

from the fabulous building with its beautiful furnishings, is that it's right in the town centre. Private car parking meant we could stroll out, and within minutes were standing below the town hall's colourful hanging baskets.

Directly opposite, the lovely timber-framed house was once a huge hall, where smoke from an open fire would have had to find its own way out of the gables.

In the past it has served many roles, including an inn, but today Wealden Hall House, festooned with colourful flowers, is the Lemon Tree café.

Many alleys lead off the high street, but Bells Lane opens out into a gorgeous narrow thoroughfare with cottage doorways framed with flowers.

Beyond the church of St Mildred – worth a visit if only to witness the fabulous wooden ceiling – the road widens where a tollgate once extracted money from turnpike traffic. Opposite, beyond the war memorial, are some delightful houses with lovely front gardens.

Even Borough Place, the whitewashed former workhouse, is a pretty addition to the street.

You need to look carefully to find Pittlesden Gatehouse, almost hidden by lush garden planting. The oldest building in town, it once served a manor house which stood where the row



Tile-hung and weatherboarded shops.

of shops opposite sit today.

Tenterden makes a perfect base to explore the Weald of Kent. Rye and the Channel coast lie 10 miles to the south, whilst Romney Marshes are the same distance east.

West are Benenden, Hawkhurst and Cranbrook, where we diverted to visit Sissinghurst Castle. In the 1930s, novelist Vita Sackville-West and husband Sir Harold Nicolson employed designer Gertrude Jekyll to convert the grounds of the Tudor mansion into one of the world's most famous gardens.

If you plan to come, make your visit early or late, as in peak season the gardens get very busy. But after 4 p.m. the crowds thin, allowing space to enjoy the "rooms", as each of the themed plantings are known.

The road south out of Tenterden passes Chapel Down, one of the many vineyards which make the most of Kent's chalky soil.

In the past, opinions that English wines couldn't compare with their French counterparts have been proved wrong. Chapel Down specialises in sparkling wines which are rated highly.

Perched on a hillside overlooking the old course of the River Rother, today rather less attractively named the Reading Sewer, the vineyard is a popular place for visitors to stroll, picnic, or eat in the café.

Only 30 years ago, the fields were filled with hops destined for Britain's brewers, but especially round Tenterden, vines have taken over. Fortunately Shepherd Neame, the Faversham-based brewery established in the 1600s, hasn't turned its back on Kentish hops!

We continued a few yards down the road to Smallhythe Place, the delightful timber-framed home of Victorian actress Ellen Terry which dates from around the 16th century.

Since 1929 the house has been a museum, whilst the adjacent thatched theatre barn hosts performances and lectures.

In the 1200s, when much of the area was underwater, Smallhythe was Britain's

third-largest shipbuilding centre. Heavy storms shifted shingle, and over the next few centuries the sea receded, leaving islands like Rye and the Isle of Oxney high and dry.

One remnant of older times is the Ferry Inn where, beside the inglenook, a hidden passage allowed smugglers to escape.

Back in Tenterden, our own accommodation also had form on the smuggling front, as a small window in the roof signalled when the coast was clear.

We took our final breakfast outside in a sunny courtyard. Whilst we recounted our explorations to fellow guests, they smiled.

"We've been here three days and haven't left the town – it is so lovely."

There's no better recommendation! ■



Smallhythe Place.

## Getting there

Tenterden is situated on the A28 between Hastings and Ashford and is less than an hour by car from the M25.

There are regular bus links from Ashford, Hastings, Headcorn, Maidstone, Rolvenden, Rye and Tunbridge Wells to Tenterden.



## For More Information

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