private "parlour", complete with open fireplace and comfortable chairs. The squire of Minstead even installed a sofa on which he could doze during the sermon (delivered from an unusual 3-decker pulpit). It's easy to understand his concern since these sermons were normally expected to last for at least an hour; star preachers seem to have thought they were short-changing their flock if they didn't prate for at least twice that long. It was around this time that churches began introducing benches for the congregation.

Admirers of the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, will want to pay their respects at his grave in the churchyard here. He loved the New Forest and a few years before he died he bought a house at Bignell Wood near Minstead. The lettering

at the base of the cross describes Sir Arthur as a 'patriot, physician and man of letters'. Minstead's other main attraction is **Furzey Gardens**, eight acres of delightful, informal woodland gardens designed by Hew Dalrymple in the 1920s and enjoying extensive views over the New Forest towards the Isle of Wight. Beautiful banks of azaleas and rhododendrons, heathers and ferns surround an attractive water garden, and amongst the notable species growing here are incandescent Chilean Fire Trees and the strange 'Bottle Brush Tree'. To the northwest of Minstead stands the **Rufus Stone**, said to mark the spot where King William II (William Rufus) was killed by an arrow while out hunting. His body was carried on the cart of Purkis, a charcoal burner, to Winchester, where William's brother Henry, who had also been hunting elsewhere in the Forest and had soon got wind of the accident, had already arrived to proclaim himself King. William had not been a popular monarch and his funeral in the Cathedral at Winchester was conducted with little ceremony and even less mourning. The fatal arrow was fired by a Norman knight, Sir Walter Tyrrel, who was aiming at a deer that had broken cover.



*Rufus Stone, Minstead*